

In absentia

As the visual landscape becomes overrun by generative AI, six contemporary artists demonstrate, through the absence of life forms in their works, how inefficient, imperfect and unpredictable humans will always remain a vital part of the creative process. By AVANTIKA SHANKAR.

TWO LINES FROM Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*, succinctly capture the inexorable human impulse to create art: "Art is not about thinking something up. It is about the opposite—getting something down." A few years ago, not knowing how to start a story and uninspired by my exchanges with ChatGPT, I put pencil to paper but wrote with my left hand. It's my non-dominant appendage and I figured it would force me to write more simply. It did. Multimedia artist Saju Kunhan also shifts to his left hand when he's trying to find new perspectives in his work. The Kerala-born, Mumbai-based artist is best known for *Home Ground*, his 2022 showcase at Tarq, in which he emblazoned teak panels, broken floor tiles and mud blocks he'd salvaged from his ancestral home in Palakkad with archival photographs of the surrounding landscape. "My work deals with the idea of migration and displacement, and my process of transferring those photos, of displacing them from one surface to another, reflects that," he shares. Before he makes the transfer, Kunhan paints his own scenes over the archival prints. He uses his left hand to do this because he believes it brings out new textures in his brushstrokes. "Although the technique is a part of the work, it's actually more important for me than the final product. The artwork is just a residue of the process."

I like the idea of art being a by-product of process—an imprint of something more significant than the sum of its parts. Machine intelligence has allowed us to generate millions of images, videos, pieces of text and even entire songs through prompts that require about as much human input as the average WhatsApp message. Already, online spaces are being

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cannibalised by AI-produced content and it's slowly becoming indiscernible from the real thing. In every corner of the internet, battles about the provenance of visuals rage on. Some artists are exposed for passing off AI-generated art as their own. Others have quit social media after being falsely accused of using AI. For Sudarshan Shetty, the question of human versus machine is an old one. Since the early 2000s, his work has been grappling with the 'absent human'. Last year, he took an exhibition titled *Future Remains* to Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna, inviting audiences to piece together the life of "an imaginary human condemned to be elsewhere" by offering up a museum of personal objects made from wood, resin and marble sand that looked

like someone had just walked out of the room after using them. He tells me the woodcarving artisans he works with are so good, they were once able to create an entire car that everybody assumed was made using a CNC (com-

puter numerical control) machine. "The idea of making art and its dissemination will itself be challenged in the future," muses Shetty, though he is quick to remind me that AI can only ever be a tool in an artist's belt, not the whole belt.

Some objects are conspicuous remnants of human presence. A cigarette butt flattened on the road could come from someone lamenting the end of a friendship, someone wondering why they didn't get that promotion at work, someone processing their heartbreak through puffs of smoke. Jaipur-based sculptor Prashant Pandey tells me he started collecting cigarette butts because he saw them as time capsules that documented these brief moments in the life of a smoker. He would imagine their breaths, their pauses, the imprint of the stressors they must have been trying to grant themselves relief from. Growing up in a home above his family's idol sculpture workshop in Jaipur, Pandey saw one part of a stone carved into a deity and worshipped, while the other was discarded as junk. It taught him to never conflate 'waste' with 'worthlessness'. "If you choose

LOOK UP

In *Vortex Oblivion* (2023), Pratap Morey maps the city's restless cycle of construction and growth through large photographic collages.



© PRATAP MOREY, 2023; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TARQ.



EAGLE EYE

In *Banglavukunnu-Thookkuparamb Road #2* (2023), Saju Kunhan delves into ancestral histories through the use of materials salvaged from his hometown. *Opposite page*: Rajyashri Goody's *Losing All Taste* reinterprets the generational pain and resilience of Dalit communities through ceramic objects resembling local food items like bhakris, meat, flowers and leaves.

to question your notion of waste, you will find that the world is full of material imbued with the added value of human experience," he says. With so much of our lives now automated, it was perhaps this elusive human experience that the artist was chasing, which led him to collect close to 350,000 cigarette butts over the course of five years. These were used to create 72 sculptures of tobacco leaves that were suspended together in an expansive installation titled *Biography* for Gallery Maskara earlier this year. The cigarette butts would have eventually disintegrated into toxic refuse and harmed any wildlife that ate them, so Pandey's use of them as an artistic material does the public service of keeping them out of the waste ecosystem.

Like Pandey's gallery-appropriate sculptures mask a gritty origin, Rajyashri Goody's ceramic installation, *Losing All Taste*, appears, at first sight, to be a colourful, whimsical view of local Maharashtrian food: bhakris, various types of meats, fruits and flowers. But when you read the 'recipe booklets' that accompany them, inspired by literature from Dalit writers like Laxman Mane, Eknath Awad and Urmila Pawar, you find yourself staring at emotions that Savarna kitchens rarely hold: shame, fear, desperation. How does one authentically and respectfully document a food culture that includes so many experiences of hunger? In 'Cactus Pods',

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inspired by Babytai Kamble's 'The Prisons We Broke', Goody offers a heart-wrenching prescription: "If your children haven't eaten for three days and look like corpses, go to the stream," she writes. "Pull cactus pods down with a stick." The viewer is then told that the cactus seeds will turn into "slabs of concrete" in the intestines. "But for that one night," Goody continues, "sleep peacefully." Goody tells me that she could very easily use AI to create these poetry recipes; all it would take is a simple search through the original text for instances involving food and a prompt to rephrase them as English-language poems. "But for me, there's value in going through the books myself. It is work that has to be done," she says. "You're learning and unlearning about yourself through these books."

I wonder if future generations will turn to such poetry for solace as they suffer through the worst of the climate crisis. Already, essentials like breathable air, potable water and open public spaces are becoming luxuries that few can afford. Echoes of this dystopia appear in *Untold*, Shreya Pate's 2021 sculpture series for Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, in which she pares architectural motifs like staircases, archways, bathtubs and other household apparatus down to their most fundamental forms. A kitchen counter looks like someone has just made rotis and wiped down the stove.



COURTESY OF RAJYASHRI GOODY. © SAJU KUNHAN, 2023; COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TARQ (OPPOSITE PAGE).

“One day, you see a 3-storey building being taken down and shortly after, that same plot has been developed into a 30-storey skyscraper. You wonder, Was there really this much space on that small patch of land?”
—PRATAP MOREY



MIND OVER MATTER
Above: Shreya Pate's *Untold* highlights the ever-present architectural elements around us. Below: Sudarshan Shetty's *Future Remains* inspects the meaning poured into the everyday possessions we surround ourselves with.



A clothesline resembles a bridge between two pyramids. Today, the sight of clothes hanging off a balcony might seem ‘typically Indian’ but it’s not hard to imagine a world where skyscrapers will have enshrouded the sun completely and those who still have the privilege of hanging their clothes out to dry will do so with all the pomp and pride of the pharaohs. All of this gloominess, of course, is my own imagination—in reality, Pate’s spatial playground invites viewers to explore the impact that architectural forms have on their bodies and psyche. “Civilisations come and go,” she says, “but architecture is something we have always lived with and will continue to live with until extinction.” Still, her work is a bleak reminder that we may soon be packed into sun-obscuring high rises that make the simple architecture we take for granted today feel like a rare luxury.

In *ED (Erective Disproportion)*, a 10-part floor-to-ceiling installation at Tarq, those very skyscrapers appear in miniature form, photographed by Pratap Morey on his walks around Mumbai. “One day, you see a 3-storey building being taken down and shortly after, that same plot has been developed into a 30-storey skyscraper. You wonder, Was there really this much space on that small patch of land?” The studio is where he ‘retaliates’, shrinking the buildings down and using forceps to place them around his own phantom metropolis.

Morey’s painstaking process is an act of spiritual defiance meant to “put the city in its place”, in the same way that Goody’s ceramics are created through repetitive physical movements that help her process the pain of her ancestors. Pandey’s sculptures made out of cigarette butts left behind by strangers embody the entire life cycle of an industrial ecosystem, just like Kunhan’s wooden panels are physical records of past lives. We worry that humans are getting lazier, that they’re always looking for the easiest ways to do the hardest things. But art like this shows us that even though most people are hurtling towards their goals without regard for the journey it took to get there, there will always be those who yearn for the scenic route.



GALLERY MASKARA (BIOGRAPHY); NITIN SAPKALE (UNTOLD); CARMEN ALBERS (FUTURE REMAINS).

SMOKE AND MIRRORS
Prashant Pandey’s *Biography* is a cultural examination of smoking and what can come out of an action that is so detrimental to humans and the environment.