



THE GREAT INDIAN SHOW

Ramesh Kalkur



This body of works produced in the year 2006 - 07, explores the form of torso with juxtaposition of various objects. Torso/perpetrator here enacts several roll. He manifests himself as a creator, mythical character, a magician and at times as philosopher. He becomes the epicenter and the object he possess equally fight for honor of this position. Pompous display of his possession/trophies reveals his glorious past, legacy and an emerging future.

World of images and objects has changed tremendously in the last decade. Images of past has been recycled, it has transgressed cultural boundaries (Freed from its associations), gained new meanings and lost many attributes. They are excessive and exclusive at the same time. These works are also about coping, using, looking for relevance and resting with these objects and images. Thus "perpetrator" here performs.

Ramesh Kalkur





Situating the Body: A Glance at Ramesh Kalkur's Recent Work

The tradition of painting has its roots in a classical tradition of patronage. The artist was typically commissioned to do work by a wealthy patron, and the role of the artist was to cast a discerning eye that revealed the beauty that lay latent within the traditional worldview of the patron. This tradition was broken in the mid-19th century by the European Impressionists, who laid the foundations for modern art by claiming the inherent impulse and right for the artist to independently go out into the world on a voyage of discovery that was free from a patron's desires. However, while the independence and autonomy of these pioneers is typically claimed by artists today, the presence of the patron continues to cast a shadow in contemporary art. The only change is that now the patron enters the scene after the painting has been produced, after it has been revealed in a gallery. But the need to match the sense of comfort with the patron's worldview has to be kept in mind by the artist, and eventually the aesthetic of the painting has to comfortably match the aesthetic of the space to which it is transferred from the gallery.

Ramesh Kalkur's work does not allow this kind of comfort that conventional art tradition demands. One cannot critique the paintings in terms of the conventional criteria of form, colour and balance. In fact they disturb such criteria more than they sustain them - the delineation of line is blurred rather than precise, the colours seem to belong more to a kitsch tradition of calendar art rather than a refined aesthetic of high art, colours tend to delineate flat pattern more than depth of form, and the themes refuse to belong to the comfort zones of direct representation or pure abstraction.

Kalkur has to be interpreted within a viewpoint that sees art as also being didactic as opposed to art being seen as merely providing aesthetic pleasure. Art has the potential to be more



D) *Getting ready for the performance*
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas

than a means by which one reveals the aesthetic of an established visual tradition - it can also be a means by which one critically reflects upon the nature of contemporary life. And the manner in which Kalkur deliberately distances himself from conventional compositional strategy indicates that he aligns himself more with the didactic and critical role of art than with the role of providing aesthetic pleasure.

The human torso forms a recurrent frame of reference in all the recent work, which clearly shows that the problematic that Kalkur examines is that of the body. This preoccupation has existed from some time, and is reflected in some earlier projects that began with aspects of performance: photographed articulations of the artist's draped and shrouded body.

The centring of the body is actually a significant concern of our time. During earlier eras of traditional societies with extended families and communal aesthetic traditions, there were many possible collective sites for inscription in order to write one's identity – such as craft objects, traditional homes, established rituals or common texts. But in this individualised globalised and nucleating world of high mobility, most of the traditional sites of inscription are decreasing in availability to a substantive (and increasing) number of people. The only consistently available site for inscription becomes one's own body: and turning to the body as a site for inscription can be seen in the increasing popularity of tattoos, body piercing and contemporary fashion.

But is the body such an easy site for inscription? Can it be situated in a stable position so that it forms a defined and controlled boundary? Kalkur's paintings challenge such assumptions. His depiction of the body tends towards classical perspective, but as an Indian painter he does not use Indian classical technique and portray the body as a rounded (often voluptuous) form accented by jewellery or fabric. Rather, the body is shown with a Greco-Roman perspective, naked and austere and with sharp muscular delineation. The viewpoint



Scene one: *Starry Night*
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas

is ambivalent - is the body being seen from the front or the back? A ribbed pattern initially strikes the eye, and you think it is the front. But a second look reveals the buttocks at the bottom of the frame and the line of a spine, and one realises the view is from behind. The head is always beyond the frame, giving the body a feeling of perpetual and unavoidable anonymity.

But the body is never standing by itself; it is always invaded by objects. The position of the objects is not clear; one cannot make out whether they are embedded within the body, grafted on to its surface, or suspended in front of it. But whatever their positions, these objects seem inextricably linked to the body, remaining in that position wherever the body moves. They look back at you without judgment. There is no apparent reason for their being there, but they appear resigned to perpetually remaining wherever they currently are. Most of the objects do not appear to belong to the body - they give the appearance of an inevitable incursion of contamination with indeterminate causes. Many of them are colonial: hunting trophies; a gown shaped by a crinoline; a formal dinner setting; a chandelier; a uniformed sepoy. Some are ambivalent symbols of economic production gone awry: a grey factory (or is it a fortress?) with rising smokestacks; a high bred dairy cow whose black patches on her skin are like continental maps and whose milk is spilling on its own wasted all over the ground. Some link back to earlier traditions: an ornamental chair; a laughing Buddha; a mask; the head of a demon. In one painting objects of fashion float at various positions: shoes, gloves, a jacket, a gown.

A pair of hands is another theme that repeats: but one wonders if the hands belong to the body within the frame, or whether they belong to someone else. In one painting, the hands are painted with a delicate henna pattern and adopt a classical *mudra* pose. But the body is being seen from the back, and the hands clearly belong to a body that is facing you. In

several of the paintings the hands hold strings that suspend the objects that invade the body: like the hands of a puppeteer who controls the scene below. Whose are these hands? Why are they there? What are they seeking to do? Are they controlling the body?

Kalkur's paintings raise discomfoting questions about the primacy that we have given to the body in recent times. He raises the question on whether one can even define the most intimate of one's possessions: one's own body. Can one ever count on the body as a territory that is exclusively one's own? Or is the body forever and inextricably tangled with and marked by a wider web? Where does one go if the body is unavoidably tainted?

When one looks at art and such questions rise to the forefront, one is left wondering about the kind of space within which such art should locate itself. When I look at Ramesh Kalkur's work, I instinctively think "This is not the kind of painting I want to hang up in my home". But in the next moment I think "This makes me ask the questions that I should and must ask". The fashionable conventions of judgment in art seem irrelevant here. Does this work belong in a gallery? Or has the gallery been reduced by fashion to a space where art is reduced to objects of visual spectacle among which people wander and idiosyncratically remark about what they do like and what they do not like? Should this kind of work be in a museum? Or has the museum, like the gallery, been reduced to visual spectacle? If art can also be critical or provocative, in what kind of space will the ensuing debate and reflection take place? Should the gallery reform itself, or do we need new institutional forms to allow the full potential of art? I am left facing the remark made by the writer Jeanette Winterson: *"If we say that art is no longer relevant to our lives, we may at least risk the question 'What has happened to our lives?' The usual question 'What has happened to art?' is too easy an escape route."*

(Footnote)¹ Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays in Ecstasy and Effrontery*, (London: Vintage Books, 1996).
Prem Chandavarkar, Bangalore, October 2007



Scene twelve: Episode of leaving trophy behind ©
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



D) Scene four: Hands of god presenting a classic dichotomy
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas





Scene sixteen: Manifestation of Kamadhenu (C)
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene ten: Great hands of god hoisting the flag (C)
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



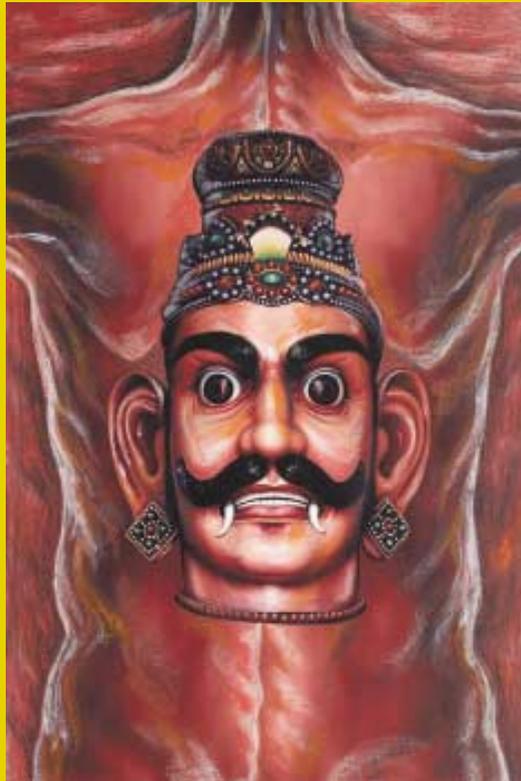
Scene thirteen: Episode of leaving trophy behind 2
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene five: Unraveling the point 1
36" X 24", Oil pastel on digital print



Scene fourteen: Mahakal sub-episode
36" X 24", Oil pastel on digital print



Scene nine: Episode of Mahakal 2
36" X 24", Oil pastel on digital print



Scene six: Unravelling the point 2
36" X 24", Oil pastel on digital print



Scene two: Introducing the great hands of god
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene eleven: Unfolding power of beauty ©
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene fifteen: *Unraveling the point*
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas





Scene nineteen: Game of power ©
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene eight: Episode of mahakal
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene eighteen: Unearthing the fort
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



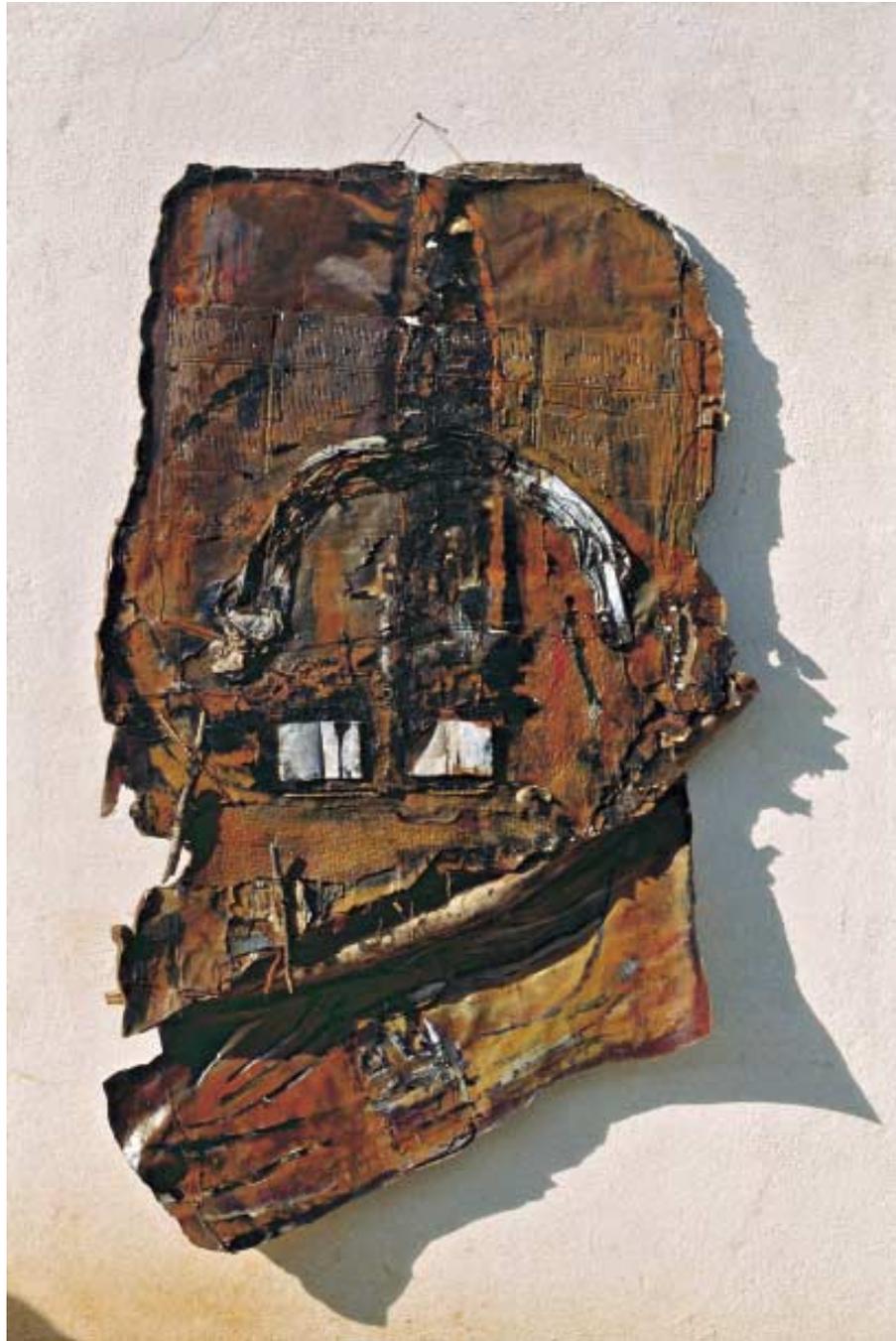
Scene seventeen: Playing god
72" X 48", Acrylic on canvas



Scene seven: Unfolding the beauty of power
36" X 24", Oil pastel on digital print

Ramesh Kalkur's art practice has revolved around a painterly response to a slew of objects and images. While Kalkur first mimicked the prevailing modes of art practices in India during 1990's, he later began to explore the language of painting with remarkable insight. In this overview I will focus on two aspects of his practice - visual strategies and concern with form. Kalkur's output during the 1990's is prolific with numerous drawings, prints, paintings and assemblages. In all these he has explored several new strategies taking cues from the prevailing conventions of painting. We see these, for instance, in the pictorial ambiguities, narrative modes, visual ironies etc to which he often resorts. All these reveal his virtuoso display of diverse tones, linear flourishes and painterly gestures. However, this innate passion for visual vocabulary expanded shortly to include photography.

During 1994-96 as a student at the Royal College of Art, London, Kalkur worked on a series of photographic self portraits. Through these 'portraits' the artist-photographer offered himself up as the subject. Shown at London in 1996 and Bangalore in 1998, the photographs mark a major step in Kalkur's art. For the first time, he appears to be breaking away from his earlier preoccupation with what the art world offered him (through the genre of painting) to find a personal voice. The initial interest in certain painterly conventions now turns, in these photographs, towards a reassessment of some norms inherent to the conventions: he inquires, for example, into the ways in which an art work, particularly as a two dimensional composition, asserts representation of objects and images. He turns to photography that has stood for long as the ultimate witness to reality. The choice is motivated, to be sure, by certain other factors, too: he is persuaded to look inward as an outsider to the social and cultural life in London. The photographs foreground issues of self reflection and identity: the images target a number of 'mug shots' of the subject, either from the front or in profile, either partially exposed or almost fully covered. The subject, through certain acts of concealing and subduing his looks and expressions, has stripped himself of the known marks of identity that a typical portrait would promise. He doubles up as a foil against which his masks and gestures enact their curious little plays. In effect, we are left to 'know' the subject through his mysterious signs: his gestures in gloved hands are rather vague and arbitrary. The imaginary roadmaps with which the artist has embellished the gloves reinforce the point. They do not represent actual places but only suggest certain shared signs of location and direction.



*Burning epics, Mixed media and material,
60" X 45", 1993* |



| *Detail*

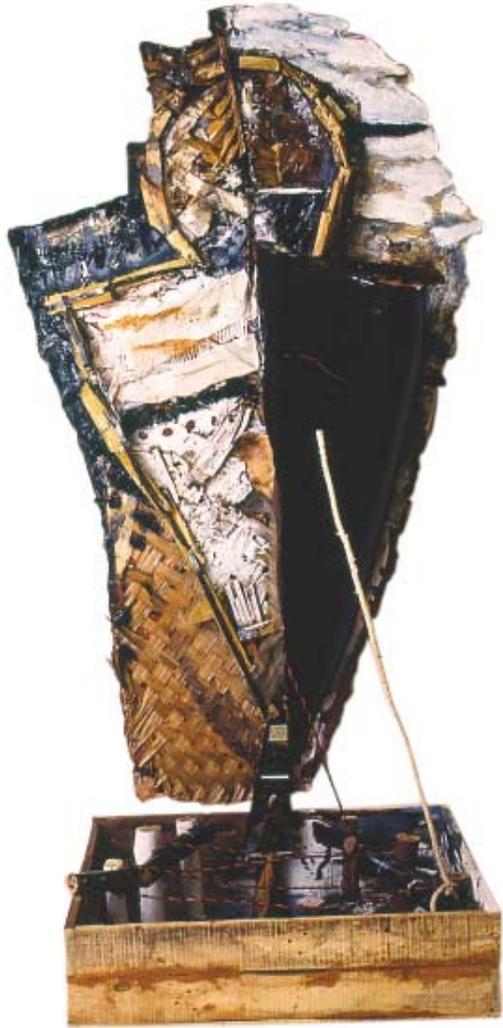
Kalkur expressed one of his recurring concerns in a recent conversation when he asked, 'are we defined by the objects we possess?'. As an artist he extends the issue to address certain conflicts between the individual and his/her social self. In fact, the photographs foresee an introspective exploration of the elusive self: they exemplify the subtle ways in which Kalkur inquires into his tensions with the world around.

However, Kalkur invariably returns to his preoccupations with form. His ambitious show titled "11x11" (2001), "Body Shop" (2003) is an effective instance of the ways in which his new concerns of the 'social body' are dovetailed with a passionate exploration of form. The enquiry into the self evident in the early photographs is replaced now by an interrogation of the social and cultural marks of the body. Kalkur undertakes this, more importantly, through an eclectic choice of visuals and display strategies: "11x11" and "Body Shop" is a multimedia installation involving a series of painted and photographed torsos. The works counter the inherent representational and symbolic associations of given images chiefly through certain formal strategies: the installation insists on two dimensional surfaces; not only the photographic images displayed on the walls of the gallery but also the box like structure in the middle bear witness to this. The three walls of the 'box' are, in fact, three large painted canvases doubling up as massive torsos. However, just as the translucent human body is simultaneously familiar and unreal, the documented images from the immediate world around inhabit now a virtual space: removed from their context. The photographs of sacred icons from a street, the discarded automobile wheels, uprooted trees etc are superimposed in such a way that they create a virtual space within the composition.

Kalkur, thus, interrogates certain conceptual preoccupations of his generation through a cultivated sense of form. His formal approach to picture making suggests a faith in the modernist vocabulary, as a visual language. It seems to resist certain cultural and symbolic associations of materials in which his contemporaries are largely interested. In turn, it also counters the essentializing tendencies in their conceptual art practices.

K. S. Srinivasa Murthy

Srinivasa Murthy writes on art in Kannada and English. He is also an artist and currently lives in Singapore.



*Vamana, Mixed media and material,
72" X 48" X 18", 1994*



*Untitled, Mixed media and material,
36" X 24" X 8", 1993*



*Flag, Mixed media and material,
84" X 48" X 10", 1994*



*Box of a traveller, Mixed media and material,
30" X 50" X 15", 1994*



| Detail



*Untitled , Photographs,
24" X 20" , 1996*





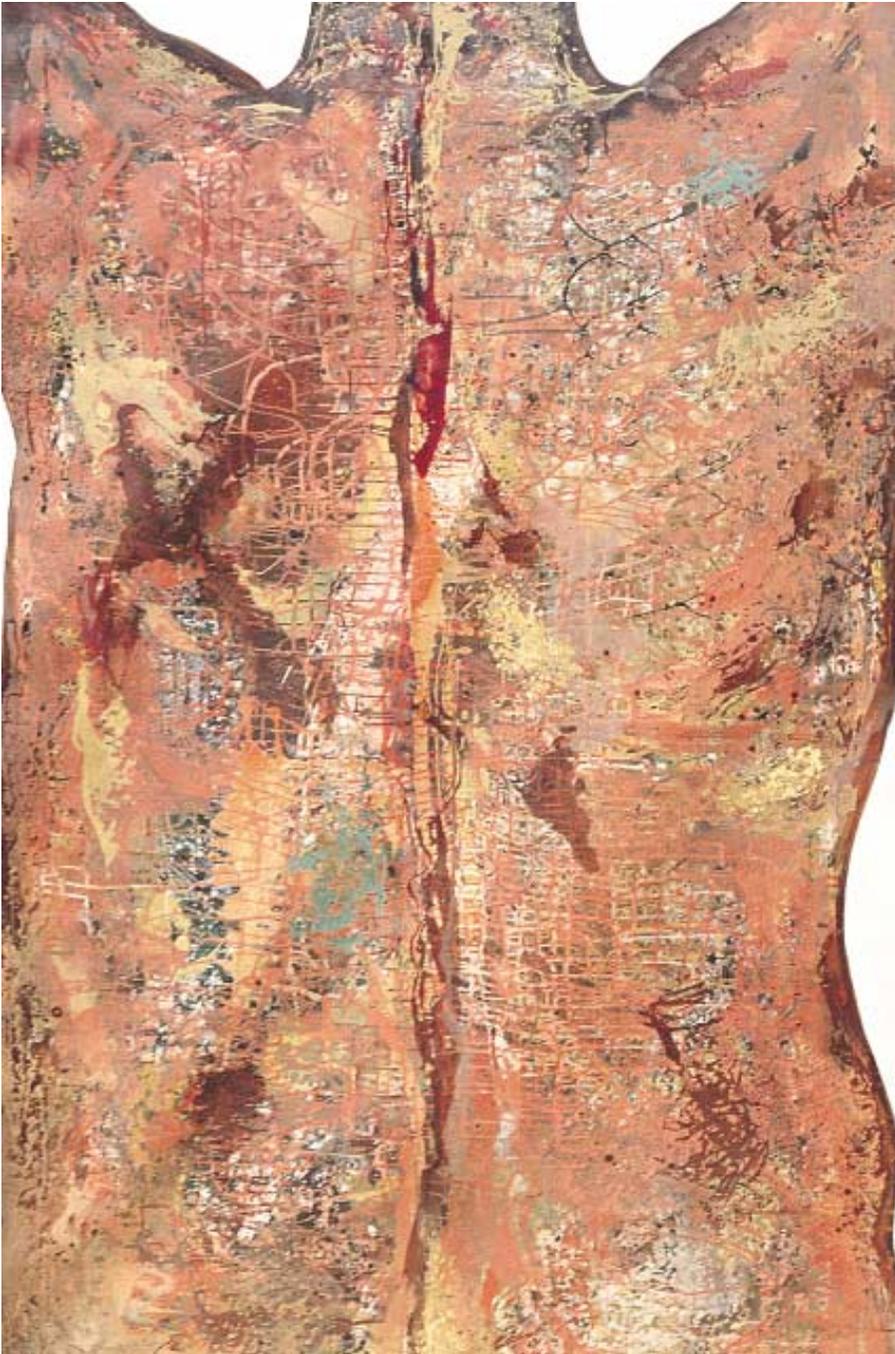
Untitled, photographs
each 24" X 20", 1996

| *Display: 11' X 11', at Gallery Sumukha, Bangalore. This set of works were exhibited at Pundole Gallery and Chemold Gallery with the title "Body Shop", 2002*





Untitled,
Acrylic on canvas, 96" X 60", 2001



Untitled,
96" X 60", Acrylic on canvas, 2002





Untitled,
84" X 60", Acrylic on canvas, 2002

Untitled, Photographs, 28" X 20", 2002

Ramesh Kalkur

Born 1969, Bangalore. Diploma in painting, Ken School of Art, Bangalore, 1990. Post Diploma in Painting, Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda, 1993. M.A in Painting, Royal College of Art, London, 1996.

Solo exhibitions: 'Assemblages' Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai, 1994. Traveling show of photographs, Sakshi Art Gallery, Bangalore, British Council Gallery, Chennai, Chitram Art Gallery, Cochin, 1998. '11 X 11' Gallery Sumukha, Bangalore 2002. 'Body Shop' Pundole Gallery & Gallery Chemold, Mumbai, 2003. Held several group shows including traveling show 'Vail' in Europe organized by iniVA, UK, 2003.

Received Inlaks take-off grant for artists in residence at Kanoria Centre for Arts, Ahmedabad, 1991. Inlaks Foundation Scholarship and Overseas Development Association shared scholarship scheme to study at Royal College of Art, 1994 - 96. John Minton Travel Grant for three months exchange program to Berlin, 1995. Parallel prize at the Degree show, Royal College of Art, London, 1996.



Acknowledgements

Special thanks to

*KSS Murthy, Vidya Murthy, Prem Chandavarkar, Jaggi, Salil and Mamatha
for the production of this book*

*Srishti School of Art Design & Technology, Dadiba and Khorshed Pundole, Premila Baid, Shireen Gandhi,
and
family and friends for their support.*



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