
Juxtaposing Modernism and Regional Modernism: Sculptures of Raghav Kaneria

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Abstract

Raghav Kaneria is considered to be one of the early modern Indian sculptors for his experiments of early 1960s. He began his journey at the Department of Sculpture, Faculty of Fine arts, Baroda under the pedagogy of Sankho Chaudhury. He attempted to exercise various mediums like bronze, cement, wood as well as scrap metal and wood. His travel and education abroad exposed him to modern European sculpture which he adopted as his language. He further translated his childhood memories from his native village into his subjectivity. This paper attempts to highlight Kaneria's journey of employing a European modernist language and rendering it with the idea of regional modernism.

Keywords: Modernism, regional modernism, modern Indian art, modern Indian sculpture, Baroda school of art, Raghav Kaneria.

Introduction

India has a long and rich sculptural history, starting from the famous examples of the Indus Valley Civilization, the magnificent sculptures from the Gupta period, Chalukyan period, and caves of Ajanta and Ellora and throughout the epochs of the history of India. Gradually, Indian sculpture paved its steps towards modernity through the institutionalized practice of art set up by the British Government. A pioneer in Indian modern sculpture, Ram Kinkar Baij set up an example and lesson that proved to be valuable for later artists. He was "A man who readily contacted the modernist vibrancy in Western art, its revolutionary cubist experiment; the monumental and the baroque in Rodin and the allusiveness of our tradition with its ability to expand experiential fact into larger metaphor." (Dube, 1985). Later Adi Davierwalla, Debiprasad Roychoudhury, Padosh Dasgupta, Sankho Chauduri, Raghav Keneria, Himmat Shah, Mahendra

Pandya, Meera Mukherjee and other artists delved themselves into this journey of sculptural experimentation.

Short Biography

Raghav Kaneria was born on the 19th of March 1936 in Anida, a village near Gondal, Gujarat. After he received his primary education in a village, he obtained admission in the Sculpture department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda in 1954. He completed his Diploma in 1959 with first class, and later received a Cultural Scholarship awarded by The Government of India to study under Prof. Sankho Chaudhuri from 1960 to 1962. Additionally, in the year 1964 he received the Commonwealth Scholarship awarded by British Government to study at Royal College of Art, London, England where he pursued his masters in 1968. From 1967 to 1969, he worked as a Faculty member in Department of Sculpture, Walthamstow School of Arts in London. His sculptures were appreciated by the British Art Historians and soon gained recognition in England. On returning to Baroda in 1969, he joined the sculpture department in Baroda as a Faculty member in the following year. In 1985 he was promoted as a Professor and continued till 1996. Kaneria has many awards and honours to his name. His personality has a curious combination of strength as well as enthusiasm which is reflected in his sculptures. He currently lives and works in Baroda and London.

Discerning the modern and regional modern in Kaneria's sculptures

As a student of visual arts, one is often encouraged to explore and experiment in disparate materials and forms. For a broadened perspective and inspiration Raghav Kaneria was introduced to modern European sculpture notably by his teachers Sankho Chaudhuri, Markand Bhatt, K.G. Subramanyan amongst others. The sculptures of modern artists like Henry Moore, Constantine Brancusi, Jean Arp, and Henri Matisse inspired Kaneria in their fascinating forms, extending his interest in bringing those forms to his early works and further to develop his mature language. His study and travel to Europe helped him understand the true sense of modern western sculpture first hand. He travelled to Europe during late modernism or when the modern art pieces were displayed in the galleries or museums as masterpieces. He was already acquainted with these art forms and practiced similar approaches earlier but the visual experience of the modern masterpieces and watching ongoing art trend in Europe gave him the push to continue to converse in this language through his entire sculptural journey.

He initially chose cement, concrete and uncarved wood as his mediums, to express powerful dynamic force in his forms. With time he favored metal and also experimented with scrap to play with its texture and surface. He also worked with junk and industrial materials to create strange forms and visuals. The images developed from these new experiments were inspired by ritual cults or deities of village culture. The nature of his work is generally ruled by the truth of nature and character of the material he uses.



Fig1 Scarecrow, scrap metal, 1963



Fig 2 Cactus, scrap metal, 1963

The 1960s saw a gradual shift in his practice, from modeling and casting to assemblage and construction in industrial scrap of either wood or steel, using direct processes like carving, joining etc. and breaking up surfaces by chiseling, nailing and drilling. The results were vigorous and had a primitive savoir of industrial culture. He achieved the finest form and image in a stylized direction using industrial junks and industrial techniques as seen in *Scarecrow* (Fig 1) and *Cactus* (Fig 2). The uneven contours of the junk pieces and the rusty textural surface depict expressions of a distorted form of figure. His sculptures produce strange imagery and significance to the new form. The forms used in his sculptures bring out the sensuous and organic beauty of industrial junk by deft combinations. These sculptures have a tendency to

break out of the prevalent design formula. In the early 1970s he brought together welding and indirect casting techniques. He selected readymade forms and cast machinery parts, ground and welded these directly to create his image or made plaster reproduction of readymade parts. He changed their shapes and movements as he desired and cast these in bronze in pieces and joined them by welding, grinding and polished finishing of the surfaces. The total composite sculpture is however a graceful chain of lyrical rhythm with broad narrow forms, round, cylindrical or circular forms, organized in various curves and flowing movements intoning the fluidity of melt metal as appeared in the sculptures of 1973. These sculptures were highly polished and they were in a combination of tubular and spherical forms in which its form is essentially dominant. They rise from a very small rounded form at the base and emerge upward into tubular forms like in *Growth*(Fig 3).

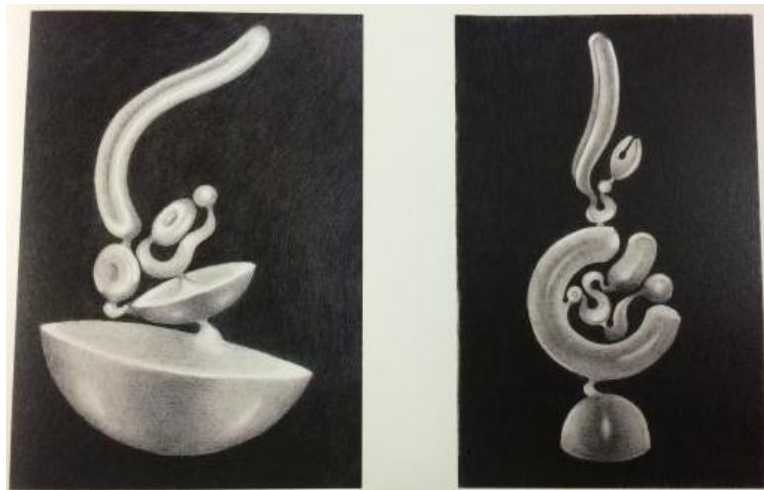


Fig 3 Growth 1,2, steel, 1972-2005

While his approach towards his visual as well as formal exploration remains modern, he did not forget his roots. The animals and deities he grew up observing in a village in Saurashtra, became the subject of his sculptures repeatedly, as we can point out we can in works such as the *Bull* (Fig 4), *Jumping Calf* (Fig 5) and *Ganesh* (Fig 6) which were executed in different times with different materials and techniques. Referring back to his childhood he evokes the senses of memories and nostalgia. He shares, “During my childhood years in a village of Saurashtra, I used

to play with animals. I enjoyed it very much. Apart from recurring nostalgia, that has also provided inspiration for my work. Even after coming to Baroda, I love playing with animals, but through my work as it gives me immense pleasure.” Objective approach in his sculpture refers to European modern language and the subjective approach is concerned with the idea of regional modernism.



Fig 4 Bull, bronze, 1959



Fig 5 Jumping Calf 2, bronze, 1978

At the time when Kaneria was practicing (late 1950s), there emerged a rather distinct idea of ‘skill’ in art that broke away from its definition in the traditional sense. It was considered then that the artist who is successful in depicting what he intends to show is skillful. So considering this notion of articulating idea into sculptural form, Kaneria was successful in depicting what he intended to show. He chose subjects from his roots but adopted modern language for its execution. His travels along with Jyoti Bhatt to the tribal and rural areas of Gujarat connected and brought him closer to the traditions of his native land. They initiated a photography project to document their life and art. He found his inspiration from tradition but was able to juxtapose it with his experience of formal experimentation in Europe. He developed his language, a language, which is liberal and communicative enough to interact on the international stage. Raghav Kaneria, through his diverse approach successfully practiced this new sense of aesthetics, which was established by the then newly built institution at Baroda.



Fig 6 Ganesh 1 , bronze, 2015

Conclusion

In Raghav Kaneria's sculptures we find the characteristics of both European Modernism and regional modernism. Form, inevitably becomes of vital importance in his sculptures. In a newspaper article in 1970, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh described his works in uncarved wood, retrospectively, as "having the intensity of totems: images risen from the earth like tombstones of an unknown tribe" (Article, Times of India). Kaneria's sense of order acquired from early modernist lessons was further enriched from his keenness for rural craft. His approach to build up his language, his eagerness to travel in search for indigenous expressions of different regions and his approach to bring these forms on an International platform manifest the idea of Regional Modernism.

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