

TOUCHSTONE GALLERY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Annex B and C at Touchstone Gallery

July 8 – August 7, 2009

"Higher" by Anil CS Rao

Opening Reception: July 10, 6 – 8:30 pm

Higher Ground in the Work of Anil Rao *By John Austin*

There is something about Anil Rao's mixed media work that immediately captures the viewer's attention. One could imagine this is the result of the work's natural exuberance, the sheer contagious joy and reverence that you feel when confronted by his optically sumptuous imagery of Tirupati and Tirumala—a holy Hindu complex in Southern India near Madras. This irrepressible high-spiritedness is fueled by the nature of artist's object, and in no small measure by Rao's flair for color and design.

These attributes in Rao's work may be stylistically seen as the property of pop art but they add a useful note of punctiliousness to the highjinks which are going on in the pictorial frames, whether it be the temples or the landscapes. They add a pop-surrealist aspect to the work, while the artist's technique of photography-based painting brings out the all-important question: when does photography become a painting and when does a painterly painting start looking like a photograph?

We are always at an impasse here and all answers are provisional, of course, but in this regard I consider Seshandri's Tail, 2008, a curious yet imagistically compelling work because it so emphatically scrambles the code between photography and painting, because of the occasional off-register quality of the image versus color ratio found in this work. The use of this quality implies a touch of irony and deepens our appreciation that the artist using, deliberately, pictorial conventions traditionally considered more appropriate to commercial art, intensely artificialized artwork rather than to so-called "high art."

The blurring of those artificially prescribed boundaries in Rao's work is remarkable. The raw image is heavily retouched in the computer, printed on canvas and then painted over utilizing standard media. The attempted end effect is neither that of a painting nor a photograph (hence mixed media). It recalls a number of traditions both from within and without the canons of high art apart from that of pop art: Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, American Romantics such as F.E. Church, and painters of the Hudson Hudson Valley School, Persian miniatures, naïf and outsider art all come to mind.

Besides, one might very easily come to the conclusion that the Dionysian aspect, the Eros-aspect of Rao's work, which rests heavily on his visually mimetic imagistic recapitulation of the sensual aspect of the natural world is harmoniously balanced by an Apollonian sense of restraint. Thus the overall syncretistic vitality of Rao's synthesis allows us to appreciate the intense plastic life of his objects as well as the high-pitched use of vibrant colors that recall the efflorescence of a torrid landscape.

Fundamentally, the deliberative artificializing motifs in Anil Rao's images which strengthen the syncretistic aspect of his work remind us that all of our concepts regarding "art" spring out of the cultural context. That interpretation, that cultural conditioning, forces us to consider our collective desires as human beings to perpetually conjure up an ideal environment whether in spirituality, architecture, poetry or the visual arts. Anil Rao's photography-based paintings make this ideal tangible by reaching to the higher ground.

John Austin is an art writer living and working in Manhattan.

