The Acumenical Pursuits of Mr. L.N. Tallur

by Peter Nagy

The hero of our story is a seemingly unassuming young man, small in stature and of a dusky complexion, whose methodical demeanor is tempered by a very jocular approach to art and life. He hails from the state of Karnataka in southern India but has been living in Korea for the better part of the past eight years. He is a craftsman but also a philosopher, concerned with the making of things and the nature of materials while also displaying a strong affinity towards the conundrums of hermeneutics and an enthusiasm for the linguistic and symbolic ambiguities inherent in all types of communication.

Mr. Tallur’s art works (primarily sculptures but also veering into the expanded terrain known as “installations”) have as their foundations an eclectic approach which includes the traditional techniques of modeling, carving and casting but also the more radical gestures of assemblage and appropriation. This polyvalent facility enables the artist to explore both ancient and contemporary dilemmas simultaneously, an astonishing feat in actuality. Throughout his production run the durable threads of well-considered content but also an astonishing discernment in regards to formal attributes. So we, the viewers, must consider any number of possibilities when encountering his creations: history, theisms, concrete manifestations of the divine and ephemeral expressions of human desire, silhouettes, patinas, the transformation of forms through migratory paths or the inevitable decay of organic substances, even noise and tonnage as sculptural components, packaged with a particular *legerdemain* that has come to be the artist’s *nom de plume* (to pit metaphors against one another, a *Tallurian* trait).

One is initially seduced by Mr. Tallur’s luxurious involvement with material stuffs. Wood is burnished, scorched and oiled to produce brooding hulks and gleaming strides; bronzes glisten with humidity; an animal fecundity is coaxed from concrete, acquiring a skin of lichen or putrid blooms; metals are polluted with corroding salves while the pitch of petroleum is used as theatrical makeup. We are in the salon of a couturier or an alchemist’s lab, with multiple materials usually combined into a single work for an operatic effect. Mr. Tallur knows what he is doing. His art is reverently anti-digital, harking back to the grandiloquent expressions of the 19th Century, when European art extolled in a decadence of faux-historicisms and Orientalist pastiche. Mr. Tallur is aware that as we spend more and more of our time with phosphorescent communication devices we will crave the viscerally physical, longing to indulge in that which has been molested by an individual’s hand. It is as if Richard Serra sits down to dinner at El Bulli with Gustave Moreau, forced to discuss the pros and cons of Salvador Dali’s most autobiographical painting, “The Great Masturbator,” exactly equidistant from each other in time. (Yes, we are trapped in just such an over-determined historical moment when confronted with the works of Mr. Tallur and Mr. Tallur knows he has us trapped, like rats in a maze, so it is good to be in Catalunya with such marvelous company and sustenance.)

Our hero’s not-so-small feats of prestidigitation are the outcome of his unorthodox education. Mr. Tallur studied art-making as a more-or-less traditional idiom in both the Indian city of Mysore and later in the English city of Leeds. In between, however, he received a Master of Fine Arts degree in Museology at the esteemed Faculty of Fine Arts in Vadodara (also known as Baroda) in the Western Indian state of Gujarat. During this time, it seems that Mr. Tallur paid as much attention to the Muse as to the Museum! One constant to his research is the investigation of the nature of value, how it is attributed to works of art and consequently transferred through a social nexus. Of primary importance to this inquiry are the tropes of presentation and display, how the art work is both addressed and framed, in order to control the viewers’ perceptions or to manipulate the audience’s expectations. The study of Museology has led Mr. Tallur to possess a heightened awareness of the internal relationships of a work of art (the multiple parts to the whole as well as how materials inflect upon one another), the placement of art works within a space and how the context in which the art work resides can influence its perceived meanings.

Value is a mercurial phantasm that lies at the very heart of the consensus we call “the art world” and its attributes can be discerned only through the judicious employment of both smoke and mirrors. In several works (such as the two versions of *Chromatophobia* and the singularly iconic *Unicode*) Mr. Tallur literally embeds coins into the surfaces of the works, providing a bling of happenstance to comment on the vicissitudes of liquidity on which investors’ anxieties feed. Exchange value, use value and symbolic value enact a perverse *ménage a trois* in Mr. Tallur’s works, often wearing their own (usually counterfeit) pedigrees on their sleeves. In the work entitled *Apocalypse*, the artist creates a ritual bath of sorts for hard currency, washing it of its sins and releasing it back into the world, fresh as a baby’s bottom. To polish means to beautify but also to cultivate, to bring sophistication to something. Mr. Tallur dances a jig around our sordid and sad devotion to money, well aware of the religious significance we have imbued it with, the commanding role it plays in all our pleasures and fears.

Here the artist also connects to a particularly Indian neurosis about money and, by extension, value in general. *Darshan* is an important concept within Hindu philosophy, meaning to literally see the deity who is resident in the temple but also for one’s self *to be seen by the deity*. The visual trade route is two-way and reciprocal. This concept then extends itself on to other types of visual materials (traditionally calendar art and later posters of Bollywood film stars) and, eventually, to luxury goods and money. The value of visuality itself is amplified while the ego of the viewer is acknowledged. This leads us to a situation where the very sight of cold, hard cash is corruptible and almost sexualized, concomitant with the attributes of shame, embarrassment, stimulation and bacchanalia that come with such territory.

The artist’s own moral position on all of this could be said to be “glottal,” (referring to the glottis, the space between the vocal chords which affects voice modulation through both expansion and contraction) so carefully does he lay a trap for the unsuspecting viewer to fall into, then implicating him or herself in these very processes of iniquity and retribution, ideally so as to gain both distance and reflection on one’s own involvement (ideally, but not necessarily so). The artist’s role, then, is to create and exploit this *space in between*, those that we encounter in our day-to-day lives (between the rigidly defined spaces of home/work/play but also our multiple identities which inhabit these particular spaces) which is then manipulated by the ebb and flow of friends, strangers, lovers and family. Considering his *oeuvre* to date, one realizes that Mr. Tallur conducts an elliptical tour through the interstices between capitalized disciplines: Science, Religion, Industry, Philosophy and Psychology. Art being the catchall term to accommodate the activities of such a Polymath.

In other works, Mr. Tallur pays particular attention to the site where heaven and earth converge, the corporeal shell that acts as a cipher for both mind and spirit (for we have scant methods to actually picture mind and spirit). In sculptures such as *Man with Holes, Deepa Laxmi, Man Carrying Hole, 0+0=0-0, Deepa Sundari, Enlightenment Machine* and *Blessing*, he employs the human figure as a site of familiarity so as to comment on its willful negation. All schools of spirituality view the body as a prison and escape from it as the ultimate goal. Our hero harnesses the processes of sculpting (grinding, carving, casting, modeling, nailing, coating) to illustrate the mortification of the flesh, the transubstantiation of energy. There is an inherent violence here, with even decapitation, suffocation, crucifixion and suicide inferred in some works, the better to arouse the senses to their ultimate abandonment. Mr. Tallur transposes ancient forms into a contemporary context while acknowledging the long history of the destruction of art (usually by religious zealots or the mentally disturbed) that is a parallel art history of its own. (I think here of not only the unfortunate encounter between the Taliban and the Bamiyan Buddhas but also the incident at St. Peter’s Basilica in 1972 when the geologist Laszlo Toth attacked Michelangelo’s *Pieta* with a hammer while shouting “I am Jesus Christ,” removing the Virgin Mary’s nose in the process.) “All must not be art, some art we must disintegrate,” said the punk rocker Patti Smith on her album *Easter* of 1978. Mr. Tallur’s clever innovation is to create forms through their defacement or partial obliteration, often making brand new, store-bought sculptures into pseudo-antiquities, again playing with our notions of what constitutes value in art works and skewering our aesthetic preferences.

Mr. Tallur manipulates found figurative forms from the diverse categories available on the Indian subcontinent: classical bronzes from the medieval Chola and Vijayanagara empires, rigid *Tirthankaras* of the Jain religion, monolithic meditative Buddhas, carved wooden animist examples from tribal cultures, and the kitsch reproductions made for the *nouveau riche* urban market. Certainly, we can surmise that the artist’s objective approach to these indigenous forms of his mother culture is due to his years living outside of India and he has been particularly courageous to use religious iconography in his work while most of his peers within India shy away from such subject matter (the primary reason being that a plethora of ghastly, religious kitsch “contemporary art” can be found in abundance). Yet Mr. Tallur’s transmogrifications of his found figures hit just the right note, allowing the original source to still be discerned while disguising them enough so that they become more globalized and less Indian. By doing so he traces the long journey of Indian figurative forms across Asia, both to the north across Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, and into Japan but also across the southern route to Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Thailand and Indonesia. Mr. Tallur posits History as one of his sculptural techniques, acknowledging its force to build up, break down and modify forms, forms being the concrete symbols by which man records ideas, movements, conflicts and resolutions.

Yet, as if our hero had not taken on enough already, there is also the subject of Science which catches his attention and feeds his imagination. He has a certain fascination with the mechanics of industrialization and the residual byproducts that it generates. At times, the sculptures can resemble laboratory experiments with materials subjected to certain processes and the observation of these transformations being the actual subject of the work (positing the convoluted trope of empiricism as interpretation). There are also the leitmotifs of medical experiments and surgical procedures running through some of the works, lending a Mad Scientist’s air to Mr. Tallur’s persona, introducing the disturbing connotations of organ theft, terminal diseases, and birth defects to his practice.

You may ask if this is truly Heroic, Mr. Tallur’s omnivorous appetite, his seemingly insatiable thirst for novelty and even spectacle. Today, with the unlimited possibilities available to all artists and the countless number of spaces (both physical and virtual) for them to display their creations, the profession of being an artist requires just as much saying “no” as thinking “yes,” demands that the artist edits himself and makes hard, even ruthless, choices. In spite of the wide range of subjects which Mr. Tallur’s art addresses, he has done so by creating an identifiable style, a rather cohesive vocabulary of forms and materials. Art-making is also brand-building and a career trajectory is predicated not only on growth and expansion but also consistency and focus. Mr. Tallur deserves the moniker of Our Hero by traversing this tight rope strung on-high while balancing prodigious packages whose contents continually shift. Considering that he has retained a firm grip on both Pleasure and Humor while doing so certainly nominates Mr. Tallur to be one of our most intrepid and victorious artists working today.