

HARMONY IN HEAVY METAL

Sculptures in Stainless Steel by **Balan Nambiar**

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Of the several cartographic mappings possible of metropolitan Bangalore, one happy one could be a map of this capital city of Karnataka based on the location of Balan Nambiar's twenty-odd public sculptures there. Which, by itself, is indication enough of the kind of impact this reclusive, if highly productive, sculptor has made in a diverse range of material for almost four decades now.

Starting out with clay and moving to concrete, Balan has traveled the route in scrap metal, bronze, iron, enamel, stone and stainless steel with memorable creations in each. And yet, it is the harmony in heavy metal that sustains his enchantment, inspiring him to produce a cornucopia of conceptual pieces, impressive as much for the earthiness of their content as for the lightness of their form, considering the weight of the material he prefers. Even the largest and heaviest of his pieces has the quality of being punched through with space and grows freely from its root like some branch in the breeze.

Born in Kerala, where the craft of traditional metal workers like the *aasaris*, *moosaris* and *thattaans* is still alive and vibrant, Balan Nambiar combines in himself an indigenous instinct for classical integrity in form as well the zeal of a high-technology freak to assert modernity through streamlining the natural and reinterpreting the iconic, divested of ornamentation. There is a high-voltage artistic engagement with space – both interior and exterior – which distinguishes Balan's creative preoccupations and informs his method.

His studio is more like a factory shop floor. Vulcan's vortex is what one imagines. Fiery furnaces, molten metal, aching anvils, iron ingots, hammer and tongs and sparks. And a strong-armed man built like an ox, whose flint eyes soften as he slaps the steel into shape to reveal a new soul. Being with Balan Nambiar, one gets into a constructionist frame of mind. One begins to look at everything around in terms of weight, density, temperature, malleability and plasticity. Because those are the conceptual concerns organic to Balan's explorations, leading to a profusion of non-figurative, non-illustrative, non-narrative large-scale metal pieces, which are as endearing for their symbolic semantics as for their geometric complexity and engineering ease.

'Tantra through technology' might be a good way of defining Balan's style as his work combines the arcane, mystic, occult and ritualistic fervour of as-yet-alive peoples' *vaama panthi* (left handed) practices on the ground (collectively signified as 'tantra') with the more rationalistic and mechanistic pursuits of technological instrumentalism that comes with the use of oxy-acetylene flames or argon gas. Common sense tells us that mysticism has no more in common with technology than say the thirsty call of a cuckoo has with the wagging tail of a Japanese dog-robot. But as the American philosopher of information technology Erik Davis has pointed out in his pioneering and influential study, '*Techgnosis*', the mystical and technical might, in fact, be the twinned halves of our cultural DNA.

Balan's work invokes this powerful archetypal connection between magic, trick and technology. His modernist aesthetic, signified by reduction, linearity and abstraction, manifests in forms that resemble ancient wands, batons, bulbs, flats, orbs, ovoids and ellipses, rich with symbolic load, which give his works the aura of tantalizing talismans. His is a conscious expedition into what can only be called 'symbolic technology' – magical forms and shapes that, like the giant instruments in a *jantar mantar*, seem effortlessly aligned to tap the hidden currents of energy in the cosmos.

This is facilitated by a series of fortuitous apprenticeships and skills training that he has sought and imbibed – from engineering draughtsmanship to brass polishing of 'sacred mirrors' at Aranmula; from the enameling techniques of Italian foundries to the traditional lost-wax bronze casting of religious icons by the *sthapatis* at Swamimalai; from the behaviour of glass-fibre reinforced cement to the delights of computer-aided drawing or CAD.

A common word you hear when you are with Balan Nambiar is the word 'research'. And he does not use the expression in any casual way nor is it in any way dilettantish. For he is backed by a quarter century of sustained observation, study and documentation of ritual performing arts of the west coast of south India. This ample body of work includes the music and the mask-making crafts associated with dance forms like the *Bhadrakali Teyyams* and *Titambu Nrityams* of north Kerala and the Bhutas of south Karnataka, to the body and floor decoration rituals like *Nagamandala* and *Paambinkalam*. Balan's curiosity to understand peoples' aesthetics and his propensity to get seduced by any constructed form has resulted in a substantial body of published papers and a unique archive of several thousand rare pictures and rarer pieces of musical recordings. And this forms the core of his primitive accumulation of conceptual

paradigms and agendas, which permeates his artistic muse and manifests in a ceaseless swell of physical and metaphysical pursuits.

Interestingly, while his creative impulse is hooked on to the sacral, to the mystical and to the iconographic, his personal attitude remains solidly iconoclastic and subversive. So even with the vast index of sacred symbols and totem poles that he draws inspiration from, like the Valampiri Shankha (sacred conch with clockwise spiral) or the Kannati Bimbam (the sacred mirror which reflects one's divine or true self) or the Sapta-Matrikas (seven mother goddesses), Balan manages to zero in on forms and themes which are cross contextual in their basic abstraction and capable of articulating the tensions between the sacred and the profane, the subjective and objective, the inner and the outer, the *sthula* and the *sukshma* (material and evanescent).

It is but a short distance from here to a lasting engagement with the philosophical questions of form/formlessness or space/time. A studied interest in cosmology, *khshetraganitam* (or the mathematics of object installations in temples) and rituals linked with the worship of female deities has sharpened his feel for the fecund sensuality of archetypal 'mother goddess' images. This, in turn, generates acceptance of ancient cosmic symbolisms of the 'universal ovum' or the 'formless divine' or the 'goddess as void' with a fascinating flavour of contemporaneity when it is interpreted in 308-316 surgical grade steel.

A contemporary attitude is, in fact, at the very core of Balan's approach. His 1995 open-air piece '*Monument to the Assassinated*' in Kota stone, steel and granite, for example, sees him interpreting the mythological Lord Rama in a critical light for having surreptitiously assassinated Vaali, the king of Kishkinda, by hiding himself behind seven *saal* trees. For Balan, whether this is history or fiction or mythology or manifestation of divinity, it represents a deep injustice, which cannot be left un-critiqued. He does not hesitate to condemn this as an instance of the first Indian forest king to be assassinated by *savarnas* (the upper caste).

This need to retell an old idea in a new context has also propelled him to actively explore mixing two or more material. He has had considerable success in interlocking hot and cold stones like granite and marble, or male and female metal like bronze and copper. In the future, he is keen to fuse hard and soft substances like stainless steel and enamel. It was also imminent that his increasingly large and constructed pieces in steel will eventually aspire to an architectural immanence. Balan is now feverishly preparing prototypes towards building a sculpture in temple scale that one can enter, like in architecture.

Balan Nambiar's early years hardly seemed to be guiding him towards a full time career in the arts. Whether, as a strapping lad, ploughing his family fields in his native village in Kannur district of Kerala, or teaching in the village school or working as a draughtsman in Indian Railways in Chennai, there was little portent that this shy and self-effacing youngster was to grow into a high priest of monumental sculpture in India. Of course, like many Malayali youngsters of the Sixties, he too was a closet painter and a writer. But it was a chance encounter with the painter and pedagogue K.C.S.Paniker, then principal of the historic Madras College of Arts, which literally brought about a course-correction in Balan's trajectory. At the late age of 27, he found himself catapulted into a second-year admission for the diploma course of the famed institution and, from then on, there was no looking back.

Despite some early exhibitions of paintings, he was to soon settle into working with stone and steel sculpture with a marked cerebral energy, which has now culminated in his fascination with stainless steel. Among the most high profile sculptors of our time, one could suggest that Balan today straddles the firmament of Indian sculpture, somewhat in the manner of the late Pilloo Pochkhanawala a decade-and-a-half ago.

Balan Nambiar's latest range of works in stainless steel seem possessed of an uncanny aura of translucency. In his landmark '*Valampiri Shankh*' created in the year 2000, for example, he has been able to enter the industrial and cyber culture with the attitude of an artisan combined with the ritualistic insight of a temple '*tantri*'. The conch with the clockwise spiral, which is a natural object spun out from the depth of the ocean, has assumed several levels of symbolic meaning in Indian cultural practices. This conch is an ubiquitous accessory to sacred ceremonies, death rituals, festive inaugurations, classical performing arts and, in mythologies like the *Mahabharata*, the herald of war. The conch inhabits most Hindu and Buddhist *puja* spaces. As a *Vaishnavite* icon, it is a sacred object in one of the multiple hands of images of gods and goddesses. It is a well-crafted and adorned item in an *arti* tray. The sound from the conch, when blown, is supposed to be the closest approximation to the cosmic sonic or the '*omkara dhvani*', another holy dimension invested in this fragile looking calcified shell.

To transform this into a sculptural art object would seem a risky proposition. On the one hand, it has not been uncommon for studio potters and ceramists to play with the conch and shell forms in clay or vitrified salt glazes or even porcelain. There it assumes a clever naturalism, faithful to all the rough and smooth textures of the original while permitting both wheel-thrown and hand-built

experimentation. Balan's intentions, however, seem to have been much more ambitious. The scale, for one. He imagined a conch a good eight feet in height, vertically placed, with the siphonal notch pointing up. Height-to-width, he also calculated a 'golden mean' proportion. But the real daring was to conceptualize it in stainless steel.

This hard and dense material clearly militates against the elemental aspects of the sacred conch – softness and curves, air and sound, porosity and wateriness, hollow spaces and lightness. And yet, the manner in which he set about achieving these very attributes in the work must be rated as a landmark in imagination, design and execution. The body of the sculpture consists of some fifty 4 mm thick laser cut stainless steel plates, equally distributed in horizontal layers in a logarithmic spiral, resembling the profile of the conch. These are TIG-welded on to a central vertical shaft, which holds the layers in place and keeps them equidistant. The whole shell is mounted on a SS base-plate and anchored to a granite slab. Though approximately 300 kilograms of 304 - grade stainless steel was used in the sculpture, the end result is of a remarkably trim looking object which seems to all at once rotate, levitate, revolve and resonate. It seems closer in its temperament to a bamboo-ribbed Japanese paper lantern. The 'see-through' character of the form virtually enables an uncanny experience of sound-in-space.

The construction of such a piece, evidently requires a sophisticated and nuanced comprehension of the structural properties of the material, which is highly prone to fatigue distortion at every stage of incremental thickness. Having the teasing and tantalizing quality of a form within a form, the sculpture underlines how aspects like irony, symbolism, memory, metaphor and paradox can be as much 'materials' of design as much as engineering or ergonomics.

Balan Nambiar's more recent work '*Kannadi Bimbam*' in stainless steel and copper also draws attention to his competence in compacting raw material with process. The idea of a 'sacred reflection', which enables a simultaneous glimpse of one's multiple selves is, to begin with, a tough enough idea to conceptualize. But to imagine it as infinite and contiguous layers of animation-like reticulations, somewhat akin to a neatly recessed layer of peeling onions, is certainly an inspired idea. It powerfully confronts us with the thought that our identities might indeed be fractured ones, even with the aid of a 'sacred' mirror.

Working with altogether new tools for art like CAD software, laser pencils, TIG welders and argon gas, Balan has opened up the possibilities of creatively fusing art and technology through cutting edge design. While design can, on the one

hand, be a mere reflection or an endorsement, it can on the other, be a breach of norm, a subversion. Liberated of the banal, the illustrative or the mechanical, modern design can be a persuasive form of critical and creative thought. And then, like Balan, you arrive at an art that is alembics of the soul.

The choice of stainless steel too seems imposed by moral as much as aesthetic concerns. Purity in sacred objects is a core issue. Steel is smelted pure and, above the 300-grade range, is also said to be bacteria-free. Its sheen and shine overlays on it a virginal, mint-fresh quality. There is a spectacularity to the substance that makes it display-cum-maintenance friendly. Its plasticity comes with high resilience and tensile strength, enabling a high degree of torsion and torque. The tensegrity in the material also permits the construction of larger than life-size installations without demanding too many stabilizing props.

For an artist familiar with principles of structural engineering or enameling techniques like *champlave*, *cloisonné* or *basetaille*, mastering the processes of stainless steel casting must have been relatively easy. Yet there is one unresolved issue. One of the most distinguishing features of Balan's works has been his sense and need for colour. It is this fascination that drew him to learn the art of enameling from his father-in-law, Paolo De Poli of Padova, Italy.

But the universe of stainless steel is colourless and aseptic, like some geometric slab with superhuman intelligence out of '2001- A Space Odyssey'. How does it reconcile with Balan's basic penchant for vibrant, feisty colours?

One can only interpret it as Balan's new inward journey in which more than with form he is engaging with space. The abstraction and balance of positive and negative space is heady, if spiritual, stuff. The pursuit of space can be among the most satisfying (and sometimes, most frustrating) adventures in art. The Cartesian idea of a generic unity to spatial extension poses a particular challenge to 'object art' to transcend the idea of being merely a void filled, towards a notion of the very erasure of a barrier between the interior and exterior. The more a sculptor achieves this, the more one sees revealed a clarity of intent. Balan Nambiar's preoccupation with fecund symbols of growth like leaves, *darbha* grass, paddy stalk, lotus, solar objects and such, leap out of their form to inhabit that no-man's-land between nature and culture, that ambiguous zone where technology, language, magic and the social imagination overlap and interpenetrate. They assume geometric motifs like parabolas, rhombus or other curved contours. Ever tuned to a techno-mystical impulse, he secularizes his forms only to reinvest them with a transformative charge.

However, in all mock seriousness, it is his cactus sculptures he finds himself most attached to. They are loaded with autobiographical irony. This desert plant thrives in adverse circumstances. In an interview, he has explained: "The cactus is a plant that flourishes or asserts its right to exist in an uncongenial atmosphere, like me." But, when created in stainless steel, it shines. Just as he does.

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