

REEL IT IN  
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I was warned about Ashish Avikunthak's video work before I entered "Vakratunda Swaha". I was told I'd be checking my watch to see how much of the 22-minute tour deforce was left within about 2 minutes of it starting.

I didn't check my watch even once.

There are a hundred things that came to mind while I was at the show and I know I won't be able to remember all of them or even articulate them. If there was ever a post that needed a "CUT THE CRAP", it's probably going to be this one. This post will end up being chaotic because what I can articulate isn't likely to be particularly coherent. Which is a) fine because this is a blog post, not an article, and b) fitting considering how the traditional notion of coherence doesn't quite apply to Avikunthak's cinematic works. His show is, however, the first time that I've missed and regretted not having my little corner of mainstream media any more because "Vakratunda Swaha" is demanding. Perhaps if viewers had some idea of what struck a chord with one person, they'd be more open to looking out for the ideas and emotions that resonate in the works. But I'd have to structure an article out of my random thoughts and stick to a word count. On second thoughts, I don't miss or regret anything.

"Vakratunda Swaha" is made up of a set of stills and two pieces titled "Et cetera" and "Vakratunda Swaha". The gallery has been divided into two black squares, separated from one another by a flimsy black wall. One of them has the photographs and "Etcetera" while the other is the screening theatre. The photographs are gorgeous and despite the fact that they're from the second short film, they give nothing away. Their eerie beauty just made me curious to see how such a wide range of visual textures are woven into one work.

Avikunthak likes to call himself a film artist, rather than a video artist. Part of this comes from the fact that he shoots in 35mm film rather than video and also because underneath his rather epic moustache is a rather contemptuous sneer for video practitioners. His chief problem with most video artists is that they're not particularly good with the technical aspects of filmmaking. No such issues with Avikunthak's work. I loved Avikunthak's imagery. It's poetic, without being clichéd or maudlin, and a delicious mix of mysterious abstraction and fathomable logic. He's not interested in presenting an obvious narrative that progresses in baby steps. The moments he places next to one another are connected by a curious tangle of the filmmaker's internal logic and ideas plucked from the shared culture of rituals and social constructs.

The four parts of "Et cetera" (brace yourself and sit on the floor, because it's 32 minutes long) may seem random but they are connected (by the act of walking, at a very basic

level). The chapter that stayed with me most vividly is "Soliloquy". It opens with the camera looking at a landscape. There are hills in the distance, some shrubbery and dry, reddish earth. A man enters the frame. We see him from behind. He's naked, but for bright red socks and black shoes. He starts walking and he keeps walking, winding his way around this landscape that looks weirdly unchanging even though the man isn't walking around in circles. At one point, the camera stops following him. The man jumps across a little gap and keeps walking ahead. After a bit, the naked figure, complete with his red socks, has blended into the landscape. The sense of solitude, vulnerability, intimacy, honesty and privacy that comes with the idea of a soliloquy is shown through the unselfconscious nudity. Yet, it's not just an everyman's body. He's distinctive: he's got red socks and shoes, for Chrissake. And he walks, like a journeying hero or a confused madman or a lost soul. And just when you think he's unusual for being naked and heading for the hills, he blends into his landscape. He's no longer solitary but part of a larger picture because of the camera's perspective. Distance brings with it an objectivity that makes the individual disappear and the internal monologue suddenly feels less personal. The walker is no longer one person but rather part of a social landscape and their soliloquy expresses the barrenness of the world to which the walker belongs. While leaving the show, I kept thinking of Girish Dahiwalé, who appears in "Vakratunda Swaha", and remembering the naked figure walking off into the distance. Bleak, bleaker and heartbreakingly bleakest.

Even though I actually remember almost every minute of "Vakratunda Swaha", I'm not going to recap it. Because that's just going to make me feel miserable about my descriptive skills. In "Vakratunda Swaha", Avikunthak's grief and shock at his friend's suicide is spliced with mythology, ritual and an eeriness that David Lynch would adore.

At the heart of the film is the memory of artist Girish Dahiwalé, who committed suicide about a year after Avikunthak shot the opening segment of the short film, and the Hindu god Ganesh. There's such bitter irony in seeing Dahiwalé immersing a little Ganapati at Chowpatty. A man so close to suicide is holding in his arms the god who is known as the remover of obstacles. Ganesh, through whom Vedavyasa told the epic Mahabharata, is seen alongside the man who has become the medium for Avikunthak's tale. Ganesh, the imperfect god made up of a far-from-ideal body and mismatched head, and the good-looking young Dahiwalé. Ganesh, whose idol is carried around the city by passionate devotees for visarjan, which is a temporary death and a long-cherished ritual that loops and returns each year. And Dahiwalé, whose corpse would be carried a year later by those who were his friends and family, continuing yet another ritual that has persisted.

Ideas swarm "Vakratunda Swaha". Gas masks weirdly mirror the god's elephant head and those who wear it walk and act boldly, expressing their grief instead of being consumed by it. It's as though the masks protecting the wearer from death, its toxicity and its ability to render someone incapable. The ritual of tonsuring appears repeatedly. It's a mark of one having survived somebody's death. It's also a mark of a new life, without the one who has died or as a Brahmin in case of those who have their heads shaved for the

thread ceremony. Avikunthak had his head shaved three times over the course of some seven-odd years in order to make "Vakratunda Swaha". You decide whether the ritual becomes a performance or if the performance is a ritual in the film. The contrast between seeing tonsuring or walking in "Et cetera" and "Vakratunda Swaha" is striking. In the first, there's a comfortable, impersonal objectivity. The same acts are trussed with emotions in "Vakratunda Swaha" and ultimately seem cathartic (or maybe I'm just a hopeless optimist). Hope is destroyed and then pieced together. The film often moves ahead by showing scenes where everything moves backwards. There's something blessedly hopeful in the little miracles, like shattered fragments coming together to create a Ganapati idol that drops into the gas-mask wearing Avikunthak's hands from the heavens. It's worth remembering that Ganesh is the bestower of wisdom in Hindu mythology.

As I left the gallery, I carried the image of Dahiwale with me: standing with the seas swirling at his waist, rain flattening his long hair against his back, a little Ganapati idol in his arms. Does he look at the idol with fond indulgence? Is that bemusement pulling at his lips because even though Dahiwale is about to drown the elephant, it's just a temporary death until next year, when the idols again return in technicolour gusto? Next year when Dahiwale would be contemplating suicide or already dead. And yet, his death, like Ganesh's, is impermanent. Aside from the annual festival dedicated to him, Hindu myths say Ganesh was killed and brought back to life. In some ways, Dahiwale is similar. Since he committed suicide in September 1998, Dahiwale has appeared in works by Riyas Komu, Atul Dodiya and now Avikunthak. A real memory and, like gods, alive through romanticised representation.

Avikunthak is clearly not interested in straightforward narratives but in a curious, dream-logic way, I think there is a tangible story in "Vakratunda Swaha". It's about a god who drowned only to reappear out of the water, a man who died and a friend who paced through his memories in an effort to understand art and death.

**CUT THE CRAP:** Awesome. But be patient and make sure you have at least an hour in hand