

An ode to human body by contemporary sculptors



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Abstract

In this research paper, a sincere effort has been made to study the creative inventiveness and exploration by contemporary sculptors, who are deeply inspired by the human body and have endeavoured to celebrate its myriad aspects in their unique and wondrous creations, setting a benchmark in the contemporary art world. Their love for ingenuity and individual quests for unveiling the joys of human form and celebrating it by adopting hitherto unheard materials, styles and mannerism thereby felicitating the human spirit to soar to greater heights. They have not only touched upon the physical aspects of human body but have been instrumental in deciphering the monumental, psychological as well as spiritual and divine realms. They stand apart as their styles are truly exclusive and full of deeper meaning than the mere appearances of their sculptures, setting the art world ablaze with new trends which may be followed by a large number of new generation artists in the times to come.

Keywords: Human Body, Greek Art, Kritios Boy, Kleobis and Biton, Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man

Research Paper

Introduction

Homosapiens first curiosity and fascination for human body perhaps was awakened in the 'Garden of Eden' when the forbidden fruit was eaten by Adam and Eve. But going back to Prehistoric times, one witnesses even the primitive cavemen were equally amused and excited with human form and they transmitted their delight and romance with human body on the surfaces of rugged walls of the caves, creating images of humans engaged in different chores and activities. This amply proves that for human beings their body was the object of first creative adventures and exploration. First of all, it is pertinent to decipher what is a body? Literally speaking the dictionaries describe "...noun, neutral, an organism, skin with material substance,...in contradiction to the spirit or soul, a material object, an organized group of people who meet for a specific purpose...."[1] It was only later realised that human body is not only a shrine of skeletal structure, tissues, muscles, veins and blood but it carries a soul, a mind and an unfathomed psyche, which is instrumental in creating mindboggling and awe-aspiring creations, which are wrapped in the layers of human mind and soul. The human body is a source of adventurism and harbours

an unquenching thirst for deciphering the biological, physiological and psychological deep mysteries embedded in the wondrous vaults of human mind. The first romance with human body has not diminished till today as masterpieces of monumental epoch-making creations we find in the museums all over the world, are driven by the images of human body and spirit, created by the artists in their individualistic styles and forms. Another observation is the way we understand and interpret the form of human body as a shifting goal-post in creative exercises and artistic expressions, inventing and re-inventing physical charm and shapes according to the specific requirements, conceptions and perceptions of the specific artists, influenced by specific cultural traditions and social norms. This pressure gave birth to an iconographic symbolism to human body. Artists and craftsmen were free to use it as per their influences and create meaningful symbols and gestures, felicitating a plethora of ideas which they wish to convey onto the onlooker. Major chunk of the masterpieces created by humans naturally carry the human forms in numerous manifestations and ideologies by giving a free ride to their imagination.

Enchanted by the physical attributes of human body,

the Greeks were courageous enough to glorify the naked human body by creating images on pottery and monolithic free-standing sculptures highlighting beauty and aesthetics and thought it was a suitable vehicle to carry their idealism and manifestations. *Kritios Boy* (480 B.C.) is a finest specimen of three-dimensional human form which besides being naked does not offend the eye and has a celestial aura. Interestingly, this masterpiece is not wrapped in any cultural symbolism...^[2] and is carved out of marble displaying the quintessential human form. This sculpture is devoid of eyes and philosophically speaking, the creator felt that it is a way to communicate with outer and inner world. Through this art piece, one can understand how away from taboos the sculptor celebrated the physical aesthetics of human body without earning the title of a voyeur. Two other notable masterpieces in similar fashion are marble sculptures of *Kleobis and Biton* (600-575 B.C.). They too are considered as setting a benchmark in furthering Classical Greek style pertaining to naturalization of human body. The Greek sculptors believed that unnecessary alterations to the physical attributes of the human body hinder the flawless flow of creations by creating impediments in the path of an imaginative idea. In 15th century, the great 'Leonardo da Vinci' - an Italian master made several studies of human form in his drawing measuring physical dimensions of human structure and the ratio between limbs and height. Through 'Vitruvian Man' he established the fundamental ratios of an ideal healthy young adult considering and employing various methods using triangles, squares and circles. The sculpture titled-'David' by 'Michelangelo' created between 1501-1504, portrays the ultimate physical charms of a young nude male which exudes the zenith of beauty in aesthetics glowing in a divine presence. A large number of copies of this masterpiece were created by other artists. Similarly the marble sculpture titled-'Venus' has limitless and enchanting presentation of female beauty. 'The Thinking Man' or 'The Thinker' sculpted by 'Auguste Rodin' - a French sculptor in 20th century added another dimension to the nude human sculpture where he brought out a common earthly man - a human being engaged in thoughtful reflection. This is a departure from the Greek and Roman sculptures where their creations look more heavenly and are drenched in divine manifestation.^[3] Slowly yet steadily, artists and sculptors all over the world were convinced that human body is indeed a powerful chariot to carry forward their emotions and perceptions. But during this process of transformation, artists enjoyed the freedom to improvise added explorable vistas by adding and deducting some

elements and symbols, to express deeply embedded social, religious, psychological, cultural and traditional concerns. Each one suitably utilise the human form in his/her inimitable style and fashion. The main plank was to achieve and convey the utopian ideals or beliefs which they felt were important for the mankind and the society to grow and progress.

In the contemporary art scene, human body has been exploited to the hilt and abstractions, enhanced in a way the language of conveying certain personal concerns and pressures of modern life. Now as we observe, the other unsavoury dark aspects of human conditions are too taken care of, thus providing a poetic license to the creators. Now the focus is on myriad maladies, exploitations, wars, hunger, mass migration, hatred and intolerance prevalent in this modern world and they have effectively use human body to voice their fears and doubts. The thirst for self-expression is growing by leaps and bounds. Individuals are deeply engaged in re-shaping the creative sensibilities through their innumerable styles, using a variety of mediums and tools to create works of art, which were hitherto not even thought of or given any credence. Indeed this is an era of free speech and free expression - a very concrete and solid democratization of art scenario, thus opening a new window to the world to let the fresh air of ideas and ideologies to come in, without any pretence, taboos or mind blocks. As the artists and sculptors started relishing the new wave of freedom with a revolutionary zeal, their creations saw a sea change as the artists now had the options to carve their artistic paths without being under the lense of criticism or strict fundamentals of traditional or classical aesthetics. This factor is amply established in the works of 'Henry Moore' - an internationally renowned sculptor. His abstract human forms have captured the imagination of millions of art lovers, who were excited and amazed to find that meaningful abstractions do enhance the essence of an artwork, in this case a sculpture. Today we find monumental and mammoth creations of this celebrated sculptor at the most prestigious places. So much so, he did not try to sculpt a human body in stone but selected a stone which look-like human form.^[4]

It is a sincere endeavour to highlight some of the path-breaking specimens of contemporary sculptures in the light of stylization, trends, mediums, conceptual perceptions and artistic approaches, and unveil the ideological philosophy and emotional impulses behind their adulation and preference, for discovering uncharted boundaries and touching the most sensitive chords of human mind and soul.

‘Gustav Vigeland’- The Fountainhead of Life:

The marvellous collection of sculptures inspired from realistic human form is visited by millions of visitors and art lovers in Oslo, Norway. Gustav Vigeland who designed this complex titled- ‘Frogner Sculpture Park’ comprising of an entrance, a bridge, a fountain, a circular staircase, a mosaic labyrinth and a forest, composed of carved human beings in stone and bronze. He devoted his entire life in completing this project which is spread across 110 acres. The visitors are spellbound by its magnificence and monumental ambience. Gustav was inspired by Rodin’s realistic human form in his early days. He was born in 1869 in Mandal, Norway. He learnt wood carving and sculpting from his father and later on visited France in 1893.^[5] Initially, he took up the career of a portrait-bust sculptor and was also following medieval sculptures. Ultimately, his creative journey took a decisive turn and he started carving monumental human figures in realistic manner and was offered several assignments by the art connoisseurs, before landing this coveted and prestigious project of creating a ‘Sculpture Park’ comprising of human beings, men, women, children in multiple groups and formations. He never look back and his entire life resolved around this project where he created magical and magnificent sculptures, human figures flying, dancing, climbing children merrily frolicking in carved out trees. The central and most attractive part is the ‘Fountain Square’ which is flocked by tourists throughout the day enjoying its glowing and awe-aspiring creations and environment. This is the shining example how a single element for this matter- a ‘Human Body’ can be engaged in conveying nearly all human feelings and emotions. This central monolithic ‘Fountain Square’ is comprised of one hundred and twenty-one human figures and is surrounded by thirty-six major groupings, all dealing with the various stages of life- birth, childhood, adolescence and old age. (Fig.1) Art critics presume that the human figures sculpted by Gustav Vigeland could be an expression of joy, faith and freedom as most of the figures are springing out to the sky to reach higher heights or to overcome impediments and difficulties in human conditions. They are shown collectively breaking free symbolising people in love, faith, struggle, life and death as the human figures are not draped in any attire intentionally to show perennial and eternal quest for human salvation. Gustav is a courageous and adventurous sculptor who stood away from the crowd and charted his own creative journey by emphasising on only just one element- the ‘Human

Body’ and has successfully established that meaningful improvisation and unstinted dedication in one’s work can achieve wonders. He has carved a niche for himself in the history of contemporary art. For this great sculptor, sculpture was his religion as he often explained this to the art critics.



Fig.1

Image Courtesy : <https://sworld.co.uk/2/3681/photoalbum/the-vigeland-park-the-world-s-largest-sculpture-park>

‘Antony Gormley’- Discovering Joys in Human Structure:

“If your work does not speak to people, it’s beyond comprehension and risible, but if people engage with it, you become tarred with the brush of populism”, says living legend Sir Antony Gormley- an internationally renowned sculptor based in England who has strived to touch the visible and invisible synergy in human form. He earnestly feels that an artist has to travel a lonely journey where he discovers himself and then tries to transmit the creative awakening to the populace. It may relate to their perceptions or not but the sacred duty of a true artist is to conquer the uncharted realms of imagination and vision. Antony Gormley has understood the joys and sorrows of human structure in philosophical as well as in physical attributes and has sincerely paid tribute to a human body, creating images which are much deeper and out of the box.^[6] He has stretched the shores of his imagination and perceptions, due to which he was able to conceive striking masterpieces of sculpture in a variety of materials, dwelling on kinetic energy and a fluid charm of its own. He was born in 1950 at Dewsbury Moor, England in the house of an Irish father and Mother of German descent. He further states, “Art is the means by which we communicate what it feels like to be

alive.” Baring his soul and immersing his creations in the sublime reservoir of free human spirit, he has amply demonstrated that specific vision of an artist in no way hinders the communication between the artist and the viewer, as all human beings share the same basic common sensibilities, all it needs is to groom the vision. Despite his abstractions in sculpture, he is hugely popular and has created a magnificent body of work based on human body and its lofty ideals, aspirations and emotions in different stylizations and mannerism, creating a new vocabulary in sculpture, which relates to the contemporary phenomenon. His works are in prestigious collections in all major museums and art galleries and his environmental and outdoor sculptures mammothly sized and grandeur, have been placed at unusual sites. Erecting his huge sculptures in urban and rural settings, he has tried to explore how human beings interact with the environment and spaces. The fragility of the human form is contrasted with Gormley’s use of industrial materials like concrete and cast iron, which bring materiality and solidity to his creations. Some of the important series he sculpted are ‘Cast Liners (2020)’ (Fig.2), ‘Stack Blockworks (2019)’, ‘Grid Works (2014-2020)’, ‘Weave Works (2018-2019)’, ‘Proppers (2010-2018)’, ‘Beamers (2009-2018)’ (Fig.3), ‘Framers (2009-2018)’, ‘Aperture (2009-2012)’, ‘Quantum Cloud (1999-2009)’ (Fig.4), etc.



Fig.2



Fig.3

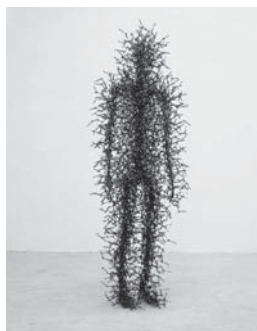


Fig.4

Image Courtesy: antonygormley.com

‘Dr. Gunther Von Hagens’- Beneath the Human Body:

Can one imagine that a sculptor has shown his creations in more than ninety cities around the world and about fifty million people have flocked to the galleries to enjoy the uniqueness of his sculptures since 1995. He is Dr. Gunther Von Hagens who is not even a trained sculptor from any school of art. We do not find any parallel or even similar content of the sculptures he has created. Dr. Gunther is a famous Anatomist from University of Heidelberg, Germany. Without any further adieu the mystery of his medium needs to be revealed which is one of its kind. His technique of sculpting is called ‘Plastination’ which in simple terms means ‘a process of halting decomposition to preserve anatomical specimens for scientific and medical education’. Viewers are stunned, shocked and amazed and some find it weird and bewildering to witness his sculptures created out of dead Human bodies skinned, preserved and plastinated, showing veins, muscles, bones and all human organs set in a number of formations in a dramatic way. People have never seen such unique style and content. Some sculptures are as large as sixteen feet and smallest one is of the size of a mouse. This exhibition titled- ‘Body Worlds’ (Fig.5 & 6) was designed to educate the general public about the inner workings of human body and what lies beneath our skin and he wants to create awareness amongst the human beings as how healthy and unhealthy lifestyles effects our fragile bodies.^[7] To a question Dr. Gunther explains that it is time we- the humans understood how our bodies work and thus generate an interest in living a healthy lifestyle physically, psychologically and physiologically and learn the marvels of this machine created by God. The exhibition is not designed to shock people as some find it horrible to see the inner organs of the body, their shapes and forms. This exhibition is curated by Dr. Angelina Whalley. Ancient human beings were well versed in preserving human bodies by mummifying them and applying various balms, salts and chemicals and there are millions of specimens of stuffed animals and bird pieces in natural history museums and in the homes of nature lovers. Though many artists or sculptors won’t be astute or motivated enough to follow this incredible trend as it requires deep study and precision. Yet it is a benchmark stylization of human form in its natural manner. The credit of

creating a new style of human body sculpture goes to Dr. Gunther. It is hoped more and more artists will find interest in these presentations and create their own sculptures based on human body parts.



Fig.5

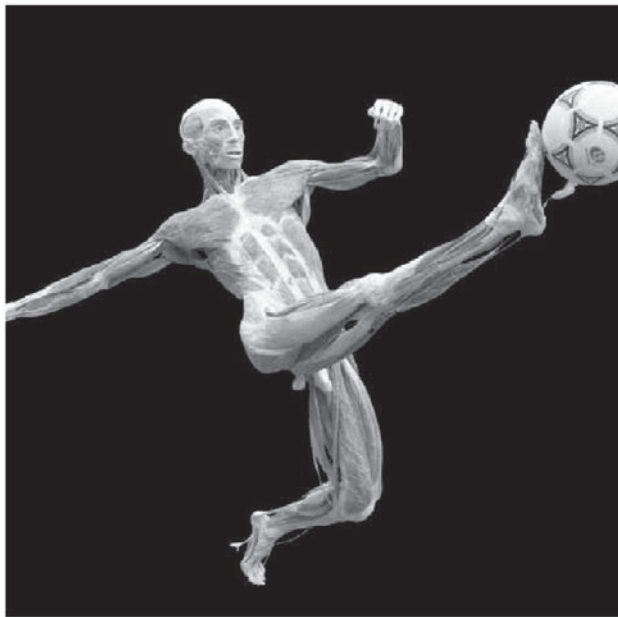


Fig 6

Image Courtesy: bodyworlds.com

‘Patricia Piccinini’- Revealing the Genesis of Creation:

Anthropoids, embryos, anthropomorphic creatures, chimeras (hybrid embryos) are some of the terms perhaps one would not have heard in the art world for inspiration

as all these are medical terms used by doctors but we have a sculptor based in Australia who was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, West Africa- Patricia Piccinini has delved deep into the world of creation, drawing inspiration from perhaps the most unusual organs, stem cells and other genetic and gynaecological procedures. She has deeply studied the progression and birth of a human being and even gone beyond and minutely studied the intricacies of egg and cell formations and birth of primates. About her work she explains, *“I am a lover of nature in its myriad forms and what lies beneath the life’s creation is my concern and interest. So naturally I am interested in physiology and other medical terms as I always crave for deeper knowledge about the natural world and keep myself updated on the issues related to human and animal forms.”* She further explains, *“I am interested in relationships: the relationship between the artificial and the natural, between humans and the environment.”* The genre of sculpture we usually see, sculptures made of stone, wood, metal, fibreglass, plaster of paris, terracotta etc but this lover of nature has created her masterpieces in silicone, aluminium, human & animal hair, leather, resin and fibreglass as these materials resemble skin, flesh, tissues, muscles and veins.^[8] Though she studied for a degree in painting as it was her first love to draw and paint. Interestingly, she was hired by Medical Museums for drawing specimens of human embryos and body parts which were well preserved for medical study. Thus she found a new interest in genetic science and was amazed at the mysteries of natural world. The form of foetuses and embryos occupied her mind most of the time and she was fascinated at their forms and physical appearances. Studying them day and night, the idea of using these natural forms was embedded in her mind. The result was thought-provoking as she herself stepped into the shoes of creating amazing sculptures made of unusual materials and her leitmotif is germination, birth and creation in its minutest detail. Her anthropomorphic creatures possess deep, thoughtful eyes, human hair and skin overlaying delicate blue veins. Her creations may shock and amuse the onlookers but some find it weird and eccentric but her philosophical intent is admirable as she is in quest for revealing the truth hidden behind our skins. From the early days she was inspired by surrealist works and has given a free vent to her imagination, to create something she really enjoys and admires, combining human and animal forms. Patricia Piccinini’s work is commendable in the sense it is unusual and unique. Some of her prominent works include ‘Kindred (2018)’, ‘Litter (2010)’, ‘Big Mother

(2005)', 'The Carrier (2012)', 'The Dreamer (2020)' (Fig.7), 'The Loafers (2018)', 'Teenage Metamorphosis (2017)', 'Sapling (2020)', 'Graham (2016)', 'Prone (2011)', 'The Offering (2009)' etc.



Fig 7

Image Courtesy: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/patricia-piccinini-the-dreamer>

'Ravinder Reddy'- Glorification of Indian Ethos

The winds of change have swept across the nations as the world has become a global village in the last three or four decades. Indian artists and sculptors freely travelled abroad and observed and absorbed the new changes and trends in contemporary art in stylization, content and new creative ventures. Several of them became successful in European and American art centres. They besides their own styles suitably improvised the new wave of thought processes and adopted new and unique materials, concepts, mannerisms and expressions. In the Indian contemporary art scene, one observes that many successful painters and sculptors have not hesitated in following the new trends prevalent in advanced countries. Call it motivation or inspiration. Standing away from this wave renowned sculptor- Ravinder Reddy explains, "When I was a student in the early 1980s, I found that many of my contemporaries were influenced by European sculptors. It was a School of thought I didn't wish to follow. Why should we do something that we are not familiar with and import from European masters? Why should I not do something that anybody can understand?" True to his commitment, he carved a niche for himself adopting the Indian ethos, traditions, sensibilities and philosophies and has successfully shown to the world that there is indelible strength, vitality and vibrancy in Indian art forms. His monumental,

glossy and colourful sculptures made in fibreglass have enthralled not even the greatest art connoisseurs and has also drawn attention of European and American art critics and viewers. Painted fibreglass mammoth female heads with typical features of Indian ladies in their own inimitable hairstyles, fashion accessories, jewellery and costumes are both bewitching and awe-aspiring. (Fig.8) They have their own aura and a mesmerising ambience of their own. Kohl-lined bulging large eyes are never wavering, the strong inclined nose and red-protruding lips invite attention.^[9] In fact Ravinder Reddy has dared to establish that native artists can choose from their own traditions and create some astounding creations, which are familiar to all Indians, yet they can be placed at par with best contemporary works of sculpture being created anywhere. His contribution is indeed commendable and the path he has chosen will certainly generate great interest in the minds of new generation sculptors. These colourful sculptures can safely be termed as 'Pop Art Sculptures' which no other Indian sculptor has dared to even visualise. Their massive sizes are spellbinding and have the capacity to lighten up any site or any open space. Ravinder Reddy has also created other full body female sculptures attired in contemporary as well as Indian costumes, these figures are bold and beautiful as they portray instant rapport with emancipation and empowerment.



Fig 8

Image Courtesy: www.saffronart.com

Conclusion

Looking at the works of these contemporary sculptors, the motif of human body is perhaps the most natural element in traditional as well as contemporary art

forms. Artists possess undiminishing interest in human form and they have freely drawn from the physical, psychological and philosophical aspects of human body, exploring the heights and depths of their imagination, to give vent to their creative impulses in expressing emotional fragility and strengths, choosing their own improvisations, to express their innermost thoughts pertaining to all aspects of creation, life and death. The ingenuity of their creative processes and their inventiveness has created wonders and today we have such stimulating contemporary sculptures pulsating with new wave international ethos. The credit of choosing their own specific paths which are unique in content and the selection of materials they chose for their wonderful creations have created benchmarks and out of this world feeling, liberating from the unsavoury loads of traditions. They have used their insight to emancipate the way we look at things and beyond. Human body will surely keep inspiring generations and generations of new artists and sculptors in the brave new art scenario.

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