

# Ajay Kurian

Working in a large variety of mediums, Ajay Kurian often creates anthropomorphized creatures, portrayed to inhabit or to generate dynamic circumstances. For Living Content's second issue, he explains how these characters enact the performances and projections of racialization while being caught in violent and wryly funny narratives. We talked about his community in New York, how his work relates to his upbringing, and about the role of childhood and fables in his practice. Ajay Kurian was born in 1984 in Baltimore, and currently lives and works in New York.

**Living Content** You moved from Baltimore to New York to do a BA at Columbia University in Art History...

**Ajay Kurian** And visual arts.

**LC** And after you finished your degree, you started a curatorial project. Can you tell me more about that project and why you chose to become an artist?

**AK** Well, it's funny because it wasn't really a choice to do one or the other, I was always making art. I was working for an artist at the

time and one of the other assistants, who was also a male model, had a buddy in the fashion world, who had a storefront that he wasn't going to use for a month. This was 2008, right after the crash. So we started thinking about it together, but then he totally flaked and it occurred to me: "well why not? Why don't I just do this on my own?". All of a sudden I took it upon myself to build this brand. I made a logo, a website, business cards - the entire infrastructure for it. It was called Gresham's Ghost, and the idea was that there was always meant to be some reciprocity between the space and the idea for the show, and it would migrate from place to place. The logo was this golden grasshopper. I started doing studio visits with the people that I knew from Columbia. Uri Aran, for instance, was incredibly generous and introduced me to a lot of other people, like Darren Bader, Zipora Fried, and Tommy Hartung. It was a great experience and I learned a lot, but I also made a lot of mistakes. I was so incredibly in the hole after this because I took out a loan to get the space. It was awful. Some things I really didn't think through.

**LC** And then you decided to become an artist...

**AK** Then I realized why don't I go into debt through sculpture instead? (laughter). Gresham's Ghost informed my way of thinking as much as anything else. It's hard to divorce it from my current practice.

**LC** It informed your way of thinking about installing and about the space?

**AK** And in terms of building narratives or ideas; how ideas can inhabit a space and become multidimensional. It never felt like I needed to anchor my practice in repetition or to cultivate a practice with a program of functioning. It felt as if I could explore a variety of different ways of making and arranging. Also, the artists that I was surrounded by had practices that were similar to that. Darren, in particular, is somebody who thinks as a curator in a lot of ways.

**LC** With that in mind, I want us to talk about the work you did for the Whitney Biennial: Childermass. How was this inspired by Wyndham Lewis' novel?

**AK** The only direct reference is the name of the two main characters: Satters and Pullman - the two main characters in his novel. I thought about it more atmospherically rather than any kind of anchor. Fredrick Jameson wrote a really good book on Wyndham Lewis' career, called "Fables of Aggression." It's about Modernism and Fascism. He called Childermass a great work of theological Science Fiction. That really appealed to me, it felt very in tune with my work. The title can also refer to the Massacre of Innocents, which also played a role in thinking about how these kids, in trying to rise, end up devastated. But the episodes of the work develop through a number of different means. I was really interested in the process of racialization and how the gaze is implicated in that process. How, from my experience growing up, my understanding of myself was

relying on other people's understandings of me: my white friends choosing when I was one of them and when I wasn't, when I made sense to them and when I was 'the other'. That became the internal atmosphere in my head; where I was not in control of my own identity. It was up to someone else. In a lot of ways that meant adopting whiteness to a great extent. To survive. There are a lot of modalities to whiteness that only became clear after I left that environment. After I left school and started to realize that this is not how I have to be.

**LC** That's a big realization. It's eye opening.

**AK** It was traumatic, and it's a very slow trauma because it happens throughout your life. It doesn't stop really. It didn't even stop after the Whitney, in a way.

**LC** What do you mean by that?

**AK** I mean, thinking about one's proximity to whiteness and what that allows in terms of power, is something that I'm thinking about and something that I wrestle with constantly. I learned these codes very early on, because I went to a very affluent, largely white school. Being fluent in multiple languages, knowing how to talk to my parents, my grandparents; to people who spoke English versus to people who didn't speak English, made it apparent that I could shift scenarios easily. There were a lot of issues around the Whitney that came up, but to tread lightly, I'll say that it

allowed me to reflect on my new situation - of new forms of privilege in a way. With that in mind, going back to the characters, this was building off of other shows in which that process of "playful" racialization happens most frequently in cartoons. We allow animals to become politically significant because it's easier to do that, rather than having a character in black face. You can sublimate various things through a cartoon animal. So there are certain contentious animals and creatures that are really important to the way in which I was thinking about assimilation. For instance, the frog characters in the basement are an open reference to Aristophanes' "The Frogs". I used the figure of the frog a number of times, so I think the valence of the figure is something that has grown in my work rather naturally. I don't know if I have a clear way of explaining the particularities of how I see that creature, but suffice to say that the frogs are the ones who decide not to climb. And, like Aristophanes' frogs, they are the guiding chorus but they aren't cast as heroes... It's an interesting position. Another example is the pitbull, a highly contentious animal in terms of how they are perceived versus how they actually live and act. The cloaking of the head versus the one uncloaked head - there are multiple ways to read that. I leave that relatively open, but I think the way that we use masks in order to hide or present oneself to others, for others, to oneself, for oneself, are all part of a social matrix. It starts getting a little more complicated as it goes up. The girl with the plane face for instance, started

as an intuition about... well it started from Taylor Swift -thinking about being in a position of extreme mobility and still feeling like a victim. She's a jet plane but she's still scared that that pitbull is reaching for her. There's a lot of calling back and forth that can happen in a wide space, whereas when it starts to constriction, then how do you approach that? How does that constriction start to change the narrative? With the giant figure for instance, I knew that I wanted a figure who wasn't climbing, who was just being pulled up without any work at all. I started thinking about what its gaze would be but I couldn't figure it out. I was really wrestling with it. I was like do I want its eyes closed? Or should the character be peering at you? That is when it hit me: I wanted it to have an atomic wedgie and the waistband would be his eyes. He could almost be blinded by that white band. I really liked the variety of readings that happened from that. There is a lot of ambiguity there, as if there were something prophetic about that. I think the most common read, which wasn't my initial one, was that this was a testament to bullying at schools. Which that's not at all how I came about it. The contradictions with the vulnerability of that character came about in the making of it. These readings exist together. Your emotional state when you walk up with it versus when you walk down with it, are almost at odds with one another. I wanted there to be these moments of ambiguity where you trust your feeling and then you also mistrust it. If I could have you warring with yourself about what you were looking at, and thinking about

it, then it felt successful. It felt like I wasn't offering you a lesson.

**LC** Can you tell me more about this desire to create ambiguity rather than offering answers?

**AK** People can't shake off discomfort. They can shake off an answer but they can't shake off discomfort. I think that this is where it comes from. Unless you give too clear of a position and you go full on aggressive - where it's aggressive to the extent that it's unsettling and it makes you upset. For instance, I think the one thing that maybe got under people's skin was the "All Holes Matter" t-shirt. I can't say that I choreographed any of these reactions, but I can say that the way that I had thought about it initially, was from an honest feeling that I had - and this came directly from the character. The t-shirts that they're wearing are not my t-shirts. These are T-shirts that they would choose themselves - very specific to them.

**LC** So you are alluding to a real person.

**AK** It's totally a real person. In a sense, these surreal science fiction aspects of my installation have to be mitigated by real feelings and real ideas that come from people. People who are deeply invested in these ideas- be they wrong or right. It's an outlook on circumstances, environment, structure, all of the things that make a person a person. These should be imbued in the character in some way, shape, or form.

**LC** We represent and often criticize human characteristics through fables. Fables are self-reflective of human nature, but you go one step further and you transform all these characters into children. Why is that? Why do you use children as opposed to adult characters?

**AK** I have a nephew who is six, my sister's kid, and seeing him growing up and not being his parent, it offers me the kind of distance you have to an artwork. Which is that the artwork is catharsis or sublimation, or demonstrates various sublimations that can happen, and it gives you space to think about a lot of difficult, problematic things. Whereas life often doesn't give you the time to think about those things. So if you are the parent's kid you're not thinking: "oh what's natural about this?" or "what's cultural about this?". There's not enough time in the fucking day to decide how you are screwing up your kid. You just have to make sure they are fed, alive, and at school. That's enough work as it is. It's hard for some and it's easier for others. I couldn't make sense of what was mimicry, what was genetic, what was societal, what was his friends. It all just became possible eligibilities. It really was hard enough to parse out, that it made me think that as soon as they start apprehending language - forget innocence. They are using your terms and your terms are far from being innocent. The way you talk about a homeless person to your kid, the way you talk about criminality, the way you

talk about cops and robbers, the way you talk about all of these things, it's all going to be influential in how they define a structure for themselves. A structure that can easily be dismantled later. It's very clear that the parents reify certain concepts very early on and the kids do the same as soon as they are able to express themselves. I think kids have a lot of agency in that as well, but that was the space in which the darker fables exist and that made perfect sense to me with the given dark reality.

**LC** I see. Now, moving on to our last question: what is something that left a mark on you, what are you reading or watching that inspires you? Or something that you often return to?

**AK** Well, the two things this Summer that I lost myself to: Twin Peaks and Elena Ferrante. One feels closer to my world than the other. I'll maybe address what I keep returning to in a minute. Twin Peaks feels really close and far away at the same time. It's one of those few moments where I was experiencing something by an artist that took me back to childhood, in a way where I felt like he had access to a truth that I didn't have access to. I felt like there was a mystery there that I really wanted to know. Not in order to explain it away, but to embark on something that felt like my brain might be part of the same ocean as that brain. I was in shallower waters. That was a weird experience, but an exhilarating and electrifying one. That's how I felt, or feel, about Ferrante. Reading this feels like you are in the

presence of a really great storyteller - like an aunt or a cousin that just starts spinning a yarn, and you're like "oh my god, she's so good at telling stories!". It's mundane - like taking the finest cuisine in the world and making it into spaghetti noodles. I'm maybe a third of the way through the third book right now. I really don't want it to end. I don't want to give too much away in terms of the way in which that narrative structure is able to expand.

**LC** And something you return to?

**AK** What do I return to? When I feel a little lost in my own stuff, when I feel unresolved in what I'm thinking about, I find that I go to catalogs and books as if looking for the revelation that I'm looking for in Lynch. But it always takes me further away because eventually, you realize that unfortunately, you have now made this world for yourself and you're on your own. No book is going to tell me where I need to go. No matter what influences you have at this point, this is your shit to own. If you rely on anything else too heavily, you lose your own honesty to yourself. So in this sense, returning always brings me back to myself because you can't steal that.





























## Image Sources and Bibliography

### Page 7

\_ Ajay Kurian

Rise (detail), 2017

Steel, foam, magic sculpt, magic smooth, styroplast, marble, shellac, custom clothes, sneakers, spray paint, paint, duct tape

Dimensions variable

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### Page 8

\_ Ajay Kurian

Rise (detail), 2017

Steel, foam, magic sculpt, magic smooth, styroplast, marble, shellac, custom clothes, sneakers, spray paint, paint, duct tape

Dimensions variable

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### Page 9

\_ Ajay Kurian

Rise (detail), 2017

Steel, foam, magic sculpt, magic smooth, styroplast, marble, shellac, custom clothes, sneakers, spray paint, paint, duct tape

Dimensions variable

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

\_ Ajay Kurian

Power, 2017

Steel, foam, magic sculpt, magic smooth, styroplast, shellac, custom clothes, sneakers, spray paint, paint, duct tape, chromed 3-D prints

Dimensions variable

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### Page 10

\_ Ajay Kurian

Growth, 2017

foam, magic sculpt, custom clothes, shellac, styroplast, paint, spray paint

Dimensions variable

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### Page 11

\_ Ajay Kurian

The Frogs, 2017

Plaster, sulfur, blue goldstone, steel, foam, magic sculpt, magic smooth, styroplast, custom clothes, sneakers, spray paint, paint, LED lights, wire, duct tape

Dimensions variable

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

### Page 12

\_ Ajay Kurian

God's Wisdom, 2016

Steel, brass wool, magic sculpt, blue foam, expanding foam, paint, fake hair, ribbon, plastic, led lights, custom duvet, down comforter, queen bed

152.40 x 203.20 x 147.32 cm (60 x 80 x 58 in)

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and White Flag Projects, St. Louis.

Page 13

\_Ajay Kurian

The Dreamers, 2016

Foam, expanding foam, rockite, marble, retroreflectors, steel, paint, clothing, plastic, sand, paint, magic sculpt, aluminum tape, wire and apples

Dimensions variable

© of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

Page 14

\_Ajay Kurian

The Dreamers, 2016

Foam, expanding foam, rockite, marble, retroreflectors, steel, paint, clothing, plastic, sand, paint, magic sculpt, aluminum tape, wire and apples

Dimensions variable

© of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

Page 15

\_Ajay Kurian

The Dreamers, 2016

Foam, expanding foam, rockite, marble, retroreflectors, steel, paint, clothing, plastic, sand, paint, magic sculpt, aluminum tape, wire and apples

Dimensions variable

© of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

Page 16

\_Ajay Kurian

Sunshine, 2013

Bronze plexiglass, lamp, melted gummi bears, paint, gravel, pop rocks, spit  
60.96 x 60.96 x 203.20 cm (24 x 24 x 80 in)

© of the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

Page 17

\_Ajay Kurian

No Drab Socks (Disgust), 2016

Epoxy clay, spray paint, steel, paint, feather boa, plastic, fringe, socks, buttons, paper, crystal clear resin, led lights, walnut, brass, fake leaves, velvet, wood

142.24 x 106.68 x 76.20 cm (56 x 42 x 30 in)

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Art Basel 2016.

Page 18

\_Ajay Kurian

No Drab Socks (Disgust), 2016

Epoxy clay, spray paint, steel, paint, feather boa, plastic, fringe, socks, buttons, paper, crystal clear resin, led lights, walnut, brass, fake leaves, velvet, wood

142.24 x 106.68 x 76.20 cm (56 x 42 x 30 inches )

© of the artist, 47 Canal, New York, and Art Basel 2016.