

ANTHONY DOWNEY

Where to Now?
Imminent
Impermanence in the
Works of Sheela Gowda

SHEELA GOWDA
IKON GALLERY
2017

On 2 March 2012, the precincts of the City Civil Court in Bangalore erupted into mayhem as a pitched battle broke out between members of the judiciary and local media groups. These skirmishes quickly degenerated into acts of vandalism, and the local police force waded in with a *lathi*-charge – or baton charge – to restore order. Three months before these events, the same judicial advocates had staged a boycott of the courts in January 2012, following an unprovoked attack on one of their members by police. This attack was part of a pattern of intimidation and harassment that, as far as the judiciary were concerned, was impeding their ability to carry out their duties. Infuriated by police harassment and, at the time, the adverse media coverage of their strike (which they considered both legitimate and necessary), the judiciary turned their anger towards the media.

A dramatic newspaper photograph of this violent event has been blown up to life-size scale for Sheela Gowda's show at the Ikon Gallery, its pixelated quality conveying something throwaway or ultimately dispensable, despite the historical import of the image. Covering an entire wall, *In Public* (2017) is, so to speak, an arresting if not faintly ridiculous sight: a central figure, a lawyer in black-and-white judicial garb, is seen in full flight about to launch a sizeable rock in the direction of their vehicle. Other lawyers rush to confront the police, whilst some scabble for more rocks to throw. The police, obviously struggling with the sheer force of events, look bemused and out of their depth as the jostle with the lawyers. The overall impact of this image suggests a degree of laughable chaos, and yet there is a uniformity to it: the police in khaki, the judiciary in black and white. There is also an unexpected calmness to the image, a sense of suspended action or a hiatus before the proverbial storm. To the far right, the original source of the judiciary's ire can be seen: a media van bearing the insignia of a local company. The media logo has been concealed, in part, by censor bars that are usually used to obscure sensitive information about a subject or person. These censor bars have been also allocated to members of the judiciary but not the police, despite the fact that they are not quite censorious enough to cover anyone's actual identity.

In terms of its aesthetic and formal contexts, this photograph has the premeditated decisiveness of a history painting, not unlike those of, say, Gustave Courbet, in which a pivotal moment in time is portrayed, one that usually augurs profound societal change or captures a

telling injustice. And yet it is just one of countless images circulating in a cultural economy that thrives on over-production and consumption. This photograph could represent a decisive moment or, equally, it could represent the status quo: an ongoing societal dysfunction that threatens collapse but seems to muddle through. The title, moreover, suggests that something blatant has occurred, a flagrancy or an affront to an accepted model of behaviour – an offense has been committed *in public* – that has an inherent quality of ‘slapstick’, the latter being a genre that consists mostly of violent mishaps, knockabout humour and sight gags. Inevitably, however, we must also enquire into who took this image and how: given that the lawyer’s ire was directed towards the media, and it is presumably a member of the media who took the original photograph, it would seem that proof of the lawyer’s anger towards the media will be ultimately supplied, so as to justify their original reports, by members of that very same media.

This embedded introspection, a visual form of *mise-en-abîme*, is undercut by the presence of actual rocks, similar to those being thrown in the photograph, lying strewn on the gallery floor in front of the photograph. It would appear that the violence of the rioting lawyers is uncontainable; it has contaminated the space and impedes on *It Stands Fallen* (2015), the other work sharing this room. Consisting of metal pipes, red fabric and wire, this bedecked gazebo-like structure has buckled and collapsed under the weight of unseen forces. Recalling the form of a *shamiana*, a popular Indian tent or awning used for public gatherings such as weddings or feasts, *It Stands Fallen* suggests a structure that can be readily relocated, a dwelling that is both improvisational and alert to change and disruption. Another drama appears to have unfolded here and perhaps a no less farcical event than the one portrayed in the photograph has caused the centre of the canopy to collapse, leaving behind only its ragged periphery. Although the entire room’s composition, its composure, intimates that it is subject to events beyond its control and the imminence of total collapse seems inevitable, the title of this work suggests otherwise: this structure, an artifact of celebration (especially if we consider the remaining cloth which now closely resembles festive bunting), still stands, albeit slightly bowed under the sheer weight of events. It becomes increasingly apparent in both works that an order, however dysfunctional or at times chaotic, can nevertheless still function and, conceivably, this is evidence of a dynamic, if on occasion unruly, civic life.

Utilising diverse means and materials, Gowda’s practice often focuses on repurposing elements or various ‘building blocks’ that reify the social impact of existing systems of exchange, production and distribution that are in operation across the Indian subcontinent, specifically Bangalore, where she lives and works. Known as the ‘garden city’, and with a population in excess of 8.5 million, Bangalore is the capital of the state of Karnataka, and one of the largest cities in India. Despite its size and importance, the city was never expected

to grow so rapidly nor was its infrastructure planned to handle such extraordinary urbanisation. Keen to engage with a globalised world economy, Bangalore readily embraced the headlong rush into an abundant future promised by, in particular, information technology. This wholesale engagement with technology has earned Bangalore the sobriquet of being India's Silicon Valley, but this status has not been achieved without a substantial, if not increasingly hazardous, price. Despite its relative wealth as the third largest hub in India for so-called high-net-worth-individuals (those with investible assets of US\$1 million or more), it suffers from disastrously high levels of pollution, with dust pollution and risky forms of waste disposal being significant concerns throughout the region. There is also a higher than average percentage of slum dwellings – the city has 862 slums from total of around 2,000 in Karnataka – and a general sense of unpreparedness when it comes to the toxic issue of municipal waste management, the latter being an admittedly complex issue in a city that has experienced unparalleled growth in recent years. The area of Whitefield, where the information technology industry is focused, is particularly affected by this, as it is considered to be the most polluted in the city.

In February 2017, to give but one example of what is at stake here, one of Bangalore's largest and most polluted lakes caught fire as a result of untreated effluents in the water supply. Due to the inadequacy of public transport, the increased carbon footprint of the city's residents – which is attributable to the manner in which Bangaloreans tend to commute in private vehicles over long distances – has greatly contributed to harmful carbon emissions and respiratory-related health issues; whilst the rapid urbanisation of Bangalore and its loss of natural resources – specifically its wetlands and green spaces – has seen both a higher level of air-borne pollutants and a rapid decline in the groundwater table. It has been estimated, in a report released in 2016 by the Indian Institute of Sciences, that 93 per cent of Bangalore's landscape will be covered by paved surfaces by 2020. According to this report, deforestation, evaporating lakes, flooding and other environmental hazards will effectively make the city 'unlivable' for its residents within the next decade or so, if not sooner.

A central component in this unprecedented urban growth has been the building of houses and high-rise offices. The robustness associated with such a building boom, and the broader ability of the city to accommodate incomers, has been achieved by a largely cheap, unregulated labour force that has allowed growth to remain inexpensive and unchecked on a municipal and state-wide level. In Gowda's *What Yet Remains* (2017), metal drums – once used to transport tree resin – have been flattened, cleaned and had eight circles of metal systematically cut from them. These metal circles are individually wrought, by hand, into *bandlis*, or metal bowls that are used in the Indian construction industry to carry concrete slurry and other building materials. Each drum, once flattened, makes up eight *bandlis* and, in conversation, Gowda is careful

to expand upon their symbolic context and what they tell us about the exchange value of labour in India and the rapid urbanisation of Bangalore. Unlike, say, a wheelbarrow, these bowl-like objects seem at one with the bodily dimensions of a worker's body, being small enough to hoist and yet big enough to transport a significant amount of material. In doing so, they maintain a human dimension, a material reality that is largely in line with the corporeal reality of the worker in question. However, the *bandli* can only maintain this personified, if not anthropomorphised, reality due to the fact that India has such a vast, and for some expendable, labour force to fuel its growth. From the most modest edifice in Bangalore to its increasingly visible high-rise buildings, it is the *bandli* that provides the most evident unit of labour in the city.

In a formal sense the utilisation of empty metal drums, whilst referencing their former function, affiliates them with the mechanised abstraction of Minimalist art forms, with each sheet of metal conforming to a specific size and shape. These objects, which are approximately the size of a small door, come in multiple colours and conditions, with each bearing the patina of previous usage. Optically, when stacked one on top of the other, the disc-like holes take on a beguilingly elliptical quality, with ovals and spheres orbiting one another playfully. The resourceful assembling of the base materiality of construction in Bangalore also embeds these objects in an ecology of meaning that is concerned with the socio- and geo-political status of modern-day India. Disavowing the often de-personalised aesthetic of Minimalism (its tendency, that is, towards well-designed, often flawless, fabrications), Gowda imbricates the precarious conditions of the millions who toil and labour – in service to both a building boom and the interest on debt owed to institutions such as the IMF and World Bank – into the material processes involved in the production of her work. In *What Yet Remains* the enduringly physical, tangible elements of the ubiquitous *bandlis*, their symbolic reality, also lends them a slightly talismanic quality. To the extent that their allegorical substance reveals an entire industry and system of global exchange value, a ritualistic, if not alchemical, set of characteristics becomes more apparent in these objects, not least in how their physical states are consistently being transformed from one condition to another. They may be disposable objects, simply made and plentiful, but they are also the enabling implement of construction and labour forces and the exacting, if not literal, measure of the city's future.

Hidden amongst the many *bandlis* that make up *What Yet Remains*, a number have had specific shapes painted on them that, at first, do not appear to be out of place. A keen eye will nevertheless observe motifs from Kazimir Malevich's work, specifically elements from his *Black Square* paintings. Malevich's now iconic paintings, of which there were four completed between 1915 and 1930 – although the first of these was anachronistically dated 1913 – were painted during a time

of exceptional unrest in Russia that was, following on from the 1905 Russian Revolution, World War One (1914–18), and the October Revolution of 1917, fast becoming a global phenomenon. Proposing in 1927 that these paintings were a way of escaping from “the dead weight of the real world”, Malevich’s revolutionary gesture was, of course, not just about withdrawal into the aesthetic as an end in itself, it was also an iconic statement on social revolution and the need, as he saw it, to develop a language that could transcend the binarism inherent in art (as a practice) and the so-called real world (as a point of reference). Based as it was on geometric forms, Malevich’s suprematist ‘grammar’ was, in short, largely a reaction to what he viewed as an overt reliance on objective realities – the mere reality of appearances and objects – and a misplaced emphasis on the centrality of human perception in the construction of the world. His squares announced a speculative future and that future was an uncertain one. To this end, his uncompromising squares were, amongst other things, foundational statements *on* the political and social turmoil engulfing Russia at that time.

Apparent abstraction, as a seismic yet imprecise measure of lasting social and political change, likewise underwrites Gowda’s non-didactic, open displays of repurposed materials and allusive forms. Everyday realities are inscribed into the material residue of activities that remain in process and far from finished; the energy still vibrant and resilient in the material reality of essential objects. These transitional and yet persistent states are similarly evident in *Properties* (2017), an unassuming work made up of cement blocks, white cement, sand, scoured *bandlis*, metal rods and mesh. The individual components in *Properties* – insinuating, perhaps, the countless houses being built by construction workers – appear functional and yet archaic, their constituent elements implying both building blocks and totems. Grids of white-painted rebar, propped against white-washed walls, recall the formal gambits of Minimalist paintings, whilst the carapaces of discarded *bandlis* stand idly by, their functionality now abandoned. Occasional holes and figurative elements in these forsaken constructions suggest animistic principles and the fundamentals of a geomorphic structure. There is, as in other works discussed here, the trace of a system in flux, an oblique, ancillary schema of structural organisation that evokes modernity – the building of high-rise buildings, for example, or the paving of a city – but through vernacular means. The localised methods of construction, in their base materiality, seem to complicate, if not contradict, the ascendant logic of modernity and urbanisation; whilst the sense of an overarching design or purpose is thwarted here and momentarily suspended. What is being lost in rapid development and unchecked urbanisation, and how, just as importantly, can it be measured? What, furthermore, will be the future of this city if its environment is despoiled to the point of no return?

Implying as it does a long-term negotiation of complex realities, the return of the vernacular in *Properties* reveals, in part at least, the

fortitude inherent in the everyday objects we regularly encounter. It is worth observing here, finally, that the overcrowding in Bangalore is also seasonal – involving, as it does, construction workers coming in from rural areas to find work – and not necessarily endemic. This is key to understanding the pulsations of an expanding metropolis and the complexity of its evolution. To this end, these objects, which bear their own allusive phenomenological language, could feasibly have a latter-day function; a tenacity of purpose that was once evident but has since been lost in the teleological march of progress and the utilitarian will that defines late modernity? Have they been left there by someone who will return and resume the work they once endeavored to complete? These artifacts, be they visual or instrumental, further disclose an apparatus of growth and impermanence. They convey the building blocks that potentially reveal both the present moment – in all its fluidity and mutability – and the trajectories of its future iteration as a historically defined moment in time. They ask, in short, a timeworn and perennial question: where to now?