

Vivan Sundaram

'I am not afraid to enter the unknown'

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Vivan Sundaram explains that he is a traveller, who comes across things, keeps moving, changing and exploring new grounds.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I would equate it with metaphysics. And since all artists like to be on their own ground, let me use one of my works to explain what I mean. In my book "Trash", there is a chapter on a video called "Turning". It is about the installation's destruction. People asked me why I destroyed it. For me it is about emphasizing the fragility of life, and the poetics of that fragility, as well as the continuous transformation of things. Even though the world is not on very solid grounds, the basis of my work is in the material realm of course - a toothbrush, plastic elements picked up from garbage and so on. How does one make something else out of them when re-presenting them? There is an organizing principle giving the

work its depth. And the poetic aspect comes from the destruction. In every death there is something of the other world, something goes and leaves this ground. There is a rise of the spirit.

This theme of constant transformation is crucial for me. There is no one Vivan Sundaram. There is no one ground that I stand on. I am like a traveler, coming across things and moving. I keep changing, constantly exploring new grounds.

I came from a completely apolitical background; my trajectory was then profoundly shaped by the political space, following the events of May 1968 in Paris: first by the politics of anarchism, later by Marxism. But I always believed that you can be both political and subjective, constantly exploring new issues, with new mediums. And in all journeys, there are cyclical connections. I constantly look at the cyclical circulation of all that is concrete and material. Its transformation and death appear a lot in my work. And the spiritual, or metaphysical reside in that. Death is about that change and transcendence. My work explores it and asks what is this journey to somewhere else.

When people recognize you for a certain kind of work, they expect you to constantly perform and produce in the same style, whereas I constantly move and shift. Many have a hard time to understand and accept it, in a time of quick-to-grab, commoditized creations. Few take the time to reflect or think or philosophize or deal with the metaphysical.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

Not really. As you know from Amrita Sher-Gil's story, my mother's background was mixed. My grand-mother's family mostly suppressed its Jewish roots, whereas my Sikh grandfather was a deeply religious man, in the most philosophical sense of the word - he tried to probe the meaning of life through many religions.

On my father's side, it was different. He was a Tamil Brahmin who rejected all of his religious background following his Western education. He became a rationalist. But he didn't impose it on anyone at home.

Then May 68 inspired you to become political?

Yes, I was so apolitical before, and those events inspired me into becoming a political being. It was so amazing to feel this anarchist sense of an extraordinary energy and collectivity. It was truly remarkable to be there.

Did you channel this energy into art?

Rather the contrary - it made me leave art. Because all art was then considered bourgeois.

Instead, I joined a very radical commune where I lived for a couple of years.

Why did you leave it?

Because I wanted to come back to India. Here I met some Communists and gradually I joined their position. And went back to art.

So what is the journey about?

Creativity is definitely a core part of it, in the largest sense of the word - constantly questioning myself and the world, not being afraid to change, to do something new, to enter the unknown.

But isn't fearing the unknown one of the most basic human traits?

Absolutely. But one of art's most important contributions is precisely that it explores the unknown and dares to question everything.

Questioning the premises of whatever I engage with is central to myself and to my philosophy. And sometimes it makes me feel very lonely.

Why so?

Because if you constantly shift and change, people may think you do not know what you are doing. Whereas after forty or forty-five years of making art with constant moves in many directions, I am quite confident about what I am doing. I know that there are some visible and invisible patterns in it all. And they all circulate meaning.

When that is the case, you have reasons to believe in what you do, because others may also perceive those patterns, which is very important.

So the impact your art has on others is important to you?

Definitely. Even if one person looks at it, and makes some sense of it, it matters. Otherwise you are just alone in your world.

What would you want your work to do to the person who experiences it?

I would hope that thanks to the element of surprise, the person who experiences my work be sensitized to the fact that whatever he or she thought they knew wasn't entirely true.

Other things can emerge. The possibility of the new gets triggered in them. And then they may apply it to themselves, to their lover, to a parent and so on. Something else would then get revealed. And that is what art does – or can do. If there is that recognition, it is an affirmation of how unplanned and unknown the journey is.

How do you see the journey – as a lonely one, or interconnected to some larger force?

I see myself on a path that fewer take, on the path of the minority. It is therefore very important to connect with others who are on that kind of journey, to find a fellow traveler. It may not come by so quickly, but it is very important to connect with such a being.

What does the word God mean to you?

By and large I don't enter that realm. Maybe because I was not brought up religious, the word God does not come easily to my lips. Also, the basis of my work does not necessarily go in that direction. Only when it comes to death, when something gets destroyed and starts again would the word God come in. But in general, I would simply say there are some elemental metaphysical forces that come about in life.

Where and when do you feel those forces?

I do not meditate or contemplate to bring them into me. But even if it is a cliché, I look at what makes me move in a certain direction, or what makes me create a certain work: there are moments when you have some thought and you do not know where it is coming from. Artists often say that ideas, works suddenly come to them and they do not know from where. It is a constant process of things maybe evolving unconsciously, unbeknownst to me, and sometimes for whatever reason, they emerge and come to the surface. I therefore constantly change, I constantly shift.

What about the idea of destiny – is there such a thing for you?

Sometimes, certain patterns emerge, certain kinds of formations. Things happen inside and outside which you could have never imagined. You let yourself go with them and cannot resist their flow. For instance, take me: coming from an upper class background and how I got carried into the

anarchist movement. It was such a strong pull. I could not resist it. And some elements of it must have remained in me, as much as some conservative elements. I am not only made up of the anarchist or the radical. Some parts in me look for order and beauty, wishing to be understood and loved.

Where is your anchor at times of great difficulty?

It is about finding the right thing to be engaged with creatively. It creates a certain kind of energy. Then there is a new Vivan Sundaram emerging, and I can face things.

Do you believe in reincarnation?

Not at all.

If there were one mystery you could ask God about, what would it be?

There is a fundamental frailty in all we build and construct. Someday I will be gone and all will disappear. It feels so fragile. I have done what I could, but it may all vanish. So I suppose I would want to ask God what will survive of me, once I am no longer here.

What is your idea of happiness?

It comes down to small things: in having happiness from what I do, and from still having a coming together with a partner, even though we have both been on a long journey.

When having those two things, something inside feels very rich and very fulfilled. It feels beautiful.