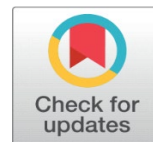


SCULPTED STEEL OF RAGHAV KANERIA

Dr. Giriraj Sharma ¹✉ , Shanta Samanta ²✉ 

¹ Associate Professor, Visual Art Department, IIS-Deemed to be University, Jaipur, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Sculpture, Faculty of Fine Arts, The M.S. University of Baroda, India



ABSTRACT

This article is a critical appreciation of Raghav Kaneria's welded sculptures done in scrap metal, mild steel, and stainless steel since 1962 to 2016. Though he has worked on many mediums like terracotta, bronze, wood, scrap metal, cement, assemblage etc. but in this article, I would like to concentrate only one medium and that is 'sheet metal' in its different forms like mild steel, stainless steel, and scrap metal. I have divided these works into three different phases depending on the style and treatment of his works and subject matter.

His first phase works were mostly done with scrap metals where found objects were welded together to create new forms. Many of these works were done when he was studying in Faculty of Fine Arts (Vadodara) and later in a Mumbai factory. These works have a rugged quality of the scrap metal sculptures with its strange primitive vitality. His second phase works were the smooth polished surfaces of abstract forms which he calls 'sprouting', done during his studies in Royal college of Art, London and during his teaching period in Waltham Forest Technical College, London and Hull College of Art, London. These sculptures consist of smooth tubular forms created in mild steel which were not an assemblage of direct forms, but a meticulous execution of forms inspired by nature. His third phase is the sensuous, simplistic, and decorative forms of Bull which he calls 'Nandi'. They were done in stainless steel sheets in Baroda, between 2014- 2016. These forms in stainless steel were created using huge flat steel sheets joined together by welding. They are simply called the Nandi forms. These three phases have different approach of execution. In this article I have tried to bring together a selection of his oeuvres made in 'metal sheets' but with very different approach in each series evoking diverse expressions.

Received 01 January 2022
Accepted 15 February 2022
Published 30 March 2022

Corresponding Author

Dr. Giriraj Sharma,
giriraj.sharma@iisuniversity.ac.in

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.75](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.75)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Keywords: Raghav Kaneria, Folk Art, Steel, Direct Metal, Scrap Metal Sculptures, Baroda School

1. INTRODUCTION

In the year 2015, Vadodara had organized a huge festival of Art in the Faculty of Fine Arts called "The VADFEST". It was a contemporary Art Festival with National and International Artist and had garnered a lot of attention. There, outside the old building premise of Pushpabaug (old building of Fine Arts), stood in attention a Majestic Bull. It was a huge beast made up of stainless steel by Raghav Kaneria. It mesmerized the viewers with its force and sheer presence. The lyrical beauty and the sensuous quality of the Bull drew a lot of attention at that time, and it compelled me to write this article.

Raghav Kaneria was born in Anida, Rajkot district in Gujarat, in a small and remote village on 19th March 1936. Educated under eclectic artist Prof. Sankho Choudhury, he is an artist whose perspective on art and life carry resonance



of village life of India. [Virani \(2012\)](#) His journey began in the Post Independent milieu and in the eclectic environment of Baroda with its pedagogical openness and its spirit of experimentation proved to be electrifying for this gifted artist.

He was very much interested in steel as a medium. He says “My ideas were not suitable for stone or wood. As a student I didn’t know welding, so I used scrap metal pieces and attached them on wood blocks(assemblages). To do that, I joined the ends of the metal pieces with iron nails and inserted these nails in the wood blocks” (Kaneria). The work Cock or Rooster, done in scrap from 1962-63 is an example of this technique. The cock represents his simple village life of his earlier days. Cock is considered as a vehicle of *Bahucharaji* Mata but Kaneria’s first encounter with cock came in existence when gypsies came into his village. His construction of the form shows the vitality and sensitivity of the material. The relation of wood and metal itself holds an erotic appeal and at the same time addition of nails symbolise pain also. Again, the trial-and-error method can be seen as spontaneous and playful manner. His construction of the form shows the vitality and sensitivity of the material. The imagery is replete with all the markers of a modernist search for Indian symbolism yet the approach of creating it is totally experimental. This work created a strong urge to explore metal as a medium of expression. [Gangopadhyay \(1985\)](#)

2. PHASE-I

After his Diploma from M.S. University of Baroda, Kaneria was invited by Virendra Shah of Mukund Iron Industry. He had a factory in Mumbai which did huge industrial castings. For metal casting, Virendra Bhai used to buy metals in the form of scraps which he melted for his castings. He had let Kaneria use these scraps free of cost to create his sculptures. Kaneria used these local scraps, learnt electric welding in this foundry and created a series of works which was exhibited in Mumbai in the year in 1963.

He had participated in a one man show from 21st to 28th February 1963, at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, where he exhibited 14 works done in scrap during his stay in Mumbai. The catalogue was accompanied by a write up by Vinayak Purohit, an Art critic where he describes the tactile qualities of Kaneria’s works. The quality of these works that are immediately perceived are those of energy, rawness, and boldness. Energy is obvious from the violence with which the rusted pieces are joined with harsh protruding iron rods [Purohit \(1963\)](#). The material (mild steel) and the technique (direct metal welding) are totally industrial, yet the outcome is very organic [Purohit \(1963\)](#). He gives credit to three special people for his Bombay journey- Mr. Virendra Shah, Kamalnayan Bajaj and Dr. Vinayak Purohit.

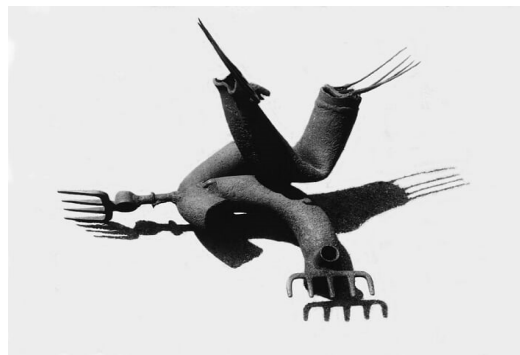


Figure 1 Cactus, 1963, Medium: Scrap Metal (Kaneria, One Man Show- Catalogue, 1963)

3. CACTUS

Discarded agricultural tools or implements which look like fork, broken pieces of exhaust pipes, crude bits of metal, iron rods and nails assume interesting and powerful shapes in his hands. It is hard work to fit the odd bits and pieces into right shapes. He continues this laborious process in his studio, until he is completely satisfied that the welding instrument and his hand has achieved their rugged and beautiful objective. These works have a savage beauty, a strange violence and energy in the forms which are crude, jagged, odds bits of metal, assumed under the direction of Kaneria's skilful hands and the welding instruments. The forms lack the colour that would normally please the average eye, but they are not without a strong sense of motion. The works are elemental and much of them strikingly beautiful in a brutal kind of way. By this time, he had already won ten major awards in India including the two Lalit kala Academy award in 1959 and 1963 [Dhamija \(1990\)](#), his works being exhibited at Paris Biennale in 1959 and Commonwealth Art Exhibition in 1962.

Ratan Parimoo in one of his writings in "Indian Sculpture Today 1983" says - these "found" forms intermingle with his subconscious producing every time a new shape and new form and even more strange juxtaposition. The use of surreal pun and metamorphosis can be seen in a work where the spiky forklike ends of partly flattened machine parts are at once a hand and trishul, though the artist calls it "Cactus". Rawness has given him a possibility to preserve the identity of the material which he has used, for example, he made a cactus (1963) in welded scrap metal. He assembled the objects without disturbing much of his surface and the industrial objects became the sign of the modernist age.

[By 1963, he had won 13 Awards and participated in two international shows like Biennale de Paris in France (1959) and Commonwealth Art Exhibition, London (1960). His Awards include National Award by Lalit Kala, New Delhi (1959 and 1963), Tamra Patra of Mumbai, State Art Exhibition, (1959 and 1960), Silver Medal of All India Sculptor's Association, Mumbai (1960), Governor's Prize, Mumbai or Bombay Art Society (1960), President of India's Silver Plaque in All India Fine Arts and Craft Society, New Delhi (1960), Recipient of National Cultural Scholarship awarded by Government of India from 1960-62, Bombay Art Society, Silver medal (1961) and Gold Medal (1962), 1st prize in Gujarat State Art Exhibition (1961) and Bombay Art Society-The Mouj Printing Bureau's Prize in Bombay Art Society (1962).] [Kaneria \(2015\)](#)

4. WARRIOR

The presence of human figure in his work is rare, and the kind of figuration he did in standing position look like avant garde and it is called Warrior in steel. This sculpture has a monumental quality, and there is a journey of idea of construction in sculpture. Here the idea and the material used are supplementary for each other. This is now in the collection of Air India, Mumbai branch. While playing with the junks, he came across a metal piece which had a blasted effect and the surface cracked. That became the wound of the warrior. The question that arises-how the idea of this sculpture came to his mind. Kaneria says that he starts his scrap works with no sketches or pre-conceived notion. He just plays with the different form for hours and a form emerges from it. "It is a subconscious effort. I try to create a form from putting together loose shapes" [Kaneria \(2015\)](#) Kaneria's sculptures with their bends and curves and assemblage depict a kind of relationship with open space.

Man-O-War- Another example is that of Tower like web form which also appears like cave. Their rusty decomposed surfaces, give them a primordial character, as if, they have been there for millions of years-since the creation of universe. In Kaneria's sculptures one can feel the presence of rich imagination and creative powers in the artist, which may be due to his rural origin.

Because of these factors, his works are unique and makes him an important Indian sculptor. To my knowledge, nobody in the country has yet explored welding of junk to such an extent and produced such startling results. [Chatterji \(1983\)](#)

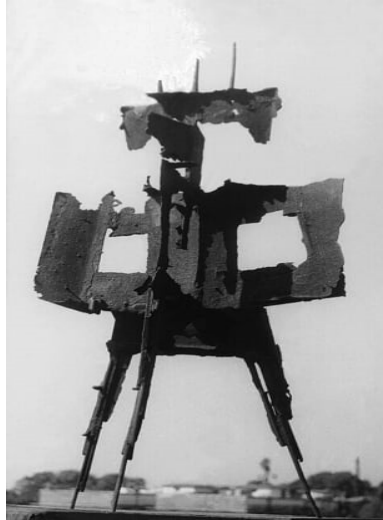


Figure 2 Chadia, Scrap Metal, 1963

Source 1st One man Show, Jahangir Art Gallery Catalogue, Artist's personal collection and From Jyoti Bhatt



Figure 3 Man-O-War, Scrap metal, 1963

Source 1st One man Show, Jahangir Art Gallery Catalogue, Artist's personal collection and From Jyoti Bhatt



Figure 4 Untitled, Scrap metal [Bhatt \(2021, March 5\)](#)

Source 1st One man Show, Jahangir Art Gallery Catalogue, Artist's personal collection and From Jyoti Bhatt

Mr. Vinayak Purohit says in this catalogue that Kaneria's works express vital energy and boldness of forms. The appeal is more to the eye, to the surface, to the limited but distinct range of rust colours; to the decayed and pitted surface; to an organisation of form of slightly menacing web. In this respect, the mode is contemporary [Purohit \(1963\)](#).



Figure 5 Kaneria welding his work

Source: Original photo from the Artist

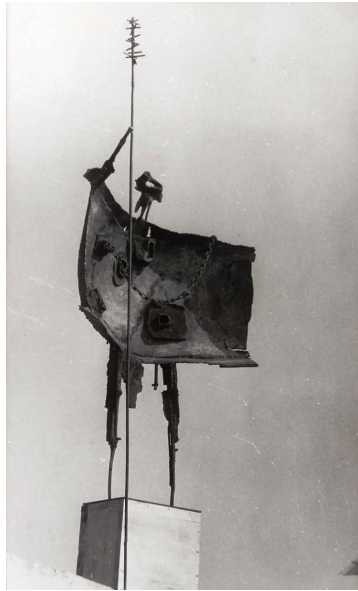


Figure 6 Warrior, scrap metal, 8 feet height

Source: Original photo from the Artist

5. PHASE-II

This was followed by his Commonwealth Scholarship Awarded by British Government to study at Royal College of Art, London, England from 1964 to 1967. Here he had begun to build up abstract forms with only a marginal reference to representation. They were also made in mild steel and inspired by germination. In interaction with British sculptors like Bryan Kneale and Philip Kings, his works furnished under logical formalist prescription, which had a place in contemporary British sculpture. He was also guided by Professor Bernard Meadows who was also his mentor. [Meadows \(1980\)](#) His works from this series was highly appreciated in London, so much so that, he had a large works bought by the Arts Council and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, an unusual success for a student. He used an abstraction conducive to the order of architectural spaces, of large interior or exterior situations. They were large tube-like steel forms which were smooth polished, surface and often painted.

These sprouting works are smoothly finished metal compositions which combine organic and technical looking machine derived forms. The pedestal or base is reduced to a visage.

[Figure 7](#) shows a group of works done during this time. Most of the works were between 8 to 12 feet in height. The round steel form that we see in these works are not ready-made forms but are created by him with straight round pipes. The process of curving them in circular shapes was most challenging thing technically. Each of these works has a minimalistic approach.

His sculpture titled 'sprouting seed' is one such example where he uses the smoothness of the form to define the smoothness of the seed and the sprouts. The material, steel is smooth yet hard and strong and this strength of the material is used to show the power and potential of a seed to grow into a large tree. The smoothness of the surface tempts us to touch it, feel it. The form looks like a controlled algebra

of bulging mass. He retains the solidity of form and material lusty shine add life to the organic development in space.



Figure 7 Group of sculptures done in London from Artist's personal collection

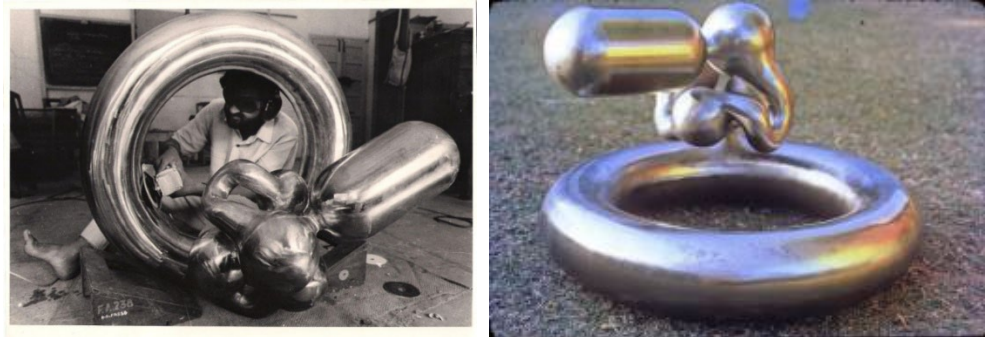


Figure 8 Sprouting Seed-Mild Steel 1971 Sheikh (1997)

6. PHASE-III

He comes back to steel again in 2013, but this time it is stainless Steel. Stainless steel is much tougher than mild steel, so the possibilities are very different than mild steel. By this time, he was already 77 years old, and handling of such large-scale works could be possible only in a factory with the help of technicians. Here steel sheets were used and cut with the help of water jets, so the cuts were very precise and the edges very smooth. They were then welded together and fixed with exact precision. Certain pieces were bent with the help of rolling machines which means too much dependence on technicians. Kaneria says, "...at any given day, I would prefer to do my works on my own rather than depending on others". [Kaneria \(2015\)](#) But the works that comes out of this challenge are unique.



Figure 9 Nandi-1, 2014 Stainless Steel-50"x22.5"x84" Kaneria (2015)

This is one of the sensuous, simplistic yet decorative forms of Nandi done in stainless steel sheets in Baroda between 2014 to 2016 consists of this third phase where the approach of the works are totally different than his earlier works. The Nandi series with its bold and rhythmic lines, the sensuous forms, expresses the form with a minimalist approach. These were huge beasts made up of stainless steel which mesmerizes the viewer with its force and sheer presence. It traverses time and cultures, owe as much debt to the then current international trend as to the folk art and design elements of native India.



Figure 10 Nandi-II, 2014, Stainless Steel-48"x36"x16"

Source: Artist's collection

This particular Nandi has an upward gaze, in spirit of bold defiance and slightly arrogant stance. Here we find amazing, robust strength of stainless steel which the artist has taken full advantage of and use of high technology which is apparent in its precise cuts of the edges. The volume has been created by bending the thick metal sheets in a machine. He has used laser technology to cut out the sensuous contours with bold precision and emotive depth.



Figure 11 Nandi-II, 2014, Stainless Steel-48"x36"x16".

Source: Artist's collection

Steel, which is an industrial material with its smooth surface, looks very cold and aloof. But in this work, the energy and vitality of the beast is felt. This Nandi has again taken an aggressive stance as if about to charge or attack but there is somewhere a touch of playfulness in it.

Normally, when the word Nandi is uttered, the image that comes to one's mind is that of a simple squatting bull as seen in Shiva temples but Kaneria's standing Nandi is full of sensuous power. The stainless steel reflects the light, and it seems gleaming and flawlessly smooth surface that expresses a subtle touch of softness reflecting on the Artist's love for animals. All these beautifully sculpted forms emerge as richly sensuous and sublime works of art.

7. OBJECTIVES

The aim of this article is to explore the creative journey of Raghav Kaneria through one medium- 'steel' in its different forms like scrap, mild steel and stainless steel and the various expressions and technical possibilities within that medium. I have tried to bifurcate all his direct metal works in three categories and explore the various possibilities of each category in terms of language, treatment, and concept. It is to explore the creative inner self of Kaneria, who even at the age of 86, still has the capacity to surprise us with his inherent zest, capturing the moments of his mundane life. His works are an inspiration to Art students, numerous Art lovers and Art practitioners, around the world.

8. CONCLUSION

Thus, we find that in all these works, though the medium is steel, the expressions and approach of works are very different. It suited him very well as it resonated with his own predilections. One of the underlying preoccupations that one witnesses time and again in his carefully built syntax is of cross-referencing and eclectic synthesis of traditional and modern. His talent is clear for all to see gaining acclaim and respect, not only for his extraordinary technical skill, but also for its beauty of form and expressive quality.



Figure 12 Nandi-II, 2014, Stainless Steel-56"x32"x12" (Kaneria R.)
source: Artist's collection

REFERENCES

- Balamani. M. (2020). Raghav Kaneria. *Journal of Creative Arts & Minds*. 6, (2). Fall/Winter, 109-125.
- Bhatt, Jyoti, (2021) *Fabers- Gujarati Sabha*, 3 monthly. Raghav Kaneria, January -, Juhu, Mumbai.
- Meadows. B. (1980). *Bernard Meadows at Royal College of Art 1960-1980' The Royal College of Art, London.*
- Purohit, V., (1963). 1st One man show of Raghav Kaneria, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, 2.
- Dhamija, R. (1990). *Catalogue of" National Exhibition of Art 1955-1990" Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi*, 39.
- Gangopadhyay, S. (1985). Raghav Kaneria ke murtishilpa. *Samakaleen Kala*, (5), 23-24.
- Gadney, R. (1980). *Bernard Meadows at Royal College of Art 1960-1980. Catalogue. London.*
- Kaneria, R. (2015). *Exhibition of Raghav Kaneria, Catalogue. Vadodara, Gujarat, Red Earth Art Gallery.*
- Parimoo, R. and R. Chatterji, (1983). *Indian Sculpture Today-1983, Raghav Kaneria, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai.* 63-64.
- Sheikh, G. (1997). *Contemporary Art in Baroda. Tulika Publication.*
- Virani. R.S. (2012). *Pratistha Smaranika-5. Nisargni nisharma nikhrelo kalakar- Anidathi England.* 65.