

Manish Nai: The Proceduralist

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Our first glimpse of Manish Nai involves the 35-year-old artist standing on top of a table pressing an iron box on a 6.6ft-long paper stuck on a wall. Two assistants stand alongside him and iron the print assiduously, leaving brown curved triangular marks behind. When the paper comes off, a print will have transferred on to the wall because of the heat.

The print is from an image that Nai took as part of his Billboards series, when he photographed empty billboards in 2011. Nai digitally merged versions of the photographs and found, by happy accident, water and dirt marks in the image arranging themselves in Rorschach's ink-blot-like patterns. "Till the paper comes off, I have no idea of what's going to appear on the wall," says Nai of his site-specific installation for curator Girish Shahane's group show *Midnight's Grandchildren* at Studio-X, Mumbai, which opened on Thursday and will go on till 30 August.

Some of this series will also be part of Nai's exhibition at Galerie Karsten Greve in St Moritz, Switzerland, which starts on 22 August. The solo exhibition will also showcase illusionistic drawings made with dry pastel and sculptures made of compressed jute, newspaper and old clothes—works that Nai is increasingly earning renown for.

Sustained procedure, tools and techniques, heat and glue are as much part of Nai's artistry as are his "spontaneous doodles" that they bring to life. The end result looks minimalist, but it emerges out of an engagement with a process that has often taken the artist years to perfect. His workshop is always buzzing and besides a few assistants, Nai has hired a carpenter who creates wooden moulds for large sculptural installations.

The artist, who grew up in Nallasopara, an underdeveloped portion of Thane district—his family consists of barbers and clothes traders—now owns three workshops in the same lane as his new home in Borivali, a far-flung, middle-class suburb of Mumbai, where he lives with his wife, artist Aaditi Joshi, and son, Deep. One of these workshops is a ground-floor room with a shutter where Nai's larger compression pieces are put together. The latest is a circular jute compression, 7.5ft in diameter, meant for the Kochi Muziris Biennale in December.

Nai began experimenting with jute the same year that his father's wholesale business of supplying jute and other packaging material shut down. By then, after attempting to paint over the natural fabric and failing ("the space between the threads is too much"), Nai began to use tracing paper over jute cloth stuck on to a canvas. This eventually became his base. Later, his work became even more procedural. He would create a doodle, scan it on Photoshop, project a highly pixelated version of it on his jute/tracing paper/canvas base, and then get to work with scissors and scalpel.

One of the works that will make it to St Moritz is a 100kg 5.7ft-long untitled piece made with burlap dyed in indigo. Nai hit upon the process of making this work while wondering what to do with the threads that remained after "unmaking the jute". He stored the threads in a wooden box, and upon opening it after many months, found that they had taken the rectangular shape of the box. Nai began making wooden moulds—small ones at first, gradually increasing their scale—into which he would put old newspapers made pulp-like with water, or jute made soft with glue. The resulting sculptural works took months to dry, but came out in simple shapes that excited Nai.

"Manish's main allegiance is to the tradition of abstraction, and he began working on it at a time when it wasn't very fashionable. Our visual culture is maximalist and decorative, but his works have had a quality of spareness since the time he came out of college. Unlike other abstractionists, Manish doesn't talk of the mysticism or spirituality of his works. He is process-driven and rigorous in his approach to creation," says Shahane, who curated a show of Nai's works at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke last year.

"I believe in process," Nai says. "I can only understand how things work once I put my hands in it." For the time being, this involves a very hot iron box and a mystifying print.