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What's the point of a retake?

Vivan Sundaram's latest work is again proof of his love for the unoriginal

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On 24 March, when *409 Ramkinkars*—presented by the Vivadi theatre group, which has described it as a cross-genre work comprising sculptural installation and theatre—opened at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in New Delhi, the chief guest, painter and art critic Gulammohammed Sheikh, while introducing the work, looked placatingly at artist Vivan Sundaram and theatre practitioner Anuradha Kapur and said, "Now the two of you must not fight."

He was referring to his own evident confusion about whether Sundaram's pieces at the show constituted independent sculptures or a part of the collective theatrical experience. Art? Or theatre?

409 Ramkinkars, which takes place across five sites at the IGNCA, informs the audience

about the life and times of the dynamic artist Ramkinkar Baij. It starts with Sundaram: his recreation of Baij's sculptures with his preferred use of found objects. A side room constructs the "studio": along with Sundaram's re-interpretations, there is paint and other materials scattered across the room. The next segment of this promenade theatre in another gallery space comprises 12 tableaux—performance pieces—that are meant to give the audience an idea of the place and times and poverty in which Baij lived.

As much as things haven't made too much sense till now, it all comes together once the audience gathers at the IGNCA's amphitheatre for a more traditional form of theatre that "tells" you the biographical elements of Baij's life and work. And sitting there in that amphitheatre, one begins to appreciate the atmosphere that was built up in that first hour.



So there it was: this was theatre that made 2 hours tick away quickly, and Sundaram's works were part of the elaborate set of the piece. But are they as interesting as independent pieces of art, as they will be displayed at the IGNCA till the end of the month, even though the rest of the performers took their final bow on 2 April? With his use of metal, rubber, light and sound, in pieces such as *The Plough* and *Mill Recall*, Sundaram's "retake" of Ramkinkar Baij has a more modern and mechanized texture to them from the sculptures they are derived from, drawing one's attention to the change in landscape, but the contemporaneity of Baij's works.

In this context, one must recall another "retake" that he undertook a few years ago, of his aunt Amrita Sher-Gil. *Retake Of Amrita* consisted of a series of digital photomontages that combined Sher-Gil's paintings with her father Umrao Singh's sensuous photographs to recreate scenes, not always factual, from this family's life. To establish that he is not removed from the family, he places himself as a child intimately sitting on Umrao Singh's lap while surrounded by the women of the household in what appears to be a

boudoir. Few will not have been intrigued by this superbly talented painter with her European sensibilities and bohemian lifestyle who tragically died early in her life. And with this work, Sundaram excavates this very sentiment that has already made us so familiar with the paintings and photographs to which Sundaram adds his signature.

There's a very famous story about a "copycat artist" called Elaine Sturtevant. Elaine's body of work, through which she speaks of originality in art, consisted of inexact replicas of recognizable works by living American artists who themselves specialized in the art of appropriation, artists such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns. So masterful was she at replicating the works and techniques of these artists that once, when Warhol was asked what his work meant, he replied: "I don't know. Ask Elaine."

In his introduction to *409 Ramkinkars*, Sundaram writes: "Artists (like art writers) have often seen the act of art-historical re-assessment as crucial for their creativity." He establishes in this act what Mark Twain once so convincingly wrote in a letter, that all ideas, at the end, are second-hand.