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India's first AI art solo

Harshit Agrawal uses machine intelligence to talk about social justice and empathy

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In the interactive video series *Masked Reality*, the viewer's facial expressions transform into those of a Kathakali dancer and a Theyyam artist. "Though both the dance forms are from Kerala, Kathakali is patronised by royal families and 'sattvic' temples, while Theyyam is performed by the lower caste. I point out to this distinction of social hierarchies by adding a golden frame to the Kathakali side of the video. This makes the work self-conscious and acts as a catalyst to conversations around such subjects," says Harshit Agrawal, the artist who has created the work using two AI (Artificial Intelligence) algorithms.

Masked Reality is part of *EXO-Stential: AI Musings On The Posthuman*, which is being hailed as India's first AI art solo. Now on display at Emami Art, Kolkata, the exhibition, organised in collaboration with 64/1—a Bengaluru-based curation and technology research collective—has been curated by Myna Mukherjee of Engendered, a transnational arts and human rights organisation.

It's interesting to see something as cold and mechanical as AI being used to create a discourse around ideas of social justice and empathy. "These days facial recognition is used for criminal profiling, and also to inhumanly treat people for criminal probability. I am using the technology in a very different context, which is closer to home, to create empathy about caste dynamics," says Agrawal.

The artist first started working in the field of AI art in 2015. A graduate of the MIT Media Lab, US, and Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, he has been nominated twice for the Lumen, the top tech art prize. His latest exhibition showcases the diversity of his practice through experiments in AI-driven painting, sculpture, text, interactive media, and more. As the curatorial note states: "He has consistently used a rootedness in Indian particularity to question the absolutist Eurocentric philosophical outlook



COURTESY THE ARTIST/ENGENDERED

From the series 'Machinic Situatedness'.

that has informed the development of AI. (He answers questions like) How can AI help us stay sensitive to the relations of power that exist in the real global world? How can we use it creatively in collaboration with marginal cultures towards representation and avoid appropriation? Can we use AI to transcend the limitations of gender?"

Mukherjee says that while AI has been used for surveillance, profiling and restrictions on freedom of movement post-9/11, this exhibition shows the possibilities it has of furthering human imagination.

One of the works, *Strange Genders*, is based on the response of 1,000 people from different walks of life who were asked to draw a woman and a man standing. An AI algorithm trained in gender was then asked to produce drawings of humans based on the data set and classify them on a broad spectrum of "female" to "not female".

"The artist investigates our cultural

representations of gender by passing human drawings through the mind of a machine, and have these conceptual representations returned to us 'more truly and more strange' by their passage through this alien 'mind,'" explains the curatorial note. Interestingly, Agrawal notes that while individual perception of gender is fixed, the collective perception is quite fluid.

"In another work, *Author (Rise)*, the viewers start writing physically on a piece of paper, and the AI takes control of the pen to write its own thoughts in continuation of theirs. You end up being a mechanical arm for the machine," says Agrawal. The work discusses loss of agency and authorship, something we are becoming familiar with as apps throw up recommendations based on our search history.

EXO-Stential: AI Musings On The Posthuman is on view Tuesday-Sunday, 11am-6pm, till 30 September.