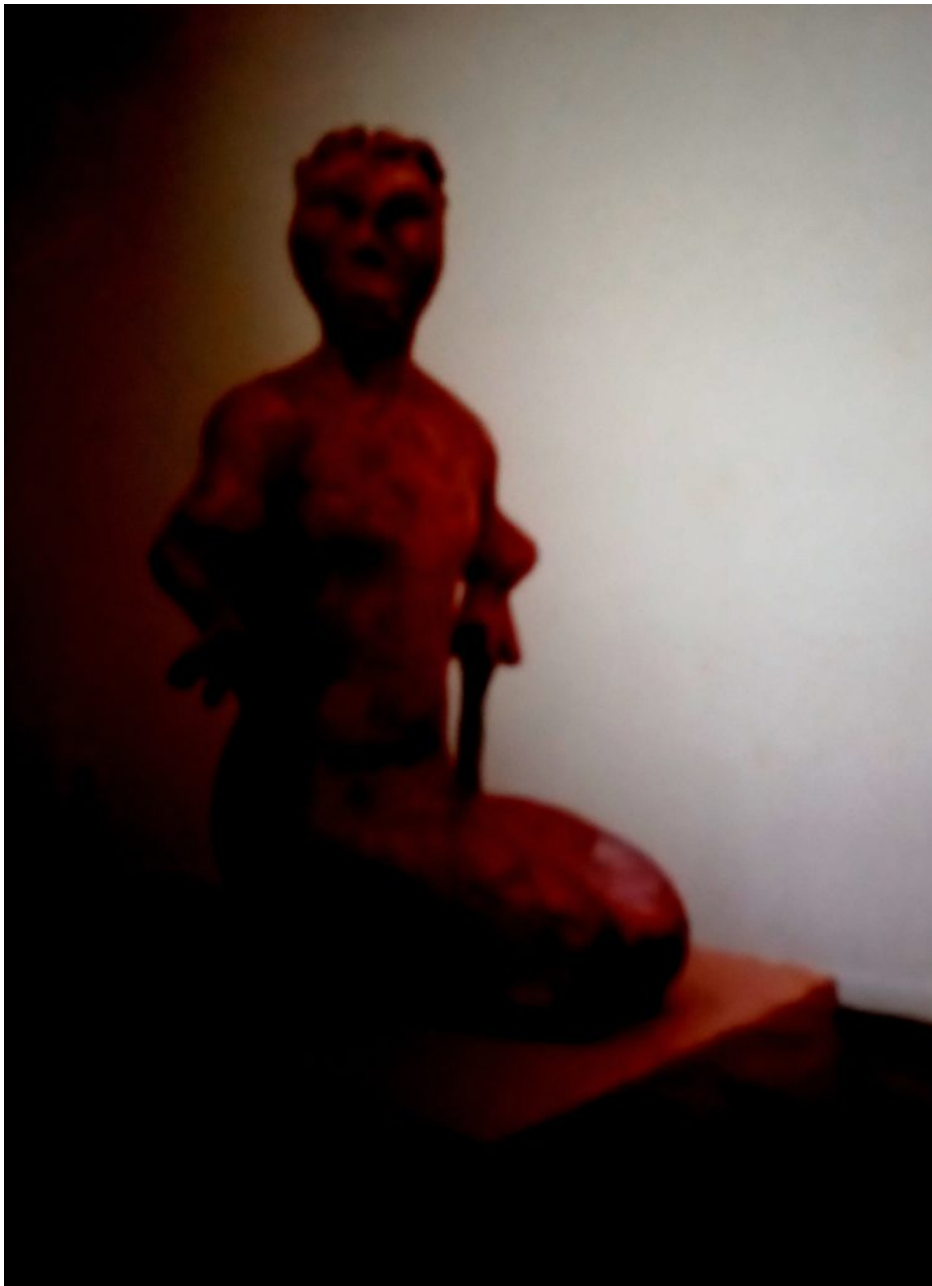


Social Distancing or Physical Distancing? / Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

a

sculptural representation



Seated Man

Covid-19 and Social Distancing

The current global coronavirus pandemic leading to COVID-19 shows no signs of dying a natural death; far from it, we are nowhere near finding a solution to arresting the spread of the virus. The virus appeared mysteriously and suddenly, infected some, multiplied rapidly, hitch-hiked by various means and entered all parts of the world – sparing no region. It underwent numerous mutations during its journey around Planet Earth and half a year later still stays firmly away from the grasp of human comprehension.

This uncontrolled, worldwide pandemic has completely transformed our lives and we have come up with one rather simple behavioral method and the only known effective one so far to cope with this situation. The world's lingua franca has given it the name "Social Distancing." The English language is highly adaptive. But the language is also very adept at coining specious terms. These terms are then taken up unquestioningly by anyone speaking any language, anywhere in the world.

I would like to discuss, using one of my sculptural works, the connotative meanings of the term "Social Distancing." As a more suitable term to use in the COVID-19 context, I would suggest the term "Physical Distancing."

A Sculptural representation

The subject of this article is a sculpture of a seated man. It is the third in the series of five sculptures that I made in Tokyo, in the late 80s. These sculptures are based on specific people I saw on the streets of "Calcutta," in the early to mid-80s. I did not and could not strike up a conversation with any of them. Perhaps I did not have the strength of spirit to connect with them through verbal communication. I had my own problems and I felt just as helpless as they did or perhaps

they did not even feel the same sort of disempowerment I felt. They were, for all I know, stronger in spirit than most and had the mental strength to accept their condition and live a functional life with a reasonable level of happiness and fulfillment.

The reason for the absence of an interaction with any of the individuals I saw and passed by on the streets of Calcutta that year in the early to mid-80s was revealed to me gradually, over the years. This happened through certain specific experiences I had with people, belonging to different groups, in various countries. These experiences were, what I would call, mundane and of little import when taken from the point of view of a day to day existence. To me, however, they were eye openers. These experiences signified to me the true meaning of the currently much bandied about term "Social Distancing."

I posted a write-up about my second sculpture in the series, *crawling man*, titled "The World on its Hands and Knees," since the person the sculpture was modeled on represented to me the condition that all of us are in now – our lives ruthlessly controlled by a global pandemic caused by a bio-chemical entity, the coronavirus, that exists in that nebulous state between living and nonliving.

The fear of COVID-19 is real, palpable, and terrifying because we have no understanding of the workings of the coronavirus. A term with a very specific meaning has been coined to describe the physical distance each of us needs to maintain with everyone except for the few people with whom we share a living space, excluding even your blood relatives if they happen to live in separate accommodation.

This **physical distancing** is termed "**Social Distancing.**"

Social Distancing vs Physical Distancing

“Social Distancing” is entirely erroneous as a term to describe the sort of distancing we need to maintain between each other during this pandemic. The ‘distancing’ is necessary so as to not catch the virus from people with whom interaction is unavoidable, termed essential workers, and spreading the virus to other individuals.

Social Distancing as a practice is nothing new; it has always existed in all societies, in one form or another. It is implemented and controlled by a small minority of agents of power, be they the ruling elite, the strong amongst the weak etc. Using the term **“Social Distancing”** in the present situation to describe a **prescriptive behavioral form** of maintaining physical distance to avoid spreading of **COVID-19** that applies to **all**, irrespective of their social standing, performs the task of validating, insidiously, the deep social divide, wide-spread all over the world. The term gives credence to the **institutionally managed** segregation of communities that disempowers large groups of people based on their color, ethnicity, economic standing, gender, etc., and people with physical disabilities. These groups of people live a **socially distanced** life. I have not included other groups or even people with disabilities that are not to do with the visible physical body, in this discussion.

Persons with physical disabilities

Among the many disempowered groups of people, such as those listed above and others, it is the group of people with physical disabilities that are uniquely placed as the ones whose lives are more severely affected by social isolation and the resulting **social distancing**. A person with physical disabilities is a single individual, often experiencing a

sense of separation even within their own family. Although living a **socially distanced** life like many other groups of people, a person with a physical disability is alone in their disability as each form of disability is different from another. The extent and nature of the disability depends on individual factors and the person with a disability does not belong to a clearly identifiable collective.

Examples of a 'collective' would be an ethno-racial social group or a community of economically deprived families, living in ghettoized, marginalized conditions. Accordingly, a person with disabilities lacks the emotional support system that individuals belonging to other disempowered groups with shared problems and a common identity have.

The social and emotional isolation of people with a physical disability may be the result of congenital factors, of deliberate acts of cruelty, accidents, and even more shockingly and tragically due to poorly understood medical treatments. These treatments are administered hastily, not having been properly verified but widely hailed as effective, and any side-effects resulting from the treatment, which may be severe and irreversible are identified only when the damage is already done.

As mentioned earlier, physical disabilities can include a whole range of conditions, including ones that are not readily visible to others or those that entirely escape the notice of people who are strangers to the person with a disability.

A physical disability of a particular kind and why it became the subject of my sculptures

The form of physical disability I chose to highlight through the set of five sculptures belong to the one category of

people (four of the sculptures referring to actual individuals I saw), who are either born with or developed later in life anomalies (*in medical terms a "deformity"*) in their bodily structure. Their limbs, extremities, and craniofacial features affect how they are viewed by others and the bodily movement and functionalities of the people in this category are restricted to various degrees. Often, the stark visual nature of their physical characteristics, entirely unique to each individual and the disabilities being specifically their own, marks them apart from others. They are denied a sense of belonging to a community. Inarguably, the social and emotional isolation that the people in this group experience compounds their day to day difficulties and increases their dependency on others. The subject was compelling and I was and still am deeply affected by the life situation of people with disabilities who have readily visible "malformations" of the body.

Before I talk about my sculpture, *seated man*, and the form and content of the work, I would like to make clear my rationale and impetus behind selecting, as subjects of my artwork, people with physical characteristics that restrict their mobility and whose body structure does not conform to expected norms. If the motivation for doing the set of sculptures is not already evident from the foregoing discussion, I would like to stress that by doing these works I want to bring to light the pain and suffering of these individuals, **which is singularly their own.**

These set of sculptures may be deemed voyeuristic, distasteful, and even lacking in basic human sensitivity and compassion on the part of the artist. This is one reading of the work, and from the point of view of the artist, that is me, the reading reflects the reader's/viewer's own point of view, which does not allow them to extend their understanding of what an art work stands for, the compelling motivations of the artist for doing works of this kind, and the complex web

of meanings the artwork holds. These meanings of the artworks constantly change and come to light depending on the context in which they are presented and the nature of the audience. There may be no specific target audience in the mind of the artist when a work is created, unless the work is commissioned by a specific patron with clear-cut requirements. My set of works are entirely self-motivated and created with no specific audience in mind.

It is my conjecture that the *seated man*, who in all probability was homeless, had a congenital condition that caused the shortening of his arms but evidently with strong musculature in the upper and forearms, both structurally relocated and joined in such a way as to provide for an elbow function. The formation of the arms had a certain degree of symmetry, in that the arms had the same proportion and structurally related to the rest of the body in a similar manner.

The Sculpture of a *seated man*



A **seated man**, homeless perhaps, his posture is almost that of a yogi. His torso is upright and handsome. He sits with his legs folded under in the yoga pose of *Vajrasana*, holding a stick in one hand for support. His arms are strong, although

shortened. They are connected securely to his shoulders in a “standard” anatomical position. His head is turned sideways to view something that he caught sight of from the corner of his eyes. He used his very own form of transport, a little trolley, which I edited out from the sculpture. This I did so as to give prominence to the figure of the man who bore himself with dignity to the extent he could, given his circumstances. The trolley would have been a distraction and would have drawn attention to his disability.

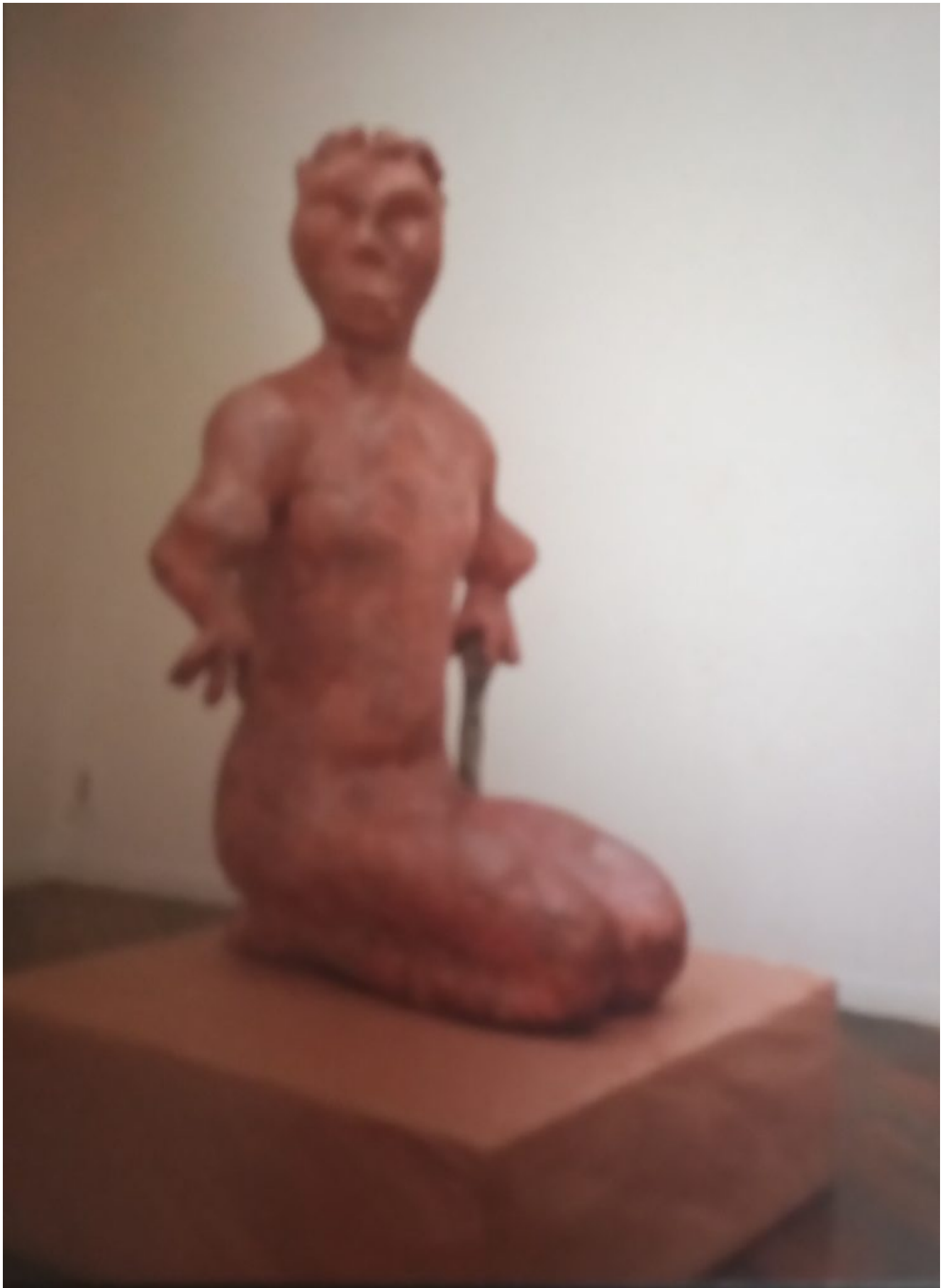
Whatever innate dignity his physical demeanor may have presented, he was still an outcast – homeless, living on the streets, and displaying those physical features that the vast majority of people could not relate to and from whom they maintained a clear social distance.

The social distancing of people such as the *seated man* has no relation to the “Social Distancing” prescribed by the governments of all countries for tackling COVID-19. What is needed in the present circumstances is “Physical Distancing.”

If the indignity of a subtle form of social distancing was not enough, the *seated man* spending most of his time on the pavement had people walking past him, occasionally tossing a few coins in his bowl, who practiced a more blatant form of “physical distancing;” whereby, when they passed him on the street, they kept a distance that was more than necessary. This they did to make certain that they avoided contact with him. They walked past him by making a wide arc of a semi-circular curve using a quick motion to go past him, in the shortest possible time.

Practicing social distancing in relation to people isolated from the mainstream of society existed way before COVID-19 gripped our lives.

Displaying the work in an art gallery

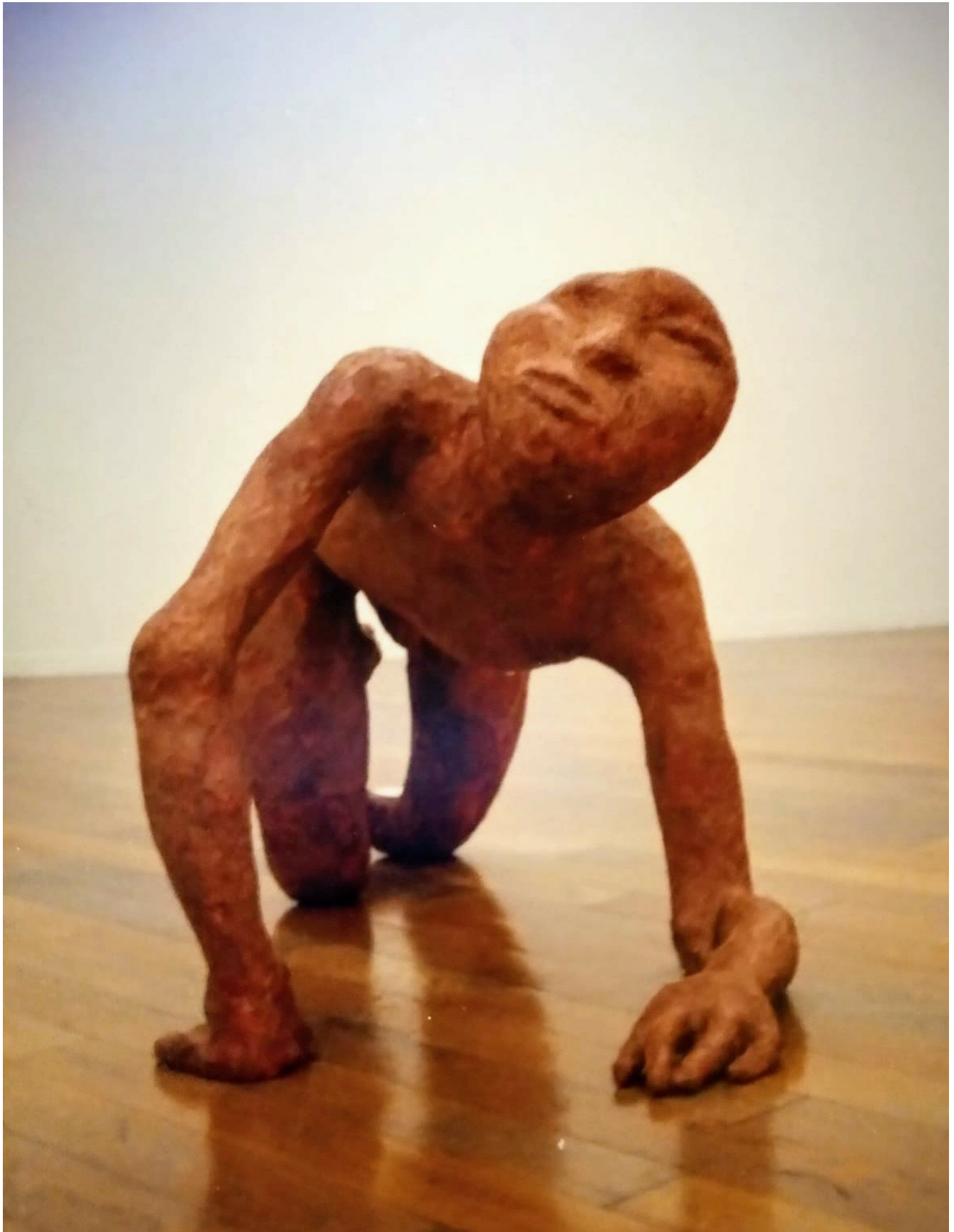


In order to express the combined qualities of dignity and social isolation of the *seated man*, the figure was placed directly on the floor of the gallery on the first day of the

show, and from the second day of the show until the closing of the show the figure was placed on a pedestal, which not only isolated him but also provided him with an elevating platform, giving him the dignity he deserves.

The World on its Hands and Knees | Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

A Sculptural Representation of Covid-19



The timeline of the global pandemic of the coronavirus and its deadly manifestation as Covid-19 needs no introduction. The scale and the enormity of the destruction caused by Covid-19, the speed at which this large-scale culling of human beings –

not in anyone's living memory – with no resolution in sight, has brought the world down on its hands and knees.

As a visual artist, my mind could only think in images in order to make sense of this holocaust-like situation and there rose from my memory a sculpture of a crawling man, which I had made more than three decades ago.

I made this sculpture in 1987 after I moved to Tokyo and I had absolutely no desire whatsoever to write about another artist's work, having worked as an art critic in New Delhi. I decided to change the course of my life and become an artist. I started working in a small back room of my two-room apartment in Tokyo. I bought large blocks of a caustic material – polystyrene, to carve life-size figures. All of the figures had irregularities in their physical form and each image/figure was based on a specific person I had seen, moving around on the streets of Calcutta (of the early to-mid 80s). The sculpture that I will be referring to is my second life-size sculpture that I ever created. I hadn't studied sculpture in Baroda, but my seven year-long study of art history enabled me, without my knowledge, to simply pick up the necessary tools and material and create sculptures of people, based on realistic figuration, a task for which I had no prior training. The sculptures were made out of a poisonous material, taking on human forms with congenital or deliberately created 'malformations' in the body, for which life models are not readily available, unless the very person I saw posed for me as a model. This meant that the forms had to be drawn purely from my memory along with a bit of imagination to crystalize the form. But, earlier I did say that these sculptures were based on actual people I had seen. I made a set of five figure sculptures, including one of a new born baby. I was, at that time, almost certain that I would not have a child – I wasn't made to be a mother. This has been proven wrong.

In this set of five figures there is one exception. This work

is purely from my imagination, a form I have never ever seen in real life, and which is based on one of my life experience that to this day makes its presence felt in my conscious and subconscious mind with decreasing intensity over the years.

I will now come to the sculpture, which is the subject of this article and which is the second one in the series of five sculptures.



Although the figure is based on someone I actually saw on a Calcutta street – and froze for a few moments when I happened to set eyes on him – and the memory of him to this day is still a strong presence, I needed to use models to carve a sculpture of the man. The person I saw should have been provided medical help, perhaps earlier on in his life, given equipment that was suitably devised for his particular needs, and an opportunity for social integration. It was the lack of any form of institutional support for the man, left to his own devices to function on the streets that stopped me in my tracks when I encountered him, while other pedestrians walked

past him and took no notice. I didn't have to stand there studying the form of the man to memorize his stance and mobility. He was not a spectacle for me but an individual, just as myself, who happened to catch my eye only very briefly but that brief encounter has had a lasting impression on me. It is a mystery to even the most seasoned practitioner of the visual arts as to why a certain image enters their consciousness and makes a home for itself in the deep recesses of their memory.

Polystyrene is the medium of all five sculptures in the group. The medium itself symbolizes the near-evil destructive potential of the myriad man-made materials enveloping the earth, in an embrace of death.

The figure, as mentioned earlier, although drawn from memory so vivid as to compel me to give it tangible form, required that I use life models who could hold the twisted posture of the figure that I wanted to carve. A model was necessary, especially in the case of this sculpture, for me to be able to study the skeletal framework of the figure that would lend itself to such contortion, observe the stress, and tension of the musculature in the limbs and the torso, with the neck craning upwards so the head could rise up to look at what is above the eye level.

The sculpture is of a man, who can move only by crawling on his hands and knees, his head trying perpetually to look at what could have been and what he may have been able to attain in his life if he had been blessed with a skeletal frame and an arrangement of limbs that would allow him "normal" physical movements. His limbs were skinny and bent in unexpected places and the angles fixed and rigid.

Yes, this is a sculpture of a man (my models for the sculpture being both male and female – friends of mine) the man crawling on his hands and knees, almost entirely without clothes, dragging his miserable collection of body parts along the

rough, dusty, broken stones of a pavement but he appeared determined to continue on with his life.

This figure of a crawling man, almost helpless and completely without hope of any improvement in his circumstances, symbolizes to me the state that the greatest of world leaders and every single human being is reduced to today, by COVID-19. The coronavirus has brought the whole world down to its hands and knees.

In my next article in the series on Covid-19, I will take up the issue of "Social Distancing," a term that is problematic due to its various negative connotations. The subject of the article will be another one of my sculptures from the series of five, titled "Seated Man."