

New Moon | Shailesh B.R.

By Dipti Anand

An inquiry into why things are the way they are, whether framed by philosophy or science, serves the primordial human urge to live with meaning. Without it, we fear the world is entombed in chaos, fated to insignificance and ephemerality, suggesting that our thoughts, beliefs, and feelings are just as inconsequential. For a human-centric worldview, this possibility is a profound source of loss and insecurity. At its core, Shailesh B.R.'s practice channels the fury of this relentless struggle – to have our existence matter, to imbue life with meaning, purpose and consequence. As if perceiving larger ideas through bifocals that could also focus on smaller actions, his impressions of the world are twofold: physical, in his apprehension of objects, processes, and rituals; and ideological, in his observation of patterns, perspectives, and symbols. His curiosity thrives where materiality and philosophy intersect.

Growing up in a small, remote village in Karnataka, India, Shailesh's early experiences were dominated by an immersion in natural environments, a life largely unencumbered by technology. The systems and mechanics he encountered instead were guided by somatic knowledge that resides in and extends from the body itself. To be present to one's circumstances became its own kind of ceremony, a practice of discerning what is historical and what is real through deep reflection. This attentiveness, when extended outward, revealed arrangements in communities, culture and the cosmos, foreshadowing the relational strategies that would come to define his later practice. Oftentimes Shailesh could be found lying akimbo on the roof, tracing the movements of the sky and relating both his position and disposition to them. He did not encounter a machine until he was almost twenty years old. Years later, in his fine art practice, Shailesh travelled to the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), on the borders of France and Switzerland, to complete a residency that engaged his curiosity in scientific principles of the universe, informed by theoretical studies in cosmology, including physics, astronomy, and astrophysics.

Today, Shailesh's interdisciplinary practice bridges values from art, science, and technology sustained by a meticulous repository of daily observations, moods, and experiences. Working across media – from paint, text, and collage materials to found objects, computer programming, and machine parts – his inquiry remains rooted in fundamental questions of existence, seeking to reconcile the eccentricities of the modern world. His repertoire of two- and three-dimensional compositions, ranging from explorations on paper to kinetic installations, intends to isolate and abstract parts of our conditioning that have perhaps become automatic. Whether examining the etiology of rites and rituals, building social cohesion, studying epistemologies, and observing human acts of performance, survival and growth, Shailesh teases out the reunion between faith and fact in the essential conditions of our humanity, like a loom where threads of belief and perception are interwoven into a single tapestry.

In this solo presentation titled *New Moon*, Shailesh explores structures of the sky through various astronomical components and the poetic undulation that ensues from our fervent questioning of neutral cosmic events, which remain indifferent to the human desire for certainty.

His works on paper include the *Shooting Stars* series, hinged on the obstinacy of a night sky, teeming with its many ambiguities, that appears exactly as it wants. Where we hope to manifest meaning, we become witnesses to the unexpected events of the cosmos, from the Big Bang and black holes to eclipses and constellations. Shailesh's plotting of positive and negative spaces visualizes both matter and its antithesis, whose imbalance remains one of the most intriguing puzzles in physics. In the more intimate sets, Shailesh returns to painting and composes diaristic meditations on observing the sky over time. The larger works extend the field of references, with paper-hole punches scattered like space debris and a symbolic vocabulary for theories on how the world came to be. In one, sperm-like comets travel into the Earth's womb, and in another a high-energy explosion of light hovers above a series of yogic postures – grounding the cosmic with the corporeal and guiding us towards the softer boundaries between an internal and external being.

In another series of works on paper titled *Forecast*, Shailesh renders visualizations of the zodiac calendar, inspired by Arpita Singh's 1999 painting titled *Aries: The Zodiac's Warrior*. A floating crossword of colors or symbols drifts in the background, over which the 12 major signs are drawn in recognizable forms. His stream-of-consciousness texts, reminiscent of diagrammatic or coding annotations, reveal a clever irony: neither the writing nor the charts carry any inherent meaning. The corresponding constellations and sky maps refuse deterministic interpretation from typical astrological readings. Instead, they offer a poetic invitation to personalized reflection, suggesting that the search for meaning is entirely provisional.

You Will Become a Star is an interactive machine that is powered by an individual's movements in the space. A pixelated panel resembling a perforated pegboard, almost like a childhood relic, erupts a travelling ball of light when someone walks by it. Its inclusion supports Shailesh's paradigmatic approach towards the cycles of life and regeneration, often by incorporating spiritual themes through metaphor and play.

Philosophy Machine 2.0 serves as the conceptual anchor of the exhibit, also exemplifying its title, *New Moon*. The spiritual meaning gleaned from the moon's varying arousal and withdrawal of light exists in conversation with nature's independent rhythms. The moon's phases represent a renewal of perception within the structures of repetition and return. For Shailesh, meaning is cumulative over durations of time that make systems, knowledge and experience vulnerable to unpredictability. Two heads resembling philosophers move in continuous and linear motions of lighting and extinguishing a lamp. Though automated, shifts in intensity and irregularities in time occur with subsequent loops. Despite its technology, the machine cannot control outcomes mirroring the interpretation of cosmic or metaphysical experiences.

Shailesh's whimsy functions rhetorically, emerging through the framing of his work within relational aesthetics. He creates environments that encourage interaction, both through our physical investigations of shifting angles and elements in his machines and our mimetic responses to thinking through liminal ideas in real time. This experience of the sculptural nature of our imagination – conceived as a population of stimuli that sparks reflection – recalls a passage from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more

often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.' Kant's invocation of morality can be understood, among other things, as internal subjectivity located in rational thought, which nonetheless feeds the impulse to imagine ourselves in relation to the infinite. Shailesh similarly situates the infinite within relational experience, allowing viewers to encounter themselves and the world anew through unexpected connections between objects and interactions. Shailesh makes visible the subtle negotiation between thought and environment, asserting that meaning, though elusive, remains possible within a continuously unfolding field of relations.