

Art in the Context of Larger Ideas

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CHENNAI: Paradoxes, the immigration wave, the digital age and the politics of identity and race — Jaret Vadera's art speaks of the layered issues of our times. An interdisciplinary artist and cultural producer based in New York, Jaret's cultural influences are many — a childhood and early education in Canada, an Indian parent and a master's degree at Yale University.

"I like stories with missing pieces," he said, at IIT-Madras, in conversation with artist Meenakshi Thirukode, Creative Director, Dakshina Chitra. Growing up in a working class family in Toronto, he would take apart everyday objects like telephones and put them together in a different way, with pieces missing. And his work today too, does not contain all the elements — photographs that are airbrushed and layered with flexiglass, giving it blurred sheen and hazy outlines, with just a hint of what there is. "Photographs sometimes become a licence to forget," he said.

Jaret's work is strongly influenced by the digital. "Infographics, visual culture, programming, this is where we live!" he said. He works on video installations, where the space becomes art that one can walk into. "Even technology can be a way of experiencing the sublime, it needn't be just nature," he said. His art is partly influenced by technology such as x-rays, algorithms, infographics and maps. Identity and race also make their way into his concepts, as social engagement is a parallel part of Jaret's life.

Being a non-white person studying at Yale, the social conditioning and prejudices brought several challenges for him. "If you are a person of colour, you are considered a representative of your race," he said, while speaking about stereotyping underrepresented communities.

One of his experiments involved taking different national flags, which he believes make strong cultural statements, and mixing up their colours to see the result. "The result was the colour of a band-aid that is labelled in crayon boxes as 'skin colour'. But this is not the colour of my parents' skin; I used to think while growing up!"

With today's art being spoken about and analysed a lot, it is no longer left to the audience to just 'know' when they look at a work. "I would like to speak less about my art!" he said, but added that with the pluralism in society today, it is important to explain the context of a work of art.