

AJAY KURIAN, *UNILATERAL EDUCATIONAL DISARMAMENT*

JOAN presents Ajay Kurian's *Unilateral Educational Disarmament*, a site-specific installation of recent sculptures. Kurian makes visually seductive works that belie complicated, layered content--from references to Goethe's *Faust* to contemporary social concerns.

At the entrance of JOAN's gallery, *Comfort Zone #5 (Mind the Gap, Praise the Curve)* 2016, a wall-based vitrine that houses a forest of plexiglass rods, fluorescent resin cast bells, plastic gingerbread men and a tangle of copper wires is bathed in a green fluorescent light. For Kurian, the glowing bells come from thinking about bell curves used in educational and evolutionary models - the mathematical beginnings of normativity. Enshrined in glass, the work is reminiscent of Mike Kelley's Kandors series of glowing resin cityscapes inspired by comic imagery of Superman's home planet. Kurian's work, however, pulls not from impossible returns, but from breaks, gaps, and societal ruptures along the lines of race, class, and ecology. The next room resembles an otherworldly school gym. Metal frame figures clad in baggy shorts and custom t-shirts congregate around climbing ropes hanging from the ceiling. Alternating between surreal and callous violence, Kurian's children channel troubling narratives into psychological and physiological performance - acting out a spectrum of aggressions, both inherited and newly created. Harnessing satire, irony and the visual appeal of science fiction, Kurian's works here balance on a knife's edge of visually alluring and conceptually alarming.

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Unilateral Educational Disarmament by Ajay Kurian

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have ever squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral, educational disarmament.

-A Nation at Risk, by T.H. Bell, Secretary of Education (1983)

The atmosphere of kill or be killed isn't lost on children. School is a training ground and as parents insist on "boys being boys," we can rest assured that American toxicity will persist. Our students, the psychological descendants of frontiersmen, follow a two-faced mantra built on a strange egotistical "freedom": *Let's grab it!* followed by *It's ours! You can't have it!* Conquering and defending even the most petty

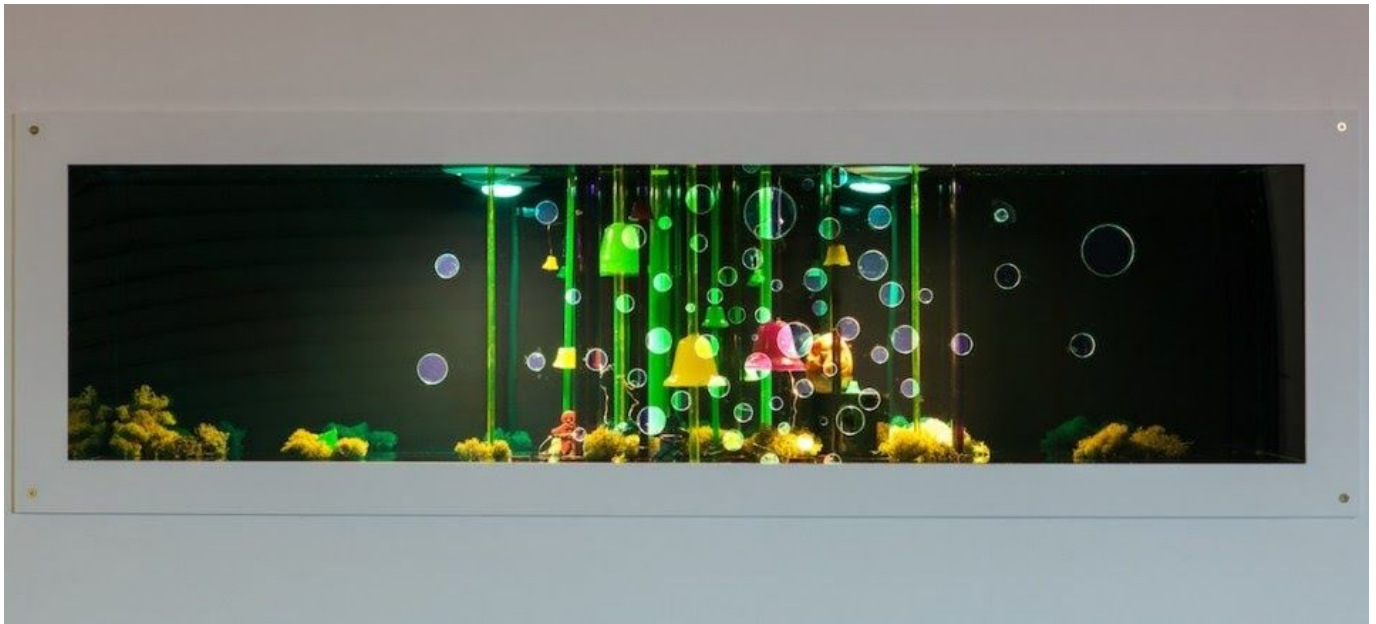
territories. If you're rich and white, this sense of entitlement is an asset—you have to learn early how to protect your stuff. If you're not, expect to fight harder to claim what's yours. Lie, cheat, and steal if you have to because colonialism is a handicap, reparations are a myth, and poverty is a thicker poison. "Mindful" parents raise distracted children. Inoculations are a sickness. And power has become schizo—both dominant and fragile. As our kids struggle to figure out how they fit in, trying to climb to the top of an unnamed peak, we win at games and blood is lost.

Public schools aren't public. Charter schools aren't colorblind. Private schools educate the few. Kids are stressed out. Parents size each other up, hoping for a miracle to get their kid into the best pre-K, to get them into the best elementary school, where they'll learn how to knit for 4 hours a day without learning what MLK stands for. Others do time for "stealing" education, stepping into a district that wouldn't have them, only to learn what is concealed by the mechanics of property is that you must already have it. An already completed circle where those outside it are painted orange. The picture of you they'll show on TV will look like a mugshot.

T.H. Bell saved his job by penning *A Nation at Risk*, an inflammatory screed whose mismatched intellectual constellations would misdirect our educational philosophy and cripple the American student. The constant equalization of quantified, abstracted federal benchmarks and academic success congealed into the oft-maligned policy named "No Child Left Behind." With such a system in place, we are slowly burning ourselves, like moths to a flame, believing that all forms of brightness are both attractive and good, without any sensitivity or comprehension of the differences between knowledge and academics, between choice and systems, between racial and historical differences and "progressive" colorblindness. The new plan, "Every Student Succeeds," has some optimistic, but neither the plan nor the very name itself suggest that this will be very different. Say the bill's name out loud and you'll hear it not as just a name but

a glib, abstract mandate that every student, indeed, succeeds. The trouble is, for that to be true, every parent, too, must succeed.

Don't mistake me. This is not a policy paper or pamphlet. It isn't an explanation, nor is it a key. It's temperature, humidity, smell, flavor, and visibility. This exhibition runs around this text, exploring its edges, performing, screaming, climbing, looking, failing, crying, pulling, thinking, meditating, and laughing.



Comfort Station #5 (Mind the Gap, Praise the Curve), 2016



Comfort Station #5 (Mind the Gap, Praise the Curve), 2016. Detail



Unilateral Educational Disarmament, Main gallery installation detail



