

ks radhakrishnan
figuring out with figures

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Relief from Within (2007), Bronze (Detail)

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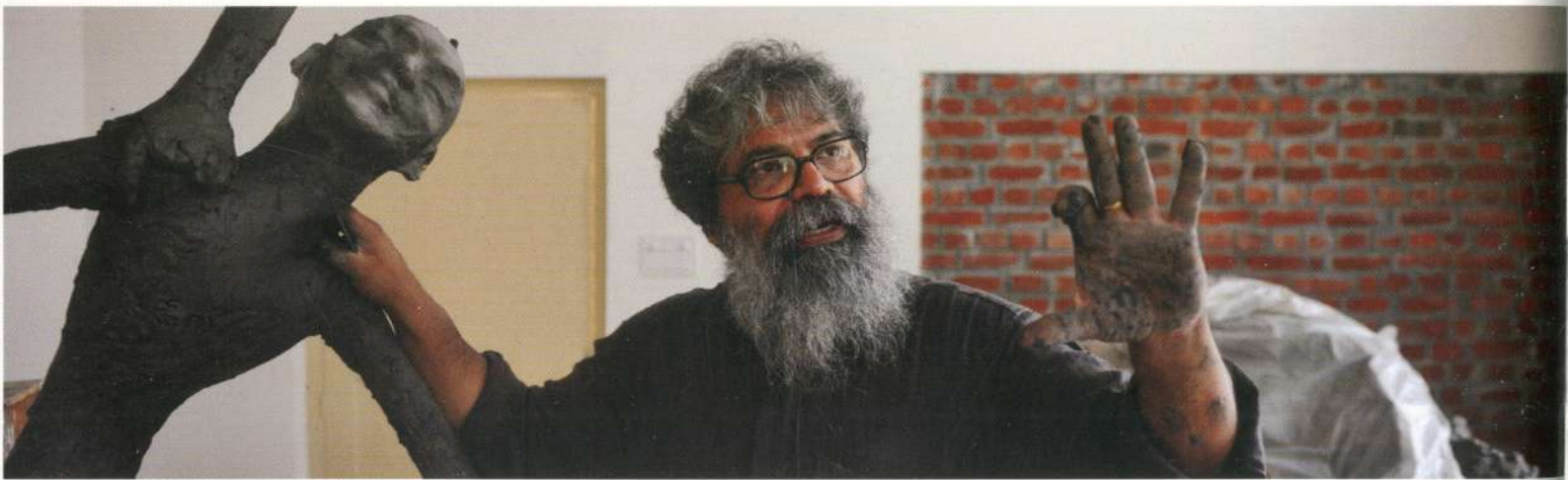
Dissolving a Cubical Order (2015), Bronze (Detail)

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Celebrating Existence in Impudence

text by
JohnnyML



KS Radhakrishnan working at Studio in Santhiniketan, 2014

Celebrating Existence in Impudence

They walk, dance, lift their heavy bodies up into the air, they migrate to the spaces that are conceivable and inconceivable, they exude the grandeur of transcendental ecstasy and they encapsulate the essence of characters that are universalized by various cultural constructs. At once they are living characters and sculptural metaphors. K.S. Radhakrishnan's oeuvre embodies them all; the impish figures constantly engage themselves in defying the norms of a generic world and even the law of gravitation. This rebellious impudence and transcendental prudence so evident in Radhakrishnan's works have been carefully structuralized by the artist for the last two decades in order to generate an aesthetic discourse in which the history of art/sculpture and the history of a creative individual's forays into social criticism find a meeting place.



Breeze through the Railing - 1 (2011), Bronze, 46 x 48 x 28.5 cm

In Radhakrishnan's thoughts and deeds, there takes place a constant transformation of the human world into something ethereal, mythical and supernatural. Witnessing, confronting, engaging and articulating the real world are carried out through subjecting them to a world that lies beyond the direct human perceptions. This deliberately designed expansive process of filtering the real into the imaginary helps the artist to speak of a local scenario which could become emblematic of the universal. The mythological narratives that are embedded in his sculptural 'actions' then could function as surrogate re-presentations of

the 'real' and the 'immediate', thereby achieving the stature of universal metaphors open to multiple interpretations.

A quick look at the evolution of Radhakrishnan's works reveals how he has been effectively establishing a few characters that contain his aesthetic philosophy. With considerable amount of 'aggressiveness and passion that he could command' Radhakrishnan as a young artist, posited himself as a part of the historical continuity of Indian sculptural traditions and drew inspiration from the sculptural renditions of Amaravati, Mathura, Ajanta and Ellora. Besides, during the 1980s that saw the formative and definitive moments of Radhakrishnan as a sculptor, he traveled widely in India and imbibed the essence of the local and folk sculptural traditions. However, his intention was not to recreate the traditional formal aesthetics in his favorite medium of bronze, on the contrary, he engaged himself with the formal and ethical values of the Indian sculptural traditions and saw how he



Maiya on the Human Square (Detail)



Airbound Musui (2013), Bronze, 80 x 23 x 22 cm

could transform these values to articulate the modern times (to an extent the post-modern) and issues pertaining to it, in bronze.

Keeping tradition and its historical continuity at one end and placing a strategically devised formal structure for articulating the 'modern' at the other, Radhakrishnan's works function between these two positions and also find their foothold in the interface of these positions. In this way, aesthetically and philosophically Radhakrishnan stands closer to his teacher and legendary sculptor Ram Kinkar Baij, and K.G.Subramanyan, who theoretically and practically stress the connection between traditional continuities within the modernist renditions. Perhaps, it is in this context of the traditional coalescing with the contemporary that, Radhakrishnan's 'Mother and Child' (1986, 1989), 'The Evocation' (1987), 'Durga' (1989), 'Chandela Rider' (1990) and so on achieve the metaphorical stature to 're-present' the 'real' and the 'immediate' as mentioned above.

Monumental in gesture, quasi-real and quasi-mythological in aspiration, supple and voluptuous in rendition, acrobatically twisted in posture, all these sculptures until the mid 1990s have one predominant representation; woman. She manifests in many forms, as the universal mother, goddess Durga, the sensually and sexually active Chandela Rider, the impossibly twisted Conch Shell and even as the woman who moves along with whirlpools and cosmic waves. Playing with space, rhythm, the lightness of existence (as against the heaviness of existence that a woman feels in the real world), juxtaposing of real and the mythological, Radhakrishnan presents a grave subjectivity that aspires to be one with his biological counterpart, the woman. The absent presence of the 'male' sculptor is only palpable through the aggressively modeled bodies of these women, where he consciously erases

the possibilities of ideological gaze, while subjugating the surrogate male representations to the mightiness of these female protagonists.

The impudence of Imps comes into his visual repertoire by mid 1990s. Art historian R.Sivakumar, who has written a volume on K.S.Radhakrishnan's works, observes that this arrival of impudence and playfulness comes in along with the entry of 'confident' male figures in his sculptural ensemble. Sivakumar equates this with the artist's own gaining of self-confidence. "(Now) after a decade of concerted effort with a greater sense of conviction and self confidence he assumes a more relaxed approach. And with that, while his thematic does not change, he becomes more playful... This new playfulness, I guess, also has something to do with the entry of male figures in his work," observes Sivakumar.



Maiya on Milestone on the Ramp (2011), Bronze, 28 x 46 x 30 cm



Imp (Maiya) on the Roof (2011), Bronze, 72 x 38 x 40 cm

Imps or impish figures are pivotal in Radhakrishnan's works on several counts. Imps are the playful demons seen abundantly in the folklore of any land. They are lesser gods, ready to help a human friend and are all prepared to disturb enemies through mischievous acts. They could be called lesser gods (but they never aspire to become gods) and they are small in physical stature. They can assume any form or shape and play active roles in the imaginative lives of human beings. Radhakrishnan, inspired by the folklore of his native state Kerala found the possibilities of



Conflict Within (2013), Bronze, 53 x 44 x 48 cm



Musui Celebrated (2013), Bronze, 84 x 26 x 26 cm



Lamp Inserted in the Human Web (2009), Bronze, 70 x 45 x 22 cm

camouflaging the artistic subjectivity in the form of imps. Impish figures, for the artist, hence became the containers of multiple subjectivities, of the artist himself as well as those of any other characters. The Imp Series of the mid 1990s present diminutive figures with smiles on their faces engaged in different activities, while assuming even the shapes of actual 'containers'.

This metaphorical device of Radhakrishnan seems to have assumed a special identity, another subjective camouflage of the artist; the identity of Musui. This character, established by the artist's continuous engagement with it in several sculptural renditions, is perhaps the only specific sculptural character in India in our modern times. It is not just the physical form of Musui that link him with a special identity; the narratives that the artist skillfully incorporates in this character's self have given him a special identity as a 'living' sculpture.



Display at Studio in New Delhi

Though well known by now through several published articles, catalogue essays and interviews with the artist, it is pertinent to recount the genesis story of Musui here again, as it underlines his role in Radhakrishnan's oeuvre. Radhakrishnan as a young student in Santiniketan found a local Santhal boy in the college campus, offering his service as a 'model' for the students. Radhakrishnan asked the boy to model for him and as the remuneration he gave a small amount. After some time the boy came back to Radhakrishnan's studio, with his hair shaved off. A peculiar smile of innocence and glee was pasted on his face. His name was Musui. Radhakrishnan made a portrait head of Musui, capturing that 'smile' in it. Upon leaving Santiniketan for Delhi, now with a determination to practice sculpture as a professional artist, Radhakrishnan carried the head of Musui along with him. The Musui head accompanied the artist during all his 'shifting' studio spaces. When Radhakrishnan decided to do the Imp Series, Musui had already grown in his mind and it should be said that the Imp Series and the Musui series grew simultaneously until they got their identities established in Radhakrishnan's sculptural ensemble.

The imps, the several manifestations of Musui and the artistic self of Radhakrishnan share a tripartite relationship. As Sivakumar suggests, they could be considered as the psychological other or 'alter ego' of the artist. As living beings need biological counterparts to feel a sense of fulfillment and completeness, Radhakrishnan has created a counterpart named 'Maiya' for Musui. Having achieved a sense of fulfillment, Musui, in the artist's thoughts, seems to be capable of hosting any number of characters in his own self. Even the imp infested world that Radhakrishnan creates has imps with Musui-Maiya faces complementing each other's existence in a jovial way. This exchange of egos or selves helps the artist to conceive a world that needs artistic and critical interventions, and



Ephemera (2014), Bronze, 76 x 76 x 137 cm



Migrating in to the Vessel (2015), Bronze, 55 x 37 x 30 cm

Radhakrishnan does it through parables, allegories and mythical narratives that could be interpreted in contemporary terms.

Transposing of egos, from artistic self to character self or vice versa, has its roots in Radhakrishnan's understanding of Kathakali, a traditional performing art form in Kerala, where the individual performer hosts different characters within and without the temporal schemes. Like a Kathakali performer, the artist exchanges his individual self with that of the character and indulges in a kind of playfulness peculiar to a court jester, who could raise crucial questions of human life and existence through jovial acts and narratives. Maiya too becomes a vehicle for the artistic ideas to travel between past and present times, even through the past and present history of art. Maiya could become an emblematic writer, a creature, a bow and arrow, a graduate and even Mona Lisa while Musui appears as a cart puller, Mulla Nasiruddeen, Kathakali performer, devil, Parasuram, Buddha, Gandhiji and so on.



Musui in the Nest (2011), Bronze, 17.5 x 35 x 35 cm

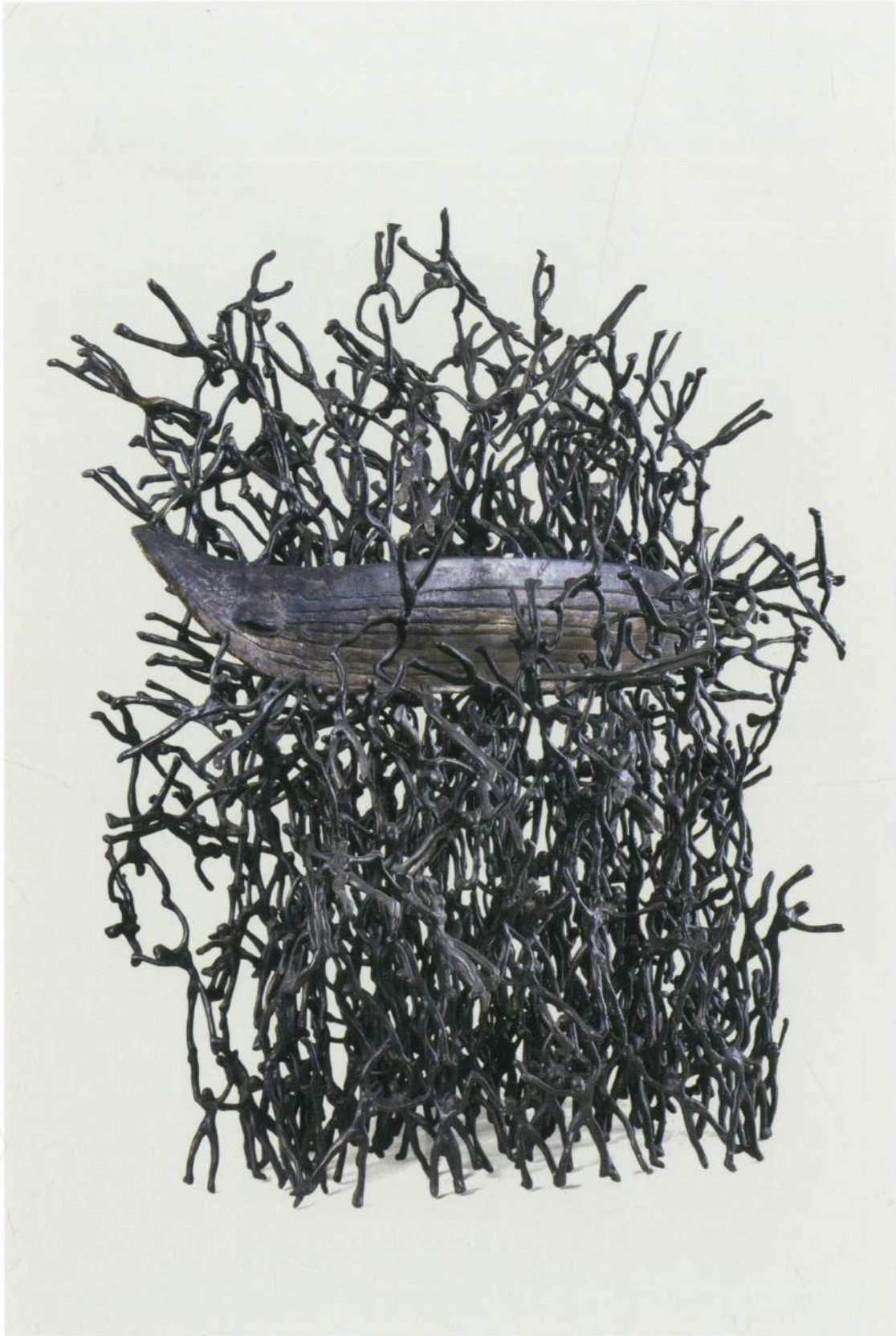


Migrating on to Dodo (2007), Bronze, 51 x 28 x 50 cm

Radhakrishnan's world is infested with people. As a migrant to the city of Delhi, which has become his home, Radhakrishnan has always been aware of the problems related to the migrant life. Using certain aesthetical modes the artist talks about these issues in a metaphorical way. His world of migrants is a positive one, the migrants are energetic and they can find their own space anywhere available to them. The positive life energy of the migrants for Radhakrishnan is what helps them to be together and create meanings. The Human Box series is intended mainly to emphasize the positivism of the migrant life. The miniature human figures are seen as migrating to boxes, columns, pillars, ritual vessels, house like structures, mirror frames and so on. They together make the rhythm of life and sense of accomplishment.



Maiya on Musui - 2 (2013), Bronze, 47 x 32 x 21 cm



Boat Inserted in the human Web (2014), Bronze, 55 x 61 x 43 cm

The Ramp, a pivotal work in Radhakrishnan's career is the reflection of human progress. In this work too the artist makes use of the impish figures with changed identities. Now they are the miniatures of impish figures, Musuis and Maiyas. They all show a jovial attitude and are seen walking towards an ascending ramp. Their impish activities are meant for reaching a goal; transcending their temporal existence into a world of wisdom. At the end of the ramp they confront transcendental figures like Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi and Selkit (the Egyptian Goddess of wealth) in the guise of Musui and Maiya. The mutual transference of identities refers to the possibilities of elevating one's own life even while pursuing the commonalities of general life.



Migrating on to the Boat (2011), Bronze, 58.5 x 56 x 22 cm



God's Own Country (2013), Bronze, 152 x 150 x 91 cm

The impish figures appear again and again in Radhakrishnan's works as part of the columns and pillars. In a sense they constitute the pillars, columns and even the surfaces of the various vessels and frames that the artist crafts to place his protagonists in various guises. This aspect of depicting 'people' as the pillars connotes them as the pillars of society, tradition and contemporary life. Of late Radhakrishnan has made a few small sculptures where the miniatures of Ramps and the ramp walks are seen in pairs and groupings. Also they are seen as a part of trees and plants. They in general represent the celebration of life and its transcendence through love and togetherness, in a way professing the humanistic philosophy of the artist.

The imps are impudent because, as mentioned elsewhere, they all defy the norms and gravitational pulls. This impudence can be attributed to most of the works of Radhakrishnan as he makes



Musui as Terraflly with Ascending Figures (2011), Bronze, 62 x 54 x 26 cm



Relief from Within (2007), Bronze, 50 x 76 cm

deliberate efforts to show not only the lightness of existence but also that of the very medium, bronze, through which these lives are represented or depicted. The airborne quality of the figures and their convoluted physical postures are consciously done for expressing the possibility of physical life and movement even in the most precarious situations. This is a chosen way of the artist for heralding the freedom of human lives. In this witnessing of the celebration of freedom, even the viewer becomes impish in attitude, taking courage to look at life with fun and mischief. Laughter is a way to transcend the ills of life and Radhakrishnan's sculptures embody the laughter of a visionary, who is impish and mischievous, like Musui in 'Terra Fly' who could look at life upside down while taking off to the firmament of freedom in complete glee and abandon. And always his anchor is people and tradition.

The latest body of small works that Radhakrishnan has been doing all these while as a part of his 'leela' (play) with the medium and ideas, shows his inclination to think about the nostalgic past. Interestingly, Radhakrishnan's cultural formation is determined by two different locations; Kerala and West Bengal (Santiniketan). As a young man he had imbibed the essence of these two locations and had also found striking similarities between the topographies and rural life. The images like a person carrying a palm leaf as a shade to escape from drizzling or a hurricane lamp or even a boat and an egg in the nest come from the nostalgic revisit to his experienced past. I am sure that only an artist who has found his maturity both in personality and creative expression could make such revisiting to the lived past. It could be one way of re-inscribing one's own memories through the peculiar characteristics of the lands or inversely, it is a way of re-inscribing the lands through the sensitive moments culled from the life one has thoroughly experienced and enjoyed.

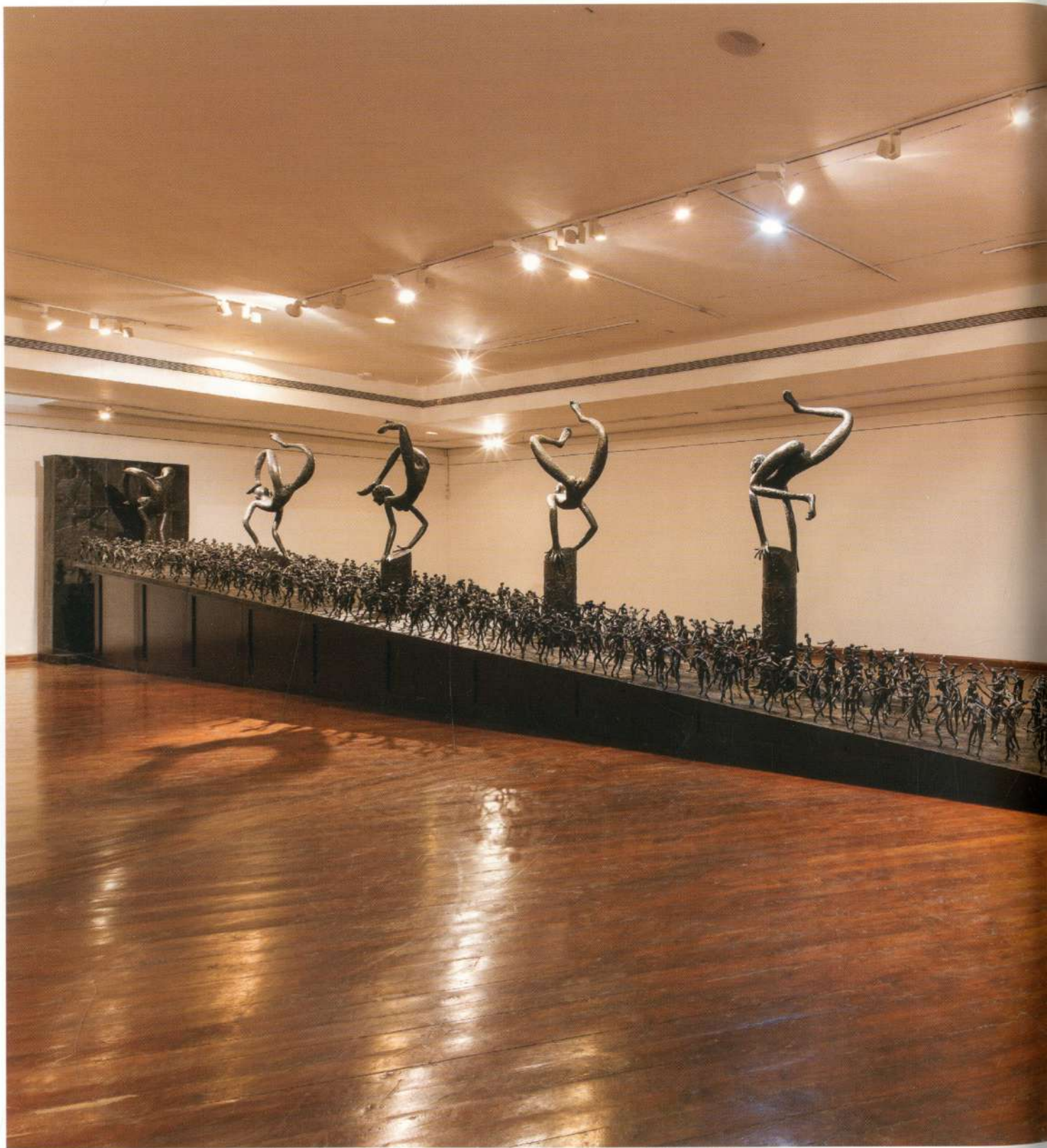
(JohnnyML is an independent writer and art-critic. He lives and works in Delhi.)



Human Square with Merging Figures in Space (2014), Bronze



God's Own Country (2013) 152 x 150 x 91 cm



Liminal Figures Liminal Space (2008), Display at National Galley of Modern Art, Bengaluru, 2015





Musui Walking with Maiya (2014), Display at National Galley of Modern Art, Bengaluru, 2015



Airbound Maiya (2012), Display at National Galley of Modern Art, Bengaluru, 2015







Freehold Musui (2008), Bronze, 140 x 58 x 44 cm



Wet Home (2013), Bronze, 64 x 33 x 36 cm



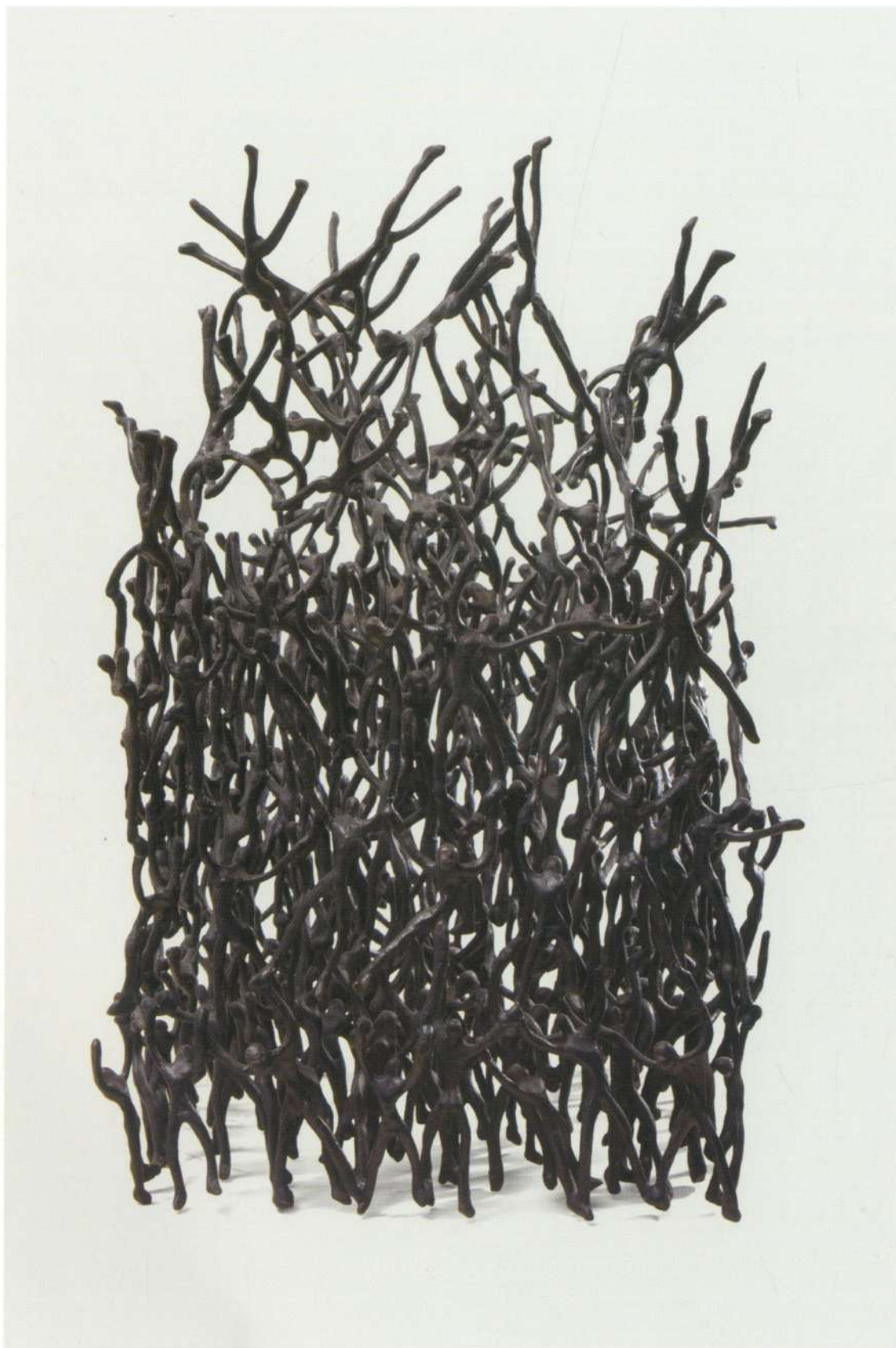
Imp (Maiya) on the Roof (2011), Bronze, 72 x 38 x 40 cm



Breeze through the Railing (2011), Bronze, 46 x 48 x 28.5 cm



Boat Inserted in the human Web (2014), Bronze, 55 x 61 x 43 cm



Dissolving a Cubical Order (2015) Bronze, 39 x 30 x 28 cm



Human Box - 3 (2013), Bronze, 40 x 33 x 24 cm



Human Box - 2 (2009), Bronze, 43 x 25 x 25 cm



Human Box - 4 (2014), Bronze, 34 x 27 x 29.5 cm



Human Box - 1 (2008), Bronze, 38 x 35 x 25 cm



Musui in the Nest (2011), Bronze, 17.5 x 35 x 35 cm



Lamp Inserted in the Human Web (2009), Bronze, 50 x 48 x 31 cm



Crossing the Pitfall (2008) Bronze, 109 x 68.5 x 68.5 cm



Head Inserted in the Human Web (2011), Bronze, 43 x 48 x 34 cm



Dissolving a Circular Order (2013), Bronze, 45 x 38 x 35 cm



Dissolving a Cubical Order (2015) Bronze, 41 x 34 x 35 cm



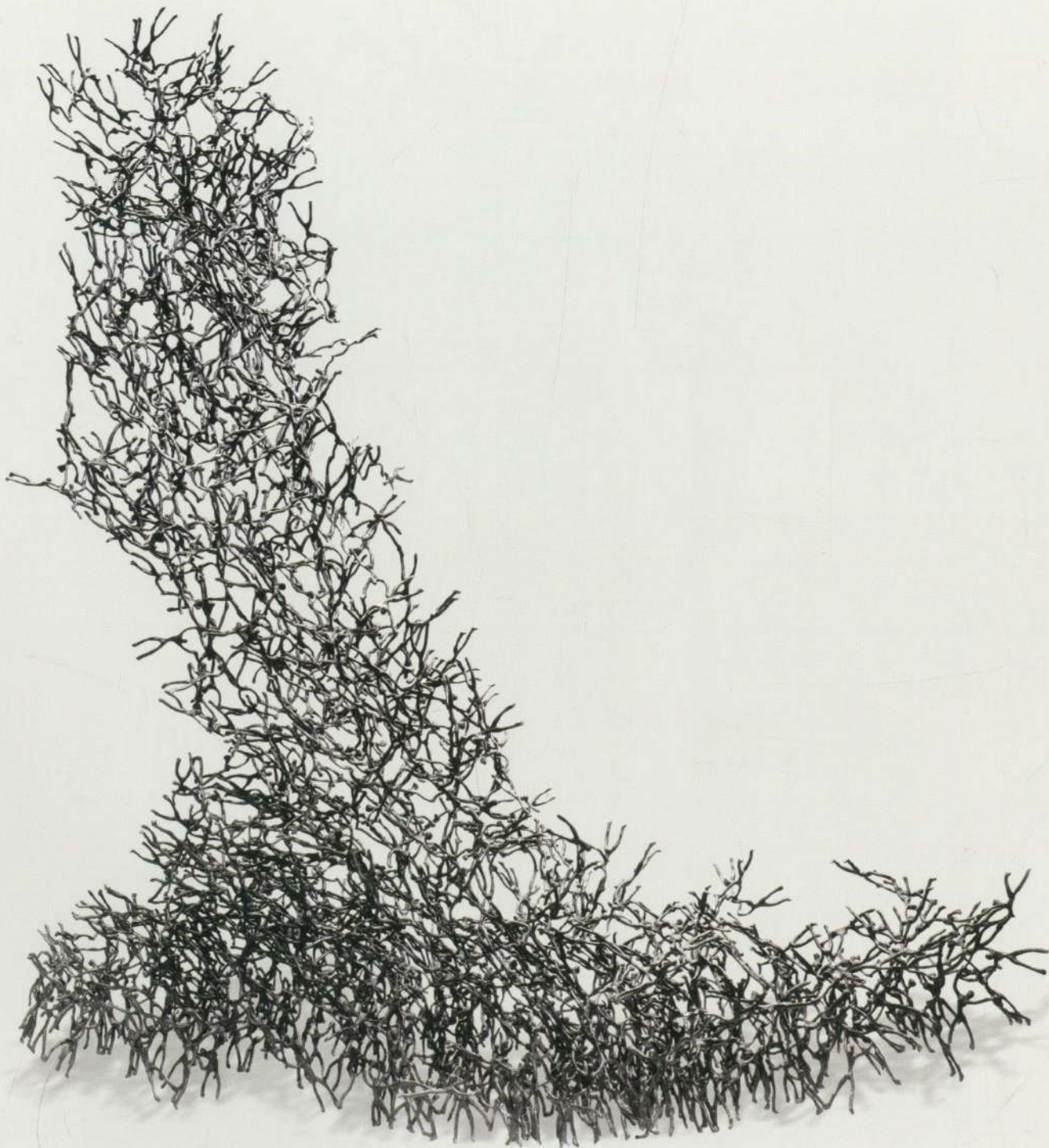
Global Migration (2006), Bronze, 36 x 22 x 36 cm



Musui as Terrafly on the Ramp (2009), Bronze, 53 x 57 x 33 cm



Musui with a Bursting Cloud - 4 (2013), Bronze, 69 x 40 x 40 cm



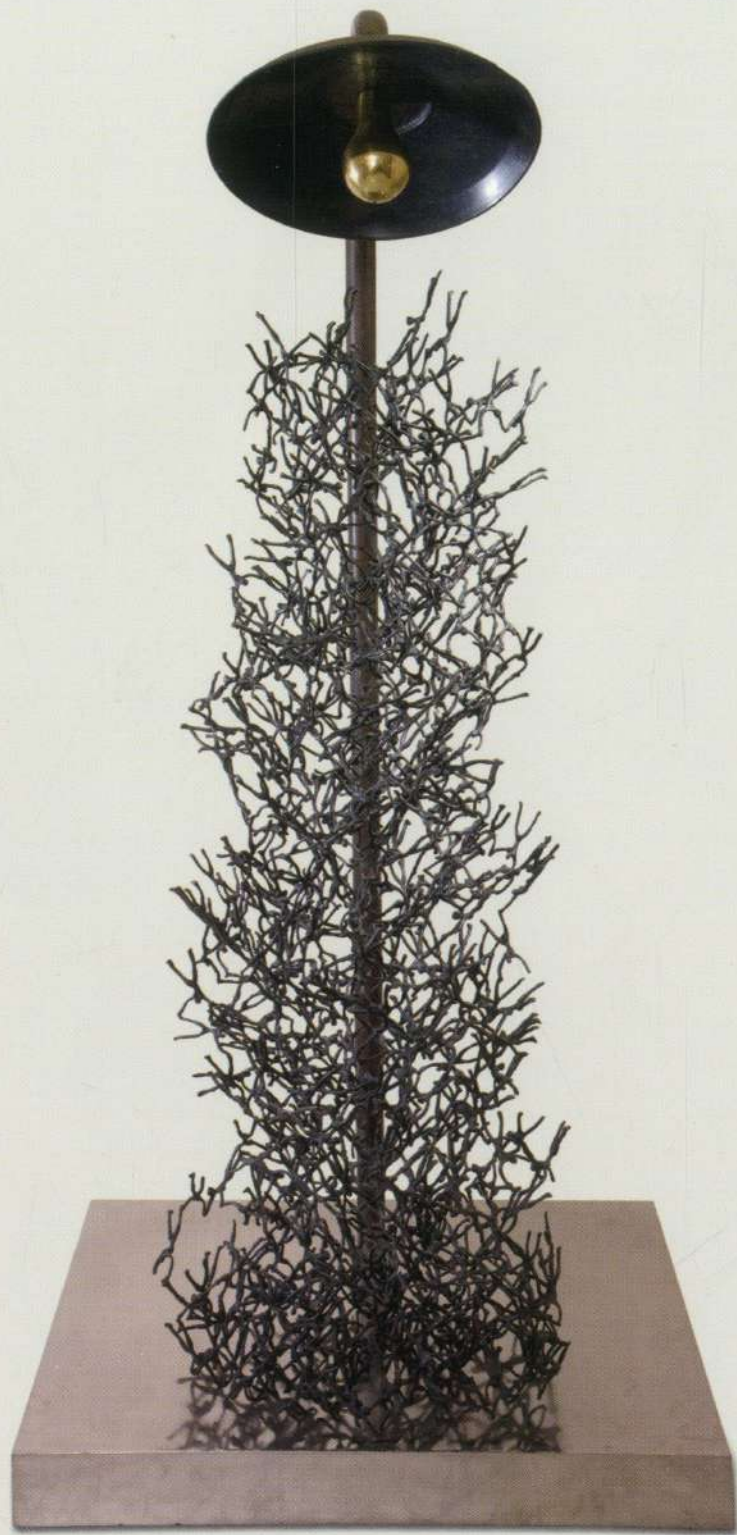
Descending Figures as Ascending Structure (2010) Bronze, 134 x 129 x 71 cm



Migrating on to Dodo (2007), Bronze, 51 x 28 x 50 cm



Fireflies of the Derelict Well (2011) Bronze, 154 x 94 x 109 cm



Ephemera (2014), Bronze, 76 x 76 x 137 cm



Maiya Walking with a Boat (2009), Bronze, 157.5 x 81 x 76 cm



Migrating on to the Boat (2011), Bronze, 58.5 x 56 x 22 cm



Maiya on the Human Square (2008) Bronze, 193 x 75 x 76 cm



Conflict Within (2013), Bronze, 53 x 44 x 48 cm



Freehold Maiya (2006), Bronze, 216 x 94 cm



Imp (Musui) on the Roof (2011), Bronze, 75 x 46 x 38 cm



Musui as Liminal Figure (2014), Bronze, 147 x 81 cm



Maiya as Liminal Figure (2014), Bronze, 139 x 78 cm



Musui Walking with Maiya (2011), Bronze, 162 x 114 x 96 cm





figuring out with figures