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ELEMENTAL

An interview with
JOANA VASCONCELOS

- RAJESH PUNJ

RIVER SONG

An interview with
DEBASHISH MUKHERJEE

- SHILPI GOSWAMI



TOWARDS A MUSEUM OF INNOCENCE

An Interview with **EBRAHIM ALKAZI**

- SAHAR ZAMAN

A NOT SO USUAL
ENCOUNTER WITH THE PRAYER WHEEL

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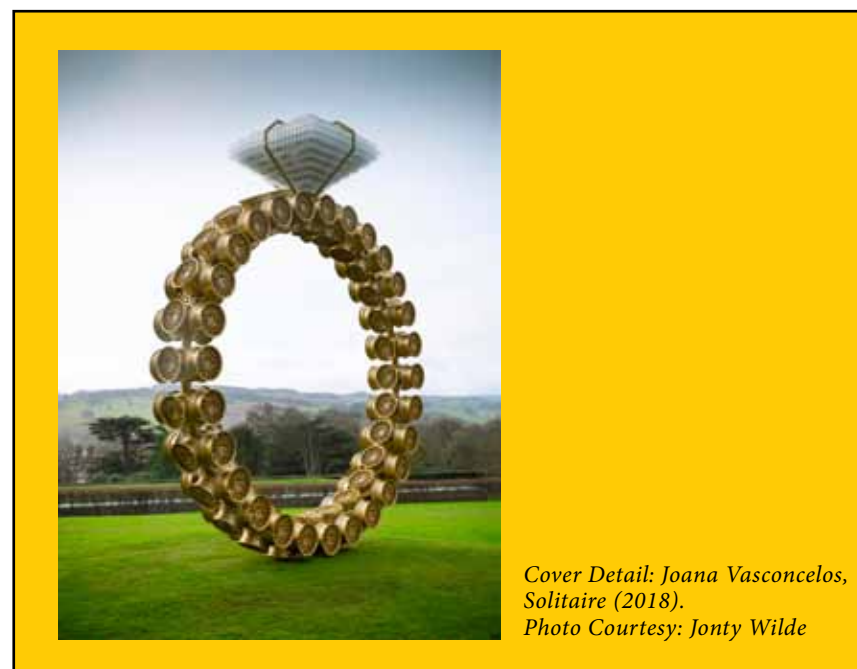
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Cover Detail: Joana Vasconcelos, Solitaire (2018).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

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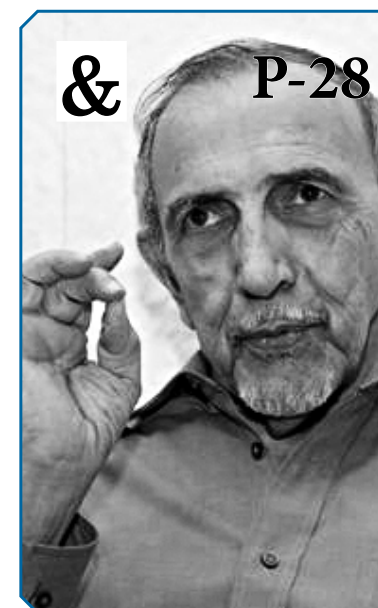
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ELEMENTAL

An interview with JOANA VASCONCELOS

- RAJESH PUNJ



In his day Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung introduced the idea that “the creation of something new was not accomplished by our intellect, but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind playing with the objects it loves.” And that reflex to rally together objects as the essential elements of an idea is what Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos does with great aplomb. Unashamed to see a casserole dish in a gallery setting, and as easily able to exhibit commonplace consumables as the pieces of a modern memorial to our lives; Vasconcelos sees our belongings as reasonable readymades for a public setting. As French-American conceptualist and chess-player Marcel Duchamp said of his choice of object as art, “my idea was to choose an object that wouldn’t attract me, either by its beauty or its ugliness. To find a point of indifference when looking at it.” Thus his choice of object was decided by its degree of dissolve, of how invisible it had become as an article of reality. That once removed from their everyday setting, and access to their contents denied, that the object’s facade function as a reference to reality, whilst serving to explain a new visual scenario. For Vasconcelos that softening of something’s original utilitarian meaning isn’t what proves her priority, it is that the object is allowed to retain its identity, whilst at the same time, the item is employed to explain anew situation that she sees as significant - as the object in the artist’s hands becomes a signifier for a swell of sensational ideas.

And like Duchamp, or (Andy) Warhol in his day, Vasconcelos seeing something in the ordinary object, looking no further than the side cabinet or kitchen sink for the props, that already have a utilitarian setting, labelled and located as such, that she, like Warhol with his Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes, removes from their rudimentary relationship to reality, relocating and reintroduced them as the body parts of her artworks. Which for Vasconcelos involves transforming the private and personal, into these astonishing public

Every element has a symbology and a concept behind it. So it requires combining objects that make sense and can go onto generating something new. So if you were to put a very strong element with another element that is as strong, side-by-side, immediately it becomes difficult because they both have their own significant symbology.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, Solitaire (2018).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

< Portrait of Joana Vasconcelos, Image courtesy: KentonThatcher



monuments. Seeing the domestic space, and the objects that operate there as being available to art and open to new possibilities. Duchamp goes further to explain how the creative act “is not performed by the artist alone.. the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications, and thus adds his or her contribution to the creative act.” Duchamp's acknowledgement of the individual as essential to art is something that Vasconcelos expanded even further, seeing the artist under the influence and involving so many others, besides her studio, of her not being able to exhibit if an institution had not invited her, and of her remaining unknown if she hadn't initially been talked about. And instead of seeing herself as central, as we would expect, Vasconcelos explains everything as being about the relationship of individuals and institutions in allowing her work to be sited and seen by an audience. Which is best explained as an inclusive philosophy, of seeing everyone and everything as elemental and integral to her work.

For their exhaustive choice of colours and inventive virtuosity, Vasconcelos' works appear as an assault on our senses –asking us to see, to touch and to hear them –as they illuminate in the natural light, as much as they glow in a gallery setting. And it is as if the artist sees every kind of object, that we likely ignore, as having the potential to alter into art, and as well for the artwork to still have those associations as central to the work. That spirited

I have a very symbiotic personality, so that means that because I can read frequencies, I can read space, and I can read energies, which means that I can adapt to a situation.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, Family Resources. Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

exchange between object and art has acted as the elixir for Vasconcelos' remarkable body of works. Jung's understanding of creating something new by means of spirited playfulness reads as a reason for how Vasconcelos withdraws something from reality, stealing it almost, to relocate and repeat its unit forms on an unprecedented scale, as the bones or brickwork of a delirious artwork at the entrance to a museum.

In a matter befitting American sculptor Claes Oldenburg, who explained of “being preoccupied with the possibility of creating art which functions in a public situation without compromising its private character of being antiheroic, anti-monumental, anti-abstract and anti-general. A paradox is intensified by the use on a grand scale of small-scale subjects, known from intimate situations – an approach that which tends, in turn, to reduce the scale of the real landscape to imaginary dimensions,” is something that Vasconcelos acknowledges as the alchemy of her work when talking about the ordinary object taking on a greater dimension. But as well it is Oldenburg's vivaciousness, of the ‘art of underwear and the art of taxicabs, and the art of ice cream cones dropped on concrete,’ that appears as active in Vasconcelos' art. Beyond Oldenburg's scale, Vasconcelos' choice of objects feels for a feminist understanding of the role of women in and outside of the home, as the soul of society.

In Machado de Assis's *The Mirror*, the Brazilian poet and playwright envisaged, “the human creature carrying two souls: one that looks from the inside out, and another that looks from outside in.” And goes on in his novel to explain how “the external soul can be an object or operation, a card game, a book, a machine, a pair of boots.” Suggesting, “that it is clear that the task of this second soul is to transmit life.” Which offers us an alternative way of looking at Vasconcelos' art, more befitting of belief systems, existence and experience, and of the energy that explains itself as life on earth. De Assis identifies the object as our eternal soul, in the same way, that Vasconcelos employs objects as the body and soul of her work. And far from being inanimate, that those objects have a residual aura. Something that Vasconcelos is convinced of, when rationalising, “everything has its own frequency, a glass of water, a pen, the frequency of wood is different from glass, so we would say the vibration of one material is different from another, and the same thing happens with people, and the same with trees. Everything is about energy, and the energy of wood is different from glass. And that happens with spaces too, every space has its own energy. If you can read that energy, and be able to connect with it, then we can go further, and actually interact with it.” Every single discussion and design is based on Vasconcelos ‘channelling’ her energy into receiving and then acting on information. That sees her as a metaphysical repository, from within which the artist draws clear

and complete ideas, as she explains, that are intended for real-time and space. All of which affirms a great deal about how Vasconcelos works, of looking into herself, as much as out onto the world, for the objects and elements that serve as the material matter for her autobiographical works.

With an idea decided, everything becomes about the space in which it is located. Of the site-specificity of works outside, against the negotiation of sculpture against space inside, that for Vasconcelos is about seeing space as manageable, even malleable. Reasoning it as her mission “to open spaces up, for a new way of seeing the world, and to connect you with your unconsciousness.” That explores its plasticity, in a way that American architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander explains space as a living organism, when he argues, “all space and matter, organic or inorganic, have some degree of life to it, and the matter is more or less alive according to its structure and arrangement.” The invitation to enter into a space, to embrace and occupy it, has Vasconcelos see it as a stage for her works that leads her audience into and out of reality, for something akin to an amusement park of modern emotions.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: *What do you feel about the artist interview, as somebody who speaks eloquently, and very often?*

Joana Vasconcelos: I have thirty-five to forty shows a year, and I can't attend all of them of course. But I do go to a few, and the truth is after a while the interviews I have to sit in on are pretty much the same, and the questions are always the same. So you only remember some of the interviews you do, but I can remember as well the person interviewing me because they are there at as many of my openings as I am. Which is important, because you can develop a relationship with them.

RP: *Which is something that interests me, of the idea of the interviewer and the interviewee becoming better acquainted over time, in a way that develops a deeper, more meaningful relationship.*

JV: That way they get to know your work (and to understand your motives).

RP: *Ah what is this –as Joana is handed a wooden tray with plain paper and colour pencils – so this is what you do whilst interviewing?*

JV: Yes, when I interview, I draw at the same time.

Manuela Costa: In meetings.

RP: *I thought you were pretending that this was something you did when speaking with someone.*

JV: No, this is real.



RP: So this can become an idea for a work? Or is it more an opportunity for you to see your subconscious in colours?

JV: Sometimes yes, sometimes it is just a way (of occupying my hands whilst I am talking).

RP: You are incredibly dedicated.

JV: I am. So tell me. Initially remind me of where you have interviewed me previously?

RP: I interviewed you very briefly at Manchester City Art Gallery, in 2015, for your exhibition of works as interventions. To return to where we are now, here at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, yesterday you spoke purposefully about the inside coming out, of the private and personal becoming public, and of the need for that to happen, as distressing as it might sound. I want to understand how you explain that as a motive for your work?

JV: When you have no shame of exhibiting your private life, in the sense that there are many things we are ashamed of. People are sometimes uncomfortable with their bodies, of their past, of their traditions, especially women, who can try to hide all of those things from everyone else. So crochet, for example, was made and used by many houses across many cultures around the world, but women have always hid that from public guise, because they wanted to conceal the fact that the women before

them, their mothers, their aunts, their grandmothers, didn't have anything other than crochet to keep them occupied. Which meant that they didn't have access to other forms of learning or activity of any kind. So one of the few expressions women were allowed besides domestic tasks was through crochet and knitting. And it is impossible to get rid of, or even to hide away these things, because would adorn every single house in Portugal, and be very personal. But they are not used or have the same value anymore. So much of it is hidden away in cupboards and at the back of a chest of drawers. People have decided not to use them because they don't want to see them, why? Not because they don't like their own handy-work, but more because they are ashamed of the fact that so many women were stuck in a reality that no longer exists. So women don't wish to be reminded of that or to ever go back to that moment. So they skirt over

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Call Center* (2014-2016). *Vista Interior* (2000). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *A Barroca* (2014). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde





those objects made by their family, and they don't want to assume them anymore. Which can still lead to beautiful moments, because if you ask a family if they have crochet from their grandmother, they will likely reply, 'yes, we use it, or oh no, we have it put away in a draw'.

RP: But then do you feel that you are having to change an entire psyche, a cultural attitude, to celebrate what might otherwise be regarded as ruinous, or not worth looking at, unless in the way of a tablecloth or hairdryer, as the most basic of objects, and to admit to having that in their homes?

JV: I am not ashamed to use it as a technique, and at the same time I feel quite privileged to honour it as a way of working. Which is not only about recognising it as a way of working, of using it, but as well of giving it a new life, a new position and perspective. So that way you can assume and be proud of what all of those women did and were, without being ashamed. It is about turning its angle. So a pen, a casserole dish, a rice bowl, has no intrinsic value, other than its utilitarian one, but it can in the right context, be seen as a significant thing, as something luxurious. Which is what I did with Marilyn 2009 - stiletto shoes made up of steel pans and their lids. We had a pair of shoes made up of something in no way lavish or valuable.

It is not for me to solve people's problems, but I can open a window that allows the audience, everyone, to look upon the world and to look at themselves differently, and to do that you have to create a template that opens up the space that enables them to look into themselves, and out into the world.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Diana* (2020), *Conselheiro* (2014), *Mustang* (2014), *Destemido* (2019). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Finisterra* (2018). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde



So you can look at your everyday life, your domestic life, and take it to a new dimension.

RP: And it really feels like that, that you take the simple, the banalest of things, and you celebrate the object for its visual value if you like - that which you then multiple.

JV: It becomes something else entirely, by abstracting the object by means of repetition and serialism. When you repeat the same elements you create a new dimension, which goes beyond the original object. I use a technique from the pointillist movement relating to realism, but in a very different context and with a baroque twist. I pick a readymade object, which works to a point and when it is repeated it creates a completely different image. For instance, with the wedding ring, *Solitaire 2018*, I repeat the rim-wheels in a way that after a while you don't see a rim-wheel anymore, you see an enormous wedding ring.

RP: A double-take, of your wondering 'what it is' and 'what is it made of?' In that sense, you have objects creating objects.

JV: The glimpse, the first look, is 'what is that?' and you will initially see a wedding ring, and then when you zoom in you can make out the rim-wheels and whisky glasses, and again when you zoom out you will see a

wedding ring. So which of them are you looking at?

RP: You manage to create objects from objects, as I say, that suggests that everything has an aesthetic value, besides its less impressive functional worth. And then how is it, with the objects that you choose, how is it that you come to select those objects over other objects, as the elements for a sculpture?

JV: Every element has a symbology and a concept behind it. So it requires combining objects that make sense and can go onto generating something new. So if you were to put a very strong element with another element that is as strong, side-by-side, immediately it becomes difficult because they both have their own significant symbology.

RP: Objects cancelling one another out.

JV: So to change the symbology, it is often better to use lesser objects, or you can use strong elements, it depends on the work.

RP: I think of Marcel Duchamp, and of his process for selecting readymades, and as well I think of how you look at objects in the world, on a day-to-day basis. When I look at things, the most basic of things, I am inclined to ignore them, as do the majority of us, but you clearly look at them anew.



JV: I do.

RP: And then are you collecting objects, both physically and mentally?

JV: Yes. I collect objects mentally, and I have a museum of ideas where I store all the necessary information, so when the time comes - it is like storing to be able to remember things - and you either collect them or you don't. I channel my ideas that is the truth.

RP: And do you have many ideas, more than you can work with?

JV: No, in fact, what you have to do is to clear your mind as much as you can, and also be as accessible as you can, and with all that space then allow yourself to store information. And then you can challenge it, and when you do that, concrete it, the idea becomes very clear.

RP: So the idea becomes simplified for it to be channelled, into and out of you.

JV: Not necessarily, but yes it is about how it is channelled. When I see the pieces in my mind, I see them completely done. The task for me is to make them in this dimension.

RP: And does that come naturally to you? Have you

had that about you from the beginning, or has that way of working developed over time - as an action and intuition?

JV: It is much more than a feeling. Channelling is that you receive information from another dimension, and it is incredibly clear in your mind. So you don't see shoes made up of pans, I do, and I do see valkyries. If you say 'okay, create a valkyrie for this room', I would organise myself, focus, and I will come here and design it.

RP: Yesterday you talked of how each of the valkyries is intended for a specific place or space.

JV: Yes, because I can connect objects to spaces, and I can connect the objects to each other. It is a capacity that I possess, and I can see things.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *I'll Be Your Mirror* (2018).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Big Booby #4* (2018).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde





^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Marilyn* (2011).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

< Joana Vasconcelos, *Eggnetic* (2016-17).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

RP: *And when you enter into a space, do you feel the urge to occupy the space entirely?*

JV: It depends, if I am asked to relate with it I can design a piece for the space or I can make an installation, it depends (on many things). It is never the same.

RP: *And as well, I assume, it is not always about being on a big scale.*

JV: No.

RP: *I saw your work at the Guggenheim Bilbao last year, whilst at the museum for a retrospective of Lucio Fontana. And I can recall coming down from the upper floors, and seeing an enormous valkyrie hanging like an alien entity from the glass and titanium frame. And it was, unlike many other works, as if these organic instruments of colour were intended for that elevated space.*

JV: Exactly, and they were.

RP: *And I wished I had had more of an opportunity to see them in their entirety.*

JV: They do for that time belong there, because when I go to a space like the Guggenheim, and it was asked of me to introduce something to the entrance space, I arrived at the entrance and thought okay, and with



the intention to do it, I 'channelled' the piece, I design it, and then I had to produce the work.

RP: *And were you not overwhelmed at all by the sheer scale of the space, and of the interruptions of architecture and artworks?*

JV: No, the scale of the space isn't important in that sense, what matters is what the space needs.

RP: *it is interesting to see it that way, of it being about the space needing something at that moment, and not that the volume or vastness of it determines everything for you.*

JV: All of the spaces I work with need something. If you can connect with a space you can envisage what it needs.

RP: *That isn't curatorial, that is entirely intuitive.*

JV: What is there that should go into that space.

RP: *And so if we think about where we are, surrounded here by your sculptures in Yorkshire, how have you gone about deciding of the location of works? And is that something you have done independently of the curator?*

JV: This was a different situation that didn't involve

Many people don't feel the need to go anywhere, and I understand that because if you travel within yourself, there is so much to discover.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, Pavillon de Vin (2016), Pavillon de Thé (2012). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, Pavillon de Vin (2016). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

site-specificity, I was able to recall works that I made elsewhere in that way, and it is always surprising when they come out of their original setting, and connect with a new space. Here I worked a great deal with Clare Lilley, because she knows the spaces better than I do, and we discussed locating the works individually. So in that sense, this is a curated exhibition, and not, as at the Guggenheim Bilbao, a site-specific show. Although Clare and I did think very carefully about which works should go where, in order, they could easily relate to the landscape, and as well with the ambience, and of how the audience visit the sculpture park. Which again is the knowledge of the curator.

RP: *You are here for a brief moment if we consider time, and the park and the light naturally alter with the seasons.*

JV: But that doesn't matter as much. I just did a show in Boston, where I was asked to do something site-specific, like the Guggenheim, Bilbao, and I chose to produce another valkyrie, and for that, I was there for three or possibly four hours, and whilst there I designed the piece, and that was as much as I needed to be there for. I was there to decide what I wanted to do and came back to install it.

RP: *When I hear you speak you appear aware of not overwhelmed by space, entirely at ease with the idea that your works will live as an exhibition within*

a space. When for the majority of us the idea of taking on such a vast space, requires of us incredible confidence that possibly we don't all have. And possibly it is to do with personality as well.

JV: No, it is to do with frequency. Everything has its own frequency, a glass of water, a pen, the frequency of wood is different from glass, so we would say the vibration of one material is different from another, and the same thing happens with people, and with trees. Everything is about energy, and the energy of wood is different from glass. And that happens with spaces too, every space has its own energy. If you can read that energy, and be able to connect to it, then we can go further and actually interact to it. I can interact with you because I can read your energy, and through my work, you can read mine. Everybody knows how to do it, some people are far more conscious about it, and others less aware of it. And some people know how to use it, and then others are not able to use it at all. In the same way that some people can speak five languages, as I do, and some of us manage with one. That can be explained as a connection that you have with your brain that is different from other people.

RP: *When I heard you speak yesterday, and all of the conversations that I had and heard about you, everyone reiterated how remarkably open you are and of your generosity of spirit. And I can feel now in your presence when you explain everything in*





such simple terms, as though what is meant to be will be. How do you create such clarity, and is it a commitment you have with yourself?

JV: I have a very symbiotic personality, so that means that because I can read frequencies, I can read space, and I can read energies, which means that I can adapt to a situation. Some people can read those energies and adapt, and some are not able to do that. So I adapt very easily to people, to spaces, and I also connect with the essence of things. And when you connect with the essence of something, everything else around it becomes less important. I see the essence of people and things, and seeing and feeling that way, allows you to interact and communicate with a lot of things, and as many people.

RP: *And that appears even more relevant now when we are all so easily distracted by many different things that are irrelevant to us.*

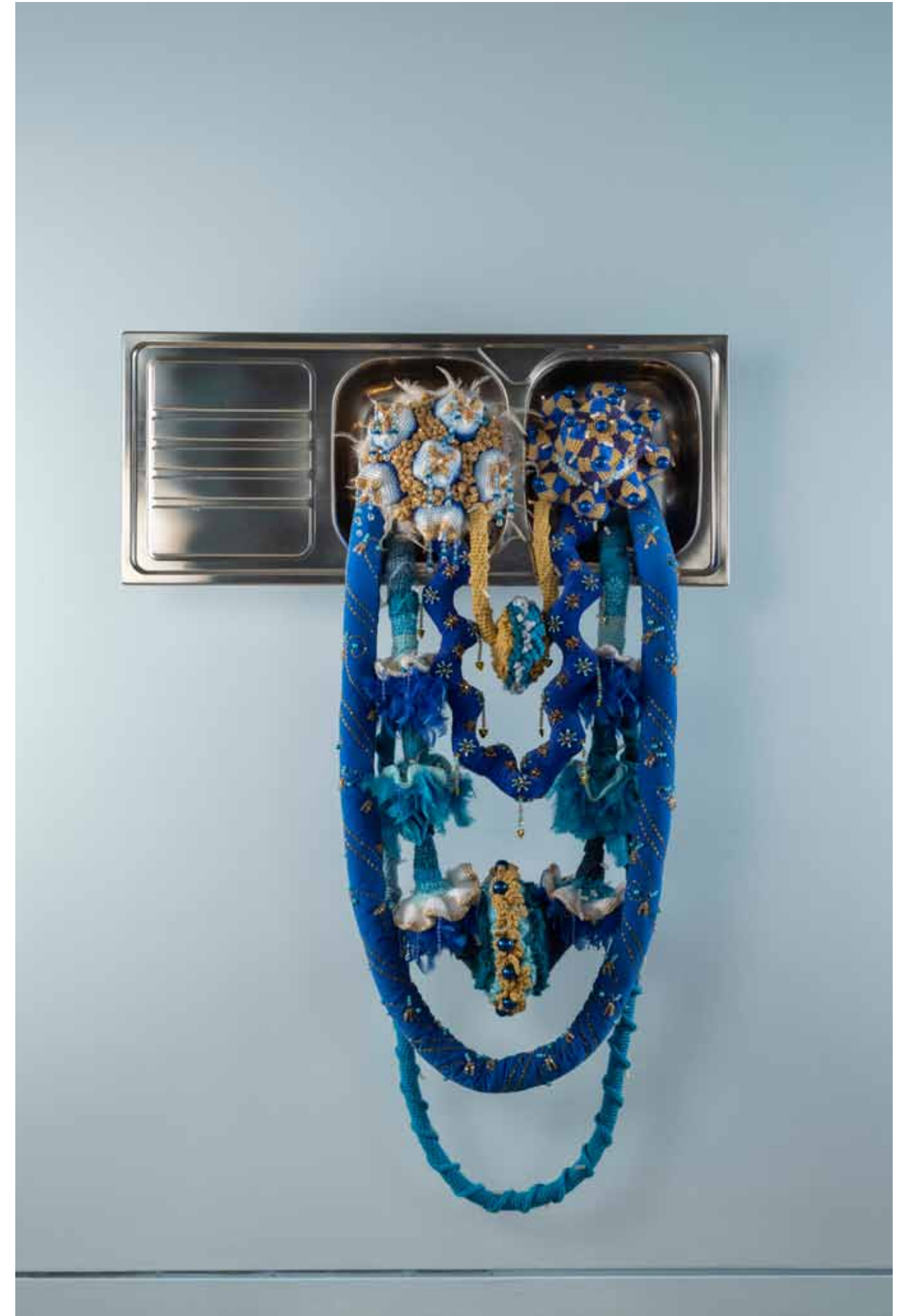
JV: Yes, exactly. When I spoke to everyone here at YSP (Yorkshire Sculpture Park) on Friday, it was a wonderful moment, and when I saw the group I instantly understood what the group needed, so I talked of my works in a certain way, to allow them all into my works, and me into each of them. When so many of them ended up crying.

RP: *And how do you feel about that, of having such an effect on your audience?*

JV: I felt the need to talk about ideas and issues that were there in the room. I felt I connected with them, and through my work, they could process their own feelings, which I won't be aware of. It is not for me to solve people's problems, but I can open a window that allows the audience, everyone, to look upon the world and to look at themselves differently, and to do that you have to create a template that opens up the space that enables them to look into themselves, and out into the world. And that is the goal of the art world to create templates as artworks, where you can re-evaluate who you are, and of the world in which we exist. Some of us do it by being crazy, intense, or incredibly negative or positive even, it depends, and what matters is the procedure you have for dealing

*^ Joana Vasconcelos, Pop Galo (2016).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde*

*> Joana Vasconcelos, Precious (2018).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde*





with those sensations. And if you then think about your life, of your family, and of who you are, then it is done. But you can synchronise with the frequency of a group, with a space, or with an individual person.

RP: *That is where it becomes incredibly interesting, beyond the boundaries of art and into reality.*

JV: You can learn to do that. I have it naturally, but I also learned some techniques, and have been learning about that for a while now. So initially I was doing it without knowing or being conscious that I was able to read energies and frequencies. And if you think about the power in the world, leaders don't rule countries without knowing how to do that, they do know how to do that.

RP: *Which has me think of charisma or control. And with your exhibiting in so many spaces and places, and going to so many different countries, do you always feel a different level and intensity of energy everywhere you go?*

JV: Yes, of course, always completely different. What has been very interesting with my own journey, of learning so much from different cultures and countries, is that the vibrations have always been completely different. I just did a trip to New Delhi, which was quite striking, for a week, and whilst there went to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, and then from

there, I went directly to Boston. So I went from Agra to Boston. I was in a car in the morning, saw the Taj Mahal, back into a car for the airport, and flew to Boston, and arrived there and wondered what had happened to me, 'what is this?' The vibrations of Boston, and of the Americas has nothing at all to do with India.

RP: *It must be quite incredible that kind of displacement and temporary placement that sees you see such extreme cultures so quickly.*

JV: I think 'oh my god', and it is interesting because the world offers you many ways of existing. There is not only one way, but there are also many cultures, many religions.

^ Joana Vasconcelos, *Purple Rain* (2017).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

> Joana Vasconcelos, *Red Independent Heart #3* (2013).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde





RP: Which has me think of the architect Renzo Piano, who talks of the need to travel.

JV: Yes, but you also don't need to go anyway, because inside each of us there is an entire universe we are unaware of. So you don't necessarily need to travel, you only need to go deep into yourself.

RP: But I would say travel allows us, forces us even, to go to those places inside ourselves, whilst physically going from one place to another.

JV: Many people don't feel the need to go anywhere, and I understand that because if you travel within yourself, there is so much to discover.

RP: Likely many of us are too afraid to do the travelling inside ourselves.

JV: Yes, I agree.

I could talk to you and explain who I am through my work, but it isn't something I believe I should do, because it becomes physiological. And the physiological relates to my own intimate processes.

< Joana Vasconcelos, Solitaire (2018). Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde

RP: It goes back to that wonderful point you made earlier 'of everyone seeing your dirty laundry'.

JV: Exactly. I have been involving that process of travelling inside myself for more than ten years that enabled me to make the pieces that I have produced for YSP because all of the works here are in some ways autobiographical. About who I am, about my life, and of my personal experiences, and I couldn't have done that without having started by talking about me. I could talk to you and explain who I am through my work, but it isn't something I believe I should do, because it becomes physiological. And the physiological relates to my own intimate processes. But then as well when I am talking about myself, I am talking about everybody else. We are one, we are united. We are because others exist. It is called 'unbutu' - I am because we are.

RP: It is included in a recently released song by Coldplay.

JV: It relates to a tribe in South Africa, that if one of its group does something wrong, the tribe comes together and puts that person in the middle of a gathering of all of the villagers, and they talk about that person's qualities. If you steal, lie, whatever it is, they bring the tribe into a circle, with that person at the centre, and say positive things. So instead of blaming them, they see it as a moment to celebrate the person's qualities, and say 'you forgot who you are.'

RP: And it really works?

JV: It really works, it is called unbutu - I am because we are.

RP: And is that central to how we should see your work?

JV: No, I exist, and when I speak about something or I translate the world through my work, I am aware that I am translating everybody's feelings as well. The person who has forgotten who they are needs to be remembered by the community, but also the community needs to be remembered by the person who has been forgotten. When one person acts out, it is because the community isn't recognising them enough. And it is the reverse with artists, we are a reflection of society, we are like a mirror reflecting what society has become.

RP: Yesterday I was in a conversation in which we talked about your studio, which I am told is a community in itself.

JV: It is.

RP: And what is it that you are doing there that you feel is important, and that possibly isn't present in society.

JV: First we try to acknowledge that we have a

community and that they are treated equally. That they are safe and that we have the utmost respect for one another, and I try to give my employee's the best conditions to work in that I can. So we eat together, we work together, we have a healer, yoga classes, karate, personal training. We have courses and classes for everyone, and people can also talk about their work, tastes, and so on. And we try to create within the wider group, a notion that everyone is important in their own way, by allowing them, celebrating even, their thing. It is a way of bringing people together. We work together for eight or nine hours a day, our lives are there in the studio, and without those people, my work wouldn't be possible. And the least I can do is to give them back (the best possible environment to work in).

RP: Which is interesting because you have throughout the day and yesterday, talked of your being here because of so many other people - in the way of unbutu, of acknowledging your presence here with other people in so many different places.

JV: 'I am because we are.'

RP: It sounds very simple, but at the same time remarkable.

JV: It does sound simple, but is equally complex.

RP: We don't do that, of acknowledging each other enough.

JV: Because we have forgotten.

RP: Fundamentally everything is about 'me'.

JV: It is very egocentric because it is 'you', 'you', 'you', but you only exist because others allow you to. I don't know if you have ever been to Thailand (or anywhere else in Asia), where the monks or the priests only exist because the community needs them. To be a priest is a calling, of course, it is something that you decide, but unless you have a community or parish that prays with you, then you have no point of existing. And the monk only exists because you offer them food, and you go to their temple. In other words 'they exist because we are there and because they are aware that we are with them.' The truth is that when I visited the monks in Venice, where I am about to do a project for the San Giorgio Maggiore church.

RP: Which dates back to the 16th century.

JV: I realised they exist in the same way that charity exists. And we are pretty much the same, artists only exist if critics keep on writing about them, institutions show them, and curators find their work. I cannot decide what you are going to write, or if I am going to be invited for another show, or if a collector will buy my work or not. Sometimes it can happen, sometimes not. I was invited in 2011 to do this show, and then again in 2014, and I thought what is it I need to do to

make this exhibition happen? Nothing. I had to wait for the right moment to arrive, and finally, it did.

RP: It appears you are entirely content with everything that is in front of you, in a way that we, for the majority, are incredibly anxious about - of the future. Was there ever a moment you felt frustrated?

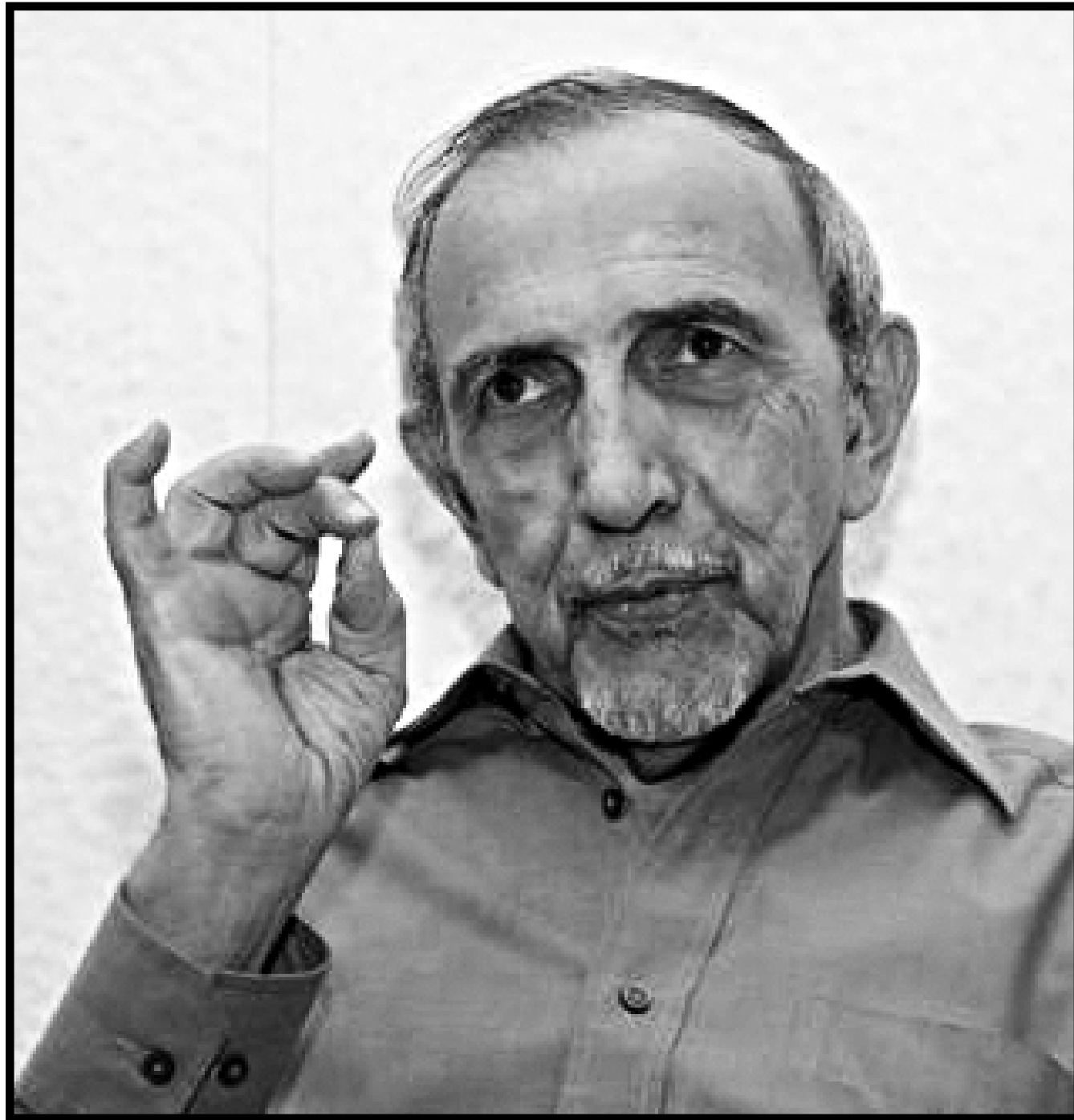
JV: Of course, there was a time I wanted to control everything, and I wanted power over it. And then, of course, I realised I didn't have the power to control anything, and so I let go.

RP: Like swimming against the tide, and then turning to face the water the other way.

When one person acts out, it is because the community isn't recognising them enough. And it is the reverse with artists, we are a reflection of society, we are like a mirror reflecting what society has become.

> Joana Vasconcelos, Tutti Frutti (2019).
Photo Courtesy: Jonty Wilde





TOWARDS A MUSEUM OF INNOCENCE

An Interview with EBRAHIM ALKAZI

- SAHAR ZAMAN

Ebrahim Alkazi – his name stands as an authority in theatre and in archival photography. The recipient of all three Padmas – the Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and more recently in 2010, the Padma Vibhushan, he has been awarded several doctorates by different universities and honoured for his contribution in

^ Ebrahim Alkazi

revolutionizing the style of theatre in India. At the age of 87 today, there's something else that's keeping him busy. A new venture for an old, passionate, long standing relationship. "We are still keeping it under wraps and not revealing much. But Mr. Alkazi has kept me busy every day since 2009....It's a lot of work", says artist Fakeha Tarannum. She is happy to be the chosen one for Alkazi's current subject of attention – his own private museum in the heart of New Delhi. Built from scratch and designed in a style that maintains his love for the classic. There are still a few months to set the opening date and announce its launch but Ebrahim Alkazi is only too glad to tease his critics who have been spreading rumours about his ailing health and growing insanity. Two days before the interview, I was warned by a well wisher to be careful of his walking stick that could well be directed at me in a fit of rage! More than scared, I was amused by this piece of news! Excerpts from my interview with him below shows how nasty these rumour mills are beginning to get about a man whose senses are well within control to execute the building of a museum of his entire art collection of the past 60 years.

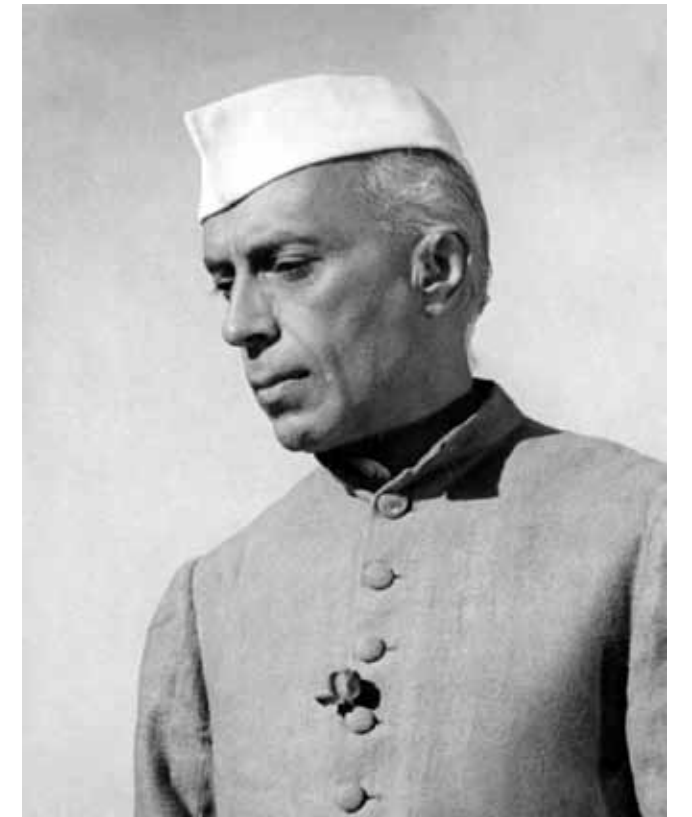
Interview

Sahar Zaman: *What's keeping you busy these days?*

Ebrahim Alkazi: Curiosity! Curiosity of life, trying to learn always, who you yourself are. You aren't merely working through characters in play. It's the story of your own life, and you want to know how your own life is related to the lives of people from different parts of the world. The terrain is tremendously exciting.

S.Z.: *Let's be a bit more specific and talk about this museum you plan to open soon.*

E.A.: Well, I want to call it The Alkazi Museum. I have an enormous collection of art. My main concern is that who will look after it when I am not around. And it's very important to retain this part of your country's history. The space will be divided into art, theatre, photography and publication. My art collection is from all over India – modern art, sculptures and antiques. I have never bought anything from under the table, so I have nothing to hide. The antiques were mainly bought from auction houses and there are receipts for most. They're from all over India. The paintings of modern masters I have acquired from artists who have been my dear friends like Tyeb Mehta, FN Souza, Akbar Padamsee and MF Husain. There are other names like KG Subramanyan and Chittravanu Majumdar who are part of my collection too. A lot of other artists whose works I have retained down the years from shows that I did in my gallery Art Heritage will be on display too. The old catalogues of Art Heritage gallery form an interesting timeline in the collection as well. In theatre, I wish to display

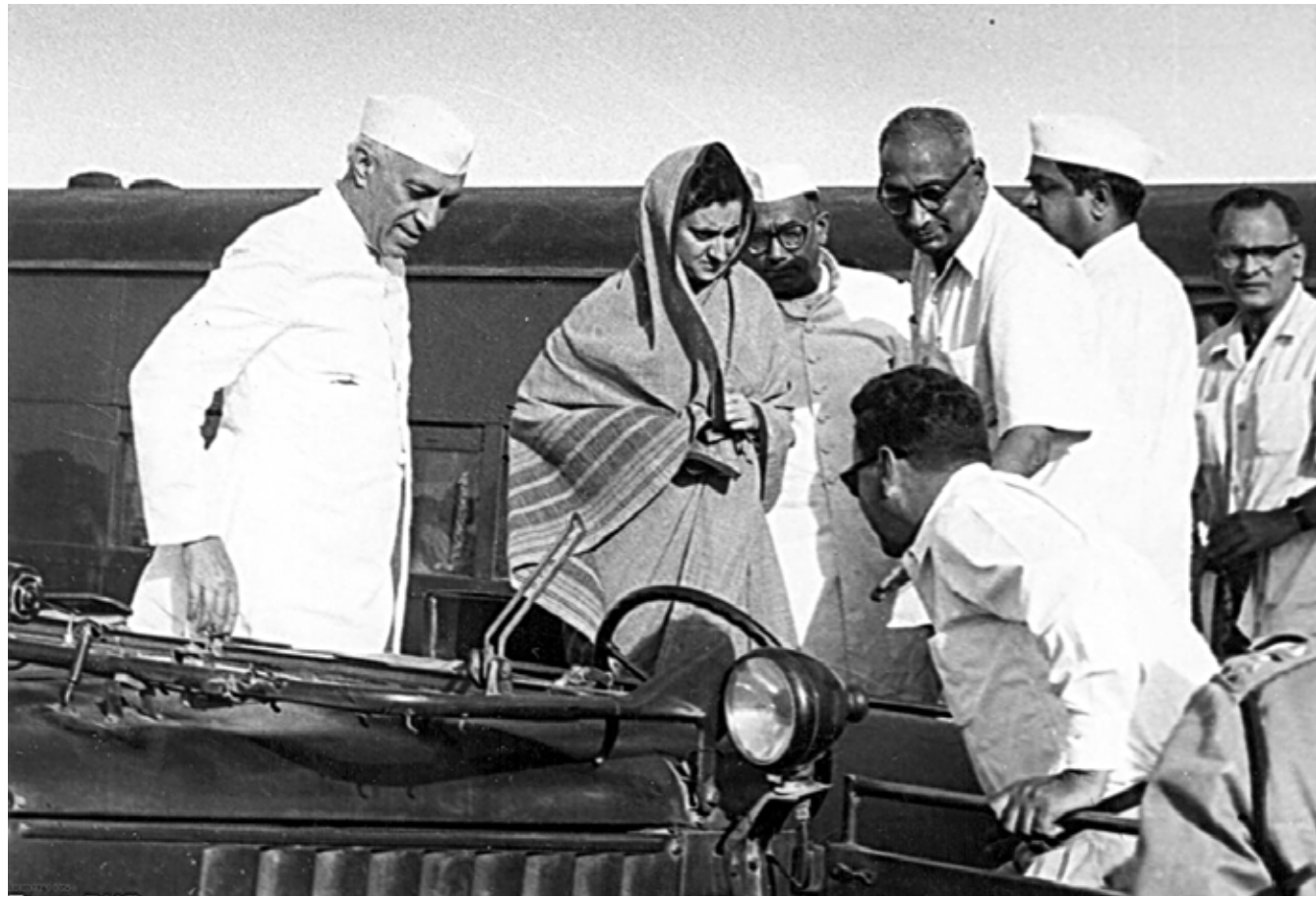


^ Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

images of performances from my productions and posters of my famous plays like Rakht Kalyan, Din Ke Andhere and Julius Caesar. Apart from that, there are artifacts I have collected from across the world like traditional Japanese tapestry, Indonesian folk art, etc.

S.Z.: *How will this museum be different from the already existing Alkazi Foundation for the Arts because that also houses a large part of your collection?*

E.A.: That is only archival photographs with our publishing wing dedicated to making books on those archival photographs. And that's a private space where you can visit only by appointment. This museum will have art and antiques that have been part of my collection for so many decades. It will be open to public. I may also look into conducting educational lectures by scholars across the world. There's been quite an impact on people from Europe with the work I have done with my exhibitions. For instance, the French Ambassador comes and sees what we're upto. He is determined to show it in France. But it needs to be worked out well. What they should be drawn by is the authority of the collection that I have put together. And it's the right attitude that we need to cultivate in India. Museums need to be open to visitors and help in cultivation of your thought process on art. Museums



in Europe and UK do that very well. They cultivate good relations and make an effort to sustain you as a dedicated visitor. The encouragement and courtesy that you are given is amazing. But this pushing and pulling attitude in India is bad and it's largely because of the market talk in art.

S.Z.: *Is it because of lack of government patronage? There are private collectors like Kiran Nadar, Anupam Poddar and Neville Tuli who are all working on their own museum. But you have been in the art scene much before than them. I would like to get sense of history from you on when government art institutions like the Lalit Kala Academy came into being and why did the initiative from the government gradually wane away to reach such a dismal situation right now?*

E.A.: It depends on the head of the government. There was great impetus given to the arts when you had leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. They were rooted in the culture of the country but they were open to a whole world of options. They had travelled a great deal and they had an open mind about things. They encouraged things. It was a privilege and honour to be around the time of Nehru. And he took a lot of interest in the theatre work I was doing. I didn't seek his presence but he used attend a lot of my shows. I tried to get the character and force that our monuments stand for. They were used for military affairs but I wanted

I am not aware of the leaders of today. Because you have to be going around and meeting them and knowing them better. I don't do that now.

^ Mahadeo Singh with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, Suratgarh

> Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru with Mahatma Gandhi

them to be used for creative work of theatre because I didn't want to do my theatre in small buildings, I wanted larger spaces. And Nehru used to come and see them. He himself showed interest. When Pandit ji died, I was taken to his home where his body was still lying and then I was asked to prepare the running commentary the next day for All India Radio. Even at Indira's death, I was rung up and told about her body lying and if I could go and see it. When I went there, there was a little book on the table that was on the side of the bed where she lay. The book had these lines - 'The woods are lovely dark and deep, I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.' I was so touched and moved. It was lovely how these leaders sought me out. When I moved from Delhi to Bombay, their support was special.

S.Z.: *Who from today's leaders do you expect this kind of appreciation and encouragement in art?*

E.A.: I am not aware of the leaders of today. Because you have to be going around and meeting them and knowing them better. I don't do that now.

S.Z.: *How closely are you following the works of contemporary artists like Subodh Gupta, Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher, etc.?*

E.A.: Well, it interests me a lot. It opens your mind

and soul to a whole new variety of experiences which are different from your own. But to familiarize yourself more with the latest, you need to move around a lot more which I don't anymore. And I strongly feel a lot more needs to be done by institutions to aide artists who have worked so hard in trying to share their experiences on life which is projected on to the canvas. That kind of refinement has not come into our entire system of putting up exhibitions.

S.Z.: *How about the annual art fair that happens every year for popularizing art and attempting to reach out to an audience that is not used to going out to galleries?*

E.A.: Well, it's a commercial affair and I'm not a businessman. There's a lot of rubbish talk about arts there. It's a matter of how much this painting was paid for and what's the market price. There should be a sufficiently long history in the study and evaluation of art before you can work out what pricing is all about. I'm just too distracted in these fairs with a lot of trivial rubbish on the art market which will not be tolerated in any serious art institution in the world. But because the prices in art have shot up so high, people are mesmerized by the money attached with art. There's no subtlety.

S.Z.: *Let's talk about theatre since that has been*





such a major part of your life. In what manner are you connected with the present day theatre?

E.A.: Oh, this is theatre, my museum. New ideas are coming to me every single day and you keep adding to the existing. The creativity of Indian artists is extraordinary. Wherever they were in India, they did remarkable work. And when you see it as part of your own contemporary history, it's brilliant and insightful. They wanted their art to be a reflection of their own lives, their struggles and their community.

S.Z.: *Your contribution to theatre and art in India is tremendous. Did you ever at any point think of going back to your roots in Saudi Arabia or following art from the Middle East? The artists there are doing very well too and there's the Sharjah Biennale that has already marked it's 10th anniversary.*

E.A.: I was rooted in Arab culture, studied our language, the Quran. But at the same time, I lived here and this country is where I was brought up. And at the end of the day, a lot depends on what my educationists brought to me. So I got an incredible world view on things. I was educated by the Jesuits in Pune. They were excellent educationists who not just taught Western thought but also educated themselves on the history of the place wherever they

were. Unlike the British, the Jesuits never looked down upon Indian culture. They were interested in humanity as a whole. They were interested in Oriental languages and local languages too. All that opened up tremendous areas for me. And most significantly, at the same time, the working of independent India also shaped my thoughts. It was a very interesting period for the history of man in the subcontinent because we were all subject to British rule. And a great deal of the civilization (Indian) was much better than anything created by the British themselves.

^ Indian Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru being greeted by U.S. President

< Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

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RIVER SONG

An interview with DEBASHISH MUKHERJEE

- SHILPI GOSWAMI



Debashish Mukherjee, *River Song*, display view

Debashish Mukherjee was born in Chapra, an old industrial town in Bihar. He grew up amidst open spaces and railway colonies, mixing freely with people from a range of social backgrounds. He graduated from the Banaras Hindu University, specializing in painting. Rooted in India, Mukherjee manifests his keen observations of India's built environment, social fabric and events from his day-to-day life into his art practice. His work interrogates into the way memory is preserved, celebrated or neglected.

He has also done extensive research with weavers and artisans across India, especially within Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Gujarat while working with a prestigious fashion house.

He is a published poet and an avid photographer. Debasish lives and works in New Delhi.



^ Debashish Mukherjee, *Museum Within 13 (detail)*

Interview

Shilpi Goswami (SG): *Let's begin with your Childhood... Where were you born and raised?*

Debashish Mukherjee(DM): I was born in Chapra, a mid-size railway junction town in North Bihar. While we were growing up during mid-seventies and eighties, life was rather simple and laid-back like any other smaller town in India, although for the longest time Chapra remained one of the important towns of Bihar because of its location. It is situated near the junction of two rivers, Saryu and the Ganga, which became one of the most important trade routes of 18th century when the Dutch, French, Portuguese and the British established the Saltpeter Refineries in this region. Even during the Mughal period, Chara was an important place- the Ain-e-Akbari describes this area as Saran Sarkar, one of the six revenue divisions.

My father worked for Indian Railways and shifted to Chapra from Benares during late sixties. The colony where we lived was altogether a very differently woven world. People from various states helped building a multi-cultural society. I have many fond memories of those days. Our home was adjacent to a water body, beyond that, miles together was a vast agricultural land where it would change colour as



^ Debashish Mukherjee, *Museum Within 13*



^ Debashish Mukherjee, *Museum Within 14*

What makes us yearn for a time lost? What triggers memories, and how do we understand the moments in which we experience them if not situated in the place or time in which they occurred? Personal memories are translated via objects and materials into nostalgia, a universal emotion but one that is experienced differently by different individuals and to different degrees each time a memory is recalled.

per the season. I still remember how the shades of green would turn into an endless liquid silver lake during the rains. Those were really beautiful days...

SG: *When did you realize that you should pursue Art as your formal education?*

DM: Like any other child, I too loved playing with colours... unfortunately many of us do not continue this passion over the unnecessary academic pressure [in school]. In my case it always worked the other way, more like a stress buster. Honestly speaking, for the longest time I didn't even know a subject called Fine Arts existed as a course available at the undergraduate level, until I happened to meet my cousin brother who lived in Delhi and sensed my keen interest in drawing. It was him who advised me to pursue Fine Arts, once I shared my dislike for Science, which I was pursuing at that point of time. Soon after, I was formally enrolled to the Department of Visual Arts, Banaras Hindu University in the month of August 1990. It all happened within 6 to 8 months of meeting him.

SG: *Who were your teachers at the University?*

DM: To start with BHU officials refused to enroll me since there was a spelling error in my class twelfth's mark sheet. I didn't know a soul there and felt quite helpless, and then I heard someone speaking softly in Bangla and followed the voice to discover a lean Sikh gentleman. He was kind enough to guide me how to resolve that issue and remained my mentor and guru throughout my art college days. He was Prof. Balbir Singh Katt. During my foundation year, he was keen that I take plastic art as my subject of specialization but somehow I was more interested to learn the techniques of painting. He respected my decision and we remained close always.

I was fortunate enough to have Dilip Dasgupta as my painting teacher and had an opportunity to meet and learn from his elder brother Bimal Dasgupta at their Assi [Ghat] residence. I was also taught by a few brilliant teachers like S. Pranam Singh, Deepak Banerjee, Kalindi Jena, Madan Lal, Dr. Ajay Singh and Dr. Anjan Chakraverty.

SG: *What was studying in Benares like?*

DM: I shifted to Benares in the year 1990 to pursue BFA, but I guess I was connected to this city through my umbilical cord. My Ma was born and brought up here in Benares and every year we visited our grandmother during the summer holidays without fail.

Once I took admission, somehow I didn't quite enjoy staying within the campus. So I would take off to Dashashwamedha Ghat for sketching almost every day on my bicycle. Once the dusk settled over Ganga, that place looked magical...I would sit and watch the reflection of lights, creating abstract



patterns on the face of the river for hours together. There was no synchronized Ganga Aarti those days. After the sunset, Ghats were much quieter and peaceful. While sitting on the steps one could hear the sound of chanting of mantras layered with the typical rhythmic pattern of temple bells. At times there would be a sharp distraction created by the boatmen, who would call out loudly for passengers.

Sketching at the Ganga Ghats every day taught me a lot...they worked like a series of practical workshops on scale, foreshortening and perspective drawing, which otherwise would have been through a very different process within the closed boundaries of a classroom. One more element of Benares always fascinated me; there were certain areas where one could feel the simultaneous presence of history and mythology while being surrounded by teeming multitudes and garish billboards screaming of the inescapable present. This constant layered juxtaposition led to an internal state of flux, which finds an expression in my works.

SG: *Mind, Memory and if I may say so... a sense of loss in time and space reflects in your body of works shown at Akar Prakar not very long ago.*

DM: What makes us yearn for a time lost? What triggers memories, and how do we understand the moments in which we experience them if not

situated in the place or time in which they occurred? Personal memories are translated via objects and materials into nostalgia, a universal emotion but one that is experienced differently by different individuals and to different degrees each time a memory is recalled. Is it possible to manifestly expand the architecture of our memories into a fabric of textures and impressions within the format of an exhibition? Can we elicit a sense of nostalgia or affect collective memory through the portraits of our personal memories?

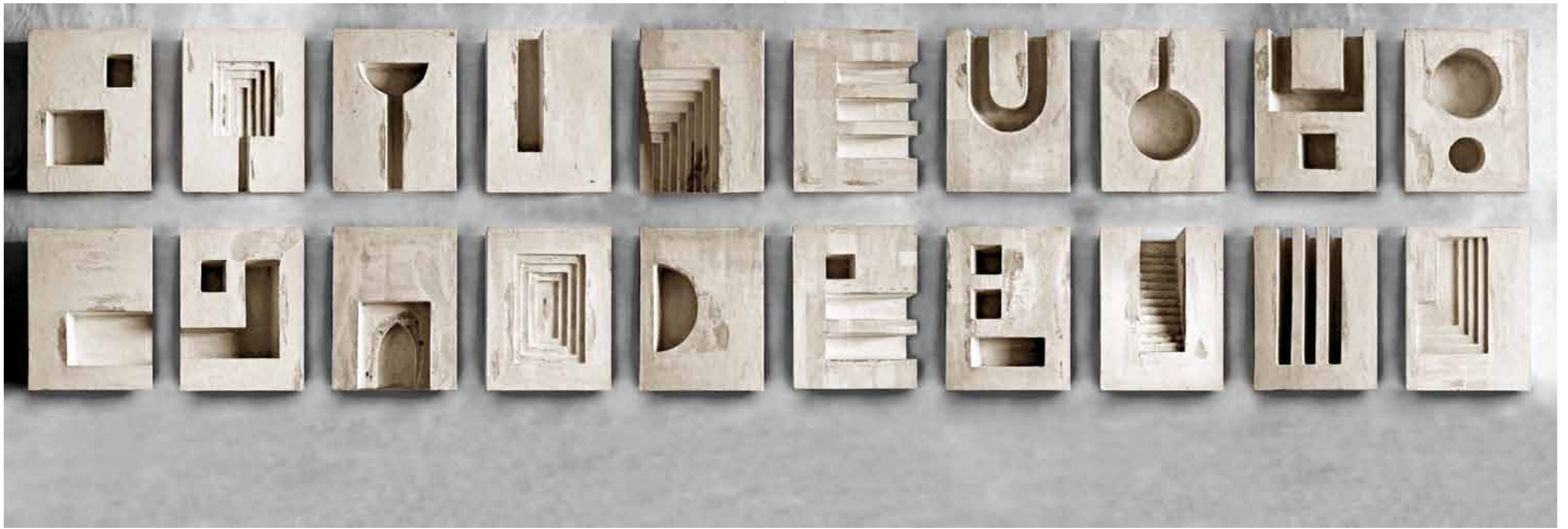
It was the beginning of 1994; post my father's retirement, we all moved to Delhi. Shifting home was new for me and I longed for that space which now only existed in the landscape of my memory. Shifting home was not merely a shift of space for me; it was a shift of emotion, culture, language, people and most importantly sounds and visuals. A space, which I called home right from my childhood, didn't belong to me anymore. The word displacement, had hit me hard.

^ Debashish Mukherjee, *Museum Within 16* (detail)

> Debashish Mukherjee, *River Song 9*



While dealing with the subject of portraiture, I wanted to challenge the typical academic boundaries of it. The work 'River Song' is an abstract portraiture of my mother. This is how I see her... an ever-flowing river of unconditional love and compassion.



I started this body of work with a few portraits. Faces, I grew up seeing almost every day within the boundaries of the railway colony. Faces that stayed with me in my subconscious- everything was multilayered. While working, it struck my mind to make portraits of those abstract spaces which I longed for. These Spaces and the dynamics of it were rather complex. They merged from one to another without thinking about any social or political boundaries. Then I focused on a series of family portraits including my parents and ancestors.

SG: *You extensively worked with threads... spools and cabinets....*

DM: Not only threads, I primarily work with mix media, but for this body of work I chose to work with textiles as my main medium. And yes, cabinets or vitrines have been a constant element as a metaphor of conservation or protection in my work.

My journey into the world of textiles began about two and half decades ago. While working with a prestigious fashion house, I got opportunities to work with the best of weavers and textile experts of our time. The various textured surfaces inspired me to weave my own stories parallel to theirs; they allowed me to get inside their fine veins filled with scripts, unread.

I shifted to Benares in the year 1990 to pursue BFA, but I guess I was connected to this city through my umbilical cord. My Ma was born and brought up here in Benares and every year we visited our grandmother during the summer holidays without fail.

^ *Debashish Mukherjee, Benares*

When I started planning this body of work, textiles walked in to my thoughts unknowingly. Layers and layers of fabrics started appearing more as a symbol of human history and I started relating fabrics to my personal emotions. Different weaving techniques like jacquards and many others started appearing like canvases where I could see the warp and weft acting as my thoughts.

My earliest memories of textiles are of my Mother's saris. Those fluid six yards had many stories hidden in them. I distinctly remember those Mahalaya (the day of the opening of the third eye of the Goddess during Durga Puja) mornings, how everyone in the family used to wake up at four in the morning to listen to the recital of Mahishasura Mardini by Birendra Krishna Bhadra on radio to mark the beginning of Durga Puja. Mahalaya would typically be in the month of October and our wooden clothes still won't be out of the closet. Ma would simply take out one of her saris and use it as a layer just to keep me warm. One more incident, which is still deeply etched in my memory, is also during one of the Durga Puja. On the way back home from the temple, it started raining. In no time a torrential rain began to fall, hard and thick making it impossible to see through. We were in the middle of an empty land and there was no place to take refuge. I must have

been four or five at that time; I started feeling quite unwell and then my mother just held me close to her body. I remember... her wet sari had amazing amount of warmth.

SG: *Your previous body of works, 'The Museum Within' you looked into the physical memories... geometric forms...co-centric circles... The artworks resembled archaeologically excavated sites... reminiscence of our physical past...*

DM: It was the beginning of 2014 when I started working on this series, which was finally called 'The Museum Within'. It was inspired by the ancient urban civilizations and their rich socio cultural elements. It is intriguing to see the way both time zones still co-exist amidst today's modern spaces.

Since very little of our historic past has been preserved in museums and textbooks, most of it lies out in the open around us. The way we have taken for granted our rich heritage without sparing a thought for preserving its dignity, has always greatly disturbed me. Be it the national capital or any other city, I have seen monuments being taken over by locals with some even living within them. Such desecrations reflect a complete lack of respect towards things we should have been proud of. It has been my effort to unravel the complex layers of

co-existence, and focus on the many aspects of our past, much of which still remains un-deciphered and unexplained. My quest was to capture all these elements that seem to be lost in the urban spaces we inhabit.

One common element, which ran through the entire body of work, was the 'aerial perspective', which I find extremely fascinating. Bird's eye view of land enabled me to study topographies that exhibit organic patterns, layers and textures created by Nature, passage of time, as well as the territorial markings by human race.

Sometimes when I would be walking down a street in Benares and all of a sudden I would stumble upon an ancient monument, a century old page would open up in front of me, which would change the entire dynamics of that particular moment. Isn't that an amazing experience?

SG: *A sense of symmetry and texture pronounce your previous works... But in this body of work you break your own sense of symmetry through your sculptural creations...*

DM: I guess you are referring to the body of work, which I did in the year 2015-2016. I felt that subject demanded the symmetrical compositions; it's not that I always walk that path. As far as textures are concerned that is a constant element, there could be in any form, paint, wood, cement and textile or for that matter any other material. Texture is something I relate with my subjects. It works like brail; one cannot see but feel the tactility of it.

Once I have finalized my layouts and am sure about the mediums, I start the process. Typically, I do not decide about any specific approach, they evolve with time. Actually it's not I who dictates the terms. It's mostly the other way.

SG: *Your Installation work takes us back to the 19th century Studio Portraits, governed by the quintessential Colonial Aesthetic practice... What draws you to engage with that sense of portraiture in your sculptural work?*

DM: You know, each time I go through our family albums, I notice... how we focus only on people and do not document spaces around them, neither we document any person in their own elements. We see these soulless clichéd images posing purposely, which is so not real. We do not keep any record of those spaces where we lived in the past.

While dealing with the subject of portraiture, I wanted to challenge the typical academic boundaries of it. The work 'River Song' is an abstract portraiture of my mother. This is how I see her... an ever-flowing river of unconditional love and compassion.

This entire body of work had about 30 portraits of

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^ Debashish Mukherjee, River Song 5

> Debashish Mukherjee, River Song 6



different times, spaces and people. They travel much beyond their surfaces and create a visual narrative, which is extremely personal yet, universal.

SG: There is tremendous use of Muslin in your work... Is it an organic response to the material?

DM: As I mentioned earlier... I select the medium based on its subject. If you go through my recent body of works, you will realize there are various types of materials being used. And there is one particular work which is a portrait of my grandmother / ancestors, and since she was a young widow I always saw her in white mulmul(muslin) and other such fine fabrics / saris, hence muslin was the obvious choice. I used about 900 meters of muslin and it remained one of the most prominent work in this series.

SG: In spite of graduating in Fine Arts, you did not pursue your artistic practice as a career for a while. Where have you been all these years? What have you been doing?

DM: From Benares I moved to Delhi in the year 1994, and that was the year of my father's retirement too. Suddenly, I grew old and had to share the responsibilities of running our family with my elder brother. It was a tough road ahead; because I wasn't mentally prepared for any job. After lot of contemplation I joined an advertisement agency to leave the very next day. And then I met Ms. Payal Jain, who had just returned from FIDM, San Francisco and started her fashion studio in Hauz Khas Village, New Delhi. We clicked from day one and so far it has been an amazingly beautiful journey. It opened a new world in front of me, a world full of hopes and possibilities. It was like entering into a different world altogether. I can't tell you how much I learnt while working with the best of national and international talents.

Meanwhile I kept discovering my own language of art. I did many commissioned works but wasn't happy with the way I was dealing with various subjects. It came to a point when I decided to take a break and shifted my focus entirely to poetry and literature, which became my refuge. Unlearning took really long and I started from the scratch once again in 2009. An installation, which I did for Aman Hotel, Delhi with another artist friend gave me a sense of confidence. Then there was no looking back. Post this I did a few site specific projects. That was the time I thought of putting together a body of works. And that's when I started working on 'The Museum Within'. Since I had completely detached myself from the Delhi's art circuit, I realized I knew no one from this world. Here I was ready with a body of work but didn't know whom to approach...and in midst of all of these I lost my father. This period was quite depressing for me.

One fine day I made a cold call to Ms. Ina Puri and requested her, if she could take out some time to review my work. She was kind enough and agreed to visit my studio. Her reaction reassured my faith in the path I chose. It was she who introduced me to Ms. Reena and Mr. Abhijit Lath of Gallery Akar Prakar. A solo show was planned, soon after Ms. Lath's visit to my studio.

When I look back and think about all these ups and downs, I feel blessed for meeting such amazing people at various points during this journey called life. It has been truly a fascinating one!!

SG: The reality of the passage of time as well as a want or a need to hold it in your memory... It is a strange paradox, which comes out in your works...

DM: Past is something I really hold close to me, that's more like a foundation of my thoughts. Whatever we are today, even as a nation, past has a huge role to play in it. And memories are the keepers of our past; hence they are extremely dear to me. Recording memories through art has been quite interesting for me, and keeping track of both the time zones becomes paradoxical at times... but such is life, full of paradoxes. Isn't it!!

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> Debashish Mukherjee, River Song 4

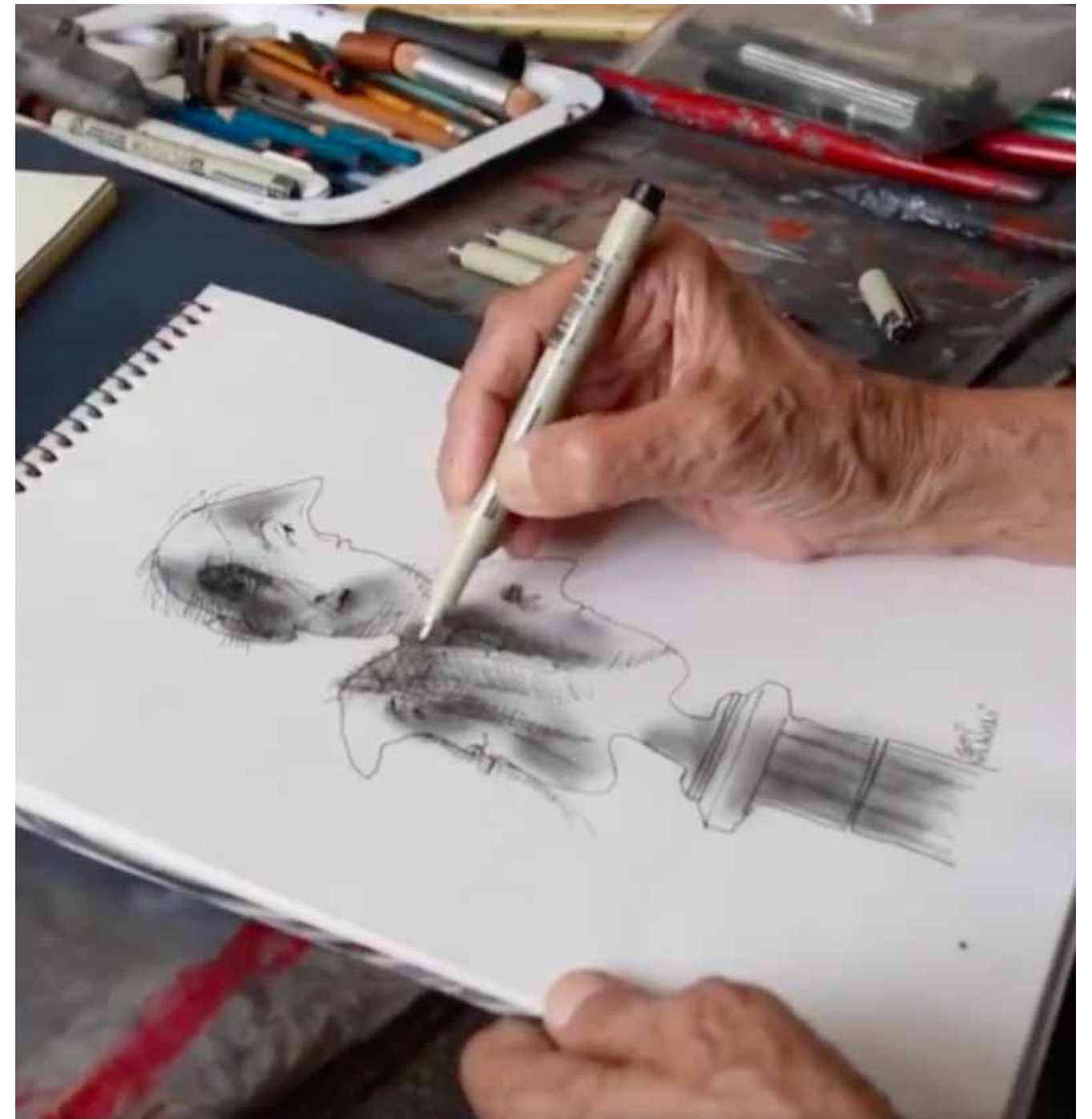




RECONFIGURING PARADIGMS: THE ART WORLD AND THE PANDEMIC

- PREETI KATHURIA

2020 being an intercalary year seems to have given the world much more time to reflect than just an additional day. The Covid-19 pandemic struck the world early this year, shook the foundations of our mundane existence and put our lives in an unforeseen lockdown. Till last year it felt like one is living in a world of infinite choices. This year the lockdown has created harsh boundaries wherein our rituals and routines have got dissolved.



^ Drawing by Gopi Gajwani, 2020, Image courtesy: The Artist

< Drawing by Gopi Gajwani, 2020, Image courtesy: The Artist

Opening up a new critical but sustainable space, the art world has undergone an unprecedented shift towards the digital medium. In an attempt to revitalize the intellectual terrain, there is an outburst of online exhibitions, curated shows, virtual tours, artist talks, workshops and webinars, some of which are replete with critical commentary. It is appreciable that when the challenges of communication and mobility had consumed the entire human race, the art world continued to reach out and work unabated. It is interesting how gallerists and curators quit over thinking and self-doubt, and wasted no time in picking up the strands of a virtual methodology. This change has helped art practitioners expand their own practice, question the existing aphorisms and find new methods to break the established tenets.

It may seem that the virtual world has subverted and overturned the dominant order of perceiving art in the physical context. But, in reality this situational deflection from the mainstream has drastically overhauled the boundaries of access and identity. Popular social media platforms have profoundly decentralized information, power and gate keeping. The unforgiving individuality of museums and galleries as prescriptive spaces has completely vanished. Art is free from the physical confines of institutions but is art moving from being more emotive to more informative now? Can virtual tours replace and recreate an exhibition's physiognomy, as an accumulated resonance of different artworks? Does art need combined convictions and objectives of the physical and the virtual space?

The present situation is peculiar for the artists, who are now questioning the power and potency of physical studio spaces and time-honored institutions. The pandemic has given the artist a break from pretensions and organized habits; an opportunity to slowdown and re-connect; a time to live fully in the present and make templates of effortless execution. For example, Delhi-based veteran artist Gopi Gajwani revisited his love for doodling humorous compositions during the lockdown and he found it immensely satisfying and enjoyable. It is also an exciting time to re-imagine and reconfigure the skin or packaging of art in the context of social media strategies. Various art galleries re-structured their exhibiting plans and opened the virtual space for some fascinating art. A wonderful example is Experimenter Gallery, Kolkata who created an online Film Program titled 'Filament' with a detailed viewing schedule of the video artworks of various artists. Currently they are showing 'Bani Abidi' as a four-part online exhibition by embedding the films on their website for ten days each. The idea is viewer friendly and the display does justice to the medium of videography. It breaks away from the canons of an exhibiting space altogether, and lets the medium carry and disseminate an artwork.

There is no doubt that virtual presence has its benefits like increased flexibility of time and location. But the verve and intensity of experiencing art for real is a necessity for many, especially for traditional art collectors. For them, the digital world is superficial, a world of constant absence. A buyer who operates on analysis, instinct and receptivity of the senses, feels alluded by the mute, graphic presentations of emotive art pieces. The online platforms seem like a danger in deviation or a blind spot for a lot of art connoisseurs and collectors.

If communication is the overriding goal of art, then the pandemic has certainly escalated the dialogue space. The webinars have situated themselves seamlessly in the arena of cultural dialogue; doing away with the inescapable tensions of organizing these for real. In spite of the perils of connectivity, the cultural visionaries like the Marg Foundation



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^ Image courtesy: Museum of Art & Photography, Bangalore

> Image courtesy: Experimenter Gallery, Kolkata

The poster is for 'Filament', an online film program presented by 'experimenter'. The title 'FILAMENT' is written in large, bold, black letters. Below it, it says 'ONLINE FILM PROGRAM | PART II'. The featured film is 'BANI ABIDI: AN UNFORESEEN SITUATION (2015)'. The program is divided into four weeks:

- WEEK 1: JULY 10 - JULY 20, 2020
- WEEK 2: JULY 20 - JULY 30, 2020
- WEEK 3: JULY 30 - AUG 10, 2020
- WEEK 4: AUG 10 - AUG 20, 2020

 Other films mentioned include 'THE DISTANCE FROM HERE (2009)', ''FUNLAND' - KARACHI SERIES II (2014)', and 'DEATH AT A 30 DEGREE ANGLE (2012)'. The website 'WWW.EXPERIMENTER.IN' is listed at the bottom. The background of the poster shows a film still of people in a room.

and Museum of Art & Photography (MAP) Bangalore have introduced Salons and Series of talks, which deconstruct, articulate and mobilize numerous visible strands of contemporary art practice. These are real, immersive engagements on social platforms in the ironical times of social distancing. We are living in unusual times, where an altered mode of working is the new normal. One can only hope that this change is allied with a future of blended encounters and discourses on art. The virtual and the physical platforms must complement each other and co-exist as illuminating facilitators of art. It might be

a precarious balancing act for managers of art, but it opens avenues of a global networking, partnership and collaboration.

At a time when the world was grappling with grimness, art has been assertive of hope and bonding. Being a proud member of my tribe, I'd say that this situation is an affirmation of the fact that the art world won't fit in a box and that its integrity is uncontained. These enthralling online activities have spearheaded a revolution in the field of art and they will remain etched in our memories for a long time to come.



A NOT SO USUAL ENCOUNTER WITH THE PRAYER WHEEL

- NITYA BALI

As defined by the Tibetan Aid Project, “The Prayer Wheel (or Dharma Wheel) is an ancient spiritual tool and a vital part of Tibetan daily life. It is turned at every opportunity in order to activate and extend the blessings of compassion, harmony, and peace to all sentient beings.”

I travelled to Lahaul Spiti with a group of travelers in May 2019, where I came across these beautiful objects adorning the captivating landscape of the place. Until then I wasn’t much aware of the historic and cultural significance of the prayer wheels. This essay unfolds my surprising encounter with a prayer wheel in Kibber Village, Spiti valley, India during my excursion through which I want to draw out the various enthralling aspects of a heritage object to the reader.

On an encounter with any object or even a thing around us, we often tend to judge the object at the first sight. In the zeal of endlessly interpreting things around us, we are influenced by our personal social, political, historical and economical background which builds our understanding and perspectives about these objects. This experience of the person who looks at the object is manifold.

How does one see an object? Is the seeing merely visual or beyond the sight? Does gazing at it builds any sort of relationship with you? Does the object narrate a story of its own to you? In a world where struggle to fight excluding heritage is real, is any object inclusive or discriminating? Is a reproduced object authentic? Also is it all about its historic value and context in which it is seen? Or beyond?

As I strolled down the way to reach the Kibber village, an incredible view of similar looking traditional houses spread across the whole of the mountain landscape welcomed me. While self-exploration of the village and its people and experiencing what lay around me, I started to look at the houses which came on my way. I came across a stretch with some of these gorgeous traditional houses which were locked with no one around to ask from or talk to. As I walked a little further, I found a house with ‘something’ that really grabbed my attention and attracted me towards it and this particular house. The house was not locked; further giving me a sigh of relief that probably I get to see that ‘something’ and someone for sure. I approached the entrance door of the house to see this object lying next to the door- a small prayer wheel embedded in a niche in the wall. Yes, with not a detailed knowledge about

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< The prayer wheel at Kibber Villagewith letters inscribed in Nepalis Landzha script; © Author



the objects background, I was actually amazed to see it outside the door of a house. As per my past encounters with the prayer wheels, to me these usually belonged to the holy and spiritual places (monasteries) or in the hands of the Tibetans. After gazing at the object for a few seconds, I began to decipher the object. Umm...why is it here? What could be the use of putting it here outside their

^ Prayer wheels placed along a walkway in Nako Village; © Author

house? While these questions rolled in my mind, I had developed an altogether personal interpretation of this object. I thought of it as a unique door bell and that may be it is located there so that when one revolves it, the soft sound it produces indicates the person inside that someone has come at their door. Seeing the prayer wheel in an entirely different context, might be a possible reasoning behind the association or thought of it that I built. Literally a metaphor of a holy object sitting outside this house with no additional background information available made me curious to further interact with it.

“I’m a laboring man, and know but little,

Or nothing at all;

But I can’t help thinking that stone once echoed

The voice of Paul.”- Thomas Hardy

After looking at the object for a while and noticing its simple aesthetics (bronze metal wheel fitted in a niche with a spindle in the centre fixing it to the top and bottom of the wooden frame painted in green), I felt the need to revolve the wheel and call out the people in the house. The metal outer surface was cold to touch and while I deliberately revolved the prayer wheel, I felt the extruding mantra ‘Om Mani Padme Hum’ letters carved on the wheel with my hands, creating an impression of the mantra letters in my mind which I recalled seeing on the prayer flags which were a common sighting throughout my excursion. As soon as the circular movement got complete, a mellow and brief sound was produced from the wheel. In the midst of the tranquil environment of the village, the little sound was audible enough. On not hearing any response from inside I revolved it for one another time. There was an aura which this whole object and its context created, still afresh in my mind while I recall my encounter with it.

As John of Damascus said, *‘When we speak of the holy and eternal Trinity, we use images of the sun, light...(sight); or a running fountain... (sound); or the mind, speech....(hearing); or a rose tree...a sweet fragrance (smell)’*

In terms of the visual aesthetics, this particular wheel was not extra ordinary. Buddhists prayer wheels across various other places around Lahaul Spiti with their intricate designs are more beautiful and pleasing to the eyes. The metal surface had blackened out at various areas indicating it being not new, exposed to exterior environment and being frequently used. This unusual context with freedom to interact with the object is probably what still caused it to grasp the sight of a passerby. It was a two way experience, where the wheel equally seemed to

be expressive and convey a lot about itself to me. The connect I had with this particular object was surreal, which immediately attracted me to itself, leaving an impact on my mind and arousing sheer inquisitiveness in me to know about this object and its construct further in depth.

MANI OR DHARMA WHEEL IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

The Compassionate Buddha Avalokiteshvara told to Nagarjuna about the existence of a Dharma wheel which was with the Bodhisattva Naga king in his palace. He informed him that anyone who sees, touches or recalls this wheel generates merit that instantly frees one from the sufferings. He asked him to take this wheel from the king and bring it with him for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Nagarjuna on meeting the King asked him to place the prayer wheel on Earth, in water, fire and wind to benefit everyone to its utmost capacity. He brought the Dharma wheel to India and gave it to the Lion-face Dakini. From the Lion-face Dakini it went to the great Indian yogi Tilopa, then to Naropa and on to Marpa, who brought it to Tibet and gave it to Milarepa, who in turn passed it to Gampopa. This is how the Prayer wheel originated in Tibetan Buddhism.

Spinning the prayer wheel even once is believed to be uplifting the soul away from all its sufferings and connect it to vast vows of Buddha in the pure land, entering the path that leads to the enlightenment.

In the words of Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche, *“If you have a mani prayer wheel in your house, your house is the same as the Potala, the pure land of the Compassion Buddha. If you have a prayer wheel next to you when you die, you don’t need po-wa.”* This text led me to comprehend and relate the placing of the prayer wheel outside this house. To the residents of this house (Tibetans), this would might have meant to be expressing their desire to belong and feel connected back to their land, the Potala (abode of Dalai Lama, the holiest site of their religion). Another strong reason would simply have been to purify and cleanse the whole aura of their house as well as whoever spins the wheel.

Like many other holy objects even prayer wheels in the Tibetan Buddhism are meant to reincarnate and be reproduced in order to bless all the beings on the planet. As explained by Lama Zopa Rinpoche *“Buddha said we should not put an incomplete text inside a holy object.”* Incomplete or deteriorated texts are not meant to be put inside prayer wheels. A new prayer wheel or text thus becomes symbolic of the reincarnation. In the words of Clare Harris *“At this point the object must be replaced by a new*

version of itself—another, cleansed, incarnation. The old model must be safely disposed of (though some of its component parts may be transplanted and reincorporated into the replacement)...”Another reason for it being reproduced is that it is believed to bring merit and peace to humankind. Hence, these are gifted to each other, bought and made in numbers. In such a case, how does one address the issue of authenticity associated with heritage objects when the object is meant to naturally decay and be reproduced? Through the prayer wheel, we understand the diverse cultural attitudes towards concepts of authenticity and the power that lies in reproduction.

While coming to its make, these objects have evolved over the period of time. The making of the prayer wheels have advanced with the use of technology, replacing the mantras written or printed on paper or cloth with microfilm prints of the mantras to be wound. Keeping the original idea of the more the number of mantras in the wheel the more powerful it becomes intact, Lama Zopa Rinpoche innovated this technology to build the most powerful prayer wheels.

The prayer wheel is a socio-cultural lineage being carried by the Tibetans through the time of its conception. The way the prayer wheel is woven into the lives and culture of Tibetans and relationship which it establishes with its user defines the social life it leads. Initially where the West was rigid towards Buddhism and use of the prayer wheel cause of its religious and political context, it is widely accepted by many across the globe today. The object grows beyond its religious realm and in the form of a source of positivity and meditation blesses the user with calmness, merit and happiness.

In a world where even the heritage institutions are coping with the complexities of inclusive heritage, it is actually interesting to look at such an object which embodies its true function more than its mere holy framework. I would end this essay with a thought to ponder: Isn't what is 'authentic' similar to what is 'exclusive' and what's tagged as 'fake' similar to 'the others'? Aren't both the concepts two sides of a same coin? So, are we really attempting to walk towards being inclusive or stretching the gap instead?

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^ Prayer wheels placed outside a shop at the Kaza market junction; © Author

> Prayer wheel on the edge of a street in Nako village; © Author





UP-CLOSE AND PERSONAL

- LINA VINCENT

Hello, this is Lina Vincent here – I hope you can hear me... In speaking as though I am on a zoom call – I am extending my current experience with steps of learning and accommodating interactions within this wholly virtual era.

While separating us physically, this period of the pandemic does not prevent us from continuing to engage with art work and what artists are doing – in fact it seems quite the opposite. The cultural industry is certainly battling the odds but it is heartening to see and understand innovative ways in which galleries and artists together are creating these possibilities and using updated technology available to us in order to

^ Sanket Viramgami,
Jungle queen in the Urban Space,
Acrylic on Canvas, 30 x 30 inches, 2020

> Aniruddha Parit,
Story of a Lost Kingdom,
Tempera on Board, 16 x 12 inches, 2018



The world has flattened into these screens on which we are viewing everything. In terms of seeing and being seen, it changes perspectives. There is something fundamentally interesting about using the framework of miniatures as a premise – theoretically, it creates a sense of familiarity and comfort because it is one of the most visible forms of classical Indian art, and in viewing, the intimate space and connection relates to the immediate and intimate action of scrolling.

continue rather than apply a full stop. Similarly, I am happy to join in this innovative space as curator and writer – with this review of a sensitively curated exhibition of five artists.

New Stories in Old Frames is an ongoing exhibition curated by Samedutta Mallick for Dhi Arts pace, Hyderabad; featuring the works of Aniruddha Parit, Mainaz Bano, Poushali Das, Ravi Chunchula and Sanket Viramgami.

The curator mentions “The schools of Mughal, Rajasthani, Pahari and Deccani miniatures have continued to amuse and inspire the artists of the generations that followed. And in the present art scenario, a great number of artists have developed their art practice by taking considerable inspiration from the element, style and theme of miniatures. Their works talk about the social, political, economic, environmental and other concerns of the contemporary time even though they are executed in a manner that has its origin in the distant past.”

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^ Ravi Chunchula,
Corridors of Contemplation, Gouache and News Paper collage on Rice Paper, 16 x 23 inches, 2020

Poushali Das,
Tales from Letters, Tempera on Wasli Paper, 6 x 15 inches (each), Set of 5, 2015

v



intimate action of scrolling. Originally formulated as illustrative devices to visualize important aspects in manuscripts and narratives, the miniature format lends itself to commentaries of the most contemporary nature, while providing the artists scope to explore the wide range of stylistic and pictorial elements. The miniature styles have enormous potential for inspiration, and my mind goes back to “Luminously between Eternities” an exhibition of contemporary miniatures featuring work by 20 artists curated by Waswo X Waswo for Gallery Ark in Baroda (2018), that set the stage for a multilayered recognition of the format. The young artists featured here have likewise, all adapted certain formal aspects of miniature painting and developed them individualistically.

Anirudha Parit works with delicate brushwork and a fine understanding of the pictorial space as seen in works like ‘Dharma Chakra’ and ‘For him and Her’ in which he contrasts plain or patterns spaces with line work and painted detailing. Evaluating Human relationships, looking into the experience of absences and presences - and an identification with the socio-political scenario that is ridden with hierarchies – these are some of the things that appear to interest him. In the diptych, ‘story of a lost kingdom’, he carefully balances the two parts, producing a cryptic commentary on power and the responsibilities that go with it.



^ Mainaz Bano,
Inheritance V, Gold leaf Varnish and Acrylic on Paper, 43 x 41 inches, Set of 25, 2018

Mainaz Bano’s works are filled with gentle references to mundane life and popular culture, often surrounded by motifs derived from the aesthetics of her home town Lucknow and a distinct reference to Mughal sensibilities. She uses objects and figures abstracted from their original backgrounds and placed as motifs in new narratives, that bend or obscure conventional meanings. She moves between personal documents, almost like a visual diary, and collective thoughts that render social constructs palpable as in the works ‘Inheritance 5’ or ‘The courtly Lucknow’. Poushali Das



has been exploring techniques of Tempera painting on various surfaces such as paper, wood and 'muga' silk. Her work often uses a combination of text and image, harking back to the manuscript traditions. The subjects refer to mythological and historical subjects but relate to her contemporary understanding of the world and all its complexities. As seen in her 'Tales from Letters' series, she masterfully juxtaposes textile patterns with delicately balanced compositions on wasli paper.

Humour and irony are devices used by Ravi Chunchula in his painted narratives, which constantly open up interpretations for the viewer. Using a highly skilled methodology of drawing and composing space in sequential or broken formats – he processes current experiences through metaphors and symbols. Works like 'Reminiscence of Daily Musings' and 'Corridors of contemplation' are in essence studies of everyday experiences. He is also studying and recording moments of change during the pandemic and brings his observations of social hierarchies into his visual records.

If you look at "Dancing girls' by Sanket Viramgami, the final artist in the compilation - it represents his distinctive visual language that uses inspiration from

Indian miniature paintings and also the 'kantha' traditional embroidery technique, especially in spatial arrangements. Poetically placed figures amidst flora and fauna, and vast topographies of saturated colour define his large format works that celebrate the innate grace and jewel like essence of Rajasthani miniatures.

This is a time when we are juggling with moments of optimism and pessimism, and the artists' engagement with these subjects and histories takes us into myriad different planes of thought. Art has this capacity to open out new worlds and now even though we cannot get up close and personal with work in a gallery – the galleries are bringing it to us in different ways.

It is an exercise for me as well in interpreting and analyzing work purely in image form, and quite a meaningful process of learning to live in a post-covid world.

^ Aniruddha Parit,
For Him and Her, Mixed media on Board, 22 x 28 inches, 2015

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