

19 December 2014

Black Pearl and Other Enchantments

The second edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has on display 94 artists from 30 countries—masters, saboteurs, and experimentalists

BY [Rosaly D'Mello](#)



Chords suddenly emerge from a harmonium, solemn-like, suggesting the beginning of a climax, resounding in waves, hollowing its way across this makeshift prison cell whose walls by now are inhabited by charcoal sketches of the periphery of the outside world that surrounds it; the backwaters of the Periyar which seem swollen in this afternoon light. Here, ferries glide, ships sail in to harbour, while Chinese fishing nets, believed to have been introduced centuries ago by Portuguese Casado settlers from Macao, wait like predators, their triangular clasps dipped patiently into the water's entrails, quietly trapping and collecting fish as they swim downstream.

We are waiting too, breathlessly hoping to catch that singular moment whose texture we imagine to have the contours of a resolution. Any minute now, Black Pearl will escape this cell he chose to inhabit for 52 continuous hours. It is the beginning of the final hour and we are keeping vigil as Black Pearl prepares himself for his exit. He is stripped down to his black sheer tights that barely disguise the black *langot* he was wearing when he first began this performance, this masquerade during which the performer, Nikhil Chopra, has relinquished his identity to assume the form of different characters.

This is the final leg of this role-play. He is now whitening his face with paint. The harmonium continues in its solemn vein, as if sanctifying the congregation, reminding us of the Christian zeal that was at the heart of the many conquests to which these lands and waters have been subjected. The refrain spills over into a kind of lyrical interlude, notes are held longer to punctuate the present as Black Pearl transforms into a Portuguese sailor from the 14th Century; projecting an image of Vasco da Gama who touched these shores in 1498, arriving in Calicut, successfully discovering a shorter route to India via the Cape of Good Hope and paving the way for the age of imperialism in the Subcontinent. Each gesture is exaggerated, the movement of one leg into the narrow opening of a pair of puffy capris, then the other, the donning of a silk shirt after first spreading it against his body, then shoving his head through the collar. We, who have been keeping the hours, have been marking time through movement. We have learnt by now that even a non-functional clock with static hands will tell the right time at least twice.

It is now five minutes to five. I have been here longer than I intended, waiting for Black Pearl to escape. At least 96 hours have passed since I first

arrived for the opening of the second edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. I have by now seen all 100 works by 94 artists from 30 countries at eight venues, apart from the many collateral and partner projects. I have been compelled to listen to the sound of the earth turning, as a backdated message from 1963 by Yoko Ono instructed me to. The illusion of the sun's journey from east to west to produce what we comprehend as a day I've had to experience through a state of perpetual sweat, continually damp armpits, as the liquid secretions of my body's exhaustion were forced to compete with those of 20 anonymous men, all of whom suffer from a phobia of bodies, all of whose sweat had been collected by a Norwegian artist, Sissel Tolaas, using devices that absorbed their perspiration as and when they felt fear.

A scientist by profession, Tolaas had then arrived at the smell profile of their sweat molecules. Micro-encapsulated combinations of these were then painted onto the surfaces of ballast stones, relics of Kochi's maritime past, once used as weights to balance cargo vessels as they were being loaded, then discarded. Like St Thomas, the doubter, who allegedly landed on the shores of Muziris in 52 AD, I have had to touch wounds in order to believe.

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We were promised an observation deck from where we could surmise our cosmic significance or lack thereof. As artistic director of the second edition, Jitish Kallat decided upon *Whorled Explorations* as his curatorial premise. Even now my tongue resists the title. It doesn't sit well; the monosyllabic first word seems to jar with its polysyllabic other. The first, I learned later, was meant to arouse the similar sounding 'world'. While the pun was lost on me, the connotations weren't. I was prepared to charter through the 'sensory and conceptual propositions that map our world, referencing history, geography, cosmology, time, space, dreams, and myths.' Kallat had chosen to use two chronologically overlapping episodes in Kerala's history during the 14th and 17th centuries as his curatorial axis. Circumambulating through Aspinwall House from left to right, it's difficult not to sense his sure, certain vision guiding your footsteps, his artistic consciousness and predilection towards metaphor charting your path, serving as a compass through what could easily have been a stormy, unruly sea of plenitude. His axial structure encompasses many bold gestures, but the artworks exist in centrifugal arrangement. They dance around Kallat's primary suggestion, move towards and away from it simultaneously, gravitating more towards two archetypal images that are referenced through two separate works; the 'Tower of Babel', which appears in Sudhir Patwardhan's triptych *Building a Home: Exploring the World*, and Anish Kapoor's magnetic work, *Descension*; reflecting what could be interpreted as a point of contact between the instinct towards anabasis and the tendency towards katabasis. Patwardhan references Breughel's 'Tower of Babel' in his second panel, reminding us of the Biblical story about a past civilisation's maiden attempt to build a tower that would reach the heavens. God, unhappy with this mortal attempt at conquest over his territory chides its builders: 'Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.' To thwart their zealous initiative, which was primarily impelled by a desire to live together in one land, the God of Genesis descends into the city and inflicts chaos by confusing their language so that they may no longer understand one another's speech and scattering them 'abroad' 'over the face of all the earth'.

Lurking behind his interpretation of Breughel's rendition of the Tower of Babel is Tatlin's Tower, a constructivist architectural project designed by Vladimir Tatlin to be erected in Russia in 1917 as a symbol of modernity that remained unrealised. 'Placing the two towers on the soil of Fort Kochi is a recognition that this Biennale is itself an admirable 'Babelian' endeavour, working for a harmonious coexistence of many Languages of Art, and seeking to bring all that is spread out in the world back home,' Patwardhan explains in a note to viewers.

Anish Kapoor's *Descension*, a tempestuous vortex of water that whirlpools ominously a few metres away from the river, resembles a black hole that will digest anything that gravitates towards its spiralling mouth, possibly regurgitating it into another dimension. Its dizzying velocity evocative of that of earth's movement through space at 1,670 kmph through which the

human race is constantly travelling.

Arriving at Kapoor's work on the far right of Aspinwall House one has had to already journey through the late Charles and Ray Eames' hypnotic video *Power of Ten* which is carefully plotted and consists of a narrative that first zooms outwards every ten seconds into the realms of outer space, its point of departure an overhead image of a couple lounging in a Chicago park, its unit of perspective ranging from the initial one metre to ten, to hundred and a thousand metres until it reaches the limits of the known universe; before then zooming inwards at the power of minus ten into the inner world of an atom until we reach the lens' destination; a 'limit of human perception', the 'infinitely small' proton embedded in one of the couple's hands, the sub-atomic merging with the galactic.

Aram Saroyan's *Mm*, recorded as the shortest poem ever written, and the second work at Aspinwall House, bridges the cosmic gap between the letters 'm' and 'n' to resemble a powerful four-legged creature and invoke the extended 'm' sound that alludes to the very birth of language, and the consciousness embedded in the existential 'I am' or the cosmological 'Om', the sound of the universe.

Mithu Sen counters the logic of language and its inherent rigidity with her 40-minute video installation based on her engagement with the occupants of a home for minor female orphans and victims of sexual and emotional abuse in Kerala through the medium of an invented personality, Mago, who she describes and portrays as a seemingly homeless person who speaks gibberish, has no understanding of the concept of time, and is in a state of transit between two unknown places; her attempt at what she calls 'radical hospitality'. Rather poignantly, at one moment in the 40-minute-long video, one of the girls decides to act as Mago's interpreter, heroically translating her gibberish into potential ideas, like a medium, illustrating Mithu's inherent point about the artifice of language and the birth of meaning—'This project seeks not only to locate communication outside the narrow alleys of comprehension, but also tries to envisage dialogue in a way that cannot be read, heard, or understood.'

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pan-anthem* enhances Sen's proposition. Conceived and displayed as an interactive sound graph illustrating a comparative analysis of world nations' military spending, the installation consists of moveable speakers, each playing the national anthem of the country it represents. The work is activated by the viewer whose presence is sensed as she moves along the clusters of nations, and who is then privy to a cacophony of simultaneously playing songs, finally culminating in a panoramic playback that is nothing short of a Babelian soundtrack.

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Suspense is a function of time; an emotional and physical manifestation of an urgently felt desire for resolution. Black Pearl can now be seen prostrating, his knees touching the ground near the exit. He remains in this exaggerated posture, his hands joined ahead of his bowed head. Perhaps he's praying, perhaps he is listening to the sound of the earth turning. When he rises, after he has destabilised our experience of time, he stands majestically at the threshold, under the arch, exhibiting all symptoms of potential ambivalence about his intended escape. He is suddenly so still he is statuesque, he resembles the figure of Vasco da Gama that I have by now encountered in various works across the breadth of the Biennale, among them Sarnath Banerjee's rivetting *Liquid History of Vasco Da Gama*, a set of drawings centered on his unreliable narrator Digital Dutta, who imagines himself to be an amateur historian, and envisaging a 'soap opera' featuring pirates, popes, convicts, smugglers, degradados, famous Omani navigators, unknown Gujarati seamen, mysterious Jews from Poznan, Moors from Calicut, the King of Portugal Don Manuel and Prester John, a mythical Christian King from Medieval European chronicles who was believed to have ruled over a nation in the East.

Adorned in curly wig, bearded, and ceremonial, Black Pearl's masquerade reminds me of Pushpamala N's quirky and dramatic recreation of an 1898 painting by Jose Veloso Salgado, *The Arrival of Vasco da Gama*, where the Portuguese navigator about whose navigating Keralans have a longstanding joke—Da Gama was such a serious navigator he was travelling even after he was dead, a reference to the fact that his body, initially interred at St Francis

Church in Fort Kochi in 1524, was finally sent to Lisbon 14 years later— first meets with the Zamorin of Calicut. Pushpamala casts herself as Da Gama, and in doing so subverts the historical significance of the original painting, made 400 years after the actual event.

Da Gama also appears in Gulammohammed Sheikh's *Gandhi and Gama* which has the two iconic figures cast on either side of a *mappa mundi*. While Gama looks ready and eager to conquer the world, Gandhi is plotting the end of colonialism in India in the 20th Century.

Kochi's history as a port city is invoked alongside the recollection of da Gama's conquest. Ships become metaphors in the artful hands of Lavanya Mani, Raqs Media Collective, Khalil Rabah, and Dinh Q Lê, while Guido van der Werve and Neha Choksi's powerful video performances present contrasting perspectives about man's relationship with infinity. Choksi's is a powerful, rejuvenating journey made by her on an ice boat rowed against the surface of an enormous sea until it melts and is symbolically returned to its womb, while Van der Werve's *Everything is going to be alright* is a dark, ominous, and melancholic 10-minute film with the artist walking on ice sheets towards the viewer being stalked by a gigantic ice-breaking ship.

The idea of excavation, inherent within this oppositional framework of ascent and descent, is masterfully revealed in the installation by Bangladeshi artist Naeem Mohaiemen's *Kazi in Nomansland*, which plays with the unearthing of a curious fact; Kazi Nazrul being the only person to be featured on stamps produced by India, Pakistan and Bangladeshi, and each country's imperialist agenda to claim the poet, who eventually lost his speech and memory, as its own. Swiss artist Julian Charrière's display of 13 found globes made of glass, plastic, paper, and wood makes a powerful point about the fragility of the world we live in and the ruins of time. The coloured dust spread poetically across the table beneath the suspended globes was essentially scraped off them with sandpaper. Where previously the dust constituted cartography, its new existence is to suggest topography. Though the object of the globe is invoked through numerous works across the expanse of the Biennale, it finds its philosophical moorings perfectly in Charrière's exquisite piece about destruction and creation, memory and loss.

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Black Pearl stirs. He is no longer a statue. He has been animated. The audience surrounds him, form a force field around his body, threatening to lay asunder his plans for escape. I wait by the boundary that separates us from the water. I sit on its edge with my legs on either side, mimicking his previous posture of ambiguity. I can see what the others can't. A long teak boat, in it two men, a row, and a motor. I am then caught off guard. Before I could anticipate it, he steps into the belly of the boat, one foot at a time. His accomplice begins to row him away from us. The waters are choppy and the boat seems to rock. Yet he starts to slip away into the fictional horizon against which he is framed. He looks like a convict. The motor is turned on, the boat springs forward, and his escape is now accelerated so that he moves away faster until his head seems to bob against the waters amid the seaweed, his red kerchief still flagging a resolute gesture of farewell.