

Kochi-Muziris Biennale



The inaugural Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) opened to the public largely unfinished. Its main exhibition venues contained empty rooms, shipping containers sat unopened and many artworks were half-installed due to a lack of electricity and personnel. At a last-minute press conference, curators Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, who had originally touted the event as an international-standard biennial, reverted to calling the festival “a work in progress.” The problem with this conceptual positioning is that it implies the KMB had intended to be an initiative focused on process, which it had not. In reality, on opening day, both participating artists and visitors were left wondering what was supposed to be happening and where. With a lack of venue maps, signage and artwork labels, most information was disseminated by word of mouth. Fortunately, following the opening, presentation and information distribution dramatically improved, and there was a palpable sense of an artistic community pulling together.

But why had things gone so horribly wrong to begin with? It has been widely reported that the KMB suffered a funding crunch after the newly elected government in Kerala refused to contribute more than the initial installment of INR 50 million (USD 920,000), and private Indian corporations that could have stepped in simply did not. KMB curators and artists also faced production setbacks due to several local issues, including successive union strikes and an apparent disconnect from the community. While some visitors empathized with the organizers, others pointed out that large-scale art events with similar logistical impediments (including problems with government bureaucracy and the importing of artworks) have been executed with considerable success in India before, such as

48 Degrees Celsius and the India Art Fair. In the end, the main problem was that these overarching issues diverted attention away from the essence of the festival, which, in fact, did showcase many spectacular, innovative artworks by some outstanding artists.

Many of the exhibited artworks engaged with the concept of an archaeological site—a reference to a concurrent excavation project taking place in Kerala aimed at conserving the ancient seaport of Muziris—including installations by Sudarshan Shetty, Amanullah Mojadidi and Vivan Sundaram. Of these, Sundaram’s work dealt directly with the corporality of the port’s unearthing, consisting of fragments from the actual heritage site arranged in the form of miniature monuments and pathways. Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto’s installation in Moidu’s Heritage Plaza, a building formerly owned by a coconut-fiber trading company, was also evocative of the port’s history as a vital nexus of the spice-trade route. Along a creaky wooden staircase, the smell of cumin, pepper and turmeric emanated from three adjoining muslin “udders” hanging from the attic ceiling.

Other works explored wider themes, such as Amar Kanwar’s *The Sovereign Forest* (2010–12)—an enclosed black room containing videos, books and shelves of seeds—which meditated on issues of social injustice. Kanwar’s project, part of an in-depth research into the psychosocial effects of aggressive land acquisition by Indian corporations in Odisha, brought to life the deeply personal aspect of experiencing loss—of land, people and a way of life—through poetic, emotive imagery. Another brilliantly executed project was the collateral exhibition at Mandalay Hall, organized by the Mumbai-based nonprofit Clark House, showcasing installation, sound and text-based works by activist-artist Htein Lin. Many of these made reference to the brutality and state oppression Lin had witnessed as a political prisoner in his native Myanmar.

As the caliber of the works on display was so high, one can only wonder what the full impact of a completed biennial could have been. Kochi remains a site with immense potential, but future editions of the KMB will have to build on this initial infrastructure (and also overcome the controversy that has since ensued regarding the transparency of its allocation of funds) in order to continue attracting prominent artists and collaborators. After all, here was an opportunity for India to redeem itself in light of its bungling of recent events with an international standing; here’s hoping the KMB does better in the future.

JYOTI DHAR

Left

PRATUANG EMJAROEN

Sacrifice (Fasting Buddha)

1976

Oil on canvas, 175 x 137 cm.

Courtesy Bangkok Art and Culture

Centre; Bangkok Metropolitan

Administration; Faculty of Architecture,

King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology

Ladkrabang, Bangkok.

Right

VIVAN SUNDARAM

Black Gold

2012

80 kilograms of pottery shards taken from an archeological site in Muziris, installed in Aspinwall House, Fort Kochi, for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2012.