

KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE

WHORLED EXPLORATIONS

Opposite page

RAMESHWAR BROOTA

Self Portrait

1963

Oil on canvas, 61 x 41 cm.

Courtesy Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

This page

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Log Book Entry Before Storm

2014

Mixed-media installation of acrylic, video, audio, photographs, diving helmet, glass tiles, offset film negative, site-specific light and air, at Kashi Art Gallery, Fort Kochi, dimensions variable. Courtesy Kochi Biennale Foundation.

“We all learn from our mistakes,” said Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) research coordinator Bonny Thomas in a documentary about the making of the festival’s inaugural 2012 edition, which was screened at its second installment, which opened in mid-December 2014. The elephant in the room was, of course, that perhaps the organizers of the KMB had not, in fact, learned from their past mistakes. The Biennale’s first edition was hailed as a triumph for its impressive artworks, though the organization was mired by financial controversy. The second iteration initially seemed to be in better stead, until organizers declared a funding crunch just 26 days before its opening. The Kerala state government, which had previously promised to give the KMB between INR 90 million to 150 million (USD 1.4 million to 2.4 million), ultimately only contributed 20 million (USD 322,000). In the end, the opening of the event was realized with the help of the art community, which rallied to donate funds and organize exhibiting projects. As heartening as this was, unresolved issues—including the KMB’s lack of financial transparency and difficulty with local infrastructure, which then impacted the production and installation of exhibited artworks—sorely brought into question the credibility and sustainability of an event of such scale and international prominence in India.

That said, a number of artworks within Jitish Kallat’s tightly curated main exhibition, “Whorled Explorations,” shone through the event’s beleaguered shortcomings. Charles and Ray Eames’s short film *Powers of Ten* (1977)—which gradually pans out from a closeup view of a couple on a picnic to the vast expanse of the universe, and then zooms all the way back into the imperceptibly minute details of an atom—set the scene and reflected the reorientation

of perspectives that was required to navigate the Biennale. Several established artists who responded to the exhibition’s theme more literally—such as Sudhir Patwardhan, whose *Building a Home; Exploring the World* (2014) comprises fantastical appropriations of science-fiction texts and classical paintings, and Pushpamala N, whose photograph *The Arrival of Vasco da Gama* (2014) reenacts a famed rendering of the Portuguese explorer’s historic landing in 15th-century Kerala—also provided an important insight into the varied art histories in India.

Meanwhile, artists such as Bharti Kher and Raqs Media Collective produced deeply layered interpretations of time, mapping and space. Raqs’s *Log Book Entry Before Storm* (2014), installed in an old house in Fort Kochi, was an enchanting environment soaked in deep-blue light, containing photographs of fossils, a diving helmet and a rectangular prism that pierced a wall connecting two rooms. One of the most striking displays of potentiality was in Sahej Rahal’s *Harbinger* (2014), a constellation of clay creatures, ranging from extraterrestrial tripods to earthly sickles, shown in a laboratory-like space. Similarly, Prajakta Potnis’s room installation inside a spice warehouse, entitled *The Kitchen Debate* (2014), was filled with curious visual references to quotidian moments and historical incidents alike, which seemed to transcend the real and the linear. Lastly, works such as Neha Choksi’s film *Iceboat* (2013), in which the ascetic performance artist rows a vessel made of ice until it dissolves into the sea, seemed to acquire an additional resonance in the Biennale’s curatorial setting, echoing the gravitational force that binds—and the metaphysical energy that liberates—people.

The KMB certainly continues to draw upon the stratified complexity of Kochi—a region with an ancient heritage site littered with crumbling colonial architecture, home to nearly a dozen different ethnicities—and remains a distinctive platform for artists to project wider ideas based on confluent concepts and cultures. With Kerala known for its socialist politics, women’s empowerment and activist movements, it is apt that the KMB not only aims to rebalance the market-driven appreciation and consumption of art in India, but seeks to reclaim the autonomy of the artist and artist-led projects in the country. As India’s only biennial, striving to encourage, create and further contemporary art within a noncommercial setting, it is crucial that the KMB find a way not only to survive its growing pains but to develop beyond them and restore faith in itself as an organization.

JYOTI DHAR

