

# Kochi-Muziris Biennale

VARIOUS VENUES, KOCHI, INDIA

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**IN HER 2013 ESSAY** “Globalism Before Globalization,” critic and curator Nancy Adajania recounts how, in 1968, the first Triennale India was initially misunderstood and rejected by the art community, and later mummified by the retrograde vision of a meddlesome state. She contrasts this star-crossed endeavor with the Delhi Biennale of 2005, which was artist-backed but short-lived because it had no state support at all. As her text rightly suggests, between these extremes lies the model for a potentially successful recurrent exhibition. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale, located in Kerala and now in its third edition, almost achieves that equipoise. It is artist-curated and backed, but its relationship to the state leaves it in a somewhat precarious position. The government provides a third of the budget—essential support, but not enough to obviate the necessity of cobbling

together a fragile coalition of corporate and private patrons, which is no easy feat in a lean economy. The unpredictable infusions of funds can create all sorts of logistical problems, as has been evident during each edition’s opening week, when artworks, maps, and labels have often been missing. Despite these difficulties, however, the biennial impressively takes up the mission of the late, lamented triennale, as the latter was described by Adajania: It investigates “new forms of globalist consciousness” that do not “flow only from the former imperial centres to the former colonies,” but instead “seek inspiration from . . . the pre-capitalist and pre-imperialist epoch.” The exhibition’s name pointedly emphasizes a long history of cultural exchange: Kochi has been a confluence of trade and ideas since the medieval era and is not far from the ancient, mythical port city of Muziris. Through this nomenclatural anachronism, the biennial lays claim to deep time, and by extension to the transnational narratives that (as Wai Che Dimock has argued) such expanded temporalities open up. The biennial also vigorously participates in a more recent history, contributing to the ongoing “South-South” dialogue exemplified by the Havana, São Paulo, and Dakar biennials.

The inaugural edition (organized by Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu) privileged the Spice Route as a vector of cosmopolitanism, while the 2014 show (organized by Jithish Kalliat) drew from Kerala’s history as a hub of intellectual and technological innovation. Conscious of the intertwined histories of Indian art and literature and well versed in ancient Sanskrit epics, fifteenth-century Hindi poetry, and contemporary English texts, curator Sudashan Shetty chose to employ a poetic framework for the third biennial, producing a more lyrical show than those of his predecessors. The exhibition’s title, “forming in the pupil of an eye,” is taken from a poem by Mumbai-

based Sharmisha Mohanty. The events program is replete with readings, and several poets have contributed projects unthethered to the page. For example, Chilean poet Raúl Zurita’s installation *The Sea of Pain*, 2016, invites the viewer to wade through a shallow pool of water while reading compelling queries emblazoned on the wall: DON’T YOU LISTEN? DON’T YOU LOOK? DON’T YOU HEAR ME? DON’T YOU SEE ME? Zurita has dedicated the piece to Galip Kurdi, the brother of toddler Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child who drowned in the Mediterranean and whose body was photographed, causing a global outpouring of grief. Galip, however, has not been photographed—he survives, a living but invisible representative of an ongoing and deepening crisis. With this emotive installation, Zurita uses language to ruefully evoke the absence of other kinds of representation, visual or political—an effect made all the more powerful by the invitation to perform a kind of ritual ablation.

Beijing-based poet and calligrapher Ouyang Jianghe, conversely, voids language’s intelligibility to foreground its formal properties and social contexts. Installed in Pepper House, a venue that originally served as storage for that once-precious commodity, his *Untitled*, 2016, is a monumental scroll, hung in wavelike swags and marked by rhythmic, calligraphic ink strokes that could evoke almost any script or alphabet. Like Jianghe, New Delhi-based theater director and artist Zuleikha Chaudhari is interested in the abstraction and recontextualization of her chosen disciplines. Her *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case*, 2015, stages the true story of an ascetic who, in 1921, claimed to be the Prince of Bhawal, an aristocrat who was thought to have died a decade earlier. Using courtroom testimony and archival photographs, Chaudhari astutely explores the distinctions between acting and living, fiction and history.



Left: Raúl Zurita, *The Sea of Pain*, 2016, seawater pool, text on eight canvases, Installation view, Asipmwall House, Raül Zurita. Below: R. K. Sadasanadan, *12 Stories (or the 12 Progeny)* (detail), 2016, natural pigment on plywood, 9' 10" x 49' 2 1/2".

Works throughout the exhibition productively blur other distinctions, evincing cultural syncretism. In the main venue, the sprawling Aspinwall House, Kochi resident P. K. Sadanandan's painting-in-progress *12 Stories (of the 12 progeny)*, 2016–, draws from ninth-century Kerala murals as well as Ajanta and Ellora cave frescoes to slowly reveal a mythological fable about how skill is more important than social hierarchy. Also amalgamating classical and contemporary art forms, Chennai-based Padmini Chettur's intense performance *Vannam*, 2016, weaves together mudras (hand gestures) from classical South Indian dance (bharatanatyam), abstracted yogic postures, and recitations from texts by Anais Nin and Junot Díaz, among others.

## Kochi can be understood as an exhibition doubly decentered.

As Chettur's work reminds us, the poem as a literary form was spoken long before it was written, and Sherry's exhibition foregrounds sonic experience and other non-verbal forms of communication in general as kinds of wordless poetry. Oslo-based artist Camille Norment's *Prime*, 2016, calls attention to the haptic properties of sound, inviting audiences to sit on benches humming and attending to the resulting vibrations while gazing at the ocean. The effect is mediative, restorative, and immediate. Exploring the sonic uncanny, Tokyo-based Yuko Mohri's intricate kinetic sculptures *Calls* and *Ohi-bi (fer fire)*, both 2013–16, use compasses, magnets, wind currents, and foghorns to conjure up ghostly auditory apparitions.

One of the most moving installations of the biennial

also works because of its aesthetic simplicity and ability to connect to fundamental impulses. Painted in a photorealist style, Vadodara-based artist Abir Kamraker's *Home*, 2016, replicates the interiors of a typical middle-class home on the walls of a house in Fort Kochi. Cluttered documents inside a Godrej cupboard, steel spice containers lined up in a kitchen, Himalaya shampoo and PearlPet plastic bottles on a dresser, glass television cabinets filled with trinkets: Kamraker illuminates the politics of everyday private life in a nation beset by propagandistic distortions of cultural memory, dictatorial economic policies, and public attacks on civil liberties.

And though the biennial is largely reflective of, rather than explicitly reactive to, political and institutional circumstances, satellite exhibitions feature more direct propositions. A collateral show, "Dissent and Discourse: The Art and Politics of Brij Mohan Anand," showcases the overlooked practice of the titular artist, whose drawings from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s use the tropes of sci-fi comics to staunchly critique the political tragedies and cultural hangovers of postimperial India. The Students' Biennale, in its second edition, references urgent local concerns including farmer suicides, women's safety, and environmental pollution. In one of the more nuanced works in this show, the students of the Government Institute of Fine Art, Jhalapur, present an untitled assemblage of photographs depicting the institute's campus grounds and buildings. The artists took the photos in an effort to "capture their college" (as the caption explains, only to find that in doing so, "the idea of the institution itself dissolv[ed].")

The work resonates with Sherry's comment, in my interview with him, that the idea of multiplicity throughout the exhibition allows for divergent and contradictory narratives to coexist. Just as Western forms of literary

analysis may fail to uncover the coherence or meaning of a *doha* (rhyming couplet), he suggests, particular artworks, or even the biennial as a whole, may "fall apart or lose meaning" if applied to a similar deconstruction.

As a way of preventing or at least negotiating such impasses, Sherry's biennial proposes a "pre-canonical" way of viewing the contemporary, as outlined by cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote. Here, the hierarchies that elevate, say, pictorial art over calligraphy or painting over craft are leveled; the process of making is seen as a form of knowledge production, just like the process of writings; and the vehicles of that knowledge may be words, but may just as easily be the suggestion of a mood or the evocation of an image.

Glitched, resourceful, transformative, and memorable, the biennial certainly retains its own idiom. Before my visit, Sri Lankan artist Jagath Weerasinghe made a comment about the proliferation of perennial art events in South Asia that I thought pithily captured something important about this distinct initiative: "We're the south of the [Global] South," he said, "but that's what gives us our strength." In other words, this can be understood as an exhibition doubly decentered. It is therefore, perhaps, ideally positioned to critique and reconfigure the relationship of metropolises and peripheries. Only by strengthening its fledgling infrastructure, however, while resisting inevitable institutionalization, will the Kochi–Muziris Biennale remain a critical counterpoint from which to recalibrate worldviews and epistemic structures. □

*The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is on view through March 29.*

JYOTI DHAR IS AN ART CRITIC BASED IN NEW DELHI AND COLOMBO, SRI LANKA. Visit our archive at [artforum.com/inprint](http://artforum.com/inprint) to read Zehra Jamshody (April 2013) and Murtaza Vali (March 2015) on previous iterations of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.



From left: Abir Kamraker, *Home*, 2016, oil on canvas. Installation view, Kochi Art Gallery. B. M. Anand, *Feudalism and Imperialism*, 1960, scratchboard, 20 × 12". Camille Norment, *Prime*, 2016, four-channel haptic audio, benches. Performance view, Aspinwall House, December 14, 2016. Camille Norment.