

Experiences

TRAVELLERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR



THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS OF ART

As the Kochi-Muziris Biennale—deferred to November this year due to the pandemic—dusts away the cobwebs at Aspinwall House, unspools the yarn at Cabral Yard, and contextualises the contemporary at Kashi Art Cafe, it is time to look back at some of the art extravaganza's most thought-provoking narratives. **BY SIDDHARTH DASGUPTA**

FROM LEFT: DAVID PEARSON/ALAMY; AGENCE OPALE/ALAMY



From left: *The Sea of Pain* by Raúl Zurita at Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016; Zurita is an award-winning Chilean protest poet and artist.

ART

IF I WERE TO USE one word to describe my decade-plus existence in the Middle East, the chosen utterance would be “ephemeral.” Within a melange of expatriates and immigrants (depending on which-world country you were from), conversations on transience, identity, and exile were never too far off the table. This held especially true when some of your closest friends came with hyphenated labels: Syrian-Lebanese, Palestinian-Syrian, Lebanese-Palestinian, and so on. For an Indian submerged in Arab notions of friendship and diplomacy, the decade was an exploration into a life of no fixed address.

Those same midnight conversations came rushing back to me in a flood when the blood-soaked existence of Alan Kurdi washed ashore a beach in Turkey in 2015. Similarly lifeless bodies of his mother and brother were soon by his side. I gazed into the young boy's soul—through a mixture of fierce reportage and the sort of media coercion that almost slithers in unnoticed—so did the world. So did Raúl Zurita. Only, the preoccupations of the Chilean protest poet and artist were on the fate of Alan's forgotten five-year-old brother, Galip.

In the coastal town of Kochi, cemented in the heart of the globally celebrated Kochi-Muziris Biennale (slated to commence with its fifth edition on November 1, 2021; kochimuzirisbiennale.org), Zurita's grief and guilt, those twin devils of artistic instigation, manifested themselves in *The Sea of Pain*—dedicated to Galip's memory. Years have

passed, but the memory remains fresh. In a large warehouse infiltrated by dilapidation and a curiously mildewed smell, the thatched roof is a flimsy rejoinder to an increasingly torrential downpour. The weather, it seems, is overcome by what it has witnessed.

In constructing his installation poem, Zurita has flooded the warehouse with murky, ankle-deep seawater, compelling viewers to wade through this discomforting stretch of remorse and culpability to read the words—spelt out in individual lines on blocks of canvas-filled walls. As you embark on this architectural recreation of a refugee's journey of desperation for an imaginary horizon, Zurita's words scream at you: “Don't you listen?” “Don't you look?” “Don't you hear me?” “Don't you see me?” “Don't you feel me?”

This installation's majesty grabs you at the throat; its immensity cannot possibly have been withstood by a museum or the predictability of a traditional spatial environment. Its poignancy lies in the process: some drift through the expanse—unnerving in its placidity—in silence; some struggle against the water; a few hesitate to get their boho-chic pyjamas and frilly gypsy skirts drenched. Very few come away unmoved.

The Biennale's main venue—Aspinwall House—lying snug in the heart of a Fort Kochi district redolent with sweetly-scented palms and the cadence of coastal life, blooms with neighbouring camaraderie and laughter, even as *The Sea of Pain* simmers in silence. Zurita's literal immersion into the Syrian refugee crisis's most enduring image culminates in a cubed wall canvas,



where the story's breadth is finally revealed. *The Sea of Pain* offers unambiguous proof that the 71-year-old Zurita (66 at the time)—recipient of Chile's National Literature Prize in 2000 and founder of the rabble-rousing CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte)—remains as furious with the world as ever.

I drift across Kochi, and time, through the misty veneer of distance, wisps of conversation that frolic in dissonance, and the insistence of hope. Birthed through storm and coveted by empires, Kochi seems endearingly nonchalant about its gripping chronicle. Framed against its unfolding estuary, my host offers me a large, extended whiff of sensations—a tropical breeze fed by the sea; Chinese fishing nets unfurling like prayers; the aroma of mangroves and coconuts; arty cafes where you mingle and savour local

▲ *Aspinwall House is a 19th-century British heritage building in Fort Kochi and the main venue of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.*

▼ *From left: Chinese fishing nets were introduced in Kochi in the 14th century; Anish Kapoor's *Descension* is a perpetual black whirlpool that appeared in the 2015 edition of the Biennale.*

flavour; an ecologically diverse heartbeat; and a cornucopia of faiths with their architectural vignettes.

The heart, with its box of memories, wanders. In 2018, Shilpa Gupta is provoking thought, memory, and radical notions of freedom with her *For in Your Tongue, I Can Not Fit* (100 Jailed Poets). The much travelled and awarded artist breaks through geopolitical borderlines to exhume the malevolence of artistic surveillance. Gupta's installation gathers 100 individual pages of poetry fed through stakes, each with a microphone left dangling above it in the eeriness of the unfinished sentence. The microphones

are reciting each individual poet's work in a sort of synchronous swell that dazes as much as it stirs. The writers represented here are caged creatures—imprisoned for their poetry and the lingua of their politics—slowly rendered invisible but for the insistent courage of their voices.

Time refuses to adhere to coherence or chronology. It's 2015 again, and the Biennale's second edition is prosperous with activity. Bombay-born, British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor is holding my gaze with *Descension*: a perpetual black whirlpool that churns with the roar of the ages. It feels as though the floor has been swallowed by this unceasing descent into whatever the mind harbours. Speaking of his sculptural voyages, Kapoor once said, "I would say the skin of an object is what defines it. Its weight and mass are contingent on its skin. But scale, of course, is much more mysterious." *Descension* lends credence to the statement, with the site-specific installation's enigma only heightened by its enticing proximity to the sea.

Aspinwall House is witnessing an archaeological excavation of the imagination. It is 2012—the Biennale's first edition—and Vivan Sundaram has brought years of cultural scrutiny and textural investigation into play. *Black Gold* corrals thousands of discarded local potshards from the Pattanam archaeological site—potshards accredited to the disappeared port town of Muziris—to form a port city anew, a Muziris reimagined. Within the large-scale installation,

▲ *Iranian visual artist Shirin Neshat's dual videoscope *Turbulent*.*

thousands of terracotta pieces mingle with black peppercorns, chronicled simultaneously in a video projection that mirrors performance art. Through mud, myth, and poetry, Sundaram has uncovered something that lingers like a wild dream—the usage of one lost city in the creation of another.

Remembrances, timeframes, and sensorial markers begin to gallop: New York-born Guerrilla Girls unfurling their fierce feminist dialogues via screaming pop-art posters; Goa-based culinary project Edible Archives transforming Cabral Yard into a culinary hotpot with the revival of 15 varieties of nearly forgotten indigenous rice duly paired with local ingredients—resulting in "a collective sensory catalogue;" Scottish artist Nathan Coley's text-based

▼ *Shilpa Gupta's thought-provoking installation *For in Your Tongue, I Can Not Fit* (100 Jailed Poets).*



COURTESY OF KOCHI BIENNALE FOUNDATION (2)





light bulb sculpture, *A Place Beyond Belief*, casting words uttered after the 9/11 attacks in a sort of incandescent aura; Chandan Gomes creating a walkthrough “book” narrating his childhood and alienation in *There Are Things I Call Home*; Iranian visual artist Shirin Neshat’s dual videoscape *Turbulent* laying bare the treacheries that women face in her homeland.

As I think back on the things I’ve seen, felt, and memorised, it’s impossible not to frame the Biennale’s vivid provocations against the devastation the human existence has had to withstand in the past year-and-a-half. The pandemic has often left us crippled, increasingly struggling for faith and fortitude. But, perhaps, it is art’s job to let us know that within all the flux, human beings will survive. We will find new ways in which to gaze at the world. To roam, to stay, to reach. To create.



▲ Chandan Gomes’s *There Are Things I Call Home* is a walkthrough “book.” Left below: Fort Kochi is the oldest fishing village in Kerala, ruled by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British at different times in its history.

GETTING THERE

Cochin International Airport is served by flights from all major cities in India. The Kochi–Muziris Biennale takes place across a range of venues centred around Fort Kochi–Mattancherry. It takes about 45 minutes to reach Fort Kochi from the airport by road.

STAY

You can choose one of the many boutique properties in and around Fort Kochi, such as **Forte Kochi Heritage Hotel** (from ₹5,600; fortekochi.in) or **Brunton Boatyard** (price on request; cghearth.com/brunton-boatyard). For a lavish lakeside stay, **Grand Hyatt Kochi Bolgatty** (from ₹8,400; hyatt.com) is a great option located not too far from Fort Kochi.

The Kochi–Muziris Biennale remains a pertinent reminder of the place beauty holds in helping us triumph over the dark. It continues to shed poetic light on the world’s ills and foibles, but rarely do these revelations arrive without a riposte of artistic potency and communal togetherness. Perhaps this year’s edition of the Biennale will witness something just as furious as the things I’ve witnessed; perhaps it won’t. Maybe the human condition will manifest itself in similarly unexpected ways; maybe it won’t. I still intend to be there—eyes open, heart beating wild. If global upheavals aren’t ripe enough grounds for revolution to flourish, I suspect not much is.

I’ll be hoping for an artist to chart contemporary geopolitics and its shifting frequencies with the accuracy of a cartographer. I’ll be hoping that the artistic choir has more women’s voices leading the charge, their fables and their triumphs serving as the heartbeat to every chorus. And I’ll be hoping that the wounds of fascism, migration, violence, and dwindling liberties will be treated with the old-fashioned panaceas of kindness, gentleness, and, yes, anger.

In the 2016 edition of the Biennale, themed *Forming in the Pupil of an Eye*, Raúl Zurita’s *The Sea of Pain* was a reminder that even global tragedies often have deeply personal geneses. For the forthcoming edition, given what has transpired across the world, I’ll be hoping that hope—often the elusive flask of manna—reveals itself to be the most crucial genesis of all. +