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PERSPECTIVES

Biennale By The Sea

An international art event highlights Kochi on the world map

By SVATI P SHAH | 1 March 2015



COURTESY KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENALE

Julian Charriere's *We Are All Astronauts* was a play on the idea of global perspective.

PEPPER HOUSE, an eighteenth-century warehouse complex in Kochi that is now an art space and café, looks out across the water towards an

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international container trans-shipment facility in Vallarpadam. The contrast between the quaint, historic godown, with its stucco walls and clay-tile roofs, and the soaring cranes and stacked containers of the trans-shipment facility, which is operated by a Dubai company—could not be more stark. Yet both reflect the maritime importance of this Kerala entrepôt, which has, for centuries, functioned as a centre of trade between Europe, the Arabian Peninsula and Asia—a crossroads not only for the exchange of goods and luxuries, but also for people of various faiths and scientific systems of thought.

The second edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which concludes this month, drew on Kochi's centrality in the ancient and medieval worlds of Indian Ocean trade and migrations. The event brought together a hundred primary exhibits, by artists from 30 countries, for four months of gallery shows, installations, lectures and interactive events. Many of the works drew on the region's history of trade to bolster its present importance as an artistic hub. Alluding to centuries of international exchange, the event, which was promoted as India's first and only biennale, projected Kochi as a centre of creativity and a major destination in the global art world.

Visitors who wandered into Pepper House—one of the biennale's several venues—would have glimpsed the religious aspect of Kerala's richly cross-pollinated heritage reflected in the Chennai artist Benitha Perciyal's installation *The Fires of Faith*. Perciyal's sculptures—wooden heads and a crucified, headless body, with hair and clothing sculpted from incense; a central altar—evoked the Christian imagery of Kerala's older cathedrals and reliquaries. Thanks in no small part to the installation's olfactory aspect (Perciyal incorporated wood, resin, frankincense and myrrh) the fully immersive work at once transported one back to Kerala's early Syrian Christian past, while also being strikingly contemporary in style.

Other works at the biennale referred to specific events, in particular the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama's arrival in Kerala in 1498, to remind visitors that, in many ways, globalisation is not a wholly new phenomenon, nor one previously alien to this place. For example, Sumakshi Singh's installation *In, Between the Pages* consisted of hanging paper panels, painted with glimpses of an Indian paradise—animals, people, settlements and forest—and also ships and roadways. Some of the panels featured looped projections of hand-drawn animations, and the installation also included a star map of the night da Gama's ships landed on this coast, guided by a navigator who is variously believed to have been Arab, Malayali, or even, as some historians have averred, Gujarati. A live video feed, transmitted to a monitor, captured a consolidated version of the panels' fragmented landscape, including the viewers walking between the panels. In this way, viewers were literally placed into an imagined history of a formative encounter between different places.

At times, the recounting of the past put forward alternatives to European narratives of history. Pushpamala N's installation *The Arrival of Vasco da Gama (after an 1898 painting by Jose Veloso Salgado)*, which featured the artist playing the part of the explorer in a richly saturated photograph, was set up in the manner of a classroom. A large blackboard detailed the role that da Gama's navigator had played in his arrival, including a chalked-in comment that the historical Kerala school of mathematics and astronomy had devised the navigational techniques that made da Gama's passage to India possible. The board went on to note that the techniques of the Kerala school, based in Kochi, were eventually appropriated by Europe, with their "heathen origins" erased. Such artworks' engagement with history and geography stood as historical commentary, and as a critique of the art world's own prevailing Euro-centrism.

We tend to think of globalisation as a contemporary phenomenon that works mostly within the dimensions of space, bringing people and things into physical proximity, of shrinking the world to allow for more rapid exchanges of ideas and information, of bringing things closer to ourselves, and ourselves closer to things and places that we may not have been able to access outside of this differently globalised era. The Kochi-Muziris biennale's artistic director, Jitish Kallat, and its curators, chose the theme of "Whorled Explorations" for this year's edition of the event (the first edition was centred on the theme of "Cosmopolitanisms")—demonstrating an understanding that biennales highlight the places that host them and the availability of the artists that participate in them, in turn shaping the international art market. Speaking at an inaugural event, the Kerala politician Shashi Tharoor encouraged attendees to contribute to the biennale, which had, he said, struggled for sponsorship. "This is not only placing this part of India and Indian artists on a privileged platform," he told the audience, "it itself provides a platform for the world as a whole."