

## BIENNALE

Raul Zurita, *The Sea of Pain*; installation with sea water and hanging text scrollsVideo projection (detail) of exiled poet Hasan Mujtaba (Sindh – Punjab) reciting in Urdu his poem *For Allen Ginsberg*

# The People's Biennale

MICHELLE BOYLE OFFERS INSIGHTS INTO THE KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE THAT TOOK PLACE FROM DECEMBER 2016 TO MARCH 2017 IN KERALA, INDIA.

AS a natural deep-water port, Fort Kochi, in the south-western state of Kerala, has been a point of arrival and departure since Roman times for vessels on the trade route between Asia and Europe. A medieval traveller to its shores once noted that, "if China is where you make your money, then Kochi is surely the place to spend it". Layers of colonial and religious histories are visible in Kochi's architectural fabric, which includes Dutch palaces, Portuguese forts, Hindu temples, Christian churches, mosques, synagogues and spice trading houses. Where Fort Kochi and the ancient port of Muziris hold the living relics of the past, the Ernakulam district across the harbour reflects modern Kochi as an expanding cosmopolitan centre of commerce. Ernakulam's vast container terminal is at the forefront of the developing Indian economy.

It is therefore no coincidence that Kochi and Ernakulam – with their multi-layered histories and outward-looking residents – should be the settings for one of Asia's biggest art events. The 2016 Kochi-Muziris Biennale straddled four months from December 2016 to March 2017 under the curatorial direction of Mumbai-based artist Sudarshan Shetty. While Kochi was never the centre of contemporary Indian art, it has proven, through three consecutive biennales, to be capable of reaching beyond itself and engaging in international art-world dialogues. As Shetty pointed out, it is for these reasons that the Kochi-Muziris Biennale would not work anywhere else in India.

## THE PEOPLE'S BIENNALE

Though introduced as the curator of the third biennale, Shetty describes himself primarily as an artist and then as a curator. As an internationally-recognised artist, he exhibited at the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012 and remembers with fondness the enthusiasm and often-chaotic nature of the fledgling biennale experiment – India's first international biennale of contemporary art. Shetty was unanimously elected as curator of the 2016 biennale by a 10-member artistic steering committee, which included notable artists such as Atul Dodiya and Bharti Kher.

The founding principle of the artist-led biennale was that it would be a 'people's biennale', open and accessible to all. A record 600,000 people visited the 2016 biennale with 20,000 alone visiting on the first free Monday. I was struck by the diversity within the attending audiences and also by conversations with local people, including a taxi driver who commented: "I go to each biennale and each time I see things that open my mind a bit more." At the 2016 biennale there was a lot to see. Over 97 invited artists from 35 countries exhibited across 12 main venues in Fort Kochi and Ernakulam, while an ancillary pro-

gramme of talks, seminars, collateral projects and a Students' Biennale (which showcased 55 artists) took place in additional spaces. The venues were well mapped and largely accessible on foot, but rickshaws were busy in the soaring midday temperatures, as they carried visitors between venues.

## FORMING IN THE PUPIL OF AN EYE

The role of curator was new to Shetty, who decided to present himself more as facilitator and host. He started conversations with selected practitioners including writers, poets, architects, dancers, musicians and thinkers – people often on the peripheries of the conventional biennale space. This curatorial approach reflected and informed Shetty's chosen title: 'Forming in the Pupil of an Eye'. When I asked Shetty about this line of inquiry, he explained that it "attempts to gather multiple positions". He also stated that "selecting from and bringing together a multiplicity of disparate sources, the artists gather and layer all the complexity of the world into their representations of it. 'Forming in the Pupil of an Eye' is an assembly and layering of multiple realities". With such a broad theme, the biennale could have become disjointed, but, the event as a whole managed to demonstrate tangible threads of connection between multiple complex works. This became increasingly apparent as I revisited exhibitions over a two-week period and spent time with the many intelligent, thoughtful and well-crafted artworks.

The striking installation *The Sea of Pain*, by the Chilean poet Raul Zurita, was dedicated to Syrian refugees and based on the story of Galip Kurdi – a five-year-old Kurdish migrant who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea along with his mother and younger brother Alan. The viewer was invited to walk through a vast high-pitched warehouse which had been filled shin-deep with sea water. The Arabian Sea lies just beyond the venue's walls and the working sounds of sea horns and cargo ships infiltrated the dead silence of Zurita's installation, where sails hung like scrolls above the lifeless water.

Another deeply affecting work was *Défilé* (2000–2007) by AES+F – a collective of four Russian artists – which comprised seven life-sized photographs of unclaimed corpses who were photographed on light boxes and dressed flamboyantly in high-end fashion. These photographs were both macabre and beautiful, with the subjects appearing to float in lifeless solitude. In a separate location, AES+F's three-channel video installation *Inverso Mundus* (2015) explored alternate realities and strange worlds.

## SITE-SPECIFIC DIALOGUES: RESPONDING TO SPACE

Another monumental project was Slovenian artist Aleš Šteger's *The Pyramid of Exiled Poets*, a mud and gold pyramid based on the Great Pyramid of Giza. It was a commentary on those poets who have disappeared or were exiled from their countries because of their work. In the dark inner-sanctum of the tomb, words of poetry emanated from the mud walls, offering a powerful and immersive meditation on the fragility of life and the endurance of art. In a similar vein, but on a more intimate scale, Bharat Sikka's photographic series 'Where the flowers still grow' presented documentation of small personal objects belonging to people who live in war-torn Kashmir. A box of bullets, portraits and torn photographs were displayed in dark rooms. Sounds from Bazar Road outside were audible, reinforcing Sikka's premise that even amidst war and terror, everyday life continues. Such dialogue between artworks and spaces was commonplace across the biennale and, according to Shetty, there was in-depth collaboration with the artists in editing and installing their work.

Several artists worked in residence and developed public engagement programmes as part of their participation. For example, Praneet Soi set up a temporary workspace for the duration of the biennale where visitors could observe the artist's working process as he engaged with local people working in the coir industry. Coir is a natural material extracted from coconut husks that was traditionally used to make floor mats but is now increasingly used in road construction. Kerala produces 85% of India's coir, so it is pivotal to livelihoods and communities in the region. In addition, India accounts for two thirds of the global coir industry, so it is big business and something that Soi wanted to explore and research. He collaborated with coir workers to develop figurative sculptures based on his sketches from media images. Titled *Cut-out archive*, the larger-than-life sculptures of tumbling figures in motion were placed in the internal courtyard garden of Pepper House in Fort Kochi. Soi's workstation was aptly situated in the nearby Aspinwall House, where English trader John H. Aspinwall founded the original coir export industry in the late nineteenth century. Irish audiences will have the opportunity to see the work of Praneet Soi when he exhibits in CCA Derry-Londonderry in October.

Other notable artists who might be less familiar to Irish audiences include New Delhi-based theatre-maker Anamika Haksar, whose socially-engaged work *Composition on Water* offered a commentary on topical social injustices of the sub-continent. Pakistani artist Salman Toor worked in collaboration with Punjabi poet Hassan Mujtaba to develop *The Revelation Project*, which addressed their experiences as immigrants living in New York. Sunil Padwal's *Room for Lies* presented a series of over 600 photographs and over-drawings documenting the artist's native Mumbai, while Desmond Lazaro's *Family Portraits* engaged with his heritage through painting, video and embroidery. Abir Karmakar's series of photorealistic oil paintings, *Home*, depicted the domestic interior of a typical middle-class Indian household that was replicated to scale as an immersive installation in Kashi Art Gallery. This created a displaced situation that reflected Karmakar's questioning of 'home' as a place between reality and nostalgic memory. Remen Chopra's floor-based sculptural installation, *I see a mountain from my window/standing like an ancient sage* (2016), took its title from a poem written by the artist's grandmother and explored issues of lineage and feminism. Her large-scale, imaginary, topographic landscape carved from recycled wood fibre was inspired by the rich symbolism of a Persian carpet, passed down through her family from mother to daughter.

In the calendar of global biennales, the Kochi Muziris Biennale is a unique event. The success of Shetty's vision for a 'people's biennale' was highly evident, not just in the diversity of the attending audience, but in the huge team of volunteers who prepare, build, invigilate and dismantle the exhibitions. However, what makes the event so special for me, is the somewhat haphazard nature of Kochi itself, and how it accommodates the intimate and monumental works of the biennale in such seamless ways.

The Indian contemporary artist and art historian Anita Dube has been named as curator of the fourth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which opens in December 2018.

**Michelle Boyle is a visual artist of Irish/Indian parentage. She will have solo exhibitions in The Cow Shed Theatre, Farmleigh House, Dublin, in late September 2017 and Gallery OED, Fort Kochi, in March 2018.**

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