

Galerie Daniel Templon

Paris

JITISH KALLAT

THE TELEGRAPH (GRAPHITI), September 22, 2013



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ABHINIT KHANNA; PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JITISH KALLAT

STORY

COVER

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Artist Jitish Kallat is going from strength to strength with two ambitious solo shows running simultaneously in Europe and the US, says **Aarti Dua**

Jitish Kallat's first solo show in Paris at the Galerie-Daniel Templon showcases his ability to work in diverse media

# Master of the arts

It's called *Covering Letter* and it's a dramatic art installation that's on show at one of the leading galleries in Paris. Walk through the door and a fog descends and then a few lines of text emerge from the haze. "Dear Friend," it begins. "Friends have been urging me to write to you for the sake of humanity." It's only when you get to the end that you realise this is an artistic representation of a missive from a certain M.K. Gandhi to none other than Herr Adolf Hitler.

The installation is part of a huge solo show *The Hour of the Day of the Month of the Season* by Jitish Kallat, one of India's top Contemporary artists, that has just opened at Galerie Daniel Templon in Paris. It's the artist's first solo show in Paris and it stretches across two separate buildings of the gallery. Kallat has used his full range of talents for the show throwing in everything from mural-sized paintings to Lilliputian scul-

ture, photography, text and also video.

"There are very few artists in the world like Jitish who work in so many different directions — he's a painter, sculptor, photographer and he works in video and installation — and all the directions are so strong and assured," says the French gallerist Daniel Templon, who has represented some of the world's biggest artists from Andy Warhol to Willem de Kooning.

As one of India's leading Contemporary artists, Kallat, 39, needs almost no introduction. He's going from strength to strength, even though the Indian Contemporary art market is in the doldrums. And though he's only 39 he has built up a strong body of work, including his large paintings capturing the essence of Mumbai and his distinctive human figures with hair that "becomes like a city or township or stacked memory" on their heads.

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PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JITISH KALLAT

Kallat's new large-scale painting *The Hour of the Day of the Month of the Season* is also the title of his ongoing show in Paris

One indication of his global standing is that even as his Paris show opened to strong reviews, he has simultaneously opened another solo show, *Epilogue*, at the San Jose Museum of Art in California.

Kallat has been a regular on the international art circuit and he has stepped up the pace recently, holding one big show after another at some of the world's most prestigious art institutions. So in 2010, he became the first Contemporary Indian artist to have a solo show at the venerated Art Institute of Chicago with his spectacular work, *Public Notice 3*.

The Art Institute is the site where Swami Vivekananda delivered his famous address to the first World Parliament of Religions on 9/11 1893. Kallat connected Vivekananda's speech with the catastrophic event that took place 108 years later on 9/11 and turned it into an art work a few years later, reproducing the speech as LED text on the staircase of the Art Institute.

That's not all. In 2011, he followed *Public Notice 3* with the brilliant *Field-notes: Tomorrow was Here Yesterday*

Kallat's huge installation, *Epilogue*, made up of 753 photographs of progressively eaten rotis representing the different phases of the moon (inset), is on show at the San Jose Museum of Art till April 2014

show at Mumbai's Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Last year, he did *Chlorophyll Parkat Nature Morte*, Delhi, and *Circa* at Melbourne's Ian Potter Museum of Art, his first solo in an Australian museum.

Kallat says that he's drawn to anything that "if on prolonged looking, (it) directs you to some life truth" or becomes "a personal provocation to think about the world we live in today".

In fact, *Public Notice 3* provoked such a huge response that it ran for an entire year. "It just took a life of its own," he says. And with *Covering Letter* now he says the fog that rises when a viewer enters has become associated with gas so that "there's no other way for me to read it either". A viewer can physically walk through this text-laden fog too.

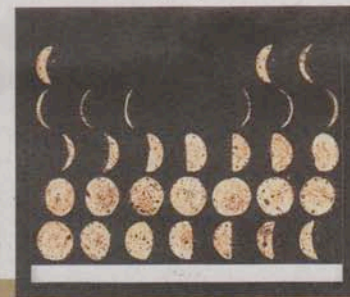
Everyone agrees that what matters is Kallat's huge passion for his art. Says *Nature Morte*'s Peter Nagy: "What's distinctive through all of Jitish's diverse art is his intelligence and the enquiry and investigation that he brings to his work."

"There's such clarity in how Jitish perceives things. Plus, he's a wonderful

person," adds Chemould Prescott Road's Shireen Gandhi, who organised his first solo show in 1997. The artist was just 23 at the time.

Gandhi believes that Kallat's a "true-blooded Bombay Boy" and "that is the essence of him as an artist". Nagy too says that much of Kallat's work is "about the fabric and feel of his city". So its migrants, street children and suburban railway have featured in his work.

Yet Kallat says he isn't inspired by the city's narratives of struggle and survival alone. "It's not the city as muse. It's just how your lived environment percolates the practice," he says. And more and more, he's taken by the underlying unity between things, and with "food, sustenance, body, sky, time".



EPICLOGUE 2010-11, 753 PIGMENT PRINTS ON ARCHIVAL PAPER: PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JITISH KALLAT STUDIO



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PUBLIC NOTICE 3, 2010. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JITISH KALLAT

## COVER STORY

Kallat's *Public Notice 3* involved reproducing Swami Vivekananda's famous speech in LED lights on the staircase of the Art Institute of Chicago

out my watch and put it in my mouth as I looked at the work. And he just roared with laughter," recounts Gandhi.

The "super-confident" young student soon got her to visit his home-studio. "Jitish being Jitish was already ready with a fairly large body of work," she recalls. Gandhi initially thought she'd get him to wait a few years before doing a solo show. "But he was clear he'd be ready by December. I had this vision of the next gallerist walking in and clinching the show. I had to decide there and then and I said okay," she remembers.

Take his installation *Epilogue* at San Jose. He's paid tribute to his late father in the work, which comprises 753 photographs of progressively eaten rotis, each representing one of the 22,500 moons that his father must have seen during his 62 years.

Or in an untitled photo-piece at Templon, "X-rays of five platters in the middle of a meal" become like a constellation of planets. He has actually X-rayed the "insides of food". What we eat or sustenance, then, gets related to the sky, which gets related to time and circadian rhythms in his works.

Says Kallat: "To me, this play between the cosmic, the microscopic, the underwater, insides of body, sky, they're all one thing. We just have to grapple with the hallucination of their separation. So, the art is an endeavour to overcome that hallucination."

Templon says: "Jitish's works are mixed with social problems and also with the philosophy of India. He reflects the complexity of his culture."

Growing up, though, Kallat didn't even contemplate the idea of becoming an artist. He had "a simple middle-class south Indian upbringing" in Mumbai's Borivli suburb. His father worked in Voltas while his mother never did "anything close to drawing or singing".

There were no artists around except for a family friend, who helped his sister with her school biology drawings. Kallat began by imitating him. "Soon, he didn't have to come anymore. My sister and her friends would drop off their books

and I would draw their plants and everything," he recounts. He honed his talent through school art competitions. Yet, he only "discovered the J.J. School of Art through advertising".

"Within the first three months, I knew I wanted to be an artist. That's when I found my calling," he says.

He gained recognition while still at J.J., where he was part of a dynamic group that included his future wife Reena Saini Kallat and artists like

Shilpa Gupta and Bose Krishnamachari. Gandhi recalls first seeing Kallat's work at Jehangir Art Gallery's Monsoon Show. "He had this large painting with a figure of himself with a watch in his mouth. So to catch his attention, I took

Kallat is a painter, sculptor, photographer and also works in video and creates installations

Kallat's first solo was called PTO and it was an immediate hit. Actually, Kallat already had collectors like Czaee Shah follow his student work and one international curator even traced him to J.J. after seeing his work hanging in Deutsche Bank, which led to his first international

show in 1997. "With Jitish, it was boom from the word go. We sold every last work in that first show," says Gandhi.

Nagy too recalls that first solo. "I had just moved to India and I never expected to see work dealing with the issues



Mumbai's narratives of struggle and survival are evident in many of Kallat's works such as this earlier painting, *Baggage Claim*

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that were being discussed in the US then, like the place of painting. So it was very exciting to discover him," he says.

Kallat feels that his early works came more "from general culture" than art. That's because the Indian economy was opening up then. So he developed a pictorial language that made references to television and the billboard. The self-image also became central. And he quickly began participating in solo and group shows, also because "I had a whole body of work sitting". "I was like a playful workaholic," he says.

Seated in his spacious Pali Hill home now, he recalls how in his tiny Borivli home, "large canvases were evolving between a sofa and television". Today, he works between his study in Bandra, his painting studio in Byculla and sculpture studio in Kandivli.

Nagy believes that Kallat has grown

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JITISH KALLAT



Kallat's sculptural work includes his series of life-sized skeletal vehicles such as *Aquasaurus*

tions like Frank Cohen's Initial Access, the Singapore Art Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. And his paintings are priced from Rs 45 lakh to about Rs 90 lakh.

Now, he's working on another solo that will open at ARNDT gallery in Singapore in October. And he's also making a huge permanent public sculpture that has been commissioned by 10 townships in lower Austria. It will open in 2014.

Ask him how he's evolved as an artist and Kallat says: "I feel more and more unsure. For the more you do things, the less you feel you know. And that's no glib statement." Instead, he says he draws his energy from this "yearning for clarity". One thing's clear though. Whatever the uncertainty, Kallat will boldly move in ever-new directions. ◆

hugely over the years, exploring different subjects and media. In 2003, for instance, he did the first *Public Notice* work, when he felt "compelled to rewrite" Jawaharlal Nehru's tryst-with-destiny speech as a burnt text on a mirror in a post-Godhra world. Yet, the archive of vehicles burnt in riots he built then became an ode to human folly later in his life-size skeletal sculptures of vehicles like *Aquasaurus*.

He's produced other strong bodies of work since like *Rickshawpolis*, *365 Lives*, *Unclaimed Baggage* and *Sweatopia*. His works are in big collec-