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SUDARSHAN SHETTY

HARPER'S BAZAAR ARABIA, February 8, 2017

ARABIA Harper's BAZAAR

In Conversation With Sudarshan Shetty



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The artist-cum-curator of the current Kochi Biennale speaks with Rahel Aima about art,

life and his fascination with the place between myth and truth

"There's belief that for every one foot you dig, literally anywhere in Kochi, you have a hundred years of history. Two feet, it's 200 years," says Indian artist Sudarshan Shetty. "It's part of that area; when you go to Kochi you cannot escape living that history." Twenty-one feet, then, should get you to the ancient seaport of Muziris from which the [Kochi-Muziris Biennial](#), curated in its third iteration by Shetty, takes its name.

It's a funny move, this twinning of a bustling modern metropolis with its ancient predecessor. Imagine an Istanbul-Byzantium biennial, or perhaps a Guangzhou-Panyu triennial. Yet in the case of Kochi, a city deeply saturated with millennia of maritime, religious and colonial histories, it somehow feels exactly right. Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama died and was initially buried there before being later dug up and re-interred in Lisbon.

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His forays east would kick off several centuries of global European imperialism as well as the spice trade that would give the city its nickname The Queen of the Arabian Sea. In Kochi, Portugal was soon joined by Britain and the Netherlands. Their architectural influences can still be seen in the pretty pastels, brickwork and timbering of old colonial homes on the island of Fort Kochi which houses the biennial's main sites, as well as in the cuisine.



Gigi Scaria's giant bell installation at the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale

Following the arrivals of Judean traders in 562 BCE and Thomas the Apostle in 52 CE Muziris became the birthplace of Indian Judaism and Christianity respectively, while just outside the modern-day city India's first mosque, the Cheraman Juma Masjid was built in 629 CE. Shetty recounts an apocryphal legend of Thomas' arrival, told to him by a local barber. The apostle encountered some priests reciting mantras as they flung water into the sky as an offering to the gods. When Thomas did the same the water remained immobilised, a spray of crystalline droplets high in the sky. Duly impressed, many of his audience were baptised on the spot, and the religion gained its first converts. One of many such anecdotes that pepper our conversation, the story speaks to Shetty's fascination with the multivalent space between myth and what is considered empirical truth. He hesitates to articulate a singular curatorial approach, preferring instead to emphasise the value of this semantic multiplicity and the way it opens up a fertile space for conversations.

The biennial title, *Forming in the Pupil of an Eye*, comes from the Hindu scriptures the Rig Vedas (Shetty is careful to maintain that he does not consider them holy texts, perhaps in light of the wave of Hindu fundamentalism currently sweeping the

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country). When a sage opens their eyes and looks at the world it is believed they are able to register the multiplicity of the world around them in a single glance, even as it is projected back at them.

“The eyes are the only reflective surface in the body,” Shetty explains, adding that “all these ancient ideas come from the physiological aspects of the body [which] become a primary source of knowledge production.” Some of the more bodied works in the biennial build upon this belief, like a dance project from Padmini Chettur which involves the audience to explore the process and discursive potentialities of making itself.



Anish Kapoor's Descension at Aspinwall House at 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale

Although Shetty was born in nearby Mangalore, his family moved to Mumbai when he was just six months old and he has remained there ever since. When he participated as an artist in the first KMB in 2012, he was struck by the way the past and present seemed to commingle and took that as the starting point for his initial conversations with artists. “This conversation needed to be outside the expectation of the biennial space,” he says, and as such he began by reaching out to India’s traditional visual artists, who work outside the confines of the contemporary art world.

It’s the fruits of this dialogue that he’s most excited about, including several classical music and poetry performances during the biennale opening week. Within

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the biennial itself, many works further allude to the idea of performance, which Shetty is particularly drawn to in the way that it temporally collapses both the making and dissemination of a work, not unlike the blink of the sage's eye. Biennials are often accused—not always unjustly—of being top-heavy, of concentrating primarily on the opening week for the benefit of the international art world glitterati that parachute in.

In contrast, Shetty appears to be approaching his biennial as itself a kind of durational performance. An in-progress play, for example, will be staged every day for a week at the beginning, middle and end points of the biennial and evolve with each iteration. Another work, which involves daily walkthroughs of the exhibition over the same timeframe, plays with the aforementioned grey space between fact and mythmaking. Shetty elaborates that he “is going to construct complete lies about the works, and that story keeps changing over a period of time so it's like 21 versions of the same story.” There are also plans to publish a leaflet every two days throughout the course of the biennial as “quasi-record” of the biennial, culminating in a series of small booklets. And a further project from artist Erik van Lieshout involves working with the local community to remake a popular Malayalam film; the finished product will be screened the following November, long after the art crowds have left.



*Mona Hatoum's Undercurrent installation at the Aspinwall House
during the 2014 Kochi-Muziris Biennale*

Shetty is unapologetic about privileging the experience of locals. “It's the in-between times that are really amazing. People from neighbouring villages come, read the text on the wall, and watch the long videos and it's amazing the

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conversations they have with each other.” He relates how the other day he was sitting in a cafe when a local rickshaw driver Moosa Bava came up to him, introduced himself and began to tell him about the various artists he had met over the first two editions of the biennial. Shetty was especially charmed when, on his way out, Moosa added, “you know, if you need any South American artists let me know!” It’s certainly a far cry from the beleaguered early days of the biennial when the government pulled the bulk of its promised funding, coupled with protests from locals (who thought the money might be better served going towards education or healthcare, for example) and a cool scepticism from the Indian art establishment, who have since wholeheartedly embraced the event.

“There is much more acceptance now as something that is important, and not only in India but everywhere I go,” Shetty agrees, musing that it goes back to the question of whether we really need art. “Who should ask this question? I don’t think an artist or a curator, it’s not a question that needs to be asked to them. I think it’s a question that each of us should be asking ourselves. Why it is important, why it is a natural need for us to have art if we want to live in a civilised society. I think it calls for a longer conversation!”