

MUMBAI

Between the urban and the ruin

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Samit Das' new show is an intricate tour of the evolution of Indian art combined with his own journey as an artist

What is art, if not an amalgam of one's own history and experiences? Often, art emerges from a thought culled from varied stimuli that find expression in a medium/s of the artist's choice. But what if the work created retraced its path, to question and reflect on these sources, both internal and external?

Samit Das's latest show *Bibliography in Progress* examines precisely these findings of introspection. It is an exploration of the self – its encounters, learnings and memories. Das creates a layered oeuvre that is as telling of its influences as it is fascinating. He terms this endeavour as “personal archaeology” that’s used to study “one’s own personal history and achieving” as opposed to the academic definition of the term. It presents and at the same time probes the multiple facets to a single culmination – this body of work. Curator Sumesh Sharma, puts it perfectly when he describes Das’ art works that, “...he makes out of material one would imagine [that comes] out of detritus artists’ studios create. In fact wood, xerox papers, watercolours, inks and canvases arrive to create these assemblages.”

Mapping a past

In Das’ case, a childhood habit of collecting interesting objects that he came across has stayed on to become his patent style. These objects which have found their way into the artist’s oeuvre are in his words a sort of “biographical map”. Das, a Shantiniketan graduate is well versed with Rabindranath Tagore’s ideologies as also the history of the nationalist movement in art, that he affirms was born out of turning away from colonial ideas and wholly towards “the tradition of India that includes Ajanta”. Tagore, Das reminds me, was as inspired by the “image of Buddha” - an awareness of which seeps into Das’ expression of pre-modernism in his own work. Using photography, often macro lenses to stylise the images he makes, Das edits them further to resemble grainy archaic prints and photocopies of the same. An avid reader of historical and ancient art

literature, like

Mohenjodaro and The Indus Civilization by John Marshall, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and *The Art of Ancient India* by Susan Huntington amongst others are a key artistic influence. The texts form a different "mapping of history" in Das' context. Elements like glue on the other hand – adhesive waiting to welcome the vague, forming future – forge the link between the current and the yet unseen, in progress.

At first glance, the works show a *mélange* of different materials which in totality seem like pieces of ancient ruins full of mystery. At the same time, mounted on iron rods, the artworks also mirror semi-formed blocks removed from an under construction site that have a 'found' quality to them. In that instant, the work belongs to both again, the urban and the ruin, the present and the past. Lingering on, mentally separating the bits that form the whole, one begins to trace the outlines that form the artist's unique visual imagery. One that constantly questions and seeks answers, oscillating between time, space and history.

Multiple conversations

Das believes that there are several dialogues at play when a work of art is placed in a specific environment. First is a dialogue between the art and the artist during the conceptualisation, creation and execution of the work; the second is that between the work and the space. And the third exists between the art, space and the viewer.

Das explains how the exhibition, showing concurrently at both Tarq and Clark House Initiative (CHI) galleries in the city, evolves in relation to these two distinct spaces. While Tarq is a "white cube gallery", the clean white walls true to its minimalistic nature; CHI is according to Das has more of a "cave-like" look and feel, with its old bare walls rich with texture and etchings. At CHI even the work displayed – mostly monochromatic paintings inspired by the Buddha sculptures of Ajanta – are at their unframed basic best, pronouncing the raw feel that the gallery exudes. One wonders if the work could be displayed elsewhere to which Das responds, "Maybe some historical ruins /monuments and also within archeological museum and sites." In doing so, one would be adding another level of dialogue to an experience already alive with multi-layered conversations.

In transition