

BIBLIOGRAPHY IN PROGRESS

SAMIT DAS

Curated by
Sumesh Sharma

Produced by

TARQ

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Artist Samit Das

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INTRODUCTION

Presented in collaboration with Clark House Initiative, 'Bibliography in Progress' is Samit Das' first solo exhibition in Mumbai after a ten-year hiatus. His works in this show and his practice at large find their core in the archive.

At TARQ, Das' series assimilates the idea of pre-modernism through contemporary practice with a unique visual language. His multimedia works on board are meticulous in their attention to detail, and their sculptural quality combines a variety of materials (iron, paint, archival images, found objects and wood) to create a stunning culmination of the various threads of his practice. The complex, layered works combine ideas of archeology, ethnography, legend and materiality, ultimately looking at the notion of how the archive interacts with space. While the series is tied together by the artist's practice, Das is reluctant to ascribe a particular narrative to every piece.

At Clark House Initiative, Das' drawings and photographs further explore pre-modernist sculpture from the Indus Valley Civilization and Buddhist tradition, elaborating on the dialogue begun at the exhibition at TARQ.

Hena Kapadia
Gallery Director

A MATERIAL TURN IN HISTORY AND AESTHETICS

- THE ART OF SAMIT DAS

Text by Sumesh Sharma

Samit Das is an artist, historian and archivist who weaves history irreverently with scholastic reasons to do so. Visual Art does not intervene in history in times where referential practice is reverential to other histories as source material to concept. But how can we chart a history of the modern and the conceptual based on our own mitigations of materiality, perceptions of space and colour, and thus make forms that narrate our idea of climate and time. Santiniketan, established by Rabindranath Tagore, now comes to be known as a University. It is not that you learn basic anatomy or painting at the school, but forms of perception and an acceptance of history from a mannerism of discovery and acceptance. Nandalal Bose would advise a young Krishna Reddy to watch a leaf form, its foliage needed a certain degree of creativity in formation and sculpting. An artist needed to think from such starts to draw on his own art.

Samit Das' studio sits on the border where Delhi's urban sprawl spreads across into the hinterland. Here the space comes in irregular use, reminding us of what Delhi might have been. Villages suddenly take on many stories to home tenants, fields turn into handicraft factories and well paved highways lead to dusty roads. From his home in a Delhi Development Authority (Affordable State Housing Scheme) flat to his studio that stands in the National Capital Region but outside the borders of the state of Delhi, Samit Das

treads a conceptual path of aesthetics. These outskirts hold many artist studios, many which hold the moniker of being factories. Samit Das has a set of the most sophisticated tools and machinery that could be used to saw, stitch, glue, nail and build art works he makes out of material one would imagine arrive out of detritus artists' studios create. In fact wood, xerox papers, watercolours, inks and canvases arrive to create these assemblages. From these sculptural reliefs he builds canvases that might be walls that are created out of layers of construction.

Architecture in India follows whims, influences, trends and ease of material, thus skylines do not usually contain aesthetic landmarks but triple layered cakes of competing aesthetics. Much like in Santiniketan, where Das graduated to become an artist, the aesthetic approach to space and design is an assemblage of influence, utility and philosophy. How we uncover these archaeologies of aesthetics depends on the narratives we imagine of our personal art histories. I for example have deep convictions in the conceptual ability of the modernism that developed at Santiniketan through a nationalist urge to forge an indigenous aesthetic.

The indigenous aesthetic was not representative of a nation, or the patronising need to depict the Santhals, tribal communities belonging to the land around the Tagore estate in Bolpur. The need to dialogue with Okakura Tenshin and invite Japanese scholars to Santiniketan to teach languages was not representative of mere mythical nation building. It was, in fact the pushback of a nation that was to be built through colonisation. The idea of free thought (not that which was ushered in by the colonial occupier) but a thought based on the freedom to choose one's own influences became the genre of Santiniketan. Thus Japanese wash techniques, traditional terracotta, Victorian choir based music and Brutalist sculpture became material evidences of a philosophical time and intellectual space based on pondering beyond the confines of geography.

Samit Das provides an oeuvre that began with experimentation in photocopies and now exists as sculptures. This journey is not surprising but one that is expected when we observe his interests. Holding the most extensive archive on Santiniketan and being one of the foremost scholars on the histories of art from South Asia, Das's art practice conceptually lies with these histories of exchange between these material mediums. His solo exhibition thus amalgamates this possibility without rarefying the materiality or the form as a commodity.

Layers engulf you with forms that draw you into watercolours that flow from the hands of Ajanta.

A year at the Camberwell College of Arts changed perspectives for Samit Das. He began collecting his iterations on art in the form of artist books. Just across from the Sir JJ School of Arts, is a hotel that flanks the Crawford Market – now officially known as the Mahatma Phule Market – a market for fresh food and perishable goods. The hotel is known as Hotel New Bengal. The Sir JJ School of Art, was established in 1858 to caste the gargoyles, architectural details and decorations for the Victoria Terminus (now called the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus). The other reason to establish an art school, one of the first in Asia, was in many utopian ways to assuage the discontent among the artisans of India who had been made redundant by the trade in ‘Manchester cloth’ post industrialization. Bombay and the environs of the Sir JJ School of Art had become the haunt of many artists, especially because of the lucrative opium trade. The Sir JJ School of Art was financed by a Parsi (Iranian Zoroastrian immigrant) – Sir Jamsetjee Jeejebhoy who had made his fortune financing the trade of opium between Bombay, Hong Kong and Canton. Through him the painter Lam Qua, the student of George Chinnery, visited the city and painted the portrait of the Merchant Prince. Samit Das following a long list of artists came to live in the Hotel New Bengal. Perhaps Lam Qua had lived in a house facing the art school more than a century ago.

The Enlightenment was brought about by travel where the Arabs transported the ‘Zero’ and Algebra across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean to Greece and Europe. I make this distinction because the idea of Europe arises from Greece, but Greece does not need Europe to identify itself. Greece identifies itself with multiple series of geographies from the Levant until the West of Africa. It was largely disinterested in mainland Western Europe through its classical glory. In fact it explains why Greece even though it has an eastern presence it is considered Western in political geography. Hotel New Bengal provides a similar dilemma. The Partition of Bengal happened through the British in 1905. Orissa, Bihar and Muslim majority districts became their own states. This communal meandering was to become the most significant legacy of British colonial rule in the subcontinent. Samit Das is the progeny of displacement of another Partition that happened in 1947, when East Bengal became a part of the Muslim majority Pakistan. Years later due to the forced implementation of Urdu, Bangladesh was born in 1971.

We do not know what makes a ‘New Bengal’ but is Samit Das the New Bengal? Bengali as a language, literature and aesthetic can even claim classical dimensions. We hear a lot about the Bengal renaissance – a period that spanned the 19th century when religious, philosophical and cultural renaissance took place in Bengal. This was achieved by a secure tenant-ship that was granted to the feudal vassals of the British East India Company (and later the Empire); to Hindu nobles who were loyal to the interests of the British. The Princelings in Calcutta, the capital of the Empire, began reading English, appearing for civil service exams, writing poetry, changing the form of prose to those found in Paris or Rome and bringing about significant changes to Hinduism which included the shunning of idolatry, caste and widow-burning. But the movement was based on an elite premise and standing. It was not egalitarian or inclusive in the manner it fashioned itself. Many younger men including Rabindranath Tagore then became interested in the self-determination of India. They joined the ranks of the nationalists, all men who had at some point studied in England and had benefited from the acts of the British to straighten Indian men into ‘Brown Sahibs’ or create a class (underclass) of Indian elites. This elite ‘Bhadralok’ could transcend ideological divisions in political parties but not the divisions of class. Bengal is today ruled by strong women who voice the concerns of those who have waited to be part of the ‘New Bengal’.

Samit Das born to refugees from East Bengal, who moved to India after the partition, was born in Jamshedpur, in the state of Bihar. In an act that arose from sheer entrepreneurial genius and nationalist guise, the Tatas established India’s foremost conglomerate with interests in tea, steel, aviation and hospitality, among others. Jamshedjee Tata, like Jamsetjee Jeejebhoy made his wealth in the opium trade. He established Jamshedpur in the forests of Bihar, now known as Jharkhand. He had found iron ore and better, found permission from the British to found it into steel. An organised, planned city was developed, managed not by a municipal board but a corporate management. The trappings of Europe that defined Bombay and Calcutta, gave way to a more neutral industrial modernism. This city attracted many people from different walks and ancestries to come make a living beyond the traditional occupations their caste or religion mandated them to do. Samit Das’s parents, like many others after Partition, shifted to towns that offered ready jobs to skilled workforces, and created a middle class out of displaced people who could not any longer claim an ancestral village or a place to return too. History had

made their identities circumspect if not redundant to Indians who were tribal in their need to decipher origins. This was surely the New India if not the New Bengal.

At Santiniketan, Nandalal Bose encouraged his students to follow the paths of nature to conceptualise ideas, to look at the leaves of a tree and imagine its formation. Krishna Reddy thought about many periods of formation from maternity to plants emerging from seeds to cyclones in Mid-west America to etch complex viscosities in his prints. Ramkinker Baij's 'Santhal Family' became a monument of irreverence, especially as sculpture was used to make monuments for the departing colonialists and arriving icons of the Nationalist movement. Somnath Hore has etched the famine in our minds - a famine that was an idea that caused many deaths - like the partition. Samit Das is often cited as an author of the art history of Modern India and the Nationalist movement - a movement of self-determination that sought to liberate us from the yoke of colonialism. A certain enthusiasm overcame the artists as they began to record the progressive future. A 'New India' was to emerge. Among them was the city of Chandigarh. Samit Das visited the city, and reinstalled the details to make one realise the footnotes to Corbusier's architecture. Where did the visual vocabulary lay and what were its origins. His book, 'Architecture of Santiniketan' sought such an investigation too. His present solo exhibition is one that maps two distinct spaces. One in an Art Deco building - Dhanraj Mahal and the other in a Neo-gothic building, Clark House.

Footnotes and the collecting of them, references and books are a part of an archivist's job. Is Samit Das an archivist? One interested in the sciences of the library? On engaging with his practice, you realise that Das is interested in reflection. Reflecting on the failures and successes of our art history and scripting a new paradigm of how we read it. Auction houses engage him to comment on certain pieces. Until now, art history was dictated by market successes and auction results.

A solo show called 'Bibliography in Progress' comments on an art scene where theory, philosophy and subsequent history are in the process of being authored. Whether archives are vast or non-existent, the conceptual act by the artist to choreograph the archive through his own practice is akin to acts by the Fluxus Group or Marcel Duchamp that negated the propensity and devotion to the canons of Western Art History.

Book keeping and art-book making can have direct connections; his time at Camberwell taught Samit not only the manner in which we craft books but to use the technique of reflection to question pedagogies of acceptance taught in colleges such as Goldsmiths in London. In India, graduating artists at the turn of the 20th century regarded themselves as Post-Modernists, placing themselves in a history in order to satiate the need for a scene and a market. What they at failed conceptually was the need to reflect and question. Samit Das negotiates many spaces and timelines scripting a 'Bibliography in Progress'. The museum and its role in scripting and representing history, even one as diverse as Santiniketan where artists from Indonesia, Uganda, Japan, Senegal and Burma gathered, cannot be comprehended through mere comparisons to Dadaism or the Bauhaus. Rather, it is only by allowing various authors to script their own histories as a reflection of time and aesthetics that will create an inclusive place for people.

A material turn in our history is a narrative that is conceptual and historical, one that encompasses the need of many subaltern subjects in their representation of the aesthetic visual vocabulary. The art of Samit Das takes us through a bend in history that is political and personal where one gives access to the author and his language.





























ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1970 in Jamshedpur, **Samit Das** began his formal artistic training at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan in 1994, where he went on to do his Masters degree two years later. In 2000, he participated in the Associate Student Post Graduate Program at the Camberwell College of Art, London. Das was the recipient of the BRIC scholarship which led to him spending time in Italy in 2011. He was also awarded the ProHelvetia Research fellowship in 2016 and has been recently chosen as a Pernod Ricard Fellow.

Samit Das' practice is influenced by his fascination with documentation and the archive. Das' love for the archive and his Santiniketan roots culminated in a documentation project at the Tagore Museum in Kolkata between 1999 and 2001. He went on to work on another project - an exhibition titled The Idea of Space and Rabindranath Tagore which was exhibited in numerous venues including Lalit Kala Academy (New Delhi), India International Centre (New Delhi), Victoria Memorial Hall (Kolkata) and Freies Museum (Berlin).

Das has exhibited extensively globally and has participated in projects such as the art installation project at the international airport in Mumbai which was curated by Rajiv Sethi. He has also authored two books - Architecture of Santiniketan: Tagore's Concept of Space, published by Niyogi Books, New Delhi and Hotel New Bengal - a limited edition book published by Onestar Press, Paris.

Samit Das lives and works in New Delhi.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sumesh Sharma is an artist, curator & writer. He co-founded the Clark House Initiative, Bombay in 2010 where he presently is the curator along with being the invited curator to the biennale of African contemporary art - DakArt 2016 and 2018, Senegal. His practice deals with alternate histories that are informed by the Black Arts Movement, Socio-Economics, Immigration in the Francophone and Vernacular Equalities of Modernism. He will curate a project at The Showroom, London and the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2017. He has curated exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, Para Site Hong Kong, Villa Vassilieff, Paris, Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, ISCP New York, Insert 2014, New Delhi among others. He has been a resident at Manifesta Online Residency, San Art, Vietnam, Cites des Arts, Paris, and was the ICI fellow for Senegal in 2014. His artist practice seeks layers through political materiality and art historical & theoretical failures while discussing the visual.

Clark House Initiative, established in 2010 by Zasha Colah and Sumesh Sharma is an artist union concerned with ideas of freedom. Strategies of equality have informed their work, while experiments in re-reading of histories, and concerns of representation and visibility, are ways to imagine alternative economies and freedom. Clark House Initiative intends to actively recall political and artistic figures into contemporaneity, and to question the recent rise of fascism in India based on exaggerated rumours of economic prosperity and nationalist pride



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