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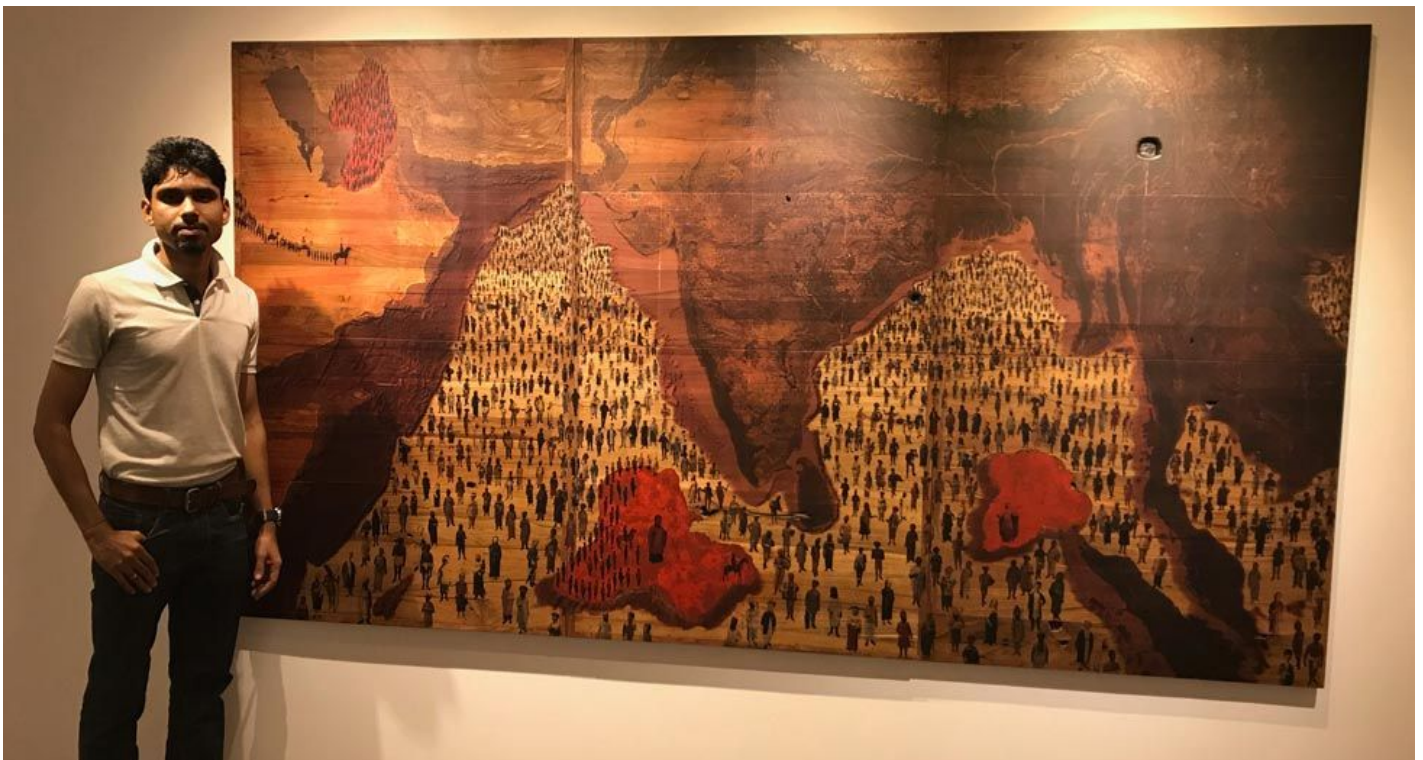


Rachna Tyagi

ART

Stained geographies

By Rachna Tyagi | November 04, 2017



Saju Kunhan with his map of South Asia in which India is depicted with numerous people from different places in different attire | Rachna Tyagi

Wood and archival images come together splendidly in Saju Kunhan's first solo exhibition, **Stained Geographies**. THE WEEK takes a look at this talented artist's work

In Mumbai's TARQ Art Gallery, Saju Kunhan's first solo exhibition, *Stained Geographies*, explores not just themes such as migration but even histories and geographies of particular lands and areas, and all of it is done through maps. Kunhan, who recently started working with maps, has called the entire series, *Map Series*. "Through maps, you can see anything, that is why I specially chose maps," he says.

Working on the *Map Series* involved going to Google Maps and taking close ups of screen shots and then stitching them all together to make them larger in size. "I take almost up to 500-600, sometimes even upto 1,000, screen shots for a work of this size," he says, pointing at a humongous work of art displayed at the gallery. "Then I make an A3 size print to work on, because if it is bigger, it can get unwieldy," says Kunhan, running his fingers over the fine lines in the wood. The lines occur when he cuts the wood into smaller panels to work on.

From the *Map Series*, four big works of Kunhan are on display, and each map has a different history, according to him. One is the world map, the second is the map of South Asia, the third is the map of Mumbai where he now lives and works, and the fourth is the map of Delhi—"the city which controls everything" in his words.



Saju Kunhan with the World map which also has borders depicting people from the time man came into being through various periods of history. It is borrowed from an Italian artiste | Rachna Tyagi

All his works are created on original teakwood, which is re-cycled, with a history dating back almost 200-300 years. The grains in the wood also interest Kunhan immensely. "If some surface doesn't have wood grains, we will draw them. I want to keep those grains and that texture in my work," he says. Pointing at deep gouges in the wood, he says "It was part of something else before... the marks are from its previous existence, I am keeping them, they were not created, it was there in the wood," he says.

What is also evident in Kunhan's work is an occasional splash of a bright colour such as red, green or yellow. "It's not purposefully done, I like those colours, it comes naturally," he says.

Kunhan's smaller works are titled *Flip Pages*. "They are my starting point," he says. Most of them are from pages of old books which Kunhan collects. But they're not reproductions, he clarifies. Here, he takes ink from print, "the natural habitat of which is paper", and transfers it onto another surface, wood, but not before working on it. "So, history is (already) there but I'm just recreating something, it's my way," says Kunhan.

His *Make In – While Burning* series captures not just iconic structures such as The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel or Mukesh Ambani's Antilla or Mumbai's Trump Towers, but also the work of traditional craftsmen, alongside. Kunhan's sharp eyes miss nothing.



Saju Kunhan with the map of Delhi which shows the numerous conquerors and rulers and how people from far and wide came to Delhi and made it their home. Delhi: A melting pot of so many cultures | Rachna Tyagi

Furthermore, his *Indelible Marks* series captures a few Indian cities that are always vulnerable to tension. Kunhan takes cities such as Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Baroda, Ayodhya and Dwarka, creates spots using maps and then depicts places such as the infamous Gulbarg society, for instance. In this series, he uses figures from museums and shows images like kids from different communities playing together, and also their lives.

So, if you want to see the tension that existed in various parts of the world depicted through a beautiful narration by Kunhan's works, in the form of conquerors, rulers and subjects, using some of the most exquisite figures taken from Salarjung museum in Hyderabad, Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai, and Goa Museum, all depicted via sepia coloured maps, or if you want to capture slices of Mumbai's life or Hyderabad or Dwarka's life, then you must drop by and see his work at TARQ Art Gallery in Mumbai. You will see why this young man has managed to impress the who's who of not just the art world but also bigwigs from the fourth estate.

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