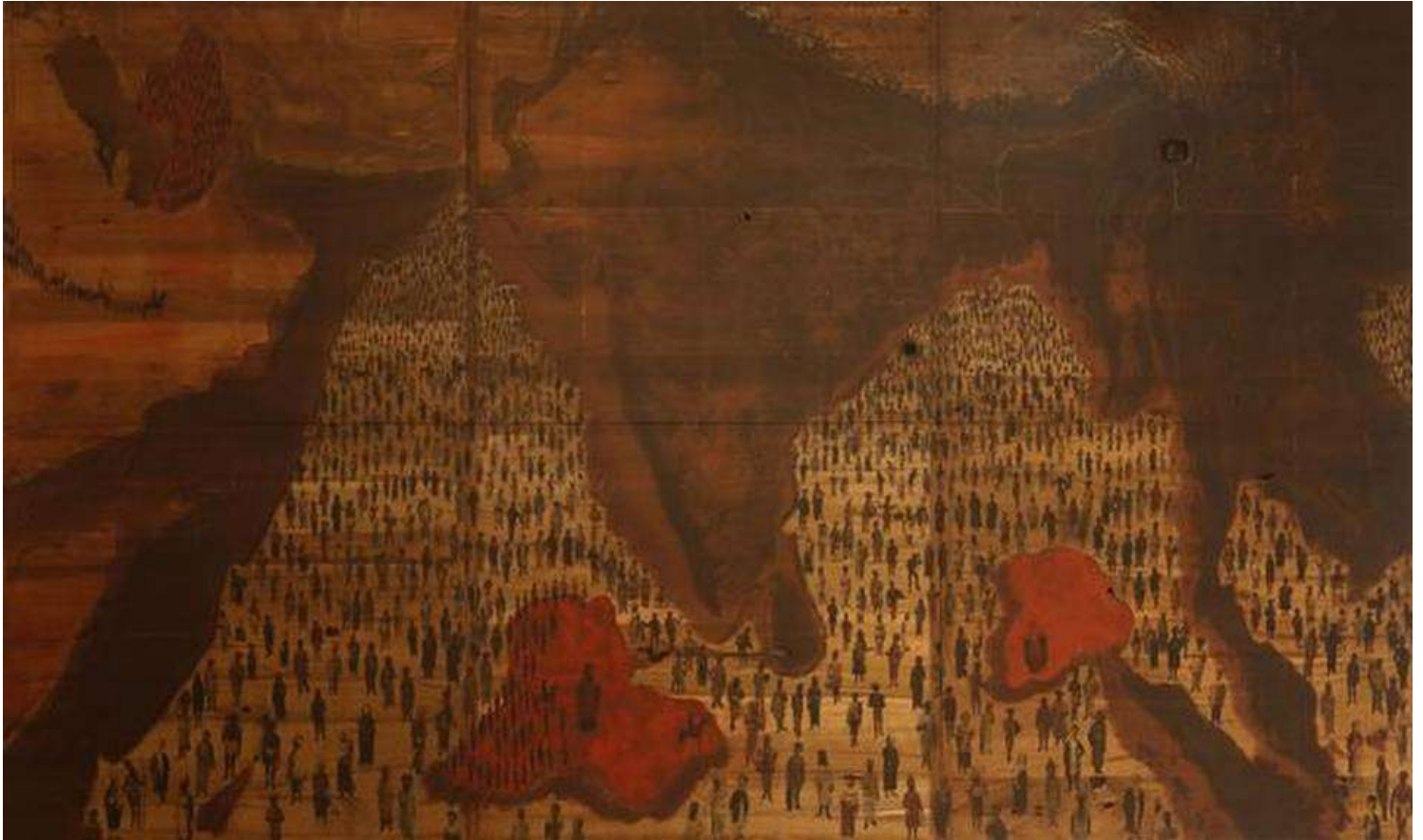


ART

Interpreting fragments of history



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NOVEMBER 20, 2017 22:00 IST

UPDATED: NOVEMBER 20, 2017 22:00 IST

Saju Kunhan uses the art of cartography to map human migratory patterns

‘Who does a city really belong to?’ This and other questions on geography and human movement through history till date form the crux of Saju Kunhan’s first solo show, *Stained Geographies*, ongoing at Tarq. The 33-year-old graduate from the J.J. School of Art contemplates the changing trends – not only in human migration and immigration – but also in the understanding and documentation of these movements, and how advances in cartography shapes modern life and journeys.

Kunhan populates *Stained Geographies* with mixed-media work on paper, as well as varying sizes of wood. Each of these speaks to Kunhan’s own history as a migrant to Mumbai – he grew up and was educated in Palakkad in central Kerala, before moving to the city to look for work. Kunhan fell into the esteemed company of senior Keralite artists – TV. Santhosh, Bose and Riyas Komu. The latter took him under his wing to work as an artist assistant in the late 2000s, when he worked with large scale wood sculptures harking back to a common Keralite heritage. Komu, Bose and the rest egged Kunhan on to complete his Masters in Fine Art (Painting) from the J.J. School of Arts.

Past present

While working for a project for the first Kochi Muziris Biennale (of which Komu is co-founder), Kunhan began to think about archiving. The project – which involved creating an archive of a Malayalam magazine – set Kunhan in the direction of his post-graduate diploma in Museology and Conservation at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), and had him considering what fragments of history left to us have to say, and how one could interpret them and the narratives they stand for as an artist.

Keeping this personal history in mind, *Stained Geographies* presents itself as a meditation on migration with a deep immediate connect. The small paper works themselves – a series titled 'Make in-While Burning' – are an outsider's perspective into a migrant-enticing city. In a nightscape splattered with distant silhouettes of a skyline (sometimes, placing within it a few familiars – the Ambani residence Antilla, or the upcoming Trump Towers) and even distant stars, smoke rises out of G-mapped patches of street. A fairly analogous series, it hits its mark without much fuss. The other three series in the exhibition speak of migration using wood. It's a surface Kunhan is familiar with, especially post the time spent at Komu's studio, surrounded by wood in varied sculptural format. Kunhan though, chooses to use wood as a canvas. Replete with damage and existing marks and a history of multiple usage, these pieces of wood come to rest, for the moment in Kunhan's works – in a series of smaller works called 'Indelible Marks' and another of large individual pieces (almost wide as large dinner tables) looking at migratory patterns over recent and ancient history.

Documenting strife

For most of these pieces, Kunhan works off of thousands of screenshots of Google Earth. Instead of sticking to old-school maps, he chooses to work off the technology that seems to be guiding almost all of us to our correct destinations lately. The use of this modern-day cartography makes the unfamiliar spaces in 'Indelible Marks' seem all at once relatable, navigable. Images of people going about their everyday life, children playing, are scattered in blank spaces on these maps. Then, creeps up the fact that each piece in the series points to a city ravaged by repeated communal violence – Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Baroda, Dwarka. Ayodhya is more obvious, as it seems Kunhan has rend it in two, seemingly forcing the work to mirror the state of mind that is 'Ayodhya'. 'Indelible Marks' draws our attention to the 'other', often considered an outsider to a historically accepted majority, that communal violence is often centred around.

Larger individual pieces track a larger history of migration. Over a 100 inches wide, each of the larger "map" pieces has Kunhan reaching into archives of the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum as well as the CSMVS in Mumbai, the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad and the Goa State Museum to find the people that populate his worlds. 'United We Stand, Divided We Rule' is about South Asia. It shows its people in the sea, and it reminds us of the once-upon-a-time South Asian maritime trade stronghold, that gave rise to a diverse culture that borrowed from all cultures who docked at their shores. It reminds us that once upon a time, technology only allowed men to sail ships as long as the winds were favourable, and often, many waited months at foreign ports before going home, and in the months they waited, they created a harmonious and fruitful exchange of cultures. The map of Mumbai ('Whose Land Is It Anyway?'), on the other hand, has a hoard incoming from the rest of India, building on its reputation as the go-to migrant destination, and of course, its importance in Kunhan's own life, as the city that embraced him and helped him make it this far. With 'Winners are not Judged' he takes on New Delhi, which controls the rest of the country, while with 'History Repeats Itself', he makes an oblique point, where migrants show increasing signs of aggression as they go from a pre-historic place to contemporary man via great civilisations like Egypt, Mesopotamia, Rome down through the Crusades to medieval conquerors to the two World Wars.

Kunhan's view on history cannot be considered fresh, nor can it be dismissed. Cartography demands engagement – even if it is to go closer and see the lines of A4 transfer sheets that Kunhan uses to move the screenshot maps onto the wood, or if it is to understand the origin of a migrant he places in the Arabian Sea just off the coast of Kerala. The title of the show, *Stained Geographies* speaks not just to the patches of violence and migration but also to Kunhan's process of

treating the wood with multiple stains of polish, cleverly mingling the transfers with the various reds of wood polish. He uses these stains to make Mumbai foggy, and the world seem like living breathing picture that is slowly turning redder. In some ways even reaching out to climate anxieties (heralded as the cause of the next great migration) in how closely it resembles heat-map colours of Earth in its present conditions. More importantly, the show speaks to more urgent conversations of borders, refugees and an unstoppable force of culture that we all need to reckon with.

Saju Kunhan will conduct a walk-through of Stained Geographies and discussion with architect Anuj Daga at Tarq, Colaba at 5 p.m, free entry but a RSVP is necessary. On till November 25.

Printable version | Nov 22, 2017 4:47:41 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/interpreting-fragments-of-history/article20601636.ece>

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