

VOLUME 21 / ISSUE 3 / QUARTER 3, 2017 / ₹200 US\$10 £6 / ISSN 0972-2947

# ART *India*

THE ART NEWS MAGAZINE OF INDIA



## CONVERSATIONS

ANITA DUBE / DEEPAK SHINDE / DESMOND LAZARO

KRISHNA REDDY / LAXMAN SHRESHTHA

NAVJOT ALTAF / SUNIL GAWDE

## Drawing on the Past

.....  
Samit Das's assemblages are mounted at the intersection  
of history and memory, suggests **Anuj Daga**.



**Samit Das**

From the series  
*Bibliography in Progress*  
 Mixed media  
 Variable size  
 2014-2017  
 Image courtesy Abner  
 Fernandes and TARQ

Samit Das's art practice requires a nuanced reading. Das juggles between the roles of a painter, sculptor and craftsman, on the one hand, and those of an archivist, historian and archaeologist, on the other. In *Bibliography In Progress* spread across Tarq and Clark House Initiative, Mumbai, from the 13<sup>th</sup> of April to the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, Das's works ask questions informed by these multilayered engagements. Curated by Sumesh Sharma, Das's show of sculpted paintings and installed pieces bring together a mélange of materials like canvas, cloth, wood, fibre, paper and metal. The resulting assemblages look fragmented and textured. Further, the constituent parts are brought together in a manner where one completes the other by means of overlapping, interlacing or juxtaposing. A unique way of seeing emerges – one that makes the viewer conscious about the 'incomplete totality' of our universe.

Often breaking neat boundaries, the frames extend themselves giving an impression of trays mounted on the wall. Such containers remind you of an archaeologist's apparatus – where she collects and sorts artefacts from a given site in order to arrange and narrativize them into a coherent, meaningful past. The act of looking into the tray is analogous to peeping through the window at the historical past as well as a personal memory.

For many of us, unpacking and packing our cabinets filled with memories may be a periodical activity. Why do we keep looking at our collections of tinker bits and bric-a-brac, taking things out and putting them away? They don't necessarily go back in the same way every time. In taking things out (to create space for new ones), we may pile them in different ways, reconsider their categories and regroup them to fit with other objects within our collection. However, we often miss the potentialities of the new juxtapositions that happen in the process outside the cabinet. Das's works emphasize the

dormant possibility of these unattended reorganizations that often scatter messily when pulled outside, but set themselves neatly within the cabinet.

Das has, in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, documented the Tagore Museum in Kolkata and explored the confluence of design, social history and architectural intervention in an exhibition titled *The Idea of Space and Rabindranath Tagore* that has been exhibited locally and internationally. The artworks in the current show possess a topography of their own – they refer to the Ajanta frescoes as well as to Buddhist viharas; they draw from abstraction as an art genre and bricolage as a strategy. They are cavernous, mysterious and dynamic. Amongst other references, embedded within their landscapes are drawings of rock-cut architectural structures or sculptures along with other relics, which were originally carved out of the hills, often to be inhabited and decorated. Entering the cave is much like diving into the dark space of a treasure chest of old memories. The co-existing duality of the part and the whole resonates with that of the actual situatedness of the Buddhist monuments which can seldom be experienced devoid of their contexts. The site is as much a part of their reading as the artefact itself.

History is often stitched, stapled and stacked – much like Das's works. The free-standing sculptures and black and white drawings transform the gallery into an archaeological site – assembling things that seem important, provoking us to think about the ones you choose to keep. What should stay back *in* the archive or *as* an archive? Stones, blocks, paintings and the spaces they occupy beckon us to be conscious of the quality of their negotiations. In a manner similar to American artist Joseph Cornell, Samit Das' works sort and reveal history that is hidden within the process of its own creation. /