

A solid touch: Samit Das on his preference for art that is tangible

Samit Das talks about the influence of Rabindranath Tagore on his work and how archaeology shapes his aesthetic.

Written by **Vandana Kalra** | Updated: September 17, 2017 11:29 am



Artist Samit Das. (Express photo by Amit Mehra)

An artwork should be touched and felt in order to be understood and experienced,” says artist Samit Das, introducing the works in his ongoing solo “Apologue and Archaeology” at Gallery Espace in Delhi. Defying convention, he chooses not to frame any of his paper works. Instead he invites visitors to run their fingers over the layered, mixed media paintings, most of which are an assemblage of works he has created in the last few decades. The base could be a sketch he completed years ago, another layer could be an enlarged photographic print from a book stapled on canvas, and, in some works,

Das has plastered the surface with sawdust and glue to give a raw and rugged impression. “I worked on each element separately and they came together over the years,” says Das, 47.

Selected for the 2017 Pernod Ricard Fellowship, he will travel to Paris in October for an exhibition which will “investigate the visual vocabulary of Indian modern art”.

Das was awarded the Pro Helvetia Research fellowship in 2016, and, in May this year, he also presented a solo in Mumbai — “Bibliography in Progress”, which explored a “personal archaeology” in his work.



Beyond labels: Untitled work by artist Samit Das. (Express photo by Amit Mehra)

It's something Das also expects from his viewers at Gallery Espace, which is hosting the ongoing solo — he has perceived the white cube as an excavation site. The gallery becomes an archeological space for the viewer to discover and experience what Das has to offer — mixed media material, sketches, sculptures and installations. “These are ideological pieces, you need to discover them the way I have. Like at an archaeological site, things need to be put together like a jigsaw puzzle,” he says. The exhibition itself is an extension of his own interest in archaeology and archives. His references, in fact, include *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* by Ananda K Coomaraswamy and *The Art of Ancient India* by Susan Huntington. “I want to create awareness about archives, bring them back to be a part of aesthetics,” says Das, walking close to a rather grainy print of a photograph from the Harappa archaeological site that he has pasted in one work; in another, we see a vessel from the period, and yet another board has the famous bronze dancing girl of Mohenjodaro.



(Express photo by Amit Mehra)

Other Indian artists might have delved into archival material before, but Das is possibly unique in his long-term engagement with the past. At his spacious studio in Charmwood village, Faridabad, art material shares cabinets with archival photographs and books, catalogues published by the Archaeological Survey of India and other material that relates to his longstanding study of Rabindranath Tagore, including his portraits and photographs of Tagore House Museum in Kolkata. There are editions of Visva Bharati News, The Visva Bharati Quarterly from 1925 onwards and pages from Roop Lekha, a seminal art journal published during the '40s and '50s by the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society.



(Express photo by Amit Mehra)

Growing up in Jamshedpur where he was born, and unlike most Bengalis of his generation, Das did not read Tagore nor was he aware of his accomplishments as a

of Tagore's free-spirited educational establishment, Santiniketan — after a year of discontentment as a student at Government Art College of Kolkata, where he “did not like the education process”. With teachers such as Somnath Hore, Jogen Chowdhury and Suhas Roy, he revelled in the inter-disciplinary environment of Santiniketan, where the studios were always open. This is where he met his wife Mithu Sen in 1991. It is also where he experimented and developed his own artistic style and ideals. Realistic paintings were gradually replaced with collages and mixed media works, with Das spending hours photographing the vast Santiniketan campus and its inhabitants.

It was art history professor R Siva Kumar, Das notes, who first pointed out that his photographs have an imagery that he could explore further. His muse was Santiniketan, its architecture that assimilated varied cultural influences, arched gateways and quarters built with local material.



(Express photo by Amit Mehra)

But the most compelling influence on Das's works remains of Santiniketan and Tagore. Das got to know Tagore through his writings as well as his interactions with Rani Chanda, wife of Anil Chanda, who was Tagore's personal secretary.

His dissertation paper 'Architecture of Santiniketan' was expanded and published as a book titled *Architecture of Santiniketan: Tagore's Concept of Space* in 2012.

“Interpretation of the artistic act is essential for understanding the Santiniketan movement. And Das is not the native informer to a visiting European curator. There is an intricate link between his practice and the archives he refers to,” says Sumesh Sharma, co-founder of the Clark House Initiative, a collaborative curatorial project.

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