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REMEMBER

AKASH KAPUR
ON AUROVILLE

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AFGHANISTAN

BACK TO THE DARK AGES

THE END OF PAX AMERICANA BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY

THE EMIRATE OF HATE BY MANVENDRA SINGH + THE TEMPTATIONS OF HISTORY



CABINET OF CURIOSITY
BY SVABHU KOHLI

Climate Change on Canvas

The colours and contours of cautionary tales

By Shaikh Ayaz

Mumbaikars grumble about their city becoming a concrete jungle. But the good folks at the Ministry of Mumbai's Magic (MMM) insist on looking beyond the worst news.

For instance, the city's incredible biodiversity. While 'Mumbai' and 'biodiversity' sounds like an oxymoron, the MMM is all praise for its rich flora and fauna that we usually overlook, especially its 59.1 sq km (as of 2018) of tropical mangrove cover that serves as a buffer zone against monsoon flooding and other natural disasters. Mumbai's 'green lungs' are also home to a living and breathing ecosystem that sustains different species of indigenous wildlife, birds, trees, coastal vegetation and fish. "It's a forgotten forest out there," claims artist Svabhva Kohli, 30, whose recent digital artwork *Cabinet of Curiosity* highlighted the different species of plant and aquatic lives found in the mangroves including leaf cutter ants, vine snakes, Bombay swamp eels, greater egrets and fiddler crabs. Kohli was one of the 92 young artists from across India who took part in Make Art for Mumbai's Mangroves, MMM's initiative launched in April to raise awareness about the need to protect these shrinking habitats. Created last year as a platform to fight climate change through art, MMM has been working with communities and artists to nurture whatever remaining nature is left in Mumbai as well as to raise an army of climate-smart citizens who can influence environmental policies and make a better and more sustainable city. "Mumbai is one city that literally needs to hold on to whatever is left of its natural ecosystems, particularly for their importance in a world rapidly impacted by the climate crisis," Kohli tells *Open*. "Thirty years ago our urban planning did not take into account the impacts in our methodology of expansion. We are witness to this

with the depleting water tables and toxic air quality in almost all our cities. Today, there's no excuse for the continued devastation of natural spaces garbed under the role of development. We have access to some of the best and most innovative design solutions in terms of how to strike a balance between development and ecology. So, why are we ignoring that science now?"

Kohli's thought-provoking art explores our political, scientific and mythical relationships with nature. Even as a child, he remembers being fascinated by the wonders of the natural world. His childhood, spent on the family farm that sat on the foothills of the Aravalli range close to Delhi, has helped shape his philosophy about nature and art. "It was amazing to live in an urban area and have your backyard touch fields, which were full of fireflies, porcupines, snakes and foxes. Herds of deer would come by at night and it was such a privilege to be a part of this harmonious landscape," he says. Now based in Goa, Kohli says about three years ago he went kayaking through a mangrove forest near his home. "Such an unreal experience. It changed my life," he remarks. After this, not only did he create the magical *Cabinet of Curiosity* series but he also became a regular visitor and keen student of mangrove forests.

Kohli, perhaps, talks like an environmentalist because he aspired to become one as a child. Now,

he's using art to narrate the stories of nature and its relationship with people. "I've had the immense privilege of having friends who come from ecological and scientific-based fields," he says, explaining why science and art can work as natural allies to combat climate change. "Today, scientists and artists have much to share, from recording biodiversity and studying landscapes to building up an archive of local insects, leaves and plants. We

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come from different worlds and different lenses but we're tied by similar interests. Their research can be aided by our storytelling and visual language. Both science and arts come from the space of observation, research and the idea of memory. We have to ensure that stories and data find spaces of collaboration between these two fields."

Art, he believes, can be a powerful way to drive climate action. "Art can ignite a sense of curiosity and wonder. For example, if I present you a dense scientific research paper on mangroves, it might not appeal to you and you might just skim through. Instead, if I give you a beautiful artwork or an interactive map and say, 'Hey guys, look at this and then let's go for a walk around the mangrove to see what we can spot,' then it becomes an exciting tool for children and adults. Age is no bar. And then you start connecting with stories, people and ecosystems at a more personal level."

Today, the best place to see art might not be a gallery or a museum. The St+art India Foundation has been focussed on making art accessible through its public projects in urban areas. So far, it has transformed neighbourhoods in Mumbai, Delhi, Panjim, Hyderabad and Chennai into art districts through experiential exhibitions, installations, murals and community living. Founded in 2014, St+art India's murals reflect issues ranging from women empowerment to celebrating the anthropological history of a city. A concern for the environment happens to be one of their constant themes. "Climate crisis is the most important conversation of the day. A lot of the artists working with us are very much interested in the environment," says Giulia Ambrogi, co-founder and curator, St+art India Foundation. One of their latest large-scale murals in Mumbai, the Worli Dairy Project saw the shabby facade of the old dairy building transformed into a canvas, with vibrant images of animals and birds leaping out at you. Created by the artist Afzan Pirzade, it was inspired by Mumbai's natural heritage. For St+art India, the Dharavi makeover has been a major success story. Another of their recent collaborations, *Chaavukara*—completed in just 17 days—in the fishing village of Kasaragod is an ode to Kerala's marine riches.

One of their most popular murals, though, remains *Breathe* in New Delhi. The location for this particular artwork was as important as its message. Painted by the graffiti artist Daku in 2016 in a container depot at the industrial Okhla area where thousands of trucks are on the move every day it was designed to draw attention to the Capital's deadly air quality. Ambrogi, 37, who was born in Rome, says her first realisation that the climate change threat has never been more dire came when she visited her hometown a few years ago. It poured unseasonably. Every subsequent trip has been the same story since. "It was a torrential monsoon, like in India. It never rains in Rome," she insists. "It's fast catching up on the planet. You can't ignore it anymore," she says. Though happy about St+art India's success, she's wary of the rhetoric about the power and reach of art.



ARTISTS ARE LEADING FROM THE TO HUMANITY'S GREATEST THREAT OF THE MISSION TO MAINSTREAM

"What I can say with pride is that street art grabs your attention and makes art democratic. Put out your message and you know that it will resonate with a broader audience. But if you are asking about impact, I think it's difficult to measure."

Heat waves, melting glaciers, thawing permafrost, hurricanes, storms, rising sea levels, the degradation of the Amazon rainforest, Australian bushfires, Uttarakhand floods, Bengaluru's burning lakes, Henan's deluge and Canada's heat dome—these are not apocalyptic scenes from a Hollywood cli-fi. The planet is warming and this is the grim reality of the Anthropocene age. While scientists and researchers are scrambling for solutions and green soldiers are busy promoting clean energy and electric cars, artists are leading from the front in their cultural response to humanity's greatest threat of the 21st century. Many have made it their mission to mainstream the climate conversation. In 2003, Olafur Eliasson, a Scandinavian artist, installed a gigantic sun at London's Tate Modern to remind us that the Earth has only one.

Closer home, artists from Bharti Kher and Gigi Scaria to Reena Saini Kallat and Prabhakar Pachpute have responded to this global emergency. "Mother Nature is more powerful than us all. When she speaks we will have no choice but to listen,"



◀ (CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT) ST+ART AT THE WORLI DAIRY BY AFZAN PIRZADE; BREATHE BY DAKU; HARVEST A LAND OF PLENTY BY RITHIKA MERCHANT; LOOKING FOR DVAIPAYANA BY ATUL BHALLA

FRONT IN THEIR CULTURAL RESPONSE 21ST CENTURY. MANY HAVE MADE IT THEIR THE CLIMATE CONVERSATION

warned Kher, in a 2018 interview with *The New York Times*. Reena Saini Kallat's *Deep Rivers Run Quiet* (2020) looked at water's complex connections with politics and culture. New Delhi-based artist Atul Bhalla has spent the last two decades working in and around the Yamuna river creating installations, performances and immersive art pieces advocating the primacy of water. "My work is a repository of meaning, myth and history," he says, adding, "I seek inspiration from water, which is such a unique element. Nothing can survive without water. Before the world came up there was a deluge, right? We are all linked to it." Though Bhalla, 57, is an artist he could well be an activist. "In India they call you an activist only if you are out on the street carrying a placard," he says, with a laugh. "I do what I do. I think you can do a lot of activism just by sketching cartoons or writing poetry. It's not always necessary to be on the picket line."

Bhalla's engagement with water began in the late 1990s. But before that, he remembers jumping into a public swimming pool as a child and becoming, as he says, "one with the element". Starting out as a painter before taking up performative photography, Bhalla has travelled to the banks of the Yamuna many times over the years as well as to the *baolis* (step-walls) and *hauzs* (water tanks) of Delhi to study the metaphysi-

cal impact of water on our lives. In one of his more famous public art works he had posed the question, "Have you ever seen the Yamuna? Have you ever touched the Yamuna?" That can't be possible because there is little access to the river today, he says. "It's hidden behind 10-foot walls. You can only see it through barricades and bridges like caged animals looking out to a water source." The artist himself dipped into the highly polluted river in one photo performance. But it wasn't always like that. "I remember in the late 1970s the Yamuna was right at the back of the Red Fort, just like the Taj Mahal. Where has the Yamuna gone? All over the world wherever there is a river in a city you have buildings facing it. Only in India we have buildings with literally their backside to the river! Except for the Tibetan colony, the entire city has turned its back on Yamuna. That's why it has become a dump yard. Because if you don't see it and you don't smell it, it doesn't exist."

The Yamuna is sacred in the Hindu mythology. Bhalla's *Looking for Dvaipayana* explored the river's Mahabharata connection. Legend has it that when the Yamuna stopped Yudhishthira from drinking her water, a game of question and answers ensued between the river and the Pandava king. Bhalla repurposed those questions in *Looking for Dvaipayana*. "You must understand why the questions should come from water. What is the lesson there? That water is all-powerful. It contains all life. *Dvaipayana* makes you relook at myths and rethink about the damage we are causing to our ecosystem," he says. Bhalla is worried about water pollution and scarcity and its impact on the future inhabitability of the planet. But he's also hopeful about the human race's inherent survival skills. "I wouldn't go with the Hollywood notion that climate change will spell the end of the world," he says with a laugh, before quickly adding, "The future is precarious. We must act now."

Like Bhalla, artist Rithika Merchant, 35, is an optimist. Currently showing in the group exhibition *Shifting Selves: Between Meaning, Mythology and Mirage* at Mumbai's Tarq gallery (until August 28th), she says, "Humanity has always managed to prevail. Even with the pandemic, in just a year we managed to make a vaccine. We are too selfish to let ourselves die out." Merchant admits that in recent years she has grown increasingly preoccupied with conspicuous consumption and its effects on the environment. Mythical creatures, parables and surreal elements inform her art. Especially, her new body of work on display at Tarq addresses water scarcity and dwindling resources using the Greek myth of Tantalus. In her painting *Tantalus* (2020) you can see the protagonist drowning but somewhere still reaching out for hope. "It looks dystopian," she says, "but at least this Tantalus has a chance to mend his ways. It's time we learn something from his cautionary tale." ■