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FRAMES OF FUTURE PAST

Text by Zaral Shah.

Visual artist Gaurav Ogale delves deeper into the stories of the six pieces that form his newest mixed media installation 'majha', created in conjunction with sound artist Farah Mulla



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FRAMES OF FUTURE PAST



Photographed by Joshua Navalkar

Taking inspiration from memories and experiences that span two decades, Gaurav Ogale's audio-visual mixed media piece *majha* portrays the world as seen by the artist from the many windows that have been his refuge over the years as he moved from city to city. Co-created with sound artist Farah Mulla, this piece was born as a response to the broader theme of the show *Shifting Selves: Between meaning, mythology and mirage*, curated by the Sarmaya Arts Foundation.

Ogale's work is often about evoking nostalgia and presenting a visual documentation of our times: "My journals have been my confidants over the years because they have travelled with me, been with me as bystanders. I have been recording conversations, recipes, spaces and people in these journals, and they unconsciously started becoming a repository of my visual memory. And because they stem from very personal anecdotes and experiences, one resonates with the tone of the stories, which evokes nostalgia."

Currently the head of visual content and design at the Sarmaya Arts Foundation, Ogale perceives museums as personal spaces that coexist with our larger histories. "As people who go to or interact with museums and their objects, we all make personal connections with them by digging into our own archives. Our reference point for any narrative is based on some already lived history...", he shares.

In a time when social media and virtual platforms have become storehouses of shared accounts and stories, the approach to showcasing art and museum exhibits is also being led by more technology-driven options as common physical spaces adapt to the restrictions of the pandemic. Weighing the pros and cons, Ogale explains, "Audiences today are consuming stories in stages, something they want to save and re-visit later; the digital medium gives one that freedom to immerse in the stories. In the post-pandemic world, as much as there has been a lot done with interactive technologies, I think we all are itching to go and touch and feel objects and

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think we all are itching to go and touch and feel objects and textures and see them in their true essence."

In an exclusive interview with *Verve*, the visual raconteur breaks down his process of curation and discusses the intimacy of creating and viewing art...

majha by Gaurav Ogale x Farah Mulla for Sarmaya



What was the thought process behind creating majha? How did you choose these specific pieces?

When Pavitra Rajaram [Brand custodian at Sarmaya] and Paul Abraham [Founder at Sarmaya] commissioned this piece to Farah and I, I wanted to retain the sensitivity and narrative of the show, which talks about identity, migration and transfer across genres. I wanted to delve into the curiosity that has stayed with me since childhood – about inheritance and ownership. So, I wrote down very specific memories, starting with my childhood at my grandparent's home in Ogalewadi and then moving cities and living out of boxes in Bombay and Poona. The windows from these spaces were always my refuge, and I would wonder what it was that I really owned as I transitioned spaces. Is it the memories one makes in the spaces or what we see from and beyond our windows that mark our invisible and fluid emotional borders?

The timeline of your video montage, which represents some of these memories and experiences, ranges over two decades from the late '90s to 2021. What made you choose the specific

elements to highlight?

I view cities, rented homes and mindscapes as being about elements that are independent of the physical space. For instance, for me, Bombay as a city is about anonymity amidst the chaos. When I think of the city, I think of people living cocooned in conches with their share of the Arabian sea. The stories I recollect from my grandfather have stayed with me not just in the form of words or sentences but also as a piece of furniture – a mirrored cupboard that travelled with our family through generations. This cupboard, to me, treasures all our conversations. These montages represent very whimsical and intimate elements that come together in a space which I am not sure I completely own.

You have collaborated with sound artist Farah Mulla for this projection. How did you select the various sounds that can be heard? Are the birdsongs, nature and surrounding sounds authentic to your experience and the settings of these visual inspirations?

It was very important for me to collaborate with an artist who could resonate with these memories through their specific lens. I have known Farah for a long time, and the advantage we had was that we knew our sensibilities and what we feel about spaces and memories at large. We had several long conversations where I described to her in great detail the sounds that have stayed with me. The audio design is purely her genius, and Farah has beautifully retained the echoes, vibrations and intensity of sounds just the way they sit in my memories. I feel that comes from the fact that she, too, reacted to the visuals through her nostalgia.

Which one of the six works was the most challenging to work on? What about this particular work stands out to you?

Overall, since this is Sarmaya's first audio-visual art acquisition and the first time I am creating something for a museum, it was fascinating and surreal in many ways. What happened in the process was that I was creating a piece from my personal archive, which was also becoming a part of a larger multi-genre physical archive.

The most challenging would be the piece *MHADA*. Because I

lived in a MHADA (Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority) building during the initial years of moving to Bombay, I have very vivid memories of the space, the people who surrounded me and the kind of conversations and sounds that echoed around. The story I have narrated here is rather on the quieter side, it's more intimate; it's about my interpretation of someone else's life, and hence I found it difficult to merge my curiosity and observation with what I have actually witnessed and seen in those homes – difficult lives within cramped up spaces. The one that stands out would definitely be *sridhar*. It takes us back to Ogalewadi in the early '90s, a little ghost village to the south of Maharashtra. These are memories from my grandfather's room, where the mirrored cupboard stood in a corner. Though there was a large window on the adjacent wall, the cupboard was my window to the world. I remember making hand gestures through the *machardani* [mosquito net] and then seeing its reflection in the cupboard mirrors. My grandfather's voice narrating stories about Claude Monet's garden and the fleeting lotuses still stay with me. In this particular piece, I find it fascinating to see the lotuses projected on the windowpanes and constantly moving in and out of the narrative.

Can you tell us a little more about the titles of each of the six visuals, and why you chose to call the entire projection majha?

Majha means "my own" in Marathi, which is my mother tongue. I often think about how loosely we use this term and re-assure ourselves about our idea of ownership. We live in rented homes but call them our own; we look at a particular part of the Arabian sea from our homes in Bombay and think of it as our own; we build spaces, claiming them to be our own – both physically and emotionally. While in constant emotional transit, do we pause and ask, do I really own this?

The first piece, *gulaab*, is about my grandfather's rose garden, which I could never see in its entirety from the window because I was a little child. And so I made my own narrative around the scent of the roses, the only thing I could feel standing near the window with raised toes.

sridhar was the name my grandfather gave me – he never addressed me as Gaurav. This piece is about the enchanting

addressed me as Gaurav. This piece is about the engineering world he constructed for me in a secluded part of the world – Ogalewadi.

c/o Bombay is about me calling Bombay my home but never really owning a home here. I also refer to the rather curtly written agreements between landlords and tenants that list down and reinforce the legal conditions of ownership.

MHADA is about the stories I have witnessed while I lived in the MHADA building.

parda breaks away from the physicality of spaces and talks about my body and gestures as a space. It is about the times when I drew the curtains and looked at the world within, finding comfort in it while playing with my little niece and making shadow characters on the curtains.

with love addresses my curiosity of “who is going to inherit my journals?” If one does, will they be able to relive those memories and read my illegible handwriting? How do we define inheritance of personal archives?

In general, what is your preferred medium to work in and how does that influence your artistic style?

My preferred medium is intuitive drawings that I make in my journals, but the film-maker in me always thinks of instances as montages, sound and frames, and I keep combining physical spaces with surreal imaginary elements. I feel comfortable working with objects from my memory, highlighting their personality and character.

Following this collaboration, would you consider adding an auditory element to your future works? What role do you think the audio plays in the experience? What could we look forward to from you in the upcoming months?

Lately, I have been experimenting with making shorter narratives because I feel it's easier to grasp as a format; it lets the viewer jump in and out of the narrative and sometimes be a part of it too.

Visuals come to me along with sound; I rarely think of

instances without sound. It's integral to my thinking as an artist and storyteller. I personally enjoy exploring ambient sounds, and even while working on this piece, Farah and I thought of a lot of sounds that make our spaces the way they are.

In the coming months, you will see some of the experiments that I have been doing with visualising my audio playlists, and of course a lot of interesting visual narratives that we have been working on at Sarmaya – telling stories of rare objects from our archive which are so relevant in popular culture and part of our living histories.

majha and Shifting Selves: Between meaning, mythology and mirage, curated by the Sarmaya Arts Foundation is on display at Tarq, Mumbai until August 28, 2021. It can be viewed online here

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