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Artist Saju Kunhan continues to paint his family histories

In the show, 'Home Ground', the artist is trying to connect our personal histories with the larger context of migration and displacement



Saju Kunhan's 'Location History-Old Puthankulam' image transfer, brass Inlay on teak wood. Copyright Saju Kunhan, 2021

Avantika Bhuyan

LAST PUBLISHED 15.02.2022 | 09:00 AM IST

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Kerala-based artist, Saju Kunhan, has always moved from the personal to the sociopolitical in his works. In his second solo, *Home Ground* at Tarq, he once again delves into family histories to talk about issues of migration and displacement. A lot of this is shaped by the oral narratives shared by various generations of his family with him. Kunhan explores these themes through his unique method of image transfers on teak wood. "Also featured in this exhibition for the first time, are the artist's works on paper. The body of work displayed in this show investigates the more personal side of Saju's practice," states gallerist Hena Kapadia. In an interview with *Lounge*, Kunhan elaborates on his style, which is often described as a speculative historical and cartographic practice:

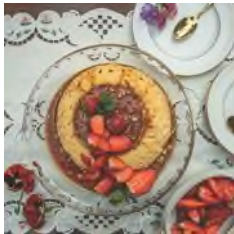
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What prompted you to delve into family histories to explore issues of migration and displacement?

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If you go deeper into familial histories, you will soon transcend the 'personal' and move to the universal. When I was a child, I heard stories of our ancestors' migration from the elders of the family. Most of those were connected with Tipu

Sultan. It is believed that we were warriors and managed to escape from north Malabar during his battle march in the region. Out of fear, we escaped to little-known forest areas of central Kerala and made settlements in those isolated areas. However, one cannot find any valid documents to confirm this story. Most of them exist as oral stories shared by generations.

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In this show, I am trying to connect our personal stories and histories with the larger context of migration and displacement. While in one work, a settlement develops in the middle of a desert, and in another work, settlements can be seen forming inside the forest. In the first one, the design of the settlement is similar to that of a 'Zaatari refugee camp', a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan. It has sprung up in the middle of a barren land, where there is limited access to the outside world and a struggle to survive. In the second one, people are expanding their territories through commercial activities, and by systematically removing portions of the forest cover.

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The materiality, in a way, becomes integral to the message. If you could talk about the use of red oxide floors, found objects, maps and maquettes, and how important the use of these materials is to you?

Actually the found objects, like the red oxide floor pieces, are from my ancestral home. I spent a significant part of my childhood there, and I have very close associations with these objects. Now that the home is destroyed, these memories and objects will not be available to the next generations. Hence my role is to archive this knowledge for the future generations.

I like to use different mediums and explore their possibilities. In my work, the objects, which are supposed to be archival objects, transform into raw materials.

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For the first time, you are showing drawings on paper as well. Could you elaborate on which ideas lend themselves to transfer on teak wood, and others as drawings?

The drawings happened by accident. These works were done during the first nationwide lockdown in 2020. I had moved from Mumbai to my village. There were hardly any materials to work with. Fortunately, I got some ink from the children at home. I also used the *midrib* of coconut leaves to draw, which also evoked memories of my childhood tryst with art.

Meanwhile with the works on teak wood, I am trying to communicate my concerns of history, migration, displacement, conquest and colonialism. Moreover, I am connecting my works to politics, power as well as environmental concerns. The events taking place today always have roots in the past. My works are all about connecting the past and present through concept and methodology.

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The process is the main aspect of my art practice. I transfer digital images on to wood. The old recycled wood carries its own history. The ink from paper is carefully transferred onto the surface. The process is time-consuming and the result is unpredictable, which always fascinates me. I call this process as displacement, because what you see is the adaptation of ink to a new condition.

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Why do you call your work a speculative historical and cartographic practice?

History has been always subjected to corrections and manipulations. This also depends on the influential force behind the history making.

I use large maps in my works, especially those of particular cities that have historical importance. While using the historical images, I subject them to a lot of corrections. After being transferred on to the wood, what you see is the reverse of the actual images with my manipulations. The historic image ends up losing its original existence.

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‘Home Ground’ exists as a collection of stories shared by generations. I connect the stories with the available written histories and make my own conclusions. So, in a way, this is my interpretation. There are historical as well as fictional elements in it. The line between fact and fiction is blurry.

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How important have institutional archives been to your work? What are the gaps that you find in the representation of histories in these archives?

I have a habit of visiting different museums and carrying out the documentation process. Whatever you see in my works is either from museums or from Google maps. I use images of museum objects, prototypes and elements from museum dioramas in my work. In museums, most of the objects are in a mummified state. I am bringing different objects and elements together, so that they can interact with each other and live on. For me this is a process of giving new life to them.

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FIRST PUBLISHED 15.02.2022 | 09:00 AM IST

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