

# AII NEWSLETTER

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AII

Art in India

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## Introductory Note

This issue of our monthly newsletter is completely dedicated to one of the most-awaited art events this year—the gallery weekend in Mumbai. The Mumbai Gallery Weekend (MGW) took place between the 10th–13th of February, with 26 galleries taking part in the four-day event and multiple artists showcasing a diverse range of works for the audiences visiting physical gallery spaces perhaps for the very first time in a long time. The fact that such an event, which had to be delayed due to covid restrictions in January, could actually take place in its entirety in a safe manner gives one hope for a gradual reopening of gallery spaces to larger audiences in the days to come and hopefully a return to what we knew as normal in the pre-pandemic days.

To start off, I put down 7 must-see shows that are still currently running and might be a good idea to go see in the days ahead. Acknowledging the current global events, in this issue I also want to spotlight the stunning solo show by Saju Kunhan at TARQ titled ‘*Homeground*’. At a time of global unrest when a large number of people in Ukraine have been forced to flee their homes for refugee shelters, ‘*Homeground*’—with its focus on themes of displacement and migration—holds particular significance. I had the lucky chance to interview Saju Kunhan, where the artist patiently spoke to me about the show and all that went behind putting it together. For anyone keen on going to see ‘*Homeground*’ at TARQ, this interview offers a complete breakdown of the artist’s inspiration behind the artworks and his experiments with themes of migration and displacement.

Here’s hoping you enjoy reading this issue as much as I enjoyed working on it in this month!

—Ankita Ghosh

## 7 SHOWS TO SEE FROM THE MUMBAI GALLERY WEEKEND

### 1. Homeground by Saju Kunhan at TARQ

Connecting the familial oral histories of the past with the present situations of migration and displacement, Saju Kunhan works with a variety of different materials to bring to the fore extensive pieces of art that captivate the viewer and call for attention to preserving and valuing the everyday objects at home. Wooden panels, with ink work across these, helps create an image of what it's like to interrogate one's ancestral histories and connect to the far-off places that we originate from. According to the artist, this show traces the evidences of migration in his family and continues his experiments with geographic locations, maps and conquest, and colonialism. Homeground is open for viewing at TARQ till the 26th of March.



Homeground by Saju Kunhan. Image Courtesy: TARQ.

### 2. Portraits of Intimacy by Sathi Guin at Akara Art

Like the name suggests, this is Sathi Guin's manner of opening up to the viewers by resorting to textures and patterns in her artworks. With fine brushstrokes, colorful palettes and abstract landscapes, the artist comes up with a body of work that urges participation from the viewers in decoding the body of work presented

in this solo exhibition. Guin leaves her paintings open to interpretation by the viewers, who are free to find narratives within the abstract works of art. Through the artworks, there is a certain discovery of time in the manner that the “intellectual and bodily self” interact to bring to the fore landscapes of “clouds, forests, waves and dunes”. Currently open for viewing, catch this solo show by Sathi Guin before the 26th of March!



Portraits of Intimacy by Sathi Guin. Image Courtesy: Akara Art.

### 3. Savage Flowers by Smriti Dixit at Art Musings

Savage Flowers--a solo exhibition by Smriti Dixit and curated by Nancy Adajania —is the artist’s adventures with found everyday objects such as plastic tags and fabric strings, which have been recycled and upcycled to create site-specific installations that captivate the audience with their size and form. Dixit blurs the lines between what we consider organic vs. what we have come to know as industrial, presenting for the audiences works that make one consider the struggle for survival for different species on a fragile planet like ours.

Interestingly, here’s how the curator sees the works beautifully brought to life by the artist: “Even as they consolidate into archetypal and biomorphic forms that remind us of mandalas, screens, yonis or cocoons, these sculptures are an



extension of the artist's body, its stresses and strains, dreams and disquiets channeled through moments of stillness, growth, and even overgrowth."



Savage Flowers by Smriti Dixit. Image Courtesy: Art Musings.

#### 4. Trinity by Hetain Patel at Chatterjee and Lal

Trinity is a visual experience in a film by Hetain Patel, which combines dance, martial arts, and sign language collaborators to weave together a narrative that is also supported by a brilliant score throughout the film. Trinity is the final part that completes Patel's ambitious trilogy which deals with explorations of languages—both spoken and that of the body. With a runtime of 23 mins, this film explores the representation of the British Indian experience on screen, emphasizing the female voice, intergenerational conflict, and the truth that our bodies hold beyond language, foregrounding a strong sense of hope. Available for viewing till the 3rd of March, Trinity currently is screened from 11 am at the gallery every 30 mins till 7pm in the evenings.





Trinity by Hetain Patel. Image Courtesy: Chatterjee & Lal.

5. **The Mud and The Rainbow at Jhaveri Contemporary**

A solo exhibition by Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, *The Mud and the Rainbow* captivates the viewers from the very first glance. 14 ceramic sculptures are presented in the show and they channelize the energy of warrior gods, guardians, fertility goddesses and protectors. Each of these figures emerged from initial drawings, and capture the complexity of images, feelings, movements, people, and places, to create something that would capture the essence of being present in a complex, technological moment in time. One feels almost unsettled on seeing the sculptures at first, because of the diverse details on each of the figures put out by Nithiyendran, who presents a show in South Asia for the very first time. Each of the sculptures draw from the multi-varieted synthesis of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian iconographies that the artist inherited from his Sri Lankan ancestry. With multiple rounds of research and a lot of thought and emotion, Nithiyendran presents a polychromatic body of work that is worthy of seeing. Visit Jhaveri Contemporary to view *The Mud and The Rainbow* before the 26th of March.



6. Cosmos by Desmond Lazaro at Chemould Prescott Road





landscapes that were born from a nostalgia of the times gone by. In the words of the artist, the river and the ecosystem around it inspired and influenced her to a great degree and it translates across her paintings beautifully. “Where do we come from” is live at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke till the 26th of March.

## **'*Homeground*' in the words of the artist himself: An interview with Saju Kunhan**

*'Homeground'*—with its wooden panels and intricately detailed canvases—makes the audience think about the present times and the connections that exist with our past. Kunhan's works made me think about the stories of migration tied to my family and so many others affected by the partition of India during independence. But above all, it brought my attention to environmental concerns that are all too real at the present moment we live in. Here's what the artist had to say about the exhibition and the manner in which he approaches his work. But first, a little introduction to Saju Kunhan...

### **Saju Kunhan**



Saju Kunhan. Image Courtesy: TARQ.

Saju Kunhan is based in Mumbai and works on themes related to concerns of history, migration, displacement, conquest, and colonialism. Aiming to build connections between the past and the present, the artist brings out his thoughts both in the concepts he works with and the methodologies he employs in his practice. Equipped with an MFA in painting from the Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai and a diploma in Museology and Conservation from CSMVS Museum, Kunhan's first solo show titled '*Stained Geographies*' was exhibited at TARQ, Mumbai. Apart from this, the artist has participated in several group shows held across the length and breadth of the country, and quite recently was part of the *Lokame Tharavadu* group show in Alappuzha, Kerala, curated by Bose Krishnamachari in 2021.

### **Inspiration behind '*Homeground*'**

I think the solo show actually evolved from my experiences in 2020 when the first lockdown happened. I had moved back to my hometown from Mumbai and over there I found a lot of time to just roam around. And it was during this time that I found a lot of objects at home as well which are very much connected with me because I spent a significant part of my childhood in that house. These objects were also somehow connected with the daily life of my family who inhabited this space over many generations. That's how the entire process started—I began with small drawings with whatever I could find at hand. And I also spent time talking to the elders in the house who had so many stories about the house and the family and through that shared knowledge and shared imagination came about my work that you see in this show.

When I was a child, I remember speaking with the elders in the family, who would always tell me these stories of our migration. These were mostly stories of where we came from and how we moved from the region of North Kerala to our current location and these were also connected to the battles that took place in the north Malabar region. But there were no traceable evidence behind these. I was keen to understand and trace some evidence for these stories. I began my own enquiries to understand how I could connect the existing stories with the available history. So that's how I was connecting the oral stories with the available recent histories of our location, of Kerala and how the migrations happened in a particular period. And I made my own conclusions during this time, understanding the links between the facts and fiction and these were mingled together. So then when I came back to Mumbai, I wanted to push these themes and the migration histories of our own into a larger context. So that's how the show slowly developed in a way.



## Situating the global in the local

Through our personal stories, especially stories of migration, when you move closer and closer to your personal stories then at some point it will manifest into a global context. In *'Homeground'*, there are two big works—*Settlements 1 and 2*—which are mostly connected to our stories and our people's migrations, but I also connect these to a larger context of the recent refugee crises across the globe. There's one work where you can see the design is like a Zatari refugee camp in Jordan but all of the figures and elements you see here are connected to how we were and how we have evolved.

In our stories, they say that we moved from north Kerala to the isolated forest areas of central Kerala. So those ideas and stories I am connecting to a larger context in *Settlement 2*, where there is a settlement happening in the middle of a forest which mostly looks like the Amazon forest, but there are different contexts one can read into these. It's also connected to the issues of illegal migrations and the illegal settlements which are always on the news.

There are also 7 small pieces—which I call *Chronicles*—connecting our stories to different incidents that have shaped my ancestors. It's connected with the colonial period and the experiences from that time. One of my great grandfather's brother was an Indian laborer in Fiji and I am just trying to understand the experiences of this person from India who went to Fiji. All of these incidents are somehow represented in the works I present, like when the Second World War was happening and Japan had almost captured the Malaysian islands, luckily this person had already moved away from to Burma. So there are these connected stories, which I am then trying to connect to a historic context.

There's also another series of works, which are just collected objects from the ancestral house. These are mostly red oxide floor pieces which were introduced in the southern states in the 60s or 70s. But when I was a child, I felt very connected to these pieces. I had spent so much time on these and when I visited these spaces, the floor pieces were still there and I was just trying to dig into the part histories through these pieces. I am trying to say something via these pieces—there are narrations, which are connected with the existence of our people in different time periods and the lives they lived through these times.

## It's all about the globe





*It's all about the globe* by Saju Kunhan. Image Courtesy: TARQ

The globe is an extension of my early works. I was always doing a lot of maps of particular regions, and I had done a lot of world maps in my last solo show. But everything till now was in a 2D space. I was wondering how to break out of the 2D maps and wanted to experiment with a transferring process in a 3D space. When working with maps, I usually take large printouts, A3 sizes and then I transfer these on surfaces. But all of it was in 2D till *The Globe*, which was an experimentation for me. I wondered how I could transfer the maps in a different surface and it was very challenging, because I had to largely work with a round surface.

With this piece of work, I'm trying to build connections with the global scenario. If you watch closely, you'll see that the lower portion has a tyre that I have attached, and most of these areas have a burnt texture. If you observe closely, you'll see that the area around the Antarctic Circle are completely burnt and it's moving upwards. I've tried to connect this piece of work to the issues of global warming and climate change.

## **A breakdown of his working style**

So I generally work by just transferring images. What I do is I take a lot of printouts of maps, which I source from Google searches. So if I wanted a big map, then what I do is I

take really small screenshots and then I stitch all of these together to make a big map. In a 9ft. X 5 ft. work, there are about 600-800 screenshots I need to take to create a bigger map. And then I take a printout of this map and I transfer these on the surface.

In the current show, what's special is that whatever you see have been sourced from museums. While the floor pieces are found objects, everything you see on the wooden panels are from different museum objects. Even the trees or animals or figures that you see, are from different museum dioramas. The process I usually undertake is that I go to museums, take photographs and I edit these images. Then I resize these images and print everything onto paper, after which the process is just transferring of these images.

I like to think of the prints as just ink on paper and I work by transferring the ink from paper to a new surface of wood. I paste these on the wooden surface and then slowly remove the fibre content of the paper from the surface. I call this process displacement, because in a way it's as if the ink is being displaced from its natural habitat of the paper to a completely new surface. And whatever one sees is the adaptation of the ink into the new surface. This is deeply connected to my conceptual idea because I mostly deal with the larger context of migration and displacement. My process also holds on to the ideas that I like to work with.

There's also a feeling of semi-transparency on the wooden surface and what's visible is the texture of the woodwork along with the ink. It allows one to see the entire surface and get a feel of the terrain which is mostly a feeling of the texture of the wood. The detailing does take some time, because there are several layers to each work, so if you wanted to create a forest or a crowd, you have to paste multiple images on a daily basis. There's also a lot of research involved in the process and most of it is unpredictable because one doesn't know how the transfer process will work. But there's also a curiosity in the process, and in wondering how each work will turn up.

*'Homeground' is currently live at TARQ Mumbai and on the virtual viewing room at the gallery's [website](#).*

That's all for this issue. If there are any suggestions or feedback you'd like to send our way, please feel free to get in touch with us at [artinindia@gmail.com](mailto:artinindia@gmail.com)!

