

Mumbai art show curated by Anish Gawande questions how we perceive history, memory

Premium

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[Nascimento Pinto](#) | nascimento.pinto@mid-day.com

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Exploring his love for Agha Shahid Ali's work, Gawande — director of the Dara Shikoh Fellowship — curates 'Event, Memory, Metaphor' at TARQ Art Gallery, with the aim of exploring how archiving frames our past, and how it can shape the future. The festival starts July 14



Veettukarodathe #5, 2021, Engrave and image transfer on found red oxide floor piece.

Photo Courtesy: Saju Kunhan and TARQ Art Gallery

For Anish Gawande, Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali is more than just an inspiration; he is a companion who has accompanied him across [countries](#) and contexts. Gawande's fascination with the poet led him to start the Dara Shikoh Fellowship in the last decade.

Gawande is taking his love for Ali's work a step further by curating 'Event, Memory, Metaphor' at Mumbai's TARQ Art Gallery, inspired by Ali's poem 'Farewell'. The exhibition is a part of Art Night Thursday and starts on July 14.

It will showcase artworks by Areez Katki, Garima Gupta, Muzzumil Ruheel, Parag Tandel, Philippe Calia, Saju Kunhan, Sameer Kulavoor and Saubiya Chasmawala, who are all a part of the gallery's archives.

Mid-Day Online spoke to Gawande to understand his vision for the show.

Here are the edited excerpts:

What was it about Agha Shahid Ali's poem 'Farewell' that inspired you to curate this show?

Shahid's poem is inspired by the intricate intertwining of memory and history. Staged as a letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit, the poem asks probing questions about how, if at all, reconciliation is possible after years of mistrust and polarisation. "Your history keeps getting in my way of my memory," writes Shahid. Should we turn to the past to heal the wounds of the present? Or do we need to reimagine new futures by turning to history as a site of fragmentation, of confusion, a space that does not provide easy answers. For me, these are the questions Shahid raises in his poetry — and, in their own way, the artists in 'Event, Memory, Metaphor' seek to answer them.

Is Agha Shahid Ali among your favourite poets? What aspect of his work do you think makes him relevant today?

I think I've treated Shahid as a friend, a companion who has accompanied me across countries and contexts. Even though he passed away far before I ever read him, he's been an indelible presence in my work for the better part of the past decade. My own work starting the Dara Shikoh Fellowship, cultivating a relationship with Kashmir, has been driven by Shahid's poetry. At a time when we are witnessing the spectacular, insidious rise of polarisation, with hatred becoming the common currency for creating divides between

communities, Shahid's poetry provides a mirror for us to understand the monsters we have become. He does not provide easy answers but pushes his reader to think beyond simple binaries, to interrogate the structures fuelling these divides. That's also what the show aspires to do.

What attracted you about these eight artists?

For me, the critical framework that brings these works together is Shahid Amin's book, 'Event, Memory, Metaphor'. That's also where the exhibition draws its title from. Amin uses oral histories of Chauri Chaura to piece apart the fragility of official narratives, of the foundational stories we tell ourselves in building imagined communities. He offers the framework of a recalcitrant event: a moment within the archive that refuses these narratives, that fragments such a uniform understanding. This show is fundamentally an archival intervention that takes Amin's provocation to turn to TARQ's own archives.

Have these works been displayed before?

The works on display in the show have all been displayed before, in very different contexts. Here, they come together to make you ask: why do we turn to the past? In what ways do we see the archive as a space for recovering power, for understanding ourselves better? And what are the dangers of such an archival turn?

Which of these eight artists' works do you relate to the most?

That's a difficult question. I've always loved Muzzumil Ruheel and Saubiya Chasmawala's works, so I'm delighted to be able to exhibit them. But the greatest find has been Areez Katki. I absolutely adore his work because he weaves together, literally and metaphorically, narratives from the past as a form of a reconfiguration of memory, history, and sexuality. Mumbai, [queerness](#) and nostalgia all come together in a heady mixture that really speaks to me.

What role do you think archives play in our lives, especially given the transformation from the physical to digital?

There's a flawed assumption that the lives we lead today, the memories we create and put out into the world today, are permanent and imperishable. The digital world, offers us a false reassurance of permanence. We marvel at how little we know of civilisations gone by, like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. We look at fragments of pottery with a mix of awe and condescension; we see them as relics from a different era. But how can we understand the fragility of the traces we are currently leaving behind? What happens if, tomorrow, social media is shut down? Vast amounts of digital debris disappears every day, without a whisper. Hundreds of years from now, will much more be known of the lives we led despite our frantic obsession with archiving, keeping records or despite our primal desire to maintain a footprint?



Anish Gawande takes inspiration from Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali's work 'Farewell' for this exhibition. Photo Courtesy: TARQ Art Gallery

How important do you think art that explores the past through a different perspective is — especially for subjects such as colonisation, personal history and sexuality — which the show delves into?

I maintain an ambiguous relationship with the power of the past to hold answers for the future or, indeed, the present. Some of the artists in the show, like Garima Gupta, turn to the colonial archive as a site of reclaiming agency. Others, like Saju Kunhan, see personal archives as a site for recovering personal histories.

This turn to the past must be accompanied by a critical interrogation of the very process of archiving. In the show, Philippe Calia turns to satellite imagery of rare mineral deposits which power the physical infrastructure that allows the digital world to come alive. Archiving remains a colonial form, an extractive process — even in its invisibilised contemporary form. Can a form so deeply imbricated in exploitative methods ever hold the possibility of redemption, of emancipation? Like with Shahid's poem, there are no easy answers.

Every artist's work touches upon a different subject with the central theme as memory. What is your perception of memory, and did it change after going through these artworks?

Memory is powerful and capacious. Understanding memory, engaging with it, is crucial to reimagine history. I am increasingly uncomfortable with the truth claims of history, of the archive. Of the possibility of a single, linear narrative. That's why I turn to memory, not as oppositional to history but as integral to the construction of history.

Unlike history, memory embraces contradictions and is comfortable with fragmentation, confusion and rupture. I'm drawn to Parag Tandel's work, which intersperses memory with history to create fantastical sculptures that see the past as a site of vivid imagination rather than stale fact-finding. He comes from a Koli background and responds to the increasing precarity of the continued existence of the Koli community in [Mumbai](#) as a result of forced migration, climate change, and infrapolitics.

Even in the face of these challenges, however, he doesn't feel the need to establish a uniform picture of what Koli identity is. Preserving history, providing a home to memory, does not require the creation of monolithic understandings of the past. Today, in the face

a time when history is being rewritten, we need to resist the urge to replace narrative with another. We need to rupture the past, blow up the idea of History H, and embrace multiple histories. That's what the show has taught me.

**l fabric, hitherto known for its plurality and tolerance, seems to
ed thin. How do you see art shaping public opinion in the future?**

abled by the belief that archiving our present is the most important task of reflected in the archival turn in contemporary art. The works in the show it unease: Sameer Kulavoor's JCB, paired with his Potato Wedges, for rs the futility of pulling out our phone cameras to record every new form of / new atrocity. Has documenting acts of oppression prevented them from take place? We keep saying, sab yaad rakha jaayega, but what is the point of na? The instances we record today will become the archives of the future. rise of justice can those archives hold? Critical theorist Anjali Arondekar's hival hermeneutics explores how the ways in which we ask questions of the tally shapes the answers we can receive. The archive is a colonial :he turn to the archive is an extractive process. Can it be reclaimed? Maybe. of the most powerful methods for its reclamation. But not without an ; of its history, of its politics.

At: TARQ Art Gallery, Colaba

When: July 14 to September 24

