

Pivot, preserve, or die?



Saju Kunhan's 'Veettukarodathe', (2021). COURTESY SAJU KUNHAN AND TARQ

"My memory keeps getting in the way of your history," writes Agha Shahid Ali in his poem, *Farewell*, which is the inspiration for an exhibition, *Event, Memory, Metaphor*, of work by eight artists about the idea of preservation and erasure. Is it best to just let some memories, histories, practices and ideas die? Should we rewrite them; should we hold on to them, refusing to be changed by time? Whether it is our review of this exhibition at the TARQ gallery, our takedown of the new Netflix version of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Nisha Susan's column on the easy labels we have for women, or our cover story on private ownership of elephants, these are the questions that run through the articles in this issue.

Our critique of *Persuasion*, for instance, is categorical that certain storylines should not be meddled with, while a review of another exhibition on colonial art that tells the story of Tipu Sultan makes one think about who decides the plot and how that influences the way it is recounted and retold. For our cover story, we meet the people who own elephants, wild animals protected by law but not shielded from everyday cruelty while in captivity. Elephant ownership is a contentious and complex issue in India. Ownership and use of these large mammals ties into tradition and culture, and, at the same time, fuels an illegal trade while subjecting them to a life of physical and psychological stress.

Juggling competing points of view—though perhaps not views such as these—within one story is familiar to director Joe Russo, who, along with his brother Anthony, has made some of Hollywood's biggest action films, such as *Avengers*, and successful shows like *Arrested Development*. Their latest, *The Gray Man*, which also stars Dhanush, released this week. Russo tells *Lounge* about bringing together different characters and ideas, his love for pop culture, and making movies that he and his brother love.

Each story in this issue provides different perspectives, and ideas for possible answers, to questions about memory, history and continuity.

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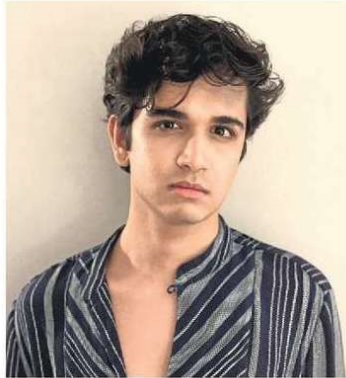
'Farewell'—and the idea of the archive

A new show takes inspiration from Agha Shahid Ali's poem to explore the clash of memory and history

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Agha Shahid Ali's poems on memory, loss and belonging have been viewed through both a personal and political lens over the past couple of years. His writings from *The Country Without A Post Office* and *The Beloved Witness* have been cited with greater urgency since the effective abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir and the subsequent internet shutdowns in the valley. Now one of his poems, *Farewell*, has inspired an art exhibition at TARQ, Mumbai.

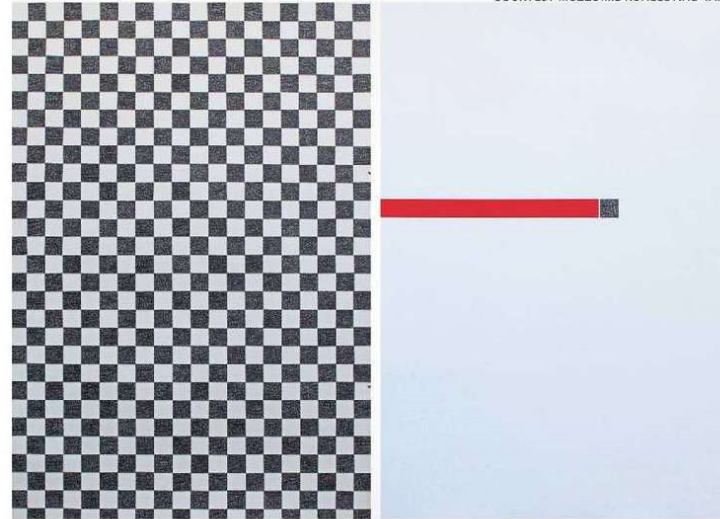
Titled *Event, Memory, Metaphor*, the show has been curated by Anish Gawande, the director of the Dara Shikoh Fellowship in India who focuses on the "global creative dialogue around Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh", and curator of Pink List India, an "archive" of politicians supporting LGBTQ+ rights. To him, *Farewell* remains one of Shahid Ali's most incredible poems. "His refrain in the poem is that your history gets in the way of my memory. It's incredible the way he builds this contested relationship," says Gawande. And it is this relationship that the show explores through the work of eight artists, including Areez Katki, Garima Gupta, Parag Tandel, Saju Kunhan and Sameer



Kulavoor.

The poem, and the works chosen from TARQ's archive in response to it, explore whether we can turn to the past to heal the wounds of the present. At a time when the turn to history is so politicised and contested—with names of roads being changed, history in textbooks being modified—Shahid Ali's work perhaps becomes all the more important. "What could the response to this erasure of history be? If history books are being changed, do we argue that they should be changed again to what they were originally? Or do we offer another explanation? One that says that we can't see history as a site of fact or of exactitude? We have to see it as a site of fragmentation and rupture, only then can possibilities emerge," says Gawande.

The idea of the archive acquires immense importance in the show—not in the context of art history, where it means a definitive repository of objects and material, but in a more fluid form. The



(clockwise, from left) Curator Anish Gawande; Muzzumil Ruheel's 'to be exact' (2018); and Parag Tandel's 'Into The Bones—2019' (2019).

works by Saju Kunhan and Areez Katki look at the archive as a space for memories. The former pieces together personal histories based on the narratives shared by generations of Kunhan's family. He uses engravings on remnants of red-oxide flooring from his ancestral home in Palakkad, Kerala, as a medium to share these histories.

Katki takes a different route—he uses embroidery and archival objects from his family home to explore migrant identity and sexuality.

Artists like Kulavoor view the archive as a witness. *JCB*, a work now on display,

was made in 2019, before bulldozer politics entered everyday conversation. "Sameer's work shows a bulldozer with people taking photos of a demolition, inspired by *JCB ki khudai* memes. It takes on a far more sinister tone today. To me, *JCB* interrogates the desire to record instances of violence. The work makes you question the impetus to bear witness, and also the futility of bearing witness," says Gawande.

Muzzumil Ruheel, who meticulously renders Urdu calligraphy in his work, reconfigures the very idea of the archive itself. "The artist's wider practice is about investigating the perceptions of events based on their documented narratives," states the curatorial note. Ruheel twists, mirrors and isolates alphabets from collected personal and marginalised accounts, pointing to the fundamental ways in which stories are documented.

Gawande's work has always examined the contested terrains of language, sexuality and history in South Asia and Francophone West Africa. "I am not an art historian but an intellectual historian and I work primarily within the field of comparative literature," he explains. "The show brings together the work I have been doing on the politics of memory, which is so integral to the politics of identity today, and puts it in conversation with art practices that reconfigure, reimagine and rework our relationship with the past." He highlights the impermanence of his-



COURTESY PARAG TANDEL AND TARQ

tory, and, hence, the impermanence of the archive—what we believe to be true might be erased tomorrow. So does that falsify the archive and all it holds? Does it then become a combination of fact and fiction? The title of the show holds the key to the answers. "The inspiration for *Event, Memory, Metaphor* came from Shahid Amin's book by the same name. He specifically traced the history of Chauri Chaura and showed how the official narrative built around it conflicted with many local narratives. The archive, then, is not a site for a uniform single story but of multiple, often contradictory, accounts of the past," says Gawande.

Gupta's work holds immense importance in this context. Her lightboxes look at the archive as a space for restitution of agency. In her work, she has constructed a catalogue of mineral samples taken from the Western Ghats by colonial powers which are now in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University, US. These were removed from their history—all one could see was their pH value and chemical composition. "Her lightboxes are fascinating," says Gawande. "When the lights are off, all you can see are mineral samples. But when illuminated, you can view the sectional history of labour, excavation and violence on the biodiversity of the Western Ghats through mining, and the colonial history behind the discovery and extraction of minerals. This is just another way of breaking open that narrative."

Event, Memory, Metaphor can be viewed at TARQ Mumbai till 24 September, 11am-6.30pm (Tuesday-Saturday).