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## *Art*

Touching upon the diverse realms of the universe of art, this section brings to life expressions that span the spectrum of creation and innovation. In conversation with India-based, German architect Niels Schoenfelder we discuss the country's evolving design philosophies, and discover the legacy of Raja Ravi Varma's art being carried forward through his Great Granddaughter Princess Rukmini Varma and her son Jaygopal Varma.



Words by  
Jackie Pinto

## THE UNLIKELY HISTORIAN

*Using actual pieces of family history to connect to a larger narrative, Saju Kunhan is archiving stories of war and displacement.*

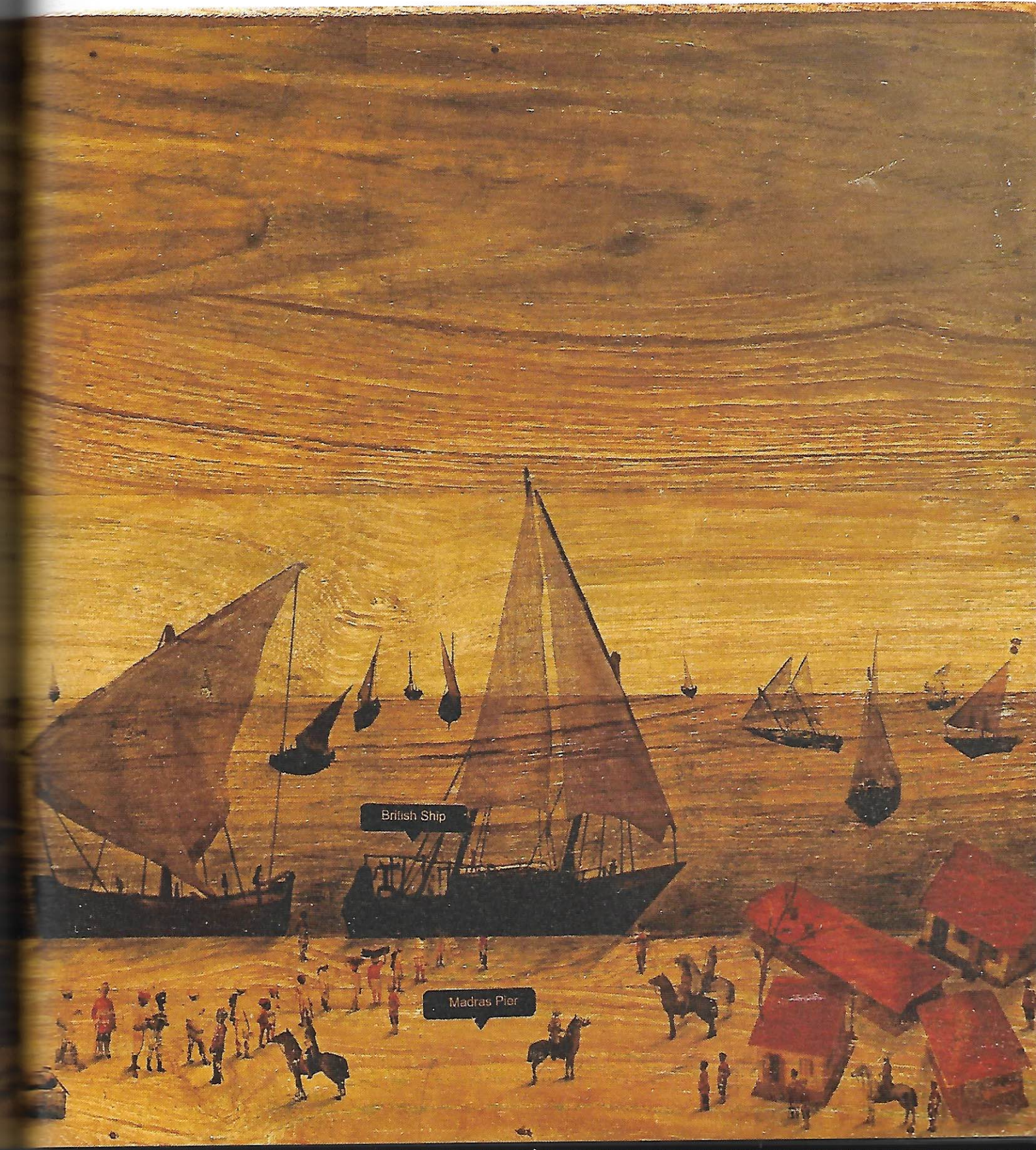
Art was never really an option as a full-fledged profession for Saju Kunhan, a contemporary artist now exhibiting at TARQ Gallery in Mumbai. With a Bachelor's degree from the Government College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in painting from the Sir JJ School of Art in Mumbai, Kunhan draws inspiration from his ancestral past. Growing up in Kerala, in a traditional rural home with red oxide floors and clay tiled roofs, he used to avidly listen to stories of his family's history, their displacement and relocation as narrated by various elders. He heard of various uncles who migrated as labour in search of work and a new way of life to distant lands from Fiji to Malaysia to Burma. These stories left an indelible impression on him and years later found a strong reflection in his art.

Kunhan was rarely exposed to art in the traditional sense - visiting exhibitions or museums was never a thing for a kid growing up in rural Kerala. *"Most of my relatives work in agriculture or as daily labourers so I had no real connection with art in that sense. But while I was in school, one of my art teachers discovered my interest in the subject and started giving me special attention and training after school hours."* While the mentoring really helped him hone his artistic skills, Kunhan didn't consider a career in art at that point, choosing to expand his horizons to Mumbai in order to work in the field of design.

*"I met other artists from Kerala there and they encouraged me to become a professional artist. Themes of migration, colonialism, wars and resettlement always fascinated me. I began to work on wood, using it as a canvas, and then I began to see merit in other mediums. I also like to use and experiment with different archival objects and explore their potential, while transforming them into raw materials. When I was a child, I heard stories of our ancestors' migration from the elders of the family. Most of those were connected with the Tipu Sultan marches and wars - in fact I heard how they escaped from north Malabar during his battle march in the region and resettled in the forests of central Kerala. There are no valid documents to confirm this story, just oral narratives shared through generations. Through my art I try to connect our personal stories and histories with the larger narrative of migration and displacement."*







British Ship

Madras Pier







Moving visually from bleak desert settlements, to rich forests that are slowly being denuded into wastelands, Saju's work is relevant across geographies and races even though it takes deep personal root in Kerala. It's about the juxtaposition of survival of the race at any cost - be it colonialism, migration or even rapacious greed. By adding fiction to word of mouth narratives he cleverly blurs the lines in his work as well as his vision. Of the many mixed media pieces of art he has produced, one series that holds a special place in his heart is that of the red oxide floor pieces that are actually from his ancestral home.

*"I spent a major part of my childhood there, and I have very close associations with these pieces that I actually salvaged from the house that no longer exists. Through my art I hope to ensure that these memories are preserved and archived for future generations."*

In this exhibition, aptly titled Home Ground, Kunhan explored and presented his theme of migration, displacement and deforestation in a compelling series of works. Using his unique method of image transfers on teak wood, he describes how he takes screenshots of zoomed images, roughly using over a thousand screenshots per piece, taking printouts and shifting the details carefully onto the prepared wooden panels. The deep earthy tones, the minute details, the soft impressions and the moodiness of the series leave a lasting impression on the viewer.

By archiving and then inviting the viewer to share in a part of his personal family history, Kunhan encourages dialogues that span diverse cultures, time frames and mediums. From his carefully antiquated wooden frames embellished with cartography to his salvaged red oxide flooring transformed into frozen memories, he actually invites both a sharing and a letting go of the mundane and the unusual.