



THE NEW
INDIAN EXPRESS



Root mapping

Artist Saju Kunhan narrates the saga of displacement and migration through his installations at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale



Published: 22nd December 2022 07:31 AM | Last Updated: 22nd December 2022 07:31 AM

Print | A+ A A-



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Express News Service

KOCHI: Life's pulls and pushes may take us to various places. However, the strings to what we call 'the roots' remain attached, no matter how far we drift away. This sense of belonging – the roots – lies at the core of Mumbai-based artist Saju Kunhan's installations displayed at Pepper House in Fort Kochi as part of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

Saju's work brings to life his village in Palakkad. The main installation includes images of his ancestral home and an aerial Google Maps view of the village printed on teakwood. Another one has earthen bricks on which the images of his ancestors have been printed.

"The entire place holds a lot of stories," says Saju, an alumnus of the Government College of Fine Arts in Thrissur. "Everything used in the installations has been sourced from the place where my ancestral home was." Saju adds there is an underlying saga of displacement and migration, too.

"There are a lot of stories surrounding my family, shared by several generations via oral narratives," he says. "My family was originally from the Malabar region. According to my forefathers, we were forced to flee and settle in central Kerala following the invasion by Tipu Sultan."



Saju narrates these stories through images on teak wood. "These works took nearly two-and-a-half months to complete," says the young artist, who is associated with TARQ gallery in Mumbai. "The works titled 'Bangalavukunnu-Thukuparambu Road', 'Back to the Soil' and 'Exile from Soil' have been made using digital images that have been painstakingly transferred onto the wooden panels."

The teakwood used, too, has a special connection. "These panels have been made of recycled wood sourced from my ancestral property. They have a history of their own," Saju adds. "The process is time-consuming, and the result is unpredictable. This unpredictability fascinates me." Saju explains he "connects the stories" told to him with "available history", and then arrives at his conclusions.

"In effect, my works are my interpretations of the stories and events," he says. "There are historical as well as fictional elements." On his brick installation, Saju says it is a "homage to those who had lived on the land". The bricks, he adds, were made using the soil and hay of the land.

"These bricks are very strong. I can vouch for that; I tested their strength. Even when thrown from heights, they won't crack," says Saju, who did his masters in painting at the Sir JJ School of Art in Mumbai.

Saju did his first solo exhibition, Stained Geographies, at TARQ, Mumbai in 2017.

His second solo show at TARQ, Home Ground, was in 2022. He has been a part of several group exhibitions, including Lokame Tharavadu (Alappuzha, 2021), which was curated by Bose Krishnamachari.