

CULTURE & LIVING

Mumbai Urban Art Festival at Sassoon Dock is preoccupied with the water-based transformations humans have wrought

Your last chance to catch the Mumbai Urban Art Festival, which explores the different facets of the sea and its water flowing through Mumbai's homes

BY RIDDHI DASTIDAR

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Pranav Gohil

Sassoon Dock is spilling over with cats. It's obvious why as you walk from Colaba towards the fishing harbour. Infusing all things at the Mumbai Urban Art Festival 2023 from the long queues of people and snacks at *bhelpuriwalas* to the coffee pop-up on the roof of a warehouse is the unadulterated smell of fish. Ice, sweat, fish, scales, sea, scum, sales, money, plastic, salt, debris.

ADVERTISING

This year, the focus of the festival, anchored by St+Art India and supported by Asian Paints, is on site-specific interrogations. Art for all = free entry and the directness of much of the artwork means that a layperson with an interest will leave thinking about their own city, household objects, maybe the view from their office and the couples at Bandra fort differently.

In the age of internet-overwhelm, where everything is terrible everywhere all at once, a sense of malaise is an inevitable response. An obvious antidote to this directionlessness is rootedness. Mumbai Urban Art Festival, especially the extension at Sassoon Dock, achieves this magnificently by exploring different facets of the sea and its water flowing through Mumbai's homes. A common thread running through the murals, paintings and installations at Sassoon Dock is the hybridity resulting from the interaction of man meets sea. There are so many outcomes here: capitalism, plastic, choropleth maps, commerce, mutant undersea creatures glowing in darkness, pigeons tangled in tyres and metal beginning to breathe and spread in their stead.



Warehouse 1 is covered in a sprawling mural by the Vayeda Brothers bringing their ancestral Warli art into contemporary urban settings. Later this month, their work will also adorn the India Art Fair edifice in Delhi. You have anemones, manta rays, seahorses and corals amid underwater foliage, schools of fish and swirling waves that lead into a portrait by Malaysian [artist](#) Andha Ras, of a fisherwoman: open-faced and somehow both serene and active.

Standouts



Serge Attukwei Clottey

Inside, Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey's bright yellow installation, "Sea Never Dries", rises and falls like a canopy or a wave to greet you, dwarfing the space. It's composed of squares of yellow gallon cans, originally used to supply [cooking oil](#) from the West to Ghana, repurposed into water containers by households—now cut and stitched together by the artist and his community as part of his project *Afrogallonism*, exploring water scarcity and the informal systems of trade and reuse in the country.



Meera Devidayal

Meera Devidayal's AV installation is a triptych of screens: the sea bookending an office-building structure with window panes reflecting the sea against a soundtrack of waves. Her installation searches for the sea in office buildings at Nariman whose glass facades reflect waves, despite the absence of the sea in the vicinity. Instead, we see gathering pigeons, men on cigarette breaks in crisp white office shirts, water-cooler conversations, conference tables, a corkboard with pinned paper notices, and the men cleaning the glass windows outside. The backs of air conditioners in a row, pumping out their hot air in contrast with the rolling waves of the sea, on which Devidayal superimposes an outline of the buildings, or two sea-facing apartment buildings between whom you see crashing waves. As a child, Devidayal had a vision of the island city sinking. "... the taps in each household bursting in sympathy with the revolt," she writes. What an image. It's mesmerising.



Parag Tandel

Also hypnotic, are auto-ethnographer Parag Tandel's sea-creature sculptures, glowing a dull red and amber in a dark room. Tandel is from Mumbai's Koli community—fisherfolk traditionally rooted in proximity to the ocean for their livelihood. His installation, "Vitamin Sea", casts the transience of the seascapes in resin—mysterious gelatinous-looking blobs reminiscent of amoeba or jellies within which you see the debris of the city the waves have pulled in. How do we adulterate the sea?

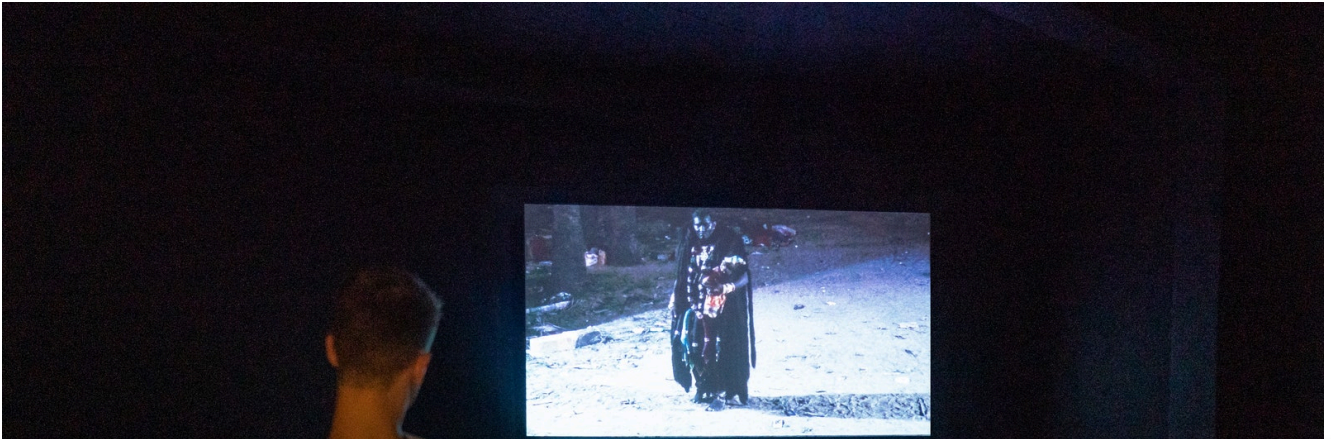


Sakshi Gupta



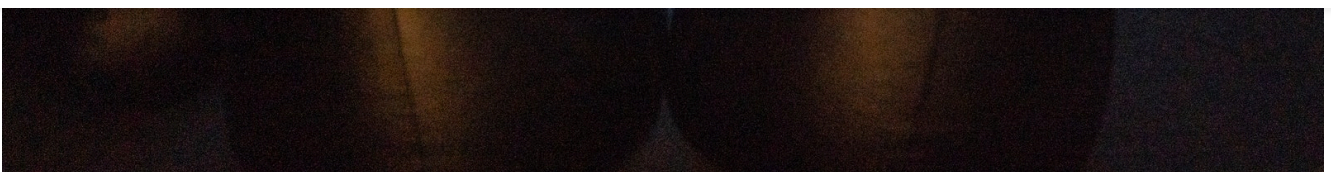
Sakshi Gupta

Sakshi Gupta creates one of the most striking installations I've encountered in a long time: a breathing mass of metal scrap, glass beads and motor that seems alive. Creaky metal joints that seem to exhale with effort, literally clinking—the pollution or interference Tandel and Devidayal meditate on is made tangible here.



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Sohrab Hura

This flows into the next room showing Sohrab Hura's single-channel video loop of "The Coast". Filmed in a seaside village in

South India at a Kali festival, the video captures trance-like religious activities highlighting bare skin, flesh and movement set to a repetitive, insistent, hypnotic stereo sound.



Sameer Kulavoor

Sameer Kulavoor's painstaking miniature reproduction of the city in collaboration with Sandeep Meher continues his ongoing interrogation of the metropolis. The work, "Metromorphosis", looks at the evolution of the urban centre, the miniature buildings stacked on top of colourful yellow, green and orange storage crates. This mini-city towering above you draws your eye: the railings of balconies, the craft that goes into designing shutters, balcony railings, staircases, window grills, and air conditioners begs the question—when was the last time you really looked at them? You do here.



Sajid Wajid Shaikh

Nearby, in front of poet Shripad Sinnakaar's beautifully lit poem "Begumpura", a girl in a tank top poses saucily for the best angle of the photograph. Earlier, I had seen her (among a crowd) taking selfies at the Sajid Wajid Shaikh installation of pipes and water titled "Pipes and Leaks". The installation forces water to flow against gravity and asks the viewer to consider the work necessary to "dominate nature", forcing rivers to flow against their natural course towards consumers. The workers responsible for Mumbai's integral infrastructure (pipes, concrete buildings, etc.) themselves have no legal water connection, and "Pipes and Leaks" asks us to interrogate what it means to have a right to water. This, of course, in India, is inescapably a question of caste.



Shripad Sinnakaar

The selfie epidemic is an apt demonstration of consumption without pause. Or maybe I'm being judgemental, I tell my friend. I, too, was drawn into my love for visual art having wandered randomly into an art fair one day on the invitation of a sculptor-friend. Maybe a selfie could be a gateway drug to poetry if the person pauses to consider the weight of the lines behind them.

Here are Sinnakaar's:

*How many generations
does it take for a dream to come true?
Long hair oiled, combed,
braid tucked tight to a ribbon
as if to secure into something.
Not some future
but a sense of moving
someplace
where sun is not overdue,
hands don't reap
what hands didn't sow,
& water doesn't ask what
the caste of our thirst is.*

*

All this while, we have been interacting with representations of the sea and its creatures. At the final stop on the roof, the walls fall away, and suddenly, somewhat unprepared, you're surrounded by the Mumbai skyline. I came up blinking into the setting sun turning the sky a pink-blue. There were glittering buildings in the distance, and below us on the shore, a mela of bobbing boats, colourful, anchored for now that are used each morning to bring in the day's catch of crabs, pomfret and shrimp.



Pranav Gohil

There is one final installation here by cinematographer Pranav Gohil, **सुन**: an enormous, empty black drum, labelled Sintex, the kind you'd find on every other building holding water. It lies on its side, top open. If you push your entire torso through this opening, you would find yourself suspended inside. And you listen. It's meant to capture the contrasts between water shortage and floods in the city. And something else: that infamous spirit of Mumbai.

Afterwards, I tell my friend that it felt like existing without boundaries. In the dark, it feels like the boundaries of your body that contain you, as different from the rest of the *stuff—*air, the concrete you stand on, the sea lapping at the dock—have dissolved. It's what stoners mean when they talk about a trip where it has been revealed to them that the world is connected. I understood with every cell how exactly I was connected to the voices of fishermen on the dock in the early morning, the silence and lapping water at night.

Mumbai Urban Art Festival at Sassoon Dock is on view until February 22.

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