

CULTURE & LIVING

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale helped me navigate the grief of losing my father

“At the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, nobody was asking me if I was doing okay, nobody offered platitudes”

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How different every word sounds now that the word “father” flickers like a moth in a jar. How do I begin to put into sentences our last conversation? I can start with the bed that grew too big. How you slipped into an endless nightmare. How it began with a pair of feet that peeked from under the curtains which soon transformed into strange figures lurking over the almirah and in the folds of the rolled-up rug. Should I include the suspicious-looking yellow van, invisible to us, that made a recurring appearance? How amma and I took turns to tease you in an attempt to snap you out of this fever dream. When that failed, on one of my visits home, I made up a security guard and stationed him outside your room. How that was our last exchange.

I stand in front of Vasudevan Akkitham’s *An almanac of a lost year*, a lockdown diary comprising 365 paintings arranged on a single long wall at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. It has been a month since my father’s death and I am a museum of regrets.



Vasudevan Akkitham’s *An almanac of a lost year*



Vasudevan Akkitham's *An almanac of a lost year*

Akkitham is well versed in the theatre of the mind. Walls and windows are a recurring backdrop here from where delirium takes flight. Often, he speaks the same language as my father. One that originates from being confined to a room. Is this maybe the purpose of art—to magnify our shared human experience, to help us understand ourselves and others a little better?

Despite it being a weekday, Aspinwall House is packed to the gills. The crowd is hustling like a school of fish, floating from one exhibit to the other. Quietly, so that we can hear the slow breathing of the sea behind us and savour the salt between words. Friends, lovers, loners, an entire family congregate around Devi Seetharam's exploration of patriarchy in public places. On an afternoon so muggy and merciless, what is it that brings us all here?



Saju Kunhan, Old Puthankulam

Saju Kunhan, who lives and works out of Mumbai but yearns for Puthankulam, a village in Palakkad, would have never imagined that a picture of his ancestral home would remind me of one I have never known. That it would bring back many dinner table conversations. My father, who had a knack for remembering the departed, often told me stories of an ancestral home just like this one, complete with a cat who wouldn't move from the spot in the yard where my grandmother was laid to rest.

In *Back to the Soil*, Kunhan serves the stories of his ancestors with a discourse on displacement and environmental degradation. He gathered bricks, tiles and mud from the ruins of his ancestral home and laid out the portraits of his ancestors on them. His second exhibit, a triptych of photographs on reclaimed wood, commemorates the escape of his ancestors from North Malabar, his family shrine and a home which no longer exists.

The essence of Kunhan's art and the process of grieving have one thing in common: the fear of forgetting people and spaces. I pick the most maternal of the faces from the brick portraits and attach them to my grandmother who died before I was born and had never been photographed. I try hard to remember the name of her cat. Did my father never mention it? I'm sure I would have asked.



The Hotel by Tenzing Dakpa



The Hotel by Tenzing Dakpa

Every artwork is a door to somebody's home and an invitation into your own lived experiences. Through his photo series, *The Hotel*, Tenzing Dakpa explores the complexities of our relationship with family and home and what it means to return to a place fundamental to the formation of one's identity; the ghost of childhood. "One's sense of self is inseparable from the spaces we create."

We meet the family cat on a flight of stairs. A parent is on the sofa, in the middle of a conversation. Elsewhere, someone is shaking the dust from the entry mat. The images are recorded in monochrome, ever so gently, with an understanding that these scenes may not hold up under the weight of colours.

I'm drawn to the photograph of the pillows. The pillows are naked, the cases perhaps drying in the sun outdoors. They appear blurry, caught mid-action; as if they have secret lives of their own. Dakpa's tender tribute to everydayness turns on a switch inside me. If I try carefully, I can just remember what it is like to live inside the perfect nucleus of my family. I can see my father sitting down with his newspaper.



One of the most commonly shared photographs from a visit to any art exhibition is the reflection of one's face on the glass of a framed artwork. This, perhaps, is no coincidence. We rarely allow ourselves time in our everyday life to confront what stirs us. There is a hurry to move on. Searching for our face in an artwork's glass facade and documenting it is a way of embracing the

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voyage as experienced by labourers. For me, watching the video essay felt like being pulled underwater, where, just last week, my father's ashes accompanied marigolds on a last journey. Does this alter the relationship between the artist and the viewer? Would it annoy Dia to know that I have added undercurrents of grief to her hard work? Personal to the political?

The sun marches along the streets of Fort Kochi. When I climb up the wonky stairs, Tishani Doshi's poem spools through my mind. Something about the freedom of making peace with what we don't know, what we don't understand. Yes, art, but also loss.

With a deep reverence for the city's past, Madiha Aijaz also evokes a different kind of loss as she documents the changing

landscape of Karachi and the erasure of its history. She captures the intimacy of public spaces, especially public libraries and the people who keep them alive. “Ghalib was destitute, and so is his library.” The librarians give the video essay a witty temper, an urgency that is somehow not at odds with its otherwise dreamy pace. Someone makes a case for the dependency on English in prime-time Pakistani shows and offers words that to me sound ephemeral, like they could only be names of flowers. *Waqba* for break. *Nazreen* for viewer. Aijaz’s melancholy, her yearning for language becomes mine while her bio leaves me in the throes of irony, as I realise that she passed away in 2019 at the age of 38.



Madiha Aijaz

When you lose someone, there are no right words. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells me the same: “You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping for language,” through *Notes on Grief*, the slim volume I carry with me across the venues. I find it easier to have conversations with strangers who do not offer me condolences or advice, like George Lawrence, the security guard at the Anand Warehouse. A comforting figure, complete with a full smile and generous nods. He is quick to point me in the direction of Amar Kanwar’s video installation in the warehouse when I ask if he has a favourite. The wooden house reminded him of his run-down home back in his hometown Aroor, in the Alappuzha district. He told me about his wife who passed away some years ago, his two daughters who are settled and away, and added he was as lonely as Kanwar’s protagonist.

This is a moment when the phrase ‘art questions the I that We are’ makes complete sense. Seemingly, the protagonist in ‘Such a morning’ is nothing like Lawrence. He is a mathematician who retreats to a derelict train carriage and explores, amongst other things, what it means to see in the dark. He identifies 49 types of darkness. In his dreams, there is a wooden house where a woman sits with a rifle impervious to the men deconstructing her home.



Amar Kanwar

Shubigi Rao, curator of the fifth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale titled *In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire*, touches upon the relationship between loneliness and collective in her curatorial note. “Even the most solitary of journeys is not one of isolation, but drinks deeply from that common wellspring of collective knowledge and ideas. Even when we work alone, we amplify the voices of others, and this form of sociability is why when we create, we are collective.”

While the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Mumbai Urban Art Festival and other community art festivals strive to democratise art, is it maybe also the right time to explore new ways of engaging with art; a personal lens that is beyond the prescribed civic and political.



Madiha Aljaz

If literature has taught me anything about grieving, it is that people who make peace with loss often have an ongoing relationship with the departed. So when I find myself with a sketch pen in one hand and a postcard in the other at the Chennai Photo Biennale, British Council and Communities of Choice's little social experiment, I could see my sadness, the vastness of it. I remembered reading about the wind phone, a yellow telephone booth in [Japan](#), where visitors can hold one-way conversations with the deceased. The wind phone has received over 30,000 visitors. But where does one begin speaking to those who are no longer among us?

The experience of increasing discomfort, according to Jeanette Winterson, is "one of the essential obstacles to overcome before we begin to appreciate art". At Durbar Hall Art Gallery, also a Biennale venue, where 34 of the finest contemporary artists come together for a group exhibition called *Idam*, art uplifts me till I descend the stairs to the very last exhibit where a young Nishad Ummer has documented one man's tryst with cancer. "What gave him relief from his soreness were poems and songs recitation of the Quran and the Oorali collective's adaptation of the Kadammanitta Chakkala poem." There are over a hundred photographs.

In the weeks after *achan's* (father in Malayalam) death, we realised we barely had any recent pictures of him. Why do we stop capturing our loved ones as they age, fall sick and remind us of the impermanence of life?

There is a temple festival outside the Durbar Hall Gallery. I sit under the banyan tree where the ants walk over me, treating me like a non-living thing. The nearest Uber is seven minutes away. While I wait, Google Photos serves up a memory from three years ago; a picture of me and my sister. I can see my father in the backdrop. His mouth curled mid-sentence, a cutting chai in hand. As we arranged our smiles for the selfie, what is it he called out for?

Here at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, nobody asked me if I was doing okay. Nobody offered platitudes. I did not have to hear another "time-will-heal" condolence. Neither the creators nor curators could never have guessed the shape-shifting and heavy-lifting these spaces would be required to do. I do worry if it is appropriate to have approached the exhibition from a place of grief, but this is the People's Biennale, and people come in different shapes and sizes. They wear their moods like the weather.

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