



REVIEWS MUMBAI

Parag Tandel

TARQ

By Mario D'Souza



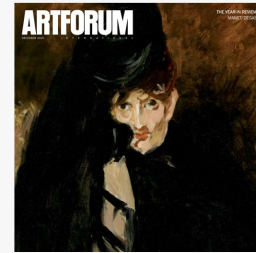
View of "Parag Tandel: Archipelagic Archivist," 2023. Photo: Shivani Goel.

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The megapolis of Mumbai was once an archipelago of seven scattered islands inhabited by the Indigenous Koli community. Primarily engaged in fishing, the Koli had developed a unique understanding of this coastal ecosystem and served as its custodians for centuries. The arrival of the Portuguese, and then the British, inaugurated a decades-long land reclamation project that was intended to connect the islands and serve as the site for a major seaport and economic hub. The title of Koli artist Parag Tandel's exhibition, "Archipelagic Archivist," emerges from his research into this history, which survives mostly in stories, songs, and recipes. He also responds to the constant and violent urbanization of the city since then, and to the more recent development of large-scale coastal infrastructure projects.

The gallery floor was occupied by *Arrival of Port Wine 3, 4, and 5*, all 2023, an armada of caravels fashioned from the hollowed-out barks of jambool trees—which are culturally significant to the Koli community—and decked out with delicate sails made of steel and threads. Reproductions of Portuguese coins line the insides of the ships, symbolizing the colonial promise of prosperity, as well as imperial loot. Amid this fleet, a sculpture of a Portuguese man-of-war rises on slender metal tentacles. The teal-blue marine hydrozoan with a fluorescent pink lip is abundant across the Indian Ocean. Known for its unbearable stench and poisonous tentacles that

Édouard Manet, *Berthe Morisot in Mourning* (detail), 1874, oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 18 7/8".

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paralyze its prey, the creature here functions as a metaphor for the exploits of its colonizer namesake.



Two bodies of work use the bones of the *kotya* fish that had been collected by the artist's mother. Yellowish in color and known to grow four feet in length, the *kotya* is a staple of Koli kitchens. Works from "Into the Bones: Blue Series," 2023, hung from the ceiling of the gallery. In these suspended sculptures, Tandel turns the bones into a fish/boat hybrid: He replicates the bones in fiber-reinforced polymer, a material that has replaced the wood traditionally used in boat making, adding bronze rudders and propellers to the fish skeletons' tails. On one of the sculptures, he has painted an invocation to the goddess Gofa Devi, similar to the short prayers in the local language, Marathi, that local fishermen paint on their boats for protection. The practice originates in the Indigenous faith, but over the years has assimilated influences from Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism.

The other series using *kotya* bones, "Into the Bones," 2019, derives from Tandel's time in the district of Bastar on India's Chota Nagpur plateau, a region where Indigenous peoples have long struggled to protect their sacred lands from state and mining interests. There, Tandel worked with the Dokhra community, who practice a thousands-of-years-old lost-wax casting technique. Tandel used this technique to cast the *kotya* bones, using ribbed lines on the outer surface of the fish bones to represent the mining sites of Bastar. On parts of the sculpture, he leaves the clay mold intact, thus hybridizing the histories of two Indigenous cultures, both of whom struggle to resist erasure and protect their lands.

At the far end of the gallery stood sculptures from the "Talisman for Coastal Futures" series, all 2023, placed atop cylindrical pedestals. On a steel armature, perhaps a representation of the ongoing infrastructure developments that threaten marine life, Tandel weaves colorful threads to depict motifs reflecting Koli life. Sea creatures, shells, offerings of fruits and vegetables, and abstract representations of wind, waves, and the sea triumphantly fill the structure. Tandel's talismans kindle hope for a future in which we survive because of and with our living ecosystems—through balance and restraint. They identify the resilience of our natural world and inherited knowledge as the key to our survival on this fast-deteriorating planet.

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