

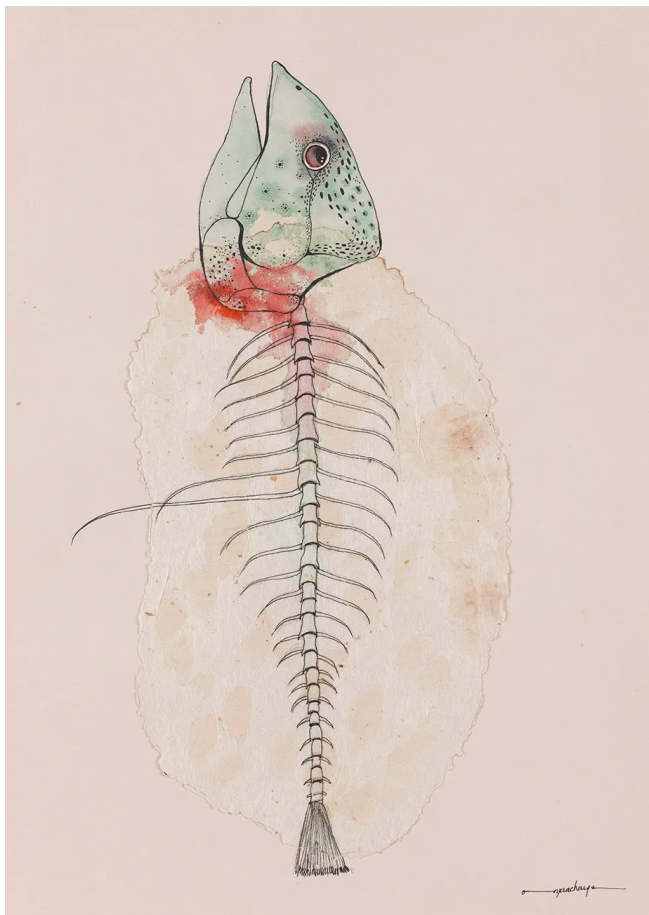
CULTURE &amp; LIVING

## Is this the most important Indian art exhibit of the season?

*Shifting Selves*, an art exhibit by Sarmaya Arts Foundation in collaboration with TARQ Art Gallery, and featuring artists like Saju Kunhan, Saubiya Chasmawala and Rithika Merchant, is having an unflinching conversation about identity and belonging

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Our bodies are visual maps. The lines, the scars, the folds are markers of experiences, of lived histories, of transitions and trajectories. It is through these histories that our identities develop, mould, alter and shape-shift. Taking a cue from this is *Shifting Selves: Between Meaning, Mythology And Mirage*, a show by Sarmaya Arts Foundation in collaboration with [TARQ](#) Art Gallery, which weaves together threads of identity and politics, migration and belonging, and our inherent ability to reconstitute ourselves when there is a shift in our circumstances. In focus are three contemporary [artists](#), Saju Kunhan, Saubiya Chasmawala and Rithika Merchant, each of whom have different approaches to the theme.

### Mapped out



Saju Kunhan's 'Cloud Over The Landscape' (2019), Image transfer, Soft pastel, Acrylic and Varnish on Wood, 6 panels  
©Sarmaya Arts Foundation

Kerala-born, Mumbai-based Saju Kunhan's practice, for instance, is rooted in maps—navigation devices associated with direction, movement and journey. They have directly, or indirectly, influenced the way we understand ourselves. With their complex geographical arrangements and vivid shorelines, maps brim with stories of the past and the present. Kunhan investigates their significance in a modern-day context by taking screenshots of Google Maps. [Pavitra Rajaram](#), the exhibition director and Sarmaya's brand custodian, explains, "Saju uses these to tell stories of migration and displacement, while looking at human relationship to land and geography."

Google Maps offer an elaborate and detailed aerial view—the whole picture of a specific region. Kunhan stitches the screenshots and manually transfers them onto salvaged wooden panels through a tedious, almost ritualistic process. For the show, on display will be 'Clouds Over A Landscape', a 9ft x 5ft board marked by a maze-like map of Delhi. With its spidery network of roads and alleyways, Delhi is a city with a chequered past. Over centuries, it has aged and transformed. "There is an emotional attachment to the city," says Kunhan. "Its mansions and cityscapes are the backdrops for every visual one has received from childhood, but now I feel apprehensive towards it. I'm concerned about the current political climate in this historic city."

To reflect this apprehension, there is the ominous presence of a dark cloud that wraps itself like a shroud over certain parts of Delhi, including Parliament House and Rashtrapati Bhavan. "You will also see a pink Yamuna, which is connected to my visual experience of the polluted streams of Mumbai near the industrial areas. So, my interest in history, politics and environment manifest very well in this work," he says.

Kunhan's modern-day rendition of Delhi is juxtaposed with an eight-part panorama of 19th-century Delhi. "It was shot by the Italian [photographer](#) Felice Beato in the 1800s, where he set up the camera, took the eight photographs and then stitched them together," says Rajaram. "We are also exhibiting loose folios from a very important album called *The People Of India*, published in the early 20th century, which was commissioned by Lord Canning to document native Indian people. All these works come together in the show for a way for us to reflect on how much our identity has changed and evolved over the years."

### A new language



'Untitled #11' (Batin), 2019 by Saubiya Chasmawala, Ink on paper, © Sarmaya Arts Foundation

While cities play a part in shaping who we are, so does our intimate relationship with the vernacular. Language offers a sense of belonging, but it can also be a burden. What happens when words come undone or become unfamiliar? Letters become mere patterns, even gibberish. Saubiya Chasmawala culls characters from Arabic script, and through measured reiteration, layers them on paper until they become opaque, obscure and lose their essence. There is an undeniable chaos in the brushstrokes—fine wisps, to thick and full streaks—that dance in abandonment. “By stripping down the letters to their bare form, Chasmawala removes the weight of meaning from a language that she can recite, but is unable to engage with on her own terms,” explains TARQ’s director, Hena Kapadia. “Saubiya's work fits beautifully into *Shifting Selves* in the sense of how we are continually negotiating with society by questioning, re-authoring and redefining norms.”

On display alongside Chasmawala’s monochromatic calligraphic creations will be coins from the Mughal Empire, a treasured part of Sarmaya’s collection. Coins as rare and precious as the ones issued by Nur Jahan, the only Mughal empress to ever issue coinage in her name. Others carry a striking feature: the Kalima. When Aurangzeb ascended the throne in the 17th century, he had the calligraphic Kalima (an invocation of Allah) on the coins removed. Although an erasure of a Mughal tradition, Aurangzeb believed that the coins would be defiled if they fell into the hands of kafirs. It was only generations later that his great-grandson, Alamgir II reintroduced the intricate inscriptions. “By contrasting Saubiya's work with these coins, we want to show how calligraphy, through the ages, has acquired different meanings based on the context. How, over centuries, it has acquired meaning and lost meaning,” explains Rajaram.

### Imagined reality



Rithika Merchant's 'Harvest' and 'A Land Of Plenty' (2020), mixed-media collage with gouache, ink and magazine cut-outs on paper © Sarmaya Arts Foundation

While Kunhan and Chasmawala's works rely on lived histories, Rithika Merchant's artworks, with their spirit-lifting watercolours and mythical hybrid creatures, delve in the otherworldly. However, if you look closely, her art eerily appears to be a journal of our times. 'Harvest' and 'A Land Of Plenty' together serve as a lens to comment on how humans are devouring the planet's resources. The latter artwork's title is an idiom that gestures at the hopeful existence of a utopian land where everything that one needs to thrive, is already in abundance. Merchant imagines a future where this is possible, only if we are judicious and restrained. "I wanted to make a vision of conscious use, where everyone comes together to take and use the resources we have in a thoughtful way," she says.

'Gates Of Horn And Ivory', however, is a warning sign. One of the figures on the left side of the painting, sits in an oar-less boat. The boat is almost at the precipice of a waterfall. "Right now, we stand at the crossroads between two very distinct futures," says Merchant. "In this moment, we inhabit both spaces and our actions will propel us one way or another. We need to have the clarity to discern what is true and act accordingly. The boatman symbolises our predicament, where we are about to go over the precipice of doom and we have already lost our oars. It may seem as though we are past the point of no return, but if we are ingenious enough and we try as hard as we can, we might be able to save ourselves."

In addition to Merchant's pieces, there will be the Odisha Pattachitra and Gond paintings that explore the crucial reciprocal alliance between humans and the environment. These will be exhibited alongside works by artists [Dhruvi Acharya](#), Shakuntala Kulkarni and Anju Acharya. Overall, *Shifting Selves* is a complex show that makes us consider multiple realities, and reflect on issues we often overlook or take for granted.

*Shifting Selves: Between Meaning, Mythology And Mirage is scheduled for August 11-28, at TARQ Art Gallery, Mumbai, India*

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