

A ground report from India's biggest art show in Kochi

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December 21, 2014

Hindustan Times

Ten feet above the ground, a man perched on a metal stand is trying to unfurl a large sheet of plastic over giant speakers. It is day one of the Kochi-Muziris biennale, and it has begun to rain. As the man teeters forward, clinging to the metal with one hand and reaching for the plastic with the other, attention veers from the musicians performing on stage to him. He stretches dangerously and a gasp goes up from the crowd. Seemingly oblivious, he gets his grip, steadies himself and tugs, and the sheets of plastic roll over the speakers. His success even elicits a smattering of applause.

The spectacle was a fitting metaphor for a festival that has been all hands-on - from the preparation of the venues to the installation of the art works and even the funding, donated largely by the art community.

"In other biennales, the show is ready by the time an artist gets there; here we have all helped each other to make this happen," says Manish Nai, whose own 400-kg work had to be manually moved into position through a narrow doorway. "It has established a great bond in the art community."

That bond was visible when the rain began to fall at the inauguration on December 12. The audience didn't disperse; they simply covered their heads or took shelter under the trees and continued to cheer the organisers.

A CROWD-PULLER

Dressed in lungis, saris, kaftans and shorts, speaking French, German, Dutch, English, Hindi, Gujarati and of course Malayalam, a total of 25,000 visitors have made their way through the biennale in the week since it opened in Kerala's commercial capital. Many were literally wearing their hearts on the sleeves, sporting 'It's our biennale' T-shirts. Some were clearly struggling to understand what it was all about; others were just proud to have Kochi hosting such a large show.

"I don't understand art, but I know that so many people are loving the experience and I am proud that this is happening in my city," said civil police official Babu VG, on duty at Pepper House, one of the biennale venues.

An elderly woman in a Kanjeevaram sari stopped every few metres to rest an aching knee, but nonetheless made her way from room to room of the Aspinwall House venue. The sight of artist Nikhil Chopra covered in charcoal, wearing just a kurta, making his bed before catching forty winks, proved too much. "Its performance art, ma'am," a volunteer explained. The woman frowned a bit, but walked resolutely on.

Across the city, the air of celebration was visible in the colourful graffiti on the walls, painted by art student volunteers; curious morning walkers gathered around installations put up on the Fort Kochi beach.

Many of the volunteers have put their own work on hold to work on the biennale - as have co-founders Riyas Komu and Bose Krishnamachari and curator Jitish Kallat. Some have taken unpaid leave, determined to be part of an international event in a city where exposure and opportunities are limited. One volunteer said he quit his job altogether, after being denied leave.

Haroon MY, 23, a commerce graduate making a living working at a cellphone-repair shop, swapped a monthly salary of Rs. 15,000



for a temporary stipend of Rs. 6,000 a month as a biennale volunteer.

“It’s not about the money. I have done this to be part of a project that will change my Kochi for the better,” he said. “I was underemployed anyway. It won’t be hard to get another job like the one I had.”

THE ART

A total of 94 main works by artists from 30 countries, including the US, UK, China and Pakistan, are on display at the biennale, alongside a number of works featured as collateral events.

Among those that were the most talked-about was UK-based sculptor Anish Kapoor’s 4-tonne installation titled Descension. Also much-discussed was Nikhil Chopra’s 52-hour art performance, titled La Perle Noire II: Aspinwall House (The Black Pearl), in which he inhabited a cell within the main venue, and placed himself within, symbolising both ruler and subject, monster and angel.

Through the 52 hours, he sketched his view of the Periyar river on the walls, symbolising the history of trade and colonisation of the coastal state. In the next building was Manish Nai’s 400-kg, 7.5-ft-tall, circular, textured work, made by compressing moulded indigo-coloured jute with burlap, evoking associations with nature, from a whirling oceanic pool to a calm night sky.

“This is brilliant, just brilliant,” said Spanish collector Richard Gallego. “The textures and the blue are not letting me leave this room.”

A few paces away, the mood in the room housing artist Prashant Pandey’s work, Artha (Hindi for Meaning) was not as jolly.

This work - an installation shaped like a giant diamond - was made out of 10,000 discarded slides containing blood drawn from a large number of people, including the artist. The work evokes multiple connections between money, violence and mortality. “This work has stirred my insides,” said Lyela Alain, an Ayurveda consultant from France.

“The response has been a pat on the back for us,” said programme director Komu. “It’s a good feeling that we have managed a second edition and the art community has descended from all over to participate. Through the biennale, I think we have managed to create a proper ecosystem for contemporary art in India, the primary goal of the project, and that makes me happy.”