

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale - The 3rd Edition

Introduction

In May 2010, the Culture Minister of Kerala, M.A Baby, approached the artist-curators Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu to start an international art platform in India. They proposed the idea of a biennial event in Kochi, in similar fashion to the Venice Biennale, due to the lack of an international platform for contemporary art in India. The Kochi Biennale Foundation (KBF) was set up as a non-profit charitable trust engaged in promoting art and culture as well as educational activities in India and of course the Kochi-Muziris Biennale itself. This was supported by the Government, private patrons, and local businesses. The first edition took place in 2012 and was thus India's first ever Biennale of international contemporary art. The name Kochi-Muziris amalgamates the historic cosmopolitan legacy of the modern metropolis of Kochi with its mystical predecessor; the ancient seaport and urban centre of Muziris.

Bose Krishnamachari is co-founder and co-president of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. He was born in Kerala and has studied at the Sir J.J School of Arts in Mumbai and Goldsmiths in London. He is an internationally acclaimed artist and curator who lives and works between Mumbai and Kerala. He has exhibited extensively across India as well as internationally in London, Paris, California, New York, Dubai, Beijing and Tokyo for instance. He has won the British Council Travel Award, the Mid-America Arts Alliance Award for Travel and Residency as well as the Charles Wallace India Trust Award. His work '*Maximum Nano*' was India's first ever 'art car'. In 2009, he was Guest of Honour at ARCO Madrid and curated the Indian pavilion. That same year, he created Gallery BMB in South Mumbai with a vision to bring the best national and international art to India. He was co-curator and artistic director of the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012. In 2016, he curated the Yinchuan Biennale in China on a pivot point on the Silk Road.

With the name of the Biennale, Kochi-Muziris, there seems to be a linking of the past and the present...

Bose Krishnamachari: Ours is a culture where the past is not really past. It is present. Of course, Muziris is being excavated a few kilometres north of Kochi, but the energies that were unleashed then are still alive and active. These are values of an abundant and confident Civilisation, a plural culture that has the capacity to receive and to exchange. 'Muziris' represents these values, which are under stress in our part of the world, and in others. So, Kochi-Muziris is both a preservation and a moving forward.

What does it mean to have a Biennale for you and what were the initial aims?

BK: The first prompt for founding the Biennale in Kochi came from the Government of Kerala itself from the Cultural Department. There was very strong infrastructure for literature, cinema and the other arts, but contemporary art did not have enough resources or support here. We thought that a biennial project, one that was led by artists, would be an able means. Of course, the project could not be restricted to the exhibition every other year. In fact, our first effort was the renovation of the 150-year-old Durbar Hall into a museum quality-

exhibition space. We wanted the Biennale to be a place where our culture could think upside down, sideways, on the edge; where it reflects on, reforms, and renews itself.



Remen Chopra, *I see a mountain from my window, standing like an ancient sage*, 2016, Carving on waterproof recycled wood fibre, 550 x 730 cm

What drew you to the curator Sudarshan Shetty?

BK: Sudarshan Shetty was chosen to be curator of the third edition by an artistic advisory committee appointed by the Kochi Biennale Foundation. The committee chose him for the breadth as well as depth of his artistic practice, which we expected would reflect in his curatorial engagement with the Biennale. He was also concerned about the larger cultural canvas of India and we knew that he would bring these intellectual interests to the exhibition. Sudarshan had also been a friend of the Foundation since the beginning, and was someone who shared the vision of the organisation.

The Third Edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale Vision Statement by Sudarshan Shetty

To draw from mythical accounts of the land of seven rivers, set amidst seven seas, anchored by a mountain at its navel. The river breathes life into the land as they are fed by countless tributaries rivers which change course, directed by winds, stopped by human actions, swallowed by floods, vaporised by the sun, filled again by rain and invoked into existence by poets. As rivers flow, overflow and recede, can a biennale accumulate meaning over time and spill into the future? The flow of these streams, their convergence, and divergence inspires a series of questions and propositions about the varied forms and approaches to knowledge

presented by the objects performed as part of the Biennale. One of these rivers – a hidden river, whose sightings are elusive and ephemeral – exists in our belief and imagination. Knowing nothing of its origins or its end – quests to find this hidden river give rise to narrative, story, poetry and perhaps to language itself.

Within the identity and ethos of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, the notion of the artist-curator seems to be most important...

BK: The emphasis on the artist is mainly an emphasis on practice. Sometimes we have seen the activity of art flying off towards an over-discursivised form whereby talking about art gains precedence over making. We felt that by asking an artist to put together the exhibition, this centrality of making could be refocused. Artists tend to have a better relation to practice, to space, to material. This is, of course, not absolute but it is these things that we wanted to put at the centre.

What have you learned from being the president and founder of the Biennale?

BK: Kochi-Muziris Biennale has been the biggest project in my life. The responsibility that has come with it has been enormous, much bigger than my artistic or curatorial practice. It has also brought me into sustained contact with people from various domains of society. The reception of the Biennale here in Kochi has also strengthened my conviction in the significance of art in our lives.



P K Sadanandan, The artist at work on a painting based on the story of Parayi Petta Panthiru Kulam, 2016-2017, Natural pigment colour (made by the artist) on the wall



Alex Seton, *Refuge*, 2015, Bianca carrara marble, eyelets, palette, 110 x 120 x 170 cm

Subrat Kumar Behera is a lithographer and watercolour artist from Odisha who currently lives and works in Vadodara. His delicately detailed imagery presents a world of magical realism inhabited by surreal characters and gods from mythological fables. He studied Printmaking at the B K College of Art and Crafts at the Utkal University of Culture in Bhubaneswar Odisha in 2008. He completed his Postgraduate Diploma in Printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts at the M S University in Baroda in 2013. He has been the recipient of multiple awards including The Gujarat State Lalit Kala Student Award in 2012 and 2013 as well as The National Young Artistes Scholarship from the Indian Ministry of Culture in 2010. Behera collaborated with the celebrated photographer and writer Waswo X Waswo in 2014 to present '*Sleeping Through the Museum*' as part of the collateral projects for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. As well as being selected as one of the Indian artists for the most recent edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, recent group exhibitions include: *Morphology of Archive*, Museum of Goa; *57th National Exhibition of Art*, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi; *The Bird Project*, Open Studio, Baroda.

Personally, what does it mean to be selected as one of the Indian artists for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale? Did you feel a great sense of responsibility?

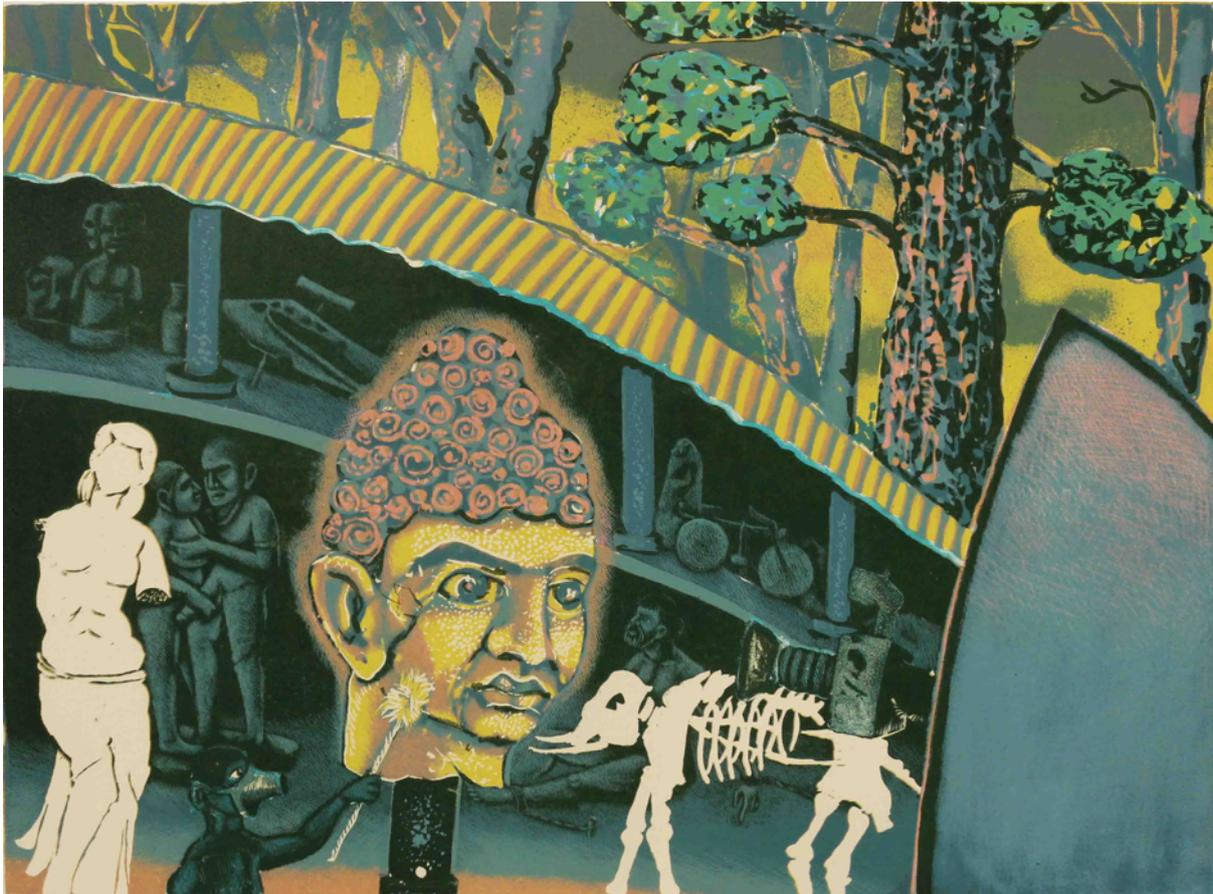
Subrat Kumar Behera: The Kochi-Muziris Biennale has become a very important space in the art scenario of India since its first edition in 2012. I had a chance to participate in its 2nd edition as I was one of the artists collaborating with the well-known American-Indian artist Waswo X Waswo. It was a collateral project of the Biennale ('*Sleeping Through the Museum*'). I was lucky enough to visit the 2nd edition and to experience the Biennale personally. I soon realised there were works that were beyond my imagination. There is an equal space for all kinds of works. Such an atmosphere gives positive energy to think freely. It was after one year that I received a message from Sudarshan Shetty, the curator, inviting me to Mumbai for a meeting.

During the meeting he asked me to do a new large work for the Biennale, which was a dream come true for me; a happy moment as well as daunting I must say. It was then that we discussed the ins and outs of the project and decided on my work for the Biennale. I was given complete freedom in conceptualising and executing my work.

Yes, when one is a part of the Biennale responsibilities comes naturally. The responsibilities are not only about my work but also towards the fact that I represent a certain aspect and certain kind of printmaking tendency. I was very much concerned for both aspects. But once I had begun with the work, the responsibilities took a backseat. It is during the planning that one thinks of the aesthetic and the technique. It is very important for me as a printmaker to not fetishise over the technique. It is a problem that most printmakers face. The responsibility was to make sure that people start viewing printmaking as a medium first and foremost.

Can you discuss your work and artistic practice? What influences and drives you?

SKB: My work oscillates between art as a personal story and a universal credence. This comes from my childhood experiences of listening to my grandmother's stories of Indian mythology, Panchatantra tales and so on. My process of choosing events, specific people, characters, iconography, monuments, et cetera at times is quite clinical. During this selection process, I am well aware of what, why and when am I am 'eliminating' a character or an event. In addition, this elimination helps me manipulate characters and the outcome of certain events. For me this elimination is very important for my process. As mentioned earlier, the subjectivity of the present work is born out of early modern and contemporary history. Events and periods in history like the industrial revolution, colonial expansion, the fall of colonial expansion, the feminist movements which gave way for LGBT movements and racial freedom, environmental movements, the white and green revolutions, globalisation, the fall of the Soviet Union which inadvertently gave a huge blow to communism and socialism, the rise of radicalism and terrorism, the rise of China and so on become very important for the making of a modern day mythology. Here, many conspiracy theories also become important as they help one gain access to certain alternate histories and probable facts. Those facts and histories which otherwise would not have seen the light of the day. Regiments and people in power since the beginning of time have always tried to manipulate crowds and the courses of history, and they have done so quite successfully on a number of occasions. This becomes the base for my work.



Subrat Kumar Behera, One panel from '*Mythological Paradigm Prophesied*', 2016, Lithography

What have you learned from being one of the artists involved? Has it had a positive influence on your artistic practice? What is next?

SKB: As a participating artist, I was lucky to get in close proximity to observe all the disciplines that it takes to make an art event. Furthermore, it also gave me an insight into the processes of a couple of the artists. Kochi is a place charged with positive energy; it is surrounded by all religious beliefs, open-minded people and beautiful landscape. It inspires one to believe in themselves and opens up horizons of thinking and creating. The Biennale definitely helped me think more deeply about my artistic practice. Following on I have some further ideas for new works. I am also setting up a lithography studio and there are a couple of very significant projects in the pipeline.



Subrat Kumar Behera, One panel from *'Mythological Paradigm Prophesied'*, 2016,
Lithography

For you, what is a Biennale. What does it stand for?

SKB: A Biennale is a large platform where we can work and think beyond the notions and nationalities of what art is or what it should be. It manages to bring together a myriad of cultures on a single platform. It becomes a space where art practices from various parts of the world come together and develop into a platform for a larger cultural, intellectual, social and aesthetic exchange. It always stands to connect the world in many ways.

Over 600,000 people attended the third edition of this Biennale. Do you feel that the Indian art scene is growing and finally getting the recognition it deserves?

SKB: Every culture develops when its own people realise the value of their own culture and at the same time give equal respect to others. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is the people's own Biennale and India's first major art event. I can see the youngsters doing a great job, they all are well aware of their own culture and it reflects through their works. They are always searching for different perspectives in which to speak their mind. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is playing a great role in the Indian art scene. I am proud to say that yes, the Indian art scene is growing rapidly. But, this is still the beginning. We have a long way to go. This is a great beginning of a new beginning. Our generation is becoming more open-minded than the previous one. We have started thinking globally and working towards harmony. It is our

responsibility to take forward the journey. Furthermore, the curator for the next edition is a woman. This also reflects the ways in which there is a maturing of minds and a beginning for equality in representation. It comes at an important juncture in the sometimes volatile and misogynistic tendencies the world is seeing today. Finally, I hope more platforms like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale come forward.



Subrat Kumar Behera, *'Mythological Paradigm Prophesied'*, 2016, Lithography, 58 panels, 70 ft long continuous display