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12 MUST-SEE WORKS FROM KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE 2016

Text by Amishi Parekh. Images courtesy: Kochi Biennale Foundation

With an ambitious curatorial vision that incorporates multiples practices, we handpick the pieces that are not-to-be-missed

With 97 works spread over 12 locations, a Students' Biennale and over 20 collateral events, the 108 days of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale are filled to the brim with art, performances and food for thought. After opening on the trademark date, 12/12 at noon, Raul Zurita's *The Sea of Pain* quickly became the talk of the town, and with good reason. This meditative piece forced us to ponder on the Syrian refugee crisis while wading through ankle-deep seawater. Interestingly, the Chilean poet was the very first artist to be announced by 2016 curator Sudarshan Shetty and this choice set the tone for the lineup that followed. From master craftsmen, theatre actors and directors, dancers, writers, poets, architects and mobile lecturers, Shetty's vision, titled 'Forming in the pupil of an eye' encompassed many practices that one wouldn't find at a typical biennale. In this regard, the third edition followed its predecessors; keeping visitors on their toes by doing the unexpected.

Walking through the bylanes of Fort Kochi and Mattancherry was an adventure itself, as we hopped from one exhibition space to the next, with a smattering of traditional music and dance performances, and thought-provoking talks and panel discussions thrown in. There were far too many pieces that stood out to mention, but these are a few that have lingered on in our minds, long after returning, in no particular order.

1. Lundahl & Seidl, *Symphony of a Missing Room: An Imagined Museum*



The guided tour, the staple of many a tourist destination is given a new meaning when participants are blindfolded and taken around some of the work by trained actors. Instructions are meted out over headphones, along with ambient sounds. For an entirely different experience of the biennale, this should be a first stop before you actually 'see' the art.

2. Zuleikha Chaudhari, *Auditioning the Plaintiff. Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case*



In this theatrical piece, Chaudhari 'stages' a rehearsal in a darkened room, creating a sense that we as the audience are conducting the audition for a role in a play. Drawing from real accounts, photographic evidence and testimonies of witnesses, we are trapped in a space between reality and performance.

3. Aleš Šteger, *The Pyramid for Exiled Poets*



The first sight to greet visitors as they entered Aspinwall House was the image of this enormous structure towering over the grounds. Entering the pyramid and walking around its circuitous passage, one is hit by a chorus of overlapping voices and the smell of mud and dung. Slovenian writer Steger creates an ode to some of the most controversial poets throughout history — Brecht, Milosz, Alighieri and others — in this multisensory work.

4. Sunil Padwal, *Room for Lies*



Have you ever wished you could walk around an artist's sketchbook or head? In his installation, Padwal gives us just that; rooms are filled to the brim with knick knacks, photographs, drawings and paintings that encapsulate a brief instance in his thought process. He conveys that it is the artist who strings together unrelated innocuous objects to instill them with meaning.

5. Chittrovanu Mazumdar, *River of Ideas*



Imagine the ghats of Varanasi in the black of night, your eyes following the millions of lamps floating along the river. Evoking a proverbial river and alluding to the omnipresence of water in Indian life, Mazumdar creates a sculptural body connected by a bridge of light. His piece represents a flow, of ideas, routines, everyday rituals that connect people.

6. Hanna Tuulikki, *Sourcemouth: Liquidbody*



This audio-visual performance combining video and a printed scroll contains three films: in the first, a silver-painted Tulikki dances in the nadi varmana style tracing the path of a river; the second shows a closeup of her eyes performing choreographed movements taking river to its source; the third focuses on the mouth, in which it instructs the viewer on the performance. Intense vocals and a hanging scroll where one can read out the instructions from left to right keep you mesmerised.

7. Wu Tien-Chang, *Farewell, Spring and Autumn Pavilions*



Set within a pavilion replete with multi-coloured lights, the screen shows a soldier marching home across ever-changing scenery as a Taiwanese folk song plays in the background. This one makes you chuckle and cringe at the same time, with its overload of kitsch imagery.

8. Yuko Mohri, *Calls and Oni-be (fen fire)*



Mohri collects discarded objects, the 'detritus of our lives' and transforms them into kinetic-sonic sculptures. Taking up an expansive white-tiled space at the biennale, these delicate pieces respond to the air, light, wind and gravity around them, filling the rooms with a gentle tinkling that cannot be replicated anywhere else.

9. Desmond Lazaro, *Family Portraits*



Blending private and public inquiry into his ancestry, from Rangoon to Madras, Leeds and Liverpool, Lazaro culls together polaroids, home movies and colonial records of previous generations of his family. Interested in exploring themes of migration and identity, the work features intimate paintings that reference his Pichvai training, embroidered panels and large hanging paintings that create the effect of zooming in and out of a personal history.

10. Gary Hill, *Dream Stop*



The KMB outpost at Durbar Hall in Ernakulam may seem like a tedious trek to the mainland, but Hill's installation proves otherwise. Engulfed by reflections of yourself walking around the room, you feel as if you've entered a topsy-turvy hall of mirrors. 32 spycams spread around a suspended 'dreamcatcher' centrepiece, project 32 different overlapping views, allowing the viewer to become part of the work as well as consider their own place within it simultaneously.

11. Bharat Sikka, *Where the flowers still grow*



The first floor of Anand Warehouse in Mattancherry becomes a walkthrough diorama depicting life in Kashmir. One is overwhelmed by how far removed and alone the people shown must be, living in the war-stricken region. Here the physical place that contains the photos is inseparable from the images themselves — A dilapidated structure with the smell of spices wafting in (perhaps its function in another life).

12. Dana Awartani, *Love is my Law, Love is my Faith*



Inspired by eight poems by Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi, Awartani's eight hanging embroideries (working with ari craftsmen in Gujarat) cycle progressively inward to a tiny golden square at the centre — Depicting the pursuit of love. This meditative piece draws from her exploration of Islamic geometry and revival of traditional crafts.

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016 runs until 29th March 2017.