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C.S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, once said that the Bible condenses myth into history. From the sweeping stories of the fall of Adam and Eve to the ark built by Noah and Joseph's multi-coloured coat, the narrative moves to the court memoirs of King David and finally, fable becomes fact with the birth of Jesus Christ. Once fable solidifies into fact, only an artist can turn it back into fable. He asks, "What if the story had another ending?" He asks, "What if it had happened in another way?" Many artists at the third edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale are playing with the past, churning it into the 'what ifs' of an abstract and alternate reality.

It is a pity that you can experience the world only through your own perspective. You can never know if another person perceives the colour blue the way you perceive it. You can only dwell in your own imagination. But Daniele Galliano, an artist from Italy, attempts, through his artwork called *Bad Trip*, to inhabit the imagination of others. For example, when immigrants leave war-torn nations to go to new countries, Galliano depicts through his art the kind of place they might have imagined they were going to. In the backdrop of a plush and plentiful landscape, he paints a boat of immigrants. The place only exists in their minds. Reality often falls short of hope. Galliano has visited flea markets in Turin to buy paintings relegated to dusty corners of shops. On these, he has superimposed his intruders—immigrants, vagabonds and squatters—who are reinventing that space, claiming ownership to a different life within the canvas.

"I'm fascinated by what goes on in the minds of people," he says. "People have such different mindsets. A person you meet at a party might be thinking something vastly different from a person you might meet at an art show like this biennale."

If Galliano's work is conceptual, Gabriel Lester's is experiential. Lester is from Amsterdam and in his work *Dwelling Kappiri Spirits*, he revives an old fable. In the seventeenth century, when the Dutch came to Kochi, the Portuguese left the city. Before they departed, they buried gold, silver and other treasures in the compounds of their majestic estates and houses. They tied up their African slaves on the walls of these compounds, sacrificing them in the belief that their ghosts



Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016

ART EXTRAVAGANZA

The third edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale encompasses not just art but many different forms of expression including dance, poetry, literature and theatre.

Theme: Forming in the pupil of an eye

Curator: Sudarshan Shetty

Venue: Works spread across 12 venues,

from Aspinwall House to Kottapuram Fort in Kochi, Kerala

Duration: December 12, 2016 to March 29, 2017

Participants: 97 artists from 31 countries



Fun and games: Curator Sudarshan Shetty with Kochi Biennale Foundation president Bose Krishnamachari

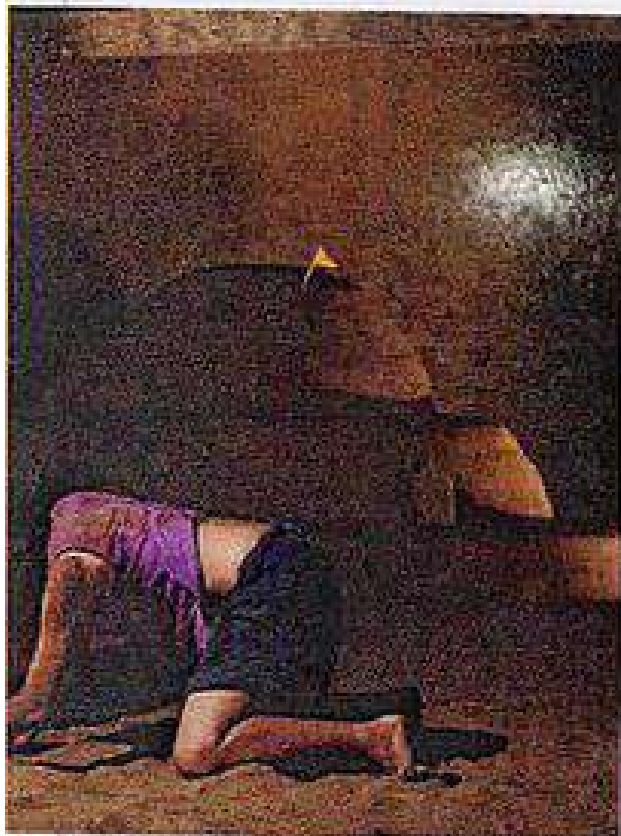


would protect the treasure. But they never returned and the myth goes that the spirits of these slaves, called Kappiri Muthappan, still wander the estates of their masters.

His installation, made of lace curtain, aluminium, wood, light and cigar, represents a large floating room with billowing curtains that are forever pregnant with a non-existent wind. Inside the room is a cigar that is left burning, an offering to the Kappiri Muthappan. The wind symbolises the restless souls of the spirits. The interest in what is known is profoundly different from the fascination in what is unknown. In the unknown, and perhaps the unknowable, anything is possible. Lester's work invites you to explore these possibilities. Freed from the servitude of their lives, what holds these African slaves captive in their afterlives? What do they yearn for?

"It all started in 2010 when I created an art installation in memory of a friend, the artist Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin, who passed away in 2007," says Lester. "That's when I remembered a family tradition: when somebody passed away, the windows were opened so that the soul could travel freely from earth to heaven. After my grandfather passed away, his body lay in the living room and when we opened all the windows, a strong breeze drift-

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Water woes:
Anamika Haksar's theatre performance uses the metaphor of water to highlight issues of caste oppression

ed into the room, transporting his soul... To commemorate Alptekin, I returned to the idea of spirits travelling from the earth to the heavens above. The installation, *Melancholia in Arcadia*, consisted of hardened lace curtains catching that moment of transition between life and death. For my installation at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, curator Sudarshan Shetty suggested I return to this work. That's when I started to look for a reinterpretation that was both site-specific and bespoke. I started to research the history of Fort Cochin and soon found out about the souls of the slaves that were killed by the Portuguese to protect their hidden treasure. I understand my installation in Kochi as a very complex composition of many suggestions—some abstract, some concrete and some, simply associations that anyone can come up with."

Anamika Haksar uses the metaphor of water to represent a range of emotions—violence, anger, peace and happiness. In her theatre work and installation *Composition on Water*, she draws on a poem by Namdeo Dhasal called *Water* that highlights the injustices and inequalities faced by dalits. In an improvised performance, her actors expose the callousness with which dalits are denied the use of fresh water. "I feel the issue of caste discrimination is extremely relevant

today, what with incidents like the death of Rohith Vemula and the agitations against cow slaughter," says Haksar. "It is incredible that this is so in the 21st century, even after so many reform movements."

Another collateral exhibition that contemporises history is Pooja Singhal's *Pichvai Tradition and Beyond—A Collateral Project*. Over three centuries ago, a few Pichvai artists came to Nathdwara in Rajasthan from Uttar Pradesh with Lord Shrinathji, an avatar of Lord Krishna. The ornate and detailed hand-painted textile art of these artists was devotional in nature, narrating the stories of Shrinathji. Singhal is trying to revive the dying tradition of Pichvai art by providing a platform to the skilled painters who learnt the art through generations of Pichvai artists. New interpretations of the work have shed the religious undertone to incorporate a contemporary scale, form and colour. "I grew up in Udaipur not far from Nathdwara and was familiar with the Pichvai tradition from

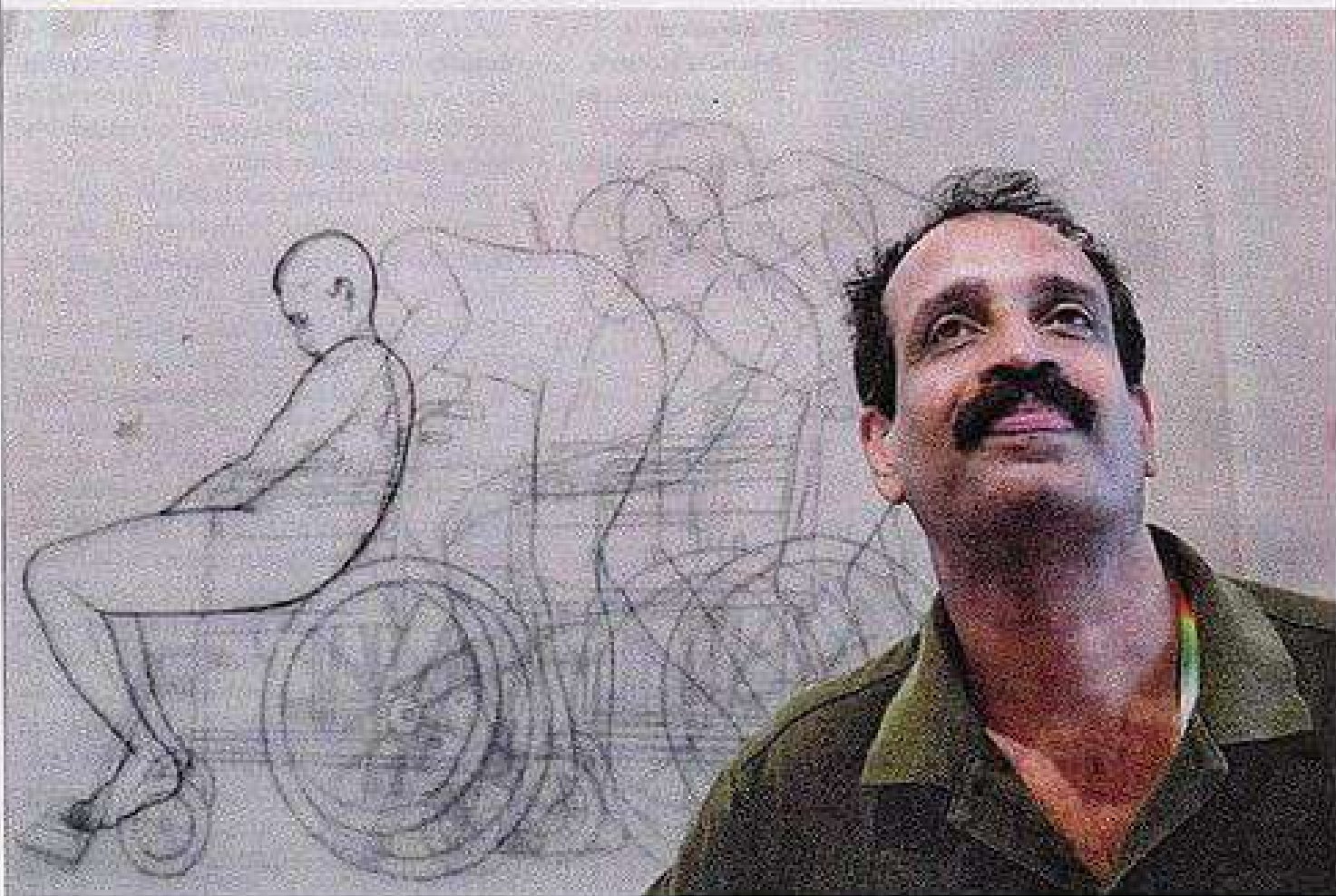


On the spot: Daniele Galliano does improvisational work

a young age," says Singhal. "My mother was a patron and Pichvai artists used to come to my house all the time to show their works to her."

A long time ago, there was a Chinese artist who used to paint landscapes. Then one day, he started drawing graphs of scraggly lines. People wondered what they signified. When asked, he replied that the graphs, like artistic ECGs, represented his state of mind when he saw the landscapes. Similarly, the work of C. Bhagyanath, an artist from Thalassery, turns the folk art of Theyyam into concepts in his

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Harnessing tradition:

C. Bhagyanath tries to capture the varied beings within ourselves

charcoal drawings. Rather than the tradition, it is the emotions triggered by the tradition that he aims to capture.

"In Theyyam, there is the story of Pulijanmam, which is about human beings trapped inside animals," he says. "Similarly, I wanted to portray the varied beings within a person. In a short story called *Boris and Me*, the writer ends on a poignant note: 'I don't know who wrote the story. Boris or me'."

There is a multiplicity of Borises within us, suggests Bhagyanath—equal and opposing forces that pull and push at the same time, resulting in the status quo that is each human being. So, in his drawings, the policeman merges into the thief, the confessor into the listener and the man who pushes a wheelchair into the man who's being pushed.

Even though he talks of multiplicity, there is a sort of homogeneity in Bhagyanath's drawings; the force that disintegrates one into multiple beings is the same force that coagulates him into one. But what of the multiplicities that cannot be fitted back together? A piece in a whole that is not part of the whole? This is the kind of multiplicity that Shetty was

thinking about when he conceptualised the biennale with the theme 'Forming in the pupil of an eye'.

"The theme is a line taken from Sharmistha Mohanty's poem," says Shetty. "The idea that when a sage opens his eye to the world, he assimilates all the multiplicities of the world into that one instant of his vision. Eyes are the only reflective surface on the body. All our ancient philosophical ideas come from our physical or the corporeal existence. I think that that is something essential to the way we look at the world, which is eminently multiple in nature. It is multiple and yet all the multiplicities are contained within the same space of experiencing the world. This edition of the biennale is an effort, even if partially, at bringing these ideas to the fore."

It is a beautiful thought: time and space in their entirety telescoping into one transcendent instant experienced by the sage. The rest of us are pilgrims in search of that instant, which we sense through the fog of beauty, art, music and poetry. As Mohanty says in her poem: "Let all boundaries be distant so we can wander far in our unknowing." ♦