

STAINED GEOGRAPHIES

SAJU KUNHAN

Text by
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Produced by

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Artworks by Saju Kunhan

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INTRODUCTION

TARQ is delighted to present “Stained Geographies” – Saju Kunhan’s first solo exhibition. This exhibition brings together a body of work that is the result of Kunhan’s exploration of the archive along with the re-interpretation of images in shifting contexts. He uses wood and archival images to articulate his conceptual investigations.

Accompanied by an essay penned by architect and researcher Anuj Daga, Saju’s exhibition catalogue highlights the spectacular variation in scale that Saju is able to execute. His works range

from small scale multimedia drawings of cityscapes to immense multi-panel works that use image transfers onto wood to depict maps and large-scale migrations from city to city, and indeed across the world. By working with maps and spaces, Saju creates a mythical, almost fantasy world, that prompts questions of where we are, how we got there, and where will go from here.

Hena Kapadia,
Gallery Director, TARQ

STAINED GEOGRAPHIES

Of maps, migrations and manipulations - Works by Sanju Kunhan

Text by Anuj Daga

1. A SEA OF STAINS

The modern formation of nation-states has reoriented its peoples to think about migratory flows quite contrarily to the manner in which the world once constituted and imagined itself. Global migration history informs us how cross continental, and international flows of people over centuries have maintained interest and inventiveness in humanity. Migration, that was once an ordinary phenomenon has become exclusive, even exclusionary today. Numerous recent political incidents bring us to face a reality where humanity is constantly at crossroads with violence for existence. Turbulent contemporary events from all over the world including unrest on the Rohingya border between Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Dokhlam issue involving the tri-junction between India, Bhutan and China, the still unresolved India-Kashmir border issue, Donald Trump's executive order on immigration in the United States, the migration of minorities to Canada, the escape of Syrian refugees to countries in Europe – and countless other migrations continue to negotiate themselves as we witness this exhibition.

Constant efforts of ethnic cleansing driven by ideas of purity, essentialism or the original, occupy socio-political imaginaries across continents today. Any minority is quickly identified as an

alien, or foreign and seen as the “other”. Questions of belonging, livelihood or place are articulated around hollow and by-gone idea(l)s of nationalism, patriotism, race or religion. Such insecurities often arise out of a projected difference, resulting in civil unrest, strife or human disasters like wars. This is not to say that humanity hasn't ever seen such turbulence before. What is rather incomprehensible, is our attitude to such mass political moves that is often misconstrued under the construct of media. It is in this political climate that we come to question the destiny of the stained geographies we occupy through Saju Kunhan's work.

The metaphor of the “stain” is apt - for it allows us to explore several ideas embedded consciously or subconsciously in Saju's practice at once. Derived from the old French *desteindre*, recorded in the sense of ‘defilement’ or ‘disgrace’; ‘stain’ in everyday use is a ‘coloured patch’ or ‘dirty mark’ existing on a surface and differs from the natural one. With such a reading, it is imperative to think of the stain as undesired, for it is something that was unplanned in the original scheme of things. Tracing further, in other languages “stain” also originates from the idea of “staying” or “stone” – lending it a sense of transient permanence. In such a pretext, stains

live dual, or even multiple lives that are conflicted between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The ideas of the ‘original’, ‘other’, ‘cleansing’, ‘displacement’ and ‘eradication’ are all implicit in the notion of the stain. Where and whom does the stain belong to? Can it exist just by itself? What is our relationship with stained artifacts? Do we immediately discard them if they are irreparable to the extent of the original? Do we dissociate stained originals from our lives? Stains in fact allow us to mark things in time and remind us of their age. This time-gap between the object and us, augmented by the stain brings us even closer to it. We find ways to make the stain a part of our lives over time, rather, stains find ways to exist with the original – even though not *as* the original. A stain thus operates together in space and time – it occupies a surface or territory that may not be originally its own, but is instead acquired gradually.

In creating four large maps presented in this exhibition along with several smaller works, Saju mobilizes the metaphor of the ‘stain’ at several levels - not only to ask questions pertinent to history and the present but also to art-making and aesthetics. In his careful selection and depiction of sites of conflicted migration, zooming down from the world, to South Asia, to the Indo-Gangetic plains and to the island of Mumbai where he currently resides, Saju tries to establish his own relationship and equation with the world at large. At the same time, he questions the collective destinies of the inhabitants who have come to settle in these regions. His works provoke the viewer to dive into a sea of stains – a pool of questions related to migration, belonging, memory, time and place to rethink their histories of settling. From mythical times to the

Mughal era and the colonial period, up to today, we find trails of people moving in search of lands which give meaning to their quest for economic, intellectual or leisurely transactions. How do we become a part of history in such a viscous environment of flows? Which history finds us? Has history found us, or have we found history?

It is the sea that holds the people together in Saju's conception. The people illustrated here are photographic translations of clay figurines and dioramas of ethnic groups and events originally documented by the British during their Indian expedition, which Saju has recreated through his close engagement with archives, rare books and artifacts at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai. Saju has been photo-documenting such figures from many other places including Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) in Mumbai along with Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad and the Goa State Museum. Some others have also been appropriated by surfing history books, magazines and periodicals picked up from roadside bookshops. The people we see on Saju's maps are thus produced through different histories. The polished wood grains that highlight the age of the canvas at once refer to the entrapment of people in the waves of time, antiquity, memory. The knots in the wood are left as anomalies in history of the substrate as well as the printed subject. Large cloud-like inkblot formations on the treated paneled natural wood allow you to immerse into the map-stains of the world. Their geographies are approached from different directions; discovered through land, water or air, however without the interference of modern day national boundaries. Saju's

maps morph the historical encounter of cultures, collision and confusion that occurs during movement onto the material it is layered on.

The smaller works index conflicted moments from this long history of migration that the artist has perhaps lived through. When looking at these, one is reminded of the communal riots, the protest of the mill workers, the terrorist attacks on the Taj Mahal Hotel – events that took place in Mumbai over the last few decades. Smoke-stains rise out of these buildings in a hazy image. As the building-image burns, it reveals the another lived reality beyond their skins and within the underbellies. Another set of small wood panels bring us to consider specific urban geographies that have lived and shaped themselves through long standing histories of communal conflict. Cities like Vadodara, Ahmedabad or Mumbai have been the principal subjects of Saju's investigation. He juxtaposes events and landscapes with each other by employing the method of staining.

Saju begins to understand staining as a conscious construct to reinstate and interrogate history. He employs the strategy of staining in order to develop a metaphorical language to make sense of the contemporary attitudes to questions of purity, the original or the essential. He stains not in order to other, but to bring together, merge and overlap. The paintings do not distinguish its different elements, rather blend them with one another. In his language, we could begin to question thus - what substances do we choose to bring marks from? What lay ideologically in such a process of staining? Whom/where does the stain, after all, belong to? Further, how is a stain

sustained over time? What ethical-moral stance do we cultivate towards stains; towards people who have settled as migrants in different parts of the world? Can staining be an emancipatory process so as to smudge the idea of the original? If understood as a method of staining, what hope does photography or painting lend us to read into such geographies? Can visual constructs through this method give us new insights into the moral panic that is experienced today across countries? Can stains be seen as links between the past and the present, between cultures and communities, as referential markers? As for geography, it gets defined in tracing human habitation. Human traces are as fluid as amorphous land masses that have drifted apart and found seemingly obscure outlines in the infinite sea. We have come to occupy these amorphous stains in the curved canvas of the sea over years of migration and movement. Needless to mention, every human occupation leaves behind marks of lived life. The work in 'Stained Geographies' brings us to confront conflicted pasts with the hope of placid reconciliations towards an emancipatory world seen beyond nationalistic boundaries.

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2. MAP AS A HABIT

As a person who hasn't travelled much, Saju likes to visit and search for places, especially those areas which have considerable historical and archaeological value, by sifting and panning through Google Earth satellite maps. Unlike from the ground, the experience of seeing places through Google lies somewhere between the visual representation of a map and the phenomenal experience of geography. Every thing on the satellite map is

real, yet an image. Google Maps do not really show boundaries between countries, their geographies are rather free flowing and they allow you to adjust your proximity from the reality of the space. In Google Maps, one can travel across continents and borders without having to take permissions. Saju drifts through the world and its history in this virtual navigation.

The process of creating the map for the work involves joining hundreds of screenshots of the Google images together. The desired size of map is printed on standard pieces of paper, stitched into a larger whole and operated upon by editing, overlaying and mirroring after which it is ready for transferring on the wood panels. These panels are created using centuries old recycled wood that has itself been subject to corrosion and decay over time. Saju preserves these marks of history over the medium in the hope of accidental results that may bring out unexpected realities. The slow manual process of bringing the digital prints on wood often gives inadvertent but interesting results. While transferring the image onto the wood through such process, one cannot predict the final outcome. Often, after transfer, portions of the map get damaged or go missing, or appear with new marks on it. The wood grained panels and their tarnished areas seen through this transferred semi-transparent image further offer a novel mystery to the reading of map.

In taking the printed matter off its natural habitat and transferring it from paper onto the wooden substratum, Saju's strategic treatment of the ink as stain, and its metaphorical references to issues of migration, displacement

and relocation is quite apparent. At the same time, reassigning the ink onto the wooden panel, which has historically been the habitat of paints gives traditional painting a contemporary spin. What is interesting however, is to think of the printed matter having two distinct sides – the front and the back. Saju's process exposes us to the other side of the print, that which necessarily alters itself over the process of its transference. This loss of information over the process is compensated by the artist in adding aspects of one's own past to the image and then peeling it off onto universal substratum that melds all layers together in a yet another time-scape. The process also suggests the collapse of two times – that of the wood and the image(s). The resultant palimpsest makes us ponder about the multiple re-contextualizations of histories through manipulations of maps, images and their overlapping contentious pasts.

As a cartographic entity, Saju Kunhan's reconstructions embrace the aesthetic strategy of vintage maps that are often framed with illustrated strips along the borders of the canvas, and are presented on sepia stained backgrounds. The overall map is an assembly of smaller pieces of wooden panels laid in a neat grid that gives the impression of folds that appear on a pocket map, and those that also divide our viewing of map into parcels. In addition, the map-images are divided into margins of standard paper sizes that were originally used for transfer of prints. These margins reposition the overall resultant image within new coordinates that may be read as meridians of migration and displacement. Working within, and yet challenging the schema of the cartographic map, Saju's artworks gently

attempt to destabilize our habitual reading of a map. Further, the grains of the wood soon start reading as an image that imprint time onto the otherwise empirical Google Maps.

Maps are however manipulations, as much as histories are. The impossibility of flattening a sphere into an orthographic map has forever made us look at continental outlines in a deceptive way. The resulting maps, thus have merely been closest approximations of actual geographies. Taking advantage of such implicit anomalies in cartographic representations, Saju embeds more manipulations as a way of leaving his own marks in history. He explains:

“As far as the transferring of ‘historic images’ to wood is concerned, it is a part of rewriting history-picking certain elements from its actual context and placing them on to an entirely different context with slight alterations. By the end of the process the image ends up losing its original view and its inverse can be seen. It is my general disposition to draw over the images on magazines, colour over it, add something new or sometimes remove or mask something else. I choose images from found books, mostly old books. Photographic printed images are always the moments of history. I destroy the moment, add more layers in it and remove certain layers of identity from it.”

Everyday rituals of marking, highlighting or altering realities within books do not merely remain traces of habit, rather, in Saju’s works, they become conscious acts of history-making. Without assuming any moral burden, his practice harmlessly reclaims map-making as a manipulative habit.

3. THE GEOGRAPHY OF A MIGRANT

Saju grew up in the rural landscape of

Palakkad, Kerala. Following pragmatic expectations of earning a living, he uninterestedly studied science, until his passion for art was identified by one of his school teachers who encouraged him to join an art school. While still waiting to get enrolled in an art course, Saju spent his days doing labour-intensive jobs like painting houses, polishing furniture, painting automobiles and making boards and banners. He came to Mumbai with the ambition of becoming a commercial designer, but was pleasantly derailed into fine arts after stimulating interactions with some prominent names in Indian contemporary art. At the same time, he found the pulse of the city, its vibrant culture, bustling energy and pace of life to be invigorating. How could Saju have let the promise of this energy escape? The material expression of his earlier work produced through techniques learnt in the environment of automobiles and garages indexes an enthused aesthetic of labour and migration. A lot of his work comprehends the newness and wondrous gaze into large paintings that capture the glamour and glaze of the city on the one hand, and the speed and escaping time on the other. A decade ago, the city of Mumbai was as it refracted to him in the automobile headlights: simultaneous projections and reflections of a city trapped in multitudes of time and people.

Over the years, however, Saju has begun to observe and delve deeper into another parallel life of the city. He looks back on how collective celebrations during events and festivals within different neighbourhoods of the city that were once open to all, now have restricted access. One begins to appreciate a new cultural geography of restraints within the natural harshness of the city. The

city brings lots of people from different areas and different cultural backgrounds into a productive anxiety. People and things get produced through collision and exchange. Such a perspective has matured into Saju’s present works. Beyond the reflective headlights, Saju has found a space from where people in the city derive their productive energy from. Saju strongly feels that he does not find this energy back in Palakkad. It is from this collusive urban geography that Saju draws his inspiration. “Everything in this city is maximum. Even if you feel lazy, the city makes you do something,” says Saju.

Movement, collisions, ruffles and stains give meaning to life in Saju’s works.

Staining is an active process that enables our engagement with history. And it is through such engagement that we are able to define distinct geographies – physical as well as cultural. What shall be the shape of the world as seen through the extents of such engagements? The works presented in this selection invite us to live the space between the finished and the incomplete. It paints a possibility in the life of a stain that gains definition in its fading, or one that learns to fade in its firmness. Saju’s geographies reconcile stains into shades of landscapes that have accumulated meaning over a slow process of history. It gestures to the stained geographies we all eventually come to inhabit.



Make in - While Burning #1
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



Make in - While Burning #2
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



Make in - While Burning #3
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



United we stand, divided we rule
Mixed media on wood | 60 x 108 inches | 2016

SINGLE FOLD

United we stand, divided we rule | Detail



United we stand, divided we rule
Mixed media on wood | 60 x 108 inches | 2016



Make in - While Burning #4
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



Make in - While Burning #5
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



Winners are not judged
Mixed media on wood | 60 x 108 inches | 2017





Make in - While Burning #6
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



DOUBLE GATEFOLD

Make in - While Burning #7
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017

History always repeats
Mixed media on wood | 60 x 108 inches | 2017





Make in - While Burning #8
Mixed media on paper | 6 x 12 inches | 2017



Whose land is it anyway
Mixed media on wood | 60 x 108 inches | 2017





The indelible marks (series)
Acrylic, ink and melamine on wood | 15 x 11 inches | 2017



The indelible marks (series)

Acrylic, ink and melamine on wood | 15 x 11 inches | 2017

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Saju Kunhan (b. 1983) began his artistic training in his home state of Kerala, at the Government College of Fine Art, Thrissur. After receiving his BFA degree, he went on to pursue his MFA in painting from the Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai. In 2014, Kunhan received a Post-Graduate Diploma degree in Museology and Conservation from CSMVS Museum, Mumbai.

Gallery at Jahangir Art Gallery, Mumbai (2016); "Liminal Affinities", the inaugural exhibition at Nine Fish Art Gallery, Mumbai (2015); "The Deep Inside", two man show at Kalakriti Art Gallery, Hyderabad (2015) and "Memento Mori", a group show at TARQ, Mumbai (2015).

He currently lives and works in Mumbai.

Kunhan has been a part of exhibitions all across the country. Some of his recent exhibitions of note are - "Mattancherry", curated by Riyas Komu at URU art harbour, Kochi (2017); "Young Subcontinent", curated by Riyas Komu at the Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa (2016); "Scape & Scope", anniversary group show of TAO Art

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anuj Daga is a hybrid design thinker interested in engineering new ways of reading and intervening into the built environment. Trained as an architect from Mumbai (2008), he went on pursue his interests in History & Theory of Architecture as well as design research through the interdisciplinary Master of Environmental Design program at Yale School of Architecture (2014). He is the recipient of the National Award (awarded by Council of Architecture, India) and also the Charles Correa Gold Medal for his undergraduate design thesis 'Cinema for the Blind'. He was awarded the Kamla Raheja Research Fellowship 2009-10 where he undertook independent research on patterns of domesticity in Mumbai. Subsequently, his practice is informed by his diverse engagements in fields of design, research and academia.

Anuj has worked with several cultural institutions as well as research & artist

organizations including Max Mueller Bhavan Mumbai, Collective Research Initiatives Trust (CRIT) - Mumbai, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) - New York and Critical Art & Media Practices (CAMP) - Mumbai in different capacities. He has a keen interest in studying visual culture in architecture and the ways different visual media tie into contemporary architectural expression. He has been a consulting architect & strategist at the Godrej Innovation Centre, Mumbai. He has been the Curatorial Assistant to Riyas Komu for the visual arts project "Young Subcontinent" from the time it was first organized by the Serendipity Arts Trust in Goa in 2016. He is also a regular contributor to Art India magazine.

Anuj is currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Environment & Architecture, Mumbai.



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