ARCHIPELAGIC ARCHIVIST

Parag Tandel

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, in that gray vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History.

— Derek Walcott, 1979^[1]

Much before the recorded history of this city we now know as Mumbai begins, the Koli people inhabited this land, stewarding the seven islands and the sea around them. Amongst the din of incessant urbanization it is often forgotten that Mumbai was originally an archipelago of islands. The Kolis depended on the waterways between these landmasses for their subsistence, becoming a primarily fishing community. Over centuries, they carefully developed a kinship with the marine ecology, calibrating their fishing patterns with mating cycles and tidal changes so as not to destroy the delicate balance of the coastal ecosystem.

These knowledges were not recorded in the ledgers and books that accompanied the arrival of large kingdoms and imperial conquerors. They had been passed down from generation to generation. The Kolis, similar to many indigenous communities across the world, follow an oral tradition.

Like the rhythms and currents of the sea, their knowledge circulates through cosmologies, stories, songs, and recipes, fluidly adapting to the environs of each koliwada^[2] that it passes through.

It is a direct result of the cultural violence of settler colonialism that these forms of archiving are considered primitive, holding no value in the eyes of modernity. Ethnographers, first European and later upper-caste Indian, take on the fraught role of recording these generational practices, their outcomes steeped in prejudice and often without the inputs of those they survey.[3] Parag Tandel, from the Chendani Koliwada in Thane on the northeast of the erstwhile archipelago, reclaims the act of archiving for and with his own community. Eschewing documents, statistics, and maps, Parag is not interested in creating an archive that unilaterally glorifies the Koli people as many imperial archives seek to do, but rather one that opens up a new perspective on history by allowing a nuanced view into the rich networks of relations between the Kolis, as well as the diverse species and topologies, that inhabit the seascape of Mumbai.

The indigenous community has had to struggle to preserve their culture in the

face of multiple influences, both Indic and European. In a previous series of works 'वर्णांध/ Varnandhaa/ Color Blind', 2018, Parag expounded the way in which the arrival of Brahminical groups mutated the faith systems of the Kolis, imposing a new set of Gods, festivals and rituals. In a new series of sculptures presented in the current exhibition, the artist critiques the influence of the Portuguese invaders who arrived at the Western coast of India in the beginning of the 16th Century. Under the guise of increasing trade profits for coastal rulers, the Portuguese navy infiltrated and conquered ports across the Indian peninsula. European influence was imposed within all facets of daily life, from faith, to food cultures, ecology and beyond.

Parag picks up a specific example of the Jambul tree to unpack the nature of this change. The tree, widely known for its rich-purple coloured sweet and sour fruit, is native to the Indian peninsula, growing in great numbers within the archipelagic region of Bombay. It is an important fixture in Koli life, often grown communally for timber and firewood. The fruits are harvested for multiple purposes, including a delicious jambul wine mostly famously prepared by

the people of the Danda Koliwada in Khar. After taking control of the seven islands, the Portuguese enforced the consumption of imported Port wine by outlawing native wines, thereby increasing their revenues and increasing their control over the community via the foreign intoxicant. Till today, the native wines of the Kolis, amongst other food traditions, are viewed through this lens of inferiority. Parag has created 'Arrival of Port Wine', 2023, a series of sculptures in wood harvested from a jambul tree planted by the artist himself in 2010, to foreground the entwined relationship between traditional erasure and colonial profits. Untreated wood with bark and branches intact has been partially hollowed out to gesture towards the material and cultural loot of imperialism. Interpreted reproductions of Portuguese coins excavated from the Vasai fort line the cavity, creating the skeleton of a ship, and the armature of sails complete the structure.

Pursuing an errant^[4] association from the image of these ships, Parag compares the mendacious approach of these conquerors to the allure of a siphonophore (similar to a jellyfish) found in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, known as a Portuguese Man O'War. It gets its name from a brightly coloured

Between Islands of Time and Material-Metaphor

By Shaunak Mahbubani

^[1] Saint Lucian poet introduced to me by dear friend, curator Frida Robles Ponce, whom I first met at Clark House Initiative not far from TARQ's initial location

^[2] Koli settlement

^[3] I want to acknowledge that I, too, am a non-indigenous person writing about an indigenous culture, and might against my best efforts bring my biases into this essay. I have been humbled by Parag's invitation to curate this exhibition, and tried my best to put his ideas into textual form here, with his continued input and feedback.

^[4] From Glissant's urge towards errantry, quoted a few paragraphs ahead

gas-filled bladder, or pneumatophore, which sits above the water and resembles an old warship at full sail. Below the surface, the creature sports long, thin tentacles, covered in venom-filled nematocysts used to paralyze and kill fish and other small creatures. Pushing the scale of his earlier resin works, the artist renders a triad of incandescent pneumatophores in resin, mounted at a height of four feet atop a cluster of tendrils. The striking view becomes a metaphor not only for Portuguese invasion, but for the fallacious "civilising" agenda of all colonial forces that entranced victims with the aesthetics of enlightenment while systemically poising their land, economy, and minds.

Sculpture sits at the core of Parag's practice. An inquiry into familiar forms and their interactions with viewers has extended over the years into a rigorous engagement with the historic relevance of material cultures. Presenting a solo exhibition after seven years, we see a profound shift towards a mode of making heavily driven by research. Much of this is entwined with his work on the 'Tandel Fund of Archives' (TFA) initiated with artist Kadambari Koli-Tandel in 2019. TFA focuses on community-led archiving processes across the multiple Koliwadas of

the city, creating pop-up museums, taking on publishing endeavours, and generating access to infrastructure such as recording equipment for songs. Kadambari and Parag often express their desire to create a small museum for their archive, albeit one that challenges and reimagines the colonial notion of such an institution.

In the Poetics of Relation, Caribbean philosopher Eduard Glissant proposes the idea of archipelagic thought, an apposition to the colonial continental manner of seeing. It is a mode of belonging that acknowledges and celebrates the specific lineage that one comes from, while simultaneously living in conscious relation with the rich diversity of beings around us. Glissant urges us to think beyond the hierarchical nature of taxonomy and the rigidity of borders that construct the colonial worldview to imagine "a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry."[5]

Trading the verticality of colonial archives for a grounded approach, Parag's interests most often lie in the everyday affectual aspects of the Koli culture. With both of his grandmothers having been

involved in businesses of drying and selling fish, the aromas, textures, songs, and shapes that circulate in these milieus have been a recurring point of departure. The establishment of the Maharashtra Industrial Development Board (MIDC) in 1962 and its ensuing policies changed the landscape of the local fishing industry. In the early days henchmen in lorries would round up fishing workers to take them for factory jobs. As a result, very few local boats were able to go out to sea. As the proliferation of industry grew, polluting affluents were dumped into water bodies like the Thane creek, depleting the health and presence of marine life close to coast. As a result of these and other conditions, the topology of Koli livelihoods has changed drastically.

Examining this changing dynamic between food, labour, and environment in 2017, Parag and Kadambari noticed many of the women who have generationally been involved in fish-related business were selling rice-flour rotis, a business that was largely unseen a few decades ago. Alongside this shift, the prevalence of dried fish in food had also decreased. With the support of a grant from Art Oxygen, Parag and Kadambari assembled a gathering of a dozen women

from Chendani Koliwada to prepare a meal of, and in the process archive the slowly vanishing recipes. During the collective cooking session community elders shared a couple of recipes that even others around were not familiar with, an important revival for the Koliwada at large. The duo recalls one of the recipes only using coconut milk and no oil - sparking a line of thinking into the introduction of ingredients like oil and salt into Koli kitchens, a thread of on-going research for them. These recipes form the backbone of the artist book Ek Bagal Mein Chand Hoga, Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan, 2022. Alongside each instructional, Parag has created an ink on paper drawing visually mapping the multiple relations between marine life and built environment. The drawings, which also reference the effect of the ongoing coastal road projects, are displayed in orginal form within the show. The artist book was designed by Zeenat Kulavoor, and published with the support of TARQ and Living Waters Museum.

The metaphor of drying is central to the inquiry of this island^[6] of work. Drying can cause deterioration and indicate loss, on the other hand, drying is also a key process towards preservation. For centuries around

the world, food, especially meat, has been dried with salt and other natural preservative agents to save for lean months. In the case of the Kolis, dried food is often consumed during the monsoon months when fish are mating and producing offspring. The community takes a hiatus from fishing during this period to respect and ensure the sustenance of the ecosystem. Kadambari recounts that the increased humidity of the monsoon also affects the dried fish in a particular way imparting a special flavour that is not present during other times of the year. The popularity of dried fish is on the decline due to factors listed above, as well as access to other styles of food. In lamenting this loss, Parag looked to mummification, another form of preservation that has common roots with drying fish. In a performance with a group of women from the Colaba Koliwada, commissioned by the Goethe Institut Mumbai, dried Bombayduck^[7]was mummified while singing songs of these shifting times. These songs, as well as recipes to cook Bombayduck, are written on rice paper in squid or cuttlefish ink, depending on the season, wrapped around the mummified fish and placed within a luminous mummy case crafted by Parag in clear translucent resin.

The silhouette of another work, too. comes from a local fish, and germinated in Parag's mother's kitchen. Mrs. Kamal Tandel has been a steady interlocutor in Parag's practice, bringing in ideas and corroborating facts about the local community. I fondly remember the aromatic shrimp curry and fried fish she had prepared when I met Parag for a studio visit in 2019. Struck by the graceful curved bones of the Kotya fish that frequently features in her cooking Mrs. Tandel began collecting bones of different shapes and sizes. The yellow-grey fish, growing to 3 or 4 feet in length, is very popular in the Chendani koliwada, sometimes makes an appearance in other Koliwadas of the city, and is completely off the radar of non-Koli pescatarians.

Parag carried this collection of bones on his self-motivated residency to Bastar, Chhattisgarh. The district is located in the Chota Nagpur plateau, home to a large population of adivasi^[8] communities and has been marred by anti-indigenous violence for many decades. It's mineral and coal rich topography make it valuable for large mining corporations, giving rise to land grabs and deforestation. The local movements for land rights have over the years been labelled as

anti-nationalist extremists, invisiblizing the core demands of the struggle. Amongst the communities that lives there are the Dokhras, who have been practicing the lostwax method of metal casting for over 5000 years. The dancing girl of Mohenjo-daro, perhaps the most widely known ancient South Asian artefact, was crafted via this technique in which slender vermicelli-like threads of soft beeswax or natural resin are wound around a clay core. This wax-clay assembly is further covered with clay from termite mounds followed by cow dung, rice paddy clay, and other organic protective materials leaving outlets for the wax to melt away when the clay is fired. Molten metal is poured into the space vacated by the wax. Parag worked with Bhupen Baghel, the son of master artist Jaidev Baghel, for over forty days, sharing biophilic knowledges to create the pieces we see in the show. In line with his interest in archiving through motifs embedded in everyday life, Parag suggested a series of sculptural objects that took their form from the Kotya fish bones. The ringed lines across each form take from the contours left in the cavity of mining sites, dotting the landscape of Bastar. Visibility of the process, and the materials used within

it, are integral to the artist's vision for the series, and Parag insisted on retaining parts of the otherwise discarded outer mould. Termite mounds, from where the clay used for the mould comes from, are an essential part of the forest ecosystem, acting as a barrier against the spread of wildfires. This presence on the pieces speaks to the notion of conservation, of habitats and indigenous wisdoms, of symbiotic relations between species. In this meeting of the Kotya fish bone with the termite clay we witness a pivotal moment in the trajectory of indigenous art in India, the alchemy produced from the convergence of Koli and Dogra cultures, of coastal waters and plateau soils.

The shapes of the Kotya fish bones are also seen in *Into the Bones - Blue series, 2023*. These three works take from the lineage of the artist's grandfather who worked as a boat builder. In that time, boats used to be constructed by hand from jackfruit wood. After the advent of industrialisation this process has largely gone out of use, and has been replaced by the fabrication in marine resin. Parag uses this reinforced resin to cast enlarged bone forms in the unmistakable blue of fishing boats. The unstoppable pace of progress weighs heavy on these works.

^[8] Translated as 'first inhabitants', primarily used by the indigenous communities of the Chota Nagpur plateau in central India

At the end of each sculpture, the artist has affixed a brass propeller denoting the shifts from manual to mechanized ways of working. This change is however not without its price. The propellers are jammed with concrete, a signification of the effects of profit seeking commercialisation on the indigenous community and coastal ecosystems.

Here, most prominently, the artist asserts the community's protest against urban development projects deteriorating the coastline of Mumbai. Looking back, this trajectory of urbanization can be traced back to the 17th century when the British took control of the Bombai Archipelago from the Portuguese. In an effort to secure the territory from invading armies and make it suitable to be a major centre of commerce, the British took on the project of reclaiming land from the ocean to join the seven islands. Land has been the city's most precious resource, and successive governments have consistently tried to enlarge its habitable footprint. Politicians seeking re-election tout the Bandra reclamation and the Bandra-Worli sea link as badges of honour, but the effects on local ecosystems are blindsided by all stakeholders involved. In 2022, the Koli community in Worli staged large protests

against the new segment of the coastal road linking Marine Drive to the existing sea link at Worli. The community said its protest was motivated by sharply rising costs and decreasing profits for fisherfolk. One of the strongest reasons for this is the effect of construction on the mating sites for fish, resulting in smaller numbers year on year. In spite of this, taking on a pragmatic approach, the community said they are not against the construction entirely, but rather that they want Koli voices to be part of the design and advisory process so that the community's concerns, such as the narrow distance between two pillars that cuts off access to a major fishing ground, can be mitigated.[9]

On looking closer at the Blue resin sculptures one notices short phrases in Marathi lettered as those on the sides of boats. These phrases call out to the protection of various deities, some indigenous governing natural forces such as Dharmatya the god of the fluid space between ocean and land, others are imported and have assimilated over the years, like Ikvira who is said to have Buddhist origins. Hindladevi, Teprekarin and Golkadevi make up the rest of the salutations, each deity favoured in different Koliwadas. In marking these phrases the artist continues a

line of inquiry into the way that faith-systems have mutated over the centuries. Both Brahminical Hinduism and Christianity have imposed their own pantheons and ideologies onto the land as they gained control over it. Parag's Colour Blind works from 2018, now quite widely recognisable in Indian art circles for their lemon and chilly forms uses that very motif to critique the way in which Brahminical traditions have become ubiquitous through the violence of their impositions — such as seemingly secular presence of the limbumirchi to ward off evil spirits which is at its root a form of worship of the Goddess Laxmi.

My earliest interactions and deep interest in Parag's works grew from understanding the layered meanings to this वर्णांच/ Color Blind series. The artist uses the form of the armature worshiped by the Kolis during the annual Bharali puja as the core of the sculptural work. [10] Traditionally, this armature is decorated with found flowers and leaves from the nearby forest to channel a non-anthropocentric deity during ceremony held at the time of the full moon in October. In praying to this natural deity, the Kolis remember all those who have been lost to the sea and ask protection for all those children who will be starting their journeys on the tides

soon. Continuing his engagement with this ritual, the artist now creates 'भराली / Talisman for Coastal Futures', 2023, using a two-tiered version of this mild steel armature. On this, he collects, what we might understand as 'found biocultural objects', or familiar motifs from the living landscape around him, marine life, shells, winds, storms, and waves. Each of the four sculptures builds on slightly divergent aspect of this biocultural landscape. One of the pieces in shades of maroon and pastel pink is closest to the first series, featuring some remnants of the lemon-chilly structure, albeit with manta rays and a large squid reclaiming the armature. Parag also points out that the manta ray has special significance in this position, as the preferred conduit to gain the blessings of the Goddess Hingladevi, reorienting our gaze to the indigenous pantheon. In shades of muted brown and grey, with pillars shrouded in scaffolding and shells cast in concrete, another piece continues the critique of coastal development and its effect on coastal ecosystems.

The other two pieces take on an exuberant approach celebrating the camaraderie between the Kolis, their marine kin, and the natural forces that hold these worlds together. Parag challenges

^[9] Why Fisherfolk Are Opposing Mumbai's Coastal Road, India Today, 04 Jan 2022, https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/why-fisherfolk-are-opposing-mumbai-s-coastal-road-project-1895919-2022-01-04, accessed 20 Aug 2023.

his own grasp over this thread technique, now experimenting with shapes that extend beyond the radius of the armature, as well as layering threads of multiple colours to create detailed surface play. In shades of yellow and green, we encounter a giant stingray with wings spread apart, surrounded by gracefully curved blue emanations, symbolic of both wind and tidal currents in their magnificent dance. The final one is most intricate, taken over by a school of resplendent multihued crabs in shades of orange, blue, green, and purple. In the core of the piece, limbs of each crab are curved into lush spiral forms speaking of the dense relationships within each species community, while the crabs on the outer boundary have arms that shoot outwards, a nod to the rhizomatic kin systems between these multispecies formations. Embellishing the Bharali armature with this range of coastal motifs, Parag expands the ask of protection from the deity, seeking a habitable, harmonious future for all living and non-living species that call the coasts of Mumbai their home.

Taking us through these islands within the exhibition, Parag displays a form of archipelagic thinking that not only looks between belonging and relation, but also extends its view to both the past and the future, visualizing the inescapable cyclic nature of time. We see that in imagining a future for ourselves and our planet in the face of this raging climate crisis, we have no other option but to track back to the ways of the past, of those who had calibrated their actions to be in sync with the very natural forces that birthed us. In navigating this flow of centuries old Koli wisdom through Parag's work, we get a glimpse of the realization that for Mumbai to retain the soul that we love dearly, it must reconnect with the waterways of the Bombai archipelago, of the time before the glamour of progress overtook all other motivations. Without its abundant coasts, without its green lungs of Aarey, without the voices of the Kolis, this maximum city may soon lose steam.

Shaunak Mahbubani (they/she) is a nomadic curator and writer. They primarily pursue projects under the exhibition series 'Allies for the Uncertain Futures' focused on exploring possibilities of co-visioning futures grounded in the pursuit of non-duality. The fourth iteration in this series, AUTOPOIESIS (2022-23) had manifestations and crosspollinations across Mexico City, New Delhi, and Berlin.

They will curate The Albanian Conference at the upcoming Lagos Biennale (2024). Other recent curatorial projects include how many songs from a single note? (TARQ, Mumbai, 2022), Party Office at documenta fifteen (Kassel 2022, co-curated with Vidisha-Fadescha), A—ligning the Un—certain (Maxim Gorki Theatre, Berlin, 2022), Skin To Skin (Experimenter, Kolkata, 2023), Entre Sures (Mexico City, 2021, Co-curated with Eli Moon), Seeds are Being Sown (PRAF, New Delhi, 2020), Reality is Post-Produced (TIER, Berlin, 2019), and Saavdhaan: The Regimes of Truth (New Delhi, 2018).

Shaunak's art writing has appeared in Artforum, Critical Collective, Mezosfera, ifa Biennale stories, STIR World, Hakara Journal and other platforms. They have been awarded residencies, grants, and

engagements from Goethe Institut, ISCP New York, La Napoule Foundation France, The Gujral Foundation, Inlaks Foundation, and IFA India. Since 2019, they have also been collaborating with artist-curator Vidisha-Fadescha under the moniker 'After Party Collective', creating momentum towards the affirmation of trans*, intersex, and gender-dissident bodies through curatorial and performance projects, including DANCE TRANS* REVOLUTION (New York, 2021), and publication series Consent of The Goverened (co-edited with Party Office, 2021-ongoing).

Shaunak is currently based between Berlin and India.

About the Curator

Parag Tandel (b. 1978), is a Mumbaibased artist with a Postgraduate-Diploma in Creative Sculpture from M. S University, Baroda (2005) and Diploma in sculpture and modelling from Sir J.J School of Art, Mumbai (2003). Tandel's solo exhibitions include Pregnant Room 1 and Pregnant Room 2, both showcased at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai, (2008 & 2010) Chronicle at TARQ, Mumbai (2016) and Autopolisphilia curated by Noopur Desai at Sudarshan art gallery, Pune, India (2018). He has also been part of various group shows across India including Event, Memory, Metaphor curated by Anish Gawande at TARQ, Mumbai (2022); New Natures: A Terrible Beauty is Born curated by Ravi Agarwal at the Goethe Institut, Mumbai (2022); All Canaries Bear Watching curated by Premjish Achari at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (2022); Fragile Kinships curated by Shaunak Mahbubani at the Swiss Embassy, New Delhi (2018); Baroda March, Mumbai (2015); Small is Big, Durbar Hall, Kochi (2013); Earth Art Project Tansa, Arka Art Trust, Mumbai (2013); The Art of Drawing, The Guild, Mumbai (2011); TAKE 2, Aarushi Arts, Delhi (2011); and AvaGard, Threshold Art Gallery, Delhi

(2009) among others.

Some of his public art projects include Tandel Fund of Archives, pop-up museum of fisherfolk, Mumbai (2020 & 2019); (En) counters- Daily Rations Public art project, curated by Artoxygen, Breathing art works, Mumbai (2017); Geographies of consumptions, Mumbai (2015); Big Catch, Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, Mumbai (2012); and Sandarbh, Rajasthan (2011). Tandel has been a recipient of the Jhunjhunwala Scholarship Award (2003); Maharashtra State Art Award (2003); and All India Art and Craft Society State Award (2003). Additionally, he has participated in residencies at the Banboo Curtain Studio, Taiwan (2018) Piramal Art Residency (2017), Space 118 (2015), Mumbai and in Partapur, Rajasthan.

Parag's artist book Ek bagal mein chand hoga ek bagal mein rotiyan was published in 2021 by TARQ with support from Mumbai Water Narratives at the Living Waters Museum. He recently showed his work How to cook Bombay Duck in various ways? at India Art Fair 2023.

He currently lives and works in Thane,

About the Artist

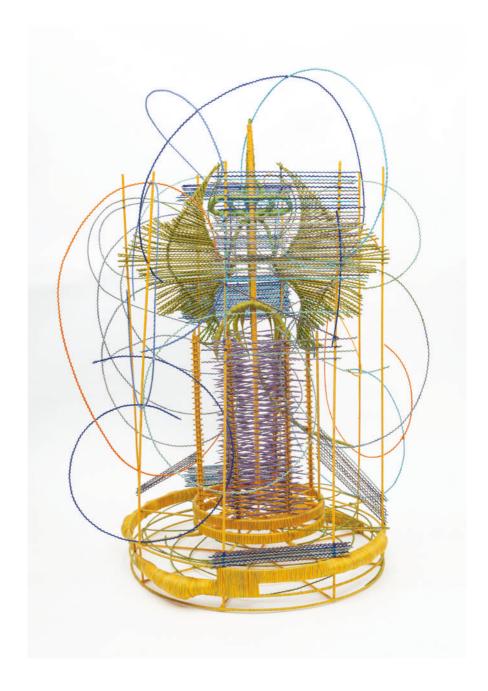




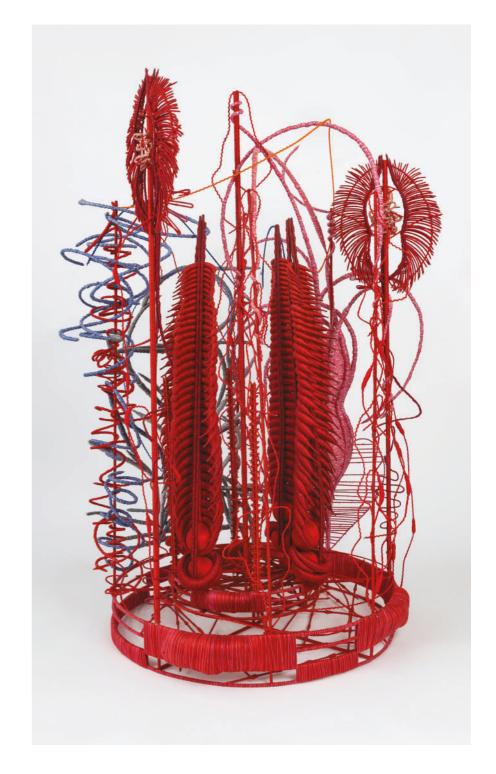
Journey of Bombayduck (details), 2023 Clear cast resin, rice paper and squid ink. 11 × 4.5 × 2.7 inches Set of 5



भराली / Talisman for Coastal Futures 1, 2023 Polyester thread, cotton thread, steel, coconut coil and concrete. 44 (L) × 24 (D) inches

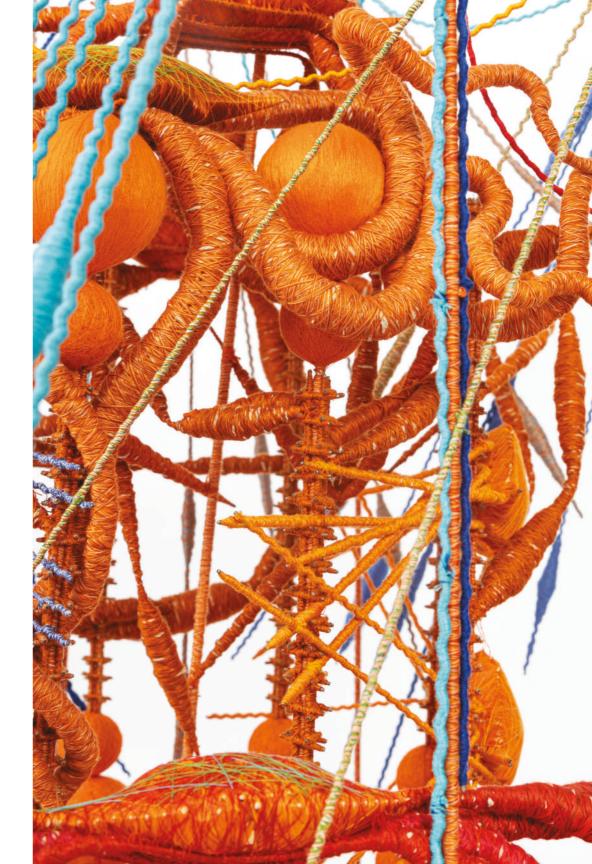


भराली / Talisman for Coastal Futures 2, 2023 Polyester thread, cotton thread and steel. 44 (L) × 24 (D) inches





भराली / Talisman for Coastal Futures 4, 2023 Polyester thread, cotton thread and steel. $46 \text{ (L)} \times 24 \text{ (D)}$ inches







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Into the Bones: Blue Series 2, 2023 Fibre reinforced polymer and bronze. $45(L) \times 8(W) \times 7(D)$ inches 28 | Archipelagic Archivist















Arrival of Port Wine 1, 2023 Resin cast 52(L) × 29(W) × 68(H) inches



Arrival of Port Wine 3, 2023 Jawa plum wood $46(L) \times 7(W) \times 37(H)$ inches





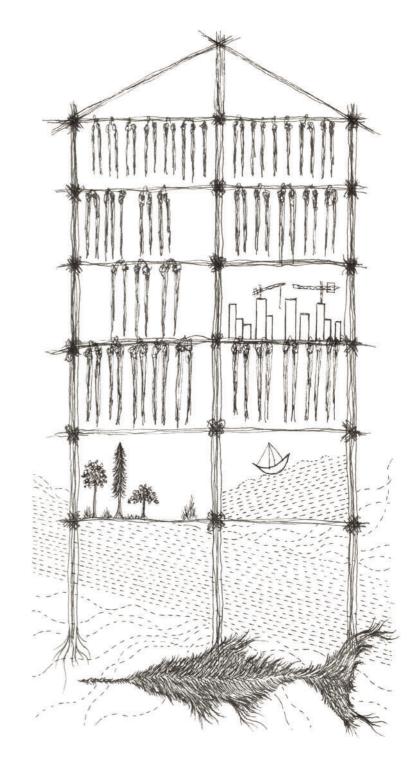
Arrival of Port Wine 4, 2023 Jawa plum wood 35(L) × 11(W) × 34(H) inches

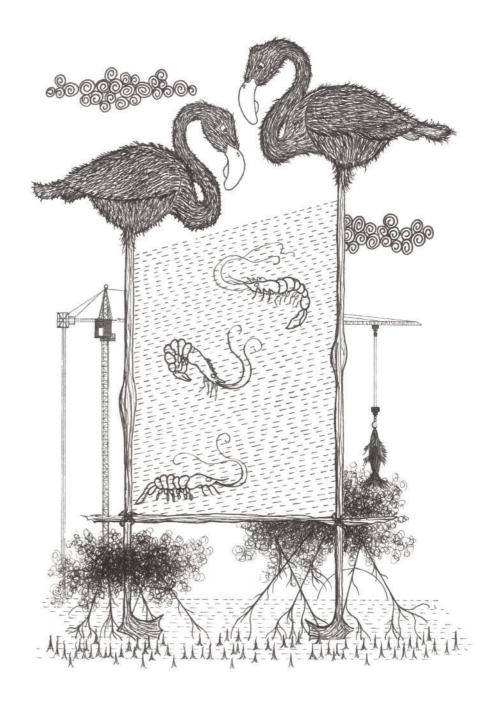


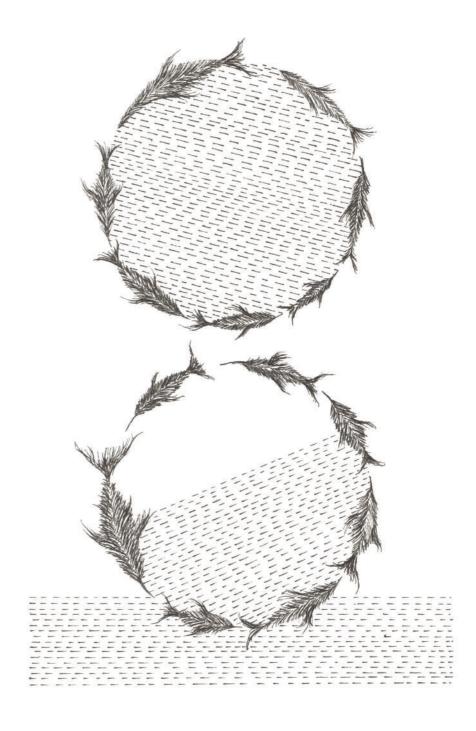
Arrival of Port Wine 5, 2023 Jawa plum wood 30(L) × 6(W) × 31(H) inches



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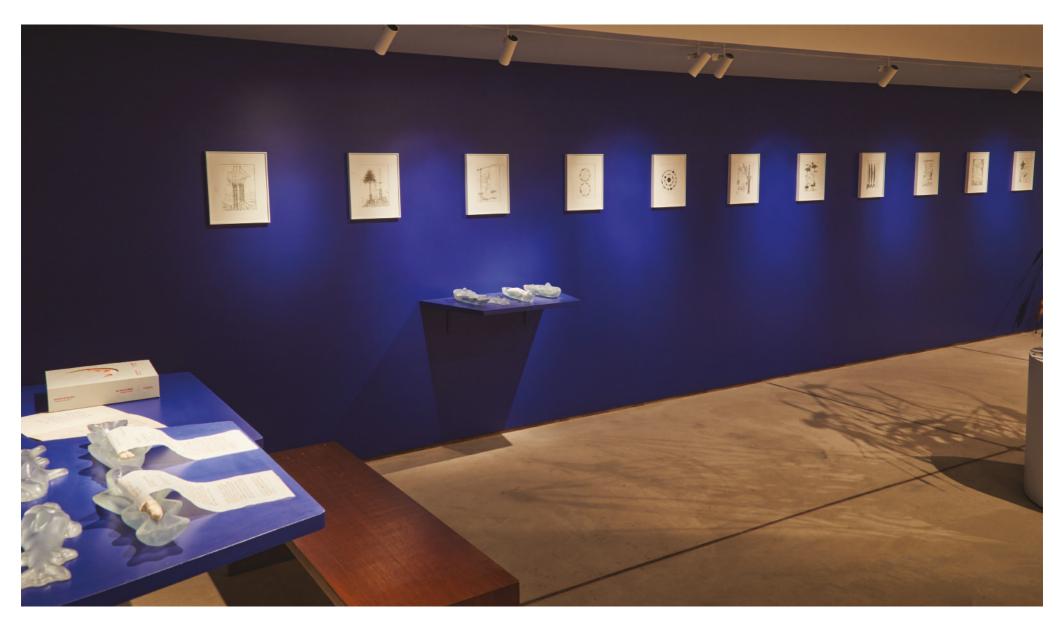








Ek Bagal Mein Chand Hoga Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan, 2022 Artist Book 9.3 × 10.8 × 3 inches Edition of 25



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