

A TOTAL OF 97 ARTISTS FROM 31 COUNTRIES HAVE DESCENDED ON COASTAL KERALA FOR ITS THREE-MONTH CELEBRATION OF ART

## STROKES OF GENIUS

**A sea of pain honouring refugees, a pyramid as a tribute to exiled poets, a novel painted on a wall — as art takes over Kerala once again, a ground report from the third edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale**

Ramesh Babu  
rbabu@hindustantimes.com

An imposing Egyptian-style pyramid greets visitors at the entrance to India's biggest art festival, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB). Slovenian artist Ales Stegar is busy taking a team of visitors into the dark interiors of the mammoth structure, titled The Pyramid of Exiled Poets. Covered with cow dung cakes, mud and bamboo mats, the pyramid is meant to represent a tomb for cast-out poets.

"It is a tribute to those who have lost their lives and homes for airing their writings," he says.

A couple of metres away, Chilean artist Raul Zurita is inviting visitors to walk through his Sea of Pain, an installation of placid, dimly lit, ankle-deep water meant as a reminder of the mounting woes of Syria's refugees. The artist has dedicated his work to 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, whose body washed ashore in Turkey last year.

Anamika Haksar is blending theatre and art in an installation that comments on growing injustice and inequality on the subcontinent. Titled Composition on Water, she is using Dalit writers' texts as the foundation for improvisation, encouraging actors to experiment with the audience so that each performance begins, unfolds and ends differently.

"This biennale is aimed at triggering a dialogue between multiple perspectives and possibilities," says curator Sudarshan Shetty. "Titled Forming in the Pupil of an Eye, more meanings emerge as one keeps the inner eye open."

An art biennale is a large-scale curated event held once every two years to bring art, artists and art lovers together without an eye on commerce; art cannot be bought at a biennale and artists participate for the prestige of having been invited.

A total of 97 artists from 31 countries have descended on coastal Kerala for its three-month celebration of art, which has left Kochi and its neighbouring Muziris awash in colour as art works pop up on walls, pillars and streetsides.

Argentine writer Sergio Chejfec, for

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instance, is writing an 88-chapter novel on the walls of Aspinwall, the sprawling sea-front heritage property — a one-time trading complex — the main venue of the KMB. The KMB is spread across 12 venues and 500,000 sq feet, with the art on display ranging from lampooning cartoons to mammoth installations, mellifluous music and thought-provoking performing art.

## ART APPRECIATION

"This is the experience of a lifetime," says Deepa Shah, 24, an IT professional from Bangalore.

"I liked the pyramid very much. Once inside you really feel these poets singing in front of you."

There is no commercial angle, adds K Meedu, 23, a professional dancer from Thrissur. "It is truly art for art's sake and you can see world famous artists in the midst of an enthusiastic audience."

Among the repeat visitors was Unnikrishnan Nair, 38, a school teacher from Palakkad who has been to every edition of the biennale since it was launched in 2012.

"This time has been the most organised so far, and the selection of works is amazing," he says.

"My favourite is the giant mural by PK Sadanandan, featuring icons and narratives inspired by mythology. Natural colour is used in the 15-metre-long and 3-metre-wide work."



(Left) Visitors at an exhibition of works by artists from the Pepper House Art Residency programme.

(Below) Chilean artist Raul Zurita's Sea of Pain uses placid, dimly lit, ankle-deep water as a reminder of the mounting woes of Syria's refugees.



(Above) Slovenian artist Ales Stegar at his installation, The Pyramid of Exiled Poets.

IMAGE BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

(Right) Feudalism and Imperialism, part of a special show of works by the little-known rebel artist Brij Mohan Anand.

IMAGE COURTESY BM ANAND FOUNDATION



Among the 22 volunteers who have put their lives on hold to help plan and organise the mammoth endeavour is recent architecture graduate Pavneet Singh, 24, who has come all the way from Chandigarh, driven by his love for art.



(Above) Graffiti at Cabral Yard, Fort Kochi, celebrates the three-month long biennale.

"It is nothing to do with my profession. But art is my first love and I wanted to be a part of the biggest art event going," he says. "I just finished my course, so this is my break. I'll be here for a month."

## REBELS WITH A CAUSE

About 2 km from the main venue, at Gallery OED, a collective of 16 artists from Artists in Residence, a 45-year-old US-based women's art initiative, have 16 of their works on display.

"Our art offers a wealth of inquiry and insight into mutable and shifting senses of identity that might be defined by gender, race, ethnicity or geography," says curator Kathrynn Myers.

There's also a special exhibition of the work of rebel artist Brij Mohan Anand (1928-1986), a relatively unknown painter

whose highly political art served as a raised voice against neo-imperialism and cultural indoctrination in the last century.

"The works of such undiscovered artists best capture the spirit of their time as seen from the common man's perspective," said acclaimed filmmaker Shaji N Karun, inaugurating the exhibition.

Another interesting feature of the third edition is the Student Biennale, where works by 470 aspiring artists from 46 art schools across the country — ranging from Imphal Art College in Manipur to Goa College of Art in Panaji — are on display.

"The student biennale platform will channel the energies of the mammoth art event into the Indian art education system. It is expected to mature into a space to explore diversity of styles and creativity," says artist Bose Krishnamachari, co-founder of KMB.

"People have taken it up in a big way. Kochi is now on top of the art map," adds fellow co-founder Riyas Komu.

What next? Organisers are upbeat after Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who inaugurated the event, promised it a permanent venue.

Currently, besides Aspinwall, some of the venues spread out across Kochi and Muziris include the Pepper House and Kashi cafes, the Durbar Hall grounds, the Dutch Warehouse godown and the heritage Kottapuram Fort.

VARIETY

## PALETTE PLEASER TWO INDIAN ARTISTS LEND THEIR SKILLS TO A HAND-PAINTED VAN GOGH FILM

## MAKING AN IMPRESSION ON THE BIG SCREEN

Anesha George  
anesha.george@hindustantimes.com

It's an 88-minute film that looks, for all the world, like a moving Van Gogh painting.

Loving Vincent is being called the world's first hand-painted animation feature. It has taken an international team of 115 artists from 19 countries two years to create. And two Indian painters were part of the massive endeavour — Hemali Vadalia, 32, of Mumbai and Shuchi Muley, 34, of Bhopal.

Both were software engineers before they switched to fine art. "I would make caricatures of all my colleagues and they would tell me I should have been an artist. So I thought, why not?" recalls Vadalia, who went on to study classical realism for two years in Italy and at the Grand Central Atelier in New York City. Muley made the switch while working as a software engineer in San Francisco in 2014.

Written and directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman, Loving Vincent traces the turbulent life of the Dutch Impressionist master, Vincent Van Gogh, using art work that recreates his thick, bold brush strokes, frame by frame.

The selection process was massive but fairly democratic. "We started with a team of Polish artists and then invited applications from around the world. We knew we needed scores of talented and enthusiastic painters," says Emma Green, digital marketing manager for Loving Vincent.

**We started with a team of Polish artists and then invited applications from around the world. We knew we needed scores of talented and enthusiastic painters. We received more than 5,000 submissions, in batches, and in batches we invited the ones whose work was most impressive to trials. Those that could clearly replicate Van Gogh's style were selected.**

EMMA GREEN, digital marketing manager for Loving Vincent

ferent parts of the world to harmonise with each other on canvas was the biggest challenge, says Welchman, who incidentally won an Oscar for his animated short film, Peter and the Wolf, in 2008.

"There are still differences between the shots done by the different painters," he adds. "But I like it, because it shows that the film was hand painted by individual artists."

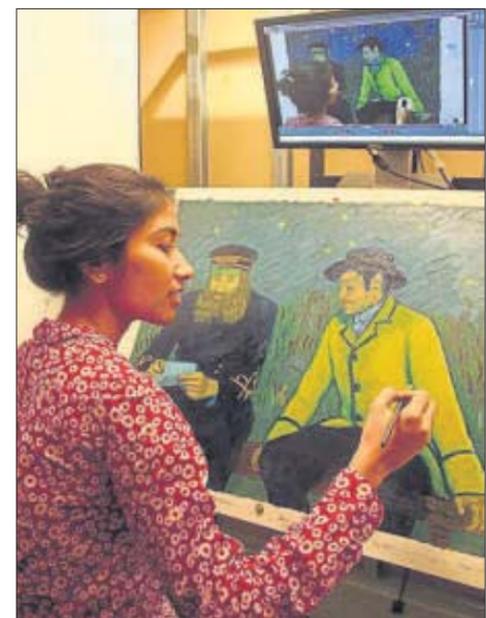
Production was completed in December — a mammoth 62,450 frames in oil paint — and the movie is set for release in 2017. The film chronicles Van Gogh's life and work, explores the legends surrounding his death from what he had claimed was a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The plot includes interviews with real-life characters at locations in Paris that were depicted in Van Gogh's paintings.

"When I first found out about the project



more on web

To hear from the artists and see more of their work, go to hindustantimes.com/lifestyle



(Mumbai artist Hemali Vadalia and (above left) Shuchi Muley from Bhopal spent three weeks just learning to mimic the style of Dutch master Impressionist Vincent Van Gogh.

in 2012, via a video on YouTube, I was amazed by the concept," says Vadalia. "If Van Gogh was to conceptualise a film today, this is how it would probably look, in his distinctive style. So I applied with my portfolio and, after a test at the Break Thru Films studio in Gdansk, Poland, in May, I was selected."

What followed were three weeks of intensive training to master the strokes and colour palette. "For the next five months, we worked for almost 12 hours a day at our personal work stations and I created 358 painted frames for seven different shots," Vadalia adds.

At each workstation, film footage was projected frame by frame onto the artist's board. He or she then painted over it; the painting was photographed, erased, and work on the next frame began.

"Depending on the length of the shot, we mixed paints in large volumes and labelled

them under categories like 'skin' and 'jacket' so that we could maintain a sense of continuity," Vadalia says.

For Muley, it was experience to cherish. "I had always been heavily influenced by classical realism, which focuses on detail. Here the challenge was to step into the shoes of one of history's most creative minds and recreate the art of a different era, even limiting the use of colours to what was perhaps available in the 1800s," she says.

Despite language barriers, considering that the artists came from countries as varied as the Ukraine, Russia, Ireland, Spain, Bulgaria and Holland, the artists all got along and learnt from each other, Vadalia adds.

Muley, for instance, honed her landscapes with help from her American roommate and Loving Vincent team member, Tiffanie Mang. "There were painters and

also sculptors who taught us minute details about replicating the human anatomy," she says. "It was a mixed group of artists, some established and others amateurs, and everyone was brimming with ideas."

The highlight, both women say, was when the real-life cast and crew visited the studio. "I remember when Douglas Booth, who plays one of the main characters, Armand Roulin, walked in. We were strangers, but I knew every detail of his face," says Muley, "from the twitch of his nose to the smile that played at the corner of his lips, because I had recreated it on canvas so many times!"