

The city of art

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A different tune: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's installation 'Pan-Anthem', at David Hall, is an interactive soundgraph composed of speakers. The speakers each play the national anthem of a different country and are arranged in the order of per capita military expenditure. - Photo: Thulasi Kakkat

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale uses the city as a wellspring and not merely a venue. Held over three months and with nearly 100 artists, it has plenty for all

The success of a festival is measured not merely in the number of tourists it attracts but rather its connection with the city. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2014 (KMB, which opened last week and runs till March 29, 2015) achieves this in no small way. Unlike many leading national festivals (think Jaipur Literature Festival) that use a city as simply a venue and not a wellspring, the KMB foregrounds the city. It is a festival inspired by Kerala and made for its people. Most of the artworks have been commissioned specially for KMB and the artists draw richly from Kochi's history as a port and thus as a starting point of discovery.

The rather boho Fort Kochi, where it is easier to find a beer than a *mundu*, is the main venue of the biennale. However, the festivities spill out to the other and, one might say, very Mallu, very non-hippie islands. I found myself at a packed Kathakali performance in the Changampuzha Park. Nary an artsy hipster was to be found here. Instead locals, some of whom had come especially for the performance, and others who had spurned their evening amble or game of carrom to watch the dance, scrambled for seats. The KMB is not cloistered behind gallery facades and glass walls, it dwells in nooks and crannies and beseeches to be discovered by one and all. And that is its biggest achievement. As artist Parvathi Nayar said at the BMW Art Talk, this biennale has been born from the soil where ancient interactions once took place.

While art is the undoubted cynosure, KMB has plenty for everyone; from a film festival to a students' biennale where young curators engage with the work of art students to workshops for children, and daily cultural programmes and seminars on history.

The art itself risks getting a bit daunting. What with 94 artists (nearly half are from India), from over 20 countries showing in eight venues, you will suffer from a problem of plenty. To make life easier, follow the "preferred designated walkway" assigned by festival curator and artistic director Jitish Kallat. The rooms at Aspinwall House (the main site) are helpfully numbered one to 69, and it makes ample sense to follow the sequence, as Kallat and his team have curated the biennale in a way that the taste of each project serves as an aperitif to the next. While the themes and treatments of the works are worlds apart, they all engage with the here and now. The art on display hasn't been created in abstraction, rather it is an attempt to see the world from different perspectives — be it up close or up above. Explaining the layout, Kallat said, "I think of this project as an observation deck, which provides a view out into the world. I would recommend a viewing *through* the biennale and not *of* the biennale."

Artistic interpretations and artspeak often sound turgid and highfalutin. The organisers, for example, could have come up with a simpler festival name than Whorled Explorations, which is both an unfortunate pun and an emptiness. While the write-ups provide useful perspectives and ways of seeing, they prove fatiguing by the end. It is wisest to visit the KMB with plenty of time on hand and an open mind. And then to make it all your own.

The first perambulation of Aspinwall House risks leaving you numbed as there is simply too much to take in. But with every consecutive walkabout, you will absorb and appreciate more. Located right by the jetty, the sea will accompany you along your explorations. Don't hurtle through 69 works, rather choose the handful that speak to you and spend time with them and the sea outside the window.

Lebanon-born Mona Hatoum's installation 'Undercurrent' (2004), consisting of a web of electric cable and light bulbs, immediately caught one's interest. The light bulbs leading out from gently twisted wires respond to the breath of viewers — the closer you step, the brighter they flicker. You can interpret this circle of light as you wish, a warning of danger, a halo of light or perhaps, Christmas baubles. Malayalee artist Aji VN's untitled landscapes of charcoal on coloured paper evoke a black-and-white Kerala. Unexpected details reveal themselves the longer you stare at these works, where the future and the past seem to coexist simultaneously. Now based in Rotterdam, the artist says, "Kerala is not simply an exotic landscape. It has other vibrations... and I wanted to touch upon those."

Another fascinating work, which draws from Kerala's maritime history, is Bengaluru-based Pushpamala N's 'The Arrival of Vasco da Gama' (2014). In this photographic work, she recreates an 1898 painting by a Portuguese painter, which depicts the first meeting between Vasco da Gama and the Calicut Zamorin. But the twist in the tale — as there must be — is that here Pushpamala masquerades as Vasco. While the photograph is a tongue-in-cheek upturning of history, it also raises questions about who is the zamorin and who the voyager in today's world.

Everyone will have their own favourites, their own pieces that reach out and whisper to them, and that is the glory of the biennale. However, the smaller venues like Pepper House, David Hall and CSI Bungalow lend themselves to more intimate conversations between the art and the viewer. They also contain some of the highlights, such as Bharti Kher's 'Three decimal points' (2014), Gigi Scaria's 'Chronicles of the Shores Foretold' (2014), Benita Perciyal's 'The Fires of Faith' (2014) and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 'Pan-anthem' (2014).

It isn't a surprise that Anish Kapoor's 'Descension' (2014) is one of the biggest draws of the festival. The viewer walks into a room, which overlooks the sea, and encounters a vortex with swirling and churning waters. The technological prowess required to pull off an embedded water tub with dervish waters, was mammoth, to say the least. Engineers and architects were called in, pillars were removed and then reinstated. Located near the jetty, you will hit water as soon as you start to dig at Aspinwall. To embed the five-tonne water tub, with a copper fan at the bottom that was imported from London, required the installation of three tube wells to constantly pump out the water. One tube well continues to function.

These backstories of incredible labour and innovation, which helped fulfil the artists' vision remain invisible to the naked eye. But also prove the most interesting and telling.

This second biennale has been pulled off despite all odds. While the state government poured in ₹9 crore last time, it has so far given only ₹2 crore, though promises of more funds still linger. But Kerala is not a rich state and finances proved to be a major concern. A crowdfunding project, the Mumbai art world and a few corporate sponsors ensured that the festival was not called off.

While funds are scarce in Kerala, the labour unions are all too strong. Different sections of Fort Kochi fall under different unions of loaders. Which means loading and unloading of trucks often becomes a game of extortion and arm-twisting. The biennale team, made up of local and national experts, had to surmount these pressures on a daily basis.

As hammers and drills banged and shrieked around us, Kallat said, "This is art in action... These sounds are just part of the lyrics." The second Kochi-Muziris Biennale is certainly a symphony worth listening to once, and then again and again.