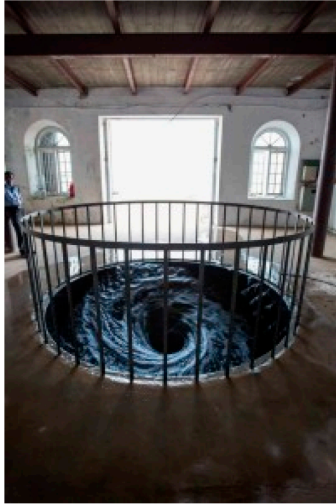


WHORLED EXPLORATIONS: KOCHI MUZIRIS BIENNALE 2014

Friday, 13 February, 2015 by Giulia Sartori Conte

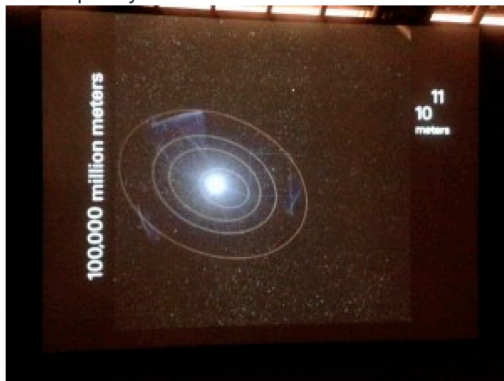


Anish Kapoor's *Descension* (2014)

Photo: Kochi-Muziris Biennale

Since 2012, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has turned Fort Kochi, a vibrant town overlooking the Arabian Sea, into a pivotal location for India's contemporary art scene. The 2014 *Whorled Explorations* Biennale, curated by artist Jitish Kallat, showcases the work of 94 artists from 30 countries. The eight venues include public spaces; warehouses facing the sea; and colonial heritage properties. Kochi, believed to coincide with the location of Muziris, an ancient port on the Silk Route, was occupied over the centuries as strategic trading site by the Portuguese, British, Dutch and Arab.

The curator aimed to use the town as a debate and observation platform to investigate the "mysterious expedition of planet Earth". Between the 14th and 17th centuries Kerala's School of Astronomy and Mathematics' advanced practices investigated human existence within the infinite universe. In the "Age of Discovery" explorers and merchants, early agents of globalisation, stretched the then-known World's boundaries, conquering and colonising. The exhibition interweaves "the bygone with the immanent, the terrestrial with the celestial", combining these fascinating, current themes, starting from their history. The Biennale's heterogeneous international and local audience is particularly striking: Fort Kochi's history as a cultural meeting point revived as the town welcomes the contemporary art world.



Charles and Ray Eames's *Power of Ten* (1977)

Photo: Giulia Sartori Conte

Kallat's ambitious conceptual framework is strengthened by the architecture and history of the buildings within which the exhibition unfolds; its themes are interlaced across venues, but also relate specifically to each heritage property's history. Aspinwall House, a 19th-century warehouse established by an English trading company, hosts the majority of the artworks. The fascinating video work *Power of Ten* (1977) by Charles and Ray Eames opens the exhibition, addressing the limits of human perception and the vastness of the cosmos. Marie Velardi's *Future Perfect* (2006) draws a map in time across the 21st Century, offering viewers a "memory of the future". These pieces set binary oppositions which will be keys to interpret the whole festival.



Picture 5: Dinh Q. Lê's *Erasure* (2011)
Photo: Giulia Sartori Conte

The presence of elements recalling the conceptual framework's celestial and journey-themed references is, at times, redundant. However, Aspinwall House's display is engaging and permeated by evocative pieces. Effective example of the recurring theme of the whorl, Anish Kapoor's water-vortex *Descension* (2014), destabilises viewers, recalling the fear of the unknown. The ship is interestingly used as a metaphor in Kahlil Rabah's photo rendering *Bioproduct* (2010), depicting a Gaza Strip-shaped aircraft carrier, and in Dinh Q. Lê's installation *Erasure* (2011), which narrates the forced displacement of Vietnamese people. Chen Chieh-jen's *Realm of Reverberations* (2014) powerfully documents the lives and memories of former patients of a Taiwanese asylum, an attempt to resist collective amnesia. David Hall, former military accommodation and battlefield, houses conflict-themed impressive works; Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pan-anthem* (2014), an interactive installation, relates national identities and patriotism with military spending's statistics.

The Biennale succeeds in tying together a diverse selection of thoughtful works. The exhibition encourages reflection on the topical theme of globalisation and its history, with an emphasis on Kochi's local reality, confirming this Biennale as a spot-to-watch for the global contemporary art scene.