

The Memory Keepers



Ali Akbar PN and Ujjal Dey explore themes of nostalgia through their multi-disciplinary practices



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By RAHUL KUMAR

Nostalgia is a reincarnation of shadows of events and people who are gone. Memory is a continent of alphabets and images that describe the past of the self, a people or a civilisation through the recognition of the present. Emami Art in Kolkata has two ongoing exhibits that explore the ideas of memory and associations.

The Salts of Many Seas showcases Ali Akbar PN's recent artworks. Multidisciplinary in nature, his thematic preoccupations traverse the delicate terrain of memory and identity, layered with socio-political undercurrents. The idea of memory is two-pronged for Akbar. "One is the collective memory, which is ingrained in the communities, and another is personal, which is intertwined with identity and experiences," he says. His works are developed from oral narratives and myths. For instance, his series titled *Chonakkuthira* is derived



Untitled work by Ali Akbar PN; (above) Ali Akbar PN; (right) Ujjal Dey

from a term that is locally used but originates in a foreign language. Akbar adds, "It connects to the large historical episodes of intercontinental exchanges. Given the lack of knowledge of the precise etymology, here the historical events and their resemblance only exist in the form of terminologies and stories." At a personal level, his conscience is developed through the experience and memory of growing up in a coastal village of Kerala.

In contrast Ujjal Dey's solo exhibition, *Dawn to Dusk: A Silent Symphony*, explores the intricate intersections of matriarchal labour and culinary spaces. His approach to textile art is informed by extensive research on textile histories of India, a nuanced examination of pre-industrial traditional dyes, and keen observations of the mundane. Dey is conscious of how simple rituals have undergone a significant change over the years. He says, "I have seen two generations (my grandmoth-

er and mother) of women doing daily household chores like cleaning, cooking and washing. To illustrate, kitchen work of the Indian household has shifted from a sitting posture to standing, since the tedious labour has been replaced by time-saving machines." His works titled *Material Memory* and *Mother and Child* are based on the memory of the traditional iron vegetable and fish cutter (*bonti/bainthi*) and stone slab with pestle (*sheel-noda/sibatta*).

Dey has a particular interest in vernacular textiles. His presentation features artworks ranging from smaller textile panels to substantial hanging pieces which remind one of the hand-painted, printed and dyed calicoes. "I was introduced to handmade textiles at Santiniketan during my graduate programme. My personal interest grew from the involvement of the mind and hand through the act of making," he explains. Akbar too responds to socio-political aspects of the region in his

art. "The formation of cultural spaces, its sharing, diffusion, its transmigration, and its response through geographical structures is something that excites me greatly. In Kerala, I was mostly working on the coastal region's rich yet marginalised cultural history. In Gujarat, I continued to explore myths, counter-myths, and meta-narratives, emphasising the rich heritage and rooted and interconnected histories," he adds. It is fascinating for him to reclaim certain histories and practices from fading, while critiquing the marginalisation and erasure of a cultural past.

Akbar relies heavily on archival research to form the basis of his work. Very often he refers to colonial-period archival images to understand the time. "As part of my research, I found a significant collection of archival images from the Omani-Zanzibar coast region, closely connected to the West Indian coasts. By observing costumes, people, and architecture from these archives, I create digital collages," he says. For instance, he composes individual figures by combining elements from various sources, including his own photographs, resulting in a jigsaw or

collage with meaningful juxtapositions.

In parallel, as a metaphorical marker of time and identity, Dey examines natural dyes that pre-date the industrial process of colouring textiles. The slow and sensorial process, elements of touch and smell add to the intuitive sensibility to his art making. The undesired outcomes, as part of the process, are carried forward as a language of spontaneity and sublimity.

WHEN & WHERE

The Salts of Many Seas and Dawn to Dusk: A Silent Symphony, Emami Art, Kolkata, till August 20