



Ali Akbar P N



*Chonakakkuthira - 4
Detail*

Ali Akbar P N is a contemporary artist whose thematic preoccupations traverse the delicate terrain of memory, myth, mobility, and heritage. He employs a sophisticated blend of archival research, site-specific study, and scholarly inquiry in his practice. 'The Salts of Many Seas' is an introduction to his recent and ongoing work. Imagined as a study lab or museum room consisting of objects, maps, and archives, the exhibition showcases his paintings, digital prints, sculptures, a book, and a video. Ali Akbar's artistic practice and worldview are profoundly intertwined with the maritime domain, emblematic of his upbringing in a coastal village on the periphery of the venerable port city of Muziris. The sea is a salient motif of his work, not only resonating as a geographical entity but also as an ideological choice that permeates the socio-cultural and politico-economic substrata of his formative milieu. Rooted in the coastal ethos of Kerala, the sea assumes multifarious roles, serving as both a locus of communal interaction and a reservoir of cultural heritage. Paradoxically, within the prevailing hegemonic cultural framework, the sea assumes an ambivalent status, simultaneously present in lived experience yet conspicuously absent in the dominant discourse. This dialectical tension between the sea's pervasive influence on local socio-cultural dynamics and its

marginalization within the broader cultural paradigms underscores Ali Akbar's work, which critiques the 'blind spots' and 'amnesia' in cultural representation and erasure inherent within the broader societal constructs. The histories of the coasts, maritime expeditions, and transoceanic migrations are neglected in scholarly discourse in comparison to the voluminous literature produced on the 'mainland' particularly centered around the dominant communities. But, ironically, it has been the interactions across the oceans that have wielded substantial influence over the region. These maritime engagements were significant in enhancing the social mobility of some communities in Kerala. Yet, the sea is radically absent in the collective cultural imagination of Kerala. This thematic absence serves as the fundamental premise and ideological orientation for Akbar's artistic practice. There is a 'maritime vision' in his work, as Dilip M. Menon suggests, the dominant historiographies, with its 'terrestrial imagination' see the ocean as the margin of thought. A deeper understanding of the movement of people, culture, and ideas would require a maritime vision (Menon, 2022).

Exhibition view, *The Salts of Many Seas*, Emami Art, 2024



Initially, his works were centered around the ideas of marginality, the psycho-social experience of isolation, social anxiety, and alienation. However, his relocation from Kerala to Baroda made a significant thematic and methodological transformation in his practice. He started engaging with the north and north-western regions and their social spheres on a deeper level. The indelible traumas of violence, the hindsight of riots, and the omnipresent specter of social disquiet are persistent thoughts in his work. Living in a time of social erosion and the perpetual imbalance of peace, Akbar adopted a strategic shift in his approach and methodology. A central impetus driving his broader artistic pursuits is the radical reclamation of secular and plural spaces embracing their syncretic elements. The strategic adoption of the representational approach advocating the reintegration of diverse elements is a means of social resistance and healing.

People, animals, and architecture are some of the recurring subjects in his work, signifying a temporal continuity; emblematic of social dynamics, cultural assimilation, and syncretic heritage. The dramatic depictions of people against various premises capture the diverse human experiences, cultural synthesis, and changes in social dynamics over time.

Animals, often imbued with ulterior symbolic motives are used to convey power, dominance, and colonization. The striking depiction of these motifs serves as narrative vessels that convey the power dynamics and political reconfiguration projects across the history of human civilization. The lion, a predominant symbolic presence across cultures is scrutinized as a symbol of imperial authority and colonization. The ubiquitous lion figures depicted in 'Relics 2', draw parallels from some of the symbolic acts of debunking iconographies as part of decolonization and anti-apartheid movements across the globe. However, works like, 'Chonakakkuthira-II', the term denoting imported supreme quality horses for martial and mercantile purposes, manifest a certain kind of progressive incorporation and politico-economic movement. These images of disparate symbols and figures carrying many layers of the past create a trans-temporal sensibility, presenting a familiar yet unseen geographical space that straddles mythological constructs and historical reality. By leveraging symbols and crafting imaginary narratives, these works challenge the entrenched power structures and emphasize the necessity of a comprehensive archival record that integrates the local and 'vernacular' historical narratives. Architecture, meanwhile, serves as a testament to the physical and cultural landscapes that shape and are shaped by human experience and interaction, embodying the confluence of cultural and political influences and contemporary realities. Through the integration of these elements, his work encapsulates the ongoing process of cultural synthesis and the depletions in it.

Installation view, *All That is Hidden: Mapping Departures in Landscape, Terrains and Geographies*, Emami Art, 2024



Installation view from India Art Fair, 2023, New Delhi

Ali Akbar's visual language is characterized by a striking blend of images of various temporal identities. Often with blurry and erratic strokes and seemingly flaky, torn, and decimated surfaces, his paintings invoke a sense of archival photographs and paintings. This visual style creates an effect that enhances a broader engagement with the paintings and the subjects depicted in them. The digital prints and videos, with the non-linear narrative and the compulsive juxtapositions of temporally disparate subjects, create a theatre of spectacular and ambiguous scenarios and events from the past. They create an ambivalent effect, invoking a critical inquiry into the dominant archival paradigms and challenging notions of truth, agency, and archival privilege. The sculptures often are reminiscent of religious and cultural relics and symbolic structures that historically catalyzed building narratives and were instrumental in establishing religious and political establishments. These symbols are often used to strengthen the existing narratives as well as to cancel the regressive social constructs and build the progressive identities of the present times. With this style of using images of disparate identities, Ali Akbar critiques how histories and memories are constructed and perceived. They engage with the complexities of time, memory, culture, and identities that shape our understanding of the world.

(From the curatorial note for 'The Salts of Many Seas' written by Sayanth R S)

References

Menon, Dilip M, 2022, *Oceanic Histories: from the terrestrial to Maritime*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.



Chonakakkuthira - I
Acrylic and inkjet print
on acid-free paper
Overall size variable
2023, Baroda



Chonakakkuthira - II
Acrylic and inkjet print
on archival paper
Overall size variable
2023



Chonakakkuthira - 4
(From the series, *Chonakakkuthira*)
Acrylic and inkjet print on
acid-free paper
Overall size variable
2023



Screw Pine in the Salty Wind
Archival inkjet print on archival paper and teak wood
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 3 works
2024, Baroda



Bank of Vatrak
Acrylic on paper and archival inkjet print on archival paper
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 2 works
2024, Baroda



Detail of *Bank of Vatrak*

Overleaf
Installation view of *Relics - 2*
Acrylic on paper, archival inkjet print on
archival paper, clay and silicone
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 7 works
2024, Baroda



Untitled
Acrylic on paper
7 x 10.2 inches
2024



Reincarnation of Myth - 1
Acrylic on paper and archival inkjet
print on archival paper
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 4 works
2024, Baroda



Reincarnation of Myth - 2
Detail

Reincarnation of Myth - 2
Acrylic on paper
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 3 works
2024, Baroda



Overleaf
Untitled
Acrylic on canvas and archival print
12.5 X 23 inches overall
Suite of 6 works
2022



Stills from

The Time Imagining From Now

Digital video

Dimension variable

Duration - 3:02 minutes

Single-channel black and white video with no sound

Unique Work

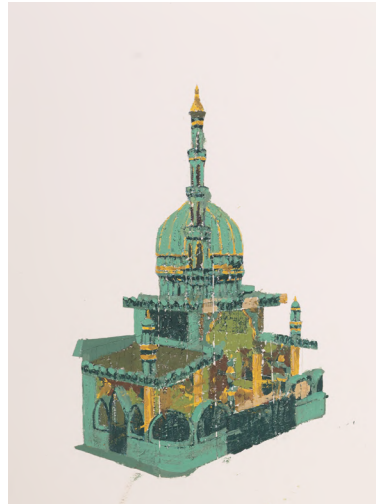
2024, Baroda and Kolkata

Detail





With a Number of Exceptions from Earlier - 1
Acrylic, archival print and charcoal on acid free paper
25 x 49 in. (63.5 x 124.5 cm.)
2022, Baroda



Fatehpura
Acrylic and inkjet print
on acid-free paper
Overall size variable
2023



Procession of Mourners - 2
Acrylic and archival inkjet on paper
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 4 works
2024, Baroda



Hijron Ka Khanqah
Acrylic on paper
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 2 works
2024

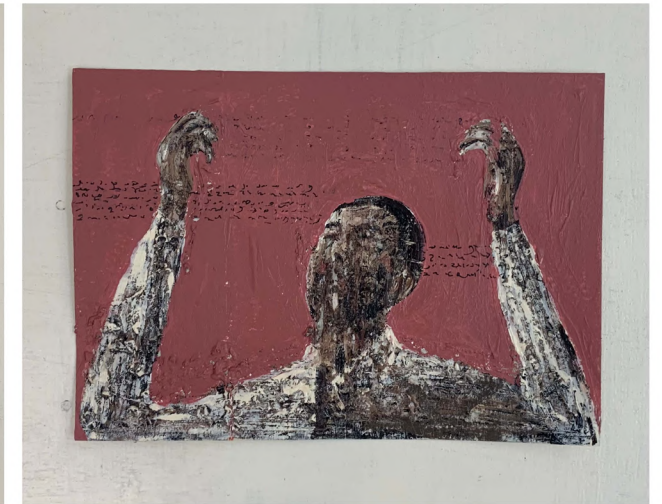
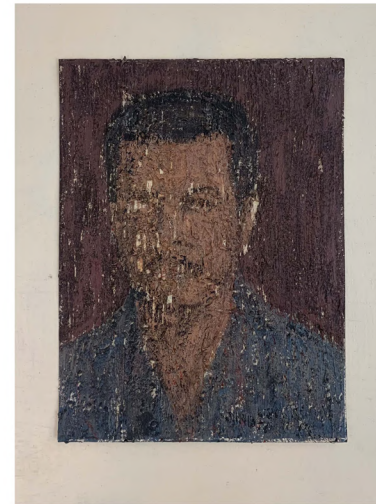


Reincarnation of Myth - 3
Acrylic on paper
Overall dimension variable
Suite of 4 works
2024

‘My practice primarily involves documenting and collecting photographs or images, mostly related to heritage and culture. I focus my research on the formation of cultural and social structures and their role in shaping personal interactions and social and behavioural patterns. Using the collected resources, I create images juxtaposing and repurposing symbols, motives and imageries, which further go into paintings, books, videos, digital prints and sculptures.’

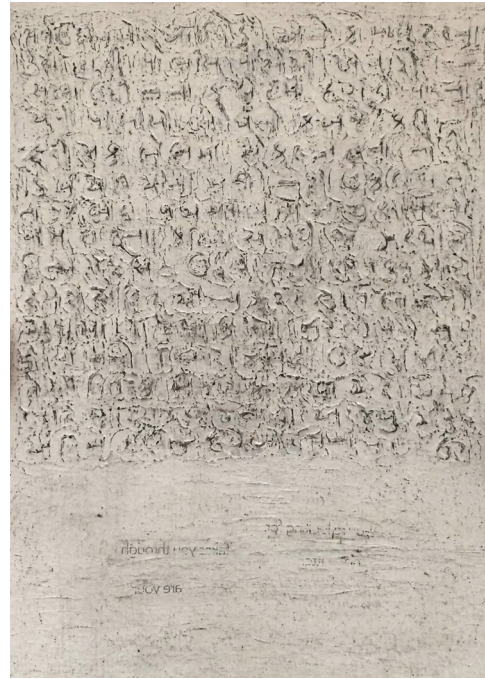
Ali Akbar P N

Untitled
Collage, acrylic, archival pen
on acid free paper
Overall size variable
Diptych
2023





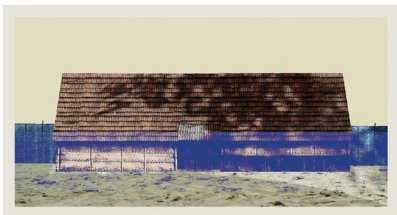
Untitled
 Acrylic, collage and
 charcoal on acid free paper
 8 x 12 inches overall
 Diptych
 2022



Untitled
 Collage, acrylic, matte medium, oil
 pastel, charcoal and archival pen on
 acid-free paper
 9 x 14 inches overall
 2022



Overleaf

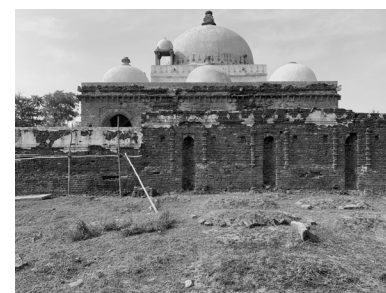
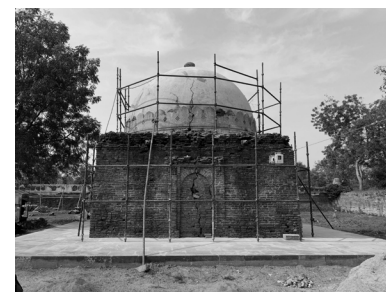


Assemblage
Acrylic, transparent paper,
collage, inkjet print, archival
print and acid-free paper
Overall size variable
2023



Untitled
Inkjet print and acrylic
on acid free paper
10.5 x 16 inches overall
Diptych
2023

Parallel River of Mahmudabad - 2
Acrylic on paper
30 x 34.6 inches each
2024



Parallel River
Archival inkjet print on archival paper
9.4 x 7.1 inches each
2024
Ahmedabad

Book - 3
Mixed media
12 x 8.5 inches book dimension
21work sheets
2021



Ali Akbar P N in his studio





Composition - 1
Acrylic, collage and charcoal on acid
free paper
28 X 45 inches
2022

The Myth of Great Floods
Collage, inkjet print, acrylic, charcoal
on acid free paper
22 x 30 inches
2022





Ali Akbar P N was born in 1996 in Koolimuttam, Central Kerala. He completed MVA in Painting from Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara, Gujarat, in 2020 and BFA in Painting from the Government College of Fine Arts Thrissur, Kerala, in 2018.

Ali Akbar was selected by an eminent jury for the first award at the annual all-India open call awards and exhibition, IMAGINARIUM 2.0 at Emami Art Kolkata 2022, and he participated in the IMAGINARIUM 3.0 Residency at Emami Art in 2024.

He has participated in many exhibitions, including All That is Hidden: Mapping Departures in Landscape, Terrains and Geographies, Emami Art, Kolkata, 2024; Fault Lines: Visual Symptoms of Discordances in Indian History at Conflictorium, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Embark, 2023, Baroda; India Art Fair 2023; Baroda Anuelle 2023, Gallery White Vadodara; Architecture Digest Design Show in December, Mumbai, 2022; From Where All That Sweat? , Trivandrum 2022; The Flying Goat Show, Goa 2022; Open Studio, Baroda 2021; Untitled III Online Exhibition, Priyasri Art Gallery Mumbai 2020; Nasreen Mohammedi Studio Display, MSU Baroda 2019 – 2020; Prologue 18 Final Display, Govt. College of Fine Arts Thrissur 2018; Kala Mela Art Exhibition, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi 2018; Group Show in Onyx Art Gallery, Kochi 2017; Charcoal Group Art Exhibition, Calicut 2017; Kasthuri Sreenivasan Trust Annual Show, Coimbatore 2017.

He currently resides and works in Vadodara, Gujarat, India.

Emami Art is a leading Indian contemporary art gallery and a platform for cultural production. Established in 2017 in Kolkata, Emami Art represents emerging, mid-career and established artists and organises a dynamic programme of exhibitions and public seminars. Since its inception, the gallery has curated and hosted intimate and large-scale exhibitions and regularly participates in national and international art fairs and conferences.

With a focus on a future-forward, complex, multi-dimensional approach that echoes South Asian history, the programme explores socio-cultural and geo-political narratives in relation to visual art practices today. As part of its knowledge-sharing and archiving activities, Emami Art regularly hosts talks, seminars, panel discussions and conversations between artists, curators and audiences to create a safe space for critical engagement.

Deeply committed to promoting a regional, national and international agenda through innovative and alternative programming, the gallery places emphasis on knowledge production and socially conscious themes. Emami Art aspires to be a catalyst of change, research, innovation and inclusivity and welcomes all sections of society.

EMAMI ART

©Emami Art, 2023
www.emamiart.com

*All rights reserved.
No part of the text or photographs
may be produced without permission
of the copyright holders.*

Published by
Emami Art
Kolkata Centre for Creativity
777, Anandapur, E.M. Bypass
Kolkata 700107

Image Courtesy:
Artist and Emami Art

Design Consultancy:
Ushmita Sahu
Texts & Editing:
**Ushmita Sahu, Sayanth R.S.,
Sriza Ray**

Publication Design:
Rajarshi Dutta

Paper Specification:
**Munken Pure, 100 GSM
SONA Cordenons**

Printed at:
CDC Printers Pvt. Ltd.

Printed on:
January 2024