

# BIG ART

The art, artists and everything in between.

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## AN AFTERNOON IN KOCHI



*Ferry ride towards Fort Kochi*

It was a rainy afternoon with a dense blue-grey sky, rolling clouds and a damp breeze, when I decided to take a ferry across from Ernakulam to Fort Kochi. I was retracing my steps and revisiting the aftermath of the third Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Gone were the bustling streets brimming with tourists, art enthusiasts, enlivened locals and the December Christmas frenzy. On this Sunday afternoon, the streets were calm, some even empty, shutters pulled and curtains drawn. It has now been a few months since the culmination of the biennale, and everybody seemed to be on vacation.



*Iranna at Kashi Art Gallery*

I stopped to check on Aspinwall House, but so had the ex-deputy prime minister, L.K. Advani! I decided to steer to Kashi Art Gallery instead. G R Iranna's works encompassed the front room that one had to pass through before arriving at the café: that's how most art-café's are designed. Tanya Abraham the curator of the gallery says, "Kashi art gallery is here to support artists who have great skill that needs to be exhibited. We also exhibit art to offer education to visitors. This happens mainly in the gallery space attached to the café as many who are oblivious to art visit the space.

"We have two other gallery spaces as well, where shows extend. Kashi is a patron of the Biennale and to us it's very important that we support an event that adds so much cultural value to society," adds Abraham, who sees a bright future in Kochi's art market. Kashi has been in constant touch with the community beyond the boundaries of the gallery, executing projects to benefit art in schools through NGOs like the Art Outreach Society, colleges and the public in general. Community projects were worked on in the last biennale. "What we need is more art education in schools and more artists taking up roles of teaching."



*Outside David Hall*  
Photo: Neha Sankhla

David Hall in the parallel neighbourhood stands amongst the numerous vintage buildings. The 17th century Dutch building with a debatable history has undergone several purposeful transformations over the four centuries. The house was christened after its last Jew owner David Koder and the space combined with a cafe is used today for cultural activities. Seven years ago, only a little before the Biennale's first edition in 2012, David Hall was transformed into a space for the arts where contemporary art exhibitions were held. Renting out the space and preparations for the biennale begins at least seven months in advance. During the off-season, the space remains open and puts up humble displays of private collections.

Charles Venantius has lived in the town of Kochi for the past 55-57 years. His insightful narrations came from his position as a native as well as that of the current manager of David Hall. "Contemporary art in Kochi has been an experience and is developing only since the past ten years. With the Biennale, the town itself has undergone a transformation. The locals have developed an inclination to the arts, one might not understand but to ensure one's role as an enthusiastic spectator," says Venantius. However, "Kochi has been warm towards the growing tourism but we are quite apprehensive about the amount of garbage this town is accumulating!"



*Pepper House Library*

Bright wall art and a sudden heavy downpour compelled me to enter Ballard Bungalows where a short chat with Markose led me to believe that art can reach out to anybody if one takes a keen interest in it. Markose, who otherwise works at the hotel, has been enthusiastic about art and the art market ever since the first biennale. Alongside his job at the hotel, he has been in constant dialog about art with artists and visitors. Now he believes art is an important component of society that everyone should indulge in. “It took at least two biennale interactions for the locals to capture the essence of art, the third was certainly successful.” The fourth edition already holds more potential, “it will turn out to be larger than the past three, also because the liquor policy is going to be lifted in Kochi. Hotel businesses will also fare better,” he predicts. He is optimistic about the future of art in Kochi and wants to do the little he can, to promote and involve his network of people in it.

Vipin Dhanurdharan sat at a table, scanning through a book in the quiet of the Pepper House Library or LaVA (Laboratory of Visual Art), a contribution of Bose Krishnamachari’s personal collection. Pepper House was founded on 12/12/12 when the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale was inaugurated and has ever since been a space devoted to biennale activities. When not engaged in the biennale activities, the house is used as studio spaces and for residency purposes. The residency is conducted in collaboration with Goethe-Institute encouraging student-exchanges and local community interactions. The Design Studio, library and the café, otherwise keeps the place alive. “Over the past few years, more students seem to be interested in reading art books and acquiring art knowledge, very soon art education in schools will be normalized”, says Dhanurdharan who has been an active member of Pepper House since its initial days.



*K Reghunadhan at Gallery OED*

A walk to the other side of town brought me to Gallery OED in Mattancherri, a congenial space with an ongoing display of the gallery's private collection. Since August 2012, the current location for the gallery at Fort Kochi was selected, the first having been founded nine years ago in Ernakulam. Gallery OED maintains a total of four spaces, sometimes running parallel exhibitions or just putting up a display of their private collections. During the Biennale, the spaces are lent out for collateral shows. "Australian artist Fiona Hall and Nalini Malani marked the first biennale's inaugural show at this space," says Dilip Narayan, owner and founder of Gallery OED. "We have continued holding international shows and maintained collaborations with international curators," he adds. For future projects he indicates, "The Biennale has certainly shown new light to the art scene in Kochi. However, I believe there is a big gap between academic art students and contemporary art that the Biennale presents; students don't seem to capture it."

Perhaps it is time to reorganize institutional art education? A conversation for some other day, but for now I was going to sip some coconut water and enjoy the clouds on a lazy Kochi afternoon.