

ANCESTORS | पूर्वज

Sahej Rahal

Curated by Puja Vaish

Ancestors is specially curated for the CSMVS Museum's centenary. The exhibition features artworks that resonate with the underpinnings of the museum in telling stories of civilisations.

Story-telling becomes an important tool in building a shared consciousness, when History is understood not as what is lived, but what is remembered.

The Museum as a site of collective memory is embedded with tales of rich local and global cultures and historical events. Through its hundred years, the Museum has been impacted by a colonial past, the birth of the nation, World Wars and two pandemics. The museum's building was repurposed as a military hospital during World War I and the Spanish Flu before it could open as a museum. The memoirs of the institution and its rich collections of ancient, natural and modern history reflect how we record and connect material and data sets of the past to chronicle our realities.

As the Museum considers its own social and cultural responsibilities in a post-pandemic world, the exhibition is an invitation to interrogate present-day fables that drive our collective conscience.

Sahej Rahal's practice uses archaeology as metaphor, where trajectories of the rise and fall of imagined civilizations are unearthed through the debris of lapsed time, prompting ruminations on the 'origins' and the 'apocalypse' and all that transpires in between.

Rahal weaves mythological narratives of otherworlds that traverse through remote pasts to distant futures. The exhibition slips these narratives into the museum, staged as an archaeological tomb site of the future. Visitors enter a make-believe crypt with relics of a post-human civilization. An accumulative archive takes shape through drawings, paintings, sculptures, writings, performances and an artificial intelligence program, forming the fragmentary 'evidence' to realms of imagined civilizations, spirit worlds and post-human eventualities. In piecing the fragments, the museum becomes a site for building stories that describe the world, its inhabitants and its belief systems, through a consideration of the ecological, human and digital imprints that are left behind.

'Ancestors' precludes with a painted panel from the CSMVS Museum that supplemented the Museum's display of archaeological finds of ancient stone tools and hand axes. The panel is a fictionalised illustration from the history of evolution, wherein our ancestors from two stages in human evolution are shown engaged in battle, one wielding stones versus the other's sharpened stone tools. Invented scenarios that present insights into civilizations are extended through the exhibition.

The show presents an immersive installation that the artist conjures from a curious case of a burial urn from the post-Harappan Chalcolithic excavation site of Inamgaon in Maharashtra. The burial of a corpse which is incongruous with others from the site, is at the centre of a debate between archaeologists as to the corpse's origins and identity within the believed social structuring of the ancient civilization.

Drawing from speculative archaeology, Rahal builds a parallel account which conceives of a generation that evolves after the extinction of humankind. References from folklore, science fiction, literature, urban legends, mythologies and video-games are incorporated to portray a futuristic ethnographic display of objects. In Rahal's story, the excavation site is overrun by indeterminate multi-limbed creatures that he creates through discarded objects and polyurethane foam. Their black spray-painted tar-like forms appear to be built from an accumulation of redundant objects from the past. An artificial intelligence program animates a similar creature that wanders in a vast deserted forest landscape, whose movements are conditioned by digital algorithms that respond to external audio stimuli. Disjointed from human cognitive experience, these artificial minds mutate and create their own mythologies of survival into the future.

Drawings by the artist from *The Book of Missing Pages*, attributed to a 'fictional archaeologist's' journal are displayed alongside myriad terracotta sculptures that mimic detritus from an archaeological dig site. The array presents an interstice where chunks of time are collapsed onto each other as artefacts seem to belong to different temporal realms, devoid of the neatness of categorization. Together with the drawings, they represent the infinite project of history. The deviant archaeologist as author of the diagrams plays the role of a saboteur or a conspirator who uncovers/plants anomalies that speak of secret civilizations. The revelations through the plot signal the process of historiography which excludes cultures and social histories that are incongruous with colonial and western modernist perspectives on which the grand arc of 'evolution' and 'progress' is predicated.

A series of short texts drawn from theories by archaeologists and cultural anthropologists channel the multiple readings of the beliefs and social orders of ancient communities. It connects the constructs of archaeology to ontology by assimilating ideas of mythologies, leisure, disease, death and ritual.

The exhibition peruses history as a subjective process through which facts are mediated. In presenting a wide swathe of time, it shifts the focus from a myopic vision in which ethnocentrism, wars, social hierarchies, civil unrest drive our thoughts and actions, to an exigent need for nurture, survival and co-existence. It urges an acceptance of the plurality of mythologies and beliefs that make communities, compelling an ethical engagement with the planet. It asks what we glean from history, who our successors would be and what kind of ancestors we would make through the world we leave behind.

-Puja Vaish



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