



The Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation presents

ANCESTORS | पूर्वज by Sahej Rahal

Curated by Puja Vaish

on occasion of the CSMVS Museum's centenary

19th February 2022 - 8th May 2022

This project was made possible by the support of the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation Installation Art Grant 2019



Curatorial note

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' preludes 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, war, social hierarchies, civil unrest drive our thoughts and actions, to an exigent need for nurture, survival and coexistence. 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



About the Artist

Sahej Rahal was the recipient of the first Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation (SSAF) Installation Art Grant in 2019. This project was made possible by the support of the SSAF.

Sahej Rahal is primarily a storyteller. He weaves together fact and fiction, to create counter-mythologies that interrogate narratives that shape the present. This myth-world takes the shape of sculptures, performances, films, paintings, installations, and AI programs, that he creates by drawing upon sources ranging from local legends to science fiction. By bringing these into dialogue with each other, Rahal creates scenarios where indeterminate beings emerge from the cracks in our civilization. Rahal's participation in group and solo exhibitions includes the Liverpool Biennial, the Kochi Biennale, the Vancouver Biennale, the MACRO Museum Rome, Kadist SF, ACCA Melbourne, CCA Glasgow. He is the recipient of the Cove Park/Henry Moore Fellowship, Akademie Schloss Solitude Fellowship and most recently the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation Installation Art Grant in 2019.

About the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation

The Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation functions as the Modern and Contemporary Art wing of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai.

Jehangir Nicholson was one of the earliest private collectors of modern Indian art. He acquired almost 800 artworks over 5 decades. The artworks in the collection date from the 1940s - early 2000s reflecting the significant trajectories of post-independence Indian art as well as the cultural milieu of the city. It was Nicholson's ardent wish to make his collection accessible to the public. As early as 1976, he formed an alliance with the National Centre for Performing Arts (NCPA) to open an exhibition space in the premises called the 'Jehangir Nicholson Museum of Modern Art'. It was the one of the first spaces in the city dedicated to Modern and Contemporary Art. When the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) opened in the 90s, Nicholson was on its advisory board and also exhibited works from his collection there. He spent his final years negotiating with the authorities for a space in the city to build a museum of contemporary art. In his will, he expressed a desire that a home be found for his collection where it would



be accessible to the public. After Nicholson passed away, the Executors of the Nicholson Estate formed the JNAF and entered into a collaboration with Mumbai's premier museum, the CSMVS where the Jehangir Nicholson gallery opened to the public on 11th April 2011. Since then, the Foundation has held several exhibitions, talks, workshops and programmes to showcase its vast collection and provide a platform for art.

For Listings

Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation presents '**Sahej Rahal: Ancestors**', Curated by **Puja Vaish**.

19th February 2022 - 8th May 2022

Exhibition Venue:

Jehangir Nicholson Gallery
Second Floor, East Wing
Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya,
159/161, Mahatma Gandhi Road,
Fort, Mumbai 400023

Timings:

10:15 am - 6 pm

Open all days

Entry:

Museum ticket applicable. Only double vaccinated visitors allowed

100 INR for Indian adults (above 15 yrs)

30 INR for children (5 - 15 yrs)