

A River Runs Through It

Mrugen Rathod's new sculpture seeks to revive the comatose Vishwamitri's rich past, notes **Sandhya Bordewekar**.

The focus of Mrugen Rathod's artworks has mainly been the ancient Vishwamitri river¹ which flows through the city of Baroda. His monumental 105 feet long, site-specific sculpture twists and turns, much like the undulating river, and hangs, suspended mid-air, in the corporate corridors of the Ark building that also houses the Ark Gallery, raising conflicting issues about myth and reality, greed and ambition, time and space, water and land, man and animal. Cheekily titled *Avataran (The Descending of the River Vishwamitri)*, after the popular Raja Ravi Varma painting depicting the descending Ganga, the Vishwamitri comes down the nearby Pavagadh hill (40 kms from Baroda and a UNESCO World Heritage Site) in a non-dramatic manner, a thin stream that gradually gains in volume by the time it enters the city.

Made with a stainless steel armature and stretched fabric, the sculpture is hollow and lit from within by LED lights. The armature traces, almost realistically, the 17 km stretch of the river's course through Baroda city. The fabric of the artwork, printed and painted, offers multiple layers of meaning. The simple checks alternate between green and yellowish-brown colours, indicative respectively of environmentally vibrant and built areas along the riverbank. A couple of small 'islands' slip away like chopped limbs, forlornly clambering up a wall or suspended mid-air, representing shallow areas that have been 'reclaimed' and to which the mother river has ceased to have access.

As a narrative sculpture, the imagery represents the historical periods of development along the river's banks. It also includes the most ancient inhabitants of the river – crocodiles. They populate the artwork as a combination of dark stony geometric scales, playing hide and seek with the green and yellow-brown checks of the fabric, challenging the viewer to spot them. "The scales of the *mugger* are deep-etched scars...", says Rathod. The artwork suggests to the viewer the presence of the collective genetic memory of these dinosaur-like reptiles – they are the only living repositories of the now-comatose river's past.

Rathod hints at historical human settlements through the shadows of the built structures as they exist today – the fortresses of the Rajputs and the Jain temples, the medieval monuments of the Gujarat Sultanate and the Indo-Saracenic buildings of Gaekwadi Baroda. Their



Mrugen Rathod. *Avataran (The Descending of the River Vishwamitri)*. Site-specific sculptural installation at ARK, Baroda. Cotton fabric, Rice paper, LED and SS Armature. Around 105'. 2018. Image courtesy the artist.

shadowy forms – domes, towers, fort walls, darwazas and temple shikharas – can be spotted in the folds of the fabric as it heaves and stretches, teasing the viewer to identify places and re-connect with the river. At its end, the sculpture turns the unruly river into a straitjacketed canal, its waters emptying into nothingness, a sharp comment on what 'riverfront' development often does.

Rathod manages to yank the frothing Vishwamitri issue out of its poisonous nallahs and scattered discursive groups into sanitized corporate corridors. As the architecture of the Ark building is conceptually based on the narration of the Great Flood or the Mahapralaya, it is indeed an ideal site to house the artwork. But then, given the context, would *Avataran* be reduced to being a glorified lamp sculpture lighting up a dark corridor? Would people look up, engage with the issue and reflect on its meaning? /

End Note: 1. Vishwamitri is a seasonal river that floods during the monsoon but is otherwise no more than a stinky gutter, snaking through Baroda city. A few years back, after the much-hyped Sabarmati 'riverfront' project in Ahmedabad with cemented shores and pumped water pumped from the Narmada, the state government decided to perform a facelift for the Vishwamitri. The project came in for a lot of criticism from the local public and was finally called off. Rathod's voice was amongst the many that actively questioned the environmental implications of the project.



SANDHYA BORDEWEKAR studied English and American Literature and has been writing on art since 1980, with a special focus on artists based in Baroda. She is an independent curator and works on theme-based exhibitions. She is currently the Managing Trustee of Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, and the Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh, working on endangered languages, and with Adivasi communities. Bordevekar has written regularly for *ART India* and is its correspondent from Baroda.

TEJAL PANDEY is a Mumbai-based photographer and writer. Starting her career as a photojournalist for the *Times of India*, Mumbai in 2007, she went on to work for *Time Out*, Mumbai and *Verve* magazines. Giving up a full-time role as Photo Editor in 2016, she chose to pursue a career independently and has since written regularly on art and photography, primarily for *The Hindu*, Mumbai, and online platforms like *Scroll.in*. She also dabbles in travel writing and photography and her work has been carried by *National Geographic Traveller India*, *Time Out Explorer*, *Air Asia India*. In addition to publications where she was employed, her photo work has been published internationally by *T Magazine*, New York, and *T magazine*, Japan. She is currently pursuing her own photo projects while simultaneously shooting for both commercial clients and documentary assignments for NGOs across India.



SONALI BHAGCHANDANI is a Research Assistant at Bodhana Arts and Research Foundation, interpreting archival material for upcoming publications. She writes on art at *The Hindu* and *ART India*. Sonali obtained a BA in English Literature from St. Xavier's College in 2016 and a diploma in Modern & Contemporary Indian Art and Curatorial Studies from the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, in 2017.

MARIO D'SOUZA received his postgraduate degree in Art History and Aesthetic Studies from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University of Baroda. His research interests include political imaginaries, the aesthetics of dissent, public acts of assembling like marching, singing, etc. He has also been researching the work and practice of Nasreen Mohamedi. He currently works as a Curator with Khoj International Artists' Association and has also contributed independently to publications like *The Wire* and *Times of India*. Recent curatorial projects he has contributed to include *Turn of the Tide* (2018), *Asia Assemble* (2017) and *Evidence Room* (2017) at Khoj. He is currently thinking about investigative art practices that negotiate law, architecture and journalism.

