

#HGCREATORS

'Dispersive Acts': Attend An Exhibition Exploring Colonial Botany & Indian Resilience



Dispersive Acts TARQ

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From whitening creams to the Indian jewels obscenely displayed in [British](#) museums, the long-lasting impacts of colonialism are clear. Even the fact that this publication is written in English has our history bleeding through every word on your screen. Yet, as obvious as these signs seem, colonial power also manifests itself as an undercurrent in the innocuous, often celebrated, parts of our lives.

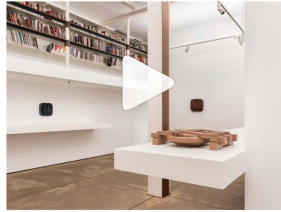
Today, with over 8,000 visitors a day, Rani Baug is a top [Mumbai](#) tourist attraction. It's an escape from busy Bombay life, commemorating biodiversity and heritage. We celebrate that it boasts over 160 years of life as India's oldest public garden. But we often tend to forget that Rani Baug was not always a space for Indian enjoyment and natural appreciation. Initially named Victoria Gardens, Rani Baug was a British colonial project. It was a site of scientific exploration for the British and an archive of stolen goods and exploited labour for us and other sites across the Americas, Africa, and Asia. This isn't to say that we shouldn't enjoy Rani Baug for what it is today; rather, it's an acknowledgement of the complexity that arises when our troubled past mingles with the present.

Amba Sayal-Bennett's latest exhibit at TARQ in Mumbai, '*Dispersive Acts*,' explores this concept of colonial [botany](#). In an interview with *Serenade Magazine*, Sayal-Bennett described Rani Baug as "both a colonial archive and a site of resistance." You can experience this duality from the moment you step through the garden's entrance, the iconic triumphal arch. Built in 1868, the arch is a relic of our colonial past, undoubtedly conceptualised by British minds and built on the backs of exploited Indian labourers. And yet, today, it's a gateway to Rani Baug, not Victoria Gardens. The garden is now decidedly *ours*- to name, enjoy, and keep alive.



DISPERSIVE ACTS

AMBA SAYAL-BENNETT
8 AUGUST - 21 SEPTEMBER 2024



VIRTUAL
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"DISPERSIVE ACTS" AT TARQ

Emerging from a strong belief that art is for the viewers, TARQ (@tarqmumbai) aims to bridge the gap between art and the audience.

For this presentation at TARQ, botanical gardens and reflections on taxonomic drawings take center stage, charting stories of oppression and resistance. Focusing on the landmark of Rani Baug (formerly Victoria Gardens) in Mumbai, Amba has been experimenting with various methods to address and challenge colonial history, which is reflected in the works on display.

The works by Amba Sayal-Bennett (@ambasayalbennett) presented at the show "Dispersive Acts" traces the movement of botanical matter across different continents. It forms part of a larger body of work exhibited across three sites—London, Mumbai, and New York.

Amba Sayal-Bennett is a British-Indian artist working across drawing, projection, and sculptural installation. Her practice explores how methods of abstraction are exclusionary and performative, crafting boundaries between what is present, manifestly absent, and othered.

8 August - 21 September, 2024
TARQ, Mumbai

(art, contemporary art, botany, sculpture, art exhibition, Mumbai, art in Mumbai, sculpture, drawing, art gallery)

#DispersiveActs #AmbaSayalBennett #ContemporaryArt #MumbaiGallery #MurtazaVali #Art #ContemporarySculpture #Botany #ColonialBotany #ArtExhibition #Sculpture #Drawing #ArtGallery #MumbaiArtGallery #Mumbai #TARQ

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One of Sayal-Bennett's sculptures reimagines this arch in an Art Deco style, reflecting the architecture that emerged in Bombay post-independence. Her work then echoes the rebellion of Rani Baug's renaming of its structure, making a stylistic choice outside of British colonial control. Sayal-Bennett's art also considers the battle between stifling colonial [architecture](#) and the unruliness of plant life in its most honest form. Consider the way British gardens are symmetrical and systematic, built-in complete opposition to the untamed, free growth of plants in the wild. For the British, our flora existed to be classified, in a vacuum where they could be taken and used without consideration of their environment. Sayal-Bennett's machine-produced sculptures showcase plants growing outside the realm of classification, playing with form and subject matter to capture our complex history of control and resistance.

ambasayalbennett
TARQ

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ambasayalbennett

Seed Coat, painted SLA, 31 x 31 x 7cm, 2024
@tarqmumbai

In my research for the shows @tarqmumbai @palmer.gallery @dianaohenry I became interested in instances of non-human agency. I came across Judy Willcocks and Kieran Mahon's writing on botanical drawings, and how this kind of illustration was a key component in the machinery which monitised plants. Voyages of discovery meant that thousands of botanical specimens were acquired and identified by European botanists, but due to the difficulty in getting live specimens back to Europe, illustrations were often made in situ. In these drawings, plants were often shown in isolation from any wider habitat on a blank background, encouraging the European scientific community to encounter them in terms of potential economic exploitation rather than part of a symbiotic ecosystem. I was interested in how the drawings themselves have a kind of agency as objects of knowledge affecting what knowledge is produced. The drawings became a way to encounter, but also active participants in, the production of a system of extraction and circulation.

In the context of rubber production in India, the rubber seeds taken from South America to India did not take root. The environment rendered the seeds useless, unable to grow or produce for colonial gain. This example stands against an understanding of nature as passive, a conception which goes hand in hand with the capitalist and colonial notion of nature as a resource to be extracted, profited from, and controlled. Here, the Indian climate and soil formed an insurgent infrastructure that refused to comply, refused to be used, and refused support this imposed crop.

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Rani Baug was once a tool of oppression, but today, our reclamation of such spaces is a sign of resilience. While archives of our past hold pain, we owe it to ourselves to [celebrate](#) our liberation rather than live in mourning. *Dispersive Acts* is a then reflection of our struggles, but also our triumphs. You can see this exhibition for yourself at [TARQ](#) from now until September 21.

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