

ARTS • 14 NOV 2024 • 4 MIN

Art Mumbai's Sculpture Walk reveals some deep-sea secrets

Artist Parag Tandel's installation uses local community knowledge to protest the upheaval of Mumbai's marine ecology

BY RADHIKA IYENGAR

'Vitamin Sea, Coastal Road Project 3' represents a particular marine organism—the plankton
Parag Tandel and IARQ



At first glance, Parag Tandel's peculiar-looking, disc-shaped sculpture stirs curiosity and awe. Its luminous shell, a phthalic blue-green hue, immediately draws you in. Though otherworldly in appearance, the sculpture is Tandel's representation of a particular marine organism—the plankton. Titled 'Vitamin Sea, Coastal Road Project 3', his installation gestures towards the fragile and inextricable relationship the Koli fishing community has with the sea and its living beings. The installation will be exhibited at Art Mumbai this weekend.

Mumbai's homegrown art fair gears up for its second iteration to showcase more than 5,000 artworks by a diverse range of artists, represented by over 70 exhibitors. From November 14 to 17, the city's Mahalaxmi Racecourse will transform into a sprawling makeshift gallery, brimming with creative wonders.

Tandel's work will be a part of a special Sculpture Walk curated by Veerangana Kumari Solanki. Featuring more than 20 large-scale sculptures, including Robert Indiana's iconic 'Love' sculpture, Ravinder Reddy's 'Devi' head, and British

Kumari Solanki. Featuring more than 20 large-scale sculptures, including Robert Indiana's iconic 'Love' sculpture, Ravinder Reddy's 'Devi' head, and British contemporary artist Julian Opie's 'Walking Figures', each piece is thoughtfully pitched in and around the fair's grounds, encouraging art aficionados to lean in, engage, interact, and pose for the 'gram.



Tandel's practice explores the material cultures and material memory of indigenous communities



The installation portrays the fragile and inextricable relationship the Koli fishing community has with the sea and its living beings

Tandel's sculpture, though ungainly in form, with a shell encrusted with pale-white barnacles, is at once beautiful and frightening. Organisms like planktons and jellyfish are a crucial part of the marine ecosystem. Among the Kolis, whale sharks (locally called 'Bahiridev') are revered as deities and are never hunted. This species subsists on countless planktons and jellyfish. However, indiscriminate urbanisation and global warming have caused an alarming decline in plankton which in turn is diminishing the whale shark population. Through his art, Tandel who is represented by Mumbai gallery TARQ, is registering his protest regarding the upheaval of our marine environments.

"The Koli community has been around for centuries and has learnt a very biophilic way of living with the sea. Our belief is that sea is a forest within a forest," says Tandel, whose oeuvre is deeply informed by his Koli background, the ecology, and the sea. "In fact, the coastal road project has destroyed major fishing grounds. This is something that has been going on ever since the seven islands' extensive reclamation. We lost major Bombay Duck breeding grounds, lobster grounds, we lost our largest oyster farm. All of us need to understand that we survive because of the oceans and seas around us."

Of all the iridescent, ethereal creatures sashaying in the deep cerulean waters, however, why did Tandel choose the humble plankton? "How do the Koli fishermen know that fish are near the shore?" he asks. "When planktons arrive, whale sharks follow them to consume them. Along with the whale sharks, more about our shared knowledge base," he explains over a Zoom call while seated in his studio in Thane, Mumbai. The loss of planktons and whale sharks in a way, trigger a loss of the community's knowledge systems, leading to a slow erasure of its identity.

Two construction rods stab the sculpture's textured body, signifying the violence of human invasions. The barnacles, made of concrete, are pierced by the rods as well. "I wanted to depict how barnacles, which purify the water, are also getting destroyed by industrialisation and development," the artist explains. "Symbolically, it shows how water is being polluted by human interference."



The barnacles, made of concrete, are pierced by construction rods



Tandel aims to show how water is being polluted by human interference

Tandel's practice explores the material cultures and material memory of indigenous communities, including his own. For instance, for one of his works titled 'Into the Bones-20199', he used the "early native technology" of Chhattisgarh's Dokhra metal craft, which is an ancient lost-wax casting technique. In his large-scale installation, 'How to Cook Bombay Duck in Various Ways', he

a symbol of loss due to the erosion of marine ecology. In similar vein, 'Vitamin Sea, Coastal Road Project 3' was cast using translucent resin, which harks back to the resin used in binding fibreglass. "Earlier, our boats were made of jackfruit wood. Now, fibreglass is used for making boats. So, I wanted to focus on glass-like resin for this sculpture," he says.

Over the years, Tandel (a surname that, incidentally, means 'captain of the ship') has been slowly shaping his own visual vocabulary, teasing out references from his community's traditions and rituals. He was deeply inspired by his late uncle, a folk singer whose songs were replete with oceanic landscapes and motifs. "I found a whole language in his songs; there were different local words for fish and other creatures. In a way, the folk songs became a curriculum or a repository for my art practice," he says, as he gets up to show a detailed, large, black-and-white sketch featuring octopi, crabs, fish eggs, and underwater flora. The sketch took him almost two years to complete.

discourse through my work. Even with 'Vitamin Sea', I want to challenge the idea of having a sculpture as a decorative, corner piece. I want people to reflect on what the sculpture is trying to say. Also, I'll continue to bring my Koli vocabulary into my art because somewhere, I feel we as a community are lost in Indian contemporary art."

While Tandel's evocative artworks are a documentation of his indigenous community, its fishing rituals and age-old wisdoms, they're also an invitation for us to look inwards: to realign and amend our own fractured relationship with the sea.

Art Mumbai is on from November 14 to 17 at Mahalaxmi Racecourse, Mumbai. Buy tickets [here](#).