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Parag Tandel

How to cook 'Bombay' ducks in various ways, 2023, Sculptural Installation, 26' x 8' x 14', Mild Steel, Dental Cement, Silicon Rubber, Wood, Bamboo, and Coconut Coir

Shristi Sainani speaks with the Artist Parag Tandel about the local foundation of his work in the Koli community and expansion into larger social, cultural, and archival practices.

Parag Tandel (b. 1978), is a Mumbai-based artist with a Postgraduate Diploma in Creative Sculpture from Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda (2005) and a Diploma in sculpture and modelling from Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai (2003).

Tandel's solo exhibitions include *Archipelagic Archivist*, curated by Shaunak Mahbubani, TARQ, Mumbai (2023); *Autopolisphilia*, curated by Noopur Desai, Sudarshan art gallery, Pune (2018); *Chronicle*, TARQ, Mumbai (2016); and *Pregnant Room 1 and Pregnant Room 2*, both showcased at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai, 2008 and 2010 respectively.

Tandel's work *HOW TO COOK 'BOMBAY' DUCK IN VARIOUS WAYS?* was exhibited as an outdoor installation at India Art Fair, Delhi, represented by TARQ, in 2023.

He has also been part of various group shows across India including the second edition of the Indian Ceramics Triennale, Arthshila (2024); *Critical Zones: In Search of a Common Ground*, Goethe Institut, Mumbai and Kolkata (2022); *New Natures: A Terrible Beauty is Born*, curated by Ravi Agarwal, Goethe Institut, Mumbai (2022); *All Canaries Bear Watching*, curated by Premjish Achari, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (2022); *Fragile Kinships*, curated by Shaunak Mahbubani, the Swiss Embassy, New Delhi (2018); *Baroda March*, Mumbai (2015); *Small is Beautiful*, Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai (2012); *The Art of Drawing*, The Guild, Mumbai (2011); and *AvaGard*, Threshold Art Gallery, Delhi (2009) among others.

Some of his public art projects include *Vitamin-Sea*, Mumbai Urban Art Festival, Mumbai (2022-2023); *Tandel Fund of Archives*,

pop-up museum of fisherfolk, Mumbai (2020 and 2019); (En)counters- Dady Ratons Public an projec, curated by nroxygen, Breathing art works, Mumbai (2017); Geographies of consumptions, Mumbai (2015); Big Catch, Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, Mumbai (2012); and Sandarbh, Rajasthan (2011). Tandel has been a recipient of the Jhunjhunwala Scholarship Award (2003); Maharashtra State Art Award (2003); and All India Art and Craft Society State Award (2003). Additionally, he has participated in residencies at The Bamboo Curtain Studio, Taiwan (2018), Piramal Art Residency (2017), Space 118 (2015), Mumbai and in Partapur, Rajasthan.

He currently lives and works in Thane, Mumbai.

Shristi Sainani What were your first memories around art, was there a moment of epiphany where you thought you had found your calling?

Parag Tandel I was born and brought up in Chendani Koliwada, Thane (fisherfolk village) sea trading town, I grew up seeing land from the ocean, my childhood play activities were fishing, bird catching, playing seafaring business and swimming. My great-grandfather and grandfather were seafarers, and My grandmother and parents were in the dry fish business, I grew up hearing narratives of fish and the ocean. I studied sculpture as a major in both art schools, my inquiries in the beginning were 'What can be art?' and 'Can Koli culture, landscape and narratives be art?' I deliberately avoided human figures and started exploring and inventing my aesthetic which was very important for me to develop my visual language, I also felt I didn't wish to be married to a single material, so I constantly kept changing materials in search of developing aesthetic which is very closer to my landscape and underscapes of brine water. My thorough research-based perspective + lived history & habitation in a fisherfolk village + Being an artist kind, have developed a good conceptual framework for my art practice, of course, it has been a long voyage of manifestation, it is the process of constant evolution, and failure, problem solving and learning. It is also important to understand as a culture creator and architecture of knowledge production is not easy, I have been seen by Archipelagic megalopolis as a representative Koli community. In the beginning, I said to my mother "If I do not get through this Arty- matter, I am surely going take up the fishing business" My mom replied "Anyway you are selling fish, only thing you are drawing and sculpting them" I studied in colonial school, Sir JJ school of Art which has a British skill-based workforce-oriented curriculum and later so-called contemporary art school MSU, Baroda, In art schools they teach us this is art, but later it is about 'What is art for you?' after school it is mostly about unlearning or pressing button, restart; I developed my 'Whys and Whats?' like 'What is sculpture/ what can be sculpture?' and 'Why I need to be an Artist?' but after coming back to Home/Mumbai, I concluded LOCAL was very important.



Color Blind Series, 2017



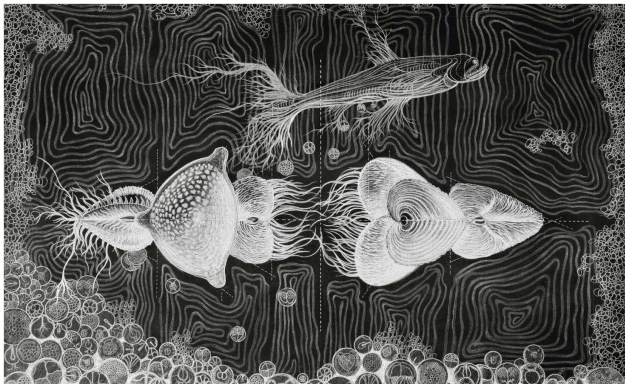
SS What have been some important references throughout your practice? Are there narratives or scapes you keep moving back to, from time to time?

PT Since the past decade, I have firmly settled on my identity as a LOCAL ARTIST of the Archipelago, here, I seriously stand for this, for me, my art should be able to be comprehended by my Koli community. My whole practice is focused on locale narratives of people who have been living here since prehistoric times. I am deliberately avoiding the Western way of thinking and processing information. Constantly thinking about what is the art of the Koli community? What do they wish to express and conclude as art? What they would care to decorate their homes with? And if you visit Koliwadadas, which are more than two hundred & fifty villages, in and around Mumbai, you will find forms and shapes from their daily life. These sea-facing villages in the megalopolis are stirring into my skull constantly. Indian Modern, post-modern and contemporary art is loaded with Western influences, I deliberately avoided human figures in my sculptures and Drawings. My socially engaged art practice does fetch forth with gatherings which are

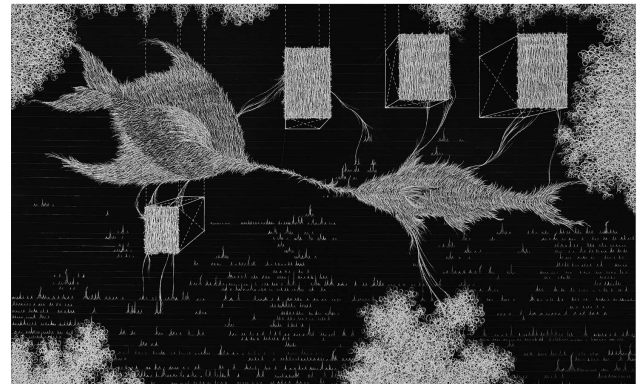
human figurative based. I feel drawing and sculpting thousands of human figures in the studio is a very comfortable task, but it is more challenging when we engage directly with human bodies and minds.

SS Please tell us a little about your sculptural works 'Color Blind' and the drawings that make up the 'AUTOPOLISPHILIA' series.

PT The *Autopolisphilia* series is a documentary drawing that implies a feeling of preoccupation with the fisher folk villages and city that one lives in, and belongs to. It stands for a causal association with a mythical landscape of the seafaring village and encroaching city that relates one with the topography through cultural ties and histories of the locale. My relationship with the seven island village as Mumbai (and also Thane) is contemplated in my recent series of drawings. These are my 'thinking drawings', as I see them, depict the unrealized as well as distorted visual narrative of the urban landscape. The urban space lends itself to reverie: a mediator of images stimulating imagination. Have preoccupation with the urban landscape arose from my experience of the loss of cultural practices, habitation, vegetation, sea species and also occupations of the Koli community. These effects of urbanisation and changing economic structures on Mumbai's Indigenous community, where I come from, play a crucial role in shaping my art practice. My work has emerged from a constant dialogue with the community through various public art initiatives and dialogical processes. However, I have extended my concerns and queries to the larger questions of cultural practices, urban landscape and ecology. I am more concerned about the loss of identity. Koli community sees the ocean as a forest within a forest, a thought of infinite forests. Are made out of stainless steel, cotton, and polyester thread. The *Color Blind* series descends from the changing culture of my Koli (fishermen) community of Mumbai, adapted over time into the megalopolis of Mumbai. The Armature, inspired by the performance of traditional, non-representational form/mother Goddess deities called 'Bharali', is decorated with references to the nimbu-Mirchi (lemon-chillies) evil eye believed to be a ward against ill-will and misfortune in the Indian subcontinent. This hybrid iconography offers a multi-layered approach to thinking about divisive ideologies, majoritarian and marginal cultural influences, and fading indigenous wisdom. Colors are a symbology of the so-called sacred pigments and an influence of materials on daily life. Originally basic structure of the armature was taken from Chendani Koliwada (fishing village), the armature in this village is uniform, and the base is a circular belt that sits horizontally on the ground, on this belt vertically nine or twenty-one needles are fabricated, mostly made out of Mild Steel, you will find this armature in every house in Chendani fishing village. Needles are decorated with locally found flowers, and for a few years, they also decorated them with farmed and exotic flowers. Ritual is performed in October on a full moon, as the Moon is the early God of the Koli tribe. The motive for performing this ritual is to remember ancestors who have lost their lives on the Ocean and children who have drowned in water bodies. It is a sort of totem to protect Newborns. It is evident these Indigenous tribes have their yearly calendar, it is evidence of narratives which develop in this landscape. However, since various types of colonization and reclamation, their brine sand has been acculturated. Using yarn in these sculptures was very crucial, it is metaphorically used as a fishing net, I somewhere wanted to avoid directly using a fishnet, but I think yarn worked very well, further, this series developed into 'Talisman for Coastal Future'.



Autopolisphilia series, 2016



SS Tell us more about your socially engaged art practice, especially about your book *Ek Bagale Mein Chand Hoga Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan*.

PT Factually, I am a loner and introvert but this facet of social engagement to develop art form is indeed another dimension. Social sculpture/Socially engaged art practice started to give back to the community and mould minds which is an important part of my art practice, how can the body as sculpture be impacted by moulding the mind? *Ek Bagal Mein Chand... Rotiyan*, As the title indicates, the project was launched by gazing nearly at the two complexions of the moon. It relates to the Koli (fishermen) community's dependence on the moon, to the literal and allegorical significances associated with it today when local indigenous vocations and traditions are on the brink of extinction. To reverse this sense of loss and drying of indigenous resources, trades, and ecosystems in these unprecedented times of climate change crises. The women of the Chendani fishing village and I had developed a *Dry Seafood Recipe* manuscript with narratives of loss and shift in occupation. Drying infers loss, yet the action itself suggests the need to preserve. Taking a spin on the word and the action, we are reviving recipes that are no longer in use because the diversity of fish available for drying is fast becoming extinct. 13 dishes once cooked by grandmothers will return to Koli kitchens. On this occasion, the women and I have presented an archive of recipes, a manuscript recording the survival of these dishes and carrying personal narratives, memories and illustrations of a landscape that has succumbed to the pressures of

uncontrolled growth. Roti is a basic staple food that starts with daily breakfast, it is accompanied by any dry fish recipe. In the afternoon Kolis has rice and fresh fish ambot (curry), as the women are busy segregating and drying fish they have to cook instantly. For dinner, we have again rice roti and ambot (curry). Rice has been a common staple food for the past one & a half centuries, earlier roti was made of ragi, sorghum, and Patni rice. Conducting a contest was crucial, as selling rice roti for livelihood is seen as a very inferior job in the community compared to fishing, because of this activity the morale of women was strengthened and the minds of the community were moulded, and that's what public sculpture is about, the 'shaping of minds'. The activity made a real impact on these women and also on the community. I see this shift of occupation as fitting as they are working in the community, the ritual of roti-making is another embodiment of the livelihood of the community.



Ek Bagal Mein Chand Hoga Ek Bagal Mein Rotiyan, 2022



SS Please tell us more about the artistic project 'Tandel Funds of Archives' What led to the inception of the project what does it stand for and is there an end goal you expect from the ongoing project?

PT 'Tandel Fund of Archives' (TFA) is a socially engaged archive and ethnographic Pop-up museum of the Koli tribes (fisherfolk) of Mumbai. We are an open artist collective, the Co-Founders of this collective are Parag Tandel and Kadambari Koli. 'Tandel Fund' in Chendani Koliwada, Thane (a central suburb of Mumbai) was founded by the Tandel Families at the beginning of the 14th century to support the Koli people economically during their time of necessity. We resumed this fund in the context of a pool of archives. Koli (fisherfolk) tribes are original inhabitants of Greater Mumbai and Mumbai's suburbs, their heritage on the seven islands spans as far as back to the Stone Age. Their predecessors who encountered the great regimes surged and fell around them, an invasion of colonialism and Imperialism. For thousands of years, Kolis have fished, rowed, and inhabited these estuarial lands, as the realm around them has altered. They are edged by unsustainable infrastructure, these indigenous tribes of seven islands are struggling like the ocean around them because of the ever-encroaching megalopolis in their fishing grounds and villages, and their rich estuaries are choking with metropolitan pollutants. Currently, this community is going through the insecurity of post-displacement. There are more than two fifty Koliwada's in and around Mumbai, each Koliwada has its own social and cultural practices. These villages are very much self-sufficient and self-sustaining lands, though the city has grown around them, these isolated villages have their own identities in Mumbai. An important part about Koliwadass is they never depended on the city's so-called basic infrastructures. Koliwada has rich natural resources and cultural existence. But in recent times these Koliwadass are being seen as the land of opportunity, these villages are sea-facing lands and others are discerning such lands as prime properties. Can we imagine the fisherfolk community without an oceanfront? We are very much concerned about the proper & ethical documentation of these indigenous tribes, whose rooted culture is on the verge of extinction. MISSION STATEMENT: TFA Collective realized that there is no museum space for the indigenous peoples in this Megalopolis. Fishermen communities of Mumbai have a deeper knowledge of the ocean's behavioural patterns, Kolis have a rich tradition and culture which needs to be documented and archived in various layers. TFA is a pool of archives, which aims to gather and document information on fishing communities in and around Greater Mumbai. The collective aims to work towards the exposure of this content through public art events in the social sphere which will be in the form of a Pop-Up community museum, It aims to forge connections with the local public sphere. The information collected in the pool will be accessible to the public for study, research, and interventions. We are closely collaborating with all the Koliwadass to archive information. Our aim is not just to work on historical documentation but also to intervene in the current times. The collective wishes to serve as an archival tool through which information and narratives of the community can be disseminated through various art forms, and act as a living museum of memory. TFA Collective looks forward to collaborating with the community, as well as researchers and artists by organizing workshops/symposia, research camps, book publications, film screenings, and pedagogical conferences that operate in the public sphere.



TFA Pop-up Museum, 2019



SS What was the core propeller behind the installation, 'HOW TO COOK 'BOMBAY' DUCK IN VARIOUS WAYS?'

PT Bombay duck has been a staple diet of Kolis (indigenous local fisherfolks of Seven Island). There are various recipes of Bombay duck which are cooked in and around seven islands. The sculpture portrays the existing situation of the ocean as a prehistoric forest and its altering under-scapes the ocean, a case study is of the Waterfront of Colaba fishing village, which is the largest natural breeding ground of Bombay duck fish. But now this 'Bombil' (Local name for Bombay duck) is searching for new habitat, reason for this migration and depletion according to local fishermen and scientists is polluted saline bodies and reclamation of ocean bodies which has destroyed ancient fish breeding grounds and estuaries. For years early humans were wandering around the earth in search of sustenance, their major occupation was hunting, fishing and gathering, The inquiry is, did Kolis of Mumbai figure out very early to settle on the Archipelago? As sustenance on the shore was extraordinarily ample. The notion came into existence because of a written paper by archaeologists, K.R.U. Todd. In his 1932 paper named 'Prehistoric Man Round Bombay' in his papers. The sculptural installation is composed of an older map of the archipelago on the ceiling, which looks like the profile of the Bombay duck head at the end of Colaba. Barricade structures are fish drying rakes around the reclaimed floor plan of present Mumbai, Barricade structures are made of Bamboo and mild steel, and fish is cast in Dental plaster. The interactive floor is made of Mild steel and silicon rubber, with bass relief motifs on each tile, forms on tiles are of local marine species which can be squeezed with barefoot, there are two openings to the installation Enter & Exit.

SS Over time, what are some major challenges you have faced while navigating the turf of 'Contemporary Art'? Are there specific aspects that you would outline to say are restrictive for your/certain artistic discourses?

PT There are not any restrictions as such, you have to find your ways in a given room. I have always looked for new possibilities to showcase my work, It was slow, but I am satisfied. I am a full-time sculpture practitioner, interdisciplinary practices are part-time. Sculpture takes time and energy, Drawing came naturally in my art practice they come to me when I get bored of sculpture or when I take off from sculpture. In my case, you see awareness of global movement of Indigenous art started a few years back, but I have been working on it for almost two decades. When I started I never thought about trends and fashion, but moreover, I chose to express my areas of curiosity to explore material culture and brine narratives. I have come a long way since 2005, it was a tough journey, as very few art galleries in India take sculptors in their list of representation. The Indian art market is wall based most likely, it is small compared to west, but it has increased rapidly in the last five years. I started my career with Pundole Art Gallery in 2007 till 2014, and then I shifted to TARQ Mumbai, Both galleries supported me a lot to continue my art practice. Art galleries have its own process and role, I am glad that I am working with people who value my art practice. The only thing I am more concerned is, that there are various methods of disseminating wisdom and ensuring that research reaches the people who have helped make it. I think research is the dirtiest word for Indigenous people, but I am giving back everything through TFA, I feel it is very fragile ground when you say you are a visual auto-ethnographer of a community.



Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. Photo by Sebastian Posings

SS What are you looking towards next - are there specific projects you are looking forward to realising shortly that you would like to share with the readers?

PT Socially engaged Pop-up Museums are increasing in my art practice slowly. I wish to work on Pop- Museums and gatherings more, as it is generating new knowledge and culture, which is a reasonable dialogue between my social sculpture and studio sculpture. These kinds of new dialogues are helping me to avoid colonial way research methodology. I feel giving back from an early stage is important. My focus is not just on fisherfolks Adivasi tribes of the archipelago, but, I am expanding my art practice towards other local Adivasi communities on the Indian subcontinent, like the Madia tribes of Bastar division and many more, Of course, some I can't disclose, but we will get to know soon, even I am curious about what I am up to. Being from the Indigenous community that is associated with the ocean visually and emotionally, how I see climate change is very crucial me, are there solutions in the past knowledge, it is evident that human beings are arrested by climate change ideas.

SS Do you have a few last words you'd like to leave for our readers before we close the interview?

PT I never imagined I would drop anchor to the Brine world I have lived in, my practice is shaped by numerous people, it is not just me who is driving my art practice to thrive naturally, it is the consequence of my milieu and environment which is in constant flux. I prefer to be called a LOCAL ARTIST, rather than more National or International artist. I feel my aesthetic is non-vegetarian and India is mostly Vegan country. My adaptation of socially engaged research methodology which can be also named social sculpture benefitted and enriched my intellectual spectrum. I think my art exercise is unravelling pressing problems of image making and processing which are inappropriate in the current Indian contemporary art scene. I think there are always some or the other restrictions but, I concluded we have to find ways to survive our art practices. It is very crucial to live creatively, creativeness is not an activity, it is action-based, A true creative being never accepts orders to thrive, it is determines to thrive, it is the nature of a creative being. I stood for actions which were vital for my art practice. Decolonize art materials and you will find, that there are so substantial materials on the subcontinent to continue manifestations. Artist beings are naturally so qualified that they can invent new sustainable ways and possibilities. Artist's job is more than what he does in the studio, the artist can catch a glimpse of something complicated and simplify it so that others can realise seeing. My conclusion is Art is purposeless, it doesn't serve any purpose in daily life, but it is the greatest invention of the human mind.

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Shristi Sainani is a curator, designer, researcher, and writer currently based in New Delhi, India, where she functions independently. Her interest lies in dismantling and assessing core concepts of exhibition making, specifically focusing on Contemporary Art churned through the diaspora of the Global South.

She also writes poetry, having published three books in the genre, and has contributed to several art and architectural forums. Her independent research focuses on collections and architecture of private art museums. Shristi's paper on inclusivity in museum spaces won the INSC Researchers Award in 2021.

Shristi is a formally trained architect. She completed her Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Sydney and her Master's degree in Curatorial Studies from the University of Melbourne.

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