

NEWS

# Delve into familial archives and ancestral histories through this artist's work

TARQ's presentation for Art Basel Hong Kong 2025 includes new works by Saju Kunhan that delve specifically into familial archives and ancestral histories.

by **Staff Writer** | March 17, 2025

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Kunhan's practice at large is an inquiry of the past through a personal lens, understanding history as a collection of memories. Employing a process of archival image transfer on recycled teak wood, he revitalises images from the past while highlighting alteration and manipulation as pertinent to the dissemination and formation of history.



'11th May 1980 Wedding Day' features black and white family photographs taken from a wedding album. The frozen stillness of the images is animated by adding a layer of painted colour which in the artist's words is to "try to add some colour to their existence."

The paint is applied to a digital print of the photograph, and subsequently transferred onto wood panels. This results in a complex, reverse layered image which is arranged consecutively across the walls of the booth, making it a host of painted memories brought to life. The revisitation of collective memories and myths are presented with care and dexterity for the viewers to pay attention to family histories that survive in splintered recollections and images.

The base of each wooden panel features a grid of inlay brass. For Kunhan, brass inlay is often associated with recollections and historical representations through various temple or domestic objects. Furthermore, his use of inlay in these works generates grids and patterns that are linked to maps, locations, and divisions, tracing back to his larger body of work. The strategic use of these structures that are metaphorical references to the issues of migration and displacement are apparent in Kunhan's visuals. The nature of recycled wood that has been subject to change, corrosion and decay over time adds another layer of felt time and the passage of it.



Using bright paint over image transfer is a significant departure for Kunhan. "Painting can

reach where photography doesn't. There are moments when I'm not happy with the picture that was taken." His decision to work over photographic images is prompted by the urge to add something or even manipulate existing history, which he has explored only once earlier, in his work 'Flipped Pages', that explores a magazine archive. Considering the nature of time in photographs, he also attempts to shatter the idea of time through painted layers that dovetail between the past and present.

In this series, Kunhan's move towards drawing from familial archives also marks his departure from his use of museum archives. The fragmented nature of family histories and experiences are connected thinly by the faculty of memory that is understood as the pillars of a structure that supports wider oral histories. Kunhan believes that an individual's artistic response ought to stem from their emotions rather than their intellect.

In the catalogue essay of 'Home Ground', Kunhan's solo presentation at TARQ in 2022, writer Skye Arundhati Thomas supports his reflections, "A family history is always representative of something much larger than itself: the social, political and cultural shifts experienced by the geography in which it is set engineers its sudden detours. Kunhan follows its routes; he is less interested in evidence that is materially traceable, and more in what lingers more ephemerally, more abstractly – in the senses, and in the small remembrances of the mind."

### About the Artist

*Saju Kunhan (b. 1983) began his artistic training in his home state of Kerala, at the Government College of Fine Art, Thrissur. After receiving his Bachelor's in Fine Arts, he went on to pursue his Master's in Fine Arts in painting from the Sir J.J School of Art, Mumbai. In 2014, Kunhan received a Post-Graduate Diploma in Museology and Conservation from CSMVS Museum, Mumbai.*

*Kunhan had his second solo exhibition, Home Ground at TARQ, Mumbai in 2022 and his first solo exhibition, Stained Geographies at TARQ, Mumbai in 2017. He has been a part of exhibitions across the country. Some of his recent exhibitions of note are – Three Steps of Land at Rajiv Menon Contemporary, Los Angeles (2024); In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire, curated by Shubigi Rao, at the Kochi Muziris Biennale, Kochi (2022); Lokame Tharavadu, curated by Bose Krishnamachari in Alappuzha, Kerala (2021); Traversing Histories, curated by Jitha Karthikeyan at Artimis Cars, Chennai (2019); India Art Fair, represented by TARQ, Mumbai (2019); Mapping Frontiers, curated by Lina Vincent Sunish as part of the Krishnakriti Festival, Hyderabad (2018); Mattancherry, curated by Riyas Komu at URUArt Harbour, Kochi (2017); Young Subcontinent, curated by Riyas Komu at the Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa (2016); Scape & Scope, anniversary group show of TAO Art Gallery at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai (2016); Liminal Affinities, the inaugural exhibition at Nine Fish Art Gallery, Mumbai (2015); The Deep Inside, two man show at Kalakriti Art Gallery, Hyderabad (2015); and Memento Mori, a group show at TARQ, Mumbai (2015).*

*He currently lives and works in Mumbai, India.*

### About TARQ

*TARQ was founded in 2014 by Hena Kapadia on the values of creating a meaningful conversation around art and its myriad connotations and contexts. It was envisioned as something of a laboratory – an incubator for young contemporary artists which would work towards pushing the boundaries of how contemporary art in India is exhibited and perceived. TARQ's youthful and experimental ethos encourages collectors, novice and seasoned alike, to approach art collecting through a perspective that marries thoughtfulness with an inquisitive eye for aesthetics and artistic processes.*

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