Review

04 - Kolkata

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MEDITATIONS ON LAND

Rituparna Sandilya

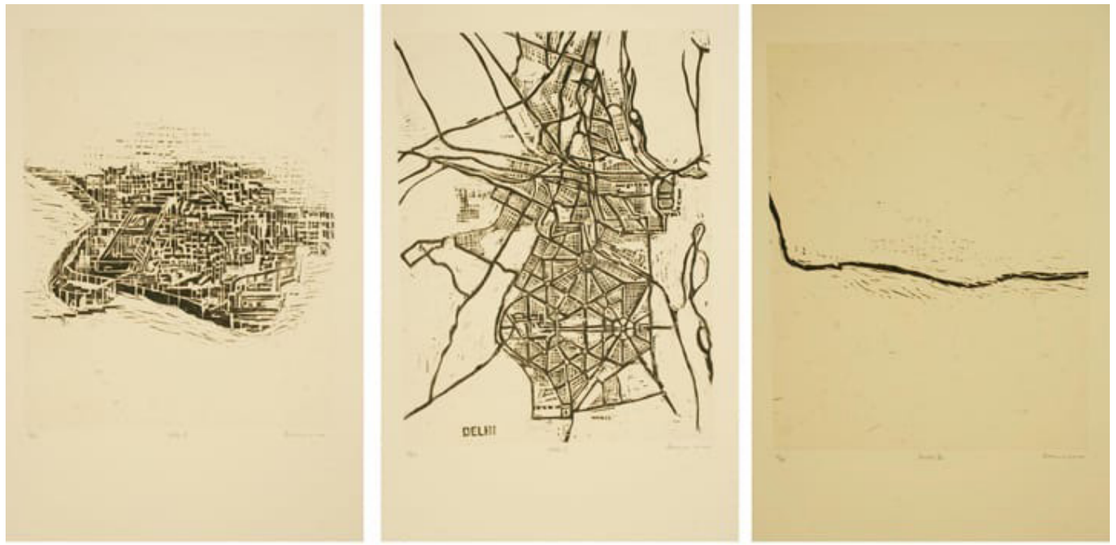


↑ KR Sunil, from the Series 'Chavittu Nadakam: Storytellers of the Seashore', 2016-2025. Image Courtesy:

Partitioned Delhi rendered in woodcut prints as a cartographic abstraction; the changing landscape of Benares traced through 45 pieces in mixed media; a lush paddy field in Kerala painted in oil; the struggle and resilience of Dalit lives explored on canvas; a stepwell symbolizing life's primordial bond with water and the covenant between land and its people, carved in compressed wood and bronze; a spine made of iron pickaxes, covered in velvet, staged as a site of convergence of land and labour and the power that controls both – these are some of the artworks one encounters in Zameen, curated by Ina Puri and scenographed by Sayantan Moitra Boka, now showing at the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata, as part of its 59th Annual Exhibition.

Zameen is the soil that is tilled, the land on which homes are built, the ground beneath our feet, and our connection with both the natural and built environment. With the entrenchment of private property and the rise of nation-states, land – over several centuries, across the globe – became increasingly equated with material inheritance on the one hand and national identity on the other, its organic relationship with human life as that which sustains and nurtures devalued beyond measure. This went hand in hand with the perennial exploitation of those who work the land – both the farmers who bring food to our table and the labourers who build our homes. The group show Zameen is a twenty-first century meditation on this altered relationship between land and human life, seen through an Indian lens. As expressed in the curatorial note, "The works in this exhibition turn towards individual subjectivity, personal narrative, and embodied memory, not as retreat, but as a way of registering unevenness, displacement, and survival."

The highlight of the show is the triptych by Zarina Hashmi - 'Delhi I, II, III' - who is being shown in Kolkata for the very first time. "She was just not a favourite artist, but my lodestar... who directed me to the other artists," curator Ina Puri said in a personal



↑ Zarina Hashmi, Delhi I, II, III, 2000. Image Courtesy; Gallery Espace

conversation, adding her gratitude to Gallery Espace for loaning the triptych for the show. Zarina, as is well known, had lost her home in Aligarh to Partition – a lifelong wound that would define her practice as an artist (after her training in printmaking in Paris and Tokyo), her peripatetic life with her diplomat husband later adding more layers to her explorations of home, and the ways they can be lost and retrieved through memory. In *Delhi* (woodcut prints of 65*50 cm done in 2000), in her own eloquent words, "incised lines and measured divisions evoke bureaucratic regimes of surveying and ownership, foregrounding displacement and loss for me" - a quote displayed as part of the Artists' Statement', placed right beside the Curator's Note on a separate wall of the gallery – making it a distinct and unusual part of the show.

The artworks of the other (living) participating artists, all significant names in contemporary Indian art – Birender Yadav, Debasish Mukherjee, KR Sunil, Mithu Sen, Ratheesh T, Riyas Komu, Shambhavi Singh, Sumedh Rajendran, V. Vinu and Vikrant Bhise – also predominantly present their signature styles and preoccupations.

Debasish Mukherjee's *Forty Five Attempts at Remembering a Familiar Land* is a case in point. It takes us to his beloved Benares – the ancient city that is at the core of his artistic consciousness and has shaped his practice in no small measure. 'Forty Five Attempts' gives us 45 pieces of abstract drawings, in mixed media on rice paper, denoting different - and some distinct - architectural features of the city and its topography. They occur repetitively across the artwork – arched doorways and windows, alleys, stepwells, the meandering Ganga and Assi. One feature that dominates the work are the grids that represent construction sites, highlighting the indiscriminate constructions that are irrevocably changing the very character of the city. "For the first 20 years of my life (from early 70s to 90s)", said the artist, "Benares was almost the same. Even 'New Benares' was not new. Then things began to change... especially in the past decade, the ghats in particular. I felt compelled to document this change through my art."

Sambhavi Singh's work, Woods and Pond in the File is a love letter to her ancestral home, drawn on iron. Six rusted iron boards stand on a wooden table forming three triangles, giving us staples of rural life – furrows, rectangular fields and the *meyre* (border) that divides them, a school, a dry pond and stars in the night sky – in her most beloved stretch of land, her maternal grandmother Rahiya's home in Twining Ganj, district Buxar, Bihar. Generations of her family have lived on and derived their identity from this land. While a legal case continues around it, the artist is moved to reflect on it "as inheritance rather than property".

Ratheesh T's set of two large paintings, executed in oil on linen, reflect his investment in quotidian life in Kerala, where he divides his time between his studio in Trivandrum and his ancestral home in Kilimanoor. Increasingly, he has leaned towards self-portraiture in his practice. In *Walking through your land*, we find him walking in his folded lungi, his back to us, the lush green of the landscape highlighted with the yellow of the afternoon sky's reflection on water and the white of innumerable birds dotting the paddy field. The BJP flags crossed on the pole next to him are a reminder of the contentious presence of politics in a seemingly idyllic land. *Holiday play* in your land foregrounds two children - framed by bamboo poles - playing in the water running through the fields. Beyond them, at





↑ Birender Yadav, Debris of Fate, 2015. Image Courtesy: The Artist
Vikrant Bhise, Untitled, 2025. Image Courtesy: The Artist and Experimenter



↑ Shambhavi Singh, Woods and Pond in the File, 2025. Image Courtesy: The Artist

two successive removes, can be seen the diminutive figures of harvesters and coconut trees on the horizon.

Ratheesh was born in a Dalit colony and worked his way out of poverty through his art. In the artworks in *Zameen*, we get a lyrical representation of a life - however exploited - that he has himself grown out of, but never dismissed or abandoned. Vikrant Bhise offers a study in contrast: steeped in Ambedkarite thought, and having had first-hand knowledge of the exploitation of Dalit labour in Mumbai, his depiction of Dalit lives and its iniquities is rendered with angst, where present struggles are often referenced with past activism. His two large untitled artworks in Zameen, in mixed media on canvas, are powerful reiterations of this preoccupation.

Birender Yadav has explored the life and labour of the rural and provincial poor in India – especially from Jharkhand and UP – for almost a decade: the exploitation of seasonal/landless migrant labour, the tools employed for their work, the bodies engaged in and broken by endless/painful toil – all find a place in his practice, often installations in clay and brick. In 'Debris of Fate', featured in *Zameen*, a triptych created with ink on debris, cement, sand and iron, he extends that exploration with construction waste – which are reassembled into "mosaic-like forms marked with tools of labour", obliquely stressing the invisibility and erasure of those who toil inherent in the finished structures of our built environment. What looks pretty at first sight turns out to be a trenchant critique of exploitation.

KR Sunil's *Chavittu Nadakam: Storytellers of the Seashore*, a set of 16 photographs (76*57 cm each) in archival print, is an ethnographic documentation of a fishermen community who live along the Muziris coast in Kerala – a region adversely affected by climate change and global warming. Converted to Christianity by colonial missionaries, they have a marginalized existence, all vestiges of which they discard while performing *Chavittu Nadakam*, an art form that combines dance-music-drama, blending "martial traditions of ancient Kerala with the theatre and musical traditions of 15th/16th century Europe".

As is evident from the above artworks, *Zameen* stands out in its expansiveness – from the materials used (paper and canvas to wood and iron), and perspectives involved (loss and longing, memory and lived experience, labour and its exploitation), to literally the geographical land covered in the show (from Kerala and Maharashtra to Delhi, UP and Bihar). It would be interesting to see other iterations of it in the future.

Zameen, Birla Academy of Art and Culture, January 9 - February 2, 2026.