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INTERVIEW WITH **JAYA ASOKAN**

DIRECTOR OF INDIA ART FAIR

- UMA PRAKASH

KARNATAKA LEATHER PUPPETRY AND ITS ANCIENT HISTORY

- SUBHRA SANKAR BHATTACHARJEE

OF LOST HOMES, MEMORY & LONGING: THE ART OF **DEBASISH MUKHERJEE**

- RITUPARNA ROY



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Jaya Asokan, Director, India Art Fair, Image Courtesy: India Art Fair and
Memories of Pakka Mahal by Debasish Mukherjee, 2023, Brick and wood, 11.25
x 5.5 x 3.25 inches (Set of 12), Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar

PROFILE



Debasish Mukherjee, Memories of Pakka Mahal, 2023, Brick and wood, 11.25 x 5.5 x 3.25 inches (Set of 12), Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar

OF LOST HOMES, MEMORY & LONGING:

THE ART OF DEBASISH MUKHERJEE

- RITUPARNA ROY



Debasish Mukherjee

Seven years after his family relocated, he went back to his home in Bihar for the first time. It was unrecognizable. No one lived there anymore, and the whole place looked like an abandoned colony. He went to the house he had grown up in, and standing in the calf-length putrid water that had filled up the space, realized that he had lost his home forever. Much later it would dawn on him that that home in a railway colony was actually nobody's home, changing hands as it did all the time - becoming a family's shelter for the duration of the breadwinner's service-life, till another such family took over. It did not matter if you did not want to leave; you had to. And find a home someplace else. It was a defining moment in his life. He had grown up hearing stories of Partition; but for the first time he could relate to one of its key components - displacement. More than a decade later, it would become a preoccupying theme of his art practice.

Chapra, Banaras, Delhi

Debasish Mukherjee practices art in Delhi, but his art itself harks



back to Chapra and Banaras. These three cities thus form the triad of his life and imagination. His journey from a depot town to the national capital via an ancient city was also the journey from innocence to experience. Youngest of four siblings, loved and pampered by all, he spent an idyllic childhood in Chapra - a railway town 70 kilometers west of Patna - living a life of simple joys in close proximity to nature. His home was at the edge of a railway colony. On one side of it was a vast expanse of agricultural land, for miles together, whose color would change with the seasons. He loved watching it sitting by a large window, especially during the relentless monsoons, when the green would turn liquid silver. He was also surrounded with a rich soundscape of human voices that were later lost to him, as he moved to bigger cities.

Central to his life was the presence of his mother; looking back, his memories of her are inseparable from the saree. Her saree thrown over their shoulders as a light shawl in autumns; the saree-anchal used as towel to wipe hands with; sarees (with large prints) transformed to a forest to play hide-and-seek in, when hung out to dry inside rooms during monsoons; saree used as screen to see films when a projector was

brought home; saree to give warmth to his little four-year-old-self when caught in a sudden torrential rain in the middle of a field. Unknowingly, she would be his first introduction to textile; something he would earn his livelihood by. And the memory of Chapra would inspire his second solo, *River Song* (2019), with the title work in it a tribute to his mother.

Banaras was built into his DNA. His grandmother had married and come into this city in 1946 from Sylhet, East Bengal, where she never returned. His mother was born there. And he spent the summers of his growing up years in the city. His most cherished memory of those times is of him entering his widowed dida's (maternal grandmother's) room and chancing upon stacks of white sarees - *dhakai*, *mulmul*, *chikankari* - in her almirah. Those layered stacks would inspire one of his most well-known creations ('Portrait from the Past'), in which he paid homage to his ancestors. The house itself would be commemorated in a later work, 'D-32/191, Debnathpura'.

His relationship with the city would deepen during his BFA years at the Banaras Hindu University. Though he specialized in painting, he was drawn to the sculptor Balbir Singh Katt; and while the academic study of Art within the campus did not excite him much, he did enjoy cycling to Dashashwamedh Ghat every evening and sketching the twilight view of the Ganges, especially the abstract pattern made on the

^ Debasish Mukherjee, *22 Moons*, 2019, Wood, fabric, industrial texture and beads, 10 inches diameter (Set of 22), Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar



water by the floating diyas of visitors. Evening *aratis* were not a spectacle then, and his diligent study of the ghat outdoors gave him lessons in perspective and depth that sketching in a classroom would not have. Three decades later, his fascination for Banaras after sundown would find expression in his third solo *Whispering Lanes* (2023), curated by Siddhi Shailendra, with 'Floating Nights' in particular harking back to his experience of the twilight ghat.

His father's retirement necessitated him taking up a job soon after college. Both he and his family moved to Delhi then; a new phase in their lives had begun. While he established himself as a textile designer in a fashion house, he remained immune to the glamour of fashion. It was creating textile that fascinated him, not its end product of a garment; a fascination that was born of his long association with weavers and craftsmen from different states of India – Rajasthan, Gujarat, U.P. and Orissa. While he had learnt the technicalities of Art in Art school, a deeper understanding of Art came to him only while working with these traditional practitioners of textile creation and watching them closely in their *karkhanas*.

When he finally embarked on his art practice – once he was confident he had found a language of his own, and encouraged by a few close friends and the mentorship of Ina Puri – he brought to bear on it not only his experience as a professional designer, but also his deep immersion in the sibling arts of music, poetry and photography. His first solo was *The Museum Within* (2016). As Kanika Anand said in

her curatorial note, "Drawn from the disciplines of cartography, archaeology and design" the Exhibition concerned itself with "the position and function of the 'museum'" and "raised questions around preservation and neglect." Banaras had a significant presence in this suite of works; it would continue, with marked different emphases, in his next two solos as well. The preoccupation with the preservation of the historical past would then give way to archiving his personal past and the subject of displacement.

Displacement

An abstract mapping of 22 years spent in Chapra on cloth stretched and marked on 22 embroidery hoops; sculpting the many facets of a lost *mohalla* in Banaras in a series of bricks; a hand-stitched piece of cloth symbolically standing for an aerial view of a home once inhabited but now lost; an array of graphite on **soft** stone pieces in varying shapes, representing monsoon clouds that must have caused havoc to millions of refugees; a homage on an Amazon package to an artist whose career was one, uninterrupted longing for home – these are some of the ways in which Debasish Mukherjee has re-imagined displacement in his work.

^ Debasish Mukherjee, *Portrait of Frozen Rain Clouds*, 2020, Graphite on soft stone, Dimensions: Variable
Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar

^ Debasish Mukherjee, *Gandhi's Last Fast*, 2020, Lime sandstone, cotton fabric, stainless steel & wooden cabinet, 7 feet x 3 feet x 18 inches,
Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar





He is on record saying that he looks at displacement “in a large and contemporary context”; and his artistic “quest oscillates between personal memories and a deeper sense of loss”. The personal memories are of his first 22 years in Chapra and his lifelong association with Banaras; the sense of loss pervades every work of his that deals with this subject.

‘22 Moons’ (in *River Song*) is an abstract mapping of his years in Chapra, a place lost to him after his father’s retirement from the railways. The round embroidery hoops that were used for this installation are a nod to the face of the steam engine that he was used to seeing all those years; in one memory etched in his mind, his father emerged out of the opening, his face smeared in smoke, with intricate layers and patterns carved on it by the carbon. The crinkles in the cloth mimic those layers, made possible by stiffening it with industrial texture and paint; they also evoke a lunar surface.

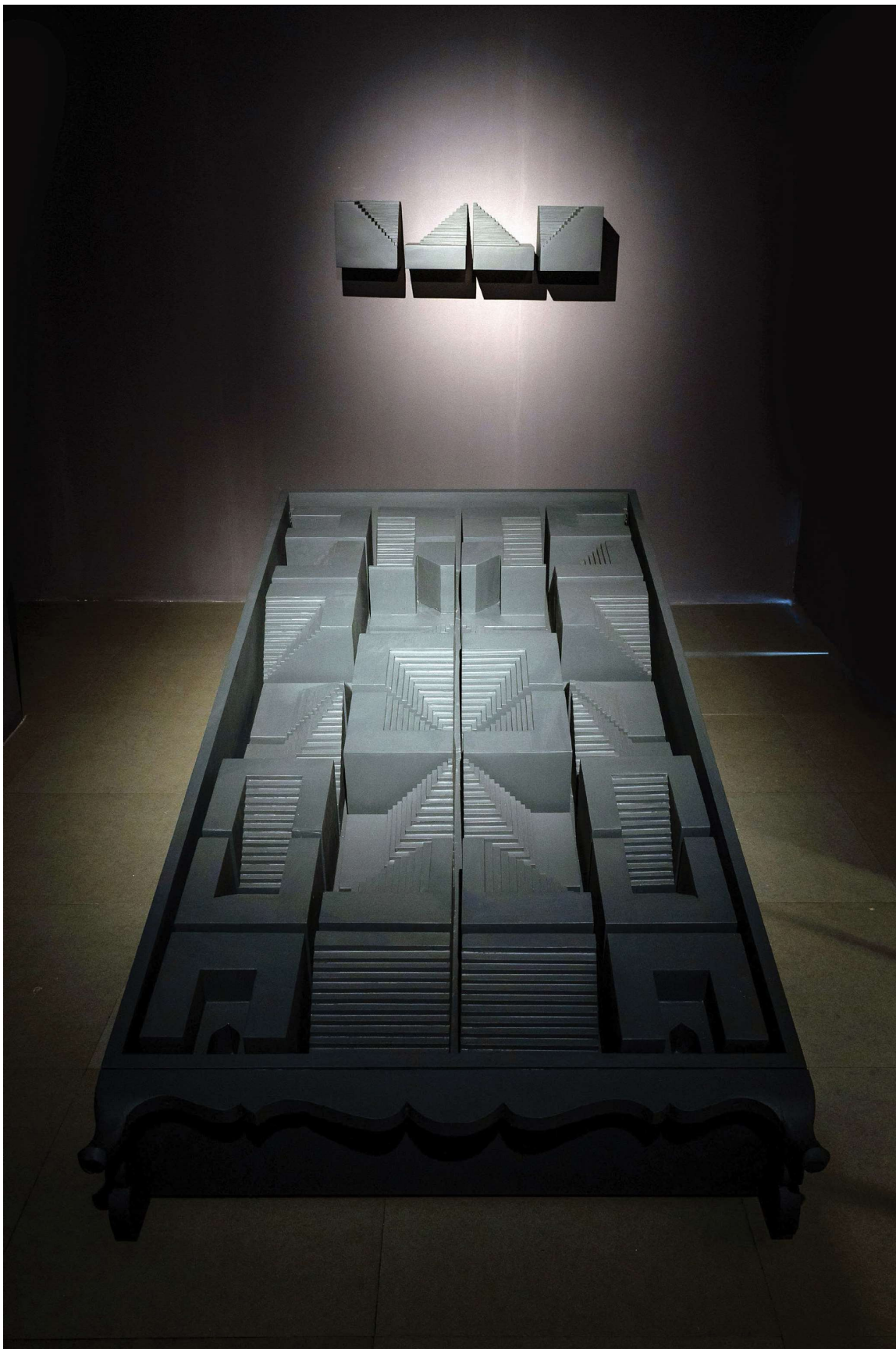
‘Memories of Pakka Mahal’ is a poignant reflection on displacement caused by development projects in an independent nation. An installation in Mukherjee’s most recent solo, *Whispering Lanes*, it is an abstract mapping of those areas, temples, houses and lanes that were demolished to build the

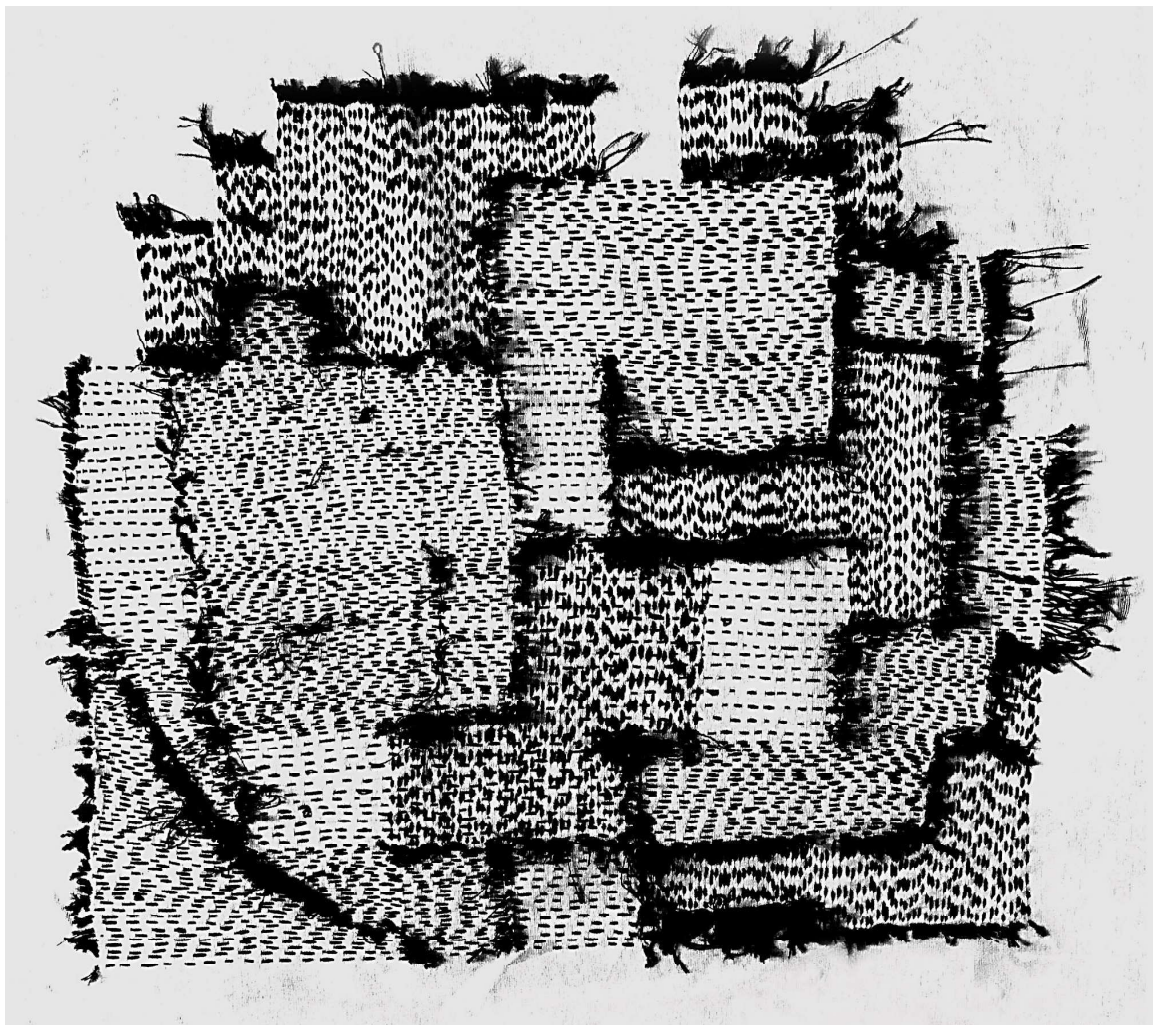
Kashi Corridor, the purpose of which was to create an uninterrupted passage for pilgrims from the Ganges to the Vishwanath temple. Pakka Mahal was one of the oldest settlements of Banaras, a locality rich in cultural heritage and steeped in the city’s ethos. Having known the place and its architectural beauty since his childhood, this demolition felt like a personal loss for Mukherjee.

He also wondered about its inhabitants, what they must have felt when they were asked to shift from a place where their families had lived for centuries. What memories would they carry? That thought gave rise to ‘Monsoon Fables’, which is a continuation of the installation on Pakka Mahal. Framed by the body of an almirah, which has a recurrent presence in Mukherjee’s practice, it is a metaphor of home and a protected space – the almirah being traditionally the place where not just clothes, but a family’s prized possessions are kept. While it has two doors and a

^ Debasish Mukherjee, *Resettling*, 2023, Aluminium and iron
Dimensions: Variable, Image Courtesy: The Artist, Partition Museum, Delhi & Akar Prakar

^ Debasish Mukherjee, *Monsoon Fables-I*, 2023, Wood,
96 x 36 x 22 inches, Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar





chest of drawers, to denote the intimate spaces of a home, the memories of the city are also contained within it: in the obvious architectural representation of the *kunds* within the frame; but also in the very tilt of the frame, which is a reminder of the Ratneshwari temple near Manikarnika, that leans at a nine degree angle.

Many of the families that were displaced from Pakka Mahal were relocated near the airport. Mukherjee had spoken to some of them in his recent visits to the city; they all missed proximity to the ghat the most. This particular displacement has been archived, among others, in a documentary titled *Taam* (2021), by Vishwanath Tiwari and Gaurav Singh. In the most poignant moment in the film, an old resident, a priest of a temple, simply refuses to leave the home where he has lived all his life (even as his son tries to persuade him otherwise) and dies before the actual demolition of the place. It is reminiscent of numerous Partition stories, where the elderly similarly refused to leave their homes.

The Partition of 1947 was the largest displacement in the subcontinent; indeed in human history. The pain of lost homes owing to the division resulted in intergenerational trauma; that has been one abiding feature of the event and its aftermath. The more tragic part is however the fact that its lessons were not learnt. In a webinar organized by KCC in August 2020, the artist stressed this point, in the immediate aftermath of the Delhi riots:

^ Debasish Mukherjee, *Portrait of a Home*, Hand-stitched texture on blended cotton, 14 x 16 inches
Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar

> Debasish Mukherjee, *Portrait from the Past*, 2019, Digital print on fabric, wood and metal, 79 x 60 x 19 inches
Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar



"Imagine if we travel back in time to 1947 for an aerial survey. What do we see?" he asked, "the millions of burnt, destroyed and abandoned homes. The empty dark spaces without any soul. What is the difference between those visuals and the visuals of Godhra or even as recent as what we saw in Delhi. We are still living under the shadow of Partition, aren't we? We still have the same amount of venom and hatred for each other. A large chunk of this generation hasn't learnt anything from the past, actually. [...] I am in Delhi, and what I saw this month of February was heartbreaking."

Mukherjee said this while elucidating on the work, 'Portrait of a Home'. Done like several other of his works on fabric - hand-stitched texture on blended cotton - it is symbolic of any home lost due to displacement which then exists only in one's memory. This work, along with the next discussed, was part of the Hub India 'Classical Radical' tripartite museum show at Turin, Italy, in 2021.

'Portraits of Frozen Rain Clouds' (graphite on soft stone) is inspired by the monsoon season, but the monsoon has a very different connotation here. It is not the season of romantic longings, but one in which India was partitioned, leaving millions of refugees destitute. Bereft of shelter as they were, rain clouds would certainly not have been welcome to them at that time.

'Gandhi's Last Fast', displayed in Akar Prakar booth at IAF 2020, is an installation that, unlike Mukherjee's other works, deals with a specific event related to the Partition: it is a symbolic tribute to the heroic effort of Gandhi to stem the tide of violence, after the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946.

It is a sandstone and fabric pillar; thus, texturally, constituted of two very different kinds of medium: one is textile - which is very soft and fluid; and the other is stone. These two contrasting mediums are a metaphor for two different religions, which put together, can however stand tall as a monument of unity.

Mukherjee's most recent installation on displacement can be found in the newly opened Partition Museum, Delhi. Titled 'Re settling: Settling', it is a work where a single bicycle is made to bear the weight of countless trunks, interwoven like a maze, only the outline of which is represented like a line-drawing. The bicycle, like bullock-carts and trains, was a vehicle of mass migration during Partition; and for millions of its refugees, a trunk or two were the only belongings they could carry at the time of forcibly leaving home. This work is reminiscent of a small bronze sculpture by K.S. Radhakrishnan titled 'Memory Carrier' (2015), which was part of his recent Exhibition, in Kolkata, *The Crowd & its Avatars*.

While speaking of Mukherjee's installations related to displacement and Partition, it is interesting to note that, there has been a paradigm shift with respect to Mukherjee's title work in *River Song*.

Intended as an unconventional portrait of his mother, with the striking red in the work a reference to the vermillion in the parting of her hair, it was interpreted as "both landscape and portrait" by Ranjit Hoskote, who also said it reminded him of the red-bordered white sarees Bengali women wore on auspicious occasions (in his essay on the Exhibition). Visitors to the show would often think of blood seeing that red and associate it with the violence of Partition. That is how Rajasri Mukhopadhyay - Mukherjee's art historian friend who was just turning curator - also read it, and wanted included in the Exhibition that would eventually become *The Legacy of Loss: Perspectives on the Partition of Bengal*, which ran at KCC from 17-29 August 2021.

Memory & longing

As is obvious by now, longing is at the heart of Mukherjee's oeuvre - longing for the past, longing for lost homes. The description of one of his artworks, 'Landscape of a Memory: An Ever Changing Portrait' - based on his family albums and archival photographs, and done specifically for the group show *The Legacies of Loss* (in which KCC and the KPM Trust had collaborated) - perhaps sums it best:

"We are always displaced from our past, with return never a possibility. As our past inevitably turns into the 'long ago and far away' of stories recounted to children, we cling on to our memories - both material and intangible, visual and sonic - held randomly together in an uneven, half-lit landscape in our minds. This work is a portrait of one such vast landscape of memory."

It could be said that Mukherjee's oeuvre, as a whole, is one vast landscape of memory - spanning both the personal and historical. It is befitting then, that this piece has found a place (along with three other representative works of his) in the permanent collection of KNMA.

Mukherjee never signs his artworks; partly because they are primarily installations, and inserting his signature would disturb them. True. But given his distinct style, his artworks would stand out

> Debasish Mukherjee, *River Song*, 2019, *Threads*, 39 x 445 inches, Image Courtesy: The Artist & Akar Prakar

