

## Collisions of the Cosmic and the Mundane: Jitish Kallat

Working across a range of mediums, subjects and scales, Jitish Kallat (b. 1974) juxtaposes everyday images and ideas with monumental themes to reflect upon ourselves, cities, nations and the world at large. Let's look at some of his works from the last two decades to explore how he draws from urban life, historical events and the cosmos to craft his own visual language.

### Urban Sprawl

Born and raised in Mumbai, a city known for its busy streets and dense population, Kallat's early works capture its frenzy. For instance, his large-scale, billboard-like paintings featuring compositions that he calls 'collisionscapes', stitching together masses of vehicles, people and derelict buildings exploding outward. Here, forms overlay each other as if defying time or even gravity, and capture ideas of confluence, acceleration and relentlessness within a still frame. The sculpted gargoyles that we see holding the painting up are inspired by the figures adorning the century-old Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, an important landmark and lifeline in Mumbai. These symbolise the bystanders who have witnessed the daily chaos of the city, as well as its evolution over the decades.

In contrast to the dynamic representations of the city, his later works like *Autosaurus Triopus* (2007) and *Aquasaurus* (2008) convey an uncanny sense of stillness. Kallat references vehicles such as rickshaws and trucks commonly seen in Mumbai, and creates works as we see here that fossilise them to portray the city's darker history. In these morbid yet playful representations, Kallat juxtaposes the past and the present, as well as the ordinary and the fantastic. Resembling archaeological finds or skeletons of beasts from unknown periods, the works pay tribute to the lives lost and vehicles burnt in communal riots in Bombay and Gujarat in the 1990s and 2000s.

### Stepping into History

In his *Public Notice* series (2003-10), Kallat cites landmark speeches from across history that propagate values of equality and tolerance, holding them up against humankind's failures. The first of this series references Jawaharlal Nehru's iconic 'Tryst with Destiny' speech which was delivered on the eve of India's independence. By presenting the words of the speech in an abstracted form as we see here, Kallat emphasises the shattered Nehruvian dream of justice and peace for an independent India. Created in the aftermath of the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, Kallat inscribed the words on reflective acrylic panels and set them on fire to evoke the mass violence and arson that had occurred. Standing in front of the work to read the text, we would be confronted by a distorted image of ourselves reflecting in the mirror-like surface, urging us to contemplate our place in these fraught histories.

In another work from this series, which was also shown as his first major exhibition in the US, Kallat cites monk-philosopher Swami Vivekananda's address at the Parliament of the World Religions in Chicago on 11th September 1893. The installation was presented on the Art Institute of Chicago's interior steps, adjacent to the

site of Vivekananda's speech. His words, which pleaded for an end to fundamentalism, intolerance and bigotry, are highlighted here in LED lights. The colours used represent the Department of Homeland Security's different levels of terror threats in the US post the 9/11 terrorist attack. Bringing together two important events that occurred on the same date but 108 years apart, the work bridges the disjuncture between the message of religious tolerance and 2001's devastating events.

Along with examining complex historical narratives, Kallat also sought new perspectives on humanity by examining the interplay between the cosmic and the day-to-day. Let's turn our attention to some of these works.

### Across the Cosmos

This work titled *Epilogue* (2010) presents a lunar chart where Kallat traces his late father's life through a depiction of the 22,889 moons he witnessed in his lifetime. A closer look at these reveals that each of these moons is in fact an image of a roti, a circular flatbread eaten across India, with seemingly chewed-off or broken edges to show its waxing or waning. Using a staple item of food as a metaphor for the passage of time, Kallat draws parallels between celestial movements and the daily routines of individuals to present a larger perspective on the idea of sustenance. In works such as *Preamble 2* (2013), he features an image of the lunar roti and its negative on a larger scale, which at a glance could be perceived as images of celestial bodies. In the context of the divided state of humanity, these works invite us to visualise our world on a macro-level, beyond the trivial differences that define our relation to each other.

Seamlessly moving between the minuscule and the macroscopic, Kallat encourages engagements that are both immersive and intimate. Referencing daily life, celestial occurrences, personal memory, as well as public histories, his works invite us to play with registers of time and space and consider new perspectives on how we inhabit our world.

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*Jitish Kallat has lived and worked in Mumbai for his entire career, graduating from the Sir JJ School of Art. The scope of his work has grown from a focus on his own city to the world and cosmos beyond, and his deep interest in history has informed several of the exhibitions he has curated. These include the 2nd Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2014) and 'Tangled Hierarchy' (2022), which travelled from the John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, UK to Kochi with the support of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.*

*While in the context of Kallat's work, the monk-philosopher Vivekananda is cited for his views on world peace, it is important to note here that scholars have criticised his view on caste inequalities and oppression. Even though, in his writings, he acknowledged that social evils nurtured by caste should be done away with, he still remained, problematically, of the view that 'Caste has kept us alive as a nation, and while it has many defects, it has many more advantages.'*

*The communal riots mentioned in this topic refer to two instances of mass violence that took place in India. The first occurred in Bombay (now Mumbai) between December 1992 and 1993 and erupted in response to the demolition of*

the Babri Masjid, resulting in the deaths of 900 people. The second, the Gujarat pogrom, refers to the outbreak of communal violence in 2002, marked by extreme brutality, resulting in an estimated 2000 deaths, looting and destruction of property across the state. While the term 'pogrom' is often used in reference to organised violence and massacre towards a particular ethnic group — particularly Jews — many scholars have adopted it to describe the 2002 events in Gujarat, which largely targeted Muslims.

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