

CULTURE

Delhi: Artists, architects and artisans come together for a show on ideas and scale

The ongoing 'Spatial Dialogues' at Delhi's Shrine Empire features a collaboration between artists and architects to reflect on the idea of memories, materiality and creative imagination

By Shaikh Ayaz

Photography by Shrine Empire

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Madhav Raman + Parul Gupta, Metaprism, Laminated Glass, glue_plywood, 81 x 65.6 x 51 inches, Ed 1 of 3 + 2AP, 2021

Art and architecture have often brought out the best in each other. From the days of the Renaissance, the two disciplines have shared an interlinked relationship thanks to the way they have inspired one another with their visual aesthetics, creative imagination, scale and materiality and formal concerns. The Delhi-based Shrine Empire's ongoing exhibition 'Spatial Dialogues' hopes to add to this centuries-long conversation. Featuring a close-knit team of artists, artisans and architects such as Martand Khosla, Abhimanyu Dalal, Ayesha Singh, Madhav Raman, Parul Gupta, Ravindra Gundu Rao and Shruti Mahajan, it reinterprets the notion of 'architecture as an event. What makes the experiment further interesting is the use of "varied materials, whether textile, glass, wood, brick dust or metal. It gave us a range of craftsmanship along with exploring ideas in urban studies, conservation and production of life in itself," says curator Sarover Zaidi.

Shefali Somani, co-founder, Shrine Empire, says the criteria for opting for artists Ayesha Singh, Shruti Mahajan and Parul Gupta was the ever-present architectural elements in their works. "Ayesha's work addresses the politics of architecture and we felt that she and Abhimanyu Dalal would make for a perfect fit. Shruti revived her conversations with Ravindra Gundu Rao from 20 years earlier, when she was a student living in Maheshwar and while the architect was restoring the Ahilya Fort. Parul chose to work with Madhav Raman as she felt there were synergies between their practices. And, we chose Martand as he wears the hat of both architect and artist," explains Somani.

The River of Memories: Shruti Mahajan + Ravindra Gundu Rao

Artist and textile designer Shruti Mahajan and conservation architect Ravindra Gundu Rao first met in Maheshwar. The fabric installation, 'Continuities of Construction' on view at 'Spatial Dialogues', is a tapestry of notes, pictures, sketches and textiles bound together by the idea of "place, space, memory, and of remembering and forgetting," says Mahajan. The central installation echoes the Wada (home) and the loom, an ode to Mahajan and Rao's "fragmented memories" of Maheshwar's Ahilya Wada on the banks of the river Narmada. "I used to see the daily rituals of people taking a bath or performing worship and the evening aartis against the backdrop of the Ahilshwar temple. I'd take a boat ride and as the boat left the ghats, it was a truly magical sight. Watching the meticulous and painstaking restoration by Ravindra Gundu Rao left a lasting impression on my understanding of space, place and time," she says.

Ravindra Gundu Rao + Shruti Mahajan, Continuities of Construction, Fabric Installation

Shruti Mahajan's showcase at 'Spatial Dialogues'

Moving around the installation (made up of fabric woven especially for the show) is a visceral experience, as the accompanying sound of loom lulls the viewer into a state of transcendence. The ghats, steps, and the river run through this project like a leitmotif. "It's like when you put your feet in the river, the lines of the ghats become visible. We have tried to evoke a similar emotional effect," says Mahajan who has worked closely with weavers over the decades. In some ways, 'Continuities of Construction' is a tribute to Indian textile and millions of unheralded artisans reinforced by the symbolic placement of the loom. Interestingly, the loom also represents architecture in its barest form. "It's essentially a structure with beams and pillars, which are basically architectural features," she concurs. At the same time, the project is a commentary on restoration and reclamation of lost cultural spaces. As the artist puts it, revisiting old places inspires "images, musings, and questions."

Through A Glass Sparkly: Parul Gupta + Madhav Raman

'Metaprism' is a site-responsive conceptual work by artist Parul Gupta and architect Madhav Raman. Crafted out of laminated glass, it summons the metaphysical play between light, mirror and reflection. Architecture forms an integral part of Noida-based Gupta's works. As she tells *AD*, "The entry point of our conversation was Madhav and my common interest in experiential nature of architecture and its interaction with the human body. This leads to talking about form, light, movement, perception, material and scale. Within this structure of our conversation we decided to start thinking through reflection: water, mirror and polished metal. Thinking through material is in many ways antithesis to both our individual practices, but we equally wanted to explore the inherent illusionistic character these materials hold."

Madhav Raman + Parul Gupta, Metaprism, Laminated Glass, glue _ plywood, 81 x 65.6 x 51 inches, Ed 1 of 3 + 2AP, 2021

She likens the process to playing table tennis "where after addition or alteration we would pass it to the other, or as Madhav calls it 'jugalbandi,' till we reached to the form which is expressive of our

initial conversation." For Gupta, this collaboration has opened up a way forward towards reflecting more deeply about glass and mirror. "We are working towards multiple iterations and prototypes to understand mirror/glass behaviour in relation to form and its surrounding. We are also aware of the perceptual agency this material holds and how to manoeuvre that in order to create events of travelling through an infinite space pool."

Given her engagement with the poetics inherent in architecture, the show has been an ideal platform for her to push the boundaries of material and ideas. "I feel architectural spaces are in flux with its interaction with daylight and the presence of the human body in it. It constantly evolves through continuous shifting, becoming and unbecoming of geometrical forms, line, colour and gradation."

The Poetics of Language: Ayesha Singh + Abhimanyu Dalal

Over 100 languages (Arabic, Brahmi, Devanagari, Bodo, Khasi and English, etc) and scripts, both old and new, have informed artist Ayesha Singh and architect Abhimanyu Dalal's 'Inversion, Incision, Immateriality.' Singh tells *AD* over an email interaction, "In this work the pyramid is inverted and contains incisions in the shape of alphabets from written scripts used by over 100 languages in India. Language attempts to transfer from the domain of a few, to the multiplicity of plurality. Light passes through each equilateral plane, often layering alphabet on alphabet to create multilingual words on the architecture of the space. Some are included in the design of the work and some interactions occur by chance. There are also specific lights that project the shape of *matras* onto the architecture, that complete various multilingual words as they appear and disappear on the ceiling, floor and walls. Within contradiction to that, another pyramid emerges, upright, from the floor."

Singh's conversation with Dalal started last year during lockdown. "We had the chance to share our experiences, thoughts, practices and ideas with each other. Initially we were looking at mazes, architectural follies, kinetic elements, and works that are only completed by the viewer's mind or physical presence. Even though the work went through various iterations, the final installation embodies many elements from our initial conversations—intentionally or unintentionally," says Singh whose work is inspired by colonial monuments, contemporary empires and political conflicts. Talking about her influences, she says, "The cities we live in are constructed with histories, stories and memories of the movement of people through space. The buildings could be contemporary or historical, informal or formal, legal or illegal, traditional or modernist or contain appropriated design elements. It is the inherent existence of contradiction in simultaneity that draws me to architecture."

Abhimanyu Dalal + Ayesha Singh, inversion, incision, immateriality

On the Square: Martand Khosla

An artist-cum-architect, Martand Khosla's practice is rooted in his connection with cities and the built environment. His work makes you consider both construction and destruction simultaneously. Unlike other artist-architect teams displaying at 'Spatial Dialogues,' Khosla is a solo player though the curatorial note proffers an intriguing possibility—he could be having a "conversation with his own architectural self."

Martand Khosla, Maximum Capacity V, Steel and wood, 55 x 55 x 8 inches, 2020

Framed like a square, Maximum Capacity V is a steel and wood ultra black composition symbolic of Khosla's tryst with urban reality. A practising architect, Khosla's art is influenced very much by his day job in the sense that it has a strong relationship with materiality, says curator Sarover Zaidi. He works with wood, brick dust and metal. All these elements remind one of built structures and