

SPERONE WESTWATER
257 Bowery New York 10002
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338
www.speronewestwater.com

Ghose, Anindita. “Jitish Kallat’s new space mission.” *www.livemint.com (Livemint)*, 26 January 2019

live **mint**



Kallat with two ‘Palindrome/Anagram Paintings’ at his studio in Byculla, Mumbai. Photo: Aniruddha chowdhury/Mint

A month into the new year, Jitish Kallat has inaugurated a new show in Paris alongside the international release of a monograph on his life’s work. He’s also renewing an old impulse—painting.

When we meet at his studio in Mumbai’s Bandra, he says his photographic work *Sightings*—which appears like colourful snapshots of distant galaxies—was born in his daily breakfast bowl at the Old Harbour Hotel in Kochi. It went on to become the centrepiece of his show at New York’s Sperone Westwater Gallery last summer. “The apple skin looked like star fields. As a visual artist, things go in odd ways...I started looking at fruit peels as a forensic image of the cosmos.

In recent times, a majority of Kallat’s inquiries have had a cosmic texture or been reliant on the forces of nature—wind, rain, fire, air. Whether it’s fruit peels becoming dazzling supernovas or wind velocities transcribed on paper, let’s say the scale has been galactic. But today, we speak about his morning walks in the botanical garden behind his other studio in Byculla. And he shares his wonderment about the soft bark of a 120-year-old white tree. “You can feel the mark of your finger...it’s like human skin,” he says.

Kallat is not only returning to painting, but also closer home. It is not for nothing that the Paris show at Galerie Templon is titled *Phase Transition* (Kallat doesn’t dispute this reading).

The monograph, a marvellously produced tome, attempts to chronicle these shifts over time. Published by Mapin and Prestel in association with Kallat’s galleries—Galerie Templon, Nature Morte, Chemould Prescott Road—it is a meditative but not necessarily academic rumination on the artist’s journey. Its editor, Natasha Ginwala, calls it a “mobius strip like circuit of text and image”. There are as many (or more) pages

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of art, photographs and reproductions from the artist's sketchbook as there are of text. Poignantly, a 1980 poem by Dilip Chitre titled *Father Returning Home* is placed in there for good measure. Kallat spoke to *Lounge* about what's driving him at the moment. Edited excerpts:

You debuted a new suite titled 'Palindrome/Anagram Painting' at Galerie Templon earlier this month. Tell us about this return to painting after a five-year hiatus.

The last time I exhibited paintings was in 2013 in Norway. After that I got tied up curating the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (in 2014). I abruptly shut down and re-routed all artistic intuition the curatorial way.

I'm conscious that there's a danger in the art world that you want works which you can talk about. This is the work, that's the umbilical cord and this is the context...painting allows you to escape that and I was keen that if I was painting, I have to escape that. I can't go into that rabbit hole with painting. *Palindrome/Anagram Painting* has so many impulses in it that the best way I can talk about it is by not talking about it.

Why are these curiously titled 'Palindrome/Anagram Painting'?

The title is opaque to the contents of the painting and more transparent to the process. When you say palindrome, you read it from either side. When I was painting, I would turn the work in all directions, put it flat down or on an incline...

These works also involve an element of collage from my own now demised and trashed set of early paintings that I began two years ago. Post the retrospective of my work (at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi in 2017), I was really disheartened with what I was doing. I was seeking unfamiliarity, a retraining of muscle memory, a retraining of responses...I wanted to see if that cause and effect between canvas and me can have a different bearing. I wanted to discard old rituals...so I started tearing off those canvasses of the early paintings and they later found their way into *Palindrome/Anagram Painting*.

And what were these early paintings that you tore up? The fragments seem to hark back to your early abstractions, which preceded the sociopolitical and cosmic work.

Yes, they were kind of abstractions. I was trying to see form and the world from the point of abstraction. When you see this flotsam of abstraction, can it begin to coalesce as images and where does that take us? What are our physical and perceptual sensations in the presence of an image? I wanted to be in that space where I cannot say so and so, and hence I'm painting it.

But I couldn't bear to see the early paintings I'd made. While trashing them, I had randomly cut out patches and corners, not thinking in any way that they would serve me later. Later, I took some fragments and started putting them up...it felt like a hurricane had swept through the studio. It almost felt like demised



A 'tetralemma' sketch from the book

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ancestors were fulfilling the promise of misbehaved progeny. After the New York show last summer, I was aching to get back to my studio, where these works awaited.

And what is the anagram part of it?

Jumbling it around, the aspect of collage. A long sentence where the words are constantly moving. Really, a sliding of imagery from one to the other. Each one has its own internal response to the primary geometry of the work. I've never done something like this before.

The idea of time, whether real time or cosmic time, has always informed your work. You seem to be obsessed with the Doomsday Clock. It features in your installation at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and the seating at Galerie Templon was shaped like the clock hands...

It has been iconic for a long time but the Doomsday Clock progressively became more important to my work two years ago. Lawrence Krauss, who wrote *The Greatest Story Ever Told... So Far*, used to be the chair of the patrons of the Doomsday Clock. He's one of the physicists who actually move the hand of the clock. This year it was on 24 January. When you begin observing the world, you also become more conscious of how delicate everything is and how precious it all is.... And then you see the pollution in the public domain—not just air pollution but the pollution in discourse and political rhetoric.

Even as you shift your focus to painting, your new set of '(Emergence) Drawing' is entirely based on material shifts. Why is materiality so important to you?

The *(Emergence) Drawings* are gesso panels with a play of black epoxy pigment and transparent lacquer. If the lacquer goes in first and the black rushes into it, it creates a ripple as it parts the lacquer. It almost becomes like a perceptible dimension. There's a luminosity from within. How does a jet of water suddenly become luminous? I'm interested in these subtle shifts in material and how they can interact and create worlds within them. I can never paint this...here, it is all perceptively perfect. Nothing of me goes in there. I circle it with a chalk pencil and paint in black around it. If only my larger paintings could get to that level at some point...

Your iconic skeletal rickshaws were a response to the Gujarat riots of 2002. Your 'Public Notice' series hinges on the words of Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda. This is an important year for Indian national politics. As an artist, do you feel the pressure to respond?

In a peculiar way, I feel *(Palindrome/Anagram Painting)* has a distinct urgency, which is masked partly because I'm not trying to be specific, because I worry about this as a condition of the art world. It is a condition that has also afflicted me in the past.

I do believe one should be able to respond in the way one feels and the feeling is not always verbal, not always immediate. The urgency to freeze-frame an impulse as something you've already interpreted and decided is becoming a condition of the world. Once you've framed it, you go through confirmation bias. So people can make placards and Facebook posts about what they've never experienced. I don't know if other animal species have evolved to become judgmental but our species certainly has.

It reminds me of a conversation at the Experimenter Curator's Hub (in Kolkata) four years ago. There was a speaker from conflict-ridden Derry in the UK. In that town known for riots he runs an art programme focused on the environment. It led to a debate about the validity of an environmental programme in a town of religious conflict. Where I stand is that if Delhi's air quality doesn't improve urgently, then the politicians

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will be coughing when they bark at each other in Parliament. So here's a condition that is common to them both and shouldn't they be doing something about it? With art, you can direct other people's gaze. You can actually talk to that third space.

Jitish Kallat, edited by Natasha Ginwala and published by Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, in association with Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, Galerie Templon, Paris, and Nature Morte, New Delhi, is now in book stores.