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Khare-Ghose, Archana. "Jitish Kallat: India's Philosopher Artist on World Stage." *blouinartinfo.com*
(*Blouin Artinfo*), 28 May 2018.

BLOUIN ARTINFO



Jitish Kallat during the installation of his show "Decimal Point" at Sperone Westwater, New York. Courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York

The year was early 2001, and the moment was just after the Sanskriti Awards — India's version of the Pulitzer — had been given to the country's top cultural achievers, across the fields of art, music, theater and journalism. The revered O.P. Jain, a patron of Indian arts and founder-president of New Delhi-based Sanskriti Pratishthan (Sanskriti Foundation), had hosted the press conference to introduce the year's winners.

A group of journalists approached Jain to pick one winner for a quick interview and photo-op — they were in a hurry. Jain, a force in Indian culture like not many before him, did not like being rushed, and let them know it. But they persisted, and the stern Mr. Jain reluctantly chose one winner to stand at his side — the artist Jitish Kallat. Jain complained that it wasn't right to make him choose from a field of winners whom his foundation had honored equally, yet added that Kallat was the artist to watch out for.

Kallat was only 27 at the time, but he had already generated enough buzz to become a star. Unlike many celebrity artists who lose sheen as they progress in their career, Kallat has only gone from strength to

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“Sightings,” 2017-2018 (composite of 4 works), by Jitish Kallat. Photography by Anil Rane. Courtesy Jitish Kallat and Sperone Westwater, New York



“Wind Study (Hilbert Curve),” 2017. Burnt adhesive, aquarelle pencil and graphite on paper, 89 x 55 1/8 inches (228.5 x 140 cm). Photography by Anil Rane. Courtesy Jitish Kallat and Sperone Westwater, New York

strength. One of the strongest names in Contemporary Indian art, he has also claimed a spot on the world stage.

Born in 1974 and based in Mumbai, Kallat has shown immense flexibility with the media he has worked in. He has used painting, photography, drawing, video, and installations to convey his ideas on the themes that concern most individuals — life, living it daily with inherent difficulties, and death. He has received acclaim for turning common themes and ideas into deeply philosophical works of art. For instance, he used the image of roti (Indian flat bread) — the country’s staple food — to explore the cyclical nature of life in his series “Conditions Apply.” One of the first works in the series had seven phases of the moon traced with waning and waxing images of roti, connecting the mundane to the celestial.

His first solo show in New York was in 1999 while his latest in the city — “Decimal Point” — is currently on view at Sperone Westwater through June 16. In the interim, he has had acclaimed solo exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, the San Jose Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art to name a few. He was the subject of a high-profile mid-career retrospective at India’s most prestigious venue, the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, last year. With more than 100 works across a variety of media, that retrospective showcased some seminal works by Kallat that have been turning points in his career and that have also placed him in the position to define the course of Contemporary Indian art. These included works from the “Public Notice” series (featuring speeches by historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru as installations), and “Covering Letter” (the installation of a personal letter by Gandhi to Adolf Hitler in 1939, written a few weeks before the beginning of the World War II, pleading him to reconsider his actions in light of the impact those would likely have) to name a few.

But the artist has progressed beyond his most famous works, and has opened new areas of enquiry as is evident with the works on view at Sperone Westwater show. On the occasion of his latest solo show, Kallat spoke to BLOUIN ARTINFO on his new works, the underlying philosophy of his art, the state of Contemporary Indian art and more.

On the surface, your works on view at Sperone Westwater suggest an undercurrent of philosophy that has shaped man’s own understanding of his relation

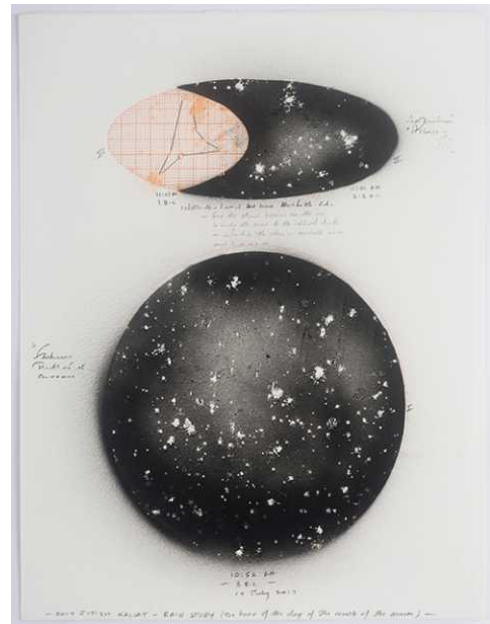
with cosmos, evidence of which is present since ancient times in various cultures. Have you also been influenced by these issues as questioned by ancient philosophers?

While philosophy is a means to arrive at a deeper understanding of the world through contemplative means, art provides a parallel means to arrive at an innate understanding of the world through observation. If philosophy and the various ancient wisdom traditions of the world converge with speculative image making in the arts or recent scientific observations, it is not so much an overlap of disciplines but the fact that these varying methods of probing the world lead to overlapping observations. To that extent, one could say that “Sightings” points our attention in a direction that would share affinities with philosophical probes in different parts of the world.

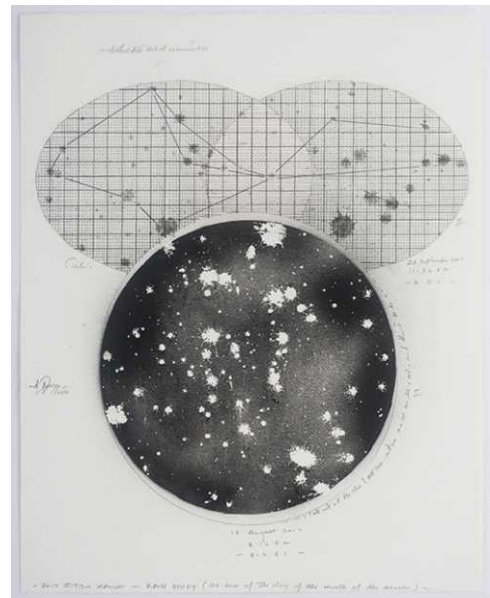
Is your current exhibition really a culmination of all the “areas of inquiry” you have pursued in your career so far, or the opening of a new area of inquiry? If it is the latter, what is it that concerns your mind currently the most, and how do you want to translate it further through your art?

You are right, at one level the exhibition could appear to open several new areas of inquiry but having said that, particular bodies of work have evolved out of works made close to a decade ago. For instance the “Sightings,” one could say, are reincarnations of certain speculations that were part of works such as “Forensic Trail of the Grand Banquet,” 2009, or “Preamble,” 2013. “Forensic Trail of the Grand Banquet” is a large slow-moving video of what seems to appear like a journey through a cosmic field, with the gradual passage of nebulae, asteroids, planets and stars. But each of these astral bodies are hundreds of X-Ray scans made of numerous food types in a doctor’s radiology lab wherein the Dicom medical files become the drifting celestial bodies. The piece seems to draw forensic links between who we are and where we come from; interstellar dust restructured as sentient beings. In “Preamble,” a lenticular photographic work, the surface of a roti/bread begins to unveil a dimension of the celestial. The “Rain Study’s” for instance emerged out of a small suite of rain studies I had made in the Laurentian mountains of Quebec, Canada in the year 2001.

One element that has continued throughout from the earliest of works is this engagement with the skies; a place where it all begins, with light and energy and photosynthesis that becomes food, and the food that becomes our bodies. These inquires have continued from some early paintings in the ‘90s.

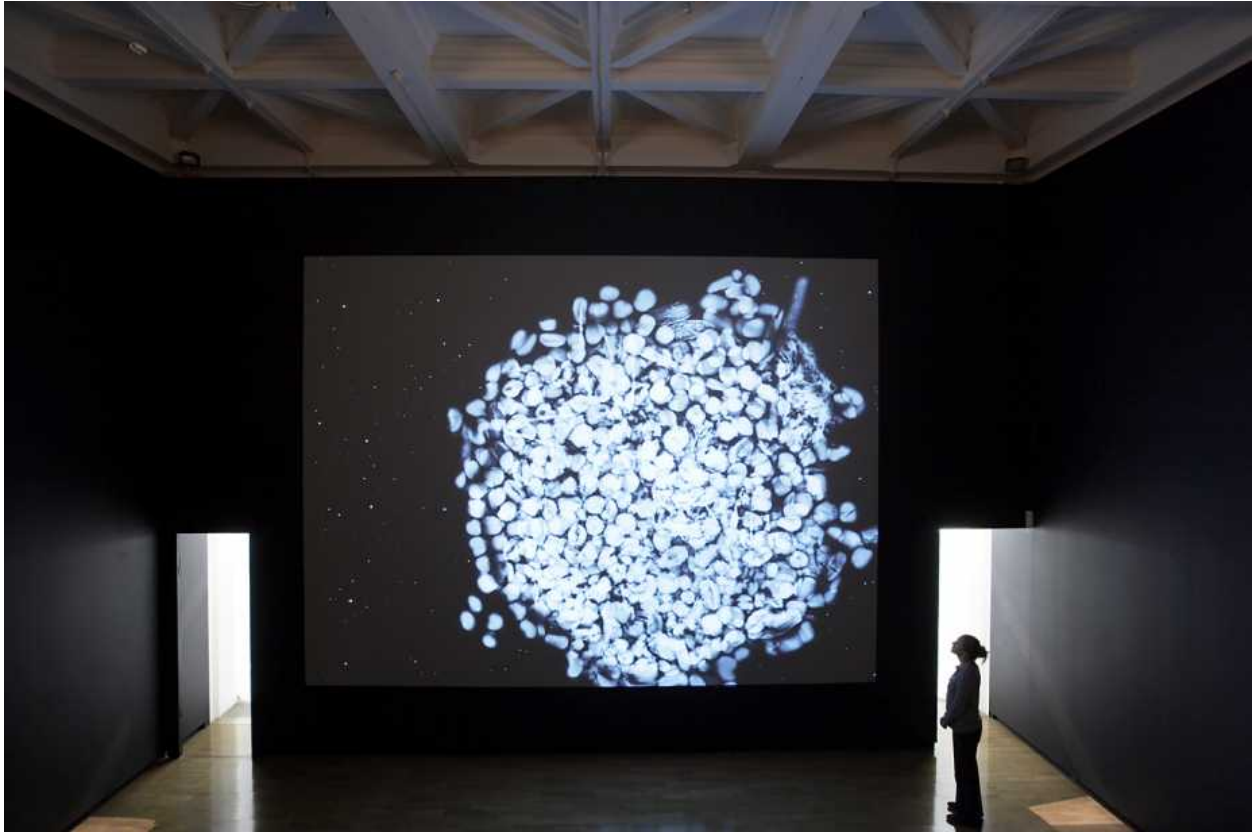


“Rain Study (the hour of the day of the month of the season),” 2017. Graphite, acrylic epoxy on Arches paper 20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm) 23 x 18 3/4 inches (58.4 x 47.6 cm). Photography by Anil Rane. Courtesy Jitish Kallat and Sperone Westwater, New York



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Jitish Kallat's "Forensic Trail of the Grand Banquet," 2009. Single channel video, duration: 00:02:20. Installation view: Haunch of the Venison, London, 2010. Courtesy Jitish Kallat

Some of your most celebrated works — the “Public Notice” trilogy, “Autosaurus Tripous,” and “Covering Letter” to name a few, have been an artist’s reaction to or an interpretation of epochal, historical events. Do you think you would want to do an artistic expression of the times of distrust and fear — both globally and in India — that we are living in now?

Works such as the “Public Notice” trilogy and “Covering Letter” returned to a historical utterance as a means to rethink the present moment through a super imposition of the historical words on to the present moment. As an artist, one draws from the world that one lives in and the questions that permeate one’s everyday thinking begins to find voice within the work. So it is hard to predict or pre-imagine a response to anything happening now... this will only be revealed in time.

You move between media with ease and it seems to be a tool for your expression instead of tailoring your expression to suit a particular medium. What remains your favorite medium to work with (perhaps because it helps you translate your ideas easily) and what are the other media that you are keen on trying in future?

As such I don’t feel a hierarchy or preference of medium, a priori. I might say that the ideas and inquiries have a seed of the medium embedded in them, and in pursuing the idea further it becomes clear what form it might take, whether it be a video or a drawing. So the “Wind Study” would have inflammable liquid, fire and wind as medium while “Covering Letter” is nothing but illuminated mist. I do often find that working across varied scales and media assists a natural self-renewal of the studio process as, at a material level, one is shifting between different registers.



Installation view of Jitish Kallat's works at Sperone Westwater. Photo by Robert Vinas Jr., 2018. Courtesy Jitish Kallat and Sperone Westwater, New York.

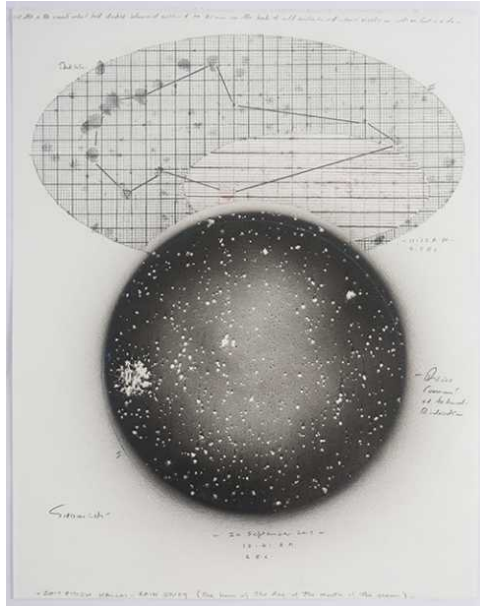
Contemporary art is devoid of any geographic trapping. However, being a representative of Contemporary Indian art scene with a global name recall, have you ever felt any pressure to have some India in your art? Conversely, do you think Contemporary art from culturally rich countries like China and India must speak to their unique identities in some way?

As artists, the neighborhood, the city, or the country, where one resides becomes the culture medium of one's experiences. It is after all one's lived experiences as well as cultural and historical inheritances that become the work you make. That said as an artist the location of one's existence is a means of adjusting the focal length at which one views the world. While I could say that I am a resident of Mumbai, I could equally say I'm a resident of India, or Asia, the planet Earth or I could say, somewhat facetiously, that I am a resident of the Milky Way Galaxy. This last remark would completely alter the focal length at which I might view the location of my residence, my sense of identity or my limiting identifications, and my immediate neighbor then becomes the Andromeda Galaxy. And each of these focal lengths alter the perspective of how you view the world... and as an artist I feel it is important to function from each of these focal lengths.

Contemporary art in India is headlined by a few artists, including you, and apart from the top few, the scene in general suffers from the lack of a strong idiom, which Modern Indian art of 1940s and after, exhibited.

Do you think there is a need for any collective effort or individual trajectories of excellence such as yours, Subodh Gupta's, Bose Krishnamachari-Riyas Komu's, to name a few, would in the long term coalesce into a strong body of Contemporary Indian art?

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If one observes carefully there is a rich and exuberant art scene wherein artists of various generations are correspondingly doing insightful, thought-provoking work. If the Indian art scene is heavily lacking in something today, it would be the institutional dimension... the absence of great museums, art schools etc.

This interview appears in the June 2018 edition of Modern Painters.