

“And since the Blood is on All our Hands...”: An Interview with Artist Karishma D’souza
R. Benedito Ferrão

RBF: [Xippas Gallery](#) in Paris is soon to host a solo exhibition by you titled *Ancestors*. Between 20 May and 29 July, 2017, visitors will be able to see a series of works that span nearly a decade. I am curious about how you chose to piece this collection together. Though it is not exclusively true that darker hues and urban settings characterize the earlier paintings, your more recent works are generally nature-themed and, so, brighter coloured. Nevertheless, there are recurring concepts that play across the canvasses.

In “Vasai: Tailor at Night” (2007), a city tenement, otherwise shrouded in darkness, reveals a rectangle of light in which is silhouetted a lone figure hunched over her or his work. Invisible labour is again the subject of “The Republic” (2016), where a worker is being lowered, by two others, into a manhole. As with “This Forest 2” (2016), “The Republic” uses leafy tones and explicit references to nature. But where “Vasai” is deliberately ponderous, the bleakness of “The Republic” is communicated ironically through the integration of the deadly work done by manual labourers into a natural landscape. This seamlessness between caste-bound labour and what is thought of as being natural, along with the title of the painting, speak to the perverse ecologies of contemporary India; however, you also imbue the works I have mentioned, and others, with overtly structural elements.

If in “Vasai” one can see the muted edges of buildings in the tailor’s town, then in “This Forest 2”, one views interior design externalized, in the form of tables and other furniture blended into the environment. Or, is it that the forest lives indoors in this painting? In “Himalayan Landscapes: Unseeing” (2016), viewers are made privy to the architecture of nature as you render it, because of the precise placement of environmental elements and the constitution of the horizon. In so doing, your audience is called to witness the artifice of this seeming orderliness, and to delve deeper.

What was your vision in bringing together *Ancestors*, what message might its viewers take away, and what is the significance of the exhibition’s title?

KD: For the exhibition to be visually coherent a final decision on the works to display will be taken only after I see the body of work from 2008-2010 and 2015-2017 together, in the space of the gallery. This is something that, till now, I have only imagined together, by viewing the few paintings from 2008 which I had with me, alongside the newer works, and through photographs.

The idea of bringing these two periods together began with a conversation with a friend, legal anthropologist Jason Keith Fernandes, who wrote [the exhibition text](#) for a preceding solo exhibition in Goa in October 2016, titled *In Retelling*, which I see as a first chapter. *Ancestors* is the second.

Jason linked a stark outdoor natural space in the painting “Chembur” from 2016 to the works of the cityscapes of 2007-2009, as both outdoor spaces speaking of singular journeys.

That another person could see a link made me feel that bringing these two bodies of paintings together could work for other underlying reasons too. I feel that they would inform each other, as viewers move between an ideal exhibition space, if it does work, since the space consists of two rooms of sizes which also suit the number of works from each of the two periods of time.

What underlies this decision is the fact that the conceptual criteria has not changed over the years. The lynchpin has been, from 2008 to the present, the sloganeering and propaganda of the Indian state, in the body of the right-wing dominant caste political party with roots in fascist ideology – the BJP. Namely the promise of “Development” has snowballed into many catchy go-to phrases.

I have been speaking to one of these slogans in this span of time: “The India Shining Campaign”.

The dual bodies of work arrive, in order to gaze at this campaign slogan, from two directions. The paintings from 2008-2010 were produced smack in the heart of so called “India Shining”, in the state of another slogan: “Vibrant Gujarat”. It was a time which witnessed the lower income population of Gujarat’s cities trying desperately to live and believe that dream - through thick and thin - fifteen hour work days, neighbours with multiple jobs, which meant lights were on in homes at five in the morning and off at eleven and twelve at night, factories running into early morning hours. Soon to come was the diamond price crash and workers being laid off after working all their lives in a place, with no pension and no wages for the next month to tide them over, as well as no other professional skills except the ability to polish diamonds. This is just one minuscule example in one profession, albeit a very visible one in Vadodra, which neighbours the diamond polishing units of the city of Surat.

I began to wonder, in those days, if people would be able to see dark tones laid quite close to each other in a painting with eyes that were increasingly cajoled to be dazzled by the bright lights of shopping malls and Nano showrooms. The flurried building and opening of these malls were written about in newspapers like they were community centre stand-ins.

I was interested in those other eyes, which had become accustomed to the darkness and the paintings were for these eyes only. There was a faint glow that these eyes would be able to see in the works, a kind of unearthly one, indiscernible whether it came from within the elements of the painting really, or from the reflection of a shine in the distance. Was it a spiritual “within” which hadn’t been lost and was only visible in starkness and subdued space? Perhaps that was asking for something too fleeting to be captured and this was instead just the light of incandescent bulbs bouncing off grey walls.

For the eyes of those returning from shopping malls, these works, hoping for a viewer to spend time before them, would try to wean those eyes, which could then, once again, feel jarred by bright lights.

India at the moment is a culmination of desperation, as laws are systematically derailed and lie un-enforced. It's a nation on a disastrous track of homogeneity.

The shine meanwhile has enveloped everything in the cities, eclipsing eye-balls into blindness wherever agency could have otherwise been freely available; eye-balls unable, in the glare of the headlights, to see any dark spaces without imagining flickering lights, which may in that split second before impact, remind one of fairy-lights on one or the other religious festival days.

The bright colours in the works from 2015-2017 are therefore only sartorial, enacting a farce, as do the structural elements, which I have painted to be hopefully formally cohesive, and at the same time hold up on, or structure out, a situation and reality which has no ethical base to exist.

The painting “This Forest 2”, questions an earlier reason I made art, to keep memories of moments of a feeling of fleeting connection and have the ability to carry this feeling or knowing within oneself at all times. The paintings in this exhibition are, as well, a self-critique and a questioning. In forests too, there are different kinds in the Indian state, speaking of government and private profiteering illegalities.

On one side is the Konkan belt of my personal memories; of stories from my grandparents, crossing over to Bombay, now Mumbai, of my own trekking experiences, and of villages at peace while away from the illegal mining regions of the Western Ghats.

On the other side are the forests which are the home of tribes of the eastern states in India, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Bengal, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh, where the central government is destroying the nation’s own citizens (this year also deploying its air-force for this purpose). Can the Red Corridor be neatly folded onto a table in the forest, put away to keep the urban memory sacrosanct and waiting on a dream of the next trekking getaway holiday?

The exhibition is titled *Ancestors* for multiple reasons. For one, if it works out on the visual sphere of cohesion at the final decision stage at the gallery with the majority of the work from 2008-2010 and 2015-2017, the earlier works are, in the ways spoken of previously, the forerunners, in a sibling language, of the works from the last three years.

The backdrop muse, most often, is the Indian nation and its promises, witnessing many citizens asking, “How are we really doing? All of us? And how long will it take? And over whose dead body? Who does the killing and in whose name? And since the blood is on all our hands what can we now do about it to enable ourselves, all of us, to move into more humane spaces?”

The exhibition is also titled *Ancestors* as a personal dedication, since returning to my home-state of Goa after ten years. It questions narrow ideas of, or ignorance of, who our ancestors really are. The term is as broad as one would like to imagine, and along with that breadth comes a breadth of belonging, which one has the right to claim.

Two quotes from Rumi speak to this, as the poet writes of working on one’s own un-bloodied spirit path while staying and engaging gently with this world.

*It’s right to love your home place, but first ask,
“Where is that, really”*

And the second:

... the world is that kind of sleep.

*The dust of many crumbled cities
settles over us like a forgetful doze,
but we are older than those cities.*

*We began
as a mineral. We emerged into plant life
and into the animal state, and then into being human,
and always we have forgotten our former states,
except in early spring when we slightly recall
being green again ...*

(The Essential Rumi, 2004)

The works of cityscapes recall my known family history of immigration to cities and railway towns in India in search for a better life and a higher income, and the changing job prospects over a few generations. I recalled the same dreams of my grandparents' generation and the prayers and planning for the children's future, while watching city life in Vadodara, while witnessing the occupations on display and the "work is worship" kind of ethic.

The term *Ancestors* also refers to individual paintings, namely "Chembur", with a very direct reference to my grandparents' home in this suburb of Bombay; "Chai Stop: Sand Castles" from 2016 refers to the shared chosen ancestry between friends in Vadodara – of mystic poets like Akkama and Sant Kabir – and the conversations where friends would quote these poets to immediately lighten, often with mirth, both woebe gone and surface "tensions" of life. In the reference in this painting to sati stones I had come across on a visit to Rajasthan, is an imagination of how these horrific mementos that jog our collective memory would move all female travellers similarly into a stunned silence. "The Republic" is a reference to the construct of caste which breaks relationships, others us all, and throws everything human into hellish confusion if one succumbs to irrationality and a lack of a better imagination of who we all are, how tied to each other. So an understanding of ancestry as claimed spaces of belonging which must be constantly widened as wisdom grows.

RBF: You have spoken of the kinship between your earlier solo exhibition, *In Retelling*, at Fundação Oriente in Goa, and the forthcoming *Ancestors* in Paris. Despite the generational connection you draw between them, there is an interesting – and generative – reversal in the naming of these exhibitions, for one expects ancestry to predate nostalgic retelling. Yet, from what you have said, you are wary of the ways in which feelings are manufactured – be it the affect attached to nationalism, development, or even tradition. You use your art to give your viewers pause, to puncture assumptions of what is natural, and to question the order of things. Some of the pieces that were on display *In Retelling* will also appear in *Ancestors*. As these

pieces travel between continents, what disruptions and continuities do you foresee occurring in how your art and its message is received in different contexts?

KD: The works could be seen as nostalgic about ideas rather than any place or time in the past.

In terms of place, of Goa, which the title *In Retelling* refers to, it is of a story I needed to re-structure for myself, as a more understood, richer narrative after a few more years of living, reading, and listening, which allowed me not to rely on my own childhood reactionary opinions and turn-table compartmentalizing and stereotyping. In my personal history, being the first generation back in Goa since my great-grandparents' generation, I felt more local in Goa than my parents. Though without fluency in Konkani, the local language, this localness was a confused one, even if I felt I partly belonged.

Nostalgia in terms of ideas would refer to the heart-break of imagining me and the country, India, sharing a youthfulness, which meant that as I would grow into adolescence, so too would the Indian state grow to solve its dire problems so visible to everyone. I would look for these signs of improvement each time I visited Mumbai as a child and teenager, though where I was looking for change in what one expected to be obvious first priorities seemed to stay exactly the same. At some point when I was around twelve, a slum in Chembur got a 'face-lift', some trees were planted, the drains and footpaths covered with kadappa stones. I waited to see this spread to the entire city which of course didn't happen.

I am reminded of the country's pledge, which was on the first page of many of our school textbooks – having it in textbooks now would certainly create cognitive-dissonance much sooner with children these days. Here is the [Wikipedia version](#) which matches my memory. I'll underline what stood out for me in my school days:

India is my country.

All Indians are my brothers and sisters.

I love my country, and I am proud of its rich and varied heritage.

I shall always strive to be worthy of it.

I shall give my parents, teachers and all elders respect and treat everyone with courtesy.

To my country and my people, I pledge my devotion.

In their well being and prosperity alone lies my happiness.

As an adult, the nation-building project can be ridiculed. As a child, I completely believed in the parts which were humanistic, to be what everyone was moving towards in this young country. Writing this reminds me of a series of lectures by Chinese and Indian thinkers at the Kochi Muzaris Biennial 2017, which were about the end of nationalism as the second phase of de-colonization.

In a separate conversation, you and I have been discussing the current political map in France. In that sense, the ideas of protectionism and the fear of the 'other', created in general populations by powers which own much of the media, that the blame for everyone's woes rest with people who have also been placed in disadvantaged circumstances, cross national borders and negate realities of a shared heritage everywhere.

For both exhibitions, in Goa and the one coming up in Paris, it is a great privilege for me to share the hope I derive from ideas of other pathways which have been laid down across veritable space and time by the poets referenced in the paintings. These poets speak of steps in a direction leading to wider ways of seeing reality, placing in their poetry a much more powerful storyline of solutions through expansive connections.

RBF: I find what you say about being a Goan returnee after so many generations rather compelling, perhaps not least because it speaks to my family's experience and my own as a transnational Goan not resident in Goa. While your responses makes it apparent that you have been richly inspired by a plethora of influences and the interrogative way in which you deconstruct these stimuli, I want to ask, now, of specifically Goan influences, if any, in your artistic process. In your time in Goa, has it given you the opportunity to explore forms of cultural expression, such as music, literature, or even work by other Goan artists? How do they illuminate your understanding of Goa?

KD: Some of the influences from Goa were filtered, through the collection set up by the Assistant State Librarian, Maria Lourdes Bravo da Costa, at the State Central Library, which had a fantastic collection of literature in English, updated within a month of new releases. Several of these were by Indian or Indian-origin authors, for instance, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* was on the library shelves within a month of its release. The State Central Library and the Goa College of Art Library were my main spaces of learning in Goa in a time before high-enough-speed Internet. To name some books which left a strong impression on my mind, there is the magic-realist *The Memory of Elephants* by Boman Desai, where the narrative moves between the history of the Parsi community and the personal life of the protagonist in present day India; *The Harem Within* by Fatima Mernissi, an account of the author's life as a child growing up in a joint-family in Morocco; a pretty insane book which was very enjoyable is by Salvador Dali and J.G. Ballard, and is titled *Diary of a Genius*; *The Hunted* by Mudra Rakshasa, which began in a way so gruesome that I had to return to finish it years later; and anthologies of Saadat Hasan Manto's writing. I'm trying to bridge my gap in reading Goan literature, still reading only in English.

Other influences were my own experiences of the landscapes of Goa, a kind of wilderness next to homes if you didn't live in the heart of cities, and the peace of the villages, the sea-side, and the Western Ghats. Living near the sea tied in well with the three years in total spent on cargo vessels intermittently, when my father worked as a master mariner. Seeing the cargo ships on the horizon and in the port from the beach brought with it a kind of security of intimately knowing other spaces as well as where one found oneself in the present.

In visual art, it was the spirit in the line drawings of Vamona Navelkar, an artist from Goa, Portugal, and Mozambique, which I saw for the first time at Gallery Attic, Panjim, and images in a book lent to me by the artist Antonio E. Costa, of the work of the Mozambique-Zimbabwean artist Luis Meque. This was a heritage I felt close to. Looking back, the influences when it came to visual art, the heritage which resonated with me personally, were rather tied to artists who had crossed many seas. Education at the Goa Art College (GCA), while I was a student there, was

connected to Bombay's J.J. School model of 19th century academicism. The approach at GCA today seems to be mixed. On my last visit to the studios nearly a year back, it appeared that the themes in play were those of tourism and religiosity, where the iconography of either isn't personally worked through, by which I mean there's no irony. So, regarding the art college, barring for me a gentle teacher named Mr. Farooqi who taught portrait painting, we were happy to be left to our own devices, as the students of the Painting Department generally were. As an art student, faith in my growth came from artists beyond the art college, such as Wilson D'Souza, Rajendre Usapkar, Antonio E. Costa, and Sonia Rodrigues Sabharwal.

RBF: It is remarkable to hear about how you have allowed your time in Goa, and the many influences you have imbibed, to serve as sources of reflection. I believe Goa is beginning to see a school of art which, while still on the fringes, is not content to render the region simply as a pretty place. And as the purveyors of this vision also think about India alongside Goa, their canvases reflect the realities of and from the margins. In concluding our interview, may I ask you to share what we might see next from you? Thank you so much for your time.

That's true. Artists in Goa have engaged with Goa's political and social realities with nuance and metaphor, often through personal mythologies, looking at place and history critically; Kaushalya Gadekar, Loretti Pinto, Ramdas Gadekar, Shilpa Mayenkar, Viraj Naik, Swapnesh Vaigankar, and Ryan Abreau are a few names that come to mind from within a generation. I do see a paucity of knowledge of the social and historical background of this state outside its borders, a non-understanding which unfortunately quite often, extends to the art market intricacies of Indian metropolitans.

Regarding my plans in the coming months, there's work-related travel since I've been granted two scholarships, one at the artists' residency in Skowhegan, Maine, US, this summer, and another at Qinyung International Art Center, Daxing, near Beijing, China in 2018. In the next months I would like to create a body of paintings, prints (etchings and serigraphs), and drawings, and possibly a project with ceramics next year. As I wrote to a friend recently, I might be able to work on/or incorporate in some way in the next works, passages or ideas abstracted from the book, *The Conference of the Birds*. In this book, numbers are mentioned as time metaphors, month and week cycles. The text was written in 1177, by Farid ud-Din Attar, a Sufi poet and theoretician of Persia, who had also travelled to India, possibly to Kashmir. It is a story about a group of birds who set off on a perilous journey to find God, and when thirty of them do, they experience non-duality between the divine and themselves. On their journey, they move through seven valleys. The book has about forty stories within the framing main story, told as parables by the hoopoe, who is the guide of the travellers/pilgrims. The imagery in the last chapter recalls the Buddhist concept of dependence-arising. In this chapter the birds meet Simurgh (the divine) in a palace where galaxies float by like specks of sand. While at Dharamshala, travelling with my friend Kim Kyoungae in 2011, I came across, in the main lecture hall, a small watercolour painting of the thirty birds and the hoopoe in the court of the Simurgh. Here the Simurgh was depicted as the Buddha preaching a sermon, the whole company seated in an open meadow with the hills of the lower Himalayas in the background, a Dharamshala landscape.

On a humorous note regarding my plan to travel to China, Attar spoke of China metaphorically, as a very distant place. From a [Wiki link](#) again:

... *China as used here, is not the geographical China, but the symbol of mystic experience, as inferred from the Hadith (used symbolically by some Sufis): 'Seek knowledge; even as far as China'.*

The residencies are differently programmed, the one at Skowhegan being very interactive, and the five months in Daxing a kind of self-organised time, a blank sheet of possibilities of travel and studio work with the opportunity to work in traditional craft techniques as well. Between these, I hope a residency in Goa, which a group of friends will propose, and help organise if we get the funding for it, will take place in early December this year.

Thank you for your interest in the work Bené, and for your invitation to do the interview!

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[Karishma D'Souza](#) is an artist who was born in Mumbai, India, in 1983. She graduated in Painting from the Goa College of Art, and completed her post-graduation in Graphic Arts from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda. She was an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie Residency, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, from 2012-2013, and currently lives and works in her home state in Goa, India.