

VIVAN SUNDARAM

Install: black gold, terraoptics and the work of termites

PHOTOINK is very pleased to present Vivan Sundaram's solo exhibition, 'Install: black gold, terraoptics and the work of termites'. The material genesis of this work is the large site-specific installation made up of discarded potshards from Pattanam, Kerala, shown in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2012. The potshards, dating between 1000 to 500 BCE, were from archaeological remains attributed to the ruins of the disappeared port-town of Muziris. The installation was flooded with black peppercorns and performatively shot, and the resulting video, *Black Gold*, shown as a floor projection.

In 2016, the same potshards were reconstituted into miniature sets and photographed from above to render a flatbed picture plane. These terracotta assemblages, titled *terraoptics*, recalled a riverine landscape with prehistoric formations. And into this landscape, crisscrossing through the terracotta forms, optical fibres were inserted to create the illusion of incandescent earth bodies suggestive of habitation.

In the current exhibition, Sundaram attempts a retake of *Black Gold* and *terraoptics* along with the new *Work of Termites* using still and moving images, light drawings and sculptures. This exhibition is also important in terms of the arc of history it travels – it compresses space and time, making temporal interventions and using an eagle's aerial view of history.

An important intervention by Sundaram is the way in which he navigates the viewer towards the white cube/the gallery by his use of the outdoors. *Burnt Mound* is the first interaction with the history of Muziris – its disappearance/forgetting and rediscovery/recall. The next encounter is an aerial view of a landscape which they must tread on before entering the installation inside.

The *Black Gold* video appears as a disorienting floor projection as soon as you enter the gallery. Once inside, the photographs juxtapose ancient and contemporary materiality – using terracotta to fibre optics as sculptures and light projections and light boxes as formats for intervening, engaging, retelling time and space. The result is an installation of found and excavated objects that coalesce with futuristic elements to create dystopian abstractions. This dystopia culminates in the *Work of Termites*, which is suggestive of the inherently destructive and corrosive forces that exist in nature as a part of its design.

Digital manipulations have been used to create perspective in flattened images, and to sharpen a sense of abstraction by transforming the familiar into strange and unknown spaces of the future. The disjuncture between materiality and abstraction, entering the realm of fantasy, is achieved by using light boxes as a medium of display that expands the connection between the terra, the optic and the fibre optic.

Referring to his choice of materials and mediums Sundaram says, 'the terrain of goods appear[s] like debris. In this, focusing on debris corresponds to a fascination for ruins'. And, as writer Ruth

Rosengarten insightfully points out, 'The desire to contemplate ruins suggests wistfulness, the inevitable melancholy borne by something broken that was once complete, together with an alert against hubristic assumptions of permanence of any kind.'

By installing these three works together in a deliberate site-specific manner, Sundaram seems to be inviting his audience to revisit the ruins by way of reimagining the potshards: resurrecting them, as it were, in a fantastical world of what life may have been, before destroying them yet again to recreate their process of annihilation. Thus the whole experience becomes emblematic of the cyclical and simultaneous processes in nature of life/death, creation/destruction, which are indifferent to human interruptions and the tendency to preserve, conserve or bring time to a standstill – through art.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Vivan Sundaram (born 1943) studied painting at M.S. University of Baroda and the Slade School of Art, London. He gravitated from his accomplished practice as a painter in the late 1980s towards working with photography and video, assemblage and installation.

Since 1990 he has made installations that include sculpture, photographs and video: *Memorial* (1993, 2014), in response to communal violence in Bombay; *History Project* (1998), a monumental site-specific installation at the Victoria Memorial, Calcutta; and continuing work on his family, *The Sher-Gil Archive* (1995) and *Re-take of Amrita* (2001–06). A series of exhibitions using found objects include *Trash* (2008), *GAGAWAKA: Making Strange* (2011) and *Postmortem* (2013). He co-authored *409 Ramkinkars* (2015) with theatre directors, and *Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946* with a cultural theorist and sound designer. His most recent exhibitions are a 50-year retrospective, 'Step inside and you are no longer a stranger', at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi (2018), and a survey exhibition, 'Disjunctures', curated by Deepak Ananth at Haus der Kunst, Munich (2018).

Sundaram has exhibited widely in India and abroad including in the Biennales of Havana, Johannesburg, Kwangju, Taipei, Sharjah, Shanghai, Sydney, Seville and Berlin, and the Asia-Pacific Triennial, Brisbane. He has organized artists' workshops and seminars at the Kasauli Art Centre from 1976 to 1991; contributed variously to the *Journal of Arts & Ideas* (1981–99); and curated several exhibitions for the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT). He is a founding member of all these organizations. Vivan Sundaram is the editor of a two-volume book, *Amrita Sher-Gil: a self-portrait in letters & writings* (2010). He is managing trustee, with his sister Navina Sundaram, of the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation (SSAF), set up in 2016.