

Apologue and Archaeology

Samit Das

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Exhibition designed by Prima Kurien

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The background of the page is an abstract composition of layered, textured paper in various shades of brown, tan, and cream. Some areas feature faint, hand-drawn sketches of human figures and architectural forms. The overall aesthetic is that of a collage or a layered artistic process.

Theoretical measures or journalistic passion in unearthing archives and connecting happenings, periods, works, disputes and influences in artistic practices fail often for they never take into account the artistic act as a concern for those events or memories. The act of an artist may take into account complex measures of geo-political realities, changes in perception towards materiality, the needs of self-determination and research into indigenous art forms but consequently a spontaneous act emerges with deft technique and talent to produce a visual resonance to the ideas that traverse an artistic mind. Academic treatment to archives invests authority into a retired entity that may have survived history but its animation is necessary for it to survive in form of utility. It cannot be given a sense of authority without the human subjective conscience acting as a narrator, one who questions the inherent subjective presumptions held by the authors of the archive who often collate based on their biases. The Archive is not invested in authenticity or truth rather it is a residue of certain information awaiting the Artist as an actor that renders history.

## Art History, as an Autodidact Investigation by an Artist.

Art History, Art Theory and Criticism are given distinct roles in the question for art. History collates the happenings and reasoning behind artistic practice, criticism provides contextual value towards art and theory somehow discusses the philosophy of art and its occurrence. History as we know it can only be recorded in a linear

fashion that imitates calendars based on time and the commencement of its recording in the form of a calendar. Calendars are based on religious framing of beginnings or the commencement of a dynasty. What if you cannot relate to these calendars and the record of time not essential to your cultural existence? What if the recording of history was never a concern to authenticate your existence? Across many Indic languages the word for yesterday and tomorrow is exactly the same word --'Kal'. Based on the philosophical belief that yesterday and tomorrow do not exist beyond the present. Thus the modernist question of progression thus provides a conundrum to a society that might be rather interested in continuance without change.

The word used for the indigenous people of India is 'Adivasi' which means people from beyond the beginning of time or as scheduled Tribes in the Indian constitution. Firstly various diverse indigenous communities are molycoddled into the status of Tribal even though their populations surpass the requirement for such status or one so called tribal group have no real affiliation with a closely inhabiting tribal group. They are distinct in language, religion, dress, cuisine and visual culture. An important example would be the Naga people of the Indian North-East. We deny their complex culture, history and practices the sophistication we accord upon ourselves as settled people. Even though many communities living in the hinterland of New Delhi and Bombay practice tribal customs of marriage and subsequent honour killings and participate caste based communal violence. Across various stretches of rural India specifically around the studio of Samit Das that stands on the juncture of the states of Delhi and Haryana, rural visual vocabularies fight a war of being eclipsed by long held traditions

in architecture, home design, home-linens, clothes and festive decoration by constant industrial visual culture aided by the economies of production. The conflict is violent at times often manifesting itself in acts of mass misogyny by men in western clothes demanding women to stop wearing jeans or the over-dramatic use of saffron flags and badly composed statues of Hindu deities made in concrete rising in the skyline.

Samit Das is an artist who dwells in this reality, he migrated to Delhi to find a vocation that would support his peculiar art practice. After years at Visvabharati Santiniketan, Das studied book-making in the United Kingdom. While in Santiniketan he spent days and weeks in the house of Rani Chanda, an artist and writer close to the Tagore family where he imbibed the essence of a practice that was honed by the Tagores and then passed through generations by the efforts of people such as Benode Behari Mukherjee, Ramkinker Baij and Nandalal Bose. An interdisciplinary approach was essential to a pushback against British studies in Culture, specifically the art colleges in Bombay and Calcutta. A 'Material Turn' emerged from the consolidation of the thoughts Rabindranath Tagore had intended at Visvabharati, but one must know the curiosity to shed the Greco-Roman model of art education should be attributed to Abanindranath Tagore.

Samit Das talks of two such evidences, one when the Tagore brothers sit on the porch of their Calcutta home and one of them comes up with a literal representation of the hum of a mosquitoes, or unlike Rabindranath when Abanindranath Tagore is asked about his reluctance to travel abroad, he talks about how he witnesses the world from that very porch. An Imaginary Travelogue [A series of

stories in First Person] written by Abanindranath titled '*Pathey Bipathey*'. In one story he talks about his interaction with a strange man who puts to words the humming of Mosquitoes. The soundscape described by Abanindranath in written words is as: "*Pomongalslomiyooshi, Pomongalslomiyooshi, SlomiyooshiPomonga....*" In the same book in a different story Abanindranath described the sounds of palanquin bearers [during his journey to *Chakrabuha* to *Balughai*] as "*Pan BiritiPohororati ... Pan BiritiPohoroRati....PohoroRati...*"

In the second case, A vintage picture shows Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Samarendranath and other Tagore cousins sitting and observing clay toys and dolls found in rural Bengal at the Southern Veranda of Number 5 Jorasanko House, Kolkata. Conceptually these toys contested the idea of sculpture and colour Theory - what paintings did they paint after such observations? Infact Picasso had never travelled out of France except for a small trip to Italy after his exile in Spain. Surely both Abanibabu and Picasso were unaware of this commonality. Much like the commonalities we wish to draw between Bauhaus and Santiniketan. Except for the inherent need to think apart from pedagogies of confirmation and power.

These two cases distinguish themselves as incidents that perform the idea of a change in perception in the formal materiality art pedagogy allowed. Santiniketan home to Ramkinker Baij, a sculptor who used a mixture of concrete and laterite mortar to make monumental sculptures initially began using the material due to lack of resources, but it provided a certain dexterity to practice that does not insist on the to classical realism of the west. Even at the Santiniketan many people opposed his practice and

found a certain vulgarity in the process. Jealousy is common in a collective and detrimental to future. To the credit of Rabindranath Tagore he supported and financed Baij's practice despite the criticism. Baij was a lower caste unlike the others who came from Brahmin and *Kulin Kayastha* upper caste backgrounds, his refusal to marry and life openly with Radharani Das, disturbed conservative Bengali intellectuals. Though Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray were among his close friends.

Samit Das collects books from across genres and scenes in art, but his collection of books and periodicals from the 1920s until now is considered as an archive by visiting academicians, scholars on Tagore and curators from various museums. Das does not display the pretence of artists who often work with archives. His studio rises above a makeshift garbage dump. This is not surprising, empty lots on both sides of his studio become a collection ground for wet garbage. Das draws and makes sculptures. At times a few photo-copied prints come into play.

Interpretation of the artistic act is essential for the understanding the Santiniketan movement. Das is not only a residue of knowledge, he is not a librarian interested in actuarial science. Nor is he the native informer to a visiting European curator. There is an intricate and deep link between his practice and the archives he refers to. Art History often fails when it depends on linear timelines. In India theoretical understanding of conceptual art is weak, but theoretical boxes that define conceptual art such as found objects, concept notifying authorship and not its production and through speculation of popular topos of visual vocabulary have been appropriated to industrially produce art objects that are not conceptually layered, naively representative,

exploitative when it comes to labour conditions mimicking Textile Sweat Shops and dishonest in intent. The artistic act is lost in a scene that see itself between the glamour industry and lazy left-wing activism. An alienation is then apparent between art and the popular masses, seen as a recreation to rich patrons and not emoting any of the concerns the artists claim loudly clear declarations of curatorial statements.

Das rather animates his memories, as young man in Jamshedpur, he was interested in photography, developing those photographs using readily available popular means, and he would then photocopy the results into complex drawings, that he would decoupage into a collage of watercolour and sculpture. Similar complexities arise with his current show at Gallery Espace. Espace or space in French is a contemplation in Das's works that are drawings, at times painting and together as collage based sculptures. Each work has a spatial structure of multiple perspectives, which blend in much like the ornamentation of the ceilings in Fatehpur Sikri.

The Harappa Civilization of the Indus valley, particularly the archaeological finds of Mohenjo-Daro reveal clays busts and bronze figurines that are used to speculate nationalistic histories. The Pasupati seal of Mohenjo-Daro is seen as an early example of Hinduism and in particular Shiva, museology in Pakistan refutes references to Hinduism and rather celebrates connections to Mesopotamia. This dichotomy of historical remembrance that is narrow is often codified by museums and academic texts by authors keen to present perspectives to their politics from positions of power they are keen to defend. A broad perspective is provided by Samit Das in his rendition of that past not in a narrative of dates but a

presentation of aesthetics that are clearly visible in his works.

Art Historical failure is common today, especially in fraught times where the concern of inclusion is necessary for the longstanding authors of Art history in Europe who suddenly realise their historic obliteration of the world combined with their hankering of colonial culpability. They fail for the reaffirm the idea of a nation on a historically diverse people who have not shared their concerns of individualism or need to record memory. For Das production of an object is not archival and not made for posterity but to serve an immediate utility that is aesthetic as a binder of oral memories of unrecorded traditions. From Museological measurements of found archaeological objects to a keen observation of the aesthetics clay toys from a fair in Rural Bengal can provide, Samit Das through his solo constructs an Apologue to Archaeology that is certainly not rewriting history, for its collation doesn't exist and not a banal comparison to global solidarities in modernism that reflects a false universalism. When one investigates into his studio it reflects a practice in common inheritance to visuals we all own but at times fear or forget their resonance.

Sumesh Sharma  
Berlin 2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 1

Mixed media  
24 x 18 inches (each)  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 2

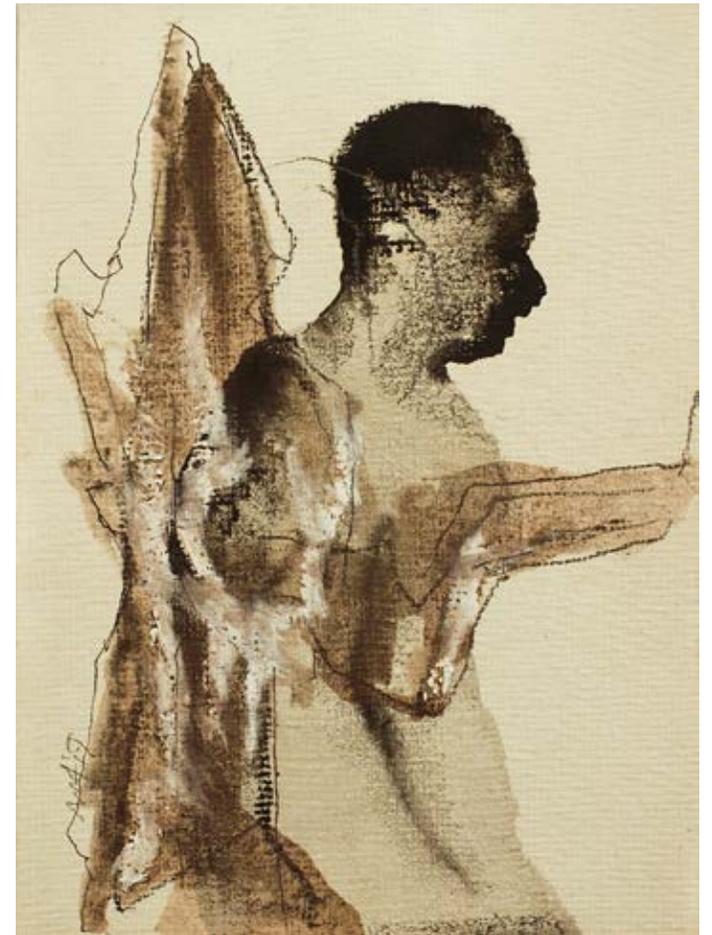
Mixed media  
17.5 x 23.5 inches  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 3

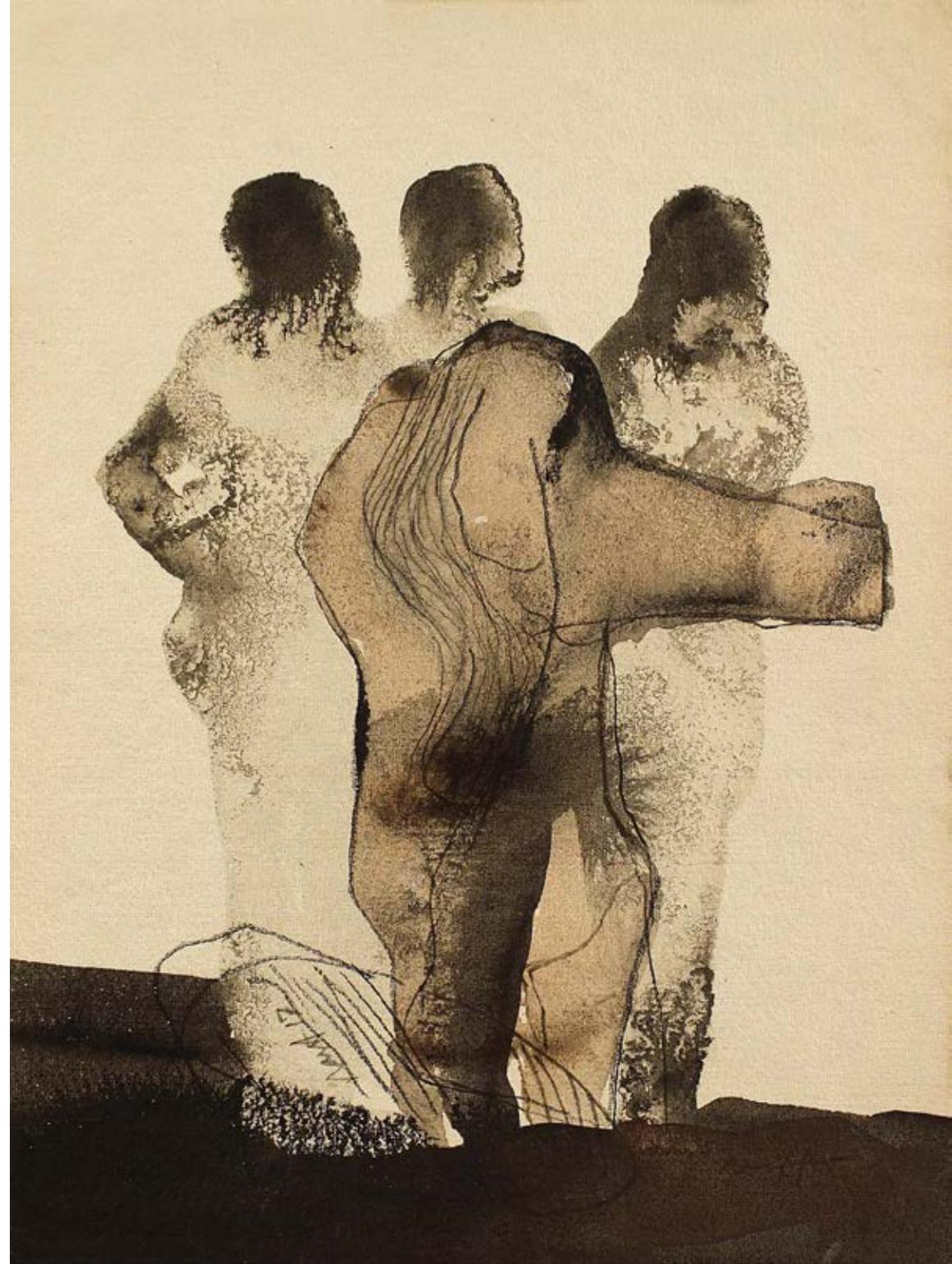
Mixed media  
14.5 x 10 inches (each)  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 4

Mixed media  
14.5 x 10 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 5

Mixed media  
Variable  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 6

Mixed media  
Variable  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 7

Mixed media  
11 x 8.25 inches (each)  
2016-2017





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Apologue and Archaeology - 8

Mixed media  
72 x 50 inches  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 9

Mixed media  
45 x 56 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 10

Mixed media  
47 x 68 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 11

Mixed media  
41 x 73 inches  
2016-2017

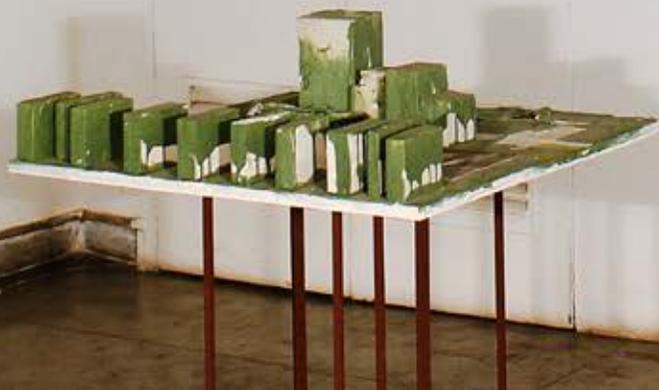




Apologue and Archaeology - 12

Mixed media  
72 x 48 inches  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 13

Mixed media  
Variable  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 14

Mixed media  
Variable  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 15

Mixed media  
Variable  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 16

Mixed media  
18 x 24 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 17

Mixed media  
24 x 18 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 18

Mixed media  
25 x 24 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 19

Mixed media  
23 x 30 inches  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 20

Mixed media  
24 x 24 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 21

Mixed media  
24 x 18 inches (each)  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 22

Mixed media  
18 x 24 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 23

Mixed media  
18 x 24 inches  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 24

Mixed media  
18 x 24 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 25

Mixed media  
16 x 20 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 26

Mixed media  
17 x 23.5 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 27

Mixed media  
10 x 8 inches (each)  
2016-2017





Apologue and Archaeology - 28

Mixed media  
18 x 24 inches  
2016-2017



Apologue and Archaeology - 29

Mixed media  
24 x 24 x 9.5 inches  
2016-2017





Samit Das was born in 1970 in Jamshedpur, specializes in Painting, Photography, Interactive art works and artist's book creating multi-sensory environments through art and architectural installations. Das studied fine arts from Santiniketan Kala Bhavan and post Experience program from Camberwell College of arts London through British Council Scholarship [CWIT].

He has deep interest on archiving and documentation for a new search of visual vocabulary through images and text. Samit has held several solo shows and has been a part of numerous curated shows and projects in New York, Paris, London, Singapore, Senegal [Dakar Biennale], New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. He has documented the Tagore house Museum in Kolkata [1999-2001].

His research on Santiniketan Architecture started from his MFA Studies, has culminated into publication titled - Architecture of Santiniketan : Tagore's concepts of space. He has collaborated to publish an Artist's Book with One star Press [France] In 2011 he had received the BRIC scholarship to visit Italy and Prohelvetia grant for Switzerland 2016 to study at Sitterwerk library and Material archives. He has conceptualised and curated a major history and archives based show on Tagore's concepts of space and Resonance of Swami Vivekananda and art of Nandalal Bose, Supported by Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India. His most recent solo exhibit has been at Clark House Initiative and Tarq in Mumbai (India).

He has also been awarded the Pernod Ricard fellowship for 2017 to work on Modern Indian Masters painters with Paris Connection.

