



Benitha Perciyal at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

ANIRUDDHA CHOWDHURY/MINT

ONE WITH THE EARTH

Seeds and rice paper help Benitha Perciyal forge a new idiom in her first solo show in Mumbai

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If there were such a thing as a seed hunter, then artist Benitha Perciyal would qualify as one. Perciyal has often used seeds and grains in her work as both material and metaphor. But to treat tiny seeds as building blocks means long hours of labour, fine handiwork and a good eye—all of which are evident in her newly opened exhibition *Aggregate*, the artist's first solo show in Mumbai.

The centrepieces of this exhibition are four coracle-like sculptures that hang on the walls of Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke. It's impossible not to be spellbound, especially by a work titled *We Shall Meet Again*. It's 5ft in diameter, with a papier-mâché base. The sculpture is almost hypnotic, making viewers feel they are either staring at a crevice below or the sky above. Level land has been left far behind. Hundreds of seeds from the Indian Elm and the Tecoma stud the sculpture's concave surface, meticulously arranged to look like rivers streaming from a single source at the centre. "They are all winged seeds, meant to disperse and settle in different places. In my neighbourhood, you can't find these trees' siblings despite the number of seeds that fall there," says Perciyal, adding, "Seeds look different when seen individually and when seen as a pile."

Like many other things in this year of droughts and floods, *We Shall Meet Again* highlights the country's water management woes. The 40-year-old artist lives and works in Chennai. On the 3-hour commute between her residence and her studio, she notices people lining up for water—a daily struggle in a city that went dry this summer.

Browsing through the exhibition, you often feel like you are standing at a sacred site, with each sculpture like a sanctum. Perciyal says the sculptures are like the womb of Mother Earth, an idea that links to her installation, *The Flower Of Maryam*, at the show. The installation is centred on a plant Perciyal picked up from a souk in Dubai but extends its idea to mother-and-child iconography, seen in a collection of vintage figurines of Mary with Jesus and Yashoda with Krishna.

Perciyal has been consistent in her use of religious themes and Christian iconography, such as *The Fires Of Faith*, shown at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2014) and at Paris' Centre Pompidou (2017). The religious theme doesn't stop at the figure of Christ on a donkey, reflecting the arrival of Christianity on the Malabar coast, but extends to the use of ingredients too. The installation was made of wood and a mix of bark powder, myrrh, frankincense, gum Arabic and essential oils. Just like *The Fires Of Faith*, Perciyal manages to make *Aggregate* an olfactory experience, with two sculptures that look like bookcases using similar materials. With *Aggregate*, however, Perciyal is relatively less interested in iconography, stressing on experience rather than image. "Religion is like a practice; we don't have to worship images. Religion is discipline and how you follow that discipline," she says.

In many ways, *We Shall Meet Again* and its companion pieces (which also use seeds, rice paper and natural materials) can be read as a counterpoint to the high-finish, metallic gloss of an Anish Kapoor work, such as *Sky Mirror*. Working with natural materials, Perciyal knows that her works will "go back to nature, decay with time, react to the weather". During our conversation, she often talks about transformation, of both the artist and the artwork. She worked on most of these sculptures simultaneously across two years, casting layer upon layer of papier-mâché or allowing a fragrant bark-wood mix to expand and condense with humidity. Going away from and coming back to each artwork for months together allowed her to reflect more on each. Even a seed, she says, looks different each time.

Aggregate is on view till 15 October.