

# Thus spake memory

Religion and ritual play a critical role in Benitha Perciyal's work. For her Mumbai debut, the Chennai-based artist shifts the narrative to form and process

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In the central room of the commodious Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke — currently, the venue for Chennai-based artist Benitha Perciyal's show, *Aggregate* — is a circular wall-mounted sculpture created out of raw banana fibre. Five-feet wide across the diameter, the sculpture titled, "What Am I looking For?" signifies the earth element. It's one of four open-mouthed, papier-mâché containers that the artist has used to represent the four elements: earth, air, fire and water.

The adjoining room holds the other three containers, their surfaces layered with rice paper and seeds. "All Arise In It, All Dissolve In It", created with African tulip seeds, depicts fire; "We Shall Meet Again", created in tacoma and Indian elm seeds, sums up water; while air, "You Can't Be Alone," is depicted with the use of rice paper and pink trumpet seeds.

"Last year, when I was creating this new body of work, there was no water in Chennai. And a lot of my work, as well as the way in which I worked, changed because of that. It made me think about how these elements affect us in ways we can't imagine," says the 41-year-old, as she throws a glance around the Colaba gallery, just days before the opening of her Mumbai show. "The material I work with signifies life. I want the works to age with me. It must speak for the moment. These materials speak to nature, and I am only the tool that allows them to have a conversation."

Perciyal, who holds both a master's degree as well as a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Chennai, started exhibiting her work in 1997. Artist Bose Krishnamachari has followed her practice ever since. He describes Perciyal as a "process art maker". "The works emerge from the location she hails from, the materiality — sensuous hand-touched works of



Benitha Perciyal makes her debut in the city at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, in Colaba



Benitha are unique in nature," he says of Perciyal's work, the foundation of which often lies in her strong faith in Christianity.

Those who visited the second-edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in

2014-2015, will remember experiencing Perciyal's *The Fires of Faith* — an ensemble of biblical characters cast from incense, bark powder, Gum Arabic, aromatic herbs and spices. That installation of sculptures revisit-



ed an important period in Kerala's history — the arrival of the apostle St Thomas at a port in Kerala that's connected to the ancient seaport of Muziris. "As a practising Christian, I have always been curious about how Christianity came to India. Why people came to accept Christ as God, as a saviour, here," says Perciyal, adding that it's not just iconography that features in her work often, but also