

PRIYADERSHINI S.

Left and right of COIR

Artist Praneet Soi worked with coir workers from Cherthala, invoking a lost skill, in his installation *Astatic Garden* for the Kochi Muziris Biennale



NATURAL FABRIC OF ART Praneet Soi with his works in coir at Pepper House, Fort Kochi PHOTOS: THULASI KAKKAT



bringing a lost world alive."

If there is one conversation, among the many, that artist Praneet Soi had with the craftsmen of the coir factory in Cherthala, one that he relishes, and one that proved crucial to his work was about using an outdated method of patterning coir, a process that had lost out to mechanisation and hence threatened the tremulous world of the workers. It was one that brought visible joy on their faces. "I was asking them to use a skill that had become redundant because of automation. For them it was a hopeful prospect to revive that," says Praneet, whose installation *Astatic Garden* catches the fluidity of movement dexterously in coir. The installation is displayed in the central courtyard of Pepper House, as part of the ongoing Kochi Muziris Biennale (KMB).

Praneet's work process for this piece, and for the final work that will include video art, drawings and documentation of "left and right of coir," will be presented towards the finale of KMB. Till then he will work, as he has been, as an embedded artist exploring the situations faced by the coir industry in Kerala and its impact on the lives of workers.

India-born, Amsterdam-based, Praneet's main art practice, painting, takes the course of exploring small and medium workshops, looking at productivity and economics. In Kolkata he closely followed the life and craft of a treadle press worker translating it into art.

Following Sudarshan Shetty's curatorial vision for KMB 2016, he toyed with the idea of enlarging drawings and small sculptures into gi-

gantic proportions. Coir seemed an exciting medium to work with and one that took him several times to coir factories in Alappuzha. In the course of his research he even met Kerala's Finance Minister, Thomas Isaac who explained to him the significance of the coir industry and the subaltern cul-

ture it signifies. "The minister told me about many important political leaders who had cut their teeth in the trade unions of the coir industry. It is a world close to the people of Kerala socially and politically," says Praneet.

He finally began his work with Travancore Cocotuft Private Ltd. in Cherthala, the

management opening up their facilities to him, the craftsmen eager to give shape to his art templates.

The *Astatic Garden* comprises figures made in coir sourced from the media, an area that is of great interest to the artist. The graphic photos, capturing subtle nuances of trauma and emotion print-

ing at an Iraqi guard, an injured woman with a surgical mask after the London bomb blast and another being carried on the shoulder to safety, an anamorphic piece, and a piece on generic architecture. When Praneet explained his imagined art to the craftsmen in the coir factory, they heard him out patiently offer-

ing ideas. The industrial application of printing the drawings on coir carpet was the easiest thing to do but not his idea of aesthetics as he was searching for a deeper process that replicated the drawings closely. Though the natural fibre carpet roll with its bristled top proved good surface and tracing the silhouettes fairly simple but forming lines and translating them was important and difficult. That's where the group of craftsmen with a skill, now not required, came helpful.

"They were happy. They could once again use a skill no longer needed by the coir industry," says the artist.

While working with the new medium many unanticipated hurdles were faced and overcome as the scale of the work too proved a challenge. Finally spray painting was applied as finish.

Looking back at the work, process, and the experience, Praneet feels that a lot can be done to widen the aesthetics from what is in use now. "Coir is predominantly being used mainly for mats but its other uses are being explored too. The coir roofing is a wonderful usage, fabrics from coir too. Organic fabrics are a rage and coir too can be used in so many ways. The coir museum is a great effort," says Praneet.

He is now looking forward to exploring the left, right and centre of the world of coir in his next two months here. His final work will be presented at his studio in Aspinwall House in mid March.

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