

# *Indian artists to shine at the Sharjah Biennial 2023*

The 15th edition of the prestigious event seeks to explore histories that shape our present, and will see works by Indian artists such as Mithu Sen, Reena Saini Kallat and Varunika Saraf



'Chorus 1' by Reena Saini Kallat

When Varunika Saraf received an email recently, informing her about being one of the 150 artists from over 70 countries selected for the highly-anticipated Sharjah Biennial next year, she was overwhelmed with emotion. "I just didn't think it was in the realm of possibility. There are artists on that list I hugely admire for what their work stands for. I hope to do justice to my inclusion with such amazing practitioners," says the 40-year-old. Other contemporary artists in the current list from India include Lavanya Mani, Anju Dodiya, Prajakta Potnis, Mithu Sen and Reena Saini Kallat.

The 15th edition of the Sharjah Biennial was conceived by the late curator Okwui Enwezor and is being curated by the organisation's director, Hoor Al Qasimi. The event was shifted from 2021 to 2023 because of the pandemic. And now, the exhibition, titled 'Thinking Historically in the Present', is slated to run from February 7-June 11, 2023 across 16 venues, which include a vegetable market, a power station and a

former kindergarten, among other spaces. The 30th anniversary of the biennial will also see commissioned works by 30 artists such as Mona Hatoum, Isaac Julien, Ibrahim Mahama, Steve McQueen, Nari Ward, Coco Fusco and Doris Salcedo.

Artist Reena Saini Kallat, whose sculpture series, titled *Chorus*, will be showcased at the exhibition, believes that such biennials offer a platform to view one's work within a wider global context. "Not only do they play a vital role in energising the art ecology of the region by creating a generative space for dialogue but also help enrich one's own practice. And to deepen thinking through a dynamic exchange of ideas and inspiration," she adds.

For Saraf, the theme of the exhibition is almost serendipitous as it addresses some of the concerns that inform her art—specifically how history informs our present. "One of the major inspirations behind my practice is Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano, who said that one has to 'search for the keys in the past history to explain our time'," she says.

At the exhibition in 2023, she plans to display 76 works from *We, The People* series. 46 of these were shown at an exhibition at Chemould Prescott in Mumbai last year. Saraf has chosen moments from history of modern India such as the Partition, the Union Carbide gas leak in Bhopal and the Chipko movement. She has hand-embroidered the images onto *khadi* textiles, inscribed with a map of the country. "The map is an assemblage of tiny dots and bleeds with Carmine extracted from the insect Cochineal, symbolising the blood that continues to be spilled in the making of the nation," explains Saraf.

In Kallat's works, there are often references to disputed territories, with much of her work highlighting the long-shared histories between civilisations that go beyond superficial differences. She addresses how people continue to be linked by language, trade, culture and technologies. In *Chorus*, for instance, the set of sculptures seek inspiration from pre-radar devices used during World War II to pick up enemy aircraft sounds. Playfully subverting the idea, she has replaced those sounds with birdsongs of national birds from nations with shared borders and shared turbulent histories. "The interlaced chorus of freely drifting birds in *Chorus* alludes to nature's defiance of artificially imposed, man-made divisions," she explains.

Another Indian artist who is displaying at the biennial is Mithu Sen, who has been working with the theme of radical hospitality for almost two decades and is developing "a performative piece with some tangible drawing works" for the upcoming exhibition. The conceptual artist is excited about the fact that the works will be showcased at all kinds of public spaces.

"For an artist, it is always challenging to explore new cultural geographies. This is how art should be—not limited to white cubes and galleries," says the multi-format creator, whose works encompass drawings, poetry, moving images, sculptures, installations, sound and reflect on themes such as sexuality, identity, counter capitalism and lingual anarchy.