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Tides and Anchors: 'Subodh Kerkar – One with the Sea' - April 2009

By Janet Bellotto



Subodh Kerkar has been connected to water all his life. From an early age he looked out to the sea and formed a relationship that can be traced throughout his journey from medical doctor to artist.

For almost 20 years, this sea-artist has been collaborating with water from painting landscapes, to carving into shorelines and forming conversations tied to the sea, both historically and politically. Presenting his second solo exhibition at the Jam Jar, Anchored Ocean, Kerkar brings to us his documented events from explorations of fishermen and their relationship with the sea, to installations that interact with the changing tide.

The black and white photographs capture his ephemeral explorations with the fishermen, whose lives with the salted water are one. These photographs breathe meditative rituals and present mnemonic devices to remind us how anchored we are to this aqueous body of the globe. Although at first, his interventions may seem to be just a form of daily rituals, they are moments that appear similar to a tide that washes away from a shore, leaving an array of remnants.

During his recent visit to Dubai, [ChinarTree](#) had an opportunity to speak with the man who is intrinsically connected to the sea. The artist, with such bubbly candor, smoothly rushes into stories relating to waves and describes his work surrounded bordered by sand and shells.

ChinarTree: You started your career as a medical doctor, how did you then shift to art?

Subodh Kerkar: As a good student I had the opportunity to study anything, so I went into medicine. I became a doctor and did quite well where about 95% of my patients were British tourists. However the idea of spending my life working like this was horrible. I felt suffocated, so I started painting while still practicing as a doctor.

I started working for a lot of the 5-star hotels, where they would give me a room to show my work. I was painting watercolors and selling successfully, but after five years I realized that this was just a technique, I realized that this was not art. As I started traveling and looking at art in different museums around the world, I learned and my work shifted to what I am doing today.

CT: Installations by the sea are quite a shift from painting watercolors - how long have you been doing this?

SK: I've been doing interventions in nature, land art mainly, for the last five years. I also develop these ephemeral works into sculptures; for example, some of them I convert into bronze, possibly as a model. This work "The Fisherman and the Moon" in the exhibition Anchored Ocean was then developed as a bronze sculpture.

CT: When working with the environment and nature, were you just using found materials?

SK: Usually I work with found natural objects – actually I consider myself a sea artist. I've always lived by the sea, I used to walk almost everyday for two hours on the beach with my father from the age of 6 to 16 and the sea has made a lasting impression on me.

CT: So what does the sea mean to you?

SK: The sea has become my friend, my inspiration, my medium and my canvas. The sea is my teacher and the vastness of the sea is exciting, inspiring. The freest moment that I feel is when I am in the sea and surrounded by it.

CT: At Art Dubai in 2007 you presented a piece called "The Boat", can you talk about that work?

SK: A lot of my work, even today, is an offshoot of history. India and Arabia had a long trade relationship, long before the Portuguese came. There were ships going to India, via 'Goa Puri' - an import port, taking back spices and grass to Arabia as they didn't have enough grass to feed hundreds of thousands of horses.

When I was invited to do this exhibition in Dubai, I thought I could use the boat to create sculptures as mnemonic devices to stir the memory and stir history.



CT: These new artworks on display at the Jam Jar are different to a simple 'land art intervention', you're working with people, connected to the sea. Can you give us a bit more insight to the creation of these works?

SK: This particular work is called the "Moon and the Tide", for which I created the shape of a moon with shells on the beach and allowed the tide to then cover it. I collected real shells from that same beach, formed the moon and waited four or five hours for the tide to come in and cover it. It's very interesting as the tide itself is affected by this process.

CT: You've also worked with Fishermen.

SK: Yes and just as I myself am connected to the sea, the fishermen I see are also inseparable from that ocean. In Indian philosophy, there is the term "advaita" meaning not two but one, so they become one with the ocean. There is this idea of inseparableness - their life and the ocean - they are anchored to the ocean like a boat.

So I thought of creating a boat out of the fishermen themselves ("The Fishermen and the boat"); sometimes they posed and the fishermen become like fish.

CT: Can you tell us a bit more about your process, how you plan your interventions and realize ideas?

Some works are spontaneous, and some are planned. Originally in "The Shoreline" I had planned to make a boat, but then I instead arranged the fishermen in a row like a shoreline.

In "The Oceanic Ritual", the circle was formed with a group of labourers that I hired from Bengal. I took them to the beach and it was spontaneous; we talked about ideas together and we went with it.

I'm always thinking about art and some of my works are also political. I'm currently working on a project, after a recent visit to the Himalayas where I met a lot of Tibetan monks, with the Tibetan flag by the ocean, 'an oceanic prayer'.



CT: Where does the next wave of work take you?

SK: More recently I've moved on to doing some other public projects and art commissions and am currently completing projects in Saudi Arabia, Brisbane and Australia.

Next I'll be going to Lisbon, where 10 artists are exhibiting in a garden called 'The Garden of Necessities' which sailors used to visit and pray. Edouard Manet also visited this garden and it was said to have inspired his painting 'The Picnic.'

When I was walking through the garden I saw a date tree which reminded me of 'the voyage of Vasco da Gama'. After sailing through the Cape of Good Hope to Zanzibar, Vasco da Gama met an Arab trader who showed him the route to India. The Portuguese brought with them many plants to India such as tomatoes, potatoes, chilis...

So for this exhibition "Picnic in the Garden" I've decided to take rice seeds to Portugal and grow half of a kilometer of rice cakes, retracing the route of Vasco da Gama.

'Anchored Ocean', Photographs by Subodh Kerkar, the Jam Jar, Dubai, 30 April – 6 June 2009

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