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The biennale in Covid times

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On the banks of the Vaigai river nearly thirty years ago, the village of Keelazhi was identified as a Sangam-era site that yielded a sophisticated city with the rich possibility of rewriting the historic antecedents of the Tamil people. Saranraj V., who grew up in Madurai and trained as a sculptor, chose to ignore the official archaeological apparatus and instead bring to life the day-to-day excavation at the site, from the vantage point of the labourers who work there. While the excavation dates to 2013, the view that he renders in his 18-minute film is of farmers toiling away on the land, seemingly with little supervision: ordinary men and women under whose paddy fields the site is unearthed-digging, sifting, separating the shards of broken pots from this ancient covered city. Saranraj captures them both at work and at rest. It is through the labour of these untrained and uncredited figures that he frames the realization of an unfolding history.

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The obscurely located Roja Muthiah Library (where the works are staged), a clutch of private galleries, and the Madras Literary Society are among the city spaces which are hosting the ongoing Chennai Photo Biennale (CPB). In only its third edition, the CPB has opted to have four curators, a smaller viewing circuit, very modest signage and a significantly reduced number of works. Touted as the only biennale to be held in India this year, however, what it achieves is a basic continuity, even as it flags important concerns in the overlapping domains of politics and ecology, labour and migration. This year's CPB features a significant number of printed works, films and video projections, making it more of a lens-based event than a photo biennale. These are accessible physically as well as online.

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The other artist displayed in close proximity to Saranraj V. at the Roja Muthiah Library is Sanchayan Ghosh. His work *Presence, as Absence*, a performance represented in shadow, comments on historic inequity, tracing it back to the colonial period. Another photographer whose work is given pride of place in the public library is Arthur Crestani. His photographic panel *Aranya* follows the low-cost housing project started by Balkrishna Doshi in Indore 30 years ago. The panel images show people living in these homes and reveal how to an extent the vision for the project has been

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belied by the onslaught of the market and its own logic of development. The conceptual approach within these three works is somewhat abstract, and would benefit from better didactics at the site.

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Forum Gallery, a small private space in Chennai, returns to the subject of Keezhadi in the works of Andreas Langeld and Sarabhi Varshini, who locate the site within the continuous process of excavations being undertaken to trace the unfoldment of its history. In the same space, Siva Sai Jeevananthanam, a 26-year-old documentary photographer based in Chennai, works with found material to trace families who have lost their loved ones to army and police brutality and jails in Kashmir; these works speak of the role of memory in acts of resistance. Titled *In the Same River*, they draw out the ambiguity of reading right and wrong, of truth and its distortions in such a zone of conflict, and of the subsequent reportage in the media. Seen in Focus Gallery, this body of images-mainly printed reproductions from newspapers-is placed opposite a photo study of elephants and their caretakers in the Kurumba tribe, by Senthil Kumaran. The theme of oppression annotates the two proximate bodies of work.

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At the Madras Literary Society, Gauri Gill's annotated photo document on the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, realized in notebook format, is on view, laid out in printed folios on tables. The distortions in 'justice' meted out to the victims inspired her repeated visits to the sites of the worst carnage in Delhi. The consequent unfolding project draws out images of the widows of Trilokpuri, the wall of genocide at Gurudwara Rakabganj, or Gagan Singh's cartoons on torture. Commentary by writers and artists through the text draw attention to the persistent horror for families who have no closure, even as the event casts its shadow on successive generations.

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Titled *Maps of Disquiet*, the CPB refers to the Great Trigonometrical Survey of 1802, initiated with a baseline in Madras, under which the entire subcontinent of India was sought to be measured and accurately mapped. Curators Bhooma Padmanabhan, Arko Dutta, Boaz Levin and Kerstin Meincke seek to reinvoké this cartographic view and ask urgent questions around migrancy, inequity and ecological disaster: 'Whose resources? Whose rivers? Whose interests? Whose voices? Whose images?'

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Against the backdrop of the previous edition curated by Pushpamala N., the downscaling of the event comes as something of a surprise; but this is also inevitable, given what the pandemic has wrought in its wake. The CPB 2019, with its spectacular spaces at the Senate House and the College of Art museum building, and impressive display of prints, has given way to the image as notation, marking a closer relation with print and text, and the use of the photographic image in multiple mediatic contexts to stimulate, question and provoke.

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