

The Kochi Muziris Biennale has established itself as one of the best in the world, says Glenn D. Lowry, Director of MoMA

Glenn D. Lowry was appointed Director, Museum Of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, in 1995, hand-picked by its wealthy patrons. He introduced all round changes - exhibitions, infrastructure, budgeting - and in his journey so far is believed to have refused more lucrative offers. He chose to concentrate on MoMA's prime mission of offering art that engages in multiple perspectives and deals with urgent and contemporary issues. As architect of the exhibitions that set new standards in the global world of modern art, Lowry has been keenly watching the birth and growth of the Kochi Muziris Biennale. His India interest stems from an early engagement with Indian Mughal history which he extended into contemporary practice at the museum. When not in work mode Lowry relaxes with a bike ride and reading fiction.

Of his current visit, he says, "I was very impressed with the last biennale. It left me hungry for more, and that's the reason I am back in Kochi to engage with the artists of the region."

(Excerpts from an exclusive interview to The Hindu MetroPlus)

Let us begin with the most obvious question, your impressions of KMB 2016.

I am very impressed. I think it is a large discursive, engaging biennale with a number of artists that I was unfamiliar with.

The impressions that I have are the importance of sound as a form of communication, the impact of domestic and personal space comes through and a kind of undercurrent that recognises the complexity of political positions. I am particularly impressed with the work of Desmond Lazaro in the way he excavates biography, memory, subtle but with powerful series of images, family history turned into a universal statement.

The other factors are it is sprawling, not only in the number of spaces but also the number of artists. I don't judge a biennale by the clarity of the curatorial position, I judge a biennale by the degree to which I find works of artists that I am unfamiliar with. I like discovering new artists. There are lots of curatorial dimensions, but honestly the curator has done a very good job.

Many MoMA curators and officials are visiting the KMB. What is this interest all about? Is there a plan to engage more meaningfully?

India is my field. I did my research on Humayun's tomb and 16th, 17th century Mughal art and architecture. When I moved to MoMA I extended that interest into contemporary practice in the museum. I am happy that there are curators of the museum that share interest with the subcontinent and the Middle East. There are a large number of artists working in the region, making work that needs to be seen. That is why we are here. We have to pay attention to what is going on from Kochi, to Mumbai, to Sao Paulo and Beijing as much as in places such as Los Angeles and New York. We live in a world where location is much more complex than it ever used to be.

You have made the exhibitions in MoMA more inclusive.

I came to MoMA because of my interest with the museum, to work with it and expand its vision.

The challenge at was how to fundamentally take it to the 21st century and enable it to become relevant in the present. That is its commitment - to the present and its 100-year-old past. How do you do it intelligently?

We are located in New York City. NY is the point from which are interests radiate. We want to be an inclusive engaging museum that can put works of arts by say artists like Gauri Gill in conversation with the works of Walker Evans.

We would like to engage with artists from Latin America, Middle East, Eastern Europe and the subcontinent

Our exhibitions are about multiple factors, not homogeneous, and they explore the long history of modern art. A museum should be full of surprises and at the same time offer something familiar and reassuring

The KMB has consistently faced funding issues, whereas with MoMA you have got it all together...

We are lucky to live in a society that has a great deal of capital. Most of the art institutions, even in the United States, are undercapitalised. Our ambitions are greater than our resources. MoMA is a private institution. The only way we can survive is by developing a strategy that enables us to do so. We survive by keeping everything in balance. The single most important factor is by holding a thoughtful engaging programme that a diverse audience wants to see. If viewers feel that our exhibition is urgent and essential to the world then everything follows from that.

Kochi feels like it is growing up nicely. There are more people than before, the infrastructure seems better now. It is very difficult to start a biennale. There are lots of biennales that started and have failed. We must recognise the extraordinary achievement of the organisational team. In three editions they have made it one of the most important biennales of the world and that too on a shoe string budget. That is incredible. You cannot imagine what a significant achievement that is.

They have made it because it is by the artists and for the artists and not concerned with the market place. This distinguishes it from other biennials.

Is the KMB spreading itself thin with too many allied programmes? Critics say it is digressing from what it set out to be.

A biennale is a festival. It endeavours to catalyse conversations across multiple platforms. If this biennale engages in multiple platforms it is a good thing, It is like coming to a fabulous dinner, where there are 30 courses. Nobody can have the 30 courses without getting indigestion, but you certainly can pick and choose and have a fantastic time.

Also biennials are organic. If this biennale gets too big for some reason then it can change itself the next time. I love the pleasure in discovering Kochi via the biennale. It is not simply discovering art but the city. Getting your map out, getting lost,... all this is enjoyable.

I am very impressed with what I am seeing. The energy, commitment and devotion of the organising group is exemplary.

What about the undercurrent of politics in the KMB?

Kerala is a State with a clear political position. It is secular with a long tradition of leftist thinking. It is in their DNA. It gives the biennale a point of departure. I don't think this biennale is politically heavy-handed.

Your views on the art market?

The art market has been on fire for the last eight to nine years. The Delhi Art Fair is very lively, Mumbai galleries are doing well. The art market is a self-defined body. It goes up and down but by and large it has, especially, in the last 10 years, been robust everywhere. The price of Indian contemporary art has exploded.

What's exciting you at the moment with regard to MoMA?

I am looking forward to a Robert Rauschenberg exhibition, a Frank Lloyd Wright exhibition, some renovations in June and lots to do about our 90th anniversary in 2019.

by PRIYADESRHINI S. (18th of March 17 in THE HINDU)