

'You cannot always be truly free'



Vimal Geethanandan took a year to finish working on his van, which he named Maaya

VIMAL GEETHANANDAN, Freelance content writer

VIMAL Geethanandan, 27, has been travelling for over six years now. In the early years, he hitch-hiked often. He later began travelling on a moped and now lives full-time in his van, which he has lovingly named Maaya. "Getting my van was like a dream come true," he says. While on the road, he did all sorts of odd jobs, including working as an interior designer, delivery boy, writer, photographer, artist, cleaner, waiter, driver, and teacher. At one point, he also ran a food truck. After saving up money and later, gathering funds through crowd-funding, he managed to buy himself a van in 2019. Geethanandan now works as a freelance content writer. He is currently in Tirupathi and will eventually leave for Bengaluru, where he will stay for five months to learn a course



on contemporary dance. "Travel for me is freedom. Freedom to move, freedom to do whatever I want," he says. However, owning a van, can sometimes feel restricting. "I realise that I cannot always be truly free, as I have to go back to my van at the end of the day." Living the van life can also be expensive—apart from fuel costs, the vehicle needs regular maintenance. "It is a machine after all."

Because India and Italy are good together

An ambitious multi-volume documentary film project addresses contemporary art versus traditions by travelling across artist studios in India and Italy, finding connections between practices

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY



MYNA
MUKHERJEE

BOTH Italy and India have this long history of the very old as well as the very new," says Myna Mukherjee, cultural producer and curator, who along with producer and curator Davide Quadrio, is behind the documentary film SAMA: Symbols and Gestures in Contemporary Art of Italy and India, VOL. I, which had a red-carpet preview at the Italian Embassy grounds last month.

Indian and South Asian art often occupies a static, exoticised space in the international forum, feels Mukherjee, restricted into exclusive categories like classical or spiritual. "I always say that there is no one story to be said about India. If someone wants to engage with a civilisation that's this old and has so many epicentres for culture, they have to be willing to embrace its complexity." Working with Quadrio, who has substantial experience with Asian cultures, having worked in China for 25 years, Mukherjee who has lived in the US for over two decades says there was trust, as "both of us had lived outside our respective countries and faced a kind of representational glitch from opposite ends of the spectrum."

Commissioned and produced by ArtHub Asia, Engendered, presented by The Embassy of Italy in India, and The Italian Cultural Institute of New Delhi and supported by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, the film is shot in over a dozen locations and features over 50 artist studios and artisan centres across Italy and India, spanning the length



and breadth of the two countries, from the waterways of the Sundarbans and Dal Lake and artist centres like Shantiniketan and Baroda in India, to the mountains of Dolomiti and the historicity of Venice in Italy. This research-based travel covered almost six months in India and two months in Italy in the middle of the pandemic. "Because it was during COVID times, we had access to a lot of artists who would otherwise be busy with exhibitions and travel," says Mukherjee.

"It was an intimate, personal and profound project, for which we were able to have this moment of concentration," agrees Quadrio. Both for an exhibition at Artissima

and later the film, the project used a wide and diverse range of artistic voices from the very well-known to the comparatively younger, based both within and outside metropolitan cities, and working with global and local reference points. The focus was both on "what remains from history and also how the contemporary can help preserve but also carry on with traditions," he says. "In that sense, we found that Italy and India were good together."

Moreover, one of the most important things the film aims at, Mukherjee points out, "is the idea of demystifying the east while imbuing the west with more soul, so also reversing the colonial eye for art, while making sure that the reference point for pedagogies is not just the west."

With other volumes in the pipeline and a second edition slated for release early next year, the project is decidedly ambitious. "The amount of work that's been put in and the volume of material that we have is unprecedented," admits Quadrio. "It's a project that is alive and can go on. Some of the conversations we had are already beautiful films in themselves."

The film is directed and



(Clockwise from top left) Stills from SAMA Vol I showing artist Marzia Migliora at her studio in Turin. Migliora uses a wide range of media including photography, video, sound and performance, and investigates themes such as identity, contradiction, desire, and responsibility, establishing a connection between places and narratives. PIC COURTESY/T-SPACE STUDIO AND ARTHUB; Practitioner, performer and teacher of the Baul tradition Paravaty Baul in Bolpur, West Bengal. A mystic singing minstrel, she is one of India's most famous folk singers keeping alive a tradition that shuns discrimination against caste and class; ruins in Bhuj, Gujarat

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Davide Quadrio



scripted by National Award winning filmmaker Onir in India and Alessandra Galletta who has made monographic documentaries on important contemporary artists like Tomás Saraceno and Adrian Paci, in Italy. For Onir, while this was an opportunity to rediscover this world of art and be on journey of finding artists, their work and connections, the project also provided an intellectual release and energy in the middle of the pandemic. His presence, he says,

was also a way to explore how someone outside this world of art would experience it. "The real discovery happened at the editing table," he shares. "Shot in India first, the material was then sent to Italy; the Italian part of the filming done keeping in mind what had already been shot here. It's such an effortless experience. You go from one world to another without even realising that you have done so."

sucheta.c@mid-day.com