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Odes and Inquisitions: Sino-Indian Connections in Recent Indian Art



Ali Akbar Mehta, *Joseph Baptista Gardens*, 2014, hand-painted photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

The Joseph Baptista Gardens is one of the most pleasant places in Mumbai.¹ Sitting atop a hillock, this garden park literally lifts you out of the noise from which even the surrounding neighbourhood of Mazagaon (which is sedate by local standards) cannot escape.

To the north and west, one gains a distinct view of the many mildew-stained high-rises that contribute to one of the highest population densities in the world. To the south, one sees rows upon rows of warehouses and train sheds. And to the east, a clear view of the city's historical *raison d'être*: Mumbai harbour, populated now with cargo and naval ships and once upon a time with frigates and opium clippers. It is not a picturesque view, for towering in the middle is a massive, yellow gantry crane inscribed with the words "Mazagaon Dock Limited, Shipbuilders to the Nation." As advertised, this is India's top shipyard, creating warships and submarines for the Indian Navy, offshore platforms for the oil industry, and tankers and cargo carriers for commercial shipping.

The site of Mumbai's former Chinatown lies in the crane's shadow. The dockside location reminds one that the basis of the overseas Chinese community in India, like most places across Asia, was the centrality of China

in international maritime trade in the colonial and early modern eras. Until the eighteenth century, Mazagaon was hardly more than a Portuguese fort surrounded by fishing villages. Both pleasantly verdant and conveniently adjacent to one of the best natural harbours in Bombay (as Mumbai was officially known prior to 1995), the place was bound to change when Zoroastrian Parsi merchants and the East India Company made Bombay the new commercial centre of Western India. By the mid-nineteenth century, Mazagaon had become a fashionable suburb for Europeans and Parsi traders, populated with many churches, private villas, and even a couple of luxury hotels.² The shipyard dates back to the early nineteenth century. The Chinese reportedly worked there as nut and bolt fitters. What remains of that community, like the much larger one in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), is composed primarily of Cantonese, Hakka, and Hupei.³

While Kolkata's Chinatown holds on, Mumbai's has been almost lost to oblivion. It registers so weakly in the city's memory that even most lifelong Mumbaikars have never heard of it. Even at its height, Mumbai's Chinatown paled in comparison with Kolkata's, which accounts for more than ninety percent of the country's Chinese-Indian population.⁴ One has to dig for mention of Chinese residents in histories of colonial Bombay. When they do appear, they are merely another detail in the colourful and multilingual crowd of traders and immigrants from across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that made Bombay famous as the most cosmopolitan city in the Orient. "Chinese with pig-tails; Japanese in the latest European attire; Malays in English jackets and loose turbans; Bukharans in tall sheep skin caps and woolen gabardines," closes Commissioner of Police S. M. Edwardes in his account of the ingredients of Bombay's melting pot streets in the first decade of the twentieth century. Also, in "certain clubs in the city where a man may purchase nightly oblivion for the modest sum of two or three annas"—which is to say, in the opium dens—"the proprietor of the club may be a Musalman; his patrons may be Hindus, Christians or Chinese." Intoxication, Edwardes observes, overcomes "distinctions of race, creed, and sovereignty"⁵—not unlike, say, money and commerce did in the street. But when the sun went down (or, if you were an addict, when the sun came up), Bombay's various ethnic groups returned to homes in communities that were more often than not segregated from one another.

I would never have known or bothered to look into any of this had it not been for a recent project by artist Ali Akbar Mehta at Clark House Initiative in south Mumbai. A converted antiques shop of odd dimensions, tucked away spaces, and personal odds and ends, Clark House tends to make everything installed in its space look like a cabinet of curiosities. Mehta's *Site: Stage: Structure* (2013–14)—an impressionistic and sentimental survey of the neighbourhood through a mix of video documentary, photographs, and personal knickknacks—appeared to be that by design.

The focus of the installation was on the personal memories of the artist's own Bohra Muslim grandparents. They talk through video interviews about their daily lives and about their family business of manufacturing



Top: Ii Akbar Mehta, *Mazagaon Dockyard Crane*, 2014, hand-painted photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Ali Akbar Mehta, *Kwan Tai Shek Temple*, 2014, hand-painted photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

fishing hooks, physical samples of which hang on the wall. There were also reflections of a less personal sort, and these were aimed at capturing traces of Mazagaon's slowly disappearing cosmopolitanism. Numerous photobooks focused on aspects of the neighbourhood's buildings and people. There were also photographs, taken by Mehta and hand-coloured by a movie poster-boards painter hired by the artist, of the few surviving churches, crucifixes, and bungalows that once crowded what was until recently a predominantly Catholic settlement. In the same series was also an image of the giant crane at Mazagaon Dock, as well as one depicting the nondescript façade (beige in reality, pink here) of a three-story building that houses, on its third story, the only distinctive remnant of the area's

Chinatown: the Daoist Kwan Tai Shek temple, dedicated to Guan Yu, the famous general of the Three Kingdoms period. It was built by Cantonese sailors in 1919. In recent years, a Buddhist temple to the bodhisattva Guanyin was established on the building's ground floor.



Ali Akbar Mehta, *Kwan Tai Shek Temple, Mumbai*, 2013–14, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.



Ali Akbar Mehta, *Kwan Tai Shek Temple, Mumbai*, 2013–14, digital photographs. Courtesy of the artist.



In another room at Clark House, Mehta had assembled images and objects related to the Kwan Tai Shek temple. On a shelf in one corner were a handful of ritual items, including cups and an incense burner and figurines from *Journey*

Ali Akbar Mehta, *Kwan Tai Shek Temple, Mumbai*, 2013–14, handmade photobook installation view of Site: Stage: Structure, Clark House Initiative, Mumbai.

to the West, most of which were borrowed from the Kwan Tai Shek or the Guanyin temple downstairs. Pinned upon the wall behind these objects was a grid of sheets of silver-painted joss paper, kept at the temple to be burned so that one can symbolically send wealth to deceased ancestors. A red light bulb dangled near the shelf, presumably to illuminate the installation in the colour of “good fortune.” Its nakedness, and the makeshift quality of the installation, was not out of keeping with homey economy of the Kwan

Ali Akbar Mehta, installation view of Kwan Tai Shek segment of Site: Stage: Structure, 2013–14, Clark House Initiative, Mumbai.



Ali Akbar Mehta, installation view of Kwan Tai Shek segment of Site: Stage: Structure, 2013–14, Clark House Initiative, Mumbai.



Tai Shek itself. But for the temple’s sunny ambience, Mehta’s “red light” was a little too raw and a little too dark. Seediness was the general effect, an unintended reminder of the old opium days.

The centrepiece of this installation was a twelve-minute video. It featured artfully shot details of the Kwan Tai Shek—for example, its bright red ceiling, burning incense, and armoured Daoist gods. The last had been partially embellished by devotees with garlands and textiles in a manner reminiscent of Hindu icons. Information about the temple’s history and its rituals were given in the voiceover, which was provided by the temple’s jaunty caretaker in his naturally comically rounded accent. “No way, not while I’m alive,” he says, responding to an unheard question of whether the temple will be dissolved and the land sold. His defiance, and the fact that on most days the temple stays locked and unused, raises the specter that perhaps his generation of Chinese-Indians will be the last to stand up for tradition.

Granted, the Chinese settlement was only one part of Site: Stage: Structure. But as the show overall could have benefited from a clearer mapping of the

neighbourhood's shifting demographics, so the Kwan Tai Shek component might have more clearly articulated why Mumbai's Chinatown has been reduced to fragments. In 1962, during the Sino-Indian War, many Chinese-Indians (not unlike Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor) were either sent to internment camps in Rajasthan and Gujarat or deported if they couldn't provide proof of Indian citizenship. Returning to their homes after the war ended, many found their property and businesses damaged or confiscated. In the spring of 1963, the PRC sent ships to India to repatriate those who wished to relocate to China. Others moved voluntarily to Western countries, many to Canada.⁶ The exodus continues to the present, especially with growing business opportunities throughout Asia, including China, of course. Many of those who are educated abroad choose to stay on in those countries.

Though the internment camps and resulting outmigration are noted in a few scholarly texts, it seems no historian has undertaken a full study. This uncomfortable episode in recent Indian history was made known to a wider public a few years ago through Rafeeq Elias's *The Legend of Fat Mama* (2012), a documentary for the BBC about Kolkata's shrinking Chinatown. The story Elias tells—of persecution, marginalization, and disappointed emigration—applies also to Mumbai, judging from the copious wall text in Mehta's Clark House installation. "According to Tulun Chen, Mumbai-based chairman of the Maharashtra Chinese Association," reports Mehta from one of his many interviews with the community, "There are just around thirty-five hundred Chinese in Mumbai, down from an estimated fifteen thousand in the mid-1960s." Those who remain are now third and fourth generation. If they have not disappeared into Indian society, they run hair salons and Chinese restaurants, including some of the most famous in the city.

Sketch-like though it might be, Mehta's project is the most focused attempt thus far to document the history and fate of Chinese-Indians in Mumbai. Information about the community is otherwise available only in the form of spotty online travel and entertainment blogs. Some of the artists and curators associated with Clark House engage in related forms of urban history and anthropological research, though I have never seen anything at the gallery on the scale of Site: Stage: Structure. Such projects not only enrich Mumbai's art scene by offering something other than aesthetic wall hangings or theory-laden group shows. They also contribute to the city's self-knowledge as a place with a conflicted and tangled cosmopolitan past. In an era in which rightwing groups continue to insist on "Mumbai" narrowly as a Hindu Marathi city, counter-historical practices like Site: Stage: Structure serve much more than ethnographic curiosity.

While Mehta's work was at Clark House Initiative, there was another China-related exhibition, just five minutes down the road, at Mumbai Art Room, a non-profit trust. Not coincidentally, this show, titled *Economic Inquisition*, was curated by the founders of Clark House, Sumesh Sharma and Zasha Colah, the latter of whom served as the Director of Mumbai Art Room between 2013 and 2014. Big the Mumbai art world is not.



Opening night of *Economic Inquisition*, Mumbai Art Room, 2014. Photo: Gum Cheng.

A three-person show, *Economic Inquisition* centred upon the work of Gum Cheng, an artist and social worker who, with his partner Clara Cheung, founded the eclectic C + G Artpartment in 2007, located in Prince Edward in Kowloon. Building on previous work engaging with television and newspapers through appropriation, at Mumbai Art Room Gum Cheng exhibited a series of quickly rendered ink paintings designed to “slow down” (according to the press release) mass media representations of the rising art market in Hong Kong. On one small monitor was a twenty-minute documentary about the first Art Basel Hong Kong in 2013, aired on *The Works*, a weekly cultural news program for RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong). Prominent gallerists, artists, and curators from New York, London, and Tokyo are interviewed about specific works and the prospects for such big-ticket art fairs in Hong Kong. It’s the usual discourse of wonderful diversity, commercial compromises, and globalizing markets, building up to Gum Cheng and Clara Cheung’s strong reservations. Gum Cheng acknowledges the high percentage of local representation within the art fair, but worries about the weakness of the exhibited work and the actual benefit to the local scene. Clara Cheung offers a more cutting criticism. “We may end up with an art market but no art,” she says. I suppose people familiar with the Hong Kong scene would immediately think of C + G Artpartment’s endeavours to create a non-profit space that combines experimental, topical exhibitions with frequent lectures and workshops.

On the walls of Mumbai Art Room was a set of nine paintings by Gum Cheng that captured the entirety of his and Clara Cheung’s televised interview in a series of freeze frames. They were titled simply *The Works*



(2014), like the RTHK program. Some of the paintings showed visitors looking at artwork or the fair’s gallery directory, while others depicted Clara Cheung and Gum Cheng talking. English subtitles appeared along the bottom of each, completing the appropriation from the televised interview, but also serving to emphasize Gum Cheng and Clara Cheung’s warnings about the relationship between art sales and creative community. A slideshow-type presentation of the paintings was presented on a small monitor on Mumbai Art Room’s floor, dubbed with the original soundtrack of the interview.

Gum Cheng, installation view of *The Works*, 2014, ink on rice paper, Mumbai Art Room. Photo: Gum Cheng.



Gum Cheng has been making related “self-portraits” since 2007, usually based on newspaper articles featuring photographs in which he appears. “This series of work,” he explained in 2010, “not only allows me to re-examine my interviews with the media at that moment in time, but also to reconcile how the media portrays me, and, more importantly, to understand how I see the way that the media sees me.”⁷ While previous such images were oil on canvas, *The Works* used brushed ink on rough-grained rice paper. Considering the content of the RTHK program, in which one Chinese artist waxes poetic about ink painting and in which “local representation” at the art fair is often confused with “East Asian representation,” one presumes Gum Cheng’s shift of medium to be an ironic comment on the expectation that non-Western artists

Gum Cheng, *The Works*, 2014, ink on rice paper.

emphasize recognizable regional aesthetics even when dealing with something as modern as the role of mass media and global capital in the shaping of culture.

In a city like Mumbai, where even the top commercial galleries suffer from a marginal cultural presence, it is hard to understand the point of exhibiting a reflexive intervention from a city that is thousands of miles away and has little purchase on the Indian imagination. Recently Clark House has been involved in projects in Hong Kong, culminating in the Eros exhibition at Para Site (October–November 2014), a group show of interlocutory collaborative works that explore shared histories and parallel experiences between Mumbai and Hong Kong. Gum Cheng himself has previously done work in Mumbai through ArtOxygen in 2013. In other words, there was, between Artpartment and Clark House, the groundwork to do something relevant at Mumbai Art Room. Yet one has to strain to make connections at Economic Inquisition.

Since there is nothing like a commercial art fair in Mumbai, that particular issue is irrelevant, at least for the time being. As for Clara Cheung’s warning that a local and organic creative community is more important than a trade in luxury artistic commodities, Mumbai has a long history of supporting its own. Though it is true that most commercial galleries in the city show artists based elsewhere in India as well as many foreign artists of Indian extraction, this is more an index of Mumbai’s slow return as the centre of the Indian art world than discrimination against local artists per se. Commercial galleries like Chemould have been committed to Mumbai-area artists for decades, even if now they only deal with blue chip names. There are ample opportunities for those outside the world of “contemporary art”—makers of technically accomplished but tacky mytho-religious and “village India” type work, for example—to exhibit in venues like the quasi-public Jehangir Art Gallery. The Hindi and Marathi-language press is more likely to cover a topical exhibition at Clark House than it is something heavy with artspeak at one of the high-end galleries. Pundits used to say that India will be the next China, but this is no truer for the art world than it has been for the economy.

The two other artists in Economic Inquisition steer the India-China discussion in entirely different directions. Mumbai-based Yogesh Barve is also an associate of Clark House. At Mumbai Art Room, he exhibited a work titled *Lack of Perspective* (2014) that not only taps into the history of China trade in Western India, but also does so in what might be called a “Chinese style” of allegorical sculpture. The work is a kind of assisted readymade. Its main component is a ceramic “martaban” jar, standing roughly a metre tall, glazed brown with a dragon on its side, picked up at the junk and antiques flea market of Chor Bazaar in central Mumbai. Martabans, which are named after the port in Burma in which they were first produced, are found in archeological sites from Japan and the Philippines to Australia and Africa, serving as a means to trace the China trade all the way back to the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1279). Used in various eras on various routes to



Left: Yogesh Barve, *Lack of Perspective*, 2014, martaban jar and mixed media. Image from separate installation at Clark House Initiative, Mumbai.

Right: Yogesh Barve, *Lack of Perspective*, 2014, martaban jar and mixed media.

store and transport precious goods like spices, alcohol, rose water, oils, and candied fruits, the martaban is imagined by Barve specifically through its late eighteenth and nineteenth century functions as a container for carrying tea westward to India (and then onto Britain) and opium eastward to China.

Onto the mouth of his martaban, Barve has fitted a strange contraption. It is composed of two parts: a round ceramic conductor that he found near the railway tracks in Baroda, in the western state of Gujarat, onto which has been cast in white cement a field of pointy cones. The intention behind this assembly is to bring in another layer of history and further widen the geographical compass of inquiry beyond Mumbai to Gujarat, where modern trade links between China and Western India originated. According to the exhibition's press release, "in the early twentieth century a Parsi man began a production facility in Morbi, Gujarat, that would copy the techniques from China to make figurines and chinaware. Failing to create ceramics of similar quality, in the 1950s they moved on to make electronic conductors that led to the establishment of a large ceramic industry in the region." Large, indeed: specializing in tiles and sanitary wares, Morbi today supplies five percent of the world's ceramic products and seventy percent of India's needs. Reports India's *Business World*, speaking to a domestic readership, "The chances are that the tiles in your drawing room or the ones in your elegant bathroom were manufactured in Morbi irrespective of the brand inscribed on it."⁸ Industrial items like ceramic filters and electroceramics are also made in large numbers.

As for the cones in Barve's sculpture, they are meant to "refute the idea of perspective and dimensions essential for an object like a ceramic urn." It took cornering curator Sumesh Sharma to find out what this means. The idea seems to be that, as a basic geometric shape used in introductory drawing classes in art school, the form of the cone represents the very rudiments of thinking about "perspective" in a general sense. Accordingly, in *Lack of Perspective*, the conductor with the cones is attached such that it can be manipulated to tilt in any direction, presenting not only a changing perspective, but also multiple mutually contradictory perspectives, since the individual cones themselves are permanently pointing in different

directions. That's my understanding, at least. As an object metaphor, *Lacking Perspective* is pretty cryptic.

My more literal mind sees in the bottom two elements of the sculpture (the martaban and the conductor) not the slippage suggested by Barve's indecisive cone-field, but, rather, a fairly clear if dispersed history of commodity and technological transfer between China and Western India. To tighten things up, Barve might have considered the Indian ceramics industry in its most recent confrontation with China. Today the town of Morbi is groaning under Chinese competition. Not only have Indian companies begun outsourcing ceramic manufacturing to China (a shift that has plagued Indian manufacturing in general for years), but imports into India from China have increased so drastically that Chinese companies have been accused of dumping (another problem for the Indian economy at large). The situation was not helped by a three-week strike by Morbi ceramic manufacturers in December 2013 against rises in state taxes and gas prices.⁹ Thus the proper morphological figure, in my view, is not a cone but a loop. The Sino-India connection has come full circle in the ceramic industry, with Indian manufacturers first trying to displace refined Chinese imports by creating economical local versions in the early twentieth century, and then finding themselves undercut by cheap Chinese derivatives at the beginning of the twenty-first. Maybe "Made in China," to stretch things a bit in the terms of Barve's sculpture, is to Indian manufacturing today what Indian opium was to the Qing.

Left: W. S. Sherwill, *Drying Room, Opium Factory at Patna*, c. 1850, lithograph after drawing.

Right: W. S. Sherwill, *The Stacking Room, Opium Factory at Patna*, c. 1850, lithograph after drawing.



On that note, there is a captivating set of lithographs that are well known among scholars of the colonial opium trade. Based on drawings by W. S. Sherwill from the 1850s, they show the drying room, stacking room, and other sections of the opium factory in Patna, which serviced Calcutta, not Bombay. Such enterprises were certainly large, but Sherwill's images make them look altogether monstrous by raising the ceiling, dwarfing the figures, and exaggerating linear perspective. They recall Étienne-Louis Boullée's impossible vision for the post-revolutionary National Library in Paris (1785), a mammoth neoclassical structure that renders its Roman ancestors an empire of miniature-makers.

Of course, such a structure wasn't even imaginable in engineering terms until the advent of steel frame architecture, one hundred years later. Today, hyperbuildings in China have made cavernous expanses almost commonplace. As for Sherwill's Boullée-like opium factory, the proper

corollary would be not the architectural wonders of the super-mall or sports centre but the kind of never-ending manufacturing spaces that Edward Burtynsky's *China* series (2002–05) made famous. "Made in China" has popularized a scale of industry and trade that the merchant kings of the British Empire, or their predecessors in Asia's ports, could only dream about. Imagine a martaban the size of today's sea-bound shipping container.



The third participant in *Economic Inquisition* was Loretta Joye Pinto. She is not an associate of Clark House. It was her work, which is more traditional in format, that really inspired me to write this article. Since graduating with a master's degree in printmaking from Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, in 2005, Pinto has been immersed in political activism in her home state of Goa. Her

Economic Inquisition,
Mumbai Art Room
(August–September 2014),
installation showing works
by Loretta Joye Pinto and
Yogesh Barve.

own village, seaside Siridao, tucked away off the main highway heading south from the state capital of Panjim, has been battling problems that plague communities across Goa, namely outmigration, real estate scams, and illegal mining activities. The last is a huge issue in the state, entailing encroachments on nature reserves, excessive environmental degradation, digging and exportation far beyond legal limits, and unreported revenues exceeding 27 billion INR (440 million USD)—all of which was facilitated by extensive corruption within the state government. The problem was so bad that the Supreme Court in Delhi had to step in and declare a total ban on mining operations in Goa in 2012. This was finally lifted in October 2014, but not before an estimated 150,000 people lost their jobs and 30 billion INR (490 million USD) was lost by the Goa economy.¹⁰ Since the main client for Goa's iron ore, China, was forced by the ban to shift procurements to other countries, there is little chance of the industry rebounding.

In Pinto's case, the matter is personal. Siridao is not adjacent to a mine, but the village's largest landowners are the Dempos, a major mining family in Goa and neighboring Karnataka. Though insensitive themselves to zoning laws and community interests, it was after the Dempos and other mining families sold large sea-facing plots to developers about ten years ago that Siridao has been faced with what one journalist calls "construction doom."¹¹ Luxury flats are being illegally built on lands that, infrastructure-wise, are barely able to sustain a small family home. New wells have been dug that rapidly drain groundwater, causing problems for farmers and existing households. Ecologically important hillocks have been razed without obtaining necessary clearances. There has been encroachment on areas reserved for the landing of local fishing vessels. Laterite walls that stood for centuries have been replaced with concrete embankments that topple after only a few years, with no one made to pick up the mess. Across India, local governing bodies known as village panchayats exist to ensure that

community interests and laws are protected. In Siridao, it is suspected that the panchayat has been bought off by developers or higher powers in the state government.

Judging from the afternoon I spent with her in Panjim and Siridao, Pinto's days are busy with phone calls, meetings, and door-to-door visits focused on dealing with such problems. She is a passionate activist. Starting in 2007, she helped found Goencha Xetkarancho Ekvott (GXE, Goan Farmers' Solidarity), a group dedicated to the protection of agricultural land and traditional livelihoods. In recent years, GXE has been most vocal about the negative environmental impact of Goa's mining industry and the requisition of forest and agricultural land for the creation of new airports to increase tourism. In the past they have organized protests against the construction of casinos and SEZs, as well as against mining activities. Though Pinto is no longer involved with the group, most of her artwork—a small but compelling body of drawings, prints, and paintings—deals with many of the same issues tackled by GXE.

Loretti Joyce Pinto, *Dolleam add mosonn padd*, 2013, charcoal sketch on paper.



“People have this false notion about Goa, only focusing on the beaches and the tourists,” she explained to a reporter on the occasion of the opening at Mumbai Art Room. “But the evils lie under the layers and conveniently hidden in the folds of the fabric that forms our society. This negative aspect has been eroding everything Goan—the land, law, habitat, and heritage. I wanted to reach the grassroots as well as a larger audience.”¹²

She showed six works at the Mumbai Art Room, three etchings and three drawings in graphite, charcoal, conté, and black colour pencil, all of which were monochrome. First was *Dolleam add mosonn padd* (2013), titled after a saying in Konkani that means something like “Look away only briefly, and all that you love will be lost.” This was a preparatory sketch for a multi-panel drawing of the same title that addresses the complexity of Goan national identity. Its elements included rusty door latches stuffed with unpaid bills, Portuguese passport covers, forms for surrendering an Indian passport, a cityscape evocative of the Portuguese-built Panjim, and a crumbling village—an array narrating the conflicted process in which Goans can opt for Portuguese citizenship, but only at the cost of shuttering or abandoning their ancestral home.

Underwriting outmigration in many cases is the selling of land and property. This appears in many of Pinto's works. At Mumbai Art Room, for example, was *While they were sleeping* (2007). The etching shows a man and woman sitting at a table, the woman coyly pushing stacks of cash towards the man as a Goan family sleeps soundly on the floor. Beneath the table, she

holds in her hand a chain attached to a chest of money. The man also holds a chain, his attached to a floating cloud depicting the future: the hatching of a golden egg containing skyscrapers and high-rises upon the bucolic estuaries and lush hillocks of the traditional Goa ecosystem.

As many of Goa's real estate developments occur on lands once owned by mining companies, it was only natural that Pinto's concerns should extend to mining itself. As mentioned above, the links between the two have been a clear and present danger even in her own Siridao. One of the most straightforward of these works is *Merry we go round* (2012), an etching that, despite its heavy subject matter, is so cute that it could be used as children's wallpaper. At centre it shows giant excavators clawing at a strip mine, looking like the famous American tabletop game, Hungry Hippos. Below and around is a parade of toy-like trucks and barges, miniature versions of the kind used to transport iron ore up Goa's rivers to harbour for export.



Loretti Joyce Pinto, *Goa to China*, 2008–09, charcoal and pencil on paper.

China entered Pinto's work through the backdoor of the Strait of Malacca, so to speak, through the connection of Goa's land troubles to China's global quest for resources. At the bottom of the drawing *Goa to China* (2008–09) are three figures in black shirts with white handkerchiefs covering their noses and mouths.

According to the artist, these are mining activists protecting their lungs from the heavy dust. The woman on the left is Pinto herself. "The handkerchief," explains the

artist, "is also a symbol of suppression," of how attempts have been made to silence protestors through "personal threats, false legal accusations, and lack of media coverage, especially national media coverage." In the background, a ravished strip mine abuts the sea, its innards carried across the water by a fleet of ships toward a shining urban landscape on the horizon. Even without the hint provided by the title, the skyline is immediately recognizable as an imagined China. There is the CCTV Headquarters and the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing to signify the endpoint of Goa's iron ore in China's building boom. They are flanked by the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City, for orientation's sake, but also presumably to place recent developments in China within a history of imperial power and monument building. That Pinto should have begun making such work in 2008 is natural: not only were protests against the mines held practically every day by this point, but the year also marked the opening of the Beijing Olympics, the epitome of China's construction boom as a triumphal projection of PRC financial prowess and visionary technocracy.

There was also *Building China at the cost of my homeland* (2008–10), a four-panel drawing. The left panel shows another landscape of strip mines being excavated. In the middle are two near-identical images of barges. And on the right, the CCTV Headquarters is in the process of being built. Ambiguity

is not a feature of Pinto's practice. But in this particular work, the lack of allegorical elements and empathetic human faces—and instead the incorporation of clear illustrative imagery in an almost photojournalistic sense of composition—make the problem at hand extremely palpable. With two ships rather than one, there is also the tendency to read the work from left to right not once but twice, and then potentially once again, creating a virtual motion-picture loop of excavation, export, and building. Hatakeyama Naoya's and (once again) Edward Burtynsky's exquisite photographs of mining in Japan and China have made viewers used to the sublime visual scale of the environmental impact of the world's consumption of natural resources. Pinto's use of recursive sequential pictorial narrative in *Building China* rejects a linear juxtaposition of before and after, emphasizing instead the threat of recurrent and potentially unstoppable processes. That the looped form of CCTV has been chosen is appropriate, for it functions as a visual instruction for the viewer to go back to the beginning and repeat until either Goa is gone or China is complete. The CCTV loop, described by Ole Scheeren (one of the building's designers) as creating "a circuit of interconnected activities" that joins "all aspects of television making in one single organism,"¹³ in Pinto's hands becomes quite the opposite, a figure of a community's unraveling and a homeland's physical dispersal.

Loretti Joyce Pinto, *Building China at the cost of my homeland*, 2008–10, four-panel drawing, charcoal and pencil on paper.



Because of the content of her work and her political activities, Pinto has a touch-and-go relationship with Goa's small art world. Fellow artists and curators have been supportive, but institutions have not always been. There is a simple reason for this. "Many art institutions in Goa," she explained to me, "were established as fronts for miners [meaning mine owners] to fool people into believing that they were contributing to the preservation and promotion of Goa's culture." The two main such institutions are located in Panjim: Sunaparanta—Goa Centre for the Arts, and Ruchika's Art Gallery, funded respectively by Dattaraj V. Salgaocar and Jaywant Chowgule, both heads of mining companies. On two occasions, Pinto has been censored at Sunaparanta. In 2009, she submitted *While they were sleeping* and *Obliteration* (2007), another work dealing with real estate (which was also in *Economic Inquisition*), to a group exhibition of local printmakers. Before the show opened, *While they were sleeping* was taken down. In 2013, the finished version of *Dolleam add mosonn padd*, the multi-panel drawing dealing with Goan migration and citizenship, was to be included in an externally curated exhibition at Sunaparanta. Against the curator's wishes, the institution refused to let it be shown.

Pinto is candid about the fact that protest art has little impact on the ground. It is something she admits without a hint of cynicism. Hers is the kind of mature honesty that an artist gains by extending their practice beyond the art world and the academy, into the unglamorous nitty-gritty of actual political activity. Still, one hopes that the Mumbai Art Room show will have some effect. As Goa's daily *O Herald* reported, "Loretti Joyce Pinto is happy to receive recognition outside of Goa at the ongoing exhibition in Mumbai, but what makes her happier is informing a larger audience about the stark reality of Goa, especially her village, which is far removed from the picture postcard view of sun and sand that one thinks of at the mere mention of Goa."¹⁴

Why stop at Mumbai? Amongst the Indian artists dealing with China-related themes (there are more than have been covered here), Pinto's work especially has something to say to people outside India, and not just the global art intelligentsia. Her prints and drawings show how some of the political and environmental issues that worry Chinese and China-watchers also directly affect communities in other areas of the globe, and not just at the level of melting icecaps. Looking upon Pinto's Beijing skyline, for example, critics of the wantonness of Chinese urban development will be pleasantly surprised to find that a citizen of another country, in a place as far-flung as Goa, has used the very same iconography of evil to incriminate their own government in wrongdoing.

China is no longer a matter of just Chinese concern. In coming years, yet more roads will lead to Asia's Rome.

Notes

1. In this essay, the name Mumbai is used when speaking about the present or the recent past, while Bombay is used for colonial times.
2. See Gillian Tindall, *City of Gold: The Biography of Bombay* (London: Penguin Books, 1982).
3. Unless otherwise noted, information regarding Mumbai's Chinese community comes from printouts and wall text in Ali Akbar Mehta's *Site: Stage: Structure* (2013–14) or from conversations with the artist.
4. Ramakrishna Chatterjee, "The Chinese Community in Calcutta: Their Early Settlement and Migration," in Madhavi Thampi, ed., *India and China in the Colonial World* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2005), 55.
5. S. M. Edwardes, *By-ways of Bombay* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala Sons and Co., 1912), 8, 22.
6. Chatterjee, "The Chinese Community in Calcutta," 62–63.
7. As quoted in Kevin Kwong, "Political survivors: Socially slanted art is a nice genre but a pair of gallery owners are making it work in their favour," *South China Morning Post*, December 14, 2010; reprinted in *Black White Q & A 2007–2010: Gum Cheng Yee Man Solo Art Exhibition* (Hong Kong: C + G Artpartment, 2010), 27.
8. Sachin Dave, "Tale Of A City: How Morbi Lost The Plot," *Business World*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.businessworld.in/news/corporate/tale-of-a-city-how-morbi-lost-the-plot/1370362/page-0.html/>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Anindya Upadhyay, "Indian economy lost Rs 50,000 crore on iron ore mining," *Economic Times*, October 28, 2014, <http://m.economictimes.com/industry/indl-goods/svs/metals-mining/indian-economy-lost-rs-50000-crore-on-iron-ore-mining-ban/articleshow/44953539.cms/>.
11. Nishitha Nair Shrivastava, "Realty Reality hits Siridao," *O Herald*, October 19, 2014, <http://www.heraldgoa.in/Review/Realty-Reality-hits-Siridao/79927.html/>. See also Lisa Ann Monteiro, "Bold and beautiful but in breach of rules," *Herald Review* June 8, 2014, <http://lisamonteirowrites.blogspot.in/2014/06/bold-beautiful-but-in-breach-of-rules.html/>.
12. Shrivastava, "Canvassing for a Cause," *O Herald*, August 24, 2014, <http://www.heraldgoa.in/Review/Canvassing-For-A-Cause/77559.html/>.
13. Ole Scheeren, "Interview with FeedMeCoolShit," 2006, *Feed Me Cool Shit*, <http://www.feedmecoolshit.com/interviews-archive/ole-scheeren/>.
14. Shrivastava, "Canvassing for a Cause."