

# 27 TALK ART, MUSIC, STYLE, FOOD



**CRYING OTTER**  
Remains of a 6.24 million year old otter were just discovered in Southwestern China, showing that these diminutive members of the weasel family were once the size of wolves.

## Whose Art is it Anyway?

Michael Müller's work raises important questions about translation and authorship



Michael Müller; (left) a work from the exhibition in Mumbai

**POOJA PILLAI**

IT IS NOT easy to interpret Michael Müller's work or to even characterise it. As the Berlin-based artist says, often when people walk into one of his solo shows, they believe what they're seeing is a group show. "It confuses many people to see drawings alongside sculptures and ceramics," he says, "I suppose it's because I don't have a 'signature style', but that's not something I'm interested in anyway." For Müller, the idea for a piece of art may simmer for a long time, before he finally gives it a form. "The material that I finally choose to work with for a particular piece actually says a great deal about the art itself. That is why my body of work looks so diverse," he says.

The heterogeneity of material is probably the most striking thing about Müller's second solo in India, which is currently on view at Jhaveri Contemporary in Mumbai. The exhibition is rather pointedly titled "For All Those Who Trust in Form and Not in Content" and features materials ranging from pencil and paper and oil paints to porcelain, plexiglass and even an oyster shell and a small metal ball. The 46-year-old artist's concern is not so much that people should "like" the work, but that they should question the context within which their likes and dislikes arise. This concern arises out of his lifelong engagement with the idea of codes and how they translate across cultures. "For example, the colour of mourning in the west is black, whereas here in India it is white. The two colours then work as codes for the same thing, but in two completely different cultures," he explains. His practice, Müller says, emerges out of this ten-

sion that exists between form and content. "Any time we communicate, whether it's through art or books or speech, there is an act of translation involved."

This idea is perhaps most beautifully expressed in the two gold leaf on cardboard works — *False and Real* and *For All Those Who Trust in Form and Not in Content (Bombay)*. In each of these, Müller has obscured the original image of the jigsaw puzzle by covering it with gold leaf, drawing attention to the gap that exists between the actual image and the image that the viewer sees. The artist also uses this approach to question the nature of authorship itself, much like Marcel Duchamp did at the beginning of the 20th century with his concept of the "readymades". In fact, Müller pays homage to Duchamp through some works; for instance, the lamellar wood and coloured plexiglass *Accessoire* references Duchamp's later career as a chess player, and the oyster and metal ball 'Ready-made' has a metal ball in place of the original pearl, reflecting Müller's authorial intervention. But the strongest statement for the idea that 'authorship' is not a concept set in stone is made by the two works in the *Do It! (Setting up History)* pieces, which requires the colour of the canvas to match the colour of the wall on which the piece is displayed. Müller says, "You have the choice of finding the exact shade of the wall with which to paint the canvas, or you could just buy a new shade and paint both the wall and the canvas with it. That's up to you. But then, will this mean that the 'creator' of the work changes each time it is exhibited in a new place? And who would you say is the real 'creator' anyway?"



Trimukhi Cultural Centre

## Tales of Light and Dark

On one night for several years, international and tribal artistes have converged in a Santhal village in Bengal to participate in a cutting-edge arts festival

**DIPANITA NATH**

WHEN THE sun sets in Borotalpada on January 28, the sound of dhaks will vibrate over the paddy fields. Under a massive ceremonial umbrella in a clearing, a group of women will match the beats with nifty foot-steps. Their sinuous limbs swaying in rhythm, they will perform an ancient dance ritual called Buru Jatra in honour of the hill deity of Santhal society. This time, however, their audience will be art lovers from across the country and the world who have gathered for the "Night of Theatre", a performance arts festival that is taking place in the Santhal village of Borotalpada in West Bengal from dusk to dawn.

Since 2012, the festival has showcased Santhal art practices and contemporary art forms created through collaborations between artistes from the community and foreign countries. This year, a sound installation designed by Andre Eric Létourneau and recorded by 10 Santhal youths is fused with a Santhal welcome ritual called Atang Daram, in which people of the village wash the feet of the guests. A dance-theatre performance, titled *Going Through This Place Now*, brings together Madrid and Berlin-based director Cuqui Jerez, Santhal performer Falguni Hansda and Venezuela's Yazel Parra Nahmens with local lighting and acoustic designer Chandrai Murmu, among others.

"Santhal villagers often go to night-long festivals. Eight years back, I went to a Santhal drama competition that started at 6 pm and finished the next day around 4 pm. In Borotalpada, I also saw a night-long Santhal film session. What was different for the villagers was to organise a festival dedicated to contemporary performing arts," says Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, one of the founders of Trimukhi Platform, the cultural centre that curates the event.

Chevallier, whose postgraduate studies in Paris was "30 per cent philosophy and 70 per cent theatre", has organised the Night of Theatre festival in Mexico City on four occasions. In India, he thought that Borotalpada, a small Adivashi village, 220 km from



The Night of Theatre festival in Borotalpada will feature several performances

Kolkata, and made up of paddy farmers and small cultivators, was a fertile setting for a fruitful combination of indigenous and international art forms. The aesthetics that were "not from centre but the periphery" appealed to him. "It was because of these two new elements — contemporary arts and peripheral location — that the Night of Theatre started in Borotalpada," he says.

This year, the Night of Theatre is also La

Nuit des idées or the Night of Ideas. "The proposal came from the French embassy and Institut français and we included two 'Philosophical Adda' sessions about the relation between art and thought — a topic which delves into ideas of theory and theatre, contemporary art and inventive thought," says Chevallier. To warm up everybody before the talks, a capsule on "What is Art", by Chevallier, and another, titled "What

is Thought", by Paris-based philosopher Patrice Maniglier, will be read out in English, Bengali and Santhali.

One of the major performances is called *Essay on Seasonal Variation in Santhal Society*, which, among other things, revisits the lives of two local women, Chumki Hansda and Kajol Hansda, through live performances, video projections, lighting and recordings. "What nobody knew, not even her husband, was that Chumki was an orphan who was found and raised by a woman from the village," says Budhray Besra, a farmer-cum-private tutor-cum-artist who carried out the research on Chumki's life for the play. Kajol was old and widowed but left behind a long narrative of subtle ways to understand and appreciate theatre. "We didn't want to influence the emotions of the audience but just give hints of Santhal life through the performances. The Essay that the title refers to will be in the audience's minds and each will be different," says Chevallier.

After two years of teaching at Sorbonne Nouvelle University in Paris and then seven years as professor at National University in Mexico, Chevallier came to India to shoot his third film, *Drowning Princess*, with Mallika Sarabhai's Darpana in Ahmedabad. "Something called my attention to Kolkata, which was overflowing with life," he says. "At that time, my life in Mexico was too good. I got sort of afraid; afraid of being stuck in a comfort zone, of not being able to continue to be artistically in movement. That's why I decided to leave my job as a university professor, sold my furniture, and even a part of my books, and came to live in Kolkata." It was 7 am when he arrived in Borotalpada on a recce of a Santhal village. "Till now, I have not been able to come out of the place," he says.

*Night of Theatre No 9 / La Nuit des Idées* will be held at Trimukhi Cultural Centre in Borotalpada Santhal Village on January 28, from 5.30 pm to 5.30 am. The journey starts on January 28, at 1 pm, from Howrah station, Kolkata. Return to the city is on January 29 at 10.30 am. Booking is open at Alliance Française du Bengale (033-4006-4801) and MACE (033-2281-6872). contact@trimukhiplatform.com and trimukhiplatform.org

### SNAPSHOTS



#### In the Running

FROM THE chawls of Mumbai to the sprawl of Kolkata, Dev Patel's cinematic journey seems to have come full circle, as the Indian-origin British actor scooped up his first Oscar nomination for his role in *Lion*. The film, based on the novel by the same name, traces the life of Saroo Brierley (played by Patel) a street urchin in Kolkata, who is adopted by an Australian couple. As he grows older, Saroo becomes obsessed with his roots and travels back to India to discover more about his parentage. The film also stars Nicole Kidman as Brierley's adoptive mother. Patel made his debut in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* in 2008. He is also known for his roles in *The Last Airbender* and *The Man Who Knew Infinity*.



#### Classically Yours

WHEN THE history of Hindustani classical music is written, vocalist Pandit Jasraj will be remembered as the pioneer who added elements of the thumri to the khayal, giving it more wiggle room and making it more audience-friendly. On January 28, a unique concert titled "My Journey: An Intimate Evening with Sangeet Martand Pandit Jasraj" will bring the musician's journey of over six decades to the fore in a live concert in Delhi. The evening, which will be replete with anecdotes, will also see a performance by the virtuoso, who turns 87 on the day. The event will take place at JLN stadium, from 6.30 pm onwards. Tickets are priced between Rs 500-Rs 5,000 and available on [bookmyshow.com](http://bookmyshow.com).

#### Home Alone

IN THE semi-fictional graphic book *The Horizon is an Imaginary Line: A Refugee Story*, authors Bani Gill and Radha Mahendru discuss the challenges faced by refugees through their protagonist Maryam, a young Somali refugee in India. Developed over a series of storytelling workshops at Khoj, talking about the illustrated work, Mahendru says, "Through Maryam, we reflect on the lived experiences of alienation and marginalization as an 'outsider' on the fringes of an increasingly bordered Global. Designed partly as an infographic, *THIAL* sets out to dispel myths



and assumptions about the 'refugee crisis' and India's ambiguous status within the global refugee regime."

## An Age of Women

Bee Rowlatt on what it means to be a feminist today and how motherhood continues to stack the odds against working women

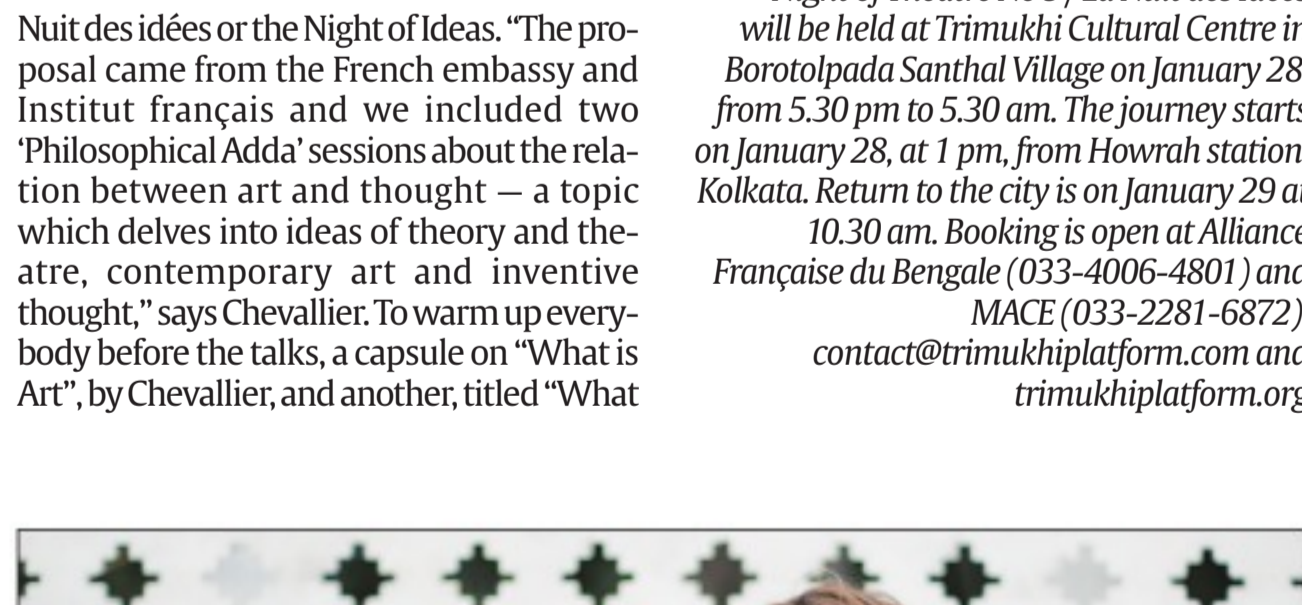
**ANUSHREE MAJUMDAR**

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT would have been proud of Bee Rowlatt. On the last day of the 10th Zee Jaipur Literature Festival, the 45-year-old British writer and journalist found herself on a panel titled "Manelists, Misogyny and Mansplaining", with writers Antara Ganguli, Anuradha Beniwal, Ruchira Gupta, Amrita Tripathi and Suhel Seth (who really should have done his homework). While shutting down Seth's blind arguments about the nature of misogyny, Rowlatt quoted Wollstonecraft from her 1792 book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "I do not wish them (women) to have power over men; but over themselves". Indian Twitter lit up with the quote and a good morning was had by all feminists.

For over two centuries, Wollstonecraft has had a profound influence on feminists from all over the world, but two years ago, Rowlatt went a step ahead. She set off to Scandinavia, retracing Wollstonecraft's footsteps when, in 1795, the latter embarked on a treasure hunt

on behalf of her lover, Gilbert Imlay. "While the affair didn't survive the journey, she wrote a remarkable travelogue, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. She travelled there with a baby, and she remarked on the 'curious tenderness' that people showed towards her. I felt the same way when I went — my infant son Will and I were a curious unit, and people were drawn to us and protective towards us. It was a really good way to connect with people one wouldn't have connected with otherwise," says Rowlatt, who wrote *In Search of Mary: The Mother of All Journeys* (Bloomsbury) about her travels following Wollstonecraft through Norway, Paris, and even a trip across the pond to California.

While gender-parity was the norm in Norway, Paris, like London, made Rowlatt feel "rather defensive" of motherhood. "But I have changed my perception after living in India. Here, I feel motherhood is inappropriately prized," she says. But since her arrival to Delhi in February 2015 with her husband and their four children, Rowlatt says that living in India has allowed her to engage with feminism and activism in varying ways. "I am a



Oinam Anand

Bee Rowlatt at the Zee Jaipur Literature Festival

mentor with the Sheroes Foundation. There's a juncture in women's lives that I find is a very fragile position — to return to work after having children, and to find that the odds are stacked against you. All of the mentoring

I do is for women caught in that space. People write to me and I reply. Financial independence and self-fulfillment for women of all backgrounds is the be-all and end-all for women," she says.