

Suspended in Time

The sixth Kochi-Muziris Biennale unfolds over 110 days, transforming the warehouses and galleries into living studios where process takes centre stage.

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Panjeri Artists' Union at Aspinwall House

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Anupama Kundoo and Bani Abidi's Barakah

Why do you picture a clock when I say the word, time? Or days trapped in calendar squares like insects under glass. Why think of time as something that merely measures or marks. Why not as a medium? I think of this with my feet pressed into the Fort Kochi sand, certain the shore has packed its belongings and moved three meters left since my last visit, quietly as a cat changing perches. In the sixth edition of Kochi Muziris Biennale featuring 66 artists and collectives, time is an artist, an architect, a gardener, invited to walk into the gallery.

Perhaps all this talk about time makes more sense when you step into Monica de Miranda's *Earthship* (2025), an S-shaped outdoor installation at Aspinwall House. Her work begins with the soil, "Because soil records everything: conquest, abandonment, labour, hope. Soil unites past and present," she says. And once you hear that, your eyes drop. What stories can a single grain of soil hold? People enter in ones and twos, not quite knowing whether to treat it as sculpture, garden, or room. They sit on the benches, talk softly, and let the soil hold them up.

"Colonisers practiced monoculture, planting only what could be exploited. As a result this land today is not fertile, so we had to plant diverse trees within the sculpture as a way of bringing the soil back to life," she says. There is something moving about watching new trees take their chances in old soil. Miranda quotes Amílcar Cabral, who insisted that "defending the land is defending humanity," and the sentence stays with me like a stone in my pocket, warm from handling, hours later when Anja Ibsch begins our call with an apology: "Sorry, there's a construction going on right next to my room." I can hear the drilling through the phone, hungry,

and mechanical. Anja is on an enormous bed, one of the many used furniture pieces she spent her days prior to the biennale hunting. The bed is covered in tutus, stockings, fabric, watercolours some of which have melted in Kochi's humidity, pressed flowers from her garden in Berlin and from her long walks through Fort Kochi. The room is a landscape, a river, a pile, a scatter, a stage.

Anja Ibsch has long treated the human body as a site. In her shifting installation for Biennale titled *Still*, Ibsch works as openly as a carpenter in a workshop, her labour neither elevated nor hidden. Time feels looser here. She moves between pieces of her life—old photographs, cutouts, objects, fabric, flowers—rearranging them, watching

them interact with one another. She calls the installation a three-dimensional puzzle. Visitors see her sorting, lifting, and placing these pieces. She doesn't mind the intrusion, in fact she depends on it. Ibsch tells me in another lifetime she worked as a bouncer, which somehow makes perfect sense. "You never know who's coming," she laughs, and adds that she uses the same instincts here: readiness, curiosity, a much gentler kind of alertness. "It gives more power to the artwork when it's witnessed," she says. "Because it's not only my focus, I can also use the focus from others. So the artwork in the end is not my artwork. It belongs to everyone who was there with me."



Anja Ibsch at work at the Biennale



Monica de Miranda's *Earthship* (2025), an S-shaped outdoor installation at Aspinwall House

As we speak, my eyes drift to Annie Ernaux's books on my desk, their spines cracked from revisits. I realise I love Ibsch for the same reason: she bares herself, treats her own life as material, and in doing so makes space for me to feel seen too. Her materials pile around her like time folded into origami. Soon the stockings will turn into floating balloon creatures. "Look at the tree, is the tree finished?" she asks me. "For me, the finished and the unfinished exist at the same time."

That same attention to presence, to the unfinished, to what unfolds in real time, is where the curatorial vision of this Biennale takes shape. "When you invite an artist, you invite their practice," Nikhil Chopra, the curator of the sixth Kochi-Muziris Biennale, tells me. Chopra has rented a scooter to zip through Fort Kochi, which tells you everything about how he's curating this edition. For him, a biennale cannot be static. "We have to focus on agility not rigidity. The how we do is as important as the what we do," Chopra adds. It's the HH Art Spaces approach, the collective Chopra co-founded: the studio is only the starting point. "This is what makes the biennale different from an exhibition. The time and the process is what brings everything into the now," he says and it's this ethos that's captured in the edition's title, *In the Time Being*.

At Aspinwall, muslin panels display plants colonisers carried away. Terracotta forms, bananas, nutmeg, and more sit on plinths, tracing the route back home. It is while talking to Shiraz Bayjoo, that I think of how plants carry time in their roots. Shiraz Bayjoo's *Sa Sime Lamer*, "the path to the sea," sounds less like a title, more like an incantation, something you'd whisper to bring back the forgotten. "For the last few years I've been looking at how the movement of plants and extraction of indigenous knowledge went hand-in-hand with the displacement of people, enslavement, indenture..." says the London-based multidisciplinary artist.

The Dutch commissions of the 1750s, the spice routes, the forced migrations, the archives of gardens, all sift through the room. You can sense the old spice-drying warehouse remembering its past. Bayjoo worked with artisans in Kochi, sharing work benches, listening to their methods, letting their skills direct the shaping of the installation. "The path to the sea," he tells me, "has been my body of work for twenty years," as if the ocean were a long book he's been slowly finishing.

Can art be made at the pace of tides? At the tempo of clouds gathering? Can you build something over three months in public and let it be unfinished, let it be wrong for some of those days, let it respond to what the weather does and what the visitors do and what your own changing mind does? In the sixth edition of the Kochi Muziris Biennale art is allowed to have a life instead of

standing at attention forever. For instance, Abul Hisham's *Healing Room* might awaken something different in each visitor. Kashmiri oud, thick and sweet, and ancient. Terracotta bowl filled with rock candy catching light. *Healing Room* is about mnemonic architecture. There is an economy to Hisham's language and to his rooms. "I wanted to understand interiority, how the spiritual, emotional, and psychological looks like when translated into physical space. How does belief inhabit the body? How do fear, devotion, and solitude inscribe themselves into memory?"

While Hisham explores how belief becomes a room inside you, Anupama Kundoo and Bani Abidi's *Barakah* shows how exteriority, a commons, can remind you who you are and why you are here. Anupama lays out a simple question that will accompany me for many walks to come. "Why must a park bench be made from concrete?" The question sounds simple, almost silly, until you realise it's about everything— from capitalism, landfills, to permanence as an ideology.

Made from Kochi's roundwood and thatch, *Barakah* carries the old wisdom of using a tree fully; wood, leaf, fibre, and fruit. Her work at the Biennale turns toward something older, pre-industrial, takes us back to when human beings coexisted with nature, adapted to climate, wore and ate, and built with what was native and in abundance. "This work shouldn't be confused with nostalgia," she's quick to clarify. "It's asking what happens when we stop insisting everything must last forever, when we remember that human resources are infinite in ways material resources are not," she adds.

At *Barakah*, which translates to a divine blessing in Arabic, visitors can eat, rest, and enjoy each other's company. The meals are prepared by the women's collective and self-help group, Kudumbashree, with fresh, local produce. Plates of food pass from one hand to another; voices overlap with the soft creak of timber and the lapping of waves. Nothing insists on lasting forever and yet everything feels enough. Enough food. Enough company. Enough time.

I leave Aspinwall House and the construction sounds follow me out, the drill biting into concrete like a word repeated until it loses all meaning. There is no silence on the other end. There is only the world making and unmaking itself constantly, at the same time. This year, at the biennale the artists have stopped measuring time and constraints. They let the humidity warp the watercolour. They let the sun bleach ideas mid-thought. Walking away, I think of all the things I abandoned because the timing felt wrong. What if time isn't running at all? What if it's standing there, collaborating while you slept, while you worried, while you forgot. All it asks is that you show up again. ■