

ART

Tales of an endangered forest



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Six artists put the spotlight firmly on the risk of losing 33 hectares of green cover in Aarey colony

To think of a forest in the city today sounds strange. Yet in our active imaginations of the city from yore, wilderness, foliage and marshy lands abound. Where then, did these large patches of green disappear? Obviously, they most likely fell off our collective memories, like chunks of deleted data. Because in reality, they're sitting right here, pushed to the outer fringes of this burgeoning metropolis we call home. Even today, as far flung parts of Mumbai

are brought closer in miles, with scores of urban developmental projects underway, the marshlands and green spaces remain neglected, underdeveloped or sadly misused.

A colossal loss

The Aarey forest in Goregaon, a no-development zone (NDZ) so far, that spreads over 1,000 hectares is a prime example. The state's proposal to use 33 hectares of this land for a metro shed project, would mean a colossal loss of as many as 4,000 trees and 10,000 tribals being displaced. And once uprooted, neither can be wholly rehabilitated. Why are we then as citizens so unconcerned? Perhaps our indifference reflects our unfamiliarity with this piece of land. Art Oxygen or Arto2, a public arts initiative, attempts to bridge this gap. Through [En]counters, its yearly festival, artists from over the world are invited to engage with different facets of everyday urban problems. The festival's eighth edition *Daily Ration*, looks at the city's relationship to food. As Leandro D'souza, founder/curator of Arto2, points out, Mumbai still holds a close relation between its immediate environment and its food network which is based on its "anarchic street culture". One, that emerged and took shape tending to the needs of both - its permanent native communities like the Kolis and the East Indians, as also its migrant population.

Six artists, in a first of its kind intervention, engage with the tribal communities and life in the forest at Aarey. By actually residing within the area for a week or more, they will create site specific work which would culminate in *Forest Tales: Mysteries hidden in concrete* - a one day event to be held on May 20. Here, people from the surrounding *padas* as well as the general public will be invited to be part of conversations between the artists, their hosts and local conservators, followed by a showing of the art works. The project owes its success to local leaders and hosts like Prakash Yashwant Bhoir, the Aarey Conservation Group, NGOs like Vanashakti, Hong Kong-based art initiative Art Together (to which four of the artists belong), and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.



Rooted in practice

Each of the artists have chosen to work with food in some way, merging their own practice with learnings from their new environment, to create something unique. D'souza believes the process to be a "more horizontal way of creating something" than hierarchical, that focuses on the mutual exchange of knowledge and experience. Vikram Arora, the only Mumbai-based artist in the

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Into the wild: Artists Michael Leung and (right) Gum Cheng

group, has created two bodies of work, both of which are strong comments on the disputed territory of 33 hectares. Through Dhartari (mother earth), an installation, he deliberately uses 33 containers filled with soil from various parts of the forest, each of which hold strong associations of memory for the tribals who live there. His second work, 'Cut me a slice of that!', is a performative piece in collaboration with the Warli community, that invites the audience to share a slice of pie inspired by a tribal recipe called Savelya. The pie here being a metaphor for the contested piece of land. "The work sheds light on the larger ecological crisis being affronted together with the more severe human suffering that is being borne at the cost of urban development", affirms Arora.

Siberian artist Katarina Rasic teams up with artist Michael Leung to evoke memory through taste, by creating works using bricks made in the local kiln and an ecological map of the forest to help with organic seed sharing. Artist Gum Cheng will be making dumplings with fillings taken from local hawkers. Objects ranging from ceramic bowls to entire makeshift kitchens have been used by the artists, all stemming from their individual interactions with this imperiled haven. The effort, as D'souza puts it, is not direct activism but more a middle ground for an audience that's curious to know what can be invented from these 'strange exchange and encounters', while celebrating "the fact that a city as dense as Bombay has a forest in its belly".

Forest Tales: Mysteries Hidden in Concrete will commence on May 20 at 11 a.m. with a talk between artists, their hosts and local conservators followed by a showing of the works. To attend, RSVP 9833303760; more details at <http://www.artoxygen.org/?p=2942> and <https://www.facebook.com/ArtOxygen/>

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