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WORLD OF HOPE**

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# A queer artist sculpts a new world of hope

Debashish Paul delves into the complexity of love and identity faced by queer men

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**O**n a solitary sandbank, located on the other side of the Ganges river—away from the crowded *ghats* of Varanasi—a quaint scene unfurls. From amidst the mists rising from the river, you can make out a small wedding band, a white horse and two protagonists wearing sculptural dresses, adorned in flowers. It seems like you have stumbled upon an intimate moment, shared by persons, whose desires are not understood by a society bound by heterosexual norms. The two queer protagonists seem to be creating their own rituals of togetherness.

This is a still from the 2024 film, *Hazaro Saalon ka Sapna*, or *A Thousand Years of Dreaming*, by Debashish Paul, which is being shown as part of his first solo—with the same title as the film—at Emami Art, Kolkata. The 30-year-old artist has constantly engaged with challenges of queer identity and desire situated within rigid societal diktats.

Paul, who hails from Phulia village in West Bengal's Nadia district, and now lives in Varanasi, has examined this complex subject from a deeply autobiographical lens. "Though the film was made in May, I have been mulling over these thoughts for a long time. I come from a small village as does my partner, who hails from a *gaon* in Uttar Pradesh," elaborates Paul. "Both our families don't understand queerness, and hence we have never been able to disclose our identities or relationship to them. There is a constant pressure to get married."

When the artist moved to Varanasi to pursue a master's degree at Banaras Hindu University, he had no queer friends, and hence there was not much awareness about other lived queer experiences. During a residency at 1 Shanthi Road Studio, Bengaluru, in 2022, Paul got to know about dating apps and met other people, who identified as queer. "When I came back to Varanasi, I continued to make friends through the apps. And a lot of them—who hailed from rural areas and had come to the city for education—mentioned the fear of disclosing their identity to family members. Some of them had resigned to the idea of getting married to girls. That, to me, seemed like a huge problem—something that would destroy the lives of the queer men, their partners, and the women they would get married to," he explains.

The film seeks to reflect that suffocation, and the need for a more fluid and inclusive society. The performance, in the film, was deliberately shot on an isolated



(clockwise, from above) A still from 'A Thousand Years of Dreaming'; 'Anatomy of a Dream', acrylic ink, charcoal, threads on fabriano paper; and Debashish Paul.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY, DEBASHISH PAUL/ EMAMI, ART.

sandbank. It symbolised the making of a new world by the protagonists, free of stifling expectations. "I always base my performances in nature, which is more fluid and inclusive," he adds.

The exhibition, centred around the film, also showcases performance stills, drawings and sculptures. In his note, Mario D'Souza, curator-writer based between Goa, Kochi and New Delhi, writes, "Paul's drawings abstract the body and its concealing garments into stretched, fantastical bodies that are man, animal, limb and cloth. Using material used in devotional sculptures and as adornment, Paul repositions and codes these pariah beings as the sacred."

The "sculptural" element is integral to the artist's practice. Hailing from a family of potters, he grew up watching his father transform clay into beautiful objects. Furthermore, having participated in *kirtans*, *jatra* and *putulnaach* (performed with dolls), he has imbibed those elements into his performance style. It makes use of fluid textile forms and sculptural dresses, which don't subscribe to any gender norm.

Some such costumes from the film have been mounted on stands, "almost like precient figures, free of the wall," states D'Souza, who has curated the show. "The drawings are like collages, making use of thread, cowrie shells, and more. They are also anthropomorphic in a sense, and there seems to be an ambiguity between



The film seeks to reflect that suffocation, and the need for a more fluid and inclusive society. The isolated sandbank symbolises the making of a new world

god and beast. He has painted them in a way that the figures seem to be forged in fire," adds D'Souza.

According to him, there are many ways of reading the images on display and the film itself. "The two protagonists only find a lone sandbank as their own space. It is not lush, but barren—the only kind that seems to be available to queer individuals. It is also a critique on the institution of marriage, which is important given the dialogue around marriage equality in recent years," he says. "Paul strings together a diverse array of ideas such as larger histories of sites like Varanasi, personal and family experiences, leading double lives, rituals, and more." The artist's strength lies in the simplicity of their approach to such complex ideas. According to D'Souza, he is not caught up in the heaviness of queer theory and discourse. He approaches it solely from his lived experience, and that of those around him. "This makes Paul's practice so special. He is an impulsive artist, he makes work as he sees and senses, with the body being the primary medium," he says.

Paul concurs and feels that the body too is a sculpture. In this film, when these strange figures stand against an isolated landscape, they look otherworldly. "This is my way of sculpting a new character and identity—one which seeks acceptance from the culture and rituals that it has emerged from. I use natural rubber to create lots of layers. It gives a sense of heaviness to this skin-like creation. But even within that heaviness, lie hopes and dreams," he says.

At Gallery 2 and 3, Emami Art, Kolkata, till 26 October, Monday-Saturday, 11am-7pm.