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"In the womb of the land": Indian artist Ritesh Meshram – in conversation

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Indian artist Ritesh Meshram is deeply inspired by metal in his latest solo show at Chemould Prescott Road.

The exhibition explores both the strength of metal and its representation of exploitative labour practices in the mining industry. *Art Radar* talks to Ritesh Meshram about his journey as an artist and the personal history that is at the core of his practice.



Ritesh Meshram, "In the womb of the land", 6 September – 11 October 2018, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai. Image courtesy Chemould Prescott Road.

Manipulating metal

"Metal echoes strength... Metal is strength... Metal resonates..." says **Ritesh Meshram** in his statement at the opening of **"In the womb of the land"** at Chemould Prescott Road in Mumbai. The Bhilai-born artist, who originally trained as a painter, is known for his inventive use of varied materials, particularly metals, harnessing inspiration from a childhood spent in a city notable for its steel industry. After completing his Bachelor in Fine Arts (Painting) in Khairagarh, Meshram moved to Mumbai in 2003 to pursue an art career and was awarded a Gasworks residency in London in 2012. He exhibited at **Chemould Prescott Road** and Birla Art Gallery in Mumbai and the Triveni Art Gallery in New Delhi. He has also participated in group exhibitions at White Square Art Gallery, Berlin (2009); **India Art Fair**, New Delhi (2011); Cass Sculpture Foundation, London (2012); **Gallerieske**, New Delhi (2014); **Dhaka Art Summit** (2014); **India Habitat Centre**, New Delhi (travelling) and Art District XIII, New Delhi (2016), amongst others.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Shelves', 2017, painted stainless steel, 49 x 7 x 5 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.

His diverse practice pays homage both to his childhood memories of Bhilai in the state of Chattisgarh in Central India and to his early theatre background. It is these multiplicities that manifest in the energy, dynamism and performative nature of his artworks, which use a variety of media including illustration, video, sound and sculpture, as well as site-specific installations and assemblages. "In the womb of the land" showcases Meshram's fascination with iron as a metal, as a symbol of strength and an expression of suppression. These qualities are an intrinsic property of the ore as well as those of the social situation of the labourers who mine it, deep in the womb of the Earth. As the artist says,

Despite its density, it's malleability allows us to exploit, to manipulate as one desires. The metaphor that then captivates me, is evaluating miners, who unearth iron ore from mines, transport it, melt it, and fragment it from its raw form – that of iron ore. For me, the journey of the miner and the metal draw parallels.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Growth of a triangle', 2017, mild steel, 73 x 42 x 16 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Piece of land', 2018, cast iron and forged mild steel, 16 x 42 x 20 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.

In pieces such as *Piece of land* (2018) and *Collection of toys* (2018), Meshram's skillful manipulations of metal and their transformation into shapes and forms oppose their logical and familiar function. His re-contextualisation of found objects, scraps, industrial waste and metallic spare parts strips them of their earlier function and converts them into a work of art fit for exhibiting in a gallery – thereby giving them the importance they deserve, by making the viewer re-evaluate the role that they played in our daily existence. His treatment of the metal varies, which celebrate not only his own multiplicities but also the versatility of the medium.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Collection of toys', 2018, wood and metal, 8 x 13.5 x 7.5 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Collection of toys', 2018, wood and metal, 12 x 21.5 x 4 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.

In *Travel of Light* (2018) he leaves the surface of the forged mild steel raw, while in *Shelves* (2017) and *Mirror* (2018) the silver-painted steel is vaguely familiar to onlookers, as it invokes memories of the household and kitchen furniture of middle-class Indian homes. Whether he is celebrating simple geometric forms in *Growth of a triangle* (2017) or the coming together of wood and metal in his tongue-in-cheek take on children's toys in the "Collection of toys" (2018) series, with "In the womb of the land" Meshram invites the viewer into his unique world, where the solidity, permanence and immortality communicated by metal and wood instills in us a meditative calmness that is strangely reassuring.

Art Radar spoke with the artist about the multiplicities in his practice and the reasons for his fascination with metal as a medium.



Ritesh Meshram, "In the womb of the land", 6 September – 11 October 2018, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai. Image courtesy Chemould Prescott Road.

You originally trained as a painter and later added sculpture and performance to your repertoire. "In the womb of the land" celebrates your fascination with metal. Could you share with *Art Radar* readers the journey of your diverse artistic practice?

Instead of trying to do something new, I did everything that I saw closely or found poetic. To me, every medium is interesting and challenging. I trained as a painter, but when I was studying art, I was also active in theatre. And theatre is a very diverse medium. Imitating something or making something as it is, never interested me. I like experimentation. I don't want to be called a painter or a sculptor. I'd like to be called an artist. In my previous exhibitions, I've showed videos, kinetic works, assemblages, installations and paintings. I'd like to introduce every new medium in my works. And in current times, it is the best creative way to present your works.

After completing my art education, I moved to Mumbai and started my art career with painting. I worked in almost every medium except oil. In Mumbai, I saw Joseph Beuys and other **Fluxus** artists' works in an exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art. The way the materials were used surprised me. I decided to work in found objects. Thereafter, I started seeing and exploring the city of Mumbai from a different angle. After working with found objects, I realised that sculpting suited my temperament better. I don't like spending much time in my studio. Perhaps that is why I enjoy staying out, gathering objects and visiting industries for assembling things. My boundary of interaction with people also expanded. I got a chance to understand the social and political structure of Mumbai too. I sculpted everything that I saw in my assemblages.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Circular Object' (series of 3), 2018, painted mild steel. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.



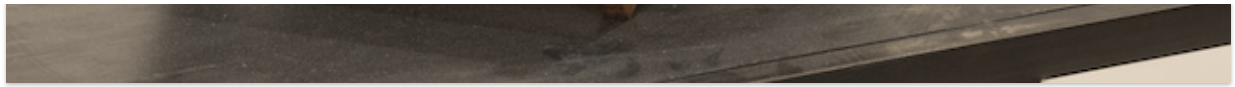
Ritesh Meshram, "In the womb of the land", 6 September – 11 October 2018, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai. Image courtesy Chemould Prescott Road.

Could you elaborate on the role played by your personal history – particularly your childhood in Bhilai, India's steel city – in the production of the works on display at "In the womb of the land"?

It appears that I chose metal as the medium because I belong to a steel city, but I don't think so. But I don't deny the fact that everything that you are and were associated with are there in your subconscious mind. Our encounters and experiences outside school also play a vital role in forming and shaping our thoughts and opinions. When I think about my art education, I wonder where I've learnt art from and what has inspired me to do what I am doing in art.

My journey from my childhood to my art education was an interesting transition. Bhilai is a steel city where I was born and brought up, whereas Khairagarh, Chattisgarh where I studied art was a kingdom, now a small town. There was a world of difference between both the places. The political set-up of both the places was also completely different. I learnt a lot in those days, perhaps much more than I learnt in my later years. Those experiences still stay with me.





Ritesh Meshram, 'Collection of toys', 2018, wood and metal, 9 x 25 x 6 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.

You are inspired by so many different aspects of metal – the material, the labourer who forged it, as well as the production process. Could you explain this further in the context of one or two of the works on display?

Materials attract me. I believe that subjects are concealed in the medium, and it is my job to find them. And still, it is debatable what comes first – the idea or the material. To me, the process of making an artwork is more important than the concept. When I embark on an artwork or when I plan it, I don't have a clear idea of what the outcome will be. I enjoy improvisations. While making an artwork, a lot of accidents happen, and I let those accidents be part of my works. I believe every artwork has a mystery. And I want the viewers to enjoy it.

Metal is heavy, metal has sound, metal is rusty. Metal itself conveys everything.

Most of the works in "In the womb of the land" are made through the forging technique. The process of forging inspired me. Forging is a process where a piece of metal is heated at a certain temperature and then hammered into a desired shape. I worked with a blacksmith who has a forging machine. My metal work is an attempt to draw a similarity in the tools of the labourers that helped me make this work and create a new aesthetic with the already existing forms. The body of works entitled "Between the lines" are forged. Each and every work has minute details. You can see the impression of the hammer. Forging gives strength to metal. A lot of pieces look found, but they are made with minute details. It's an important aspect of all the works. The collection of toys looks simple but is actually delusive. When you take a closer look at the objects, you realise their normal functioning has been impaired.

Many of your pieces both in the past and in this show are intended at making viewers contemplate the meaning of labour. How have you accomplished this in the current show?

I have worked with the labourers and I have closely seen how they are exploited and how they suffer because of working in an unorganised industry. The narratives of these works have come from their lives and their works. What I have also explored through my metal work is to draw a similarity in the tools of the labourers. There is such an aesthetic in these tools – whether it is the design, the sound they make, or their form. For me to create a new aesthetic with the already existing forms was something that inspired the process of my own work.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Emerging from the black', 2018, wood and mild steel, 66 x 30 x 10 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.

There is a sense of performance and theatricality in your work – in the back stories that are evident but unknown to spectators in pieces such as *In Between the Lines* and *Emerging from the Black*. Does this come from your early interest in theatre as an art form?

Because of my theatre background, I was confident about the language I was using, but at the same time I had the understanding to see art and theatre differently. If I have to define my artworks in one word, I'll call them playful. Yes, playfulness is a quality that is seen in almost all my artworks and it has of course, come from my theatre practice. But the process also plays an important role in bringing out the playful nature. I don't plan anything in advance.



Ritesh Meshram, 'Mirror', 2018, painted mild steel, 66.5 x 22 x 13 in. Image courtesy the artist and Chemould Prescott Road.

Your treatment of the works on display at "In the womb of the land" differ from piece to piece – from the rawness of rusted forged steel in some, to the silver-painted surfaces of others such as *Mirror*. What is the creative intent behind these choices?

Visually each work in "In the womb of the land" gives you a different experience. If you remove the titles of the works you can interpret them individually also. In this body of work, the surfaces of the metal have been treated differently. Some have a thin coat of black, while the others are painted glossy silver. Overcome with nostalgia for my hometown, I've painted 'window-to-watch' grey. In the heavily rusted work *A piece of land*, you can feel the weight of the metal and the beauty of its rawness. In the works painted black, you can clearly see the impression of hammering and the strength of forged metal. The work entitled *Mirror* is roughly painted with industrial silver oil-based colour, which is used in industries for different purposes. Most of the works are welded, while a few are joined with nuts and bolts.



Ritesh Meshram, "In the womb of the land", 6 September – 11 October 2018, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai. Image courtesy Chemould Prescott Road.

You have also used the found objects of our daily existence in many of your installations. How do you re-contextualise these familiar items in your work in order to raise them from the ranks of the ordinary?

Objects have their own history. When I use them in my works, I play with the shape and the nature of the existing forms. Most of my assemblages have a casual look, and you can enjoy its beauty. In all these works, even a nail is part of my work. Nothing is hidden. Sometimes the original form of the objects is left as it is, and sometimes it's changed by rearranging or distorting it or adding something. When the viewers come across it, they first experience a kind of illusion. It is only after some time that they realise what the object is.



Ritesh Meshram, "In the womb of the land", 6 September – 11 October 2018, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai. Image courtesy Chemould Prescott Road.

You have continuously reinvented yourself in your assemblages and "In the womb of the land" is no different. What can *Art Radar* readers look forward to in your practice in the coming months?

I'd like to continue experimenting with metal.

Amita Kini-Singh

2347

"In the womb of the land" by Ritesh Meshram is on view from 6 September to 11 October 2018 at Chemould Prescott Road, 3rd Floor, Queens Mansion, G. Talwatkar Marg, Fort, Mumbai 400 001.

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