

Praneet Soi

Are the Kolkata-born artist's latest works an expression of hope for a more tolerant future or an expression of sorrow about a lost past?

by Niru Ratnam

Towards the end of 2010, Praneet Soi visited Srinagar in the Kashmir Valley, which had earlier suffered a bout of violent protest and political unrest initially triggered by a bungled Indian army operation but that then widened to a more general protest about Indian rule and subsequently American geopolitical influence. Srinagar is the largest city in the Kashmir Valley and serves as the summer capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is also the site where the political problems that have bedevilled Kashmir since the end of British occupation and the beginning of Indian rule have regularly surfaced. Soi spent ten days exploring the city's architecture. Subsequently he produced a slide projection, *SriNagar* (2011–), made up of fragments of text together with images of both old and new buildings, interiors and architectural detailing from around the city. The architecture included the highly patterned interiors of the shrines of Sufi saints, reflecting the importance of Sufism in Kashmir, a detail that particularly caught his attention.

Soi returned to Srinagar in 2014 and this time worked in the atelier of Fayaz Jan, a master craftsman whose apprentices work on the type of painted papier-mâché boxes and objects that are found for sale across Kashmir. The art of papier-mâché arrived in Kashmir from Iran along with Sufi culture. Bulbul Shah, the Sufi saint, is said to have converted the Buddhist ruler Rinchen Shah to Islam during the fourteenth century, and unusually, Sufism became a dominant influence on Kashmiri society, in contrast to its more common status as a minority position in Islamic societies. However its centrality to Kashmir has recently been challenged, as a more doctrinaire, Wahhabi-inflected Islam has taken hold, and its ideas of tolerance put under strain by the territorial conflict between India and Pakistan over the region.

The notion of the migration of ideas, religion and the visual culture associated with religions is central to the two further bodies of work that Soi produced after this second visit: *Srinagar* (2014), which was exhibited at the Irish contemporary art biennial EVA International, in Limerick, in 2014 and at the Experimenter gallery in Kolkata the following spring; and *Srinagar II*, shown by the same gallery at last autumn's Frieze London art fair. *Srinagar* consisted of an installation

of 45 papier-mâché tiles, a slide projection and wall-based works. This time the slide projection was more specific, focusing on the decorative inlaid stonework at Sufi shrines, interspersed with images of buildings, a sometimes abstracted map of Kashmir and fragments of text including the 'Instrument of Accession' (1947), by which Maharajah Hari Singh agreed to Indian rule after the British departed. The intricate geometrical patterning seen in a number of the slides was also depicted on the papier-mâché tiles that were executed by Soi, working collaboratively with artisans in Fayaz Jan's workshop. Different designs of Islamic patterning appear across tiles, sometimes limited to the space of an individual tile, sometimes layered across a number of them. Delicate floral and vegetal imagery is seen in other tiles. In a few tiles the image of the chinar leaf is seen. A symbol of Kashmiri heritage, the chinar was brought to Kashmir on a large scale by the Mughal emperor Jahangir during his reign, between 1605 and 1627. Like Sufism and papier-mâché, it is something that emigrated to Kashmir and subsequently became typical of the region.

A smaller suite of papier-mâché tiles, *Srinagar II – Paintings on Papier-Mâché* was shown at Frieze London as part of the artist's solo presentation with Experimenter. Here, the decorative geometrical imagery that was evident in the earlier series was interspersed with free-floating images of Srinagar's architecture, such as a meticulously rendered houseboat or the exterior of a fort. Contemporary aspects of the landscape, such as the detail of a flyover, also feature. There is no apparent hierarchy to the different motifs in the two series: instead they seem to be unanchored to the background, which is a solid colour. This, combined with Soi's occasional use of different perspectives, contributes to a deliberately disjointed visual effect. It is a technique that recalls earlier figurative works by Soi in which either one or two figures are pictured in the centre of canvases against an opaque background, as if they had been cut-and-pasted in. These figures are based on found images that formed Soi's archive – news clippings of war, terrorism and crime. While each figure came loaded as a signifier of political unrest, Soi's handling of them seemed to be an attempt to distance them from that background, to isolate the form from the circumstance. Each was depicted

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Srinagar (detail), 2014, 42 papier-mâché tiles;
each 30 × 30 cm, acrylic and gouache, paint,
protective uv matt varnish



Srinagar (detail), 2014, 42 papier-mâché tiles; each
30 × 30 cm, acrylic and gouache, paint, protective uv matt varnish



Srinagar II (detail), 2015, 24 papier-mâché tiles;
10 tiles 30 × 30 cm each; 6 tiles 46 × 30 each; 2 tiles 46 × 46 cm each;
2 tiles 51 × 51 cm each; 4 tiles of variable dimensions;
acrylic and gouache, UV matt varnish



in ‘sometimes impossible conditions of torsion’, as the critic Ranjit Hoskote noted. They were wrapped, moulded or folded around each other – a result, in part, of a working method that involved throwing paper cutouts of figures against a wall and seeing what patterns they made as they landed. The process restaged social disaster and political unrest as something to be articulated through form rather than narrative – albeit at the risk of aestheticising disaster. Soi’s use of the Renaissance technique of anamorphosis – where the figure or object depicted is distorted so that it can only be clearly recognised from a particular angle or by using mirrors – further adds to this decoupling of his figures from their original roles.

This move away from the figure as actor towards the figure as sign was made more literal in the slide work *Kumartuli Printer, Notes on Labour, Part 1* (2010), which features images of a printer using an old pedal-operated press in Kolkata as well as images of his workshop. Interspersed with the cans of ink, receipts and tools is a sequence in which the operator feeds paper into the machine so that it produces images of his hands. In effect the printer’s manual labour becomes a sign produced by manual labour. The emphasis on this theme, and on the reproduction of signs that are rooted in conflict, are refined in the later *Srinagar* works. With these the artisanal labour is the making of the papier-mâché decorative objects. The traces of human form have almost entirely disappeared and been replaced by geometric forms depicted floating free against flat backgrounds in the way that the earlier figures did. The imagery is not abstracted from found photographs of unrest and violence: instead it is taken from a way of living that perhaps offered an alternative to societal unrest and regional warfare.

Soi’s travels to Srinagar and subsequent research into its Sufi culture have provided the artist with subject matter that fits his ongoing investigation into the spaces that open up when visual signs are prised away from the context in which they were originally meant to be seen. Moreover, the political and social undercurrent to these

works is more nuanced than his earlier use of found images from the aftermath of terrorist atrocities. The patterning on the *Srinagar* works, the materiality of the papier-mâché and the symbol of the chinar leaf are very deliberate signs of the Sufi culture that migrated to Kashmir from Iran and existed as a highly particular way of life in this pocket of the subcontinent. For not only did Kashmiri Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits (the Hindus native to Kashmir) share a number of customs and beliefs through the shared traditions of Sufism, there was also a broad tolerance of different faith systems. This was a particular characteristic of the Rishi order of Sufism, which evolved in Kashmir indigenously during the fifteenth century and differed from both fundamentalist Islam and other Sufi orders in part through its acceptance of other faiths. The result was, for a time, a composite Hindu-Muslim culture of overlapping religious identities. Thus, Soi’s use of Sufi geometric patterns is not just about the migration of signs from the Middle East to Kashmir but can also be read as invoking a more tolerant, inclusive moment in time where the teachings of Islam were mixed with earlier traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. This was a moment when Muslim and Hindu belief systems overlapped and when the Sufi shrines around Kashmir would attract both Hindus and Muslims. The question that Soi’s works from Srinagar pose is whether or not such a moment is recoverable or whether like the faded, blurred images of the *Kumartuli Printer*’s hand, these are signs of a moment that has gone. As a new, harsher way of thinking about the world emerges, one where there is less room for signs to migrate and mean something quite different from what they might have originally been invoked for, Soi’s new works pose the question of whether it might be possible to recover ambiguity and how that process might begin. **ara**

Work by Praneet Soi can be seen in the 1st Asian Biennial / 5th Guangzhou Triennial through 10 April and in Praneet Soi – Srinagar, presented as part of The Collection Now, at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 28 January – 10 April



above Kumartuli Printer, *Notes on Labour, Part 1* (details), 2010,
80 slides, rotary carousel projector

facing page Praneet Soi, 2009 (installation view,
Het Oog (The Eye), Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2009)

all images Courtesy the artist and Experimenter, Kolkata