

“Notes on Labour”: India’s Praneet Soi – artist profile

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With a major solo exhibition in Mumbai’s oldest museum just behind him, Praneet Soi’s profile is set to rise.

Art Radar looks at the 46-year-old artist’s “Notes on Labour”, which ran at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai until late July 2017.



Praneet Soi, 'Untitled– Notes on Labour'. Installation view at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Aluminium, plywood, acrylic paint, A4 sized drawings and prints. 488 x 244 cm. Image courtesy the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

Praneet Soi (b. 1971, Kolkata, India) has had a long career behind him. Educated at the Maharajah Sayajirao University, and then the University of California, Soi’s artistic practice has developed over the years to encompass

drawing, painting, photography and installation. With nearly two decades of artistic practice behind him, Soi's latest exhibition entitled "**Notes on Labour**" was held at the **Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum** (BDL Museum) in Mumbai, from 15 May 2017 to 25 July 2017. Soi was one of the artists selected to work with the Museum's rich history and archives. As Mumbai's oldest museum, the institution's expansive collections and well-preserved exhibition space became the context for Soi's latest research-driven project.

Soi's latest exhibition is a continuation of the Museum's exhibition series "Engaging Traditions", curated by Tasneem Zakaria Mehta, who has curated multiple solo shows of contemporary artists at the museum thus far.

Soi's project with the BDL Museum opened in the richly decorated main foyer of the Industrial Arts gallery, where a newly-installed curved wall stands. Depicting a series of hand-painted motifs, where human figures freewheel across the surface, the work references one of the seminal publications about India's decorative arts and its manufacture – the *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, which was published by W. Griggs and Sons in 1886. The book, which is part of the Museum's library collection, offers a historical record of the decorative arts and crafts in India, as well as the industries that it was supported by during the time. Soi's wall, with its evocation of textile, art and other crafts, sets the tone for visitors exploring the rest of his project. An act of homage to the craftsman, Soi's project focuses on the myriad of craftsmen and labourers that support an entire industry, and the creative process through which they practice their craft.

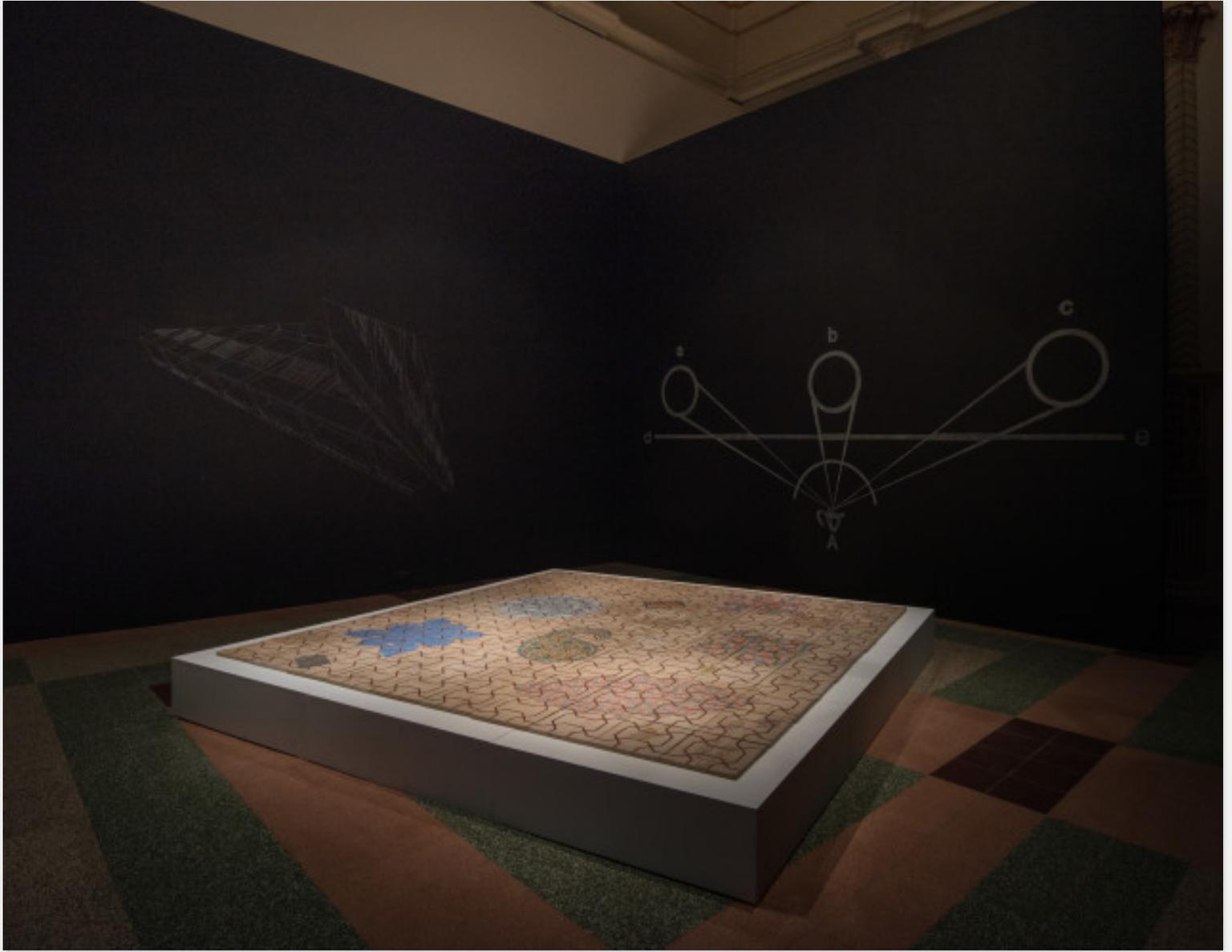


Praneet Soi, 'Untitled – Notes on Labour', front view of installation at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. aluminium, plywood, acrylic paint, A4 sized drawings and prints, 488 x 244 cm. Image courtesy the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

Praneet Soi, 'Untitled – Notes on Labour', back view of installation at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. aluminium, plywood, acrylic paint, A4 sized drawings and prints, 488 x 244 cm. Image courtesy the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

Collaborating with traditional craftsman from his hometown of Kolkata, as well as Srinagar, India, and Guangzhou, China, Soi pulled together a veritable archive related to the decorative arts industries today. Part of his presentation included the work *Tile as Archive*, which combines 100 papier-mâché tiles. Soi travelled to the studio of Fayaz Jan, a Kashmiri artisan known for his designs. Arranged in a square measuring three metres on each

side, the large-scale work serves as a record of the Kashmiri design, motifs and patterns that were used in the craftsman's atelier.

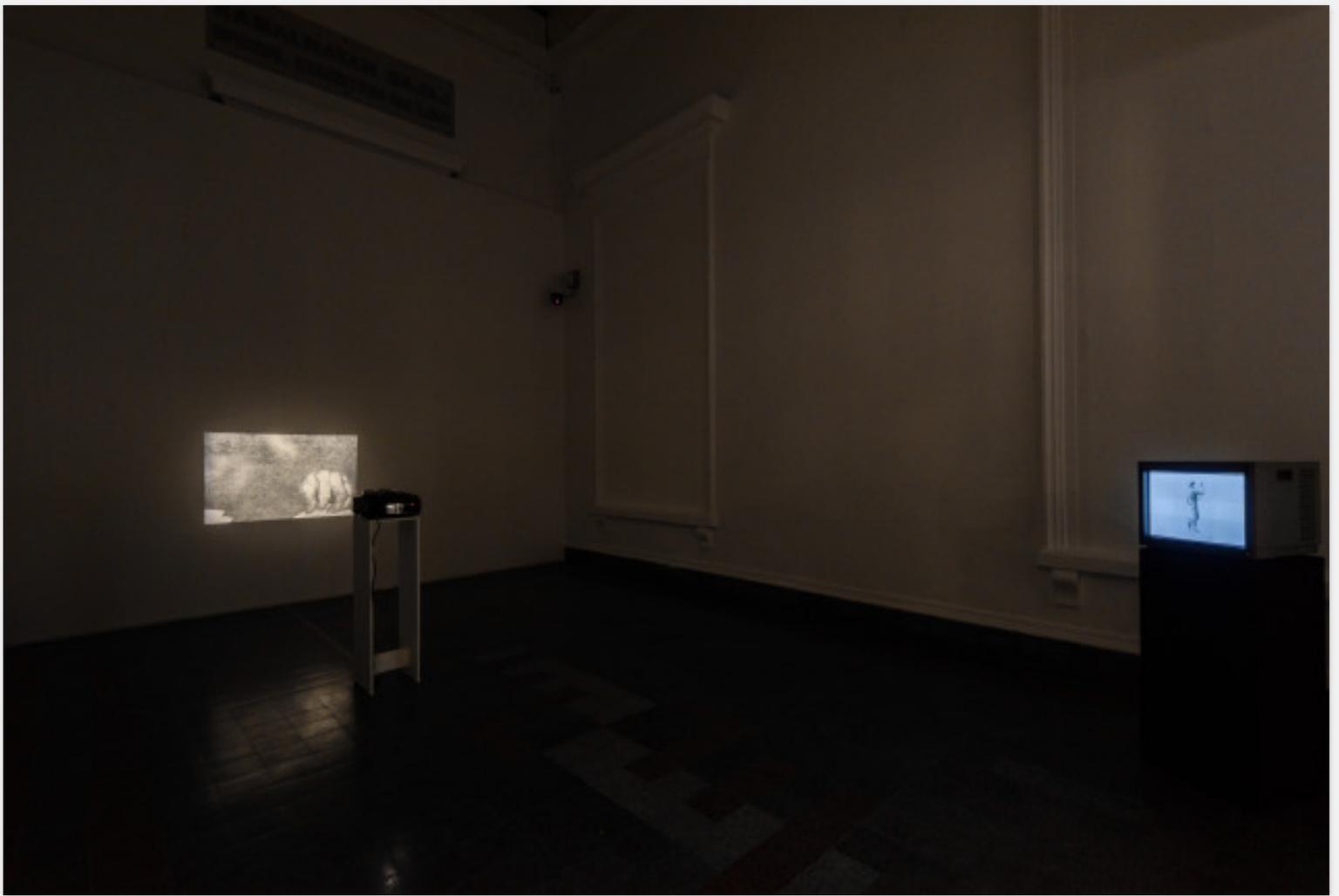


Praneet Soi, 'Tile as Archive', 100 papier-mache tiles, 12 x 12 inches each. Installation view at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Image courtesy the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.



Praneet Soi, detail of 'Tile as Archive', 100 papier-mache tiles, 12 x 12 inches each. Image courtesy the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

Soi's focus on expanding our archive of knowledge on Indian craft and industry spills over into the labour process; *Kumaratuli Printer* is a slide installation that records the working of the treadle press, a type of foot-operated printing press. The printer's workshop in Kumaratuli, North Kolkata, was where Soi began his excavation into labour and craft. As the viewer watches, Soi's slide show reveals that the images that the treadle press is printing are, in fact, a documentation of the printer's hands working, creating a never-ending cycle of labour.

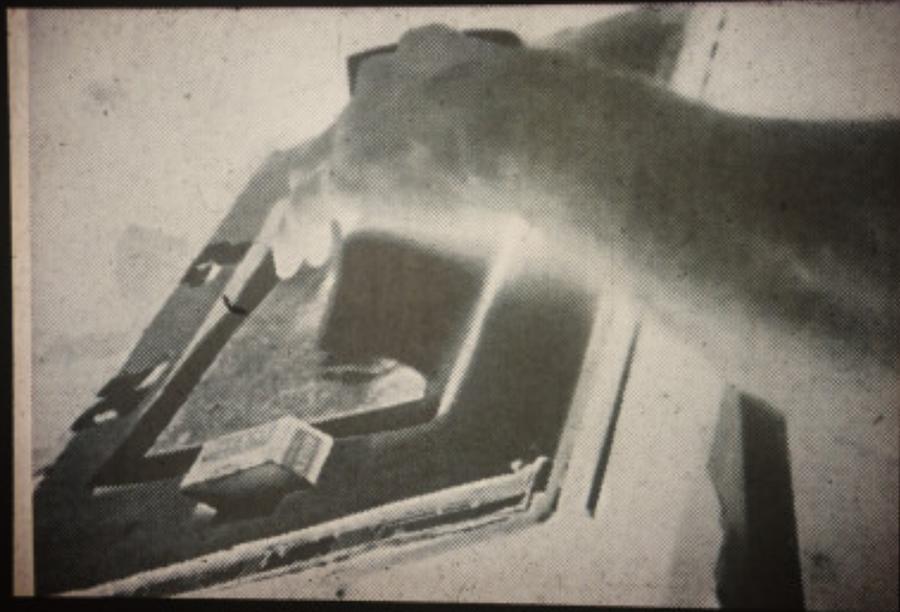


Praneet Soi, 'Kumaratuli Printer', Slide Installation, 80 slides, Kodak Ektapro projector, 80 slides. Installation view at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Image courtesy Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum.

Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.



Praneet Soi, 'Kumaratuli Printer', detail of slide installation, 80 slides, Kodak Ektapro projector, 80 slides. Image courtesy Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

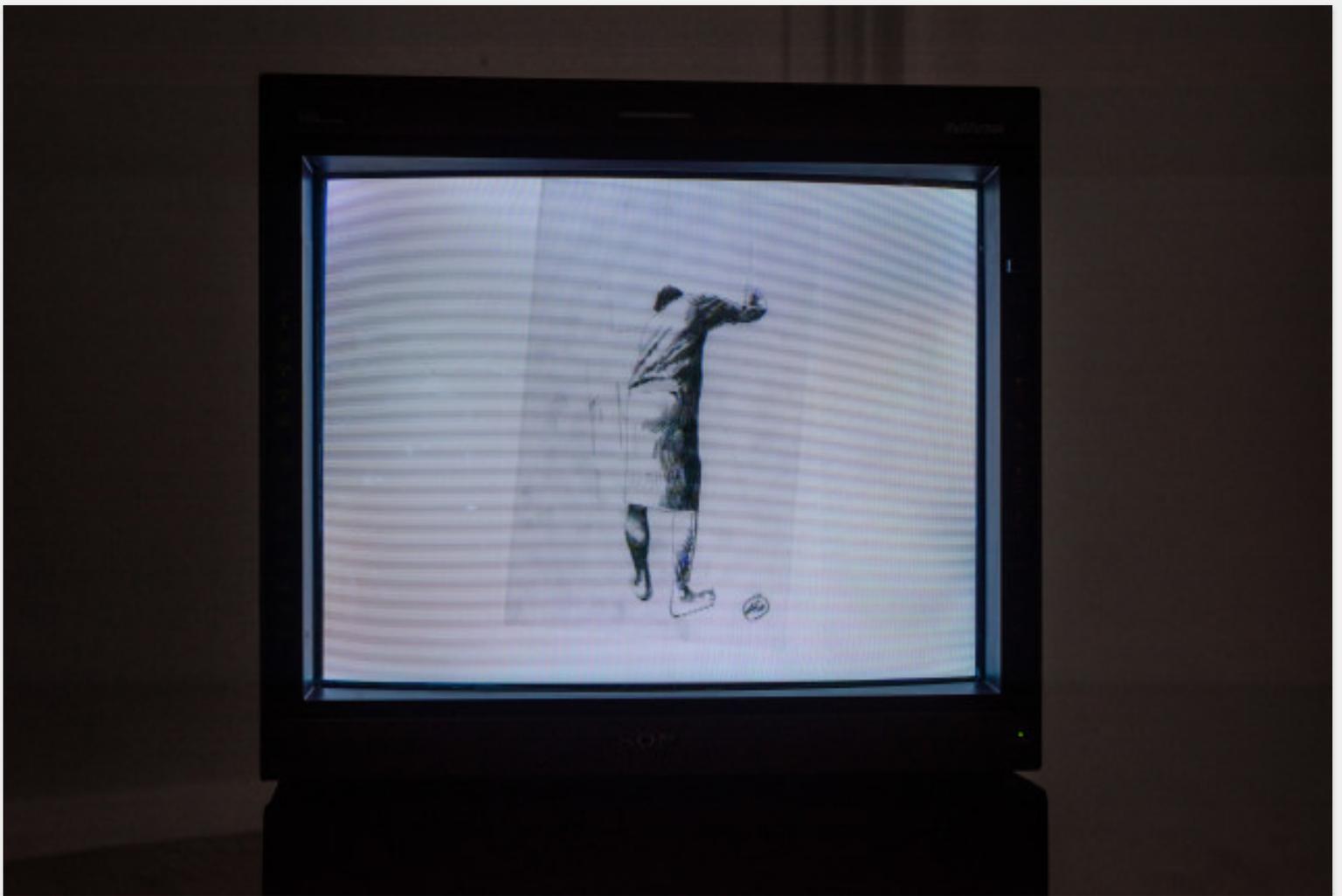


Praneet Soi, 'Kumartuli Printer', detail of slide installation, 80 slides, Kodak Ektapro projector, 80 slides. Image courtesy Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

Peering deeper into the craft industry, Soi also includes an animation of a labourer making plastic balls for children to play with, in a clip entitled *Kumartuli Ball Maker*. By extensively documenting, recording and building on already existent archives of the decorative arts and crafts industry in India, Soi's latest exhibition expands the wealth of knowledge available to us about socio-economic realities, and the sheer act of labour involved in creation.

This knowledge-centric, knowledge-driven approach is not altogether unfamiliar to those previously acquainted with Soi's artistic practice. Soi's expeditions to areas around India are also motivated by a deep desire to understand the wider geopolitical context of his own motherland. One of Soi's projects revolves around the locale of Srinagar, which he visited in 2010. With a history of violent protests, riots and deep dissatisfaction, 'Srinagar' became shorthand for the political issues befalling the Kashmir Valley since decolonisation and withdrawal of British presence. Finding inspiration from the architecture of the old city, Soi explored the physical buildings that made up Srinagar, creating a slide projection, entitled 'SriNagar' (2011), weaving together façades of old and new buildings with text works. Soi's return to Srinagar in 2014 would subsequently find him in the workshop of Fayaz Jan, where he commenced compiling the archive shown in the exhibition at BLD Museum.

The deep desire to make sense of socio-economic landscapes and situations reach further back in time. From 1999 to 2001, Soi developed *The California Miniatures*. It was Soi's way of meditating on the Californian landscape during the years he lived there. Soi would take pictures of scenes that interested him and send for the photographs to be developed. Using the unfolded cartons that the developed photographs arrived in, Soi painted the same photographs in miniature on the cardboard surfaces, creating unconventional, colourful montages that explored the Californian landscapes that he encountered.



Praneet Soi, 'Kumartuli Ball Maker', mp4 clip, 15 sec. Installation view at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Image courtesy of Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

Subsequently, Soi's work has tackled a wide range of issues and problems, challenging the ways in which we perceive our realities. One of the more evocative early works of Soi's revolves around the human body and the way it is represented in images. *Disasters of War* (2005), for example, revolves around media-distributed images of conflict, unrest and dispute; Soi remakes the images in the miniature format, evoking the despair of the characters within the scenes. Soi continues to meditate on mass-media images that attained icon-like status in the project *Four Miniatures* (2009). Using the image of the tortured Abu Gharib detainee, as well as the image of falling figures from the burning World Trade Centre in New York, Soi re-represented the human figure, creating the motif of the freewheeling human figure that finds its way into most of his work.

Yet, one of Soi's best known projects remains the installation that he produced for India's inaugural official pavilion at the **54th Venice Biennale** (2011). Creating a site-specific mural with an L-shaped wall, Soi drew upon his signature freewheeling human forms. Finding inspiration from the title of the exhibition, "Everyone agrees: it's about to explode", Soi's figures seemed knocked about by some unexplained explosion. Decorating his signature figures with details such as architectural drawings, Soi's presentation at the Indian Pavilion was part of a survey of contemporary Indian art, drawing together artists of different backgrounds and ethnicities.



Praneet Soi, 'Astatic Machine', wood and overhead projector, acetate prints. Installation view at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Image courtesy the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo: Anil Rane. © Praneet Soi.

More recently, Soi has remained dedicated to uncovering deeper truths. The past few years have seen Soi travelling extensively, involving himself in projects that have, eventually, led to the creation of many of the pieces and archives that went on show at BDL. With his latest exhibition at the BDL Museum, Soi marked a major milestone in bringing together a significant body of work that deals with the craft and decorative arts industry in India, shedding light on the processes of labour, and traditions that still guide its making and doing. Combining a dedication to knowledge generation with innovative practices, Praneet Soi remains one of India's contemporary artists to watch.

Junni Chen

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