

## Sounding the Alarm

In Navin Thomas's sculptures, music memorialises the inhabited experience of spaces even as it frames an elegy for the beleaguered planet, points out **Adwait Singh**.



The pièce de résistance of Navin Thomas' solo show at GALLERYYSKE in Delhi, from the 20<sup>th</sup> of October to the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, was an apocalyptic brass band rasping forth a dirge of dystopian notes ranging from a cacophony of musical instruments being tuned for a recital, to recordings from an intense table tennis match, to a symphony of ship horns echoing

into the stark stretches of the subarctic. Titled *The weather report in 3 parts by the phantom orchestra*, the sound installation comprised an ensemble of six musical instruments, including a sousaphone, a tuba, a euphonium and a French Horn, salvaged from a metal recycling facility and set up on a circular dais from where they appeared to conduct



**Navin Thomas.**

*The weather report in 3 parts by the phantom orchestra.*  
Reclaimed wood, brass. Dimensions variable. 2018.

an ominous score, abstracting the alarming frequency with which natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, forest fires and floods have come to hound a world that stands at the fag-end of a civilizational spurt enabled by fossil fuels.

Rather than sampling and recording realistic sounds of country-sized chunks of ice cleaving off the polar permafrost or uproarious conflagrations devouring oil fields down to their final dregs, the artist has decided to sidestep the literal in composing what he calls the ‘acoustic architecture’ of this hauntingly dismal swansong in an attempt to convey the incomprehensible stupendousness of the ‘hyperobject’ that describes global climate change. The abstract poetics that informs this planetary elegy, has further translated into material visualisations in the form of two composite wooden sculptures displayed on an adjacent wall, titled *Sheet music for table tennis*. Resembling curiously crafted pinball boards, or the hallowed anatomies of some strange musical instruments, the motley topology of these wooden sculptures can be read as encrypted ciphers left behind by the makers from the past for a future audience, especially when viewed together with the archival photograph of a colonial brass band – the Madras Sappers – perhaps the missing referent of the aforementioned ‘phantom

orchestra’. Why table tennis, one might ask. “A ping pong ball,” explains Thomas, “can be much like the weather, bruised and battered and yet light and playful and then at the same time, most of all uncertain.”

Metaphorical correlation of this sort between the works and their titles is the operating thread throughout the show, starting from the exhibition title *Out Here in the Exosphere* which mysteriously situates the scene in the rarefied transitional zone between the earth and the outer space, priming the mind for xenogenetic theories or a molecularization perhaps that affords a better understanding of spatial poetics and an altogether loose perception of time. Dwelling in this uncertainty, one is left to draw the connection between classical music, antiquated navigational technology and cosmic architecture, between colonial legacies and the current state of ecology, between an undead past and a precarious present. The dramatic lighting, shadow play, dialogic arrangements of individual works and most of all the titular promptings, further contribute to the generative wave of synaesthesia that sweeps over the audience, gently guiding their exhibition experience.

On a more formalist register, what also merits attention is the significant artistic investment in the spatiality of music. For





**Navin Thomas.** *Sentinels in time and out of reason a.k.a we are the guardians of each other.* Reclaimed wood. Dimensions variable. 2018. Images courtesy the artist and GALLERYYSKE.

instance, the photo-responsive installation *Sentinels in time and out of reason a.k.a we are the guardians of each other* came out of the impossible artistic quest for designing acoustic chambers for instruments such as the tanpura that cannot be tuned perfectly. The interest in harmonics and metronomic precision associated with these prototypes that the artists refers to as ‘fictional symphony halls’ is complemented by an attentiveness to temporal dynamics observed in a set of conjoint rocking chairs titled *Hours & Minutes*. Works such as these, as well as the untitled chimeric wooden sculptures that combine, what seems to be, architectural elements from medieval astrological observatories with

sound chambers, quadrants, astrolabes and human anatomical features, are an attempt not only at materialising the invisible architecture of music but also articulating the musicality of space and how music as a marker of past lived experiences (real or imagined) in space can illuminate our response to architecture. This last is especially resonant with the title *Sentinels in Time*, according music the function of memorialising and crystallizing patterns of inhabitation of spaces over time, explaining the ineffable appeal of certain architectural sites, shapes and features as well as their deeper imbrications with human psychology. /