

# Blue from Bombay

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Veeranganakumari Solanki Jamwal (Mumbai, 1985) is an independent curator and art-writer based in Bengaluru, India. She studied English Literature and holds post-graduate diplomas in Indian Aesthetics, Art Criticism and Theory and an MA in History. She was a participant of the first Gwangju Biennale International Curators' course. Her curatorial experience has involved research, curating and co-curating exhibitions on emerging Indian, Asian and international artists and art practices, in India as well as internationally. She is currently the India correspondent for Flash Art International and has contributed papers and articles to several international art journals and publications.

*Blue, Tarpaulin blue – on the roofs, in the market, on boats, on buildings, over people – everywhere... It first became evident in Mumbai (Bombay), then Belgium, then Italy, and now, it is omnipresent.*

There are always preconceived notions, which we carry with us when we travel to a new city or space. We arrive at places expectantly – and this either leads to disappointment or delight. These are influenced by memories or things we may have read or heard that impact the unbiased element of surprises.

A melting pot is a place where everyone is accepted for who they are; it is a place where cultures merge and differences dissolve; a place where hopes are high and dreams are achieved – this is BOMBAY – the city accepts you, if you accept her.

In November 2014, Marie Julia Bollansée arrived in India for a residency in Mumbai at 'What About Art?', with a notion of being uprooted in an unknown land and rediscovering herself. Instead, she was deeply drawn back to her youth and memories of her younger days in Belgium that were influenced by the hippie culture and objects from India. She found familiar memories from her childhood in Antwerp around Mumbai. With her keen interest on discovering the city through its people, she wandered, absorbed and plunged into this melting pot.

Bollansée describes her experience in Mumbai as one that deepened her insight into her work and outlook on society. She was struck by the contrast in which differences co-exist as reality in India, as compared to Europe where differences of class, rich and poor are covered over the surface, but are a silently bubbling under. Mumbai also made the artist bolder with experimenting with her works and expressing her views. It made her comprehension of the Western society clearer along with everything else around her. The images and videos she gathered in Mumbai lead to a series of video performances. These video performances from the series 'Between ... and Here and Now' are more complicated than any that she has done thus far. The experience left her with the confidence to include elements such as wool, steel and other props along with the blue tarpaulin.

Bollansée's early works were set in nature and gardens. She relates this to being a mother of three children, where her daily surroundings reflected in her works. Once she felt the freedom to allow other influences into her works, she began to travel a lot more. Her exploration of places and cities began during a residency in Paris in 2012, following which she has explored and experienced many cities. The artist absorbs these places and lets her observations speak through her work.

Just across the window from where she lived in Mumbai, the blue tarpaulin, which sheltered and housed a group of men, drew her attention. The blue then crept into the artist's vision, at first slowly and then all of a sudden, this attraction, went on to thread together Bollansée's exploration of Mumbai, and eventually other cities and her own artistic practice.

The colour blue has been recurrent in Bollansée's work over the past fifteen years. The first appearance it made in performances was in 'BODI, printing the wall' (1999), which was inspired by a family trip to Ethiopia. Here, the artist became familiar with members of an Ethiopian tribe, who paint their bodies blue during rituals. This work was followed by 'House' (2002), which was inspired by the medieval mystic

Hadewych and Boticelli's *'Venus'*. The first blue-knitting experience that combined blue with wool was in the shop of designer Walter Van Beirendonck, *'Survival KnIT'* (2003). A lot of Bollansée's early drawings and sculptures also included this colour.

The influences of blue, root from the Lapis Lazuli stone used to derive the colour blue during the Renaissance, to the synthetic Indigo blue, prominent during the industrial revolution, which is when blue jeans were invented. The Tarpaulin blue that now takes over cocoons both these blues. However, the artist's perception of blue also changed along with her experience in Mumbai and the use of blue tarpaulins. The association of the tarpaulin though it is not necessarily a joyous one, always acts as a supplement for survival, shelter and protection. Houses, firewood, boats, fugitives, they all use it for the sole purpose of shelter. The artist's choice to work with this material as a primary focus of her on-going works reflects her way of looking at and embracing reality. Though a vibrant contrast to city landscapes, this stark blue sheet also exposes the vulnerable sheltered objects and beings under it.

— *'Waterfield Road'* (2014), was Bollansée's first video performance after the Mumbai residency in the series *'Between Bombay and here and now'*. This work is more literal compared to later performances, and includes a metal frame and sheep's wool to contextualise the open blue tarpaulin house of the workers on the terrace, filmed silently. This video performance gives rise to several questions that are further addressed in the artist's work and the manner in which she observes and gathers images of a city. There is a sudden awareness of a sense of always being surveyed, tracked and watched, unaware – even in the private shelter of our homes. The same props appear in *'Arabian Sea'* (2014), where the artist's performance against the blue tarpaulin hut mimics the fisherwoman drying her day's catch unaware of the fact that her actions are being recorded. The distant sound of traffic puts into perspective the city by the seaside. The fish link to another of Bollansée's video performances with Mumbai – *'Khar Danda'* (2015). Here the blue tarpaulin sits behind the fisherwoman, while she cleans and cuts the fish. The artist on the other hand, creates an action of almost undoing this act of killing and cutting. In a more recent work from the series, *'Pali Naka'* (2015), the artist's performance immediately comments on the layered looped video of ladies dressed in *burkhas* and 'face scarves' jumping into an auto-rickshaw. A satire on contemporary dialogues about the act of covering and uncovering identity, the video begins with the artist clad in cotton bandages. As the performance progresses, the looped background video does not change, but the artist is completely uncovered and exposed with just the blue tarpaulin in front of her – will this provide shelter and protection from silent onlookers?

— As a viewer of the video performances, it appears as though Bollansée is a layer that has merged with the video, and what we see is through her keen sense of observation and perception. The artist uses her body as a medium or material for her work. This act could link back to her background and formal training as a sculptor. Her actions may in some way attempt to connect with situations and people she has filmed. She disconnects with herself and through her body and performances, attempts to represent the human being in the current situation of the world. We become silent observers, intruders, and spies... almost. In the progression of her work from 2014 to 2016, the artist's movements in reaction to the video in the performances has decreased and she allows the presence of her and the blue tarpaulin to travel the layered scenes silently.

The video performances from the series '*Between... Here and Now*' (2016) in Mumbai ('*Carter Road*' and '*Byculla*'), Rome, Pompeii, New York, Stromboli and Budapest, Bollansée's body layers itself as one with the video. Her actions are more muted as a silent yet omnipresent being. These performances relate to perhaps an evolution of the series, in which the artist does not find it necessary to add any other materials, other than her as a layer. The stillness and right juxtaposition within the video are loud enough to highlight the presence of being watched silently – always.

— In her series '*To the Absent Audience*', Bollansée directly addresses the fact that these performances are being watched in various cities and countries by people who she may not know are her audience. Early experiences of being the subject of her husband's photography experiments also reflect in this series with the simplicity and minimal use of surroundings and props. The sculptural and ritualistic elements of these videos depict the artist's concerns with the world around her, which are sheltered by blue tarpaulin sheets. '*Bache*' (2015), exposes the beauty of hydrangeas from Bollansée's mother's garden. In fear of them being destroyed, they are sheltered and cared for with the significant blue tarpaulin. Similarly in '*Tarpaulin*' (2015), the artist places wax dolls from the Mount Mary Church in Bandra, Mumbai in an altar-like vitrine and covers them with blue tarpaulin for protection. These dolls are offered in the Church for protection and blessings; however, they, too, need to be protected. The blue tarpaulin is a universal sheet for providing protection, maybe even for cultures.

— For an artist, whose works are deeply rooted in observations and connections with people and cultures, the blue tarpaulin becomes a universal connection. When reading about new cities, Bollansée says that it is through writers of a country or city that she explores a place, and not tourist guides. There may be the chance of missing out on things, but there is a greater chance of experiencing people and local scenes. Her passion to connect with people and different cultures led to '*Bombay Conversations*' (2014), which gave the artist the opportunity to meet more people, to move around the city and, at a more spiritual level, be able to understand and connect with those who speak a different language. (This is a project that Bollansée intends to repeat and allow to grow in other cities.) The connection with spirituality in Bollansée's practice, threads back to her use of sheep wool. This material has been a part of the artist's work over the past fifteen years, in dresses and video performances. Her most recent project '*Robot Factory*' (2016) brings together people, wool and blue tarpaulin. We associate robots with programmed machines that perform tasks and recently, have been attributed with artificial intelligence to make what may be considered rational decisions. However, Bollansée describes her '*Robot Factory*' as one that is equipped with AS (Artificial Spirituality) by the coming together of a group of people who collectively knit to create robots. In this contemporary world where technology over rules personal relationships, these knitted robots lay to rest on blue tarpaulin sheets after accomplishing the task of activating humaneness...

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