

# Creating seabed scapes



The three artists' water installation

The water installation of T2, part of the *panch mahabhuta*, the India Elemental theme, is designed by film director Shekhar Kapur together with Rajeev Sethi. A ten-metre high blue-turquoise ceramic wall forms the backdrop. From it, and from a series of blue-green pillars in front, emerge ancient water spouts that spew water onto a ceramic installation that represents a cityscape. Place your hand in the water, and you hear a sound. Move your hand in the water of another spout, and you hear a different note. If you don't mind getting wet hands, it is possible to play a small melody as you move your hands underneath all the spouts.

Below this installation you find the illuminated seabed scapes of Priya Sundaravalli. "My work came in as an afterthought of the designer," she says. "In September 2012 there was the Auroville Festival at the India International Centre in New Delhi, where I exhibited my installation of ceramic objects. [see *Auroville Today* # 279, October 2012] The exhibition was coming to an end, and I was visiting museums in Delhi, when I received a call to come immediately – that Rajeev Sethi wanted to speak to me. I rushed back to find this gentleman standing there, quietly taking in my work. He said he liked what he saw, enquired about the price and then bought the installation for the new airport in Mumbai. I had no idea what he was talking about. He invited me to visit him and his design team at his office next day to see for myself what he planned to do with my work."

It was there that she learned that her

installation would be put under a glass walkway and form the base of the water installation of the five elements theme. The model had already been fully developed. The Pandit family (father-son team of Padmashri awardee B.R. Pandit and son Abhay Pandit) would make the wall and pillars; artist Vipul Kumar had been assigned to make the



Priya Sundaravalli at her installation

ceramic cityscapes – a work inspired by the Mumbai monsoons falling upon the blue tarpaulins that cover the slums – and sound engineer K.J. Singh had been roped in to solve the problem of how, by touching water, you can produce musical notes. "To this original idea, Rajeev had now added a new design element which was my installation. It was going to be placed beneath a raised glass walkway, with two glass stairways leading into it."

It was a great model. But the airport builders had their doubts. For this installation, unlike any of the other art works at T2, required major structural changes. The airport's engineers had to find a way to support, on the third floor of the terminal and in an area of 45 square metres, 15 tons of stone water spouts and ceramics, 20 tons of iron, 5 tons of water and

2.5 tons of white *kolam* (limestone) powder. At first, nobody believed it could be done. But ultimately the solution to this complex engineering riddle was found.

"I only learned about this issue much later," says Priya. "They had asked me about the weight of my pieces – which altogether weighed not more than a 75 kilos – but were concerned when I told them that the weight of the *kolam* powder and the bricks which I needed for making the seabed would exceed several tonnes."

Priya, from her side, was uneasy when she was heard that the dimensions of the glass floor walkway would be 9 metres by 4 metres. "It was more than three times the size of my Delhi exhibition! How was I going to fill that space up? I knew that the Delhi installation with its 120 odd pieces had been rather closely packed and that my pieces would show better with more space around them. But three times the display size!" She decided to make 200 more pieces, at no additional cost for the airport. "This was my chance to offer the best of what I could for the



Ancient water spouts splash water at the city scapes of Vipul Kumar

country." And so, in March 2013, 16 boxes with more than 300 pieces of fragile ceramics and 2.5 tons of *kolam* powder left Auroville by lorry on its way to Mumbai.

But it was only in October 2013 that the work of the other artists had sufficiently proceeded for Priya to start her work on the floor. It was far from plain sailing.

"I call it my 'groundhog days', after the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day* where the main character is forced to relive the same day over and over again until he changes personally," she says. "I had estimated that it would take me 10 days to create the seabed and install my ceramics – but it took almost 40 days! The workmen who had been assigned to help me were not always at their motivated best, and there was a lot of *tamas*! Often the work had all to be done all over again. Then there was a big leak in one of the tanks. Water flowed like a brook through the installation out on the floor in front. And once again, all the work had to be redone."

But it was a great learning experience. "After a couple of failures I realised that I was being too nice to the workers, expecting that they would respond with prompt and perfect work. When it didn't happen, I switched to being a nasty bully – perhaps it made me unpopular for a while, but I got respect and what I wanted! I learned that I had to insist on perfection the first time around and never take 'no' or 'later' for an answer. This was a big learning for me."

Now that this installation is over, does she have specific plans for the future? "In March I will start a four-months internship at the Gimhae Clayarch museum in Korea. I want to study architectural ceramics; to create something big and also combine clay with other media such as fibre glass or metal, possibly with kinetic elements." She smiles. "But I have no specific concepts in mind. I am certain I will be guided."

Carel



A part of the seabed scape installation is visible through the glass staircase