

Madhvi SUBRAHMANIAN India / Singapore

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Earth's Whispers, 2016

Reflecting on her peripatetic life, Subrahmanian's oeuvre investigates ideas of loss and longing associated with migration and rapid urbanization particularly in the South and South-East Asia. While migration is as old as humanity, the phenomenon has accelerated in the past century due to increasingly globalized labour markets associated with capitalism.

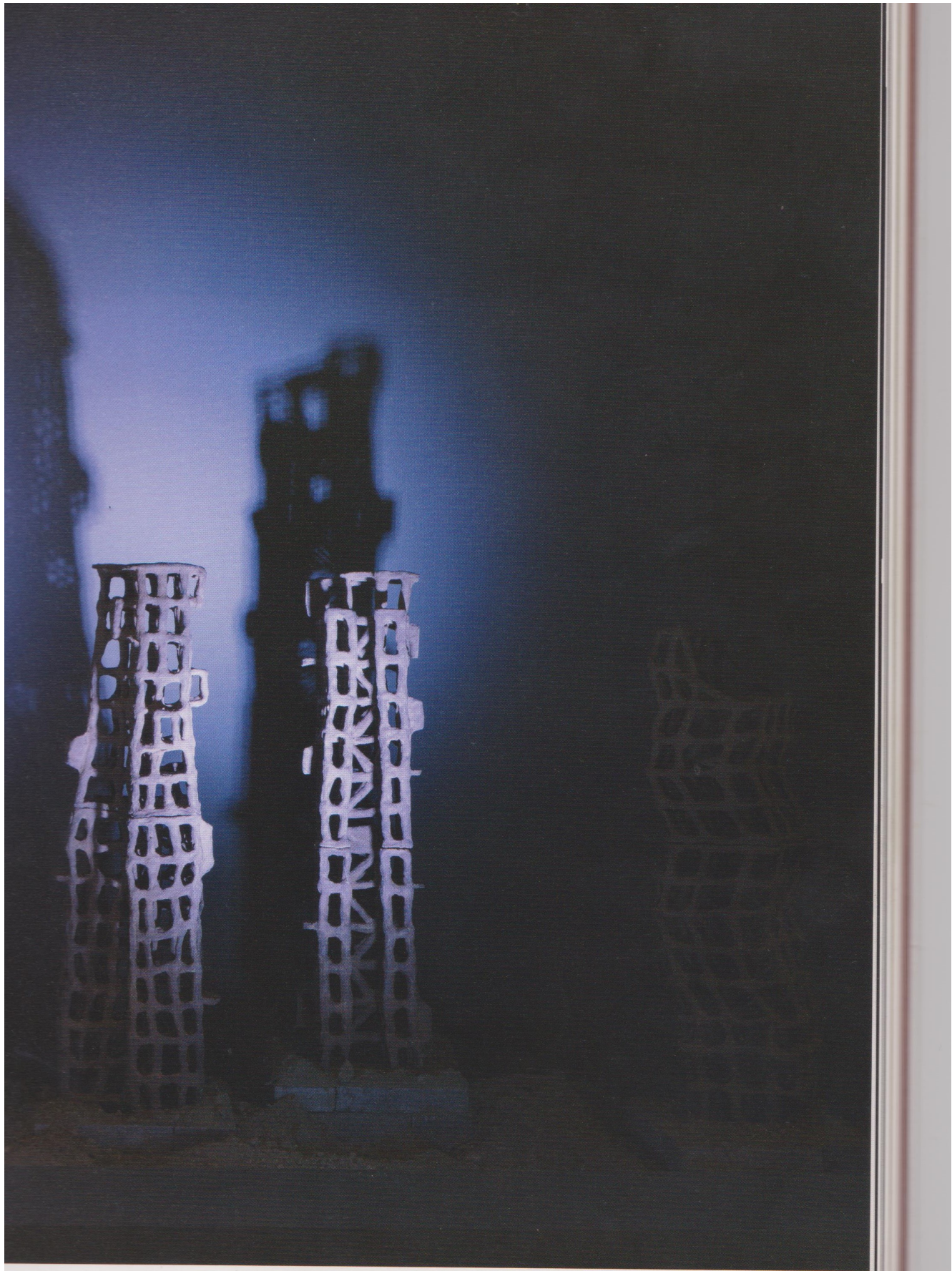
Earth's Whispers, a new body of work developed especially for this Biennale, was initiated in response to the artist's interest in roadside shrines, a common landmark within her native Indian landscape. Associated with devotional practices, these shrines may range in size and scale, from a collection of garlanded rocks to larger monuments often found under old trees. Frenetic urbanization, and expanding transport infrastructures are responsible for the ongoing loss of trees on a massive scale and with them the tradition of roadside shrines.

The artist explains:

New highways are leading to new cities being built from the ground up sometimes without any inhabitants. In other instances shiny chrome and glass towers are replacing old buildings of stone and brick. The urban landscape is continuously growing, changing and evolving with the raw earth and trees receding into the shadows and into our collective memory. With the current speed of change our memories are fast morphing into imagination and the recent past is turning into mythical lore. My research and ideas have led me down a meandering path to the relationship of the earth and urbanization, and what that means to me.

I have always enjoyed the energy, the movement and the excitement of a city; however, I am equally aware of the paradoxical loneliness, anonymity and isolation often present in an urban environment. As an artist engaged so directly with the Earth, I question how this world of concrete and glass distances us from the soil and the earth, affecting our psychological state.¹

Subrahmanian's works are composite forms, recalling both skyscrapers and organic landforms encrusted with trees and creepers. City and nature are not framed as dialectical opposites, rather are combined, and appear to twist and writhe uncomfortably, in an uneasy dialogue. The forms explore an existential form of alienation resulting from urbanization, but simultaneously embrace rough, hand-worked, seemingly spontaneous red earth forms. Collectively, the sculptures act as contemporary secular shrines rising out of a bed of bricks and mud. They are activated by a sound scape that recalls natural resonances, including the rustling of leaves, wind, crickets chirping etc, and by a lighting system, that produces slow moving and looming shadows on the walls behind. These sensory elements enhance a sense of consciousness of the environment and the passage of time. The immersive environment offers a calm, poetic space for meditation, and serves to remind spectators of 'the organic world present in our collective memory.'²



Earth's Whispers, 2016
(1) 84cm x 17cm x 17cm (2) 76cm x 20cm x 17cm (3) 89cm x 12cm x 17cm (4) 79cm x 19cm x 25cm (5) 78cm x 9cm x 20cm
Stoneware, mud, bricks, sound and moving light