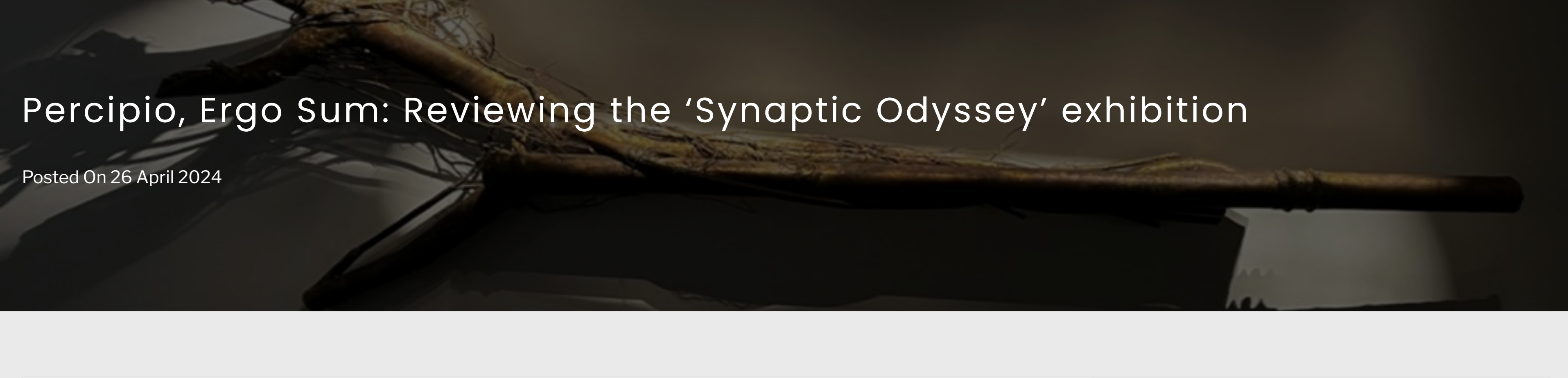




THE POLYPHONY

CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES



Percipio, Ergo Sum: Reviewing the ‘Synaptic Odyssey’ exhibition

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Swati Joshi reports back from ‘Synaptic Odyssey’, an exhibition themed around cognition and art at Ahmedabad’s Iram Gallery in Gujarat, India, which ran from 11 March to 5 April 2024.

Art purveys experience. It challenges and disentralls our occluded understanding of colours, luminosity, textures, patterns, blankness, smells, and sounds to sometimes ensorcell, and other times shock, viewers. The moments of time, experience, memory, feeling, movement, etc. encapsured in art rupture our comfort zone and replenish it, through brazen representation, with fardels of dauntless sensory experiences. Art revives memories, unearthing our unconscious fiduciary relationship with certain acquired responses to external sensory stimuli. And so, when I first read the title of the exhibition ‘Synaptic Odysseys’, it evoked my past sensory experience of reading the work of Santiago Ramon y Cajal (1852-1934), Charles Scott Sherrington (1857-1952), Jerzy Konorski (1903-1973), and Eric Kandel (1929), being seated on a wooden chair that wore a strong smell of turpentine.

Satyajit Dave, the curator of this exhibition, has employed the same logic in his curatorial process. Dave, who has been kind and generous in sharing information concerning materializing this show, said in a telephone interview: “This exhibition is based on the artistic engagement with the process of cognition and aims to invite the viewers to touch the artworks, smell the raw materials used in making the artistic pieces, and see everything in the gallery to develop their own unique sensory experience”. Dave’s words disembody into the historical canon of neuroscientific research. They resonate with Jerzy Konorski’s explanation of exteroception:

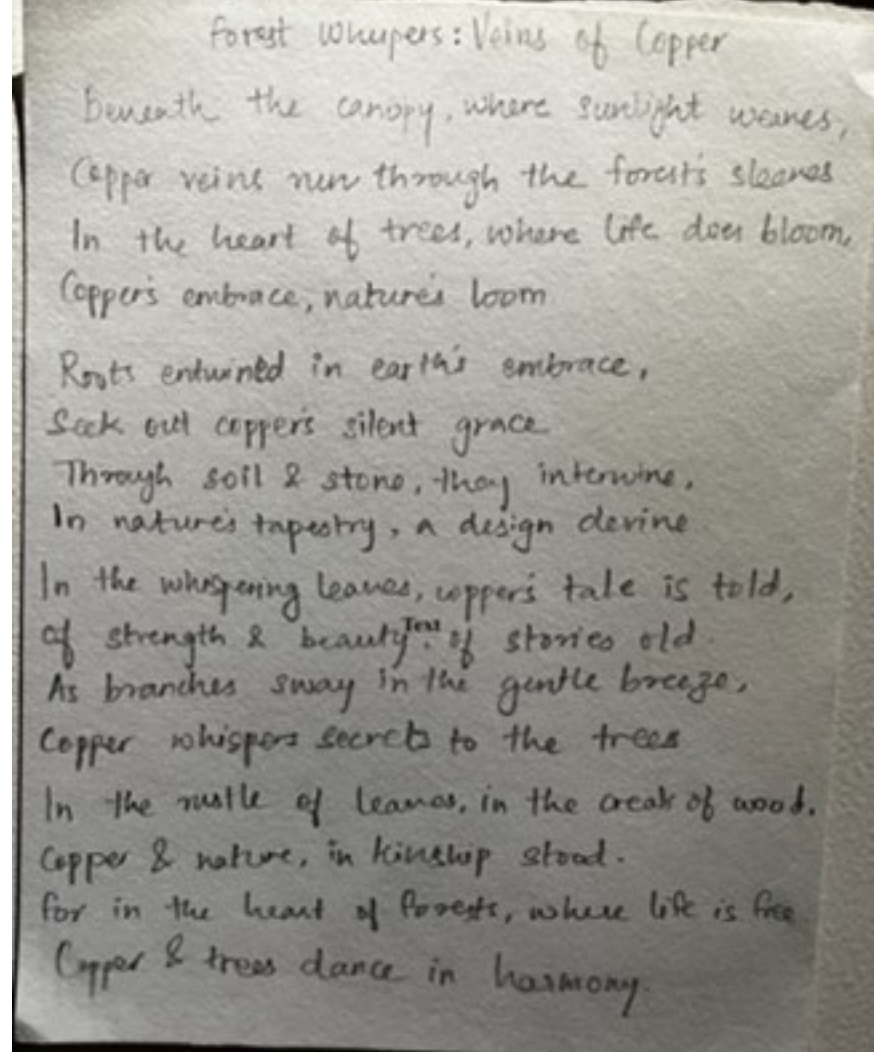
“The objects of the external world we deal with in our life are characterized by their “macrostructure”, which is chiefly perceived by the visual system [...] and their “microstructure” or texture, whose perception is accomplished by exteroceptive somesthesia. Here belong such properties of objects as: smoothness versus roughness, porosity, softness versus hardness, elasticity versus plasticity, dryness versus moistness, sliminess, coldness versus warmth. Here also belongs the sharpness of an object or its strong pressure producing localized pain, either of the pinprick or pinching type.

— Konorski 1967, 134

Dave’s idea of inviting visitors to embrace the show’s visual, tactile, and olfactory sensory experience makes the exhibition *sui generis* and helps visitors understand how various senses work *pari passu* bolstering neuroplasticity. His thoughts align with Mateos-Aparicio and Rodríguez-Moreno’s (2009, 1) explanation of the concept of neuroplasticity – of fostering cerebral capacity “through specific learning or practice, repetitive activity”. Iram art gallery’s serpentine space renders an analogous cerebral experience as it leads the guests on a multisensory journey of perception where sight, smell, and touch are challenged by the bravado of the recurrent patterns in the artworks. The meditative lambent beams of yellow light foreground the plasticity of the organic matter that has inspired the art practices and creativity. The images below demonstrate Narayan Sinha and Rakesh Patel’s artistic practices, engaging in a dialogue with the show’s theme:



Untitled artwork by Narayan Sinha. Photo courtesy of the author.



Undated poem by Narayan Sinha curated by Satyajit Dave from Narayan’s diary. Image courtesy of the author.



Untitled artwork by Rakesh Patel. Image courtesy of the author.

The plasticity of the show induces a dialogue between the ferocious forests and factories of the east (West Bengal) and the mellowed idyllic setting of the west (Gujarat). Sinha’s poem aptly shows “Copper’s embrace” manifested in his untitled artworks that probably depict either a tree’s branch or a segment of neural network. Sinha’s artworks embody the amalgamation of the wild chaos of the Sundarbans and the coordinated rhythms of the factory machines. Similarly, Patel’s collaboration with local woodworkers sheds light on his flexible approach to learning about the plasticity of various kinds of wood available in Gujarat for crafting his artworks. Akin to the endeavours of neuroscientists and neurobiologists who study the plasticity of the brain that involves reorganising “either the structure or the function of neurons... [which] is necessary not only for neural networks to acquire new capabilities, but also for them to remain robust and stable over time” (Appelbaum et al. 2023, 113), Sinha and Patel’s artworks are made of malleable materials like copper, steel, brass, and wood. The show proffers a multilayered unconscious experience of synaptic plasticity imbricated in the robust structures derived from malleable substances. The following images of metals, alloys, and wood blocks unfold their potential of elasticity:

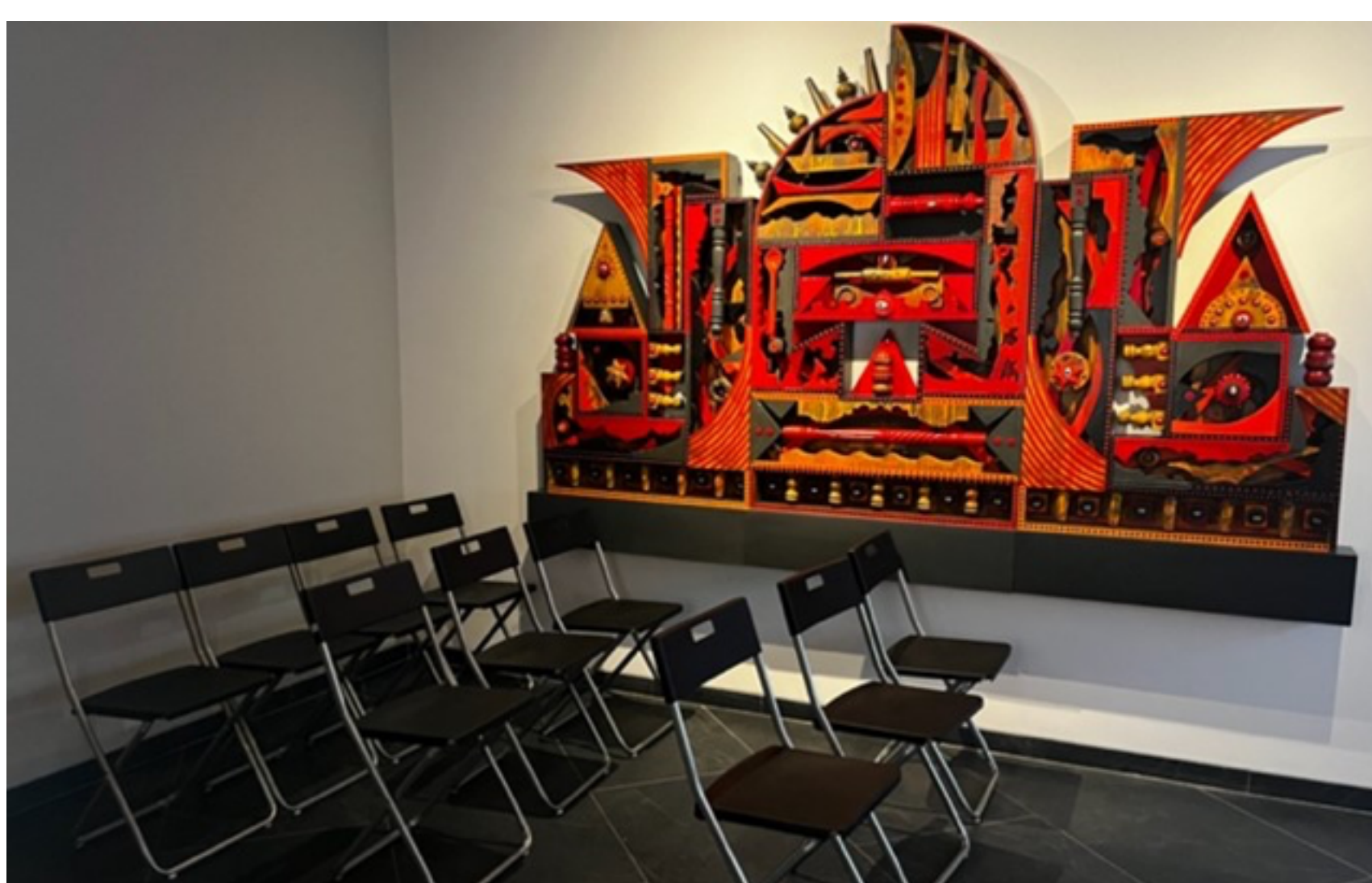


Copper wire and brass. Image courtesy of the author.



Wood block. Image courtesy of the author.

The show aims to establish a sustained dialogue with the audience by inviting them to participate in guest lectures delivered by Satyajit Dave, Prof. Deepak Kannal, Dr. Leslee Lazar, and Asit Bhatt. Listening to the lectures sitting right next to the artworks makes one realise, as Dave says, “how the artworks and artists are looking back at the audience”. And the image of the setting shared below conveys the caress of the artistic ambience of the gallery:



Lecture space at the Iram art gallery. Photo courtesy of the author.

The exhibition leaves a lasting impression on the senses, enkindling a desire to know more about the self through perception of the artworks. Dave’s curatorial reasoning creates a layered atmosphere for the plurality of experiences, which resonates with the Proustian unnamed narrator who encounters his new self each time he wakes up from his sleep. While exiting the gallery, I was acquainted with a new version of myself who had gained a heightened awareness of the role of the senses in perceiving the external environment.

About the author

Swati Joshi has recently graduated with a PhD in medical humanities from the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar. She is currently co-guest-editing a special issue of the *Journal of Medical Humanities* with Jade French. Swati’s research has been published in *Humanities* journal, *Handbook of Aging, Health, and Public Policy* (Springer), *Medical Humanities* and *The Polyphony*, among other places.

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