

Chennai-based art campaign reveals grim pollution truth; Residents confront air quality issues through creative expression

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Chennai's air pollution crisis is brought to life through an art exhibition where smog itself becomes the artist. 'Pugai Padam' showcases 'smo...

Framed stencils of a red-wattled lapwing, a glowing sunrise, fish and a butterfly, rendered in ashy greys fill the walls. But what also catches your eye at this art exhibition is there is no artist's name mentioned on any of the work. "It's because the 'artist' of these works is the city's polluted air," says Archanaa Seker, one of the organisers of 'Pugai Padam: When Smog Makes Art' a three-day art campaign in Chennai which opened on Feb 4, which aims to confront the city's deepening air-pollution crisis. The event is organised by the Pugai Padam Collective, a coalition of youth groups and art-

activists. "The campaign challenges the state's reliance on air quality indices, dash boards and studies, even as pollution continues," says Archanaa.

At the heart of the exhibition are 'smog plates', an art medium inspired by Los Angeles based artist Kim Abeles. These were installed across 14 locations in the city, many of them pollution hotspots such as Thiruvottiyur, Kodungaiyur, Kuruvimedu, Kikatalai, Mylapore, Besant Nagar, Saidapet and Velachery. The flexi glass plates were left to absorb particulate matter over a month.

"Each plate has a unique stencil. For example, for Chromepet, the stencil of a belt was used as there are leather tanneries there.



For Kodungaiyur, we used a plastic cover to symbolise the dump yard. Next to these pieces, we have placed photo graphs and captions describing the homes this smog was collected from to show what it means for families who live in these spaces," she says.

The exhibition also has a series of installations such as chest X-rays comparing healthy lungs with damaged ones due to pollution. "A child's school uniform from Kattukuppam is displayed with a note explaining how children in the area are asked to bring an extra set of clothes because coughing and vomiting is so common," says Archanaa. There are re-creations of the insides of steel workshops scattered around Korukkupettai.

Subbalakshmi, a resident of North Chennai whose neighbourhood features in the exhibition, says living with pollution is almost routine. "We know the air is making us sick. But our work, our homes, everything is here; we cannot afford rent in other parts of the city. We cannot just leave," she says.

The campaign also includes a play, 'Maasu Kadhaigal', which will be performed on Sunday between 5pm and 6pm. Co-scripted and enacted by youth from the Arunodaya Centre in North Chennai, the performance draws from everyday encounters with toxic air, illness and loss, through stories of a mother packing extra uniforms for a child who coughs until she vomits, a home maker sweeping mounds of dust three times a day, and a young man living beside a coal-ash pond with toxic dust caked in his nose and ears.

The exhibition is open to all from 3pm to 7pm till Feb 8.