

# FEATHERS ON THE WATER

*The work of Mumbai-bred Dubai-based  
Vikram Divecha addresses labour, value  
and time with a focus on interrogating  
specific environments as well as  
challenging socio-economic structures.  
Patrick Martin Lichty meets with the artist  
and explores his various systems of art*

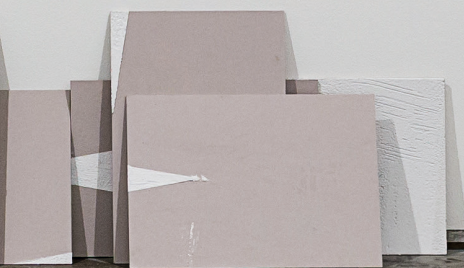
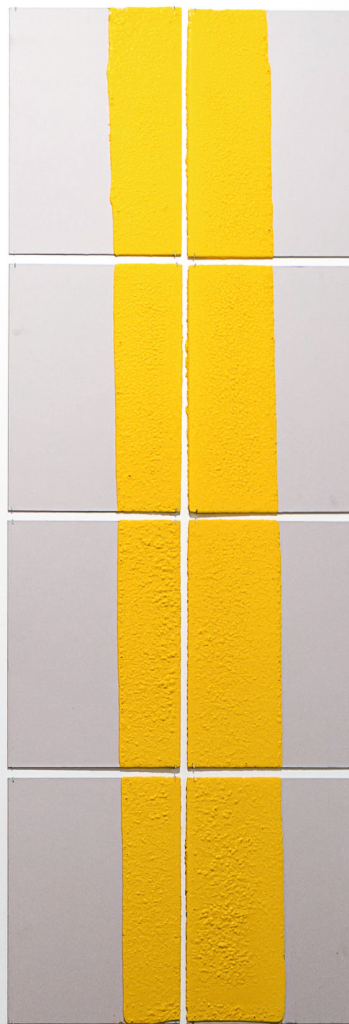




“I think it’s over here... look for the wall... once we find that, we’ll find the doorway...” This is how I was introduced to the work of Vikram Divecha, which deals with subtle systems of power at sublime proportions. My colleague, Professor Woodman Taylor insisted that I see Divecha’s seminal piece *Boulder Plot*, taking me out in the night to search for it. At the original site, boulders

— blasted out of a quarry in Fujairah and were selected by those that retained part of the boreholes for explosive charges used to excavate the stone from the mountain. These stones, oddly reminiscent of the work of Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi, were placed in a walled enclosure the size of the plot of Divecha’s apartment building. The enclosure represented the potential end result of the boulders, as the mountains of Fujairah are quarried and pulverised for the construction of Dubai. Being introduced to this work was an excellent entry point for understanding the scales and nature of Divecha’s work.

Vikram takes a relational approach to art making that involves looking at the systems that are formed from the core structures of society, and subtly altering their rules. “One part of my work explores what I call found processes,” he states, “I see the various practices that go on in our infrastructure, such as trash collection, or road construction, and I insert myself into that system, and see how that changes the results.” *Degenerative Disarrangement* (2014) is a work that is emblematic of this approach, as he noticed that in the servicing of roads, pavement would be removed and then replaced, often with segments rotated or out of place. For this work’s installation at the Sikka Art Festival, Divecha worked with the Dubai Transit Authority to transplant a section of pavement from outside the BurJuman Metro stop, and had workers reconstruct it at the Al Fahidi House. A bricklayer was paid for a certain amount of time, and inevitably, the pieces were placed in a more or less random fashion, as perfect reconstruction would be unfeasibly labor intensive. This aesthetic “disarrangement” reflected the “found process” from which it came, and the necessities created by that process. This also led to work surrounding the construction of roads and their processes, such as *Urban Epidermis*, and *Road Marking*, which was recently on display as part of his show *Minor Works* at Isabelle Van den Eynde Gallery.



An exhibition view of *Minor Work* by Vikram Divecha at Isabelle Van Den Eynde in Dubai





"I SEE THE VARIOUS PRACTICES THAT GO ON IN OUR INFRASTRUCTURE, SUCH AS TRASH COLLECTION, OR ROAD CONSTRUCTION, AND I INSERT MYSELF INTO THAT SYSTEM, AND SEE HOW THAT CHANGES THE RESULTS"

*Vikram Divecha*

Divecha's work investigates labour, capital, infrastructure, services and the structure of communities by creating a situation, applying constraints to it, and seeing what effects arise when that moment exists in public. These effects can be as subtle as merely affecting results the completion of a task to affecting the functions of a city. During *The Portrait Project*, Divecha "employed" people to anonymously paint a portrait of him. However, they agreed to follow an equation determining, given how much they normally make, how long they would have to do a portrait for Dh150. The more one was paid in their actual profession, the less time they would have. The more you were paid, the less time you would have to do the paintings, which were displayed at the Tashkeel Art Center. This time, labour constraints was also at play in *Degenerative Disarrangement*, as the bricklayer hired to reset the pieces of pavement was paid for only so much time. This made precise reconstruction impractical.

Another example of Divecha's work with social systems is *The Warehouse Project*. Divecha bartered possession of real estate at Alserkal Avenue with a general trading company requiring storage facilities, without relinquishing the warehouse's intended function as an art space. It would be filled with children's toys, effectively diverting the flow of goods and capital through the space. In a way, Adam Smith's invisible hand of the market replaced the artist's hand, shaping the

sculpture of stacks of toy crates containing anything from Hello Kitty, to Dora the Explorer, over the four month run of the work. This period of time was also problematic in that storage agreements operated on different rules than art spaces, making negotiations with lawyers necessary to determine agreements between the art foundation and the holding company.

2017 represents a year of biennials, as Divecha is featured in the Sharjah, Kochi-Muziris, and Venice exhibitions, with *Boulder Plot* and *Degenerative Disarrangement* at the Venice Biennale. The fact that *Disarrangement* is being reconstructed again in the UAE pavilion with a set amount of labour and budget translates the work situationally from BurJuman to Al Fahidi to Venice. And, if the worker runs out of time, the remaining bricks will be stacked on site there as well. But Divecha is fascinated at how his process has transformed his subject. "So, this pavement, it started in BurJuman, it became, more or less, a permanent fixture in al Fahidi, and it's being reconstructed in Venice, and then what? What are these objects now? After Venice, is this an installation, or will these pieces be saleable art objects?" muses the artist. So, one must consider, are *Degenerative Disarrangement's* constituent parts now an installation, or are the bricks artworks in themselves?

Also at the 2017 Venice Biennale is a meditative short video documenting *Boulder Plot*, entitled *Bathing Boulders*. In it, huge





Above: an exhibition view of *Minor Work* by Vikram Divecha at Isabelle Van Den Eynde Gallery in Dubai  
Right, top: *Sketchbook 3*. 2017. Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Fine Art Photo Rag. 78.4 x 100 cm. Edition of three plus two artist's proofs  
Below: *Sketchbook 4*. 2017. Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle Fine Art Photo Rag. 78.4 x 100 cm. Edition of three plus two artist's proofs  
Courtesy the artist and Isabelle Van Den Eynde Gallery

pieces of rock are washed by hand, with hoses spraying water on the massive stones, echoing the washing of elephants in India and Thailand. The sacred quality of the piece is unique to Divecha's *oeuvre*. While he deals with sublime topics, his work often has a purely deconstructive and analytical quality. As we see the water cascading over the stones and the hands caressing the rock, we are reconnected with the immense powers that Divecha employs in the creation of his work. The video expresses this in a gentle, almost intimate fashion, as though the elements are elephants of stone blown from the earth itself.

Even though Divecha's work subtly channels power through the processes embedded in his situations, he does not consider his work as being subversive or disruptive to the ecologies he is affecting. An analogy he uses is very similar to the notion of the "Butterfly Effect" where the flapping wings of a butterfly start the turbulence that becomes a hurricane on the other side of the world. "In many ways, I feel like I am doing what someone suggested was 'putting feathers on the water, you know? Something that creates a little ripple, but doesn't disturb everything, and cascade out.'" Perhaps his manner of observing the most fundamental of the practices of humanity and using them as his medium fits this metaphor exactly. And Divecha is at the shore, putting feathers in the water that ripple out, subtly affecting the fabric of what constitutes our reality.