

The Kumbh imaginarium

Reflections, verbal and visual, from the largest cosmic gathering of the last 144 years.



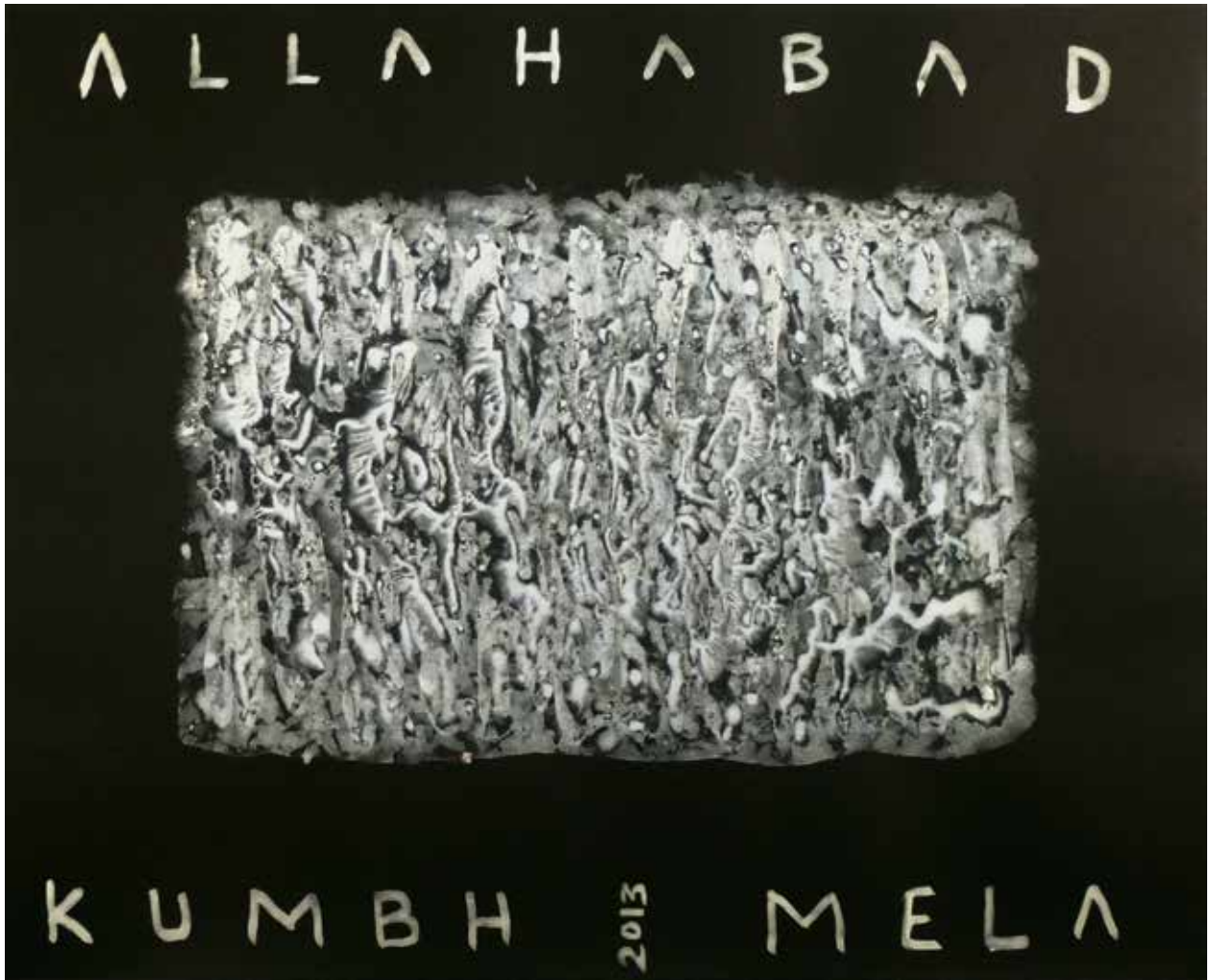
They' say there were 110 million of us camping inside the dried riverbed of the Ganga this February—40 million of whom touched the holiest waters on the big bathing day—though I never saw 'them' or their counting devices. It could be that the figure is propped against unintentional underestimation, because even during my one week there, Janaki Devi(s) got lost repeatedly and Kamala Devi(s) was reunited with her family on a daily basis. Over two dozen Rajus were heard sobbing over the thunderously shrill loudspeakers, looking for their mothers in yellow saris and red sweaters and red saris and yellow sweaters.

'They' also say that 97,000 of us went down the classic Bollywood way of separation at the Maha Kumbh Mela on February 10, 2013. The loudspeakers were the truest storytellers; with the world's most overwhelmingly muddled sounds they literally spoke volumes about longing. Twelve homeopathy hospitals, five temporary bus stands, several Harvard investigations and countless hours of telly coverage later, some of us are still reeling with the Kumbh aftereffects.

There were others though, figures from the magical pop-up city that went unrecorded in all the transient chaos. Such as the number of postcards sent from the Kumbh Nagar post office, of which no one knows how many reached their destinations after the canvas palace had been dismantled and packed away until the stars align in their desired divine manner once again. Such as the number of eyes that saw the full moon rise over the world's largest here-today-gone-tomorrow city. Figures such as the number of songs played around-the-clock and away from any microphones, their beautiful couplets and accompanying musical notes audible only to the mindful pilgrims in neighbouring tents. Or the number of Ramlilas performed, camphor sticks lighted, gongs sounded,

Shahi Snan on Mauni Amavasya by Esteban Prendes
100 x 155 cm, Mixed media on paper, February 2013

Artist's impression: 'It was the moment and the place to be. My father, my mystical friend and I met the Ganga, the Yamuna and the mystical river—experience of a lifetime, shared with infinite others.'



atheists converted, destinies connected, perceptions changed, realities abandoned and artists inspired.

In the littlest corner of our little tent—I say ‘our’ because the incidental pluralism of this ancient gathering bound everyone present into one identity—in a tiny speck of the 5,000 acres of the city of impermanence, these were the figures that occupied our minds. The intangible figures that never made it to the charts, that could only be recorded through figurative mediums.

Kumbh Nagar—a microcosm of India—was as much a creative space as Rome or Paris, only a couple of million times more intense. Some of us brought wrinkled plastic bags laden with rice and wheat, some toted cameras, some lugged multi-wheel suitcases full of hand sanitisers while some brought notebooks and paints—where gods congregated, there was space for everyone. Even along the banks of the Sangam waters, amidst the throng of fervent bathers, there was enough space to create art. For each mystic there was someone mystified, recording the encounter on film, on page, on muddy ground if need be—the scope for indulgence, we realised, is infinite.

And then, a city with population larger than that of Canada, disappears. All of it, including the toilets, the loudspeakers, electricity wires, water pipelines, and the most transient of all—we the people. Like the dust that settled on to our eyelashes over 55 days, washed off with one splash of water, gone with the movement of planets and stars. 110 million of us. The police officers gone too. And Raju and Kamala Devi.

Kumbh Nagar is no country for the mirthless, the artless or the faithless; its metaphysical realities are the gravitational force that draws 9 per cent of the Indian population every 12 years. There is no possible way to talk about it in present tense, it either was or will be. What is, is these subjective ruminations expressed as artistic inspirations, best understood by looking through the kaleidoscopic film of dust that settled on to everything last winter.

But enough ink has been spilt; in these pages are the painted pictures from the littlest corner of one of the many little tents.

How heavy can a page be?
40-million-humans-and-330-million-gods heavy. ■

Kumbh Mela 2013
by Ramón Prendes
20 x 25 cm, Acrylic
on paper, February
2013

Artist’s impression:
‘10th February,
as we headed for
the Sangam, all of
mankind seemed
to be with us.
It was a unique,
unforgettable
experience, and I
was aware that it
could only happen
in India. Allahabad
and Kumbh Mela
are two names that
will forever evoke
those memories.’