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Exhibitions

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How Rihanna inspired this artist's constellations of Swarovski crystals

David Sequeira's Indian heritage conjures a surprising celestial alignment in his installation for the TarraWarra Biennial.

By Andrew Stephens

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Artist David Sequeira and right, Rihanna. SCOTT MCNAUGHTON, GETTY IMAGES

On a trip to India 10 years ago with his partner Ben, David Sequeira spent time at the historic Jantar Mantar observatory in Jaipur. Amid its many creamy-gold towering astronomical instruments, they gazed into the sky. At the time, the Rihanna song *Diamonds* was big and they often heard her singing the line “You and I, we’re like diamonds in the sky”.

“It was very romantic,” Sequeira says. “But it was also a reminder that Ben and I are part of histories, cultures, timelines and geographies that will always be much bigger than ourselves.”

The outdoor observatory, built for the Rajput king who founded the northern city, was completed in 1734. Sequeira, who was born in India but raised in Australia since he was three, visits it every time he is in Jaipur (as well as a similar site in Delhi). For one of his two new works for the ninth TarraWarra Biennial, Sequeira has used images of the Jantar Mantar in a large wall covering titled *Looking to the stars for answers*.

Screen printed in large sections at Spacecraft studio in Footscray, the midnight blue and black work graces a 13-by-five metre wall at TarraWarra. A second work is arranged across its surface: with Rihanna’s lyrics as its title, this comprises 16 small paintings studded with constellations of Swarovski crystals. In the style of Indian miniatures, these are painted in gouache on board and feature Sequeira and his partner together or solo.



Crystal-studded miniatures by David Sequeira depict the artist and his partner, Ben.

Sequeira’s deep interest in the Jantar Mantar observatory arises from his heritage, as well as his enduring interest in colour, geometry and connections between the personal and the universal. What is at the heart of these and Sequeira’s previous large-scale and colour-rich artworks is the intersection of the infinite and the minuscule, of big ideas and small details, nuance and breadth.

“The Jantar Mantar is such a beautiful, poetic construction. Its only purpose is to look up at the heavens, up at the stars,” he says, noting that the historic site seems to be a confluence of the celestial and the terrestrial. “There is this sense of the micro and the macro, this singular experience of being inside of something way bigger and more enveloping than you could ever imagine it to be.

“And why I love those constructions so much: there is something so modernist about them, something minimalist, and yet what they represent is far from minimalism. Their intention is to consider our relationship to the cosmos.”

This connects beautifully with the theme of the biennial, which features 15 artists and has a focus on the interconnectedness between Australia, Asia and local oceanic regions. The biennial’s curator, Léuli Eshrāghi, developed the theme while living in the Northern Territory during extended border closures at the height of the pandemic, all the while contemplating the idea of neighbourliness.



The Jantar Mantar observatory in Jaipur. ISTOCK

“In particular I was thinking about how do we human beings begin to move away from thinking about ourselves only, to considering the needs of the environment around us and the importance of those connections?” Eshrāghi says.

For Sequeira, a new connectedness manifested in the mid-1990s when he approached artists who worked in the Indian miniature tradition, plying their trade out of tiny shops in Udaipur, Rajasthan. The tradition emerged in the eighth century but began to reach its golden age from the 16th century, with artists creating small paintings on silk or paper that were displayed in bound folios rather than on walls. This meant they were shared on a more intimate level, in the manner of literature, poetry and books.

“This art form was, and remains, a very personal experience,” Sequeira says. “I like to imagine people in the 17th century looking at these images by candlelight, physically holding them in their lap. I can’t think of inanimate objects other than books that human beings have such intense relationships with. That’s why I work with these miniaturists – they come from that

tradition. They are not celebrated artists, and they work largely for a tourist market, but they create entire worlds in their tiny paintings.

“Working with them really honours what they do for a living and at the same time it has created something that opened up the door to articulate my experiences of being part of the India diaspora. Yes, I am Australian, but when I was growing up, [I was] not quite Australian, and not quite Indian. Now I ask: what does it mean to be an artist in 2023 and to come from two countries colonised by Britain and to be part of an artistic academic community exploring these questions?”

Sequeira’s meditations on colour have long been admired – he’s been making art and working in museums for more than 30 years and is now the director of the Fiona and Sidney Myer Gallery at the Victorian College of the Arts, where he also teaches.



David Sequeira working on his “wallpaper” inspired by Jaipur’s Jantar Mantar observatory. SCOTT MCNAUGHTON

Last year he exhibited three large-scale installations at Bunjil Place in Narre Warren. *All the things I should have said that I never said* included a room lined with hundreds of thrift-store vases arranged into colour sets from across the spectrum.

There was also a choreographed catwalk show with dozens of men sporting colourfully printed kurtas (traditional Indian shirts). Sequeira was among the models. “I looked like a walking fridge,” he says, remembering his stress on the night. But visitors applauded his adventurous engagement with Indian culture.

With his new work at TarraWarra and his Song paintings – 340 small colour works on music sheets – simultaneously opening at Sydney’s *The National 4 Australian Art Now*, Sequeira continues to assess how art might influence the way we live in the world.

“I love the idea of complexity,” he says. “When there is a multiplicity of ideas and histories, we can see that nothing is linear or simple. How do you know when art is good? I can’t answer that question any other way than to say that when I encounter a work of art that has me experience something bigger than myself, where something is revealed to me about the world, then that is really a rich moment.”

***The TarraWarra Biennial* is at TarraWarra Museum of Art until July 16; twma.com.au.
The National 4: Australian Art Now is showing in four Sydney venues; [the-national.com.au](http://thenational.com.au)**

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