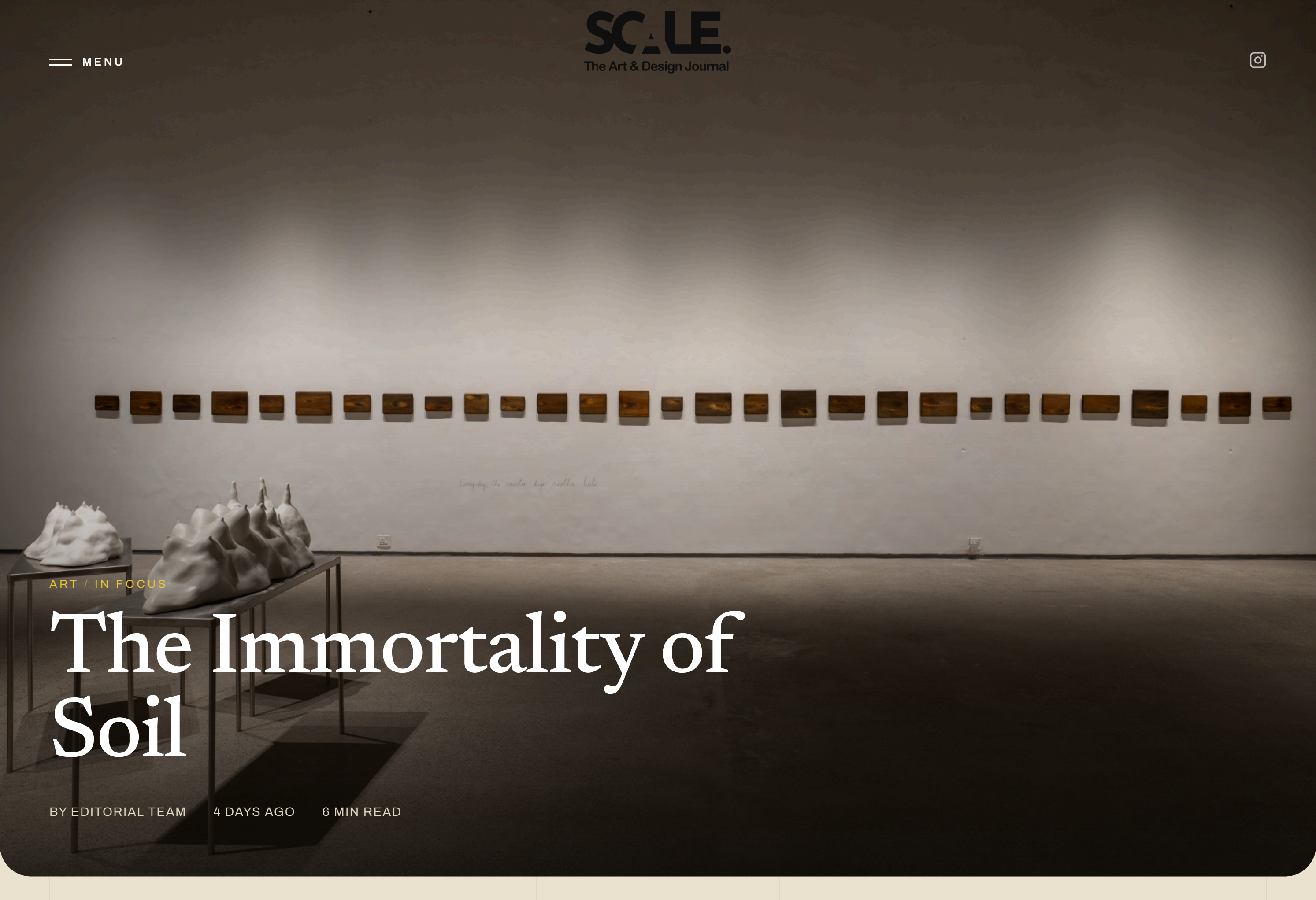

ART / IN FOCUS

The Immortality of Soil

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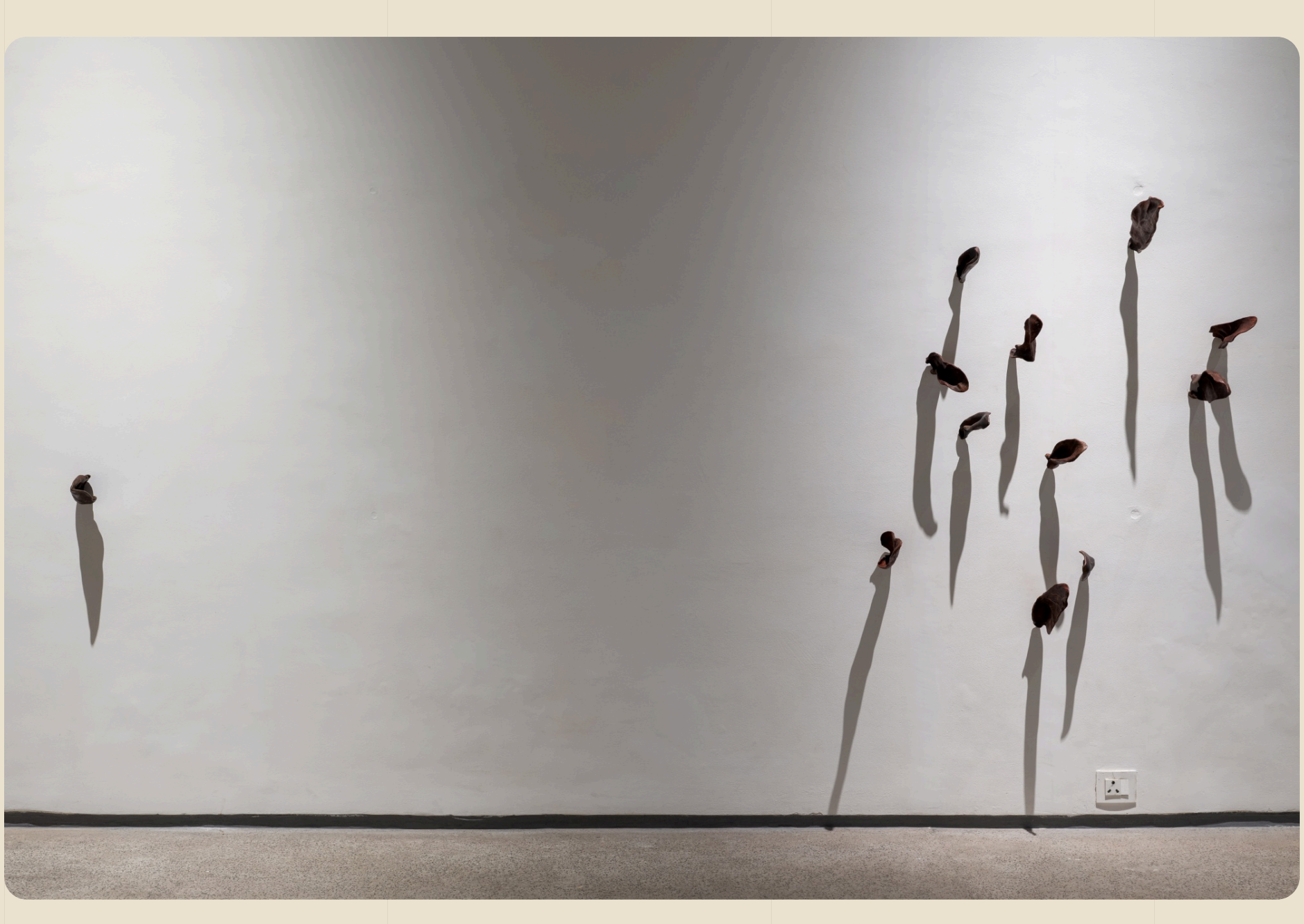
Lakshmi Niwas Collective's latest show in Mumbai explores the unseen symbiosis and conflict that throb in our landscapes. By Rajashree Balaram

Is there more to swollen animal udders, lonely bulls waiting in a sperm bank, and the hollow remains of a seed? In their latest show at Gallery Maskara in Mumbai, artists Namrata Neog and Sunoj D make us look at all that we fail to notice in a landscape's timeless spectacle

Namrata Neog and Sunoj D of Lakshmi Nivas Collective

As much as we see the landscape, the landscape sees us. What may sound preternatural at first is a profound reality that runs like a through-line through all 11 exhibits in Namrata Neog and Sunoj D's ongoing show *The Immortality of Soil* at Gallery Maskara in Mumbai.

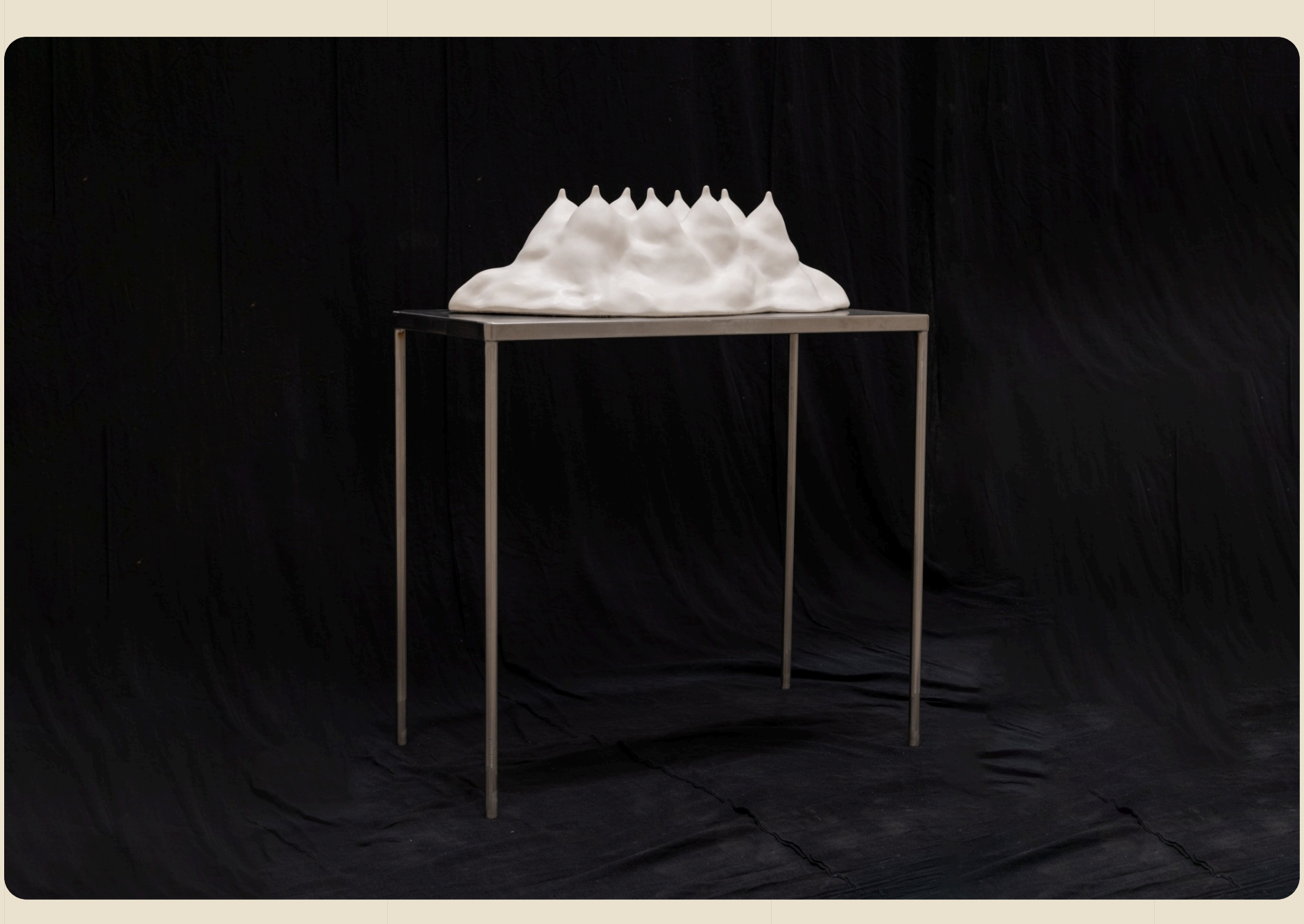
The two founders of Lakshmi Niwas Collective, who have laboured for nearly a decade in Parudur village in northern Kerala to hone their multi-hyphenate identities as animal herders/farmers/artists, have a refreshing take on the power dynamics that pulsate between human beings and animals, and the land that belongs to both.



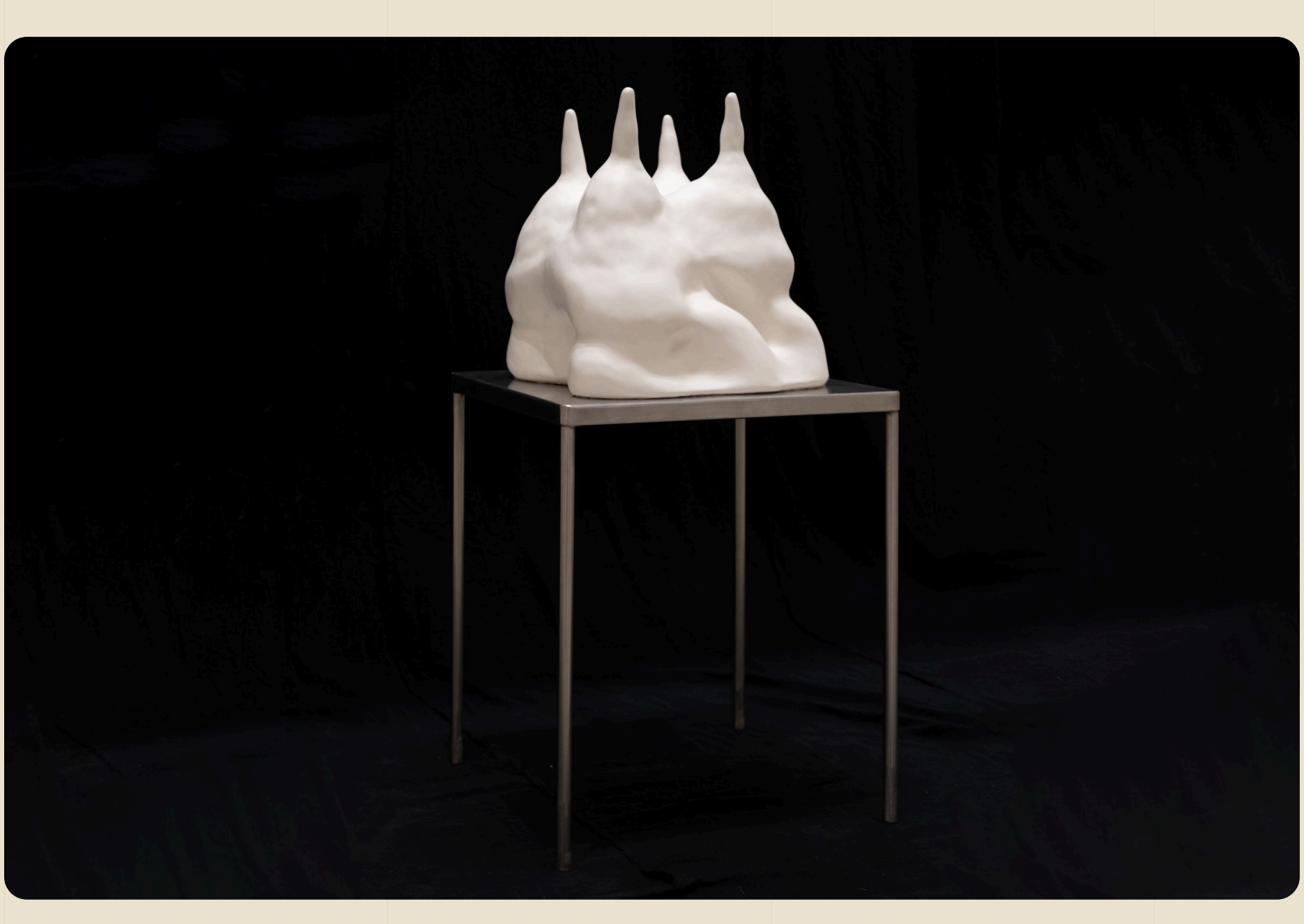
Between two winds, 2026 Patina on brass cast (12 pieces) Size as installed: 47 x 131 x 11.5 inches

This tension is most evident in the sculpture series *Our Horizons Never Meet,* an unapologetic ode to animal udders, goat, pig, dog, and cow, rendered in slaked lime, marble dust, and terracotta. The steel tables that showcase the udders subtly remind the viewer of the modern industrial setups where mass-manufactured human food is often handled.

"Our farm and its animals have been our primary source of income for many years now," says Namrata. "Like all farmers, we too find ourselves ruthlessly focused on our animals' udders. After all, a lactating cow is of great value to raise healthy calves and to gain abundant supplies of milk. But even as we benefit from the economy that governs farm animals and their productive capacities, we realised that we have failed to acknowledge the sentience of our animals."

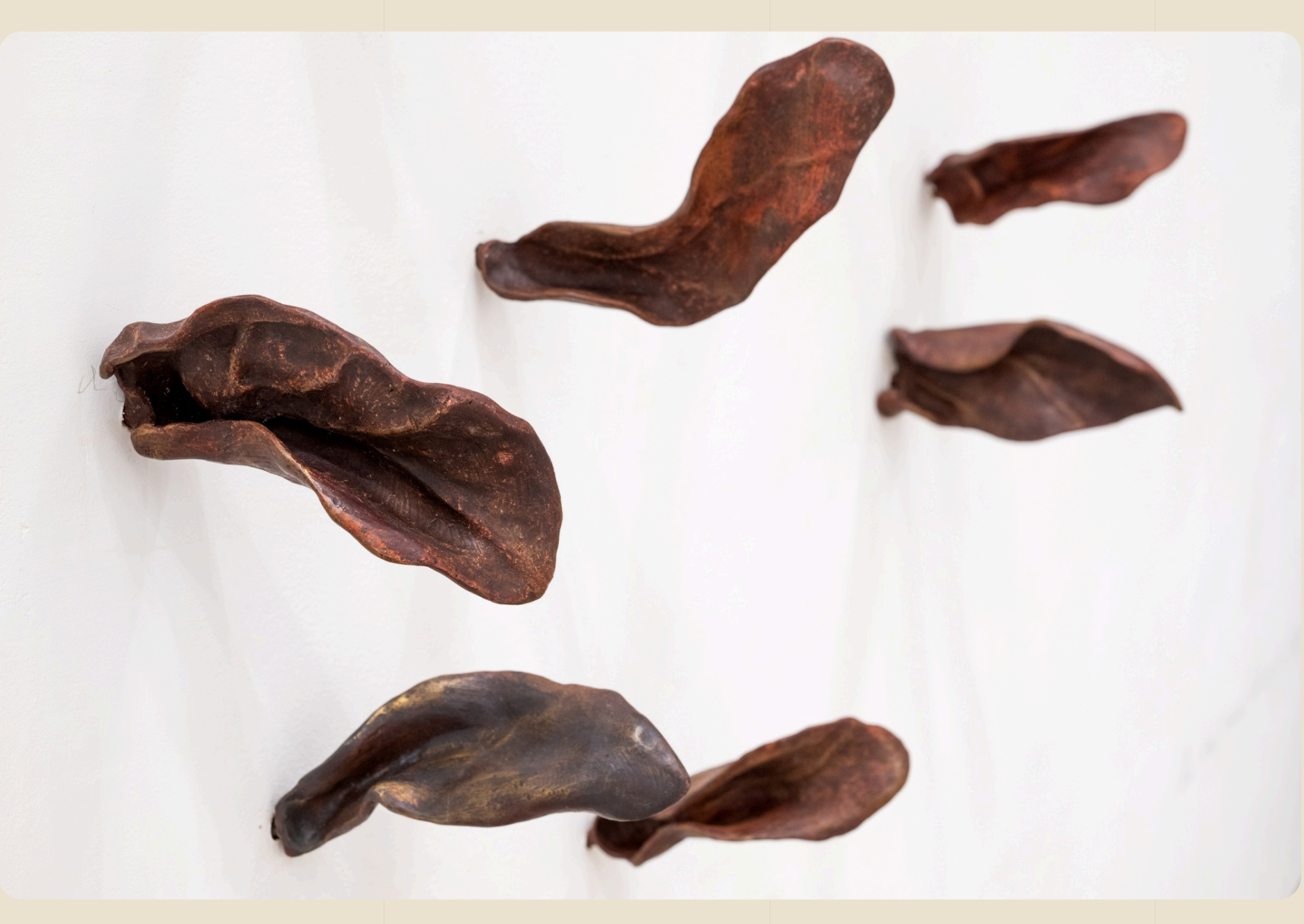


Our horizons never meet, 2026 Slaked lime, marble dust on terracotta, stainless steel; 9 x 28.5 x 14 inches (dog), 38 x 31.5 x 16 inches with pedestal



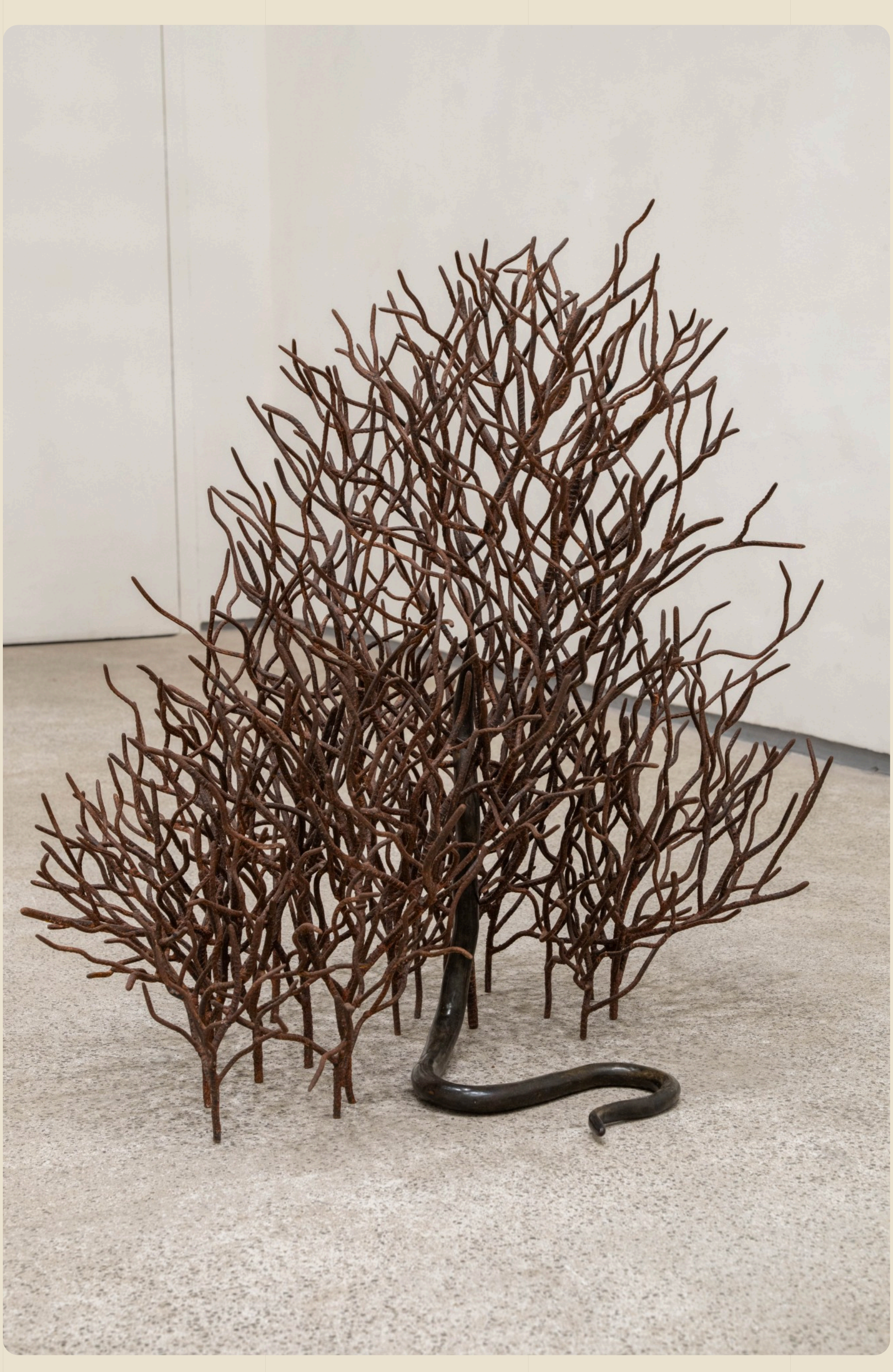
Our Horizons Never Meet (Cow)

These observations don't stem from random epiphanies. The two artists have perfected the art of introspection. After long hours spent foraging and herding livestock along grazing lands, they have made it a practice to share with each other daily what they have seen and heard, amid the grasses and trees.



Between Two Winds, 2026

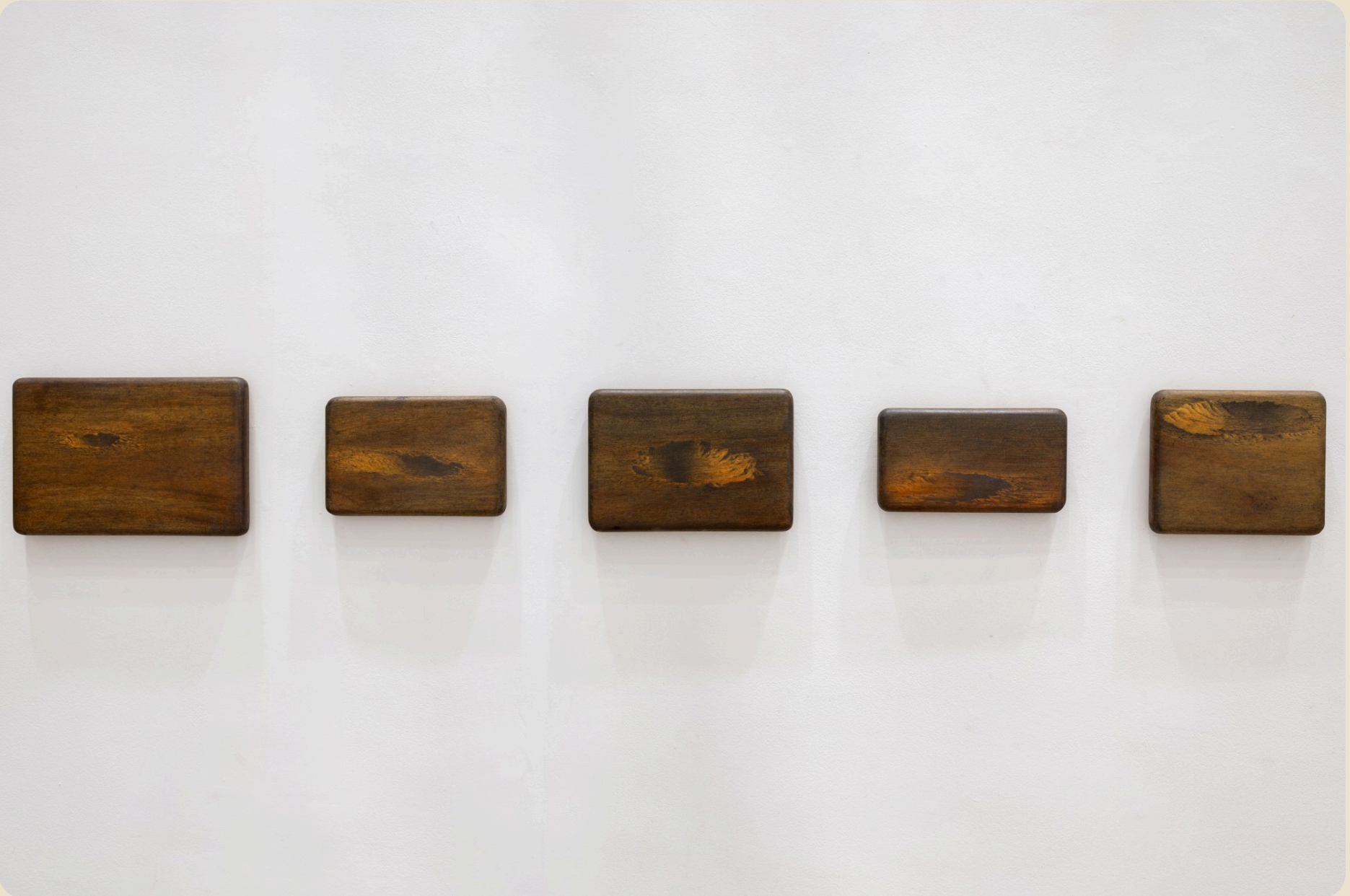
The culmination of these late-evening exchanges can be seen in *Between Two Winds*, an assembly of cattle ears cast in patinated brass fixed to the gallery wall.



Act I, 2026 Reclaimed iron, patina on brass cast

"In cities, people's ears don't always pick up all the sounds," says Sunoj. "We realised this when we started herding animals through the woods. There are moments when we notice their ears twitch and orient in the same direction as if they sense a threat lurking in the bushes. Maybe a fox or another such predator, lying in wait in one corner. The thing is, the passing wind becomes the agent of communication between the potential predator and the prey. So what we humans may perceive as pristine silence is also home to a whole different language of communication unfolding between us, our herd, and the unseen threat."

The Web of Life

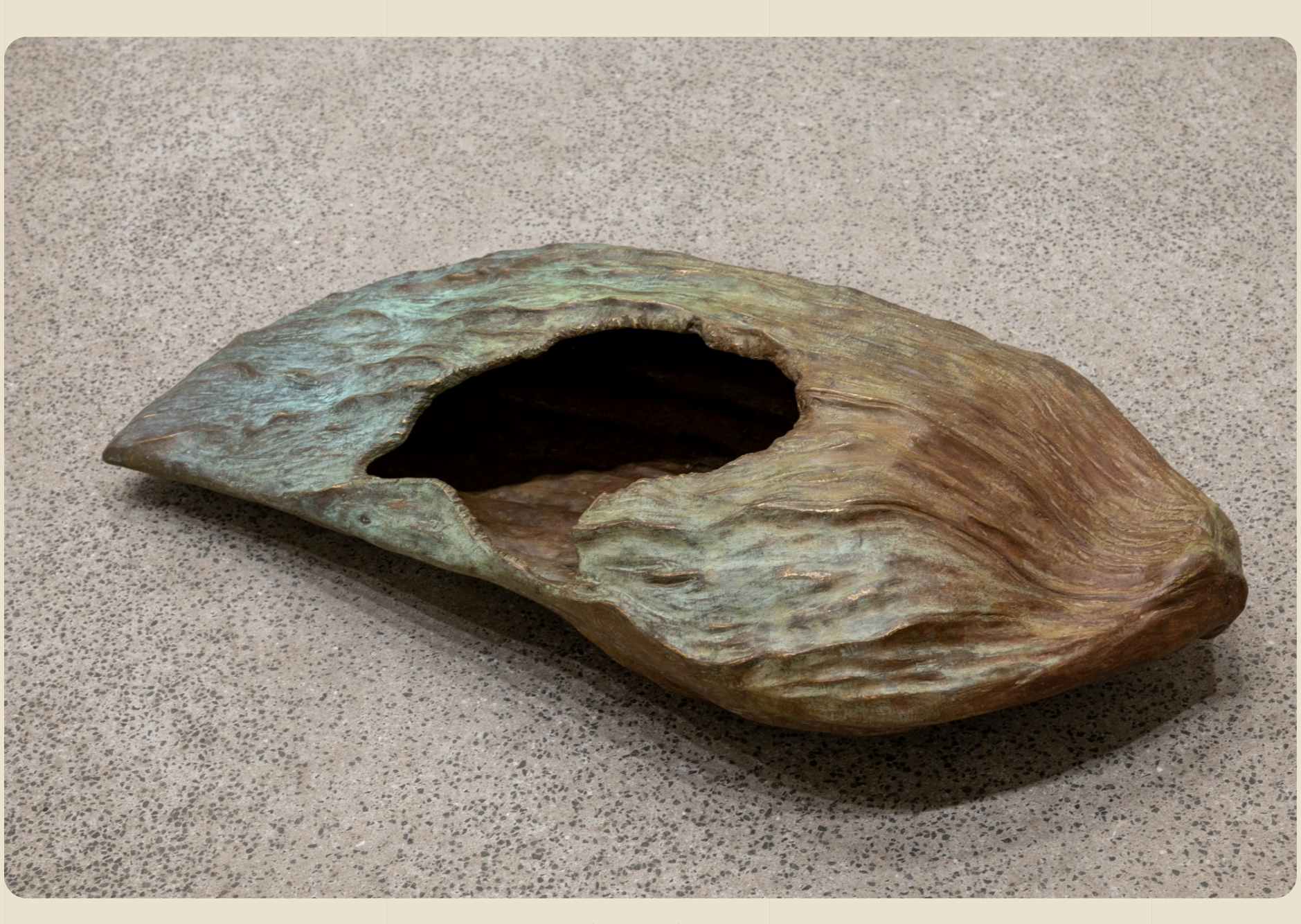


29 days of seduction, 2026

Each exhibit in the show nudges you to repeatedly evaluate your place in the land, and the many journeys as venerable as your own.

> *"The distance between us and the landscape never quite exists; we are entangled in it in ways we have not comprehended yet," says Sunoj.*

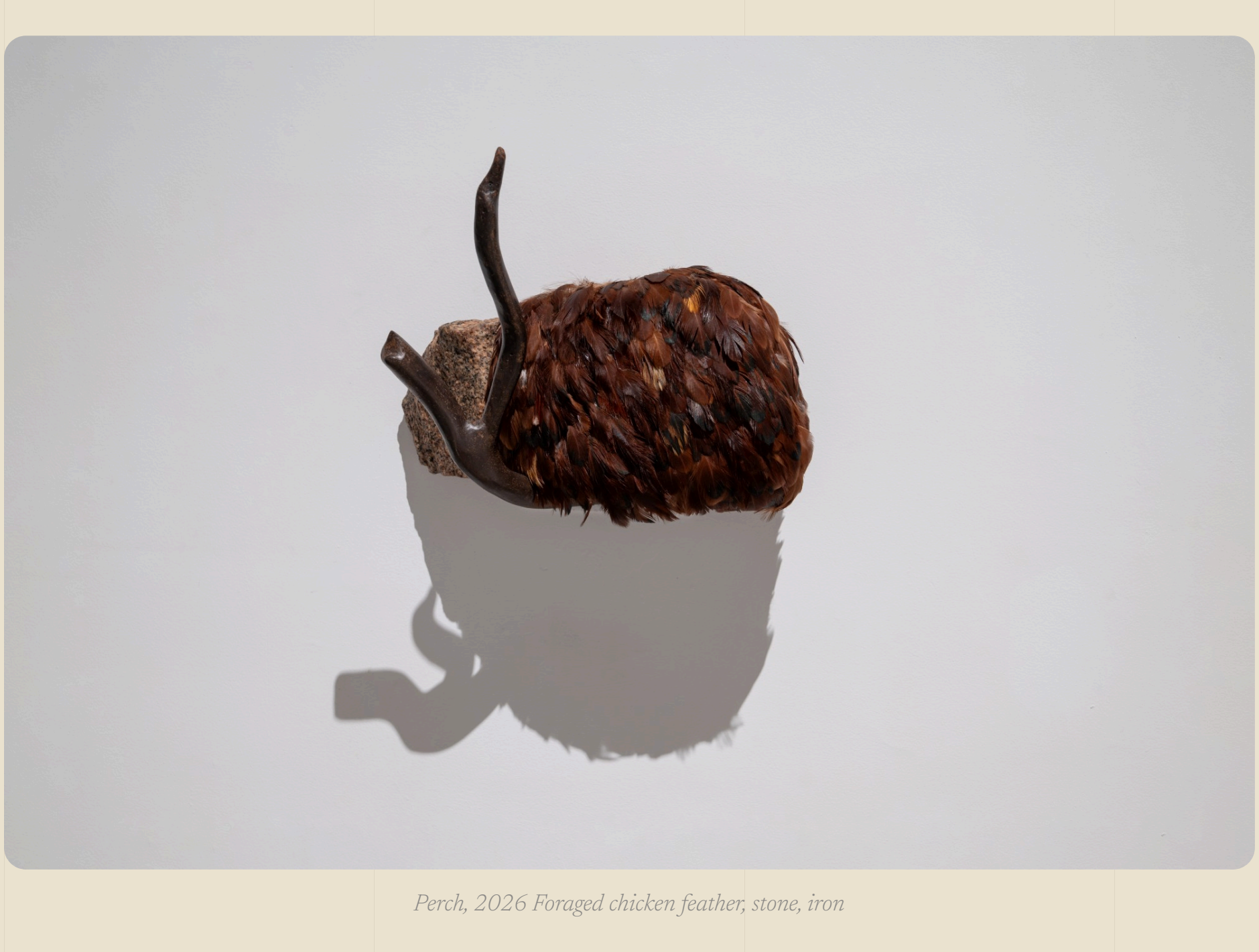
"The distance between us and the landscape never quite exists; we are entangled in it in ways we have not comprehended yet," says Sunoj. "For example, we eat a mango and discard the seed. The residual substance on the seed is then eaten up by insects, and finally the hollowed-out shell becomes a crevice for a baby squirrel, till the remains finally disintegrate into the soil. The journey of the seed continues in parallel to our journey, long after we have eaten it. We are not conscious of it."



Eat. Ate. Eaten.

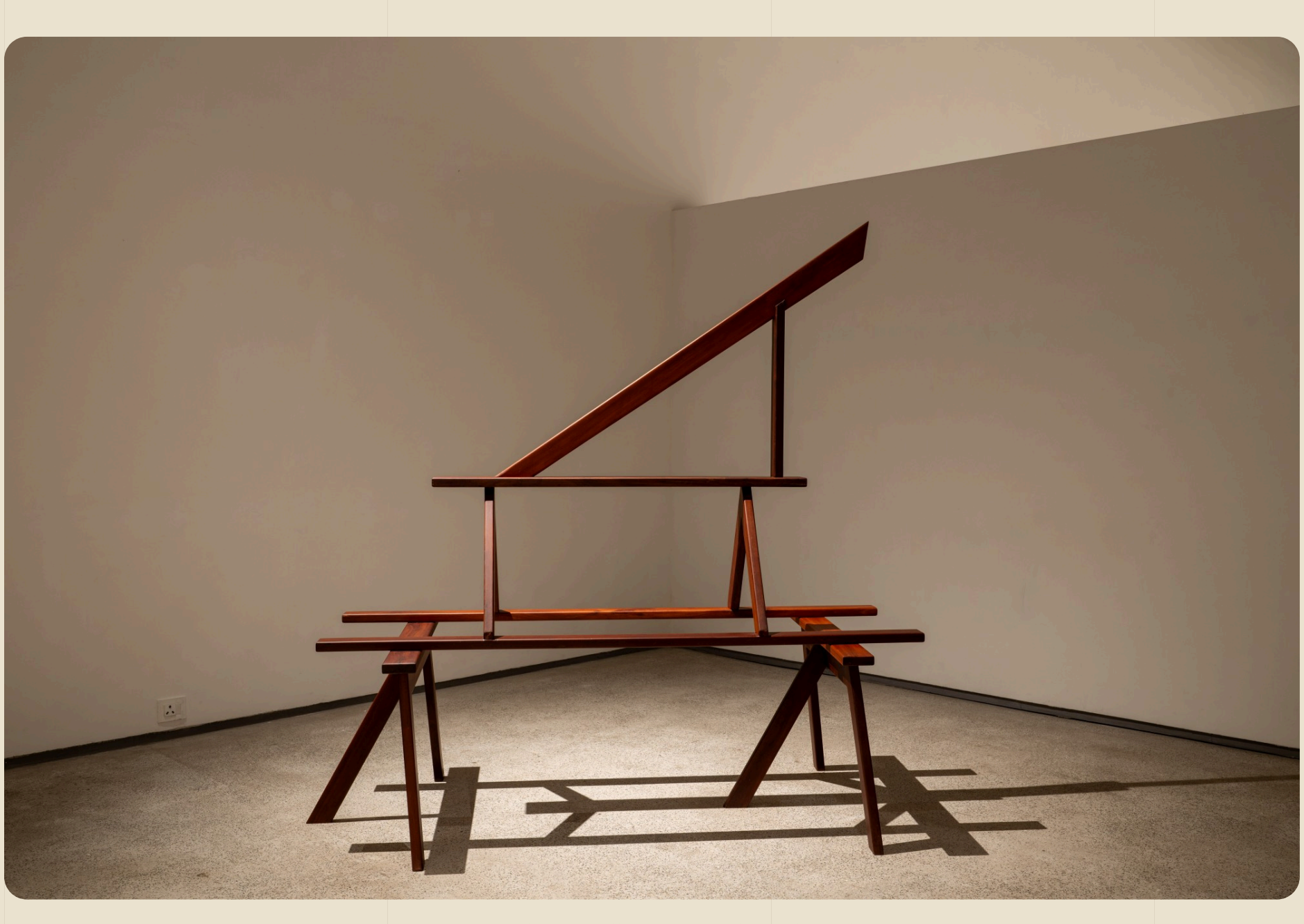
Eat. Ate. Eaten, a sculpture of a hollow seed in patinated brass, questions the human-centric approach that dictates our gaze when we look at the land. Are we really seeing all that the land is showing us, or deducting a thousand stories only to focus on the many optimal ways in which our surrounding flora and fauna can yield to our needs?

The two artists admit that they have learned to read the deeper (often painful) realities that foster at the intersection of animal husbandry and human consumption, thanks to their all-day engagement with animals and their conversations with farmers and herders who are regular visitors at their home. They are privy to the collective misery of knowing that the bull has disappeared from the herd, only to be confined in sperm banks that are proliferating even in the smallest of villages.



Perch, 2026 Foraged chicken feather, stone, iron

"It is sad to see that happening, but raising and maintaining a bull is a prohibitively expensive affair," points out Namrata. "Some years ago, we had a tough time accessing a bull to impregnate our cow. We got one from a village that was nearly 40 kms away. It was hilarious to see villagers coming home just to meet the bull. The irony hits home when we see the annual post-harvest festival when bulls are celebrated with gigantic tableaux of the animal, installed with robotic eye movement."



Assembling a Bull I, 2024, reclaimed wood

A separate room in the gallery is devoted to *Assembling A Bull 1,* a sculpture in reclaimed wood. The solitary stance is as good as a tribute to the many lonely bulls standing in line at cattle sperm banks everywhere, their life chained by a purpose they didn't sign up for. Even as all the equations between land and creatures change and metamorphose, the two artists also realised that the only unchangeable quotient is the soil. That may explain why the title of the show belongs to an exhibit of a brick that they found in an abandoned brick factory. It has a cat's paw print baked into it.

"To think that a cat may have nonchalantly walked on the brick while it was still in pliable wet clay form, and its footprint endured is a reminder that the landscape is made of many such encounters, of chance and intent," says Sunoj. "Some encounters are fleeting, while others endure."

The Immortality Of Soil

Till October 24, 2026

Gallery Maskara, Apollo Bandar, Colaba, Mumbai.

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