

AJAY KURIAN

NEW YORK

Poised formally between minimalism, sound art, and white-cube earthworks, Ajay Kurian's solo exhibition *Petrichor* is named after the smell of rain on soil, but it takes much of its inspiration from the philosophical writings and aesthetic considerations of Robert Smithson [Audio Visual Arts; November 13, 2011—January 22, 2012]. Kurian's work involves a historical and theoretical mapping—a kind of gardening, actually. But it seeks to remind us that “we are always within multiple gardens.”

Pushing the gallery door inward to enter the space— itself an unusual East Village recess between an auto repair garage and a faded real estate office—one shovels dusty white rubble toward the wall. The gallery floor is part-broken and part-constructed. Looking like a plaster pseudopod, the solid, elevated portion of the floor seems more incidental than path-like. The first choice is whether to step on the chalky broken chunks—the remains of the artist's previous series of cast plaster paintings—or overextend each step to reach solid ground. Inside, one encounters *Where the Bee Sucks...*, 2011, Kurian's bare but fertile oasis, curiously enlivened by the faint, phonographic whine of a soprano emerging from two perfectly formed mother-of-pearl nautilus mounted to the wall and each fitted with a tiny speaker hidden in its smooth whorls. The shape of these objects registers a crisp geometry, no doubt a nod to Smithson's obsession with spirals, but they also serve to conjure up an atmosphere of another time. These relics, as emblems of decorative kitsch, creep out to wallpaper the space with a Romantic sensibility—an eighteenth-century adaptation of Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* called “Where the Bee Sucks There Lurk I,” played repeatedly, conjuring up images of a garden.

At the center of the gallery, *Strange Gardener*, 2011, a waist-high mirrored plinth, stands as an island within an island, its top plane modeled in the slightly irregular rectangular shape of the space. On its top surface, a subtle but elegant, wavy composition of salt grains initially seems to suggest a crafted naturalistic pattern,