







Foreword

— Paul Henkel

It is rare in this day and age that one is presented with something, especially art, wholeheartedly genuine. That is how I felt the first time I had the honor of visiting Sagarika Sundaram's studio on the Upper West Side. My friend Vajra Kingsley had shared Sagarika's work with me, and I was already obsessed, yet nothing could prepare me for the wonder and authenticity of her work in person.

On that cold November morning, Sagarika opened my eyes to a world I knew very little about. Felt, the artist's preferred medium, as it turns out, is our oldest form of textile making. I watched as she picked from various bright piles of wool and then layered them into grids, patterns and forms. In watching her work, it becomes apparent that Sagarika's technique is like building layers of paint on a canvas, but with far more emphasis on the physical construction. After arduous and exacting layering and composition, she moved to the most transformative stage of the process: the felting process itself. Soap and water is all that is required for Sagarika's wooly preparations to be transformed into unified felt tapestries. It is impossible to give that afternoon true justice in so few words, and every time I have been back she dazzles with another innovation. Yet I knew after leaving that studio that Sagarika's work was amongst the most unique and important artwork being made today.

While I have alluded to comparisons with painting, I find that these monumental felt works offer something apart in their aura. While they begin life with woolen fibers composed upon a flat surface, like layers of paint upon canvas, the felting process renders them into unified material, akin to a carved block of marble. This oneness of Sagarika's artwork makes the complexity of her compositions ever more intriguing. One might be tempted to call her artworks abstract, and while not wrong, some time spent closely looking begins to reveal the elements of her inspiration and visual language. Tree rings, flower petals, root systems, moss growths and creeping vines all play a role in her visual language. These are by no means natural landscapes, but rather illusions and fantasies of natural elements that Sagarika has closely observed and drawn from. It is the combination of these phenomena that make the artworks almost feel naturally grown.

The combination of all these elements results in a practice that is unapologetically the artist's own in its combination of honesty and originality. I knew that when I left Sagarika's studio after that first visit that I would do anything to have the honor to show her work at Palo Gallery. I am so thankful that the moment has now arrived.



Introduction

— Peter Nagy

The human psyche craves balance in the stimuli that it experiences and this can often result in the aesthetic choices an individual will make. A fashion designer, working with the human figure all day, may crave purely abstract artworks during leisure time. As our lives have become increasingly digitized in the past decade, our collective consumption of photography and video on a daily basis is surely now greater than any humans that have come before. Long gone are the days of the expensive imported fashion magazine that is fetishized over months, returning to linger over its carefully crafted images. Meanwhile, art magazines are about keeping abreast of gallery exhibitions and the scholarly essays, as we don't rely on them for pictures of art.

The art world has responded to this situation by turning its focus to experiences that are immersive and performative and objects that are tactile, fecund, succulent, and paradoxical. (I purposely ignore the brief moment of the Non-Fungible Token here, as that was a folly both initiated and promoted by tech geeks and finance nerds, not lovers of art.) While painting and sculpture in general have been invigorated by this climate, it is art created from textiles and ceramics that has benefited most greatly, by both an elevation in status and increased visibility.

It is ironic then that I discovered the art of Sagarika Sundaram via Instagram, but not surprising as she is based in New York and I in New Delhi. Her elaborate wall reliefs and constructions, made primarily of felt but incorporating other fibers, seem predestined by an art history that has become polysemous, expansive, and libidinous. The referential elasticity of these works illuminates the viewers' perspective: while New Yorkers may read a trajectory that takes us from the stained passages of Helen Frankenthaler to the poured fugues of Lynda Benglis to the syncopated caricatures of Elizabeth Murray, a visitor to Chennai will certainly see the shards of coconut shells, kumkum and haldi powders, Kanchipuram silks, fruits, and flowers encountered at any temple. My own frame of reference finds traces of the women of Punk (Patti Smith, The Slits, Nina Hagen) in Sagarika's audacious iconoclasm and arresting dexterity. And to paraphrase Karen Carpenter: "She's only just begun."





An Ecology of Making — Andrew Gardner

Suspended from the ceiling, hung on the wall, or standing on the floor, Sagarika Sundaram's beguiling and monumental works are not forged from metal, thrown in clay, or hammered in stone. Instead, they are built using raw wool, vast plumes of animal fiber, dyed in luminescent colors and molded together to create a structurally integral surface. She achieves these mesmerizing abstractions using the ancient art of felting, a method of textile production that was first used by peoples from across the Eurasian world, who put the fleece of domesticated sheep, goat, and camel to work in a process that has not fundamentally changed since its inception. In Sundaram's work, felt is a bridge between thousands of years of human ingenuity, a tribute to the techniques and traditions that unite us, as well as the landscapes, the animals, and the labor that have made such an art form possible. And while her practice is global in its methods, Sundaram's work comes from a deeply personal place, an evocation of a peripatetic childhood growing up between India and Dubai, and her adult years living across three continents. Works such as *Kosha* (2023) radiate with a dynamic energy of a single atom split and exploded into a million different pieces, ruptures, punctures, and viscera undulating across the felted surface, revealing hidden landscapes that lie beneath. To experience her work is to be fully embodied, to be in touch with both the natural world but also one's own sensual self—to the inner worlds that exist inside us all.

Felt is quite probably the earliest form of textile. Written evidence of its existence dates as far back as 2300 B.C. in China, but archaeologists have found far earlier examples in the Central Asian steppe, home to the nomadic herders whose domesticated animals provided the source of the fiber. The process Sundaram employs today remains largely unchanged from the methods of thousands of years ago, when artisans across the Silk Road molded felted fabric. Once sheared, the wool fibers are combed then spread out over a flat surface and rubbed together using a combination of oil and water—or in some cases, urine. Friction, weight, and time eventually give way to a single plane of enmeshed fiber: a textile, formed. Both insulating and water resistant, felt is as adaptable as it is portable, making it suitable as a garment as well as a shelter. "In Hindi, there's this idea of 'roti, kapda, makan,' food, clothing and shelter – three basic needs in life," Sundaram says. From Gujarat to Kashmir and modern day Mongolia, these essential building blocks can be found entirely in the flocks of wool-producing animals, which provide the materials for clothing and shelter as well as the milk and protein for food.

Textile is a fact of life in India, and it has been this way for millennia. It's the land of cotton, after all—in 400 BCE, Herodotus wrote of the miraculous "trees" that grew wool—and evidence of ancient felted wools in India goes back to well before that famous Greek historian's time. Today, India remains among the top textile exporting nations in the world. "Most people from South India have an innate relationship with handloom fabric because there's so much of it every day," Sundaram says. Indian culture and textiles were omnipresent growing up in Dubai, rich material connections to life in the subcontinent that continues to shape the artist's practice today. But she also recalls her own memories of time spent in India, in her family's apartment in Chennai (Madras), watching her grandmother painstakingly folding and unfolding her nine-yard saris and washing them in a bucket to hang out for drying. And at Rishi Valley, the experimental boarding school in southern India she attended beginning at age 11, where she learned the art of Indonesian Batik textile painting, a technique involving wax resists and successive dye baths to achieve a polychromed image. And while a university student studying graphic design at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, where she became enchanted with the mesmerizing felted rugs of an elder classmate. Eight years in the corporate design world, a career that took her to Australia, the Middle East, and Europe, and, the artist says, "I was ready to discover a creative language that was more personal and long term." Textiles, long a distant dream, became the focus of Sundaram's life.

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Fiber's plasticity belies the complexities of putting it to good use, as the artist soon discovered. Until the industrial revolution brought forth mechanization, weaving—that is, fibers interlaced together in a repeated pattern on an x- and y-axis—required hundreds of hours of painstaking hand labor to turn raw material into spun yarn that could then be intricately woven on a loom. With felt, the wisps of fiber retain an integrity closer to the animal from which it is derived, but the process of building the textile is arguably more physically demanding than weaving, especially as it expands in scale. Studying for an MFA at Parsons in New York, Sundaram abandoned weaving in favor of felt, keen to explore the unconstrained possibilities of working with minimally processed wool fiber. Her early experiments with the technique started small, with works such as *Chequerboard* (2020) and *Skin* (2020), which rely on alternating blocks of color, perhaps a subtle homage to the woven grid. As the scale of the work grew, the demands on her labor grew too, but it also afforded experimentation and play. *Oracle* (2020) is an energetic fission of colorful abstraction, as ruptures and woolen profusions emanate from a surface of cerulean blue, chili pepper red, and sunflower yellow. Here, strands of bright color meld seamlessly with one another as if fluid paints on a canvas, a study of the natural behaviors of multi-colored wool fiber, as it twists and curves across the surface.

Cloth for garments, sleep, or shelter—the textiles that one most encounters on a regular basis—only finds its three dimensional form when paired with a body or an architecture. But fiber has always been more malleable than that, and a spate of artists working in the second half of the 20th century, including Mrinalini Mukherjee in India, Cecilia Vicuña in Chile, Magdalena Abakanowicz in Poland, and Sheila Hicks in the United States, were among a group of international women who were insistent on exploring this structural potential, using techniques such as macramé, weaving, and raw fiber piling. Sundaram's approach represents a continuous line from these trailblazing artists, as she explores the architectural and spatial possibilities of felt. *Swayambhu* (2020), named after an ancient stupa in Nepal and a Sanskrit word meaning 'self-born,' gives literal form to the artist's continued fascination with the beauty and solitude of religious architecture. She describes sacred temples across Asia as "architecture that is designed to create powerful energetic fields." The tower-like form, at once human and totemic, and simultaneously treelike and architectural, bears a natural resonance with the likes of Mukherjee, whose figural macramé Deities series recalled some of the revered forest goddesses of Indian mythology. But while Mukherjee's muted palettes played background to the immense form of her sculptures, Sundaram embraces the power of simultaneous color, playfully endowing *Swayambhu* with a bright palette of red, blue, green, white, and yellow.

Wool is naturally white, gray, black, or brown, but humans have long known that plants, insects, and other natural matter could be used to transform fiber into a range of brilliant hues. When the purplish mauveine, the first synthetic dye, was discovered in 1856 by an Englishman named William Henry Perkin, it proved that the possibilities for color could be endless, giving artists access to a range of pigments

both natural and alchemical in origin. For Sundaram, "the chemistry of color" is as intrinsic to the work as its final form. She compares the dyeing process to her natural inclination towards cooking—like any good recipe, it requires an astute understanding of the raw materials. In *Asia Major* (2022), Sundaram relies heavily on wools dyed with traditional substances—the fermented leaves of the indigo plant, first discovered in India, for blues and the crushed cochineal insect, sourced from cactus pads in Mexico, for the reds—revealing a dazzling landscape of natural colors that spans Asia to the Americas. But in other works, such as *Flame of the Forest* (2022), woolen embellishments resembling umbilical cords, veins, and other bodily matter are imbued with phosphorescent synthetic dyes that owe a debt to Perkin's early discovery. These elements literally glow when set against colors more natural in origin, a surprising juxtaposition that speaks to the aliveness of both the composition and the material itself.

What the herd animal eats, the weather it is exposed to, and how it lives its life—these attributes are deeply-rooted in the wool's physical properties, a calling card for the unique geography of the places the animals call home. Terroir, a French word used most often in association with winemaking, refers to the natural landscape and conditions where a given product is produced and how those elements affect the product in its final form. Sundaram relates this term to her own practice, where an intimacy with nature, and the global network of farmers and artisans with whom she trades in wool and dye products, plays a forceful role in determining the final shape of the work. In *Passage Along the Edge of Earth*, first presented in 2022 while the artist was in residence at Art Omi in upstate New York, Sundaram recalls the *ger* (yurts) still found in the Central Asian steppe. The floating tent-like sculpture becomes both an architecture and a cocoon—a portal for immersion and contemplation, a hidden world summoned—as the participant passes through two slits in the triangular apparatus, embracing those who come into contact with its woolen surface. In this sensual, physical experience, there is also an unmistakable fact of its creation: This sculpture was made in the Hudson Valley, using wools sourced from sheep herds at nearby farms, sheep whose milk is distributed as cheese and yogurt for hungry local mouths. The entire ecosystem of this object's creation was within immediate striking distance of the artist's studio. Some works are literally embedded in the landscape, too, as in *Time Slip* (2023), presented at the AI Held Foundation in upstate New York. Recalling the form of a serpent twisting around trees and burrowing through the soil, the piece is formed from sliced felted discs of concentric circles in reds and pink, a recurring motif in the artist's practice. These brightly colored roundels are manufactured by artisans in the Himalayan foothills and sliced off in the artist's studio—as if Italian salami sourced from a New York deli. The Himalayas to the Hudson by way of the foothills of Lombardy.

Across Sundaram's work, an ecology of making begins to form: ancient techniques that connect bodies to labor and materials to geographies. Her personal and intuitive approach centers on the material act of an object's creation—the fiber and the color form the basis of the idea, giving shape to a natural unfolding. Inside the caverns, ruptures, splits, and undoings that mark the surface of her work, one begins to see the ways that felt, a humble material known for thousands of years across the ancient world, has much to teach us about where humanity has been and where it may be headed—about how the local becomes global, the personal becomes communal, and the natural becomes human. Sundaram's work interrogates the essential conditions required to create a shared humanity, and the debts owed to the plants, animals, and landscapes that make building a society possible.

¹Laufer, Berthold. "The Early History of Felt." *American Anthropologist* 32, no. 1 (1930): 1-18.

²Ibid.

³Dorothy Schriver. "A Century of Color." *The Science News-Letter* 70, no. 10 (1956): 154.



Swayambhu, 2020, hand-dyed wool, wire



The artist's grandmother Ranganayaki at home in Jamshedpur, India













Time Slip, 2023, Himalayan wool and shagbark hickory trees.
Installation view, Al Held Foundation, Boiceville, New York, USA, May–October, 2023.



Swell, 2023, Himalayan wool and rocks.
Installation view, AI Held Foundation, Boiceville, New York, USA, May–October, 2023.



Trefoil, 2023, Hudson Valley wool and tree stump.
Installation view, AI Held Foundation, Boiceville, New York, USA, May–October, 2023.



CONVERSATION

Andrew Gardner
Bahauddin Dagar
Sagarika Sundaram
Vyjayanthi Rao

This conversation took place on July 28, 2023 at 4 World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan between artist Sagarika Sundaram, musician Bahauddin Dagar, and writers and curators Andrew Gardner and Vyjayanthi Rao. Dagar, the renowned Rudra Veena performer, on a visit to New York from India, was invited to the studio by Rao. The conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

ANDREW GARDNER

Hi Sagarika, can you tell us a little bit about where we are and what we're surrounded by today?

SAGARIKA SUNDARAM

We are in my studio at Silver Arts Project in 4 World Trade Center. I call my studio "the corner office." With these big windows that look out onto the Hudson River, it's as if I can step out into the sky. I have a bed in the corner, which is my reading nook. There's work on the floor where I'm making and building my fiber compositions, and the rest of the studio has work hanging on the wall.

We're in conversation because I have my first ever solo show, titled *Source* at Palo Gallery in New York City, opening in November. The show has given me a reason to bring together people I've wanted to work with for a while. Happy to be having this conversation with you.

AG

We are too. Do you want to start with your journey into working with textiles?

SS

Most people from Southern India have an innate relationship with handloom fabric because there's so much of it every day. I am thinking about my mother's saris and my father's veshtis. Wearing these garments requires a literacy with pleating and folding cloth. I can picture my grandmother washing her nine-yard sari in our apartment in Chennai (Madras). She would fold the cloth precisely, throw it over a clothesline hung high up with a long stick and use the tool to methodically unfold it out to dry. I was eleven years old and living in Dubai with my parents, when I left to study at a residential school in India called Rishi Valley. At school we swept our floors daily with an Indian-style broom, and squatted to mop with a cloth. We washed our clothes, socks, and undergarments on washing stones by hand. I bring all of this work into my artwork. It was at Rishi Valley that I also started to think about textile as artwork.

VYJAYANTHI RAO

Can you talk a little bit about the school at Rishi Valley? It is both an important place in your own life experience but it is also a very unique institution within India and globally.

SS

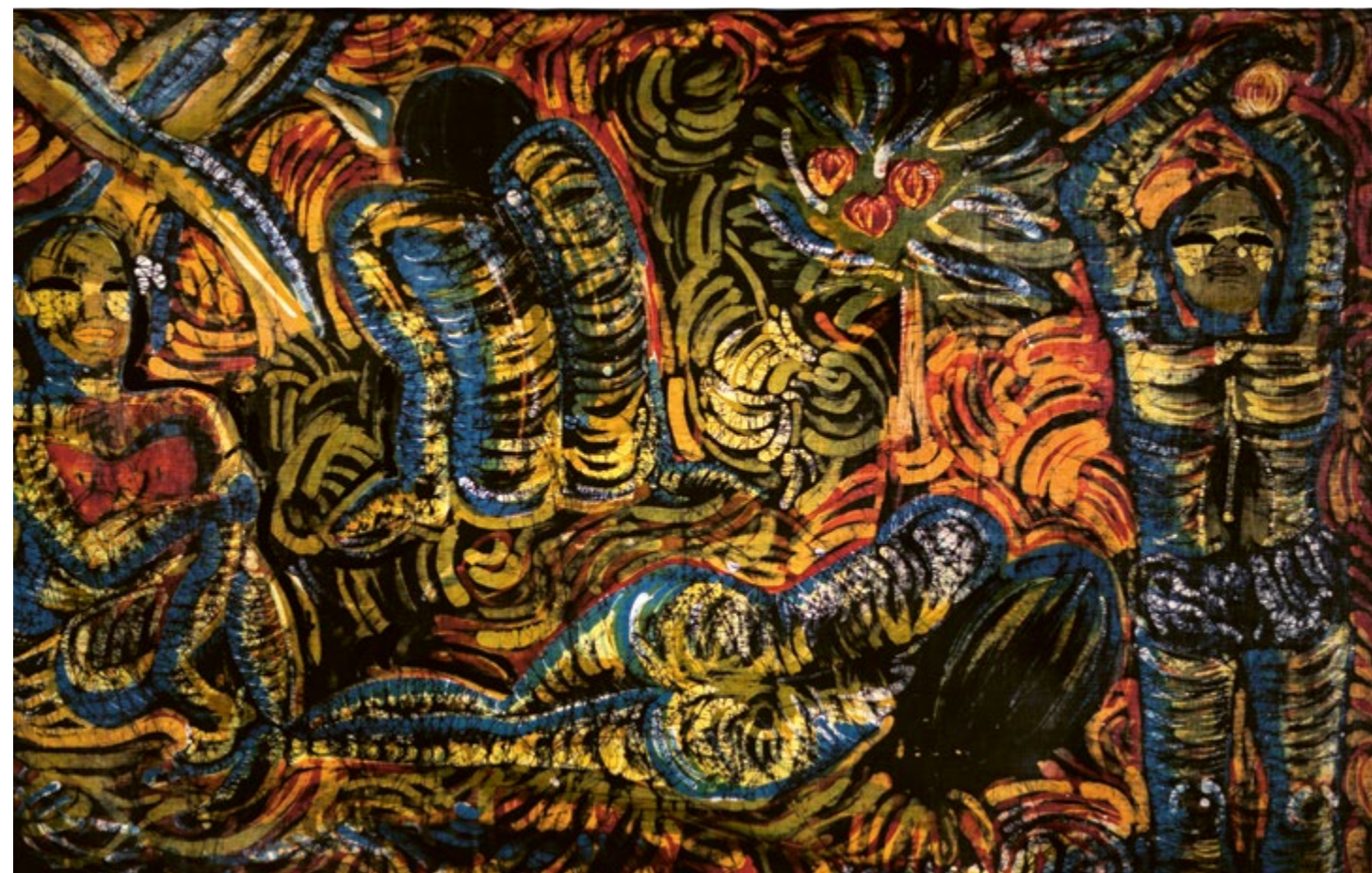
Rishi Valley is a very special place for me personally—I feel like I have a deeper relationship with India because of it. The school is located on about 360 acres of land surrounded by hills. It was started by the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti in the 1920s. He was being groomed by Annie Besant and the Theosophical Society to be a kind of new world leader. The day he was to assume leadership of an organization called the Order of the Star, he disbanded the organization on the premise that he was no guru or leader. He famously said in a speech that day, "Truth is a pathless land," meaning each of us needs to find our own way to freedom. This idea resonates with me and the way I've arrived at my work—finding my own truth or a truth. Who knows how long I'm going to be here. It's where I am for now. I just experimented to discover this thing that I'm doing right now. There's a spirit of inquiry at Rishi Valley. We could question and challenge our teachers...

VR

Which was quite rare in the context of schools in India.

SS

Yes. In the friendships I still maintain with people from school, we have space to question and interrogate and challenge each other. Art at Rishi Valley was also special, many of my classmates' parents were artists, filmmakers and activists, which indirectly shaped my worldview. Many of our art teachers were from Shantiniketan, a school in West Bengal started by poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, which had a strong culture of the batik wax resist cloth painting technique. I still have the recommendation letter my teacher Manoranjan Das wrote for me for university. He was the dyer, and mixed color for us. From the sixth grade through 12th, I did batik.



Sagarika holds up a batik fabric, above, produced at Rishi Valley.

SS

This is based on a Gauguin painting whose title I love: *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* I was obsessed with Gauguin in school, before I understood the broader context of his work, and also the Group of Seven from Canada—artists who were thinking about color and movement.

In batik, the image slowly emerges in reverse, because you start by blocking off the white parts of the fabric with wax, then yellow, green, all the way to black—you progressively go from light to dark colors. With my feltmaking process, I make the work upside down. So I create the compositional part of the face first and then build the body of the textile in reverse. I enjoy holding the composition like a puzzle in my head, the unknown of felting it and flipping it over and then cutting it open, letting it slowly reveal itself. There's a relationship between batik and feltmaking in this way.

AG

Can you elaborate on this?

SS

I lay the wool down like I'm sketching—I cross-hatch the wool, overlapping it to form a mesh, a strong connected membrane. In batik, specifically in the style that I practiced, wax brushstrokes are a form of mark-making. That's the relationship between the two: the gesture and color too. At school, it was complicated for our teacher, Manoranjan Sir, to explain dyeing to us. So he would mix dyes and we would paint. These days I mix my own formulations. Oftentimes you are looking at a color that will not be the final tone, because it has to be treated with another solution for the true tone to pop. There's a sense of transformation as I lay fiber down for felt, too—there's an alchemy to it. It changes in its final form. And then there's the relationship of fluid and fiber...

VR

Because fluid fuses the fibers?

SS

Yes, along with friction. So when I wet the wool, I rub it and roll, and rub it over and over. There's a relationship there.

AG

There's something elemental about using water to diffuse fiber, very bodily. It's a complex process of getting the water and the wool to actually entwine by felting together. With dye too—it's a real process to actually impregnate the fibers with color.

SS

Absolutely. My interest in cooking helped me learn how to dye and follow a recipe, rewriting it step by step. I tell my students at Pratt, "If you like to cook, you'll be a good dyer. If you like dyeing, you will become a better cook." And with wetting the wool—it's sheep hair, right? You need to let it really impregnate the fiber. I can feel it tighten under my fingers as it felts, it feels alive.

Also, it's very process heavy. I have to understand the physics of fiber, the chemistry of color. In that way, my work is essentially a research project, starting with a question. And then that answer leads to another question.

VR

Can you give an example of what you mean by a question?

SS

For example, what if the work opens in half? What if it splits open in concentric circles, with a nest of cords at its navel? What if it split in cascading circles in an asymmetrical composition? What if I use only three colors? What if it uses all the color I have at hand, can I still make something un-harmoniously harmonious? Can I double the width of

one length of cloth? What if one could walk around the work? What if one could walk through it, and then through it once again, and be touched by the work in the process? Can a flat plane communicate a sense of roundness? And so on.

VR

You went to the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, where you studied Graphic Design. But after eight years doing corporate design, you pivoted to being an artist. How do you understand this evolution? What does art mean to you?

SS

In design, I think the end result is more determinant. But with art, nobody's asking me to do this work. There's no purpose. There's no client. Art is the truest mirror of my subconscious self. It's much more ambiguous what that end result is, and I find great joy in that journey. I want to be very playful in my work and my life. Working in this way connects me to myself, to my inner world.

AG

One of the things that I'm always so drawn to with textile culture is that it's a shared medium, almost universally, around the world. You're making something that is both of your life, where you come from, but it's also universal, and there's something sort of beautiful about that conversation.

SS

Absolutely. Across Central Asia, the Silk Road, in China, in Turkey, in Iran, in India, in Iraq—the Fertile Crescent, the birthplace of civilization—wherever there's sheep, there's felt. I describe it like a connective tissue, or fascia. I love discovering connections that are separate and simultaneous. It's evidence for me that humans think in patterns across time and geographies.

AG

Can you talk about fiber as a material?

SS

Someone asked me in an interview, How do you feel working with such humble materials? And I thought, These are not humble materials! They're high quality. They come from sheep and are renewable—they're like jewels. In my studio I feel like I'm surrounded by rubies and emeralds, treasures from the earth. It's difficult to make something uninteresting when my starting point is so rich. I like the word *terroir*—just like wine, wool is informed by the soil the sheep grazes on, the moisture levels. Its habitat gives it perfume and flavor.

My network of wool suppliers is constantly shifting and expanding. Each variety of wool has its own texture, which lends itself to a unique handwriting in the work. There's a beauty of working with material from its source. If you're really paying attention as you work, you naturally wonder how the material came to be in its present state, and what it was before, where it is from. Even with dye, what is the chemical formulation? What impact does it have in its afterlife? It is a general sensitivity to the origin of things that one engenders.

VR

I perceive three ecologies in your work. The first is this ecology of the sheep and the felt and a whole arc that happens between those two. Then, there's the ecology of the production of felt, and how it involves choreographing not only processes, but also other people—sheep herders, artisans, assistants. And then the third is the psychology of the body, the inner and the outer, the connection with the natural world to the bodily, hand-making process, which becomes evident in its final form. These three are all nested within one another so that you can look at a work and wonder, what is the world that it opens? Your work also involves a lot of cutting and slicing through, as a surgeon would cut open skin and cut through layers of muscle to reach an organ.

AG

Right. All the work is very visceral—it's an explosion and profusion of all these different life forms emanating from a central force, a nucleus—

I love discovering connections that are separate and simultaneous. It's evidence for me that humans think in patterns across time and geographies.

SS

—like a seed. I'm not setting out to make a thing with a center that the work grows from. When I have a predetermined image in my head, I'm less interested in it. But if I have a clear question for myself when I begin the work, then the result is surprising to me, it's a discovery.

Even with my students, I say that the purpose of this work is not to make a beautiful thing. You're trying to find your own handwriting. I feel like my handwriting has not changed from that batik piece in 10th grade to the movement I see in my work now. It is a kind of rhythm in the hand.

BAHAUDDIN DAGAR

I remember my father saying that you don't have to make the music beautiful, it is beautiful in itself. You have to discover how beautiful it is.

VR

Can you speak a little about how you approach this relationship between the innate and the discoverable?

SS

Felt is very plastic. There is so much to do, it's a whole world of different treatments. Slicing and hiding and discovering something inside has been very exciting. The first work I made in this way was a nested ball that I cut open like a geode. That object is important because it marks the start of this line of inquiry in the work.

VR

This connects to the sensual aspect of your work.

Sagarika brings over a spiral piece used in the creation of her work.

SS

These spiral ones were the first ones I made. I like the edible register, meaty. Makes me think of the *Navarasas*, specifically *Bibhatsam*—

VR

Meaning: horror, disgust!

SS

I have been enjoying thinking about the nine *Rasas* or essences in Indian aesthetic theory that is said is in every artwork. I find *Bibhatsam* interesting and under-explored. I like when a work has ferocious beauty, as if it's going to eat you up, like a monstrous Venus flytrap. On the edge of scary and frightening, but still extremely beautiful and erotic. When I make the work, my whole body is moving, dancing in a rhythm—I'm activated in a sensorial way. I've tried making drawings, but ultimately, I have to be here, making. It's in that moment when I'm in contact with the thing. It reminds me of this quote from the *Natyashastra*¹:

*Yatho Hasta thatho Drishti,
Yatho Drishti thatho Manah
Yatho Manah thatho Bhaava,
Yatho Bhaava thatho Rasa.*

Meaning,

Where the hands (*hasta*) are, there goes the vision (*drishti*);
where the vision goes, the mind goes (*manah*);
where the mind goes, there is an expression
of inner feeling (*bhaava*)
and where there is *bhaava*, mood or sentiment (*rasa*) is evoked.

VR

Rasa or 'mood' emerges in the space between the work and its experience or reception by its audience. It emerges from the interaction



The artist's work often references the landscapes and places where she is making and felting.



37 Image from *Unseers series* (2020–ongoing) featuring work made using the spiral roundel forms.

between the viewer and the work. It is not about the intention of the artist or not only about that. So as an artist, if you're sad, you cannot play that sadness in music. You play something and the sentiment is created in the person experiencing the art. *Rasa* is inclusive of the creation and its reception.

BD

Rasa is also this thing that stays with you past the time that the artwork has lasted. It sort of exists in an abstraction, a formless thing within your mind. Moving away from that for a minute, I want to ask you about your sense of beginning and creation in relation to your process—as you unfold a particular work or when you turn it over, there's kind of a new beginning to the work. Do you consciously feel that there is a pattern emerging and connecting in the editing or cutting? Is the end result predetermined or does it happen naturally?

SS

I like what you say about 'new beginnings,' because when I flip it over after it felt together, it's a new beginning. Then when I cut it open, that's a new beginning. A series of linked new beginnings keeps me moving forward. There's a moment at the start where I throw certain colors down, or throw fiber down with an energy that guides the way the rest of the composition unfolds. But I never really know what the final composition is going to look like until all layers are open and interact with each other.

BD

Do you feel there are multiple centers in your work? When do you feel you have arrived at something and you have to let go of it? Is there a way of ending the work that you have derived?

SS

As I build a composition, a few anchor points tend to emerge, which the rest of the composition responds to. But then when an approach starts to feel like a habit, I can see it in the final result, it lacks a certain freshness. So I have to break things apart and try something new. By the time things are humming along the ending makes itself obvious, though that was certainly not always the case. There's something very special about my first artworks where I felt like I was making all these mistakes and it was just really a very scary place to be making the work. They have an unselfconscious energy to them. The scariness never really goes away, but that's also an exciting and healthy part of making the work.

BD

Do you let your mistakes be? Do they look beautiful to you or do you just try to resolve them whilst you're working?

SS

I really don't have any other choice. But each mistake contains so much learning. It always teaches me something, you know? I like to say, there's no wrong answer. As my process has matured, paper and fabric models have naturally emerged as part of the thinking. I always find that it helps to start a work with a very clear, simple question, even if it evolves as I go along. The question is something to come back to.

BD

We were talking about intensity earlier. When you go from small to big, what happens to the intensity? How do you see it transforming? Do you manage to keep the intensity or does it change into something else?

SS

When I make large works, I have room to play—because it's a space so big that it is beyond my control. So it forces me to step into a place of risk. A specialist in contemporary Chinese art told me that in China, they say an artwork is successful when it's apparent that an artist is 'at play.' My work shows me when I'm being self-conscious and not. Feeling free is a state of being that comes when I have the time to make for no reason other than just to move and make, enjoying the texture of everything, the color, the relationships. Like when I make a mix of

color and think, "Oh, I like the way this vibrates." But sometimes it also comes along with the rush of a deadline.

Smaller works arrive as sketches for larger ones in the process of solving a problem. For example, how do I cut apart layers one and four without cutting open two and three, when all four are fused together? The model transforms significantly when it scales up into a full-sized work, and offers an arena to generate tension and intensity. That said, recently I made a small book-like object that feels like it carries the sense of freedom I like to see in the work. It feels like a gateway to a new line of questions.

BD

When you feel the work is finished, does that intensity stay forever every time you revisit that artwork?

SS

The work is complete when I can feel it talking to me. What it says to me perhaps changes over time because I change too. It depends on when and how I encounter the work, in what context, and how much time has passed since I saw it last. After I finish work I like living with it for a few months so that I have time to hear what it has to say, intimately. It helps inform the next ones.

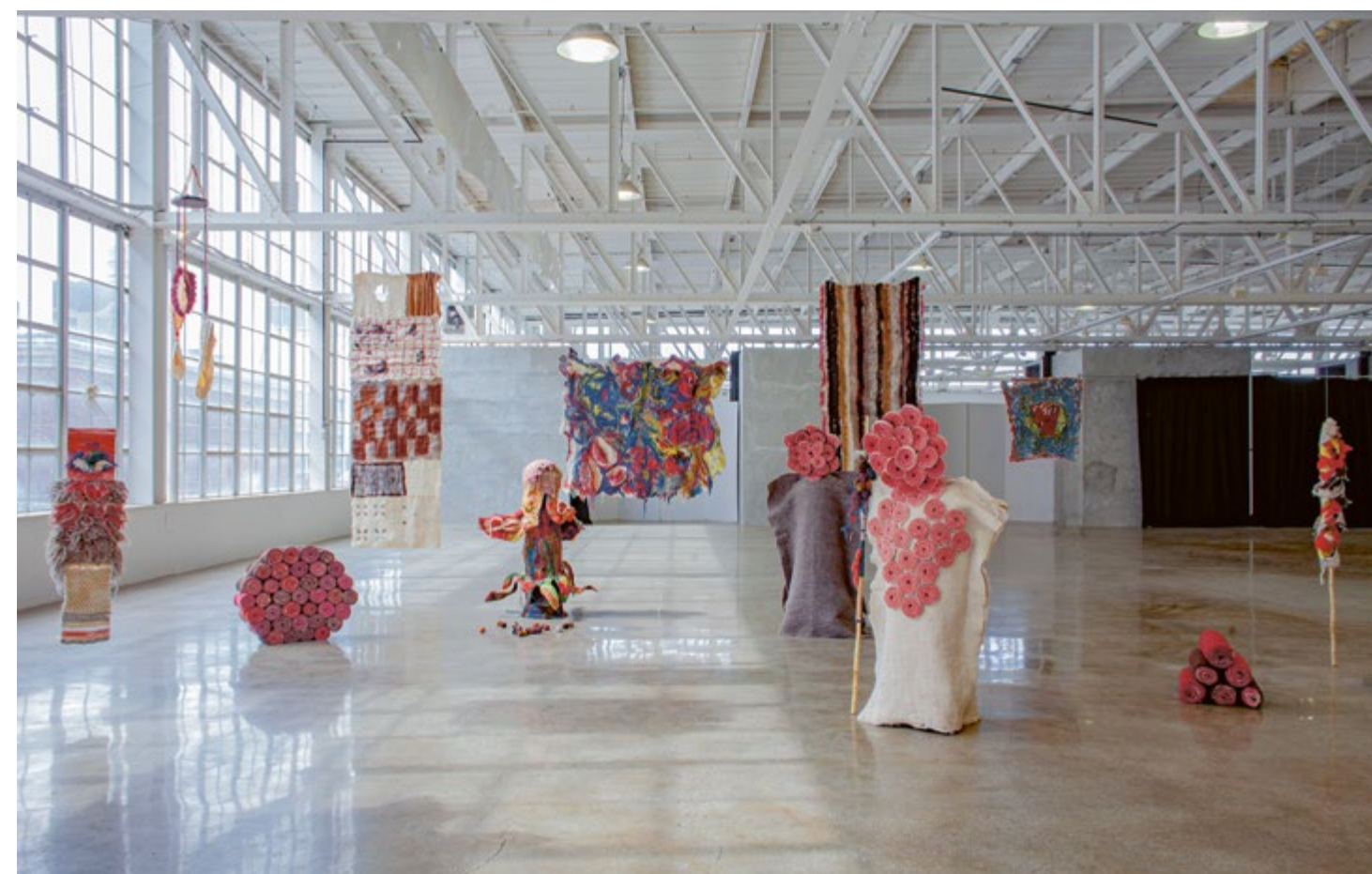
VR

I would like to touch on another aspect of your work: architecture. You describe your work as going from the flatness of textile to sculpture but I also see an interest in architectural and spatial dimensions.

SS

I'm interested in tracing things back to their starting points. Architecture, agriculture, and cloth making have been so intertwined starting from when we shifted from being nomadic hunter-gatherers and began growing things, and needed to store, protect and clothe ourselves. This is why I like working outdoors, it offers the potential to engage all three of these fundamental disciplines that I see as intertwined with the origins of human civilization.

Growing up between India and the Middle East, I saw many examples of traditional architecture designed to create powerful energetic fields. I'm reading a book on the Sufi tradition in Persian architecture, and it talks about the dome and the difference between qualifying space in Islamic and Western architecture. Spaces like mosques are often empty, because the idea is for you to feel the space and the roundness of the room by being in it.



Installation view, *Hybrid*, Mana Contemporary, New Jersey, USA, September 2020.

Same thing walking around a temple or a stupa: the form of the building guides the way you move through it, and in this way provokes an internal movement. There is a famous stupa in Nepal that I visited called Swayambhunath. I didn't realize it was such an important word in temple architecture. Its name comes from the Sanskrit word *Swayambhu*, meaning self-created, auto-generated. Like a nautilus shell. I think temple architects were the greatest artists—they made sculptures on a huge level, and were thinking about the essence of space, the body and the creative principle. I feel so alive in these spaces.

BD

Everything you're saying has resonance with what we've been thinking about in Indian classical music for so many centuries. The new gets formed inside the old all the time. Do you see a new possibility in your work that is happening now? For example, you're reading about Persian architecture.

SS

I love the feeling of being lost. Like in a maze garden. I marvel at how Mughal and French royalty created botanical worlds steeped in fantasy and play. I would like to create a felted hedge maze that is almost like being inside a video game. It's a nested configuration—you have worlds within worlds. Where the material sonically alters the viewer's sense of space, to feel presence through absence of sound, to feel fullness through a void. I think that would be a fun puzzle to unlock next.

BD

What you say matches exactly to what Indian miniature painting stands for: moving outward from a single point and returning back to the same, making these movements again and again. And every time we make these strokes something new emerges. With every stroke there's a different story, a different feeling within the same frame. What they are doing handheld, you are doing at a very different scale.

SS

I love the relationships that you draw out with older forms of art.

BD

You know, I'm at a point in life where I'm seeing in my students how there's an entirely new way of looking at things, but it's all connected to the old. My generation or the one before that, they have lost that. Somehow the new generation is digging back into what is lost. And it does not come out of reading, it comes out of thinking and applying yourself. Yes, the entire *shastras* of work and ethics and art and music is all there within them. Most of them don't have a language to explain it, they're bursting out. And I'm rediscovering it through them. It's like an implosion.

VR

I love the way this conversation has touched upon and returned to the idea of heritage and what it means for a contemporary artist working with felt to make these connections across time, across geographies, and across different artistic and creative practices. I really feel the residues of all of those connections in your work.

AG

Well said. I feel like there are other questions, but it seems a good moment to stop, or we could continue for two more hours. Thank you.

SS

Thank you all for being here.

¹The *Natyashastra* is generally considered a canonical text on Indian aesthetics and performing arts, attributed to Bharata, and compiled in written form two millennia ago. It is a live text, in that it continues to be referenced even today by performers, artists, audiences and critics, creating a common vocabulary for communicating aesthetic experience.



Installation view, Moody Center Center for the Arts, January–May 2023.
Passage Along the Edge of Earth, 2022, wool, indigo.






Hidden Landscapes


Inner Worlds

Vyjayanthi V. Rao



“How to account for the attraction of textiles? For me, it’s their interdimensionality. Both three-dimensional structures and two-dimensional planes, textiles, from the most simply knotted nets to the most technically advanced carbon-fiber weaves, hover between those states. A textile (even one as dense as felt) invites the eye to see its strands and, at the same time, see it as a field.”

SUSAN YELAVICH, ASSAYING: STRAY THOUGHTS, CULLED WORDS

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a glass, with a blurred background. The hand is in the foreground, and the glass is partially filled. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

About a year ago, Sagarika told me that she was going to have her first solo exhibition. We first met when she moved to New York to start her MFA program at Parsons, where I had been teaching Anthropology to design students. We bonded over many things—our diasporic journeys, our institutional ties, and our love of food and cooking. She was ever willing to try what I made in my South Indian kitchen and I, in turn, was fascinated by the medium in which she worked. I had little experience with the world of felt, growing up in the tropical parts of India where silks and cottons predominate but I was curious to learn more about Sagarika’s journey as an artist. Visiting her studio, I was struck by the profusion of color, the scale and ambition of the works and the laborious process that went into making the work. Most immediately, the impression was deeply ecological—of landscapes with rivulets running through them and a sense of being entangled.

In this text, I want to follow Susan Yelavich’s invitation to see the strands in Sagarika’s work, thus roaming freely over the range of influences and sources of her work. What follows is not a linear text with paragraphs building on each other but rather a glossary of terms, concepts, and references which form the force field around her work. This vocabulary emerged from many conversations between us over the past few years as fellow travelers along many similar routes. I offer these strands for the reader to work into their own interpretive frameworks, to see the field that is Sagarika’s work in their own way. The reader is urged to read the entries aloud or performatively. Either way, this text is meant as evocative and invocative of the landscapes that one might find hidden in these works, offering metonymic associations across a diverse set of terms drawn from different worlds and different practices.

A — Akam

“In the rhetoric, and in the anthologies, the poems were classified by their themes as akam and puram. Akam (pronounced abam) meant ‘interior,’ puram ‘exterior.’ Akam poems were love poems; puram poems are poems on war, kings, death, etc. The two types of poems had differing properties. The akam poems are presented in five sections, as they are in several of the anthologies. Each section contains poems that evoke a particular landscape: hillside, seaside, forests, cultivated fields, and the wilderness (or desert). Each landscape, with the mood it represents and the poems that evoke it, is called by the name of a flower or a plant of the region: kurinci, a mountain flower; neytal, blue lily, mullai, jasmine; marutam, queen’s flower; palai, a desert tree.”

— A. K. Ramanujan
Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies
and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil

Akam is a term from a poetic tradition in classical Tamil, that is over two thousand years old (dated between 100 BCE and 250 CE). Often referred to as *Camkam* poetry, it is an offering of the oldest continuously spoken language in the world, Tamil to the world. *Akam* is a classificatory device developed by interpreters of this poetic tradition, the most recent among them being the poet and translator A. K. Ramanujan.

The works in this exhibition drew me to retrieve this vocabulary, which associates a landscape with a mood and in turn with a natural form that embodies that mood. The metonymic association of landscapes like mountains, deserts, seashores, forests, fields, cities and their flora and fauna with inner landscapes of emotion, feeling and mood is a form of abstraction that has survived through millennia. These forms of abstraction are deeply connected to phenomena that are seen as “natural.” Ramanujan refers to the “language of landscapes especially in *akam* poems,” as poetic “second language.” Unlike abstractions attributed to minimalists that are drawn from geometry, this poetic tradition is a source that is closer to forms of thought that are born in the languages of South Asia. As I read it, I am reminded of the ways in which South Asian philosophy is based fundamentally in the entanglement of being. More recently this form of thinking has been discovered in the West, through the work of object-oriented philosophers, ecological thinkers, and environmental humanists, who argue for non-separation between subject and object, which also comes to mind, viscerally.

As Ramanujan writes, “the interior world is archetypal.” There are no particular people or places named in the *akam*, only *dramatis personae* who appear as roles or pronouns. Accordingly, the artist is referred to in my text sometimes simply as “She.”

A — Andaz

Andaz (Urdu) means something like the act of estimating, a guess. For the scale of Her work, this is an important action. One never knows how things will turn out. Being open to the unknown is what distinguishes the work of art from design and perhaps from craft. To be led by *Andaz*, *andaz se*.

B — Bindu

Point or dot (Sanskrit), *bindu* denotes the point where creation begins and where unity is achieved. The geode, the pupil of the eye, circularity is at the heart of Her creative process.

B — Burle-Marx

The tropical gardener, who decolonized landscape design and mastered the art of transference—from the garden to the street, from jewelry to music. She has often referred to him in conversations.

C — Color

“Isidore of Seville, the savants’ savant, said in the seventh century AD that color and heat were the same since colors came from fire or sunlight and because the words for them were fundamentally the same, calor and color... To equate calor with color as did Isidore of Seville detaches us from a purely visual approach to vision and makes color the cutting edge of such a shift. Color vision becomes less a retinal and more a total bodily activity to the fairytale extent that in looking at something, we may even pass into the image... color comes across here as more a presence than a sign, more a force than a code, and more as calor, which is why, so I believe, John Ruskin declared in his book Modern Painters, that ‘colour is the most sacred element of all visible things.’”

— Michael Taussig
What Color is the Sacred?

Each composition is a balancing act of color – limited only by vision, by the chemical process, by the abilities of the wool to ‘take’ to the dye and the reaction of the dyed wool to the qualities of light and air.

D — *Dubai*

From Her childhood spent in Dubai, at first in Her parents' home and later traveling back from residential school in India, She relayed a story to me about the fashion shows that Her mother organized with saris gifted by *Nalli Silks*, one of the best-known stores retailing silk weaves from Kanjeevaram in Tamil Nadu. The eponymous Kanjeevaram saris, named for the town in which they are woven, are coveted and cherished as heirlooms. The saris, samosas and soul sisters of Her childhood, whose families hailed from every part of India kept the material connections alive through diasporic dispersal.

D — *Dyeing*

Dyeing is like cooking and chemistry, rolled into one, She once said. Art and science. It cannot be taught, only practiced in making and experimentation.

E — *Ecology*

An ecological practice is one that provokes questions of how ideas, practices and processes are connected. In the tangled landscapes of her felt creations, the sheep, its diet, its herders and shearers, the maker, Her friends and helpers, the studio, the farm and the factory are all connected in the choreography of the inner, the corporeal and the sensual to the outer, to the worlds of the sheep, through the artists' hand.

F — *Fold (see A)*

The concept of the Fold appears prominently in the work of Gilles Deleuze, the 20th century philosopher from whom many artists have drawn inspiration. The fold is a way of bringing time into the relationship between the exterior and the interior—the interior is never static, as it is a momentary manifestation of an exterior folded in. There is then no “authentic” inner landscape, a deeply held colonial fetish. As the work is spliced open, her inner worlds reveal hidden landscapes, rabbit holes of color and composition into which one could disappear and be transformed.

H — *Himachal*

The Himalayan foothills where the wool for many of Her works come from. Despite the distance, *Himachali* wool crafters meticulously carry out the labor of making and dyeing, following instructions relayed on phone and in person from the artist's mother who once traveled to meet the makers.

H — *Hudson Valley*

Another source, closer by, a different terroir, a differently behaved fiber.

I — *India*

To be haunted by locality is a condition of diaspora. To be dispersed and to long for. But also, to have the power to disperse, to create anew. Home is where She belongs.

K — *Kosba*

The self is organized in sheaths (*kosbas*), and the journey from the outermost to the innermost is the journey of self-realization. *Kosbas* are devices for visualizing the distribution and balance of energy across a universe, at any scale. Splicing and unsheathing the felted creation reveals what holds its hidden landscapes together.

L — *Labor*

She shared a short film with a few of us. Four friends get on the subway at World Trade Center with an immense roll. Curious strangers kindly inquire. When the friends disembark uptown, dusk has fallen and the roll is carried up to an abandoned industrial space where once clothes were laundered with chemicals. The roll is unfolded and the felters get to work... I marvel at the effort, here for its own sake, while elsewhere crafters make useful things—clothes, blankets and shelters with the same materials and the same intensity—soap, water, wool, hands, feet, pressure. Here, four friends labor together.

M — *Mothers*

Mrinalini, Georgia, Zarina, Gego. Origins, sisters, mothers, and Others.

N — *Namda*

Namda is the Kashmiri craft of embroidered, felted rugs. *Namdass* are made for sitting—on floors or as saddles, they go back to the Iron Age in Southern Asia, most likely introduced by the nomadic peoples who traveled there from Central Asia. Legends tell of a saint worried about woolen fibers sticking together, whose tears of despair rolled down and caused fibers to fuse. The Artist's journey into felt began with a glimpse into the making of *Namda* while a student at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad.

P — *Practice*

We spoke about the discipline of laboring everyday with the material and how that discipline is connected to the development of shared affect between artist and audience. Practice, sometimes also akin to the Marxist concept of praxis when production and commodification of the artwork is involved, is also what connects the work of the hands to that of the gaze to that of the mind and from there to the creation of feeling, affect, mood and sentiment.

S — *Sari* (see also F)

This ancient zero-waste garment, raised to dizzying heights by weavers and makers across South Asia, the sari taught Her how to fold and unfold, to contemplate upon what was being folded and what lay within and beyond the Fold.

S — *Sheep*

Where there are sheep, there is felt, She once said to me, quite simply.

T — *Tamil*

The mother-tongue and the source of the *Cankam* poetry, that introduces us to the folds of the interior landscape, where fauna, season and the qualities of the soil—its slope, its porosity and its density—all meet to tell us stories of our desires.

V — *Vagina*

She does not shy away from the orifice. The opening of the universe, approached sensually through labia, flesh engorged and throbbing with blood, the vagina is a creative eye, revered and sometimes even worshiped.

W — *Wool*

The source and the gift, from one form of being to another, transformed from Source to Form.

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- Yelavich, Susan. *Assaying: Stray Thoughts, Culled Words*. July 21, 2022. susanyelavich.com.









Atlas, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, silk, bamboo silk, wire, 5ft 9 in x 12 ft x 12 in (175 cm x 366 cm x 31 cm)





Flame of the Forest, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, 9 ft 9 in x 8 ft x 6 in (297 cm x 244 cm x 15 cm)
Collection of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi



Kosha, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, 8 ft 6 in x 8 ft 6 in x 8 in (259 cm x 259 cm x 20 cm)



Iris, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, 7 ft 1 in x 6 ft 5 in x 4 in (216 cm x 196 cm x 10 cm)
Collection of Anvida Reddy, Hyderabad



Siren, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, silk, bamboo silk, 8 ft x 5 ft 5 in x 4 in (244 cm x 165 cm x 10 cm)
Collection of Sangita Jindal, Mumbai





Zebu, 2022, Hand-dyed wool, 30 in x 3 ft 7 in x 1 in (76 cm x 109 cm x 2.5 cm)



Seed, 2017, Wool, 5 in x 10 in (13 cm x 26 cm) (each)



Source, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, bamboo silk, wire, 14 ft 4 in x 12 ft x 12 ft (436 cm x 365 cm x 365 cm)







Oracle, 2020, Hand-dyed wool, 6 ft x 7 ft x 4 in (183 cm x 213 cm x 10.16 cm)
Collection of Sunita & Vijay Choraria, Mumbai



Asia Major, 2019, Hand-dyed wool, silk, 5 ft x 6 ft 2 in x 4 in (153 cm x 183 cm x 10 cm)
Collection of Prashant Gupta, New Delhi



Into the Valley, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, silk, bamboo silk, 5ft 10 in x 5 ft x 1 in (178 cm x 153 cm x 2.5 cm)



Floating World, 2022, Hand-dyed wool, silk, 5 ft 8 in x 5 ft x 4 in (173 cm x 152.5 cm x 10.16 cm)
Collection of Priyanka & Vimal Khandwala, Mumbai





Book 1 - 7.10.23, New York, 2023, Hand-dyed wool, bamboo silk, 17 in x 21 in x 2 in (43 cm x 53 cm x 5 cm)





Book 2 - 6.9.23, New York, 2023, Hand dyed wool, bamboo silk, 15 in x 19 in x 2 in (38 cm x 48 cm x 5 cm)

EDUCATION

- 2020 Parsons School of Design, The New School, New York, NY - MFA Textiles
 2008 National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, India - B.Des, Visual Communication
 2007 Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), Baltimore, MD - Exchange Semester in Graphic Design

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 Palo Gallery, New York, NY
 AI Held Foundation / River Valley Arts Collective, 'On the Grounds', Boiceville, NY
 2022 Frestonian Gallery, 'Form/Symbol', London, UK

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 British Textile Biennale, The Whitaker Museum and Art Gallery, Lancashire, UK
 Moody Center, Rice University, 'Narrative Threads: Fiber Art Today', Houston, TX
 The Armory Show, Nature Morte Gallery, New York, NY
 Frieze London, Nature Morte Gallery, New York, NY
 Visitor Center Gallery, 'Provenance', Newburgh, NY
 Bannister Gallery, Rhode Island College, New Explorations in Memoryscapes, Providence, RI
 Opening Gallery, 'A/Typical Now', New York, NY
 2022 Malin Gallery, 'Anthem X', Miami, Florida
 The Armory Show, Nature Morte Gallery, New York, NY
 Studio Artego, 'Color in Perspective', Queens, NY
 Iron Velvet Gallery, 'How to Love in Many Ways', New York, NY
 Nature Morte Gallery, 'New Forms of Thought', New York, NY
 2021 New York Live Arts, NYFA IAP Group show, 'In/Between 2022', New York, NY
 Frieze New York OVR, Jhaveri Contemporary
 Mana Contemporary, 'Materialistic', Jersey City, NJ,
 Ace Hotel Brooklyn, 'Textiles: A Group Show, Brooklyn, NY
 West Harlem Art Fund, 'Elements', Governors Island, NY
 Roulette Intermedium, 'Let's Go Out and Play', Brooklyn, NY
 Nature Morte Gallery, 'Hanging Gardens', New Delhi, India
 2020 Mana Contemporary, 'Hybrid', Jersey City, NJ
 Urban Zen Gallery, 'Industrial Bodies', New York, NY
 2019 'TEXTO', Casa Pedregal, Mexico City, MX
 Webster University, Surface Design Association, 'Small Works', St Louis, MO

FELLOWSHIPS & RESIDENCIES

- 2024 Senior Fellow, Silver Art Projects, New York, NY
 Fountainhead Residency, Miami, FL
 2023 Silver Art Projects, New York, NY
 2022 Art Omi Residency, Ghent, NY
 Bronx Museum AIM Fellow, Bronx, NY
 New York Foundation for the Arts IAP Program: Visual and Multidisciplinary Arts Fellow, NY
 2016 Walkin Studios, Bangalore, India

AWARDS & GRANTS

- 2022 The Hopper Prize
 2020 Michael Kalil Endowment for Smart Design, Parsons School of Constructed Environments, New York, NY
 Tishman Award for Excellence in Climate Justice & Sustainability, The New School, New York, NY
 2018 President's Scholarship, The New School, New York, NY

TEACHING

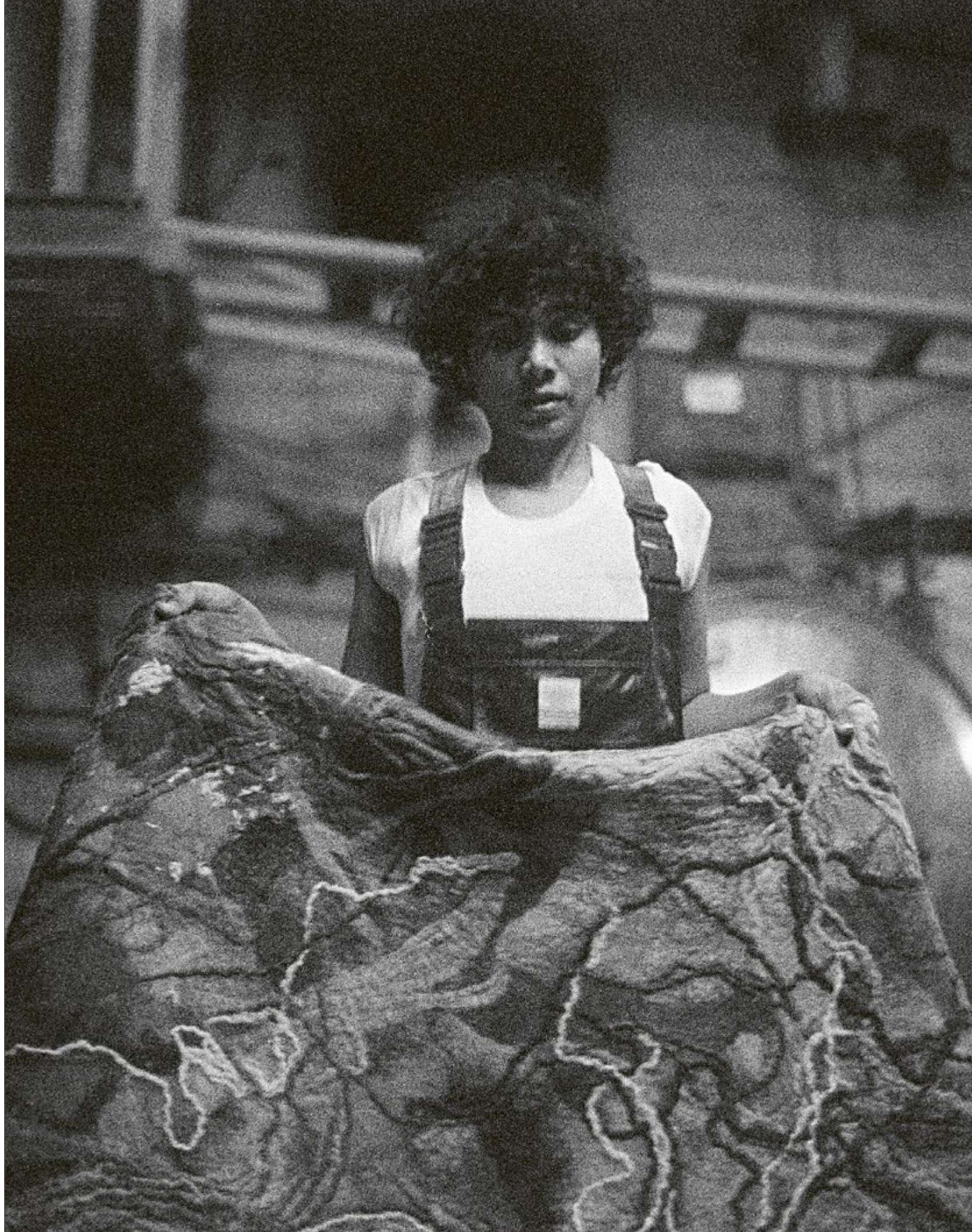
- 2022 Visiting Assistant Professor, BFA: Textiles Minor, Pratt Institute, New York, NY
 2020 Visiting Lecturer, Textiles, BFA: Studio Arts, NYU, New York, NY
 Visiting Lecturer, Textiles, BFA: Fashion Design, Parsons School of Design, New York, NY
 2019 Artist Immersion Program, Residency Lead, Jaipur, India

PRESS

- 2023 The New York Times: 'The Armory Show, in a Back-to-School Edition'
 Artnews: 'The Best Booths at the Armory Show, Where Under-Recognized Giants and Rising Stars Collide'
 Houston Chronicle: 'Free, tactile fiber art exhibit opens at Rice Moody Center'
 2022 Coolhunting: The Armory Show 2022: Textured Works
 Artnet: The 10 Best Booths at The Armory Show 2022
 2021 Artnet, Studio Visit: Textile Artist Sagarika Sundaram on Working in Silence, New York, NY
 2020 PBS.org, Rising Artist

COLLECTIONS

- Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India
 The Ahmanson Collection
 Ace Hotel Brooklyn, NY



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Palo Gallery
30 Bond St
New York, NY 10012
United States

T +1 646-877-1469
E info@palogallery.net
<https://www.palogallery.com/>

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