

# domus

INDIA

052

LA CITTÀ DELL' UOMO

**Contributors**

Suprio Bhattacharjee  
Jasem Pirani  
Aparna Andhare

**Authors**

Sumesh Sharma  
Curator

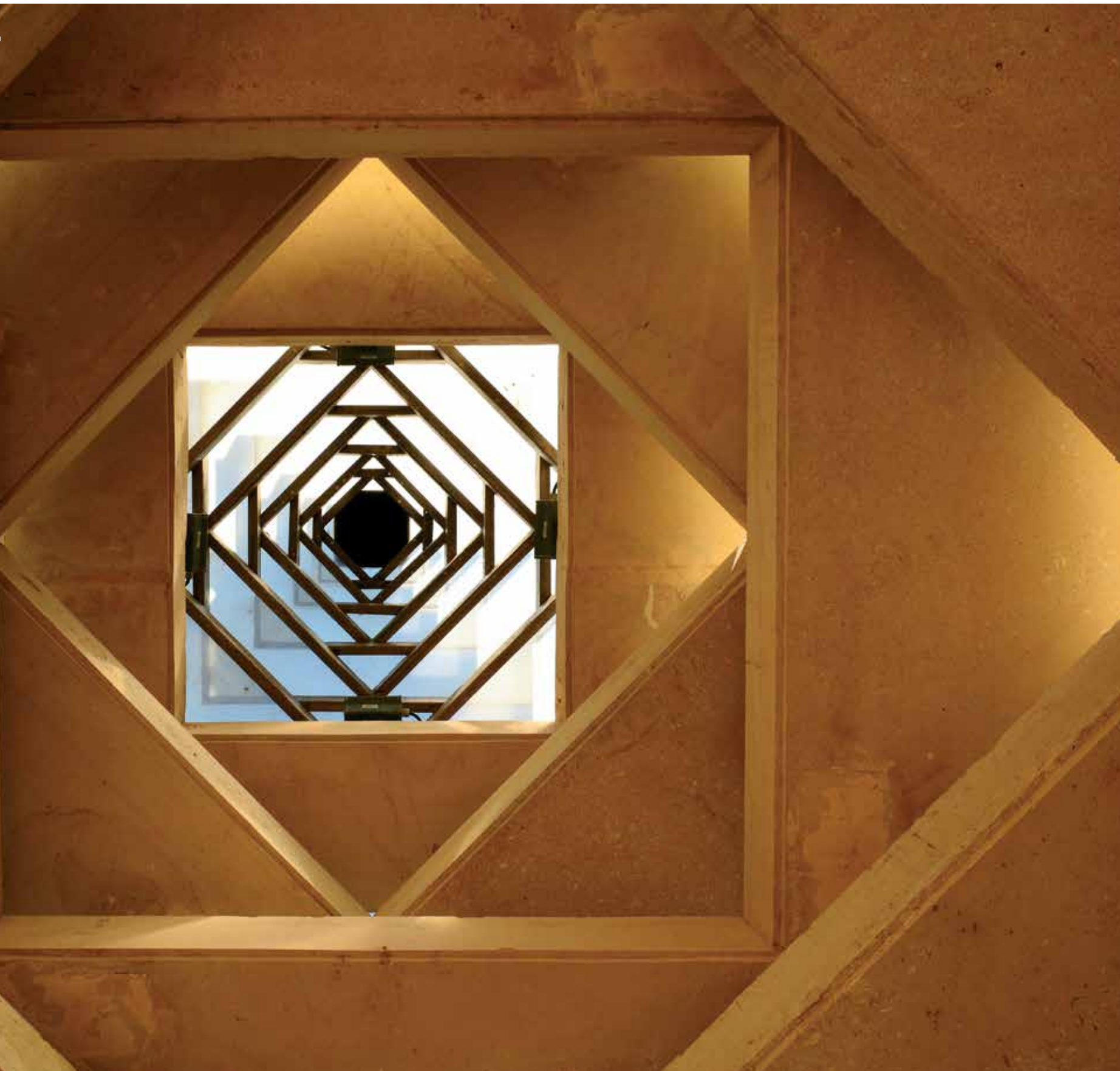
Freddie Ribeiro  
Architect

Kamu Iyer  
Architect

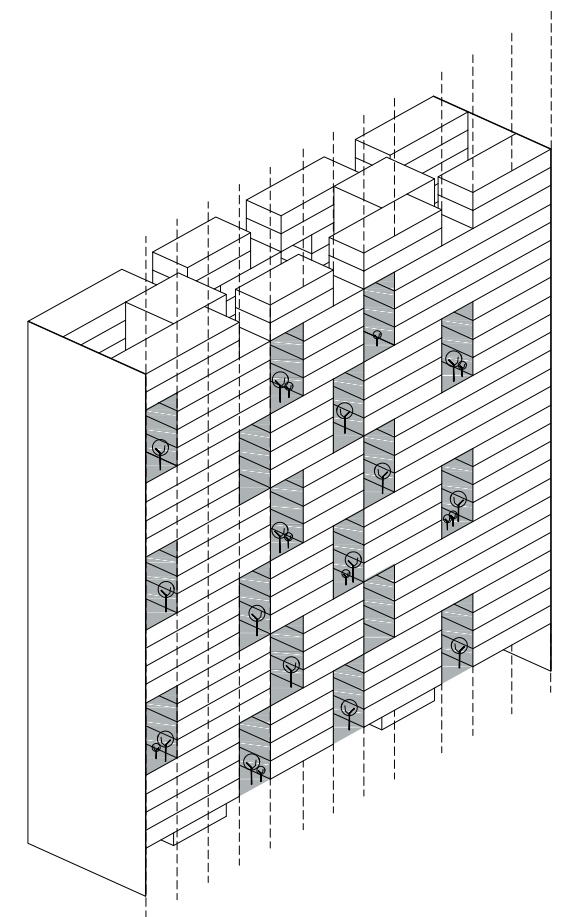
**Photographers**

Deepshikha Jain  
Kishore Pawar  
Akash Kumar Das  
Phil Sayer  
Václav Sedý  
Marco Covi

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Cover: Rather than a solid block, the individual components of the *shikhara* of the temple in Barmer, Rajasthan designed by SpaceMatters, are offset from each other. This helps channelise more light into the inner sanctum or the *garbhagriha* of the temple. Seen here is the detail of the *vedika* or finial, when viewed from below.



Isometric drawing of the conceptual structure – Tropical Lagoon, Thane designed by Urban Studio.



## GEOMETRIES OF WORK AND CONTEXT

Kaiwan Mehta

As we close this double issue – a combined issue between June and July 2016, since Domus is 11 issues a year – I enter into a conference titled “*Between Life and Places*” based on the thematic *Biographies and the Production of Space*; the thematic I decided about 2 years ago for the residency programme at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany, in my capacity as chairman of the jury. The conference includes many jurors of the current cycle of fellows at the Akademie as well as many of the fellows present, marked specifically by two extraordinary keynote lectures – the first by Professor Ackbar Abbas from University of California, Irvine, USA, titled, *Posthumous Life: Translation, Politics, and Spaces of Deception* and the second, by independent curator and cultural theorist Nancy Adajania from Mumbai, India, titled, “*I believe that I can travel to the stars*” – *Reflections on the Emerging Organic Intellectual in India*.

Geographies are intense zones of human action and interaction – from market-places to migration, and homes to cyber communities. Spaces are not simply containers within which people live and work; spaces are a product of human lives and the actions that take place in those spaces. Exploring the relationship between the physical armature of a place and the larger sphere of political and cultural action and production is something that this theme proposes to engage with. In this exploration, we propose to engage with biographies – the vectored lives of people and things; biographies are complex journeys of individuals within multiple lives and spaces. The biography is proposed as a means to exploring the culture of spaces and the sciences of its production. Biographies could be, as Gertrude Koch in her Foreword to the English translation of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Times* says – “channels of communication by means of which subjectivity and facticity engage in a constant nervous process of dialogue”.

Places and geographies are active zones of politics and cultural processes and it is in the attempt to understand the complexity of what makes a place that we propose to work with the lives of people and objects that are part of these places – their structure, their composition, their occupation, and their journeys. What is the relationship between life and places, politics and spaces in the everyday lives of people and their societies, their objects and their stories? As architects we constantly see ourselves as producers of spaces, and buildings as spatio-

formal entities – but one could safely say that we miss to recognise the multiple histories, and many lives and after-lives that exist beyond the single individual architect or designer, that shapes the life and look of spaces as well as places. We have become adept at talking about contexts – from where people come, into which people build and produce – but our sense of ‘context’ is now become a blinkered entity – one desperately stuck to the idea of geography – which manifests itself in identification of land and soil, climate and a few architectural elements; a very narrow-minded sense of doing things! We forget that we all, today especially, belong to many context from across the world – our readings, our seeings, our references come from many geographic and many intellectual traditions, from many places. We draw from diverse biography of ideas. This is not a call to disregard the idea of ‘locality’ or zones defined as regions or nations – but is an articulation to ask one to recognise the diversity of traditions (intellectual, and other) and experiences (readings, people, ideas) we are as human beings composed of. Our designs and architectural articulations do not escape this – and to fool yourself in believing that there is something in design that makes it exclusively Indian or not so, will only be an unproductive excursion, which may even be harmful. Process of education constantly encounters this problem – where does one draw from in setting up curricula? In education there are established genealogies of thinkers, theories, and texts, but after a basic introduction, these established genealogies restrict the possibilities by which a student understands his/her zones and methodologies of action/practice. Processes of thinking are often more crucial than just the set of theories or different thoughts established over time and history. Processes of thinking are often embedded in practices and the crafts that people work with. To excavate and explore, and firstly closely and attentively listen to the experience of practice – is an absolutely necessary mode of education. As one is also planning for a new academic year one is crucially confronted with these questions – especially in programmes that engage with the teaching of histories, theories and forms of criticism. We often forget that history, theory, or criticism, are essentially forms of practice, modes of action, and forms of doing – and not simply about reading a set of established texts and thinkers.

As educators, as thinkers, as critics who actively produce the fields of action – design, architecture, and the politics of culture – the

engagement with relationships of living and space-making is crucial to understand. It is a delicate zone with many ambiguities and details that are often difficult to understand – but as professional crafters of spatial formulations (buildings) an awareness of this central character of our work is necessary – the birth, life, and after-life of places and spaces.

Individual lives composed of actions and thoughts are traces, residues as well as ingredients of spatial geometries and geographies, co-producing as well as reviewing the history and poetics of spatial atmospheres. Spatial atmospheres are physical realities that are the scenarios and contexts within which civilisation and human action unfolds. These atmospheres are heterogeneous compositions – they shape their layers differently in differing contexts and histories, as they continue to network across histories. These atmospheres are constructed out of physical media – where individuals craft environments that exist within such atmospheres, producing a measure and scale for the atmospheres themselves, periodically redrawing geometries of these contexts too.

Actions, thoughts and the craft that individuals work with, allowing them to make-interact with, review-challenge, the space-atmospheres is a constant area of investigation and enchantment. The individual within the collective, the individual within the network of atmospheres, often charts a trajectory that allows for a creative understanding of contexts and spaces we occupy in everyday lives. The biographies of such trajectories could occupy the shelf of inquiries in one’s ‘cabinet of thinking’ on contemporary culture, and the places of its production. **km**



CONFETTI



## VOCABULARY OF THE LANDSCAPE

Layered with art historical and social references, a recent exhibition questions the tenets of our society through a narrative of surreal landscapes that speak in multiple layers of imagination. The crucial use of the colour red in the work is symbolic of the tropes of violence, beauty, and the co-existence of the two

**Sumesh Sharma**



Vermillion red and its connotations with the feminine would make a boring essay. So would any attempt to discuss the colour and its attributes with aesthetics. Rather, if we delve into the prism of layers that Soghra Khurasani excavates with the use of simple colour theory divided by the troughs of her woodcuts, we may begin to read that what she claims to be under the skin. Like a row of antiquarian tablets, hang the woodcut blocks that are responsible for these prints, the inks leave a faint reminder of their presence by tinting the wood. Of such simple composition and simple technique, the works of Khurasani hold ambitions to question tenets of our society that are seldom dealt with in the vocabulary of the landscape. 'Cratered Fiction' thus becomes a narration of solidarity with feminist rage that engulfs South Asia, among the women who are subject to violence, one that manifests in varied experiences, but shared among all. To speak one doesn't need to experience but to hear the pain of others. Some of Khurasani's narrations are fictional but they hold the anguish in dissent of patriarchy carefully placed by using metaphors of topography.

Craters form lakes and mysteries around celestial bodies landing on earth. Volcanoes become dormant to form craters that create biospheres of their own. Across continents, animist traditions have long believed craters to be depositories of energy that are akin to the womb. In Bali, a dormant volcano is often the site for the occult and sacrifices to Mother Nature. The crater with its origin in the volcano or in the impact of a fallen meteorite possesses a latent energy, one that may be displaced but existent in feminine metaphors. Geographical fault lines and the path of earthquakes reveal to us the insides of the world on which we dwell and sometimes allow spurts of molten lava and hot springs. Lava and ash bring fertility to dormant soils, and hot springs give us remedies for the skin. Khurasani imagines her skin to be the topography that begins to reveal in rebellion the colour red as a marker of a revolution.

Misogyny in South Asia is a long-debated topic of concern with a recent spurt in the tales of horrid rapes and violence women have faced in India's national capital, Delhi. A sudden review of security, cultural stereotypes, and urbanism became the natural path of reconciliation and remedy. Media, both at home and the loathed 'West', turned their attention to crimes against women, turning away their championing of India as a burgeoning world power and high growth economy. Protests, groupings, and social media garnered a sense of solidarity that was genuine. Governments faltered with uncalled for censorship, the paranoia of being ashamed, and ministers who rather found fault with the victims of sexual violence. Khurasani performed her anguish and disgust in the form of a burning typographic installation that had her words in solidarity carved out in the soil. From here began her tryst with the series of prints that would narrate her imagined pain she believed the women had endured.

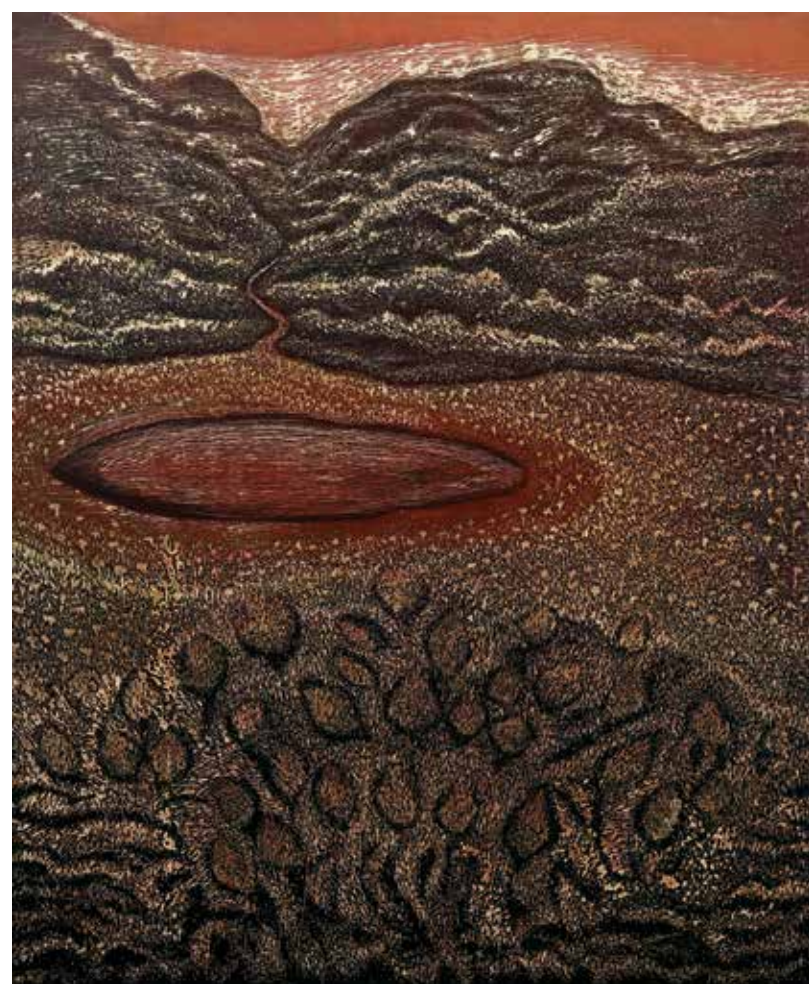




Two acrylic studies on handmade paper (p 34 & 37) are a start to the series. One depicts a crater and the other depicts a river flowing through a crimson landscape. The landscapes are composed of the elementary vocabulary available to an artist. A landscape is often foregrounded by a mountain range in the horizon, by a river and subsequently by a valley. Such compositions are found in elementary classes for children who do not have any particular interest in topography. Khurasani reveals her practice at this juncture; these landscapes are covered in conflicting shades of red. Initially they begin with shades of green and purple; later they become a printmaker's play with the viscosity of the ink. This is a feat of accomplished technical ability. Shades are conflicting because they near each other's pigmentation and it is easiest to describe the nearest shade itself. Khurasani is entrenched in this complex process of carving deeper troughs into her woodcuts to accommodate the various shades of red that spell out a landscape that narrates her feminist solidarity. Printmaking, the inventor of the 'edition' is least seen as the harbinger of conceptual practice. Artists like Khurasani demonstrate their deep understanding of the concept without having to adhere to aesthetics scripted in the 1970s that now define contemporary conceptual art.

A pair of portraits that now exist as woodblocks of a Mughal Emperor and his consort — presumably Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal — garlanded by a circular bed of roses which are presumably grenades on a starry night are the precursors to Khurasani's engagement with the circular that now manifest as craters. Why would she use explosives to denote a portrait that is most popular in Mughal miniatures and the mention of romance in South Asia? As a society, we have

**Previous spread: Skin beneath, 2015. Woodcut print on paper, 32 x 48 inches**  
**This page top: Beyond my skin and your soil, 2015. Woodcut print on paper, 32 x 48 inches. Right: Land-escapes, 2015. Woodblocks, 48 x 120 inches**



**Land-escapes, 2015. Woodblocks, 48 x 40 inches**





**Above: Even the sun hides when it flows, 2015. Woodcut print on paper, 32 x 48 inches**

come to depend on folklore and mythical pasts that absolve us of our present failures to reconcile our hypocrisies. Ours is a nation that houses only one of the seven wonders of the world that is dedicated to romance — the Taj Mahal at Agra — from where not far is the hinterland that is the hotbed of forced marriages. Most marriages are presumed to be arranged at a tender age without any consent of those being married. In the case of women, their consent is attached with the will of the father or family elders. When the will is defied by elopement with men of other castes, or with a distant cousin — easy to encounter within large feudal clans, fathers punish their daughters with death sanctioned by village or community kangaroo courts. This hypocrisy is disguised behind the very garb of fascination for Shah Jahan's devotion to Mumtaz Mahal and numerous other romances that are then played out in the setting of moonlit nights in every alternate Bollywood movie which Indian families watch with religiosity every Friday. Shades denote colour, and what can be contained between and underneath the shades of skin but blood? The caste system has successfully convinced Indians into believing the existence of competing bloodlines — some purer, others untouchable, a few higher, and a lot many lower and many outside the realm of discussion. These pedigrees are almost debated like those of dogs with certified kennel lines — each bred to a special vocation. But nothing is merrier if a human is bred to perfect, clear skin. Matrimonial columns in the nation's dailies have endless demands from the grooms across India seeking brides with a pinkish tinge or a milky-white complexion. Perhaps in Khurasani's valleys in red, this harvest of skin is illuminated by the pink sky. These then give rise to a series of red etchings called 'Beneath Shades'

and 'Dark Shades' where rivers or molten lava in deep red collect into pools or craters. The red here suddenly is representative of the gathering of women who trickled into a mass of protests during the aftermath of the Delhi rapes. The constant dehumanisation of women is most symptomatic in the choreography of Bollywood songs. It is very common to see the leading duo of an actor and an actress dancing to gyrating tunes surrounded by the pristine mountainscapes of Switzerland or by the sea in Australia accompanied by a troupe of Caucasian dancers who appear out of nowhere dressed scantily in clothes that do not deserve the script, art direction or styling for the movie. Often we hear Right-wing organisations or the random cleric cry hoarse over swimsuit competitions in beauty pageants for Indian women or the length of the skirt an Indian tennis player wears to Wimbledon. But even our film censors and print media such as magazines and newspapers are not shy of films that flaunt Caucasian dancing troupes dressed in bikinis. This is not a call for censorship but to raise the inherent hypocrisy of censor boards that spend hours regulating the lengths of kisses between actors and the depictions of sex but are inherently racist with their acceptance when a person of another race is objectified for box office returns. The families that frequent the movies do not see it as an affront to traditional values of modesty, nor are we surprised or take much notice when publicity material depicting these scenes appear in our daily newspapers. We are blinded by it as we accept a certain lack of modesty that may be alarming if demonstrated by women of our own race. This objectification has its origins in the history of Bollywood. While intimacy was well accepted in the earlier decades of cinema, a flight from modernism and a turn towards the

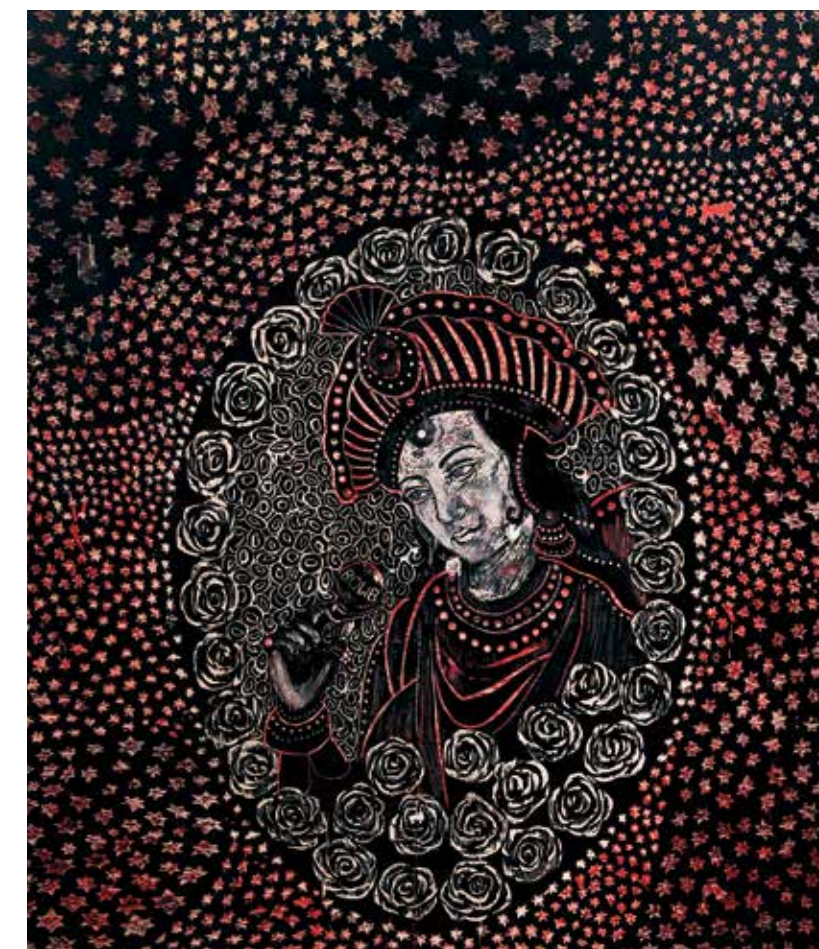
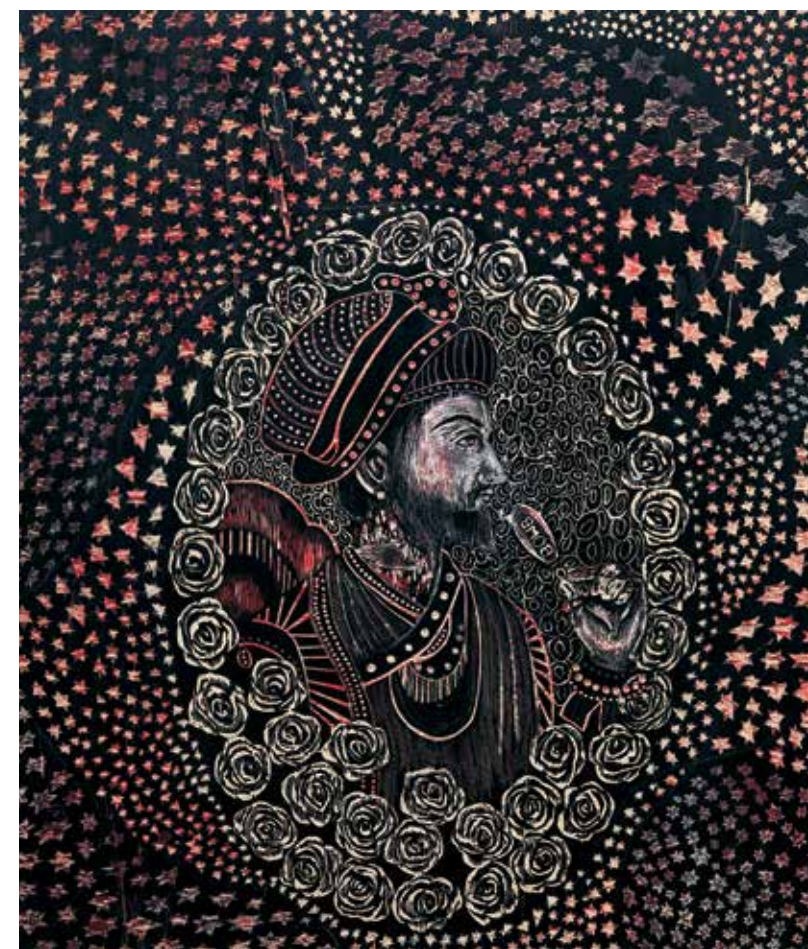
conservative ethos was seen in the 1980s — an era when the Indian economy grappled with the loss of liquidity, and slow growth. Bollywood in the 1980s went through its bleakest phase and was supplemented only by series based on religious epics on government-controlled television. With liberalisation the arena opened up to private distribution of television content and the introduction of cable television. Cinema found new avenues and modes of financing; in this new era of competition, sleaze would sell well. Actresses soon were required to sport complexions that would complement the skin-clearing creams they endorsed. They also began fitting into body types and sizes that are not associated with or expected of South Asian women. Scenes that depicted rape had been on the rise since the 1980s — often woven into the script to demonstrate the chivalry of the actor. Thus a perverse sense of intimacy has risen in a generation exposed to such media which has been very sophisticated in its cinematography, colour gradation and editing. A constrained, rigid and conservative society that harks on patriarchy using the cudgels of tradition is one that is always morally debased under its skin. Khurasani grates into her woodcuts, symbolically unearthing those layers to reveal our uncomfortable truths.

Misogyny is not only at home in India. It is not representative of any culture or enshrined in the tenets of any religion, though all organised religion has tried to deal with womankind placing the guilt of temptation and sin on them. Honour is often equated to the ownership and safeguarding of women, gold and land. Most societies demonstrate this ownership with fervour, speaking on behalf of those who have the right over their own lives and their individual voices. The debate on misogyny and its cultural attributes almost always takes on cultural attributes and cherry-picking for prosecution and demonising of a certain people. It is common to hear of those lamenting immigration or espousing the cause for war to champion their cause as a respite for women from misogyny and barbaric

alien traditions. A recent debate on a European television station saw arguments between a group of experts who tried to associate female genital mutilation to be an Islamic problem that would engulf the Occident and was argued by group of self-professed Muslim moderates as an issue confined to Africa and not to Islam. The debate was aimed at building consensus to keep refugees out of Europe and thus the *hijab* and other attributes one often associates with the suppression of women rights in the Orient were seen legitimate in their vocabulary to espouse concerns that were largely Islamophobic and racist. The Muslim moderates felt no scruples in demonising immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa; Somalis and Ghanaians didn't share their race, thus not entirely their franchise of the same creed. Genital mutilation is called '*Khulna*' in India and was once widely practised across faiths. No faith advocates a call for such acts — rather it is motivated by the barbaric insecurities of men who fear the sexual gratification of a woman as a threat to their inherent inability to consummate the responsibilities that arise out of a relationship, and the insecurity of failure and the loss of ownership and control they exert over their womenfolk. Khurasani somewhere refers to her own experiences with traditionally mandated ritualistic violence.

The colour red adorns foreheads, trees, corners, temple mounts, sarees and colonially accepted associations with danger — such as fire brigades and emergency exits. But its association with blood might be considered chivalrous or unclear. Purity and access to public life has well defined dimensions in India. Menstruation is still seen as a cause of taboo and ill-luck, menstruating women are banned from temple grounds and kitchens, and in traditional families, the main home. Menstruation is well debated with sanitary pad suppliers drafting their advertisements to champion women's liberation, while apologists for tradition draft long essays on the seclusion of women during the period based on arguments of hygiene, nourishment, and other scientific

**Below: Starry night and explosives, 2011. Woodblocks, 44 x 76 inches**





chicanery. Days are counted by the earth's movement around the sun and the period occurs with ritual proximity to its schedule. Appropriating the grandeur of the Sun's bright red, making it feminine, and countering its unquestioned association with masculinity, Khurasani in her large woodcut spread depicting a riverine flow in a hilly rift, tells us how 'Even the Sun hides when it flows'.

A large woodcut that resembles a ploughed field is aptly named 'Beyond my skin and your soil', and becomes a metaphor of patriarchal greed. Here, the fertile topsoil is excavated, and beneath a woman's body exist planes of neutrality. While the claim of gender neutrality cannot wash away the historic discrimination women have suffered in a male-dominated world, gender neutrality could be practised at the workplace, factoring in the needs that are special to both, where maternity should not be a cursed end to a fertile brain. The fear of barren wombs and the love for virgin lands are burdens that arise when we seek a resource and not replenishment, for emotions are abandoned for biological dysfunctions and economic gains. A male heir, real estate, a constant need to acquire, and eventually, acquisition, blind our visions from what we seek in life. Participating in this heinous crime are other women who subjugate their daughters, and those of others, into lives that satiate the wants of men.

In the history of Social Realism, women have stood by men in the march towards a revolution. These stylistic portraits have much resonance in our concerns for change and the end of the feudal society. The Soviet regime constantly worked towards dismantling traditional modes of society across its republics, specifically in Central Asia. Mao Zedong also catered to the idea of equality and destroyed the notion of the male heir by implementing the one-child policy. But Stalin himself alienated his daughter, sending millions of women to their deaths in purges and ill-fated population exchanges. An equal participation of women was sought in the Cultural Revolution Mao hosted in China, resulting in an equal number of the millions who perished in Mao's social laboratory. The woodcut was the official propaganda material used by the Communists in

China to propagate a new pantheon of men, and first among the equals was Mao. He was often placed in the horizon alongside a red radiant sun. The colour red, associated with Communism, sat well within the Chinese-Confucian traditions that saw it auspicious. Traditional techniques and compositions used by sophisticated traditions of woodcut printing popular in China and Japan lent themselves with ease to the new political reality. Mass-produced paper now could just be pressed on to inked blocks to produce propaganda that was recognised as the only means of artistic expression. The Communist Party of India borrowed these traditions from Japan and from Käthe Kollwitz's revolutionary zeal for workers and pacifism. Chittaprosad, Zainul Abedin, and Somnath Hore documented famines and later, wars, with incredible sensitivity in their drawings for the Communist Party across India and Bangladesh. Khurasani is aware of these traditions but rather ignores the authorship of the colour red that lies with the Communist factions. She does so because in the quest for land in India's central tribal belt, women face sexual violence at the hands of the state and the guerillas. The pantheon in Mao's red woodcuts never depicts a woman who keeps equal voice in the politburo, and the discourse somehow always ends up discussing land. Therefore in her diptych 'And this burning land belongs to you' (, she balances the rising sun and the mountain range with a valley that finds its basin in a crater — enacting a relationship between the landscape and a woman's body.

'Land-escapes', another woodcut of the same body of work, follows a similar trajectory where the crater is a halo around a growth of flowers. An early landscape from 2013 that exists as four small canvases is reminiscent of the poet Etel Adnan's candy-coloured elementary depictions of her native Lebanon. Those abstract landscapes gave Adnan a voice to discuss alienation and displacement in a society fractured by language and religion. Such expression is an escape for Khurasani. The four canvases have a cobalt blue hue for the mountain ranges and a pink sky that together lead up to fields of roses that are placed like poppies. These works are the essence of



**Left: Flushing fields, 2015. Acrylic on paper, 17 x 17 inches (each). Above: Beneath shades never fades, 2014. Woodcut print on paper, 30 x 50 inches**

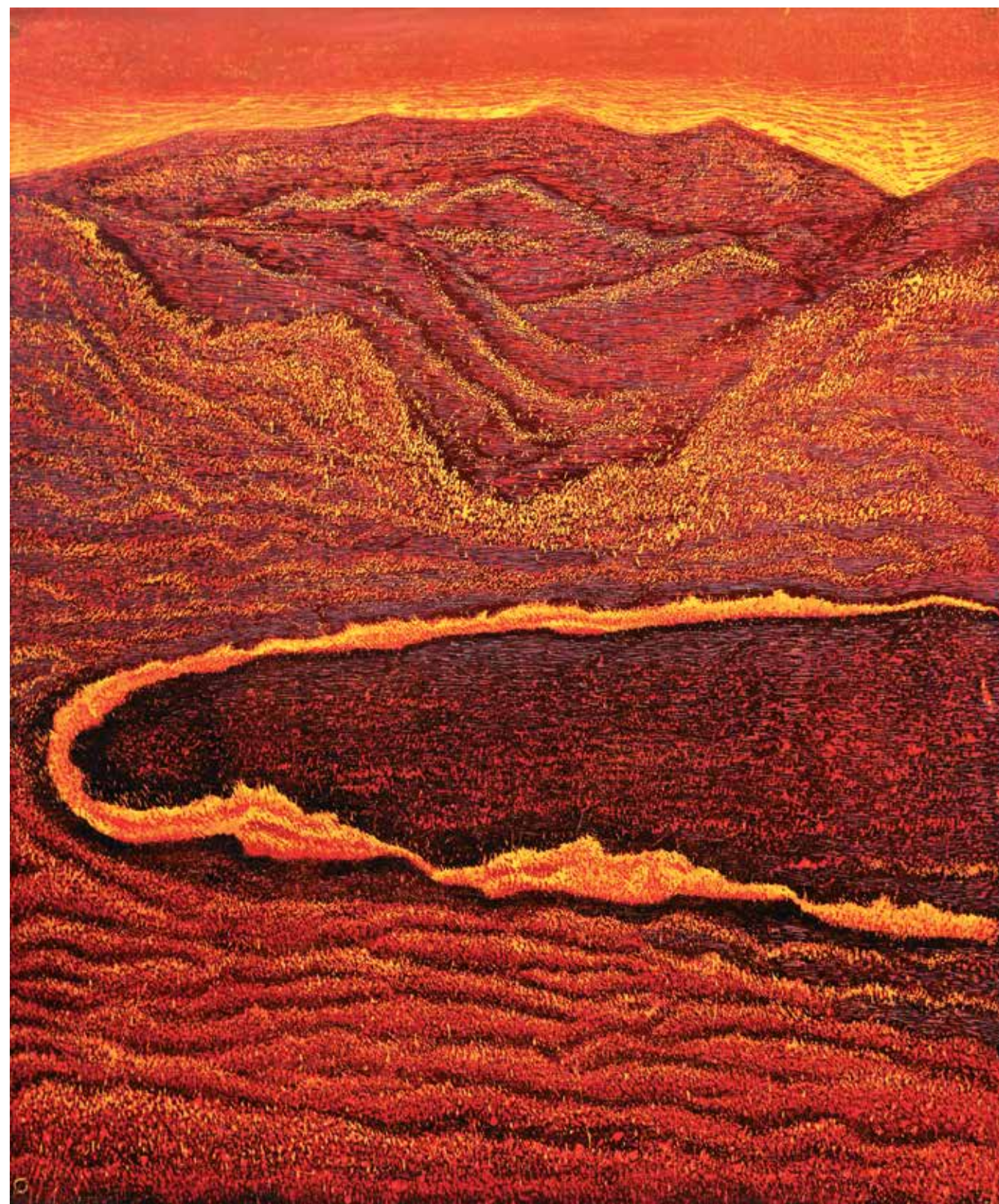


Khurasani's 'Cratered Fiction' where magical realism narrates a concerned layered voice of feminism. A set of etchings in grisaille called 'Vigil in between' are nightscapes of her imagination where the vigil is synonymous with the protection feminist solidarity provides with an alert vision. Earlier this year Khurasani participated in a state-sponsored printmaking camp — a participation among many known printmakers from across India. Here she created the first of many craters that were to come. The woodblock that measures 20 inches by 16 inches in the format of a portrait depicts a crater compounded by a volcano. Her last solo show at TARQ was synonymous with the volcano; in her present exhibition, the volcano is dormant but latent with energy and nourishment. Craters can relate to her anxiety that manifests in abrasions on her skin, gentle troughs of disgust and pain. Or rather the crater is a singular metaphor to the vagina. This visual vocabulary ascertains the artist's continuous placement of herself as the landscape she sculpts on her woodblocks. When placed together they manifest into an architectural setting that engulfs the viewer like the narrow corridors of the Kamakhya Devi temple in Guwahati, Assam in Eastern India. The temple is designed to be humid with smooth walls that curve and is dark with rays of light that

lead you into the sanctorum that houses a wet trough filled with vermilion-coloured water. The entirety of the visit often reminds us of a walk through a mother's womb. Such is the belief in the divinity of the space that it shuts each year ritually to allow the Goddess to menstruate. 'Beneath shades never fades' ends the conceptual cycle that began with Khurasani's woodblock from January 2015.

A set of 12 etchings depict the shades of being feminine. What is described as feminine by Khurasani might not encompass the various understandings of the word. For Khurasani it is a continuous search in her own being to understand her own complexity with an issue that now defines her current oeuvre of works. Thus as a comment to allow her viewers their voice in her works, she engraves 12 stanzas in the form of etchings to allow an open-ended conversation in order to include all that she has missed out on. For this is a fictional response to atrocities that she has not witnessed but imagined in courageous empathy. In late 2014 Sughra Khurasani opened a solo show, 'Reclaiming Voices' at Kalakriti Art Gallery, curated by Noman Ammouri in the city of Hyderabad. This exhibition happened after the partitioning of her home state, Andhra Pradesh, into the newly formed state of Telangana that



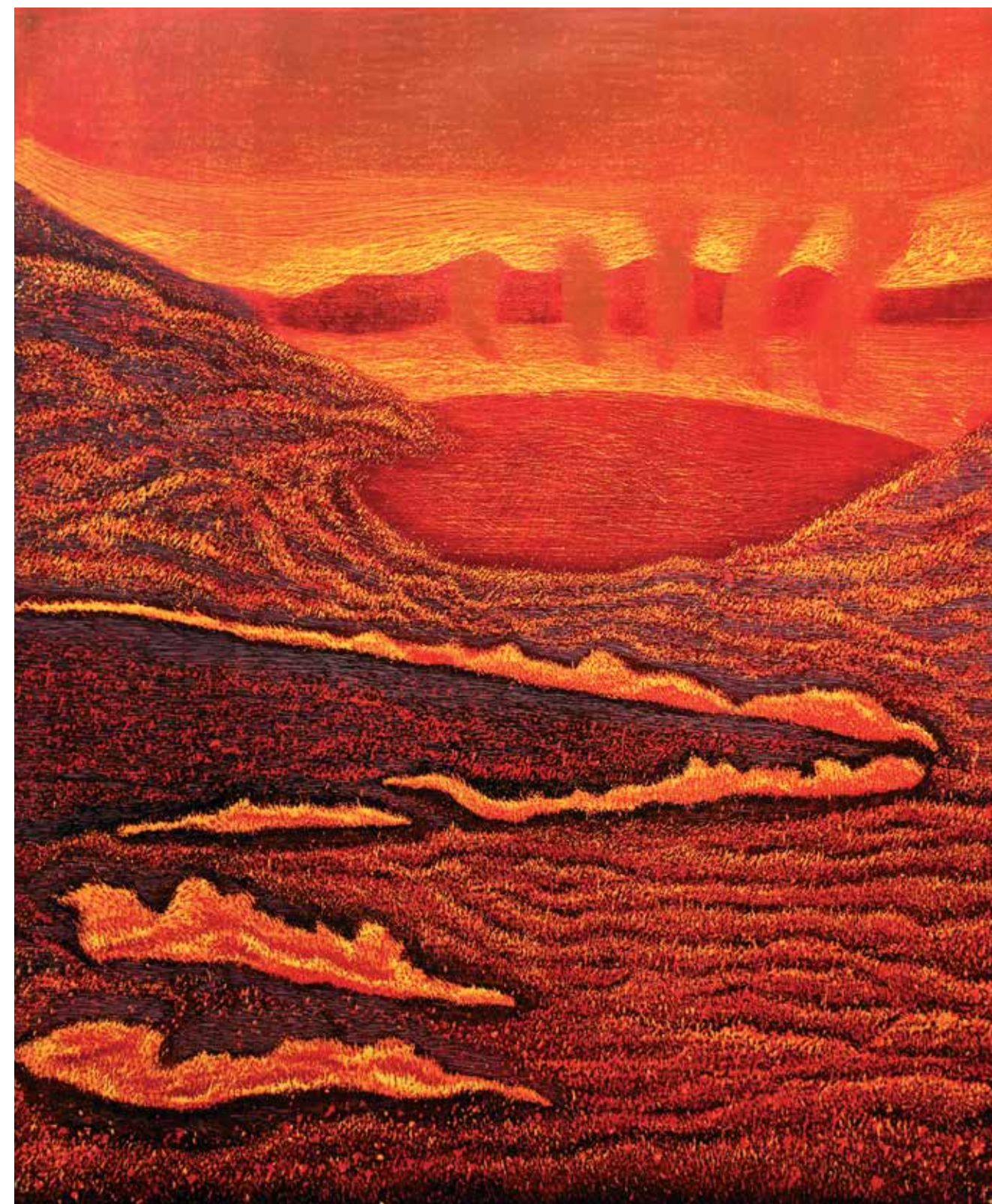


had Hyderabad as its capital, leaving Andhra Pradesh to contend with the coastal areas. She comes from Visakhapatnam a city on India's Eastern coast and remained with Andhra Pradesh. The show was boycotted by local artists from Telangana who censored the right to show an artist from Andhra Pradesh, citing parochial interests and discrimination meted out to them during in the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh. Khurasani's and Ammouri's efforts were addressing these very divisions that claimed lives throughout the history of India since its own partition that had created resultant communal fault lines. The snub that was meted out to her confirmed her resolve to counter the politics of ignoring the voices of women by politicians who drum up emotions to pander to parochial and communal issues.

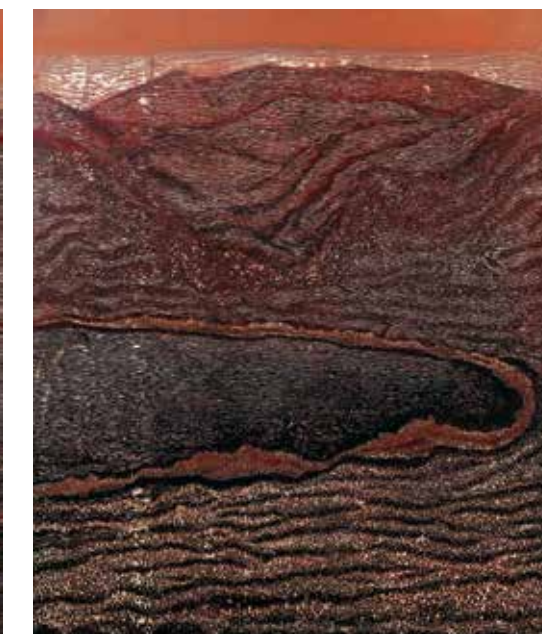
The solo project of Soghra Khurasani, 'Cratered Fiction', is part of a citywide arts festival called 'Liberty Taken'. Conceptualised before the terror attacks in Paris, 'Liberty Taken' sought to explore

the ideas of liberty in terms of visual content and infrastructure for its distribution — occupying cinemas, art schools, art spaces and galleries. 'Liberty' in the context of Khurasani is literally 'Taken' away in the annals of violence and predation women have to face on our streets, turning the cityscape into a network of labyrinths that have boundaries and limitations that are only visible to women. Your writer also takes the liberty to respond to a body of works where his voice does not find easy legitimacy as he himself was conditioned in an environment that bred misogyny. This liberty is based on his observations, accounts he has heard from women, and his own faltering with various misogynies. Soghra Khurasani presents a relay of landscapes that urge a catharsis that can come about by allowing women to be heard in equal voices. For it is men who suffer too under the duress of a society that is repressed and relentless in its acts of discrimination. Radical art, political practice in the visual arts and social justice and eventual change

cannot exist without addressing the alienation of women. 'Cratered Fiction' exists as a narrative of surreal landscapes that speak in multiple layers of imagination that refuse to reveal themselves with ease; rather they expect a debate on the concerns they project. @



**Above: And this burning land belongs to you, 2015. Woodcut print on paper, 48 x 40 inches. Right: Land-escapes, 2015. Woodblocks, 48 x 120 inches**



The exhibition Cratered Fiction by Soghra Khurasani was curated by Sumesh Sharma. It was on show from 11 December, 2015 to 16 January, 2016 at TARQ Gallery, Mumbai. Cratered Fiction was part of 'Liberty Taken', a festival of the arts that took place at different spaces across Mumbai. It was a collaborative project of Clark House Initiative and TARQ Gallery, Mumbai.