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The Looming Legacy

Weaving tapestries of varied scales, materials and textures



Rosalyn D'Mello | 02 Apr, 2021



Pentagrams White by Boshudhara Mukherjee (Courtesy: Tarq)

The qualifier ‘tapestry-like’ is used to describe the large-scale installations by the artist Boshudhara Mukherjee (who prefers to go by her first name) that populate her ongoing solo at TARQ, Mumbai, titled *The Familiars* (until 24 April, 2021). Boshudhara’s reference to tapestry is not literal, in that, she doesn’t actually use either a vertical or horizontal loom. Her installations are hand-woven using her own shredded canvases and recently, post-lockdown, fabric and textile discards.

Boshudhara began using weaving techniques back in 2007, while doing her Master’s at The Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), Vadodara. “I always loved crafts and had been experimenting with different techniques like using resists, scratching out drawings on the surface of my canvas, stitching, etcetera. This idea just worked, it clicked and I knew it had found me,” she says over an email. Scrolling through her current work and zooming in on the immense and laborious detailing, it’s clear that she is not exactly interested in treating the canvas as a surface upon which to paint so much as in its textile properties; its fibrous elements. “I wanted to play with its materiality,” she writes, hypothesising that her decision to weave was perhaps born out of a restlessness, a desire to experiment and a need to “break out” of the rectangular frame while still celebrating the canvas. “Since then, of course, the work has evolved in form, scale, material and texture,” she adds.

Painting was the subject of her Master’s degree. Formally speaking, she had never ‘learned’ to weave beyond the craft assignments in school that require students to weave paper mats. She supposes that her relationship with the technique evolved from her memory of “a very basic understanding” of how strips of paper could move together to create a surface. In fact, the woven paper mats do serve as a guide to what tapestry essentially involves. The vertical strips laid as the surface connote the warp, while the individually assembled strips that alternate above and under each warp, constituting strand serve as the weft. The two axes comprise the fundamentals of the ‘loom,’ which could be understood as a holding frame. While paper has an inherent firmness that lets it stay in place through the process, these

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unread s relative lightness makes one more dependent on a machine, like the loom, to hold it in place; a beater, or a reed, a fork-like apparatus is necessary to regulate the tension between threads and to pat down the weft. Given that Boshudhara essentially builds her woven installation using a range of media, one can see why she hand-weaves. Like many female artists, she inherited slow-stitching skills from her grandmother, mother, and aunt. “My hands were trained to think and work with material,” she writes. “This, merged with art school learning, has helped me evolve my style.”



Mauna Kea by Monika Correa (Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary)

While the lineage of her technique is assuredly female, the inspiration for this body of work is feline. Boshudhara draws from her observations of her cats and their movements. She quotes from Lewis Piaget Shanks’ 1931 translation of Charles Baudelaire’s *Le Chat* from his 1857 collection, *Fleurs du mal*, ‘She prowls around my shadowy brain / as though it were her dwelling place /— a great soft beast of charming ways, / meowing in a mellow strain.’ One glimpses the finesse of her recording of the lithe bodily movements of Ubu, for instance, whom she refers to as a silver-grey ‘mackerel tabby’ in the installation, *ubu*, a 15.5 x 8-feet, 2019 work that attempts, like Baudelaire’s poem, to capture the essence of her companion animal. She builds a recurring motif out of Ubu’s black, triangular patterned coat. ‘The work tries to reflect this shy, handsome, moody creature with a complex soul,’ reads part of the caption. The ‘tapestry-like’ installation does in fact convey a sense of invisible movement, to her credit. But most intriguingly, Boshudhara complicates the premise so that the work is not just about a person obsessed with her cats, rather, an artist who conjures up her co-habitation within an other-than-human sensual universe. Her cats are her companion creatures. The title, ‘*The Familiars*’ is a reference to witchcraft, the entity in question comprising a range of ‘spirit guides’ who presumably assume the form of an animal or a human to guide individuals by serving as protectors or guardians. Boshudhara sees her artworks as an alter-ego created by her, yet, self-determining, organically growing entities following their own predestined path.

Boshudhara creates her tapestry-like work upon the floor of her studio, using free-style weaving techniques. “The main implements are my hands,” she says. Other implements involve a stapler and a scissor. The new work incorporates crochet elements for the first time. She uses either a size 7 or 4.5 hook, depending on the texture she’s after, to create the mesh that serves to contain and connect various found or collage elements. Each piece takes between three to four months to complete. “There is no segregated area or time. The work builds and grows with life and daily chores happening around it, bearing witness to the ups and downs, and the mundane. This I think is why me and *mine* become such an intrinsic part of each piece,” she adds. “The work develops organically. I usually have a starting point, which could be a colour or a fabric that I want to use, and the work slowly develops layers and grows out of that. Each day the focus is completely on the task at hand. It is about having deep faith that at the end, somehow, it will all come together the way it is meant to.”

GIVEN THE time-consuming dimension inherent to the medium of tapestry, not to mention the bodily mechanics involved in either sitting on the floor to hand-weave, or in front of a loom, it isn’t as commonly practised as painting. Making a tapestry involves ‘back-breaking’ work. One has to manoeuvre a series of coordinated, synchronised weft movements in order to set-up and allow even the simplest pattern to manifest. Additionally, one is frequently working with the reverse image, since the ‘right side’ is always facing away from the person at the loom. Many

weavers use mirrors to circumvent this perspectival challenge. One also needs prep to create one's preferred coloured scheme in the weft. Some of these complexities have become more apparent to me through my regular voyeuristic engagements with Alyssa Phoebus Mumtaz who chronicles them online. I'd encountered her drawings once at the Mumbai-based gallery, Jhaveri Contemporary and was in fact struck by how she frequently demarcated the warp, rendering them visible by punctuating their structure, otherwise swallowed by the weft. Mumtaz writes with humility about her attempts with the loom using implements she inherited from her dear friend who had begun her practice some 40 years ago. In November 2020, Mumtaz chronicled her first few woven inches, a feat for any beginner. Even the best, most practised weavers frequently spend numerous hours weaving about one inch of fabric. In a post she elaborated upon a photograph after setting up her warp. 'In this weaving method, the warp, the vertical inner architecture of the textile, is formed by a single unbroken strand of hand-spun wool looped in a precise figure eight formation... As the weaving progresses it will be completely covered by the weft.'



Daphne Fibre and twigs by Priya Ravish Mehra (Courtesy: Gallery Threshold)

Mumtaz's processual insights into the meditative aspects of the tapestry medium alerted me to the wide range of ingenious methods by which artists improvise upon technical elements of the craft in order to exert agency over the process. Boshudhara, for instance, creates a structural framework by patching her constituting elements on the floor in order to then cut off strips which she then weaves with her hands, making her body the holding ground. Mumtaz works with a vertical loom that stands harp-like upon her working area.

MONIKA CORREA, among the pioneering contemporary practitioners of the medium in South Asia, imagines the tapestry as a canvas, inflecting it with movement using a loom whose structure was possibly influenced by the drawings given to her by the person who facilitated her technical introduction to tapestry, the Finnish-American textile artist, Marianne Strengell. She met Strengell in 1962, when she had accompanied her husband, Charles to Boston. Correa had been struck by Rya rugs she'd seen on a trip to Finland a month before. She eventually trained at the Weaver's Service Centre, in Mumbai. Her historic innovation has been her re-engineering of the reed. She got a carpenter to chop off its top, comprising iron filings stuck with tar, allowing her to then take the wooden rack and screw it on. Being able to unscrew at will meant she was able to extricate the reed according to her whim. She could allow wefts to collect and then, by shifting the reed could displace them slightly, thus allowing for a sense of movement within the weave. This explains the brilliance of a work like her 2019, *Dudhsagar Falls*, which is a marvellous iteration of how Correa manipulates thread to achieve the effect of gravitational force, using a medium that historically held static elements of patterns. The work has been recently acquired by the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



“My hands were

Given the immensity of time and labour each piece demands, it's not every day that one gets to encounter a tapestry by Correa. That her work has got the recognition it deserves is thanks to Shireen Gandhi of Chemould Prescott Road, who convinced her into doing a solo back in 2013, which piqued the interest of Priya and Amrita Jhaveri, who invited her to exhibit her 1980s works as part of an exhibition titled *Approaching Abstraction*. “It

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was the material qualities of the work, along with a dedicated, lifelong engagement with weaving that drew us to Monika’s work,” Priya writes in an email. “The evolution in her practice engaged us as well: a real pioneer, Monika has innovated weaving techniques to create her own language.” Jhaveri notes that at the beginning there was no established market value for her works as there was no developed market for them. “We had to create a market for her work by taking into account her age, the body of remaining works, the growing institutional interest in her work and then make a judgement about pricing.” Jhaveri affirms that Correa’s artistic output has proved critically and commercially successful.

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Besides Correa, another artist without whose interventions any thesis on contemporary explorations of the tapestry medium cannot be imagined is the late Priya Ravish Mehra. Her profound, loving and research-driven artistic practice sealed her legacy. Rightfully so, it was through Mrinalini Mukherjee, another artist who embraced the textile medium (long before either the market or discourse could appreciate its possibilities), that Gallery Threshold director Tuntty Chauhan met Mehra, whom she describes as a “very self-effacing soul”. Chauhan became aware of Mehra’s work as a textile historian. “When I visited her home in Delhi I was drawn to her work, which transcended her practice with textiles,” says Chauhan. Apparently, because of her cancer diagnosis and subsequent chemotherapy, Mehra was soon unable to work with threads as she ran the risk of cutting her fragile skin. “So she started working with paper pulp, gauge, and any and everything that she sourced from her garden... discarded nests, fallen leaves, bark, often repairing and salvaging her own discarded or half-finished weaves,” Chauhan recounts. Mehra poetically expanded the very notion of tapestry, asking us to reconsider the materiality of fibre through her use of paper pulp, thus dissolving the boundaries between the warp and the weft while still structurally referring to them, operating firmly within a tapestry tradition.

Mehra’s swansong in 2017, a solo *Presence in Absence* was curated by Chauhan at Gallery Threshold, and included works made by her from 2014 until 2017. In the catalogue, Mehra recounts the genesis of the work—her obsession with the *rafoogars* who excelled at darning antique Kashmiri kani shawls which are typically made on a loom and have been historically produced in her hometown, Najibabad. Mehra was drawing on the inscribed metaphor of healing within their gesture of mending, imagining her artistic interventions with paper pulp and other media as part of a conspiratorial process of self-healing. Chauhan phrases it poetically, referring to her as a ‘*rafoogari*’ of her own body. “It sucked me in... it was challenging but I was drawn to it and I offered her a show with no idea that this was going to change the course of her life. She was overwhelmed with the response and am glad she saw this before she passed on. She deserved it,” writes Chauhan.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rosalyn D'Mello
Rosalyn D'Mello is an art critic and the author of A Handbook For My Lover

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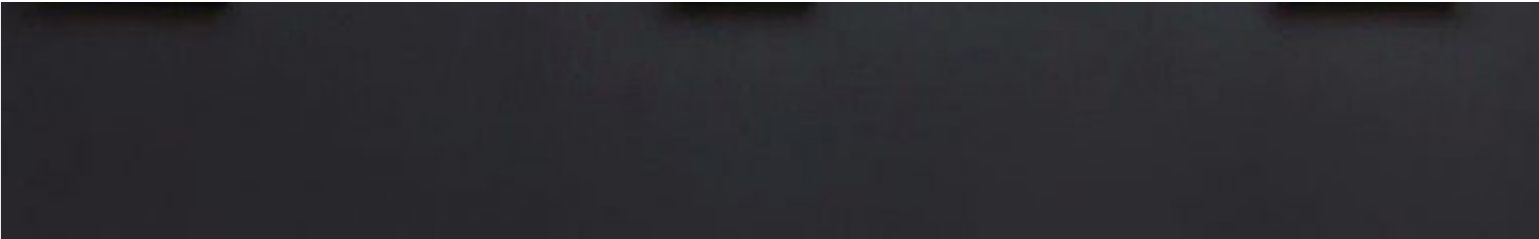
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