

# Vishwa Shroff

April 2021

*“... [I]n this post-colonial attempt to reconcile, I am looking for material remains of that which recall the shared and exchanged. I am therefore looking at spaces and places that were built between the 1870s and 1960s, as they hold within them physical evidence of what makes me familiar with Bombay, London, Hong Kong and Sydney all at once, whilst they speak of the time that has passed between then and now, in the alterations they have sustained.”*

[Vishwa Shroff's](#) artistic practise is firmly rooted in drawing, with a proclivity towards architectural forms that serve as compelling take-off points for a deeper contemplation on memory and our relationship with the material world. Her works seek to explore the narratives of lived experiences that lay embedded within surfaces. Shroff trained at The Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU, Baroda in 2002 and at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (UK) in 2003. She has had seven solo exhibitions in India, UK and USA, including the recently concluded *Folly Measures* at Tarq, Mumbai as well as several group shows. She has participated in several artist residencies, most recently at the Swiss Cottage Library in Camden 2017, London and as been the recipient of the UNESCO–Aschberg Bursaries for Artists in 2011 and the Josuken Housing Research Grant in 2020 . Her work was part of TARQ's presentation at India Art Fair 2017 and Art Basel Hong Kong 2018. Shroff is currently the co-director of [SqW:Lab](#). She lives and works between Mumbai and Tokyo.





Image courtesy of the artist



*Folly Measures*, 2020

TARQ Gallery installation image

Image courtesy of the artist and [TARQ | gallery website](#)

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Vishwa Shroff's work explores spatial and narrative possibilities of Urban and architectural scenarios. The subtle metamorphosis that denotes an in-between and a (simultaneously) specific moment in time are recorded through drawings. This act of drawing the markings and physical manifestations of usage, the cracks and discolorations that appear as scars in these architectural spaces, are understood as durational dialogs between the building and those that have passed through them.

The attentions with which these objects are perceived generate a record of isolated artefacts that have developed in space and time. The shifting balance between permanence and transition is evocative of life that once existed, of neighbourhood anecdotes and landmarks, whilst the buildings become a repository of its own history. These spaces and places have a momentary and uncertain existence that allow them to be construed as chronicles of Linear time, encompassing the days, weeks and months that have passed between then and now and as a continuum. They are perceived as temporal maps of architectural fashions, memorials to alterations of that space which is intentionally conceived, mutates and is in a constant state of flux.

The drawing method attempts to synchronise the act of looking. It follows the eye as it shifts from one object to the next, whilst Shroff consider the evolution in representing space or architecture or city that have been employed from about the mid 1800's: how drawing is experienced or how what is drawn is experienced. The simplicity of the drawing technique is complimented by the complexities of the form, like paper Victorian toy theatres, the assemblage of the paper layers and the play involved in this making process allows narration to become a game in the mind of the viewer to play as one would with a doll house or Lego, permitting narrative constructs and micro stories to appear where they are not particularly intended.



Shroff Vishwa: work in progress

Image courtesy of the artist and TARQ

## IN DISCUSSION

**Amrit Singh Sandhu** / Thank you for giving me your time to be a part of this project. It's really exciting for me because I'm from Chandigarh but I don't really have any connections to the art world back home in India. Talking to you is a big opportunity for me to learn more about the creative minds in our rich country, like yourself.

First of all, your work is beautiful! The attention to detail and precision in your work suggests patience and consciousness. I can imagine that for you creating these works of art is a meditative process. Your work depicts memory, not through representation of people but instead through the marks they leave behind in the space around them, which I find very fascinating. The spaces have their own character and atmosphere — like there is a presence in the absence.

I'm curious about your process. How do you choose these spaces? Are they linked to your own personal memories or are they elements that help convey a particular message?

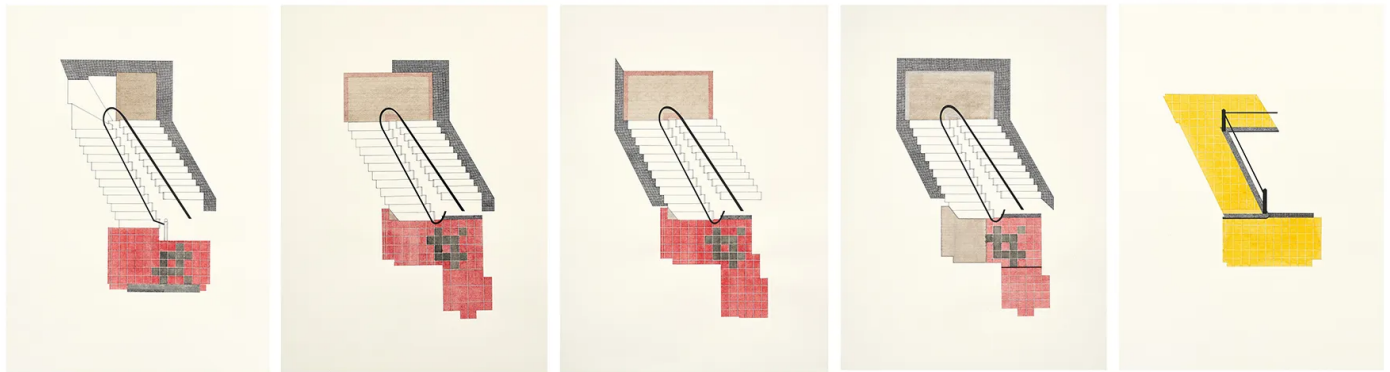
**Vishwa Shroff** / Chandigarh is, to my mind, an architectural mecca that I haven't been to as an adult and am hoping to be able to visit soon. It is somehow thrilling to be speaking to someone who is from The Indian Modernist city. I wonder if you lived there and what that was like??

Jumping straight into your questions: My interest in architecture, especially (but not limited to) domestic architecture, started with my parents constructing a new home for themselves. Not only did this throw me into the deep end of the process of making a house, but the ultimate move from the house I grew up in to the one where I visit now, has had me thinking about how, even without its occupants, homes and other buildings become repositories of memories of those that have passed through them. In my mind then, spaces and places have a momentary and uncertain existence that allow them to be construed as chronicles of Linear time, encompassing the days, weeks and months that have passed between then and now, as a continuum. They are perceived as temporal maps of architectural fashions, memorials to alterations of that space which is intentionally conceived, mutates and is in a constant state of flux. Moreover, I have been interested in the massive exchange that took place during the colonial period. By no means am I overlooking, or underestimating, or romanticizing the evils of the Raj but it did, for better and for worse, change food habits, dining protocols, fashions, language, referential anecdotes, architecture, domestic floor plans, kitchens and just about



everything else. It left us confused in some ways and determined in others. Now in this post-colonial attempt to reconcile, I am looking for material remains of that which recalls the shared and exchanged. I am therefore looking at spaces and places that were built between the 1870s and 1960s, as they hold within them physical evidence of what makes me familiar with Bombay, London, Hong Kong and Sydney all at once, whilst they speak of the time that has passed between then and now, in the alterations they have sustained.

With the *Partywalls Series*, 2012–ongoing, while this interest still holds true, I am furthering my quest towards personal spaces that hold evidence of a previous existence — a structure which was, and will soon be replaced. The momentary existence is suggestive of that interlude that exists only in this time. Unlike historical buildings, they are destined to be superseded and are reminiscent of the attention with which we observe. The evolutionary nature of Partisan walls, ladles them with a preordained notion of ephemeral histories akin to oral traditions that are retold and literally built up. Therefore, drawings of these walls is a personal attempt to register or catalogue transitory pauses that occur in the process, as certain artifacts become part of the city's memory and new ones are yet to emerge.



*Bombay Stairwell Series 1*, 2019

Ink and Watercolour on Paper

18.7 x 13.8 inches (each)

Image courtesy of the artist and TARQ

**AS** / I agree with words not being enough to describe one's process and journey but you've given such a great window into your vision. It's interesting that you talk about recording the "in-betweens." Historic monuments were made to be symbolic of a particular time; they have stillness to them. But an evolving society can be better realized through the daily life, spaces people occupy and, as you mentioned, the gap between the structures that existed and that are yet to emerge, threading them to other parts of the world.

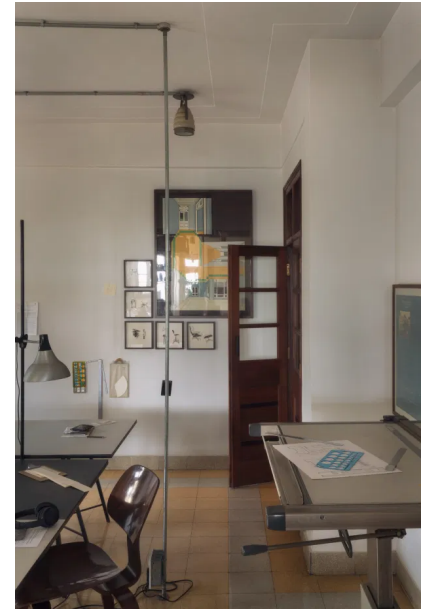
Now with technology — another product of the west colonizing in a different way and promoting the idea of convenience — it's become so easy to log everything with camera phone in hand and social media documentation that lives forever on the interweb. How does this affect your choice of medium and your practice overall?

Yes! I was born and brought up in Chandigarh and moved to New York for college almost five years ago. It's so good to hear your excitement for Chandigarh. I didn't really travel outside the city so growing up I thought that's what the rest of India looked like. But now that my family has moved to Amritsar and I moved to NYC, I can see the differences. I have always wanted to travel to Mumbai, it's one of my father's favorite places to visit and see the architecture.

**VS** / I have always thought of the question of photography as age old, one that keeps resurfacing as photography becomes more accessible. But fundamentally I think the question has remained unchanged since the beginning of photography. Having said that, it is a medium that has intimidated and aided me. Intimidated, perhaps because I grew up looking at photographs of Jyoti Bhatt, Nasreen Mohammedi, Raghav Kaneria and the likes, and never thought that the frames I was composing did justice either to the medium (in the way that these artists' photographs did) nor to the way my eye was looking. I sometimes think that my eye never learnt to look through the viewfinder frame and kept wandering. Drawing permits me to explore this very wandering.

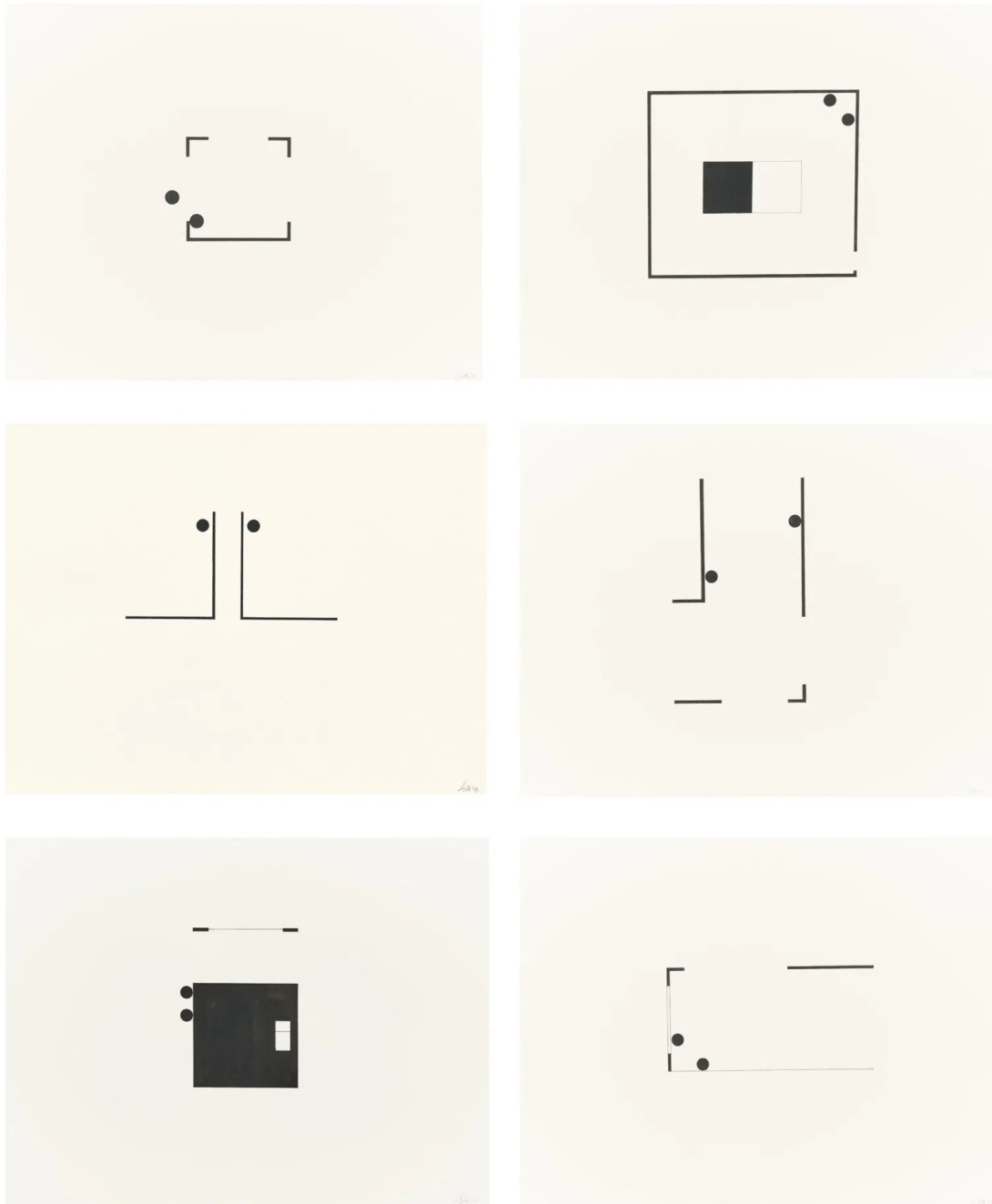
Drawing, has become a personal challenge and exploration. It has allowed me manipulations and combinations of techniques that become suggestive of eye's and body's movement through space. It even permits omitting, which makes for interesting compositional decisions. That is not to undermine photography's potential or its post-production potential as David Hockey has so successfully done. I do use the quick snapshot of the iPhone to bring back the spaces I visit into my studio as reference material or data that I draw from. Moreover, it is studio photography that has fascinated me. I have referenced and stylistically copied the theatricality of backdrops, especially painted backdrops or photographs that are painted on.

A few years ago, on a trip to Rajasthan, I had discovered portraits of Rajas that were photographed, painted, cut to silhouette, and stuck on board, making them rather sculptural and standing alone in the space they occupied, or one could say, taking on its current surroundings as part of the frame. I have used this technique, with drawing, cutting them out of the paper to see what it will do if the white space is removed and forcefully made to be the object that it represents. I suppose in that way, I have had a close relationship with photography although I do not use it as a medium directly. Works of artists, such as Waswo X. Waswo, continue to inspire and challenge my compositional understanding and help me push my own boundaries towards what drawing can do.



Vishwa Shroff: studio

Image: Fabien Charuau



*Everyday Rossana*, 2018

Ink on Paper, 10 x 12.9 in. (each)

Image courtesy of the artist and TARQ

**AS** / It's visible in your work that you open and unfold those spaces using a combination of perspectives to show a panorama view of your thoughts. I can see your process and research being similar from the way you use different mediums and techniques to support the medium in which you choose to present your finished work.

I'm glad you brought up the cutouts because I am very fascinated by *Memories Of A Known City*, 2012, where you bring your drawings to a life-size interactive form, while still maintaining the two-dimensional drawing aspect. In a way, they come out of the frame and become alive and tangible while altering their surroundings to exist. They are replicas but they also become their own thing that exists in that particular time and space. You had a similar approach for your set design for *Guards at the Taj*, 2017. How do you find turning memories of physical spaces back into a representational interactive space?

**VS** / The cut-outs have, so far, led to two realizations. One, they serve to become objects in their own right, adopting their surroundings, whilst allowing me to emphasize the object's identity. The act of cutting then gives the drawing a certain weight. The second purpose has been to convey transparency and a sense of continuation.

With *Memories Of A Known City* and more recently *His-story Project, 2019*, I have employed the cut-out in the first sense. The rearrangement of objects, paired with onsite drawing, is aimed at distorting perceptions of time. I have been interested in what Brian Dillon in his essay “A Short Story of Decay” eloquently writes, “The ruin is not a site of melancholy or mourning but of radical Potential.” It is this sentiment that permits us, I hope, to view the transformations of buildings with a sense of excavation in their interim. A perceived unearthing of physical evidence of a bygone that lives only in mnemonic discourse or as assigned historic lineage that it is destined to become. Both the projects generated drawings that were intended to instantly root the viewer into an awareness of the space that they are standing in, echoing notions of discovery. At the same time, they gave the buildings an assumed genealogy and drawings that masquerade as evidence of an archaeological process. However, the site-specific floor work displaces this immediacy of time to tumble back into history, leaving one to wonder whether these drawn tiles are markers of architectural residues, or an intervention to add to the history of this space.

In *Room, 2011*; *Postulating Premises, 2015*; *Corridor Project, 2015*; and *Windows Project, 2014*, I have used the cut outs in their second sense, where they indicate either transparency, or continuation, or layering. One behind the other that is partially revealed and waiting. Waiting for that turn of page, or peep, or a walk behind. In some way they emulate my restlessness, and the repositioning of the body with a thirst to scrutinize every inch, survey every corner and dekho (see) every detail. The restlessness is then as much an object held in the room as the furniture and furnishings, characteristic of a new, temporary inhabitant. The endeavour is to transfer this optic and corporeal manoeuvrings.

*Guards At The Taj* was a different matter. Here the drawings were made post-production to the set, which responded to the script.

## *“The ruin is not a site of melancholy or mourning but of radical Potential”*

*Brian Dillon, A Short Story of Decay*

**AS** / You have given a great peek into your vision and process. The intricacies in your work show a meditative process of carefulness and patience. The way you bind history with the tangibility of its traces existing in the present is very fascinating to me. I would love to know more about your studio rituals. How do you prepare and spend your time in the studio? What do you like to surround yourself with when getting into the zone of creating and thinking? Do you notice any habits or traces you leave behind after a workday or end of a project (in the space you’re working in, or your sketchbook, or anywhere else)?

**VS** / I live in my studio or my home is my studio or I work from home, whichever way you put it. It means that transitioning from non-working hours to working hours is seamless. Every time I look at my work space, the mind automatically starts to think, and having a partner that does the same, discussions of life and work have got very intermingled. But to keep the discipline, I observe my studio hours strictly from 10am to 7pm with an hour and a half break at lunch time. At the start of any work, once the thoughts have come together, I start drawing in the sketchbook or on loose sheets of paper, sometimes I use a graph or Axonometric. This is then cleaned up, first to get it to the image I want it to be, then scaled if required, followed by tracing it on the final sheet of paper I will work on and so start the process of masking, adding colour and ink, cutting, re-masking, adding more colour and so on, until I am done. Then the stretched paper is un-mounted and I cut again if required. This is then put in the paper drawers that I am so, so happy to finally have!!

On some days, I read and make notes rather than draw anything at all or write — brain vomit is important to me, to clear my head that sometimes gets stuck in a loop. I listen to music or a podcast or talk radio while I work. I need a chosen noise to mute out the sound of traffic and movements of my dog, cat and sour assistants. Having those headphones on has become a physical indication for the dog that it’s not playtime. Mornings are sometimes spent on catching up on correspondence, accounts, inventories and other such administrative chores that I have pushed back until I have to do them. Sometimes I let this pile get too high or wait until I get an earful from the accountant.

While all this may sound like I work in a lawyer’s chamber, I find that keeping this ritual allows my mind to not be distracted all the time (which it tends to do if I give it the time) and to know at the end of the day that it has been worthwhile. Having said that, I do take little breaks, play with the dog, look for the cat, cook lunch, have a smoke, make tea, get distracted by something I have heard on a podcast and look for the history of ketchup. But by and large, I keep the schedule.

I sit with the laptop in front of me. It is my device of choice for the music and just about everything else that is not possible by hand. He lives here on the desk even if I come and go. So does one penholder with all my essential tools, a caddy with inks, erasers and cables and typewriter, which we initially got on *John Ros’ request*, but has become integral to my fun times. The rest of my equipment sits on a trolley behind me or is hung on the wall and in the storage at the back of the house. I need my studio space and desk to be clutter free when I start every morning, and I suppose it’s the last thing I do before the end of the day. Everything must go back to their homes and the table wiped clean.





*Sunshine 2, 2021*

Ink and watercolour on paper

22.4 x 16 cm (each)

Image courtesy of the artist and TARQ

**AS** / I'm always intrigued by how people describe a day in their lives — their routine, small habits that are sometimes unrealized until one recalls the whole day. The way you illustrate what goes inside the house/studio reminds me of your work and “the in-betweens” we were earlier discussing — how each day is planned the same way but there are those small things and moments that leave different marks.

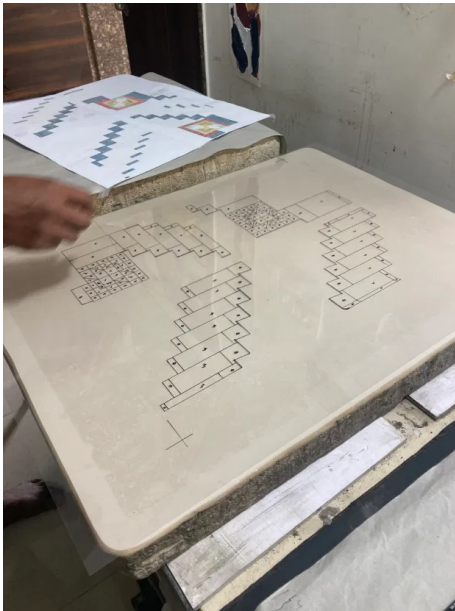
Moving on to what's happening outside our homes in India right now, we are seeing the farmer's protests making history by being the world's largest organized protest. People are united on the streets irrespective of religion, the divide in our society that was recently fueled in 2020 with the new Citizenship Amendment Act. It's been upsetting to see the protestors losing their freedom of expression with barriers on their Internet access, online censorship and a biased media that has made it difficult to find accurate updates on the situation.

Being in New York during the recent protests of Black Lives Movement, I saw a lot of artists and creatives using art as the medium to amplify voices of black people and people of color. Since art is a very powerful mode of political expression, have you seen this movement influence the Indian art world? Has it affected your practice in any way or work of the creatives around you?

**VS** / I could just tell you of course that in India too, artists have responded to recent political upheavals as with the work of [Sameer Kulavoor](#), another [studioVisit](#) that John Ros has done. He is producing work that, if not necessarily positions himself within the protests, are definitely recording them. Ronny Sen is another contemporary, who has been documenting what has been going on through his photography. But to answer your question, I would like to think about what visual material has been done either directly or indirectly for such protests since the Independence movement as I believe that not only has it impacted our visual language but that when we see it, we see it as a curated and comprehensive hindsight. I think that for all that is currently happening, it is too soon to have such a retrospective collection. Works of artists such as Gaganendranath Tagore, when seen now have a more apparent, direct and animated language, but such analysis is made possible only through the body of work seen in its totality. Similarly, I was recently looking at old promotional posters of Air India. As I was scrolling down my screen, I started noticing transformation in the way women are represented. You start with a modern western portrayal and as time goes by it changes into an idea of, or one could even say, for the Indian woman. Air India is responding to a popular language but when you see it as a collection, it's visible how propaganda

affects popular language. I am reminded too of Prof. Vinay Lal's (Professor of History and Asian American Studies at UCLA) analysis of the film 'Dewaar. He points out the transition from the rural to the urban and the impact of partition on Bollywood. In doing so, he points out the cinema's documentation of changes within society as well as its influence on progression. Now, in so much as social media goes, I sometimes think it's actually counterproductive. One sees cute puppies, dinner plates, holiday photos and current affairs with the same passive scroll, or the same surface, which I think dilutes critical conversations. Not to mention, it has taken the trajectory that media (all) seems to follow. What starts out as the voice of the people, as unbiased and objective, documentative, reaches a point when it becomes opinionated and that opinion is of course biased. I don't know how it would be possible for us artists who are currently working and I don't think that tyrannic fear or the systematic silencing that has come with the current political atmosphere is going to mute anyone, especially those of us who have a critique.

With all this on my mind, I believe that both, negation and editing of history goes beyond the cliché, 'History is written by those in power', and see my work as small material evidences of history, akin to oral histories– narratives and anecdotal stories through which I learn my past and navigate my thinking. The ambition is for the work to become record of time and movement as it stands in this moment.



Lithograph work in progress

Image courtesy of artist and [Litholekha](#)

*"While there are clichés that history is of the winning side restored by the ruling, what I find interesting is the small material evidences and domestic histories existing within this. ... This is one of the ways in which I'd like to see my work — for it to become a historic record because these times will get changed, it just needs a new owner."*

**AS** / I find it very interesting when you talk about people responding to popular language and following a path that is driven by what is more socially accepted. It is evident through art history that women have been perceived and represented for centuries as the subject or the muse, rather than the creator itself. And when credited, they are given the title of "women artists" reinforcing the idea that men are the default when talking about artists.

Being born and raised in India myself, I understand how there are predetermined expectations attached to our identity and lifestyle as women, especially with art as a tool for self expression in a society where women expressing their opinion isn't commonly accepted. Along with that, there are challenges that come with being a woman of color for the rest of the world. I want to know your take on the representation of artists who are women in the Indian art community. How do you find being a creative and a woman of color yourself in the art world, both in India and internationally?

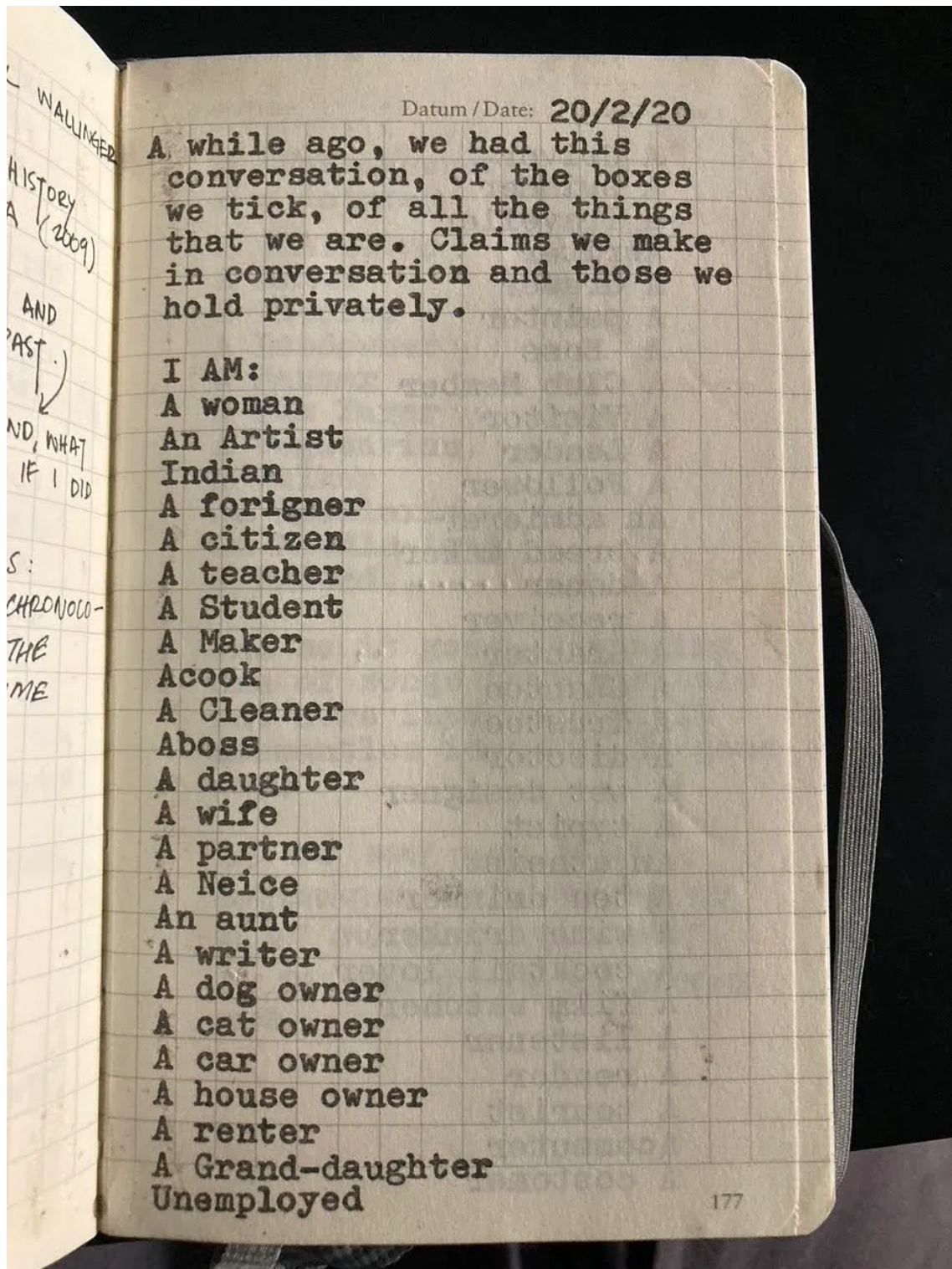
**VS** / On a lighter note, I am reminded of [Calvin and Hobbs](#). "I find my life a lot easier the lower I keep everyone's expectations," says Calvin and I agree. Being a woman, being an Indian, being an artist, as categories are low enough, but being an Indian woman artist puts me in such a low category that external expectations are controlled and I can have more freedom to do as I please. But jokes apart, I do not underestimate my

privilege within these social, economic and political apparatuses that are aimed at dishing out disadvantage to the slightest variant from norms set out by such few that I have sometimes wondered how it is possible at all.

I do not have much to say about representation of artists who are women in the Indian art community, as I think that at least within contemporary art galleries, the concern of the artist, rather than gender are being talked about. Nonetheless, I do believe that any curators or writers who work with gender-based exhibitions or articles must strike a fine balance between providing the 'women' artists with a platform and the possibility that 'women' are further marginalized due to such exhibitions or texts.

For me being an Indian and being a woman are both states of my being that I can take for granted and rest assured that neither can be taken away from me. Therefore, I think that neither needs to be spoken about. I much rather speak of the concerns and narratives that I bring through the work I make. A few years ago, in conversation with [Charlie \(Levine\)](#), I had come to think of the many roles we take on, or play out if you like, depending on the situation we are presented with or put ourselves in. I am many things to many people or the many forms that I fill, and represent myself in lieu of these. For example, to my family, I am a daughter, a niece or an aunt. To them, the artist, the dog owner, etc. are inconsequential. The light I am seen in while with them is that of the relationship I have with them and not outside of it. And just for fun, I made a list of every box I may tick. Every time I see the list, there are things to add and remove. We are not a constant, and we use our 'boxes' as we are required to.

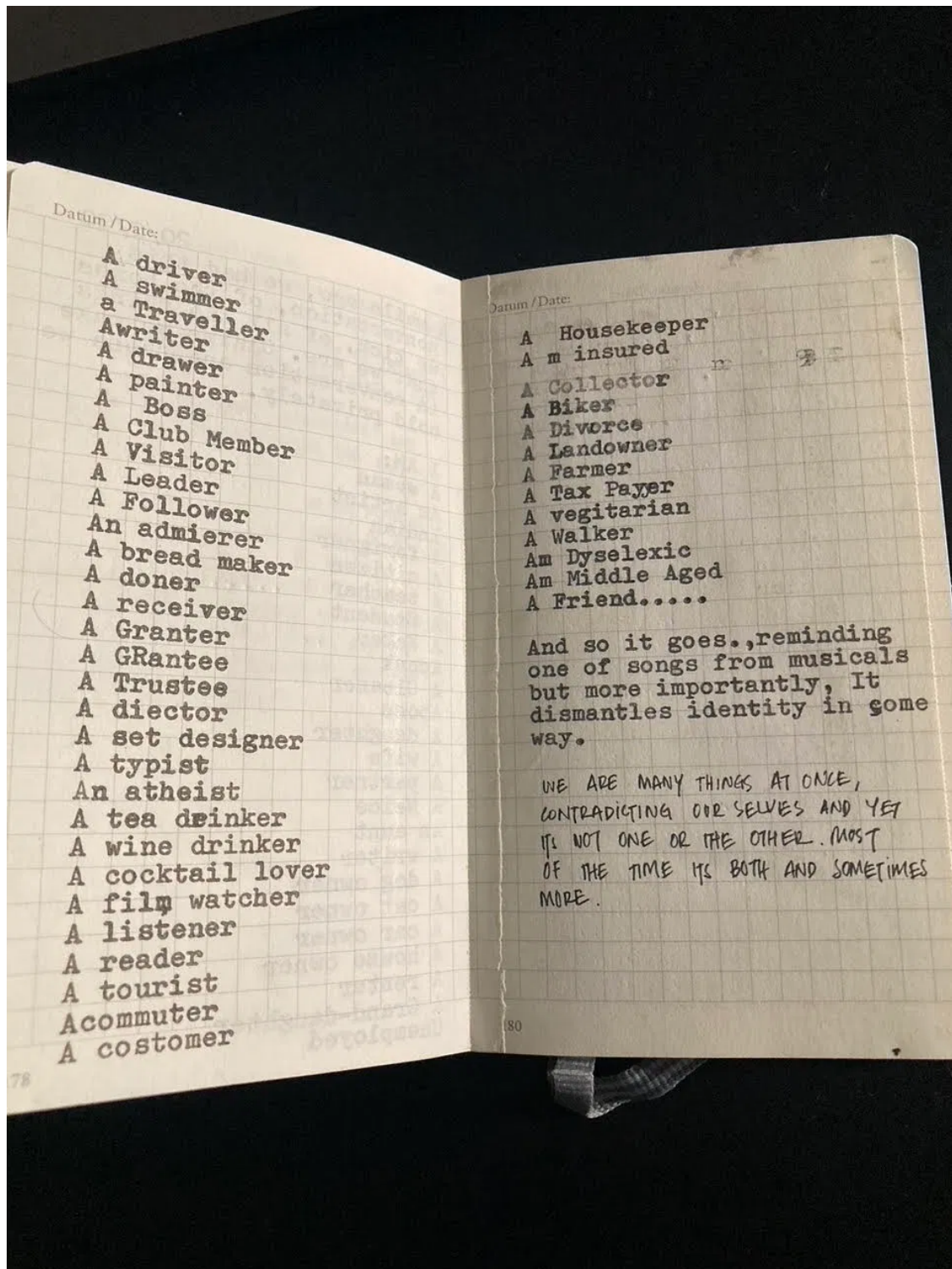




Sketchbook (Traveling project in Collaboration with Charlie Levine)

Image courtesy of the artist and Charlie Levine





Sketchbook (Traveling project in Collaboration with Charlie Levine)

Image courtesy of the artist and Charlie Levine

AS / I love that list! It's helpful especially as a documentation to realize and remind ourselves of the different ways in which we create our mark in our surroundings, intentionally or unintentionally. And what you said about adding and removing, the list evolves as we do. I see our lives as being about giving and receiving, in whatever manner one can interpret that. I think it's so important to be mindful of the ways in which we share our existence with others and the exchanges that happen within that.

Being a part of the art community has helped me realize the importance of collaboration in the form of exchanging ideas, knowledge, providing assistance and guidance, making connections and uplifting each other. It's so fascinating how this learning collaboration can happen irrespective of distance or time, like we are collaborating on this studioVisit being in different time zones! How do you see collaboration being a part of your practice? Are there any recent exciting collaborative projects you have been working on?

VS / Collaborations happen every time there is a convergence of ideas, where the discussion has matured enough to start a project. My most long-standing collaborator has been Architect Katsushi Goto, with whom I share a studio space, and have been in constant conversation with for over 12

years. It has led to many projects including books and essays. Currently, we are working on a research project that focuses on Bombay Art Deco Kitchens. It will culminate in a book and a paper this October. Because the conversation here has been ongoing, we seem to naturally slide in and out of collaborative projects.

The other constant collaboration I have had is with Charlie Levine and [Rossana Van Mierlo](#). The four of us (incl. Goto) run a fellowship program, SqW:Lab (<https://sqwlab.com>) where two distinct ways of collaborating are at play. We collaborate administratively and ideate with each other for the overall program, and we collaborate with invited fellow artists creatively. Here too, it is conversations that come to convergences. During the fellowship these conversations are guided, allowing quick experiments. This is followed by longer 2 person collaborations, and it is then that you really explore possibilities of the project.

These two different ways of collaborating have been fodder to my brains. I am energized and propelled in new directions, learning the things I do not know, and sharing the things that I do.

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## THE SIX...

Six questions asked of all our guests.

### What are you currently reading?

[Ali Smith's \*Artful\*](#) and [Zarina Hashmi's \*Directions To My House\*](#)

### What are you currently watching?

I'm not really watching anything right now but have been listening to the [History of English Podcast](#) while I work.

### What was the last meal you made?

Dal and Rice

### Can you share a recipe?

What you need –

6 eggs  
1 cup grated coconut  
4 red chillies  
1 tsp cumin seeds  
1 tsp mustard seeds  
5 cloves garlic  
1/4" piece of ginger  
1 tsp turmeric  
1 onion  
1 tomato  
2 tsp tamarind extract / extract from a few rinds of kokum soaked in water  
1 tbsp chopped coriander leaves

What you do with it –

Hard boil the eggs and cut in half  
Grind coconut, chillies, cumin, mustard, garlic and ginger to a paste  
Mix in with tumeric and tamarind extract / kokum water  
Slice the onion and chop the tomato  
Fry onions in a kadai till it turns brown and add the ground masala, salt and chopped tomato  
Fry for 2 more mins and add a cup of water and bring to a boil  
Cook for 5 mins  
Place the eggs over the masala  
Cover the pan and cook for 4–5 mins  
Garnish with chopped coriander leaves

### Whose studio have you visited recently that really excited you?

I have been working at [Litholekha](#) with Subrat Kumar Behera to produce lithograph editions. This has been very thrilling.

**What have you seen recently (either art; performance; film, music; stage; etc.) that had a significant impact on you and your work?**

Two films that I refer too often are [Hitchcock's \*Rear Window\*](#) and [Jacques Tati's \*Mon Oncle\*](#).

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A sincere thanks to Amrit Singh Sandhu and Vishwa Shroff from john ros and studioELL — thank you for your generosity in sharing this discussion with us.



[Amrit Singh Sandhu](#), born in India, currently lives in New York. Sandhu attained her BFA Painting degree from Pratt Institute in 2020. She primarily works with oil, gouache and watercolors. Trained as a realistic painter, her curiosity took her to experiment with modernism and abstraction to challenge and expand her creativity. Her work revolves around the idea of memory and exploring how everyone has their own unique version of reality. Through the invented characters in her oil paintings with enhanced expressions, she intends to question her perception and reflect on her own inner thoughts and emotions about the people, culture and structures in her society.

This interview was conducted over a series of emails which started with an question and led to a responsive conversation. The text has been edited slightly for this publication.

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