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The New Wave of South Asian Textile Artists

By Sohini Dey



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Jamdani sculptures, canvas crochet, painted fabric scrolls—five women artists combine crafts, community values and creativity to make contemporary masterpieces

Amid the rush of festivities, crowds thronging malls, markets and every imaginable public space in anticipation of Diwali, an exhibition in Delhi's Bikaner House aimed a challenge "to break with conventions and embrace a new wave of South Asian contemporary textile art." *Rehang*, was a group

show of South Asian contemporary textile artists hosted by Anant Art gallery (October 21-31). Curator Uthra Rajgopal brought together 15 artists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, speckling the rooms of Bikaner House with multidisciplinary works of art mounted on tabletops, suspended from ceilings, draped across walls and staircases and through audio-visual presentations showcasing a rich diversity of textile crafts. Think miniature Victorian gowns, film and soundscapes, jordanian


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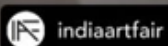

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Posted [@withregram](#) • [@indiaartfair](#) "Our association with cloth — it's from the moment we are born till the moment we leave this earth," says [@U.D.Rajgopal](#), curator of the stunning South Asian textile art show by [@AnantArtIndia](#) at Bikaner House in Delhi, closing today!

Want to know more about textile art? Head to the [#IndiaArtFair](#) website> Stories and read '10 Textile Artists You should Know' for an introduction to the essential modern and contemporary textile artists from [#SouthAsia](#).

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In the diversity of displays, common themes bound the works of many artists. Engagements with colonial histories and their impact on local arts and crafts emerged as an area of interest for many, as did the theme of kinship and memory—more than one artist recalls their early interest in textile emerging in family traditions of sewing and crafts or even recycling and reuse. There are also common grounds in the collaborative nature of these projects, use of found objects and textiles as medium of protest and rehabilitation. Here, five women textiles artists from the region, who were part of the exhibition, speak about their artistic practice and inspirations.

Boshudhara Mukherjee, India

At first glance, Bengaluru based artist and teacher Boshudhara Mukherjee's works resemble delicate webs. Look closer and one sees layers of material interventions emerge in the construction of canvas with fabrics and threads. "Once canvas is removed from its rectangular frame, it becomes malleable and free flowing with a strong core that allows it to be manipulated and used in so many different possibilities," says Mukherjee, a student of painting from Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), Baroda, whose works have been exhibited in galleries across India as well as Dubai, Abu Dhabi

and Muscat.

Photo: Boshudh:

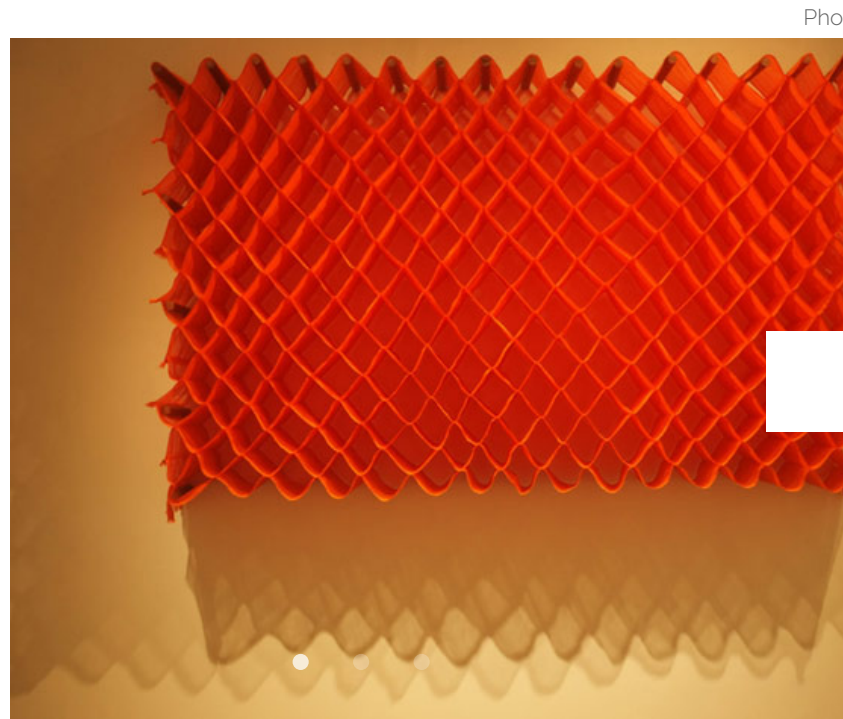


An installation shot of 'Pentagrams White', 2020. Fabric, denim, uncoated cardboard

Mukherjee also incorporates techniques like crochet and patchwork—skills she attributes to learning from her mother and grandmother when growing up in Kurseong (West Bengal). “The thread in works like ‘Pentagram White’ or ‘Pentagram Red’, besides adding colour and an additional layer also helps to bind the work together, so the thinnest element in the work is the actual backbone of the whole piece,” she adds. Mukherjee's last solo show, *The Familiars* (at Tarq Mumbai this year) explored ideas of belonging and kinship inspired by Wicca ‘spirit guides’ with site-specific installations such as ‘New Bridges’ and ‘Egg’. Mukherjee's work often includes recycled saris and garments, in ‘Adi’ (2019), the artist used pants and jeans from men in her life. “My art work is very much part of my daily routine, making it an extension of who I am and how I live; so to reuse old work to make something new, didn't seem like a new or alien idea,” Mukherjee says. “Reusing parts of an existing work in a new work is a very natural evolution, a metamorphosis.”

Yasmin Jahan Nupur, Bangladesh

"What moves me about *jamdani* is its history, juxtaposed against where we are today—many artisans are not able to continue their professions and even climate change has disrupted production," says Dhaka based artist Yasmin Jahan Nupur. An alumnus of University of Chittagong, Nupur makes textile intrinsic to her oeuvre, woven with ideas of colonialism, ecological change and vanishing crafts. 'Dreamed About Walking in the Sky' (2019) features *jamdani* strung like fabrics drying in the sun and embroidered with expressions of protests. 'A Tailor is Sewing the Dress of Tipu Sultan' (2018) is a performance of sewing a handwoven ensemble inspired by a *jama* said to belong to Tipu Sultan (displayed at V&A London).



An installation shot of 'Unity of the Untitled 1'.

For her 2018 solo show at Exhibit320 in Delhi, Patterns of a Tactile Score, Nupur showcased among other works, 'Unity of the Untitled 1 (2017)', *jamdani* woven in a gridlike matrix and 'Golden Net' (2016-18), a thread and rope installation Nupur credits a fisherman for helping her crafts. These were part of *Rehang*, as was 'Velvet Roses' (2015), an interpretation of roses

in three-dimensional form. "My work is rooted in collaboration," Nupur adds, noting the two jamdani weavers in Narayanganj who work with her, as well as other artisans she has engaged over the years.

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, Afghanistan/India

In a series of works titled 'An-Nisa' (The Women) by Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, garment silhouettes painted with ink on *manjarpot* fabric showcase botanicals, text and anatomical features like eyes and hearts along with one featuring a 'faceless woman', representing the unseen and unheard lives of women. Ahmadzai's art is a culmination of women's narratives and art, her Afghan ancestry and childhood in Najibabad (a UP town known for its *raffugars* or darners). "Cloth gives me the flexibility of folding, ironing and using the material," she says. "There are of course other connotations, such as the fact that cloth is important to cover the body, it's another skin, another layer, and for many women, if not all, acts like a protective shield."

Photo: Arshi

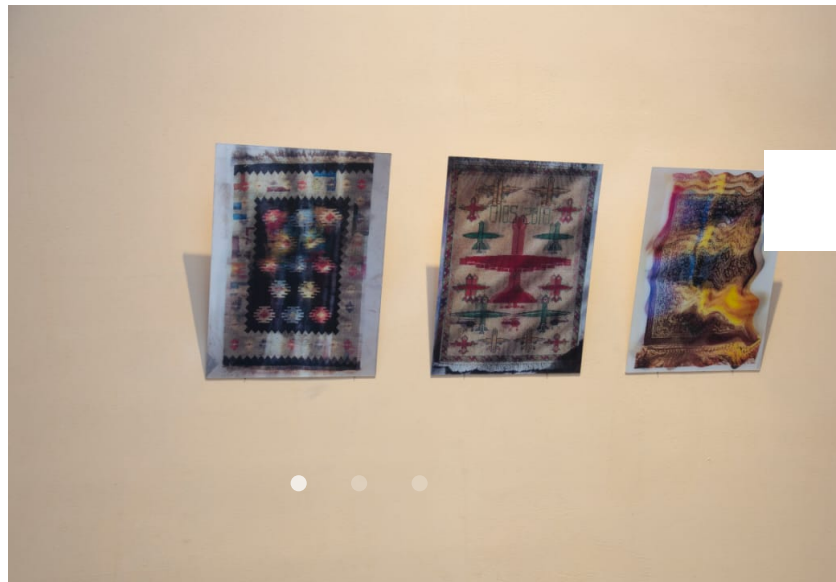


(L-R) Women working on the 'Lihaaf' scroll; an installation shot of 'Lihaaf', mi fabric (2020)..

A recipient of the INLAKS Fine Art Award in 2019, Ahmadzai studied fine arts at Aligarh Muslim University (2011) and Jamia Millia Islamia (2013), and works between Afghanistan and India. In April this year, she presented her first solo show at Delhi's Blueprint12 gallery, *Nafas or The Isolation Diaries*—a series of fabric art comprising the contents of 120 one-sided letters she wrote from Najifabad to her husband in Kabul over 10 months during the pandemic's first wave in 2020. Last year, Ahmadzai also conceptualised 'Lihaaf', working with women from Najibabad to produce a scroll, part of Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan's Five Million Incidents series." It was a cathartic experience—women sang, women gossiped, some napped, some dropped out. But eventually their camaraderie came together and broke the barriers of religions, parental or maybe patriarchal boundaries that were imposed upon them," Ahmadzai says, adding that she hopes to carry the project to other parts of the country.

Maryam Hina Hasnain

For Karachi-based artist Maryam Hina Hasnain, *Rehang* marked her first showcase in India. She presented 'Shapeshifter 1' and 'Under the Rug' and in a trio of lenticulars (technology employed to create a sense of depth), all inspired by carpets. "I started doing textile interventions on existing carpets and found materials around 2018," says the artist, who graduated from Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of Arts London in January. "It allowed me to rethink the textile but also explore ideas of trade, displacement and migration through carpets which present themselves as tropes of orientalism through objecthood." Such themes are central to Hasnain's practice, for which carpets have become an emblem.



A distinguishing element is the conflation of such histories with new ideas emerging from a digital landscape. "My interest lies not only in the making of the objects and visuals but also in their circulation and interpretation," says Hasnain noting that textiles are carpet are often "othered for their aesthetic and referring to a slower means of making. A digital aesthetic is often read as more universal code, belonging to a world of rapid progress and locating it in a desirable contemporary." Her works are rife with references ranging from jacquard loom punch cards to Morse Code and pixels. Case in point: in the lenticulars, 'ReOrientation Realigned' incorporates digital interventions, 'Nintendo and The Ottoman Empire' is executed through manual paintings and 'Weaponizing Ornaments' uses images of a War Rug acquired from the carpet markets in Karachi.

Chathuri Nissansala, Sri Lanka

Broken, misshapen idols take the spotlight in *Ritualising the Disfigured: Memorials of Healing from Sri Lanka*, a series of works by Colombo based multidisciplinary artist Chathuri Nissansala which was showcased as a virtual solo exhibition by Anant Art this year (August 12-September 12). It is an artistic endeavour bordering on the archaeological, with idols collected from across Sri Lanka. "The initial series at *Rehang* consists of figurines

collected from Church Kochchikade (St Anthony's Shrine), which was subjected to the 2019 Easter attacks," she says. The artist memorialises them with vivid beadwork and embroidery, crowning the heads and body parts of figurines, lacing tea cups or sculpted around vases.



A sculpture from Chathuri Nissansala's 'Ritualising the Disfigured: Memorials' series.

A Bachelor in Fine Arts graduate from Chitra Kala Parishath, Bengaluru (2017) and MSU, Baroda, Nissansala's practice includes mixed media art and performance. Her performance installation 'Ornamentation of death, Bling!' was recently showcased as part of the trans*oceanic platform, a residency for feminist, queer dialogues in Colombo. Nissansala is an apprentice of Sri Lankan artist Somapala Pothupitiya and a member of the Mullegama Art Centre where she learns traditional costume making. "This traditional art form incorporated within the work is part of Sri Lanka's rich traditional costume/textile making, located in the southern region," says Nissansarla. "It is believed that the performers harness the universal energy into themselves through the costumes. Hence through its language my attempt was to re contextualise on the disfigured statues 'to breathe in life, healing'

into them."

Banner (in order of appearance):

Yasmin Jahan Nupur

'A Tailor is Sewing Tipu Sultan's Dress', (2018)

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai

'An-Nisa II', (2020)

Maryam Hina Hasnain

'Shapershifter 1', (2021)

Chathuri Nissansala

'Mother' (2021)

Preview: Boshudhara Mukherjee

'adi', 2019

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