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Meet Indian art's newest voices

Drag, audio, performance, tapestry, AI, video, Machine Learning—young artists are combining media and methods to come up with new ways of seeing



'How Does One Say Queen In Islam?'(still 1), 2020, performance by Sarah Naqvi. Courtesy: Tarq and the artist

Avantika Bhuyan

LAST PUBLISHED 30.04.2022 | 07:01 AM IST

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A wave of staccato sounds and voices washes over me as I listen to Moonis Ahmad Shah's new audio art project. They are half-words, non-words, indistinguishable as language, dialect or speech. Yet, there is a sense of familiarity and belonging—unifying sounds of distress, abstract sounds of conversations and calls to action.

Over the past year, Shah and Hafsa Sayeed have been downloading audio archives of riots, protests and gatherings in India. At his studio in Melbourne, Australia, they feed these into a Machine Learning algorithm, to speculate on the new voices of future gatherings. Shah, who was born in Kashmir, has been working with institutional archives, using Machine Learning to turn what are usually tools of surveillance and control on their head to speculate, visually and sonically, about the invisibility that organised knowledge creates.

For centuries, artists have explored ideas of the “self” and its relation to society. Today, young Indian artists like Shah are going further to ask: Who is the “other”, who are the people discriminated against over time or subtly erased from existence by virtue of their identity, gender or religion? By the simple act of responding to pressing issues of the time, their art becomes a searing commentary on society, life and politics.

Also read: [India Art Fair 2022 celebrates resilience of the art community](#)

So, when Arpita Akhanda, who is from Odisha, or Sudipta Das, who grew up in Assam's Silchar, create works about holding on to memories of a lost home, they inevitably touch upon issues of migration and displacement. Or, when Delhi-based Vidisha-Fadescha, a visual artist who works with video, performance and text, creates an arts space that is anti-caste, anti-racist and trans*feminist, it shines a spotlight on glaring social inequity. These new voices are using video, digital interventions, tapestries, murals, facades to make sure their message reaches us. [Their art confronts and challenges](#), reminding us of our



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Priyanka and Prateek Raja, who founded the Kolkata-based Experimenter gallery in 2009 to focus on the work of contemporary artists, have observed that themes recur in the work of young artists, aged 25-40, as they focus not just on gender and identity but also on the impact of technology on lives.

Not all these themes are new—after all, senior artists like Atul Dodiya, Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh, Nalini Malani, Bhupen Khakhar and Zarina have addressed the idea of home, of fractures in society, of queerness, for years. But what sets the younger artists apart is their approach. “We think they are not daunted by material, form or rapid changes in technology. They are experimental in their approach in many ways and more open to collaborations and partnerships with other practitioners. They are more often than not rooted in many forms of simultaneous research and try to bring their distilled thought to viewers through their mediums and practices,” says Priyanka Raja. She believes that while the older artists were more direct in their approach, and more effective at documenting fraught moments, the younger generation goes further, forcing the viewer to think.

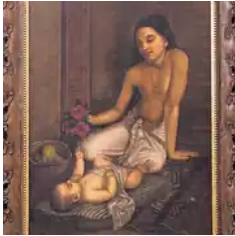
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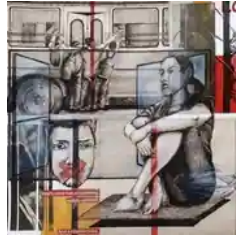
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Art collectives from the North-East focus on the community



The lesser-known raja: Ravi Varma's partner in art



Editors note: Looking beyond the frame

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Biraaj Dodiya, 'Double Orbit' , (2022), oil on linen. Courtesy: Experimenter, Kolkata

Such alternative, critical voices have become more significant given the rise of authoritarian regimes across the world, increasing inequality, crumbling economies, the growth of social media and frenzy of fake information. Shefali Somani of the Delhi-based Shrine Empire Gallery says we are all seeking voices that help us make sense of the world. Artists are assuming this social responsibility.

Nomadic curator Shaunak Mahubani shares this view, adding that all around us ideas and identities are being pushed into narrow boxes. "The current civic and political sphere doesn't allow for heterogeneity. In these times, the artist's imagination is required more than ever, infusing perspectives with plurality, fluidity and transformative power. Without these forms of thought and growth, we as a society will become stuck in somebody else's idea of a fundamentalist world," Mahubani says.

The circumstances in which the artists have been raised also play a role in the kind of influences they bring to their work. For some, it's the experience of growing up in smaller towns, for others it is living through conflict. Pakistan-based intermedial artist [Omer Wasim](#), for instance, bears witness to relentless



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Dodiya, 29, as an exceptional artist who looks at identity and personal depiction of memory and human emotion. “She has deeply connected studio practice that anchors itself in poetry and thinking that furthers her own explorations of fragile sentiments,” she says. Then there is Aziz Hazara, 30, who looks at what it means to be born, and live, in a war-torn world. Born in Afghanistan’s Wardak province in 1992, he is acutely aware of notions of nation, identity and what it means to be caught in the cross-currents of political ideologies.

For Mahbubani, the most interesting artists in the younger group are those resisting transphobia, gender-based violence, the push towards homogeneity, and the continued oppression of historically marginalised groups such as Dalit and Adivasi communities. “They are not afraid to call out our inequalities and hypocrisies, especially within art ecosystems, and this gives me hope that collectively we can find a more equitable and caring way of making and sharing art,” they say. “Most of these artists have also broken out of the niche of a singular medium, deploying formats such as drag, projection mapping, 3D printing, as required, to showcase their point of view.”

They cite the example of Bengaluru-based artist-film-maker Vishal Kumaraswamy, 34, who is working at the intersection of subaltern identities and technology. Using disintegrated cinema, 3D simulation, text, sound and performance, Kumaraswamy challenges implicit biases of caste, race and language present within tech innovations such as Artificial Intelligence. Then there is Rahee Punyashloka, 28, better known by his Instagram moniker, @artedkar.

Also read: [Aparajita Jain is democratising art through technology](#)

An experimental film-maker, a visual artist and a cultural theorist, the Delhi-based artist has been leveraging Instagram to archive Dalit histories in his signature Ambedkarite blue and white works, while raising pertinent questions about art-world infrastructure through short textual pieces. Mahbubani mentions another artist. “Sarah Naqvi has also recently pushed their material-based practice to include drag performance and video installations. The 26-year-old (multimedia) artist’s new work continues past themes of gender and religious discrimination, albeit with new immersive formats and a spicy dash of humour,” they say. Naqvi was born in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, and is currently based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Lounge speaks to a few young artists whose practice focuses on three key themes—identity, gender and memory—while pushing boundaries and forcing us to think beyond what is apparently on show. These young artists are astute, creative chroniclers of the contemporary world, bearing witness to shifts, drastic and subtle.



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Vidisha-Fadescha is an artist-curator who has founded an art space, Party Office, in Delhi. They are currently in the midst of preparations for Documenta fifteen, slated to be held from 18 June-25 September in Kassel, Germany. There, they will be creating a social gathering space, releasing new publications, hosting parties, and premiering a new video work. “Some of us, who grew up with an experience of being isolated, don’t realise if we were outcast because of our gender expression, caste or our desires. So all of these intersections are our queerness,” says Vidisha.



A studio portrait of Vidisha-Fadescha by Shaunak Mahbubani at the Party Office

Since 2008, they have been part of the queer movement and have felt the need for an intersectional dialogue. In 2020, Vidisha opened up their home as the Party Office, an anti-caste, anti-racist and trans*feminist art and social space—initially a physical space, it has evolved into a conceptual space that travels to different locations. “A ‘party’ is a political group; and also a site for building solidarity, kinship, and the possibility to ‘do nothing’ in safe company. Office, here, is interested in deconstructing gendered structures and hierarchical organising; centring the act of survival, undoing the conditioning of neo-liberal work through queer anarchist positions,” notes the artist statement.

Also read: [Feeling femme should be celebrated: Aravani Art Project](#)

Though Vidisha’s personal practice lies at the intersection of video, sound, performance and text—such as *Burn All The Books That Call You The Unknown*, a video work that uses the theatrics of the dance floor to look at how the body embodies collective histories, violence and vulnerabilities—at the Party Office they are foregrounding the voices of people who have lived experiences of marginalisation by race, gender and religion. “Through conversations, publications and events, we are building intersectional and trans-national dialogues. It’s important to not just talk about the oppression upon communities, who we are allies to, but to also provide material resources to the



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whichever country they find themselves in, and find a community in. So Party Office has expanded to those satellite locations, while also existing as conceptual architecture.

They started a project called *Consent Of The Governed*, which looks at the subjectivity of kink. “Kink has been outcast by the queer community as well, where kinksters have been banned from queer prides. The practice of consent and negotiation in kink is what we need to learn from,” says Vidisha. Online public discussion of two publications planned in this series have already been commissioned by Germany-based organisations.

Party Office has also set up an annual archiving grant; the amount varies, depending on what is available. In 2021, the money came from personal projects; this year, it is coming from the documenta grant. Last year, it was given to members of the Samata Kala Manch, an Ambedkarite cultural organisation in Maharashtra. The resulting essays will be published in a bilingual publication, in Marathi and English. “These essays also challenge the format of archiving, as they have been written from lived memory, with figures appearing not necessarily in a timeline but as one remembers,” says Vidisha. “In 2022, the archiving grant has been presented to Yogesh Maitreya, Panther’s Paw Publication, who, along with Shiva N., is creating text and typography of anti-caste alphabets, an abecedary.”

At documenta fifteen, Party Office is creating two installation spaces. One will host a new video work by Vidisha, the second in the series of *Qworkaholics Anonymous*. The series plays on the format of de-addiction programmes, inviting friends, activists and kinksters to “do nothing” in safe company as a pushback against neo-liberal pressures of hyper-productivity.

The second will be a space for gatherings, after-parties, public programmes. “A site of resilience, radical pleasure and collective power. Taking forward our idea of parties as important sites of liberation and affirmation of those marginalised, we are creating parties, focusing on people of colour and people across the trans spectrum, and more,” they say. “We have an extensive public programme where we invite progressive thinkers to take us through their lived experiences through multiformat talks and performances.” Some of the names include Mahbubani, Ali Akbar Mehta, Jyotsna Siddharth, Amrish Kondurkar, Ramya Pattanaik, Abhinit Khanna and Vidha Saumya.

Soft focus, hard stories: Gurjeet Singh, 27

The first day of the India Art Fair in Delhi, 28 April, brought with it a unique performance, *Ghar Ghar*. Soft textile sculptures had transformed the Fair’s new “Studio” space into a *mandap*. It offered a peek into Chandigarh-based artist Gurjeet Singh’s childhood. when children would play *ahar ahar*. enacting a



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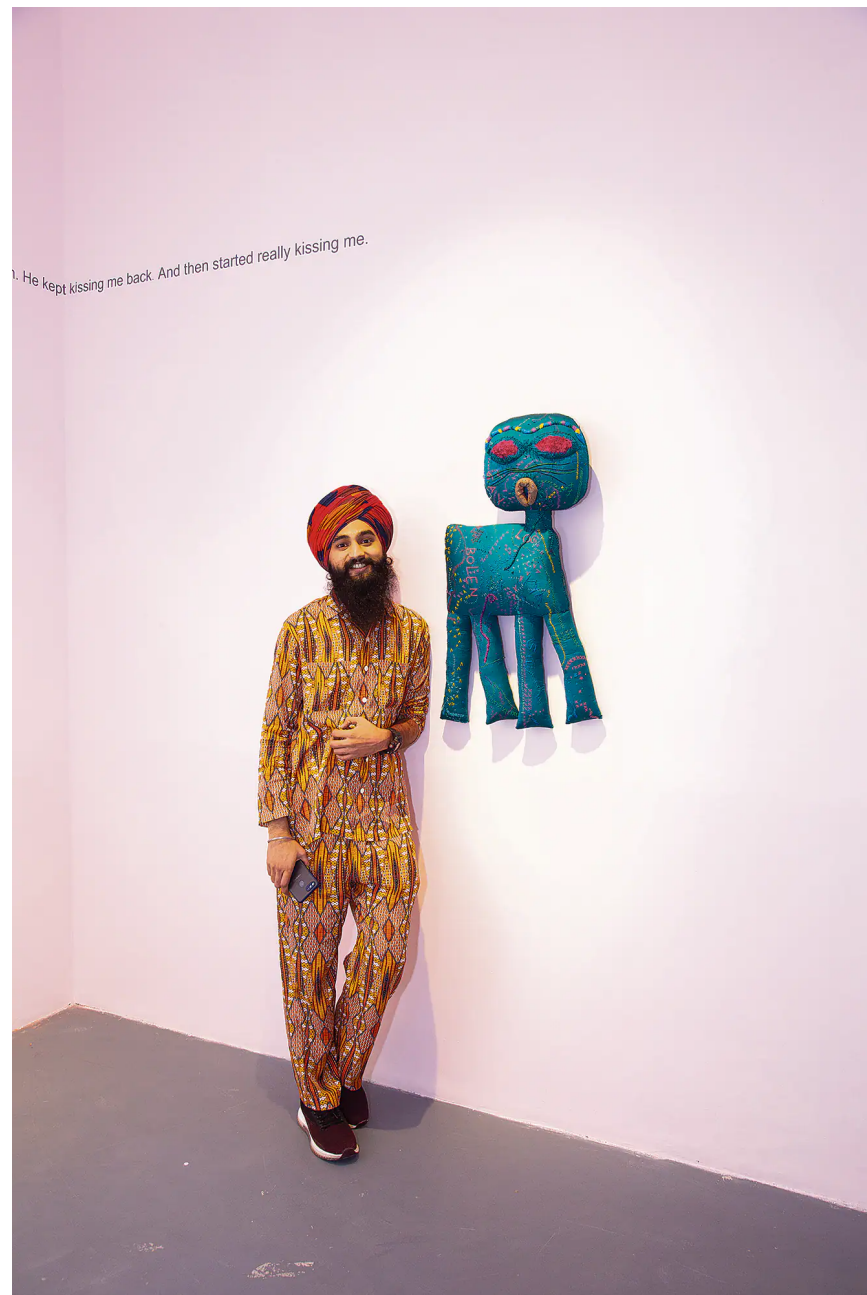
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this role-play were of the same sex. “What if we were not conditioned to think that only a man and a woman can get married? What if this wasn’t fed to us? Maybe then people won’t be judged or judge others,” says the artist.

Also read: [16 artworks you must not miss at the India Art Fair 2022](#)



Gurjeet Singh has now started extending his sculptural practice to performance

Singh, whose practice centres on creating soft sculptures with textiles to tell stories of identity and gender, says fabric allows him to express the textures and shapes of lives better. He has extended his work to performance, with the sculptures becoming part of the narrative. The artist, who grew up with four sisters and a brother in the Punjab village of Algon Kothi, close to the border with Pakistan, watched the women in his family create beautiful embroidery. But he had no inkling that his future could lie in the art field until his high school teacher suggested he apply to the fine arts college in Chandigarh.

“No one in my family had travelled so far, or even contemplated a career in the



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prompted him to go further—why, they asked, just create a likeness if you are drawing a tree near a pond? Why not imagine the worlds that this tree contains within? Singh started travelling, looking for miniature traditions in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, and Punjab. He also started working with cloth, making small sculptures.

During his master's course in Chandigarh, he won an award for one such work. "But when people found out that this was made by a boy, they were surprised. It took me back to my childhood, when kids in school used to say, 'Tu ladke jaisa toh hai hi nahi (You are nothing like a boy).' As I embarked on my artistic practice, I realised that material and questions in my subconscious had started merging and my works began to be centred around stereotype and gender," he says. Soon, residencies started coming his way and his work got a clear direction.



Singh's practice centres on creating soft sculptures with textiles to tell stories of identity and gender

His focus turned to the hidden, invisible LGBTQ+ stories and relationship narratives. One of his sculptures was inspired by a conversation with a friend who told him about an acquaintance's plight. "I named the work Manavgeet but that was not his real name," adds Singh. "This person was 30-plus and queer. But his family was pressuring him to get married." When he refused, they took



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very interesting. LGBTQ+ stories don't need to follow a set narrative or stereotype. And soft sculptures offer that possibility. I use clothes, which are embodiments of physical beauty, to bring out the inner beauty of people. The end result is a surprise for me too," says Singh.

On Saturday, he will be creating art out of scraps and clothing at the Delhi-based fashion and design house Bodice Studio, which has joined Chemould/Shift, an extension programme for young artists by the Mumbai-based gallery Chemould Prescott Road, in supporting his practice.

The memory collector: Arpita Akhanda, 29

On 29 April, over nearly 360 minutes, Arpita Akhanda cut and deconstructed nearly 360ft of a barbed wire fence at the Fair. Through this performance, the artist questioned whether people realise that psychological barriers can be as forbidding as physical ones. "At this time, there is renewed tension along the borders, especially in Russia and Ukraine. The idea of what is the 'other' is being reinforced. It is not just the physical borders that I am untying but the mental ones as well," she says.

Also read: [Two artists look at Sri Lanka's fractured history](#)

Akhanda, born in Cuttack, Odisha, has always been interested in memory. Her grandfather, also an artist, moved from what used to be East Bengal at the time of Partition. He went to Santiniketan in West Bengal to study the arts—Akhanda has studied there too. There, he got caught up in the fervour of the freedom struggle. "He was a photographer and a poet, and documented his idea of home wherever he went. He would write about and photograph all the events happening around him," says the Santiniketan-based artist.



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'1. 15 Minutes of Requiem' by Arpita Akhanda

Growing up, bedtime stories meant hearing about how the family had left their village with just a brass vessel for water; even this they couldn't take beyond the border since the metal belonged to the other side. "Perhaps that's why I am so interested in identity and memory," she says. This interest first surfaced in 2015, when she was a student of Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. A couple of seniors were planning an Independence Day performance on the body's performative memory. Suddenly, an anecdote her grandfather had related came to mind. In 1946, when he realised that the partition of India was inevitable, he donned Khadi, went to the ghats of Varanasi, took off all the clothes associated with the freedom struggle and offered them to the Ganga river. He wrote a poem, *Khēda*, about it as well. "That became a point of reference for me in 2015, when the debate around nationalism had begun to gain force again. I too recited a poem, inked it on Khadi clothes, and then gave those away," she says.

That became the starting point to look at personal histories—albums, clothes, postcards—to understand a bigger issue. She started weaving together



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Ghar (2020) weaves together letters sent to the different houses her family lived in after Partition, with the images of those houses. The piece was a metaphorical home for all the memories of shelters past and present.

Soon, Akhanda began to focus on the body in her work—after all, it is the vessel that carries all memories and experiences. In 2020, during a Piramal Art Residency, she created a four-hour performance, *Transitory Body*, drawing parallels between replanted trees and her replanted family history. Both bodies had gone through the process of displacement and replacement. Her body carried within itself memories of partition-separation-division-dissection-detachment in the form of dates. She created two sets of stamps—red ones for herself and blue ones for viewers. “I invited them to think of any memory that related to separation-division and whisper it into my ear and stamp my body. I, in turn, whispered a memory into their ear and stamped myself. After the performance, when I washed myself, the red ink faded away and the blue one stayed. It was very beautiful. I have now started calling my body a memory collector,” says Akhanda.

Turning the archive on its head: Moonis Ahmad Shah, 30

When he is not delving into audio archives, Shah is creating 3D scan drawings of discarded psychiatric instruments from Srinagar and Melbourne. Some of the drawings—grey, with hints of colour—resemble freshly-excavated artefacts. “These were about to be thrown away, but by doing 3D scans I have tried to turn them into reproducible objects, thereby extending their lifespan. Through these, I am looking at the structure and the objectification of care,” says the artist.

Also read: [A book that celebrates 100 years of artist Amar Nath Sehgal](#)

Shah has always been interested in the history of the archive, which has been institutionalised from the 17th century. He reverse-engineers archives to negate their roles as tools of control. “Whenever a state, not just the political state but any form of organised knowledge, exerts its control, certain communities get suppressed and invisibilised,” he says. “I use the archive as one of the tools to create a relationship with what has been made invisible by organised knowledge.”



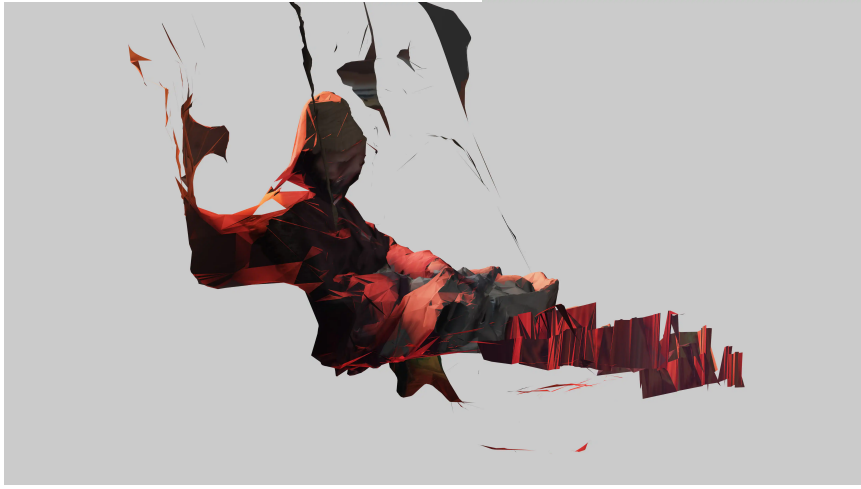
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‘Accidentally Miraculous Everyday from that Heaven’

Shah started working on this in 2019, following the curfew in Kashmir after Article 370 of the Constitution was effectively abrogated. The valley was no stranger to curfews. “Every time I experienced such a communication breakdown with my family and friends, I observed the fractures in everyday life. Suddenly, people had to move from their usual tasks related to their professions to new ones related to their households. In moments of disruption, new acts came up,” he says. To him, these were still articulations of resistance—that life refuses to die, and through the abstractness of being and its embeddedness in the landscape, people keep gathering. So, in his 2021 work, *Accidental, Miraculous Everyday From That Heaven*, he used photogrammetry, print on aluminium Dibond, etchings and video projection to stitch together this “new everyday-ness”.

Finding art in poetry: Anshuka Mahapatra, 25

One of the most striking works by Mahapatra is *Unbloomed*, an acrylic on canvas from 2021. In a series of images, the artist draws a parallel between seed growing in a jar and an embryo in a womb. She alludes to the discrimination the girl child faces from inception. The cracks in the jars—and the eventual withering of the flower—in the ensuing images are metaphors for the mindsets about gender.



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Dilemma
Oil on canvas
30" x 60"
2019

‘Dilemma’ by Anshuka Mahapatra

For Mahapatra, who is from Odisha, the human condition is central to her work, irrespective of whether she talks about climate change or gender violence. As she pursues a master’s in printmaking from the SN School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, her practice—spread across painting, printmaking and video installation—has been about engaging with, and incorporating, text into the image-making process.

This is evident in the facade at the Fair, where poetic phrases in seven languages—Odia, Assamese, Hindi, Gujarati, Malayalam, Kannada and English—evoke fleeting moments of beauty from the everyday. “In my childhood, I have had to travel with my family a lot, thus giving rise to opportunities to interact with people from different places and cultures. Many a time, these interactions led me to question my own beliefs and observations. The triggering points have resulted in the choices I have made in my artistic practice,” she says.

Dilemma and *Chaotic*, both powerful works, feature faceless figures, often skeletal, pared to the bare bones. “The use of faceless figures is an attempt to not



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skeletal figures and fossilised beings come from a very personal space, wherein I have had trouble understanding human behaviour in certain social and political scenarios.”

FIRST PUBLISHED 29.04.2022 | 04:30 PM IST

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