Cover: Rather than a solid block, the individual components of the shikhara are offset from each other. This helps channelise more light into the inner sanctum of the temple. Seen here is the detail of the vedika or finial, when viewed from below.
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 Biographics 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 Achill 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 hence 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 explore the culture of spaces and the stories of its production. Biographies could be, as Gertrude Koch in her *Perforated* the English translation of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Skizzen. Offenbach and the Paris of His Times* says—“channels of communication by means of which subjectivity and facticity engage in a constant narrow 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 structures, their composition, their occupation, and their journeys. What is the relationship between life and place, 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 spatial-geographical entities—but one could safely say that we miss to recognize the multiple histories, and many lives and after-lives that exist beyond the simple 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 sensings, our reference 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 an articulation to ask one to recognize the diversity of traditions (intellectual, and other) and experience (readings, people, ideas) we are as human beings composed of. Our designs and architectural articulations do not escape this—and to feel yourself in believing that there is something in design that makes it exclusively Indian or not so, will only be an unproductive, even hurtful; 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, those established genealogies restrict the possibilities by which a student understands his/her zones and methodologies of action/practice. Processes of thinking are often more 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 deeply deeply and attentively listen to the experience of practices—is an absolutely necessary mode of education. As one is also planning for a new academic year one is crucified confronted with these questions—especially as programmers 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 thing—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 creator of spatial formations (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 realizations that are the scenarios and contexts within which civilisation and human action unfold. 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 each atmosphere, producing a measure and scales for the atmospheres themselves, periodically reshaping 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 chart 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 thought’s—our contemporary culture, and the places of its production. km
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
Two acrylic studies on handmade paper (pp. 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 thoughts 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
come to depend on folklore and mythical pasts that absolve us of our present failures to resolve 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 denied 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 glib of fascination for Shah Jahan’s devotion to Mumtaz Mahal and numerous other romances that are then played out in the setting of moth-ridden books in every alternate Bollywood movie which Indian families watch with religiously 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 as things of dogs with certified kennel lines — each breed 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 the grooms across India seeking brides with a pinkish tinge or a milky-white complexion. Perhaps the grooms across India seeking brides with a pinkish tinge or a milky-white complexion. Perhaps the grooms across India seeking brides with a pinkish tinge or a milky-white complexion. Perhaps the grooms across India seeking brides with a pinkish tinge or a milky-white complexion.

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 women 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 churny-picking for prosecution and demonising of a certain people or race. Such is the case of those lamenting immigration or espousing the cause for war to champion their cause as a representative of those who have the right over their lives and their individual voices. The debate on misogyny and its cultural attributes almost always takes on cultural attributes and churny-picking for prosecution and demonising of a certain people or race. Such is the case of those lamenting immigration or espousing the cause for war to champion their cause as a representative of those who have the right over their lives and their individual voices.

conventional 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 serials based on religious epic 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, there was an increasing demand for films that would complement the skin-cleansing 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 raped heroes had since the 1980s — often woven into the script to demonstrate the chivalry of the actor. This was a perverse sense of intimacy that has risen in a generation exposed to such media which has been very seductive in its cinematography, colour gradation and editing. A constrained, rigid and conservative society that harks on patriarchy through 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 unconfessable truths.

Domus 52 June-July 2016

CONFETTI

Woodcuts, 44 x 76 inches
China. Days are counted by the earth’s movement around the sun and the period occurs first among the equals was Mao. He was often placed in the horizons 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 simplified 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 guerrillas. The paradox 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 dictaphone ‘Land belongs to you’, she balances the rising sun and the mountain range with a valley that finds its basin in a crater — exhibiting a relationship between the landscape and a woman’s body.

Land-escape: 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 post-Erb Adnan’s candy-coloured elementary depictions of his native Lebanon. Those abstract landscapes gave Adnan a voice to discuss alienation and 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 lead solo show at TAFE 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 caricatures the active, 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 names connotes of the Kamakhyi Devi temple in Guwahati, Assam in Eastern India. The temple is designed to be humbled with smooth walls that curve and is dark with rays of light that lead you into the sanctum that houses a wet trough filled with vermilion-coloured water. The entirety of the visit often reminisce us of a walk through a mother’s womb. Such is the belief in the divinity of the space that it shunts each year fittingly 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 varied 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 continuous search in her own being to understand her own complexity with an issue that now defines
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. 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.

The exhibition ‘Cratered Fiction’ by Soghra Khurasani was curated by Sumesh Sharma. It was on view from 11 December 2015 to 16 January 2016 at the Lilavati Museum. ‘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.