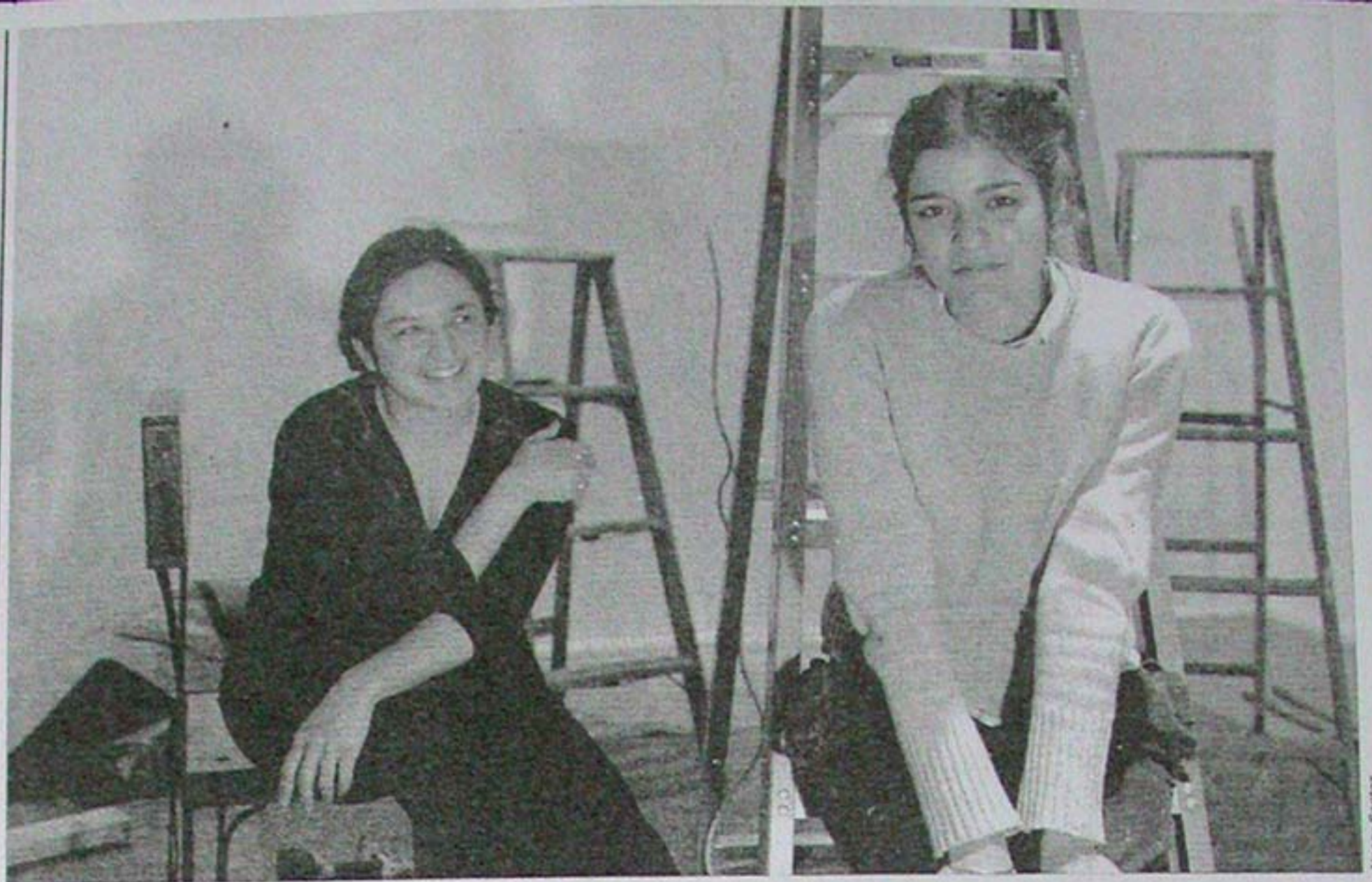


CHARLESTON  
CITY PAPER



Chicagoans Paola Cabal and Sumakshi Singh are transforming the Halsey Gallery space itself into a unique site-specific artwork

## Trading Spaces

*Visiting artists transform the Halsey Gallery*

BY NICK SMITH

With just a few days to go before the *ElsweHERE* exhibition opens at the Halsey Gallery, it's dark on the second floor. The regular track lights have been removed, and the walls look bare. A smattering of security lights cast shadows through a veil of hanging threads. The shadows are unwelcoming, which should please commissioned artist Paola Cabal.

"I came to the city on a site visit last November," says Cabal, who's based in Chicago. "I was shown historic Charleston, not North Charleston. I noticed a tremendous tension here, especially in terms of racial and demographic status. If you work in a particular part [of the city], you don't see the other part." Cabal decided to explore this with her installation. "I wanted to articulate the darkness — making the light spaces the spaces of exclusions — the ones you can't get into because of the threads."

Cabal's art often looks at light patterns as they come into architectural spaces. No natural light enters her Halsey space, so she's used the security lights — the ones left on when the gallery's closed, that visitors

don't usually see. "I'm working with lots of threads, hanging from the ceiling to the floor or at different heights. The closer you get to the lights, the closer they are to the ground; the further away, the closer they are to the ceiling."

Downstairs a different project is taking shape. Armed with lumber and plaster, Sumakshi Singh is rearticulating the black-framed, big glass entrance to the gallery. "I want to create confusion about when the entrance occurs," says Singh. "I'm always concerned with how gallery spaces are demarcated from the outside world, and what the white cube space of a gallery actually means."

The two replicated entrance ways won't be the only surprise. "The entrance is visually dramatic, but the interventions in the interior walls will be less obvious." When Singh saw the outside of the gallery, she noticed doors and windows that had been blocked off. "The interior of the space has complete disregard for the exterior, so I'm imitating the window façades." It's as if you can see a faint impression of those frames from within, as if they're pressing their way into the building. "I'm using flat white plaster sanded down to match the walls; it'll be like Braille, just faint remnants," adds Singh, whose work is so subtle that it sometimes escapes the attention of viewers. "The people who have to notice it, do."

Singh also plans to tie up her installation with Cabal's by using similar thread, "to articulate the entire frame of the gallery. The way they bend in and out, and the shadows that they cast on the walls, should create visual confusion. But the string may or may not be noticed — it may be discounted as a blurring of peripheral vision."

"Sumakshi's art requires incredible attention," says Mark Sloane, the Halsey's director and senior curator. "When I saw her exhibition in Chicago, I had to really look to see her work. It heightens the sensibilities. I realized that her work was sympathetic to Paola's, and they both had burning passions for work and ideas. These two have a remarkable knack for framing issues within a space. It's like they drill a hole in a thing, look deep into its concept and find an angle."

The artists are living in Charleston for two weeks, with an honorarium to fund their work. With student volunteers from the CofC School of the Arts on hand to assist them and staff available for advice, Sloane wants to leave them to their own devices. "This is a grand experiment. The aim is to create a condition where anything can happen and many things do," he says.

This isn't the first time the Halsey space has been transformed. Past artists have turned it into a juke joint and a Chinese laundry, among other things, as a response to their own personal histories as well as that of the city. "I've found that artists can articulate topics through art that are hard to articulate otherwise," says Sloane. "The questions that Sumakshi and Paola frame should be of interest to everyone. I'm hoping that the exhibition will make people's heads hurt, question what it is, why it is, what art is, what an artist does and what an exhibition space is for. Maybe as a result they'll pay more attention to the world outside the gallery."

*ElsweHERE* is a brave attempt to banish the bullshit of art gallery elitism by acknowledging the outside world, toying with the hallowed "white cube" space and creating an immersive experience. "I like people to spend time in a space in silence and contemplation," says Cabal, "not socializing or chattering." Whether or not her wish is granted, visitors to the Halsey for the next month should be pleasantly intrigued. "They'll find a comprehensive experience that they can participate in." □

## Visual Arts

### ElsweHERE

Halsey Gallery  
Opening reception  
Fri. Jan. 21, 5-7 p.m.  
On view through  
Feb. 18, 11-4 p.m.  
Free  
Simons Center for  
the Arts  
54 St. Philip Street  
963-5680