

## Artist who 'perverts the sterility of a place'



Sumakshi Singh

Chicago is an extremely manicured city, where nothing grows or dies. One morning, all of a sudden you would see tulips in full bloom all over the city, deftly planted the night before, and the next morning it would all be gone, says sculptor Sumakshi Singh, who makes site-specific installations that send conventional concepts of space, time, metaphor, reality and illusion for a toss.

This peculiar characteristic of Chicago got Ms. Singh — a native of India who taught art in the city for eight years — to do works of art that, in her own words, would “pervert the sterility of the place”. Thus she meticulously crafted her own diminutive sculptures that sprout on the wall, floor or ceiling, she calls them micro-interventions in/on the wall, using painted moss, fungus, polymer clay et al, while making deft use of a crack on its surface or a spider web in a corner.

The deft play on space eventually began to blur the boundaries between a culturally rich intellectual space and the ‘natural’ world outside.

In a conversation with *The Hindu* here on Tuesday, Ms. Singh said viewers of her works soon began to call her to enquire if a moss-covered nail on the wall along a sidewalk or a cobweb in a curious crack in an underpass formed part of her works.

The realisation that the space between the material pieces that were part of her works was as important as the pieces themselves was the starting point of a travel in space-time quandary. “My interactive work traverses the lines between metaphor, reality, illusion and ranges from plays on space-time theories to cultural, historic and physical critiques of place, done in paintings, interactive installations, sculpture, video and performances,” says the artist, who is scouting the city ahead of the second Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

Ms. Singh grew up all over India, but returned to Delhi every year to her grandfather's house on vacation. “Nothing used to change there. The objects in his living room and the stories behind each of them were so familiar. But then after he died in 2006, I felt strange walking through the space. My perception of them had shifted,” says Ms. Singh, who mapped out her grandpa's living room in a three-dimensional illusion in her studio space, in a work titled ‘Mapping the Memory Mandala’.

By mapping the living room in dry pastels on objects in her studio, she created the three-dimensional work which when viewed from the entrance offered a three-dimensional view of the illusory living room. “But as you enter the enclosure and walk through, you would see the actual objects in the room coming to life, the illusion fragmenting bit by bit, at the end of which I'm left with nothing but dust. A viewer at the entrance in the meantime, would be watching you walk through the illusory living room, making it a tad creepy sticking a hand through a [an illusory] chair or a [made-up] wall.”

Ms. Singh has performed, with a body paint animation series, the process of sipping coffee from a sketched coffee-cup. As one who meditates, has done yoga and believes in the Hindu philosophy of Maya [illusion], she explores the possibilities of reality as a viewer's construct. Which is why in Rome, she turned the ceiling of a museum corridor into a church ceiling, with frescos coming to ‘animated’ life!

In Kochi, she will probably create an old-time illusory manuscript for viewers to walk on!