



PROFILE

visions of TIME AND SPACE

Embroidery is just one of the making languages adopted by New Delhi-based Sumakshi Singh when exploring the demarcation between image and object

EMBROIDERY IN SUMAKSHI SINGH'S creations has evolved from being an embellishment to complete works shorn even of the ground fabric.

'For me, making art has been a way to look at where I am within myself and in the world; to process life, process the big questions about death and grief, beauty and joy, to look at what feels real and how I can go about recognising it. It lets me observe how meaning is constructed in the multi-layered experiences of existence – all these sort of meaty territories that aren't always, or perhaps almost never, satisfied with a mental answer,' says the Indian artist and art educator. And in asking these questions and in their exploration, her work has taken on different forms – from drawing and painting to installations, animation, sculpture, performance, working with living plants and embroidery. But at each point, whatever her chosen medium, there has been a quality of labour intensiveness in the work that has allowed her a kind of slowing down; an opening of a quieter space with less conditioning, where her questions can be aired and art created. 'The slowing down can happen in many ways – through a quiet, repetitive, meditative action like embroidery or the mapping of an illusion, which requires me to suspend my usual perceptions of space and enter a dimension with new laws of perception.'

Above l-r: Sumakshi Singh, *Interstices – Traces in Light, Breath and Air, Lily*

Interstices – Traces in Light, Breath and Air, Orchid

Interstices – Traces in Light, Breath and Air, Thistle

Interstices – Traces in Light, Breath and Air, Thyme

All Saatchi Gallery, London, 2016. Groundless thread drawings. Each 58.5 x 35.5cm

Opposite: Installation detail of groundless thread drawings from 'In the Garden'. Solo exhibition at Arthouz Chennai, India, 2016



PHOTO COURTESY: SUNDER RAKHU



Installation from 'Leaving the Terrestrial: Its Own Kind of Archive'. Solo show, 2017. Vitrine Display. Glass, thread, wire

PHOTO COURTESY: DHEERAJ THAKUR

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Singh's work has been inspired continuously by nature – by gardens, weeds in sidewalks, marine life and reflections. 'Sometimes an onlooker sees without naming and notices a moment where the object ceases to be what it seems and withdraws its form-ness. For me, this often happens in nature.'

During her BA in Fine Arts (painting, drawing and ceramics, completed in 2001) from the acclaimed MS University in Baroda, Gujarat, Singh found that her canvases were barely recognisable as paintings, so full were they of found objects which she pasted down and then sewed into. She would also tear up her paintings, reconfigure them and stitch them together and cut them up again, and repeat this process several times as death and resurrection cycles. Later, Singh went on to teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (where previously she had received an MFA in 2003). In the early 2000s, she used embroidery on her paintings as forms of embellishment, texture and site-specificity (using the exact embroidery patterns found in the cities referenced by the painting, on the painting) often dissolving the boundaries of represented image and actual object. She used – and continues to use – polyester and at times cotton and nylon thread, working a running stitch that loops upon itself. She finds running stitch has immense potential as an immediate, dimensional strategy for mark making. She also weaves rope, plastic thread and wire in and out of the canvases.

As Singh embroidered her works she found stitch served

as a marker of time, a concept poignantly expressed the project Memory Threads (2009) at Unidee, Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy, in which she referenced its once prosperous, and now faded, textile industry and the consequences upon the economy of Biella. She printed the image of a particular room in a defunct mill onto a cloth. She then embroidered this with an image of the same space from the 1920s, depicting it at the height of its economic success, with thread that was similar to the one made in that mill. The process was recorded as a time-lapse stop-motion animation, so that the 1920s image appeared stitch-by-stitch over the image of the abandoned mill. This animation of layered times was projected upon the old abandoned looms found in the mill and flowing fabric, which was made to emerge from the looms as if recently woven. The animation included images of the artist's hand, the needle and the loose thread moving. Singh's work gradually evolved to 'groundless thread drawings' as she calls the delicate, skeletal works she moved towards creating.

When her mother, an accomplished embroiderer and gardener passed away in 2013, Singh re-read some of the letters her mother had written to her (that also had flowers and leaves from her garden pressed between them) as a way of reconnecting with her. She started to trace out her mother's handwriting on cloth and started embroidering her mother's words to 'secure them'.

'In embroidery the image is literally tied to the fabric. ❖



PHOTO COURTESY: AJIT BHADORIA

Above: *Ferns* (detail), 2017. 123 x 84cm

Below: *Mushroom Sprout*, 2017. 123 x 94cm

Right: *Hummingbird Letter* (detail), 2016. 58 x 35.5cm

Detail of table-top installation of embroidered letters and pressed plants from 'In the Garden' solo exhibition



PHOTO COURTESY: AJIT BHADORIA



Installation view of 'Leaving the Terrestrial: Its Own Kind of Archive'. An archive of invented botanical and maritime specimens
PHOTO COURTESY: DHEERAJ THAKUR



'In embroidery the image is literally tied to the fabric. It pierces the ground.

The needle goes through it, grabs the ground from both sides and ties itself to the ground for support. The embroidered image is not an image on one side like that of a drawing'

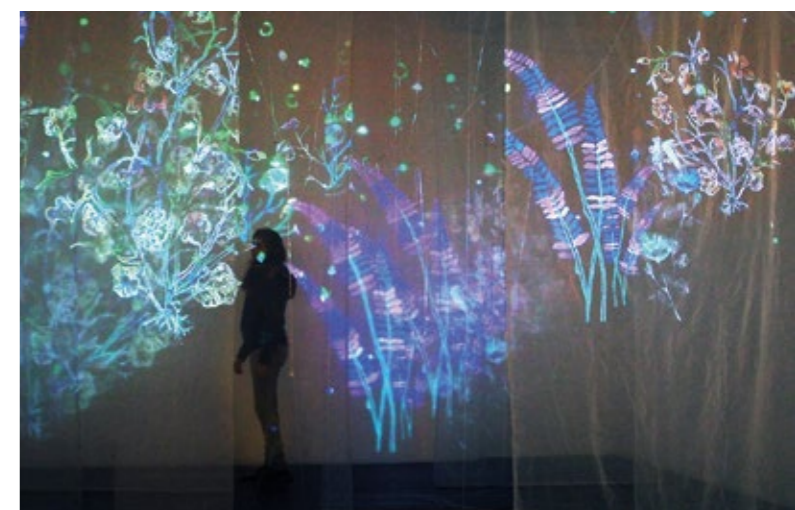
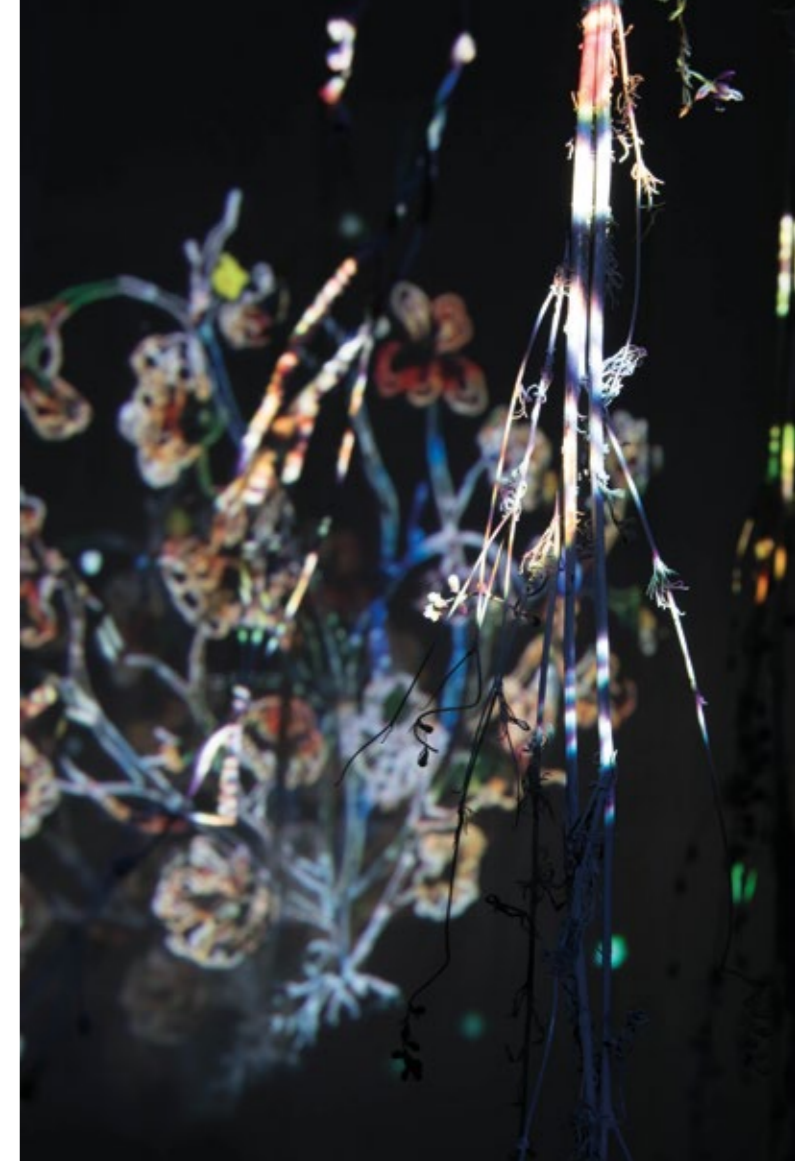
It pierces the ground. The needle goes through it, grabs the ground from both sides and ties itself to the ground for support. The embroidered image is not an image on one side like that of a drawing.'

Yet, as she started to stitch, she realised that the fabric on which some of these words were embroidered felt too present. 'It was almost a clinging that was happening. I felt it was necessary for these words to levitate and be full of breath, air and space; float freely and be light. And so I started working on removing all the fabric. It involved cutting out the fabric and dissolving some of the edges, leaving behind the thread skeleton of embroidery alone. With the ground removed, the work started to feel a little more right. And as I realised that I was creating some sort of an archive of memory, it was important that the elements felt as if they had been reduced to a flattened, black and white essence, an armature, on which living experience usually plumps itself out.'

Sumakshi then started working with her mother's embroidery and the project extended to embroidering plants, leaves, seeds and flowers that had grown in her mother's garden, creating works that appeared as if pressed and preserved in their skeletal delicacy. The works (ranging from less than 2cm to 5.6m x 2.75m) were exhibited as suspended from the ceiling, or in frames, glass boxes or glass vitrines, as if embroidered on air. Her solo exhibition 'In the Garden' shown at Exhibit 320, New Delhi, India, and Saatchi Gallery, London in 2016 presented these works along with an installation of an ethereal garden of light. Luminous hand-drawn and embroidered stop-motion animations were projected on sheer scrolls suspended from the ceiling, bringing together the notion of animation, time lapse and embroidery. Each retained its individuality whilst constituting and contributing to the whole and drawing the viewer in. In her recent body of work 'Leaving the Terrestrial: Its own Kind of Archive' at Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, Mumbai (May-June 2017), Sumakshi transformed 'the space into something between a natural history museum display and a child's laboratory of invented maritime specimens made of thread'. This included an 18ft representation of coral and a large table-top display of tiny lace specimens and, in bringing together the many strands of her practice, Sumakshi's questions on memory, time, perception and existentialism find voice in these works, whose languages reside between the ethereal and the physical, between labour and effortlessness. ●

Brinda Gill

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Above: Detail and installation view of 'In The Garden', 2016/17. Immersive installation with embroidery-based stop-motion animations projected on multiple screens and suspended plants
PHOTO COURTESY: DHEERAJ THAKUR

Left: Artist Sumakshi Singh