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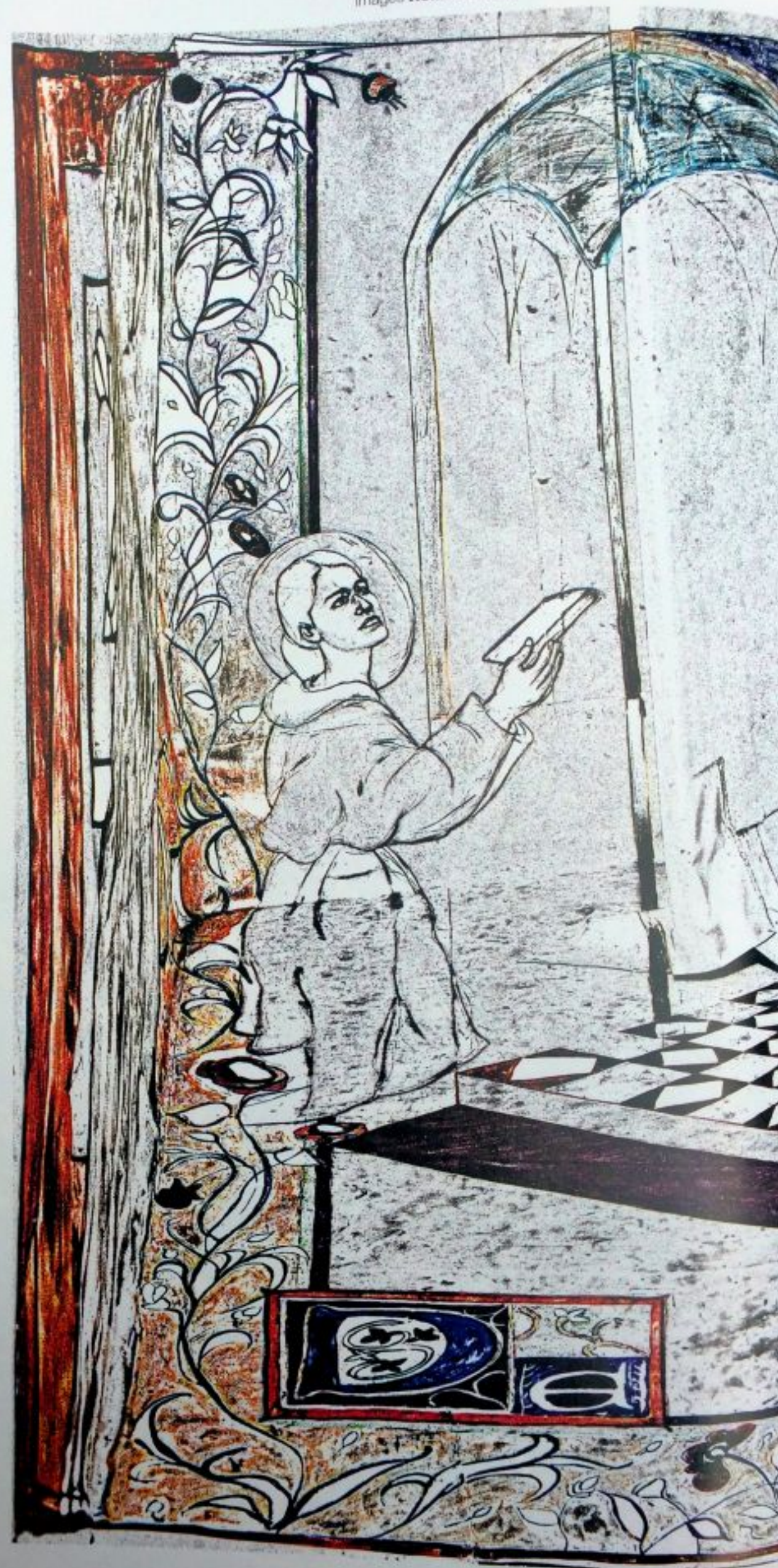
OUR COVER IS AN ILLUSION

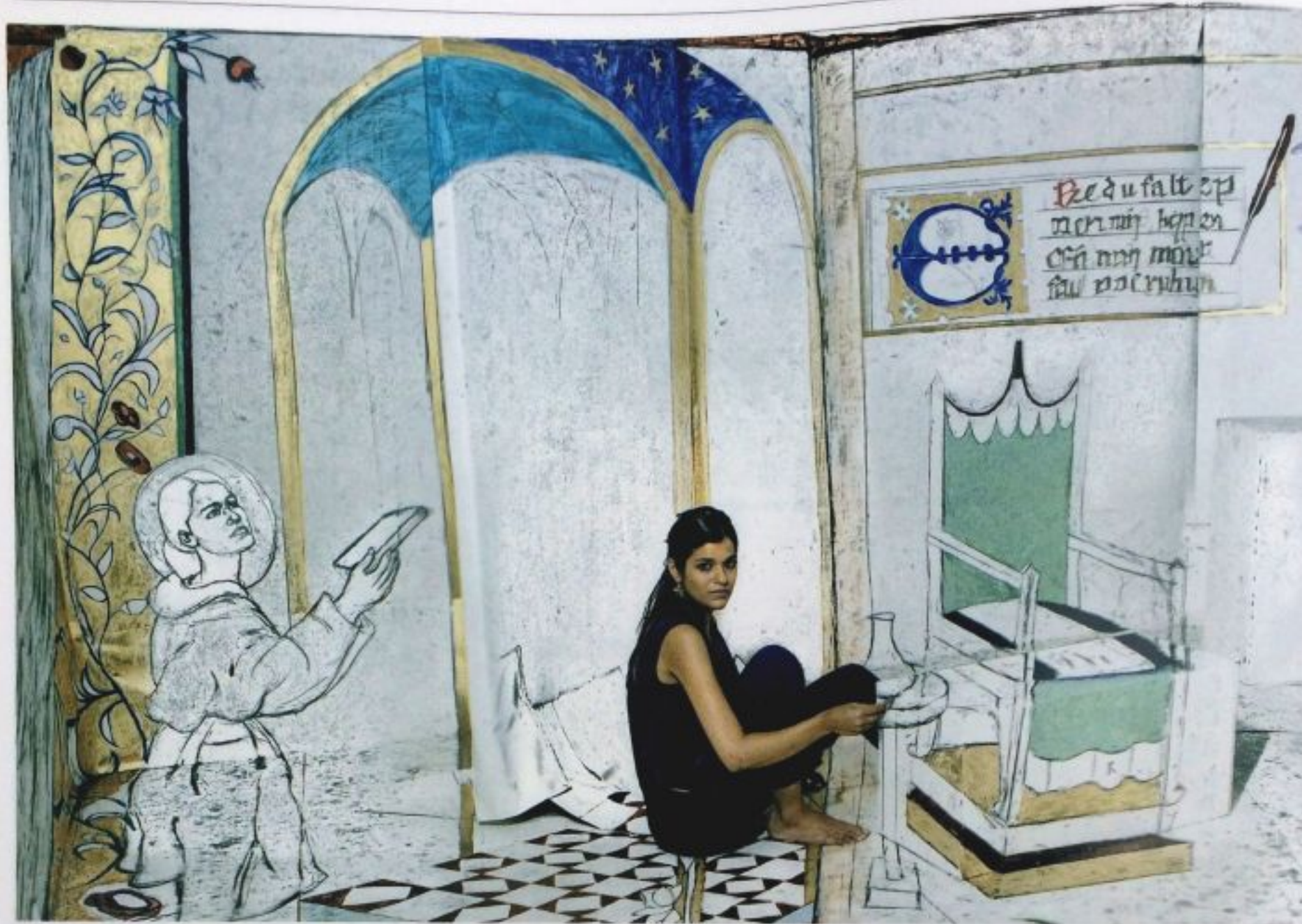
BY SUMAKSHI SINGH



My world My illusions

Being with her is like trying to keep up with a whirlwind. Trying to match her energy is like corking a fizzy bottle of uncorked champagne. And stepping into her unique world is like being Alice in Wonderland. But that's Delhi-born, world-based Sumakshi Singh, an artist and educator who at the young age of 31 years, has exhibited at some of the world's most elite galleries, has taught at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lectured at Oxford University, among several other. For this issue of ANDPERSAND, Singh recreates two pages from a 14th Century illuminated manuscript book, where she is the miniature protagonist interacting with the illusory objects and characters





We can call you a visual artist, who creates an alternative world for people to see. But can you tell a person how to see it as a whole?

Just the opposite! I appreciate quirky vantage points challenging the very formula of "how one should view the world as a whole". Our brains are so quick to jump in with 'this' signifies 'this'. It's a bit of an impoverished "one is to one" relationship. I often try to look at something as if I were seeing it for the first time: to see it without naming it, if I can. The world is loaded with visual surprises when conditioned ideas of "what I am seeing" are pried apart.

When did you find the artist in you?

When I was two years old, I always said "artist" and then "teacher". Now I feel so boringly predictable, I am both! For a while I thought I would be an astrophysicist but the intuitive mysteries of the right brain won over the linear problem solving tendencies.

Tell us about where you grew up and your early impressions of life.

I grew up in nine states in India, my father had a transferable job. Then I lived in Chicago, France and Italy. I was always bringing home a collection of things that I had seen along the way that my poor mother would sportingly display on the mantelpiece. She still reminds me that it would take me over an hour to walk the block

home in Hyderabad, since I had to examine every twig on the way (some remnants of squirrel genes from a past life)! Now a lot of my work involves micro-interventions that I create in and on architectural surfaces.

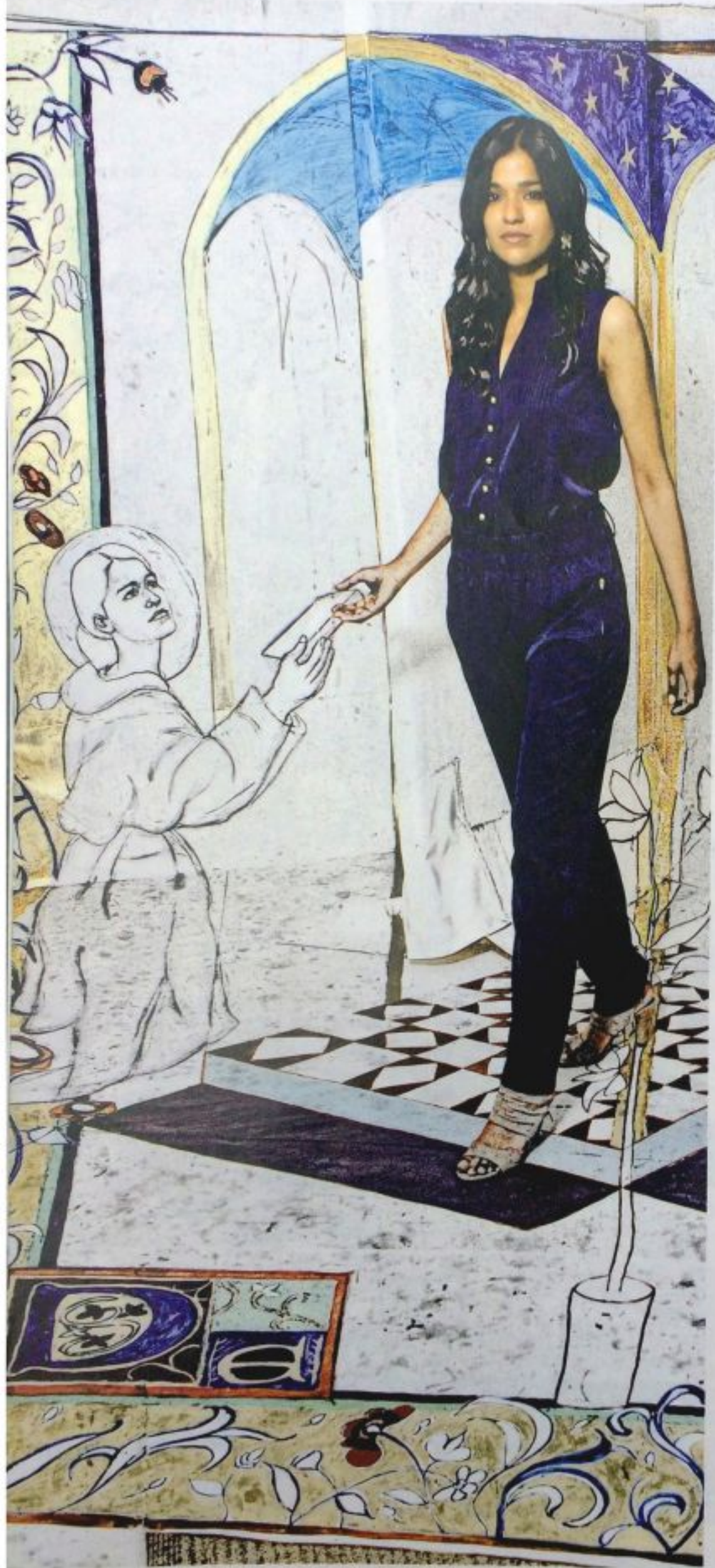
As an established artist, you are known for your perceptual installations and interactive work. What influences you and how should viewers view your artwork?

One day, I was sitting and looking at a stool in my studio and realised that in order for me to see that stool exactly like that it would have to be drawn on the column behind, the wall 12 feet away and the floor in between. It's weird how our vision works!

Soon after that my grandfather died and walking through the space that he occupied, I was filled with a sense of the uncanny. I was asking myself: what does it mean to spend a lifetime collecting objects, building a home, making a space yours in a way that outlives you? All the familiar objects there seemed to change meaning. I had to renegotiate my relationships with them. The only place where I could hold onto a feeling of familiarity was in the world of photographs: they seemed more tangible than my direct experience of the space.

I wanted to recreate this experience for viewers. So I mapped the illusion of my grandfather's living room in dry pastels onto the pre-existing objects and architecture of my studio space. Viewed from the entrance this perceptual space obliterates the





"real". Viewers simultaneously watch themselves in a live video projection and in this mediated version they see themselves in the perfectly lined up illusion of the living room, walking over (and even cutting through!) solid seeming objects, while blurring and erasing these fictional objects, through their motion.

At the India Art Summit in Delhi this year, I created an animation in addition to an installation where I interacted with the virtual (drawn) objects as if they were real.

Recently you lectured at Oxford University, London. What was the topic? This is a very prestigious honour for some one so young.

Since the talk was at a Museum of Ethnography and Social anthropology at Oxford University, I expanded on how I use the armature of social, political, economic and architectural histories of spaces for my work. I also talked about the politics of the "white cube": museum/ gallery spaces and what it means to have an object divorced from its original context and fit with a certain violence into these spaces.

While most artists use their environment as a background, in your work, the background is a part of the art on display. How does an environment influence your work?

I paint, draw, make animations and do site-specific projects. For example, one body of work sponsored by the Mattress Factory Museum of Art in a Pittsburgh neighbourhood, looked like reflective puddles of water on the sidewalk after the rain. Upon closer inspection viewers realised these reflections didn't change as they moved. The "puddles" (that were actually paintings/ digital prints cast in resins, carefully fitted into the holes in the sidewalk, calculated to perspective to imitate reflections) actually were "reflecting" images of the same space as it looked like 100 years ago and of the people that inhabited them. This was a pertinent gesture as most of the people had recently moved into the neighbourhood, without a real sense of connection to its history.

Another body of work looks like tiny colourful microcosms and parasitic activity growing inside and on top of architectural surfaces. I began this body of work in Chicago, which is an incredibly manicured city. Coming from India where you see trees growing out of the sides of buildings, my desire was to somehow pervert the sterility of these groomed surfaces and invite the language of the weed on the side walk.

What are you working on next?

I am part of the "Indian Highway" show at MAXXI in Rome starting in September. I will be recreating a high Gothic ceiling in a long corridor space, complete with the flaking islands of frescoes left at the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi. I am also working on developing characters that represent various autobiographical traits (spring-boarding from the Bhagavad Gita) that interact with each other in the playing field of Maya (illusionist spaces). This will probably be shown at Religare Art, Delhi, in January. I will also be doing a solo project for Black and White Gallery in New York &.



You need to know

Singh is an artist and educator who has taught for many years at the School of the Art Institute, Chicago, and lectured at Oxford University, Columbia University and The Chicago Humanities Festival, among other museums and colleges. She has mentored residencies for the Victoria and Albert Museum, TheWhyNotPlace, Delhi and was a visiting artist advisor at KHOJ Delhi.

Her installations, paintings, drawings and sculptures have been presented in exhibitions in India, China, USA and Europe. Recent venues include Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon, France, Mattress Factory Museum of Contemporary Art, Pittsburgh and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. She was awarded a Zegna Grant in 2009, an Illinois Arts Council award in 2007 and Richard H Driehaus Foundation Award in 2005.

She was a finalist for the Rijksakademie in 2006. Singh received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and a BFA from Maharaja Sayajiro University, Baroda.

She loves: Swami Kriyananda, meditation, hiking, swimming, the humility of early Richard Tuttle, the quiet quality of James Turrell, the disruption of positive/negative space in Rachel Whiteread's Water Towers and the simplicity of Toba Khedoori's drawings of architecture. "I really enjoy Olafur Eliasson's sensibility and Simon Starling's incredible cohesiveness of action/ process/ concept to product."

At home, she enjoys Sheeba Chacchi's rigour, Shilpa Gupta's simple works — blessed bandwidth and a 100 hand drawn maps of India, Jitish Kallat's insightful pocket series, Vivan Sundaram's versatility and Kiran Subbaiah's humour.

Singh is represented by Religare Art.



Making of the cover

1) THE BLANK CANVAS STUCK ON THE WALLS OF SINGH'S STUDIO AT WHYNOTPLACE, SAKET. 2) SINGH WITH SOME HELP, WORKS ON THE ART INSTALLATION. SEEN THROUGH A SCALED DOWN DRAWING OF THE INSTALLATION ON GLASS. 3) BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL TO FILL COLOURS. 4) IN THE PREVIOUS IMAGE, THE THRONE LOOKS INTACT, WHEREAS IN THIS, THE ACTUAL PLACEMENT COMES THOUGH. THAT'S SINGH'S MAGIC! 5) AN IMAGE FROM AN ANGLE WHERE SINGH DOESN'T MERGE WITH THE INSTALLATION AND THE 3D ILLUSION FALLS APART; 6) AND IMAGE FROM THE PERFECT ANGLE THAT LETS US SEE SINGH AS A PART OF THE INSTALLATION. THE INSTALLATION IS NOW COMPLETE!



Styling by Arushi Parakh; Makeup by Monisha Bakshi