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Astrophysics, Sanskrit, Kashmiri Shaivism: Notes from an artist's sketchbook

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Photo: <https://artadia.org/artist/sumakshi-singh/>

New Delhi– She still keeps up with Astrophysics, stressing that it actually informs her art practice. Particularly admiring Nassim Hamein, who for the past three decades has been researching and discovering connections in physics, mathematics, geometry, cosmology and quantum mechanics, artist Sumakshi Singh, also an art educator who has taught at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lectured at Oxford University, Columbia University and The Chicago Humanities Festival among other museums and colleges, is missing mentoring nowadays.

“I haven’t done a lot lately. It keeps me on my toes as an artist as in that environment, I am constantly learning, re-evaluating my givens about art or even life in general and considering new value systems. It is a privilege to witness things being manifested from the seed idea, processed through the unique lens of that particular student and engaging in dialogue about what it means,” says Singh, whose work has been presented at venues like the Saatchi Gallery UK), Kochi Biennale, Museum of Contemporary Art (France), MAXXI Museum (Italy), UCCA Beijing, Mattress Factory Museum of Contemporary Art (USA), Van Harrison Gallery New York (USA), Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, USA) and Illinois State Museum (USA).

Even as her work ‘Specters of Home’ in which viewers are invited to inhabit an ethereal labyrinth of transparent architectural facades from 33 Link Road – Singh’s family home built in Delhi soon after partition, when her grandparents migrated from Pakistan to India, is currently being exhibited by KNMA in a virtual tour, the artist, in whose work memory plays a vital role says that at times there is something to digest from the past.

“If past is feeling present, or intruding now, then I need to process it. And my primary way of processing a feeling or a question about ‘my story’ or ‘history’ or the story of that place is to make something labour intensive, to spend time immersed in the feeling of it. And I stop when I feel some sense of closure within.”

For someone known for her scale, for example ‘In, Between The Pages’ that was witnessed during the Kochi Biennale in 2014, it’s about thinking in space.

“I try to feel what the body would feel like moving through it once the artwork was there – do I want the work to feel intimate, precious, tiny calling for attention – moment to moment in every point of the space (like in the micro-interventions),

or does the work need to immerse, engulf the viewer into a different environment (a landscape of the ghosts of memory, a labyrinth of illusions, an ethereal life-sized mirage, a garden of light). What is invoked and what is evoked at different scales?”

Fascinated with art since the age of two, and encouraged by her father (“just because you can do something, doesn’t mean you should. Do what you love.”), Singh, who feels that art is primary way to process life, hear her authentic voice, and connect with people in a way that can move past the mind insists that while the subject matter of her work may not be political but the way in which its experience can subvert the mainstream value system, could be considered challenging our everyday “givens”.

“This could happen by simply creating an installation that requires viewers to slow down and experience a different rhythm of time within themselves. To breathe, to pay attention to what is here, now; to consider what sort of things do we assign attention to, how do we see, how do we frame information and construct meaning from it ?

“There is the Micro-interventions body of work I have created, which varies from elaborate miniature sculptures to tiny bumps and cracks on the wall, to painted shadows. People spend more time looking at the spaces between the ‘pieces’, observing the texture of the “empty” wall — unable to decide how much is part of the art and how much isn’t — in other words the artworks seem to lose their edges and migrate into each-others’ territories — everything becomes part of the art experience — and once that happens — a crack on your own wall at home, mold on the subway wall- it all joins into a continuing art experience — changing the way one processed their visual environment earlier. It also leaves one unable to collect (in one’s mind), commodify or easily consume an ongoing experience.”

Smiling that her “mad” experiments keeps her edges sharpened, Singh, for whom inspiration can come as a visual idea or a feeling — and the latter is more internal —memory, an inner metaphysical inquiry, an emotion, she then walks through the space and feels how the idea can manifest in this particular place. “Sometimes I come to a place – blank. And just sit. It’s not really waiting even – I don’t know exactly what it is – it’s just sort of sitting, walking, feeling the space and being aware. And then an idea arrives.”

The artist who attended MSU, Baroda before leaving for her Master's programme at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago does feel that despite some amazing students, Indian art schools need to step up. "The curriculum needs to encourage field trips, interaction with practicing artists, interdisciplinary activity and courses which really encourage a pushing of boundaries — conceptually and materially."

Singh, whose site specific work and assignments means that she is mostly travelling, does sometimes miss being 'grounded', maybe that's why so much of her work has had to do with the idea of 'home'.

"I made a conscious decision to try and stay in one place, my Gurgaon studio, for at least a couple of months at a time — it's also what the work needed, otherwise I wasn't being able to have a relationship with my work — the work had to be pulled and pushed and fought with and reconciled with and listened to..."

A few years back, when the luxury brand Hermes which across the world invites artists to create artist windows — which displayed their artworks/designed environments in conjunction with Hermes products asked Singh to do the same for their store in India, what emerged was 'Pages from a Dream Journal' in 2019. "It was wonderful and challenging as the language of visual merchandising needs to be bold and draw you in and my usual impulse as an artist has been to create work which is almost invisible. So it was a real collaboration — trying to figure out how to respect both value systems."

The lockdown for Singh was all about — gorging on this time and space like a starving beast. "In art, it meant a quieter studio practice — painting, making samples, experimenting with materials and not trying to make 'finished' pieces — and giving herself myself freedom to make a mess and fail flamboyantly.

"In astrophysics I've done a good amount of research and taken pages and pages of notes. I am learning Sanskrit, reading books that have been sitting on my shelf for years — from Art Theory to Ayurveda to Kashmiri Shaivism. It's been full and beautiful and very inward." (IANS)