

News / Magazine / Leisure / No joke

## No joke

*Artist Vibha Galhotra's work looks at the environment with "motherly concern", she says.*

Chinki Sinha

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Known for her environmental concerns, Galhotra thinks of her art as that missing red ink. (Photo: Yasir Iqbal)

It's no coincidence that book of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's jokes lies on the table in artist Vibha Galhotra's Delhi flat. One of the jokes in it offers a pretty good explanation of Galhotra's work: when an East German goes to Siberia for work, he tells his friends that to get past the censor he'll use a simple code, everything in blue ink will be true, and anything in red ink will be false. Everything is wonderful here. Stores are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, movie theatres show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair, his first letter reads. The only thing unavailable is red ink.

Known for her environmental concerns, Galhotra thinks of her art as that missing red ink. I look at the environment with a motherly concern. And, of course, you have felt the gender bias. You know it stops you from many things, but you break the wheel, she says.

She picked up the threads for her upcoming work, to be showcased in New York at the Jack Shainman Gallery next year, from the research of various space agencies, especially NASA's quest to find water beyond Earth. They are selling one-way ticket to Mars, she says. Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX, claims [we will] inhabit Mars by 2024. His proposal for a spacefaring civilisation, with a multi-planetary species' hints toward a new scary form of colonisation.

Simultaneously, Galhotra's also working on 'Food for Thought', a public participatory performance that revolves around the theme of panchabhuta or the five elements (water, air, fire, air and ether). But don't expect pretty things, she says.

For her recent work as part of the 'Facing India' exhibition at Germany's Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, she imagined a future Anthropocene, where viewers confronted the damage humanity has wrought upon the environment.

# At Lux, artist's bell-based sculptures address environmental changes



Works by Vibha Galhotra: on wall, "World Trash," and in foreground, "Between." (Courtesy photo)

By **Maya Kroth**

APRIL 11, 2017, 7:15 PM

**T**his month, New Delhi-based conceptual artist Vibha Galhotra is in residence at [Encinitas' Lux Art Institute](#) with a series of works inspired by globalization's effect on the environment.

Galhotra garnered international attention with "Absur-City-Pity-Dity," a 2015 exhibition in New York City that found the artist responding to "all kinds of absurdity I observed in the city of Delhi," including the festering pollution of the Yamuna River.

At Lux, she'll turn her attention to our local waterways.

beehive, a serpent, a river slick with oil.

Here's Galhotra in her own words:

"I got inclined toward nature at university, because there was nothing else to do on the campus: no entertainment of the modern world, no clubs, no pubs. I thought, 'I'm in the 18th century!' But that brought me closer to the natural world. I used to go the rivers and make a work and leave it there. My site-specific work started there.

"I was using seeds in my work, but I was looking for a more permanent material. The shape of the ghungroos is inspired by seeds. Ghungroos are worn by women, but they were also worn by men earlier; the tribe used to wear them to make their presence felt in the natural world. There's not a gender thing present in these works. For that matter, I'm not a very gender-specific person.

"When I shifted to Delhi, I knew it was a rude place for the environment. I started studying and realized that the living conditions here are not right for human beings — or any beings. I saw how birds are missing from the city, how other species are missing, and I thought, 'Who am I? I might be missing from the city very soon.'

"I'm talking about global issues through a local window. These are issues all over the world, not just in Delhi.

"I am from a generation which is seeing a major change in education, environment, culture. (Water pollution) is a major issue all around the world: E-waste is being thrown into the ocean and it's changing aquatic life. The whole Earth is changing its course; it might be a natural process or the human impact. ... The whole world is living under a fear factor.

"(Nobody owns) water, air, earth, ether or fire, but somebody else can claim that ownership and start selling bottled water. This is a common resource; why do I need to buy it? Because somebody created a fear that this water is poisonous, so we all started consuming it, buying it without realizing it's a source that is common.

"In India, we believe in the element of ether: panchabuta, atmosphere, space. Whatever you throw in space, it'll come back like a boomerang. I feel that we are creating a lot of fear: advertising, news, all environmental research is based on fear factor. Maybe my art is even based on fear factor. It's a boomerang: that fear will come back to us. I try to find the presence of some hope everywhere.

"There will be certain things in the show that leave people with melancholia, but I want them to walk away with hope. (I want to get people) talking about the commons; rather than what's mine or yours, we need to talk about these commons now. (To see that) the globe is one, rather than have borders which are inbetween us. But those borders are not seen by nature. If any devastation happens in the natural world, it impacts the whole world."

With Galhotra at the Art Institute of Chicago



**Where:** 1550 S. El Camino Real, Encinitas

**Tickets:** \$5 for adults. Free for Lux members, ages 21 and under and bicycle riders.

**Phone:** (760) 436-6611

**Online:** [luxartinstitute.org](http://luxartinstitute.org)

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## SPOTLIGHT ART

## Living in the age of the Anthropocene



Georgina Maddox

APRIL 01, 2017 16:23 IST

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**A Vibha Galhotra exhibition puts a fresh spin on the five elements of nature to point to an ongoing concern: the damaged environment**

Manthan, or the churning of the ocean, is an age-old myth that speaks of the battle between *devas* and *asuras*, where the two sides of good and evil churned the ocean to extract *amrit* or nectar—the elixir of life. Artist Vibha Galhotra references the myth in the contemporary context with her tongue planted firmly in cheek in a video work of the same name. The short film (10.44

min) feature  
waters of the

ack, polluted

They dredge

it is contemporary

context has changed to black sludge. We can thank the daily dumping of chemical effluents and urban waste into the Yamuna for this. Delhi's arterial river once supported all kinds of biodiversity.

Galhotra's statement about the state of the environment is sharp and cutting and extends to her other works as well, that are part of her solo show now on in the capital. The artist has, in fact, changed the pristine, white cube look of the gallery by scattering concrete slabs on the floor (a metaphor for the concretising of the earth) and by placing installations, video works and photographs all over in a manner that makes more for an intervention than simple viewing. Through her structurally large but deeply aesthetic works, she tries to redefine her own existence and ownership in a commerce-driven world.

"My exhibition examines the age of the Anthropocene (the age of mankind) with a critical eye. While we place mankind at the top of the pyramid of existence, our mad rush towards what is perceived as progress has ruined our environment and brought it to the brink of irreversible damage and destruction," says Galhotra, 39, who has been working with environment issues over the past decade.



"I have referred to the five elements, water, air, fire, earth and ether," says the Delhi-based artist who believes that art can be used to make a statement and engender change. Galhotra is an alumnus of Kala Bhavan Santiniketan, where she completed her Masters in 2001, and is an awardee of the prestigious Rockefeller Grant for 2016 at Bellagio Center.

#### 4000 AD

For this exhibition, as most of her others, Galhotra backs each of her works with in-depth research. For the overall approach, she has referenced conceptual artist Stanley Brouwn's manifesto, '4000 AD'. She also draws upon Plato's atomic patterns of the five classical elements named Platonic solids, believed to offer an account of the formation of the universe, representing the

underlying  
graph, 'The

The objects of each shape, whether cube, hexagon or tetrahedrons, where each shape, whether cube, hexagon or tetrahedron of the elements. Galhotra's trademark *ghungroo* bells used in most of her earlier works have been employed as a visual tapestry for Steffen's acceleration graph. "It looks a bit like a wave, and echoes *Manthan*," she observes with a smile. "However, what it really signifies is the rapid growth rate of our society and its impact on earth. After World War II, in the 1950s, Steffen informs us that earth's ecosystem and atmosphere changed rapidly owing to the altered economic patterns of production and consumption." Tempting us with its shiny surface and aesthetic appeal, 'Acceleration' draws us in only to present us with grim facts. We are consuming resources at a faster rate than they can be replenished.

A series of photographs titled 'Breath by Breath' looks ironically at the element most often taken for granted: air. "When I grew up, one never thought about air or *vayu* because it was everywhere, it was not one of the visible elements and we were never aware of the air that we so freely breathed," says Galhotra. However, Delhi is one of the world's most polluted cities today, and comes second only to Beijing in China. "We are now forced to sit up and take notice."

### Cleaning leaves

"I was shocked to see jars of air being sold online. I thought, are these companies trying to make fools of us? But it made me reflect and I began looking seriously at the issue of air." Galhotra followed the Central Pollution Control Board around Delhi, taking photographs of their survey equipment and also creating a series of humorous yet poignant images of the artist armed with a butterfly net trying to capture fresh air—in front of a rubbish pile, at a traffic signal, on a field in the outskirts of Delhi. The futility of the action underscores the irreversible damage done to the planet.

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Another meditative work captures the artist wearing rubber gloves and painstakingly cleaning the leaves of a plant. "I actually do this on my balcony, because my plants are often covered with a film of dust. This normally gets washed away by the rain, but since Delhi has not seen proper rains in a while, we resort to this," she says, gesturing towards the soiled gloves that are hung as part of the display.

One is curious about the sheets floating in formaldehyde, à la Damian Hirst, and the artist reveals that these are the pieces of fabric used to dredge the Yamuna in the film *Manthan*. One sheet is pristine white and the other black with sludge. "I wanted to preserve them as sculptural objects, a residue of the performance," she says.

The gallery walk ends with an audio piece that is both amazing and shocking. A large metal container with the world map etched on it stands in the middle of a gallery room. When you hit its surface, a cacophony of voices breaks out.

The work, titled 'Time Symphony or Cacophony', captures the last element, ether. "Sound travels through air. For this work, I sourced different sound recordings from various time periods, like political speeches and recorded conversations between people. What first starts as cacophony dies down until one can hear individual voices," says Galhotra. Sound is the most primordial of the elements and it seems most appropriate to end here.

**ON VIEW:** [In] *Sanity in the Age of Reason, Exhibit 320, New Delhi, till April 16*



## Ways of seeing: Vibha Galhotra's exhibition says that the Apocalypse need not be an event, if you care to look differently

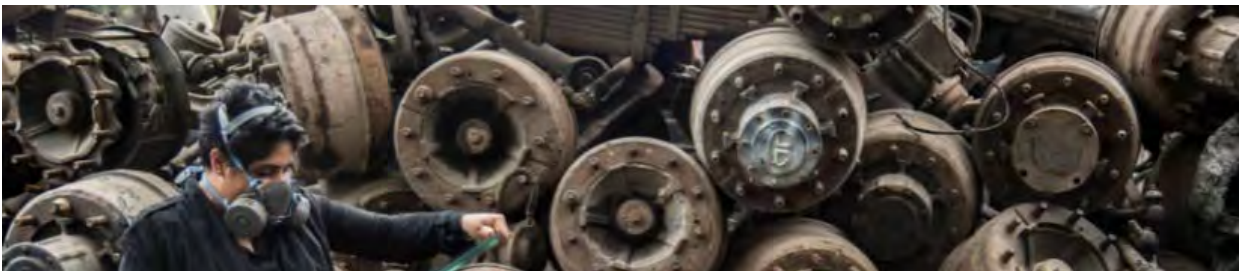
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Manik Sharma (/author/manik-sharma) Mar, 25 2017 09:00:13 IST

The Holocene has existed for 11,000 years. A period during which civilisations have grown, narratives have been set by the human form and nature has had to evolve, even at times contradict with the likes of the Plague or AIDS, most importantly coupled with expansion.

The nature of this evolution that has now come to relate more with consumption than anything else, has been so forceful, that scientists across the world in 2016, declared it the age of Anthropocene. The age of unavoidable human impact in everything that is around us. It comes as a challenge not only for those who will be daubing their cotton samples with the air and water of the age, but even those who will stand and ponder the aesthetic of it all. How does the artist react to an age, where Nature is at its weakest, where beauty is a matter of manufactured details, and humanity is so much in control it can't help but be deprecatory. Delhi-based, Vibha Galhotra, through her exhibition [IN]SANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON, is trying to perhaps ask, and find some answers.

Galhotra has through photographs, videos, and installations mined the everyday nooks that we choose to look away from, to address a problem that is glaring back at us – our own destructive influence.





“The project came out of my continuous research around Belief and Reality centering around the very basic questions of absence and presence? Who are we? (in terms of our ownership claim on earth) and where are we going? The questions delved deep into the atmosphere including not just the natural physical world, but also the atmosphere which we create through social, economic and political interactions within it,” Galhotra says.







The exhibition is a cross-over between philosophy, science and even at times mythology. The definitive line is drawn at faith, which is perhaps what the exhibition as a whole intends to shake. Are we simply content with being the superior and thus not considering the impact of it or due to it?



A desecrated pillar with bars of iron sticking out like teeth in the middle of the curation is a stark and stately reminder of the 'irony' of structures. They secure our ideas of space, but at the same time, threaten our ideas of freedom. The very difficulty in navigating around an object so obscenely solid and uncompromisingly horrid makes the exhibition a tough experience. And therein lies the point itself. A resident of Delhi herself, Galhotra finds in the Yamuna both inspiration and subject.

"I have specifically focused on the Yamuna river that flows through Delhi, the city of my residence, as it offers an interesting analogy to juxtapose the religious sanctity of the river with its actual state of being a cesspool. By showcasing our ability to pollute even something we consider 'holy'," she says.

The most striking component of the exhibition is perhaps the performative photo series 'Breath by Breath'. In the series Galhotra poses with objects, ironically inclined to capture some of Delhi's air, from areas that we'd rather not visit, or at least stand at for more than a second. These images borrow from dystopian themes that are somewhere between George Miller, David Lynch and Cormac McCarthy.

Ghastly and thoroughly odd, what makes these photos stick is the commonality of its otherwise regular parlance. Is it then simply a matter of seeing as much as it might be of ignoring the physical consequences? "I wanted to talk about our present dystopian state of existence and juxtapose it with our utopian ideal of a world in which we would rather be living. 'Breath by Breath' is an allegory of the element Air or Vayu, one of the five Panchabhutas. The work is a commentary on the deteriorating air quality which goes a step further by capitalizing in creating products like air purifiers and cans of a breath of fresh air, stratifying the socio-economic structure even further," Galhotra says. The

Ways of seeing: Vibha Galhotra's exhibition says that the Apocalypse need not be an event, if you care to look differently  
socio-economic factor here is crucial, and it would suggest that artists may in the future find it difficult to reject  
considering any of these.

Is this then — also a unique age for art — where the shift from beauty to the beast, has slowly begun? Galhotra believes that though not all artists will veer this way, and remain detached, it is unlikely that art will be the same as it has been for years. “It is ironic that most people still associate art with beauty and decoration. However, if one goes revisits historical accounts of the past cultures, art had always been a medium to bring change and movement in society. In fact, history itself was coded and decoded through artistic mediums. There has to be constant change in art. The artists of any age depicted the times and space they inhabited,” she says.

In the gallery, on a couple of metallic stands rest a pair of gloves and napkins, blackened during the process of filming and photographing the elements on show, as if to say, that there is death in each waft of air that passes us by. And if you look carefully, this definitely shall not pass.

*'[In]sanity in the Age of Reason' is open at Exhibit320 in Delhi, till 17 April, 2017.*

#Apocalypse (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/apocalypse>) #Art (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/art>) #Artandculture (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/artandculture>)  
#Breath by breath (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/breath-by-breath>) #Delhi (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/delhi>) #Exhibition (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/exhibition>)  
#F weekend (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/f-weekend>) #Vibha galhotra (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/vibha-galhotra>)  
#Ways of seeing (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/ways-of-seeing>) #[in]sanity in the age of reason (<http://www.firstpost.com/tag/insanity-in-the-age-of-reason>)

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# [IN]SANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON

VIBHA GALHOTRA

18th MARCH - 17th APRIL, 2017



*“When the people will have lost their remembrance and thus will have no past, only future  
When they will have to discover everything, every moment again and again  
When they will have lost their need for contact with others ...  
Then they will live in a world of only colour, light, space, time, sounds and movement  
Then colour light space time sounds and movement will be free  
No music  
No theatre  
No art  
No  
There will be  
Sound  
Colour  
Light  
Space  
Time  
Movement.”*

*Stanley Brouwn*





Exhibition view - [In]sanity In The Age of Reason



# When the River of Life Nears Zero Time

## Vibha Galhotra's (In)Sanity In The Age Of Reason”

M. Neelika Jayawardane

As I write about Vibha Galhotra's work from Upstate New York, where I live and work, we should be in the depths of winter. It is the last week of February, and temperatures should sit well below zero Celsius. There should be mounds of old, dirty snow on the roadsides, tainted by de-icing mixes of rock salt and sodium or potassium chloride, scraped aside by the army of snow ploughs that troll the highways and by ways after each snowfall. Low clouds should be greying each day, with barely a hint of the nearing spring equinox. So harsh is the long winter in this post-industrial city with little to prettify its rows of abandoned warehouses and obsolete smokestacks that there is no month in which we long more for Spring than during winter's last stretch in February. Yet, this morning, I woke up to thunderstorms and torrential rain. The tulip and crocus bulbs I planted in the autumn – late March harbingers of spring, antidote to the rusting cityscape are already sending up their long green leaves.

This environmental and climate “weirding” is how most people in this region, deeply invested in the brand of political conservatism specific to the U.S. one that dictates that climate change is a “liberal” invention intended to curb industry and gum up progress have been forced to realise that something is wrong. Although it is commonplace today to hear news reports about noxious spills of livestock faecal matter from factory farms, exploding oil rigs that destroy an entire Gulf's ecosystem, meltdowns at nuclear plants poisoning surrounding farmland, climate science literacy alone has not been sufficient to change minds. In the face of push-back and misinformation promulgated by lobbyists trained to oppose environmental protection laws, and the politicians whose careers and campaigns powerful industry leaders fund, science seems to be losing. Years of scientific research, with facts, figures, and graphs to support claims of imminent environmental collapse, seem powerless. Rationality that hallmark characteristic of the enlightenment, on which modern (European) man's superiority over beast and nature was constructed has not been enough.

As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin argue, the emergence of an appreciation for the beauty of industrialisation and destroyed environments is intimately linked to imperial ventures; in their introduction to Art in the Anthropocene, they note that according to visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, “[t]he aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics—it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful—and thereby anaesthetized the perception of



modern industrial pollution.”<sup>1</sup> We can see this fascination with the altered environment through “the ever more colourful sunsets caused by particulate matter in the atmosphere, or to the aestheticized presentation of environmental destruction or explosive urbanization in the photographs of Edward Burtyknsy and Vincent Laforet respectively”. Jessica Lack, too, notes, “art about man's impact on the environment, spearheaded by the land art movement in the 1960s, was largely fatalistic and sought to reveal its grubby beauty.”<sup>2</sup> As examples, Lack reminds us of Richard Billingham's “amber-lit photographs of a deprived industrial backwater near Coventry, The Black Country, or Tomoko Takahashi's seemingly chaotic installations of modern detritus.”

What does it mean for artists to work within a world that is undeniably altered and possibly irreversibly damaged by human activity? What does it mean for artists, and their visual practices, to encounter the Anthropocene, without simply aesthetically arresting works that inevitably draw attention to the artist

and normalise devastating problems? And will their singular, often locally-focused efforts undermine the need for more systemic, interdisciplinary changes? Even as we feel our impotence in the face of catastrophic changes to the five great elements, water, earth, fire, air, and space or the panchabhuta which, according to Hindu mythology, is the basis of all cosmic creation – can artists and art become more relevant – more present, more here – even as we feel our impotence in the face of catastrophic changes? Most importantly of all, can aesthetic practices and audience encounters with art be fashioned in such a way that we are better able to address the social, economic, and political implications of climate change? That is, can art and aesthetics often a practice of the elite properly address the fact that the Anthropocene era will effect more damage on the daily, lived experiences of the poor, the marginalised, and disenfranchised, partnering and including their political presence?

These are questions that conceptual artist Vibha Galhotra attempts to

address in her exhibition, **(IN)SANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON**. What artistic expression can she, as an artist, thinker, environmental activist and ordinary inhabitant of Delhi, find in the effluvial sludge clogging up the Yamuna River – this undeniable, material, and visible toxic evidence of the slow devastation of the health of an entire city's inhabitants? One cannot walk in to Galhotra's exhibition expecting “prettiness” to meditate the troubling realities that she addresses. Like other artists whose work recognises that we have, irreversibly, “entered the ‘Anthropocene’ – a new geologic era marked by the impact of human activity on the earth” – her work also engages in a variety of modes, “ranging from critique to practical demonstrations and shading into other current tendencies like social practice, relational aesthetics, environmental activism and systems theory.”

In “The Land and Water and Air That We Are: Some Thoughts on COP 21,” Heather Davis beautifully renders the feelings that accompany the slow suffocation and poisoning of life forms in ethereal, poetic language.



MARKS / linoleum and foot prints / 18 x 30 in / 2016-17





ACCELERATION / ghusroos, fabric, wood and steel / 2 x 117 in / 2017



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BREATH BY BREATH / digital print on archival paper / 18 x 36 in / 2016-17

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These are questions that conceptual artist Vibha Galhotra attempts to address in her exhibition, **(IN)SANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON**. What artistic expression can she, as an artist, thinker, environmental activist and ordinary inhabitant of Delhi, find in the effluvial sludge clogging up the Yamuna River – this undeniable, material, and visible toxic evidence of the slow devastation of the health of an entire city’s inhabitants? One cannot walk in to Galhotra’s exhibition expecting “prettiness” to meditate the troubling realities that she addresses. Like other artists whose work recognises that we have, irreversibly, “entered the

‘Anthropocene’ – a new geologic era marked by the impact of human activity on the earth” – her work also engages in a variety of modes, “ranging from critique to practical demonstrations and shading into other current tendencies like social practice, relational aesthetics, environmental activism and systems theory.”<sup>4</sup>

In “The Land and Water and Air That We Are: Some Thoughts on COP21,” Heather Davis beautifully renders the feelings that accompany the slow suffocation and poisoning of life forms in ethereal, poetic language. She illustrates how the very molecules of which we, as human beings, are composed are poorer because of pollution and species extinction:

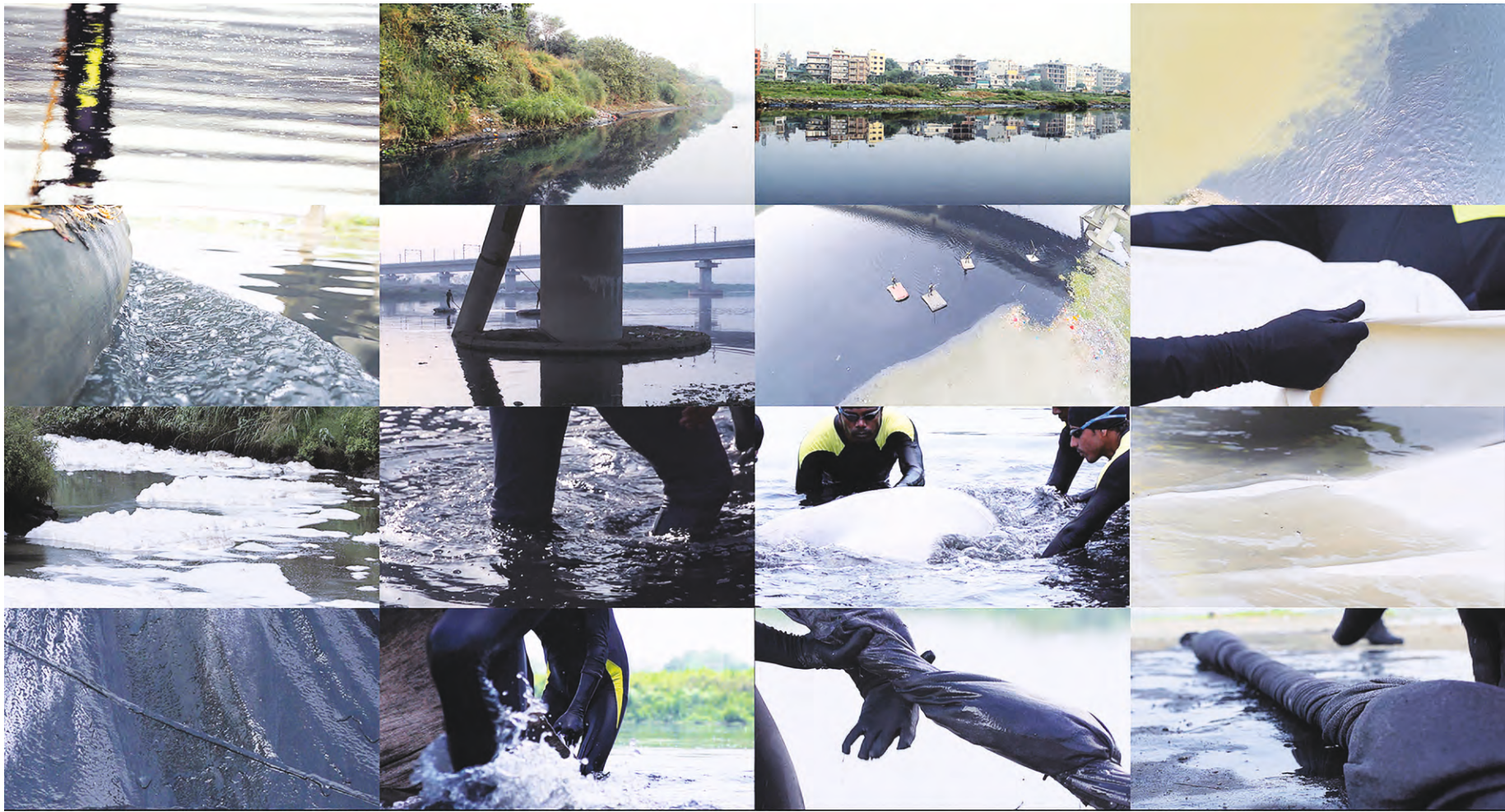
*“Every time we breathe, we pull the world into our bodies...We become the outside through our breath, our food, and our porous skin...We have come into existence with and because of so many others, from carbon to microbes to dogs...[but we] are losing, with the increase in aromatic hydrocarbons and methane and carbon, the animals and plants and air and water that compose us.”*<sup>5</sup>

Galhotra’s work – like Davis’ writing requires an emotional and psychological engagement; it demands that we meditate on our daily breath as an essential part of our ecological awareness, reconnecting us to indigenous practices that interconnect human hopes and dreams with flora and fauna, fire and water, earth, sun, stars, and the atmosphere. It insists that we bend our practices according to seasonal changes. It also requires our rational modernity to be part of this process, calling for our intellectual, scientific, and political engagement.

The space that her multimedia installations occupy, for this exhibit







Stills from the film MANTHAN



REMAINS / resin, fabric & metal / 8 x 5.5 x 94 in / 2015-16



TIME SYMPHONY OR CACOPHONY / steel and sound / 96 x 168 x 24 in / 2016-17







As I write about Vibha Galhotra's work from Upstate New York, where I live and work, we should be in the depths of winter. It is the last week of February, and temperatures should sit well below zero Celsius. There should be mounds of old, dirty snow on the roadsides, tainted by de-icing mixes of rock salt and sodium or potassium chloride, scraped aside by the army of snow ploughs that troll the highways and by ways after each snowfall. Low clouds should be greying each day, with barely a hint of the nearing spring equinox. So harsh is the long winter in this post-industrial city with little to prettify its rows of abandoned warehouses and obsolete smoke-stacks that there is no month in which we long more for Spring than during winter's last stretch in February. Yet, this morning, I woke up to thunderstorms and torrential rain. The tulip and crocus bulbs I planted in the autumn – late March harbingers of spring, antidote to the rusting cityscape are already sending up their long green leaves.

This environmental and climate “weirding” is how most people in this region, deeply invested in the brand of political conservatism specific to the U.S. one that dictates that climate change is a “liberal” invention intended to curb industry and gum up progress have been forced to realise that something is wrong. Although it is commonplace today to hear news reports about noxious spills of live-

stock faecal matter from factory farms, exploding oil rigs that destroy an entire Gulf's ecosystem, meltdowns at nuclear plants poisoning surrounding farmland, climate science literacy alone has not been sufficient to change minds. In the face of push-back and misinformation promulgated by lobbyists trained to oppose environmental protection laws, and the politicians whose careers and campaigns powerful industry leaders fund, science seems to be losing. Years of scientific research, with facts, figures, and graphs to support claims of imminent environmental collapse, seem powerless. Rationality that hallmark characteristic of the enlightenment, on which modern (European) man's superiority over beast and nature was constructed has not been enough.

As Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin argue, the emergence of an appreciation for the beauty of industrialisation and destroyed environments is intimately linked to imperial ventures; in their introduction to Art in the Anthropocene, they note that according to visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff, “[t]he aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics—it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful—and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.”<sup>1</sup> We can see this fascination with the altered environment through “the ever more colourful sunsets caused by particulate matter in



the atmosphere, or to the aestheticized presentation of environmental destruction or explosive urbanization in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky and Vincent Laforet respectively”<sup>2</sup>. Jessica Lack, too, notes, “art about man's impact on the environment, spearheaded by the land art movement in the 1960s, was largely fatalistic and sought to reveal its grubby beauty.”<sup>3</sup> As examples, Lack reminds us of Richard Billingham's “amber-lit photographs of a deprived industrial backwater near Coventry, The Black Country, or Tomoko Takahashi's seemingly chaotic installations of modern detritus.”

What does it mean for artists to work within a world that is undeniably altered and possibly irreversibly damaged by human activity? What does it mean for artists, and their visual practices, to encounter the Anthropocene, without simply aesthetically arresting works that inevitably draw attention to the artist and normalise devastating problems? And will their singular, often locally focused efforts undermine the need for more systemic, interdisciplinary changes? Even as we feel our impotence in the face of catastrophic changes to the five great elements, water, earth, fire, air, and space or the panchabhuta which, according to Hindu mythology, is the basis of all cosmic creation – can artists and art become more relevant – more present, more here – even as we feel our impo-

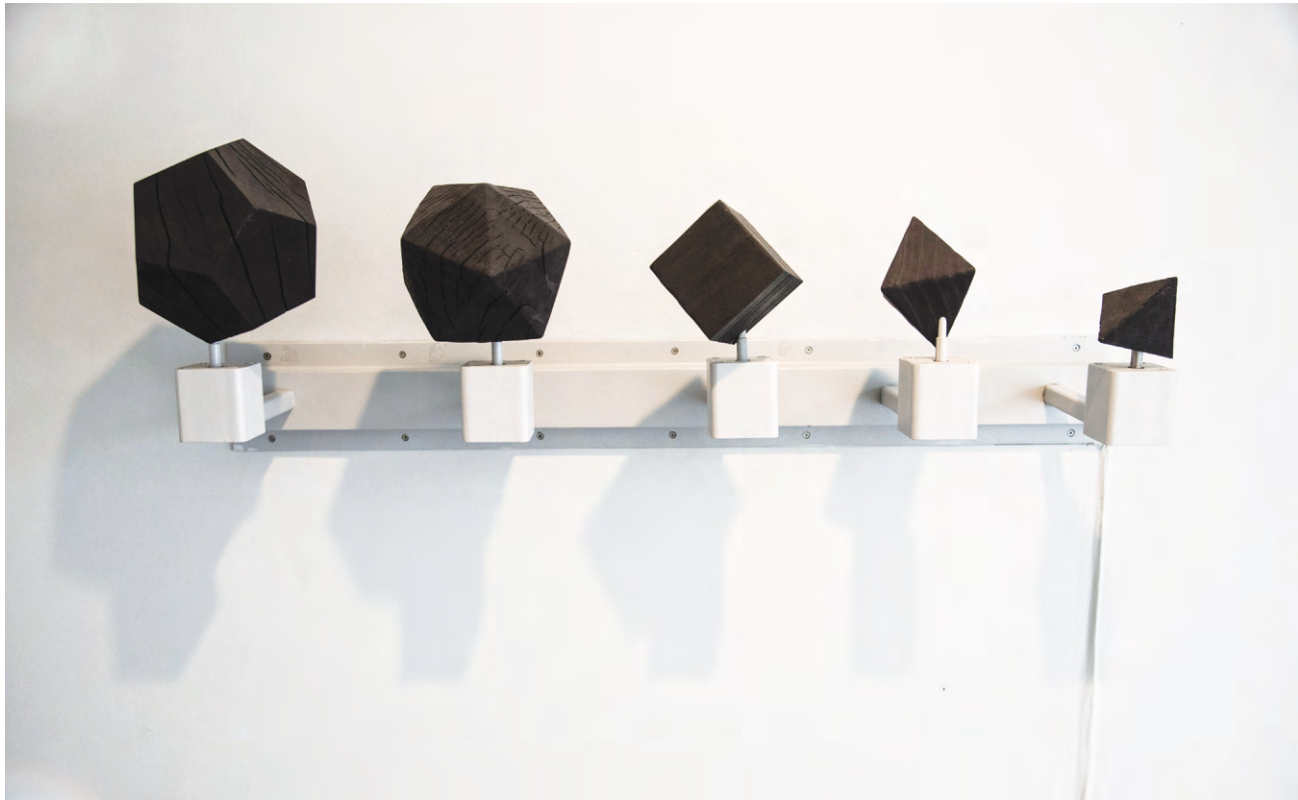
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# [IN]SANITY IN THE AGE OF REASON

VIBHA GALHOTRA

18th MARCH - 17th APRIL, 2017



ELEMENTS / wood, steel, motors / 16 x 46 x 13.5 in



ACCELERATION / ghungroos, fabric, wood and steel / 2 x 117 in / 2017



MANTHAN / film duration 10:44 mins / 2015

The work FIVE ELEMENTS is inspired by the mathematical three-dimensional forms of the Platonic solids, named after the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who designed them around 350 A.D. to represent the atomic pattern of the five classical elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether. The mathematical symmetry of these solids which are composed of congruent regular convex polygons with identical faces meeting at a vertex, led Plato to theorize in his dialogue ‘Timaeus’ that these solids were the building blocks of nature or life itself. To the five solids composed including tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, or icosahedron, he attributed the atomic patterns of the elements fire, earth, air, water and ether or cosmos respectively. Through this depiction, Plato presented an account of the formation of the universe and believed it to be “the handiwork of a divine Craftsman... who, imitating an unchanging and eternal model, imposes mathematical order on a preexistent chaos to generate the ordered universe (kosmos).” Impressed with these geometric shapes which lie at the cross-section of science and spirituality, Galhotra tried to revisit the formlessness of these elements which give form to everything that exists.

The work ACCELERATION, is based on Professor Will Steffen's climate change graph “**The Great Acceleration**”, which shows the changes in Earth's ecosystem and atmosphere owing to changing economic patterns of production and consumption, the latter especially gaining momentum post the 1950s. Ghungroos, which have been a trademark of Galhotra's practice, provide fluidity, and therefore tactfully employed by her to deconstruct the anthropogenic trends and reconstruct Steffen's graph. The metallic sheen of this graphical representation is ambiguous, since while the shiny surface draws the viewer close, bringing him face-to-face with Anthropogenic realities, yet the aesthetic appeal is almost evasive of the very dire realities the work represents, in the process, presenting a satire of sorts concerning our attitude towards our environment.

Water or Jal is the underlying concern of the work MANTHAN, a short film. The element water is dualistic in character, being eternal in its atomic form and yet being perishable in the form of water bodies. The film depicts four people dressed in rubber suits churning the sludge and sediments from the river, thereby invoking Hindu mythology where the gods churn the ocean to obtain the nectar of immortality. By referencing this immortality, Galhotra examines the ecological threat facing the sacred Yamuna river and its repercussions on the mortality of those who come in contact with it. Focusing on the faecal content and chemical pollutants that have polluted the river to the extent of turning it into a sewage, its continued supply of drinking water to the residents of Delhi forces the viewer to contemplate the implications of the latter on not only the health of its immediate consumers, but also the larger ecosystem of the city. Through the work, Galhotra urges us to find a solution before it is too late.

M. Neelika Jayawardane is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego, and an Honorary Research Associate at the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa (CISA), University of the Witwatersrand (South Africa). She is a founding member of the online magazine, *Africa is a Country*, where she was a senior editor and contributor from 2010-2016. Her writing is featured in *Transitions*, *Contemporary&*, *Al Jazeera English*, *Art South Africa*, *Contemporary Practices: Visual Art from the Middle East*, and *Research in African Literatures*. She writes about and collaborates with visual artists.

<sup>1</sup>Davis, Heather and Turpin, Etienne. “Art & Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction.” Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies. London: Open Humanities Press, 2015. 3-29.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Lack, Jessica. “Can art help us understand environmental disaster?” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/mar/21/art-environmental-disaster-oil>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017.

<sup>4</sup>Heartney, Eleanor. “Art for the Anthropocene Era.” Art in America. 06 FEB. 2014. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/art-for-the-anthropocene-era/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017

<sup>5</sup>Davis, Heather. “The Land and Water and Air That We Are: Some Thoughts on COP 21.” SFAQ NYAQ/ LXAQ: International Art and Culture. <http://sfaq.us/2016/03/the-land-and-water-and-air-that-we-are-some-thoughts-on-cop-21/>. Accessed 26 Feb. 2017.

<sup>6</sup>Van den Boogaard, Oscar. “In Search of Stanley Brouwn: The Man Who Wishes to Remain Invisible.” Frieze blog. 12 Mar 2014. <https://frieze.com/article/search-stanley-brouwn>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Heartney, Eleanor. “Art for the Anthropocene Era.” Art in America. 06 FEB. 2014. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/art-for-the-anthropocene-era/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017

<sup>9</sup>Scott, Jill and Kueffer, Christoph. “Environmental Justice, ‘Collapse’ and the Question of Evidence: What Can the Arts Contribute? A Dialogue.” Environmental Justice and the Arts, Vol. 3, 2015. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. 4-5.

<sup>11</sup>Scott, Jill and Kueffer, Christoph. “Environmental Justice, ‘Collapse’ and the Question of Evidence: What Can the Arts Contribute? A Dialogue.” Environmental Justice and the Arts, Vol. 3, 2015.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. 5.





COMBUSTION / steel, brass and brunt fossil fuel / 60 in dia / 2016

The work COMBUSTION is based on the ancient water clock concept encapsulating the element of Fire or Agni. The clock, which denotes time, is made using a big pan filled with burnt oil, containing a small bowl with a pinhole that measures time intervals. Resonating with fire's essential characteristic i.e. heat, the use of diesel instead of water is a metaphor for humans running out of time to save our planet from becoming ashen through the overuse of fossil fuels.



REMAINS / resin,fabric and metal / 8 x 5.5 x 94 in / 2015-16

The work REMAINS is formed from the shroud-like cloths dipped in the Yamuna in the film Manthan firstly before it mixes with the sewage and secondly after it becomes a real cesspool, the color of the fabric revealing the level of contamination of the polluted river in each case. In the sculptural works thus created, the churned fabric along with sediments from the river are inserted in resin, and then encased to archive the contamination of the river, their toxic translucency capturing the contamination of the present times itself.



BREATH BY BREATH /digital print on archival paper / 18 x 36 in / 2016-17

The work BREATH BY BREATH allegorizes the element Air or Vayu. While air pollution levels in most urban areas have been a matter of serious concern, the data generated through the National Ambient Air Monitoring Network does not cater well to understanding the air quality a common person breathes. The present system of air quality information, therefore, does not facilitate people's participation in air quality improvement efforts. In this light, the installation works on many levels incorporating a room constructed for the viewers to rejuvenate themselves by breathing in fresh oxygen through a mask or sitting under UV lights. Simultaneously, the room is also equipped with a television screening the performative staged photo-documentation of Galhotra collecting polluted air from different spots in the city of New Delhi. In addition, a LED screen next to the television, displays Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data on pollution from the Board's real time data collection archive. While the experience of "a breath of fresh air" reinvigorates the memory of what only seems to be an extinct forgotten thing, the subsequent juxtaposition of this former experience with visuals and data about our present air scenario aims to creates an urgency in the mind of the viewer. On another note, it calls to question the increasing consumerism which not only led us to such a state of the environment, but which further capitalizes on our lack by creating products like air purifiers and cans of a breath of fresh air, stratifying the socio-economic structure even further. The work resonates with Galhotra's cry "Who owns the Earth", forcing us to introspect the extremes to which we will go before we decide to take ownership of our actions.



TIME SYMPHONY OR CACOPHONY / steel and sound / 96 x 168 x 24 in / 2016-17

Ether or Akasha, the most pivotal yet subtle of elements, represents the space the other elements fill in. The origin of ether is shabda or sound in its primordial, un-manifested form, in the form of vibrations which emerge long before they take the form of sound in the ear. Sound and ether are, therefore, inseparable. As a homage to these sound vibrations, the work TIME SYMPHONY OR CACOPHONY, therefore, presents an interactive sound wall incorporating sounds from different time periods, which can be triggered on touch at multiple points. Incorporating both positive and negative sounds of our times and the energy, which moves us, the sound waves connect us to other living and non-living beings. The work, then, will create a symphony or rather cacophony of sounds, orchestrating the atmosphere of our present chaotic times.



CLEANSING / video in loop / 2016

The work CLEANSING is an amalgamation of the concerns associated with the elements Air and Earth. Environmental pollution due to mining and quarrying activities coupled with the rise in road traffic and congestion is leading to escalating dust levels. The latter is causing dust deposition on plants and vegetation in turn adversely affecting internal plant processes like photosynthesis, respiration, transpiration, and absorption of phytotoxic gaseous pollutants. In this rapidly changing world, we, humans, considering ourselves to be adaptable creatures barely acknowledge the modern-day pollution levels and passively accept it to be the new reality of the world we inhabit. To retract this passive attitude, three performers will be appointed to clean each leaf of a plant carefully (as in the practice of Zen), without engaging with the viewers, solely focusing on the connection between them and the plant. In this age of Anthropocene, the work is a commentary on the choking breath of plants, ironically the latter being the life saviors of our own breath.



MARKS / linoleum and foot print / 18 x 30 in / 2016-17

The work, MARKS, inclines towards the element Earth or Prithvi, resulting from the unknown participation of people walking on linoleum mats laid out at different public places including school, market, parking lot, temple, bank post-demonetization (November 2016), hospital, traffic, metro station, spice market, etc. Resonating with Stanley Brouwn's practice which explored the impact of our daily actions on the environment, the work captures the abstract imagery of people's footprints, metaphorically representing the imprints or rather stains we are leaving behind on our planet.





Vibha Galhotra is a recipient of prestigious **Rockefeller Grant** at their Bellagio Center, 2016. At present, she is an **Asian Cultural Council** fellow in the US, pursuing continual research on belief and reality to intervene on the subject of Anthropocene.

Galhotra's practice ranges across photography, film, video, found objects, performative objects, sculpture, installation, text, sound, drawing, and public interventions. Vibha shares, that her art practice crosses the dimensions of art, ecology, economy, science, spirituality, and activism and constantly trying to create a parallel between belief and reality, absence and presence, construction or [De] construction within the social, political and economical domain of our constructed structures. The constant negotiation of human with ecosystem and win the mystery within that ecosystem, interest her to continue her practice based on research and intuitive imagination to understand and question the alienation of human in the atmosphere or the atmosphere in the human dominated world.

Through her massive but aesthetic work (both philosophically and structurally) she tries to redefine her own existence and ownership in this commerce driven world. Vibha studied art in Kala Bhavan Santiniketan, where she completed her Masters in 2001, and earlier in Chandigarh, Government College of Art. She is been honored with YFLO Woman Achiever of the Year Award in 2015, Inlaks Foundation Fine Arts Award in 2005-06, the National Scholarship from the Human Resource Department, Government of India in 2001-02, and the Artist Under 30 Award, Chandigarh State Lalit Kala Academy Award in 1998.

To mention a few of Galhotra's exhibitions, her solo exhibitions include: “Absur–City–Pity– Dity” at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York (USA, 2015); “The Black Cloud Project”: A Public Participatory Project (2014); “Metropia” at Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston Salem, North Carolina (USA, 2012); “ReBirth Day” at Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea, Piazza Cavour, San Giovanni Valdarno (Italy, 2012); She has exhibited at the Dhaka Art Summit (Dhaka,2014) Kathmandu International Art Festival (Nepal,2012); “Between” at Colombo Art Biennial (Sri Lanka, 2012); “India Awakens - Under the Banyan tree” at The Essel Museum of Contemporary Art, Austria (2010); 4th Aluminum BAKU Biennial (Azerbaijan, 2009). In 2009, she was also featured in Younger than Jesus: Artist directory co-published by Phaidon Press Limited, London, England and New Museum, New York.

Galhotra’s work will be features in the upcoming book of Dr Michael Petry, Book Of Words. Her work is in collections worldwide including the Casa Masaccio Arte Contemporanea, Italy; Gates Foundation, USA; Singapore Art Museum, Singapore; Essl Museum, Austria; Devi Art Foundation, India; Casoria Contemporary Art Museum, Italy; Galerie Gut Gasteil (an open-air art museum), Austria; Saga Art College, Japan; the Europas Parkas, Lithuania.

[In] Sanity In The Age Of Reason will be followed by another Solo exhibition of Galhotra’s collective works from previous exhibition at the LUX institute, San Diego, USA opening on March 29 th 2017 and her presentation at Darkened Mirror, curated by Lauren Dickens at San Jose Museum, US.

The artist lives and works in New Delhi, India

EXHIBIT 320

Exhibit 320 is located in the heart of Lado Sarai, in capital city of New Delhi, India providing dynamic and creative hub for artists, the arts and its audience. Exhibit 320 showcases contemporary art from India and the sub-continent, creating a platform for new thoughts and ideas. The emphasis of the exhibition space is on art that engages in new means, both by thoughts and material. It has opened this organizational space for creative endeavour, aesthetic explorations, and furthering visual dialogues. Our aim is to discover and encourage contemporary and evolving talent. Exhibit 320, supports seminars, lectures, and discussions, talks that contextualise art within a critical discourse through it’s non-profit 1After320.



# sculpture

June 2016

## reviews

### NEW YORK

#### Vibha Galhotra

##### Jack Shainman Gallery

"A river runs through it" could be the subtitle for Vibha Galhotra's recent exhibition inspired by the Yamuna River, a legendary tributary of the sacred Ganges, which is also one of the world's most polluted waterways. Tapestry-like constructions, sculptures, an installation, and a film all continue Galhotra's examination of the effects of globalization and development by focusing on the critical role of water in daily life, not just in the artist's native India and hometown of Delhi, but for all of us.

The Yamuna is featured in *Manthan*, a short film that served as the show's conceptual center. Taken from *Samudra Manthan*, Sanskrit for "churning the ocean," the title

refers to the well-known Hindu myth in which the gods (*Devas*) and the demons (*Asuras*) roil the river's waters to obtain *Amrita*, the nectar of immortality. Reimagining this myth for contemporary times, the film begins somewhat romantically with the camera slowly panning the river, lingering on its shimmering light. After a few minutes of this Impressionist idyll, torrents of sudsy water begin to pour from large pipes into fetid polluted ponds, disrupting the contemplative reverie with a dismal, even rude, display of the Yamuna's sorry present state. Just as these images take effect, the viewer is suddenly plunged into the river near the close-up torsos of several semi-nude men who churn the waters in slow motion. As a drumming score builds to a crescendo,

the men drop a large white cloth, letting it sink into the waves. Once immersed, the cloth is gathered and twisted into a coil, the men's straining and rinsing serving as a performative act of purifying and cleansing that, like the *Amrita* of the myth, signifies the restoration of immortality—now in the form of an unpolluted river—to the world.

Yet Galhotra, ever the realist, added a cautionary note to this modern retelling. In a nearby room, two lengths of coiled cloth, props from the film—one white and the other blackened with sediment—were cast in resin and displayed on metal stands like archaeological finds or scientific specimens. These impressive pieces were accompanied by a number of small, amber-tinged resin boxes, each preserving edible

plants harvested from the contaminated waters, affirming, like the preserved cloths, that the river, instead of nurturing new life, can now only produce relics.

Juxtaposing fact with fable and myth, Galhotra's sculptures and film offer a double reading that merges the personal with the political. In *365 Days*, a large-scale installation laid out in a calendar-like grid along a long wall and floor, Galhotra uses river sediment to create drawings and collages that, along with texts and photocopies, provide an intimate record of her daily life, including observations and ongoing research. Stained by the river's residue, which is preserved in glass bottles placed

Vibha Galhotra, installation view of "Absur-City-Pity-Dity," 2015.



COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NY





TOP: COURTESY JACK SHANNAN GALLERY, NY / BOTTOM: © VIBHA GALHOTRA, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHANNAN GALLERY, NY

on the floor in the same grid format as the drawings, the installation locks the practical and philosophical in a dialogic embrace. The small, diary-like drawings, inspired and nourished by water, trace and sustain individual creativity, even as the incidental marks of the river and the self meditate on the complex relationship of the river to the surrounding population. When joined with the insistent representation of the flow of time, the installation asks viewers to consider the river and their place in time from a larger, more global perspective.

Galhotra continues her focus on the impact of over-development in several tapestry-scale wall reliefs and sculptures made with *ghungroos*, tiny bells worn by women when performing traditional Indian dances. Sewn together by women's co-operatives working with the artist, these constructions play against the grain by juxtaposing alluring metallic decoration and troubling subject matter. *Majnu Ka Tila* describes a scene of unregulated construction along the Yamuna, with images of buildings that cast murky reflections onto the water.

Above: Vibha Galhotra, *Consumed Contamination*, 2012. Vegetables from Yamuna River bed and resin, 15 x 7.5 x 2 in. each. Left: Vibha Galhotra, *Flow*, 2015. Nickel-coated ghungroos, fabric, and polyurethane, 129 x 93.25 x 112.5 in.

While the sensuous arrangement of colorful bells entices, the pleasure of looking is undercut by the insinuation of wasteful materiality. *Altering* offers a mirror reflection of the same river view. With the ghungroos sewn shut so that only the memory of sonic rhythms lingers, the rectangular buildings disintegrate into oozing patterns of gold and silver, suggesting a future panorama of environmental degradation. In *Flow*, which moves between description and abstraction, the ghungroos have been shaped into a cylindrical pipe that soon morphs into a stream and then a pond. Installed in a corner, the installation seemed to expand across the space as if unrestrained, its undulating splotches of gold, silver, and bronze and refracted light intermingling attractive picturesque patterns with repelling swirls of implied polluted contagion.

It is not without irony that Galhotra titled this exhibition "Absur-City-Pity-Dity." Playing on the word "ditty" as in "simple song or poem" and "dity," an acronym for "do it to yourself" or possibly "did I tell you," these works present a raga/rap filled with rhythms, embellishments, iterations, and juxtapositions. Profoundly incongruous, fanciful, and factual,

Galhotra's poetic take on the current state of global development invites the viewer to churn again the waters of the Yamuna in search of resolution and renewal.

—Susan Canning

#### BEVERLY HILLS

**Matt Hope**

ACE Gallery

Matt Hope's recent solo exhibition was a complex conceptual show that welded together art and science. With formal art degrees from England and California, Hope combines artistry with a knowledge of metal fabrication, structural design, and sound engineering to create his "Sun Dragon Hardware" hybrid creations. The show included two distinct series: a group of finely crafted metal "Tools" and a congregation of mechanical "Towers." In addition, a salon-style display of drawings and sketches provided a backdrop to Hope's three-dimensional works. Both series play with scale, materials, and utility. The shiny silver "Tools" are enlarged to a size that robs them of their original purpose, while the totemic "Towers" are minuscule in comparison to their real-life inspirations.

A native Londoner, since 2007 Hope has made his home in Beijing's Caochangdi art district (the creative area identified with Ai Weiwei). The title "Sun Dragon Hardware"—his tool box and muse—refers to a chaotic industrial parts market on the outskirts of Beijing, where raw plastic flies from power saws, sunglasses replace safety goggles, sparks fly, and steel lies strewn about.

Hope's sculptures are informed by this energetic scene, as well as by his interest in rave culture and its dream of a mass utopian uprising.

The "Towers" are best appreciated in operation, when the whirring components, jarring and twisting mechanisms, and playful interplay of currents stimulate a sensory overload of sound, movement, and

Posted at: Jun 5, 2016, 12:45 AM; last updated: Jun 5, 2016, 12:45 AM (IST)

## PRESERVE

### Don't write off the Yamuna yet

Artist Vibha Galhotra's recent work, Absur-City-Pity-Dity, mocks at man's abuse of nature, but doesn't blame him



Vibha Galhotra

#### Sarika Sharma

Astring of ghungroos would have ideally spurred some rhythm, but in artist Vibha Galhotra's Absur-City-Pity-Dity, the tiny bells seem searching for some. Not frantically or frenziedly, but in a muted yet powerful way. Searching for the rhythm that defines life. Life that thrives on water. Water that is abused and misused. And that is what became the leitmotif of Vibha's Yamuna project that was widely appreciated when it opened at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York some time ago.

Absur-City-Pity-Dity seems to say how a city and its practices are making it an object of pity. "The exhibition was conceived amid the ongoing research and concerns around the issues of anthropocene and its impact on the human health. We are creating a pitiful situation for our own selves by inventing the Absurd constantly," she says.

The exhibition was a sequel of her exhibition, Sediment and Other Untitled, which was based on her observation and research around Yamuna and Mithi, two rivers in mega cities Delhi and Mumbai respectively. Both are under continuous destruction. Absur-City-Pity-Dity, as such, becomes an extension to explore the same issue.



“I believe that the utopia of development, which is unplanned and not premeditated nearly enough, will eventually lead us to an unknown zone,” she says.

Vibha’s works depict a lot of grime. Affluent suffocating our being and we struggling to survive. Is man paying for his own doing? Well, Vibha feels man is impacting all the resources, but doesn’t have much choice. It is about survival after all. “I refer to the mis-planning and the greed of our times and the constant abuse of natural resources. My observations are about these times and I wish to encourage contemplation, rather than impose my opinions on the viewer. I do not believe in blaming, however, self-realisation can definitely help.”

Nickel-coated ghungroos have been Vibha’s preferred medium for several years now and she uses these in this project too. “I began using the material to showcase the constant construction, de-construction and re-construction of my own drawings and to metaphorically and aesthetically represent what I am working on — the catastrophe. To me it depicts a vulgarity of the time, which crawls on to my drawings and ornaments it with material beauty,” says Vibha, for whom art has always been about concern. She often engages in public art projects to create a dialogue among different communities. Vibha says working with the public to raise questions, dialogue and debates through the medium of art makes the question accessible to all and lets the viewer contemplate on many levels.

Vibha is on her next project — Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? — based on the title of one of Paul Gauguin’s painting. She is also looking forward to her upcoming residency at Bellagio Center — The Rockefeller Foundation, that will focus on the idea of health between belief and reality.

Meanwhile, on World Environment Day today, taking a cue from Absur-City-Pity-Dity, let’s try and give a thought to our rivers, for belief or reality, whatever suits you.

### **Who killed the river?**

Though revered, Yamuna is dying. Quite unlike the missing Saraswati and efforts to ‘revive’ it in Haryana! We are suffocating one to death and wasting energy on something that is not there. How do you look at the contradictions, we ask Vibha. “The issue is debatable, given the power of the state government to change the course of the river and decide how much water a river needs. And it is not about this one river, but many. India, which glorifies the country’s natural resources in the national anthem, is a hypocrite. Yamuna, which is not yet a dead river, will be driven towards its end by the capitalists’ greed and the power they exercise. The course of the river will be changed, parts will dry up, the river will be missed, absent and then forgotten. Therefore, either we need to rethink our behaviour now or bear the consequences in the form of a slow catastrophe.”

# Making Art Amidst the Death of an Immortal River

BY [ADRIAN MUOIO](#) ON 19/12/2015 • [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Installation view. Vibha Galhotra: *Absur -City -Pity -Dity*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, October 29 – December 5, 2015. ©Vibha Galhotra. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

**New York:** Amidst the thousands of ghungroos on the walls and floors, the muted and meditative essence of Vibha Galhotra's exhibition at [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in New York City is curiously contradictory. It's somewhat illogical, too. Yet in a show titled *Absur -City -Pity -Dity*, it makes perfect sense that logic would be left at the door.

Less than a block from New York's historic Hudson River, Galhotra's exhibition focuses aesthetically on the Yamuna – a river that is deemed both immortal by Hindus as a deity and empirically “dead” by scientists for its infamous toxicity levels. Like the river itself, the Delhi-based artist struggles with this dichotomous coexistence in her works.

Five large tapestries of ghungroos punctuate the exhibition. In their transfixed state, the pea-sized bells are purely aesthetic; they betray their traditional, percussive function, or rather Galhotra denies them of it. The composition of each work is overwhelmingly dense and the palette is consistently sordid. In one of the more clearly-defined tapestries, *Majnu Ka Tila*, the congestion of the materials draws a clear correlation to that of the eponymous neighbourhood the work depicts, questioning the merit of its facade of progress. In an installation titled *Flow* (2015), the ghungroos seem to seep through the meeting point of two walls, puddling in the corner and oozing disconcertingly along the gallery floor. Though even with the more confrontational quality inherent in installation works like *Flow*, the overall effect of the tapestries is distinctly somber ...

thousands of alarm bells – individually minuscule but together having the potential to beckon change – all silenced.

In many of the pieces, Galhotra moves beyond metaphor, literally using the river and its now defunct ecosystem as her materials. One work is composed solely of an heaping splatter of sediment mixed with resin on glass – a creation cleverly derived from an otherwise deleterious material. In a more niche corner of the gallery, various organic matter suspended in blocks of resin huddle haphazardly on the floor. Particularly through the pale yellow tinge of the resin, the vegetation (all plucked from the Yamuna and its shores) looks both decrepit and sterile; the arrangement is akin to a grouping of fossils from a museum of natural history. But rather than act in this same scientific vein – as a sterile documentation of life now extinct – Galhotra's *Consumed Contamination* series functions more compellingly as both a darkly humorous and forebodingly desperate attempt at preservation.



Installation view of *Consumed Contamination*. Vibha Galhotra: *Absur –City –Pity – Dity*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, October 29 – December 5, 2015. ©Vibha Galhotra. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

In the very front of the exhibition, 365 notecard-sized drawings hang on the wall like the pages of a calendar, with an equal number of small corked glass bottles reflecting the layout on the floor. Galhotra composed the work like a collaborative daily log, with one drawing and one water sample for each day of the year. The drawings vary from one to the next, containing some variation of typed text and handwritten scribbles from local residents, and printed or hand drawn images. In every work though, there is a sediment-stain from the river water that Galhotra evidently poured on each piece of paper. In these works, Galhotra connects the contamination of the Yamuna with larger cultural issues. The associations can get very blunt – one is all white except for a large sediment blotch dividing the words “social pollution” – and after walking through the repetitive and despondent calendar, amelioration seems an impossible undertaking.

Yet in her ten-minute video *Manthan*, Galhotra provides a glimmer of hope. With a group of wet-suit clad performers wading waist-deep in the river and rhythmically churning its water, the film recalls the story of the Samudra Manthan, in which Vishnu calls upon his followers to unite with their enemies and churn the ocean waters in order to release *amrit*, the nectar of immortality, from its abyss. According to Hindu mythology, many magnificent beings and objects were born in the process. Galhotra's film lacks the clear narrative structure of its Hindu counterpart, but even so, it presents a similarly optimistic possibility for the achievement of newfound life in the dark

stagnant depths of blight.

In the wake of the landmark universal climate accord in Paris, *Absur -City -Pity -Dity*'s emphasis on collaboration – from the sewing of the ghungaroo tapestries for which Galhotra enlisted the help of local women, to the community-based narrative developed in *365 Days*, to the cooperative effort in *Manthan* – is particularly pertinent. Both the agreement and the exhibition acknowledge similar sentiments; that there is an immediate need to reroute the path we've so indifferently and perilously plotted, and that the impetus for change can only derive from a sustained, collective energy.

*Vibha Galhotra's exhibition, Absur -City -Pity -Dity, was at the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, from October 29 – December 5, 2015*

*Adrian Muoio is a freelance writer based in New York City.*

# CITYLAB

## Dredging a Dirty River for Art

One of the world's most polluted rivers, the Yamuna, is the source for new work by the Indian artist Vibha Galhotra.

**SHAHNAZ HABIB** @mixedmsg Dec 2, 2015 Comments



"Majnu Ka Tila" (2015), made out of nickel-coated ghungroos (small bells), fabric, and wood. (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

One day in July 2014, the Delhi-based artist [Vibha Galhotra](#) started collecting water from the river Yamuna, which flows through the city. Every day for a year, she gathered a few ounces of the murky liquid and stored it in a small bottle with a cork stopper.

The 365 bottles of yellow water—some of the deadliest water found in India—sit on the floor at the [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) in New York, part of Galhotra's solo show, [Absur-Pity-City-Dity](#). It's a complicated journal of a river and an artist and the city they belong to.

The Yamuna is a sacred river that shows up in many Indian myths. According to Hindu scriptures, seven sages brought the river goddess down from the heavens. Both the Yamunotri glacier where the river begins its flow and Allahabad, where it merges with the river Ganga (or Ganges), are considered holy places, and visited by thousands of pilgrims every year.

Bringing rich alluvial soils from the Himalayan Mountains, the Yamuna has fed the north Indian plains since the Paleolithic era. Over centuries of empire-building, the river remained the eastern

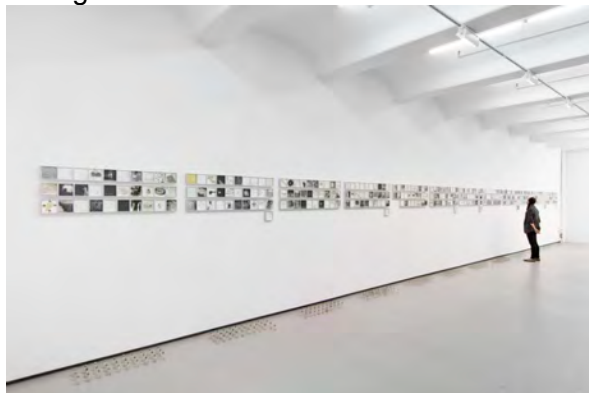
border of Delhi, the line that separated the capital from the provinces. But in contemporary India, with development in full swing, flyovers connect the older sections of Delhi with the newly built urban extensions across the river.

Today the Yamuna shows up in a different kind of story—about [the most polluted rivers of the world](#). It shares this dubious honor with rivers like the Mississippi and the Yangtze, which have supported industrialization on their shores and have been rewarded with toxicity. More than half of the waste that Delhi generates—including raw sewage, industrial effluents, and animal carcasses—gets dumped into the Yamuna. While the river is [relatively healthy](#) in its Himalayan segment, it turns into an open sewer by the time it leaves Delhi.

For Galhotra, the pollution, dirt, and sewage are literally material. She has used river sediment as ink, creating abstract paintings with the dark sludge.

In an interview in the zine that accompanies the show, she writes about watching a couple bathe in the dirty river as they perform rites for their ancestors. She is filled with “anger at their superficial faith”—because, ironically, many of the rituals involved in worshipping the river contribute to its pollution.

What emerges from her own tactile engagement with the unholiness of the river is the other river, the mythical goddess that pilgrims visit, who gives generously of herself to the land she flows through.



“365 Days” (2015), 365 drawings made of ink, photocopy, collage, and sediment on paper, and 365 glass bottles (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery) // “Flow” (2015), nickel-coated ghungroos and fabric (Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

One part of the show (which closes on December 5) is *Manthan*, a video that Galhotra directed; it’s a retelling of an Indian myth in which gods and demons churned the ocean together to find the nectar of life. *Manthan* starts with images of an unspoiled river, in which trees seem to grow out of the mirroring waters. This is the Yamuna before it reaches Delhi. Then we see tributaries of sewage emptying into the river.

Four men appear on rafts. They unfurl a pristine white sheet and, holding its four corners, submerge it in the river. When the fabric returns to the surface, it is gleaming with filth.

The men braid the fabric into a snake-like coil. (In the original myth, the gods and demons persuade the snake god to be their rope.) They then slowly squeeze the water out, a greasy black



fluid that cannot really be called water.



"Untitled (from Manthan)" (2015), fabric and sediment embedded in resin  
(Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

The Delhi government has been working to clean the river for two decades, but the ambitious Yamuna Action Plan, funded by loans from Japan's International Cooperation Agency, has [very little to show](#) in terms of results. The city's sewage treatment infrastructure is [inadequate](#), and the rapid pace of industrialization over the last decade has not helped.

That didn't stop Delhi's Water Minister, Kapil Mishra, from promising in September [to bathe in a clean Yamuna](#) three years from now.

On display at the gallery, suspended in resin like an archeological artifact, is the filth-soaked coil of fabric from the video. It seems to mock the hope that the river can be restored in a mere three years. Clean, safe water seems all too elusive—perhaps that was the true nectar of life in the old myth.

## Eco conscience: Vibha Galhotra's creations comment on New Delhi pollution

ART / 2 NOV 2015 / BY BROOK MASON



Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City's Chelsea district is currently staging 'Vibha Galhotra: Absur-City-Pity-Dity', in which the artist focuses on the heavily polluted Yamuna River, considered one of the world's most contaminated rivers

While it's certainly the norm for world leaders to call attention to dire environmental issues, New Delhi-based artist Vibha Galhotra addresses similar concerns in her compelling oeuvre, which is currently on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. Titled 'Vibha Galhotra: Absur-City-Pity-Dity', the exhibition focuses on the heavily polluted Yamuna River, considered one of the world's most contaminated rivers as well as on severe urban sprawl through video, sculpture, tapestry, photography and installation art.

'Vibha's work is haunting as she reveals in a very real way the erosion related to that river as well as the extreme overcrowding in so many of India's cities, yet at same time marked by sheer beauty,' says Shainman. 'Her work is a kind of visual reportage and document along with a meditative statement all at once.'

Even the materials Galhotra uses directly reference the river. For her 2015 installation project *365 days*, she collected river sediment in approximately three hundred and sixty five small glass vials accompanied by both photographs and message related to the river. Elsewhere are swathes of white cotton which when drenched in the river have turned to a morbid black, which she then encases in resin.

Then Galhotra's complex tapestry *Majanu ka tilla*, is composed of ghungroos, small metal bells worn by women in traditional Indian dance. Arranged in an amorphous shape, the composition is crowded, almost claustrophobic speaking of the increasing density of cities.

'I know of no other artist who conveys such a powerful message' says Shainman.

## Asian artists use a snake and a magic carpet to bind art

Mahim Gupta, Hindustan Times New Delhi, April 30, 2014

First Published: 13:46 IST 30/4/2014

A 120-feet-long snake made from ankle bells is carefully placed inside Exhibit 320, an art gallery in the Capital.

The [installation](#), that starts from the roof and spreads onto the floor, reminds us of how we are mostly neither here, nor there, in our existence, and is aptly titled, *Between*.

This is one of the many artworks that are part of *Past Tradition*, an ongoing art exhibition by six artists of Asian origin.

The six paintings, two installations, an art video and a carpet, showcase the aesthetics and inveiglement of art and typify how extolled Asian artists have similar sensibilities and a cultural connect.

The creator of the snake installation, Vibha Galhotra, the lone Indian artist taking part in this exhibition, tells us, "I took inspiration from the human intestine. When I moved from Chandigarh to Delhi some time back, I was always eating out, and battling a bad immune system. This complex-looking piece tells that tale."



Azerbaijani artist Faig Ahmed, who showcases a woollen handmade carpet at the show, says, "My work explores the traditional idea of the carpet as a space for storytelling. It is influenced from Persian architecture."

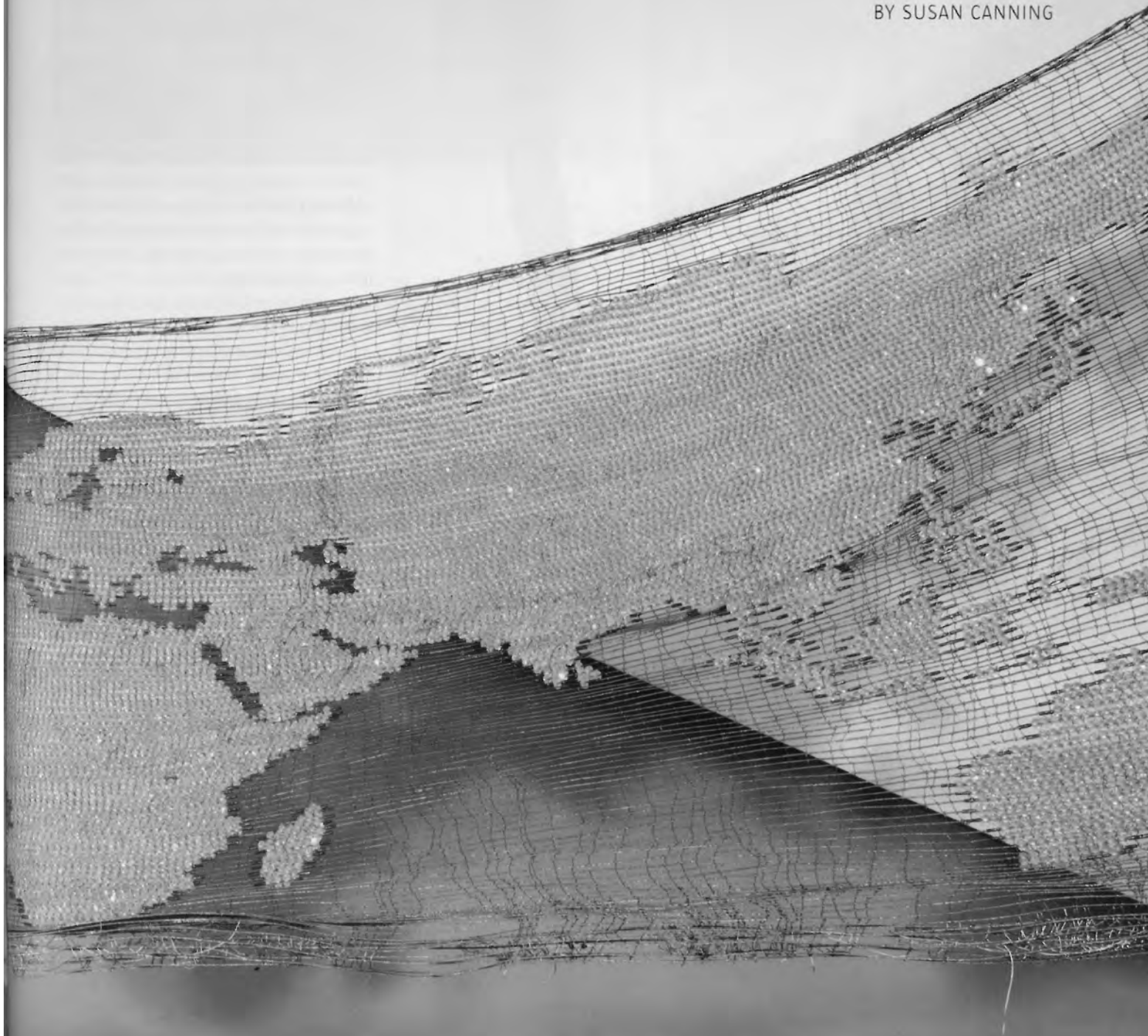
We also spoke to Pakistani artist Waqas Khan, who displays a drawing on wasli (handmade paper used for painting miniatures).

"My work explores Sufism. I use wasli, a modern day pen and permanent ink as a medium to explore ideas," Khan says.

Vibha Galhotra

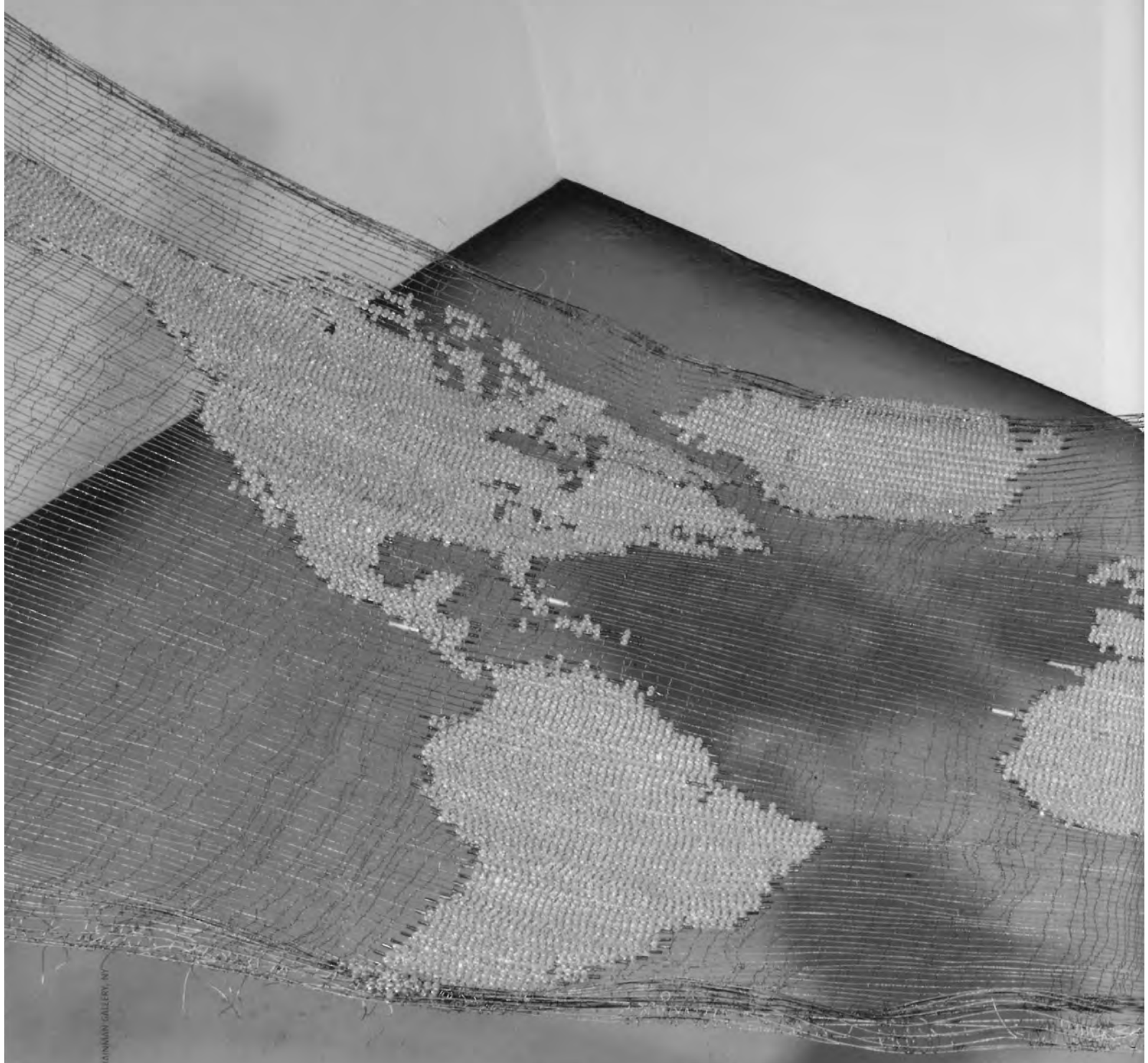
# Hidden in Plain Sight

BY SUSAN CANNING



*Altering Boon* (detail), 2011. Glass beads, wire, and wood, 136 x 36 in.





COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHANKMAN GALLERY, NY





*Between Known and Unknown*, 2011. Nickel-coated ghungroos, fabric, polyurethane, thread, wood, and metal, 45 x 17 x 17 in.

not what they seem. Camouflage, the art of visual deception, lies at the heart of Galhotra's sculptural project. Willfully and purposefully, she obfuscates our vision in order to interrogate the discourses of power hidden in plain sight.

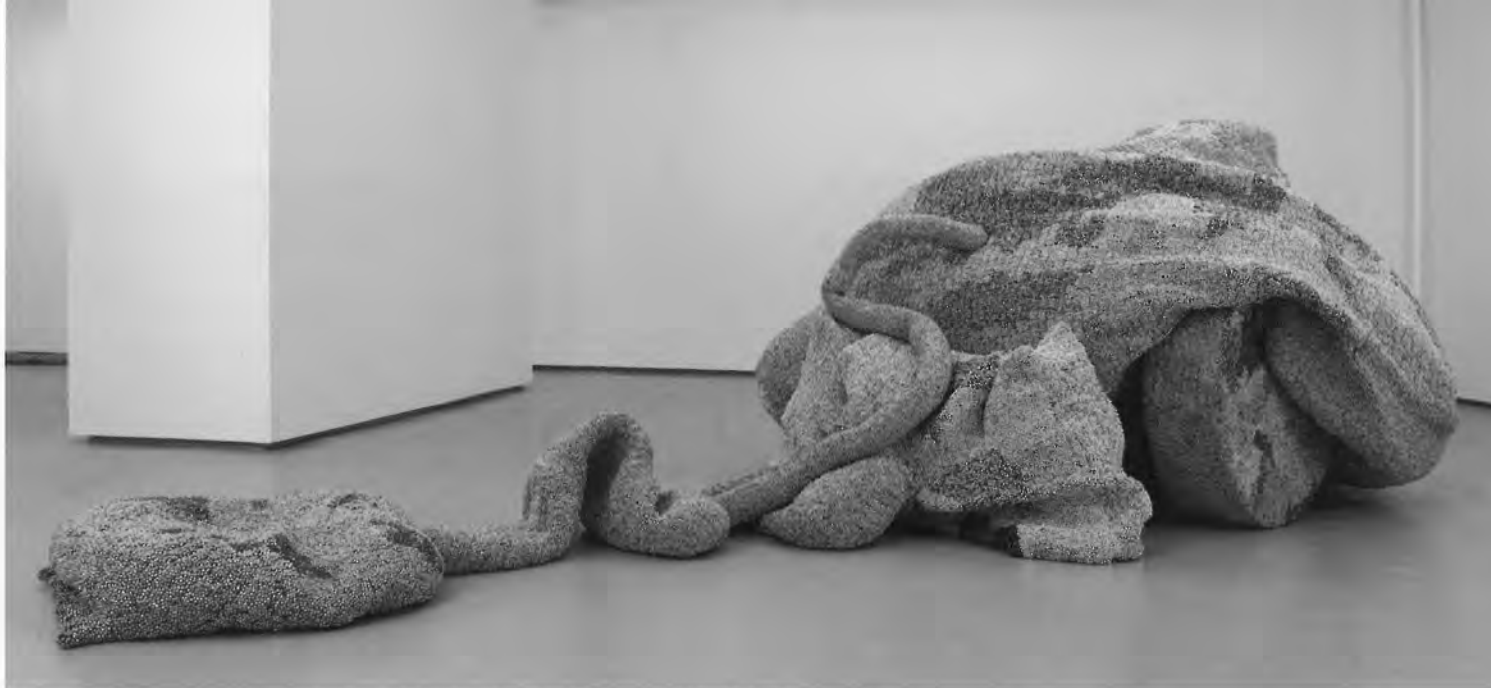
Her central concern is the global economy and its effect on the environment, especially in developing countries like her native India, which is coping with the complex challenges brought on by over-development, ecological destruction, and climate change. While her agenda is serious, Galhotra resists polemical posturing, disguising her message in sculptures, paintings, and installations notable for their enticing charm and often delicate beauty.

A number of her works are fabricated with *ghungroos*, the tiny ankle bells that provide musical accompaniment for Indian classical dancers. Enticing and exotic, these bells serve as visible and audible signs of women's public performance in Indian culture and art. Related to the North Indian *payal* or *pajeb*—anklets whose bells melodiously accompany women's domestic labor—ghungroos also speak to the concealed narratives of class and power that shape the often repressive reality of daily life for lower caste Indian women. Ghungroos are also worn as ornaments by new brides and are familiar motifs of popular culture, especially in Indian cinema and poetry, where they are commonly linked to the spectacle of the bazaar and the fallen woman; when cracked or broken, they signify the loss of virginity.

Galhotra recycles this potent symbol of femininity, transforming women's daily experience into the connective element of her sculptural forms. Used in profuse abundance, the ghungroos gain in expressive force—their overwhelming numbers signaling not only collective agency, but also the contrary and subversive possibilities of excess. Shared empowerment is embedded in Galhotra's process, arising from the intensive communal activity of the working-class women whom she employs to turn their traditional domestic skills into art while

Vibha Galhotra's first exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery began dramatically with *Neo Camouflage* (2008), an installation in which four mannequins dressed in military garb stood guard before a large photo mural of Old Delhi rooftops. The panoramic vista, seen from a tower of the Jama Masjid mosque (the city's highest spot), casts a god-like omnipresence and aura of surveillance over the seemingly endless expanse of buildings, streets, and rooftops, even as

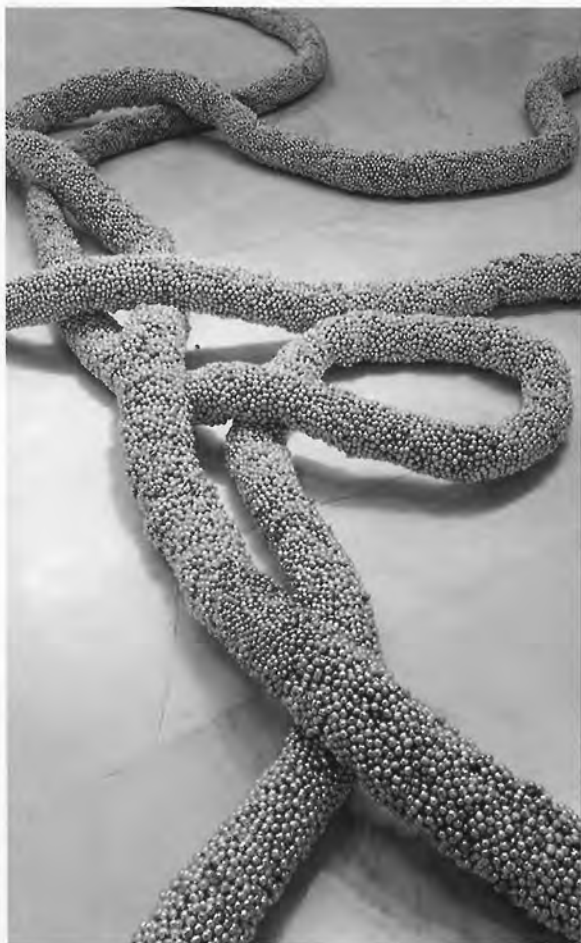
the view—digitally expanded and manipulated through Photoshop mirroring—describes a place of overwhelming density and unfettered development. Reprinted on the mannequin's uniforms, the same photograph serves as camouflage that allows these stern sentinels to blend into the city unfolding behind them. Controlling access to what is seen, watching while being watched, these cloaked figures put us on notice: look carefully, for things are



collectively hand-sewing the bells onto the sculptures. Shaped into rugs, a coiling rope, a beehive, even an earthmover, the diminutive ghungroos disguise their means of production, their narratives of gender and class, environmental concerns, and feminist critique behind an enticing, brassy bright, shimmering veil. When covered with ankle bells, *Dead Monster*, Galhotra's

life-size re-creation of an earthmover—that ubiquitous vehicle of urban construction and development—becomes a sort of alien: a strange, groveling, dragon-like grotesque, a monster without shape or purpose, whose destructive swagger has been rendered flaccid and powerless by decorative excess.

**Above:** *Dead Monster*, 2011. Nickel-coated ghungroos, fabric, polyurethane, thread, and steel, dimensions variable. **Below and detail:** *Between*, 2011. Nickel-coated ghungroos, fabric, polyurethane, thread, and steel, dimensions variable.







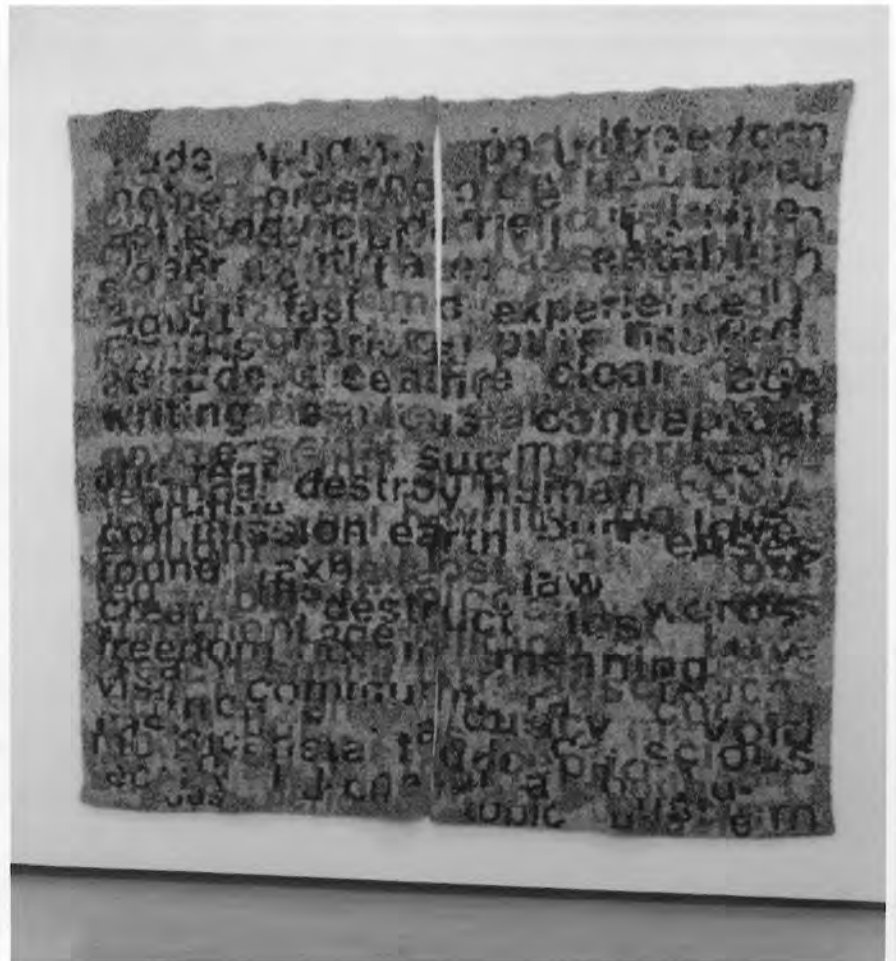
*Between Known and Unknown* features one of the earliest forms that Galhotra encrusted with ankle bells—the beehive. Here, the beehive is hidden beneath a wooden table topped by a globe, a configuration that alludes to the disappearance of this once plentiful feature of rural India. The assembled elements metaphorically describe the symbiotic—and exploitive—relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Indeed, the hive's organic body, attached to the table that it appears to nurture, has been assimilated—natural resources covered over, disguised, and subsumed by the table's elegant and stylized form. Culture trumps nature, sustaining the hierarchy of power proclaimed by the small but imperious globe at the top.

Resembling an internal organ, or perhaps a climbing vine, the ghungroo-covered coil of *Between* also explores the contradictions of an in-between state. Rising up mysteriously to the ceiling like a ladder, the rope offers viewers a luminous, glittering escape route, even as it collapses into a tangled pile on the floor, offsetting the promise of transcendence with the repetitive, arduous tasks of the everyday. On another level, the coiling rope that spills across the floor can be linked to the body, specifically to the intestines, its mottled surface alluding to diet and consumption, disease and contagion, as well as to Galhotra's struggle with colitis.

Likewise, *Word Trash* and *(De)Constructing Thoughts* offer multiple readings, with text

as their material. Sewn into wall tapestries, the ghungroos spell out words that, depending on your perspective, either come into focus or devolve into jargon-laden babble.

Above: *Altering Boon*, 2011. Glass beads, wire, and wood, 136 x 36 in. Below: *Word Trash*, 2012. Nickel-coated ghungroos, fabric, thread, and polyurethane, 103 x 108 in.







*Neo Camouflage*, 2008. Digital print on fabric and vinyl, mannequins, shoes, and belts, installation view.

Descriptive, contradictory, associative, disruptive or fragmentary, collapsing or expanding, the words dynamically articulate the conflicting agendas of Modernism. Materialized into an irregular, reflective surface by the ankle bells, the letters and words again become camouflage, overlapping patterns of texture and monochromatic color that conceal and undermine any attempt at cohesive meaning. In these tapestries, Modernism's utopian narrative has degenerated into decoration, ersatz formalism without meaning or purpose.

Other works explore themes of dislocation and unsustainability as Galhotra deploys the disarming allure of craft to visualize environmental concerns. In *Altering Boon*, she weaves glass beads and stainless steel wire

into a flimsy hammock. The beads coalesce into a world map that casts a shadow along the floor. Obliquely present and yet hardly able to sustain its own shadow, on the verge of collapse and implying that there is more beneath the surface, the hammock serves as a metaphor for a fragile global ecology. In other works, Galhotra uses natural materials, like sediment from the holy river Yamuna, to trace the pollution brought by development. In *White Noise*, she makes a cast of a brick wall in rag paper, creating an anti-monument to unregulated urban construction that replicates the dicey and often unsubstantial materials used in India and other developing countries.

Just as Galhotra positions the mannequins in *Neo Camouflage* between states—merging into and standing guard in front of the photo mural of Old Delhi—she situates art world viewers in the gap between the familiar and comfortable space of Modernism's

utopian promise and the dislocated, contrary, and troubled space that this promise has become in the developing world. Hidden in plain sight, Modernism's utopian/dystopian dualities are revealed and critiqued by Galhotra's coyly seductive deceptions. Her dissent, an alternative strategy of poetic intervention and feminist critique camouflaged within non-traditional materials and labor-intensive methods, unmasks and reveals the underlying agenda and hidden power behind global development and its legacy of environmental destruction.

*Susan Canning is a writer and educator based in New York.*

*Vibha Galhotra's work is now on view in the solo exhibition, "Metropia," at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, through February 10, 2013.*



# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

JUNE/JULY '12

View of Vibha Galhotra's *Neo Camouflage*, 2008, digital C-print on fabric and vinyl, mannequins, shoes and belts; at Jack Shainman.



## VIBHA GALHOTRA JACK SHAINMAN

Upon entering the gallery, viewers were confronted by a sprawling, 53-foot photographic mural of an expansive stretch of New Delhi, with houses and buildings squeezed together in a chaotic, cluttered urban landscape. Seven mannequins wearing military or security uniforms—made of fabric printed with the same design as the mural—stood before the metropolis, at once presiding over and merging with it. In this 2008 installation, appropriately titled *Neo Camouflage*, artist Vibha Galhotra criticizes the state of urban development in India. Born in the modernist planned city of Chandigarh in 1978, Galhotra now makes New Delhi her home, and her relationship with it appears to be a conflicted one.

Evoking issues of overpopulation and the unequal distribution of wealth, the mural's crowded panorama is echoed in the wall-hung work *Untitled (Veil Triptych)*, 2011. An image of what looks like an immense Pueblo village or a

favela in Brazil spans across this work's three fabric panels; a construction crane looms in the foreground. At a distance, the piece appears to be made entirely of wool. Up close, however, the image is seen to be composed of countless *ghungroos*—small bells traditionally made into anklets worn by Indian classical dancers—in hues of silver, gold and nickel, recalling El Anatsui's metal-scrap works.

*Ghungroos* were encountered throughout the show, providing motifs of the feminine and of craft labor in the face of industrialization (to stitch the bells into her compositions, the artist employs local women whose husbands, she said in a recent interview, don't allow them to hold jobs). Another of these highly embellished works is the elusive *Word Trash* (2012), which, suggesting an exercise in free association, features traces of words including *earth*, *destroy*, *experience*, *meaning*, *writing*, *conceptual* and *age* rendered in *ghungroos* on two fabric panels.

Most compelling perhaps are Galhotra's more intimate pieces evoking global concerns. In *Altering Boon* (2011),

for instance, the fragility of the world is translated into a map of the continents woven into a hammock made of nylon cord and white glass beads and suspended in one corner of the gallery. On the ground below, this world map is cast in shadow form. In *Between Known and Unknown* (2011), an elegantly crafted antique table with cabriole legs is the support for a small globe made of charred wood—a literal portrayal of a scorched earth. From the table's underside hangs a cluster of *ghungroos* suggestive of a natural formation, an organic conglomeration that lies beneath this representation of an abused world.

Galhotra's exhibition indicated that she will use anything to convey her ideas, even sediment from the sacred but sewage-contaminated Yamuna River, as in the abstract composition *Sediment* (2011). Albeit tied to process art on one level, her works deal with issues such as industrial pollution and disease, serving as a critique of urbanization and an examination of her own place in the world.

—A.M. Weaver



## Vibha Galhotra on Her Latest Work at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Vibha Galhotra's "Neo Monster"

by Sehba Muhammad Published: March 29, 2012

**Vibha Galhotra's** tactile new works spread across **Jack Shainman Gallery, New York**, like a mysterious algae. The show, titled "Utopia of a Difference," is the Delhi-based artist's first solo on American turf.

The dense assortment of pieces includes purely conceptual aperitifs like "6 Days of Footstep" (2011), a flat ochre linoleum sheet laid on the floor of an urban shopping mall which is given form by the imprints of thousands of Indian feet. More technically astute works include "Neo Monster," and the 1440-inch hanging fabric rope "Between..." (2011), which spills onto the gallery floor in delicate disarray. The artist refers to it as immortalization of her intestines. Both these works are completely covered by the artist's trademark medium—ghungroos, small bronze or silver Indian bells worn on the ankles of married women and Indian dancers.

The artist's warm brown eyes twinkled with the reflection of her bronze ghungroos as she evocatively told **ARTINFO** about the isolation that complements urbanization, the corruption of nature, and the female labor she hires to help create her colossal artwork.

**Your work explores the "changing topography of India," what in particular are you referring to?**

You see verticals coming up everywhere. The whole landscape is changing very fast and without thought. For example Delhi is on a major seismic zone but they continue to build sky scrappers. The quality of life is becoming suffocating with one building after another. People are also becoming more and more obsessed with money, and it's all fed with the shiny illusion of advertising.

I'm not really a Gandhian, but I believe in his saying, "Invention should be used for need not greed."

**What have we lost on our way to so-called progress?**

Good memory, good living, good relationships. I think the next generation will feel very lonely. Relationships might even die out altogether, like they are dying now. Today everything is about money, you give kids money and they are happy. It's that kind of relationship- building. It's not emotional like it was earlier.

## **So, what is your idea of Utopia?**

We all live in the dreamy worlds of our own utopia.

## **Do you feel your older work like “Neo Camouflage” (2008) and “Beehive” (2006) deal with these ideas more directly?**

Yes my earlier works were more direct. Like with “Neo Camouflage” you immediately think chaos or militancy.

The new works are more indirect, personal and social, which is more interesting for me. Now the viewer and I have a dialogue. They put their own minds to read the work, which is very beautiful.

## **What does your piece “Dead monster” (2011) represent?**

The monster series started with the piece “Earth Mover” later titled “Neo Monster” (2011). When you see these big machines moving around in your city you feel like they are aliens or new monsters. They were really working hard in Delhi before the common wealth games, the construction boom was at a peak, so you found these machines all over and you felt interrupted. In my own dreamland I thought of them as New Monsters.

Now I'm making the New Monster dead. It's a very limp, helpless object which is almost dead, signifying a change and even a new hope.

## **How did you decide to use ghungroos, a loaded feminine and cultural object, to depict your idea of urbanization and mechanization?**

I started using ghungroos because I was looking for a material that looked organic. Once I started using it I couldn't stop. When I saw this material for the first time I kept it in my room for 10-15 days and it started to grow on me. If you keep looking at this material it starts growing in your head like a psychedelic experience.

I don't use the cultural context, but yes it is there, so I can't avoid it.

## **How do you construct these pieces and how long does it take you?**

Three to four women weavers work on one piece. I map out the areas that they have to cover with ghungroos and they stitch them in. I've moved to the village now, and employ the local women. Many of them don't have jobs and their husbands don't let them work outside, but they come to me since I am a woman.

It takes them about three to six months to do one piece. Dead monster took about eight months to finish. I use a thick strong canvas fabric to make the mould and then it's covered with the bells.

## **Do you identify with other Indian artists using found objects, like Bharti Kher who also covers her sculptures in a somewhat similar manner with bindhis, a traditional Indian forehead decoration worn in South Asia?**

There are a lot of artists using found material. Now you see it more often because a lot of artists are exposed to the international scene. Bharti has been using the material for ages. I wouldn't call her an Indian artist though, she comes from the UK, and as a foreigner she might be fascinated with these local materials. I never got into those cultural or Indian things. For me the world is one. I don't believe in borders.

I've been using the material from my college years in 2001, before that I was also into found material and forms. I was a nature wanderer and would use a lot of that in my work.

## **Who is your favorite South Asian artist?**

That's a hard one, but I enjoy looking at Sudarshan Shetty's work. I like some of Subodh's [Gupta] work; he really brought out the use of found objects. I like Mithu Sen's work.

In Pakistan I love Shazia Sikander and some of Rashid Rana's work, more of his earlier pieces.

## **What's next?**

A solo show at Gallery Espace in India.



# Stan Douglas and Vibha Galhotra: Sewage Muck, Meet Disco

Two artists tackle the real world in very different ways

By Christian Viveros-Faune Wednesday, Apr 4 2012

In our time, art has seen more questionable uses than baby wipes. Recently, there has been, among other hot messes, art as propaganda (Russian artist Alexei Sergienko's pop portraits of Vladimir Putin), art as entertainment (Brooklyn Museum's survey of the young Keith Haring), a wave of conspicuously artless art as attitude (through June 12 at the Whitney Museum), and a dangerous tsunami of art as investment (see the copycat auction patterns of the world's superrich). Like the dotcom bubble, this last development will probably illustrate quite soon why certain financial tides sink, not raise, most boats.

Still, examples abound of art that challenges viewers, quite literally, to stop and ask hard questions about normal life. In good times and especially in bad, artists have proved particularly adept at confronting their own realities. This kind of art invites conflict rather than avoids it. The real difference between work that encourages addressing the world and that which refuses to can be summarized pretty simply: It's often what distinguishes artists who believe that they have something to say from others who, for whatever reason, feel that they have to say something.

One artist with plenty to say—about how the other half lives—is the sculptor Vibha Galhotra. On view at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, Galhotra's first solo exhibition outside of her native India features CNN narratives from the booming subcontinent relayed in a fresh and artful guise. Moving way beyond Wolf Blitzer schmalz and *Shumdog Millionaire* kitsch, this artist examines the dynamic upheavals affecting her homeland today—the effect of runaway economic growth and globalization—through a visual vocabulary that is resolutely and impressively her own.

An artist interested in finding correspondences between what takes place within her New Delhi studio and the 1.2 billion–person ferment without, Galhotra eschews formal consistency for a grab bag of materials (including actual waste and other people's idea of garbage) that vary wildly from subject to subject and (frequently) from artwork to artwork. This young artist makes idea art for a postconceptual time. Although a few works in her debut exhibition fizzle—specifically, her more minimal-minded experiments—Galhotra's best efforts supply layered, incisive visual metaphors for a whole host of global social, cultural, and economic clusterjams.

Take her sculpture *Altering Boon*, for example. A theatrically lit wire-and-glass-bead hammock tucked into a corner of the gallery, the stretched metal network displays a glittering *mapa mundi* on its surface: Its shadowy outline appears below, inviting reflections about fragility and the perilous nature of idealizations. Another work, the bluntly titled *Sediment*, takes

on the look of a tar-colored painterly abstraction. The fact that it's made with muck that Galhotra scooped up from the filthy Yamuna River—this tributary of the Ganges becomes a sewage drain once it reaches New Delhi—turns what at first sight reads like a macho Franz Kline painting into something approaching an environmentalist's manifesto.

And then there are Galhotra's *ghungroo* works. A set of large-scale tapestries and sculptures the artist fashions from the tiny metal ankle bells women use in India to advertise their marital status, these pieces display a cumulative nature that mirrors the unregulated but weirdly ordered buildings littering New Delhi's dirt-poor neighborhoods. These works assume the shifting form of one of the artist's enduring obsessions: the beehive. Just as the metropolis's dystopic shantytowns emerge from a welter of insect-like activity, a few of Galhotra's gallery sculptures are fashioned from a parallel artistic process. Take her lumbering, floppy *Dead Monster*, for example: A life-size earthmover, it's painstakingly sewn together from thousands of little *ghungroos*.

A second New York exhibition to query the blind spots between appearance and reality features the work of veteran Canadian filmmaker and photographer Stan Douglas. Long a sleuth of the codes and patterns that make up social constructions, Douglas has spent a career investigating the cultural and technological biases that shape our world. His strength—for which he is widely celebrated—lies in finding deep visual and philosophical insights hidden in plain sight. Like Galhotra, Douglas operates like a smart gumshoe: His discoveries can quickly turn the easily overlooked into teeming crime scenes.

For "Disco Angola," his new exhibition at David Zwirner gallery, Douglas presents eight new large-scale color photographs of two seemingly disparate historical locales: 1970s New York and liberation-era Angola. Assuming the role of photojournalist—while in reality playing expert set designer and stylist—Douglas meticulously re-created "snapshots" of New York's disco counterculture, as well as striking images of a time that kicked off decades of political violence in Africa. Placed side by side inside the gallery, Douglas's pretend period pics draw hot parallels between two cool faux locations. (The pictures were shot in Los Angeles, adding more layers to the onion.) There's the music (the African saxophonist Manu Dibango is often credited for writing the first disco hit); there's the fashion (bell-bottoms and flared collars crossed the Atlantic); finally, there's the cold war that once pitted a tiny nation against the world's greatest superpower. (Anyone remember that?)

The pictures are fascinating. Drawing equally on the nostalgia for '70s utopian ideology and the visual swank of films like *Carlos* and *Mesrine: Killer Instinct*, Douglas has concocted what amounts to fake narratives based on real history at a time when interpretations of both the past and present appear as locked down as Tim Gunn's libido. The metaphorical possibilities opened up by Douglas's photographic inventions—as evidenced in the colorful black-power portrait *A Luta Continua, 1974* and in the glittery disco number *Two Friends, 1975*—throw brand-new light on a long-ago revolutionary and dystopic age. Although way too digitally crisp to be 40 years old, Douglas's pictures cast the historical imagination in HD resolution. No wonder they look like stills from a new HBO series.

Douglas's counterfeit photographs call out for more reality in art, not less. The same can easily be said about Galhotra's empathetic sculptures. For these two artists and their clued-in contemporaries, applying art to life's trials and triumphs remains the essential condition for actually saying something.

# ARTslant India

Vibha Galhotra: On Our India Watchlist



(Image: Vibha Galhotra, *Untitled (Veil)*, 2011, nickel coated gunroos (trinklets) and fabric, and pu coat, 82 x 53 inches; © Jack Shainman Gallery)

## Vibha Galhotra (b. 1978, Chandigarh, India)

Vibha Galhotra's art is largely about 'recoding'. It involves recoding at several levels, between the artist and the work. The process leads to decoding of a thought into a representation; between the work and the material, wherein form is recoded to subtle sensory perception and texture, and of the 'said or conveyed' to the aesthete who sees the work, translating the whole process of recoding syntax from the conception to the formation.

Though Vibha Galhotra specializes in graphics, her work explores a wide range of mediums, which demonstrates her versatility. She delves in painting, animation videos, site-specific installations and sculpting. In graphic work, she often transfers her ideas into bronze sculptural forms.

Vibha Galhotra's works will be in an upcoming group show at [Exhibit 320](#) from **25th Nov. - 25th Dec. 2011**.

**Education:** MFA, Graphics, Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharti, Santiniketan, 2001. BFA, Graphics, Government College of Arts, Chandigarh, 1999.



Sunday, May 29, 2011

## Artist extraordinaire: Success rests lightly on the young shoulders of Chandigarh-born Vibha Galhotra, whose works are, at once, experimental as well as stimulating, writes **Nonika Singh**

**W**HEN **Vibha Galhotra** first voiced her desire to become an artist, her father's only reservation was, "Don't become a *jhola chaap* artist (read an artist with no money)". Today, of course, as the daughter has become a globe-trotting avant-garde artist, the father is still bemused with her unusual choice of material and ability to weave it all together. He even wonders aloud, "Pray, who will buy all this?"



Work in Progress. Digital print on archival paper, 2010

The world, however, is applauding collectors like Anupam Poddar, who are too keen to buy and museums that include prestigious ones such as Essl Museum, Austria, Singapore Art Museum, San Jose Museum, USA, lapping up her work, which is, at once, experimental and stimulating.

Perturbed by growing urbanisation, environmental concerns are first and foremost on the young artist's mind. She says, "I am not an activist but my works are an indictment of urbanisation of the changing environment."

She is greatly influenced by the works of environmental artists like Andy Goldsworthy and Christo.



Vibha Galhotra

An avid reader of the prophecies of Nostradamus, she doesn't predict an apocalypse but feels the world will change drastically.

Her work *New Cultivars*, made up of grass and iron with grass growing out of gun-shaped podiums, alludes to similar sentiments.

As she puts it: "Global warming is a real threat and so is terrorism. On the one hand, we are replacing natural landscapes with man-made things and then in a bid to snatch these, we spread terror."

In a digital print, *Work in Progress*, her pique with growing urbanisation and ceaseless construction in the name of development manifests strongly as well as aesthetically.

"It was a dream-come-true" for Vibha when she got a chance to work with renowned sculptor Ashish Ghosh in Lithuania.

"An alumnus of the Government College of Art, Chandigarh and Kala Bhavan, Visvabharati, Santiniketan, Chandigarh-born Vibha knew she didn't belong to the City Beautiful. After she moved base to Delhi in 2004, things started moving at a fast pace and soon she had two residences abroad. By then, the art world had begun to nod appreciatively.

The turning point came in 2007 when she created her much-acclaimed work, a beehive made out of *ghungroos*, once again a reflection of urban congestion. Ghungroos, interestingly, remain her muse till date. Recently she created veils of ghungroos. Ghungroos as a leitmotif of her creations came to her when she visited a music shop, along with friends, who wanted to buy some musical instrument.



**Inconvenience Regretted. Variable. Metal, 2008.**  
Exhibited at Solo show Metropia: Project 88 Gallery  
Mumbai, 2008 Art Summit, New Delhi

A self-confessed collector, who loves working with found objects, one of her memorable works, The Collective, has been created out of bits and pieces that came her way through barter exchange with friends and fellow artists. Has India woken up to such a unique idiom and vocabulary that she and other cutting-edge artists of her generation are employing? Vibha, however, feels mediums are not art. "Be it installation, paintings or sculptures, what matters is what is being said through them. Besides, how can GenNext artists not respond to technology that is so easily available and accessible? We are the Google generation. The intervention of technology in art is a forgone thing."



**New Cultivars. Variable. Iron and Grass, 2010**

But hers is no assembly line production. In fact, she is not even a prolific artist and, at best, creates three to four works in a year. Often large, "I need a full wall", though currently she is also engaged in smaller 10-inch creations.

Repetition of material or style is an anathema to her. Scrounging markets for newer materials, the explorer in her is forever in search of creating anew and afresh.

Success rests lightly on young shoulders. Even though she has exhibited at Miami Art Basel, Jack Shainman Gallery USA, Indigo Blue Art Gallery, Singapore, Museum of Contemporary Art, China, and picked up awards like the Inlaks Foundation award, she states that it's not achievements but whatever she has learned en route that excites her.

About Santiniketan, she reminisces, "When I first joined it, I was in tears. But soon fell in love with the place where you can't find either a cup of decent coffee or even watch television. But while taking you back to the 18th century, it introduces you to a world that is beautiful and vibrant brimming with history and culture."

Dying traditions perturb her. She wants to work at the grassroots level to reach out those in the remote corners of the country. Along with her husband, she has formed an NGO, which aims to do art with public within public spaces. Meanwhile, her quest for that elusive creation after which she can comfortably retire continues. But judging the way she is racing ahead, the art world is unlikely to let her renounce anytime soon.

# SAN JOSE MUSEUM OF ART

Modern and Contemporary Art from India  
February 25, 2011 through September 4, 2011, San Jose  
Museum of Art



**UNTITLED (Beehive), 2006**

Bronze and metal trinkets  
Brass *ghungroos* (approximately  
8,000), fabric, wood, and steel  
6 x 49 x 25 inches  
Collection of Dipti and Rakesh  
Mathur  
Photo: Courtesy Gallery Espace,  
New Delhi

**Vibha Galhotra**

Born 1978, Chandigarh, India  
Lives and works in Delhi, India

In *Beehive*, Vibha Galhotra replicated the organic form of a hive using bronze ghungroo bells, which are traditionally strung together and worn as anklets by classical Indian dancers. The bells represent the traditions of India while the hive evokes the buzzing chaos of metropolitan life. For the artist, cities today resemble hives: the landscape is constantly altered and working drones have become the accepted norm



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INTERNATIONAL EDITION

# THE ART NEWSPAPER

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## Vibha Galhotra

### The secret behind the veil

Whether its wicker, fabric, bells or copper wire, 32-year-old Vibha Galhotra belongs to a new generation of female Indian artists for whom the medium is key to their practice. Galhotra uses non-traditional materials to create large-scale, highly tactile pieces inspired by her day-to-day experiences of life in New Delhi. New York's Jack Shainman Gallery (P94/621) is showing *Veil*, 2008, a piece made from thousands of ghungroos—small metallic bells—hand sewn onto a piece of fabric. Ghungroos are commonly strung together and worn as ankle bracelets by classical Indian dancers. "The idea behind the piece is that it represents a veiled woman or possibly a modern curtain," says gallery co-owner Claude Simard who also revealed that the young artist only joined the gallery about six months ago. "She has created a mini universe with this piece," says her gallerist. The \$40,000 work caught the eye of California collectors on the fair's preview day. **E.S.**



© CASEY TATCHETT



## Master strokes

Chitra Subramanyam

Friday, March 19, 2010



### Vibha Galhotra

Nearly two months and 8,000 ghungroos, that's what it took sculptor Vibha Galhotra to create a beehive, one of her most successful pieces of art. And through it Galhotra reflects the human condition in a busy metropolis— above the ground and in their ivory tower. "Like my generation," she says, "Not rooted and confused." Her inspiration is life around her.

The streets of Delhi fascinate her and she's often bartering or picking up material. It could be a weaver bird's nest, an intricate web of copper woven together or a theatrical expression of internal thoughts through a photo series, each requires a different collection of skill. The nest will be seen in October at an exhibition in Mumbai. Galhotra says she plans to make it 20 feet high to allow people to sit inside and absorb the atmosphere. After studying printmaking in Chandigarh, Galhotra was able to cultivate her love for sculpting at Santiniketan. "There is something really physical about sculptures. A painting is to be seen. But one can touch and feel a sculpture," she says.

**PROVENANCE** Chandigarh,

Santiniketan and now Delhi

**AGE** 29

**DREAM PROJECT** Creating huge open air sculptures.

**FAVOURITE MEDIUM** The medium isn't important to me. It's about conveying the message.

**ART GURU** K.G. Subramanyam who was the visiting faculty at Santiniketan and inspired me to do anything and everything.

**CURRENT CREATION** Horizontal vs. Vertical (above), on urbanisation.



**Zafri Mudasser Nofil**

**New Delhi, January 27**

## Modern artists owe a lot to German expressionist Dix

is works may not have Indian or Asian influence, but the brutal honesty and forcefulness of Otto Dix's art can be found in many contemporary works, says art historian Philipp Gutbrod about the great German expressionist.

"I see Dix's influence in artworks by for example George Condo, Nigel Cooke, or Manuel Ocampo. These artists succeed in giving their paintings a maximum impact. They are clearly aware of art history and have studied the masters, but they use their exceptional technique outside of traditional aesthetic norms," Gutbrod, president of New York's Villa Grisebach Auctions Inc., told PTI.

He says that India has a "wonderfully rich" art tradition and young artists are becoming more and more successful on the international art scene.

"Even though the contemporary art world around the globe is becoming increasingly homogeneous, I enjoy seeing clear elements of Indian culture in contemporary Indian art."

Gutbrod has special praise for Indian artists like Tyeb Mehta, Anish Kapoor, Subodh Gupta and **Vibha Galhotra**.

"Many fascinating and famous artists have emerged from India, for example Tyeb Mehta and Anish Kapoor. Of the younger artists, Subodh Gupta is already well known and I also like **Vibha Galhotra**, who I think will continue to surprise us in the future with exceptional artworks," he says.

Gutbrod came out a biography of the artist "Otto Dix: The Art of Life" in German and English spanning his eventful life and multifaceted body of work.

Dix (1891-1969) was not known to have been influenced by Asian artists, but in his early years, he was "influenced by Impressionism and Jugendstil, art movements owing a lot to Asian art."

Exhibitions of Dix's works have, however, been held in Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai.

Gutbrod finds Dix to be an extremely passionate person on every level.

"He absorbed life and created art with all his senses. His outlook on life was truly based on the writings of the philosopher Nietzsche: 'Beyond Good and Evil'. He did not adhere to

social norms and did not believe in absolute morals. Still, he did speak up when he saw things that seemed unjust or wrong to him.

"For example, he painted his famous War triptych against the resurgence of a nationalistic movement in Germany at the end of the Weimar Republic, because he believed the truth was not being told about the horrors of war," he says.

Dix fought and drew on the front during World War I in the grip of a Dionysian lust for life. After 1918, he gave this war the most honest face ever bestowed on it by an artist. During the Weimar Republic, Dix proved to be an enfant terrible, a dandy, and an urban sophisticate, but he was also a respected professor.

Driven out of his position by the Nazis just several months after they came to power, then ostracized and threatened, he retreated to Lake Constance, employing broad brushstrokes to forge a new path after 1945.

The book accompanies Dix through his eventful life and his multifaceted oeuvre - from the early self-portraits to the masterpieces of the twenties and the calm, mature work of his later career.

Six years before his death in 1969, Dix had said, "I am a realist. I must see everything. I must experience all of life's abysses for myself."

Gutbrod says this credo is testimony to the artist's uncompromising commitment to even the harshest realism and stood as a guiding principle throughout his life.