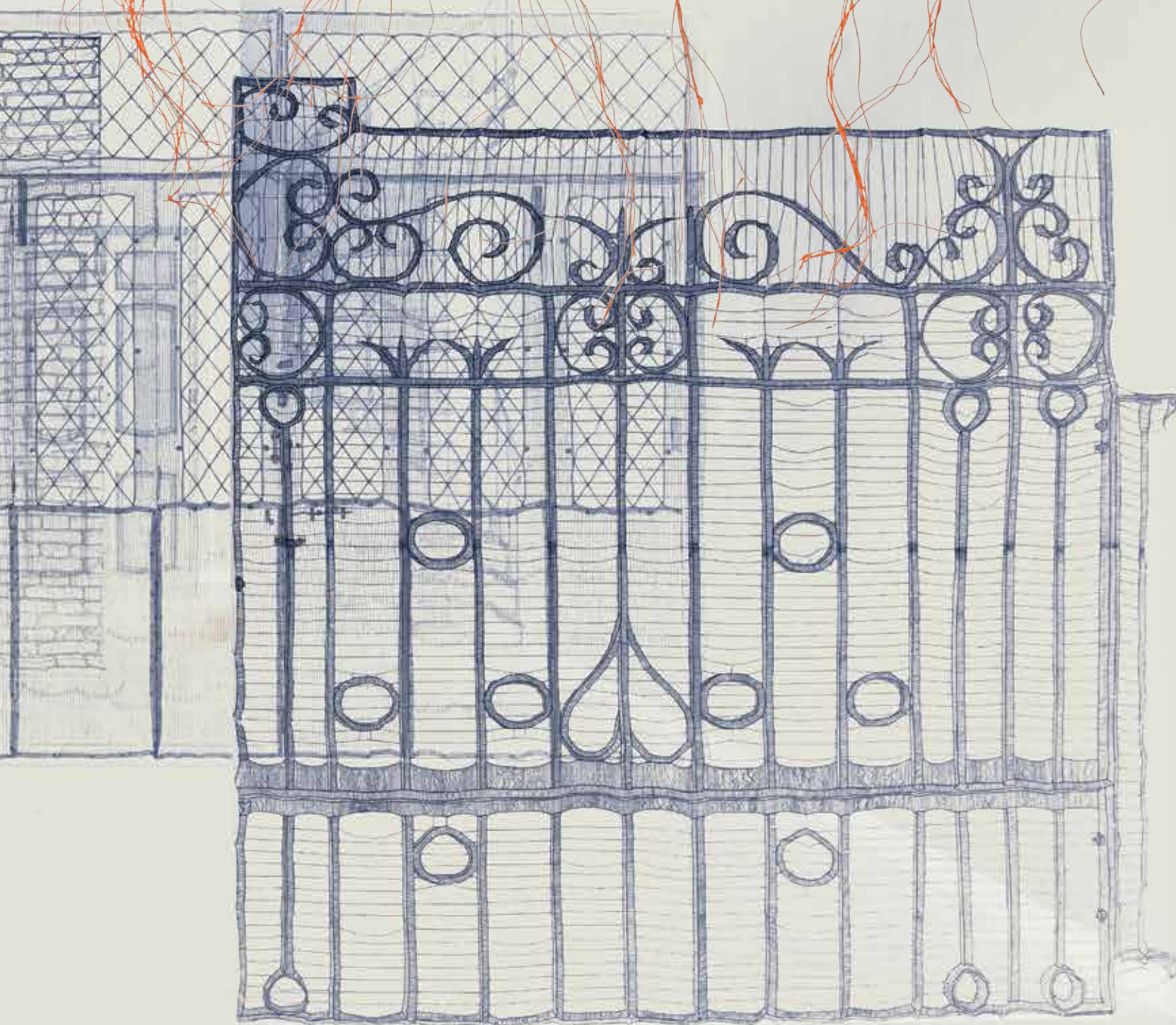


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Q&A
Arts

On Shimmering Air

Artist Sumakshi Singh shares her thoughts about the criss-crossing rivers of time and memory and why the poetry inherent in the act of embroidery is perhaps one way of navigating this space of unknowability

Praveena Shivram

A Blueprint of Before and After, Thread and wire, Room dimensions: 18' x 30', 2018.
Photograph from the solo exhibition at Wilfrid Israel Museum of Asian Art, Israel.

I am sitting in a room. In front of me, a wall, a massive wall of memories, is crowding for my attention, like a Sunday morning celebrity darshan. All I need to do is wave and close my eyes for them to disappear, knowing that when I do open my eyes, the ones that remain are the ones that stay with me for life. I have often wondered if the memories we hold (or the memories that hold us) are what constitute the choices we make, because memory itself is born out of choice, and as much as remembering is a gift of the universe, distortion is the gift of mankind. What then, of the memories that I discard? Where do they go? Have they simply closed their eyes to me?

As I experience Sumakshi Singh’s breathlessly light ‘groundless thread drawings’ (where once the embroidery is done, the fabric is taken away), I am transported to that room again. I am confronted with my memories, my choices, again. And it is strangely hypnotic, this ability that thread has, that embroidery has, that patterns have, of dancing with a grace that is fragile and a power that is rooted to the earth. Singh’s works are tangible experiences of deeply resonating truths that are somehow intertwined with the intangible ones that we carry. And as the lines blur, it doesn’t matter anymore that it is me sitting in another room, at a different time and place, a piece of cloth tightly grasped within a round wooden frame, as my needle and thread create soft, minuscule holes through which I can continuously lose and find myself, or that it is Singh herself, sitting in her studio, meditating with her needle and thread. ‘I am very conscious of this dance between the visible intent and the ‘behind the scenes’ mapping of the trajectory of the thread, the marking of time with each stitch, the story told by the continuous and discontinuous threads, a knot, a stutter in judgement or a colour cut short. In my experience, being fully present in the current, tangible action (the movement of the needle, the brush, the finger on the clay) is being in a flow, an almost hypnotic flow; and I often suspect that this flow being directed magnetically by the pattern/form awaiting manifestation. And I am constantly aware of the wonderful mysteriousness of this invisible thing waiting to reveal itself,’ says Singh.

And when it does, at least for us the viewer, it is like the different threads of the ocean surrendering to the rhythm of the moon, knowing all the while what when the waters are calm again, the silver pattern of the moonbeam will remain. A choice made, a choice unmade; what remains is what leads you to the unknowability of what exists beyond.



33 Link Road, Thread.
Photograph from the solo exhibition at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai.

Excerpts from the interview

What is your earliest memory of embroidering? And what is it about embroidering that truly speaks to you? That even 18 hours of embroidering for a work then becomes possible, that can even make ‘time elastic’?

With my mother, in our garden in Gomia, Bihar, doing a cross stitch pattern – I was probably five. My mother and grandmother were both wonderful embroiderers and took great pains to

embellish even our everyday clothes, bedspreads and handkerchiefs to make them ‘special’. So I guess my association with embroidery is of nurturance, of a sweet, feminine kind. We spent many sunny, winter hours embroidering together in silence or in quiet conversation in the garden. John O'Donohue (Irish mystic and poet) talks of different rhythms of time we have layered within ourselves – most of us function on ‘surface time’ which tends to be over-structured, frantic, linear, goal/future focused, measured and then there are

other experiences of time within us, other rhythms – when we are walking alone in nature, or meditating, or aware of our breath or embroidering.

Memories can often become problematic because of its unreliability, but it is also this unreliability, this changeability that is its strength, that gives it its definition. Given this nature of memory, how would you like your work to be remembered and therefore defined?

In, Between the Pages: An interactive, multi-media installation that plays with perspective to create the illusion of a manuscript book, in which viewers see themselves and others moving about as miniature characters, 70' x 30', 2014. Aligned installation view at the Kochi Muziris Biennale, 2014.



Actually, I am quite suspicious of definitions. To me, a defined thing is in danger of becoming a dead thing. We tend to put it in a box of the 'known'; we close down its other possibilities, forget to re-evaluate and revisit it and lose out on discovering that possible fountain of fresh, new insights springing from 'the same old place'. Memory is fascinating and seems so linked to desire. I have created archives of embroidered skeletons of plant forms from my mother's previous gardens, which had been pressed, preserved and sent to me in letters. I am now working on ethereal, architectural skins made of fine thread, recreating (in exact, life-size dimensions) the architectural facades of homes I have lived in or had intimate connections with. I have mapped a 3D illusion of my deceased grandfather's living room, titled *Mapping the*

Memory Mandala in erasable chalk pastel which disappeared as people walked through it... I am conscious of the desire to preserve a feeling of a place or person and am simultaneously aware of the poignant futility of that fixing action. (*What is memory fixing itself to? A changing mind, a malleable story we tell ourselves about what happened to us?*) And so, often, I allow the embroidered forms to unravel. There are so many threads to pick up a story by. Memory is a displacement (of an event, emotion, thing) in time and is coloured by the layers of new information, shifting thoughts, changing value systems and desires that have occurred within that time. It is complex and subtle, intangible and layered, contradictory and clear, sensual and factual – it is a living thing which is growing, dying and re-forming every day.

house and measuring and drawing out architectural details and soon discovered that most of the bolts, hinges, latches and grills were of slightly varying sizes – probably having been individually made instead of mass produced. I started thinking about each individual element – what a labour of love it must have been – and standing in this vacated house, I thought about the temporal nature of both the form and the meaning of 'home'. As a response, I started to create exact, life-size replicas of these intimately familiar architectural surfaces with every scar, hinge, welding blob in place – in fine, white thread – so that they shimmered like ethereal mirages. I wanted to transform hard architecture into soft, tactile skins and let the language of memory echo through these ghostly, veil-like, white surfaces; flattened as if preserved within the pages of a book. Viewers were invited to walk through a labyrinthine arrangement of transparent windows, walls, gates and staircases, which overlapped to evoke resonances, contradictions, harmonies and dissonances from different vantage points.

I am curious to know how much of your experiences with your earlier works/series become a part of the next one. Is this something that you are able to map in retrospect or even while working?

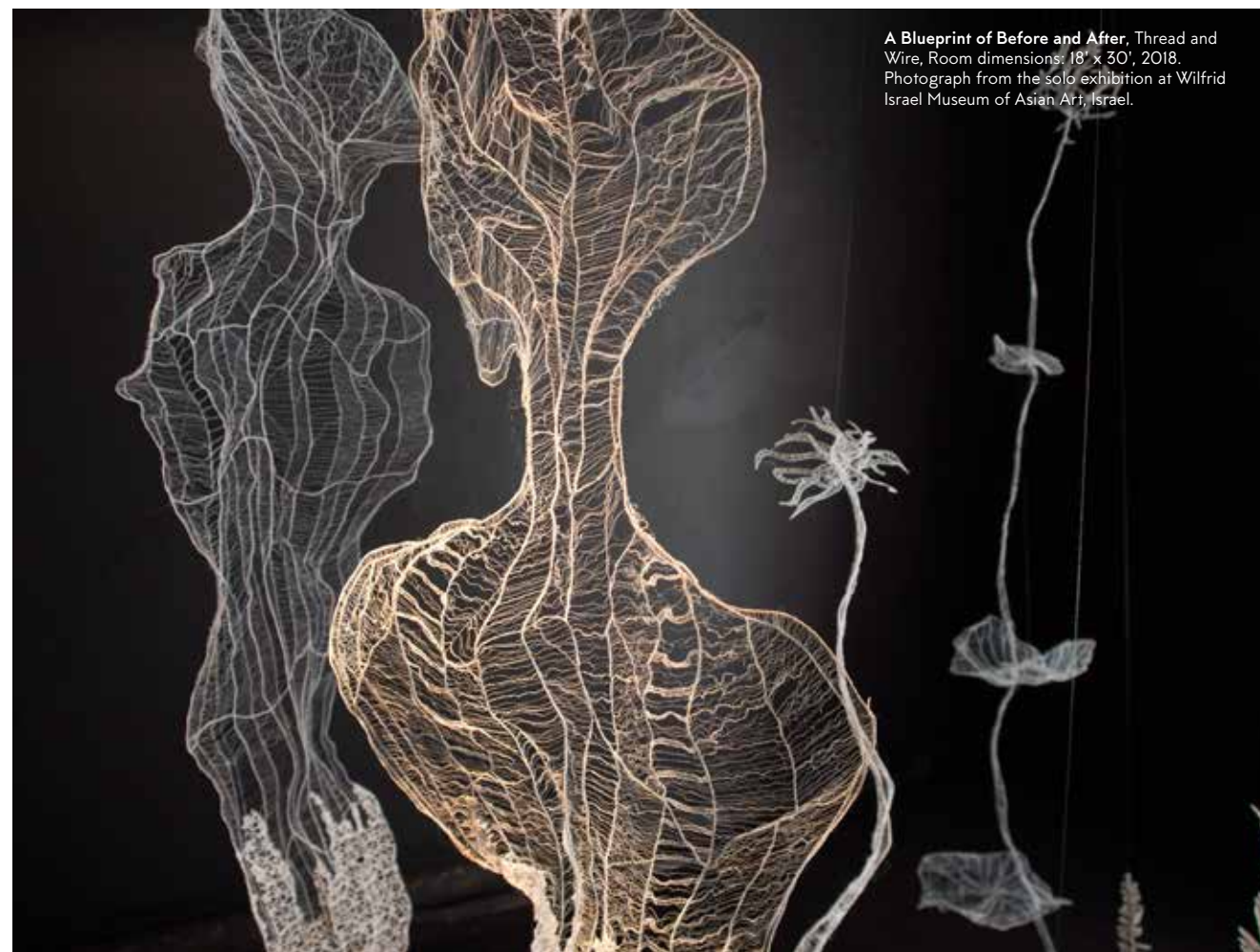
Some years ago I was asked to talk about my work at Oxford University. And because I was nervous, I prepared long and hard finding the connective threads in my practice which has included video, animation, anamorphic illusions, interactive installations, embroidery, sculpture, painting and projection mapping. After my talk, one professor stood up and congratulated me saying, 'It is so wonderful to hear an artist articulate so clearly what made her move from one body of work to the next. It is so clear and even logical.' The minute I heard those words, I realised that I had misrepresented the process. Yes, in hindsight, I could see what a lot of the underlying connections were, but in real time it is more about subtle, intuitive pulls toward partially formed visual or even feeling-based ideas, which then result in the transformation of some feeling or the opening up of some hidden question I had within me.

Could you tell us a little bit about your current architecture series – what was the process of creation like for this one, and how did it begin to unfold?

I've had a fairly nomadic life, living in several states and countries, but the idea of home was continually tethered to one address – 33 Link Road – my grandparents' home built in Delhi soon after the Partition, when they migrated from Pakistan to India. It has been a site of gathering, sharing pre-Partition histories, embroidering in the sun, family weddings, sleepovers, a room where my mother was born ... the list goes on. For the first time in almost 70 years, this home (stated as our permanent address in all official documents) now lies unoccupied. So I started going into this empty



Circumferences Reforming: Peel Till They Bloom, Layers of paper, individually painted, adhered and carved into. Detail from the solo show at TRIAD, Miami, 2012



A Blueprint of Before and After, Thread and Wire, Room dimensions: 18' x 30', 2018. Photograph from the solo exhibition at Wilfrid Israel Museum of Asian Art, Israel.



33 Link Road, Thread. Photograph from the solo exhibition at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai.

You have said often that creating art for you is a way of processing death and grief. Has the fabric of that engagement changed over the years?

The beauty of the studio for me is that it allows for any insistent, urgent, undigested and usually invisible feeling, inquiry or observation to find its way out – often unbeknownst to me. In the initial stages of a work, I am just aware of an intuitive impulse to work with a particular form in a particular material. I have learnt to trust that feeling and not over-analyse it. As the physical form of the artwork starts to get more and more refined in its manifestation, I find that some question or raw emotion within gets clearer and more refined as well. This outward making is actually a process of inner transformation and I know the piece is done, when something in me is done – it has received closure of some sort. Making art has been a way for me to process where I am within myself (and sometimes within the world), a way to process life and its experiences and that has included death, loss, the fickleness of our perceptions, the shifting



Sumakshi Singh

constructions of memory, the experience of beauty, silence and meditative awareness, challenging our conditioned frameworks... My work often renders familiar form into insubstantial mirages, challenging its solidity and by extension the fixity of meaning and the intimacy of knowing that it symbolises.

