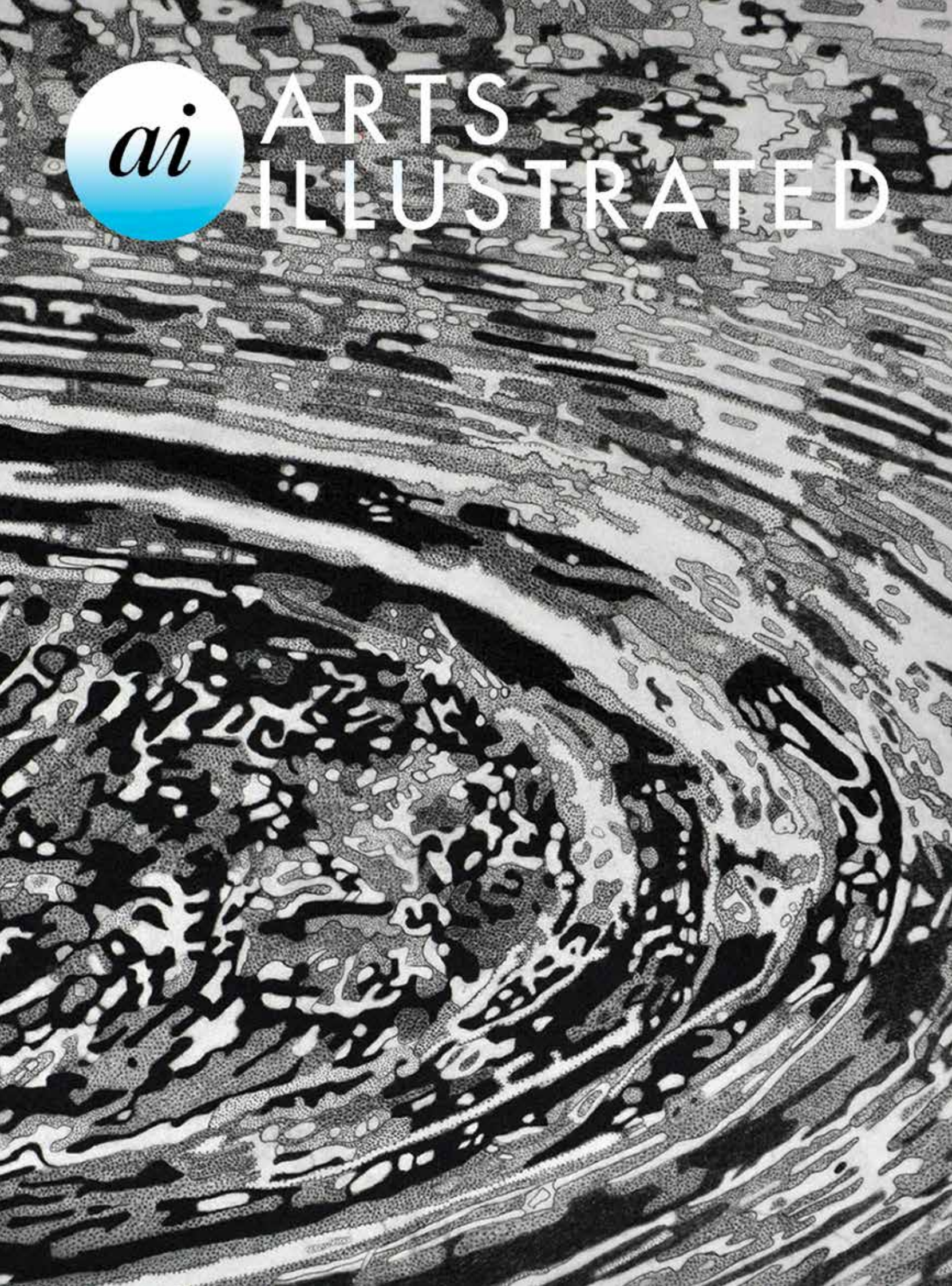
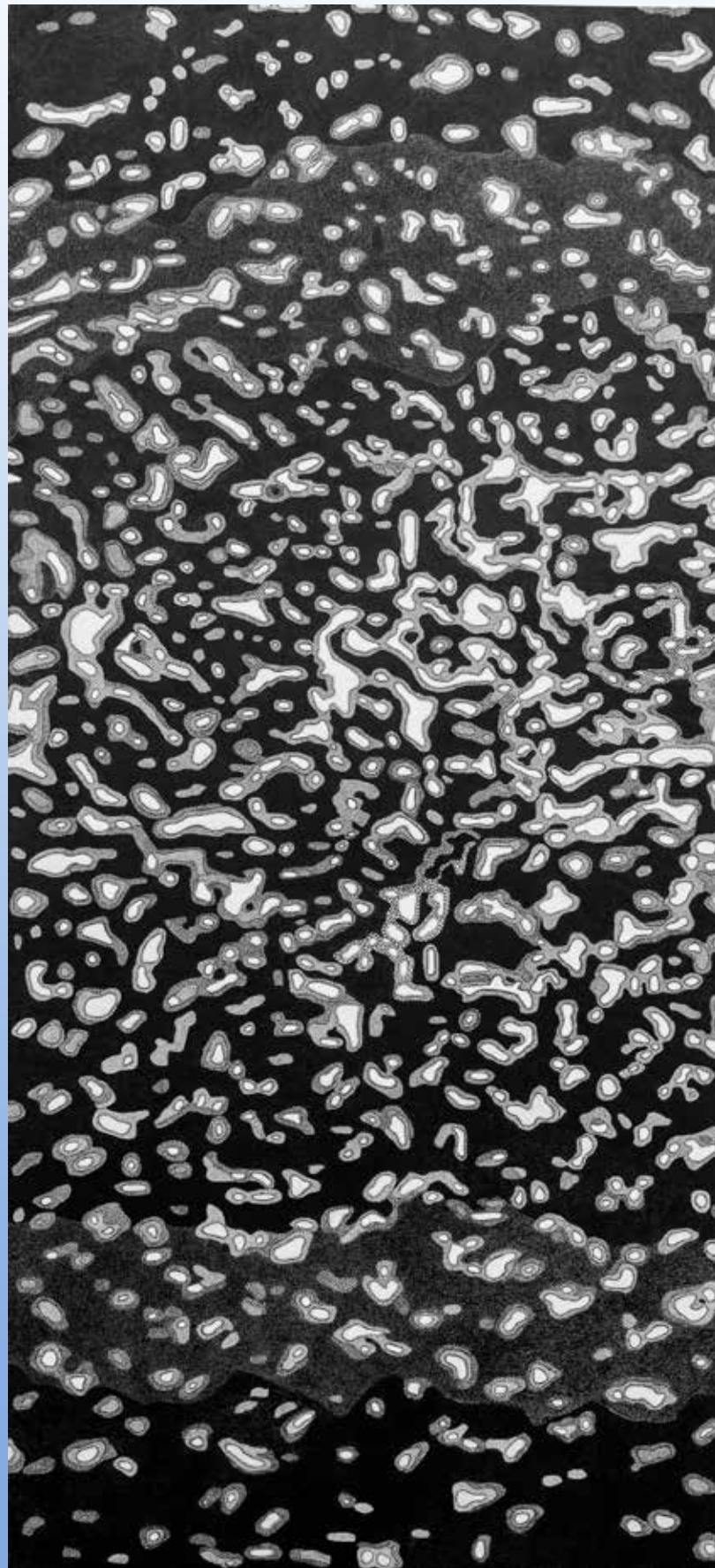




# ARTS ILLUSTRATED







**The Arrow of Time (Triptych).** Hand-drawn  
Graphite on Canvas covered Wooden Panels,  
54" x 24" x 2" each panel.

Q&A  
Arts

# Medium in the Message

In conversation with the versatile Parvathi Nayar  
on her choice of medium, on colour, on trash and  
the rivers of memories that flow through it all

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

If Lewis Carroll's Alice walked into Parvathi Nayar's exhibition – *The Atlas of Reimaginings* – she would, inevitably, ask the White Rabbit, 'How long is a second?' and the White Rabbit would reply, 'Sometimes, longer than forever.' In Nayar's purposeful, intricate and seemingly fragile detailing you find a kind of infinity that makes you want to pause. To wait. To remain still. And to become aware of that deep rumbling of emotions underneath as the static and the fluid meet and move away with the pulsating grace and rhythm of figure eight skaters on an ice rink. And then to listen to the respectful question (#consent): 'Do you want to jump in?' If you say 'no', the stillness remains watertight, like a group huddle you cannot break into; if the answer is a 'maybe', then you can hear its gentle ripple of friendship, like a hand that invites you for a swim; and if the answer is a 'yes', then invariably you will find



me there still (pun unintended), in Nayar's graphite-tinged world of black and white and grey stories, the dots and lines and swirls imitating the essence of colour, a Wonderland that reveals itself only if you are ready and willing.

I met Nayar for the first time at her studio before the launch of this exhibition. The studio was crowded with artworks, some covered, some propped on the couch, some stacked against walls and on tables, a tray of pens, pencils, brushes that I almost tripped over, and a little drawing by her daughter proudly pasted on the wall. This was a lived-in studio, unafraid to hide its chaos. And amidst it all, the artist herself, speaking in unhurried words, allowing space for her thoughts to run

into each other, collide, and then emerge as a sentence, as a thought that unravels with a consciousness that almost feels like Nayar is standing outside of herself, constantly observing. 'I have always drawn, but never shown my drawings because I kind of fell into believing that hierarchy without even consciously thinking about it, that first you draw, then you paint it and then you show your work. It was only when I went to London for my MA in Fine Art did my tutors tell me that I was a good draughtsman and that I should show these drawings. It was also a time when drawing was having a resurgence, with entire shows on just drawings. It was, for me, quite a momentous decision to say I am going to just show drawings. Then it became a way of how do I

present my drawings, because my subject matter is not old fashioned, it is looking beneath the layers, it is cinematic frames, it is stop motion, but how do I present it in a way that allows people to see it as something contemporary and modern. So the form with which people interacted with my drawings became important,' she explains.

And that experimenting with form is evident throughout her body of work. The circles, the diptych, the triptych, the quadriptych, the boxed forms, the animation and augmented reality, and video work – Nayar's drawings and works are as much about how it's contained and constricted as it is about freedom and liberation. 'Circular forms started right from the

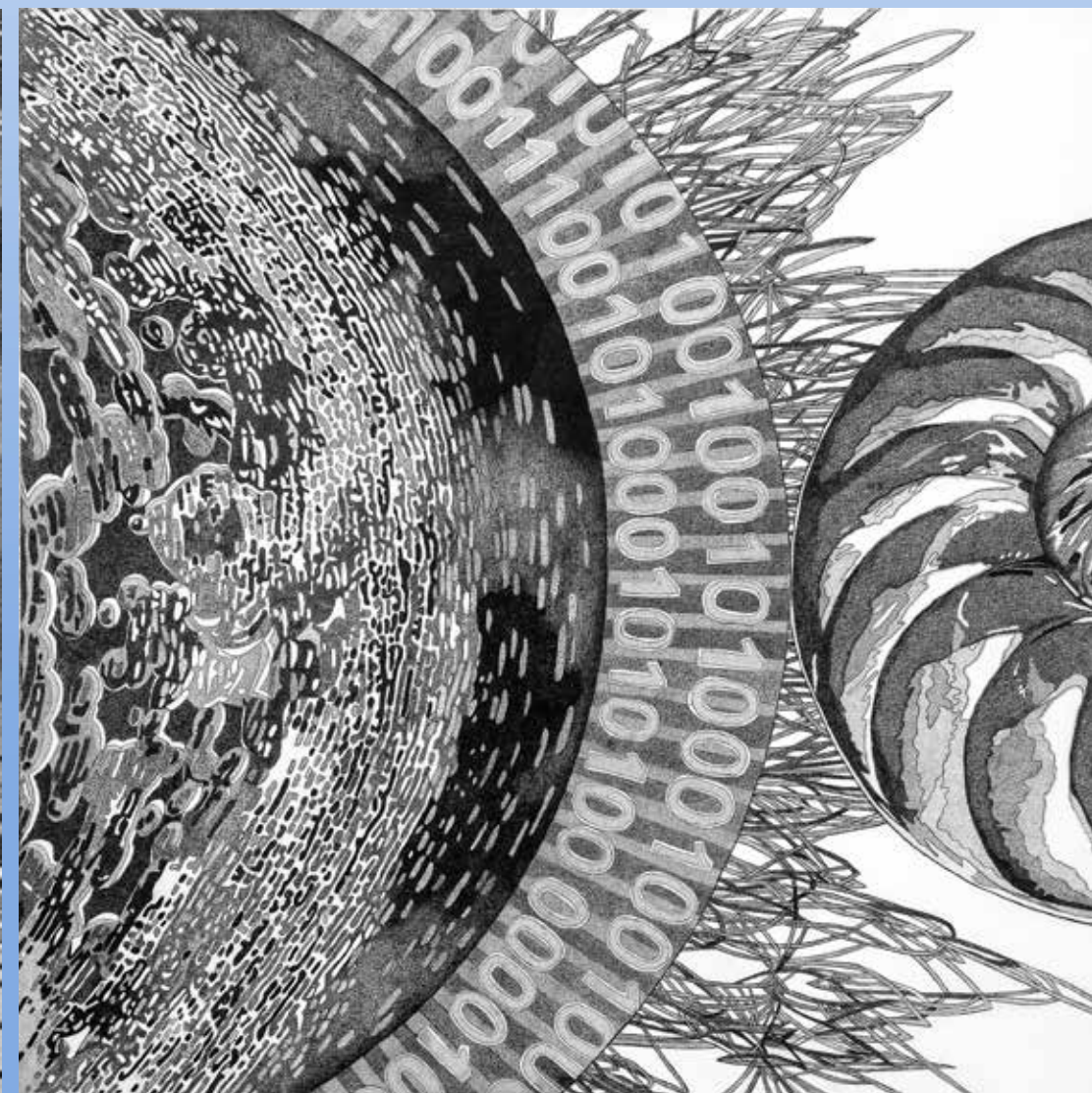
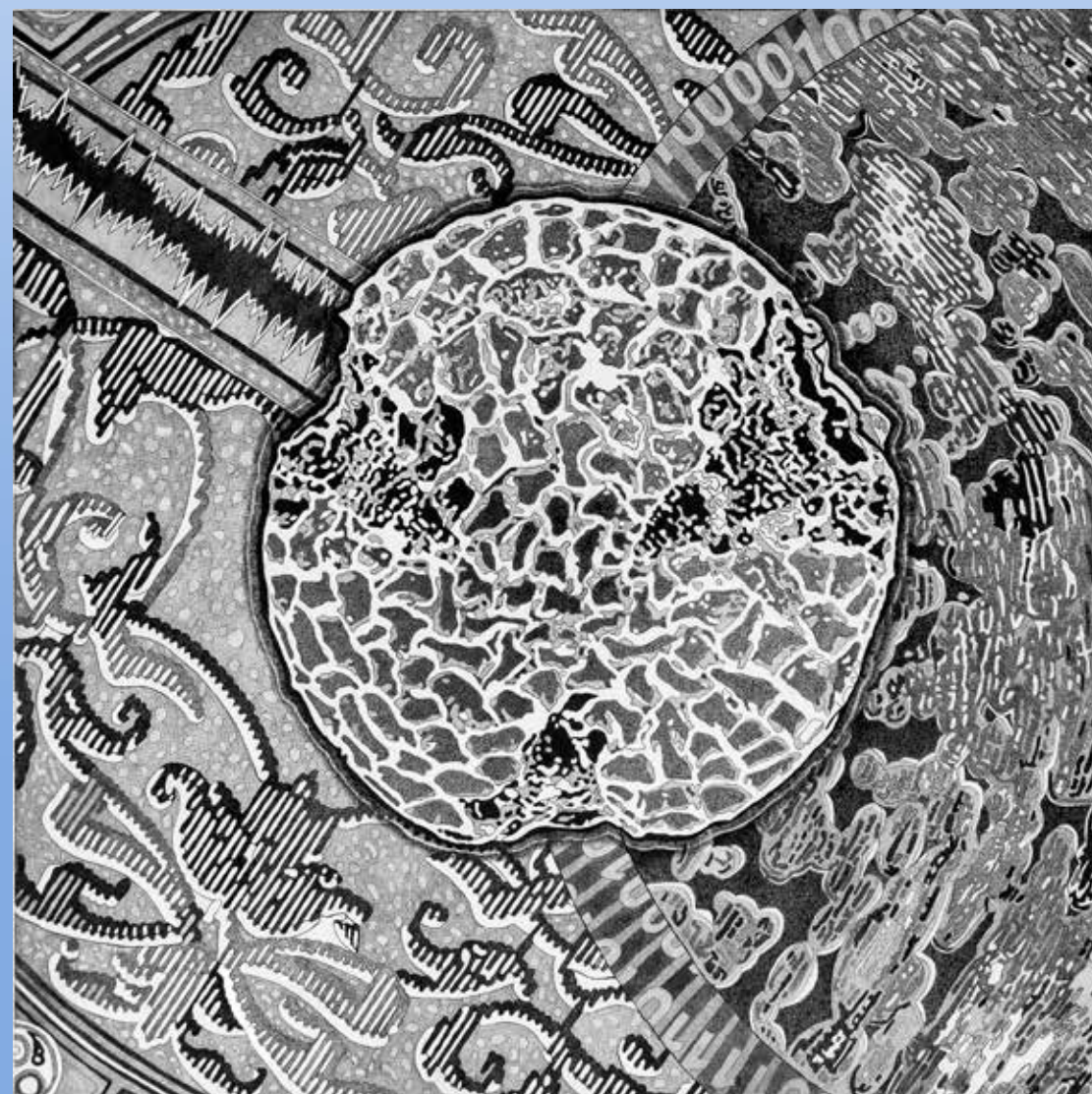
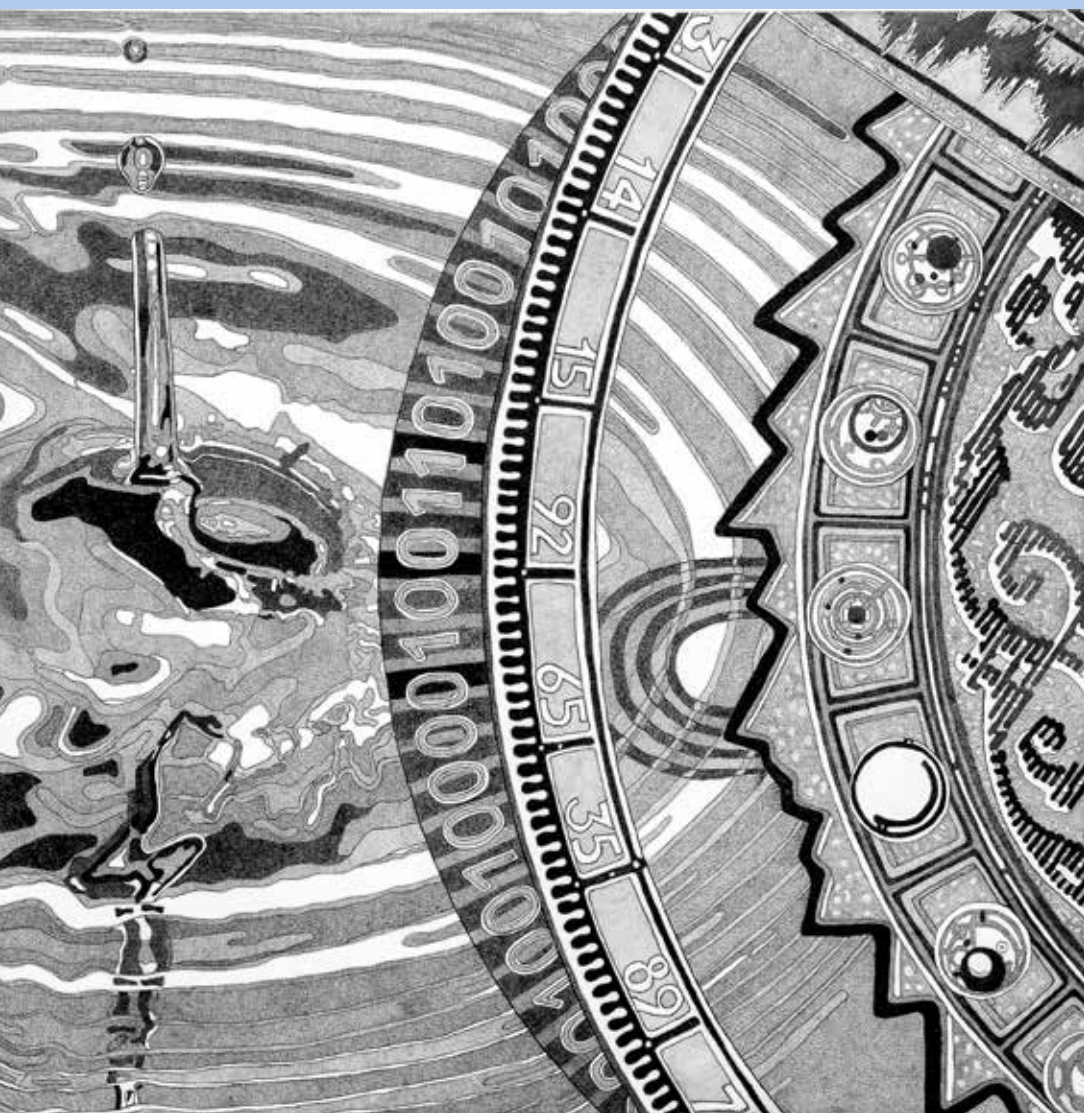
beginning when I started working with scientific images. The circle represented the lens of the microscope, the lens of the telescope, a Petri dish, the eye – I like geometry and the purity of the geometric form. The triangle is something I haven't yet worked with because I am terrified it might look like a pizza or something,' she says with a smile that is convivial and yet one that masks quiet ambition that will find a way to work around that form as well. 'I also work with fracturing, because – I am going to sound so boring – I am very fascinated by quantum physics. Not that I understand any of its mathematics, and it is only through writing and literature that I understand it 0.001%, but it is all so exciting and fascinating. Quantum tells you that you don't see things

continuously, everything is absorbed in quanta, in packets, so I thought what if I give the viewer things in pieces? Why don't I puncture the image and make you pause and think about what you see and what you are going to see.'

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Before I met Nayar for the interview, I had visited her exhibition on a quiet afternoon with my six-year-old son. He was more interested to see the trash installation of the *Wave* on the terrace, but walked with me patiently through Nayar's graphite on wood works. A while later he asked me, 'If this is water, why isn't it blue?' I must have given a regular mom-explanation ('Because it is black and white') but it set me thinking about Nayar's

process, of how she visualises her artworks, and whether the colour bleeds out later. 'I think when I am in that graphite mood, I visualise already without colour. In a sense, as depths and patterns; I am seeing things in black and white and shades of grey. It probably comes from the fact that I have always drawn; and those drawings grew in complexity and you begin to see things as this black, which sucks in all the colour, and this white, which lets out all the colour, and everything is existing as a value in between. In fact, for a while, I was only working with immense amounts of colour, and then I went back to black and white,

**Nocturne-Three Movements of a Crossing (Triptych).**  
Hand-drawn Graphite on Linen  
Panels, 36"X36" each panel.





Wave: Trash Art Installation, Trash, Metal  
Fixtures, PVC, Sand and Paint,  
114"x192"x32"





and now I find colour has started coming in again. Like they say, medium is the message, I think the colour is also the message. Any colour. Black and white has a certain aesthetic. For me it is purity of form, it is like a written text; I am giving you a pure construct of every single thing I am thinking about, but it also says feel free to come in and colour it, feel free to take this and fly with it. In that sense, I feel a coloured image is very finite. You don't look at a blue hummingbird and think I wonder what it could be if it was purple. I mean, you might,

but that is rare. Whereas, you do look at this water ripple and think, I wonder what it would be like if it was blue, or was she thinking of clean water or dirty water, is it the turquoise blue of the pond or the muddy water of a ditch. Can I take that with me and play with it?

In retrospect, when I look at Nayar's work, that was the first thing that happened. In one of her graphite works, which simply traces the trajectory of a drop of water over seven frames, or in her animated work of black and white poppies floating up and then

gently falling back down as if surrendering to the whims of an erratic breeze (or mind), I wondered how the experience would have changed had this been rendered in colour. Purely from the perspective of form and craft, Nayar's drawings consciously and resourcefully defy conventions without the blatant overtones of activism. This isn't a loud, sloganeering protestor, but one who participates in silence, allowing the powerful presence of dots and lines to do the talking. This is that persistent voice in your head that unexpectedly pops up like an eager mole, and then

disappears only to appear elsewhere, forcing you to move to catch it, and thereby placing the onus of responsibility on you to act. 'Even if it is unfashionable to say so, my art is very passionate. It is full of intensity and emotionally charged. My art is emotion. So, maybe, black and white is a way of channeling that emotion without it becoming syrupy or sentimental, you know? The limited palette can create unusual answers to both conceptual and emotional questions,' she says. 'To be honest, it is also an aesthetic choice, though I am not saying

I am against colour. I love colour, and maybe there will be another colour explosion, but then, it would be organic.'

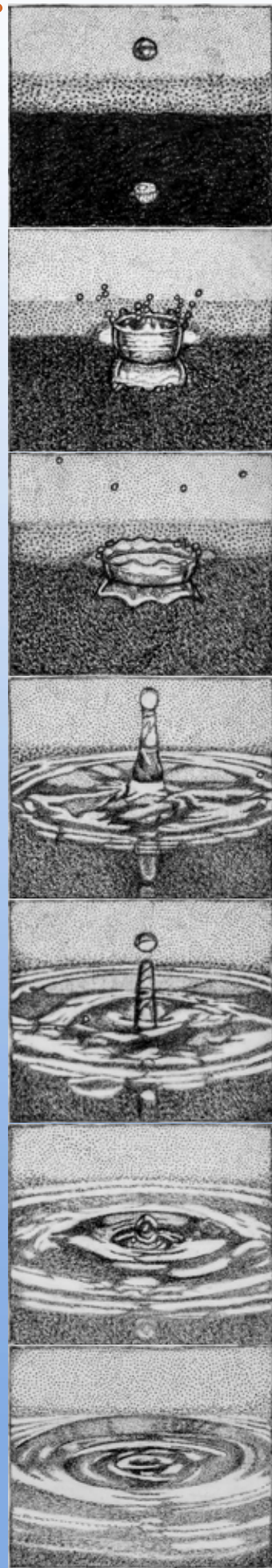
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Right at the centre of Nayar's trash installation based on Katsushika Hokusai's *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* is a small Styrofoam teacup with a handle. And all around it, the rush and debilitating power of the wave is captured using blue and white trash – Harpic bottles, deodorant and shampoo bottles, bunches of plastic spoons and forks, bottle

caps and medicine bottles and strips, milk packets, Parachute coconut oil bottles, tubes of toothpaste – it is endless, this collection of trash and what it represents. It is also overwhelming that the simple act of segregation of colour can bring in so much consciousness and awareness to what we consume and what we discard. And that the single teacup can do the same. 'I feel that

**A Cycle of Poppies (Diptych),**  
Hand-drawn Graphite & Mixed  
Media on Wooden Panels,  
15" x 18.5" each panel.







contemporary art has to deal with the present. For me, it has always been about philosophy and space – what is this space, what are we made of, and I think in a way that science is a visual language and is speaking to us very urgently about understanding the world we are in. When we accept certain scientific ideas of how we are all made of water, how we are all so similar that many of the beliefs of being a better caste or race ought to fall away. I don't proselatise. I don't believe it is art's role to tell you what to do. But in subtle ways, it is art's role to open up parts of thinking. For me it is sort of working at that scientific plane, but organically that's moved into more obvious fields like water and trash and the environment as extensions of this idea of space. Space is also environment. Space is also the spaces in which we live. It's also another thing of our times and it's an urgent question. Both with the Kolam installation (made with trash from the Adyar River for Goethe's DAMnedART Project) and this trash installation, I organically found a way of talking about it without being didactic. It speaks directly to the man on the street,' she says.

As does the performative video based on AK Ramanujan's poem *The River*, using photographs of words from the street to recreate the poem in a way that is surreal and frighteningly relevant to the reality of the twin floods in Chennai and Kerala, not to forget the silent, raging flood of trash, an underground

Tsunami waiting to happen. Ramanujan's poem, seen in this context, then becomes, quite unsuspectingly, the thread that weaves Nayar's works. Of community, of collaboration, of belonging, of identity and of immediacy. 'I embrace the act of collaboration in this era of convergence and learn something from everyone I work with – carpenters, architects, curators. Putting up the trash installation, for instance, was an incredible act of sharing ideas and experiences between me, Lina Vincent the curator of the show, and Archana from Madras Terrace Architectural Works: what would the sub-structure be like, how would it hold the trash? I think collaborations are a good thing and makes the work inhabit different spaces – it also goes into the digital, the cinematic, and it suggests, like the poppies, that it is breaking out of things and going elsewhere. I do want to constantly push the art into something else. I am always at that place of being imbalanced, of thinking what next. It's good, I feel, because without some level of creative discomfort, you wouldn't do a thing.'

In the end, there is quietness. I don't mean the philosophical end (although there is quietness there, too), but at the end of walking through Nayar's exhibition, at the end of a visit to her studio, at the end of an interview with her, at the end of an overwhelming experience of rivers and trash

and the garden of plenty with poppies and lotuses that Nayar so deftly juxtaposes with the idea of scarcity – because how can hope not be the other side of dismal everydayness? – there is quietness. And a deep reflection of the idea of self – for the earth and the human being. 'I want my art to reach as many people as possible. I want it to be a dialogue that is meaningful. What I don't want my art to do is for it to become shallow. I want the richness to remain. Art, for me, is a tightrope. By that, I mean, there is always a richness of thought-detail-work-research that goes into my work, but I don't want it to become "burdened" with these things either. I am very conscious that it is a specific tightrope I have elected to walk on, between abstraction and reality, between the conceptual and the communicative... My hope is that while I continue to make

art, I don't fall off that tightrope. The work can tip over in the viewer's mind into specificities; it's so wonderful when I see a viewer have an ah-ha moment with the work and sharing "this is what it is, this is what it says to me". But the art itself should remain in that space where it is still a proposition, where it still says, what do you think?"

**The Sound of Water**, Hand-drawn Graphite on Wooden Panels, 29" x 14.5" when framed.

**Eddies & Swirls**, Hand-drawn Graphite on Wooden Panels, 5"x7", Projects 3" from the wall.

Parvathi Nayar

All Images Courtesy of Parvathi Nayar and Gallery Veda, Chennai.

