

THE SOUTH SOUTH SOUTH

PROJECTS/PROCESSES

VOL. III/2018



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PROJECTS
VOLUME

PROCESSES
THREE



SERENDIPITY
ARTS
FESTIVAL
GOA 2018



On Matters of Hand: Craft, Design and Technique

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In a high-vaulted room on the top floor of the Adil Shah Palace, with large windows that open out to Goa's smoothly blue Mandovi river, designer Rashmi Varma has placed a pair of handmade household brooms on a long white table, under an enormous crystal chandelier. The chandelier's ostentatious extravagance is met by the clean curvature of the grass and date leaf brooms: finely wound together to create a unique geometry, braided and rolled for the appropriate width and base, different leaves joined by delicately placed knots and pins. With this simple juxtaposition, Varma erases the hierarchies implied between the objects, and the histories that sustain them. "Each object is a social environment as well as an economic one," she says as we move through *Matters of Hand: Craft, Design and Technique*, her curated show at Serendipity Arts Festival 2018, for which she has carefully brought together objects from across India that reflect a certain formal sensibility. "I am trying to move away from strict definitions of 'traditional' or 'modern'," Varma adds as we pause in front of the brooms, "things have been modern for over 5,000 years."

At the entrance of the show are a series of mended objects: two stools, a chair, two lifeguard chairs and a sculpture from the collection of designer Ishan Khosla. The chairs and stools, part of a series entitled *Construct Deconstruct Construct* (2018), are most often sourced from public spaces, and have been repeatedly repaired by using scraps and pieces of plastic, rope, metal, wood, leaves, twine and cloth. Here, form is spontaneous, as is the process of making. The more you pay attention, the more the objects reveal their details: a plastic tarpaulin

twisted into a piece of palm leaf and yellow rope to fix a broken roof, or a staggered set of nails bent together to secure the broken limb of a stool. Khosla finds that “these vernacular pieces of furniture are gestural in nature ... the sitter and the seat are reflections of each other, they both represent the beauty of imperfection.” By opening the show with these pieces, Varma seems to set the tone for the show—the premise here is to pay attention. She is less interested in objects that are beautiful, and more in those that are complex and full of history.

A sense of quiet pervades through the show, allowing for the geometry and internal rhythms of the objects to speak for themselves. Varma’s chosen objects lend easily to abstraction: each has a certain rudimentary form or pattern of repetition which, when isolated, can still stand on its own, without requiring additional embellishments. Narratives around Indian craft often veer toward an excess of a decorative saturation of colour, motif and symbol. Varma shows us that the opposite can be true. In one corner sits a set of simple and smoothly spun pottery vessels: a *bhadak* and *bhabbhu* for water, a *maati* for churning buttermilk, a *paatar* for kneading dough and a *karsiyo* for drinking water or setting yoghurt. These come from Kutch, Western Gujarat, from a stoneware making practice that finds its roots all the way back to the Indus Valley Civilisation.

Varma brings in the pottery of the *kumbhar* Ramju Ali, who imbues each object with an uncomplicated but highly specific shape, using many different techniques. These objects are hand formed and beaten using a *faraai*, a flat wooden paddle. To soften the clay before working with it, Ali kneads it with his feet for about an hour, pummeling and massaging it to get the right consistency. Each object is then appropriately pinched, thrown or coiled according to the nature of its use. Some pots are later painted with a gossamer white pigment in flowing lines of fish, waves and hatches, which are characteristic of Kutchi pottery. Around the *bhadak* is a red cording—almost like a tight, knitted sweater—made by Ali’s son Ahmed, which protects the pot from breaking and from the sweltering rays of the sun. Ramju Ali

is especially attentive in making pottery for the *aam admi*: he protects the vessels from wear and tear so that farmers can carry them out into the fields without worry. Although certain craft items make it to urban environments under expensive labels or handloom fairs, many are still in use in a local, regional way, as Ali’s practice shows.

Elsewhere in the room, a *korai* grass *pais* or mat—known in its home state of Tamil Nadu as *pattu pais* after the town Pattamadai, where it has been made for generations—softly shimmers in tones of a dusty-golden pink and beige, where a small floral, but highly geometric, pattern repeats itself endlessly in an almost dizzyingly perfect symmetry. The mat sits soft and pliable, appearing as though made of woven fabric. Where such weaving is most often done with dry material, in Pattamadai, the Labbai and Rowther, communities split *korai* grass into fine strips and wet these with water from the Thamirabarani River (traditionally named Tamaraparani), upon whose banks the grass usually grows. Horizontal bands of colour are carefully woven together, with cotton or nylon in the warp. Patterns for the mats are usually inspired by sari designs, or the parallel lines of Bhavani dhurries, geometric blankets woven from a coarse thread called *jamakkalam*.

The *pattu pais* is no ordinary mat. As Pushpa Chari writes for *The Hindu* (1996):

In the metamorphosis of the green *korai* growing wild on the banks of the Tamaraparani, into the wonder that is the Pattamadai mat lies the genius of the *paramparic* [traditional] Indian craftsman ... his empathy with the moods and rhythms of nature ... as well as total dedication to his calling spells the very essence of India’s craft heritage, be it the *minakari* and *jadau* jewellery of Jaipur, the *namdahs* and carpets of Kashmir, the shola pith craft of Bengal or the stone carvings of Karnataka.¹

Chari draws a landscape from which to view the mats: they belong to an ancient industry of tools, mechanisms and community. Like the brooms under a crystal chandelier, the mats are as precious as

Jaipur gems. For the mat displayed in *Matters of Hand*, its creator and designer, Jeenath Beevi, who is part of a generations-old weaving family in Pattamadai, wove in an elegant *mullai poo*: a small jasmine bud motif. The highest quality of *pattu pais* is so intricate and silky that it sits at the equivalent of 120 thread counts. Mats like these often accompany a bride to her new home, and may bear the names of the wedded couple at the top. Beevi has added the word “serendipity” for this particular occasion.

Varma’s reluctance to define practices as “traditional” or “modern” is useful, and important. Craft often lends itself to a nationalistic discourse—both historically and in the present day—as it often becomes a manner by which to uphold misplaced notions of “authenticity.” What feels important here is that craft does not belong to a geography, it belongs to movement and migration. What is often implied by the term tradition is that it is immutable, or has remained unchanged over time. A tradition is, of course, the opposite of this: it is hybrid, dynamic and ever evolving, especially for craft, where techniques and process are the evidence of decades-long exchanges between different individuals, infrastructure and communities. Varma’s own design practice is deeply rooted in materiality and technique, informed by her travels through the subcontinent and a careful attention to the craft proficiencies of different regions and mediums. For *Matters of Hand*, she has travelled extensively, familiarising herself with not only the objects themselves, but the communities and families that have been involved in making them for generations.

A particularly striking moment in this regard is a video whose sound fills up the room with a rhythmic tapping. In it, a group of about eight men beat a piece of metal at highly coordinated and methodical intervals. In the small video taken by Varma at the workshop of Suraj Prakash Maharana—from the Kansari community of Kantilo, Odisha—a group of craftsmen under his employ work on a *kansa* disc. *Kansa* is a bell-metal alloy made from a mix of 85% copper and 5% tin, properties that Ayurveda considers to play an important role in

the body’s metabolism by providing a gradual release of iron, which in turn eliminates free radicals and kills bacteria. To make the *kansa* discs, which operate as a raw material for what eventually becomes household utensils, molten alloy is poured into terracotta moulds that have been first rubbed with mustard oil. From the moulds, small circular ingots are leaked out and hand beaten by a group of artisans into required shapes. Their choreography is like a dance, one of a primal kind—ceremonial, and in a tight circular fist around an open fire. By isolating this one element of the process through film, Varma amplifies its meditative quality. The *Kansari* artisans begin the metalwork in the early hours of the morning, before dawn, while the day is still cool, and work till noon.

The disc is kept over an open fire to remain malleable enough to be beaten into shape, and the term “bell-metal” alludes to the musical sounds of the tapping on the hot disc. The metal is shaped into plates, bowls and other utensils, the finishing process for which requires a grinding (both by machine and hand) to smoothen out and polish the toughened metal. The *kansa* utensils are enormously heavy, given their composition, and can often weigh up to two or three kilograms a piece. Each is a nearly black matte, or otherwise polished to a rich, golden hue. The metal is almost glassy, as though dipped in reflective oil. At *Matters of Hand*, a set of utensils from Maharana’s workshop is placed underneath the video. They are more slender and lightweight than conventional *kansa* utensils, as he has devised a method by which to reduce their overall weight, giving him a competitive edge at a time when ultra-light stainless steel and aluminum are all but replacing this ancient craft.

As is so dramatically illustrated by the video from Maharana’s workshop, there is something innately ritualistic and performative to the crafts of the subcontinent. As Partha Mitter writes in *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850 – 1922: Occidental Orientations* (1994), the ancient arts of the subcontinent are “living traditions of craftsmanship.”² We may read into them as almost utopian spaces in which identity, community and even protest are performed through



ritual and labour. Where Western notions of craft often relegate form, technique and invention to individual makers, in India these are almost always about community. However, it is crucial that this very notion of community is critically examined. In the subcontinent, it is impossible to speak about community, craft, skill or tradition without a discussion of caste, and this is especially true of practices where generations of the same communities have been making the same object, or working with the same material.

Usually, kinship, caste and occupational ties bind craft communities. These are often governed by the *Jajmani* system: a pre-industrial socio-economic system in which lower castes are tied to certain labour practices (and monetary remittances) by upper caste landlords or traders. The etymology of the word *Jajmani* traces back to *yajman*, a word for patron. However, the realities of these relationships are not nearly as polite; they are considered an almost permanent hierarchy, not based on any written contract, but solely on caste. It is thus essential to continuously remember that in India, the material and labour relations of technique, production and exchange are completely inextricable from the internal structures of caste. In an effort toward transparency, Varma has at every instance explicitly mentioned the community that is involved with each object.

What caste does, apart from its obviously violent segregations, is make these skills entirely oral histories: it is not as though these techniques and forms find other translations, or are shared between castes; they are instead passed on between members of the same caste and community. This makes them even more fragile and susceptible to erasure, particularly under industrialisation and the introduction of new materials, or the loss of older material palettes.

For the Martiniquan postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant, “History (with a capital *H*) ends where the histories of those people once reputed to be without history come together.”³ In his seminal 1976 essay “The Quarrel with History,” Glissant articulates an insightful argument in which he deconstructs the histories of the various

colonisations of the Caribbean countries, and the patterns of slavery that arose as a result. There is of course a much broader link, and his essay may begin to inform a critique on the writing of the histories of the Indian subcontinent as well. For Glissant, it is the artefacts of culture, literature, architecture, music and art, that we must use in the building of a new narrative, one that can divorce itself from its mainstream counterpart as a way to maintain a “continuous, open resistance” against hegemonic knowledge structures.⁴ History, written flatly, with a linear arc of progression, can reduce things to chronology, where events are highlighted for their exceptional quality. Whereas it is in oral traditions that we may begin to construct more complex, nuanced and robust narratives. To extend Glissant’s concerns, we must also have a critical reflection on the histories of craft, and the communities that have mobilised its practices.

“Craft,” in the manner by which we use it today, was first put to use in late eighteenth-century Britain,⁵ moving to different parts of the world in the nineteenth. This movement was a result of empire, where nineteenth-century British thinkers were preoccupied by concerns that brought both the vernacular and decorative arts together with the politics of labour, as proposed by Paul Greenhalgh in “The History of Craft” (1997). This was the direct result of a growing anxiety towards industrialisation, which in turn led to an increased attention, and even valorisation, of the vernacular. It was important to go back to village life, to the countryside craftspeople, and (in what is trickier territory) “the authentic tradition.” At the same time, the decorative arts (or these so-called authentic traditions) were being separated from the fine arts, which were growing to be an exclusive category under the thrust of modernity. Incidentally, the resistance to mechanical means of production goes back to the Industrial Revolution, where figures like John Ruskin and William Morris wrote of alienated labourers in the machine age (as is evident in their writings around the nineteenth-century British Arts and Crafts Movement), and produced long theses that romanticised non-industrial work. Incidentally, Morris took up the cause of protecting Indian artisans from the aggressive tools of industrialisation. Thus, under the British-led Arts

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and Crafts Movement of the 1850s, vernacular traditions, politics of labour and decorative arts were flung together to coin the term “craft.” As Greenhalgh writes, “the historical moment was right, the combination in this context dynamic and compelling.”⁶

In the Indian context, the vernacular became a tool to defeat empire. The Quit India Movement, launched in 1942, appropriated and drew from the language of the farmer and country labourer in order to resist the mechanisms of empire, and with it, to initiate an early legacy of closed market economics. The socialist concerns of the new republic were immediate: the labourer could no longer remain alienated by the economy or politics. In the fine arts, modernist thinkers and painters began a long preoccupation with the pastoral and the vernacular: looking to the countryside for motif, symbol and metaphor. Traditions were seen as something to be updated and infused with the modernist sensibility of a young republic. The separations between the crafts and fine arts remained, although many artists dabbled in the abstraction of multiple craft motifs, reproducing them on their canvases or through sculpture.

Greenhalgh also writes that craft is “a signifier that has no stable significance.”⁷ He implies that from the very inception of the word, nobody knows what to do about it. What history seems to show us is that the term collectively describes and flattens separate genres that were not always placed together in any category. And most importantly: where each grows from completely separate circumstances. This could not be truer than in the Indian subcontinent, where as Varma’s skilful curation shows, many objects produce a very specific function according to their forms and material.

Varma also brings into a space that functions much like a white cube, objects that are neither conceptual nor figurative—they simply exist as they are—allowing the viewer to rest eyes on formal symmetries and functions. What is most refreshing about her rooms at the Adil Shah Palace is the stillness and space that is afforded to each object.



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You are drawn to their surfaces, textures and forms. You pay attention to the slightest graduations in colour: in *Kalash* (2016), a rug from the Manchaha series of the Jaipur Rug Foundation, subtle graduations of shade and hue softly dabble in the light. The rug was created by Kamli Devi, and assisted by her friend Bimla Devi—artisans who otherwise work with the company Jaipur Rugs on predetermined designs for commercial sales. However, in the Manchaha (which roughly translates to “as your mind desires”) series, the artisans were given free rein to create their own designs for rugs, the only constraint being the colour palette they could use. It was an initiative with the intention to use the excess stock yarn left over from commercial production. Devi was given hues of red and pink, and she in turn made an intricate tapestry of ceremonial vessels, snacks, doors, diamonds, and symbols for good luck. There is never a moment where the colour is flat or unified. Given the limited quantities for each shade, Devi continuously blends colours together, much like an oil painter working on a single panel for months in different shades. At *Matters of Hand*, it’s not always about what the eye is able to see, but also what the eye might find soothing, enticing, or drawn to focus on for an extended period of time. There is a meditative quality to looking, in the same way that there is a meditation in the making.

While there are works that are soothing to the eye, there are also those that are physical architectures and are soothing to *be* in. These are also works that are largely conceptual but turn functional quite easily; for example, in Swapnaa Tamhane’s soft architecture in *Tent: A space for the ceremony of close readings* (2018), at any given moment of the day, people could be seen resting, whispering, giggling or sharing an intimate moment. Inspired by the mid-1950s Mill Owner’s Association Building designed by Le Corbusier and Balkrishna Doshi in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Tamhane designed a series of block prints that repeat endlessly on a flowing cotton khadi structure that is tacked up on a metal frame, and affixed with tassels. She uses details from the facade of the building, the inner conference room and the roof to draw up her block prints. Inside the tent hangs a small paper lantern that Tamhane has handmade, using mulched khadi cotton,



and with a cutout that repeats the same design. The blocks used for printing were carved by Mukesh P. Prajapati in Petaphur, and the cotton khadi fabric dyed by Salehmamad D. Khatri of Ajrakhpur, Kutch, Gujarat. This particular block-printing process was no simple task: it required scouring, lime resist printing, mordanting and dyeing the cloth multiple times to produce the right tone and colour. Tamhane's soft architecture is both cosy and grand: with a swooped ceiling and diffused light.

"I think my favourite parts of the travels were meeting with the families of the different artisans, eating with them and spending time," Varma tells me as we sit out on the balcony of the Adil Shah Palace. It's a blazing day and the sun is shining hard off the glistening Mandovi as she speaks, a vivid backdrop against which she tells me her stories and details of the objects on display (which most often turn into anecdotes about their makers). Varma is thoughtful and gentle in a manner that is completely charming, and it is at once clear that she has poured a lot of herself into this show, which is a portrait of the forms that she is drawn to and the collaborations that are meaningful to her. "The family is very much part of the craft," she adds, "and it is hard to separate the life from the work."

I look out onto the river as large ferries trudge across its length and illuminated signboards flicker over at the opposite bank with ads for casinos and beer. A shining patch in the water catches my eye and I watch as a single plastic bottle scurries its way along with the tide, an image that stays with me as I walk back into *Matters of Hand*. Every single object in here could be replaced, or has already been, replaced by plastic, I think, shuddering internally. I quickly return to one of my favourite pieces from the show, *Chomukh Chatai* (2018) by Rajineb Murji Vankar: a mat made from recycled videocassette tape, plastic bags and nylon wrap. Vankar is also from Kutch, where the most ubiquitous method of waste disposal is burning large piles of plastic and trash, releasing heady toxins into the night air. In an initiative started by the non-profit organisation Khamir, plastic waste collectors (of the lower castes) were employed and properly

contracted to collect, sort and strip the raw materials for weavers to weave out intricate and durable textiles. Nylon is used for the warp, plastic for the weft, and the weaves created on pit looms that are ancient to the region. The thick material is then crafted into backpacks, cushions, mats, wallpaper and coverings. In "Chomukh Chatai," Vankar has created a vibrant tableau of floral geometric motifs (*chomukh*) with white plastic bags, complemented by the glassy blacks of videocassette film. The work takes me to the desert and to the Kutchi salt flats, frozen in my memory with similarly satin textures of sand and salt.

Notes

¹ P. Chari, "The wonder of the Pattamadai mat," *The Hindu*, February 25, 1996, 15.

² Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

³ Édouard Glissant, "The Quarrel with History," in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 64.

⁴ Glissant, "The Quarrel with History," 63.

⁵ Paul Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft," in *The Culture of Craft*, ed. Peter Dormer (Minneapolis, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 20.

⁶ Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft," 35.

⁷ Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft," 20-21.

Image Captions

P. 8
Meitei-Pangal Community, Imphal Valley, Manipur
Artisan unknown Taothum or Kabo-Lu, 2018

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Bamboo, polythene cord
Rajiben Murji Vankar
Chomukh Chatai, 2018
Recycled videotape plastic weft, plastic bags, nylon warp

P. 12
Artisan unknown
Serakipharo, 2018
Palm leaf
Nagaland
Artisan unknown
Jharu (broom), 2018
Grass
Jharkhand

P. 18-19
Installation view of the exhibition Matters of Hand: Craft, Design and
Technique at the Chandelier Room in Adil Shah Palace. (please replace with
image titled Matters-82)

P. 23
Aman Khanna (Claymen)
Bhoop Singh
Gyan Chiluvary
Shankar Singh
“Mess Is More”, 2018
Terracotta clay
Yashesh Virkar
Lounger, 2013
Bamboo, cotton cord

Page 25
Swapnaa Tamhane
Mukesh P. Prajapati
Salehmamad D. Khatri

“Tent: A Space for the Ceremony of Close Readings”, 2018
Cotton, natural dyes, metal frame, handmade paper lantern, tassels