

ABSUR -CITY- PITY- DITY

NEW YORK, OCTOBER 29, 2015



WILD TALES, COSMIC WATERS

by RADHIKA SUBRAMANIAM

There are signs of flowing water on Mars, says the news, bringing an unexpected thrill to a Monday morning. We see reflected in our red neighbor some of the potencies of our own liquid planet. With water comes the promise of life. Without it, all is latent.

Water slips its way into every crevice of our lives. It crashes into our imaginations even as it rocks us to sleep. It appears as a welcome glass of hospitality; it coaxes a seed to sprout; it soothes the parched land. It appears as a leak in the roof; a puddle on the road; a dripping faucet and in the frustration before the mute mouth of many an Indian municipal tap. We are lulled into complacency by its quiet foundational flow until its ravaging excesses—as floods, hurricanes and tsunamis—command our attention. Vibha Galhotra's work finds its movement in the deep swell between water's daily dream space and its mythic force.

The rivers of Hindu mythology are wild, powerful women whose strength as they surge down from the mountains threatens to engulf the world that it embraces. In fact, it is this force in the mythic Ganga that is curbed by Shiva who binds her raging torrent in his hair. In Delhi, where Galhotra makes her home, flows the dark Yamuna, a tributary of the Ganga and no less the stuff of legend. The rivers emerge, in an untitled work in the exhibition, in the fine tracery sewn by female fingers into a map of a very fluid India, where these once wild women are diaphanous and delicate—but they are there.

Galhotra lets water seep into the room as it does into daily life. Yamuna watches us. Still and sullen in bottles, she accompanies the desultory meander of urban life in 365 Days. Her black alluvial innards spatter across the canvas in Sediment. The insistent seepage through the cracks of buildings and spaces, manifested through Galhotra's hallmark ghungroo sculptures, is seen in *Flow*, *Majnu ka Tilla* and *Altering*. Ghungroos are the bells tied around the dancer's ankles that provide additional percussion as her feet hit the ground. The onomatopoeic *chhan chhan* of the ghungroo is the vocabulary of poetry and anticipation. The dull burnished bells are painstakingly sewn together by women working with Galhotra into these intricate displays. They tumble forth relentlessly: hundreds of open mouths with their small metal tongues, as quiet as the women who made them, as quiet as the river, silent but everywhere around us.

The news from Mars reminds us that the story of life and water is inevitably a cosmic one. In a time

Untitled (From the series Flow) detail

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Continued from page 1

before time, when the universe was cursed into arid gloom, everything in it withered, decayed, and died. Here begins the story of the Samudra Manthan, the mythic tale from which Galhotra takes the inspiration of transformation. The god of gods, Vishnu, assures his followers that amrit, the nectar of immortality—the promise of sustained life—would be released by the primordial ocean if they join together with their sworn enemies to churn it. With the mighty mountain Mandara as their staff and the snake-king, Vasuki as a cord, the two sides pull back and forth as any peasant woman might as she churns butter. Many glorious things and beings emerge in the course of the churning but in this power and fury, Vasuki also spews the ugly poison, Kalakuta. Its evil would destroy the earth were it not that the great destroyer Shiva intervenes and swallows it. It halts in his throat where it remains forever, turning his throat blue, much as the stark beauty of a white canvas holds the black power of Yamuna’s sediment.

Shiva is himself a dancer—and this is surely no accident here. His cosmic tandava, which releases the energies of creation, destruction and emancipation, appears in the iconography of Nataraja—the lord of the dance, arms raised, hair flying, beating drum to hand, the right foot firm on the demon of ignorance and the left aloft in the air. What will it take for the ghungroos of that dancing foot to come crashing down to our earth, releasing the power of their voices, *chhan chhan*, to awaken us from our complacent slumber?



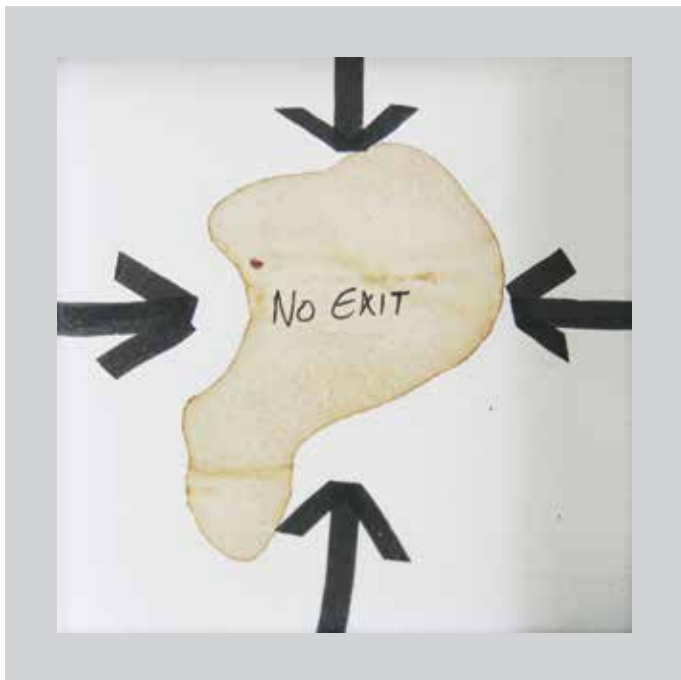
Remains (from Manthan) / Cloth, Resin and metal/ 95.4 x 7.95 X 5.2 inches / 2015

ECOLOGIES OF THE VISUAL, ECONOMIES OF PROFIT

by SHARLENE KHAN

There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (Barad, 2003/2008: 120).

Looking is a responsibility; a visceral, ethical and historically conscious practice. (Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012: 8).



June 30, 2015, *From 365 Days* / mixmedia on paper and water collected from river Yamuna / 4.5 x 4.5 x 1.5 each frame / 2014 - 2015



In her essay 'Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains' (2006), social scientist Doreen Massey reflects on the current ecological crisis citing, "...there is loss, as the mobile planet, human and non-human, continues on its way." [i] Our highly mediated, increasingly urbanised and industrialised world leaves us feeling anxious, discontent and helpless in light of the eco-dilemma. Delhi-based visual artist Vibha Galhotra's work focuses on such aspects of alienation and disconnect: individuals from each other; cultural traditions from indigenous knowledges; human culture from 'nature.' [ii] But how does one deal with the intangibility of such concepts in material form? That is the challenge Galhotra's exhibition *Absur-City-Pity-Dity* (2015) raises using mixed-media sculptural work, drawings, and digital video. The tone of this show is set by the beauty and tactility on display, so that its sense of materiality draws attention to the fact that matter 'matters.'

Galhotra's sense of working with material evidences a mind-set in which her chosen media are intrinsic conductors for concepts blurring boundaries between painting, sculpture, photography, and installation. This sense of working in 'inter-'spaces marks a 'both-and' [iii] philosophy that speaks to the locality and particularity of the artist's life, but also her engagement with global frameworks. This 'both-and' world view is akin to the concept of 'intra-activity' proposed by feminist theorist Karen Barad (2003/2008: 135) in her essay 'Towards an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter':

Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena, but of "things"-in-phenomena. The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency.

In *Absur-City-Pity-Dity*, this intra-connectedness of life and art, of Delhi and the artist herself, of Indian culture with scientific curiosity and concern about human and nonhuman is interwoven in a number of ways. The exhibition begins with tales of 'I' in *365 DAYS*, which narrates personal interactions with Delhi, the vibrant, artistic centre India and home to 18 million residents. The density of the population presents many structural problems for India in terms of providing basic services to the growing urban population, as well as the effects that come with modernisation and capitalisation in the form of toxic air and water pollution, and the decimation of natural resources. It is almost maddening to try to comprehend the scale of these social issues. Material Feminisms editors Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (2008: 9) point out that environmental justice movements have been advocating that: "... the environment [is] not in some distant place, but within homes, schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods. These movements reveal that lower-class peoples, indigenous peoples, and people of colour carry a disproportionate toxic load." This manifests daily in Delhiites' lives and dreams, and is the inspiration of the everydayness of *365 DAYS*. In these small framed, soiled narratives, Galhotra captures the anguish, confusion and smallness one feels daily bombarded with stories of disease, war, world poverty and natural disasters. Added to these are our own autobiographical baggage, and as the artist bravely makes known, that of participating in a precarious capitalist art field.

Tensions pervade Galhotra's work and it is worth drawing on deconstructivist feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's invocation of 'imaginative terror.' In an interview with Spivak, Jenny Sharpe asks her how she can employ the politically incorrect 'mother-earth' image ("the soil is our mother, your mother and mine") [iv] in her agricultural discussions with local Indian farmers.

Spivak notes that such stereotypical metaphors represent an older world philosophy that can still be used to appeal to people for whom they have meaning and, thus, harnessed against capitalistic practices (Sharpe and Spivak, 2003: 615-616). Spivak proposes using imagination as material practice, as a strategic instrument in fighting abstract concepts which mean little to everyday people: "This is the kind of thing whereby rather than use fear of punishment, you use a certain kind of imaginative terror in terms of the consequences of putting foreign seeds and fertilizers in the soil" (ibid: 616).

We see such 'imaginative terror' in the *Sediment* and *Manthan* works. In *Sediment*, the black sludge of the Yamuna River splashes like India-ink across large canvases. The water of the Yamuna is not simply a medium in this work, but a material visual actor speaking on the contradictions of its image of holiness and its reality as a contaminating, dying body of water. This is further exemplified in the resin-encased organics in *Consumed Contamination* in which scientific-like museum displays of exotic species are revealed as festering vegetables. How can 'holy' waters produce such unholy objects? In the video *Manthan*, the Hindu mythology of Samudra Manthan (which means to 'churn the ocean') is performatively used to overcome desire and "mitigate the catastrophe of the river" (Galhotra, 2015). Neoprene-clad bodies dredge the waters with a clean linen cloth, but instead of the water cleansing, the cloth is blackened. Galhotra presents the resin-encased clean and soiled black cloths as material accompaniments to the distancing of the video, raising a compelling visualisation of both white and blackened cloths as colours of mourning.

Galhotra's questioning of the gaze is akin to Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia-Kelly's (2012: 4) concept of 'ecologies of the visual,' where looking is not simply about contemporary production and consumption but rather:

The focus is on questions of effect, histories, and ethics of engagement, interpretation, practice and process, which often fracture or displace the familiar fields of genre, media, audiencing and production. We can describe this as a concern with ecologies of the visual; where the co-constitution of visibility and materiality is in constant dynamic process and situated within networks, hierarchies and discourses of power.

Ecologies of the visual seek a holistic practice of understanding visual-material intra-actions within much larger frameworks of embodied and embedded socio-historical, political, economic and ecological frameworks. Visuality-materiality in Galhotra's work seduces the viewer into ecological awareness without the usual preachiness of such messaging. Here the "politics of doing things with the visual" [v] are harnessed to political affectivity through the use of pleasing aesthetics to evidence the cost of economies of profit.

For instance, in her latest ghungroo works she interrogates appearances of 'value' and 'progress' in her now familiar trickster methodologies. In *Altering*, *Majnu Ka Tila* and *Kachra Chownk*, we see images and reflections of Delhi's cities and seemingly natural landscapes, all composed of the ghungroos which are burnished in different shades and sewn shut (this engages their visual tactility and simultaneously denies their sonic function). The reflections of these scenes hint at something amiss. In *Majnu Ka Tila*, the mirror-image of the cityscape,

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WHERE SHOULD THE BIRDS FLY AFTER THE LAST SKY?¹

NOTES ON VIBHA GALHOTRA'S INVESTIGATIONS

by NICOLA TREZZI

I think the tree is an element of regeneration, which in itself is a concept of time. The oak is especially so because it is a slowly growing tree with a kind of really solid heartwood. It has always been a form of sculpture, a symbol for this planet.
—Joseph Beuys²

The world Joseph Beuys was trying to regenerate with his radical acts has dramatically changed. However, there are still artists who are interested in making a change, artists that are willing to devote their practice to the cause, who take advantage of their prophetic role in order to shift the focus to issues that belong to reality at large, to politics, to the environment, and to nature. Because of her multitasking, fluid and positive position, Vibha Galhotra has established herself as one of the most interesting examples of this kind. Born and raised in India, Galhotra has taken the relationship between nature and culture to a new level, linking the philosophical understanding of anthropology³, rooted in Western thinking, to traditions—both theoretical and practical—that belong to the East.

Galhotra's actions reside, from many points of view, within a gray area⁴ between the East and the West. One of her most iconic images is a map of the world marking all her travels, which include Nepal, Italy, and United States, among others. This simple, yet powerful composition is accompanied by a statement in which she describes her experience at security checkpoints in various airports throughout the globe.⁵ The concept of these multiple moments of “imposed pause” is crystalized in her work *Altering Boon*

(2011), a hammock featuring a map of the globe made of glass beads. In her attempt to establish links, moments of “dynamic rest” and reflections create “bridges”⁶ between culture and nature, poverty and wealth, and the East and West. While her work is global in content, it is also a most precise encapsulation of many issues dominating India today, such as civilization's role in pollution, the mistreatment of natural resources, and the effect of technology on the natural and cultural landscapes, a connection Galhotra subtly creates with the use of ghungroos.⁷

Galhotra's exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York is the ultimate attempt to confront universal problems related to globalization, using the Indian condition as the example for the larger overview. Two works are particularly interesting in this regard, because they create a perfect balance between the history of art—whether from the West or from the East—and environmental issues affecting the Indian tradition and the contemporary state of the country. The series *Consumed Contamination* (2015), in which several kinds of vegetables are suspended in small monoliths of resin, employs the language of minimalist sculpture, raising pressing issues such as pollution, the exploitation of land by agriculture, consumption, and the contamination of natural resources, especially water. The second work, *Manthan*⁸ (2015), is a video documenting the following action: four men in wetsuits and goggles meet on an extremely polluted site alongside the Yamuna river,⁹ each taking one corner of a white cloth and dipping it into the river's black waters. They twist, squeeze, and wring the cloth in symbolic cleansing, transforming it into a sculpture which Galhotra has trapped in a long prism of resin.

While uniquely her own design, her work echoes artistic developments of different generations and regions¹⁰. What separates and identifies Galhotra is the attitude in execution. Avoiding the figure of the artist as superior creature, as demiurge, Galhotra goes for the actual making. She is the originator of many grassroots initiatives¹¹, she gets her hands dirty, works alongside the people, and travels from one corner of the planet to the other. It is important to understand Galhotra's modus operandi as truly ecological; at the same time deep care and attention should be given to the etymology of the word ecology rather than its widely accepted meaning. The word describes the branch of biology dealing with the relationship between organisms and their environment, but its etymology is much broader and universal: oikos “house, dwelling place, habitation” and logia “study of.” In other words, her ‘ecological’ attitude creates a parallel between the micro and the macro: the house as a representation of the whole planet, the artist as a representative of humankind, and the artwork as the essence of all things thought and made by humans.

Galhotra's practice doesn't appear as a direct remedy to the problems of globalization; instead each artwork must be considered as symbolic territory in which solutions for a better reality can be found. The current situation of India and its society becomes material for speculations, formal investigations, and conceptual interpretations.

Indian thinker Homi K. Bhabha writes:

[...] DissemiNation—owes something to the wit and wisdom of Jacques Derrida, but something more to my own experience of migration. I have

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My early works were concerned with sharing moments that were extremely personal through a mode, which may be read as the performative.

ART, ECOLOGY, AND A POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

PRIYA PALL IN CONVERSATION WITH VIBHA GALHOTRA

PP: Knowing you for almost a decade, I notice that your practice is located between construction, demolition, and rebuilding in our living environment. You interrogate underlying concerns about the interdependence of economy, ecology, politics, and culture throughout your work, from conception to realization, working in the tension between various antitheses, like absence/presence, silence/noise, replete/wanting. Could you elaborate on that?

VG: These tensions form the basis of my work. My practice is based on the observation that while the things we perceive are formed around opposites, different stages in between coexist; if something is present, the absence is felt as well. For instance, the environment we are creating right now (in all directions: economic, political, social and environmental) is not organic and has a high quotient of artifice. The interdependency of these environments is such that if interrupted, life as we know it would fail.

PP: What would you say are some of the key considerations in this exhibition you have titled *Absur – City – Pity – Dity*?

VG: This exhibition speaks of my tryst with the environment in both visceral and physical terms. Many of my works have come out of this engagement. Basing my knowledge on available research, my work is concerned with exploring, examining, and understanding issues of the environment. There is no data that can be presented without bias. At the very least it is skewed by the researcher's own global perspective. Furthermore, we can only consume the research that is made public, without any way of verifying it. We take the data given to us as facts and that becomes our truth – nowadays referred to as the “Google Syndrome.”

My work is a way of questioning this truth. It is a documentation of a journey, which can be understood as a kind of research into the real world. The works in this exhibition are a testimony to the way we live. They have come out of my long-standing concern and need to call

attention to our misplaced priorities. Thus, it speaks of the highly absurd way in which we live, and simultaneously, of scientific process and knowledge. Activists such as Vandana Shiva in India are constantly fighting for the fundamental right to a healthy living environment.

The present destabilization of climate systems and weather patterns with their intensifying catastrophes are induced by human activity, yet many people are ignorant as to the causes. At present it seems the human future is uncertain what with natural catastrophes, conflict and war pushing us to the brink of ecological, economic and social collapse.

PP: Thematically, this exhibition is a continuation of, rather than a departure from, the previous exhibitions. Certain works of yours have been parsed differently in this exhibition, for instance, the resin cast works are a variant of the work *Consumed Contamination in Sediments & Other Untitled....* What is the basis for returning to a specific form?

VG: The continuous observation of one thing and looking into another as its result made me question and scrutinize the mockery we create around ourselves in the name of so called development – or perhaps I should say for the dream of a Utopia. Sustainable environment is one such issue: we are the ones who have created the problem, and as such, the solution will also come from us. We just need to find it.

My continual trips to the banks of river Yamuna, which runs through Delhi, led me to make these works. I jugged with thoughts between reality and belief.

I would like to recount an incident that moved me towards this direction: on a Sunday winter morning on my visit to the Yamuna, I was particularly overwhelmed by the stench of sewage waste in the river. While I was engrossed with documenting the river, a couple began performing a ceremony for their ancestors at the banks of the river, which involved bathing into the “holy” river

to pay respect to their ancestors. I was shocked at their oblivion to the filth, as they stripped and submerged themselves in the water. But even more so, I was filled with anger at their superficial faith, and their irreverence towards something they considered holy.

I felt that there was no choice for me but to bring people face-to-face with reality, which I did by using the actual sediment from the river on to the canvases. I used the works in this exhibition to highlight the surrealism of the situation at a much more profound level.

PP: Your first ghungroo work – the *Beehive* – was hedged in on all sides by urban and industrial development and as such, it became a focus for consideration of the impact of man on the environment. It evoked, reflected, and mourned change. Your most recent work however seems to establish a new relationship with ghungroos, almost painting with them as wall-based sculptures. The spatial context itself differs.

VG: With the ghungroo works in this exhibition, my intent was to create surreal interventions that are glossy and spectacular. I wanted not only to highlight the environmental agenda prevalent in my works, which is undeniable, but rather to make the viewer aware of our own perception of our surroundings – to “see” our environment that we take for granted, as a boon. Furthermore, this algae-like organic “growth” of ghungroos completely covers my drawing until it is deconstructed. The attempt is to gradually draw the viewers in with the lushness of the surface and towards reality through it. The process of making each work is very long and laborious, as would be the actual deterioration of the environment. Its tactility and the materiality brought in an altogether different cultural process.

PP: In your works there is always an articulation of environmental frameworks, was there ever a time when this was not a concern?

VG: I see the environment as a constant muse in my

practice and in my life. I am strongly influenced by where I may be situated in at any given time. My father's work required us to move often from one place to another. Regardless of where we were, it was always the natural environment that stimulated me. Geography informs life in most places, and it has always interested me to observe indigenous practice. The environment I grew up in was not as urban as it is today. People were quite dependent on the natural environment and adapted their ways around it – not like today's conditioned environment. I still enjoy the moment with nature where technology isn't the driving force. The idea of sovereignty of nature where man has to find his existence has always inspired me.

PP: The work *365 Days* is the outcome of a personal journal you maintained, yet there is nothing personal about it. There is only a sense of time, human activity, entropy, and disconnectedness. Each day begins and ends independently of others – only connected by contaminated water. One feels a conscious layering and overlapping of different histories, different temporalities, and duration. Furthermore, the landscapes in your works are both a place and placeless, both very particular and universal. The singular and the generic are conflated to highlight problems with reckless urban development. The actual place is obliterated, making our question our own place in this world.

VG: The work *365 Days* was a daily diary I maintained over the last year, recording events, thoughts, behaviors, emotions, philosophies and action that inspired me, made me happy, unhappy, angry, surprised, shocked, amused, frightened, confused, envious, overwhelmed, filled with wonder or acceptance, frustrated, depressed, ashamed and so on. Each day that passed came with its own absurdities.

Each work in this piece documents an actual event in a specific place at a specific point of time, determined from my own experience. However, my attempt is not just to map my own reality, but through it, the reality of urban life across the surface of the planet with materials we consume every day, in order to re-evaluate our own behavior. Similarly, the landscape too could be anywhere on the planet. It is not a comment on a particular landscape.

I, through all this, am a traveler, an observer of situations that play out at the Theatre of the Absurd. My time on the planet may seem dark, but in actuality it is the ray of hope that I am seeking in midst of it all.

PP: How do you think Delhi has impacted your life, first as migrant and now as a resident?

VG: It is always fun to talk about my journey of settling in the city of Delhi. While growing up, we moved around quite a bit through North India, due to my father's work. We never stayed in one place for very long. So this feeling belonging to a place is something I have learnt only in Delhi. This is the longest I have ever stayed at any one place. I was used to relocating in a new place as a child, however living in Delhi as a professional, where I had to make tough decisions on how to survive in this big and expensive city was difficult! (I better not go into de-

tails). Moving to new places actually gives me a feeling on being somewhere "in between." This reminds me of the beautiful quote of John Cage --

I Have Nothing to Say and I Am Saying It...We don't have to have tradition if we somehow free ourselves from our memories. Then each thing that we see is new. It is so as though as if we have become tourists and that we were living in countries that were very exciting, because we don't know them... I have the feeling that a sound is acting, and I love the activity of sound. What it does, is it gets louder and quieter, and it gets higher and lower. And it gets longer and shorter. I'm completely satisfied with that, I don't need sound to talk to me.

PP: Were there any other major influences on your practice?

VG: A major turning point, which made me question my artistic practice, came during a residency in South Africa. Not only was this a period of self-discovery, where I again found myself questioning my identity, but it was also the awakening of my political consciousness. During this time, I came across William Kentridge's work and was inspired by how his work was a perfect marriage between concept, aesthetics, and his ethical standpoint. I was intrigued by the angst I experienced in his oeuvre. I felt that he is able to achieve and convey an emptiness to the viewer somewhere deep down which remains with the viewer rather the visual imagery. This is what I try to achieve in my work as well.

PP: A large proportion of artists working in the field of environmental activism are female, such as Betsy Damon, Nancy Holt, or Dominique Mazeaud. In the 1970s, ideas about ecology and feminism were brought together and gave rise to a way of thinking and working sometimes labeled as Eco-feminism.

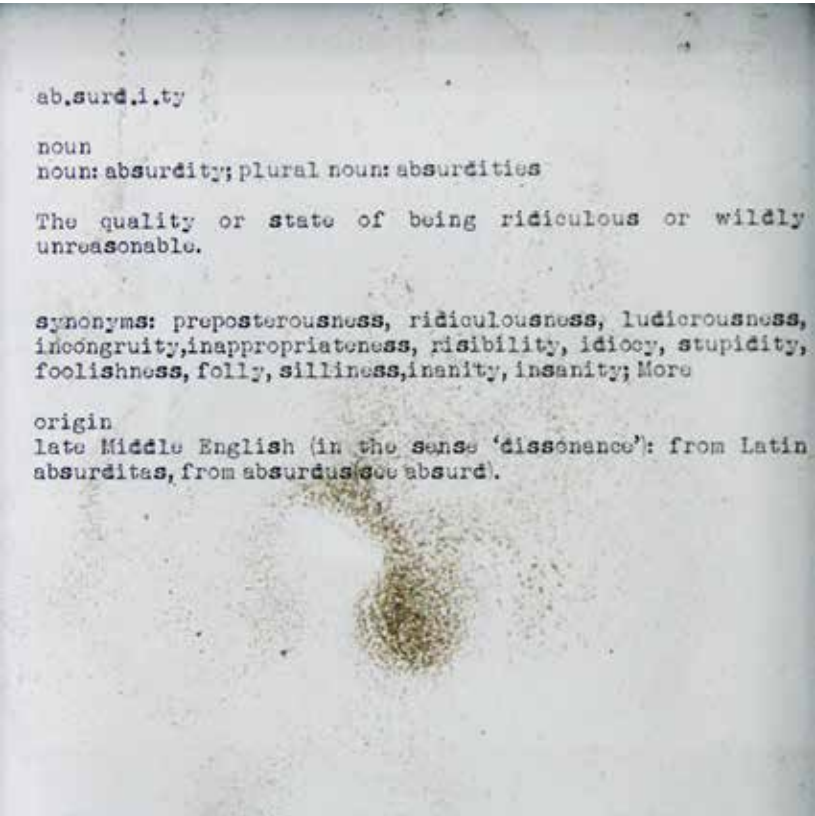
VG: I too have been placed into that compartment, however, from my end, it is not deliberate. I would like to emphasize that I am not into any kind of "isms." I don't wish to perpetuate ideas that are archetypically feminine or feminist. Nor am I an activist. I was drawn to 'abused' sites, such as the river, not through a desire to redeem them but because I found them philosophically interesting.

PP: And finally, this is the first time that you have embarked on making a film. What prompted you to explore this medium? And how was the experience? Please also tell us a bit more about the theme of the film.

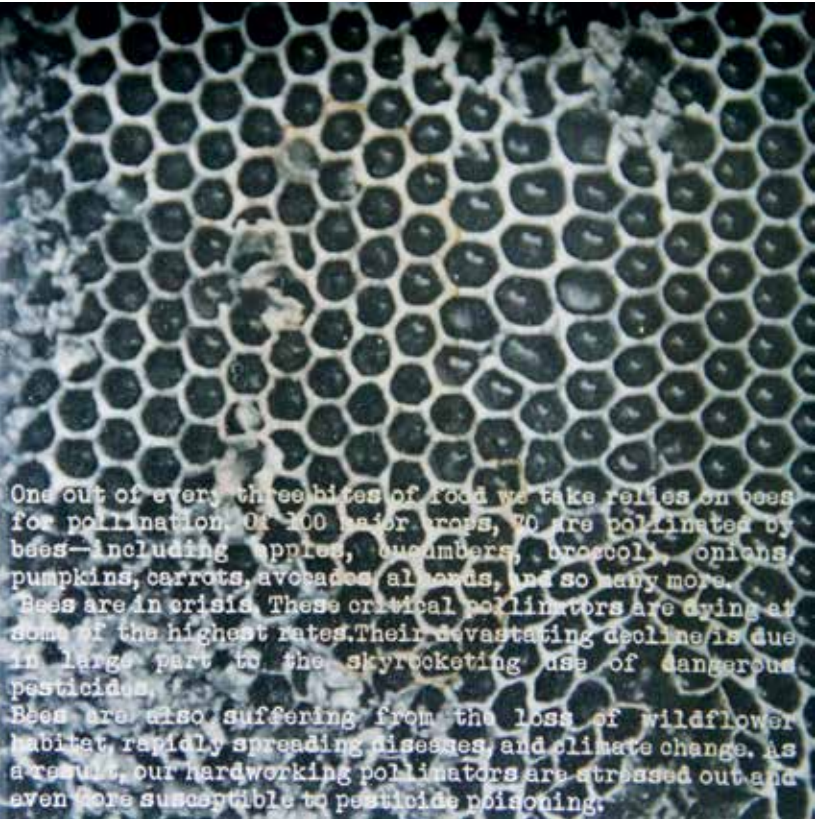
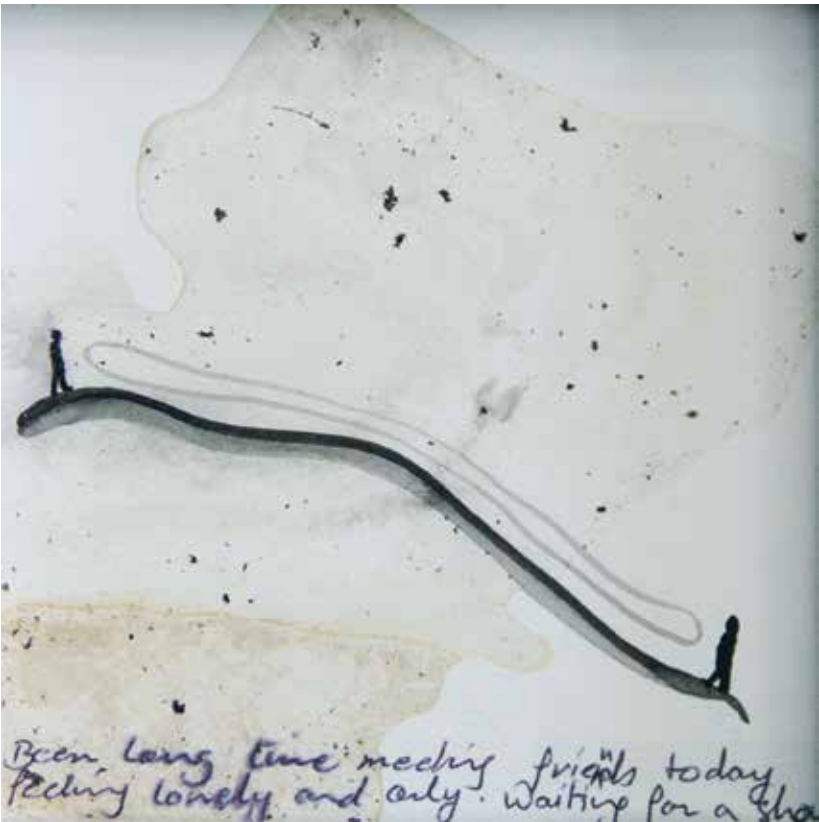
VG: *Manthan* is based on my personal mourning and cleansing of the Yamuna river, which runs through Delhi. The title invokes a tale from Hindu mythology [Samudra Manthan or "to churn the ocean" to obtain the Amrita (nectar of immortality)]. The film examines the prospects of mitigating the catastrophe of ecology, of the river life force and contrives a situation of the process of churning the deleterious out of the river through a romanticized, performative picturesque space. *Mathan* is my refusal to give up hope that we can find a way to turn things around before it's too late.

SEDIMENTS . . . COULD
BE CALLED A DEVIATION
[. . .] A SEDIMENT IS A
LIVING, BREATHING
MEDIUM.





Clockwise from top left:
July 1, 2014, From 365 Days; August 13, 2014, From 365 Days;
July 22, 2014, From 365 Days ; January 22, 2015, From 365 Days
each: mixmedia on paper and water collected from river Yamuna
/ 4.5 x 4.5 x 1.5 each frame / 2014 - 2015;



lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. Also the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status—the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man. The gathering of clouds from which the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks “where should the birds fly after the last sky?”¹²

Two works echo Darwish’s poem, summarizing many core elements of her entire practice: a unique playfulness, a specific constitution in which the whole is made of many elements and many elements made the whole, the necessity of addressing pressing global issues without being direct or illustrative, and the possibility of breaking the holiness of the artwork and to increase its desire to be touched, played with, and manipulated.

The first work is *Absence Presence* (2011), consisting of a large “flock” of metal birds, which are also toys and musical instruments. They are peaceful and threatening at the same time, especially when installed in a single room, creating a very Hitchcock-like atmosphere. The birds are, in fact, replicas of old toys which were common in India 10 or 20 years ago, but now banned for safety reasons and only available as collectable items. In this work, the attention focuses on the extinction of birds and other species of animals worldwide, especially the house sparrows, which almost disappeared from the urban jungle of contemporary India.

The second work, still in progress, is called *Black Cloud*. The artist invited eighty local people from Bikaner, in the Indian state of Rajasthan, to a field in the Dharnidhar area, where men of all ages released a cloud of small black kites, poetically embodying the artist’s growing concern with environmental issues, whether it be disappearing sparrows, the state of the Yamuna, or the rising levels of air pollution.¹³

Following Vibha Galhotra’s unique, precious and vital investigations, one can’t help but think about the prophetic words of another individual who linked the West and East. Magnificently conceptualizing the artist’s position, in his book *On the Will in Nature* Arthur Schopenhauer writes:

*The inner essence of Man and of the whole of Nature and in the assumption connected with it that, somehow or other, this omnipotence might possibly for once make itself felt, even when proceeding from the individual. People were unable to investigate and distinguish the difference between the capabilities of the will as thing-in-itself and the same will in its individual manifestation; but they assumed without further ado, that under certain circumstances, the will might be enabled to break through the barriers of individuation.*¹⁴

In comparing Galhotra’s thoughts on nature to Schopenhauer’s,¹⁵ we begin to see her work as a manifestation of the will breaking down the barriers of individualization, starting from the cellular, the organism, in order to connect the essence of the whole mankind and the whole of nature. Complex and meaningful, the art of Vibha Galhotra is capable of intertwining omnipotence and humbleness, a strong sense of independence and a genuine desire for communality, a clear desire to embrace the world and a firm understanding of its Indian

own roots.

1) “The Earth is Closing on Us // The Earth is closing on us / pushing us through the last passage / and we tear off our limbs to pass through. / The Earth is squeezing us. / I wish we were its wheat / so we could die and live again. / I wish the Earth was our mother / so she’d be kind to us. // I wish we were pictures on the rocks / for our dreams to carry as mirrors. / We saw the faces of those who will throw / our children out of the window of this last space. / Our star will hang up mirrors. / Where should we go after the last frontiers? / Where should the birds fly after the last sky? / Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air? / We will write our names with scarlet steam. / We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh. / We will die here, here in the last passage. / Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree.” Mahmoud Darwish, “The Earth Is Closing on Us” (trans. Abdullah al-Udhari) in *Victims of a Map* (London, al-Saqi Books, 1984): ¹³.

2) Richard Demarco, “Conversations with Artists,” *Studio International* 195, no. 996 (September 1982): 46.

3) Within the current globalized art field the figure of the anthropologist has influenced many artists and curators; one of the most recent examples being “Intense Proximity: La Triennale 2012,” a project by Okwui Enwezor. Regarding this project Enwezor writes: “[...] in the opening of *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss begins with a disavowal of being possessed of such nausea or intellectual vertigo that sets ethnographic travel in motion. He writes, “Adventure has no place in the anthropologist’s profession....” Especially since: “Nowadays, being an explorer is a trade, which consists not, as one might think, in discovering hitherto unknown facts after years of study, but in covering a great many miles and assembling lantern slides or motion pictures, preferably in color, so as to fill a hall with an audience for several days in succession. For this audience, platitudes and commonplaces seem to have been miraculously transmuted into revelations by the sole fact that their author, instead of doing his plagiarizing at home, has supposedly sanctified it by covering 20 thousand miles.” The theme of contact pervades all the information-gathering missions of ethnographic fieldwork. Gathering and analyzing this information presupposed the establishment of proximity and distance between the researcher and the cultures being observed.” Okwui Enwezor, “Traveling Times: Exhibitions and Ethnographic Realism,” in *Modern Painters* (June 2014): 41.

4) “Gray area” commonly defines something existing between two extremes and having mixed characteristics of both, or a situation lacking clearly defined characteristics. An interesting comparison is a similar term “gray zone” which defines a specific kind of Lymphoma. This metaphor identifies the artist as one who attempts to cure the most dangerous and unclear diseases of the earth.

5) See: Nicola Trezzi (ed.) *Contemporary Renaissance* (San Giovanni Valdarno, MK Search Art, 2013) for the full description.

6) The work generates several interpretations: while the aforementioned moments of rest and introspection are embodied by the light resting and reflecting on the glass-beads of which the hammock is made, the notion of “bridge” is communicated by the shape of the hammock, and the “dynamic rest” being the primal function of the hammock, literally a rocking bed.

7) In comparison to known Indian international artists such as Bharti Kher and Subodh Gupta, Galhotra’s work takes a different direction, avoiding straightforward references to exotic symbols of Indian society, a position perfectly illustrated by a special cover of the magazine *Wallpaper** in which Gupta and Kher—both admired by Galhotra—were photographed dressed as a nawab—the honorific title ratified and bestowed by the reigning Mu-

ghal Emperor to semi-autonomous Muslim rulers of princely states in South Asia—and his begum (female). Exceptional in this regard is Galhotra’s famous series of works created with ghungroos (Urdu: گھنگرو), (Hindi: गहंगरो), also known as Ghunghroo or Ghunghru or Ghungur (Bengali) or Salangai (Tamil), which is one of many small metallic bells strung together to form Ghungroos, a musical anklet tied to the feet of classical Indian and Pakistani dancers.

8) *Samudra manthan*—“churning of the ocean of milk”—is one of the most known episodes of the Hindu mythology. The story appears in the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Vishnu Purana*. In accordance to this mythological episode, and in connection to this work, the artist also mentions that the goal of the churn is to obtain the *Amrit* (Punjabi: ਅਮਰਿਤ)—the “nectar of immortality.”

9) A holy site and the largest tributary river of the Ganges, the Yamuna [Sanskrit and Hindi: यमुना] originates from the Yamunotri glacier on the southwest side of the of Banderpooch peaks in the uppermost region of the Lower Himalayas in Uttarakhand.

10) There is a long tradition of artworks known as “earth works” that are created with natural agents, the most iconic ones belonging to the so-called Land Art movement; see: Philipp Kaiser and Miwon Kwon (eds.), *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles and New York/London: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Prestel). However, in connection to this work two artists specifically come to mind: Korean pioneer artist Lee Seung-Taek and emerging British artist Jessica Warboys.

11) The artist has engaged in grassroots initiatives several times, from *Re-birth Day* to *Black Cloud*. Interestingly enough, the word grassroots not only defines the work of the artist denotatively—“of, relating to, or involving the common people, especially as contrasted with or separable from an elite”—but also through its literal meaning: “grass” and “roots,” representative of the work being presented at her upcoming show at Jack Shainman Gallery.

12) Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London/New York, Routledge, 1990): 139.

13) “Air pollution is one of the key issues the whole world is concerned about. Air pollution, both indoors and outdoors, poses health risks to millions of people every day, contributing to asthma, emphysema, heart disease, and other potentially lethal conditions. What the researchers called ‘ambient particulate matter pollution’ was the fourth-leading risk factor for deaths in China in 2010. Air pollution ranked seventh on the worldwide list of risk factors, contributing to 3.2 million deaths in 2010. The project will be initiated to express views on environmental conditions, through visual aesthetics, fun and an active participation by the public at large by flying black kites.” Vibha Galhotra, email conversation with the author.

14) Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Will in Nature* (trans. Madame Karl Hillebrand), (London, George Bell & Sons, 1889): 341.

15) While I am totally responsible for this peculiar juxtaposition between Schopenhauer’s philosophy and Galhotra’s art, the artist does mention a series of figures that have influenced her practice: from Raja Mohan’s interest in ecology and economy to Slavoj Žižek’s political statements; from Salman Rushdie’s fascination for the absurd to John Cage’s research on silence; from the 15th-century Indian mystic poet and saint of India Kabir to Global Water Development Partners CEO Usha Rao-Monari.

of ‘development’ and ‘progress,’ shows a decaying that is simultaneously happening, which is further intoned by the silenced ghungroos, the ringers of Indian culture.

In the performativity[vi] of these picturesque landscapes, Galhotra deconstructs the illusion of material wealth, and the lies, desire and mythologization of tourism. She uses ‘landscape as provocation’[vii] to encourage us to rethink the representational language, to feel the anxiety beyond the postcard image. This is given further visualisation in the works *Flow I* and *II*, in which we see the ghungroos flowing down a wall and pooling into a puddle like an oil spill. Again, the absurdity of the concept is underwritten by the beautiful materiality on view. What is seeping and flowing? Placed in a white cube gallery context, the trickster could be telling us that our high culture – itself an embodiment of Western philosophies and art in the distancing of culture from nature through the culturalization of nature – will not save us, that our disconnect with each other, mind from body and with ‘nature’ is seeping, festering, coming through the cracks. The writing is on the wall as they say – and will probably be purchased and admired. An absur[-city-pity] dity which characterises all of Galhotra’s practice, where mimetic qualities and almost-but-not-quietness is used to not only call the politics of ecology into question, but also the ethics of the art world as well as ideas of existentialism (see Khan 2015).

In one panel from *365 DAYS*, Galhotra shows us that even the definition of ‘absurdity’ is, well, absurd: “The quality or state of being ridiculous or wildly unreasonable.” She questions whether feelings of absurdity are indeed unreasonable or ridiculous given the contradictions and ambiguities we endure in post-colonial societies. Recalling English playwright’s Michael Esslin’s theorisation on the ‘theatre of the absurd,’ in which absurdity was seen as modern man’s feelings of estrangement and alienation when rationality and technology failed him,[viii] and Massey’s ideas of loss today, the artist’s creative methodologies evince a black humour wrapped in poetic reflection of the not-quite-right. How then to tackle these issues that make one feel utterly negligible?

Ecofeminists Marie Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993: 20) remind us that we are ultimately responsible: “Yet all women and all men have a body which is directly affected by the destructions of the industrial system. Therefore, all women and finally also all men have a ‘material base’ from which to analyse and change these processes.” Galhotra, optimistically still believes that communal effort will turn things around. In her practice she often works collectively with local communities. In her ghungroo works, she constructs digital images which are then deconstructed into tonal patterns by a team of local women, and finally reconstructed into the incredibly heavy ghungroo works which evidences this team effort. In the digital video *Manthan*, we see bodies attempting to ‘churn the ocean’, an act which is meant to signify that our mortal and immortal selves cannot be divorced from the nonhuman entities whose fate we share.

Part of Galhotra’s ‘politics of doing things with visuals’ is a consideration of the geo-politics of “embodied, material encounter and engagement” (Rose and Tolia-Kelly, 2012: 3). Alaimo and Hekman (2008: 8) argue that from such ‘situated actions’ and a re-focus on material consequences, there is already a necessary shift from abstract concepts like ‘ethical principles’ to ‘ethical practices’ within specific contexts that “also allow for an openness to the needs, the significance, and the liveliness of the more-than-human world.” Galhotra’s works are not simply about ‘final products,’ but a rethinking of processes of making and consuming.

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Still from the video *Manthan*, Duration "10 : 40 min