

OSMOSIS

RITHIKA MERCHANT
SAMANTA BATRA MEHTA
SAVIA MAHAJAN

CURATED BY SHALEEN WADHWANA

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Produced by

TARQ

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TEXT BY SHALEEN WADHWANA

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OSMOSIS | genesis of an idea

My curatorial eye is a result of my academic journey through art, history, and art history and spending time working with museums, art fairs, biennales and galleries, as well as an Arts educator. In September 2018, when I was teaching my students at the Design Management Department at the MIT Institute of Design in Pune, I had an 'AHA' moment. After a rigorous timeline exercise of historical evidence of social difference from the Harappan times till now, a student asked, 'What is the History of Death?'. It led to a longer discussion on the evolution of rites and rituals, inter-cultural similarities and differences. This question germinated into a series of public engagement workshops and interviews¹.

I want to build spaces where contemplation is nurtured around symbiotic universal 'truths', like life and death, which embraces us in our present times same as it embraced our ancestors, and equally crucial, the yearning to feel at 'home'. OSMOSIS was born to create a space where these concepts can be linked with contemporary art practices.

In the cultural context, an effortless unconscious assimilation of ideas and knowledge across time² is defined as Osmosis. This aptly defines the cycle of life and death, and the feeling of belongingness. Such ideas accumulate in our collective thoughts, rites, rituals, conversations, interactions across time and space, forming an integral part of being a society of humans. At TARQ, this exhibition unpacks the practices of artists Rithika Merchant, Savia Mahajan, Samanta Batra Mehta as they respond to Life/Death and Distance/Belonging.

HIRAETH | our 'new' histories connected with ink

Hiraeth is a Welsh term that means an intense longing for a home, where one may have never been. Sometimes, an attachment so strong to it, that it can cause physical pain³. I felt hiraeth when I gazed at my grandfather's crib in our old house in Calcutta, a man I have never met. Can this feeling of hiraeth lie in tastes of food, aromas of land, textures of clothes, folklores, stories, legends and myths of which one hears? Is it to be found within intangible spaces like our mind maps or in physical spaces, like the addresses we live at? Is it in all of these? These questions were the starting point of my conversations with Samanta, Rithika and Savia. In their practices, I could respond to common strands - how to depict what belonging means, and what feeling at 'home' looks like. 'Home' as a feeling through geography, region, ethnicity, memories, legacies, intangible cultural heritage, is how members of society create their identity, and continue to identify themselves with such

¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/Putting-the-fun-in-funerals/articleshow/67505011.cms>

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/osmosis>

³ O'connor, K. (2009). The Secret History Of 'the Weed Of Hiraeth': Laverbread, Identity, And Museums In Wales. *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, (22), 82-101. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41417139>

markers. Hence, I look at TARQ as a composite structure that holds this theme on the ground floor, and welcomes the viewer with these very questions.

Although the three artists have lived across 3 continents, in over 10 cities, ranging from Liege to London, but Bombay happens to be the one connecting strand between them. When I asked them where 'home' is, they revealed that a significant amount of their time, physically or emotionally remains connected to Bombay, coincidentally the city in which this show is held. Hiraeth is experienced by Rithika when she thinks about Bombay, where she grew up and where her parents continue to live. This is reflected in the connotations of the crow - referring to the City of Birds - which is Bombay. Crows appear in the work *Trial by Fire*, or as beaked heads on feathered female humanoids in her works in this show.

Considering that the idea of 'nation' itself is an imagined community⁴, most of the global crises today are punctuated with the grief of losing one's idea of belonging and the strife of displacement, be it the Middle East or Eastern Europe. Closer to our inhabited territory, refugees and migrant labour still seek active negotiations of 'home' within the Indian subcontinent. Speaking about her ideas of home and the impact that the partition of British India had on her grandparents, Samanta talks of her ancestral home, "Today, the home in Panipat no longer exists and my grandparents are no more. There are no photographs of the Panipat garden, nor the home. None of their traumatic experiences were ever captured in the written form...". For Samanta, 'being away' has made her appreciate and engage with her "homeland" in a very intense, mindful way.

This is reflected in her ecosystem which has created literal gardens, be it the distinction she knows between the flora and fauna across all the continents she has inhabited, to even keeping a plant sapling alive in a cup, physically transported by her from her home in London to India. She refers to this love for botany as an ode to one of her grandfathers who was a scientist and a botanist, and through such 'germinating' imagery, she can transcend time and connect with him. Her patient meditative skill of layering the work constantly with ink, is reflected in the white ink foliage that spreads across the mylar sheet in *Untethering, Unfolding*, that is so whisperingly light in weight, and yet so heavy in hiraeth. Similarly, her idea of belonging transposes through the assemblages over cut-outs of vintage text and the mixed media layering in *Half and Half is Not Always Full* and the *Illusion of Identity* and *Salvation* series.

My academic research is centered on the embedded histories in objects⁵, and what identities are accumulated in the lives they have led across time and space⁶. I have been piecing together parts of that story, in this exhibition as well. 'How much square inch is really mine then? Is it the space where my feet are firmly planted?' echo Savia's

⁴ Anderson, B. R. O. G. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.

⁵ MA Thesis by Shaleen Wadhvana; 'Drunk with Plunder: Tracing Object Biographies of Artifacts looted during the Uprising of 1857 in British India' 2013, submitted to SOAS Department of Art and/or Archaeology, University of London.

⁶ Richard H. Davis (1997). *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

thoughts about hiraeth. Interestingly enough, Savia's practise primarily concentrates on repurposing everyday 'home' objects, and creating sculptures that re-contextualise their histories. 'Liminal' itself means 'being situated at a sensory threshold' as well as 'relating to being in an intermediate phase', both crucial to our emotions as we find our senses activated when we feel like we belong. Therefore, a series of the *Liminal Entity* porcelain works are tied with this meaning, and create this conversation on the ground floor.

A crucial part of what makes us feel at home are also the legacies we bear, in the stories of our ancestors passed on from one generation to the next, the hearsay, the belief systems, and the folklore. This creates a chain of habitual affinities amongst ourselves, such as a certain way of making home-made pickle, or possessing a behavioral tic, for example. Rithika too, is 'interested in how these different fragments are "woven" together to form a complete image and what these woven images and stories collectively say about us'. In her practice, she uses feminine symbols to re-contextualize the binaries of gender iconography. The internal mindscapes she creates in *An Interior World, The Tapestry I (Anima)* and *The Tapestry II (Animus)*, present a more rounded idea of femininity through these very myths and narratives that she explores, offers us another understanding of what 'inclusivity' may mean.

Geological events which predate us give us clues as to how Home Sapiens have survived and evolved so far. This story is revealed to us by the volcanic deposits present in the strata of the earth - much like how Savia's *Chambers, Nuggets (Au) and Rich Deposits* speak of the organic fractures and clues present; with its singed lines, onion skin, gold leaf fragments, ink and tea extracts.

Life / Death | a cycle more phoenix, less Icarus

Looking at different artists' practises, one often studies their points of intersection to understand where, and if, they meet. Recording collected histories, myths and stories, through mark making with pigment and ink, is where the practises of Savia, Rithika and Samanta form a conjoined language. They lend the viewer an insight into their ideas of how they feel at 'home' and their phoenix-like acceptance: that new life, arises on the ashes of its predecessor. Unlike Icarus, the greek mythological character who flew too close to the Sun with his wax laden feathers and perished, a seeming finality associated with the concept of Death.

Recording collected histories, myths and stories, through mark making with pigment and ink, is where the practises of Savia, Rithika and Samanta form a conjoined language. They lend the viewer an insight into their ideas of how they feel at 'home' and their phoenix-like acceptance: that new life, arises on the ashes of its predecessor.

Thanatophobia, the fear of death, or also known as death anxiety, is best expressed by the poetess Adrienne Rich, who personifies death, as 'you' and all of humanity as 'us' through these lines : 'You are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you, you are taking parts of us into places never planned, you are going far away with pieces of our lives'. Espoused by the diverse audience that attended my History and Future of Death workshop in January 2019 : death, while understood scientifically and culturally as something that will occur, is surprisingly the least talked about. In the same vein, the first floor attempts to look at the cycle of life and death with a fairly inviting lens, and treating death and the birthing of life, as an equalizing inevitable reality we have had, and will continue to have.

Savia's consistent 'relic-ising' of her artistic inquiry reminds of a modern day reliquary, slowly amassing archaeological evidence of our present through 'freezing' and 'lithify-ing' our daily lives and deaths. Through *Madre*, Savia has touched upon the overarching life giving form of the Mother as understood across many belief systems. That is in interesting contrast with how Samanta looks at the body as a form and site of germination, of growth, tempered with the passage of time and temporality of the cycle of life and death. She is a collector of antiquities, ranging from 19th-20th century books, photographs, frames, vitrines, making their way consistently into her practice. As in the *Return to the Garden*, a cluster of mounted vintage photographs, in one glance the viewer is transported to the lives of people who passed away more than a 100 years ago. That ending of life has been overlaid with the motifs of a young human foetus, germinating in vein-like embryonic red pigment ink. Here Samanta's foliage and cut paper assemblages, create a contemporary narrative on the idea of memory, and contrast

beautifully with Rithika's artworks that depict folklore assigning powers of giving life and taking life away, to feminine characters across mythologies and stories. She has brought in the entire spectrum with women : seen as powerful and free in *Shapeshifter and Daughters of the Sky*, as a sexual weapon in *Visha Kanya*, as a merciful life-consumer and vengeful destroyer in *The Moon Devours Her Children*. But the common theme still remains that in all the above scenarios, the woman is still a tool of patriarchal systems, and still vulnerable in power dynamics.

Eadem Mutata Resurgo | **changed, yet the same I rise**

The already robust practices of the three artists' lent themselves to a comprehensive response to the themes of OSMOSIS, by virtue of who they are. Rithika's fascination with comparative mythology turns her art into a repository of form created when ideas coalesce across cultures. The antiquarian collector in Samanta is aroused with the available histories in sepia toned memories of books, flora and fauna forming multihued time-capsules in her work. Savia, as a sculptor, pays homage to the same ancestral role of creating artefact like works that codify the contemporary everydayness.

In OSMOSIS, the materiality of artist practices' ranges from painting, ceramic, watercolor, ink, collage to found objects, drawing and digital prints - creating an immersive environment and multiple points of convergence. An enjoyable contrast is created with Rithika's efficient and consistent paper folds, alluding to a symmetry but at the same time, achieving their opaque translucency through her handling of gouache and watercolor which is reminiscent of the desaturated color in

old maps. In Savia's practice, she adds heavy amounts of paper to the preparatory clay for its initial strength. After the firing process, this paper becomes the 'ghost material' whose presence is felt in its absence. With Samanta too, the paper she uses in assemblages, collage or cut work, is embedded with memory as she is sourcing it from antiquarian books. Subsequently, ink is a meeting point of the practises ; through its presence in Rithika's work as the boundary creator, in Savia's work as marking the Earth's heartbeat through its geological veins, and in Samanta's work as the printed stories in vintage books she builds her work upon.

Ending with Eadem mutata resurgo, a phrase in Latin which translates to 'Changed, yet the same I rise', we live with concepts we have known : Life/Death, Distance/Belonging, through a newer lens aiming for lasting engagement.

Rithika's fascination with comparative mythology turns her art into a repository of form created when ideas coalesce across cultures.



Image © Rithika Merchant
Tapestry I (Anima)
Gouache and ink on paper
31.4 x 19.5 inches, 2019



Image © Rithika Merchant
Daughters of the sky
Gouache and ink on paper
29 x 23.5 inches, 2019

Image © Rithika Merchant
Shapeshifter
Gouache and ink on paper
29 x 23.5 inches, 2019





Image © Rithika Merchant
Trial by fire
Gouache and ink on paper
27.5 x 38.5 inches, 2019

The antiquarian collector in Samanta is aroused with the available histories in sepia toned memories of books, flora and fauna forming multihued time-capsules in her work.



Image © Samanta Batra Mehta
Illusion of identity and salvation #15
Mixed media on acid free paper
11 x 16 inches, 2019

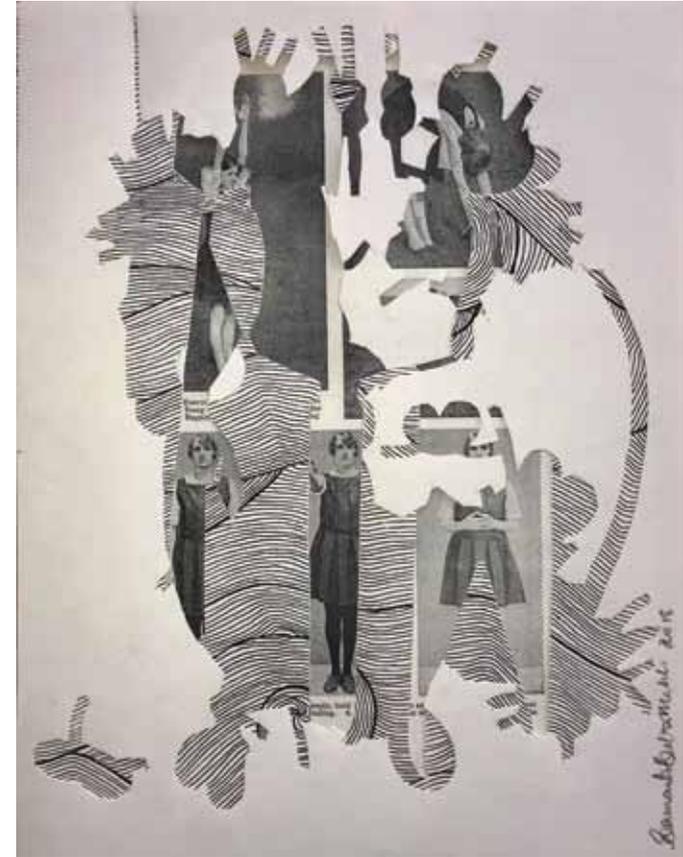


Image © Samanta Batra Mehta
Half And Half Is Not Always Full (Detail)
Cut out drawings and collage on acid free paper
10 x 8.5 inches, Set of 21
2018

Savia, as a sculptor, pays homage to the same ancestral role of creating artefact like works that codify the contemporary everydayness.



Image © Savia Mahajan
Liminal entity 2
Porcelain paper clay and rust [Fe₂O₃]
Fired at 1250°C and re-fired at 750°C
5 x 12 x 9.5 inches, 2016

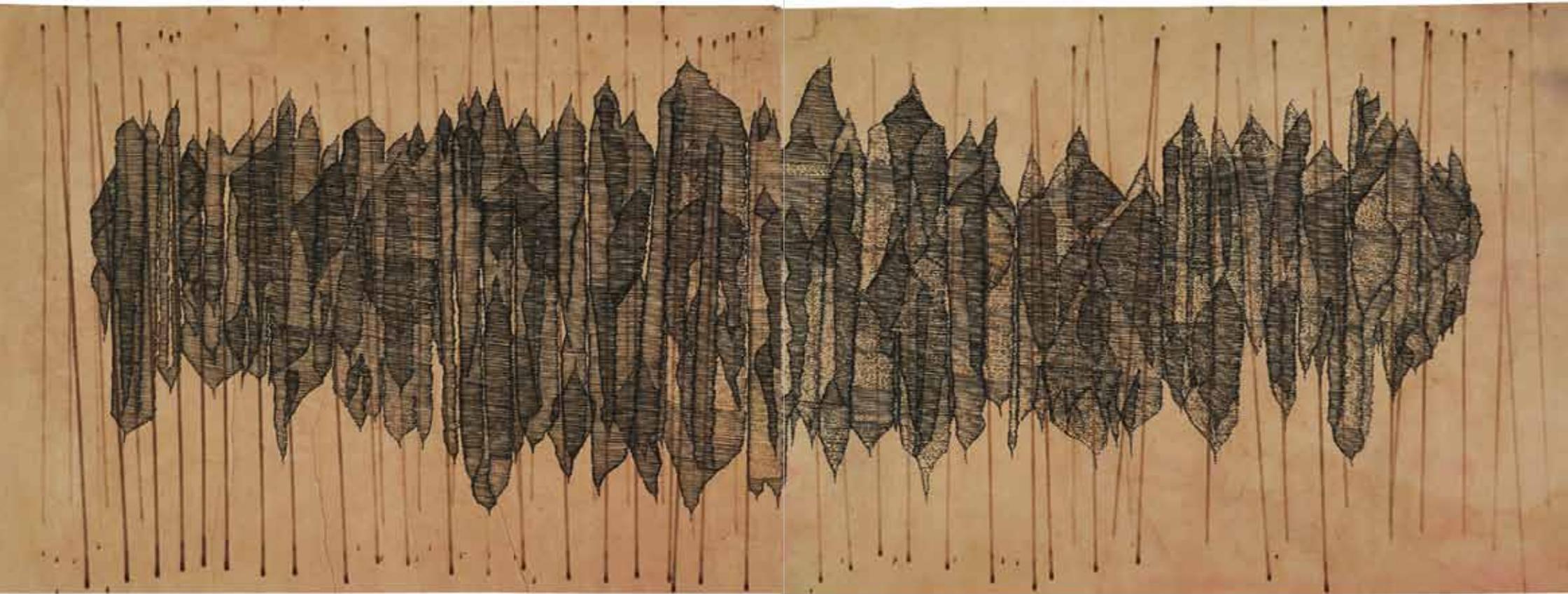


Image © Savia Mahajan

Chambers

Pen and ink, singed lines, stained with onion skin and tea extracts on Washi Paper
25.5 x 9.5 inches (unframed), 29 x 13 x 1 inches (framed)
2018



Image © Savia Mahajan

Resurgō 3 (Detail)

Manganese Dioxide (MnO₂) based clay-body, Calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) based glaze, slips and Platinum (Pt), Fired at 1220°C and re-fired at 750°C
Post firing additions: Rust (Fe₂O₃·nH₂O) silver leaf, iron wire, dyed hemp twine and epoxy
13 x 5 x 3 inches, 2019



Image © Savia Mahajan

Rich deposits 2

Pen and ink on handmade cotton rag paper with addition of shredded, out-of-circulation currency notes and platinum dust
34.5 x 26.5 inches (unframed), 40.2 x 31.2 x 1 inches (framed)
2019

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Rithika Merchant (b. 1986) received her Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts from Parsons - The New School of Design, New York (2008). Since graduating, she has exhibited her work extensively, including a number of solo exhibitions in India, Spain, Germany, France and the United States.

Her most recent solo shows include *Where the Water Takes us* at TARQ, Mumbai (2017); *Ancestral Home* at Galeria Bien Cuadrado, Barcelona (2017); *Intersections* at Galeria Combustion Espontanea, Madrid (2016); *Luna Tabulatorum* at Stephen Romano Gallery, New York (2015); and *Encyclopedia of the Strange* at Tiny Griffon Gallery, Nuremberg (2014).

Her recent group exhibitions include *Spring! A Group Show of Contemporary Drawing* at Galerie LJ, Paris (2019); *Homo Faber* at The Michaelangelo Foundation, Venice (2018); *Portal* at October Gallery, London (2018); *Sensorium / The End Is Only The Beginning* Sunaparanta, Goa Centre for the Arts, Goa (2018); *This Burning Land Belongs To You* at the Swiss Cottage Gallery, London (presented by TARQ for Camden Kala, UK/ India Year of Culture 2017); *Language of the Birds: Occult and Art* at 80WSE Gallery, New York (2016); and a two-person show, *Reliquaries: The Remembered Self* at TARQ, Mumbai (2015). Her work has also been included in group shows at The New Gallery, Calgary (2017); Summerhall, Edinburgh (2015) and The Morbid Anatomy Museum, New York (2015).

She has also collaborated with Chloé, a French fashion house on multiple collections for which she was awarded the Vogue India Young Achiever of the Year Award at its Women of the Year Awards 2018. She was also named one of Vogue Magazine's Vogue World 100 Creative Voices.

She currently divides her time between Mumbai and Barcelona.

Samanta Batra Mehta's work has been exhibited at various international venues including at the Queens Museum of the Arts, the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, Aicon Gallery and Saffronart in New York, the Hunterdon Museum and the Visual Arts Center, New Jersey, the Taubman Museum of Art, Virginia and the NIU Museum, Illinois, Fondazione Fotographia, Modena and Artopia, Milan.

She has had solo exhibitions at Shrine Empire, Delhi, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai and at Art Basel Hong Kong in the 'Discoveries' section. Her first solo exhibition in 2014, 'Cabinet of Curiosities', with Shrine Empire, New Delhi was nominated for the Forbes India Art Award in the 'Best Debut Solo' category. She has participated in several group exhibitions throughout India including at Bodhi Art Gallery, Gallery BMB, Gallery OED, Gallery Sumukha and Tarq in Mumbai. In 2014, Samanta's work was included in the 'Reading Room', a partner exhibition at the Kochi Biennale 2014.

Her work has been showcased at leading art fairs such as at Art Basel, Hong Kong, Art Dubai, India Art Fair, Bologna Arte Fiere, and Salon Du Dessin Contemporain at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris where she was invited to make a large site-specific mural. Samanta is the recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation's 2014-2015 Painters & Sculptors Grant Award in the US. She was shortlisted for the Sovereign Asian Art Prize in 2017. Her works are included in several collections in India and abroad including at Fondazione Fotografia Cassa di Risparmio di Modena in Italy, the RPG Group, the Jindal Collection, Birla Art Foundation, among others.

Born in New Delhi, the artist currently lives and works in New York

Savia Mahajan began her formal artistic training in her home city of Mumbai, at the L.S. Raheja School of Art. Though she trained as a painter, since 2010, Savia's practice began moving away from the medium of painting, towards ceramics. The transition was the result of a "relinquishing of traditional art mediums (and) a deeper inquiry about practice." She has since, worked extensively at a local pottery studio in Mumbai, which has given her the space to experiment and develop many of her ceramic processes and techniques.

These developments in Savia's practice resulted in *Liminal*—her first solo exhibition at TARQ in September, 2017. This was followed by a landmark group exhibition—*Mutable: Ceramics and Clay Art in India Since 1947*, curated by Dr. Annapurna Garimella and Sindhura D.M. at the Piramal Art Foundation, Mumbai.

Savia has recently been a part of several projects including solo project *Resurgō* at TARQ's booth, Art Basel, Hong Kong (2019); and group presentations including the Second Edition of The Sculpture Park, The Madhvendra Palace, Nahargarh Fort, Jaipur, curated by Peter Nagy (2018-19) and the Indian Ceramics Triennale, Jaipur, (2018).

Savia lives in Mumbai and works in a Ceramic studio consisting of a gas kiln which she set up in an Industrial space in Mumbai, 2018.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Shaleen Wadhwana (b. 1991) received a BA History (Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi) and MA Art History and Archaeology (SOAS, London), and has academic expertise in Art Appreciation (National Museum Institute, Delhi). She is a recipient of the Scholarship of Excellence for Cultural Heritage Law (University of Geneva) and is a Young India Fellow (Ashoka University). She has presented her academic research on embedded histories in objects looted during the 1857 Mutiny at University College London. She has previously worked in museums and galleries like the Heritage Transport Museum, Haryana and Chemould Prescott Road Gallery, Mumbai. Shaleen curates art and heritage based experiences for a wide spectrum of audiences. These range from universities like Michigan, Harvard, and IISER to NGOs like Slam Out Loud, and the Government of Maharashtra. She has recently co-authored an article for the Ministry of External Affairs of India about the impact of the Lodi Art District on its nearby communities.

Presently, she is a visiting faculty at the Design Management Department of MIT Institute of Design, Pune and the Humanities curriculum designer for their Innovation programme. *OSMOSIS* marks the beginning of her curatorial journey, the idea of which was born in her classroom in Pune.

Artworks by
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