

Suchitra Gahlot

(b. 1977)

Suchitra Gahlot has a keen sense of narrative and a meticulous eye for detail. She does not believe in subscribing to any one particular medium to express herself, allowing her choice of material to be dictated instead by the idea being explored. She uses various media to create sculptural installations, which are in turn witty, ironic and pensive.

Roselyn D’Mello speaks to Suchitra Gahlot about the motivations behind her practice.

Roselyn D’Mello: You had your debut show barely a year ago at Shrine Empire Gallery, New Delhi. Was this show a culmination of years of preparation? Could you talk about the experience and the response?

Suchitra Gahlot: It doesn’t feel like a debut when you’ve been doing it for a long time. I was working with all these ideas in my head for seven years before the 2009 Art Summit came along. Showing with Shrine Empire at the Art Summit was a memorable experience. I didn’t plan for a debut like that, it just happened. Neither did I come with pre-conceived expectations that made the occasion hugely momentous, like the Olympics or something.

We showed the work, *One Thousand Tears* at the summit and I was delighted to see people interact with the piece. I remember, for a few hours every day I’d just mill around the work to see how people would react to it. For some reason, nobody

realized I was the artist (I must not look arty enough), and this was great because people were so open about how they interacted with it. Some wanted to steal a bottle or two they most identified with, most took pictures of their ‘bottle’. I also recall a bunch of children who popped by. Tired from having trudged around the whole fair, and being constantly told not to touch any of the works on display, they were so glad to be able to finally interact with a shiny old typewriter and type all they liked on it. It was fun.

RD'M: Seven years is a long time to hold ideas in your head. What prevented you from showing your works any earlier? Do you think there a lot more platforms available for young, independent artists now than there were seven years ago?

SG: No, that's not the reason why I did not exhibit before. I just feel it wasn't my time. I did have all these ideas in my head for a long time and as the ideas grew so did my frustration because I was never quite able to produce the work as I had imagined them (for various reasons, money primarily). The thrill of every new idea just paled because it reminded me of failed attempts at the ones before.

It took me seven years to get to a place in my life and my head where I was comfortable with producing my artwork. So in that sense my struggle was more of an internal one, though I am happy that young artists are getting far more support today than ever before.

RD'M: You once said that as an artist, you like to put people in

your shoes. Could you elaborate on how that idea influences the motivations behind your work?

SG: My works are expressions of the voices in my head that don't go away. Often, these are questions that don't really have any answers, not for me anyway. I attempt to make and put these things out there just to 'get over it' in some way. The detail and level of control that I bring to my work is a measure of compensation, really, for the helplessness I experience in coming to terms with those questions. My installations are informed by minimalism and operate within a precise visual aesthetic. The conditions represented in my work may be flawed but the degree of perfection I like to bring to that flaw is an attention to detail that really comes from my own obsessions that do not allow me to ever leave a room without re-arranging it entirely in my head. The arrangement of every piece is very studied and I do this over and over again, to a point of exhaustion.

In life, I struggle with all kinds of questions, but in my art, I can

articulate them perfectly. It's not that I manage to find the answers through my work, I'm simply able to illustrate the questions better. My art seeks to present the question to the world once again, it's like repackaging the question and throwing it out at the world. You could say it's like having an existential crisis that I articulate through my art. I'd like to believe my work exists within a curious dichotomy of being a deeply personal narrative, that could also belong to everyone at the same time. My work It draws from my own subjective experience, to that extent it is very personal. However, my work addressesin addressing issues or emotions such as issues and illustrates emotions like anger, love and hate that are universal, it also becomes relevant to and so to that extent could be relevant to any functioning member of society. I hope my works makes viewers reflect on their own emotions and internal struggles'unanswered' questions . I'd probably liken myself to an Oracle -: I simply join the dots for people so that people can walk away with their own pictures.

RD'M: I'm curious to know how your engagement with advertising and graphic design has contributed to your practice as an artist, especially in your handling of material.

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SG: My experiences in advertising have always been about making a connection with people even if it were to the commercial end of selling a tube of toothpaste. I suppose I have always been intrigued by the idea of telling a story whether through advertisements or art installations. My art is influenced by advertising in that it is an anti-thesis to everything that is presented and packaged and sold to us -: it may be seen as a reflex, of sorts, that counters my consumerist self. Advertising is my day job and I'm aware that I'm technically peddling stuff to people. When you do it over and over it does seem a little insincere. While I'm happy going out there and buying and selling stuff, I know that at some level, by indulging in it I am also perpetuating the myth of consumerism. Maybe I don't dislike it enough not to do it.

Although this contradiction does gnaws away at me, my art acts like a detox, of sorts. It's not that I'm pitted against consumerism or, corporations or marketing gurus at large, . tThe motivations behind my installationswork spring from another, a very emotional space. My practice offers me an outlet to make peace with myself. It serves as a counterpoint to who I may be as a person. There are bits of me that I don't like, but I don't dislike them enough to change myself. My art is about *one* me rebelling against the *other* me, : the artist rebelling against the person. This rebellion renders itself as art. The installations attempt to tear you away, if only for a moment, from the glitzy world we live in and take you on an introspective journey that explores the frailty of human emotions.

RD'M: And how do your works address the 'frailty of human emotions'?

SG: I am interested in exploring everything that makes us human. People across the world

are caught up the same questions of love, fear, life and death. In that we are bound by the same intimacies though we may be complete strangers. Like I said before, the installations I create do not seek to frame answers in as much as they accept the questions they pose.

RD'M: Could you talk about the motivation behind your work being displayed in *Her Work is Never Done*?

SG: *All I have ever really wanted is a nice cold shower*, is an installation of a shower cubicle made of silk, ceramic, steel and wood. As it references urban consumerism, it frames a commentary on the quotidian indulgences we allow ourselves. I myself have never learned to exercise restraint when it comes to wanting things that I don't need. I happily succumb to the lures of consumerism and with little remorse afterwards. I do feel wasteful but clearly not enough to steer clear of the next big shiny thing thrown my way.

This mechanical relationship of feeding an insatiable want is tiresome and endless because every new thing gets old really quickly, you soon tire of it and become like the child with a hundred toys who has no interest in playing with even one of them. Once you need an external stimulus to feel good about yourself, it soon becomes akin to an addiction; you need higher doses of it to get the same level of happiness that you felt the first time you got something. Each item therefore has to work harder than the last because it ups the ante. That's when the polar opposite works best – the simpler things. The everyday habit of taking a shower, something so routine and simple, can make you retreat into a different space and it works like nothing else in making me feel cleansed and comforted. Typically, if something becomes a habit you tend to tire of it, but perhaps because this is something so simple, like comfort food, you never really tire of it.

RD'M: Your works pose a counterpoint to modern consumerist trends, however the work itself, an 'art object' on display in a gallery space, or at an art fair (which again, are commercially driven spaces) becomes an object of desire, an item for consumption. How do you respond the irony in that?

SG: Without the counterpoint of consumerism, my dilemma wouldn't exist in the first place. The contradiction emerges from the nature of the conflict. To remain centered is a struggle in the world that is constantly tugging away at you. I despair in this scenario because I see where I am and also where I'd like to be. While the desire to be free exists, there is also a force that is fighting that desire which, in turn makes the discord unending and almost irresolvable. Rather like the chicken and egg question. In that sense, the work needs to be consumed to arrive at the distress caused by that consumption. Without that

context, the work has no meaning.

RD'M: Your titles indicate that your work shares a strong connection with text. Would you like to comment on that?

SG: What can be seen leaves little room for further imagination, words on the other hand can be far more powerful visual tools. Since time immemorial, language has been at the heart of shaping the destiny of civilisations and empires. In our own country, we know well the influence of the two words 'Quit India'. I'm not saying words are more important than images, only that I've always enjoyed the relationship words enjoy with visuals. My works rely heavily on this interdependence. It's a bit of a cat and mouse game, sometimes the words determine the visual and sometimes the visual command words. I'd like to believe the use of language imparts a personality and wit to my installations.