

‘What We Leave Behind’

**Uthra Rajgopal**

Independent Curator

Specialist in South Asian Dress, Textiles and Textile Art.

To enter the world of the artist, Madi Acharya-Baskerville, is to enter the world of a playful activist. Tread softly for these works are precious, a coalescence of scavenged scraps and deformed debris. Her materials are the remnants from the regurgitation of mass production and rapacious consumption, washed up on coastlines and rivers. This is her playground. With a licence to mudlark, a roving eye and rummaging fingers, this artist, a member of the Royal Society of Sculptors, combines found materials and objects that have been partially destroyed, discarded, retrieved and handed down which in turn are carefully assembled into fantastical kitsch relics. They confront us with alarming familiarity. The things we throw out come back to haunt us. As humans continue to exhaust the earth’s natural resources, the environmental waste we cause creates life-threatening toxic pollution. This is what we leave behind.

Her works of art offer a tremendous irony between longing and belonging, catastrophe and success, distant lands and our immediate neighbourhood. My recent trip to the artist’s studio in Oxford, underlined this. Everywhere I looked I saw materials that had been disrupted by time, such as pieces of driftwood that now looked like a pair of legs, squashed plastic bottles, dismembered dolls’ heads and arms, colourful torn nets which once held fish and fruits and fragments of Indian cloth. However, Acharya-Baskerville explained to me that she doesn’t like to manipulate the materials as such. Their bruised, shredded and battered state find their own place quite quickly and spontaneously - by virtue of their shape, texture or colours - and this is how the sculptures take form. They grow by chance. The fact that these found objects have been partially destroyed through the ravages of time give her permission for further intervention. For example, cutting up a moth-eaten cloth yields to the act. As the artist explains, if the cloth had been in pristine condition, she would feel like a trespasser, that the material itself would be putting up some sort of resistance to her hand or blade. It would feel like committing a crime by cutting it apart even further. Yet the real crime or irony is in the rejection of the original goods, the point at which the garment or empty plastic bottle was thrown out or discarded in the first place and subsequently repurposed into a work of art.

If we look closer at the ‘bird sculptures’ from the series *Natural Selection: Survival of the Plastic* we can see that embroidered fragments layered onto the surface mimic the texture of feathers. For example, in *Bird of Paradise* we can see elements of pink ari embroidery. Once they were petals on a Kashmiri shawl, now they have been carefully cut around to

adorn the surface of the plastic assemblage, giving 'life' to the feathers on the body of the bird. The play of textures on the surface of the 'bird' creates a *trompe l'oeil*. An extension of the 'deceit' of fine Indian embroidery such as ari work, as we find here.

Ari embroidery is identifiable as a continuous chain-stitch and is typically seen in Indian embroidered textiles from Gujarat and Kashmir. Each stitch is created by drawing the thread through the fabric with a hooked tool, the ari needle, which looks like a crochet needle. The embroiderer uses the hook to catch the loop of thread and pull it through the fabric (which has been stretched on a frame) punching and twisting the needle in and out, up and down. There are many examples of extremely fine ari work embroidery in museum collections, so fine that they look like paintings at first glance.<sup>1</sup>

As we cast our eyes further down *Bird of Paradise* we see the 'bird' perched on burnt driftwood and a plastic life buoy, now cracked and deformed. The combination of fuchsia pink, pistachio green and marigold orange is striking. Further, if we look more closely, we see traces of netting which recall the process of being caught unaware and entwined. Being trapped. More irony! And these colours speak of hot climates in tropical regions. Acharya-Baskerville tells me that situating herself on the coastal edge is a place for thinking. For here, she is not just letting her mind drift and escape to the lush climates of India, her country of birth, where she spent her early childhood, but to other distant lands, too, all connected by the great oceans of the world. To places where ancestors once lived, where the sea supported and engulfed life. There is a spiritual *and* a physical connection which is impregnated into everything: from the concept to the construction. Yet it is more than a duality - it is a multiplicity of identities and voices. For the water that laps on the edges of our coastal areas are a swirling melange of all seas, from all shorelines, from all countries, across millennia. From the Bay of Bengal to the Bay of Biscay and beyond, these seas that keep us afloat have touched so many lives and carried the detritus of so many cultures.

Similarly in the sculptures, *Bird in Hand* and *In memory of an injured blackbird* we see embroidered fragments in bright yellow, orange and blue. In *Bird in Hand*, the placement of this embroidery gives definition to this hapless 'chick's' head. Around it's 'open beak' we see the most extraordinary, delicately placed seed beads, resembling the bright yellow outline of a chick's open mouth as it waits for one of its parents for their next feed. And although there is an element of symmetry in the placement of the mirrorwork eyes, there is an endearing wonkiness that adds to its vulnerability. All these elements have been amalgamated with glue and gloss, combined with mutilated South Asian fabrics, originally made by an unknown hand, punctuated with intricate patterns.

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of fine ari work see the Victoria & Albert Museum Collection IS.155-1953 bed or wall hanging from Gujarat, made for export to Europe, c.1700. Cotton embroidered with silk.

In *Bird in Hand*, we also observe that a decorative pattern (which echoes the embroidery) has been burnt onto the surface of the driftwood, acting like a tattoo on skin. The motifs of the pattern, along with the mirror work eyes and saffron colours collectively convey fragments of memories of the Indian subcontinent, the way people dress, the way they adorn their bodies and even decorate their homes. Patterns and patterning are often highly symbolic in India. They act as signifiers of identity, a rite of passage and community and are often associated with warding off the evil eye.<sup>2</sup> These collective memories of India come flooding through most strongly in the painted works. *Backyard bananas*, *Gone south*, *Hennafest* and *No idle sitting*, all recall precious lived experiences.

Perhaps the way we dress is the ultimate expression of adornment which the artist critiques with impish humour. *Topaz Tears*, *A Shell of the Future*, *Vessel Robes*, *His Heart is in the Jungle* all reference elements of the decorated, dressed body. Whether we do this with shiny sequins and beads, jewellery, floral patterns or herringbone tweed -even the ubiquitous strips of false eyelashes have all been captured here - in our efforts to stand out from the crowd. None more so evident than seeing people dressed up for a night out. Consider *Mirrorball Mirrorbust*. The assemblage of real hair extensions, dangling from the long branch-body, the glitterball spheres as breasts and the outline of pink lips give this sculpture an irresistible feminine, coquettish construction. It is unashamedly eye-catching, and the spherical breasts recall the anatomical construction of countless female forms, as seen in ancient and medieval Indian sculptures. This figure demands to be noticed.

Long hair has featured in many myths, religious and folk stories. From Rapunzel to Medusa, Shiva's matted locks and the Gopis adoring Krishna.<sup>3</sup> Hair has always been a thing of beauty, entrapment and envy. All these concepts are captured in the series of 'hanging' works. The long black tendrils are caught in a mesh of nets, stitched and wrapped in strips of saris. Once again, the hanging rope-like structures provoke a sense of play and mischief and a collective strength.

Even our consumption of fast fashion takes centre stage in *Baby Steps*. Here the cheaply-printed pattern of bright heart-shaped motifs (perhaps even butterflies) has been collaged onto two amalgamated plastic bottles which make up the 'legs' and 'feet'. The fabric has been wrapped in such a way to create the bulky outline of a baby's nappy. And around the feet we see again, tiny seed beads, which here act like ankle chains. Acharya-Baskerville asks us to think, is this the climate we want our children to grow up in?

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<sup>2</sup> For example, outside the front door of a home, it is common to see the daily ritual of drawing out a pattern in chalk (known in the South of India as kolam) to evoke auspiciousness.

<sup>3</sup> In the Ramayana (an ancient sacred text), Lord Shiva is said to have used his locks of hair to break the flow of the mighty Ganga which now forms the river Ganges. This is one of the holiest rivers for Hindus and yet it is one of the most polluted rivers in the world. The Gopis are female cow-herders, unconditionally devoted to Lord Krishna. They are known for their beauty, joyfulness and are always depicted with very long hair.

Our actions are our responsibility and have a direct impact on the health of the planet and on our own bodies. *Vitamin Orange* being a case in point as its title plays with the absurd hypocrisy of the consumption of oranges to provide us with our daily dose of vitamin C to keep us healthy, yet the reality is that so many fruits (such as oranges) are sold in packaging that disintegrates into microscopic plastics, leading to fatal consequences for flora, sea life, birds and eventually, us. Here we see the bird with its tail lured and caught in plastic. Yet simultaneously, the shape of the tail in the hollow of the plastic ball resembles a pestle and mortar, alluding to the crushing and pounding of herbs and spices as in Ayurvedic medicine. These ancient remedies of healing are in turn under threat of annihilation due to excessive consumption.

To conclude, Madi Acharya-Baskerville's first solo show, 'My Life as a Bird' at gallery Darl-e and the Bear in Oxford, provides us with an unrivalled opportunity to see an extraordinary artist whose work has a delicate yet powerful ability to provoke outrage at our devastating environmental destruction. Her work is now part of the permanent collection at the Whitworth, the University of Manchester, acquired as part of the Art Fund New Collecting Award<sup>4</sup>. She is part of the new wave of British-Asian diaspora artists and is utterly unique in the way she combines a delicious mixture of randomly hoarded everyday things we throw away, with a generous helping of irony and humour, critiquing consumption and South Asian-ness.

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<sup>4</sup> Awarded to Uthra Rajgopal in 2019