

ART&DEAL

ISSUE.167-168 VOL.19 NO.134-135 MARCH - APRIL, 2023 ₹250 \$45 €40 £35



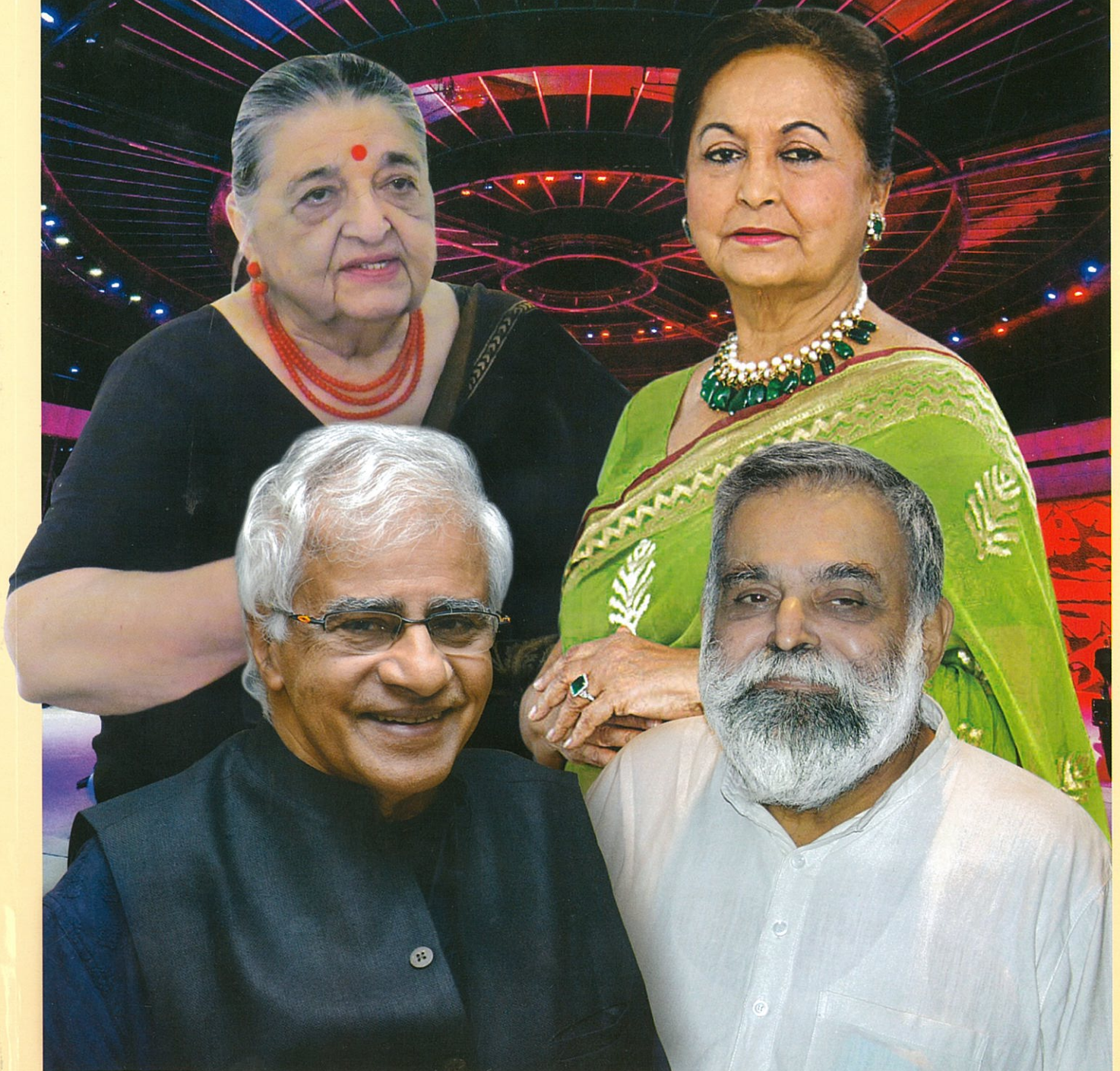
TRIBUTE TO

VIVAN SUNDARAM (1943 - 2023)

SUNEET CHOPRA (1941 - 2023)

JASLEEN DHAMIJA (1933 - 2023)

MRS. SHIRIN PAUL (1944- 2023)





Sarika Bajaj

MEDIUM OF TRANSCENDENCE

- LINA VINCENT

Artist Sarika Bajaj's studio is a wondrous place –with the plethora of organic forms created from feathers, raw and woven jute, thread, and fibres of various kinds, the feeling is that of entering an alternate world – one that is far removed from the bustling centre of Mumbai city.

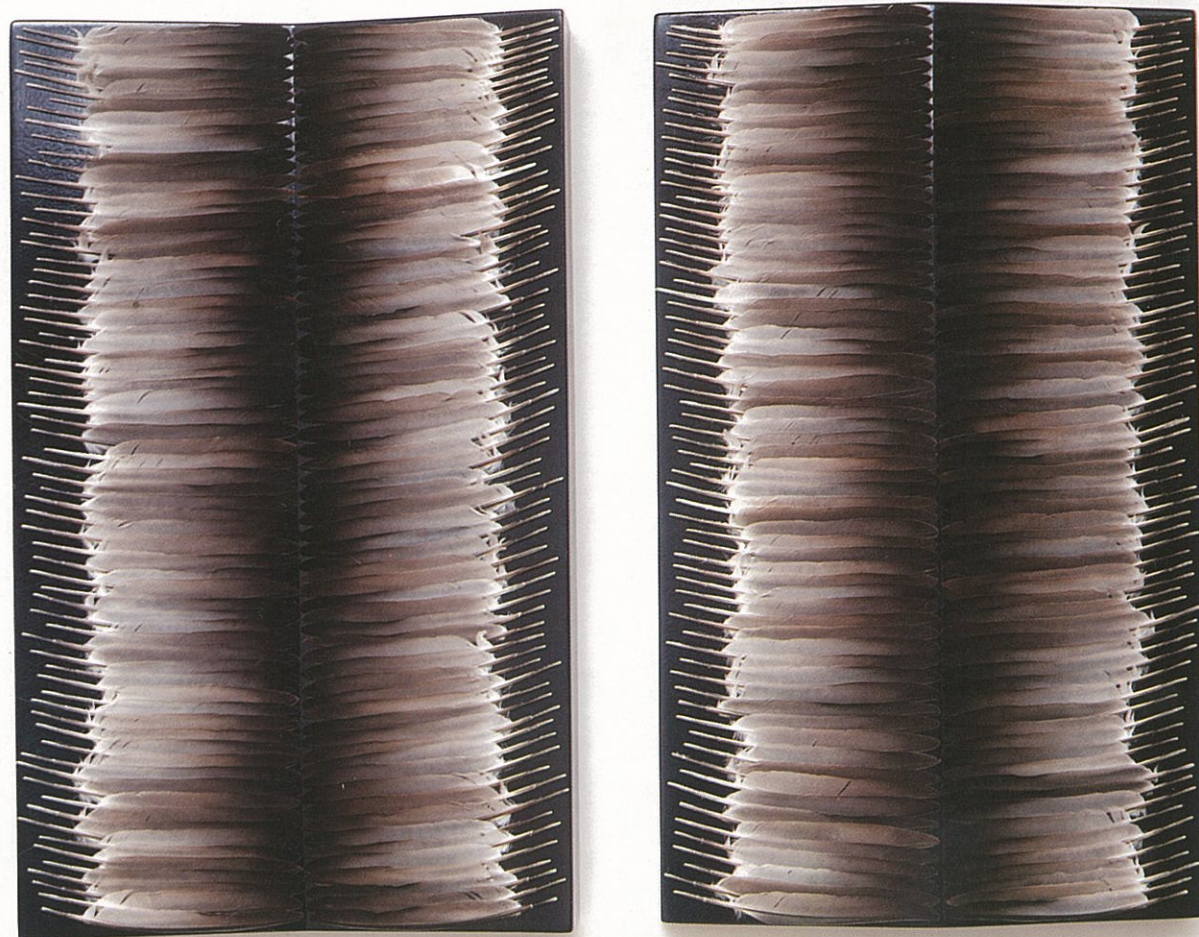
Cultures from ancient times have placed special relevance on feathers, often associating them with spiritual links to other dimensions; as symbols of divinity, transcendence and ascension, as well as carriers of healing powers. Ritual or festive costumes in South American, African and South-East Asian indigenous traditions often included feathers of specific birds, while ancient Celtic, Viking and even Greek cultures used this material in headdresses. A signature feather of the Peacock or other exotic bird has often been used as embellishment in turbans and crowns of Persian and Indian royalty – giving a touch of grace as well as power. The feather has sacred connotations in Indian mythology too, connecting the human realm to that of the divine or trans-dimensional plane. Seen in fashion shows and the cabaret, as part of masquerades and parades, feathers have also been connected with glamour and opulence.

However, the feathers that Bajaj works with are discards – naturally thrown off by common city birds, and carefully assembled into artworks. Forming earthy, abstract topographies, these artworks occupy an interesting space between the conventionally defined categories of art-objects. The utilisation of feathers, the meticulous acts of knotting and weaving, and their aggregation within an organic, and amorphous whole, create meanings that are at once patently readable and obscure. Her early practice involved drawing and painting, creating an intrinsic connection between human beings and the natural world, making way for surreal interactions of body parts and flora and fauna. Later, her investigations drew her to birds and their feathers, and she began to explore their materiality and possibilities in abstract design and expression.

Initially the act of weaving began when she attempted to recycle the unused shafts left over from her feather sculptures; later she began to enjoy the both the process and the outcome. "Using repetitive and labour-intensive techniques such as sewing, knotting, twisting, ravelling and unravelling, I generate forms with disparate materials of distinct symbolism. These diverse materials merge into a cohesive whole. By recycling and constantly giving new shapes and meanings to the discarded feathers I collect, I believe I am making the presence of these beings be felt.", explains Bajaj.

During the disorienting time of the pandemic, she found deep solace in the meditative craft of knotting and stitching, something familiar and beloved to her that she saw as a legacy from her mother, who excelled in embroidery, knitting, crocheting and

< Sarika Bajaj, *Of A Bird I, Feathers and Threads on Jute*, 2019



working deftly with her hands. There is a gentle femininity in the act of stitching, and yet, the artworks become a space for the establishment of stronger commentaries.

Deeply engaged with the context of the Anthropocene, and studying the phenomenon of displacement, the artist says, "My work seeks to highlight humankind's relationship with nature. I believe our lives are inexorably intertwined and are both complex and interdependent...Birds are an extension of nature and have been revered since ancient times. With present ecological concerns such as climate change, and habitat loss due to multiple reasons, they are threatened worldwide. Unprecedented growth in human populations has altered natural ecosystems; too many vying for consumption of resources has caused intense deterioration of natural environments and loss of biodiversity. Isn't it paradoxical that humans, who are responsible for this adversity are now appalled by the present damage?"

The current series of work, largely composed of tapestries, developed out of the long period of isolation during the pandemic when she was unable to access the spaces and resources commonly available.

She resorted to utilising everything that was already within her studio, even if it was originally meant to be discarded. These included boxes of quill sections kept away from earlier processes. She began to tie these together methodically, meditatively, weaving rows and patterns that grew in scale. Interwoven within a composite of membranes and threads, the quill-sections appear partially camouflaged within the rhythmic structure of the panels. The artist generates a natural geometry with the materials, contrasting the brilliance of the coloured threads with the muted tones of the quills and jute fibre.

Bajaj instantly elevates the mundane forms of the feather quills when integrating them into her process – a process that comprises gathering, preparing, segregating, cutting and tying. While her earlier practice involved the repetitive arrangement of feathers that she gathered around the city of Mumbai, conceptually, her investigations into notions of survival (of both humans and other living beings)

^ Sarika Bajaj, *Flight V, Pigeon Feathers on Plyboard*, 2017



and the precarious nature of existence drew her to the material as being symbols of temporality, freedom, and natural migration. For Bajaj, these objects discarded by birds continue to speak of the life in Indian metropolises, with the unchecked urbanism and patterns of consumption that leave little or no space for other creatures. She has developed an intuitive language and personalised aesthetics surrounding this unusual medium of feathers. Having built a repertoire with the material, she has delved into narrativizing it in different forms including performative acts with (her)self. In her performance piece 'Exodus' (2021), she ensconced herself within one of her tapestries, entering into a trance-like state as she moved through space, perhaps subconsciously enacting a ritual tribute to the natural world.

Each work is embedded with multiple layers of memory, time, and presence, through the object's materiality and the artist's navigation of it. Each piece can trigger a range of responses - from the activation of a personal recollection, to the desire for tactile interaction; it can push one to contemplate universal truths, or encounter a plethora of meanings from the intended symbolisms. These complexities have become the basis for her ongoing research and arts practice.

In positioning Bajaj's work within an art historical legacy, it is important to acknowledge the works of artists like British born Kate MccG wire who creates

organic yet solid sculptural forms with feathers as a primary material. Susie MacMurray, also British, is another artist recognised for her work with the medium, which she uses in mostly large-scale, site-specific installations that interact with the architecture and historic location/identity they are placed within. Chris Maynard's 'Shadow Boxes' are well known – the US based artist connects reality and dreams through his surreal use of the fragile forms. US based diaspora artist Rina Banerjee has established the use of feathers, among other materials, in her dynamic aesthetic language that delves into discussions of culture, identity and belonging in multi-layered presentations.

For Bajaj, the context of feathers and thread has now become an ever-expanding space of exploration, with new meanings and forms arising organically. "I believe art can be a catalyst for change and has the power to transform; through art you reflect yourselves and your surroundings" she notes. Through the medium, there has been continued acknowledgement of strength in fragility, fragmentation and unity; in schooling something wild and free like a feather, the artist is like a shaman, shaping them together in one form, without each piece losing its worth and relevance.

^ Sarika Bajaj, *Nothing Lasts Forever, Pigeon and Crow Feathers*, 2016