



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





## Team

### Sales Offices

#### Chennai

127 T.T.K. Road, Alwarpet,  
Chennai 600018  
phone +91 82203 08777  
phone +91 44 4216 5100  
sales@artsillustrated.in

#### Coimbatore

Jenney's Residency  
Opp CIT Avinashi Road,  
Coimbatore Aerodrome Post,  
Coimbatore 641014  
phone +91 82203 08777  
sales@artsillustrated.in

#### Abu Dhabi

Flat No. 701, 7th Floor,  
H.E.Shaikh Tahnoon Bin Moh'd  
Al Nahyan Building, (Arab Bank  
Building), Al Nasr Street,  
Abu Dhabi, U.A.E.  
phone +97 15631 89405  
sales@artsillustrated.in

#### Singapore

No. 1, Kim Seng Promenade,  
12-01 Great World City (East  
Tower), Singapore 237994  
sales@artsillustrated.in

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#### Contributors

Abha Iyengar  
Arti Sandhu  
Krystin Arneson  
Meera Rajagopalan  
Poonam Ganglani  
Rehana Munir  
Romain Maitra  
Sanjana Srinivasan  
Saritha Rao Rayachoti  
Seema Massot  
Shantanu Prakash  
Siddhartha Das  
Supriya Sehgal  
Suzanne McNeill

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LA 5 Global Publications  
#127, T.T.K. Road, Alwarpet,  
Chennai 600018, India  
phone +91 44 4216 5100  
info@artsillustrated.in  
editorial@artsillustrated.in  
sales@artsillustrated.in

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Akaram Abo Alfoz

Amit Kumar Jain

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G. Venkat Ram

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## Publisher's note

The earliest symbol for division is the rigid line with two dots on either side, never moving, never meeting, never crossing over. It is seared in our brains that the idea of division is sacrosanct – you pick a side and you stay there.

Thankfully, the arts give us a fluid construct from which to view 'division', our theme for this issue. We look at artist(e)s who structurally or ideologically engage with this great divide – sometimes by intention, sometimes by circumstance, and sometimes by coincidence – giving us new ideas, perspectives and the possibility to change the stories we have heard and symbols we have grown up with. And, most importantly, to re-negotiate this intensely polarised world with its seeming allure of connectedness.

Vincent Adaikalraj



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### Editor's note

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The theme for this issue arrived with Norwegian-British documentary film-maker Deeyah Khan's 'White Right: Meeting the Enemy'. The film, which traces the rise of white fundamentalism, has some disturbing interviews with neo-Nazis as Khan asks quite simply 'I am a woman of colour, I am the daughter of immigrants, I am a Muslim, I am a feminist, I am a lefty liberal, and what I want to ask you is, am I your enemy?' By the end of the film, you are surprised and overwhelmed with how a simple act of crossing the divide with no judgement, no prejudice or bias or expectation, and by purely listening with the need to understand, change begins.

We knew instantly this was what our theme should be this issue: Of humanising divisions that by virtue of their separateness allow us to build bridges. It was a hard issue to work on because it meant meeting head-on the divisions in our minds, in our cultural contexts, our social-political realities and questioning the parts that make us individuals without leeching the individuality of the other. We had a heightened sense of awareness and consciousness while putting this issue together, but, as always, the magazine took a life of its own, choosing the stories it wanted to tell. (For instance, despite several e-mails to Deeyah Khan, the interview we wanted never happened. But the magazine, smug in its all-knowing avatar, continued nonetheless. Sore point, obviously, for me.)

But the stories that did make this issue are each mini revelations of what deep convictions can do and undo, of what art can create and destroy, and how ideas, simple in texture, can have profound implications. And, how, everything begins with a question.

*How will we cross the ocean? We will build a bridge of stones...oops, sorry, wrong example, clearly, for the statuesque times we live in.*

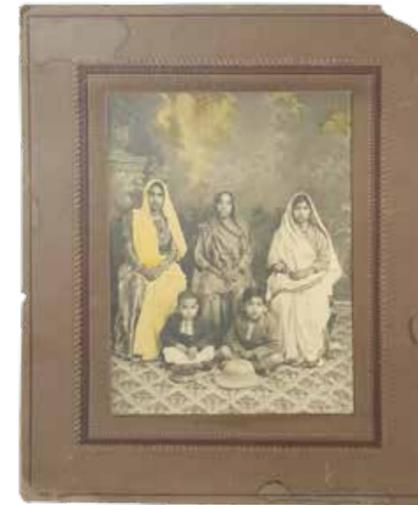


Praveena Shivram  
praveena@artsillustrated.in

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### Cover Artist

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The original photograph used for the cover



Whenever my father travelled on work, *Amma ji*, our old landlady, would taunt my mother, '*Ghiya ji ki bahu, mero miyo ghar nahi, mujhe kisi ko dar nahi*'. It literally translates to – 'I fear nothing, because my man is not home'. When the men were at work, the women were free to do as they pleased. They could step out, meet up with friends, hang out. Much like in the photograph that I chose to create the cover image for this issue of Arts Illustrated. Three women posing with two children...I could not help but imagine them to be my mother, my *mausi* (my mother's sister) and my *maami ji* (my mother's sister in-law), and the children as though they were my brother and I. I recall going to places with them as a child, to the beauty parlour, the blouse tailor, the temple, walking narrow lanes, eating *paani poori*, and orange candies. And *Amma ji*'s prying eyes at the end of the day.

I grew up believing that women must remain scared of their husbands. That is why they step out only when the men-folk were not around. For most of my life I have witnessed issues about liberty for women around me. I have questioned their relationship with men – with their

fathers, husbands, co-workers, or mere co-passengers in public transport. I assumed that I would grow up to be more empathetic.

The cover of this issue is about this strange dichotomy that a woman's life is. Between time and space where she can be as she pleases to be, and where she must conform to forced rules. Between a virtual world and the real one. Between tradition and modernity. Between what is intimate and what is public. And often this divide does not exist in the physical space. It is intangible, one that is born in the mind, constantly fed to the heart through centuries of cultural conditioning.

And now, in my work, she ushers in a new era through some kind of a Blue Screen – embracing and rejecting, adapting and shifting through a multitude of dimensions. In a state of transit. Painting a reality that she likes, finding a safe space, escaping into nothingness. Celebrating the divide that has been a foundation of sorts. Resetting. Refreshing. Rebooting.



Nandan Ghiya

Studio assistants: Mukesh Vijay and Sitaram Jangid  
Profile photograph: Vigyan Anand  
Cover page curated by Rahul Kumar



Happily Ever After V.2.0, Acrylic on photograph, wooden frame, 2012.

All Images Courtesy of the artist and Exhibit 320, New Delhi.

Q&A  
Arts

# The Unresolved Quest

In conversation with Nandan Ghiya, a self-taught artist, whose works represent several unresolved issues expressed in a unique visual language. He grew up in a small town in North India in a traditional and conservative household. Yet, he was sent to a convent school. Dichotomies of bhajans at home to Christ in school, to preserving heritage living in Jaipur on the one hand and yet giving in to the Western concepts of development, Nandan's works question the idea of contrast through censorship and vandalism. He embraces the bygone using vintage photographs and frames, and juxtaposes them with a digital layer.

RAHUL KUMAR

*Normally art practices are additive in nature, where material and objects are added and combined to form the final work. You begin with a whole and remove the unwanted. Please explain how you approach this subtractive process in your work?*

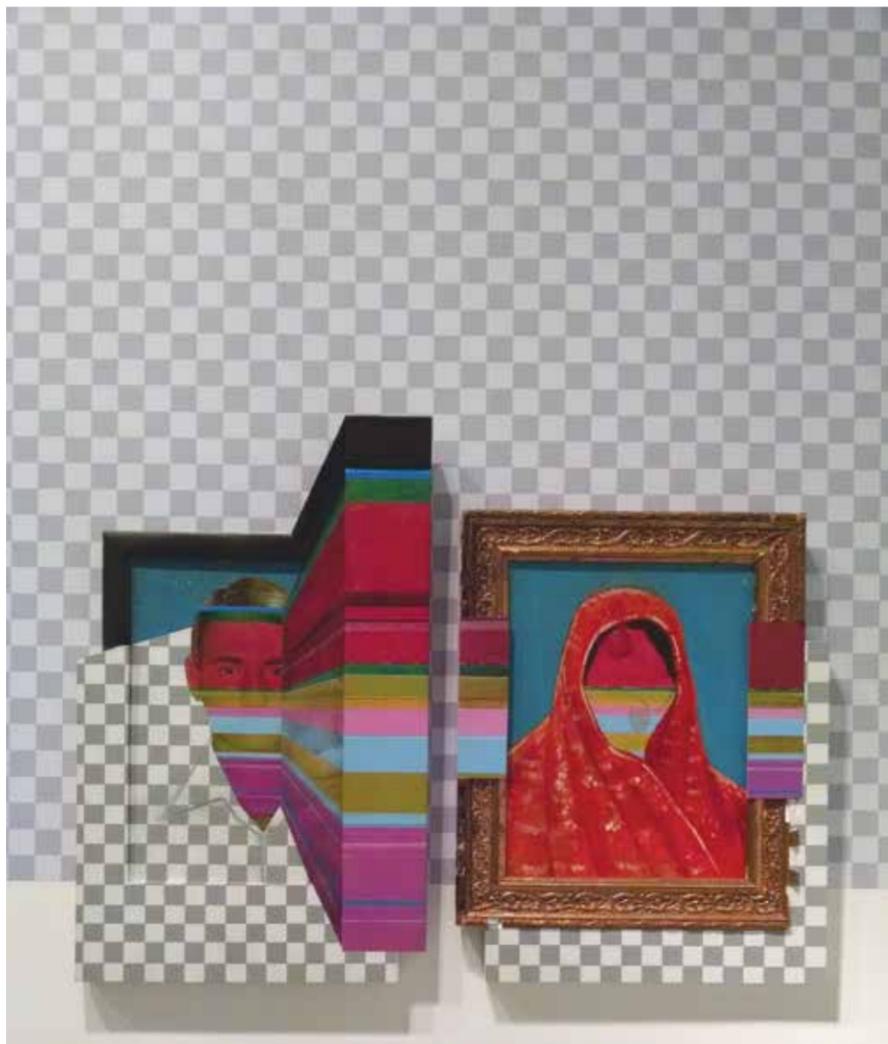
I add to subtract. And then, I subtract to add. Literally, metaphorically and philosophically. My process itself has two big influences – the philosophies of *Sanatana dharma* and the concept of blue screens in digital technology. To shed one's identity and strip oneself of all (worldly) associations is what is entailed in various forms of meditative practices based on the philosophies and teachings of *Sanatana dharma*. That, I feel,

is the true idea of evolution and transcendence which has been most fascinating for me. I am not the body. I am not the mind. I am not an artist. Nor a man. I am not sick. I am not young. Nor am I old. For all these are mere associations with the body. But, I am. So then the question arises, 'Who am I?' In my work, I attempt to strip away those associations. I deface. I subtract. In the process, I create space from the existing clutter. These are things one did not even choose. I did not choose to be a Hindu or a man or to be born in Jaipur, or even be an artist for that matter. It is a strange phenomenon to live with, as if it were a pattern, a construct of a sci-fi fantasy. And so, I create space by blanking out imagery.

I cannot say what I am hoping to achieve at the end of it. I am yet to reach there. So far, my practice has been all about the creation of that space. And to this, I layer flat colours, reminiscent of the blue digital screens. It presents endless possibilities, and I hope that in due course something befitting will get added. I am on the lookout.

*You alter an existing work of art (image of another photographer) in your works. This can be termed as an act of vandalism. Have you considered legal or moral implications of distorting other original art works?*

For me this has a philosophical implication. To create a new meaning by shedding the old. I have, however, concerned myself with the idea of vandalism. I exhibited a series of large abstract canvases at a show that I titled *Time Vandal*. I wonder, isn't 'time' itself the ultimate vandal? Is it not stripping everything away, bit by bit? What is vandalism really? What makes people do it? Is it an angry, desperate and often foolish impulse? My discovery has been profound and fills me with empathy for vandals! I see it as an attempt to claim something that is not ours. I recall visiting a historical monument in Udaipur. Forget the walls of the fort, or tree trunks, even the leaves were not spared from vandalism. There were plants with large leaves that had been tattooed upon, as though claimed by lovers or frustrated abusers. For the photographs that I use, more than moral or



An interracial couple in a transmission error c2021, Acrylic on painted photographs, wooden frame, (left) 21" x 13", (right) 18" x 13", 2016.

Big Lebowski 43, Acrylic on photograph, wooden frame and vintage wallpaper, diptych, 2012.



#MenInRed, Acrylic, wood, laminate and photograph. 39.5" x 33", 2015.

legal issues in doing so, I concern myself with the fact that it has been discarded. Discarded not by the creator or owner, but often by time itself. I am simply resurrecting it. And I like to primarily work with found and 'existing work of art', which have lost its purpose and therefore ceased to exist actually.

*Then, how important are the metaphorical references of a vintage image? For instance, the connotations disappear in works where you have employed first-hand images that you have taken?*

The vintage image has already been subtracted in many ways. Since it has been discarded (the kinds I work with), it has been stripped of its previous associations of ownership and belonging, preciousness and relevance. This may have happened for a variety of reasons, ranging from death to relocation, or simply deterioration owing to time and weather. The result is that it has been declared redundant. The owners do not want it. Collectors do not care for it. Museums are not interested in

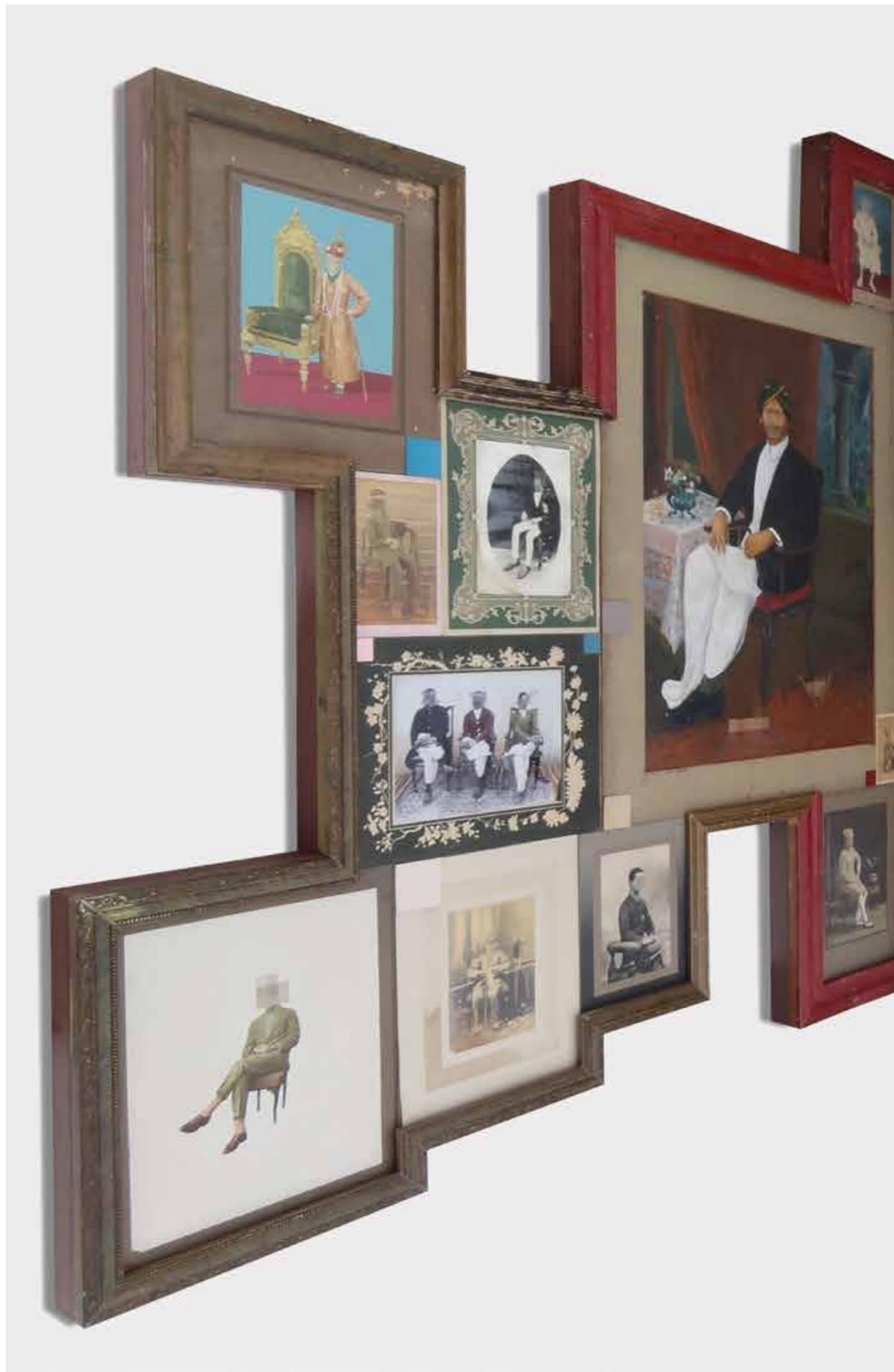
it. Researchers do not value it. So, the connotations have already disappeared. In my studio, the image goes through a process of further subtraction. And this time, it is one that nothing else could do because now it symbolically enters the world of digital technology, although I consider my works to be 'in process', in a state of transition. They are neither old, nor new. Neither vintage, nor digital. They are not now, nor are they bygone. I explore the space that is beyond saakaar (the personified) and niraakaa (the abstract). The virtual world is a very fascinating place of observation. It is the ultimate *maya* (illusion). Everything being stripped of its old identity to create a new identity, rather multiple identities! And hey, hurrah! now, I need not just be a *Rajasthani/Marwari* man/45-year-old. Now I can be one and many, and in many worlds at the same time!

*Your recent body of work dwells on the idea of conflict and discord. Does it reflect the current environment of the country? Is it a more personal, intuitive reaction, or a structured response?*

My concerns are of form and space. We are all forms existing in a space. And that in turn is a form existing in another space...it is an endless loop. It is how the structure of the universe alludes to an atom. And in that regard, I feel that we are the entire country itself as individuals, only at a micro level. Like a drop of water in the ocean carries the same characteristics as that of the ocean. Every drop is the ocean itself. Likewise, every pixel is the image itself. Then, in essence, how can my work not dwell on all the divisive conflict and discord of our times, particularly within the country? However, I do believe that this is not just a current phenomenon. It has been the state forever. The human race is not all inclusive. There have been forced divisions all along. However, I would not say that my work is a structured response to this. At best, it is an intuitive reaction, one that may eventually evolve into a structured response over the course of my art practise.



Metamorphia, Installation View, Acrylic on photograph, wooden frame, vintage wallpaper and painted wall, 2018.



Chairmen (diptych), Acrylic on photograph, wood and laminates, 88" 49" (approx), 2012-2014.



Your art visually deals with the idea of division and gaps. Even the process you employ literally divides the steps of image creation and wood work. Is this idea followed through ideologically as well?

Yes! We are in a state of a weird division. The very idea of space is changing. The concept of citizenship and country is changing. While certain boundaries are being blurred and merged, new ones are emerging. Where reality ends, virtuality begins. Identities are merging to form new identities, ones that are no longer necessarily governed by your religion, gender or nationality. My art creates the image that captures these new divided identities. The clothes we wear define one form of division. The backdrop against which you pose for a selfie defines yet another divide. For a photograph, the mount and the frame become the final boundary within which it must exist. And then perhaps the wall. My images break through all those confines and divisions of identity, boundary, dimension and even space. In my work, one cannot tell where a person ends and the wallpaper starts. Or, where the mount ends and the frame begins. Maybe, my work aspires to be simply a reflection of the narrative of human existence, of this ceaseless transition. Maybe, it is a narrative of the narrative itself. My works are never confined in the bounds of a

perfect rectangular or a square frame. They always stretch, skew, and distort. It is a fluid and moving state. It is divided, reaching out, and somewhat all over the place. My art practice is the search for a language to record that narrative shift. It is far from being resolved.

*In the series titled 'Blue Screen', the visual transition is presented in a sudden and dramatic way, making the conflict more apparent. Please talk about the inspiration for this.*

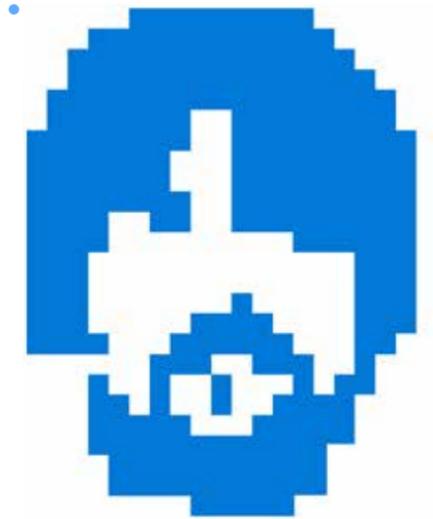
*The Blue Screen of Death*, as seen on sudden collapse of a computer, became a huge source of agony for me. It must have been 2014 when something went wrong with my PC. In my small town, it could not be diagnosed or repaired. For me, it was like experiencing death. I had plans to work, to surf, to organise my documents, and suddenly it was all gone. What remained was the 'blue screen'. It was as if the angel of death was invoked and came for me. My data files crashed, with several images not saved. Many of us have gone through the existential angst brought about by the 'blue screen', and thus was the birth of this work series. It was my reflection of multiple trysts with the ultimate weapon of mass annihilation that led to the subsequent, literal and metaphorical 'creation of spaces' within and outside the images that I was working with.

*You choose not to be present on popular social media personally; however, you have deep interest in using associated symbols in your works. Please talk about your interest in digital images in contrast with traditional photographs.*

You could say it is a kind of abstinence. For fear of addiction, maybe! The Internet, social media, and the digital image are all a source of inspiration for me. They are sacred like a deity. They are meant to be revered and appreciated from a distance. An objective distance. Also, I consider myself a creator of 'digital images'. I need to refrain from the consumption of the same. And I am quite convinced about it, although I am told all the time that I will become redundant if I am not interacting with the world through social media. And here I am, trying to not let old photographs become redundant. Such a strange paradox.

*Would you consider graphic referencing and symbolism to create somewhat abstract imagery in future? How do you intend to alter your visual language for a continued engagement with your viewers?*

That is what I wish to get at – symbolism and graphic referencing, all converging into abstraction. Abstraction is the highest realm of all. It is familiar in its ambiguity. It is



stripped of various connotations. It is space-like, allowing you to exist in it, and be it. It is nostalgia, a reminder. In future, I hope my work can become more immersive. The viewers must become a part of it, since it concerns them. I want to attempt to take them into the realm of transition, as though they are at an airport, where they can take a flight from the digital to the physical, the bygone to a futuristic world. Right now, my images are small. They must scale up to be inviting spaces, and inclusive for an immersive experience. Anonymous, yet full of nostalgia!

- The Eclipse, Acrylic on photograph and wooden frame, 2016.
- Three Indigenous Women Adapting, Acrylic on photograph and chintz, 2017.
- Varna-Sankara V.1.3, Acrylic on photograph and wooden frame, 2012.
- Nandan Ghiya Pixelated.



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