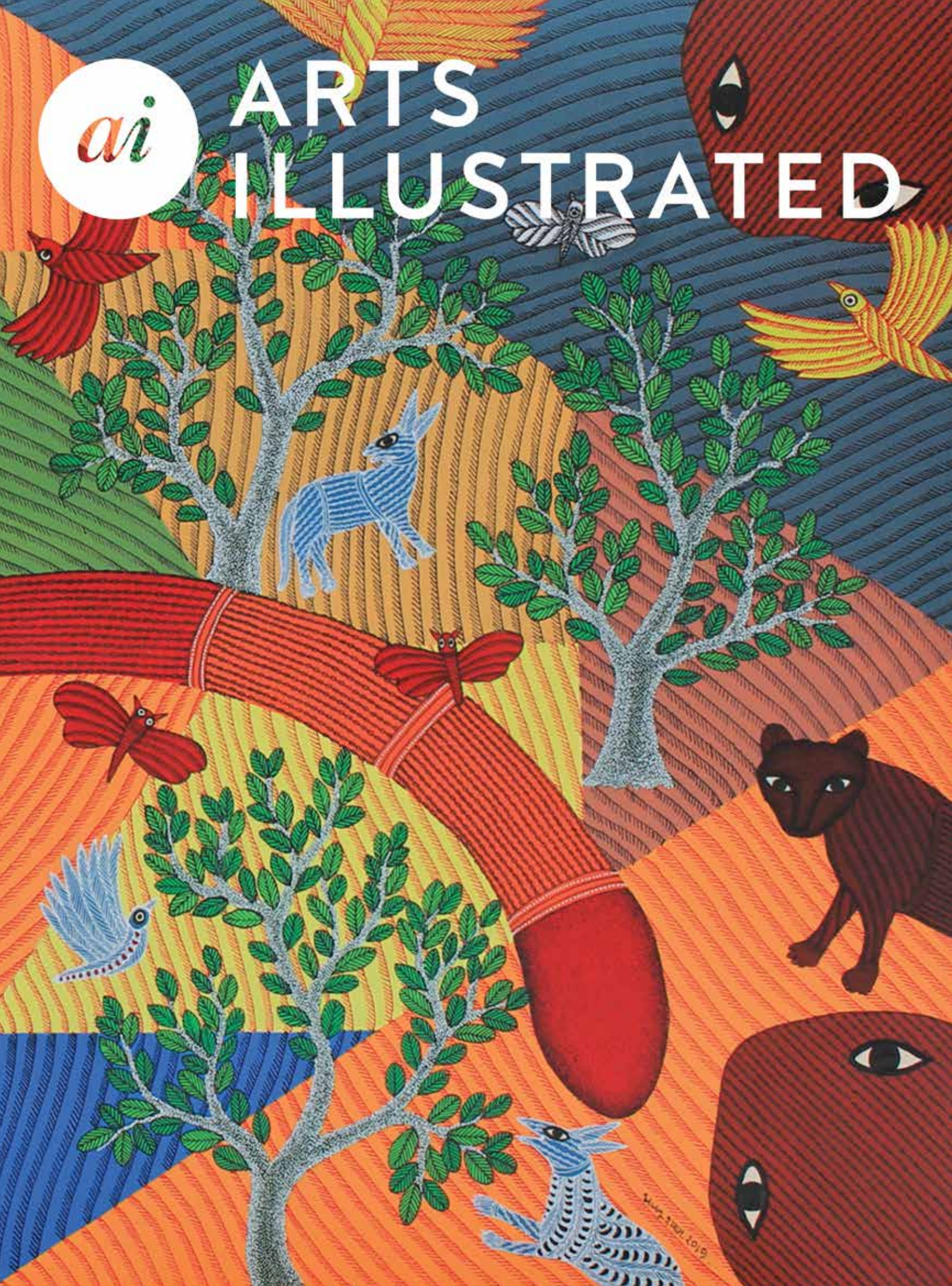




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Publisher's note

After the rains, that unmistakable smell of wet earth – *mann vasanai*, as we say in Tamil – is like an old, weathered hand reaching out from the depths of the earth to meet us. In that gesture of reaching up, it carries with it a deep-rooted sense of knowing. We see that gesture in a young sapling or an ancient tree, and are reminded, time and again, that it is the soil beneath our feet that makes us stand tall.

And, so, our theme this issue is simply that – Soil – with all the images, metaphors and symbolism it carries: the politics of caste, identity and belonging; the artfulness (and earthworm-y quality) of constant restructuring and relevance; the power and influence of privilege and perceived dominance; and even those sensory filaments of memory and nostalgia unconsciously (and consciously) conditioned with dollops of prejudice.

Vincent Adaikalraj



Vincent Adaikalraj

Editor's note

Science textbooks in middle school will tell you about the different layers of soil and the different kinds of soil, and record books will carry intricate drawings with careful pencil shading, and, maybe, if you are lucky, a field trip will happen to understand it all better. And yet, between school and what is now scarily called adulthood, what we understand about the various nuances ingrained in this ground beneath our feet inexplicably floats on the surface like oil in water.

This issue was a revelation in so many ways. Our original vision was to look at ways in which the idea and ideology of soil can be interpreted, but where it took us instead was to examine our own ideas and ideologies; roots buried so deep that it took a lot of spadework to even realise that the premise where we began was flawed; our lens was narrow, our world-view sensitive but not sensitised, and our understanding mostly dust-filled like textbooks and record books in the attic.

For me, this issue and its collection of compelling perspectives were also stories that were filled with hope. Not the kind born out of despair, but one born out of beauty, of the need to create and express and dialogue and build spaces that inform rather than explain by virtue of its existence, like soil itself, delighting more in its presence than in its action, and trusting more in its effect than in the promise of consequence, reacting always to the connections it makes.

Like words.
Colours.
Thoughts.
Ideas.
Expression.

Innumerable and inexhaustible, like non-judgemental, accepting, tolerant grains of sand. Lessons learnt much? Yes. But also, strangely, lessons discarded much.



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With the intention of creating the universe, *Bara Dev* (the Supreme God), floating on a lotus leaf, rubbed the dirt off his body and created a blue crow. He ordered it to fetch some mud. Flying for several days in search of mud, the crow sat on what he thought was an island, but was actually a snake, whose poisonous breath turned the crow black, as we see it today. The crow asked the snake for help in finding mud. The snake directed him to *Kekramal Shatri* (crab warrior).

Kekramal was resting with his head in the sky, body in water and hind legs in the netherworld. He held the crow in his claws and took him to the netherworld, the abode of the *Kenchua* (earthworm) king. Mud was food to the *Kenchua*. So, on hearing about the request, the king swallowed all the mud to save it for his subjects and refused to give any of it to the crow. *Kekramal* squeezed the head of *Kenchua* with his claws to disgorge seven lumps. The squeezing of his neck left a ring that can still be seen on all earthworms. The crow then rolled the mud into three balls, held one in its beak, two in its claws, and took them to *Bara Dev*.

Bara Dev flattened the mud balls across water to form a floating layer of crust. However, *Sutaikeda* (dung

beetle) cracked and crumbled it. In anger, *Bara Dev* tossed the *Sutaikeda* into the water. *Sutaikeda*, along with *Jalharin Mata* (water goddess), emerged from the water and divided the earth into *Khands* (divisions), each invested with its own special qualities. Some full of minerals, some fertile, some with red clay and some filled with sand.

The Great *Khand* was still unstable. To secure it for eternity, the four corners were pinned down by four snakes. On this now-stabilised earth, *Bara Dev* created trees, rivulets and mountains. With the remaining mud, he created man and woman and breathed life into them. Meanwhile, *Jalharin Mata* created *samaya* (time), the moon, and the sun. *Bara Dev* and *Jalharin Mata* beheld with joy the creation of life and disappeared.

For this issue of Arts Illustrated I have depicted The Great *Khand* with 14 divisions. The back cover represents everything below the ground and underwater. The front cover is the *Shrishti* (universe) above ground. The earthworm runs across both, since it is one animal that lives in water, underground and above it. It also links back to the mythological story of the creation of this planet.



Bhajju Shyam



Collective Commons

A House with a View

Rarely does one come across a house that is built around art. The Passi residence in South Delhi was conceived of keeping in mind their enviable collection of art and furniture that represent avant-garde design trends. 'All the walls of our home are painted white so the works of art can remain the focus, and all the corridors and halls are designed to be like mini-galleries with proper lighting,' says Shalini Passi, patron of the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art and founder of the recently launched Shalini Passi Foundation that focuses on supporting artists working in new media.

RAHUL KUMAR

Photographs by Shantanu Prakash

Architecture and design were an integral part of my growing up. My grandfather and father had a business of construction and real estate development. As a result, the idea of creating space, architectural detailing and design were commonplace for our household. The dinner table discussions would be on how the latest project is being laid out or what is unique about the cladding of a certain building. There was no escaping the creatives for me. While I am more known as a patron and collector of art, my bigger passion is fashion and design.

Art was my choice of career.

Not many may know now, but I studied art and also practised painting. From doing clay work in school to formally getting trained as a painter, art had always been my focus. My first solo show in 2006 was held in New Delhi. I was very focused on my practice. As is my personality – somewhat obsessive – I was investing most of waking hours in painting. I was so engrossed with my art that it started to impact my health. But soon I realised that my paintings were just pretty pictures. They lacked depth and soul. On self-introspection, I came to the conclusion that my life was too comfortable and protected to really engage with the real world. There was little opportunity for me to get meaningful inspiration. There was no point in my continuing to paint beautiful images that just displayed my skill and technique. As a result, my art practice got left behind.



I started to collect for this house. While we always had interest in art and even bought works in the past, it was only around 2007 that I began collecting seriously. This house we now live in was being built then. We planned it to specifically display art and design. Since the building was constructed from scratch, we had the opportunity to put display of art at the core of everything, be it architecture, access to natural light, or wall and floor finish. All of it was done to enhance the experience of viewing design and engaging with art.

Design was my first love. Mid-century furniture, period silverware and antique carpets, all have huge depth and creative energy. Even fashion is something that I personally invested in. It is myopic in my

view to see fine arts as the only works of art. I believe in creative expression that is multi-disciplinary. I have collected some of the most cutting-edge pieces of furniture and rare object d'arts. It is then an interesting challenge to live in a space where things are well coordinated.

I owe my artistic sensibility to Sanyal and Bawa. BC Sanyal and Manjit Bawa were friends of my teacher. I had the distinct opportunity to interact with them, show them my work and deliberate on creative ideas. I admired what they created and subconsciously I followed a similar sensibility. Talking about modern masters gave me valuable insights – then as an aspiring artist, and now as a collector.

I study and research before making any buy-decision. There is nothing that I acquire without personally building an in-depth understanding of. I spend a lot of time and effort in reading about artists, their practices, concerns and trajectory. Only when I am fully convinced do I move to adding their works in my collection. I do not depend on anyone to guide me in the process. I do visit shows and interact with gallerists and curators. But the decision to acquire a work is usually entirely mine and I am very clear about what I want. I was once keenly interested in *Theatre of Shade*, an early 1990s work of Anita Dube. It is a strong work where she explores the sociology of the sensation of terror. On contacting her gallery, I learnt that the

installation was with another collector. Anita refused to repeat the work or make anything on similar lines again, which speaks volumes of her as an artist. I waited for almost two years before I could buy the work off the collector.

Some of the most significant works that we own are specially commissioned.

I believe in giving respect to the works by placing them appropriately. Not all works are on display, but as far as possible, I like to provide space to artists and then allow them to make something special for me. This becomes especially relevant for our home since it is not really a museum with a white-cube environment. It is a place that is lived-in and with strong design elements. Who better to decide the 'what and how' of the work than the creators themselves?

My personal room and office spaces see most rotation of art works. We have a private facility to store art that is not displayed. It is a world-class facility to store and preserve the works. I enjoy rotating works, but my bedroom and home-office get new works most often. After all, I spend most hours in these two spaces. I like to create a continued story, my sort of curation to spaces within the home. Currently, our living space consists of all the works that concern feminism in one way or another. Bharti Kher's bindi work to Ravinder Reddy's head and Bawa's *kaali* towards the end of the walkway... I enjoy these connections.

My collection will grow at the pace my own knowledge will grow. I am well aware that there is no





escape from gaining knowledge and becoming aware myself. I must read and research to continue to explore contemporary art practices, not only in India but also globally. I do hope to eventually create a museum for others to freely enjoy what I have created. At the moment, a lot of my effort goes into stabilising my foundation. I hope to get back to my art study, soon!

A Raza work is one that I am closest to.

It was still early days of building my art collection. We acquired a 1995 work by SH Raza titled *Germination* from the secondary market. There

was a lot of noise of works being non-authentic and fake. I got to know that Raza *saab* was in town and I contacted him requesting for a meeting. I took the work for him to authenticate. When the painting was presented in front of him, to my utter shock, he began to cry. I was petrified, thinking that I made a big mistake by showing a fake work and he was pained to see a copied work. After a few minutes he thanked me by saying this work took him into the past. I was moved by his sensitivity, and my fondness for the work grew even more.

Shalini Passi



