

REVERBERATIONS: TEXTILE AS ECHO

Curated by Murtaza Vali

M'barek Bouhchichi, Sayan Chanda, Himali Singh Soin and Swapnaa Tamhane

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Reverberations: Textile as Echo brings together work by four contemporary artists – M'barek Bouhchichi, Sayan Chanda, Himali Singh Soin, and Swapnaa Tamhane – that references the rich and diverse history and practice of textile arts across South and West Asia and North Africa. Often made in collaboration with master artisans, the included artworks use a variety of traditional dyeing and weaving techniques and materials: wool cloth made in southeastern Morocco and then stained with henna; a handwoven tapestry and a patchwork abstraction that incorporate deconstructed vintage quilts and scarves from Bengal; Ikat fabric dyed and woven in Andhra Pradesh; and industrially made cotton embellished by hand with wood block printing and mirror embroidery in the desert region of Kutch, Gujarat. Countering colonial and modernist discourses that devalued such Indigenous textile traditions as mere craft, these works reclaim their vitality as a mode of contemporary expression. Complicating modernist notions of autonomy and authorship through collaboration, they blur commonly held distinctions between object and process, form and ornament, past and future, and the handmade and the digital. And much like the traditional techniques and processes they invoke, these artworks remind us that textile is always a multisensory medium, resonating across visual, sonic, and bodily registers.

M'barek Bouhchichi's *Terra* series continues his exploration of forgotten correspondences between southeastern Morocco, where he is from, and northeastern Mali. Produced in collaboration with a community of women working to preserve ancestral weaving techniques, the wool fabric is dyed using henna paste, carefully building up chromatic intensity through successive applications. Suggesting both architecture and landscape – especially given henna's characteristic reddish-brown color, which evokes clay-rich soil – the minimal compositions are inspired by patterns and motifs shared between the two regions, commemorating the circulation of culture and knowledge across an area spanning the majestic Atlas Mountains and the arid western Sahara that has been inhabited and traversed by the Amazigh for millennia. Bouhchichi displays these dyed fabrics pulled taut over wooden stretchers like canvas, asserting their status as abstract painting.

Sayan Chanda's ongoing *Jomi* series is inspired by childhood memories of female elders reading poet Jasimuddin's *Nakshi Kanthar Math (The Field of the Embroidered Quilt)* (1928) to him. The Bengali literary masterpiece narrates the tragedy of Rupai and Saju, a young couple interminably separated through circumstance. Heartbroken, Saju embroiders episodes from her life onto a quilt, a repository for her loss, longing, and grief, which Rupai discovers draped across her grave upon his eventual but tragically belated return. Acknowledging the importance of textiles as bearers of personal and collective memory, history, and knowledge, in Chanda's *Jomi* series – titled after the Bengali word for ground/land/field – he "excavates" vintage Kantha quilts, including those of his grandmother, unpicking, deconstructing, and rearranging their parts into new abstract compositions. The repeating arches of Chanda's handwoven tapestry *Of an exceedingly mischievous and disgraceful nature* – which incorporates bits of vintage quilts and gamchhas (coarse cotton cloth commonly used as a scarf or headdress across eastern parts of South Asia)—reference the characteristic circular roofless architecture of medieval Yogini temples in India. While its title is derived from 19th century Orientalist H. H. Wilson's writing on Indian religious practices, the negative space between the tapestry's vertical columns acknowledges the empty niches at these temples, the sculptures that once occupied them looted by the same colonial structures that denigrated the deities they represented as crude and vulgar.

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Part of a broader multidisciplinary project titled “we are opposite like that,” **Himali Singh Soin’s** *Mountain, pixelated in the water* translates the recordings of ice crystals smashing into each other and a trio of soundscapes that speculate on the disruptive presence of Others such as herself at the earth’s icy poles into a double Ikat tapestry. A labor – intensive process in which a pattern is first carefully marked out and resist dyed on yarn before being woven into fabric, Ikat’s characteristic glitchy striated edges uncannily resemble the pixelated digital audio print. The tapestry was made by master weaver Gajam Govardhan and his family using natural and sustainable materials such as indigo, organic cotton, and ahimsa (non-violent) silk (harvested carefully so as not to harm the silkworms that produce it). These materials are also historically resonant, recalling the extractive colonial histories of indigo cultivation and Gandhi’s promotion of handspun cotton as a political strategy for disrupting colonial trade and achieving self-sufficiency and independence. Delicate hints of a pinkish – red evoke both ancient terracotta artifacts and the iron – rich earth they are excavated from. Displayed as a landscape, the audio print’s jagged white peaks floating in a sea of blue recall the magical and otherworldly polar horizon that inspired Soin’s speculations, while the accompanying soundscape *Subcontinentment* theorizes alternative imaginations of the future that center South Asian chronologies, cosmologies, epistemologies, and bodies.

In **Swapnaa Tamhane’s** *Bird’s-Eye* series, mirrors are carefully hand-cut and embroidered by members of the Qasab Kutch Craftswomen Producer Co. Ltd onto fabric vividly colored using natural dyes such as indigo and alizarin, recreating a plan of a remote Kutchi village that the artist found in a vintage design magazine produced in post-independence India. Mirroring and inverting the found pattern, Tamhane transforms an exercise in cartographic control into eye catching ornament. Tamhane’s *Achadiya V* begins as a drop cloth pinned to the print beds used by master block printer Salemamad Khatri. Absorbing the excess dye and resist that seeps through the fabric being printing on, the drop cloth accumulates a variety of marks, ranging from traditional Ajrakh motifs that Khatri prints regularly to the novel patterns designed by Tamhane based on the interiors of Le Corbusier’s famous Mill Owners’ Association Building in Ahmedabad. These otherwise invisible residues of the printing process are revealed by subsequently dyeing the fabric in indigo, which Tamhane further embellishes with mirrors to create a twinkling liquid surface. Accompanied by the heartbeat-like sound of block printing, *Achadiya V* is a palimpsest of labor and life in Khatri’s workshop.

While Tamhane and Soin present textiles as scores – for the repeating rhythms of the handmade and for Other future imaginaries, respectively – Bouhchichi and Chanda translate architecture and landscape onto and into fabric, highlighting textile’s capacity to hold and carry personal and collective memory, history, and identity. Through their research into and use of traditional techniques and materials and their collaborations with master artisans, these artists ensure that the rich history of textile art continues to reverberate into and through the contemporary. The “verb” embedded in “reverberation” echoes the vitality demonstrated by the diversity of these artistic approaches and subjects. It reminds us that textile is frequently the result of collective and collaborative labor, a mode of expression in which thought does not precede action or dialogue but emerges from and through it. It also reminds us that textile is not solely a product but also always a process, one that continues to resonate through time and across landscapes both familiar and unexpected.

Reverberations: Textile as Echo is the second of three exhibitions showcasing contemporary approaches to textile and fiber art curated by Murtaza Vali for Green Art Gallery.