



Shadows,
Stitches
&
Many Hands

Recent works by
Rucha Kulkarni

Curated by
Vrushali Dhage

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Exhibition on view from

1st October- 5th October 2022,

at Sudarshan Rangmanch, Pune

Shadows, Stitches and Many Hands, reflects Rucha's engagements, interactions, and research interests, with a strong contextual reference to the notion of labour, gender, and respect (or lack thereof). Beginning with her five-year social-entrepreneurial project of 'Quilt Culture' (2015-2020), and intense interactions with quilters, the *godhadi* (quilt in Marathi) makers, to her migration through economically stable countries. Rucha navigates her way by playing a participant in these two spheres. The first one, as a maker, as she places herself within the circle of quilters and craftsmen and second one, as an inextricable participant within a fiercely competitive consumerist society, within the global circuitry.

Through the Quilt Culture project, she managed not just to form a working-group to share creative experiences, but successfully managed to create an ecosystem for long term independent financial sustenance for the involved quilter women - a category largely marginalized. Forming a respectable and mutually protected grounds of working cohesively - an act of self-empowerment and definition. Drawing inspiration from their individual stories and experiences, and the perceptions of the stereotyped 'feminine' skill within traditional practices. Given which, with labour/toil, skill, and the relevant people as a primary ground, Rucha analyses the superstructures that it sustains, and explores the notion of 'labour' especially of 'skilled labour' through various perspectives. Beginning from its very etymological relevance to its constantly

updated versions for global circulation.

Rucha's interactions with the quilters and her study of the outsourced skilled labour by the fashion industry revealed similar patterns of obliteration. The large brands epitomizing fast fashion, not just financially exploit these craftsmen, but guiltlessly disregard their traditional skills and creative contribution, as mere outsourced labour/service. Given the same, the artist has been dealing with the areas of shared authorship in a very careful way. The products of the Quilt Culture were used to incur income/profits solely for the quilters, what the artist gained was purely immense knowledge of the tradition and inspiration to work on it. Providing significant vantages – of aesthetics, of re-reading collective effort, and of relegation of the traditional practices from the high art to those limitedly domestic and utilitarian. The long-term association helped the artist gain the skillset to quilt the artworks herself. She metaphorically brings forth the nonchalance of the buyers (herself too, a discomfiting occasional inclusion) and brands of the seductive consumerist world. As a category of (un)informed masses whose unhinged desire for profitability makes allowance for selective ignorance; paradoxically, as the choice makers reside in a well-connected world, which invariably nauseates/saturates one with information. An immediate level of tension and unease builds up, as she raises questions over choices, psychological frameworks, individual (in)securities — oscillating between ethics and

elementary humanity, and callousness and monetary incentives. Even as the works draw from multiple stories and sources from those of basic cognizance of skill and toil, its obfuscation within the larger / glamorised economic and seductive retail setups, notions of authorship of products, gender, the politics of gender labour preference relations, of female craftsmanship / labour and its relegation to domestic ubiquity, its socio-economic implications, etcetera, the artist insistently resists from being literal and sentimental, and poignantly attempts to find spaces of intervention / interception.

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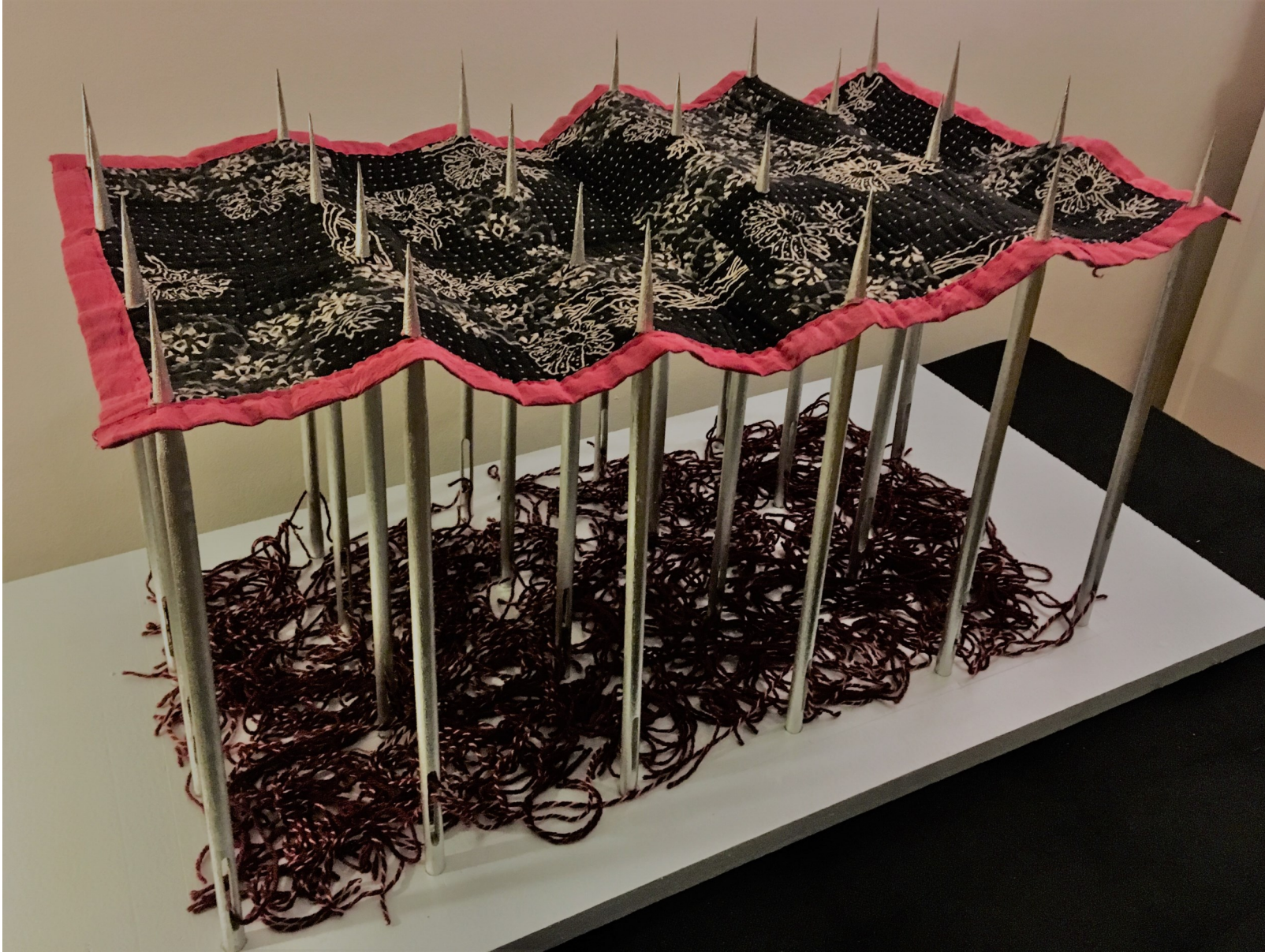


Maker Absent, 2022

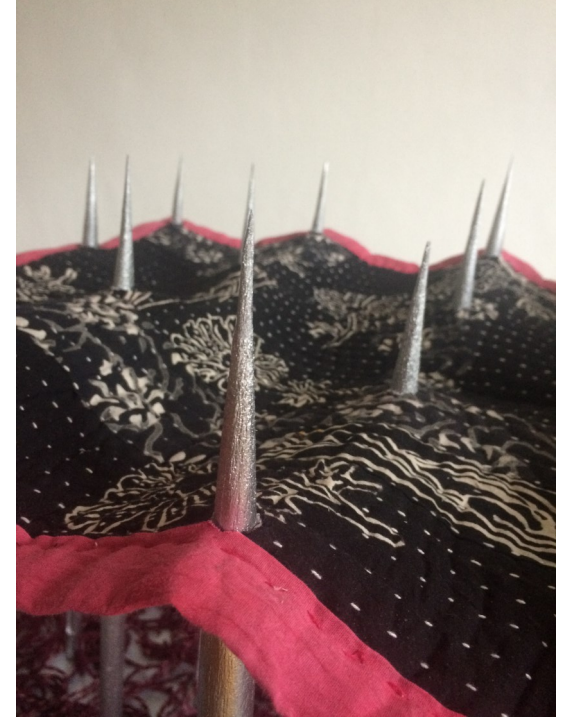
silk threads and fabric colour on
discarded layers fabrics,
90 x 145 cm



*We exist, but not in your world
You can't see us, but we see you
Ask your roti, she knows me
Or ask your quilt, it will tell you similar story
We exist, but not in your word
Our hands are stitched to be empty
We needle to weave your thread*



The Feel Matters, 2019
Hand- quilted layers of Fabric,
threads, Needles carved in
wood,
30 x40 x45 inch



*I buy and I buy
My blanket smells of sweat, but it's not me
I lost the sense of smell to a bargain for the Dream
Which neither I paint, nor I sell*



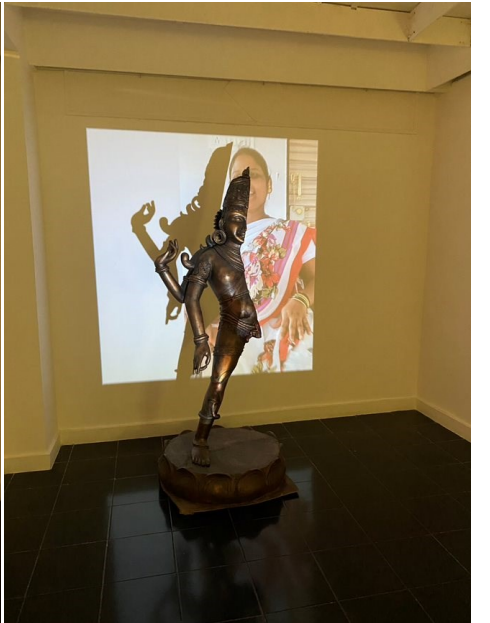
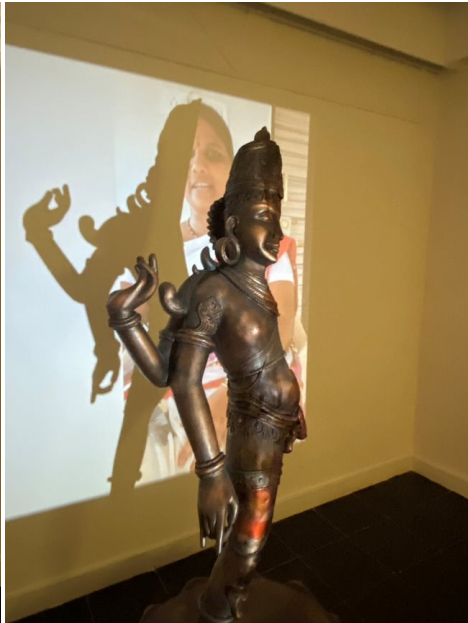
Thousand Scents of Strength, 2019
Video installation with burning fragrance sticks, silk threads,
cotton handloom saree and wooden structure
size variable



Thousand Scents of Strength

"Quiet strength need not be mistaken for useless vulnerability."

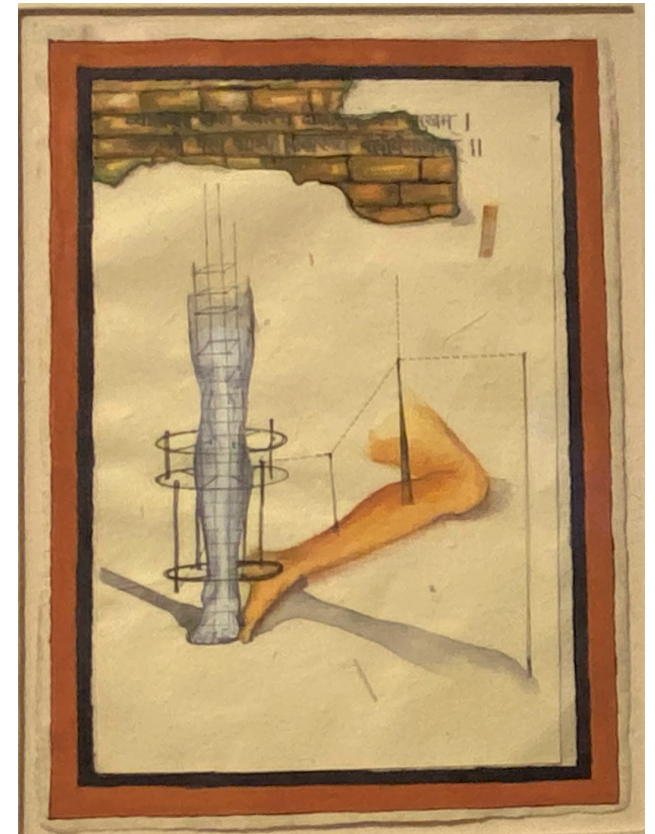
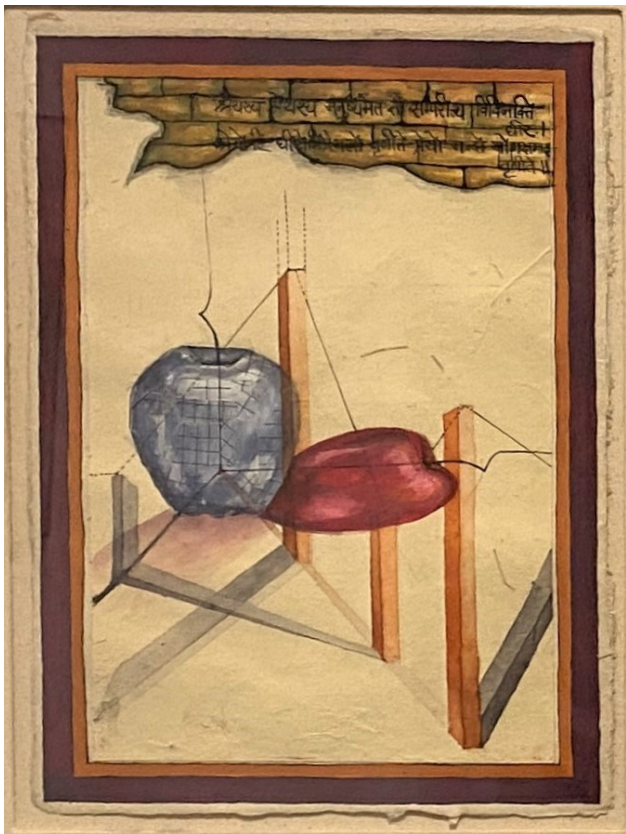
- Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*
Viewers were invited to experience the intensive labor by contributing in stitching the text.



Half Obscured, 2019
Fiber cast sculpture and video projection,
165 cm x 45cm x 50 cm



Half Obscured, 2019
Fiber cast sculpture and video projection,
165 cm x 45cm x 50 cm



Untitled I, 2020
Water colour on paper collage,
triptych 21cm x 30 cm each



Untitled II, 2020
Water colour on paper collage,
triptych 21cm x 30 cm each

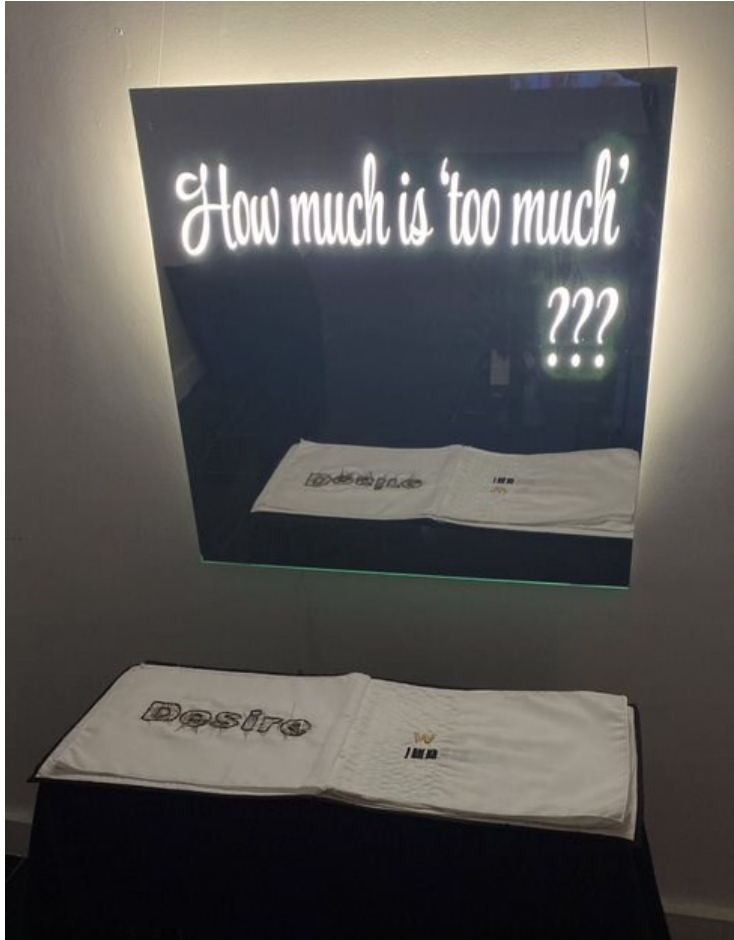


*The chic dining table is
full of food yet the eater
is missing,
The scarcity and excess is
just a matter of side,
The labour is awarded a
fisheye,
The hope of seeing 'the
whole fish' is still
starving...*

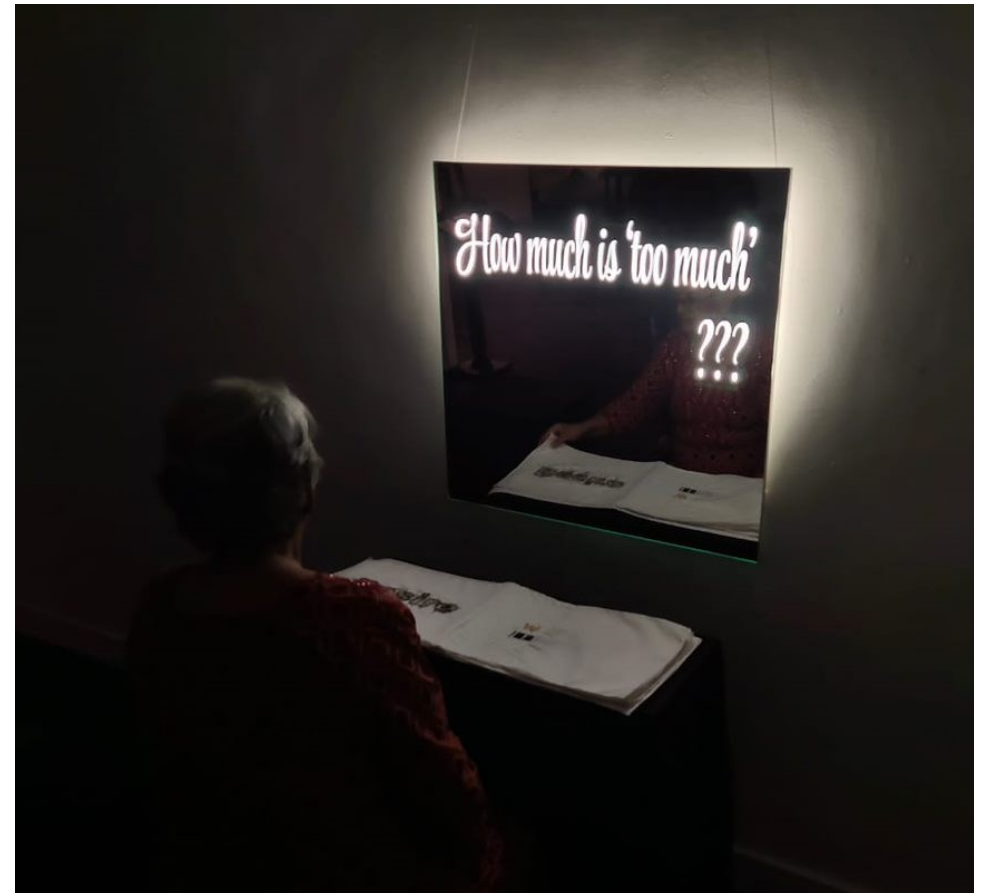
Gothic, Global & Fish eye, 2020
Ink and gouache on paper,
50 x 65 cm



Homo Economicus, 2020
Ink and gouache on paper,
50 x 65 cm



Journal of a Trial Room, 2022
Book of discarded fabrics, needles,
silk threads, mirror and lights
size variable



*They buy, you buy, I buy
They compete, you compete & I try
They play n we get played*



दुपटे Dupate - a baby quilt, 2021

Hand-quilted layers of fabric, threads, fabric color on a
light box,
80 x 80 cm

Maker Absent

While giving due cognizance to the maker, the artist addresses the act of their identity obliteration by opening questions regarding the socio-economic systems and capitalist structures that encourages the same. Exquisite products marketed for the 'precious hands' that crafted them, ironically treat the bodies of the hands as mere outsourced inexpensive labour. Rucha explores the materiality of semi-transparent quilted fabrics by playing with light and shadows over the layers of paintings. Simultaneously, the artist highlights blinkers of the patriarchal society have traditionally overlooked this form of female labour, where the beautiful up hands that labour are deprived of due cognizance. .

The Feel matters

Mapping the larger picture of mass-production, she explicitly studies the reduction of the notions of 'skill' and 'tradition' to conveniently replaceable techniques. Economic liberalization globally (and especially in Indian for the current works) did provide a pedestal for international growth, but also exposed small traditional businesses to their blows. In the attempt of exploring the very dichotomy of - capitalist comfort and miseries, Rucha works on the process driven analogy of the stitch and the prick.

Thousand Scents of Strength

The work takes form from incense sticks, that metaphorically strike the opposing sensorial associations. Of the lingering scent, which is not just as a mere fragrance, but a sensory reminder of the strength of hard work with which the very object came in existence. Is it the material or the process of making it, which smells so good? The incense sticks that are used for therapeutic purposes or for religious ones, hold the toil of nimble little fingers. The multi-sensory installation juxtaposes intangibility of in-cense with the potency of a 'skill' - and its capacity to let the human element survive through a product.

"Quiet strength need not be mistaken for useless vulnerability."

- Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*

Viewers were invited to experience the intense labor by stitching the text on the works, as their individual contribution- labour.

The Half Obscured

In the process of exploring the notion of labour, Rucha realised how the profession of quilters was designated a strict feminine domain, a near naturalisation. Even while being conflicted by the same, the artist observed the ease and comfort the women felt within the circle of the female quilters. For the sculptural installation *The Half Obscured*, the artist drew inspiration from the iconography of Ardhanarishwara, a form of lord Shiva, which has half masculine and half feminine body; the iconography celebrating the synergy between the male and the female. The artist reconstructs the same to counter the accepted constructs of gendered labour. The female-half of the sculpture is physically absent. But is reconstructed through shadows and narrations, of the quilters. Thereby, providing an intimate first-hand narration of how they form a respectable ground for themselves to work cohesively - an act of self-empowerment and definition.

Untitled I and II

The Untitled I and II are images of the artist's mental and physical locales; of the physical spaces of movement and presence, amalgamated with their impact on the individual thought process. Through these works the artist traces the drastic transformations she experienced in understanding norms of pleasure and possession. Beginning from sheer aesthetic pleasure derived from small yet finer things, to another radically opposite materialism - lived reality of being surrounded/engulfed in a society advocating illimitable materialism.

At a formal level the carefully rendered visual elements of the flora and fauna, domestic objects utility and comfort, the text, the *subhashitas*, both of etcetera, take roots from her educational background, intercepted by her conceptual and at times physical self (as a current reality). Whereas the grid-like patterns reflect the incessant need for quantification, of valued objects of material pleasure, evidently desirous of an ascending trend. The blend of the two builds a near surreal feel to the visual, which at many levels addresses these dilemmas, conflicts, and partial reconfiguration of belief systems.

Gothic, Global & fish eye

While undertaking a scholarly approach of finding her own grounds within the capitalist-consumerist society and of one largely devoid of it (as in rural India), the artist reads the satirical aspects on the lines of Grant Wood. Rucha recontextualises the notion of Gothic and global through - its monumentality, awe and contrasting disparities, in the highly capitalist economies. The towering architecture of metro/mega-policies, the Paradox of Choice - the consequent stressful abundance, uneven distribution of resources, and the multiplicity of the same through various frames, synoptically recontextualise assurance and paranoia as an eternal pair. Having direct reference to Grant Wood's "American Gothic", the work maps the contrast between then rural American landscape, architectural style namely Carpenter Gothic and contemporary adaptations of gothic monumentality, marking the pinnacle of capitalism.

Work referred "American Gothic - Grant Wood (American, 1891-1942) — Google Arts & Culture." Google Arts & Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/american-gothic-grant-wood-american-1891-1942/5QEPm0jCc183Aw?hl=en>. Accessed 19 September 2022.

Schwartz, Barry. The paradox of choice: why more is less. Ecco, 2004.

Homo Economicus

Homo Economicus (/ˌhəʊmᵊʊ ˌɛkəˈnɒmɪkəs, ˌhɒmᵊʊ ˌɛkəˈnɒmɪkəs/) is another term for economic man - using rational assessments, Homo economicus attempts to maximise utility as a consumer and economic profit as a producer ("Homo economicus").

The artist reads and re-reads the concept of Homo Economicus as she constantly navigates between opposing worlds. On one hand, the labour finds a rooted background; and on the other, glamour, and gilded life of the capitalist-consumerist world in which she finds herself as an experiential reality. The juxtaposition of forms aims at raising questions about the exploitative character of capitalism at multiple levels - towards the planet and its resources and humans themselves. Further, Chirico's presence and the eerie loneliness of the figure in

the bed, the engulfing emblems of growth-charting, the predictable cyclicity of the modern world - all made palatable through the luring gold, denote the unpleasant coexistence of the utopian and dystopian worlds.

Work referred "Homo economicus." BehavioralEconomics.com, <https://www.behavioraleconomics.com/resources/mini-encyclopedia-of-be/homo-economicus/>. Accessed 18 September 2022.

Journal of a Trial Room

In this work, the artist creates a situation selecting emblems of the massive garment retail industry. Barcodes, luscious fabric, and a mirror to gaze at, are employed to strike a critical dialogue and a space of inescapable answerability. The journal becomes a space where the people before the mirrors inscribe their presence. The materials are loaded with contexts and texts (in this case), ensuring to convey/highlight the psychological play at various fronts, conversely, the sheer callousness of the system; and simultaneously re-examines the possibility of a threshold to this imbalance.

दुपटे *Dupate* - a baby quilt

The egalitarian approach to project Quilt Culture was the notion of a collective feminine labour as a gathering-point and exploring 'sisterhood', creating intimate space to share personal stories, some general happenings, extremely personal experiences or some of silenced facts. Once some of the quilter women shared stories/experiences about the rampant practice of female feticide, while working on a baby quilt. The irony of the situation stayed with the artist. She gave form to it through the layered narrations of baby quilt and explored/exposed it against the X-Ray screen. *Dupate*, has to be read through its layers - not just about a singular malpractice, but the misuse of the technology that facilitates it, and yet the works itself symbolizes a hope for a new life.

Artist's Biography

Rucha Kulkarni



Rucha Kulkarni (Amsterdam, NL and Pune, IN) is an artist whose works consider a public sphere as space for participation, inspiration, and self-retrospection. Having a graduation in painting, her education in Indology and Art History, also contributes heavily to her works as she draws references from the same, while reading contemporary issues. Of her recent and significant projects, Quilt Culture, was a major microfinancing project in which the artist worked with *godhadi* craftsmen (quilters) from Maharashtra. Simultaneously, forming grounds for intervening notions of traditions, female skill, labour, and rights, tokenism with respect to the same. And analysing the larger picture of survival in an overpowering consumerist society. The project helped further her works exhibited at various shows. Beyond Quilting 2020, Nautilus Expo, Amsterdam, Asia Culture Week Exhibition 2019, Asia Culture Center, Gwangju, South Korea, Boven de Kronen. 2019, Barbarakerk, Culemborg, The Netherlands. The artist has exhibited and participated in various exhibitions, biennales, and residencies in India and abroad. She has also lectured and conducted workshops in various art institutions across India.

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Curator's Biography

Vrushali Dhage



Vrushali Dhage (SF Bay Area) is an art historian and curator whose area of research considers artistic research, public participation, and interdisciplinary collaborations as vital in understanding ecological transformations, urban development, and possible sustainable practices. This stems from her doctoral thesis which focused on tracing the impact of economic globalisation on contemporary Indian art. She was a faculty member at the Dept. of Art History and Aesthetics, MSU Baroda, and has lectured at various other universities and institutions in India. Dhage has participated in and facilitated art residencies; and has curated shows of traditional and contemporary artists. Her research work and writings have been published in various art magazines, portals, books, and research journals internationally.

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