

Surrey Art Gallery Presents



SWAPNAA TAMHANE
NO SURFACE IS NEUTRAL

September 23 — November 26, 2023

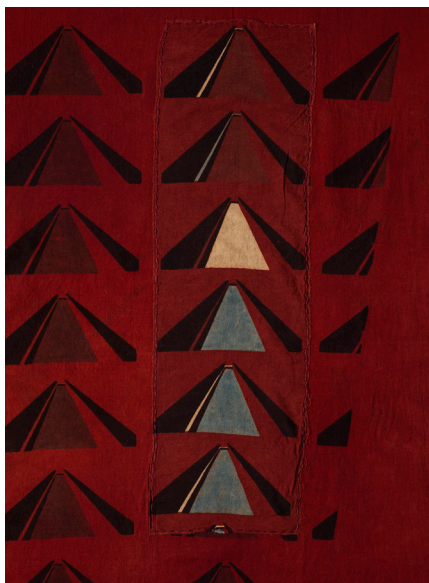


SWAPNAA TAMHANE
NO SURFACE IS NEUTRAL

Curated by Dr. Deepali Dewan

Surrey Art Gallery

Surrey Art Gallery Associate Curator of Adult Programs Sameena Siddiqui interviewed curator Dr. Deepali Dewan in the summer of 2023. This text captures Dr. Dewan's reflections on the central themes of the exhibition, and its relevance within Indian social history.



S: Tell us about your interest in Swapnaa Tamhane's body of work and exhibition *No Surface is Neutral?*

D: I am interested in this body of work by Swapnaa Tamhane because it references different moments in South Asia's history through visual forms that carry the baggage of that history. And yet the work brings them together in a way that feels completely contemporary,

new, and relevant to our times. All of the works in the exhibition are connected in some way to India's history of cotton—either being made of cotton or associated with the techniques of embellishing cotton like block-printing and embroidery. Some are deconstructed to their very fibres and reconstituted as paper, crumpled and returned to a textile-like flexibility. Others are made from a piece of thicker low-quality cotton used under fabric while it is being block-printed: the piece that no one was ever supposed to see. While history serves to add symbolic weight to each work, their meaning is not contained in that historical reference alone. Each is more than a sum of its parts, coming together like a poem that has rhythm, dimension, and emotion.

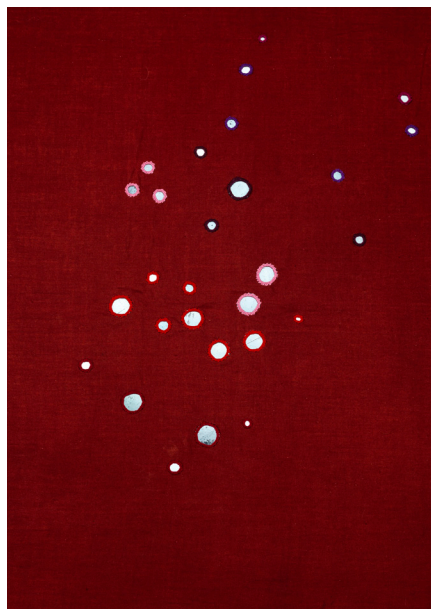
I am also interested in this body of work because of its collaborative nature. For many of the pieces, Tamhane created them in collaboration with several artists in India, specifically

the wood-block carver Mukesh Prajapati and his family, the hand block-printer and dyer Salemamad Khatri, and the women's embroidery collective called Qasab. The nature of the collaboration was not simply transactional, though an aspect of that is unavoidable given current economic structures, many supporting revival efforts. Rather each artist played a role and had some degree of creative agency in their contribution to the work. In this way, I was interested in how this collaboration did not fit into the model of working with artists from formerly-colonized spaces who work in historical modes that has been handed down to us. It was a way of rejecting the colonial constructs that framed and continue to frame these artists as "native craftsmen."

The title of the exhibition, *Swapnaa Tamhane: No Surface is Neutral*, is meant to convey the layered quality of each of the artworks, their connection to various moments in India's colonial and modern history, and their rejection of certain colonial ideas in favour of trying to imagine a different way of being in the world. As well, *No Surface is Neutral* refers to the act of drawing, which at its core involves the hands of artists and their intervention onto a surface, no matter what material that surface is made of. Drawing is at the core of Tamhane's practice. The works in the exhibition, even the larger textile installations, are ultimately a form of drawing for the artist, one where many hands come together.

S: Any curatorial challenges you faced while developing this exhibition? Or rewarding situations?

D: As in many contexts, one of the most challenging parts of the project was also the most rewarding.





When I curated a version of this exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, we made an effort to move away from colonial ideas about the hierarchy of artistic practice, where the Western urban painter and sculptor is considered an “artist” while the maker located in a formerly-colonized space (usually in the Global South) and working in a historical mode is considered an “artisan” or “craftsman.” We didn’t

want the artwork to be a theoretical exercise in decolonization but rather one that infused the exhibition at all levels. So, with intentionality, we called all the makers in the exhibition “artists.” As well, all the artists received honorariums based on Canada’s CARFAC (Canadian Artists’ Representation / Le Front des artistes canadiens) guidelines. CARFAC is an organization that represents artists in Canada and advocates for royalties to artists for the non-commercial display and reproduction of their artwork. The latter came with challenges as we had to find creative solutions to navigate institutional financial procedures. These approaches are small gestures but they moved us in the direction of doing things differently. It was rewarding because the artists in India were not expecting the honorarium, having long become accustomed to the transactional nature of their work where their rights as artists were not recognized in international circles. Doing things differently has shifted something in us all. I am happy that we will follow the same practice at Surrey Art Gallery.

S: Indian textiles, block-printing traditions, and dye processes were known for high quality and expertise until the 18th century. How did colonialism and its economy shift trade and narrative, and how did the technical craftsmanship of Indian artisans come under criticism?

D: Indian cotton has been traded around the world for at least two millennia. It was considered a luxury product for its lightweight qualities. India was also the first place in the world to develop the technology of colourfast dyeing using natural vegetable and mineral pigments. India's colours were known for their vividness thanks to the mineral composition of certain rivers in which the fabrics were washed, especially in Northwestern India and the Southern Coromandel coast. Thus, colourfully printed and painted Indian fabric, particularly cotton, was in high demand by global consumers and used as currency in the trade for spices and other commodities. Cotton is what brought Europeans to India's shores, first as traders and then as rulers with imperial ambitions. The Dutch and French East India Companies and then the British East India Company vied for the control of the cotton trade. As British Imperialism grew and turned into colonial rule, from the 18th-19th century, the British took over the cotton trade and then cotton production, moving cotton manufacturing to textile mills in Manchester, England. They sold the cloth back to a captive audience of colonized subjects in India at cheaper prices that decimated the millennia-old cotton industry in India. Ironically, when colonial art schools opened in the mid-19th century, they criticized Indian textile artists for the decline of Indian textile production and for trying to produce commercially viable designs for a contemporary consumer rather than what colonial



authorities had deemed “traditional” design. At the same time, colonial art schools praised the hereditary craftsman as the link to preserve traditional art. These dynamics produced a contradiction at the heart of colonial art education, and shaped the way Indian art would be perceived for decades to come.

No Surface is Neutral pushes against this complicated colonial history of cotton, exposes colonial ideas around art and art making that linger with us today, and imagines a different way forward.

S: How does *No Surface is Neutral* layer historical references and debates, but also address the contemporary situation of textile workers, artisans, and cotton farmers in India?

D: *No Surface is Neutral* has several historical reference points. On the one hand, it evokes the long history of tents within the South Asian landscape—from the elaborate Mughal and Rajput tents that moved with the ruler for battle or leisure to the blue tarp over chai stalls today. These forms of malleable architecture that create spaces of light and colour stand as a counterpart to the rigidity of built forms that, to this day within India, mark a sense of wealth, status, and inaccessibility. On the other hand, the exhibition layers in the history of cotton in India that is embedded in imperial and colonial histories with later moments during India’s Nationalist movement and in its early post-colonial period. In the early 20th century, cotton became a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. For example, the Khadi movement championed by Mahatma Gandhi promoted hand-spun cotton as a direct response to imported Manchester cotton and struck at the heart of the colonial economy. Even political rallies well after Independence in 1947 continued to hold demonstrations of spinning cotton thread. *No Surface is Neutral* also references the Indian-owned textile mills that opened in the first half of the 20th century and served as competition to the Manchester Mills by keeping manufacturing and the benefit of India’s purchasing power within the country. Several works in the exhibition draw

on motifs from the Textile Mill Owners' Association Building in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, a grand modernist building designed by Swiss architect Le Corbusier, considered the father of Modern architecture. While the building is a testament to the vision of self-governance and self-sufficiency of the Jain textile mill owners who gathered in its halls, it also marked a new era of transnational exchange where European design was seen as a universal marker of modernity. In this post-colonial era, the economic inequalities of colonialism were not eliminated but rather reconfigured. Today, the mass manufacture of synthetic fabrics, the ascendancy of fast fashion, and the negative impact of both on the planet are some of the new conditions impacting textile makers in India. *No Surface is Neutral* recognizes that the story of decolonization, represented by Indian cotton, is one that continues today.



Biographies

Swapnaa Tamhane is a Montreal-based artist, curator, and writer. Her body of work includes drawing, textiles, handmade paper, text, and sculpture. Current and recent exhibitions include Vaporizing into Mist: Innovation in Craft Through Art & Design, Nature Morte, Delhi, Sculpture Park 3, Madhavendra Palace, Jaipur, DROP CLOTH, Hamilton Artists Inc., Worlding Public Cultures, FOFA Gallery, Montreal, Mobile Palace, ROM, and The Golden Fibre, V&A Dundee, Scotland.

Dr. Deepali Dewan is the Dan Mishra Senior Curator of Global South Asia at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto and an Associate Professor in the Department of Art History at the University of Toronto. Her research spans issues of colonial, modern and contemporary visual culture in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora. She has curated and published for over twenty years the history of photography and its critical historiographies and contemporary art as it explores ways of being and knowing in the world.

Sameena Siddiqui is Associate Curator of Adult Programs at Surrey Art Gallery. She is also a Ph.D. candidate and Shastri Research Doctoral Fellow at the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory, University of British Columbia, Canada. Siddiqui has presented her research at several international conferences and residencies and published in peer-reviewed journals and art magazines. Her dissertation research won the MFAH Joan and Stanford Alexander Dissertation Award, US, 2021.

List of Works

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Salemamad Khatri, and Mukesh, Pragnesh, and Avdhesh Prajapati, and Bhavesh Rajnikant. Assistance from Sine Kundargi-Girard and Lydia Haywood-Munn

Mobile Palace

2019–2021

Natural dyes, appliqué, and beading on cotton

Ajrakhpur, Gujarat, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada

115 x 700 cm (each panel), 3.5 x 14.25 x 12.5 m (installation)

Swapnaa Tamhane

Translation, 2017

Embroidery on undyed khaddar

Punjab, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada

67 x 194 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

Untitled (Nazar), 2017

Water-soluble graphite on handmade Khadi paper

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

29 x 23 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

Tubular, 2017

Water soluble graphite on handmade Khadi paper

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

21.5 x 28.5 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

Anonymous Labourer with Back Facing Us, 2019

Water soluble graphite on handmade jute paper

Montreal Quebec, Canada

28 x 35.5 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

Brush, 2019–2020

Pencil on paper

Montreal Quebec, Canada

29.5 x 42 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

Dye wash bath: capital “D” design, 2020–2023

Vinyl

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Salemamad Khatri

Untitled (Phulkari), 2017

Water soluble graphite on Khadi paper mounted on block-printed cotton,
natural dyes

Montreal, Quebec, Canada and Ajarkhpur, Gujarat, India

68.5 x 45.5 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

Handloom, 2022

Water soluble graphite on handmade Khadi paper, cut and woven, mounted on
block-printed cotton, natural dyes

Montreal, Quebec, Canada and Ajarkhpur, Gujarat, India

21.5 x 28.5 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane

A Situation in Between, 2018

Water-soluble graphite on handmade Khadi paper

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

44 x 60 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Salemamad Khatri

Achadiya II, 2020

Block print on cotton, indigo, mirrors, aluminum tubes

Ajrarkhpur, Gujarat, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada

125 x 825 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Salemamad Khatri

Achadiya IV, 2020-2023

Block print on cotton, indigo, mirrors, aluminum tubes

Ajrarkhpur, Gujarat, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada

125 x 825 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Salemamad Khatri

Achadiya III, 2020-2023

Block print on cotton, indigo, mirrors, aluminum tubes

Ajrarkhpur, Gujarat, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada

125 x 825 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Salemamad Khatri and Qasab Kutch Craftswomen
Producer Co. Ltd.

Achadiya V, 2021

Indigo-dyed dropcloth with handcut mirrors and embroidery on cotton,
aluminum and steel stand

Ajrarkhpur, Gujarat, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada

125 x 825 cm (cloth), 213 x 152.5 x 297 cm (installation)

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Qasab Kutch Craftswomen Producer Co. Ltd.
Bird's-Eye 1, 2020
Natural dyes, embroidery, and mirrors on cotton
Kutch, Gujarat, India
99 x 114 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane, with Qasab Kutch Craftswomen Producer Co. Ltd.
Bird's-Eye 2, 2020
Natural dyes, embroidery, and mirrors on cotton
Kutch, Gujarat, India
96 x 113 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane
Post-independence: These fibres bind as they want, 2018
Image transfer on handmade Khadi paper
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
22.5 x 29.5 cm

Swapnaa Tamhane
Inside, 2021
Video projection, 7 mins looped

Swapnaa Tamhane
Workshop, 2023
Audio, 3:08 mins

Swapnaa Tamhane
The India Report, 2023
Kala cotton pulp with machine-cut mirrors
Kutch, Gujarat, India and Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Approx. 19 x 25.5 cm each

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Image credits:

Cover: Swapnaa Tamhane with Mukesh, Pragnesh, Avdhesh Prajapati, and Bhavesh Rajnikant, printing blocks carved for *Mobile Palace*, 2019, teak wood. Photo: Paul Eekhoff, Royal Ontario Museum. Design: Chris King.

4: Swapnaa Tamhane, *Mobile Palace* (detail), 2019-2021, natural dyes and appliqué on cotton. Photo Paul Eekhoff, ROM.

5: Swapnaa Tamhane, *Bird's-Eye 2* (detail), 2020, natural dye, embroidery, mirrors on cotton. Photo by Paul Eekhoff, ROM.

6: Swapnaa Tamhane, *Mobile Palace* (detail of installation), 2019-2021, natural dyes and applique on cotton. Photo Paul Eekhoff, ROM.

7: Swapnaa Tamhane, *Untitled (Phulkari)*, 2017, water-soluble graphite on handmade Khadi paper mounted on cotton. Photo Paul Eekhoff, ROM

9: Swapnaa Tamhane, *Mobile Palace* (detail), 2019-2021, natural dyes and applique on cotton. Photo by Paul Eekhoff, ROM.

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