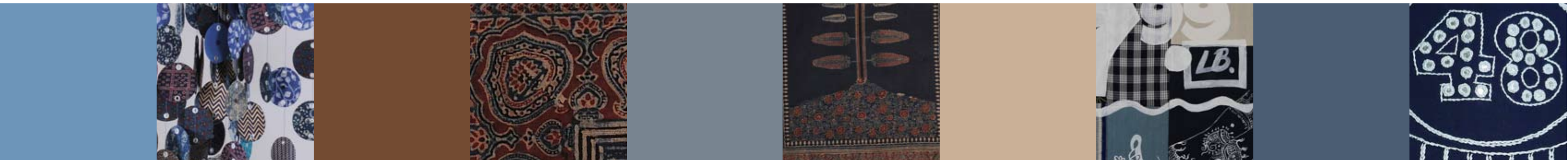


INDIGO

Shelly Jyoti and Laura Kina
Chicago Cultural Center
January 26 – April 2, 2013





Shelly Jyoti

Indigo Narratives: Gandhi's Spinning Wheel
Ajrakh resist dyeing on khadi fabric
46 in. x 46 in., 2009



Shelly Jyoti

Shelly Jyoti is a New Delhi based visual artist, fashion designer, poet and an independent curator whose work references designs and textiles of the 20th Century in the cultural context of Indian history. She is trained as a fashion designer from National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi, and she earned her MA in English Literature from Punjab University, Chandigarh. Her solo shows include: *Beyond Mithila: Exploring the Decorative* (India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, 2009; Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, 2008; Jamaat Art Gallery, Mumbai, 2008) and *Lyrical Abstraction* (India Habitat Centre, New Delhi 2007, Srishti Art Gallery Baroda 2009). Her work is in the TAPI collection (Textiles & Art of the People of India) in Surat, India and the MGC ASEAN Textile Museum in Cambodia. Her work has been reviewed in Art India, ArtEtc., Business Standard, Financial Times, Indian Express Mumbai, India Today, The Hindustan Times, and Times of India. Her literary works are in collection with Sahitya Akademi, the journal of Indian English literature. Her recent curatorial works include *Vastram: Splendid World of Indian Textiles* for MGC Asian Traditional Textile Museum, Cambodia, 2012 and other South Asian countries.

My work is centered on historical iconographic elements, designs, and textiles of the 20th Century within the cultural context of Indian history.

I explore and construct the hermeneutics of period histories within the socio-economic and political inquiry in my art practice.

Indigo Narratives (2009-12) features sculpture, installation and paintings that incorporate hand embroidered textiles, ajrakh printing on khadi, and Sanskrit calligraphy. My narratives are inspired by the accounts of the tyranny of British colonial indigo planters on native farmers of chamaparan and Mahatma Gandhi's subsequent intervention in Bihar 1917-18, the first satyagrah led by Gandhi on the Indian soil after his fight against racialism in South Africa. The works engage textile references of coastal Gujarat, literary texts such as *Neel Darpan* through the history of India's colonial past along with references to indigo plant/color/dye.

The use of ajrakh printing on khadi utilizes indigo techniques, which are used by Khatri, the immigrants from Sindh and Baluchistan during 1600 C.E.

Through this process I examine the implications of personal, political and cross-cultural choices of these communities.

Working with 9th generation ajrakh artisans in Bhuj in the interior of Gujarat on khadi fabric with ancient indigo resist printing techniques, my designs, however, are entirely contemporary interpretations of the politics of indigo. Also incorporating traditional needlecraft designs motifs of different clans by artisans from fair trade women's collectives such as Shurjan: Threads of Life and thus helping contribute to providing sustainable means of income for some of India's under privileged women.

To me, textiles created for artwork performs a great sense of preservation as a visual medium for documentation purpose than compared to functional textiles. Both have symbolic purposes. My artwork challenges me to apply this vision of traditional pattern block and color in the context of a socially and environmentally responsible design practice. Through my contemporary design motifs and presentation I strive to present the viewer with a heritage so rich and color so historically meaningful, in today's context of technique and its conservation.

INDIGO NARRATIVES HAS BEEN FUNDED IN PART BY THE GUJARAT LALIT KALA ACADEMY AND INDIAN COUNCIL OF CULTURAL RELATIONS. SPECIAL THANKS TO CHANDA BEN, FROM SHRUJAN: THE THREADS OF LIFE, FOR SUPPORTING AN ALLUSION TO STITCHES SERIES; DR ISMAIL MOHAMAD & JUNAID BHAI FROM THE 9TH/10TH GENERATION KHATRI FAMILY FROM BHUJ FOR ASSISTING TO CREATE ECO-FRIENDLY AJRAKH WORK FOR AN ALLUSION TO AJRAKH SERIES; SAKOR BHAI, A SKILLED AJRAKH ARTISAN, SEJAL OF BARODA FOR THEIR HERITAGE BLOCKS; PATTERN MASTER MEHMOOD BHAI OF BARODA FOR STYLIZING THE CANVASES.

WWW.SHELLYJYOTI.COM

“Shelly uses linkage to develop a narrative by relying heavily on the narratives around the indigo movement and the legacy of indigo and craftwork handed over from generations to generations of traditional craftswomen.”

- Michelle Yee

Shelly Jyoti

Indigo Narratives: An Indigo Plant
Ajrakh resist dyeing on khadi fabric
60 x 46in., 2009
TAPI collection

“Shelly’s work bridges the elements of fashion and textiles into visual art context of documentation and conservation.”

- Johny ML

Shelly Jyoti

Indigo Narratives: An Allusion to Stitches - An Indigo Leaf
Acrylic on canvas, Sanskrit calligraphy
designed embroidered patches
40 x 33in., 2009



Shelly Jyoti

An Allusion to Stitches: An Ode to Neel Darpan I, II, and III
Acrylic on canvas, Sanskrit calligraphy, designed embroidered patches
Three panels 23 x 20 in. each, 2009

Shelly Jyoti

Homage - Woeful Tales of the Ryots of Champaran
200 indigo resist print circular discs,
7 in. diameter each, hanging with fish net
Dimensions variable, approx. 8 ft. high, 2009

www.shellyjyoti.com

Shelly Jyoti



Indigo Narratives: Gandhi's Spinning Wheel
Ajrakh resist dyeing on khadi fabric
46 in. x 46in., 2009



Indigo Narratives: An Indigo Plant
Ajrakh resist dyeing on khadi fabric
60 x 46in., 2009
TAPI collection



An Allusion to Stitches: An Ode to Neel Darpan I, II, and III
Acrylic on canvas, Sanskrit calligraphy, designed embroidered patches
Three panels 23 x 20 in. each, 2009



Indigo Narratives: An Allusion to Stitches - An Indigo Leaf
Acrylic on canvas, Sanskrit calligraphy
designed embroidered patches
40 x 33in., 2009



Homage - Woeful Tales of the Ryots of Champaran
200 indigo resist print circular discs,
7 in. diameter each, hanging with fish net
Dimensions variable, approx. 8 ft. high, 2009



ago Cultural Center

INDIGO Shelly Jyoti and Laura

Laura Kina

Devon Avenue Sampler: Golda Meir/Gandhi Marg
Hand embroidery on khadi fabric
16x40 in., 2009



INDIGO Shelly Jyoti and Laura Kina Chicago Cultural Center

Laura Kina

Laura Kina is Associate Professor of Art, Media, and Design and Vincent de Paul Professor at DePaul University in Chicago, IL. Her artwork focuses on Asian American and mixed race representation and histories and themes of distance and belonging. She earned her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her solo shows include: *Sugar* (Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, 2010), *A Many-Splendored Thing* (Gene Siskel Film Center, Chicago, 2010), *Aloha Dreams* and *Hapa Soap Operas* (Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts, Miami, 2007 and 2003), and *Loving* (Grand Projects, New Haven, 2006). Her artwork has shown nationally and internationally, most recently as part of *Art Is My Life* at the Okinawan Prefectural Museum and Art Museum. Her art has been published in *Other Tongues: Mixed-Race Women Speak Out*; *Embracing Ambiguity: Faces of the Future*; and *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation*. She is the co-editor of *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art* (University of Washington Press, 2013).

Devon Avenue Sampler features vintage and contemporary street signs and imagery from my West Roger's Park Chicago immigrant neighborhood where Orthodox Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Christians all live. This all-American urban South Asian/Jewish corridor is lined with jewelers, ethnic grocery stores, bakeries, spice shops, restaurants, colorful sari shops, travel & tour services, cell phone/electronics/luggage shops, beauty shops advertising eye brow threading and mehndi, and a base ball field. Using indigo blue colored thread and khadi fabric (two materials long associated with Mahatma Gandhi and symbolic of India's Freedom Movement from British colonization) along with a sprinkling of Gujarat style mirrored bling and Jewish inspired prayer shawl tassels, my samplings of Devon Avenue's poly-cultural street signs have been hand embroidered by artisans from MarketPlace: Handwork of India. MarketPlace is a fair trade women's collective based in Mumbai. The use of the word the word "sampler" in the series title thus refers to both embroidery samplers and "sampling" as in cultural appropriation.

The use of the word the word "sampler" in the series title thus refers to both embroidery samplers and "sampling" as in cultural appropriation.

I have also sewn patchwork canvases of dark blue fabrics and denim reminiscent in form to Japanese indigo boro quilts to reflect my own mixed ethnic heritage in the background. On these collage-like constructions I hand painted iconography from street signs in my neighborhood. From 1930-1970s Devon Avenue was predominantly Jewish. My husband's family used to live and work here in the late 1950s to 1980. South Asian migration eclipsed the Jewish community beginning in the 70s-80s and as newer groups continue to arrive the neighborhood remains in flux. The ethnic street signs record a quickly disappearing past as they collide, overlap, and fade into the present.

DEVON AVENUE SAMPLER HAS BEEN FUNDED IN PART BY GRANTS FROM DEPAUL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY RESEARCH COUNCIL GRANT, AND FUNDING FROM THE SOCIETY OF VINCENT DE PAUL PROFESSORS. SPECIAL THANKS TO PUSHPIKA FREITAS, LALITA MONTEIRO AND SHAILY AGRAWAL OF MARKETPLACE: HANDWORK OF INDIA FOR OVERSEEING PRODUCTION OF THE EMBROIDERY WORK AND THE TALENTED ARTISANS OF MARKETPLACE WHO MADE THIS WORK POSSIBLE: ZABINA SHEIKH, MEERA SINGH, REKHA SONAWALA, HASEENA QURESHI, RAMILA SOLANKI, RABIA SHEIKH, DEEPIKA SURTI, AND MOHAMMAD ABUR KANI.

WWW.LAURAKINA.COM

"Kina's work brings forth diaspora in all its colorful vivacity, and yet invokes the struggles inherent in migration and relocation."

– Michelle Yee

Laura Kina

Devon Avenue Sampler: Mehndi
Hand embroidery on khadi fabric
18x10 in., 2009

"Hers is a genre of Pop art with
a distinctly postcolonial edge."

– Murtaza Vali

Laura Kina

Devon Avenue Sampler: New York Kosher
Hand embroidery on khadi fabric
18x10 in., 2009



Chicago Cultural Center
INDIGO Shelly Jyoti and Laura Kina

Hema's
Kitchen

JAMIA
MASJID

SILKS
SAREES
SUITS
KARAVI COLLECTION
INDIA

Regal

DRESS MATERIALS
SUITINGS
SHIRTINGS
2616 W. DENVER AVE
(773) 734-1365

ISP INDIA SARI PALACE

ROSENBLUM'S
WORLD OF JUDAICA, INC

LB.

P



PAY TO PARK



Laura Kina

EYE CARE

Devon Avenue Sampler: Pay to Park
Acrylic on patchwork quilt
60 x 60 in., 2011



10

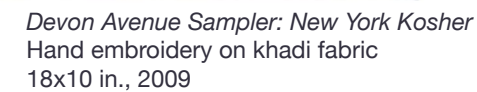
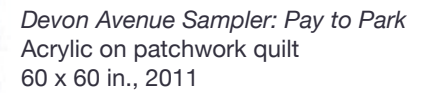


Laura Kina

Devon Avenue Sampler
Acrylic on patchwork quilt
53x77 in., 2009

TEL-AVIV
KOSHER
Bakery

Laura Kina



travel

From 2009-2012 Indigo: Shelly Jyoti and Laura Kina traveled to India at the RedEarth Gallery, Vadodra; India Habitat Centre, New Delhi; Nehru Art Centre, Mumbai and in the U.S. at ArtXChange Gallery in Seattle and Diana Lowenstein Fine Arts in Miami, FL.

The exhibition has been featured or reviewed in India in: ArtEtc., Art India, The Asian Age, Business Standard, Business Today, Deccan Herald, Design Today, DNA After Hrs, The Economic Times, Financial Express, Good Housekeeping, The Hindustan Times, Indian Express, New Woman, Open Magazine, The Pioneer, The Times of India and in Miami in El Nuevo Herald and as a “critic’s pick” at artCircuits.com.





The Dye That Binds: Indigo Iconographies

Using indigo-dyed *khadi* embellished with embroidery, produced in collaboration with fair trade craft collectives in India, Laura Kina and Shelly Jyoti’s project is appropriately transnational, engaging the rich and storied past of this oldest and most treasured of natural dyes.¹ Activating traditional forms and craft practices associated with its use, their collaboration acknowledges not just indigo’s supposed roots in the subcontinent but traces some of the many routes that have carried it around the globe through the centuries, revisiting the painful histories of colonial expansion and exploitation, and spirited resistance to these injustices, that its trade inspired.² Unsurprisingly, given these transnational trajectories, both their projects draw on migrant communities and histories—Kina on the multiethnic Chicago neighborhood she calls home and Jyoti on the ninth generation *ajrak* artisan communities in her home state of Gujarat—and their attendant experiences of displacement and adaptation, disruption and continuity.

Kina and Jyoti’s use of textiles is a familiar feminist gesture, acknowledging the efforts of an earlier generation of feminist artists, who championed crafts such as embroidery and weaving—traditionally associated with women—as viable and vital art practice, challenging the traditional patriarchal

hierarchy of art historical mediums. Similarly, their collaborations with skilled craftspeople is not without important art historical precedents, most notably Alighiero e Boetti’s *Mappa* (1971-1994), a series of embroidered world maps with each country’s territory marked by its respective flag, which were fabricated by groups of Afghani women according to the artist’s specifications and drawings.³

A trained textile designer, Jyoti has long been drawn to and repeatedly drawn from India’s rich tradition of traditional crafts. For *Indigo Narratives* (2009) Jyoti collaborated with a community of *ajrak* artisans who migrated from nearby Sindh and Baluchistan to coastal Gujarat and brought with them centuries old techniques for resist printing with indigo. In the two dimensional works from this suite a stylized iconography recounts episodes from indigo’s history in India through such craft techniques associated with indigo itself. The indigo plant is emblemized into a precise arrangement of simple shapes and patterns. In the triptych *An Ode to “Neel Darpan”*, the ethical thrust and moral indignation of Dinabandhu Mitra’s Bengali play of the same name is translated into a simple but powerful set of symbols. Set in 19th century Bengal, which by then had emerged as the world’s biggest producer of indigo, the play was written in 1860, in the immediate aftermath

of the Indigo Revolt, a mass protest by downtrodden farmers forced to cultivate indigo by colonial planters for a pittance. Using simple, accessible language, the play graphically and honestly portrayed the peasants’ dire, inhumane circumstances and its subsequent translation and publication in English caused quite a stir in political circles in both Calcutta and London.⁴ In Jyoti’s triptych, the colonizers are hawks, dominating the frame, a cruel twinkle in their eyes, their hooked beaks razor sharp; the peasants are worms, defenseless prey, struggling in vain to survive.

While such economy of form is a common strategy in the decorative arts, where stylized patterns repeat, it also recalls the ancient tradition of aniconism in South Asia, which privileges symbolic over anthropomorphic images for representations of the divine: Buddha represented through footprints or a Bodhi tree in the narrative reliefs at Sanchi, or Shiva who continues to be worshipped in the form of a lingam.⁵ In Jyoti’s works a comparable strategy is applied to Gandhi, whose successful 1917 *satyagraha* on behalf of destitute indigo farmers in Champaran, Bihar, garnered him nationwide fame and the title of Mahatma. The spinning wheel, or *charkha*, closely associated with Gandhi through his championing of homespun khadi as a method of resisting oppressive

colonial economies, repeats in different iterations.⁶ The symbol now enjoys pride of place on the Indian flag and its simple circular shape is multivalent, recalling not just Buddha’s *dharmachakra*, but more general sacred forms such as the *mandala* and *bindu*. In other panels, modest wooden sandals, Gandhi’s preferred footwear, serve as synecdoches for him, recalling not just his austere life but also his untimely death. A ceremonial procession of similarly shaped footprints in stone mark Gandhi’s last walk through the gardens of Birla House to the spot where he was assassinated on January 30, 1948.

Simple emblematic forms reappear in the trio of sculptural works in the suite. A cascade of bound stick figures, constructed out of indigo-dyed rope and entangled in chains, and a coolie’s jacket glowing deep blue serve as icons of the forced labor and oppression wrought in the name of indigo not just in India, but globally. And while the wind chime-like cluster of discs decorated in various block prints using indigo demonstrates the vibrant creativity of this traditional craft it also serves as a rustling elegy for those who died in its name.

Like other mythical Little Indias—Oaktree Road in Northern New Jersey, Jackson Heights in the New York borough of Queens and Toronto’s famous Gerrard Street—I



The Dye That Binds continued

had heard about Devon Avenue long before my maiden visit. Or rather, I was heralded with tales of Dewan Street—a creolization with helpful phonetic adjustments for ‘V’-challenged South Asians—where I would find the best kababs in the Midwest. Despite what one might think, immigrant enclaves like Devon Avenue are rarely monocultural; immigrants attract other immigrants, from cultures both slightly and very different, who add to the cultural mix, transforming the neighborhood’s look and feel. The Indian and Pakistani pioneers of Jackson Heights have gradually made way for more recent arrivals from Bangladesh and Nepal, reflecting shifts in global geopolitics and immigration patterns. And before the Desis descended in the 1970s, Devon Avenue was largely Jewish and Russian.

In *Devon Avenue Sampler* (2009) Kina reminds us of the area’s rich multiethnic history and current cultural diversity. Her title acknowledges both the tradition of embroidered samplers but also Kina’s strategy of appropriation and pastiche, providing a seemingly random sampling of Devon Avenue’s specific urban milieu.⁷ In earlier work Kina demonstrated an acute understanding of the fact that cultures, ethnicities, nationalities and the stereotypes they might inspire are socially and semiotically constructed, maintained and

circulated through popular culture, through advertising and mass media’s familiar economy of signs.⁸ Hers is a genre of Pop art with a distinctly postcolonial edge.

Devon Avenue Sampler is composed entirely of such signs, scattered across a patchwork of variously pattern and colored fabrics, many in shades of indigo, inspired by Japanese boro quilts, modest utilitarian textiles cobbled together from discarded scraps. Local street signs and logos for a kabab restaurant, chop suey house and kosher bakery jostle with an advertisement for waxing and threading services and images of exotic hennaed hands and seductive kohl-lined eyes lifted from product packaging, the latter, a feminist critique of the beauty industry perhaps. Food and fashion, both bodily desires, are often the strongest bonds immigrants hold to their cultures of origin. Additionally, “ethnic” cuisine and dress are integral parts of America’s multicultural landscape and the first encounter with another culture is often mediated through them. Visual tropes of travel and technology services, necessary for maintaining vital links with family back home, are also thrown into the mix.

Formally, its fragmented ground of interlocking planes overlaid with textual and visual fragments, indexical markers of the particular environs of Devon Avenue, recalls

the collage aesthetic and papiers collés of synthetic Cubism, which incorporated actual bits of topical ephemera into the picture plane. As anthropologist James Clifford suggests, collage is a particularly apt “way of making space for heterogeneity, for historical and political, not simply aesthetic, juxtapositions.”⁹ Other famous portraits of famous streets, which similarly sidestep traditional representational paradigms of street life, also come to mind: Piet Mondrian’s distillation of the energy, rhythm and lights of New York’s famed thoroughfare into a pulsating abstract grid in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43), and Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), a wonderfully deadpan photobook that simply shows exactly what its title states. Kina constructs a comparable portrait of a multiethnic Main Street USA, its vintage all-American aesthetic retrofitted by various immigrant communities to fulfill their particular needs, desires and fantasies.

In 1930, the legendary Duke Ellington composed a soulful ballad that musically captured a deep mournful melancholy, a sentiment “bluer than blue can be,” a *Mood Indigo*. It is this mood, which manages to encapsulate not just the cruel histories of colonial oppression and exploitation but also the feelings of displacement, homesickness and nostalgia that plague all immigrants,

that pulses as color through the disparate elements of this collaboration, the rich darkness of this alchemical dye, indigo.

Murtaza Vali

New York

November 2009

¹For a comprehensive history of indigo see Jenny Balfour-Paul, *Indigo* (London, British Museum Press, 1998). See also Victoria Finlay, *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* ((New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), pp. 318-351.

²“Indigo” is derived from the Latin indicum/Greek *indikon* meaning “of/from India.” The opposition between roots and routes is borrowed from James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³Luca Cerizza, *Alighiero e Boetti: Mappa* (London: Afterall Books, 2008).

⁴For a history of indigo in colonial Bengal and a translation of Dinabandhu Mitra’s play see Amiya Rao & B.G. Rao, *The Blue Devil: Indigo and Colonial Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); see also Ranajit Guha, “Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (October 1974), pp. 1-46.

⁵For a discussion of the aniconic tradition in early Buddhist visual practice see Vidya Dehejia, “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems,” *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 21 (1991), pp. 45-66.

⁶For the history and strategic deployment of this icon during India’s struggle for independence see Rebecca M. Brown, “Spinning without Touching the Wheel: Anticolonialism, Indian Nationalism, and the Deployment of Symbol,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2009), pp. 230-245.

⁷The embroidered sampler has inspired other contemporary artists as well, most notably, Elaine Reichek. For an extended discussion of her work see Paula Birnbaum, “Elaine Reichek: Pixels, Bytes, and Stitches,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 18-35.

⁸In previous projects, Kina has used the melodramatic visuals of soap operas and deconstructed the tropical island paradise fantasy representations of Hawaii. For an overview of Kina’s earlier work see Sarah Giller Nelson, “Laura Kina,” *The New Authenticities: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation* (Chicago: Spertus Press, 2007), pp. 92-94.

⁹Clifford, 3.



Indigo Inscriptions

About the production of gendered and politicized authorship in the history of resistance and survival.

‘(Nevertheless) there are ways in which the sexuality and corporeality of the subject leave their traces or marks on the texts produced, just as we in turn must recognize that the processes of textual production also leave their trace or residue on the body of the writer (and readers)’- Elizabeth Grosz.

When Baroda, Gujarat, India based Shelly Jyoti and Devon Avenue, Chicago based Laura Kina take on ‘indigo’ as a topic in the production of a visual aesthetic discourse, their subjectivities as ‘women’ become imperative in the process. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, there would be a mutual inscription of sexual identities on to the subjects and their ‘objects’ of production. This process of gendering vis-à-vis production of an object/commodity, in turn results into the simultaneous politicization of the subject and the product, irrespective of their declared positioning within the realm of common social exchanges.

Seen within the context of an exhibition project, the works of both Jyoti and Kina come before the viewers/readers through a conscious agency, which encapsulates the authors’ gendered subjectivity and the inscription of the same on their works of

art. Though these two artists do not overtly position themselves as political subjects, the methods of production and the history of it draw attention to a crucial political debate that involves the issues like the global commodification of labor, women as the subjects and objects of consumption and the modes of resistance and survival undertaken by women all over the world, who are caught within the mechanisms and history of profit driven production-dissemination-consumption chain.

Hence, both Jyoti and Kina’s references to the Champaran Movement (1917-18) led by Mahatma Gandhi and the movement’s focus to the production of the famous blue dye called ‘indigo’, gain the status of a political metaphor, which is aesthetically detached from the current methods of commodity production while showing the capabilities of containing a critique on/of the same.

Champaran Movement was Mahatma Gandhi’s pioneering efforts to test the efficacy of his non-violent Satyagraha philosophy. After the Kheda Satyagraha in Kheda district of South Gujarat, where he organized the Patidars against the land revenue laws of the British, Gandhiji turned his attention to Champaran in North-West Bihar, where the landless tenants were forced to do the unprofitable indigo plantations. (In fact, Champaran and Kheda movements

happened almost simultaneously and history says that Sardar Vallabhai Patel played the leading role in Kheda movement and Gandhiji played the role of a spiritual leader. And this was one of the great learning lessons for Mahatma Gandhi). The indigo planters who mostly toiled in the plantations in horrendous working and living conditions were not allowed to cultivate the lands with food or other cash crops. Even the British officials of the time believed that the indigo dye made out of these plants and exported to textile conglomerates all over the world was stained by the blood of the hapless farmers in Bihar and Bengal.

Today, indigo is no longer an oppressive thing as the dye could be manufactured using chemicals. But the history of indigo cannot be forgotten as several uncelebrated lives were sacrificed within the plantations during the times since the 17th century. For Shelly and Laura, this history of these unsung people involves the history of women and their crafts too. Therefore, the selection of ‘Champaran and Indigo’ as a point of departure is a conscious political agency for these artists and by using the indigo metaphor as a bridge between the historical and contemporary role of women in the production (of both commodities and aestheticized commodities), they re-evoked a discourse that would analyze the role

of women in the contemporary world of production and consumption.

Shelly Jyoti calls her current suite of works generally as ‘Indigo Narratives’. A textile designer by profession and a visual artist by choice, Shelly has been working with textile workers and traditional crafts women for a long time. Her research interest in the history of craftswomen has led her to the history of Indigo. She makes a two way connection with the Azrak craftspeople who came to India from Balluchistan in early 17th century and settled in north Gujarat and with a contemporary artist, Laura Kina. Shelly uses this linkage to develop a narrative by relying heavily on the narratives around the indigo movement and the legacy of indigo and craftwork handed over from generations to generations of traditional craftswomen.

Shelly Jyoti’s narratives come in two different forms; one, as sculptural installations and two, as painted and embroidered two dimensional works on canvas. The sculptural installations, which are curiously kinetic, show diminutive human figures dangling from metal ropes. These figures are the emblematic human beings who were once oppressed by the draconian land laws of the colonizing government. Interestingly, these dangling figures suddenly draw parallel with the farmers of our times who are forced to commit suicide thanks to the



Indigo Inscriptions continued

imperial introduction of genetically modified seeds. The indigo victims are still around, in a new form under new forms of imperial governments, Jyoti seems to say.

Indigo Narratives become quite a poignant affair in the works like ‘Homage/Ballad of Woeful Tales’ and ‘Blued/Indigo Coolie’. In these sculptural works, the woman-man relationship within an oppressive system of production is emphasized through sensitively handcrafted buttons and through the iconization of a coolie/ menial worker’s uniform, which too is dyed with indigo. Shelly’s paintings in this series are in a way collaborative works with the Arzak craftspeople who carry on with a long tradition of indigo resist block printing technique and embroidery. Jyoti selects images from the lives of these women as well as the images related to the Champaran Movement and Gandhiji’s life. Each image has its own vital linkages with the present and the past, positing the works as a field of inscription of the gendered subjectivities of the author/s.

Creation of collaborative narratives is what inspires Laura Kina to her works. Kina does not directly refer to Champaran Movement. Instead, she reaches out to this particular referential point through the usage of the color indigo as the predominant background in her ‘handcrafted’ paintings, which are

abundant with the imageries from her local settings at Devon Avenue. Some of the images directly make linkages with the life of Gandhiji and what attracts the viewers’ eyes is Kina’s insistence on the local histories of a place, which is American and multicultural at the same time.

Devon Avenue in Chicago, which is a corridor of the South Asian and Jewish communities amply populated with the characteristics of migrant communities, has two roads named after Mahatma Gandhi and Golda Meir Boulevard, Indian and Israeli social reformers and political leaders respectively. The signages in and around Devon Avenue not only accentuate the history of the people who migrated to the place but also underlines their cultural and political leanings and their insistence on ‘difference’. Through the emphasis on difference, Kina creates a narrative, which with its intrinsic relationship with the craftswomen in India and the khadi clothe, places before us a discourse on ‘women and their productive labor’ in the larger context of contemporary times.

Women from the ‘Market Place’, a Mumbai based craftswomen’s collective work with Kina to create the ensemble of her works. In this way, these signage paintings using embroidery as a medium become an internal narrative of the women involved and also this narrative contains the gender and political

inscriptions of the author/s. Kina deliberately calls her works as ‘sampler’. Sampling a way to collaborate and appropriate, which could be double-edged seen from two different cultural perspectives. Collaboration and appropriation is a political act for creating a subaltern but unified narrative of expression but at the same time, it could be a critique on the ways in which the global corporations appropriate crafts and the craftswomen’s lives into their profit driven enterprises.

Laura Kina very consciously inscribes her socio-cultural positioning as a gendered and political subject in the selection of images. Without taking an overt stance of an Indophile, Kina makes an aesthetic linkage with the chosen thematic of indigo. Shelly Jyoti and Laura Kina together create a body of works that not only speaks of the de-politicized existence of craft in an exhibition space but also makes a statement on the politicized selves that become an agency in the production of a discourse on gender and gendered production of aesthetics and commodity.

The present project by these two artists becomes all the more important especially when we come to know that there are no existing visual documentations on Gandhiji’s involvement in Champaran. For the first time in history, Champaran movement and its peculiar connection with indigo is given

a visual representation and representation by two contemporary artists. And this goes beyond illustration and sympathetic affiliation as both Jyoti and Kina bring in their respective subjectivities to position their works within the textual discourse of the concerned history.

JohnyML
New Delhi
October 2009



Moving Materials: Reclaiming Histories of Migration

In the introduction to *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers*, Kobena Mercer states that “Migration throws objects, identities and ideas into flux...Taking account of life-changing journeys...deepen our understanding of the critical and creative role of estrangement and displacement...”¹ Mercer’s statement empowers mobility, viewing it as a crucible from where creativity struggles into productive action. The dynamic movement inherent in migration, though troubling and unsettling, acts as “critical and creative” perspectives that ultimately turn victimization into agency. For artists Laura Kina and Shelly Jyoti, materials hold the power to invoke histories of mobility, to tell stories and to empower change. In a unique collaboration, Kina and Jyoti utilize indigo and khadi fabric to retell a story of a torrid colonial past filled with displacement and relocation. Through the processes of making objects the artists reclaim the terror of indigo’s past and enable the material to create change.

Indigo and khadi in India’s history move through stories of colonization, rebellion, empowerment and struggles of independence. Through these two materials, the artists examine patterns of migration influenced by economies formed by the high demand for indigo – demand that inflicted cruelty upon communities, but ultimately also worked to form and shape

them. By reminding viewers of the fraught history surrounding these materials, Kina and Jyoti’s objects literally migrate through time and space and, in turn, cast a critical and productive eye towards the distressing history inherent in their chosen materials. Both in the creation and exhibition of the work, Jyoti’s *Indigo Narratives* and Kina’s *Devon Avenue Sampler* are displaced and re-placed into diverse spaces. From a multi-ethnic street in the heart of Chicago, Illinois to the small town of Bhuj, Gujarat, Kina and Jyoti’s work remind us of the innate motion situated within art objects.

From the outset, the coming together of artists Laura Kina and Shelly Jyoti is unusual. Based out of Chicago, Kina self-associates with a mixed racial and ethnic heritage. Born to Japanese/Anglo American Christian parents and holding both a BFA and an MFA, Kina creates work that emerges from an academic and Western art discourse. Inspired by the ethnically-diverse avenue of Chicago, *Devon Avenue Sampler* makes visual the ever-changing diversity of immigrant communities. Jyoti, on the other hand, holds bachelor’s and graduate degrees in English literature. From this literary background, the Baroda, India-based artist presents *Indigo Narratives*, a series that appropriately finds its inspiration in a literary text, *Neel Darpan*, an 1860 play written by Dinabandhu Mitra. Through the narrative of

indigo in pre-, present-, and post-colonial India, Jyoti’s project traces hierarchies within indigo farming imposed by the British upon the indigenous farmers and craftsmen of India.

Through the three-part series of *Indigo Narratives*, Jyoti chronologically moves through the macro history of indigo brought to Bhuj, India in the 1600s to the colonial exploitation of indigo farming and craft and the subsequent intervention of Mahatma Ghandi. Now, in 2009, Jyoti arrived in contemporary Bhuj to work with 9th generation Azrak artisans to give form to her sculptural textiles. Descendants of migrating communities² from Sindh and Baluchistan, these artisans represent a history of “interchanges within communities.” Thus, through the complicated history of Indigo, Jyoti’s work refuses a stagnant conceptualization of colonizer and colonized, insisting on the influencing powers of communities upon each other. In the final component of this series, *An Ode to “Neel Darpan,”* Jyoti created a visual conception of the literary play. Each panel of the triptych exhibits hawks with lotuses in their beaks rising over a ground with worms. The hawks, representing the British colonizers, twist and manipulate lotuses in their beaks. The lotuses signal planters, British and Indian individuals who acted as intercessors and translators between the British colonizers and the indigo farmers, here represented as the hardworking

and severely underappreciated worms. Jyoti’s decision to utilize *Neel Darpan*, a text the artist likens to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* published just a few years earlier in the United States, highlights the importance of a text that shed light upon a specific and cruel political and social situation. In addition, however, Jyoti selected a text that was translated by a British missionary and distributed in the United Kingdom where it raised awareness among the commonwealth population of its own people’s exploitation of indigo farmers.³ Thus, *Indigo Narratives* highlight the impact of migrations as evoked by the spatial movements of artisans from Sindh and Baluchistan to Bhuj, by the collision of a British missionary and an Indian text, by the return of Ghandi from South Africa to India, and finally by Jyoti’s own movement from Baroda to Bhuj.⁵

Such histories of colonization, immigration, transnationalism, and the collision and influence of cultures upon one another are as relevant in the American diaspora. In Kina’s work, the blending of cultures is dizzying. *Devon Avenue*, the multi-cultural stretch of Chicago that serves as both Kina’s home and influence, is situated in the heart of Little India and boasts a myriad of immigrant communities. The street, quite literally, explodes with signage signifying the intense diversity of the place. Kina’s work



Moving Materials continued

brings forth diaspora in all its colorful vivacity, and yet invokes the struggles inherent in migration and relocation. For example, in *Devon Avenue Sampler: Eyebrows Threading*, Kina re-creates a sign advertising the low cost of beauty services suggesting an immigrant-run business. While the sign advertises eyebrow threading and waxing, it can be imagined displayed prominently on a nail salon's window. Such salons are typically associated with Asian women who have developed a significant skill in order to create a livelihood.⁶ Embroidered on khadi fabric and dyed an indigo blue, Kina's work indirectly reminds of the Indigo narratives of India so implicit in Jyoti's work, suggesting both the area's identity as Little India and the economic struggle that, though contextually different, are experienced by both Jyoti's Indigo artisans and Kina's immigrant communities. Still, like Devon Avenue itself, Kina's work extends beyond only an Indian diasporic identity to represent a jumble of cultures, interwoven but not without distinct borders. Kina's work is a reminder of the strength of identity and history. While the subjects of her pieces hint at a myriad of cultures – Jewish, Pakistani, Russian, Desi, Vietnamese, Muslim, etc – literally woven into fabrics suggestive of another and specific culture, each one stands on its own. Kina's Devon Avenue is no melting pot where cultures come to melt into one another,

losing identity and inimitability. Instead, it is a conglomeration of cultures; each undeniably influenced and impacted, yet still determinedly its unique own. Situated at this point of cultural collision where Kina and Jyoti's projects meet sits another point of intersection – one as fundamental as their chosen mediums. Here resides decades of conversations and dialogues about the role of textiles in fine art. As art historian Paula Birnbaum reminds, "Since the early 1970s feminine artists have been using embroidery as a vehicle to reclaim female agency...and to question the validity of a hierarchy of genres in the history of art."⁶ Artists such as Elaine Reichek and Judy Chicago have sought to "[unravel] the tradition of the embroidered sampler" to "critique the patriarchal and modernist assumptions of our culture."⁷ Like Reichek and Chicago, Kina and Jyoti's work resonate with feminist concerns and utilize embroidery as legitimate art mediums. However, Kina and Jyoti have both extended beyond a feminist concern for historical representation and instead turned their art into vehicles to assist women in contemporary society. By employing fair trade women collectives based in India to give form to their artistic concepts, the artists provide business for these collectives, owned and operated by, and with the purpose of providing, women with the "opportunity and the chance to

earn a dignified living."⁸ By turning their "high art" concepts over to the hands of craftswoman, Kina and Jyoti do not merely critique "patriarchal... assumptions," but also tangibly affect lives.⁹ They reclaim not only textiles as a legitimate art form, but also the history of labor associated with indigo. They utilize the past to empower the women of the present. Textiles, while questioning the [masculine] perspectives of high art versus low art, also arrest attention on the actual materiality of an art object. With its tactile quality, textiles remind the viewer of the objects very object-ness – inviting the viewer to touch, handle, and thus move.¹⁰ As Kina and Jyoti's projects moved from studios to cooperatives back to studios and finally into the galleries for exhibition, they are shipped across oceans, adjusted and handled by innumerable hands, building and holding the meaning that will ultimately be inseparable from their physical presence. More importantly, in the journeys that each object will travel, the art itself will impact, remind of and change its surroundings. Mirroring the interaction of humans through migration and mobility, the movements of art objects inform and influence every destination.

Finally when these objects reach the galleries meant for viewers' eyes, they will already hold weighty meaning from decades of conflicted powers in India, from cultures coming together in the immigrant-heavy

society of the United States, from the empowerment of women, and from the transnational and nuanced diversity of the world. For Laura Kina and Shelly Jyoti, art is an enabler. It enables history to influence and affect the decisions of the present. Art questions and dismantles its own hierarchies to bring light upon the implications forced upon simple materials. Finally, it enables such implications to be questioned and reworked to create tangible change, not just in perceptions of history, but in the status quo of today's societies.

Michelle Yee

November 2009

New York City, NY

¹Kobena Mercer, "Introduction" in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 7.

²Shelly Jyoti, Artist's Statement, 2009.

³It is important to note that Reverend James Long, the English missionary who translated, published and distributed the text, was arguably more concerned with the dissemination of Biblical values and norms upon an indigenous (and presumably heathen) population than with the rights of the farmers as human beings. A relevant and interesting perspective is presented in Purabi Panwar's article, "Vernacular Dressing and English Re-dressings: Translating *Neel Darpan*" in *Translation Today Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (October 2004), 6 November 2009, <http://www.anukriti.net/tt/vernacular.asp>.

⁴Shelly Jyoti, Artist's Statement, 2009.

⁵Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles, eds. *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity & Change in the 21st Century* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center press, 2003), 240. Lai and Arguelles present the staggering statistic that "30 percent of the 22,000 nail manicure salons in the United States" are owned by Vietnamese immigrants, primarily women.

⁶Paula Birnbaum, "Elaine Reichek: Pixels, Bytes, and Stitches" *CAA Art Journal* vol. 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008), 19. For Judy Chicago, see Paula Harper. "The Chicago Resolutions." *Art in America* vol. 88 no. 6 (June 2000), 112-15, 137-8

⁷Birnbaum, 19.

⁸Pushpika Freitas, "Our Mission: Legacies of Love," *MarketPlace: Handword of India, Mumbai, India*. 9 October 2009. www.marketplaceindia.org/MPI

⁹Birnbaum, 19.

¹⁰My use of the term "object-ness" admits and is indebted to a lengthy and complex art historical discourse about the art object as a physical presence versus a mechanical reproduction. I admit that I cannot here give Michael Fried's 1967 article "Art and Objecthood" and Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" the discussion that their texts justifiably demand. Thus I hope that it suffices to state my own impetus to use the term object-ness as an apt phrase to underscore the demand of an object to be physically handled and thus to exchange hands.



INDIGO

