



The view from Aaditi Joshi's thirteenth floor apartment in Mumbai.

TO THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR: THOUGHTS ON PLASTICS, PROXIMITY, AND PRESENCE

Words by Leah Triplett Harrington

Aaditi Joshi lives in a thirteenth-floor apartment in Mumbai, India, a short walk from the Borivali Hills in Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The corner windows in her apartment face both east and west, with a view of several other high-rise buildings and the Hills. She often shoots short Instagram stories of this view and the sunset, capturing its particularly ochre orange. I know this not because I've been to her apartment, to Mumbai, or even met her in person. We met online when I interviewed her in the spring of 2016 about her colossal new sculpture, made of painted plastics and an LED light and presented in the exhibition "Megacities Asia" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Since then, we've kept in regular contact between Mumbai and Boston, corresponding with WhatsApp and Instagram, mostly between longer dialogues over phone and email.

Our four-year virtual conversation shapes my understanding of the critical relationship between the artist and the curator/critic (in this case, Joshi and me). Distance and place are more than just geographic considerations—they shape how we understand each other and our cultural and spatial separations. Is it possible to be present in both, although digitally?

It's apt that the relationship between Joshi and myself hinges on electronics. First, the vehicles of our communications—our cell phones, the Internet—rely on plastics. This ubiquitous material has been the primary element of Joshi's painting, drawing, sculpture, video, and photographic work. As with her work at the MFA, Joshi finds, transforms, and crafts discarded plastics into highly formal assemblages in her painting and sculpture; in her video, photography, and drawing, plastics are framed as a way to document an instant as it evolves and continues into the next. Secondly, electronic, cross-cultural communications are natural to us, having both come of age in the early 2000s. Joshi was born in 1980, the first year in a decade of explosive globalism, consumerism, and individualism. People became more singular than

ever before (see: the iPhone) even though we became more connected than ever before (see: the Internet). In contemporary art, identity politics and international biennial circuits framed critical discussion on place.

So back to her thirteenth-floor window. I often catch the scene here on an Instagram story, sometimes quite early on the East Coast when the sun is setting in her time zone. What does it mean that I'm watching it from my home in Boston? In other words, how does my positionality affect how I'm seeing her work? Do I need to consider the decades of writing and exhibition-making on globalism to offer a useful critical response? I want to view her work through an appreciation of global simultaneousness—that is, we are all together at once, though dispersed and different, as Instagram demonstrates. This approach

would dispense with the homogenizing exoticization of the international biennial; instead, this framework will be firmly present in the sensitivity and subjectivity of Joshi's work.

Even though we are so in touch, I know I've missed out on much of Joshi's work because we are physically distant. Her sculptural work, delicate and precise while also malleable and metamorphic, is so idiosyncratic that I know up-close, in-person viewing yields so much more than pixels. Plastic is an inherently ambivalent material—it's offered the world as much

good as it has bad, arguably—and it changes with the slightest shifts in chemistry and context. Her plastics require a presence.

"There is nothing special about this material," Joshi insists to me during a phone conversation last July. In our current age, artists, curators, and audiences demand a thematic specificity—in other words, they all but reject formalism and its focus on form alone. Joshi's work is as formal as it is thematically ambiguous. Is it a celebration of plastics? A condemnation of waste? Maybe both? "I have to let the work speak for itself," she says when I ask



Aaditi Joshi, *Untitled (17)*, 2018. Polypropylene bag, wood, 31 x 31 x 3 inches. All artwork courtesy of the artist.



her about the many messages that audiences may read into her work. "As an artist, I always wonder where it will go tomorrow," she says, implying her resistance to singular readings of her work. There is much more beneath the surface.

In 2017, about a year after the "Megacities" exhibition that brought us together, Joshi sent me a Google Drive full of small-scale works of white cement and strips of plastic. With the effect of a flattened heap of trash, they toggled between painting and sculpture, and were so modest where the "Megacities" work was so grand. Inside were images of smaller, more intimate works. Neat strips of yellow, pink, white, and purple plastics were embedded into opaque slabs of opaque concrete. In some, the plastics are confetti engulfing the concrete; in others, the heavy and opaque concrete takes over the airy, sheer plastic.

Where was the body in these new works? The figure, and Joshi's own body, had a presence in her work until early the 2010s. Trained as a painter at Mumbai's L.S. Raheja School of Art, Joshi indeed was a figure painter during school and in the years after she graduated in 2001. In dry pastel drawings from 2007, close-ups of ears, eyes, hands, and feet are wrapped in plastic as if shrink-wrapped. She herself appears in a 49-second video from 2008, *Suffocation*, which I showed at a pop-up at Gallery Kayafas in 2017. In it, we see Joshi's face straight-on, a clear plastic bag over her head. Her eyes are closed, heightening the sense of danger in the scene, while she breathes in and out, the sound of her inhale and exhale amplified to a theatrical degree. These early works consider our bodies' reliance on plastic, emphasizing the dangers therein.

Curators and writers alike have seized this theme in her work, often implying that her interest in plastics is rooted in a 2005 tragedy in Mumbai. That summer, during an especially heavy monsoon season, plastic waste choked Mumbai's drainage system, causing the deaths of 1,094 people in what are now known as the Maharashtra floods. Of course, using plastics as a theme and a material assumed a new significance after this disaster, but it was not the impetus for her use of plastics, as she's emphasized to me several times. Joshi is much more interested in the material transformation of the plastic, and how in one instance it's useful, and in another, it's a deadly detritus.

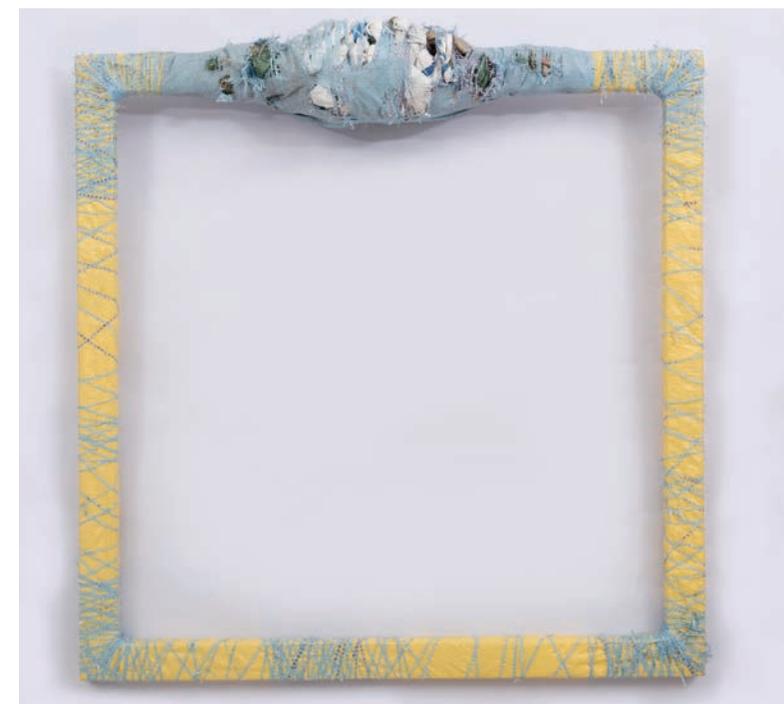


By March 2016, when she spent several weeks in Boston creating *Untitled* for "Megacities," the body's presence evolved into physicality of the work. Once the show was open and Joshi returned to Mumbai, she would watch as viewers bent and crept under the hulk of plied plastics. *Untitled* itself had a bodily presence, its base being an LED light armature, with bits of painted plastics accumulated on it like sinew and muscle. The clear plastics came from single-use plastics, the kind manufactured in Mumbai, and were heated by a small flame, which melted them into lacy particles. Amassed, they were a heap that to me recalled the floating trash islands that stipple our oceans. No matter where we are in the world, we use and discard plastics; our trash connects us.

To "Megacities" co-curator Al Miner, Joshi's installation evoked Duchamp's *Twelve Hundred Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling over a Stove* (1938). Duchamp and his ready-mades were a conceptual underpinning of "Megacities." Duchamp dots the catalogue entries, and white-cube aesthetics and geography-based organization informed the exhibition's layout (Joshi's *Untitled* was grouped with work by fellow Indian artists Subodh Gupta and Hema Upadhyay). Then, as now, I question these Euro-American, Modernism-informed approaches. Is there no way to escape Duchamp in a North American presentation of found-object sculptures created by Asian artists? Must Modern, European white men always dictate our looking?

In this observation, I'm reminded that her work is purposefully ambivalent so as to be meditative, taking viewers beyond easy categories of modern or not, formal or figurative. "The process is the understanding," she tells me, meaning such binaries are useless. As she makes, the work waits, she says, transforming itself and "taking you somewhere else." Where is the somewhere else—an endpoint—and where is the starting point? It's this line of questioning that illuminates where I am starting from—in other words, my identity as a white, middle-class woman from North America—when I look at these works.

"The contemporary art world does not have a problem legitimizing art histories dealing with the transnational or the non-West, but the discipline of art history still seems to lean towards only doing so through a multiculturalist approach that homogenizes difference," writes Alpesh Kantilal



(opposite top) Aaditi Joshi, *Untitled*, 2017. White Cement, polypropylene bags, resin, 12 x 7.5 x 1/2 inches.

(opposite bottom) Aaditi Joshi, *Untitled (8)*, 2018. White cement, Polypropylene bags, Resin, stainless steel mesh armature, 9 x 10 x 0.5 inches.

(above top) Aaditi Joshi, still from *Suffocation*, 2008. Single channel video, color with sound. 49 seconds.

(above bottom) Aaditi Joshi, *Untitled (9)*, 2018. Polypropylene bag, wood, 32 x 30 x 5 inches.



Patel in the preface to his 2017 monograph, *Productive failure: Writing queer transnational South Asian art histories*. It is this sort of homogenization that I worry about when I write about Joshi's work. Am I flattening it with my unavoidably Euro-American perspective? Is it possible for me to think objectively about the work? These are questions that stop me short when I think about artists working outside the United States.

Patel offers me a framework to approach some answers. He cites 1987 words from Indian post-colonial and feminist literary scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which outline a layered, dimensional structure for understanding how to move past this very Euro-American problem in the twenty-first century. "I argue that critics and historians should implicitly configure the artwork as a subject, which materializes as a subject-in-making...rather than as an *object to be explained*" (emphasis mine). In other words, I should stop trying to escape my own subjectivity. And as Joshi's work reminds me, there is ambivalence in this world, and in-betweenness that always affects transformation. Personal investment is engagement with the work.

This spring, as the global pandemic gripped India and the United States alike with equal force, Joshi sent me a series of small pen-and-ink drawings she'd been working on since lockdown. "During this time what was with me, in my core thoughts, were the memories of the making process and my impressions of the work I left undone," she said, describing her feelings during the early lockdown days. Though she couldn't work with her plastics or her sculpture away from her studio, she kept a sketchbook handy and started to draw the colorful, plastic-based sculptures she had been working on just before lockdown.

She sent me another Google Drive folder of what she'd been working on pre-lockdown: plastic and primary-colored as ever, these pieces are pared down in texture and structure. Primarily wooden frames enveloped in softly hued bubble wrap and other plastics, these untitled works are gracefully minimal. My favorites of these are ones in which a contorted knot of plastics bulge from the smoothness. The sketches she sent me were of frenetic, twisting lines, understandable compositions given the anxiety of the time.

As with her sculptural works, she had started with a corner, working outward. Gradually, she shifted into more spontaneity. Instead of working from an image of her work—a fixed idea of what it should look like—she let line and shape lead her, a process parallel to the

"subject-in-making" framework Patel suggests. "I soon realized there was no point in just keeping thinking about these works, it was not satisfying my urge of my creating," Joshi said. Sketching for her usually took the form of a preparatory drawing for her. But in lockdown, she reversed this process and the mark-making of drawing was an end and beginning all at once.

"In between stages—presence—are inspiring me constantly," she tells me from her apartment. It's noon my time at 10:30 p.m. her time. "That in-between moment...in the end, there is nothing left," she says. She's talking about why Instagram is such an appropriate vehicle for her work, as it documents and accumulates moments. But she doesn't make work specifically for the platform. Instead, she shares moments she finds particularly powerful. "Reflections don't stay for a long time—they are just momentary, and are neither complete artwork nor meaningless thoughts," she says, describing them more like "seeds" to the next steps in her work.

Frequently the moments she elects to share on Instagram include videos of her floor-to-ceiling open windows. I'm

so present with them, I don't know these aren't snapshots until her billowy white curtains begin to move. I think of what Joshi wrote to me in our most recent exchange: "To touch can be toxic is what 2020 has taught us," she wrote, continuing, "On the other hand, it has trained us how an association can be nurtured even through isolation." I think of Patel and his suggestion for personal investment and engagement, and that these can take many forms. But before I can think too long, the image is gone. //

Leah Triplett Harrington is editor-at-large at Boston Art Review.

Aaditi Joshi, *Untitled*, 2016. Fused plastic bags, acrylic paint, LED lights, wood armature site-specific installation, MFA Boston. Photo by Smita Jacob / Hogger & Co.



Aaditi Joshi, *Untitled (6)*, 2019. Polypropylene bag, wood, 8 x 8 x 1/2 inches.

Aaditi Joshi with *Untitled*, 2016. Fused plastic bags, acrylic paint, LED lights, wood armature. Site-specific installation, MFA Boston. Photo by Smita Jacob / Hogger & Co.

