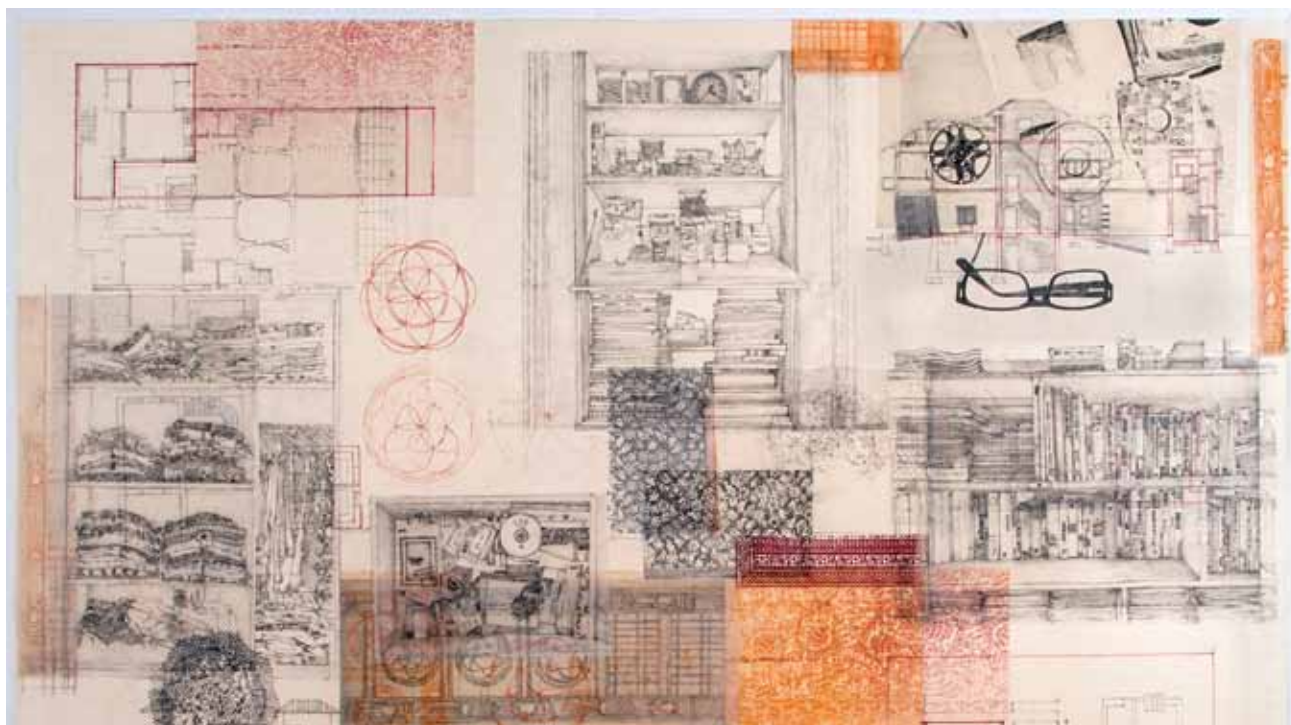


DRAWING

on Memories

Nandini Bagla Chirimar, a New York based mixed media artist, says as a child she was excited by what a simple pencil could create on a piece of paper and to this day, this is what she enjoys most about drawing



Family Portait (920)

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Nandini Chirimar at her New York studio

Originally from the Pink City, Jaipur, Nandini Bagla Chirimar moved to the US where she started her artistic career three decades ago. Her work draws on thoughts and images that populate her mind as she goes through her daily life as an artist, mother, daughter and homemaker. In an email interview to Art Soul Life from New York, where she is currently based, Nandini tells us memories and how they relate to our present is an important theme in her work and she often wonders how we become who we are - is it genetic, environmental, circumstantial or purely coincidental? How much space in our mind is occupied by memories versus the present? "For the past few years I have been working with my concept of 'Unwritten Wills', in which I explore the larger question of what we receive from people and places that are important to us," she says. "Their true legacy, one that does not come in a will or legal document." Nandini says her explorations answer some questions for her, but many remain, and she continues to think, draw and print. "It is my hope that my work will generate thoughts about these important questions that many of us reflect on in our lives," she adds. Often touted as one of the most promising contemporary artists around, she studied art for two years in Delhi before leaving for the US to complete her BFA in Drawing and Painting from Cornell University on a full scholarship. This was followed with a residency at Skowhegan School of Art, and an MFA in Painting from The Hoffberger School, Maryland Institute College of Art. She has spent four years in Japan studying woodblock printing from Taika Kinoshita and also trained under Dhiraj Choudhury, Arun Bose, and later Vijay Kumar. Taking her learnings full circle, she currently teaches Japanese woodblock printing and experimental printmaking, among other things. Her work is in many public and private collections, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, US Department of State, Art in Embassies Program, RPG Collection and Bucks County Esthetics Center. Here are the excerpts of the interview:

You grew up in Jaipur, came to Delhi to study at the Delhi College of Art and then moved to the US. But your affection for drawing must've started much before you enrolled for your BFA. How did it all begin?

I loved drawing as far as I can remember back as a child. In my art classes at Maharani Gayatri Devi School, Jaipur, one of my favourite places was the 'Art Cottage'. This was a little house where our art teacher Miss Das used to set up beautiful still life and plant compositions for us to draw. We had low tables so we could sit on the



The artist immersed deeply in her work at her studio

ground and observe our subjects at eye level. I remember vividly drawing and painting these from various angles and light and shade effects, and enjoying every moment of it. At home, my parents had a large collection of art books, which included comprehensive individual volumes on many famous artists. I devoured these books and started drawing from them. Especially during holidays, my close friend and I would sit for hours learning about the artists and drawing from their books using pencil, charcoal, pen and ink. As I did this, I started following the lines of what I saw around me with my eyes and wanting to translate it into drawing. The idea of creating a new reality on paper fascinated me. Growing up in Jaipur, I was surrounded by beautiful architecture, art and textiles, which became part of my consciousness. I felt inspired by the composition and colours in miniature and folk paintings. I keenly observed the architecture in the city and how miniature painting artists translated it into two dimensional painting in their work. I loved the fabric patterns from Sanganer, the centre for block printing near Jaipur, and visited the artisans to see how the blocks were carved and used to print fabric.

As I experienced the above, I found I enjoyed drawing and training my eye to see the overall

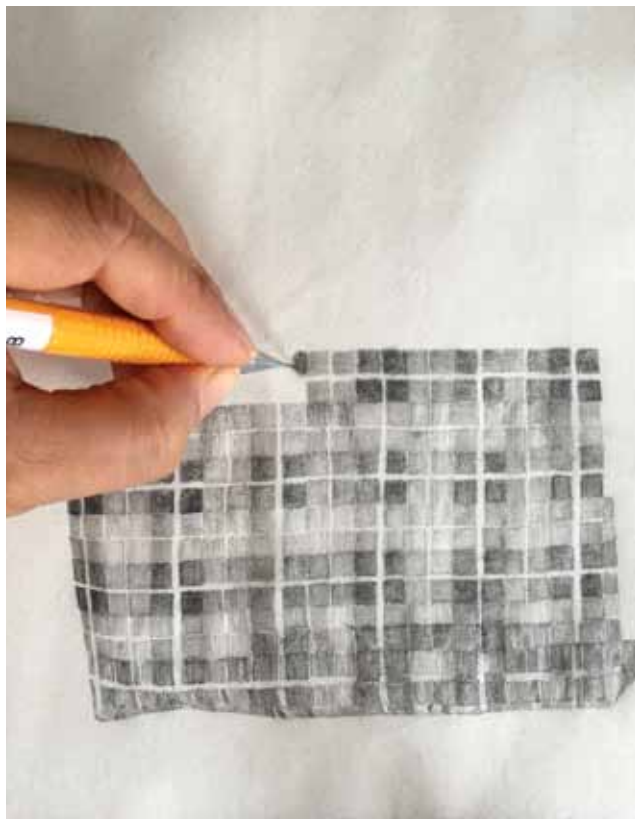
proportions as well as the smallest details in my subject. I was excited by what a simple pencil could create on a piece of paper. To this day, this is what I enjoy most about drawing.

What's the difference between art as it is taught in India and the West?

I found that basic art teaching methods in my art college in Delhi and my undergraduate department at Cornell were quite similar. However, one difference I found was at Cornell there were many courses in other subjects built into the curriculum. Since the art department was part of a much larger university, I could choose between extensive offerings in Art History, English, Computer Science, Philosophy, Business or pretty much any subject. I felt this enriched my art education greatly. Of course, this was possible because I went to a large university - I am not sure how it would be at undergraduate programmes in dedicated art schools.

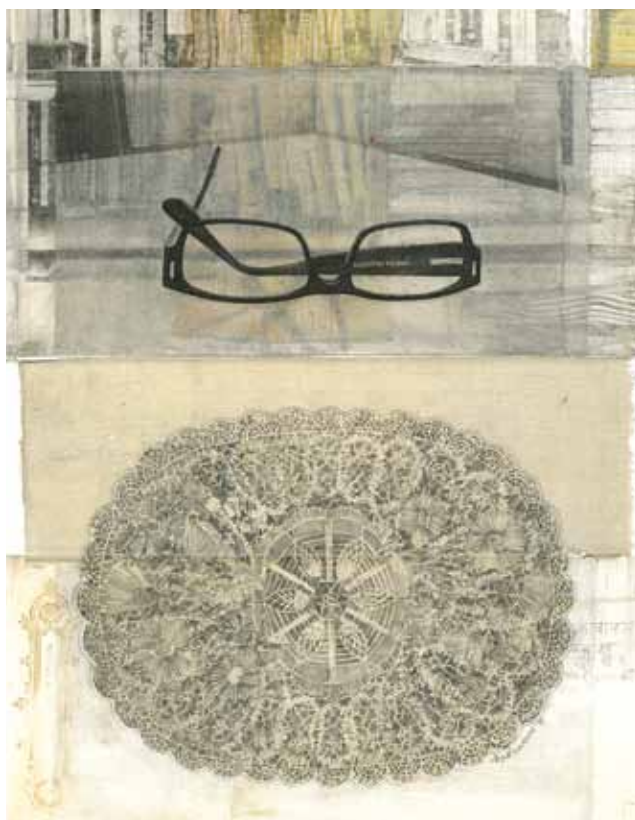
Please explain your style of work, the inspiration and thought processes that go behind it.

My work draws on thoughts and images that populate my mind as I go through my daily life



as an artist, mother, daughter and homemaker living in New York. I explore things that become significant in our lives, and how/if they start to define our identity. Autobiographical elements are used to touch upon larger phenomenon, including tradition, memories, relationships, feelings, death, time and our current busy lives. Memories and how they relate to our present is an important theme in my work. Thoughts of people and places, those far away, and those who are no more, surface as I go about my life. The emotions that accompany these thoughts acquire an abstract, sometimes overwhelming life of their own. They become a visual presence in my work through incessant, detailed line and colour.

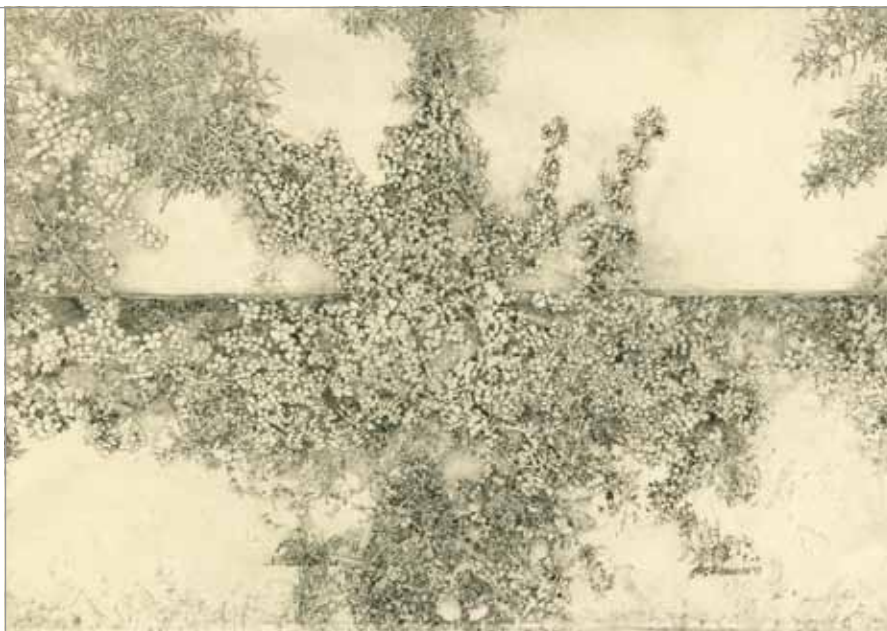
Researching everyday objects for their function in our lives, and their social significance, is part of my process. I draw from maps, cities, architecture, houses, plants, everyday objects, clothing, books, patterns, letters, photographs and miscellaneous personal belongings. Works on paper, including drawing and printmaking form a large part of my artistic practice. I work extensively on Japanese paper using pencil, pen, watercolour, etching, chine collé and woodblock printing. The translucencies in this paper allow for experimental printing and layering techniques. Watercolour, gold leaf, sewing and small objects are also often used. Sometimes the paper is cut, rolled or stacked to make relief work. Other mediums I work with include thread, handmade paper, photography, digital and object based work.



Most of your work is very detailed with drawing, etching, woodblock printing, chine-colle, thread, gold leaf, watercolour etc. How much of research goes into each work?

I feel each work of art results from everything one has learned and experienced. While a specific piece might take a certain number of hours to make, it is the years of research, learning and experimentation that actually make the piece. My artistic research takes three forms - research about the concepts, materials and techniques.

I think about and document my own life, thoughts and emotions in detail. I talk with people and research places, traditions and things that I'm interested in. I take thousands of photographs and collect objects that inspire me. My studio closet is filled with drawers upon drawers of things that I have collected and continue to research. I also enjoy researching and finding art supplies that help me achieve what I would like visually, right from simple pencils to specialized glues. Drawing tools being some of



His Garden Grows

my main materials, I have tried many types of pencils and pens, from regular drawing pencils to highly specialized, thinnest possible mechanical pencils and pens. I find each of these create different kinds of line and tone, and when drawing, lay them out and choose the one that is most suitable for the type of line I want. The same goes for brushes, paint, and surfaces. Over the years I have worked with watercolour, acrylic, oil, gouache, tempera, paper, fabric, thread and many other materials. While each of these was suitable for what I was doing then, I have found paper to be the most suitable medium for my current work. I spent almost two years learning and experimenting with various types of papers and glues before I could find the ones that worked best for my process. I like using the fine differences between Japanese papers, often combining them with Western papers to create translucencies and history in my pieces. This was only possible after I really understood the different fibres and paper making processes. My studio drawers are full of dozens of types of papers and glues, and I continue trying out new ones to achieve more variations.

The third thing I love to research is artistic techniques. In addition to drawing and painting, I have been researching printmaking and chine colle techniques extensively over the last few years. I have taken classes in (and

I work with pencil and pen on Japanese Kozo paper to make detailed drawings. Printmaking is an important part of my work. I print on Japanese paper using experimental techniques, and layer these prints with drawings to make mixed media pieces.

still continue to) various methods, like etching, collagraph, Japanese woodblock, viscosity, relief, solar plate and chine colle. Part of my research is also reading books about it and working with artists who use similar materials. This has enabled me to develop my own experimental printmaking and layering process using Japanese paper, something I also now enjoy teaching. I find it extremely exciting to keep researching and learning techniques to achieve good craftsmanship and new visual qualities in my work.

How has living in New York helped you grow as an artist?

Living in New York has given me an opportunity to see a large amount of art through the fantastic exhibitions in its museums, galleries, art fairs and institutions. Much of it has been from all over the world. This, combined with the presence of large scale public art throughout the city has been extremely inspiring for me. I have also been fortunate to get to know many wonderful artists here, and also become part of two print shop communities where I work and teach. There are a lot of resources for artists available which have been very helpful in developing my practice. I have been able to take specialized classes and easily find a huge variety of Japanese paper and other art supplies which have added greatly to my work.

How did you get drawn to printmaking and the Japanese Kozo paper?

Many years ago I had the good fortune of meeting Professor Arun Bose at an art event in New York. He was teaching printmaking at Lehman College at the time, and accepted me as his student. Meeting Prof Bose and learning printmaking from him was life changing for me. I spent a few wonderful years learning etching, viscosity, solar plate and



Plans, Dreams and Destiny

collagraph techniques from him. He showed me many complex processes and I have been hooked to printmaking ever since. I then had the opportunity to live in Tokyo for a few years, and was able to find another inspiring teacher, Taika Kinoshita Sensei, who taught me Japanese woodblock printing for four years. He also introduced me to Japanese paper, including Kozo paper. Despite language differences, we were able to start working using gestures and dictionaries and with time grew to communicate easily. I learned everything about this magnificent ancient art from him. I discovered it used a whole different set of tools and techniques than Western printmaking, and the aesthetic was very different too. The tools themselves were like little works of art. It was fascinating to learn the process, and added a whole new depth and dimension to my work. I have also been teaching Japanese woodblock printing here in New York, and am happy I can make more people aware of this ancient art form. Kinoshita Sensei also taught me several other techniques, including gluing with Japanese nori, and introduced me to Japanese paper. This was the start of my love of Japanese paper, which transformed my practice entirely.

Where do all these creative ideas come from?

For me they come from what I see, think and feel as I go through life. My interactions with people, art, places. I feel as if my life experiences get embedded in my mind and take visual form as I make art. My ideas also come from the work itself. Once I start drawing, painting or printing, the work acquires a life of its own and starts to speak to

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me about what it needs next. Ideas also come to me from the materials I use. Often, if I'm stuck, I pick up a new pen or ink to work with, and I find my answers as I use the material.

You've had shows both in India and abroad. Where do you get more appreciative audience for your kind of work?

I have been fortunate to get support and positive responses to my work in both India and New York.

How do you rate Indian Contemporary artists with their western counterparts?

I believe art is universal, and an artist is an artist from within, regardless of where they live and practice. ■