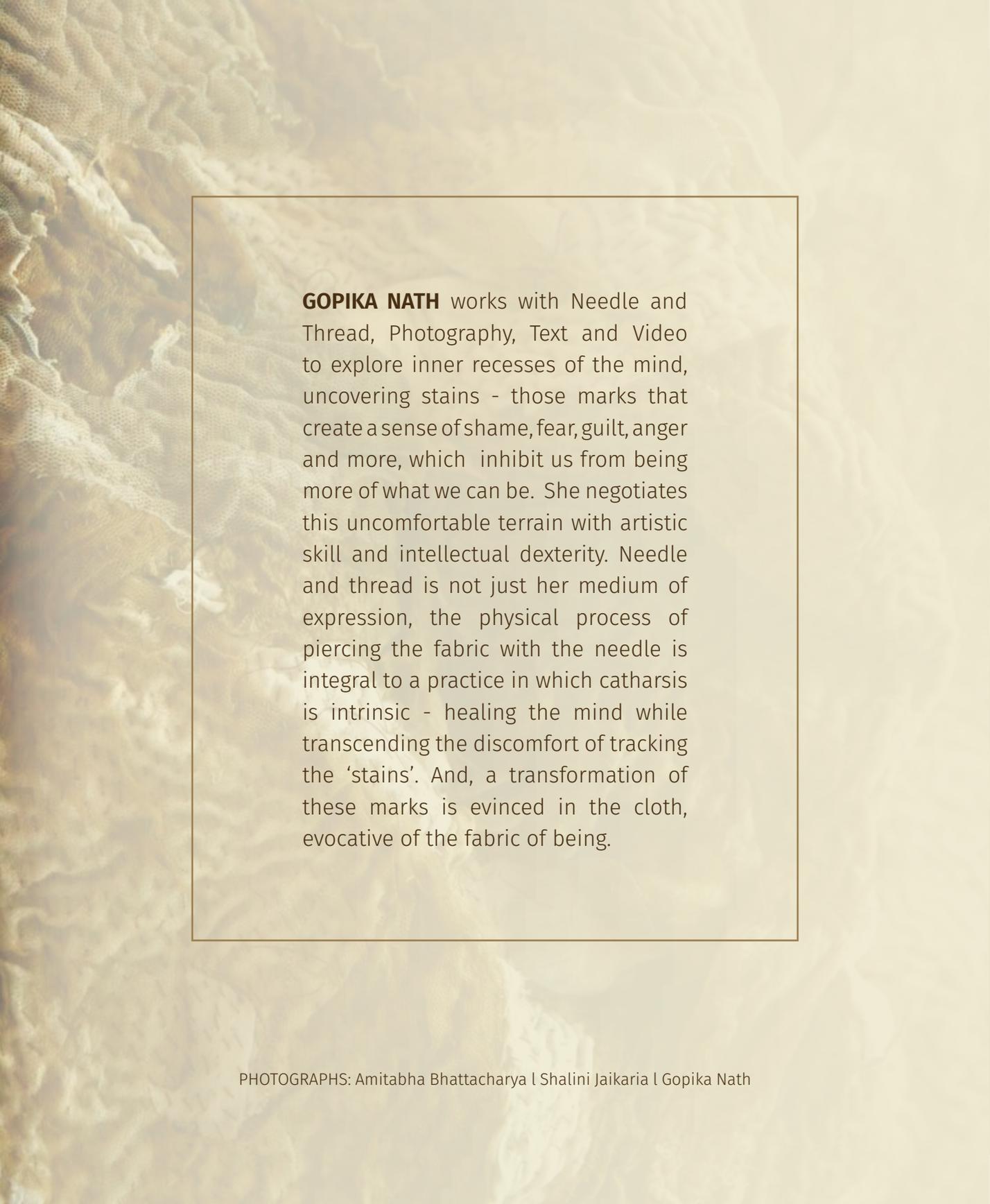


The Piercing Needle

Recent works

by

Gopika Nath



GOPIKA NATH works with Needle and Thread, Photography, Text and Video to explore inner recesses of the mind, uncovering stains - those marks that create a sense of shame, fear, guilt, anger and more, which inhibit us from being more of what we can be. She negotiates this uncomfortable terrain with artistic skill and intellectual dexterity. Needle and thread is not just her medium of expression, the physical process of piercing the fabric with the needle is integral to a practice in which catharsis is intrinsic - healing the mind while transcending the discomfort of tracking the 'stains'. And, a transformation of these marks is evinced in the cloth, evocative of the fabric of being.

TOPOGRAPHY OF A STITCHED LANDSCAPE

by Ina Puri

Gopika Nath's studio in Palam Vihar is a quiet space, filled with plants and the soothing sounds of pigeons murmuring on the window ledges. A home that is far away from the bustling lanes of the city, where a cacophony of traffic sounds and human voices mark the existence of another world, eight floors below. Within, the sounds recede. There is the distant humming of an old Mohammed Rafi song and you walk into a domestic space, with an air of quietude and peacefulness. The artist, seated on the floor, is completely absorbed in the act of stitching. The rhythmic motions of her needle piercing through the fabric, emerging only to dip again. Gradually, the spell is broken and she looks up smiling, gesturing at the work she is holding in her hands, flexing her long fingers cramped from long hours of work. She offers you tea and narrates her story about the Chai-wallah.

The topography of the stitched landscape now spreads before you, its contour lines and pressure graphs mapping her private journey. Nostalgia and hope form a part of her visionary landscape. The glittering cosmic view intimately framed in a miniature format which seeks to deliberately dissolve, rather than replicate, the visible. Her works are an abstractionist's psalm; sparsely ascetic and spiritual.

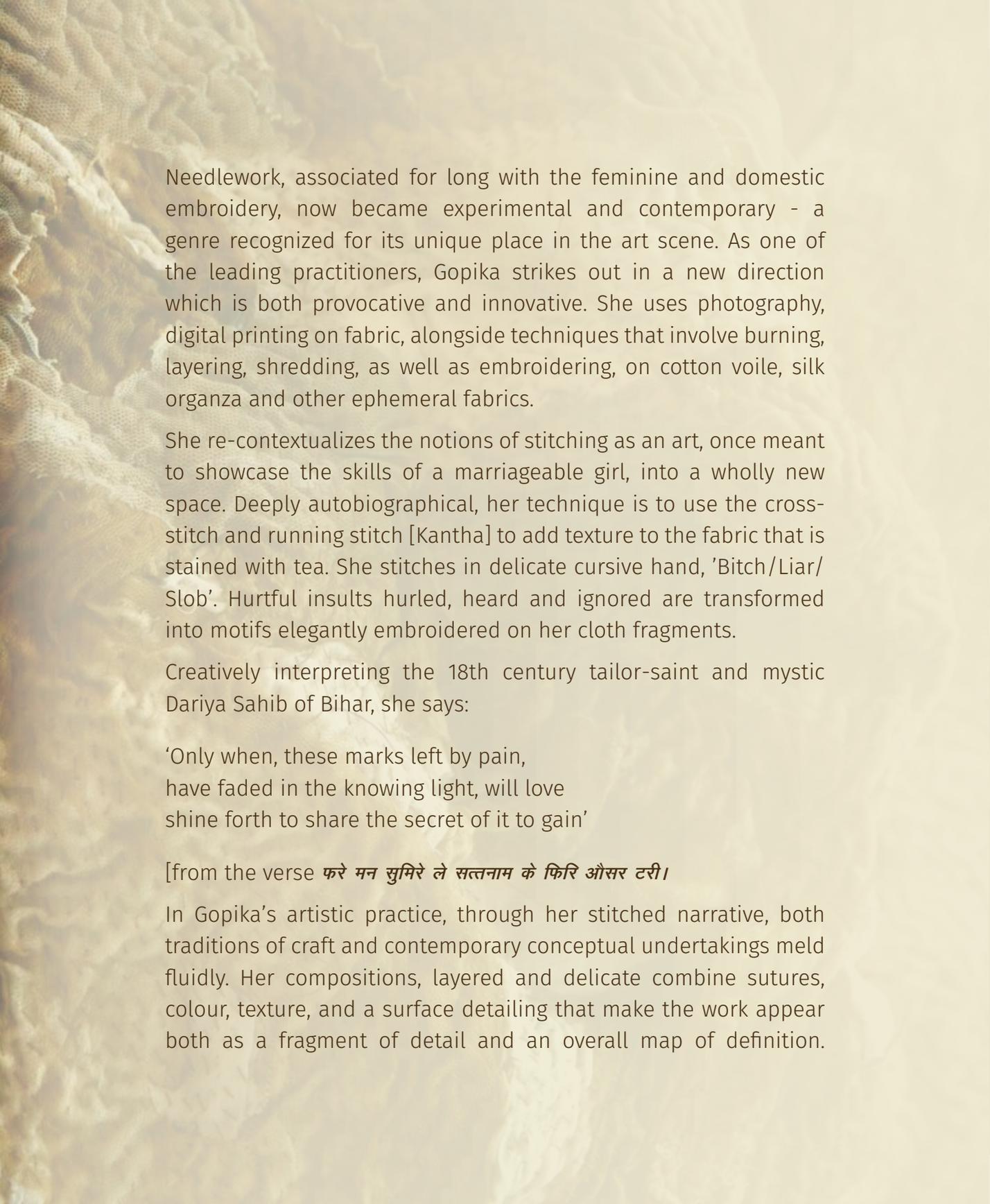
Tracing the history of textiles in India it is interesting to see how practices gradually broke away from the traditional space, to occupy centre stage for some contemporary artists. The needle became the brush, seeking to illuminate, provoke and create an identity (for itself) that, went beyond the feminine domain.



Community of Cups, 2010 [28 X 27 Inches, unframed]

Materials: cotton voile, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

Technique: photography, digital printing, tearing, layering, stitching, embroidery



Needlework, associated for long with the feminine and domestic embroidery, now became experimental and contemporary - a genre recognized for its unique place in the art scene. As one of the leading practitioners, Gopika strikes out in a new direction which is both provocative and innovative. She uses photography, digital printing on fabric, alongside techniques that involve burning, layering, shredding, as well as embroidering, on cotton voile, silk organza and other ephemeral fabrics.

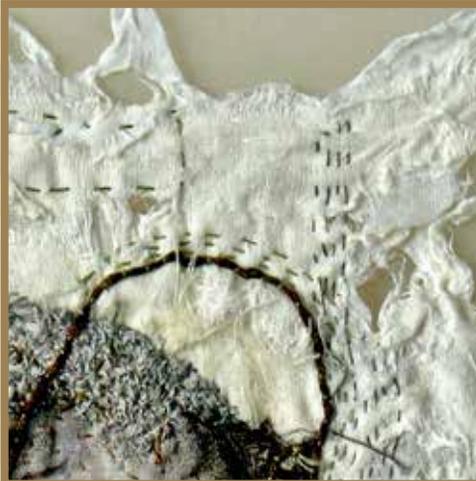
She re-contextualizes the notions of stitching as an art, once meant to showcase the skills of a marriageable girl, into a wholly new space. Deeply autobiographical, her technique is to use the cross-stitch and running stitch [Kantha] to add texture to the fabric that is stained with tea. She stitches in delicate cursive hand, 'Bitch/Liar/Slob'. Hurtful insults hurled, heard and ignored are transformed into motifs elegantly embroidered on her cloth fragments.

Creatively interpreting the 18th century tailor-saint and mystic Dariya Sahib of Bihar, she says:

'Only when, these marks left by pain,
have faded in the knowing light, will love
shine forth to share the secret of it to gain'

[from the verse *करे मन सुमिरे ले सत्तनाम के फिरि औसर टरी।*]

In Gopika's artistic practice, through her stitched narrative, both traditions of craft and contemporary conceptual undertakings meld fluidly. Her compositions, layered and delicate combine sutures, colour, texture, and a surface detailing that make the work appear both as a fragment of detail and an overall map of definition.

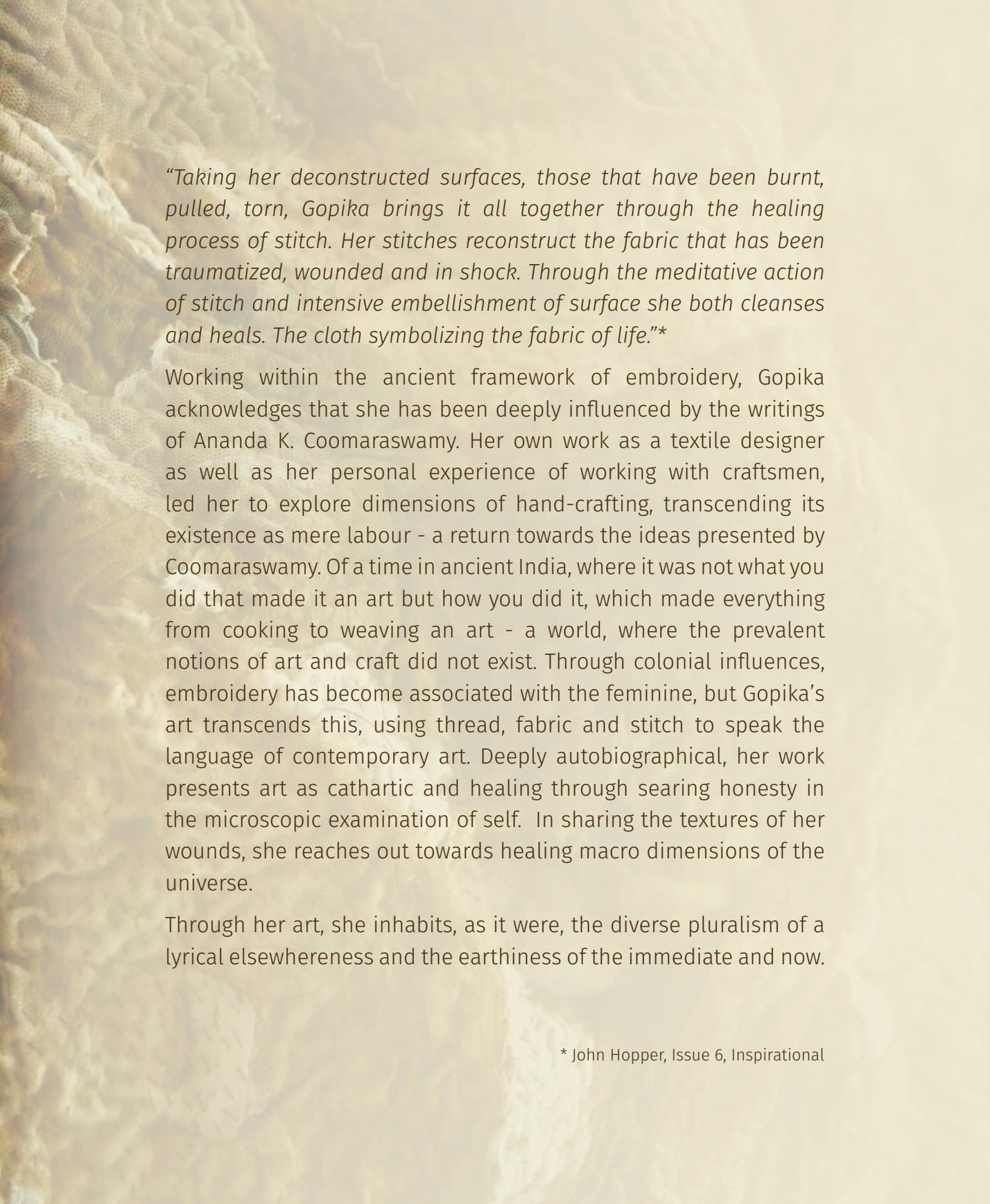


When The Fabric was Brutalized II, 2010

[9 X 8.5 Inches – unframed]

Materials: cotton voile, cotton floss,
cotton-polyester thread

Technique: photography, digital printing,
tearing, layering, stitching, embroidery



*“Taking her deconstructed surfaces, those that have been burnt, pulled, torn, Gopika brings it all together through the healing process of stitch. Her stitches reconstruct the fabric that has been traumatized, wounded and in shock. Through the meditative action of stitch and intensive embellishment of surface she both cleanses and heals. The cloth symbolizing the fabric of life.”**

Working within the ancient framework of embroidery, Gopika acknowledges that she has been deeply influenced by the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Her own work as a textile designer as well as her personal experience of working with craftsmen, led her to explore dimensions of hand-crafting, transcending its existence as mere labour - a return towards the ideas presented by Coomaraswamy. Of a time in ancient India, where it was not what you did that made it an art but how you did it, which made everything from cooking to weaving an art - a world, where the prevalent notions of art and craft did not exist. Through colonial influences, embroidery has become associated with the feminine, but Gopika’s art transcends this, using thread, fabric and stitch to speak the language of contemporary art. Deeply autobiographical, her work presents art as cathartic and healing through searing honesty in the microscopic examination of self. In sharing the textures of her wounds, she reaches out towards healing macro dimensions of the universe.

Through her art, she inhabits, as it were, the diverse pluralism of a lyrical elsewhere and the earthiness of the immediate and now.

* John Hopper, Issue 6, Inspirational



Word-Stains I, Lair, 2014,

[16 x 18 inches - unframed]

Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss,
cotton-polyester thread

Technique: layering, tearing, pulling, stitching,
staining with tea-leaves, embroidery

The layers of fabric bind memories and metaphors. The ascetic severities of her medium notwithstanding, you get a glimpse of an inner romantic self. Unbidden, these words by Louise Bourgeois come to mind: *“If you hold a naked child against your naked breast, it is not the end of softness, it is the beginning of softness, life itself”*.

Meanwhile, outside her studio ledge, the pigeons nudge and nestle. Beyond the Gurgaon skies, the sun sets, casting long shadows. Within, the lamps are lit; the soft strains of music play on as Gopika’s needle dips and soars, dips and soars.

Ina Puri: From the (almost) ritualistic pouring of the amber liquid to the cutting of the fabric, then the stitching, your artistic process is quite unique!

The chronicles of the Chai-wallah begin with the ceremonial pouring of tea that seeps into the material, leaving a dark stain on the cloth. It is as if the Chai patterns hint at personal geographies, as they spread out, mapping uncharted courses.

There are two separate acts, Gopika -the initial spontaneous spillage, followed by the other action, the stitching and the cutting, which are conscious acts, carefully considered and executed. Comment.

Gopika Nath: Yes Ina, they are two separate acts. The spillage is not as much spontaneous as it is unconscious – when one is not really present, but absent-mindedly thinking of something else, because pouring tea into the cup or drinking tea has been done day in and day out for years together. It doesn’t require me to be focused. I can do it even in my absent-minded state.

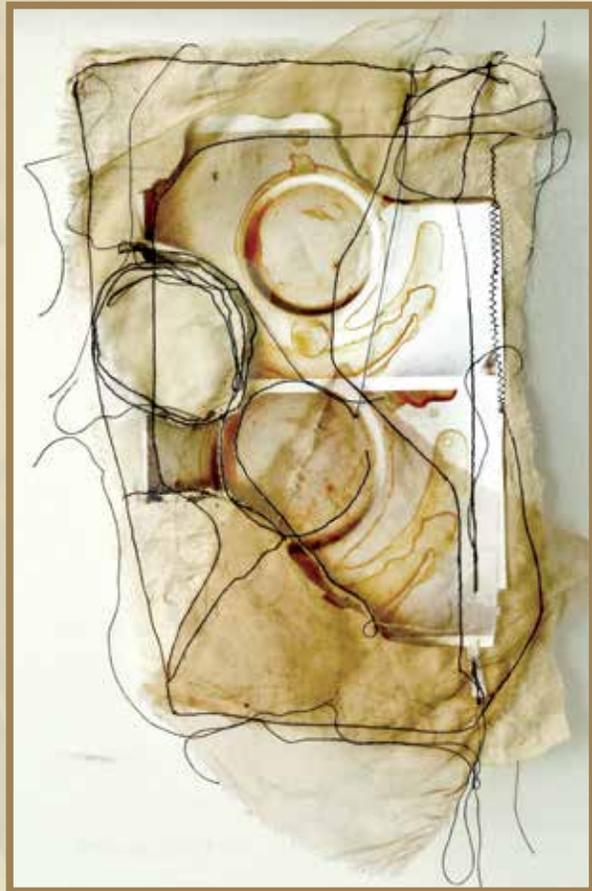
Tea stains

A careless hand
poured

Filled my cup

And stained
the world
that saucers it

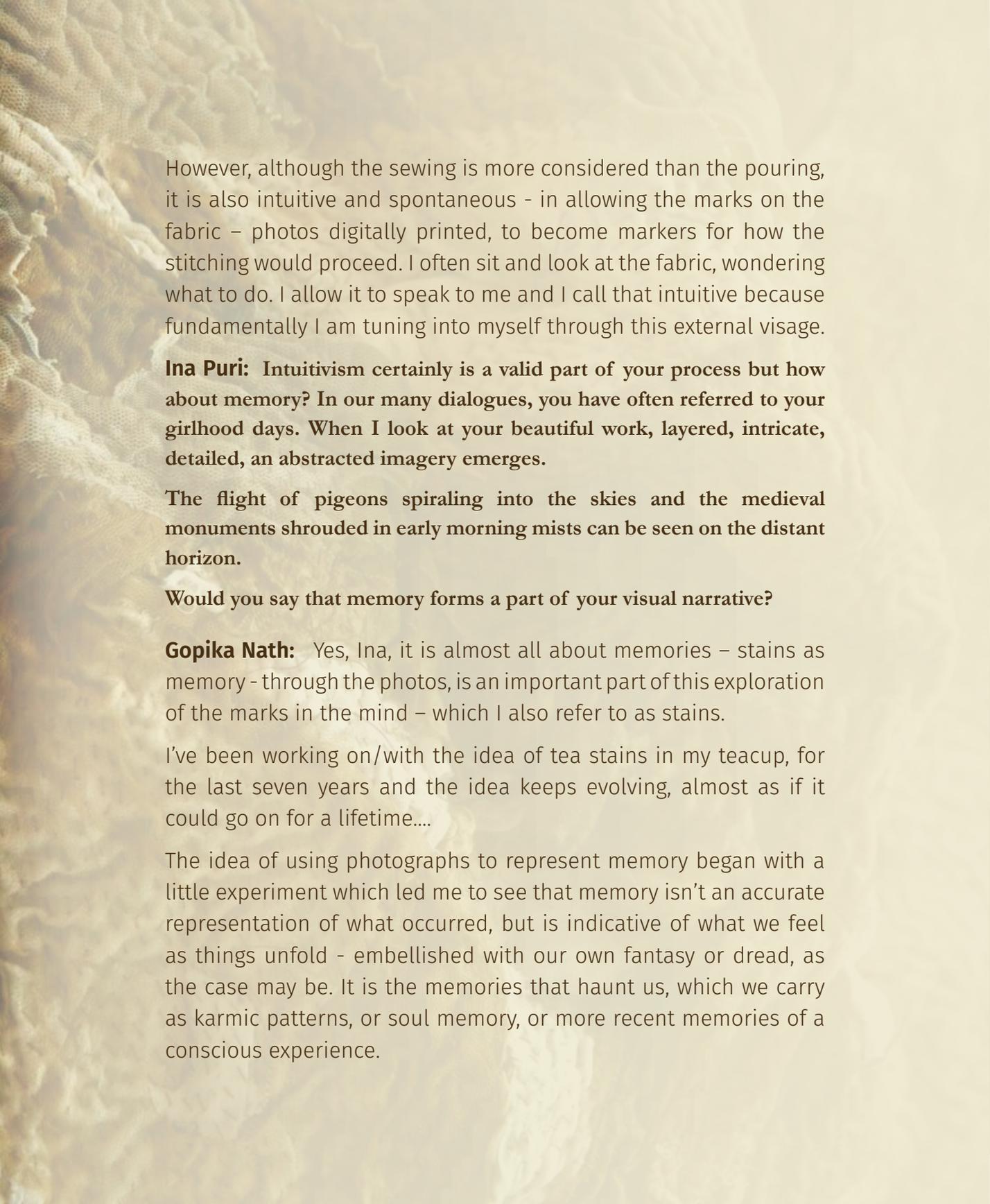
©Gopika Nath [2015]



A Careless Hand Poured, 2015 [7.5 x 8 inches – unframed, set of three]

Materials: Photographic paper, cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

Technique: burning, machine embroidery, staining with tea-leaves



However, although the sewing is more considered than the pouring, it is also intuitive and spontaneous - in allowing the marks on the fabric – photos digitally printed, to become markers for how the stitching would proceed. I often sit and look at the fabric, wondering what to do. I allow it to speak to me and I call that intuitive because fundamentally I am tuning into myself through this external visage.

Ina Puri: Intuitivism certainly is a valid part of your process but how about memory? In our many dialogues, you have often referred to your girlhood days. When I look at your beautiful work, layered, intricate, detailed, an abstracted imagery emerges.

The flight of pigeons spiraling into the skies and the medieval monuments shrouded in early morning mists can be seen on the distant horizon.

Would you say that memory forms a part of your visual narrative?

Gopika Nath: Yes, Ina, it is almost all about memories – stains as memory - through the photos, is an important part of this exploration of the marks in the mind – which I also refer to as stains.

I've been working on/with the idea of tea stains in my teacup, for the last seven years and the idea keeps evolving, almost as if it could go on for a lifetime....

The idea of using photographs to represent memory began with a little experiment which led me to see that memory isn't an accurate representation of what occurred, but is indicative of what we feel as things unfold - embellished with our own fantasy or dread, as the case may be. It is the memories that haunt us, which we carry as karmic patterns, or soul memory, or more recent memories of a conscious experience.



Ember Remains, 2015 [10 x 12 inches – unframed], I of a set of three
Materials: photographic paper, cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread
Technique: burning, layering, hand-sewing, machine embroidery, staining with tea-leaves



Masking the Darkness, 2015 [10 x 12 inches - unframed], II of set of three
Materials: photographic paper, cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread
Technique: burning, layering, hand-sewing, machine embroidery, staining with tea-leaves



All in a Tea-cup I, 2011 [11 x 14 inches - unframed]

Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread.

Technique: photography, digital printing, layering, tearing, pulling, embroidery.



All in a Tea-cup I, 2011 [11 x 14 inches - unframed] A detail

Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread.

Technique: photography, digital printing, layering, tearing, pulling, embroidery.

Writing this poem enabled clarity of looking at those marks in my tea-cup, which I recorded through the camera. It references the past.

Masala Chai

The morning cup always tastes good
but as it diminishes, I see stains
In my porcelain-white teacup

Perfect circles marking the gravity
of stagnant moments; and a smudge of brown
where the froth had been roused

And, when it's almost all been drunk,
tell-tale marks remind of paths crossed
Of embarrassment, guilt and blame

For views that imposed and I could not
stand up for myself. Irritated by reflections
that weren't what I'd like to see,

I gulped the murky dregs, scoured the cup
with some Vim and a Scotchbrite

Lines above the brow remained



The Stain Tea Party, 2015 'Selfish' word-stain [size variable]

Materials: glass tea-cups and saucers, cotton and silk fabrics, glue, thread, beads, sequins, copper wire, fabric table cloth.

Technique: Site specific Installation



The Stain Tea Party, 2015 'Dheeth' word-stain [size variable]

Materials: glass tea-cups and saucers, cotton and silk fabrics, glue, thread, beads, sequins copper wire, fabric table cloth.

Technique: Site specific Installation

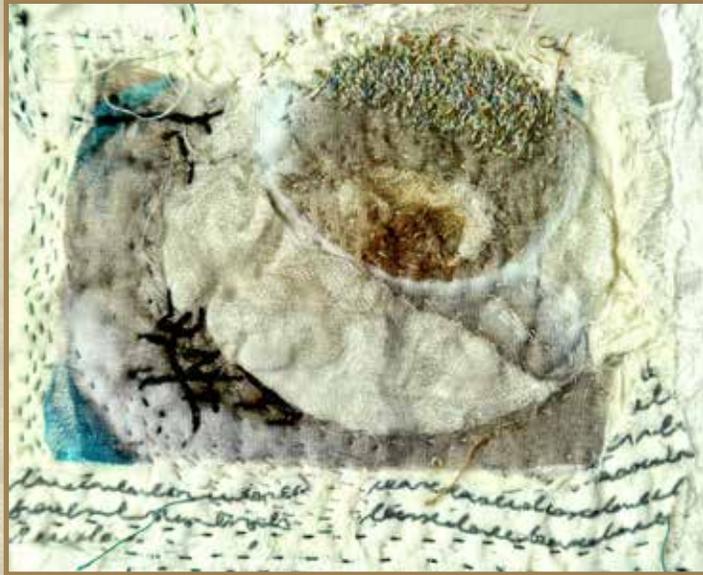
Ina Puri: Your work speaks to me in many narratives, reflecting many moods and moments of your life. I find it remarkable that the academic side that is also so much a part of your persona is so frequently underemphasized.

Gopika Nath: Long before painters picked up a brush they painted with the needle, In the West the art of embroidery became associated with the feminine symbolizing subjugation and subversion. In India, more than women, men embroider professionally. Jawaharlal Nehru once said the history of India could be written with textiles as its leit motif. I think he was right. In my quest to understand how history influenced the contemporary artist, I undertook a historical pilgrimage, travelling and researching.

Ina Puri: In your other avatar, you are a scholar and textile historian but it is as a poet and artist that I know you. When you pick up a camera, for instance, you perceive your subject through the lens quite differently.

Gopika Nath: (Smiles) **It all started when I bought a new phone in March 2009. I was inspired to click anything and everything that caught my attention. In doing this, I started focusing on little things in my everyday life—from leftover food in the dishes to dregs of coffee or tea in a cup. Although I must have photographed everything from dying cut flowers to shadow lines and more, it was the dregs in the teacup that fascinated me the most.**

Ina Puri: Till you mastered the art of working with tea stains? That is fascinating, Gopika! Seeing your work, I am reminded of a favourite musician's lines. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan sang so movingly: *'Har charkhey de naal, tera naam japniyaa.'*



Dregs In Your Tea-cup – III, 2010 [7 X 7 Inches – unframed]
Materials: cotton voile, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread
Technique: photography, digital printing, tearing, layering, embroidery



Dregs in Your Tea-cup I, 2010 [6.5 X 7.5 inches - unframed]
Materials: cotton voile, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread
Technique: photography, digital printing, tearing layering, embroidery

Would you agree that the action of stitching is meditative, like chanting?
Like a prayer?

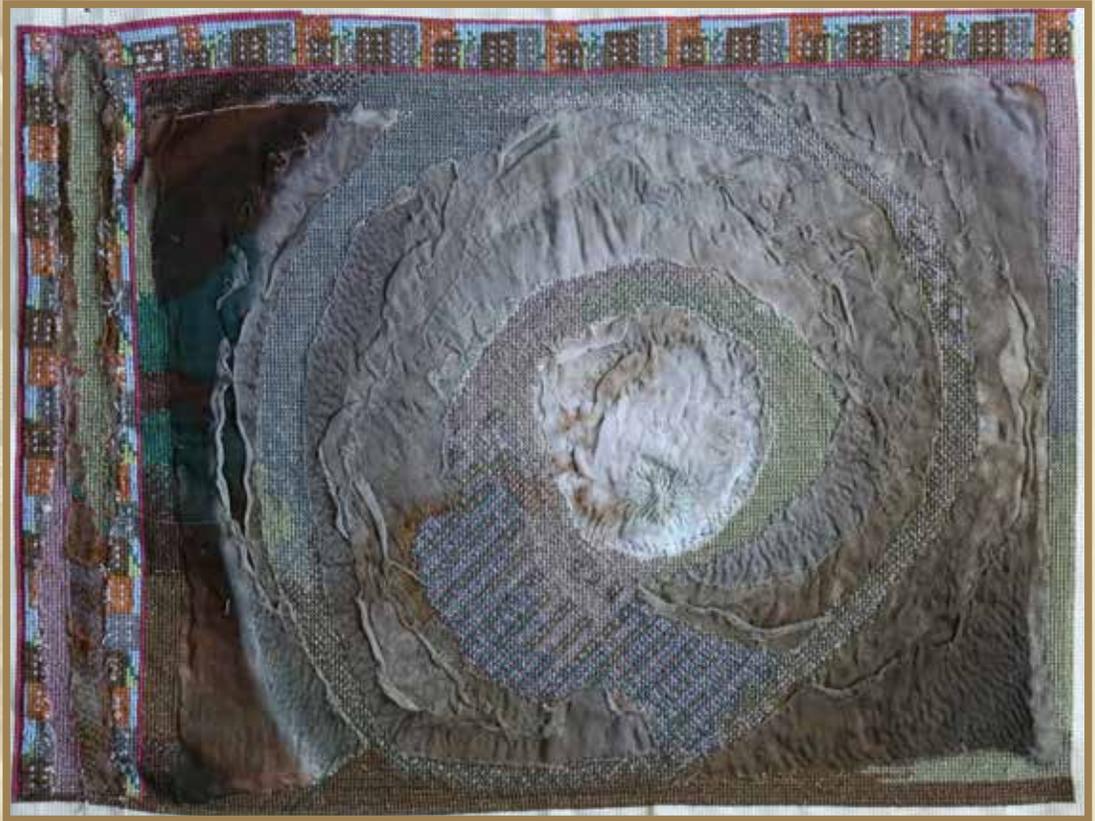
Gopika Nath: Yes, I absolutely agree. When I first encountered the writings of Ananda K Coomaraswamy, I was struck by two things he said about the crafts – that they “nourished the man corpus anima et spiritus” – in ancient India and that “an artist was not a special kind of person, but every man a special kind of artist otherwise less than a man.” – I was curious about both. And my work as an artist-crafts person has been a lot about exploring, to understand what he meant.

I began my Stitch Journals, <http://gopikanathstitchjournal.blogspot.com/> to share the meditative aspect of my art in a more tangible way. To express my innermost thoughts about how my work was not just embroidery but so much more.

Ina Puri: Spiritual texts, epics and poetry have inspired you. When it came to your interpretation of the Rg Veda you had an interesting take on the Charioteer’s role. Will you explain that reference with reference to Doniger’s writing?

Gopika Nath: Wendy Doniger’s text is a translation from the Rg Veda-not the hymn of creation per se, but about various aspects of creation in the Rg Veda. The particular hymn that I referred to is called the Creation of the Sacrifice, which is from book ten, hymn 130 [10.130].

If we look at Christ, there too it is said that he sacrificed himself for the greater good of man – so sacrifice is intricately linked with the spiritual ascendancy of man – towards his realization of himself as god or the supreme being/energy etc.



All In A Tea-Cup II, 2011,

[13 x 17.75 inches – unframed]

Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss,
cotton-polyester thread,

Technique: photography, digital printing,
layering, tearing, pulling, embroidery

In the **Rig Veda**, the ancients question the existence of the world:

“Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down upon it, in the highest heavens, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.”

This is the last verse of the hymn of creation, one that I have read often, with great interest.

“The Man [Purusa] stretches the warp and draws the weft; the Man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky. These are the pegs that are fastened in place; they [gods] made the melodies into the shuttles for weaving.”

[Rg Veda/Doniger O’ Flaherty 10.9]

Then the verse, about the Charioteer:

“The ritual repetitions harmonized with the chants and with the metres; the seven divine sages harmonized with the original models. When the wise men looked back along the path of those who went before, they took up the reins like charioteers.”

Where sacrifice is intricately linked with spiritual ascendancy of man – towards his realization of himself as god/energy, sacrifice can mean many things and could even include certain kinds of renunciation too. I choose to embroider as a crafts-person bringing attention and value to the ancient ideals of hand-crafting. By working as an artist-craftsperson and bringing this work into the art gallery, I am neither a conventional artist, in the sense of contemporary art, nor a craftsman in the traditional sense, but eschewing the comfort of the known to tread uncharted paths – yet drawing from ‘those who went before’.



An Awkward Marriage, 2013 [13 x 14 inches -unframed] A detail

Materials: cotton fabrics, nylon net, silk, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread, copper wire.

Technique: Layering, tearing, pulling, stitching, staining with tea-leaves.

Ina Puri: You equate the body with a sacred garment. A virtual journey into the artistic process you have created with the fabric and thread. The simple act of needlecraft transforms into a hallowed undertaking?

Gopika Nath: *“The body is a sacred garment. It’s your first and last garment; it is what you enter and depart life with, and it should be treated with honour.”* – I love these lines by the contemporary dancer Martha Graham

Kabir also refers to the body as a garment when he speaks of gajji, or chadariya. Other saint poets use this analogy of cloth as the garb of the soul too. The idea of weaving cloth, as an analogy to the essential sacrifice of man – or sacrifice in general – something that we do for each other in the day-to-day living is considered a sacred act in the Vedas. And the deeper and deeper that I have gone into my work with textiles, the more I have realized it is also a sacred act for me. It is sacred in the sense of it being a kind of meditation on life, on myself and I record this in my stitch journal.

Ina Puri: Stitching thus becomes a meditation on life. Perhaps it was always meant to be so? Sutradhar after all is the Absolute Creator!

Gopika Nath: To me the essential sacredness of working with textiles, is not only that it is the garment that clothes the body which can be likened to the essential garb of the soul, but, to make this fabric or do anything with it requires a lot of time and discipline and this also becomes a meditation on life.



Mapping Mindstains, 2013 [15.5 x 17.75 inches - unframed]

Material: cotton fabrics, nylon net, silk cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

Technique: layering, tearing, pulling, stitching, staining with tea-leaves.

People in ancient India expressed their philosophical ideas and summarized their worldview using textile terminology, where thread was not only the material basis for fabric but also as the metaphorical fabric of the universe, and the holder of thread (sutradhara) was looked upon as the world's premier architect - the supreme creator.

Ina Puri: Coming back to our present, the bane of the ordinary and mundane. The presence of separation, loss, melancholy stains all our lives with a tinge of pain. The existential crisis often merges with the galactic in your work, texturing the cloth with interplay of functions. Would you agree?

Gopika Nath: Pain and pleasure are two sides of the same coin. Melancholy stems essentially from a loss of sense of self – why this, why that and why me or why I couldn't I do different and better and xyz in the same vein. This melancholia is also capable of enabling humility, which in turn enables surrender to the larger spirit of existence.

I have always lived in an urban setting –in the larger metropolises. Born in Bombay, I spent my early childhood in Calcutta and then Delhi [boarding school in Shimla], and then I went to pursue my further studies in London. I came back to Delhi in 1985 and am now based in Gurgaon. **In a sense, I know only a city environment – it is my world and therefore it is the world I contemplate through my life and therefore through my work.**

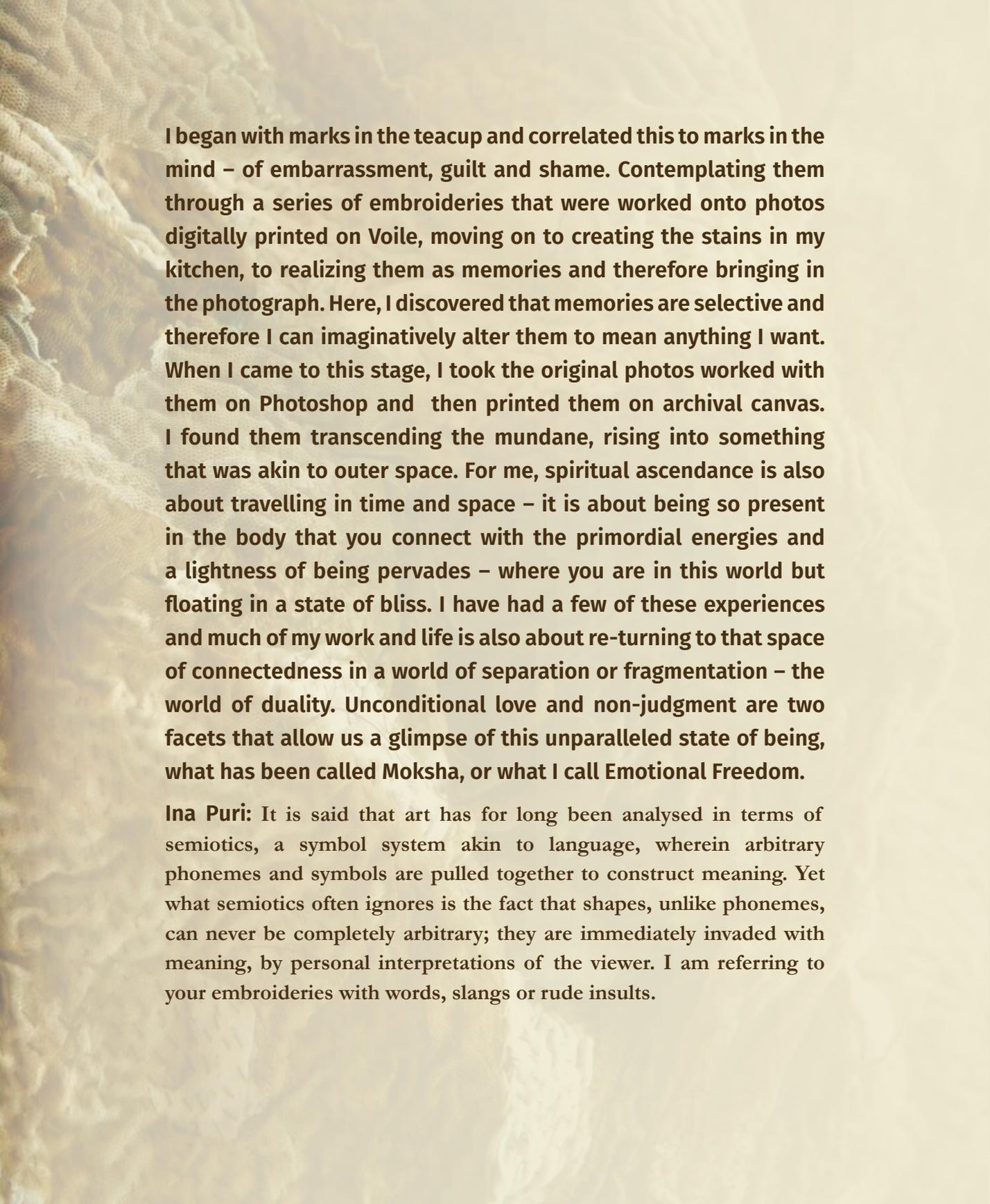
The galactic is something that I have noticed emerging in the later stages of my work in this project of stains.



The Universe in My Tea-cup, 2015 Set of 30 [10.25 x 8.5 inches each - framed]

Materials: Archival canvas, pen and ink, cotton floss Cotton-polyester thread, metallic thread, plastic sequins, glass and plastic beads

Technique: Photography, digital print, hand and machine embroidery, hand drawing



I began with marks in the teacup and correlated this to marks in the mind – of embarrassment, guilt and shame. Contemplating them through a series of embroideries that were worked onto photos digitally printed on Voile, moving on to creating the stains in my kitchen, to realizing them as memories and therefore bringing in the photograph. Here, I discovered that memories are selective and therefore I can imaginatively alter them to mean anything I want. When I came to this stage, I took the original photos worked with them on Photoshop and then printed them on archival canvas. I found them transcending the mundane, rising into something that was akin to outer space. For me, spiritual ascendance is also about travelling in time and space – it is about being so present in the body that you connect with the primordial energies and a lightness of being pervades – where you are in this world but floating in a state of bliss. I have had a few of these experiences and much of my work and life is also about re-turning to that space of connectedness in a world of separation or fragmentation – the world of duality. Unconditional love and non-judgment are two facets that allow us a glimpse of this unparalleled state of being, what has been called Moksha, or what I call Emotional Freedom.

Ina Puri: It is said that art has for long been analysed in terms of semiotics, a symbol system akin to language, wherein arbitrary phonemes and symbols are pulled together to construct meaning. Yet what semiotics often ignores is the fact that shapes, unlike phonemes, can never be completely arbitrary; they are immediately invaded with meaning, by personal interpretations of the viewer. I am referring to your embroideries with words, slangs or rude insults.



Word-Stains II, Selfish, 2014-15 [14 x 12.5 inches – unframed]

Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread,

Technique: layering, tearing, pulling, stitching, machine and hand embroidery



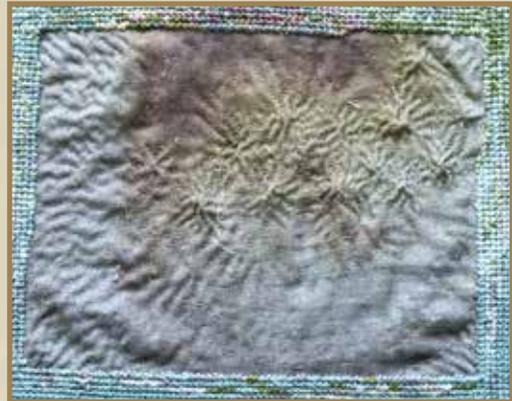
Word-Stains II, Selfish, 2014-15 [14 x 12.5 inches – unframed] Details
Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread,
Technique: layering, tearing, pulling, stitching, machine and hand embroidery



Gopika Nath: Language is that through which one can give or communicate meaning – to translate into or from words, images, symbols and/or sounds. Art is such a language and there is a lot of symbolism in the act of working with needle and thread. Language is made out of symbols and phonemes through which we construct meaning. The meaning that we draw from anything is based on our perceptions and experiences and therefore understanding of things. This sense of personal intervention pervades the entire gamut of the arts. Sometimes the meaning is more direct such as when I bring in the word-stains [as I call them] such as liar, selfish and failure, there is immediacy in recognition of what that means. Bringing attention to an idea that would otherwise get lost in the depth of philosophical meanderings of what stains really are, or what it is that I mean by marks that cause shame.

Ina Puri: **Gopika, I want you to elaborate a bit on your work. There is the density and spacing, of the sutures, but how do you prepare the cloth, initially, before the stitching begins? We are aware that your material is there already, in its ready form, but that is before you transform it. By staining, burning, and tearing.**

Gopika Nath: In the conventional sense of composing the page or canvas, I don't really compose the fabric – I approach it from a rather raw state without any intent to compose. What emerges is actually through the process of adding and subtraction through burning and more.



Just Looking, 2012 [5 x 6.5 inches – unframed], set of five

Materials: cotton voile, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

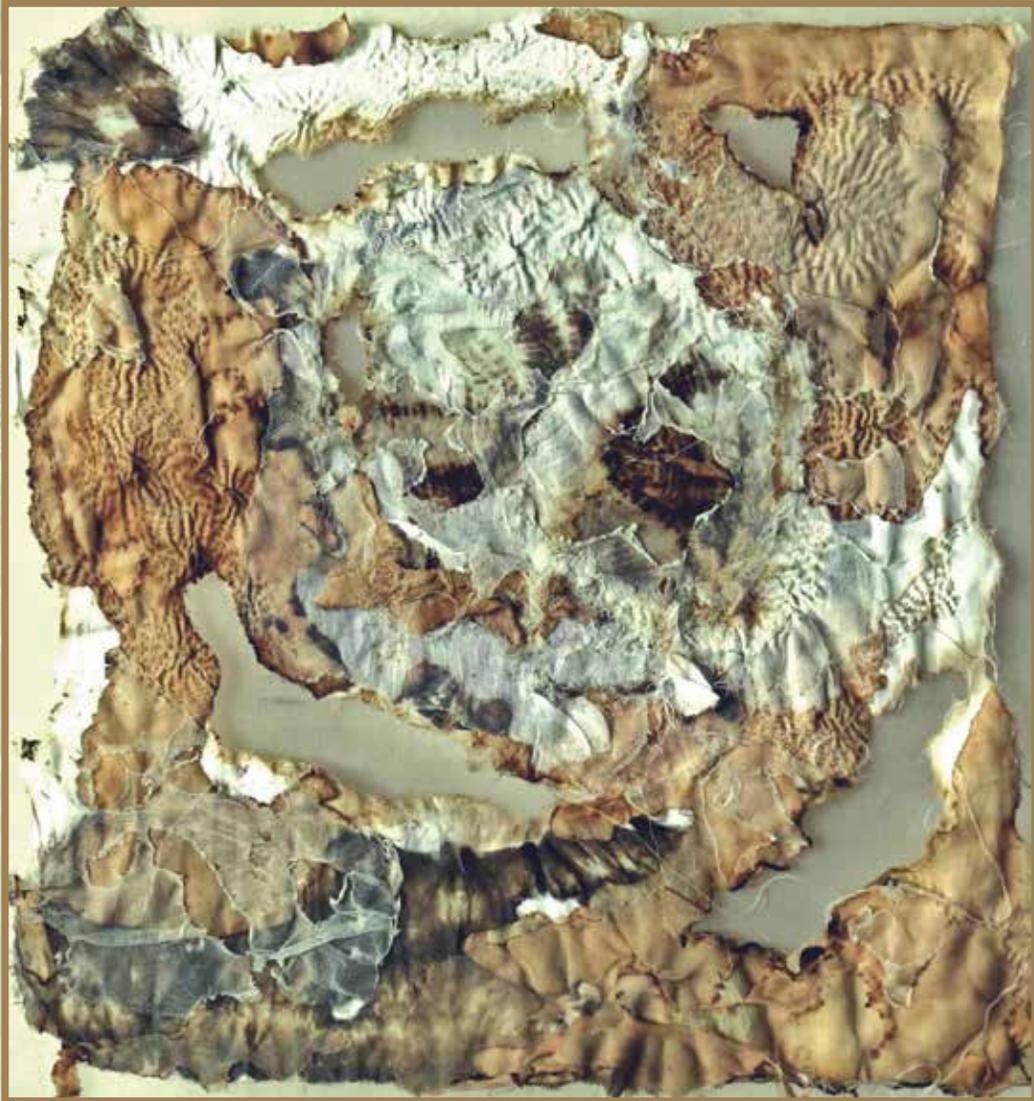
Technique: photography, digital printing, tearing, layering, stitching, embroidery



In the initial stages of this project, I took machine-made cotton voile, cut it in places – like a rent or tear with a pair of scissors. This fabric was then washed and scrubbed with a hard brush – deliberately taking the threads apart. Once I had done this to two or three same sized pieces, I tacked them together and cut through the layers and then put them through the same washing process, this time as a collective cloth. The resultant texture evoked a sense of fragility and fragmentation, from the essential self, such as I felt then. There was vicarious pleasure in doing to the cloth what had been done to me- experiences that tore apart the fabric of being.

Often, after I have laboriously stitched – going round and round the motif, creating a sort of sculptural effect akin to traditional Kantha [when the fabric puckers], **I would feel a sense of discontent with the orderly lines and on an impulse burn it – destroy the apparent order to reflect an inner state of chaos. I love watching the embers dance along the edge of the fabric and then die out as the fabric shrivels into a grey ash.** But it is also quite a draining process. My eyes smart and I feel really tired. I think it has a lot to do with the toxic fumes that the lungs do not appreciate. At least not after I have spent the morning doing pranayama!

Ina Puri: What you do to the pristine, translucent, diaphanous voile material, Gopika!! Obviously, one can see how the work and its process, almost violently and deliberately veers away from formalist aesthetic orthodoxy. And once again, Louise Bourgeois comes to mind: *“There is no feminine experience in art, at least not in my case, because not just by being a woman does one have a different experience.”*



Fragments of the Whole, 2013 [14 x 15 inches—unframed]

Materials: cotton voile, nylon net, silk, cotton-polyester thread

Technique: shibori, kantha, burning, stitching, staining with chai and potassium permanganate dyes

Gopika Nath: Yes, the entire process is about the process and not so much about the finished piece. The art, as I said earlier, is a result of the process and the process leads to another kind of art another kind of art - with the grace it provides in the living process.

The work disturbs: I feel the violence that has been enacted and of the response of the material that's been violated but I also see elements of restraint. After all, the material I use is inanimate; not another human being bashed against a wall.

Ina Puri: The abstract and non-abstract both find their way to your pictorial narrative and a story is narrated, presentness swapped for an older time. The path of the seams create their own private realities, sometimes the tea stains lead you to the tea cup, under the layers of delicate cloth, sewn exquisitely together, at other times, a cosmos lays hidden, under the stars.

Gopika Nath: *"There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? [breath] Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?"*

[Nasadiya 10.129 – Rg Veda/Doniger O' Flaherty]

I bring back the hymn of creation because you refer to the abstract and non-abstract and through this hymn I infer that existence and non-existence, form and absence of form or abstract are all part of the formlessness of being that we know but never really see in its wholeness – the proverbial paradox. And living is about straddling the two – not one or the other, but an ever-changing, pendulum-like balance between the two aspects of being in its non-being.



Re-Imagining Innocence, 2015

[12 x 16 inches - unframed]

Materials: photo paper, cotton fabrics, cotton floss, silk organza, cotton-polyester thread

Techniques: drawing, burning, layering, hand and machine embroidery, staining with tea-leaves

The path of seams...You use a very interesting phrase Ina, because a garment would have seams but while I am not sewing a garment, I am stitching together fragments of memory, presence and aspirations – so past, in the present, looking to or imagining a future – at some level all co-existing in the present – there are stitches, but not seams – there is joining but not as a seam would join, but in the way they join Kanthas and Sujani quilts – used fabric recycled– by extension used ideas, of what has been and gone – the past, the memories, the stains etc.



Self-doubt, 2014 [34.75 x 39 inches – unframed] A Detail

Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread,

Technique: burning, layering, hand-sewing, machine embroidery, staining with tea-leaves

Kantha Revelations

She stitches in and out
through years
layered
Memories
marked in
stretches of thread
uniform

Going in and out
without pausing
to reminisce
or ponder
on fear and pain
An unfeeling needle
moves on
and on,
round and around
as if in a trance.

Punctuating wounds
Hurting
to mend
Holding together
a disintegrating fabric
Its eye
finds its way
around shapes
I could not have seen

Defining them,
neat
rows of kantha
sculpt reminisces
of an ear
Sometimes
a skull

The cloth is worn
Warp and weft move
apart
The tension apparent
Hues harking
of stains,
that cannot
be washed away
stare back at me

A fragile fabric
questioning
the notion of
a cleaned slate



Again and Again I, 2011 [9 x 10.75 inches – unframed], set of three
Materials: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread,
Technique: photography, digital printing, layering, tearing, pulling, stitching



Again and Again II, 2011 [6.6 x 8.8 inches – unframed], set of three

Materials: Cotton voile, polyester-cotton thread

Technique: photography, digital print, layering, stitching, embroidery



There are Layers and Layers, 2011 [12 x 14.5 inches- unframed]

Material: cotton fabrics, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread.

Technique: photography, digital printing, layering, tearing, pulling, embroidery.

THE SOUND OF STITCHING

(single channel, looped video)

Gopika Nath uses needle and thread to explore inner recesses of the mind. This is not just a medium of expression; the physical process of piercing the fabric with a needle is integral to a practice in which catharsis is intrinsic.



In 'THE SOUND OF STITCHING' the artist sings, as she sews. This song "*chaen se humko kabhi, aapne toh jeene na diya, zehar bhi chaha kabhi, peena toh peene na diya*"* roughly translates to suggest that one is never quite left in peace. The heart's desires torment and even in moments of despair, one isn't permitted that drink of poison to end this torture of being. Though the song is essentially one that speaks of romantic despair, its lament is evocative of that

nagging sense of disappointment/stress that underlies almost every moment of being. Those feelings that surface in deep silence but are never really shared in conversations, become the leit motif for 'The Sound of Stitching'.

Bollywood cinema played a significant role in the artist's growing up years. It was perhaps the limited entertainment available to them as children that she and her younger sister would spend hours listening to the radio, learning countless songs from Hindi movies and singing. Over the years, these songs have become a part of the artist's own inner dialogue. In the silence of moments when she stitches, echoing the deeper feelings within, they lend voice to the sound of stitching.

This video focuses on the repetitive action of stitching, which is calming and allows the inner chatter to still. Singing not only aids catharsis through stitching, but formalizes the inner chatter as song.



THE STAIN TEA PARTY (Site Specific Installation)

गुरु बेचारा क्या करे शब्द ना लागे अंग,
कहे कबीर मैली गजी कैसे जागे रंग।।

*Guru bechaara kya kare sabad na laage ang
Kahe Kabir maili gajji kaise jaage rang*

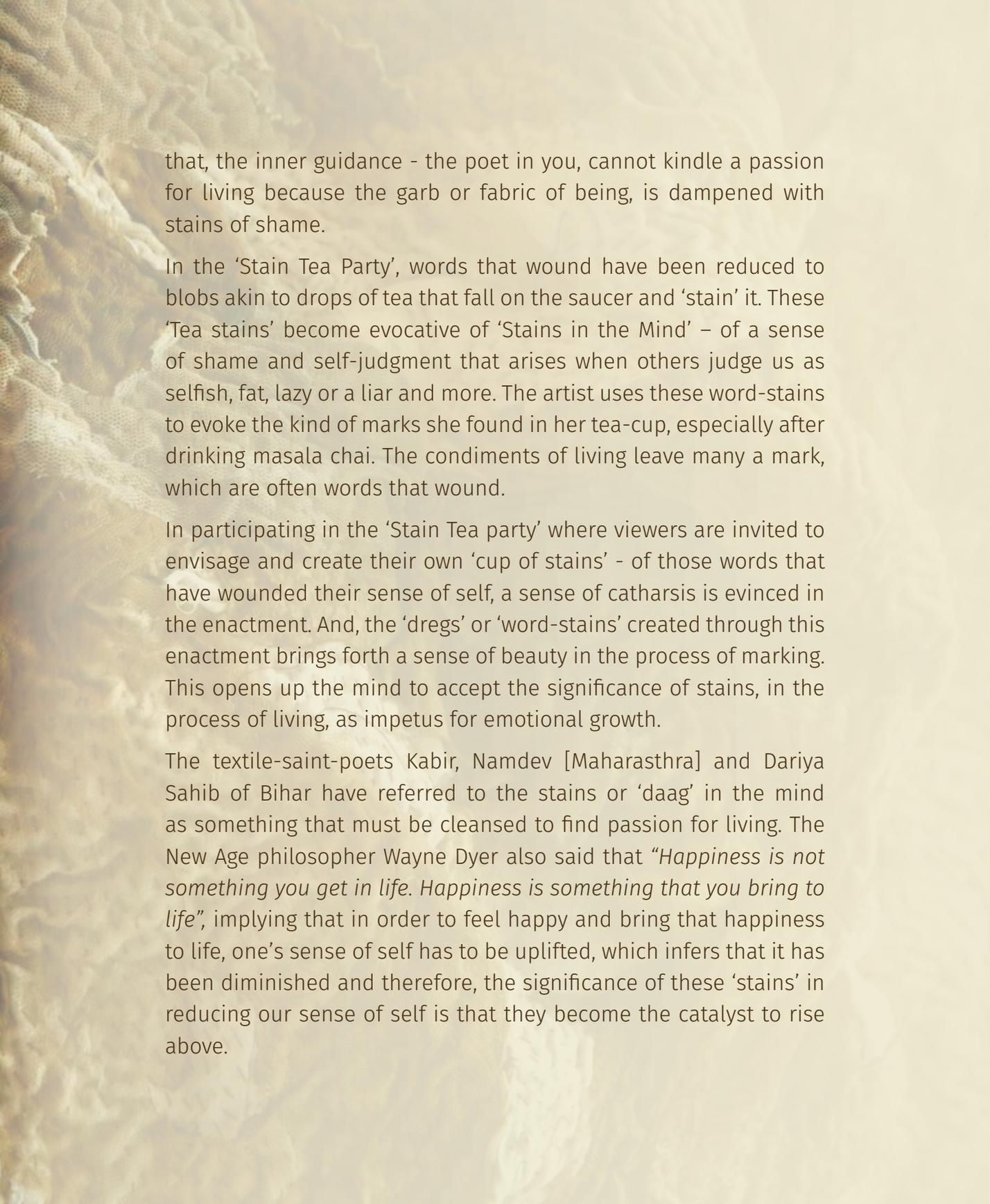


If the poet's words don't
arouse your passion.
She is not to blame.
It's fire cannot be kindled
if your garb is dampened
with stains of shame.

[transcreation: gopika nath]

Are you ashamed of
something? As a young girl
studying in a convent school,
one was often chided with
the idea that we should be
ashamed of ourselves. And
somewhere this kind of
thinking begins to take over
and judging one-self based
on such notions of shame

become embedded in the psyche till such point as they drag you
down. And as Kabir says, the fabric of our being becomes so marked



that, the inner guidance - the poet in you, cannot kindle a passion for living because the garb or fabric of being, is dampened with stains of shame.

In the 'Stain Tea Party', words that wound have been reduced to blobs akin to drops of tea that fall on the saucer and 'stain' it. These 'Tea stains' become evocative of 'Stains in the Mind' - of a sense of shame and self-judgment that arises when others judge us as selfish, fat, lazy or a liar and more. The artist uses these word-stains to evoke the kind of marks she found in her tea-cup, especially after drinking masala chai. The condiments of living leave many a mark, which are often words that wound.

In participating in the 'Stain Tea party' where viewers are invited to envisage and create their own 'cup of stains' - of those words that have wounded their sense of self, a sense of catharsis is evinced in the enactment. And, the 'dregs' or 'word-stains' created through this enactment brings forth a sense of beauty in the process of marking. This opens up the mind to accept the significance of stains, in the process of living, as impetus for emotional growth.

The textile-saint-poets Kabir, Namdev [Maharashtra] and Dariya Sahib of Bihar have referred to the stains or 'daag' in the mind as something that must be cleansed to find passion for living. The New Age philosopher Wayne Dyer also said that "*Happiness is not something you get in life. Happiness is something that you bring to life*", implying that in order to feel happy and bring that happiness to life, one's sense of self has to be uplifted, which infers that it has been diminished and therefore, the significance of these 'stains' in reducing our sense of self is that they become the catalyst to rise above.



When The Fabric was Brutalized I, 2010 [8 X 8.75 Inches – unframed]

Materials: cotton voile, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

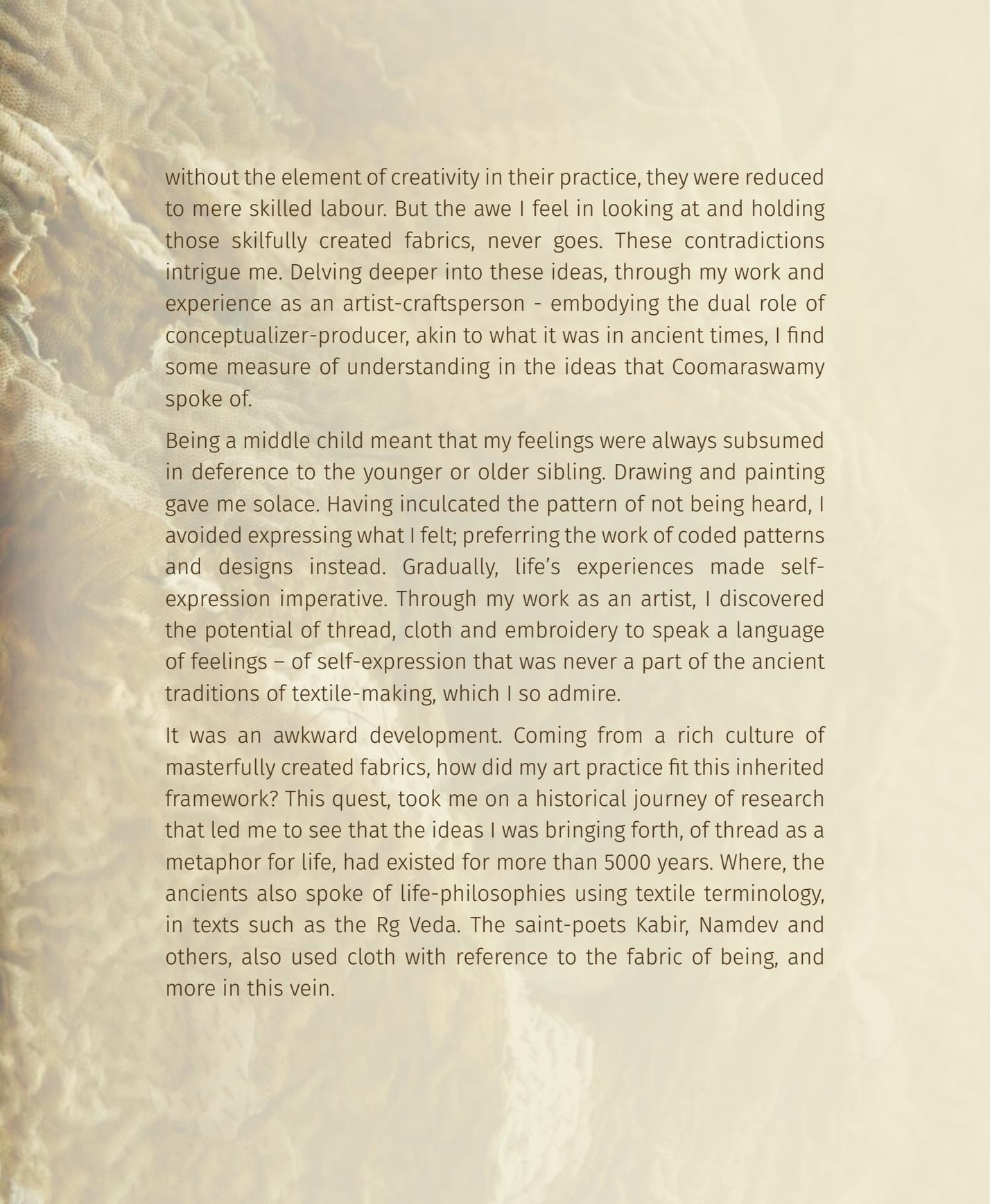
Technique: photography, digital printing, tearing, layering, stitching, embroidery

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I was sixteen years old, when our class teacher asked the students in my class, what we wanted to do after school. I blurted out that I wanted to be a textile designer. This utterance stunned me then, and continues to baffle, for I had no idea where it came from. There had been no exposure to textiles and neither do I recollect being interested in them. I forgot about this idea, but fate intervened whenever I tried to veer away from textiles. And yet, it was thus pushed into working with textiles that, I fell in love with the medium and now working with anything else is unthinkable.

The deep-rooted philosophy of Indian textiles, their history and excellence has always inspired me. I have this yearning to make as beautiful, skilfully structured textiles, as our craftsman did and still do. But, despite acquiring the relevant skills, I found my environment - life in the metropolises such that I have known, didn't facilitate that kind of discipline. I need self-expression; I cannot work with skill alone.

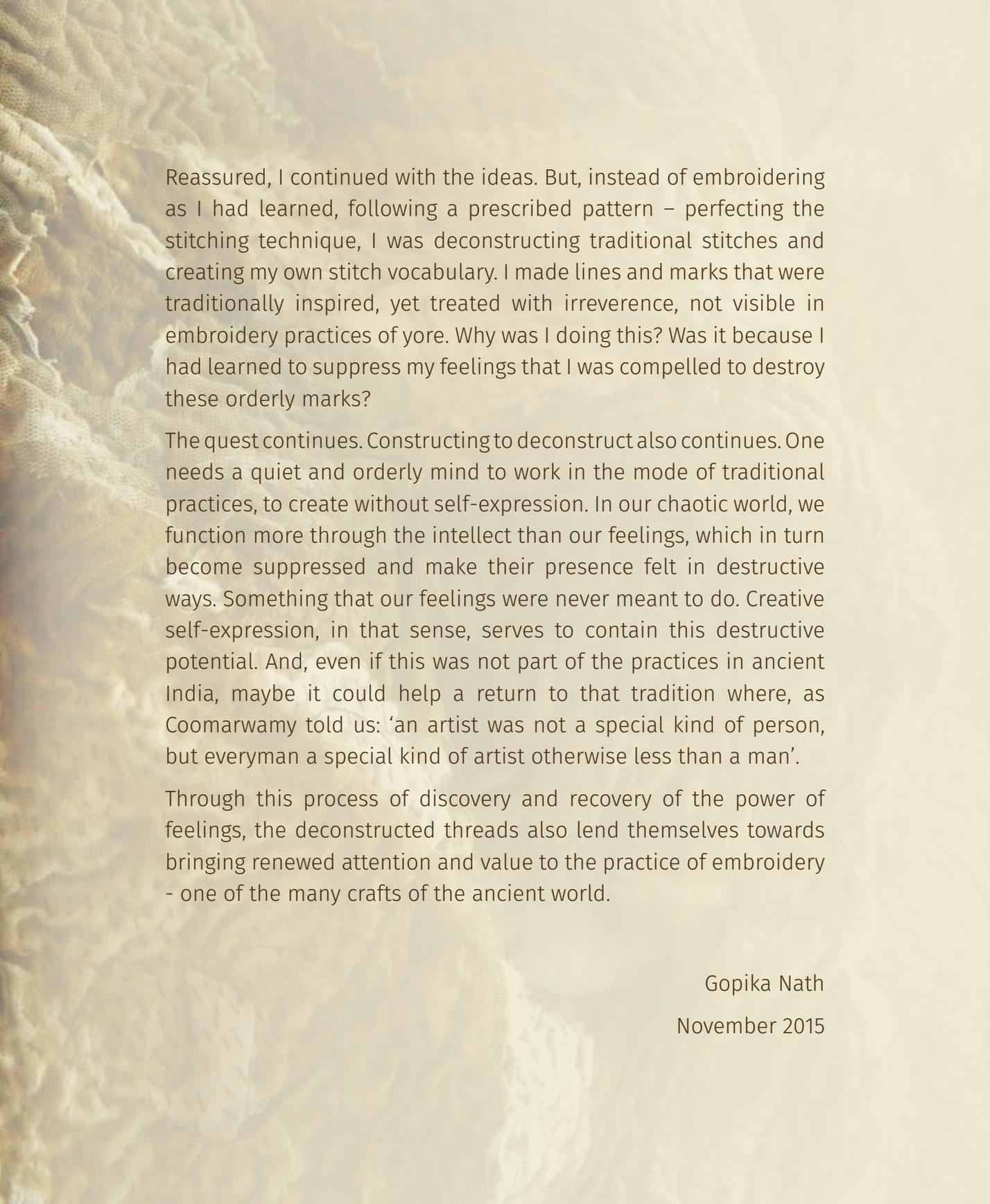
Working as a designer, I have worked with rural craftsman in different parts of the country. It was their predicament in this frenetic digitized age that took me deeper into the historical practices and traditions where I found myself resonating with the ideas of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. I was intrigued that crafts in ancient India nourished the man in mind, body and spirit and that too without self-expression which was the norm in Western art practices. He said that in ancient India, this was considered more 'pitiable than heroic'. And yet, while working with the craftspeople, I felt intimidated by the fact that I was telling them what to do -



without the element of creativity in their practice, they were reduced to mere skilled labour. But the awe I feel in looking at and holding those skilfully created fabrics, never goes. These contradictions intrigue me. Delving deeper into these ideas, through my work and experience as an artist-craftsperson - embodying the dual role of conceptualizer-producer, akin to what it was in ancient times, I find some measure of understanding in the ideas that Coomaraswamy spoke of.

Being a middle child meant that my feelings were always subsumed in deference to the younger or older sibling. Drawing and painting gave me solace. Having inculcated the pattern of not being heard, I avoided expressing what I felt; preferring the work of coded patterns and designs instead. Gradually, life's experiences made self-expression imperative. Through my work as an artist, I discovered the potential of thread, cloth and embroidery to speak a language of feelings – of self-expression that was never a part of the ancient traditions of textile-making, which I so admire.

It was an awkward development. Coming from a rich culture of masterfully created fabrics, how did my art practice fit this inherited framework? This quest, took me on a historical journey of research that led me to see that the ideas I was bringing forth, of thread as a metaphor for life, had existed for more than 5000 years. Where, the ancients also spoke of life-philosophies using textile terminology, in texts such as the Rg Veda. The saint-poets Kabir, Namdev and others, also used cloth with reference to the fabric of being, and more in this vein.



Reassured, I continued with the ideas. But, instead of embroidering as I had learned, following a prescribed pattern – perfecting the stitching technique, I was deconstructing traditional stitches and creating my own stitch vocabulary. I made lines and marks that were traditionally inspired, yet treated with irreverence, not visible in embroidery practices of yore. Why was I doing this? Was it because I had learned to suppress my feelings that I was compelled to destroy these orderly marks?

The quest continues. Constructing to deconstruct also continues. One needs a quiet and orderly mind to work in the mode of traditional practices, to create without self-expression. In our chaotic world, we function more through the intellect than our feelings, which in turn become suppressed and make their presence felt in destructive ways. Something that our feelings were never meant to do. Creative self-expression, in that sense, serves to contain this destructive potential. And, even if this was not part of the practices in ancient India, maybe it could help a return to that tradition where, as Coomarwamy told us: ‘an artist was not a special kind of person, but everyman a special kind of artist otherwise less than a man’.

Through this process of discovery and recovery of the power of feelings, the deconstructed threads also lend themselves towards bringing renewed attention and value to the practice of embroidery - one of the many crafts of the ancient world.

Gopika Nath

November 2015



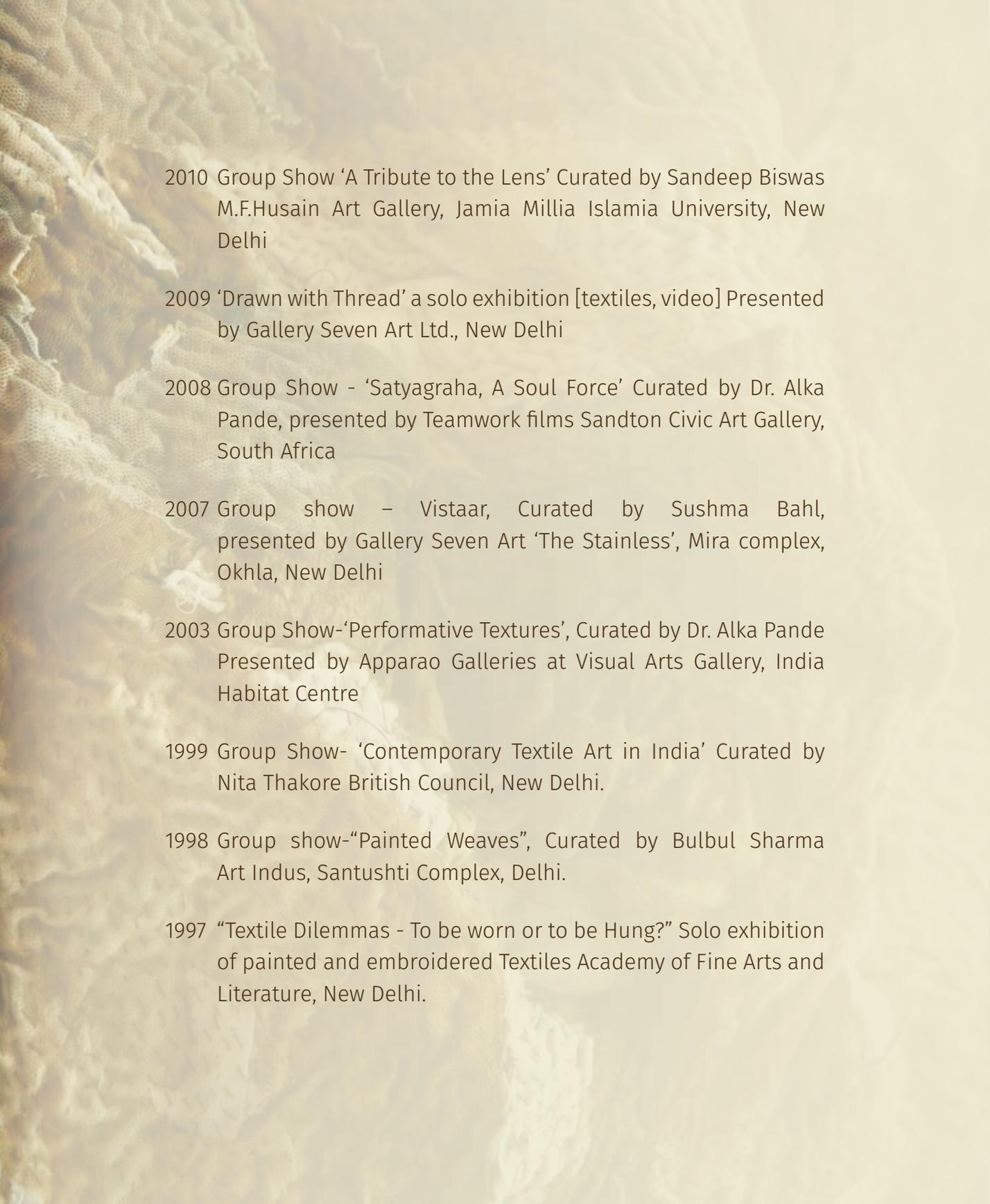
Gopika Nath is a Fulbright Scholar and an alumnus of Central St. Martins, London, U.K. Her association with Textiles began in 1976 and, as a design professional, her talent and expertise have been successfully employed by the Corporate Sector, the Handloom/Craft sector, Retail Organizations, Fashion Designers, Exporters, Government and Educational Institutions. An artist, art critic, blogger, poet and teacher, Gopika is passionate about textiles and is working to bridge the prevalent art-craft divide through her work as an artist-craftsperson. Using thread as a metaphor for life, she is evolving a contemporary language of embroidery and re-contextualizing the ideals of hand-crafting as practiced in ancient India. She is also working on creative translations of the poetry of Textile Saint Poets, Kabir, Namdev, Dariya Sahib and others who have used textile terminology in their writings. Her textiles have been exhibited in India and abroad.

Select Exhibitions:

2015 *'Fragments and Fragmentation'*, two person show with Kathryn Myers [textiles, video and installation] Gallery Art and Aesthetics, New Delhi

Group Show *'Unfolding'-New Indian Textiles*, Curated by Maggie Baxter Fremantle Art Centre, Perth, *Australia*

Group Show *'Unfolding'- New Indian Textiles*, Curated by Maggie Baxter RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, *Australia*

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- 2010 Group Show 'A Tribute to the Lens' Curated by Sandeep Biswas
M.F.Husain Art Gallery, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New
Delhi
- 2009 'Drawn with Thread' a solo exhibition [textiles, video] Presented
by Gallery Seven Art Ltd., New Delhi
- 2008 Group Show - 'Satyagraha, A Soul Force' Curated by Dr. Alka
Pande, presented by Teamwork films Sandton Civic Art Gallery,
South Africa
- 2007 Group show - Vistaar, Curated by Sushma Bahl,
presented by Gallery Seven Art 'The Stainless', Mira complex,
Okhla, New Delhi
- 2003 Group Show-'Performative Textures', Curated by Dr. Alka Pande
Presented by Apparao Galleries at Visual Arts Gallery, India
Habitat Centre
- 1999 Group Show- 'Contemporary Textile Art in India' Curated by
Nita Thakore British Council, New Delhi.
- 1998 Group show-"Painted Weaves", Curated by Bulbul Sharma
Art Indus, Santushti Complex, Delhi.
- 1997 "Textile Dilemmas - To be worn or to be Hung?" Solo exhibition
of painted and embroidered Textiles Academy of Fine Arts and
Literature, New Delhi.

BLOGS:

EVOLVING A CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE OF EMBROIDERY:

Stitch Journal

<http://gopikanathstitchjournal.blogspot.com>

CREATIVE NON-FICTION:

Garam Masala Chai

<http://garammasalachai.blogspot.com>

PUBLISHED ART REVIEWS AND OPINIONS:

Artviews

<http://gopikanathartviews.blogspot.com>

POETRY: PUBLISHED POEMS

A Matter of Words

<http://gopikanath.blogspot.com>

Recent video interviews

http://bringhomestories.com/showcase_gopikanath.shtml

INTERVIEW by PROFESSOR KATHRYN MYERS

[University of Connecticut, U.S.A]

<http://regardingindia.com/portfolio/gopika-nath/>