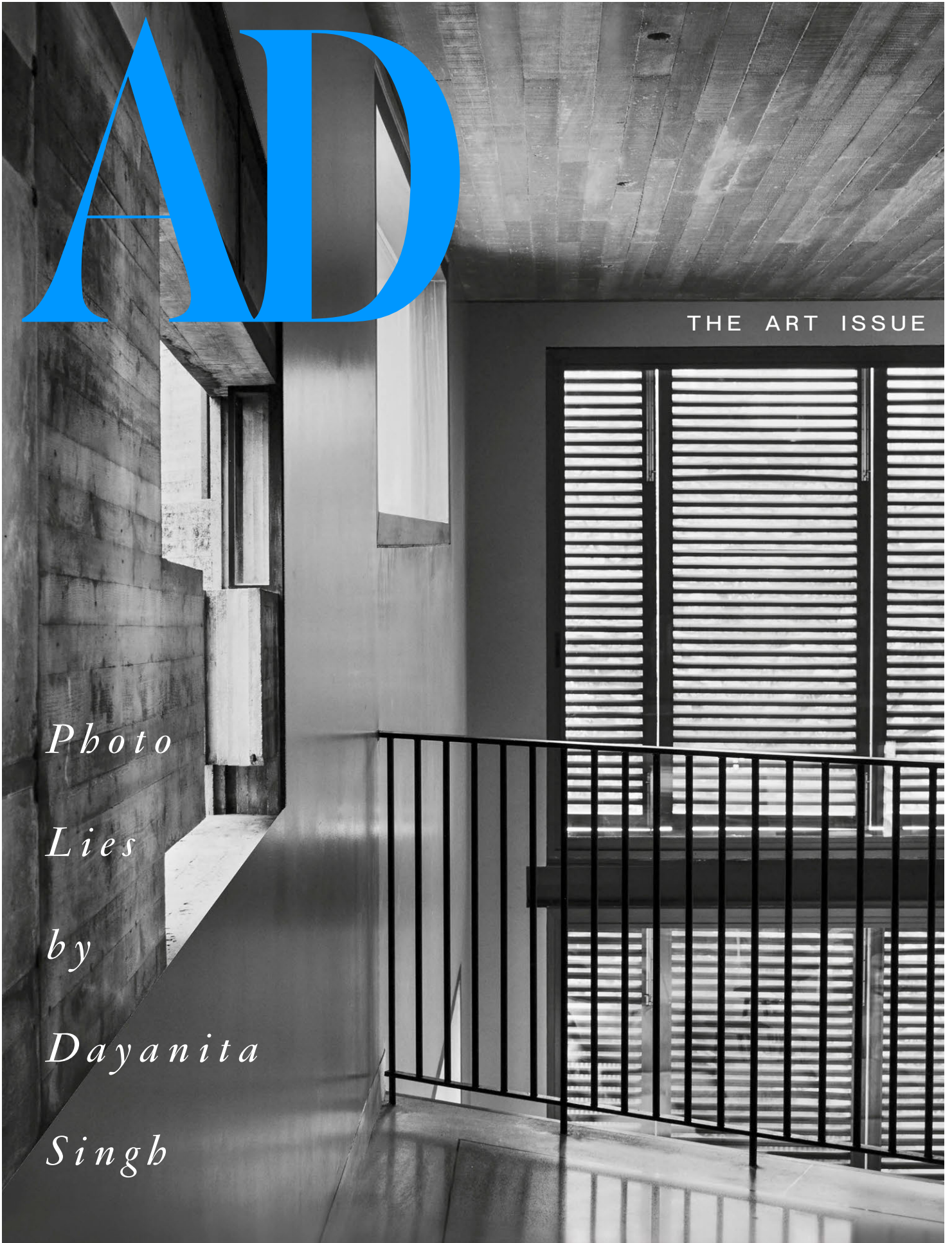


AD

THE ART ISSUE

Photo
Lies
by
Dayanita
Singh



**FIVE SOUTH
ASIAN ARTISTS
IN LONDON**

AD visits
young trailblazing
artists from
South Asia
and its diaspora
in their
London studios
to discover
their practices
and unique
interpretations of
a shared history.

TEXT: MAANAV JALAN

PHOTOS: ATHUL PRASAD



MATTHEW KRISHANU

Krishanu's paintings revisit scenes from his childhood in Bangladesh and India, and life in London, where he has lived for nearly two decades. In his Blackhorse Lane studio, we see examples from his years-long series standing next to each other. In *Another Country*—an ongoing series he started in 2012—Krishanu and his brother perch on trees and monkey bars in an unnamed landscape. His daughter takes their place in a 2024 painting, climbing a tree in Epping Forest, London, guarded at the base by the painter's late wife, writer Uschi Gatward. While rooted in personal memory, the ambition of Krishanu's paintings goes beyond autobiography. His figures gesture at the criss-crossing social

histories of “the majority of people in the world”, that is, those “with brown skin and black hair”. Krishanu's *Mission* series, likewise, is less the story of his missionary father in Bangladesh and more a reflection on Western cultural hegemony in South Asia. Within these paintings, we see rooms in which iconic pictures from the canon of Western art history hang, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. These “quotations” as Krishanu calls them, recontextualized in a South Asian setting, make a clever flip—it is now the canon that does not quite belong in the room. Each canvas in Krishanu's studio is a membrane, tensely holding together many worlds, “many lineages”.





JASLEEN KAUR

Kaur's shared studio in Somerset House holds the prototypes and remnants of her object-based installations, including from *Alter Altar* (2023) at Tramway, Glasgow that won the artist the prestigious 2024 Turner Prize. A "cut and paste" spirit guides her works, which combine elements from her life growing up in Glasgow's Sikh community and contemporary life in London. Kaur grew up around her father's hardware shop, "surrounded by goods, specifically cheap imported goods", and completed her formal training in jewellery-making at the Glasgow School of Art in 2008. Over the years, the artist has come to wield her closeness with craft and mass-produced objects "without shame" and intuitively. An early sculptural work, *Father's Shoes* (2009), for example, collages her father's blue rubber chappals and leather brogues into one piece of footwear. Her treatment of family photographs is now instantly recognizable for their use of torn-up pieces of roti and orange-tinted resin, the colour of Scotland's favourite soda, Irn-Bru. In her hands, objects from various registers of life come together and transform but keep their dignity intact. Faces are covered up, words are not too legible and works are installed at a safe distance from our eyes. "NOT WANTING TO BE DIGESTED", says one of the Post-it notes pinned to her board, a reminder that we are not entitled to see it all.





SAYYAN CHANDA

"In all the ways I can be timid, my work takes up space," says the Kolkata-born Sayan Chanda about his imposing tapestries, three of which are hung in his home-studio in North West London. Each has taken him around two months to complete, made using a self-fashioned tapestry frame to reweave manually unravelled kantha quilts, gamcha material and black jute fibre. In form, scale and palette—earthy reds, yellows and blacks—the works are reminiscent of pioneering soft sculptures by artists like Mrinalini Mukherji and Magdalena Abakanowicz, some of Chanda's go-tos. Around the large tapestries are intricate ceramic sculptures that combine references such as

ceremonial lamps and snake heads to create unfamiliar forms that look as if "dug out from an ancient archeological site". Chanda's works are responses to his deep interest in social and cultural history. "My work often gets clubbed with the esoteric," he says, "but that is a very late attribute of the work." The starting point is obsessive research into colonial anthropological and indological texts to excavate forgotten histories of female figures in Indian canon. The inspiration comes from these "exiled and marginalized female divinities, victims of male-centric reinterpretation over the years", he explains. Each work can be seen as a revival, the result of slow research and practice, made with a quiet faith.

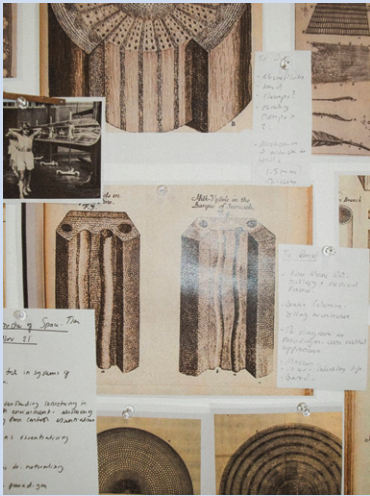




ARINJOY SEN

Formally trained as an architect, Sen is a multidisciplinary artist, combining critical architectural thinking, digital drawing and collaborative work. He is drawn to various South Asian folk traditions of visual representation, such as Mughal miniatures, Kalighat paintings and Pattachitra. For him, these are not just visual forms but important cultural and historical documents with which to develop a new language of telling stories and imagining space. In his work *Bengali Song*, shown at the 18th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2023, for example, Sen created digital drawings inspired by folk traditions to depict the communal life around Bangladesh's revolutionary modular housing typology known as Khudi Bari, meaning "little house", used by many of the country's marginalized and landless people, including at the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. These drawings were then translated into embroidered panels by kantha artisans at SHE Kantha, an NGO working with artisans around West Bengal. "My drawings were ultimately up to their interpretations," Sen says, describing the collaborative process. "Besides a few borders, nothing was dictated. I wanted them to weave their own stories into the work." He is currently working on a project on the Marichjhapi massacre of 1979 in the Sundarbans, along with one on the "alternative origins of Calcutta", traced through Kalighat paintings, calendar art and the city's historic red light district.





One way to approach Amba Sayal-Bennett's meticulous 3D-printed sculptures is to view them as maps. If they seem unreadable, they are intentionally so and a way for the artist to challenge the assumption that the world can be known, manipulated and laid bare. Since her PhD in Art Practice and Learning at Goldsmiths, University of London, near her studio in Deptford, the artist has been working around the world, responding to

the architectural and aesthetic histories of each site through her practice of mapping, drawing and building. For her 2024 exhibition at Tarq, Mumbai, the artist drew inspiration from the neighbouring Rani Bagh, formerly Victoria Gardens, set up by the British as an outpost of bigger gardens like the Kew gardens in London. The now disorderly garden in Mumbai became a way for her to think through the complicated movement of materials such

as rubber plants, an important colonial crop, exported from the Kew nurseries to India with the hope of setting up productive plantations. The seedlings, however, did not really take and the full scope of their plans failed. Each of Sayal-Bennett's sculptures functions in this spirit, in the image of an ideal but somehow botched. Their contours, markings and keys mutate, overgrow and overtake the original plan.

AMBA SAYAL-BENNETT