Gulammohammed Sheikh’s Kaarwaan and Other Works

Images, information, and narratives from memory, of the lectures delivered by Gulammohammed Sheikh for our art history courses in Baroda form into a display of artworks at the exhibition Kaarwaan and Other Works

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Vivan Sundaram – a tribute – Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

I missed seeing Vivan’s stupendously varied body of work as it was developing and the startling constructions he made and exhibited over the decades, since I moved to Tokyo in the late 1980s.

Torii Gateway and Enclosure – Dark Secrets /Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

An important lesson I learnt from doing this show was that when an idea starts to take the shape of an object a dynamic external entity may completely hijack your carefully planned art work.

Shalini Patel- Banana Tree Drawings during Lockdown/ Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

Shalini Patel's drawings, some in pencil and others in charcoal were done during lockdown. Nowhere to go, nothing much to do outside with friends, acquaintances or passers-by; she had all the time on her hands and the opportunity to observe the banana trees in her neighbour's yard. For these drawings the view was from the first floor balcony of her house.

It's these banana plants that lent themselves to serve as artistic models to Shalini's black and white drawings of 2021. Before we discuss the formal content of the drawings and Shalini's very own interpretation of this tropical wonder of nature, let's look at the distinctive form of a banana plant. In fact, there are three distinctive forms in the main within a single banana plant – t**he trunk, the fruits, and the leaves.** A banana plant is often referred to as a tree due its size.

The trunk of a banana plant has a plump tubular form, soft, flexible, fibrous within and covered in layered sheaths, unlike the wooden trunks of shrubs and trees. The leaves are large, very large, and radiate out and become floppy all too soon. Each leaf is an individual growth separating out directly from the trunk, starting off as a cylinder that slowly unfurls and opens out to the familiar shape of a banana leaf. Then there are the bananas themselves, which grow in multi-levelled clusters, each banana pointing upwards and attached to a thick stalk that droops from the weight of several dozens of bananas, and at the end of the stalk grows a

large purple-hued blossom of tightly packed petals.

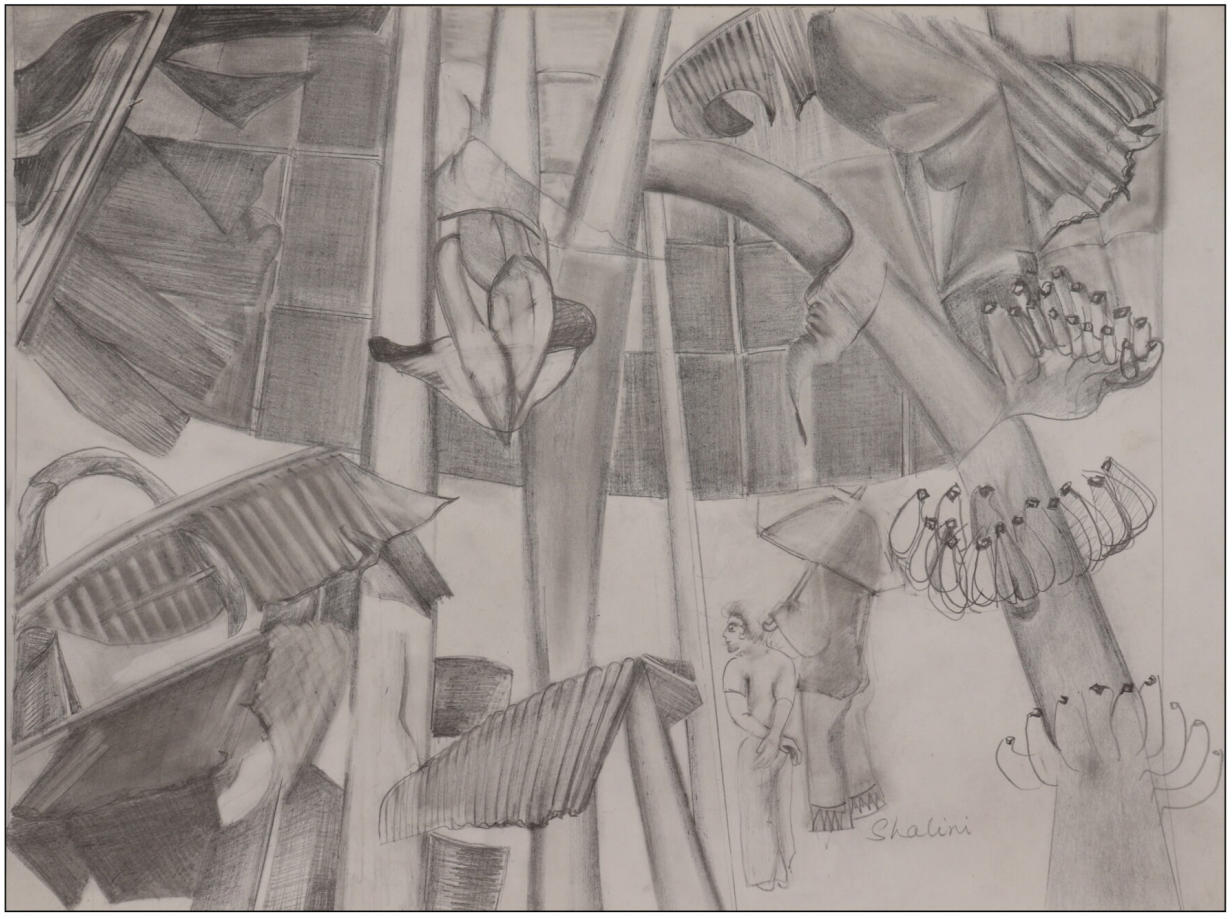
All parts of a banana plant have their use. The fruits and the blossoms are edible, the leaves are used in cooking and most commonly serve as disposable plates in India, and the fibre in the trunks provide material for making ropes, baskets and mats etc. Parts of the trunk are also edible. It is said that each plant produces fruits and blossoms just once in its lifetime and then the plant is cut-down and in its place there's a new plant ready and waiting to become a full-fledged banana plant. Considering this, Shalini's drawings are perhaps the only record of the existence of those specific banana plants, which lived through the lockdown and by now will have become dead matter. Shalini observed the changes the banana plants underwent and recorded them in sketches and drawings.

Form and Content of the Drawings

Banana plants have been widely represented in Indian art and art of other countries. Although banana plants are ubiquitous in the tropical climate of India as Shalini said to me she had never before drawn a banana plant or its many plant parts until last year.

The drawings are variously titled **"The Banana Tree," "Composition from the Banana Tree," "Friends to Look At," "Song of a Bird," "The Night," etc. and "Composition,"**

Title - compostion from the banana tree
Year of work - 2021



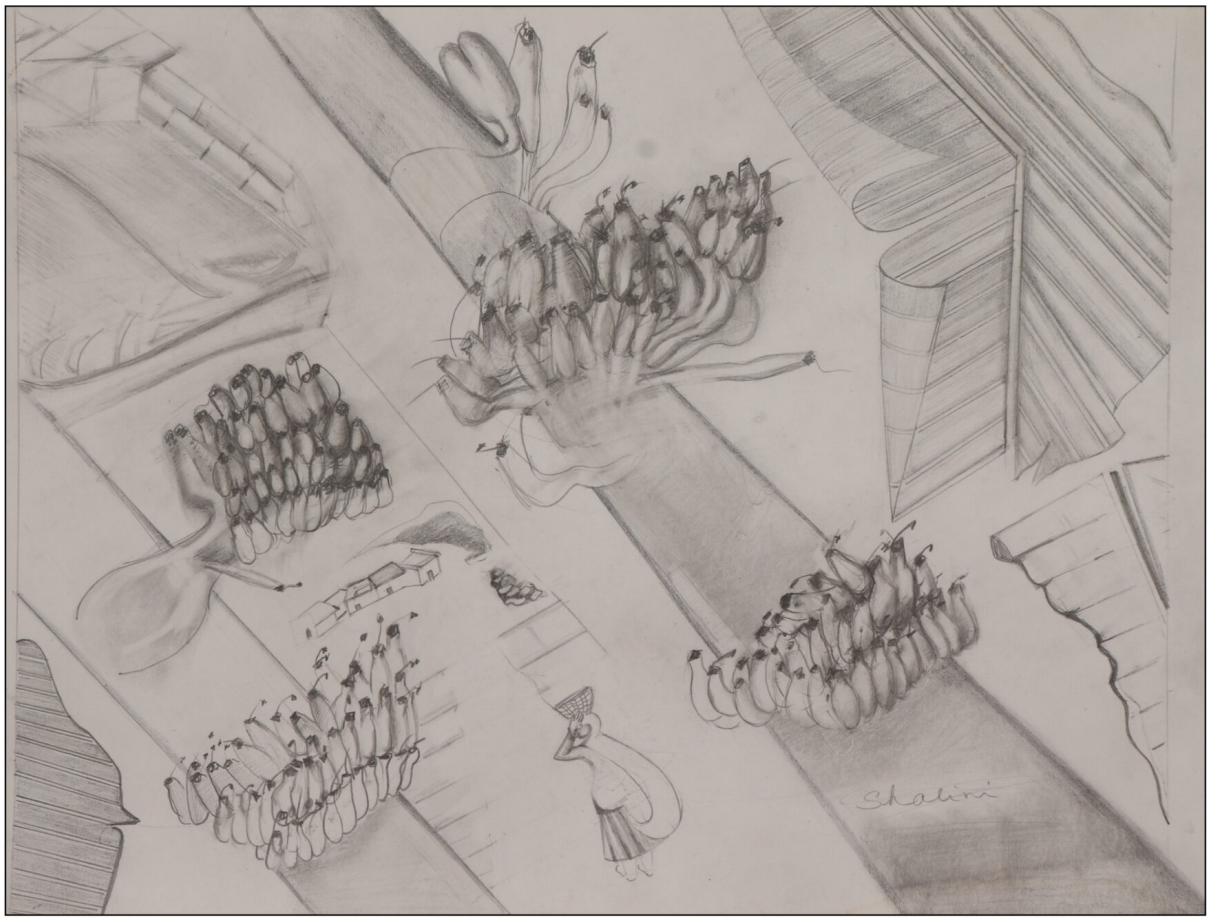
Medium - Pencil on paper
Size - 12 x 16 inches

The works range from the depictive to the abstract. The earlier works in this group of drawings were more depictive such as those titled **“Compositions from a Banana Tree”** and progressively the drawings became more minimalist and abstract

and simply titled **“Composition.”**

When an artist titles a work “Composition” or “Untitled” there is an immediate understanding on the part of the viewer that the subject matter or the formal reality of the work has been constructed as a design, bereft to a large extent of marks of identity as to what the work is about. The works titled “Composition” in Shalini’s banana tree drawings are arrangements of elements of a banana plant, such as a small section of a banana leaf, a portion of a stem or the trunk and other forms within the plant. Shalini devices ways to depict the forms and textures of a banana leaf such as the ridges that extend from the spine to the curvy edge of the leaf, which are a series of parallel lines, the leaf in the process of unfurling, and the natural splits that occur along the ridges in the leaf over time. We may presume that the various elements in any given drawing in this series are put together by breaking apart the view and arranging the elements into a composition drawn from the artist’s imagination.

Title - compostion from the banana tree
Year of work - 2021



Medium - Pencil on paper
Size - 12 x 16 inches

However, in the case of these works the compositions are as they existed within the growth of the banana trees, which the artist observed and then drew without rearranging any of the elements. It was a matter of merely selecting a frame

consisting of a pre-existing composition that appealed to the artist. Still, it is to be noted that many of the drawings have compositions made up of diagonals and radiating lines, which we may not associate with the vertical trunks and the characteristic curved forms of a banana plant.

The compositions have areas that are filled with textures drawn from the banana plant with negative spaces in-between, creating a play of dark and light forms. Despite the abstraction and given the non-descriptive title **“Composition**” of many of the works they leave no room for doubt as to the source of the subject, namely, that the forms and textures are clearly drawn from a banana plant, however fragmented, and no other plant or object.

The title **“Compositions from a Banana Tree”** that many of the works carry is telling. The preposition “from” denotes that the artist is not the all-powerful creator for whom subject matter is something to simply reach out to and grab and make it the very own property of the artist. Through the title the artist acknowledges that the “Banana Tree,” the protagonist of the works, is the giver and the artist the receiver.

Many of the drawings have representational elements and are simple narratives of fleeting activities of birds and squirrels among the banana trees. The work titled **“Friends to look at”** is one such drawing where the elements are drawn with a sensitivity and expressiveness that I wouldn’t hesitate to say are feminine in their impact. The drawing depicts squirrels running along a wire, which crosses through banana trees. The work is not merely charming, it has the pathos of a life lived during a prolonged period of a global lockdown – pitting freedom against incarceration.

Title - Friends to look at
Year of work - 2021



Medium - Pencil on paper
Size - 12 x 15 inches

Another work, a charcoal drawing titled “Song of a Bird “shows a bird in the left foreground with its beak open. The work evokes sound through visual representation and by the choice of words for the title.

Title - Song of a bird
Year of work - 2021



Medium - Charcoal on paper
Size - 10 x 14 inches

In some of the works we see people on the ground but they are diminutive in the presence of the seemingly towering banana trees. Even the clusters of upturned bananas look like groups of people wearing shrouds, huddled together. These works give

prominence to nature and raise the debate of man Vs nature.

The work in charcoal titled **“The night”** has many surprising features. The night is not dark; however, the large banana leaf, again only a fragment of a leaf- its lower half- occupying nearly three quarters of the space within the composition – along with other elements in the drawing is depicted in dark tones. Touching the edge of the leaf is the full moon surrounded by a dark circle and in the vicinity is a lone star, prominent because of its shape that of the Star of David. Shalini’s interpretation of a night-time view is unique/original.

Title - The night

Year of work - 2021



Medium - Charcoal on paper

Size - 10 x 15 inches

Shalini’s set of drawings titled “Harmony” are being exhibited in Bhilwara, Rajasthan, at Akriti Art Gallery from 5th. to 9th. Sept., 2022. The exhibition is sponsored by the Gujarat State

Lalit Kala Akademi.

The General having crossed a Torii boundary – Drawing with a Torii and a figure

The trajectory of my art practice takes on a zigzag path sometimes; and at other times a circuitous one or a U-turn that I didn’t expect to take.
The work “The General” is one such. I started off with figure sculptures and then went on to study life drawing at Boston University.

A Novel Solution – My First Sculpture/Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

The sculpture shown below is a faithful depiction of the person I passed by in the street in as far as the main feature of “a man walking backwards” (seen from the point of view of the feet) is concerned. But there are other metaphorical features to the form of the body, all of which are hidden at the back, which are revealed when the viewer goes around the sculpture to inspect the feet.

The General having crossed a Torii boundary/Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

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Madan Lal Gupta – Innovations in Bricks/Archana H Colquhoun

Using an integrated art methodology to study works of Madan Lal Gupta…..in conversation with Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

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Autumn Tree of Pleasure – Japan/Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

- **The Tree has a Symbolism that is Timeless and Universal**

in its Origins. The Expressions are limitless and found in all cultures and religions.

The Bhagawad Gita (15.1)

Lord Krishna describes the divine Ashvattha tree, as that whose roots grow upwards and the branches of which extend downwards; its leaves are the sacred knowledge of the Vedas; the knower of this tree has attained the knowledge of the Vedas.

Carl Gustav Jung

"No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell."

The above two quotes, to me, point to the limitless ways in which the symbolism of a tree can be expressed.

I would like to place my painting "Autumn Tree of Pleasure" within the context of the extensive symbolism that the Tree has generated in our imagination.

In this essay, I would like to talk about the visual devices I used in the painting of the autumn tree to depict time, movement, **and the part that memory plays in the creation of an artwork.** I painted the 'autumn tree' before I moved back to India, at the turn of the century.

- **Materials used in the painting**

The autumn tree is painted on an imperial size card sheet with charcoal, pastels, acrylic paints, and a bit of turmeric for the yellow – or is the yellow pigment not turmeric?

The quality and range of paper types, including the sizes and formats of cut and rolled paper that I encountered in Japan filled me with such joy and amazement that I switched from

sculpture and installation art to painting, for a time.

- **The Tree and the Painting**



In the painting, **I wanted to show** – most of all – **the movement of falling leaves**.

Fall is another name for **autumn**.

A tree shedding its autumnal leaves*, the shade of* ***kumkum*** *red – deep, rich, dense, and tactile –* ***is an annual spectacle of nature*** *that is witnessed only in some parts of the world, which have a temperate climate.*

- **My relationship with the tree**

Coming from the tropics i.e. southern India, I found **the concept of the four seasons** not just novel but in some respects alien.

After the first few years of living in Japan, I began to form my own, personal relationship with each of the **four seasons** that came and went in a regular cycle, without exception, every year.

Summer is perhaps the least favourite season for most people in Japan and it was the same for me.

Of the other three seasons – the soft, gentle **spring**, preceded by a cold, crisp, snowy **winter**, and the third the **autumn** with the grandeur of its colours and dazzling hues – **is my most inspirational.**

- **Picking a singular iconic image of a tree and blotting out the surrounding panoramic stretch**

The subject of the painting, **The Autumn Tree of Pleasure**, which I painted after having lived through several Japanese autumns, harked back to an image (of a painting of an autumn tree) that was already present in my mind as a vivid and abiding memory, for more than a decade, before I visited Japan and made the country my second home.

I am referring here to the well-known Indian miniature painting titled "**Squirrels in a Chinar Tree**" by the master painter **Abu'l-Hasan** (see NOTE below) who worked in the Mughal emperor, Jahangir's atelier in the seventeenth century. The Chinar tree grows in the valleys of Kashmir and is considered to be a symbol of Kashmir's rich, cultural and environmental heritage.

I was introduced to this painting in my art history classes in Baroda. The **shape of the leaves** of the Chinar tree, the **flame-red hue** of many of them (alongside the green leaves) depicted in the Mughal miniature painting, I found puzzling and fascinating. This was a tree in the early stages of an autumnal metamorphosis. Such a tree, where leaves seemed to take the place of flowers because of their distinctive colours, I had never seen in southern India.

[NOTE: *The work is sometimes attributed to the artist Mansur or considered to be a collaborative work by the two artists. In any case, works of art not only in India but also in Europe were the result of collective work by trainee artists and artisans who worked under the auspices of a single master to whom then the work of art would be attributed. The painting is in the collection of a museum outside India as are a large number of other masterpieces of Indian art. A simple Internet search will disclose all necessary information on the painting. Due to copyright restrictions I have not included an image of the painting, which is titled in most cases "**Squirrels in a Plane Tree**."*]

- **The Chinar tree and my painting**

The **Chinar tree** belongs to the family of **Plane trees** and resembles the **Japanese maple tree**. It is considered to be an endangered species going by the rapidly decreasing numbers of the tree in Kashmir. One of the features of the **Chinar tree** is its **deep and extensive root growth** that covers a ground area

larger than the spread of its tree top. The bifurcation of the tree trunk into roots is visible just above the ground level where the tree rises in its magnificence.

The roots of a **Chinar tree** need to breathe and be able to draw nutrients and generous amounts of water from the surrounding soil for its survival, healthy growth, and longevity. When road construction and building works are carried out close to and right above the ground area where the roots of the Chinar tree lie **the death of the tree from suffocation and starvation soon follows**.

- **A Pictorial Analysis of the painting "An Autumn Tree of Pleasure" through Q & A**

Q1. What sort of a tree is the ***Autumn Tree of Pleasure***, is it a Chinar tree?

A1. The tree in the painting is a generic, deciduous tree that sheds its leaves in the **autumn** but before it starts to bare its branches, a performance takes place whereby the **green leaves turn** into a **golden yellow followed by a deep orange, and/or finally a blood-red hue**.

Q2. How did this painting come about?

A2. I can best answer the question in the form of a **sequence diagram** using words and symbols as follows:

a ***memory*** **+** a ***life experience*** **→** a **memory retrieval through synchronic activation** within the brain **↔** a ***motivation to create*** = the ***final art work***

Note: It is a mystery as to why only certain memories and or life experiences lead to the production of an artwork, especially when the artwork is purely self-motivated and is not a work that is commissioned by a patron.

Q3. How is **movement** depicted in the **painting**? What **pictorial devices** do you employ to **show movement** in a **static, two-dimensional representation** of an image?

A3. The following **four elements** are used to depict movement in the painting.

- Wind
- Shifting axis in the composition
- Suggestion of Time through placement of pictorial elements on the picture surface
- Change in pigmentation

1**. Wind creates movement** which in turn disturbs the leaves, dislodging them from the branches, and speeds up the process of the falling of the leaves.

2**. Diagonal lines** in a composition can also be used to **show movement**. In the painting the branches of the tree are drawn in sweeping, rightward curves the arcs pointing downwards.

3. **Time represents movement**. The passing of time is inferred from the position of the leaves painted as individual elements in a random pattern at varying levels within the painting, which shows the descent of the leaves to the ground at different times.

4. **Change in pigment** can also indicate the passing of time. The leaves on the ground are painted dark red the colour of dried blood and it can be understood that the leaves have been on the ground for some time, in contrast to the brighter red of the leaves that are shown airborne.

The painting, *Autumn Tree of Pleasure,* to me represents the tragic history of Kashmir. The region was considered a paradise on earth, depicted as such in countless paintings and in the romantic song sequences of Indian movies till just a few decades ago.

As a visual artist, *I have so far rarely repeated an artistic idea or a form, unless I am in the process of exploring the various facets and permutational possibilities of the idea.* Use of different materials comes into play when I want to express an idea through different media – paintings, sculptures, art installations etc.



A variation on the autumn tree is a painting which I made

using only the red viscous liquid that comes in a tiny tube with a dipper for painting a ***bindi*** – a red dot or an elongated line on the forehead, which is commonly used in India by women as a chief element of facial makeup.

I sometimes refer to the painting as **A Red Tree**, which I painted very soon after painting **The Autumn Tree of Pleasure**.

Photo Credit: **Arun Visweswaran**

The X factor of Installation Art/Archana Hebbar Colquhoun

Installation Art

I would like to quote from the **Tate glossary of art terms** a definition of **Installation Art**.

"Mixed-media constructions or assemblages usually designed for a specific place and for a temporary period of time"

This definition is broad, succinct and most suitably describes many of my installation works. One example is the ***Altar,*** an installation work in which I bring together paintings, sculptural works in wood and brass, bricks, and a temple bell that I displayed at a gallery in New Delhi, **as a single work**.



However, the presentation features of an art installation allow an artist to mix and match artworks and objects and present what might be *a hybrid collection* of works as ***one homogenous whole***. The arrangement and display of the works and

objects are designed by the artist (not by a curator) and the completed assemblage would result in a new, **composite work** – an art installation bearing the name of the artist as its creator.

Installation art throws up rich and exciting possibilities for artistic expression.

I would like to present a descriptive analysis of the installation work titled ***Altar***. The installation consists of four discrete components: the centrepiece; the pedestal; the paintings; and a temple bell.

The Centrepiece – a Torii gateway with Obstacles

The main component of the installation, **the centrepiece**, is a Torii gateway with chained objects suspended from the top-centre of the gateway; the objects acting as an obstacle to entry.



The main advantage of installation art is that an artist can create multiple works of "installation" using the same set of (art) objects by assembling them in different compositions and playing around with the placements of the objects. The

possibilities for innovation are virtually limitless. The centrepiece of the present installation consists of four detachable pieces: the Torii gateway and three small brass sculptures, connected by chains – acting as **an obstacle**.

The obstacle consists of one main part – *a Z-shaped form* and an auxiliary part – *two forms* resting on the base of the Torii gateway connected on either side by a chain to the suspended Z-shaped form. The *two forms* (not clearly seen in the featured photograph) are sculptural expressions of a slipper and a footprint in 3D form. The three forms (of a hand-held size) are in fact three independent sculptural works, which can be displayed individually or in combination with other related works.

[Note: I made a series of small sculptural works, cast in brass, all of which can be connected to one or more works, interchangeably, using chains. A discussion about these works would form the subject of a separate article.]

The Pedestal

The centrepiece, the Torii gateway, rests on a dry wall of bricks, within which is a niche acting as the sanctum sanctorum of a temple with an architectural feature of a step leading into the small, vertical hollow in the wall.



Sculptural works, unless very large, are always placed on a pedestal in a gallery setting. The use of a brick construction instead of a wooden pedestal box to display the Torii sculpture opens up the meaning of **the work** (consisting of the Torii and the brick wall) since the pedestal becomes a part of the work. The brick wall, on which the Torii gateway is placed, can be seen as depicting **sacred architecture that has a sculptural component**, the Torii. If the Torii was placed on a wooden display pedestal instead of a brick wall it would be seen as a (simple*) work of sculpture.

The brick wall plays a transformative role in terms of meaning and construction within the installation.

* I use the term “simple” not as a qualitative description of the art of sculpture but as a depth of vision employed in reading a work of art.

[Note: The bricks used in this installation are common burnt clay bricks made and used in India for constructing houses and other small buildings. The bricks are **backing bricks** (as opposed to **facing bricks –** used as a veneer**)** and they require rendering with mortar to hold them in place and need plastering once a wall is built.

The dry brick wall on which the centrepiece of the present installation rests can easily be taken down without damaging the bricks and the bricks put to use for which they were made originally. The bricks in the dry wall in the installation do not sit flush on and against each other as no mortar is used to build the wall.

Paintings of Torii gateways with Obstacles

I explored further the subject of the main (sculptural) component of the (Torii gateway) installation in paintings. The two paintings hanging on the wall, above the centrepiece, one to the left are from a series of paintings the idea for which came to me after I had done a body of Torii sculptural works. The paintings are of a slightly later date.



The main subject of the paintings is the two-part form of an “obstacle.” Although the form of the Torii no longer appears in the paintings the top edge of the painting is suggestive of the existence of a Torii gateway.

The paintings are self-explanatory, except that they are titled *“Herbal Paintings”* – an entirely new category of works. As I continued to explore the theme of the “Torii with obstacles” in a 2D medium the principal focus of the works shifted to the pigments I chose to use in making the paintings. The subject matter of a Torii with obstacles that

was the source of the paintings became incidental to the painted works, a mere vestige of an earlier idea.

The pigments used in the paintings are turmeric, kumkum, henna, and kaajal (organic eyeliner paste).

[***Note:*** Turmeric and the red kumkum powder are indispensable to any ritual performed in a temple, and are considered sacred.]

A Bronze Temple Bell

The presence of the temple bell in the installation not only points to another series of works titled "**Sound Sculptures**" but also transforms the meaning of the installation, just as the brick wall does.

Many of the small sculptural works described earlier in the essay (the obstacles in the Torii) are in fact examples of **sound sculptures**. When the original clay or plaster forms of the sculptural works were cast in brass I asked the artisan to place a tiny stone inside the hollow of the brass works so as to create a sound (as does a child's rattle) when the object is picked up by a viewer for closer inspection.

The fact that these brass works incorporate the element of sound is not evident unless a viewer is already familiar with the works. The bell acts as a connecting thread to the sound element hidden in the brass sculptures.

The (hybrid) collection of works featured in the installation present a meaning that is *concentric*.

The temple bell with its definitive meaning provides a trajectory through which the viewer comes to see the installation as one that represents **sacred space**.

The temple bell and the bricks are two components of the installation that are obviously **not** made by me. This is one advantage of installation art where works and objects not made by the artist can be presented in a 3D assemblage along with

other works without the artist being accused of misappropriation.

There is no possibility of doubt in the viewer’s mind as to the origin and identity of the temple bell and the utilitarian bricks, both of which are integral to the installation.

Conclusion

The works and objects of one installation can be presented in a different combination in another installation and context. In one installation the same set of objects can be displayed in a grouping that is intended to convey one primary meaning but when presented in a different combination (irrespective of the display space) the installation could express a statement that could not be read from a construction of an earlier installation, which consisted of the exact same set of objects.

For example, if the temple bell was not hung above the centrepiece but placed on the floor, upright or on its side, it would change the meaning of the work, almost entirely.

A number of other issues to be discussed and clarified with respect to this installation arise in my mind, although the essay has now come to its end.

No writing on an artwork can and will be conclusive.