

[Home](#)
[About](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Equity Plan](#)
[Opportunities](#)
[Events](#)
[Podcast](#)
[Shop](#)
[Support Us](#)



Sponso
rs



THE
CARNEGIE
GALLERY EDUCATION THEATRE

KMAC
MUSEUM

Ruckus



All Images: Installation view of
Template Days: Avantika Bawa & May
Tveit at the University of Kentucky Art
Museum.

→ University of Kentucky Art Museum,
Lexington

[Home](#)
[About](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Equity Plan](#)
[Opportunities](#)
[Events](#)
[Podcast](#)
[Shop](#)
[Support Us](#)



Sponso
rs



Template Days

Review

Del O'Brien

In a small back gallery at the University of Kentucky Art Museum, four embossments, made in 2021 by Avantika Bawa, left little up to perception alone. Into the supple surfaces of a few medium-sized sheets of handmade paper, the artist had pressed designs like footprints in snow. Their syntax was basic, since Bawa had used just one basic tool to make them: a small mock-up of metal scaffolding. Installed as multiples on pedestals in the gallery, the scaffolds were skeletal and made of 3D-printed steel; pushed down into the paper, they'd left a trace that was spectral but uniform. Shallow dimples from each impression met on the sheets at staunch right angles, combining upwards—with an almost fractal rhyming and regularity—into austere suggestions of rectangle. Every divot had been left uncolored and the sheet untouched by anything but the metal. The resulting works all had the soft providential quality of a spontaneous image. They seemed edgeless (they were unframed and white as the walls they were mounted on), and their surfaces verged on undifferentiation. Bawa's embossments staved off utter blankness, though, by becoming just slightly more than visual.

By this I mean that the artist set up for herself a problem, and solved it lyrically. Bawa is clearly interested in how structures inflect the spaces they're placed in, and vice versa. Her scaffolds themselves, in fact, seemed intended in the galleries as a poem

[Home](#)
[About](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Equity Plan](#)
[Opportunities](#)
[Events](#)
[Podcast](#)
[Shop](#)
[Support Us](#)



Sponso
rs



on physical relation, spidering hyperrationally up from their plain bases but casting uncontrolled shadows onto the wall behind them. The embossments were made to be another modality of this study on space: interrupting the otherwise empty paper-face, the scaffolds' indices gave each sheet a heft beyond its status as a surface.

Bawa's problem, then, was an old one: how is an artist to cultivate in her viewer the suspension of disbelief necessary for their enjoyment of her work, without effacing the affective potential of the work's physical presence? How is she to do so without elevating physicality into an obliterative literality? A lesser artist than Bawa would likely have pursued a theoretical or semantic solution. Bawa's brilliance lies in her resolution to have proceeded artistically.

Bawa's interventions on her embossments seemed slight, sensed like a breeze. Each arrangement of impressions claimed a definite overall shape, algorithmically a helix or a column or a heavy concavity. Made up of iterating swarms of smooth rectangular pocks, each form massed together into itself as a visual denseness set against the large plane of untouched white outside it. The impressed images feigned a rigid, almost "objective" embodiment of both the tool and the repetitive process which made them, but even the fastest glance could catch the sheets throbbing with aliveness. Tiny departures from rote indexicality were barely perceptible, which made the pages thrum with more than just the fact of their physical presence—it vivified them with the significant weight of Bawa's imagination. Two sets of impressions might have been set slightly off of

[Home](#)
[About](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Equity Plan](#)
[Opportunities](#)
[Events](#)
[Podcast](#)
[Shop](#)
[Support Us](#)



Sponso
rs



each other's center, a skewed little ripple of chance cultivated happily between them. Or else a field of ruts would be interrupted by a flock of mounds projecting out *from* the page, the result of Bawa (slyly, I'm sure) flipping it and embossing its verso.

The most songlike of the four embossments registered Bawa's artful tricks electrically in its overall design. It was thick with pits at its bottom, which climbed up methodically towards a curve at the page's waist, above which was just smooth surface. This sloping boundary was where Bawa staked everything, it seemed: a point of bald confrontation between the reality of the page and the fictiveness of what the impressions clawed towards conveying. Crucially, Bawa didn't use the former to suppress the ineradicable history of the latter, but rather suspended each within the pull of the other.

My obvious impulse to incorporate the impressed form as an image, however barren, was stymied at the point where the sheet became a sheet; but as soon as I began to recognize the page for its presence and plainness, the image's unworldly sinuosity knocked me away from stultifying literalness. In this palpitative push and pull my own physical thereness felt thoroughly implicated—my heart beat and my mouth watered and I felt my skin on my clothes in ambiguous response—but my relation to the work was by no means theoretical, even theorizable. It was instead like I was inside the work in the way we sometimes wish to be inside of movies or photos or representational paintings. I was privy to, even part of its machinations, but still ineluctably an interloper in the world it was creating.

[Home](#)
[About](#)
[Masthead](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Equity Plan](#)
[Opportunities](#)
[Events](#)
[Podcast](#)
[Shop](#)
[Support Us](#)



Sponsors



The other half of *Template Days*, the unassuming two-person show which held Bawa's installation, consisted of a handful of monoprints and two large hanging sculptures by the artist May Tveit. Conceptually, these engaged many of the same themes (process, presence, indexicality) as Bawa's pieces, but without their same degree of livening contingency.

Tveit's sculptures projected stepwise from the flat wall into the gallery's space and were roughly the size of a human body; her prints, which looked like ziggurats built for a lost religion, were delicate and luminous impressions of templates that had been built in the sculptures' idiom. But where Bawa's embossments, in their dynamism as compositions, unfolded well beyond the concepts which determined how and why they were made, Tveit's contributions seemed a bit mired in their own thoughtfulness. Her impressions, to be sure, were enigmatic in an archeological sort of way, and against their firm right angles they graded at pleasant random through patches of dark charcoal to chirps of rich white. But their moments of formal and hermeneutic freeness seemed always undercut by the looming presence of their matrices hung on the wall beside them. This relationship was presented as almost solvably indexical, which gave Tveit's contributions the quality of essays on ideas about space, rather than exultations through them.

I was so much more enamored of Bawa's embossments, then, because of the exquisite, mutually inflective balance they struck between their conceptual program and their physical manifestation. So charged in their presence as to seem almost sexual, and so lush in their sparing

Home
About
Masthead
Submissions
Equity Plan
Opportunities
Events
Podcast
Shop
Support Us



Sponso
rs



design as to cultivate genuine fancy,
these works set themselves into a
constant sublativ motion with the
ideas which bore but would readily
constrict them. And so, as good art
must always be, they were
inexhaustible.

-

1.21.22

*Del O'Brien (he/they) is a critic and
historian based in St. Louis, MO.*

Aesthetics of Care and Radical
Filmmaking
Essay, Jena Seiler, Tijah
Bumgarner, 2023

Sponsors

RUCKUS, 2018-2023

Louisville, KY