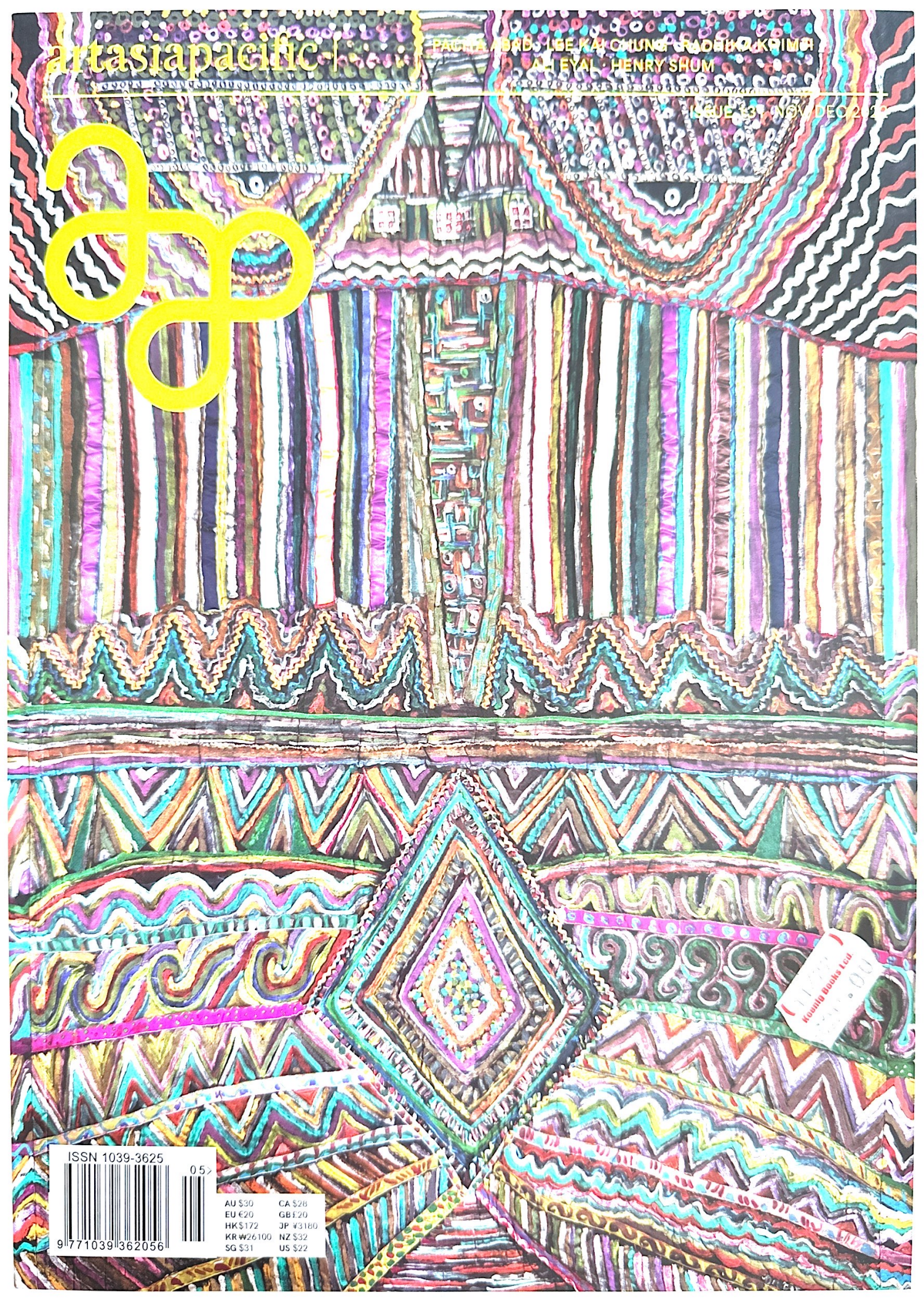
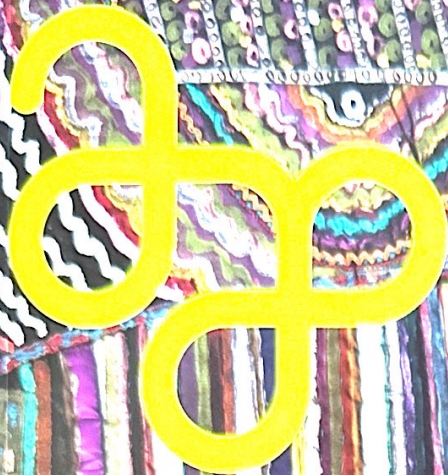


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# RADHIKA KHIMJI

## Embodying the Mind's Eye

BY HG MASTERS



Portrait of RADHIKA KHIMJI. All images courtesy the artist and Experimenter, Kolkata.

In our public lives as much as in our private spaces, we are constantly negotiating who gets to see what of ourselves. Where and how are we allowed to be seen? How much of ourselves—physically, emotionally, or culturally—can or should we reveal? Who stops us from deciding for ourselves? And how are we shaped physically and psychically by our surroundings?

All these questions—whether understood socio-politically or more specifically as feminist issues, or historically as topics in psychoanalysis, existentialist philosophy, or media theory—circulate in the semi-abstract, semi-figurative artworks that the London-based Radhika Khimji has been creating over the last two decades. They came flooding back in my mind as we were catching up on a video call in September. I started by asking about her most recent

major endeavor: the multipart installation *Under, Inner, Under* (2022) created for the inaugural Oman Pavilion curated by scholar Aisha Stoby at the 59th Venice Biennale this year. The project's backstory dates back a few years to her interest in the *garra* fish unique to the Al Hoota Cave in the Hajar mountains of Oman where, in the darkness, skin grows over their eyes. As Khimji thought about them, the blind fish were a metaphor for ourselves: for our spiritual or philosophical seeking, for the effects of our social conditioning on the bodies we are born with—or into, depending on your beliefs.

The funeral of the British queen was happening on the day we spoke, and Khimji also related that she had thought about the *garra* when the sultan of Oman was ill before his death in early 2020, and the future of the country was uncertain.

At several moments in our conversation, Khimji also used the word “censorship”—which I wasn’t expecting to hear in relation to the fish—but it made sense when she described the fish as relating to her larger interests in “what you can see and what you can’t see.” While there may be an Oman-related subtext as with all elements in Khimji’s practice, it operates on many levels simultaneously, as the political, cultural, and personal aspects become entangled.

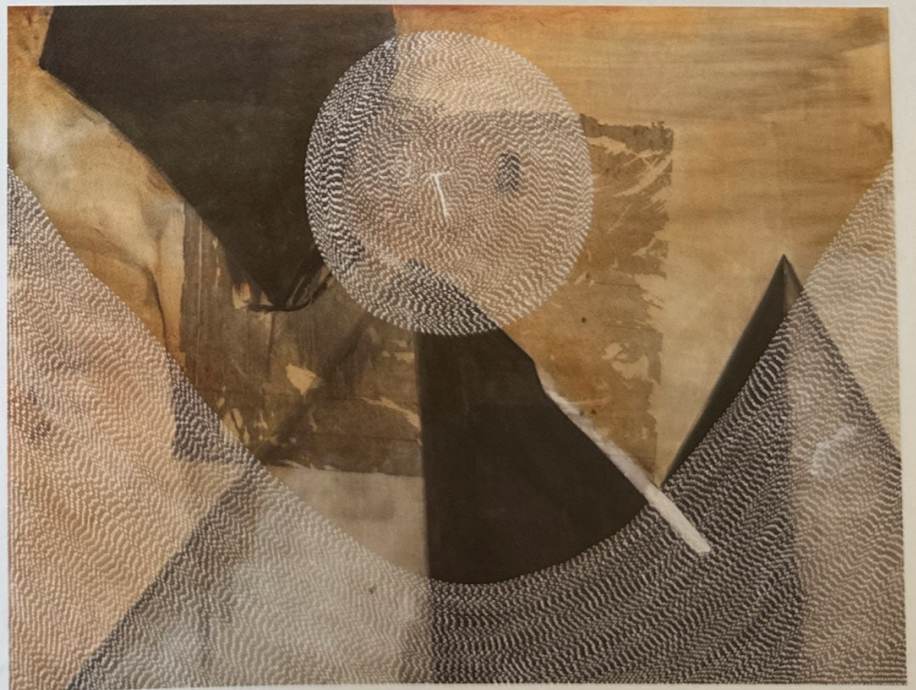
When she finally was able to visit the cave in mid-2021, she ultimately became much more interested in the natural environment itself, rather than the small, lethargic aquatic creatures. She took numerous photographs of the cave’s rocky interiors. When Oman’s pavilion at Venice was given the official green light toward the end of the year, she decided to have these images of the textured surfaces printed on pieces of three-meter fabric, which she adorned with abstract forms created with rows and circles of painted dabs.

These rows and radiating circles of marks—here in paint, but in other forms across her practice including lines of red thread stitched across the surface—Khimji explained, come from the shapes of the necklaces seen in painted icons of the deity Krishna, a practice she studied at an earlier point in her life and has been incorporating into her work ever since. Reflecting her family’s heritage as a member of the Gujarati community in Oman, the abstract motifs have multiple meanings in her work—“as a layer, a mediation, a ritual, a gesture performed,” she said—that directly relates to the religious practices her family performs at home every day.

The blind *garra* fish led her to consider the way even we—eye-sighted, bipedal sapiens not confined to dark caves—nonetheless have a limited perspective, walking around the world with our own heads largely oriented downward at the ground (or smart phone). One element of



From top to bottom, anti-clockwise: Installation view of **RADHIKA KHIMJI's** *Under, Inner, Under*, 2022, multimedia installation, dimensions variable, at the Oman Pavilion, 59th Venice Biennale, 2022. Photo by Thierry Bal. **RADHIKA KHIMJI**, *See through stander*, 2008, oil and glue on plexi and plywood, 217×76×4cm. **RADHIKA KHIMJI**, *Slice the gaze away*, 2021, oil and photo transfer on paper and birch plywood, 100×120cm.



*Under, Inner, Under* is a curving wall of geometric sidewalk-pavement blocks, which like the roof of the cave, mirrors our limited awareness. Another component was a roundabout-like circle on the floor where she placed an enlarged, wooden painted version of the blindfish. Collectively, the installation reflects her personal experience of the built and natural landscape of the country. "Muscat doesn't really have a city center," she explained to me, "so it has all these roundabouts that are like chains on a necklace. You end up feeling disembodied, and there's not a sense of togetherness." But she concedes her experience perhaps reflects that "I'm from India but grew up in Oman, so there's a sense of dislocation."

For Khimji, the installation is meant to be experienced spatially—to capture the feeling of being "encompassed" by the work, with its haptic density, details, and connections between elements. Another important feature was a large hanging aluminum metal sculpture with circular cutouts, part of an older series, and based on her drawings that she makes with portions excised using a hole-puncher. Coyly titled *The Dangler* (2008), she at first described them as "parts of the body" before admitting, "They're labias, basically." These are interpretations that can't necessarily be unseen in the case of an otherwise abstract-looking form.

We laughed at this revelation, and this led Khimji to recount a conversation she had with her gallerist Prateek Raja during her show "Adorning Shadows" at Experimenter gallery in Kolkata in October

2021, when he had encouraged her to be more open about the references in her work. "I'm so used to censoring the sexuality in my work," she admitted. I asked whether she was planning to talk more about this aspect, which Khimji thought still could be, for herself and others in certain contexts, "vulnerable-making and embarrassing." But she said it was necessary for her to embrace these elements rather than speaking about it in a highly coded manner of "surrealistic" forms, as she has in the past. She also said with conviction: "You don't really get the work if you don't get the censorship involved: this relationship of the body to space, and being seen and being looked at, and looking at yourself being looked at. It can get really decorative if you don't talk about that."

Interestingly, I thought while reviewing the notes I took about our conversation, that "censorship" could be so easily replaced with "sexuality" in this context. The two words mark the poles between which her depictions of the body and her abstractions alternate—sometimes explicitly when a form is obviously a body part disguised as an abstract form, or less obviously when a shape might be a body part. In Khimji's works, there are many curves and circles as well as many torsos, backs, thighs, breasts, butts, and limbs—bodies and their many parts, partially concealed or revealed.

What I maybe didn't understand or appreciate about Khimji's practice—or it hadn't fully emerged when I first encountered her work more than a decade ago—was how her perceptions on the body

and its many social and psychological resonances were manifested in their ontological fluidity. She describes her works as "at once a painting, a drawing, and a collage; it is also an embroidery and a sculpture." In her sketchbooks and works on paper, Khimji also incorporates elements of images with colored thread in lines and patterns that evoke Indian textiles. But in addition to creating paintings full of bodily forms—as in a trio of 2.4-meter tall multimedia paintings of pattern-covered, limb-like forms, *Lick the sky*, *Curling inwards*, and *Belly at the gate* (all 2021) that she showed at Experimenter last year—there was also a wooden-outlined, bodily-looking form with a painted plexiglass surface, titled *See through stander* (2008), propped in the corner of the space. As it leaned, not quite on the wall or on the floor, it almost became itself a spectator of the works hanging on the wall.

She showed me the new multipart work she was creating for Experimenter's booth at Frieze London, where she exhibited alongside Krishna Reddy's works from the 1960s and '70s, among other peers. I felt excited by the potential of her bodily-like painting-sculptures, such as *See through stander*, being continually moved around an exhibition space—as a reflection of the many forms of fluidity explored and embodied in her practice. Though working in a genre that privileges vision and the eye-to-mind connection, Khimji remains attuned to the body, both the human-individual and our collective social ones.



Installation view of RADHIKA KHIMJI's (from left to right) *Lick the sky*, *Curling inwards*, and *Belly at the gate*, all 2021, acrylic, pencil, and glue on digital print on paper and MDF, 243.8 × 121.9 × 0.5 cm, at "Adorning Shadows," Experimenter, Kolkata, 2021.