



The Lakshmi Mittal and Family  
**SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE**  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

# ARTS PROGRAM REPORT 2021-22





Cover Credit:

**Bunu Dhungana**

From the series

**CONFRONTATIONS (2017)**

Digital photography

Archival Pigment print

Bunu Dhungana is a 2021-22 Visiting Artist Fellow at the Mittal Institute.

# Arts Program Report

July 2021 – June 2022



The Lakshmi Mittal and Family

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## Letter from the Chair

**W**e have lots of exciting news to share with you in this report, including being back on campus with our Visiting Artist Fellows (VAFs), a new architecture project, and a distinguished artist from South Asia at Harvard in 2023.

But first, I am thrilled to welcome the Mittal Institute's new executive director, **Hitesh Hathi**. Hitesh comes to us with rich experience in leadership and management and a lifelong engagement with South Asia, including his graduate work at Harvard on the aesthetics of

Sanskrit and Urdu poetry and classical architecture. He was an executive producer for Boston's NPR news station, WBUR, and among other accomplishments, has trained in Dhrupad. Under his guidance, we look forward to the Arts Program expanding to music and the performing arts.

This year, Harvard was back in-person, and so, too, was our VAF program. Nepali photographer **Bunu Dhungana** and Indian artist **Pragati Jain** spent eight busy weeks at Harvard from October to December 2021, taking classes, researching new areas of interest, prepar-

ing an exhibit for the campus community, and meeting with the university's faculty.

In Spring 2022, our VAF arrived on campus from Pakistan. **Mehwish Abid** is the principal architect at the Studio of Architecture, Research, and Design (SARD) in Lahore. She is a trans-disciplinary academic and visual artist heading the School of Architecture, Design and Urbanism at the Institute for Art and Culture. Our second VAF, **Sharbendu De**, a lens-based artist from New Delhi, has been delayed until the fall due to COVID-related travel challenges.

The Conservation, Science, Training, and Research (CoSTAR) Program has just finished up its second module, following a successful first module that focused on the intersection of art history and material science. The second module focused on theoretical and practical sessions in technical studies of painted surfaces and South Asian art's historical interpretation and kicked off last fall with a fascinating virtual event with experts from the Harvard Art Museums.

We are also excited to announce that in 2023, we will have our first-ever Distinguished Artist Fellow visiting the cam-

pus. The senior visual artist from South Asia will have the opportunity to spend two weeks engaging with Harvard faculty, students and the Mittal Institute's broader community, and will share their work through a public lecture. Stay tuned – we'll be announcing the new DAF very soon!

Finally, we are looking forward to a new project, the State of Architecture in South Asia, which has been conceptualized as a three-to-five year project that looks to answer the fundamental questions related to architecture in a region in transition today. The initiative kicked

off in March with an event in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Design and the MoMA, which opened a new exhibit, "The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947–1985."

We welcome your thoughts and ideas, and, as always, thank you for everything that you do for the Mittal Institute, especially the thriving Arts Program.

**DIPTI MATHUR**  
Chair, Arts Council





**GAPE WITHIN I - SUSTAINING (2017)**  
Photography, mix media, sound, and oral histories

## SCHOLARS

# Visiting Artist Fellowship

The VAF Program has grown from a short exchange to a vibrant eight-week academic program with more than 25 alumni artists from across South Asia, all of whom have enriched the campus community.

**T**he Mittal Institute was thrilled to welcome two Visiting Artist Fellows to Harvard after a year of virtual programming. Nepali photographer **Bunu Dhungana** and Indian artist **Pragati Jain** spent eight busy weeks at Harvard from October to December 2021, taking classes, researching new areas of interest, preparing an exhibit for the campus community, and meeting with the university's esteemed faculty.

One of the special aspects of the program is the opportunity for VAFs to advance their artistic practice by tapping into Harvard's vast library network. To look more closely at how women's movements have influenced public performances, Pragati spent hours in Harvard's Woodberry Poetry Room, researching the writings of poets and photographers, including **Adrienne Rich** and Indian poet **Amrita Pritam**, to explore their approaches to women's movements. Bunu immersed herself in different courses on campus, especially film. She visited Professor **Julie Mallozzi's** class, "Observation and Intervention: Filmmaking as Inquiry," where she learned from other students about their process in making and editing films. One of the highlights of this year's VAF Program was a moving virtual art exhibition entitled 'Women in South Asia: Expectations, Burdens and Obligations' that featured Pragati and Bunu in conversation with **Jinah Kim**, Gardner Cowles Professor of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University and Faculty Director of the Arts Program.

During the Spring 2022 semester, Pakistani artist **Mehwish Abid** joined us on campus and hosted a fascinating participatory exhibit on the material culture related to the Partition titled, "South Asian Narratives: Reclaiming and Retelling." She also spent time visiting the Harvard Art Museums, met with faculty, joined classes taught by Prof. **Homi Bhabha** and even squeezed in a trip to New York City before heading home.

# Mehwish Abid

## On South Asian Narratives: Reclaiming and Retelling

**MEHWISH ABID** is the principal architect at the Studio of Architecture, Research, and Design (SARD). She is a trans-disciplinary academic and visual artist heading the School of Architecture, Design and Urbanism at IAC, Lahore. She has received distinctions for both her graduate and postgraduate dissertations at COMSATS University Islamabad and the University of Liverpool, UK. As a visual artist, she explores formation of new methods of immersion through material culture and experiments with the medium of sound, text, image, and objects. Her practice is research-based that roots itself in decolonial notions of investigation.



The Mittal Institute caught up with Mehwish to learn more about her artwork and what she plans to focus on while at Harvard.

**Welcome, Mehwish! What are your first impressions of Harvard – what has surprised or excited you so far?**

Thank you so much for the warm welcome by the Mittal Institute and Harvard at large. It has been a fulfilling and rich experience so far. It has only been a week since the initiation of my residency; however, it has been around 20 days since I reached Cambridge from Lahore, Pakistan. I wanted to give myself some time before the start of the residency to absorb my environment, get over the jetlag, sort out my accommodation, figure out my way around the city so and so forth. To be honest, my first impressions were all over the place; I was mesmerized at first, just with the thought that I am at Harvard, and then later, adjusting to the celebrated accommodation at Peabody Terrace, and being surrounded by historic and contemporary architecture by world-famous architects – I was just so taken by it all and still am.

The Harvard campus and access to its resources is a treat, especially being an architect/academic with a visual art practice. I am thrilled by the opportunities that are unfolding every day in front of me through this program for my project *Decolonising Home through Objects (DHTO)*. The opportunities are in the form of being able to attend classes of highly esteemed scholars, having the prospect of one-on-one discussions with them, taking guided tours of museums, or exploring Le Corbusier's special collection archives at the Graduate School of Design. Lastly, to be able to see the relevance of my academic and art practice in conversations that I am having with various scholars, or in talks by professors and curators, has been most moving and uplifting for me.

**How did you get started as an artist – when did you know you wanted to pursue a career in the arts?**

I have consistently been fascinated with the impact of the prevailing socio-cultural and political mindset on spatiality and design and how the former symbiotically reflects itself in built spaces, expressing power dynamics within the built environment and dictating the terms of association and interaction externally. From an early age, I was exposed to all kinds of art, be it photography, music, drawing, poetry, or storytelling. Being the youngest daughter, I have been extremely fortunate to have parents who have supported my choice of opting for architecture for my undergraduate studies rather than pushing me for the most common choices in Pakistan i.e., engineering, law, or medicine.





**GAPE WITHIN I - PIGEONHOLES (2017)**

Photographs and immersive installation

Wood, ceramic pottery, glass bottles and photographs

16" x 24"

“I also feel it is very important for artists to approach art with research-based methods to create a 21st-century understanding of this discipline, in which nuanced tactics and tools can be experimented with to engage and discuss issues relevant to this time.”

— MEHWISH ABID



I feel it was my undergraduate studies and exposure to artistic mediums that enhanced my interest in art as a field and in the medium of photography. During my postgraduate studies at the Liverpool School of Architecture, University of Liverpool, I elected subjects such as critiques and communication in the visual arts and architecture and current themes in architectural research. I strongly feel it was such exposures where I found myself comfortable and yet inquisitive at the same time about the interdisciplinarity of art and architecture. Later, when I went back home, I founded my studio, in which I practiced as an architect and an artist. Very soon, I started teaching and my work positioned itself at the crossroads between art, architecture, and the methods through which it may create dialogue and engagement.

Why did you decide to apply to the Visiting Artist Fellowship program? What do you hope to gain from this experience?

The Visiting Artist Fellowship at the Mittal Institute focuses on exposing artists to a wide array of resources to facilitate them to build research for their projects and their practice, in a vicinity full of diverse and rich academic reserves. It is an opportunity for any creative soul to find their momentum and direction, especially if their practice is research based. I hope that through this opportunity and experience there will be a creation of space for inter/trans-disciplinary individuals in the Pakistani art world and Pakistani academia. I also hope to bring attention to the importance of archiving, object photography, and storytelling as a method to practice visual art and hence, the creation of dialogue between the artist and the observer positioned at the crossroads between art, architecture, and the methods through which it may create dialogue and engagement.

KAMMAR BEGUM CUTLERY  
CIRCA 1960  
From the Series  
*Decolonising Home through Objects (DHTO)*  
Archival and object photography, texts,  
photographic paper, silver spoons



### ASGHARI BEGUM SEATING IN KITCHEN – PEERAY CIRCA 1940

From the Series

*Decolonising Home through Objects (DHTO)*

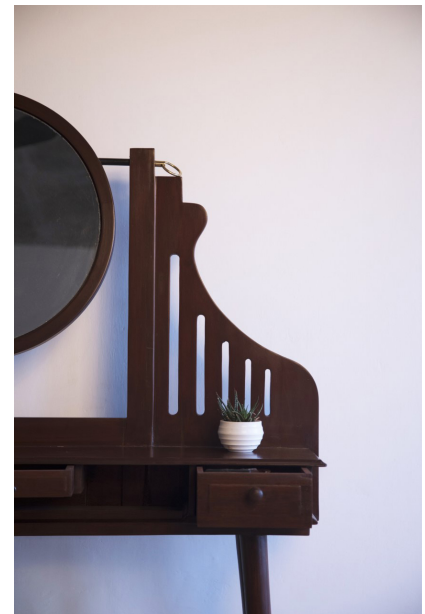
Archival and object photography, texts, Rose wood rattan chair, photographic paper

VAF artists are given the opportunity to attend classes and receive mentorship from faculty. Additionally, they conduct independent research. Can you tell us more about your research project that you'll be working on while at Harvard?

I am looking forward to attending a couple of classes at Harvard for which I have been accepted by two scholars: Professor Jinah Kim for her class on Himalayan art and Professor K. Michael Hays for his class on Modernism and its counter-narratives. I am also looking forward to having one-to-one discussions with Professor Jinah Kim, as I seek her expertise in exploring the medium of archival photography of objects as an interactive installation for engendering narratives from people encountering the proposed exhibit at Mittal Institute.

The ongoing Mittal Institute project on the Partition of British India will benefit my proposed work as well, especially with the collected oral histories through the portal of crowdsourcing memories. Many opportunities may arise in unfolding the decolonization of homes through objects for which Professor Jennifer Leaning and Professor Tarun Khanna will be my go-to academics, though I still have to approach them for my project. The project is rooted in the understanding of appropriation of spatiality through objects; hence the research unit of "Cities and Settlements" led by Professor Rahul Mehrotra will be beneficial for discussion on an aspect of altered spaces post-Partition. I will hopefully get to have a very enlightening conversation with these scholars and would be deeply interested in receiving mentorship from them.

For my Ph.D proposal, I am looking into the decolonization of post-conflict residential architecture that shaped housing for the capital of Punjab, Lahore. For chalking



### ASGHARI BEGUM CONSOLE CIRCA 1940

From the Series

*Decolonising Home through Objects (DHTO)*

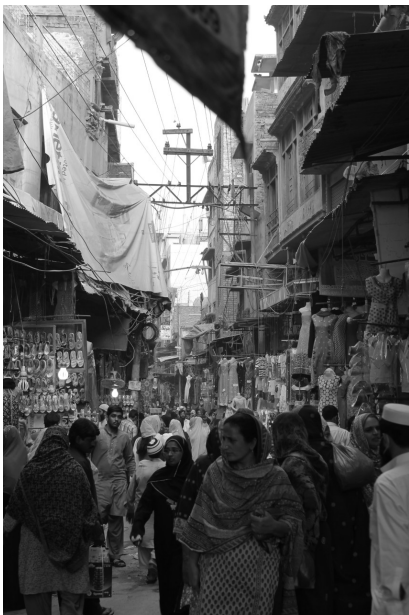
Drawings, archival and object photography, texts, teak, and ash wood



“I hope that through this opportunity and experience there will be a creation of space for inter/trans-disciplinary individuals in the Pakistani art world and Pakistani academia.”

— MEHWISH ABID

GAPE WITHIN I -  
THE ANTIQUE SHOP (2017)  
Photography, mix media, sound,  
and oral histories



GAPE WITHIN III -  
AVAILABLE FOR RENT III (2018)  
Zine publication, sound, and oral histories

out the methodologies of the mentioned research, I arrived at archiving material culture as one of the primary research methods. As a visual art practitioner, *Decolonising Home through Objects (DHTO)* is conceptualized on the peripheries of the disciplines of art and architecture and theoretical frameworks of material culture, post-colonialism, and decolonisation.

Simultaneously, deeply drawn towards the history of what shaped homes in Lahore post-conflict, I started collecting dilapidated furniture pieces and objects that my family possessed that either migrated from India or were created post-Partition. After the trauma of conflict and colonial supremacy, the people of Lahore built their homes or appropriated their occupied spaces according to their own identity and sense of familiarity. This project envisions to create a public archive built with the help of the community through people's historical narratives and a participative approach that can turn into a living digital museum of visual and tactile memory, which influenced the architecture and spatiality of homes that prevailed after the creation of Pakistan. The hope is to uncover the process of decolonization of home through material culture.

What is most important characteristic that an artist must possess – and what advice would you give to someone interested in a career in the arts?

Perseverance is one quality that all artists must possess. The continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties is what I feel guarantees creative fulfilment. I also feel it is very important for artists to approach art with research-based meth-



GAPE WITHIN II - AVAILABLE FOR RENT I & II (2018) (left to right)  
Photography and Installation

ods to create a 21st-century understanding of this discipline, in which nuanced tactics and tools can be experimented with to engage and discuss issues relevant to this time. My advice to artists is to be authentic with their work and their own growth. It is a long process.

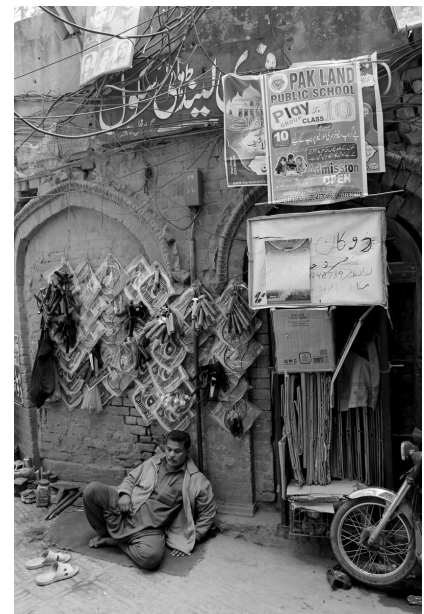
To be able to produce authentic work, one must have an extra source of income so one isn't forced to rush the process and I strongly feel that academics make impactful artists.

What do you hope your artwork inspires in people/society – what legacy do you hope to have?

In Pakistan, the art world is closely knit, and though throughout the world the boundaries are blurred between artists and architects, we still have them back at home. In regard to Pakistan, I hope to create a space for future trans-disciplinary practitioners.

The region of South Asia has a tumultuous history of colonialism and mass migration. With the recent Kabul take-over by the Taliban, it has become crucial to create peacebuilding linkages with India. *DHTO* ensures cross-border research for mutually unfolding the narratives from Partition related to socio-economic and spatial altered realities, which can create an impactful ripple of discourse generated across borders through the medium of art.

*[This interview took place in March 2022.]*



GAPE WITHIN I - SUSTAINING (2017)  
Photography, mix media, sound, and oral histories



**EX (IT) – HEGIRA (2019)**

Interactive Installation; In Mix Medium

Wood, brick, and copper wire

16" x 24"





**THE END- ARCHIVING THE HOUGHT - I (2021)**

Mix Media: Glass LED, acrylics, pointers on archival paper & typewriting on 4 lined papers from cursive handwriting notebook 24" x 16"

# Bunu Dhungana

## On Gender Norms in Art and Artistic Expression

**BUNU DHUNGANA** uses photography as a medium to explore and question the world around her. While her personal projects center around gender, she has worked in a wide range of forms — from visual ethnography to commercial and journalistic work. Dhungana believes that visual stories can reach people, engage them, and start conversations. She is currently working with Photo Circle and Nepal Picture Library. She holds a master's degree in sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.



The Mittal Institute recently interviewed Bunu Dhungana to learn more about her artistic motivations.

**Thank you, Bunu, for participating in the Mittal Institute's Visiting Artist Fellowship! Talk to us about your childhood — where did you grow up, and what drew you to the arts? How did your life experiences inform or influence your art today?**

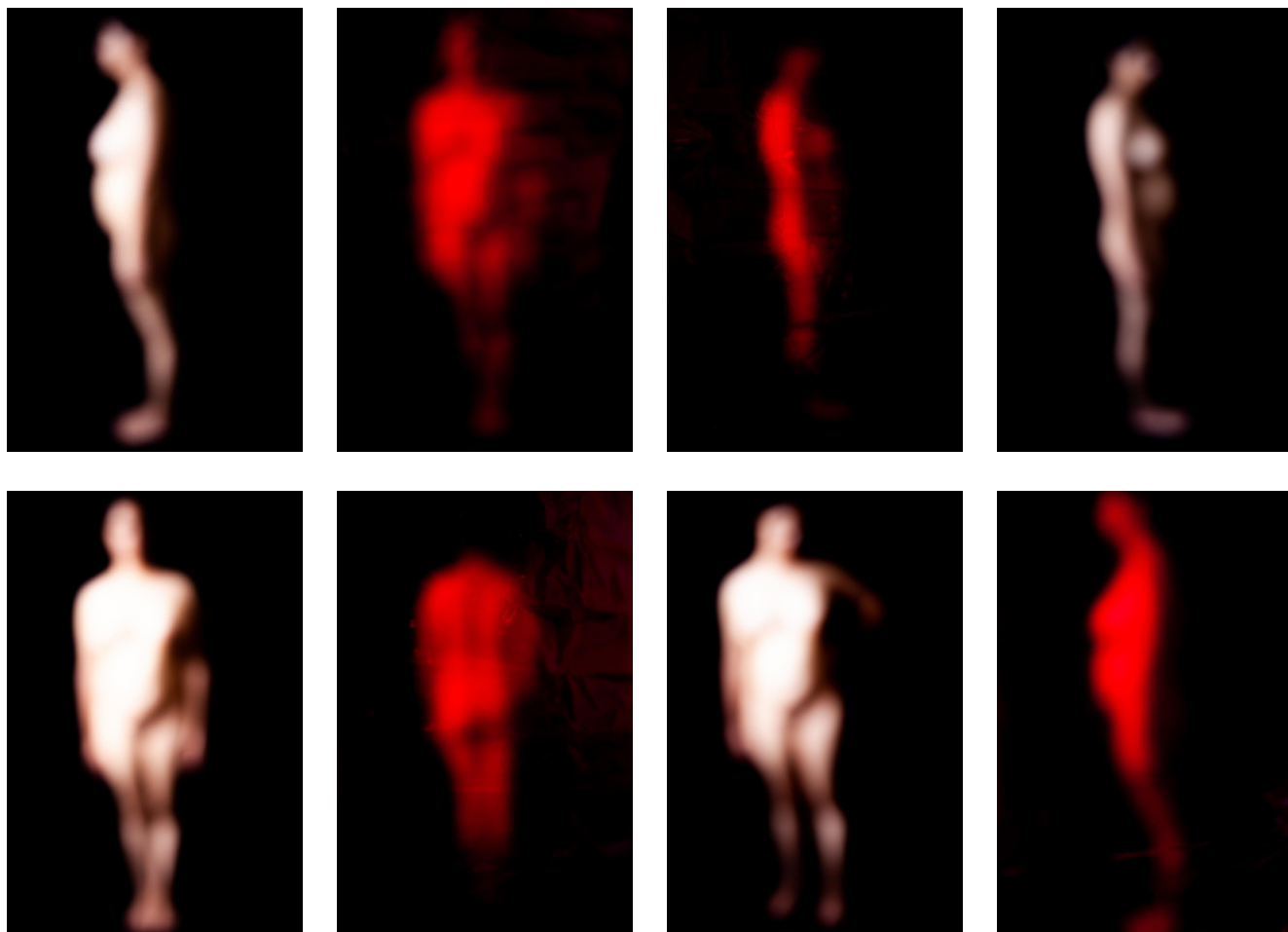
My parents tell me that I was quite a handful and a stubborn child, and that they didn't know what to do with me. They sent me to a boarding school for a couple of years in Kathmandu; they had to keep moving around Nepal because of their jobs. It made practical sense, but it was also to discipline me. In retrospect, I feel that I suppressed a part of me in the process to fit in and be a "good girl," though I always struggled to fit in. I think it's been a process for me to find where I belong. As I grow older, I am getting more comfortable being myself and being the "bad woman."

It must have been difficult for my parents between their jobs, moving around, and handling my brother and me. I can now empathize with them; as you grow older, you realize how parents try their best, given their personal and structural constraints.

I always looked forward to the vacations. I got to see different parts of Nepal from early on — from villages to small towns to big cities. We would visit our grandparents from both sides in their respective villages during festivals too. I saw how inequalities were manifested in our immediate families because of a lack of access to resources and education. I didn't have the vocabulary for it back then, but I understood. I saw how most of my family members had domestic help, and they were treated differently as well. Though over the years it has changed significantly, there is this strong sense of a feudal mindset. There are layers of caste, class, gender, and regional inequalities throughout Nepal. The idea of who gets to be a Nepali is such a fraught notion; it's led by deeply brahminical patriarchal thinking.

Growing up in Nepal, I noticed how boys and girls were treated differently. I saw how women would be in the kitchen cooking while men would be talking about politics, and the women would serve them tea and food. It's not that women didn't discuss politics; rather, the gender roles were clearly defined.

There is one memory that I keep going back to: one of my favorite pastimes during my boarding school vacations was looking at my mother's carefully-stored photo albums. Her family lived in a village in eastern Nepal, and they were well documented photographically. It was a big joint family. I even found a photo of her great-grand-



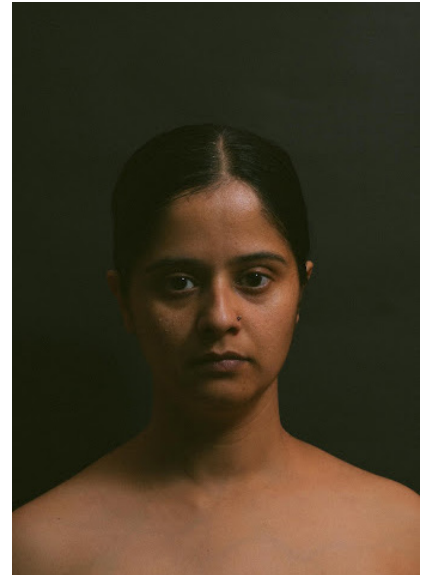
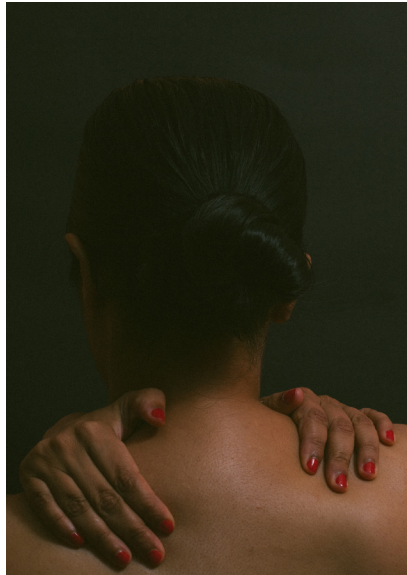
From the series  
**CONFRONTATIONS (2018)**  
 Digital photography  
 Archival Pigment print

father and great-grandmother. They had taken it in Darjeeling, India. Now that I look back, she had narrativized those albums. Photos of her almost entire clan — her mother, aunts, sisters-in-law, grandfather, father, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews, and nieces along with her friends. Albums had group and individual portraits. She got it from her home when she got married. But what I can't forget even now is seeing photos of my mother wearing miniskirts and trousers with her friends. I used to wonder why she never wore them anymore.

Over the years, some photo albums have faded while others have been misplaced or lost, but the memories of looking at the albums will always stay with me. So there was always a pull towards photography for me since the time I was a child. And even then, I hated when anyone told me that I had to behave like a girl! Naturally, all these experiences get translated into the work I do now.

“Over the years, some photo albums have faded while others have been misplaced or lost, but the memories of looking at the albums will always stay with me. So there was always a pull towards photography for me since the time I was a child.”

— BUNU DHUNGANA



Why did you initially decide to apply to the VAF program? What do you hope to take home with you from this experience?

I learned about the VAF program in 2018, but I didn't have the confidence to apply. I thought I would never get in. It's Harvard! You know we have this image of institutions and an idea of people who belong here. And academically, I wasn't a very bright student. Even now, I have my moments of doubt.

Then 2020 happened, and everything changed. Being by oneself during the lockdown was challenging and life-changing in so many ways. There were moments when I had such clarity about where I wanted to be in life, and there were times when I didn't know what I was doing. In between these moments, I decided to apply. It worked on the application for months. I still have the draft. In the beginning, I was trying to sound smart, and it was so pretentious! One of my friends read my application and gave me her honest feedback, and that helped me so much. I feel truly grateful to be surrounded by people who give me honest feedback.

I applied, thinking I should at least give it a try. At the same time, I wanted to expand my understanding of art, dig deeper into feminist theories and interact with some of the best minds. I also wanted to see where my work would fit in the larger discourse of gender here.

When I tell people I am still processing my experience at Harvard, they make fun of me, but it's true. It's been a flow of information from the time I have come here, and it's such a short amount of time. It's unfair! And the amount of thinking we have to



do in such a short span actually might not be a bad thing in the long run. One doesn't always have the luxury of time, but it takes me time to formulate my thoughts and even more time to write them down.

I have noticed that people have such a strong sense of self here or maybe pretend to have such a sense? It could be a very superficial reading, but that's the impression I get. So I hope to take that back with me, along with some experiences, friendships, and books. I dropped my wallet on the bus with money and all my credit cards in it, and someone returned it with everything intact. These experiences matter too. I am so grateful to the person who returned it. I now carry a fanny pack. Apparently, it's hip!

**What have been some highlights of your experience at Harvard thus far? And how are you finding it, being so far from home?**

My highlights include going to classes. Oh, how I have missed going to classes! Even though I got to attend very few classes, I feel they were tremendously helpful. I got to share my work with students too. What stood out was seeing how students in the gender studies class reacted compared to the film students. In the former, the students shared their experiences of being women and man (there was only one in the class) and their thoughts on marriage and their relationships with their mothers, and the intersections of these experiences – it was so intimate.

In comparison, the film students wanted to know more about the process of making my work – the selection process of photographs in the series, framing, how peo-

From the series  
**CONFRONTATIONS (2017)**  
Digital photography  
Archival Pigment print

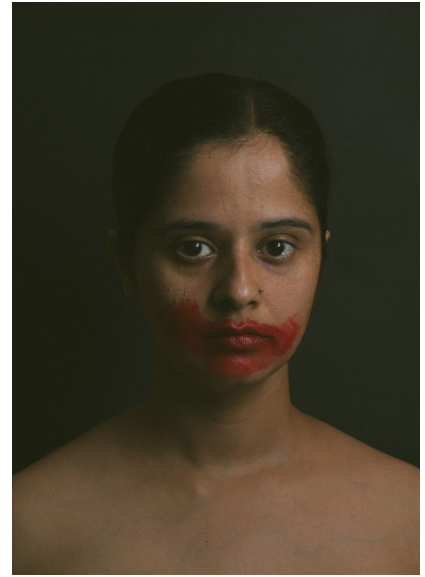




From the series  
**CONFRONTATIONS (2017)**  
Digital photography  
Archival Pigment print



From the series  
**CONFRONTATIONS (2017)**  
Digital photography  
Archival Pigment print



From the series  
**CONFRONTATIONS (2017)**  
Digital photography  
Archival Pigment print

ple have viewed my work in different places, and when I think a body of work ends, among other questions. It's maybe because they were working on their films too? It's different when you have to make things; you think about the practicalities and the decisions one has to make during and after the creation.

Being away from home and navigating this world has been an enriching experience, especially post-pandemic. I have enjoyed being out in the world and interacting with and connecting with people in a world that is so different from mine. There are some familiarities because of globalization, of course, but it is a different world. America is this giant cultural exporter, I guess. What happens here percolates down to our parts of the world culturally and politically.

**As a VAF, you are currently working on a research project. Can you tell our community about your project, and how it is coming along?**

When I went to the Harvard Art Museum, I was starstruck looking at Rothko, Picasso, Pollock, among other “masters” of art, and wondered why I didn’t feel the same way looking at work by O’Keeffe, for instance – so I started my research with that question. And this is not a new question, but it struck me while I was looking at artwork. During my research, I found out that Lina Nochlin, an American Art Historian, had asked in the seventies: Why haven’t there been great women artists?

While researching, I learned that women performance artists in the seventies used performance art as “feminist intervention” in opposition to traditional masculine art practices. I found this very powerful – and of course, this form isn’t without prob-





lems and questions like everything else, but it felt powerful. I had been thinking of the word “performance” for a while. Many people, when they look at my work, talk about performance too. You know how we talk about gender as performative – performing for the camera, our everyday performances, performance arts, and a host of other intersections. So I am trying to understand the idea of performance in different disciplines and mediums. It sounds very vast, but I am enjoying these complexities and connections. I can’t help but wonder, what is real in the end?

**As an artist, you must be completely dedicated to your craft. What do you hope your artwork inspires in people/society – what legacy to you hope to have?**

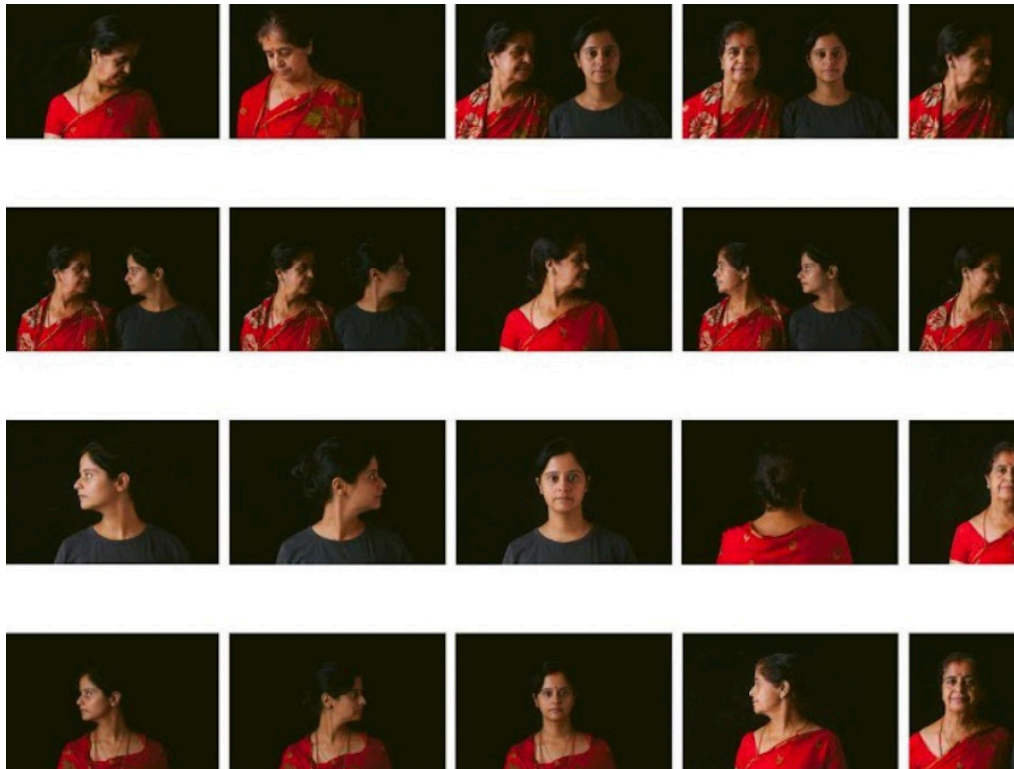
This is the most difficult question for me to answer. I mean, legacy is such a big word, but at the same time, as I write this, I wonder why I am shying away from it. I hope to make work that will make people think and hopefully start conversations. I do believe in the inherent power of art; it can provoke and ask questions, but one should be wary of glorifying it too much. It’s tied to so many other factors like power, gender, class, and economic structures. Of course, it has the power to transform and heal; at the same time, it’s important to critique it too. Also, who defines what art is? Who has the right to call oneself an artist? Who are we making art for? I think these are some questions to think about too as artists.

**What are the biggest challenges and opportunities of a career in the arts? What advice would you give someone contemplating a career path like yours?**

I think everyone’s journey is different as an artist. It matters where you are situated

“I do believe in the inherent power of art; it can provoke and ask questions, but one should be wary of glorifying it too much. It’s tied to so many other factors like power, gender, class, and economic structures. Of course, it has the power to transform and heal; at the same time, it’s important to critique it too.”

— BUNU DHUNGANA



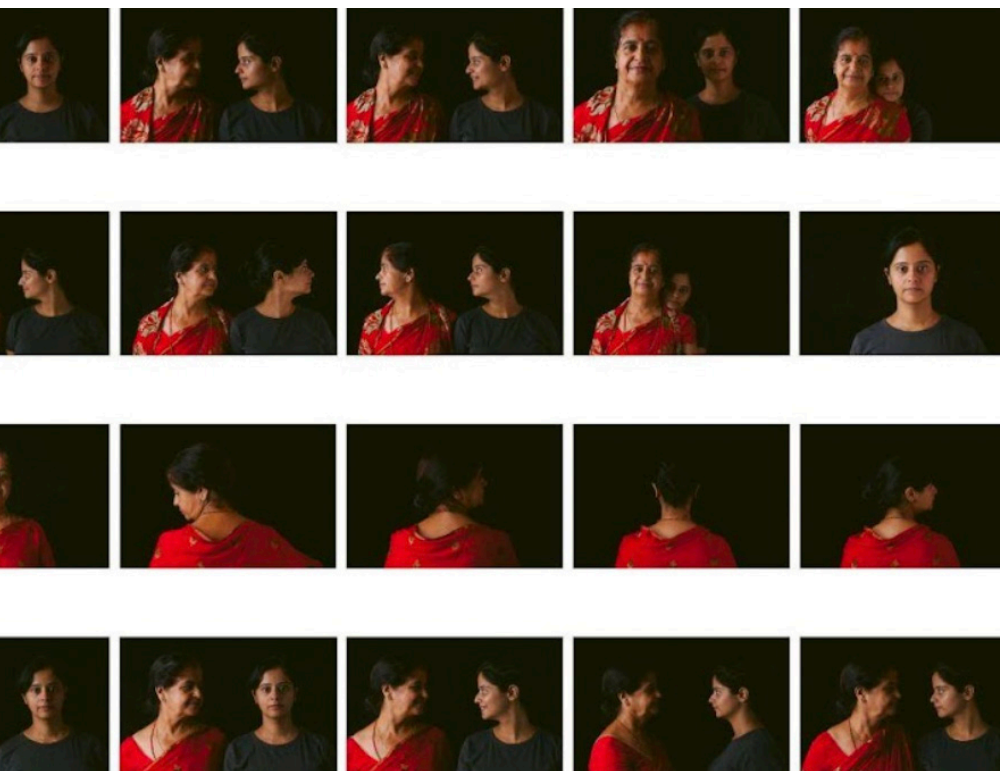
in the world. Sometimes it is easy to give advice to people about what they should do without understanding the context of where they are coming from. But one piece of advice I would like to give is to find a mentor who can give you honest feedback. That’s important.

I would personally love to see more Nepali names and more Nepali women artists globally. Why are there so few names? We need to think about this.

You know I never thought I would be an artist. Growing up in a middle-class household in a country like Nepal means you study and get a job. I didn’t know or see any artists in my immediate surroundings growing up. And I have clear memories of my father saying how he always wanted to become a writer but he had a family to take care of.

After my Master’s degree, I worked as a researcher for some years, which took me around Nepal, and that was when I got a point-and-shoot camera and started taking





photos. I wanted to pursue academics but failed miserably. Somehow I jumped into photography without thinking too much. I was so confident that I had a knack for visuals! I didn't understand back then that it would take me many years to hone my skills as a photographer and a storyteller.

Most importantly, I didn't understand how difficult it would be to sustain things financially. Now I see I also had a certain kind of privilege to make these decisions, but it wasn't easy. And I still have a long way to go. I have so much to learn and unlearn.

I am definitely in a better position now than, say, five years ago, but I still struggle to make the best use of the opportunities that come my way; a part of me is still unsure about myself. I hope this self-doubt goes away.

*[This interview took place in December 2021.]*

From the series  
**CONFRONTATIONS (2018)**  
 Digital photography  
 Archival Pigment print

Video loop + Audio;  
 36 photos of Mommy & me  
 4 minutes 45 seconds

# Pragati Jain

## On Being a Practicing Artist and Woman in India Today

**PRAGATI JAIN** is a Bangalore-based performance artist whose work draws attention to prevailing conflicts in civilized societies, where each one of us has similar aspirations, struggles, and persistent ideas of practicing equality. In an atmosphere of shared fear, confusion, and hope, she creates art about the likenesses that bind us.



The Mittal Institute checked in with Pragati Jain, to learn how her experience at Harvard is transpiring and what projects she is working on.

**Why did you initially decide to apply to the VAF program? What do you hope to take home with you from this experience?**

Living in India for 37 years now, I have become familiar with people's engagement with social and political culture, as well as capitalism and its effect. There is beauty in India's diversity, where people communicate easily in more than three languages and the overlap of various traditions is remarkable – in fact, the coexistence of different ideologies is striking.

However, with such a dense population there are also challenges surrounding supply and demand. The inequality inside and outside various sections and communities of society is persistent; to balance that out in today's fast-paced urbanization is difficult. For instance, when a middle-class woman and mother aspires to work or to be ambitious, she is judged for her commitment towards her motherly duties; whereas a woman from a lower class is forced to take any job as a food seller, house cleaner, or nanny and leave her kids behind in order to support the family.

Though the outlook can be subjective in both the cases, the lack of choices for a woman is disturbing. And at the end of the day, both of them feel deprived of the basic freedom to shape their life with their own will, without judgement. This contrast is difficult to process and adapt to on a daily basis.

When I chose to apply for this program, I had been developing my work in the direction that addresses these common yet distressing issues. Questions such as: "Where to draw the line?" "What is acceptable and what is not?" and "Who decides it?" have been an ongoing conflict with the series of works I have done so far.

The Mittal Institute has done incredible work in creating the bridge to connect, converse openly, and provide a fantastic opportunity for mid-career artists to share their stories on such matters across continents. Maybe we all have more or less similar confrontations to manage, but need cohesive action to resolve them. I was inclined to be a part of the program and explore the culture here, and to learn and observe how things function here. More than any other country, America has witnessed and experienced in depth all four waves of feminism, and seen its positive impact over the lives of thousands of women. And with the help of online communication portals, recent movements have a strong support that is capable of traveling farther than its origin.



IDENTITY CRISIS (2018)  
Photography

Along with the intense academic learning and access to Harvard's resources, I believe I am going to take enough courage with me to express fearlessly, and expand and intensify my work in new ways.

**What have been some highlights of your experience at Harvard thus far? And how are you finding it, being so far from home?**

My journey from India has been surprisingly warm and welcoming. I have never seen such a huge spread of a multi-ethnic crowd anywhere, which makes me wonder if "Not one race but sum of all" is the new "race" that reflects our time. I haven't walked down the street in Cambridge only to see one type of cuisine or everything named in an identical format; instead, I look around and I see all the colors. Small gestures such as people greeting you on daily walks, or waiting for you to cross the road adds so much to basic human values.



#### SAFDIYA (2020)

From the series *I am more than my...*  
Photography, Public Art

Maybe this is too early for me to capture the essence of air here and I also don't want to be blind in denying the unspoken struggle around the identity crisis, but I strongly feel that there is a change that is happening in the way people see each other. They might not see a person wholly, but at least she/he is not invisible anymore.

I have two young kids, a six-year-old girl and a three-year-old boy back home in India, so it's a little challenging to be away from them. But I keep reminding myself that down the road my experience will add a significant role in their upbringing and whatever I have been witnessing and learning will change me as a mother and artist.

As a Visiting Artist Fellow, you are currently working on a research project. Can you tell our community about your project, and how it is coming along? How can we view the finished product?

I am a performance artist and I'm currently researching the writings of American poets-photographers, such as Adrienne Rich, Cynthia Rich, Roni Horn and Indian poet Amrita Pritam – artists who have approached women's rights through respective mediums to explore practices, values or traditions to be kept, modified, or discarded. I am also reading about women's movements and how they have influenced public performances.

I have been logging and living the experiences in parallel; that is, unlayering the cultural differences in spoken languages, behaviors, needs, and also the shared similarities among people/women here. I will eventually try to stitch it together to form a cohesive narrative either in a series of visuals, performance or audio recording, or





NAVNEET (2020)

From the series *I am more than my...*  
Photography, Public Art

“In India, art is still seen as a luxury and not a necessity. And this is a difficult situation to deal with as there has to be a change in how people look at art. My intention with doing performances or creating art in public places is to break this wall of assumptions/ prejudices.”

— PRAGATI JAIN



HOLY CHLORINE (2020)

Performance



**PARALLEL WORLD (2020)** (*right*)  
45 mins Performance  
Lying on sidewalk with mirror in hands



**ME AND MY IMAGE** (*below*)  
A series of short performances that reflects the resemblance and incongruity of one's image in her mind to one's true self. And how does this gap between the two – the perceived image and reality – constantly alter itself.



maybe incorporate all three. The direction I am moving in is more towards understanding the reality that everyone needs each other, despite the contrast in gender, ideologies and nationality.

As an artist, you must be completely dedicated to your craft. What do you hope your artwork inspires in people/society – what legacy do you hope to have?

In India, art is still seen as a luxury and not a necessity. And this is a difficult situation to deal with as there has to be a change in how people look at art. My intention with doing performances or creating art in public places is to break this wall of assumptions and prejudices. Especially in these current times, where unspoken personal and political issues surrounding mental health, gender discrimination, systemic racism, and unequal rights have become key concerns, I believe art has a potential to initiate refreshing dialogue, and influence people's thought process to be more adaptive, empathetic and fearless.

What are the biggest challenges and opportunities of a career in the arts? What advice would you give someone contemplating a career path like yours?

Depending on what kind of challenges we are talking about, some of the genuine concerns are around the visibility of the art/artist; the psychological struggle/creative hurdles to narrow down to an idea; an idea's sustenance; and there are other practical challenges that include the cost/production of the art work. Each artist comes



**ADJUST (2021) (left)**

45 mins Performance in a glass box with 5 women of different ages and backgrounds. The box was placed in between the roads in Bangalore.

**I DID NOT DIE (2021) (below)**

2 Hrs Performance in the Christian Cemetery



across above these challenges sometime or another, and each of them has various levels of complexities. These might include lack of resources, funds and mentorship. And while Art is subjective, measuring its parameters to evaluate if it's developing in the right direction or not is one of the struggles I have often faced. And thus I feel the need for the space/people for brainstorming. Additionally, there are sometimes limited platforms to showcase art works or the right place that can further influence and enhance the overall magnitude of the art piece.

I believe that we become like the kind of job we do. I mean, eventually, people knowingly or unknowingly start to think, behave, evaluate, process, negotiate, and express in the language they use in their profession. Because most time of the day is spent at the workplace. Hence I feel that in being an artist, I can form my own language and that keeps me close to how I am as a person. My work influences me and gives me a unique identity. It's like the famous quote 'I AM MY OWN FREQUENCY' – I see this as the biggest opportunity that gives me freedom to define myself in a way I want, especially in today's time when we are dealing with national and racial identity.

My advice would be if you are passionate about the process of creation, and are courageous to take risks, be an artist. Art is medicine and society needs it now more than ever.

*[This interview took place in November 2021.]*



**NO ONE IS LISTENING (2020) (above)**

45 Mins Performance  
Wrote a word 'Bachao- Help' with the charcoal on the street wall in Bangalore





Harvard Art Museum

## SCHOLARS

# Distinguished Artist Fellowship

For the first year ever, the Mittal Institute will host a leading artist from South Asia for two weeks at Harvard, providing a unique opportunity for the campus community to learn from one of the region's most celebrated artistic minds.

**T**he Mittal Institute will welcome the first-ever Distinguished Artist Fellow to the Harvard campus in 2023.

The Distinguished Artist Fellowship (DAF) is designed to bring forth critical issues relevant to South Asia through the lens of art and design. Each year, a nominating committee composed of Harvard faculty and contemporary South Asian art experts will nominate a senior visual artist from South Asia who will be invited to Harvard's campus. The artist will have the opportunity to spend two weeks engaging with Harvard faculty, students, and the Mittal Institute's broader community, and will share their work through a public lecture.

To select the DAF, the Mittal Institute accepts nominations from leading curators and practitioners from South Asia and beyond. This year, the Committee gathered and deliberated on more than 30 outstanding names from across the region. A new DAF is expected to be announced in the summer.

This program is funded by the generous contribution of **Dipti Mathur**, Chair of the Mittal Institute's Arts Council.



Images by CSMVS



## PLATFORM

# Conservation Science Research and Training Program (CoSTAR)

CoSTAR is transforming art conservation in South Asia by connecting leading scholars from Harvard and beyond to practitioners in South Asia at museums and institutions on the forefront of restoring and preserving the region's treasures.

**L**ed by **Jinah Kim**, George P. Bickford Professor of Indian and South Asia Art at Harvard University, **Anupam Sah**, Head of Conservation at CSMVS Museum, **Narayan Khandekar**, Director of the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, and **Meena Hewett**, Arts Program Advisor at the Mittal Institute, the CoSTAR Program aims to bridge the gap between art history, museology, art conservation, and conservation science with the goal to strengthen art conservation practices in South Asia. The Mittal Institute collaborates with the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) Museum, Mumbai, and the Harvard Art Museums to develop programming for CoSTAR. Launched in December 2020, CoSTAR is envisioned as a series of theoretical and practical modules covering various topics in conservation science.

CoSTAR's Module 1 inaugurated the way for a 'Knowledge Commons': a virtual platform to bring together museums and cultural and academic institutions to collaborate and share best practices that constitute a viable ecosystem for museums and the scientific study of cultural heritage in India. It was run between April 15 – June 20, 2021, and comprised of online lectures.

CoSTAR's Module 2 ran from November 2021 to June 2022 and nurtured the seeds implanted by Module 1. It focused on building knowledge in technical studies of painted surfaces and South Asian Art's historical interpretation. Sessions in Module 2 included 'Introduction to the Paintings / Painted Surfaces of South Asia,' 'Painting Techniques in India,' and 'Setting up a Painted Surfaces Analysis Workspace.' Module II engaged with a) institutions committed to building up basic facilities for art conservation research; b) motivated early and mid-level career art historians, curators, museologists, art conservators; and c) scientists interested in the field of art and archaeology.



Hall of Nations and Nehru Pavilion by **ARCHITEXTUREZ**

## PLATFORM

# The State of Architecture in South Asia Project

The State of Architecture in South Asia Project has been conceptualized as a three-to-five year project that looks to answer the fundamental questions related to architecture in a region in transition.

South Asia is in a period of rapid change, and architecture and its different forms of engagement with society – whether preservation and reconstruction or new buildings – force societies to make choices for spatial organization but also identity formations and, more deeply, the representation of their aspirations. Under the direction of **Rahul Mehrotra**, John T. Dunlop Professor in Housing and Urbanization at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the project has been conceptualized as a three-to-five year project that looks to answer the fundamental questions related to architecture in a region in transition. These questions include: Does architecture matter in these states of transition, which range from political and economic shifts to cultural and religious impulses? What does the practice of architecture in the region mean for the next generation – for the making of the architect and architectural education? Can architecture address the abject inequity that has surrounded us in South Asia? And many more questions that range from the protocols of practice to the nature of emerging patronage and pedagogy.

The long-term project will take the form of numerous formats, including a sustained lecture series, a podcast highlighting upcoming practitioners from the region, as well as workshops, conferences, and a publication. The project will culminate in a traveling exhibition, which will start its journey in South Asia and end in the U.S., accruing modifications and adaptations as it travels. In order to achieve this, the project team has already embarked on creating a coalition of partners and collaborators from different parts of South Asia.

The ultimate goal of the project is to address a critical gap in the discourse surrounding contemporary architecture and design in the region. The project will focus on the field in the post-2000 period (the last 20 years) and attempt to articulate the role of architecture in responding to this state of transition in the South Asia region.

# Arts Advisory Council

## Financial Projections FY 2022 - FY 2025

LMSAI Cambridge Headquarters

<b>Arts Advisory Council Fund</b>	<b>FY 2022</b> <i>(Projected)</i>	<b>FY 2023</b> <i>(Projected)</i>	<b>FY 2024</b> <i>(Projected)</i>	<b>FY 2025</b> <i>(Projected)</i>
Beginning balance and interest earned	\$ 89,541	\$ 127,119	\$ 99,627	\$ 49,699
Arts Advisory Council Gifts	135,000	70,000	50,000	50,000
Total Expenses	84,758	84,819	86,920	88,812
FAS Gift Assessment (15%)	12,714	12,723	13,038	13,322
<b>Net Operating (Deficit)/Surplus</b>	<b>\$ 127,069</b>	<b>\$ 99,577</b>	<b>\$ 49,669</b>	<b>\$ (2,435)</b>

*(funding deficit)*

## LMSAI New Delhi Office

<b>Arts Advisory Council Fund</b>	<b>FY 2022</b> <i>(Actuals)</i>	<b>FY 2023</b> <i>(Projected)</i>	<b>FY 2024</b> <i>(Projected)</i>	<b>FY 2025</b> <i>(Projected)</i>
Balance Carry Over	\$ 11,703	\$ 27,506	\$ 2,211	\$ 4,961
Arts Advisory Council Gifts	40,000	35,000	20,000	20,000
Total Expenses	21,041	52,431	15,000	15,000
FAS Gift Assessment (15%)	3,156	7,865	2,250	2,250
<b>Net Operating (Deficit)/Surplus</b>	<b>\$ 27,506</b>	<b>\$ 2,211</b>	<b>\$ 4,961</b>	<b>\$ 7,711</b>

NOTE: Exchange Rate: US\$1 = 70 INR (Indian Rupee)



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