



TRAVERSING TRADITIONS

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INDIA





## traversing traditions / india

Charter Oak Cultural Center  
21 Charter Oak Avenue  
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

santosh kumar das  
chotsani elaine dean  
alexander gorlizki  
shelly jyoti  
robert kirschbaum  
jacqueline metheny  
saroj shyam  
venkat raman singh shyam

# schedule of events

## **september 22**

exhibition reception

6 pm

## **october 8**

traversing music

7 pm

## **october 13**

traversing traditions: panel discussion

7 pm

## **october 15**

traversing dance

7 pm

## **october 22**

traversing film

closing reception

7 pm

Cover Image:

Alexander Gorlizki

*Anti-Cyclone* (detail) 2012. Pigment and gold on paper, 17 1/4 x 12 3/4"

Inside front cover:

Venkat Raman Singh Shyam

*Dougan Guru* 2012. Acrylic on paper, 30 x 22"

Back cover:

Shelly Jyoti

*Indigo Narratives: An Allusion to Ajrakh - An Indigo Tree*, 2010. Ajrakh resist dyeing on khadi fabric, 72 x 46"

# acknowledgements

Indians have always had an integrated approach to the arts. For ancient Indians, performing arts, visual arts, and literary arts were all interconnected. All art forms shared the same philosophy: Arts are the means to purify emotions and to attain spiritual heights.

Though today's Indian arts are rooted in the past, they are still innovative and experimental. For thousands of years the arts were limited to temples, royal courts, and the salons of the affluent. Now the passions of Indian arts, derived from a fascination with myths, dreams, and epics, have amalgamated with the social, economic, political, and technological realities of life and readily embrace globalization.

Traversing Traditions-India is an important event for the greater Hartford community, showcasing music, visual arts, and dance. High-caliber performing artists will present both traditional and contemporary classical music and dances of India. The visual and media arts segments redefine notions of the "contemporary" through an amalgamation of traditional, indigenous, popular, and current art practice by both Indian and Western artists. We hope that visitors to "Traversing Traditions" will come away with a greater understanding of the interconnected nature of India's arts, experiencing each through the prism of the whole.

Preservation efforts in the 1970's saved Connecticut's oldest synagogue (built in 1876) and created the community center that hosts Traversing Traditions-India. Now beautifully restored, the Charter Oak Cultural Center has both a gallery and performance space that serve Hartford's diverse ethnic communities, among them Indians and other South Asians. Just as India strives to preserve traditional art forms while refashioning them as touchstones and resources for contemporary forms and concepts, Traversing Traditions-India reflects the vision of the Charter Oak Cultural Center in creating the future through considered preservation of the past.

Organizing an exhibition and events requires the talents and commitment of many individuals. Changes in the Charter Oak staff along the way meant that we have enjoyed working with many people who contributed their creative ideas and logistical expertise, including Janice LaMotta, Dona Larcen, Laura Maltz Rozza, and Aurora Santiago Ortiz. We are grateful to current programming coordinator Cody Daigle-Orians, who carried the idea for the exhibition forward and also designed the catalog. We thank Elizabeth Mahan for her superb editing skills. As Executive Director of the Charter Oak Cultural Center in 2001, Rabbi Donna Berman saved the Center from closing its doors permanently and breathed new life into the vital community center we enjoy today. We thank her for the opportunity to contribute the arts of India to this esteemed legacy.

Kathryn Myers & Rachna Ramya Agrawal



## traversing traditions / india

The eight artists in this exhibition, from both India and the United States, are immersed in Indian culture in diverse ways through their interest in and integration of diverse concepts, techniques, materials, and processes. Their work attests to how traditional arts continue to be relevant, and even revelatory, opening up new avenues of art practice. Through formal investigation and experimentation, as well as serendipitous encounters, the artists in this exhibition are attuned to the material and cultural heritage they engage with so respectfully and resourcefully. Their work demonstrates how tradition might be perceived, experienced, defined, and redefined from various vantage points.

Questioning and redefining tradition has many precedents in Indian art and culture. Post-colonial artists often sought contradictory ways to consider and recover what might be perceived as authentically “Indian.” For some this was a renewed appreciation for and revival of distinctive art forms, such as miniature painting, ancient murals, or indigenous arts from rural and tribal regions. Other artists selectively integrated aspects of art from India and the west, creating unique styles of Indian modernism. Early western artists traveling in India depicted “picturesque” scenes with a sense of curiosity and responsiveness that contradicted the colonial attitudes of the day. For subsequent generations of western artists, engaging with Indian art and culture has been both beneficially disruptive and enlightening, as new ideas, materials, and processes enlarged their creative practices and challenged the hegemony of western art.

Indigenous artists from rural and tribal India create strikingly distinctive forms of art defined by region, religion, caste, and gender. Now, however, there is a greater flexibility of practice. Some traditions that were strictly matrilineal are currently being practiced by both women and men. Traditionally these artists were self-taught, learning their craft from members of their family or community, but now workshops and schools in traditional arts are increasingly common in the villages where the arts are practiced. Sponsored by museums and galleries or motivated by their own interests and research, some urban artists now work collaboratively with indigenous artists, developing fruitful relationships and sharing techniques and skills. The subject matter of indigenous art has also greatly expanded over time. Earlier works were primarily made for religious or ritual use, such as large murals for the wedding chamber, or illustrations of deities and complex mythological tales. Vivid descriptions of village life are also common as well abstract decorative or ritual paintings made on mud courtyard floors. While these traditional forms have continued and are often imaginatively reinvented, a more expanded repertoire of imagery now also draws on local and global sociopolitical issues and autobiography. Rather than the natural pigments used in the past, more permanent materials such as acrylic paint on canvas and paper are common, helping preserve as well as disseminate indigenous art more widely.

Striking stylistic differences defined by their distinctive traditions distinguish the work of **Santosh Kumar Das, Venkat Raman Singh Shyam** and **Saroj Shyam**. Working in a refined linear style common to Madhubani art from the Mithila region of Bihar, Santosh Kumar Das's versatile repertoire includes traditional themes of religion, ritual, and mythology as well as significant political events and the delights of quotidian life. Venkat Singh Shyam and Saroj Shyam, from the Gond tribe of central India, create works informed by Gond ritual and narrative traditions. Saroj Shyam's small abstract acrylic paintings on paper are inspired by auspicious diagrams called dignas, ephemeral, ritual creations—made by applying different colors of clay onto walls and earthen floors and patios of Gond houses. While resembling both western minimal abstraction and pop art, her colorful work evokes the ancient indigenous roots of Indian abstraction. Working in two distinct but related styles with acrylic paint and ink, Venkat Shyam's subjects include elaborate Gond mythology, current events, and his own imaginative autobiography. New Delhi-based textile artist and designer **Shelly Jyoti** collaborates with skilled artisans from Kutch, in northwest India, to illustrate episodes drawn from modern Indian history through the use of traditional embroidery techniques and block printing.

Research, fellowships, travel and artistic collaborations have drawn **Chotsani Elaine Dean, Alexander Gornizki, Robert Kirschbaum, and Jacqueline Metheny** to India. Through her research of the cotton trade in India and the United States, ceramicist Chotsani Dean has found commonalities and contrasts in both materials and social history. Through his extended collaboration with Jaipur miniature painter Riyaz Uddin, Alexander Gornizki reinvents images and decorative motifs drawn from Indian and Islamic miniature painting to form new stylistic and narrative relationships. Robert Kirschbaum's syncretic approach to visualizations of the divine layer concepts of sacred space grounded in Jewish thought with forms, materials, and colors arising from diverse sources of sacred and earthly Indian art and craft. Refashioning common and discarded materials such as jute, wire and metal strappings, Jacqueline Metheny's intimately scaled groupings of objects bring to mind the sacred and transitory nature of Indian sidewalk shrines.

Traversing Traditions/India showcases contemporary artists' reciprocal dialogues with Indian tradition, demonstrating the generous spirit and dynamism of contemporary global art.

Kathryn Myers

# santosh kumar das



*Gujarat Series: Ram and Gandhi Mourn Shiva's Trident Piercing Mother Earth, 2005. Inkjet print, 20 ½ x 15". Private collection.*

Practicing a form of art particular to the Kayasth caste in the Mithala region of Bihar in northern India, Santosh Kumar Das both follows and innovates tradition. Bihar is one of the poorest states in India, but despite the region's poverty, Mithala art, also referred to as Madhubani, after the largest city in the area, is rich in material, metaphor and message.

Santosh Kumar Das is a versatile artist who traverses tradition in several respects. Das is male in a traditionally matrilineal tradition, and works in a variety of styles, some normally practiced by different castes. Like most indigenous artists, his first exposure to visual expression came by observing others in his family and community: he witnessed his mother creating elaborate images for marriage and other domestic rituals on the floor and walls of their home. His own early artistic endeavors impressed a visiting foreigner, who urged and subsidized his attendance at a prestigious art collage, the M. S. University of Baroda. Although inspired by his exposure there to the works of modernist artists like Picasso, after graduating Das returned to his native community to continue practicing and expanding Mithila's traditionally-rooted styles.

Madhubani art was largely unknown outside of the region until 1934, when, after a major earthquake, colonial officers were amazed to see for the first time, through crumbled walls, colorful interior murals. Starting with relief efforts in the 1960's and the evolution from painting on walls to the widespread use of





*Rain*, 2013. Ink on paper, 12 x 18". Private collection.

paper and canvas, Madhubani art has been justly preserved and continues to develop. Many Mithila artists, including Santosh Kumar Das, have been included in significant national and international exhibitions.

Primarily practiced by artists belonging to the region's Kayastha caste, to which Das belongs, his works in this exhibition are created in a refined monochromatic linear style. The subject-matter of much Mithila art includes religious, mythological imagery and ritual diagrams, as well as more secular and politically topical themes. For instance, his extensive Gujarat Series, created after communal violence in 2002, visualizes those events by depicting how the tragedy of a fire -- that burned to death Hindu pilgrims in a halted train -- triggered a series of riots, wherein mostly innocent Muslims were targeted and killed. By contrast, Das's *Rain* series of drawings celebrates his delightful experience of a sudden downpour -- in which his hapless umbrella proved useless against nature's wrath.

Santosh Kumar Das's exquisitely refined images demonstrate exceptional skill and command of design. While he may work through an idea a series of studies, unlike most contemporary Mithila artists he does not first sketch images using a pencil and eraser before applying ink. Instead, with keen visualization and control, he firmly applies pen or brush directly to paper.

## chotsani elaine dean



*Fat Quarter: bundle piece for time to quilt. Ceramic, 4.5" x 4", 2014.*  
Collection of the artist.

Chotsani Elaine Dean's work is inspired and informed by quilts as well as the cultural circumstances and lives of enslaved African-Americans, especially enslaved women who made cotton quilts during the period of slavery in early America, and also other quilting traditions that emerged in the 19th century. Cotton, if we follow it from the plantations of the American South to the trading posts of Wall Street, in New York City, takes us into the realm of commodities traded the world over. In researching the trade routes of cotton, Dean encountered another important commodity: tea—and its origins and role in Indian culture.

The striking similarities and differences between the historical cotton plantations of the early American South and the tea plantations of the British Raj drew Dean to India on a Fulbright Scholar Grant in 2012–13. Time spent in Assam visiting and meeting with people at tea plantations, along with her research at Tokalai Research Association, expanded Dean's aesthetic narrative and the formal elements of her ceramics to reflect, honor, and symbolically unite peoples of Indian and American tea and cotton plantations who are not often remembered, whose stories remain untold. Dean, a descendant of people enslaved to produce "King Cotton" for a world they were not allowed to share or benefit from, finds herself the beneficiary of the perseverance of her ancestors and their campaign



*Study #2: post-Jaipur, block printing by way of cotton, 2016. Blockprints, ink, ceramic tile, dimensions vary. Collection of the artist.*

for freedom. It is the power of this ancestry that impels Dean's determination to connect with and preserve these plantation histories and traditions. The people of Indian tea and U.S. cotton plantations share the experience of repression and control by their respective systems of colonialism, leading Dean to create work that stimulates meaningful discourse, giving voice to the complex and marginalized histories of tea and cotton plantations. Formally, Dean's already fluid and exuberant use of pattern and color was further inspired by her documentation of Indian crafts, textiles, religious imagery and popular culture. Connections, collisions, and layerings of form and color reverberate through her collages, block prints and ceramic tile installations.

# Alexander Gorlizki



*Dinner is Served.* 2015. Pigment and gold on paper. 17 ¼ x 12 ¾.  
Collection of the artist.

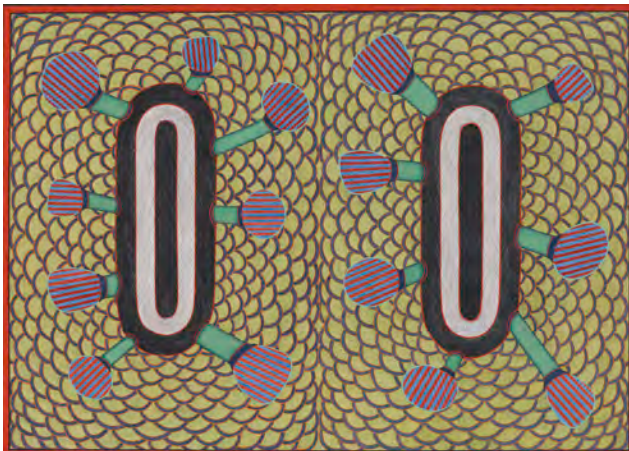
The elastic space of an Indian miniature painting is simultaneously flat and three-dimensional. Traveling through decorative borders and portals of saturated pigments, one arrives in worlds, both imagined and real, of court and quotidian life that reveal the elaborate genealogies of deities and dizzying mythological tales. Although Mughal and Rajasthani miniature painting ateliers, once supported by lavish royal court patronage, largely died out during British colonial rule, the tradition has continued to evolve. Some descendants of the original painting families still produce traditional imagery for new clients, including a growing tourist market. Contemporary artists in South Asia and the west, drawn to this exquisite tradition, have traveled to study with miniature painters, learning techniques of grinding pigments into luminous colors and the use of microscopic single-hair brushes. Some Western artists, such as Alexander Gorlizki, have enjoyed extended artistic collaborations with miniature painters.

The inspiration for Gorlizki's curious imagery is both esoteric and ordinary, ranging from medieval manuscripts to telletubbies to the aura of his mother's shop in London, which was filled with antique textiles from Central and South Asia. Gorlizki has himself become an avid collector, and the delicate paper of Indian paintings is a vivid presence on the walls of his Brooklyn, New York, studio.

Collaborating with the superbly gifted Jaipur miniature painter Riyaz Uddin, Gorlizki's provides detailed instructions and sketches of ideas, which Uddin and his atelier execute. Each painting may pass back and forth between Jaipur and Brooklyn for several years before being completed.

Excising, fracturing, and reassembling figures, objects, shapes, and patterns from an extensive trove of invented and appropriated sources, Gorlizki creates surreal, dissociative narratives that are both lighthearted and unnerving. At times, he extends the puzzling play even further by painting over old photographs: refined rendering producing a visual jolt to the real. Those familiar with Indian art may recognize some of images he refashions, while other forms appropriated from more incidental details, such as the shape of a bolster, the stripe on a shade, or repetitive pattern of a wave or cloud, might seem strangely familiar but elude easy identification.

Echoing traditional Mughal portraiture in which a central figure is framed by vignettes relating to his or her life, Gorlizki depicts a woman, perhaps from the Victorian era, dressed in white, pressing her hands upon an invisible window pane. Surrounded by fragments from the fabulous architecture of Indian and Islamic palaces, lush flora and fauna, a snake charmer, tea-bearer, and a tennis-playing elephant deity, she might be a former British subject "staying on," gazing at the uncanny new world she inhabits. Strikingly different in form and content are Gorlizki's obsessively detailed patterned abstractions. Here contrasting genres of painting, busy miniatures and quiet cosmology diagrams, provide fertile ground for strange growths and graftings, new life evolving from venerable old forms.



*Today's the Day*. 2011. Pigment on paper. 14 5/8 x 20 3/8. Collection of the artist.



# shelly jyoti



*Indigo Narratives, an Allusion to Ajrakh – Gandhi's Red Spinning Wheel, 2009. Ajrakh resist dyeing khadi fabric, 46 x 46". Collection of the artist.*

For many artists in urban India, collaborations with artisans living in rural or tribal areas have been an invaluable way to enrich their creative practice. For Shelly Jyoti, whose educational background includes Literature and Fashion Design, a keen interest in both India's material and sociopolitical history has inspired her textile work over the past several decades.

As a designer Jyoti has had a long interest in India's many distinct craft and textile traditions. And as some traditional materials and processes have been associated with important episodes in Indian history, her passion for Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence has found artistic form through her collaborations with artisans who practice particular forms of dyeing and embroidery in the district of Kutch, in northwest India.

*Khadi*, hand-spun cloth, and *Swaraj*, self-rule, are key terms related to the Indian independence movement. This humble material used by Gandhi asserted a powerful message that led Indians to freedom from colonial rule. Using Khadi as the ground for processes of traditional dyeing and embroidery, Jyoti's images combine non-objective and semi-abstract forms with sumptuously decorated surfaces that illustrate aspects of Indian history.

Ajrakh, a unique process of block printing found in India's earliest settlements, is still practiced in northwest India and Pakistan, particularly in the city of



*Indigo Narratives, an Allusion to Ajrakh - Spin a Thread and Wear the Dress*, 2010. Ajrakh resist dyeing on khadi fabric, 46 x 46". Collection of the artist.

Bhuj, where Jyoti travels to create her work. One of the key dyes used in this technique, indigo, led to an extended series of work exploring the indigo trade. Using traditional natural pigment dyes and printing blocks of both ornate and minimal shapes and patterns, she skillfully combines individual components into complex arrangements. The elemental shapes provide a generous space for her luxuriously printed, dyed and stitched patterns to be fully appreciated.

Many of her symbols are mutable, allowing for both universal and specific meaning. The repetition of a particular shape, such as a circle used in multiple works, provides formal continuity while allowing for subtle nuances of difference based on how the symbol is contextualized. *An Allusion to Ajrakh, An Indigo Tree*, while based on the form of the indigo plant, also refers to the universal Tree of Life. A large circle, spiral or chakra in the crest of the tree likewise rests in the heart space of the kurta in *Spin a Thread and Wear the Dress*. In Gandhi's Red Spinning Wheel, the spiral is enclosed within a series of square decorative frames, resembling the structure an Indian yantra or mandala. Works from the *Bindu* series by the pioneering late modernist painter S.H. Raza also come to mind. The spiral as a symbol of cycle of life as well as a quotidian mechanical object, echoes Gandhi's ideal of taking positive action to spin one's own future. The chakra as a point of energy in Indian thought further echoes Gandhi's hope to create community through the deceptively simple act of spinning, resulting in *swadeshi*, or self-sufficiency.

# robert kirschbaum



Shamiana factory workers with a portion of *Tabernacle*, 1996-97. Fabric piecework, 72" x 72".

Perhaps the most ancient and elemental motivation for the creation of structures and images is the attempt to identify and depict the sacred. There have always been places set apart -- from the top of a mountain to a tree by a river, to a corner of a house -- which have functioned as sites of interaction between the image of a deity, and the deity itself. While the dynamic of artistic practice in the west has thrust more secular pursuits upon the contemporary artist, many of us are seeking to reclaim and reinterpret the primary spiritual foundation of our heritage as artists and artisans.

Robert Kirschbaum's art has been an attempt to create signs and symbols that constitute an ongoing investigation of sacred space. Throughout his work, he explores the sacred ideal of body, portal, altar and temple as shelters for the spirit, and as models of the heavens. While his ideas have been grounded in Judaic sources, the forms, structures and colors he employs have been influenced by, and often derived from, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain art, and the tribal arts and crafts of India.



Advertisement for Maan Tent Works, Bangalore, *India* c.1996. Ink on adhesive paper, 4 3/4 x 7".

Journeys to India in 1988 and 1996-97 allowed Kirschbaum to observe the incredible richness and variety of form, material, and method through which attempts were made to visualize the divine. Says Kirschbaum, "I was deeply impressed and very much inspired by the wealth of invention brought to bear by the artist and non-artist alike." Visits with the Bene Israel community of Bombay -- Jews who are perhaps the most indigenous of India's three Jewish communities -- and to their sacred sites along the Konkan coast, gave him a syncretic model for his approach. Informed by his view of a congruence between South Asian and West Asian religious traditions, particularly those which relate to the design and structure of the temple, his work fuses geometry derived from a South Indian treatise on sacred architecture -- the *Vastusutra Upanishad* -- as well as forms and colors from Indian textiles and popular prints, Tibetan paintings and prayer flags, with the messianic ideal of the Jerusalem Temple and Jewish ritual objects such as ark curtains, amulets and mezuzahs.

# jacqueline metheny



*NearFar*, 1996-2006. Coir and found objects, 58 x 15 x 10". Collection of the artist.

Jacqueline Metheny makes sculpture constructed from materials that have no evident intrinsic or cultural value, that are abundant and easy to acquire. Her materials, including discarded fabric, wire, and metal strapping, are sewn, crocheted, or bolted together to create multiple small sculptural forms. These forms are then used as components that are either attached to each other, or simply grouped, to create a larger piece of sculpture. The repurposed material and simple mode of construction gains value through the visual interplay of each unique component and their resulting synergy.

Twenty years ago, Metheny lived briefly in India. She was attracted to the omnipresent sidewalk shrines she found throughout the various towns and cities she visited. These shrines contained handmade icons constructed of local materials like mud, straw, or stone. Often highly abstract in shape, these icons were adorned with objects or clothing, or painted with just enough information





*Near/Far* (detail)

to convey the identity of the deities they represented. The capacity to invest simple form with greater meaning informs the work that Metheny began while still living in India, and recently completed for this exhibition.

Her sculpture, *Near/Far*, has a shrine-like presence. Nestled into this space are various forms made from coconut husk fibers. This material, called coir, is abundant throughout India. It is sold in bales in the local markets and used to make floor mats, and to stuff mattresses. Metheny compresses the coir and sews it into tight forms that vary in size and shape. Attached to the surface of each, are objects that acquired from India's ubiquitous street markets such as brushes, locks, bangles, bells, and other objects are familiar and whose use in daily life is readily apparent. In the context of her sculpture, they lose their utility and are transformed into a visual language that suggests a greater, yet unknown, purpose. Each distinctive form seems to impart a clue to this unknown, but as a whole they resist the complete story.

# saroj shyam



*Digna for Tulsi Mata, 2013 (Auspicious Design for the Goddess, Manifest as the Sacred Basil Plant).*  
Acrylic on paper, 14 x 10". Private collection.

Throughout rural India, villagers have traditionally applied auspicious designs to the walls, floors and patios of their homes. The names, meanings and styles of these designs differ according to particular regions, villages, communities and families. Such work is usually done by women, who can become locally admired for their distinctive styles and innovations. The creation of such traditional designs within their original domestic context is but one of many ritual activities meant to attract divine blessings upon a household—and not intended to make “art” per se. Indeed, indigenous Indian cultures have neither a word or concept equivalent to “art”—a foreign term introduced to India by British traders and colonials.

The Gond tribal artist Saroj Shyam first learned to make dignas (the Gond word for auspicious designs) by watching her grandmother apply different colors of clay onto their family’s adobe home in Rasoi, a village in eastern Madhya Pradesh (central India). Since moving to Bhopal in 1997, she’s enjoyed creating small-scale dignas in bright acrylic paints on paper. The two dignas illustrated here relate to the worship of Tulsi Mata (the Mother Goddess manifest as the sacred basil plant). They and the other small dignas displayed in this exhibit were made in preparation for a series of seven large digna paintings commissioned for permanent display at Radford University’s Selu Conservancy. That display’s 2015 inauguration was held in conjunction with a major Gond art exhibition at Radford



*Digna for Tulsi Mata, 2013 (Auspicious Design for the Goddess, Manifest as the Sacred Basil Plant).*  
Acrylic on paper, 14 x 10". Private collection.

University Art Museum—which also commissioned Saroj Shyam to create a large temporary floor digna, using natural clay pigments that she brought from traditional village sources. The exhibition’s inauguration was held at the time of Diwali (the Hindu festival of lights), and thus Saroj Shyam created a Diwali-related digna, upon which she placed lit candles—thereby (in the words of the art historian Aurogeeta Das) “...infusing it, in a modern space, with a degree of ritualism.\*

In the early 20th Century, European and American “primitive art” galleries and connoisseurs preferred to collect only objects made by anonymous tribals for ritual purposes, using only indigenous, natural media. Over recent decades, museums and collectors have broadened their appreciation to include works created in various modern media, for non-ritual purposes, by living tribal artists fully credited by name. For example, starting in the 1980s, contemporary Gond and Australian aboriginal artists first achieved international acclaim for their powerfully spiritual imagery painted in acrylics on canvas. Now artists like Saroj Shyam freely alternate between natural/traditional and synthetic/modern media, practicing art and rituals in ways that sometimes blur such distinctions.

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\* Aurogeeta Das’s “Indigenous Indian Art Abroad,” Warli: An Artists’ Exchange (a V&A Museum exhibition catalogue, ed. by Emily Crane; Singular Publishing Ltd, Norwich, UK; 2016; p. 22)

# venkat raman singh shyam



*Finding My Way, #1, 2012. Ink and acrylic tinting on paper, 9 x 9".*  
Private collection.

Indian tribal communities traditionally integrate various forms of visual expression into their daily life activities. Only recently has the discrete concept of “art”—and the possibility of earning a livelihood as a professional artist—been introduced to them by outsiders. Yet talented tribals wanting to pursue careers in the visual arts face all kinds of challenges, as is vividly shown by the life of the Gond artist Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, a.k.a. “Venkat.”

Venkat started drawing as a child at his family’s home, in the rural village of Sijhora (eastern Madhya Pradesh, central India), where he was often scolded for making pictures in charcoal—which was considered inauspicious. When his family’s poverty forced him to drop out of school, he quickly learned to support himself in various ways, including ditch-digging and tailoring, and then later—seeking better employment in New Delhi—as an electrician, mason, plumber, cook, house painter and (when all else failed) plying a cycle rickshaw. Throughout it all he felt his true vocation was to create art. Fortunately, his uncle — Jangarh Singh Shyam — was then becoming internationally renown as the leading Gond artist—in-residence at Bhopal’s Bharat Bhavan cultural center.

Venkat assisted Jangarh as one of his apprentices, filling-in designated canvas areas with Jangarh’s signature patterns and colored dots. Jangarh created powerful, highly-detailed visualizations of Gond deities—who had never before been thus depicted because of iconic taboos. Following his uncle’s lead, Venkat likewise visualized Gond deities in vividly imaginative ways, such as his double-faced representation of Dougan Guru, a god of dual aspects worshipped by Gond gunias (shamanic healers) see inside front cover



*Finding My Way, #5, 2012. Ink and acrylic tinting on paper, 9 x 9".*  
Private collection.

With Jangarh's encouragement, Venkat developed his own broad array of unique patterns, styles and imagery, which he continues to expand. His works range from large, boldly colored murals to small, delicately detailed ink drawings. He has been commissioned by museums, hotels, educational institutions and private collectors to create works in papier maché, glass, sheet iron, animated film, wood sculpture and ceramic tiles, as well as paintings in oil, acrylics and ink applied to canvas, paper and silk.

Reflecting upon his checkered past of hardships and successes, Venkat created a loosely narrative series of sixteen autobiographical drawings. In the first of the two here illustrated, he appears as a child making a mural on his village home. The other shows him as a frenetic youth, hustling in the city: six legs propel him forward as he brandishes various vocational attributes—held aloft in multiple arms, like a Hindu deity; the head's two faces look in opposite directions, recalling his depiction of Dougan Guru. These drawings later inspired Venkat to write and lavishly illustrate a 180-page autobiography (co-authored by S. Anand). According to the eminent Indian artist and art historian Gulammohammed Sheikh, Venkat's imagery "...argues forcefully against the divisive diktats of the art world, which relegate the art of the village to 'craft' and pit it unfairly against the dominant urban modern art."\*

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\* Venkat Raman Singh Shyam & S. Anand's *Finding My Way*, Navayana Publishing Pvt., New Delhi; 2016; pg. 1).



# biographies

**Kathryn Myers** (*exhibition curator*) is a painter and Professor of Art at the University of Connecticut. She received a BA at St. Xavier College in Chicago and an MFA in painting at The University of Wisconsin, Madison. In 2002 and 2011 she received Fulbright Fellowships to India. Other awards include The Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation Studio Space Program in 1991 and 1992, and grants from the Connecticut Commission on Arts and Culture in 1991 and 2012. She has curated several exhibitions on Indian art including *Masala, Diversity and Democracy in South Asian Art*, and *Convergence*, Art from India and the Diaspora, at the William Benton Museum of Art, Radiate, Art of the South Asian Diaspora, at the Windsor Art Center, Windsor, CT and Gallery 400, the University of Illinois, Chicago. Her video series, *Regarding India*, features interviews with contemporary artists in India. She has exhibited her paintings, photographs and videos widely in the United States and India and is currently represented by Gallery Art and Aesthetic in New Delhi.

**Rachna Ramya Agrawal** (*co-curator, coordinator of Indian music and dance programs*) is a performer, choreographer, educator, and author who received her Master's degree in dance from the prestigious Pracheen Kala Kendra in India. She also trained in Choreography at the Natya Institute of Choreography in New Delhi, India. In addition to her degrees in dance, Rachna also holds an MBA from the University of Hartford, a Master's degree in Hindi Literature from Delhi University and a senior diploma in Classical Indian Vocal Music from Prayag Sangeet Samiti. Agrawal has won many awards in dance, including a gold medal from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, in recognition of her Kathak skill. Currently she is on teaching faculty at Trinity College in Hartford and is also the Artistic Director of the Sumbhaav School of Kathak Dance. She is listed in YAC Artist roster and performs and conducts residencies in various schools in CT. Rachna is with the CT Commission on the Arts since 1993.

**John H. Bowles** (*consulting curator and panel speaker*) contributed essays on Saroj Shyam and Venkat Raman Singh Shyam. He received his BA and MEd from Harvard University. A noted author and curator, he has written many articles on Indian art with a focus on the work of indigenous artists. He curated the touring exhibition *Painted Songs & Stories: The Hybrid Flowering of Contemporary Pardhan Gond Art* and authored its accompanying catalog. He produced the first international touring exhibition of contemporary art of northwest Mexico's Huichol Indians. He is currently developing an exhibition on the Tree of Life, as depicted by artists worldwide.

**Santosh Kumar Das** is from a well-known family of painters of the Kayastha caste who practice a form of art named for ancient region of Mithila in the state of Bihar in northwest India. He lives and works in the village of Ranti near the town of Madhubani. He learned his craft by watching his mother paint elaborate ritual images on the floor of his house and then received an BA from MS University of Baroda in Gujarat. He has exhibited his work widely in the United States and India and received international acclaim for his 2002 Gujarat Series which was included in *The Edge of Desire*, Recent Art in India exhibition which toured Australia, the United States, Monterrey, Mexico and India. His work has been included in exhibitions at Syracuse University, William Patterson State University in New Jersey, Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco, the India Habit Center and the Devi Art Foundation in New Delhi. His works are in the permanent collection of Oberlin College, The Mithila Museum in Japan, The Ethnic Art Foundation, among others. From 2003-08 he was the first director at the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani.

**Chotsani Elaine Dean** is an artist and Assistant Professor of Art, Ceramics at the South Carolina School of the Arts at Anderson University, South Carolina. Born in Hartford, CT, she received her BFA in Ceramics from the Hartford Art School and MFA from Washington University in St. Louis. In 2012-13 she received a Fulbright Scholarship conduct research and teach India. She has conducted workshops and lectured about her work widely, including at Sanskriti Kendra, New Delhi, The Krishnamurti Foundation, Banaras Hindu University and Kriti Gallery in Varanasi, MS University of Baroda, India, and Appalachia State University. In 2012 she was artist-in-residence at Clayfinders Pottery, Thrissur, Kerala and in 2014 she was the inaugural MJ DO Good resident at Red Lodge Clay Center in Montana. She has exhibited her work widely in the United States and India including at Kriti Gallery, Varanasi, Art Chamber, Goa, Aurodhran Gallery, Pondicherry, in India and Manchester Community College, Windsor Art Center, Windsor, in Connecticut and Hunterdon Museum of Art, Clinton, NJ among others. In 2010 she received a Connecticut Arts Grant.

**Alexander Gorlizki** was born in London, England and lives and works in New York City. He received a BA from Bristol Polytech and an MFA from the Slade School in London. His work has been extensively exhibited in Europe and the United States with solo exhibitions including, *Variable Dimensions* at The Crow Collection in Dallas TX, *Galerie Martin Kudlek* in Cologne Germany, *Jhavery Contemporary* in Mumbai, *John Bergguen* in San Francisco and *Van Doren Waxter* in New York. Group exhibitions include *Approaching Infinity* at The Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, *Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs*, the Royal Museum of Ontario and *Drawing Crazy Patterns on Sheets*, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Barrington, MA. He is included in several museum collections including the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO, the Museum Kunst Palast Düsseldorf, Germany, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK. He is represented by Van Doren Waxter Gallery in New York.

**Shelly Jyoti** is a New Delhi based textile artist and fashion designer. She received her BA in Literature and MA in American Literature from Punjab University, Chandigarh, and received a certificate in Fashion Design from the National Institute of Fashion Technology in New Delhi. Her solo exhibition, *Salt: The Great March*, toured throughout India, including the Indira Gandhi Center for the Arts, India International Center, Azad Bhavan Gallery and Indian Council of Cultural Relations in New Delhi, and at Dakshinachitra Museum in Chennai. *Indigo: New Works* by Shelly Jyoti and Laura Kina was exhibited at the India Habitat Center in New Delhi and Nehru Center in Mumbai and toured the United States, including the Chicago Cultural Center and Gandhi Memorial Center in Washington, D.C. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions including at Twelve Gates Gallery, Philadelphia, Women Made Gallery, Chicago, Max Mueller Marg, New Delhi, and Jahangir Gallery, Mumbai. She has also curated several exhibitions and given lectures and workshops throughout India and in the United States.

**Robert Kirschbaum** received his MFA degree from Yale University in 1974, and undergraduate degrees from the University of Rochester and the Boston Museum School. The recipient of numerous grants and awards, including three Fulbright awards and an Artist's Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, he has exhibited and lectured throughout the United States and abroad. His artwork is represented in permanent collections, including the New Britain Museum of American Art, William Benton Museum, The Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York, Yale University Art Gallery, the U.S. State Department, and the Pennell Print Collection of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Kirschbaum has been teaching in universities for more than forty years, having held full time positions at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, and Montclair State University in New Jersey. A native of New York, where he maintains a studio, he is currently Professor of Fine Arts at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. At Trinity, he served as Director of Studio Arts from 1990 to 1998, and as Chair of the Department of Fine Arts from 1992 to 1995.

**Jacqueline Metheny** received her MFA from Hunter College in New York City in 1991, and a BFA from Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville in 1981. She moved to New York City that year, where she worked as a graphic designer for Dell Publishing Company before entering graduate school. Following her graduation from Hunter, Metheny moved her studio to Hartford, Connecticut. She continues to produce her work in the Hartford area. In her art, Metheny uses repurposed materials to make sculpture, exploring mass and assembly, while referencing various systems found in mathematics, microbiology, and genetics. Her work has been exhibited extensively in the United States and abroad since 1982, most recently in a group exhibition at 511 Gallery in New York City, and in a solo show at 709 Gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as part of "The Re:New Festival," described as a city-wide "celebration of creative reuse, transformation and sustainability." Metheny has taught 3-D design and sculpture at the University of Connecticut, Central Connecticut State University, the University of New Haven, and Trinity College, Hartford. She currently divides her time between West Hartford, Connecticut and New York City.

**Saroj Shyam** was born in 1978 in the village of Patangarh, eastern Madhya Pradesh (central India). She married the artist Venkat Raman Singh Shyam in 1996, and moved to the city of Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh's state capital, where she assisted him with his paintings. She gradually began to work independently, creating her own figurative images and abstract dignas (auspicious designs). In 2007 Bhopal's Indira Gandhi National Museum of Mankind commissioned Shyam to do gallery murals and floor dignas. Her paintings have been shown at New Delhi's Lalit Kala Akademi, London's Rebecca Hossack Gallery, Mumbai's Shivaji Museum, as well as Radford University Art Museum and Miller-Off-Main-Street Gallery (in Virginia, USA). In 2015 she was commissioned by Radford University's Selu Conservancy to create a permanent display of large digna paintings. Her illustrations will appear in two forthcoming books published by Ujjain's Kalidasa Akademi. She and her husband Venkat continue to live in Bhopal with their two children, Naveen and Mrinalini.

**Venkat Raman Singh Shyam** (a.k.a. "Venkat") was born in 1970 in the village of Sihora, Madhya Pradesh, and in 1988 moved to the state capital of Bhopal to apprentice under his uncle, the renown seminal Gond master Jangarh Singh Shyam. Venkat's work has been exhibited at: The National Gallery of Modern Art (Mumbai); The Horniman Museum and The Nehru Centre (London); Galerie Anders Hus and Galerie Hervé Perdirolle (Paris); the Brookline Arts Center and Wellesley College's Davis Museum (Massachusetts, USA); Virginia Tech's Perspective Gallery and Radford University Art Museum (Virginia, USA); and Queensland Art Gallery (Australia). Examples of Venkat's work can be found in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Ottawa's National Gallery of Canada—where Venkat was selected from over eighty exhibited artists to give a formal lecture at the 2013 inauguration of "Sakahàn" exhibition (launching the first of NGC's quinquennial international indigenous art exhibitions). In April, 2016, Navayana Publishing released Venkat's lavishly illustrated 180-page autobiography (co-authored by S. Anand), entitled *Finding My Way*. His work has been warmly acclaimed by prominent art historians Brijinder Nath Goswamy and John Berger.

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