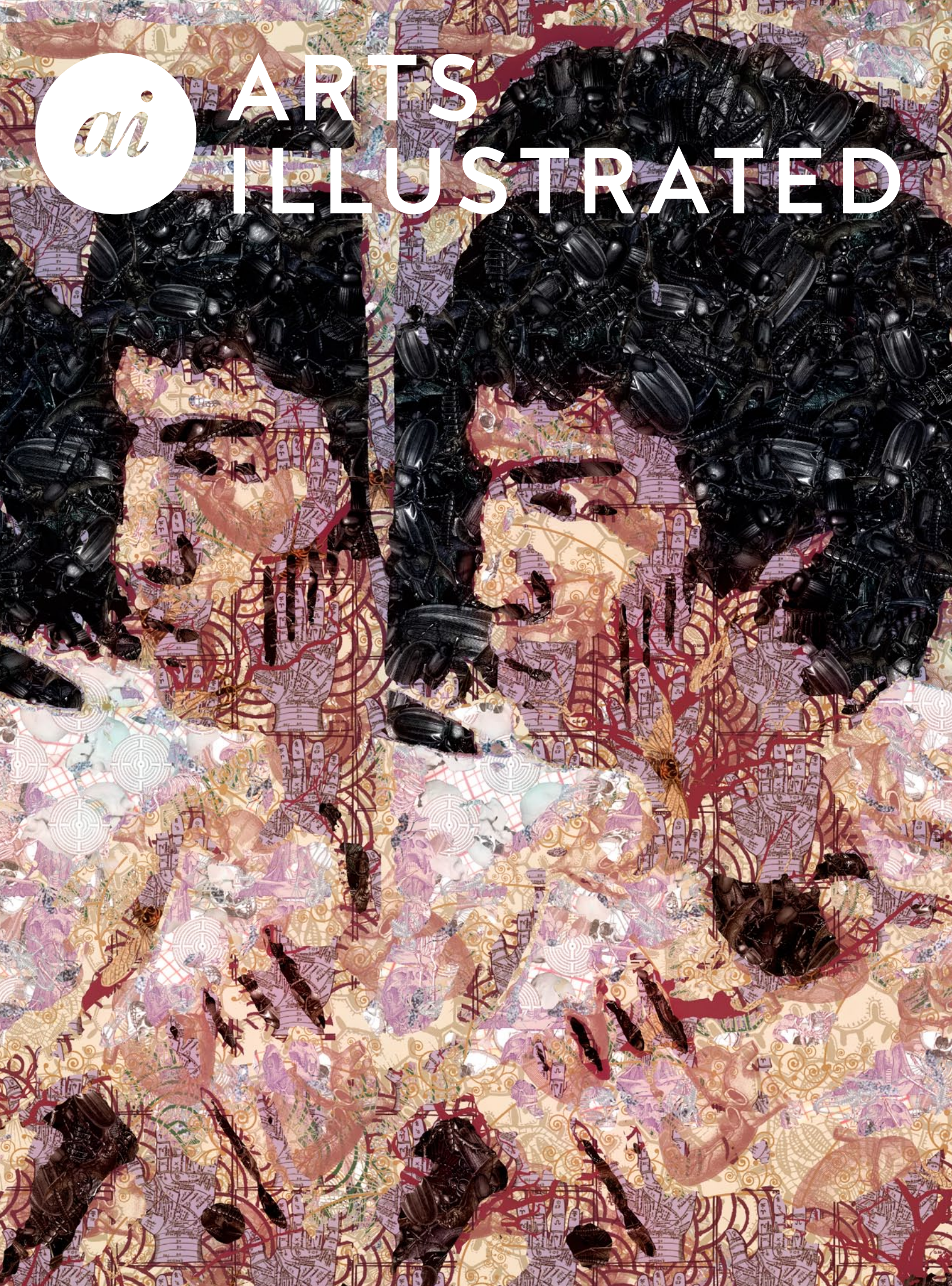




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CORRIGENDUM

In the last issue of our magazine - Humour & Art (Aug-Sept, 2017) - we missed artist Tara Kelton's second name in the 'cover artist' page. We regret the error and the inconvenience caused.

Cover Artist



Like much of my practice to date, my work is primarily autobiographical, but an unusual biography at that. Coloured by a condition, I imagine and perceive connections between things that others most often do not. Over a period of almost a decade and a half, I constructed and imagined life through a grand and heroic virtual journey. It was something I felt so strongly connected to that I didn't give it too much thought as to how it would be received by a few others. The cover for this particular issue, therefore, has special significance and resonance to me as something that blurs the line between what is considered sane and insane.

In the first chapter of my journey, I started by hitting a stratospheric mental high and literally vomited out a massive 'script' over a series of a thousand e-mails or so (I am sincerely sorry to those who received it). This script was a grand remix of art, from song lyrics, poetry, film plots, literature and visual art taken from both high and popular culture. In the subsequent chapters of my journey, this 'script' structured my reading of reality. I tried to fit every event and encounter in my life into its ambiguous plot.

One of the fundamental metaphysical elements in my journey was the mirror. And one very critical sequence from a popular film structured everything that I was to go through eventually. This is the final fight sequence in the film *Enter the Dragon* between Bruce Lee and the antagonist. This game of cat and mouse inside a hall of mirrors succinctly sums up much of what I imagined I was living through. It was the perception of a powerful and scathing presence that constantly reflected my own ugly image back to me and broke one self-image after the other in the process.

This is one of the most intense autobiographical references and one that has been on my mind for a very long time. For this cover, I found the perfect context in which to articulate this image. Rather than one print alone, which is how many of my pieces are reproduced, it is important to me that this is a cover and will therefore be reproduced in quantity, a metaphor for a hall of mirrors of its own.



Avinash Veeraraghavan

Cover arranged by Rahul Kumar

Q&A

In Visible Company

Artist Priya Ravish Mehra, who has spent years researching the role of darners in Indian textile and removed the veil of obscurity through her practice, talks to us about why making the invisible visible is a way to appreciate the imperfection of perfection

RAHUL KUMAR

I first saw the works of Priya Ravish Mehra at Gallery Threshold in New Delhi, with the display mostly comprising of her new mixed-media works that marked a departure, both aesthetic and conceptual, in her practice as a tapestry weaver. It was an intriguing body of work and in my desire to know more about her practice I visited one of her *baithaks* with darners. It felt like a homage to these neglected and anonymous artisans whose contribution to the protection of the treasury of Indian culture has not been acknowledged in the textile narrative. The darners at the event sat on the ground with a table lamp focused on the cloth they were meticulously working on. 'Darners have existed since mankind has known cloth. It is important to understand and accept the fact that the birth of cloth on a loom will always have defects. And it is the darners who correct this defect. They make the cloth "perfect". Such an irony

then that the one who makes imperfections invisible must remain invisible himself,' says Priya.

Priya's love for Indian textile emerges from her upbringing. Both her parents were artists and they studied at Shantiniketan. 'I don't think I "admired" art as a child; it was just part of everyday life. Right from the table and bed linen to *pichhawai* on walls, Gujarati *toran* on doors, they were all normal and not really seen as anything special or extraordinary. The distinction between art, craft and design did not exist for me. My grandparents lived in Najibabad in Uttar Pradesh. It is a region where traditional and professional darners lived in nearby villages. Historically, the town served as a hub of the shawl trade in North India for over 250 years. They would collect old pieces of textiles for repair. And because my parents had a particular interest in textiles, it was natural for them to engage

with the visiting darners, talking about pieces of cloths, embroidery and weaves, their origin and application. Others would go to museums, and here we were with the museum coming right to our home!' she says.

The day we had fixed up to meet, I received a text requesting a change in time. In a curious coincidence, that morning Priya had to attend the funeral of Martand Singh, the man who championed the cause of Indian textiles and was a mentor to her *Saris of India Project*.

In fact, a significant part of her work has revolved around researching and documenting the process of darning. It is a trenchant paradox that Priya was given a few months, but twelve years post-diagnosis, she continues to fight cancer and her research work remains a significant source that provides new meaning for her.



Untitled, Palm stem with Daphne pulp, 9" x 15", 2016.

Excerpts from the interview

It is fascinating and somewhat ironical how you gained strength from your understanding of the darning process to cope with your health conditions. In what ways did this provide you with the sensitivity and, both, a sense of acceptance and courage to fight?

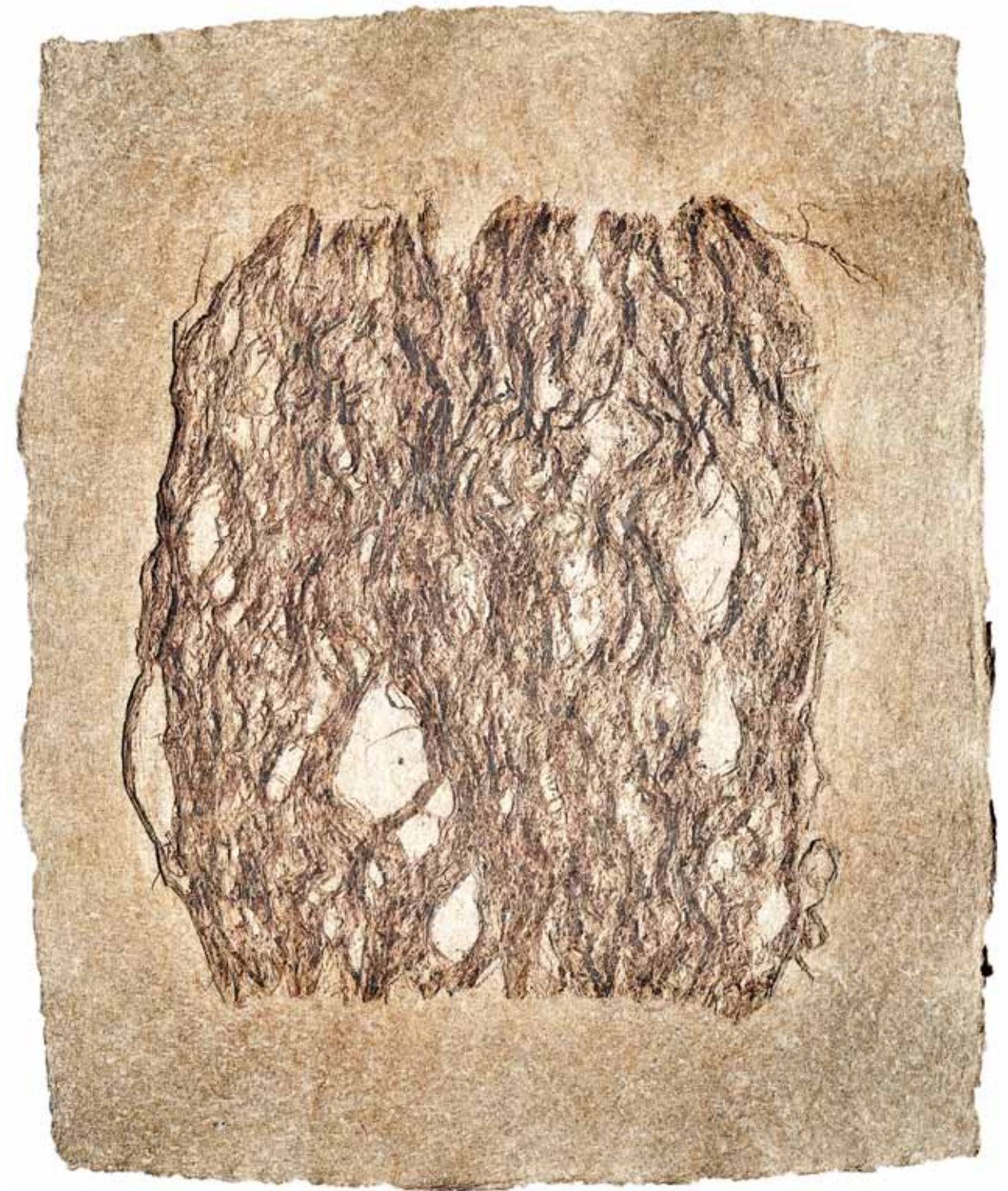
We don't like to talk about wear-and-tear. As a result, it becomes our tendency to not acknowledge it. In my experience of working with darners so closely, I realised that since they mend, only they can see those defects. This realisation was immensely helpful in my acceptance of the wear-and-tear of my own body. It is easy to see problems outside of

us, but at some level we all need to be darners! We will work on our defects only if we closely examine and train ourselves to see our own defects. When I fell ill, I was really dejected. I got a feeling of being rejected and discarded. I was unable to keep pace with life and felt left out. Then I used this metaphor of giving life to a piece of cloth to regain and contain myself. I felt this is something I have to deal with. I cannot brush it under the carpet. It is strange that while I got comfortable in dealing with it, people I spoke with wanted to refer to it as 'the capital C'. When they did not even want to say the word 'cancer', how could they learn to deal with it, I felt.

The process of darning has so much to offer by way of learning about life itself. It is the weakness of the thread that creates the visible defects, but it is the very threads from the fabric that is used to darn it right back. Likewise, in life, it is the strength from within that leads to improvement. One can have doctors and healers, but eventually you have to find the shortcoming and then overcome it. It is our journey of realisation. I am imperfect, as are you. So why hide it? We must appreciate it and work on it. It is this story and life of a fabric that made me aware of and sensitive to the very fabric of my life.



Untitled, Kantha fragments with paper pulp, 14.5" x 17.5", 2016.



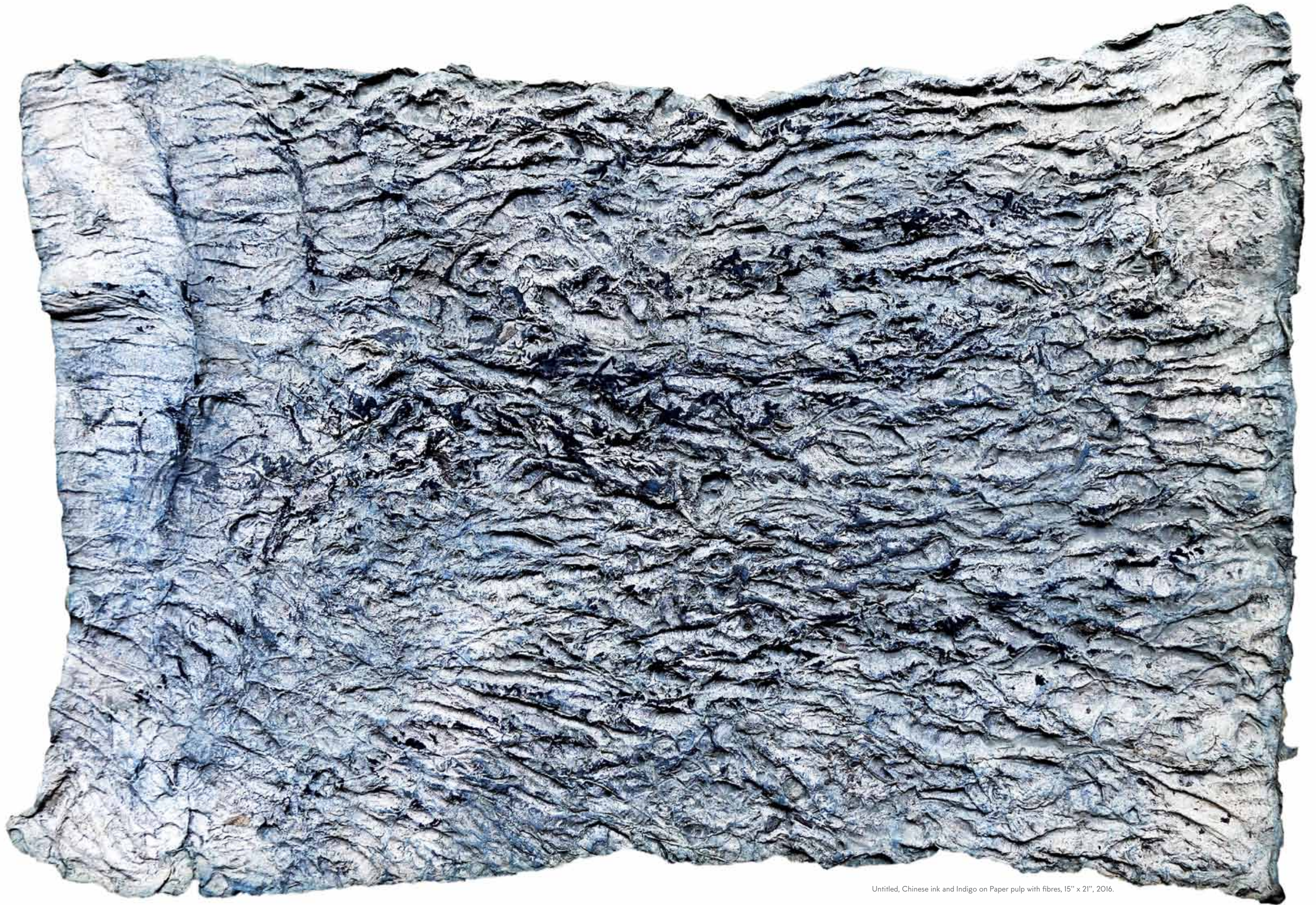
Untitled, Daphne fiber with Ramie pulp, 17" x 14", 2016.

What encouraged your extensive research on darners was the apparent lack of documentation. Why do you think this has not been studied before?

Any scholarly research requires bibliography to reference other published material. It is during my research that I realised nothing was documented on this entire section of textile space. I only had first-hand information that grew organically. I was once invited to

present at an international forum and we spoke of 'conservation', something very different from 'restoration' as a concept. Internationally, tapestry is restored in museums – from rugs and carpets to cloths. They become items in glass boxes in museums to preserve in other parts of the world. I recall a funny story when I was at a museum in the United States for a show on Kashmiri shawls and the curator was

passionately talking about a piece of tapestry from India that was several decades old, with a 'Do Not Touch' sign under it. And there I was roaming around wearing a saree, made of a similar weave, which was also a few decades old! They made the object dead and I made it live. Of course, the cloth needed maintenance. The big difference I realised was easy access to darners. In India, the poor also access them as do the wealthy.



Untitled, Chinese ink and Indigo on Paper pulp with fibres, 15" x 21", 2016.

I am keen to know about your experience in tapestry making – what are the sticking differences and similarities in how this is applied in India versus what you learnt in the United Kingdom? What was your work and style like when you weaved?

I was initially inspired by nature. The colours I used and the patterns mimicked the cyclic order of nature. At Shantiniketan I learnt the very basics of tapestry weaving. The training was focused on pictorial weaving, to create motifs and figures on the cloth using a loom. I expanded my worldview after a two-hour workshop with the Canadian tapestry weaver Peter Harris that I took during my college years. In its pure form and significance, Indian tapestry can only be found in the *kani* shawls of Kashmir, with the only possible exception of Deccan

Paihani sarees. Soon after I moved to Delhi, I was asked by the British Council to man a show of textiles by Bobbie Cox, probably because I knew the process and that would come in handy while explaining it to visitors. I ended up spending hours with the works at the show and I got inspired to research and learn tapestry in the United Kingdom. It is at the West Dean College that I learnt the advanced technique of weaving and also applying a more conceptual and abstract layer to my work. I was very fortunate to study under weavers who were working on a major project for the Henry Moore Foundation. They were commissioning to translate his sketches, drawings and watercolours into tapestries and some of the master craftsmen in the United Kingdom were working on this.

This was hugely valuable to enhance my technical knowledge and take it forward from the basic interlocking technique that I learnt back home.

Your current work does not directly use the traditional cloth-making process that you trained in at Shantiniketan and in the United Kingdom. The mixed-media works have a sense of immediacy and spontaneity, whereas the tapestry and weaving is a slow and repetitive process. Why and how did you make this shift?

As a process, weaving is physically taxing. I had to take a break from it after my children were born. Soon after that I was diagnosed with cancer, because of which I had to practically let go of weaving. Meanwhile, I was involved in reviving the *Banarasi* Brocade with my brother, Tushar Kumar, at our design studio. So,

I remained connected with the creative without making any work of my own. Around four years ago, out of the blue, I was invited by a Swiss artist to be part of a group show. He insisted on a new body of work and fortunately because of delayed funding, I had a year to prepare. Weaving anything new was out of the question, so I had to reinvent myself. I decided to 'restore' my old discarded works. I used the principles of *rafoo* but I am not a darning – so I used other material with the cloth to patch up the defects. I was visiting hospitals for my treatment and would encounter plaster and special cloth net masks in the radiology and orthopaedics departments. I decided to use paper pulp, and sometimes added natural fibre to it to act as the binding agent. Also, I have always been inspired by nature and I spend several hours in my garden. One contemplative afternoon, I noticed a bird gathering found threads and fibre to build a nest, beautifully weaving twigs and sticks for strength. Sadly, the half-done nest fell during a storm. I thought to myself that the bird used what was discarded and found in my garden, so I will source from its discarded nest. I took this further and used the left-over yarn on my loom and fragments of my rejected weaving. All the association with darning was coming back in my work now. This reconstruction and reconstitution was to both material and meaning of fibre. The thematic and symbolic focus of this work is impermanence and material duality is re-imagined



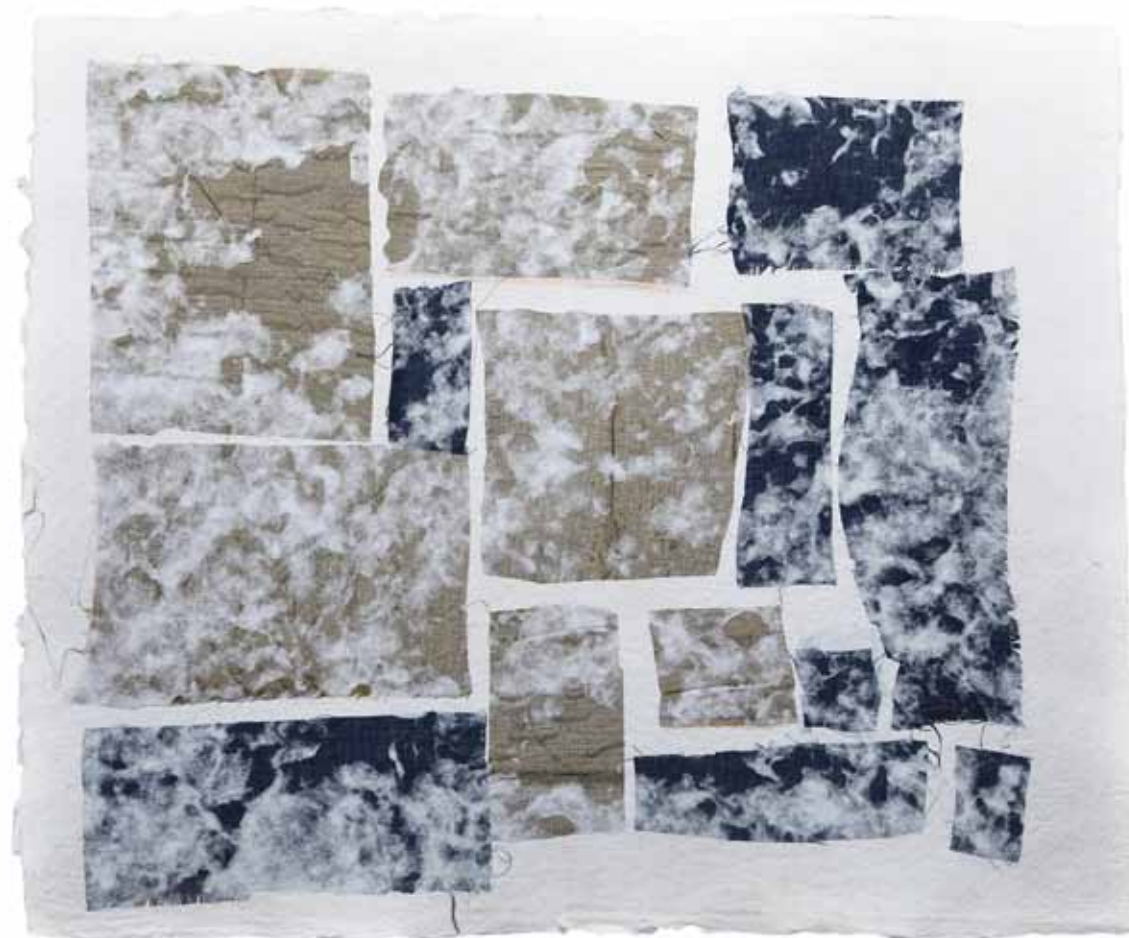
Priya Ravish Mehra

as a unity. This was healing for me, as it was for the viewers of my work. Given my severe health issues, I doubt if I can really work at the loom. But I will continue to reinvent and improvise, and work on design projects for weaving communities on their traditional looms.

Do you think your work celebrates the flaws and degeneration, both of which are a natural phenomenon, or is it about salvaging the residual?

Both, actually. A darning in Urdu is called *rafoogarh*, which is formed by combining two words – *Rafoo* translates to 'going' and *Garflan* means 'holding'. Therefore, *rafoogari* or darning, in essence, is 'salvaging what is going'. 'Repair' becomes a crucial instrument of awareness. It is used as a metaphor of both visible and invisible darning in abstract forms to suggest sudden and unforeseen rupture in the once-reliable order of things. I am blissfully at a stage where I no more overlook the wear and tear. I accept it. I let it

go and move on. This is the healing and mending. It is peaceful at the core, but at the same time not hiding the defects or shortcomings. It may be celebrating those for some or just making them visible for others, but it is not disturbing. It may not be an object of beauty, but it is certainly telling a story.



Untitled, Cotton and silk fragments with paper pulp, 15" x 18", 2016.

All images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Threshold..

