SHEILA MAKHIJANI

by Olivia Sand

Within the art world, Sheila Makhijani (b 1962, India) is one of the rare artists whose practice seems to exist in complete harmony with her medium. Devoted to drawing since she was an art student, she sees the world through her own lens, a world driven by lines and colours. Her practice is intuitive, bringing to life an explosion of line and colour held together by an extraordinary sense of control and precision. Determined to continue exploring the revelations and possibilities of the medium, Sheila Makhijani relentlessly examines opportunities to carry the medium forward towards further innovation. Proficient not only in drawing but also in painting, sculpture, and installation, she takes us on her journey as an artist in a career spanning more than 35 years. A remarkable ambassador for the medium of drawing, she has a wealth of stories to tell.

WATCH
Sheila Makhijani discuss her work



Sheila Makhijani

Asian Art Newspaper: Throughout your career, you developed a friendship with Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015), a pioneer sculptor in India. How did it impact your career?
Sheila Makhijani: I met Mrinalini Mukherjee during my college years, studying for my bachelor's degree. I initially contacted her because I was about to complete a written work, but she was so busy that she recommended I make an appointment before going. As a student, of course, you feel intimidated and nervous to go to these artists: I ended up being too scared and never went. However, three or four years after I finished my Masters, she was the one who put up my first solo show. Around that time, the art market was beginning to change in India, with new galleries opening in Delhi. Generally, these new galleries relied on various artists to curate their exhibitions because they did not really know how to go about using the space. In my case, one of them contacted Mrinalini to hang my show and that' is when I came to know her. I was extremely grateful that she installed my exhibition because she made me see what space was. It was my first solo exhibition, and, without her, I probably would never have understood how to mount a work in an empty space and would not have realised how long it took to hang the works. In addition, in relation to an exhibition, the biggest lesson from her was understanding that one does not look at the work while in the studio because the pieces become completely different once taken out of the studio space.

This is how I was introduced to Mrinalini – an extremely friendly and warm person. We did not meet again for some years – I followed my own path and went off to Japan, and when I returned, I was looking for work. By chance, she asked me whether I could sit for her exhibition as she could not be there the whole day. So, I went to her show at the British Council as a guide, which is something I had done in the past to earn money. I was getting 100 rupees a day, which was a lot of money at that time. This brought us closer. Then, whenever she had an exhibition, she would call me to help her put up the pieces or just discuss her work. Similarly, if I was the one having a show, she would always arrive beforehand to see how it was being installed. She would give me her feedback, and that is how we became friends. Our friendship developed mainly through of our work.

AAN: You briefly mentioned your stay in Japan. After studying in Delhi, what prompted you to go to Japan to pursue an additional degree, and why specifically Japan?
SM: There was a time in India when it was very difficult to travel. There were restrictions from the government allowing people to carry no more than US$500 when going abroad, even if they had more funds available. Therefore, with that limited amount, it was impossible for most of us artists or individuals to travel and visit everything we wanted to see. I experienced it directly, as when I travelled by myself, I realised it was challenging to survive, even by staying at a friend's place. In order to travel around Europe, for example, it quickly ate up US$100, here or there, to get to a major city like London or to visit Italy. As a result, the $500 budget did not get us anywhere.

The other option we had, if we wanted to go abroad, was to apply for scholarships. Back then, there were four different scholarships focusing on art. For three consecutive years, I applied for every scholarship or opportunity that came up. I got the Japanese scholarship and went to study there for a year and a half.

AAN: Did your stay in Japan open new perspectives in your practice or the use of paper?
SM: I learned a lot there and my understanding and knowledge of the medium of oil painting grew considerably while in Japan. In Kanazawa, my professor was highly versed in the technique of oil painting. His own work was embedded with semi-precious stones, gold foil, etc. He showed me, for example, how to use a brush when applying Japanese ink. He also taught me how to cut Japanese paper without scissors or a blade, using only my hands. I picked up all these small tips, which I practised a lot.

In my college years, and before going to Japan, I was very proficient in drawing, even though I also liked oil painting. However, at the end of the day, it became an issue how to store the paintings. In that respect, paper was much easier, and such a convenient medium. In Japan, I continued to rely on paper, but since my professor was such a good technician, he also taught me a lot with regards to oil painting, and more specifically what could go wrong in an oil painting. Earlier, in India, I could see some of my colours open and crack. He recommended that I either work faster without letting the colour dry, or give it enough time to dry. He also showed me various ways of preparing a canvas or a board, all these technical things that are essential in painting. It was all very new to me because in those days, in India, we did not have these kinds of materials, as opposed to today. In addition, at the time, being an artist was not considered something important.



Not At All (2002), gouache on paper, 5 x 7 inches, courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York I New Delhi © Sheila Makhijani



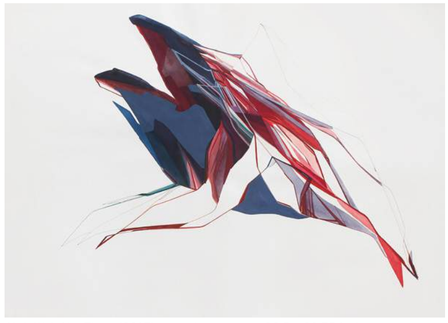
Can be the other way as well? (2006), dry pastel on paper, 22 x 30 inches, Kirin Nadar Museum of Art, courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York I New Delhi © Sheila Makhijani

AAN: You also attended various residencies (the Netherlands, Uganda, and Japan, among others) which opened your practice to different mediums. How so?
SM: The residency in Japan allowed me to meet students from different parts of the country, in addition to foreign students from Korea and China. While in Japan, I also took classes in *urushi* lacquer techniques and ceramics, both of which were technically demanding and made me recognise that technique and skill go hand-in-hand for a complete expression. Japan made a strong impact and, going back to India, I worked on paper, this time with inks – orange and black inks – including sumi ink. These works looked like blots of colour, a drop of rain, or a small, polished stone. They could be a puddle I saw on the road – anything and everything.

The residency in the Netherlands proved to be very interesting, because I got to explore ceramics further. I was very fortunate, as while I was a student, the Dutch ambassador to India saw my work in my Masters exhibition and acquired several pieces. She became a very good friend and later opened a gallery in Amsterdam called the Foundation for Indian Artists; I also showed my work there. The foundation supplied a workshop and that is how I, along with three other Indian artists, happened to go to the European Ceramic Work Centre for three months. It was fantastic, as we learned a lot about glazing, and had access to all technical help. Later, I made some ceramics in India, but I did not do so much because one needs a studio, a kiln, etc, I preferred to continue with different materials with which I could work in my studio.

> *I do not have the patience to draw something exactly the way it looks*

AAN: It seems that among the artists from India that a Western audience is most familiar with the majority happens to work figuratively. In your opinion, why is that?
SM: I do not know. Beyond the artists who have recognition abroad, abstraction is very much present in India. In my case, I prefer abstraction because I do not have the patience to draw something exactly the way it looks. I much rather want to make something I do not know. In addition, while I was working on the orange and black pieces, I became quite worried as someone told me they were so spiritual, like tantric. That was not my intention but was simply the result of what I wanted to do. This immediately led me to start titling my work. Of course, there are many artists in India, especially from Rajasthan such as Acharya Vyakul (1930-2000), for example, who completed tantric, small, and very circular works. Abstraction is very present in India. It is also spiritual, but that description does not apply to my work.



Ah-h Wait Not There (2017), gouache on paper, 26.5 x 33.75 inches, courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York I New Delhi © Sheila Makhijani

AAN: You just brought up the titles of your pieces for your individual works or your exhibitions. Their titles sound catchy and to the point. How do they come about?
SM: They come instinctively. Initially, I preferred not to title my works at all, but since everybody found them spiritual, I had no choice but to title them. Regarding my process, I do not title the works immediately, but only later when I see them again. I keep them on my lap, look at them carefully and title them intuitively. It is done in a moment's decision. I title all the works for what they say to me, or what they say to each other. Sometimes, my drawings seem to be in dialogue with the lines interacting and talking to each other. I am in conversation with the work, assessing if a title is right for it or not. Overall, it is an automatic process.

AAN: It seems difficult to decide if what drives you as an artist is the love of paper, the love of lines, or possibly both? What are your thoughts?
SM: For me, it is the love of a line more than anything else. I like paper because it is convenient. I can keep it on my lap and draw, whereas for a painting, it must be against the wall unless it is a very small piece. It is primarily the colour that excites me, followed by paint, line, as well as the material. A canvas requires me to paint the entire surface because I do not like the cloth to be empty, but on paper I love the whiteness and its quality. My love affair with paper started well before going to Japan. During my master's at the College of Art in New Delhi, I would start my day with a drawing and then move on to a painting. Both mediums, the paintings and drawings, have no connection and I do not sketch for a painting or vice versa. In the early stages of my career, my paintings always had a man-made object like a train, a door, or using the light and shade falling on a window as a starting point.

AAN: Has there been an internal struggle towards equally mastering painting and drawing?
SM: Over time, I drew closer to paper. I could experiment more freely with what I was doing on paper, but not so in oils, as I was still struggling not just with its application, but also the content. In the 1990s, the necessity of making an object on canvas still stayed with me. The daunting large size of the canvas was there in front of me, then the wait period of the process, which I consciously wanted to rectify, would not allow my oil paintings to have a life of their own. Soon, I realised maybe I should scale down the size, which would then probably allow me to be able to work faster as then I could slowly enlarge the size of the works. During this period, my obsession with paper grew, and I moved from orange and black inks to gouaches.

The advantage of gouache over watercolours is that I could hide my mistakes, at least so I thought at that time. Overworking on a piece and then covering it with a layer of opaque gouache, and working over it again, led me to try and see the third dimension in my work. Using the brush, I drew line after line, each one emerging from the previous and giving way to the next. I found myself moving between the desire to contain them and the need to let them exist freely – to follow their own pace, their own movement – alongside their ongoing conversation with one another and with the space

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Rakhimov, Vladimir Pan, Bakhtiyar Saipov and Daribay Saipov.

Tashkent-based, seventh-generation ceramicist Shokhrukh Rakhimov (b 2002, Uzbekistan) bridges Uzbek ancestral craft and contemporary expression through The Colour of Silence, In Search of Truth, comprising seven large-scale ceramic orbs enriched with locally sourced minerals and pigments.

ART WEEK TOKYO

Art Week Tokyo announced further highlights from its city-wide programme of exhibitions and special platforms, taking place from 4 to 8 November 2026. Across 55 participating venues, the newly announced programming brings together leading Japanese and international artists, curators, architects, and creative practitioners, growing the breadth of this year's event.

New institutional highlights include *Nam June Paik: The 20th Anniversary of His Passing at Watari-um,* the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, which revisits the pioneering media artist's long-standing relationship with the museum and its Mario Botta-designed space, while reflecting on the relevance of his visionary practice in an age of LCD screens, smartphones, and AI. Also featured is a group exhibition, *Seeds and Roots: How to Cultivate a City,* at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery featuring ceramic artist Akane Saijo, textile artist Yoko Daihara, and installation artist Takeshi Yasura, exploring how people connect with nature in urban environments.

Previously announced institutional programming includes *Mariko Mori: All That Shines* at Mori Art Museum, a major retrospective organised in collaboration with the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation, and *Tada Minami: Still, Shimmering Light* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, the artist's first retrospective.

YAYOI KUSAMA (1929-2026)

The Japanese avant-garde artist Yayoi Kusama, who became famous for her colourful polka dot-covered sculptures and installations, died in August at the age of 97. Kusama, who had voluntarily lived in a psychiatric hospital for decades, was known for her bright red wig and her giant, quirky creations. Perhaps her best-known were those covered in polka dots. Kusama became one of the world's most recognisable artists and a global cultural icon in her 80s and 90s, after having been mostly overlooked for decades. She went on to become Japan's first solo artist to represent the country at the 1993 Venice Biennale. Her exhibitions drew large crowds around the world, and her vibrant works fetched some of the highest-ever prices for a female artist at auction.

The artist's gallery, David Zwirner, said in a statement, 'Kusama devoted her life to an international career as an avant-garde artist, working primarily in the visual arts while also extending her practice to performance, novels, poetry, and other forms of expression. She continued to paint until shortly before her passing, never setting aside her brush, and remained steadfast in her lifelong belief that love can save the world.'

In 2025, a major travelling European exhibition was the first Kusama retrospective in Switzerland. The exhibition then travelled to the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, where it closed on 2 August 2026 with 480,335 visitors – the most successful show in the museum's history. On 11 September, the exhibition opened at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and runs until 17 January 2027.

DAYTON ART INSTITUTE, OHIO

The Dayton Art Institute (DAI) has announced Jessimi Jones, formerly the Director of the Springfield Museum of Art, as the museum's new Director and President. She takes up her new role on 19 October 2026.

At the Springfield Museum of Art, Jones helped advance an institutional philosophy centred on the belief that 'Art Belongs to All People'. The north wing of the museum was reimagined to create more welcoming and participatory spaces for visitors. Attendance increased by 98% in the first year following the reopening. Jones plans to use this experience to build on the DAI's more than 100-year history while exploring opportunities to deepen the museum's role as a cultural resource for Dayton and the surrounding region.

KOREAN FILM WINS SILVER LION IN VENICE

A film exploring the intertwined lives of two married couples, *Possible Love* (Ga-neung-han Sa-rang) directed by Lee Chang-dong, has won the Silver Lion Grand Jury Prize in Venice. The story revolves around a laid-off worker and his spouse and a documentary filmmaker and her spouse – crossing paths to film a documentary and facing their different lives and hidden desires. Lee previously won a Silver Lion for Best Director at the festival 24 years ago for his 2002 film *Oasis.*

NAM JUNE PAIK PRIZE, SEOUL

The Nam June Paik Art Centre has announced Japanese visual artist and composer Ryoji Ikeda as the winner of this year's KRW 50 million ($36,400) Nam June Paik Prize. A formal award ceremony took place at the centre on 8 September. Born in 1966 in Gifu, central Japan, and currently based between Paris and Kyoto, Ikeda is a pioneer of minimalist 'glitch' art, whose works probe the aesthetic and sensorial potential of technology. His experimental installations and live performances often combine flashing lights, mathematical codes, and electronic soundscapes to explore questions about human perception and digital distortion.



Every once in a while (2022), oil on canvas, 16 x 21 inches, courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York | New Delhi
© Sheila Makhijani

around them. In allowing the lines to become independent yet connected, I felt myself moving closer to the nature of the drawn line itself. Beyond working in inks and gouaches, I also tried my hand at compressed charcoal, dry pastels, and pencil, among other media.

AAN: To achieve the freedom you just described in your drawings, do you work freehand?
SM: Absolutely. Working freehand allows me to make changes and move in whichever way I want. I basically start my piece without any fixed idea in my mind and let the drawing follow its own path.

AAN: That resonates with your quote, 'this path is an addiction'. Can you elaborate?
SM: Perhaps addiction was not the correct word. It is more accurate to say that it is like breathing. One needs to breathe to survive, and I need to make work every single day to survive – this is the kind of addiction I have. Once you start creating art, you cannot leave. I cannot separate myself from art. It is a part of me and if it is not there, I feel totally lost.

AAN: Has it always been this way? Has colour always held a special place in your practice too?
SM: It has always been like that since I was younger, even when I was in college. I remember while we were studying the human body, my professor asked me to make a portrait of a person who had a similar skin tone to mine, solely using the three primary colours. It ended up being a very interesting exercise for me. It is only later that I came to realise how important colour was to me. I was literally fascinated with it. Looking back, my professor probably saw right then that my way of working was with colour, even if at the time, I did not give much importance to that exercise and perhaps, did not realise what I was doing.

AAN: You were quoted as saying you wanted to create a language only with colour and line, which would speak in their own voice. Do you feel you succeeded?
SM: I do not know whether I succeeded or not. I just feel that when you are making something which is realistic, you are then actually abstracting it and putting it on a canvas: for example, if it is a human figure, you put it on a canvas, making a 3D into a 2D. In my case, the paint and the colour – whether it is a line or a flow of colour – should be able to have their own language without having to be constricted in a 3D object on a canvas or a paper. I do not know whether they actually speak to me or whether they speak to others in that language, but I try my best for them to have their own freedom and not be limited by any boundaries.

AAN: Your practice remains very intuitive and spontaneous. Is there also a kind of self-discovery on a personal level or a deeper discovery of the medium?
SM: I learn from every work as every work teaches me something. I know what I can do, and what the possibilities are, but I do not know whether I consciously apply this knowledge into another work. When I do a new work, I start again on a new journey: I may make the same mistake again and maybe that exact mistake becomes correct in the next work. It may not work for one piece, but it may work for another one. All that is intuitive. So, I do learn from every work, but I do not know whether I can see it. Knowledge is something very complex and as my process is so intuitive, I do not think I can apply it consciously into another work.

AAN: When you say you learn from every work, can you elaborate?
SM: For example, I know when I have overdone a work. I will not show or exhibit a piece when I know it has been overworked. This is not an option for me. Early on, when I saw my works maybe 10 years later, I always felt they were not truly representative of me or there was something wrong. Today, I recognise that they are part of a learning curve. Originally, I may not have liked a work, but maybe 40 years later, I feel that work is acceptable. You do learn, and years later, you may have a different response to your own work.

Every time there is an exhibition, and I see some of the works framed, I believe they sometimes lose a part of their joy and freedom. For example, the frame seems to contain them too tightly as if they were confined in a prison. Therefore, once they are installed, I think some works do not want to be hung on a wall but want to be taken out of the frame. That kind of learning keeps happening with some works best not hung but kept on the lap. All that learning is present in the back of the mind, but I do not consciously apply it even though I may do so subconsciously.

AAN: It seems there is a thin line between a drawing being overworked and realising when it is finished.
SM: You must control yourself. You quickly know that the piece was better before and that you have just ruined it. As a result, you want to try and make it better. Sometimes it goes into a different direction, and it ends up looking nicer. Generally, you can do that with gouaches, but you cannot do that with watercolour. Ultimately, it all depends on the material you use, on how pristine you want your work to be, how clean you want your colours to remain. But overall, a drawing should be finished instinctively, otherwise the spontaneity has gone with the whole drawing becoming overworked. Then, they are basically dead drawings.

AAN: Listening to you, there seem to be so many factors one needs to control between the paper, the line, the pressure applied on the paper, etc. Can you ever master the entire process?
SM: I do not think you can master anything, because if you do, it is no longer interesting. I work with a brush and not with a pen. My training in Japan was very useful as I was taught how to use a brush, how to apply pressure on it, depending on how thick the line should be. It is basically like calligraphy, it is not very difficult, but it requires practice – it is a skill. As you acquire the skill, you then must see how to undo that skill to let the work become unconstrained and what it should be. I hope people see the work without focusing on the skill. Skill does not matter as it is just a tool or a language. Skill becomes a language to reach and express yourself.

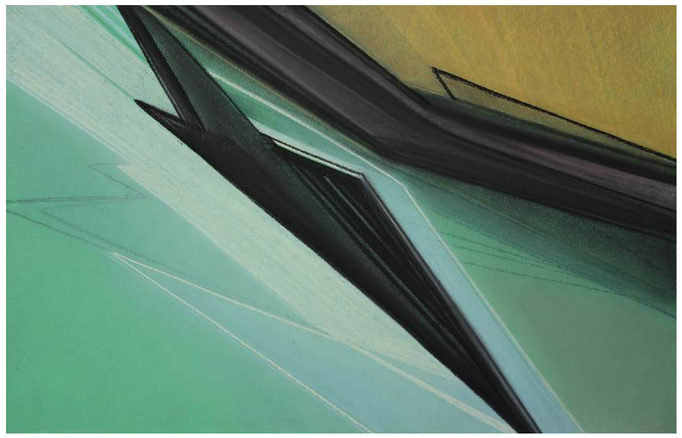
AAN: Comparing your outdoor oversized drawing installations with your smaller pieces, how do you manage scale?
SM: I can work in any scale. This is one thing I also learned from Mrinalini Mukherjee. Back in the 1990s, when she was installing my show, she recommended I never lose the quality of working in both small and large sizes. She recognised that I had this ability to work in different scales, an important quality for an artist. Somehow, that stayed with me and I still remember it. Scale is not an issue for me. The only constraint I have is the size of my studio. Presently, everybody is completing large works in India, which encourages me to perhaps do even smaller ones?

> *A drawing should be finished instinctively, otherwise it can be over worked*

AAN: With a career spanning more than 35 years, are there still some challenges remaining?
SM: I feel I have genuinely done nothing so far, especially when I see what is happening around me. Perhaps I am not experimental enough as I used to be? One does need to continue experimenting to push oneself forward. I therefore very consciously push my boundary. I try to do that occasionally, but that is not enough as I think my mind still does not allow me to move away from the skill or the technique that is very consciously in my head. It is very difficult to break out of this, as painting comes very easily and drawing is like breathing, I am doing it every day – it is like food or like an addiction. Although I did do certain 3D works over the years, the patience which is required to make a really large 3D work is considerable. I probably do not have that patience or, maybe, I am drawn to things that come more easily. Perhaps as drawing and painting come so naturally to me, I try to push the boundaries within what I know? But that is not enough. I need to break out more as an artist and keep on pushing my boundary. I do not do that enough. I know that. Therefore, pushing my boundaries on a regular basis is definitely an ongoing challenge.

AAN: Beyond drawing and painting, you have also completed engraved acrylic pieces. How did they come about?
SM: Back in 1999 or 2000, I created some acrylic cubes. As I painted one of them moving it on my hand, the drawing moved too. I was thrilled because I always wanted to make animation. That is probably why my work has so many lines.

AAN: What attracts you about animation?
SM: I have loved it since childhood. I enjoy animation because you can make anything flat move and create depth within a 2D. I always wanted my drawings to be animated with the feeling that they are coming in and out, moving and running. For me, when I am drawing, it is like animation, with this colour going here, that line coming on top of this colour, and something going underneath. I want to see how I can make a work on paper or canvas which becomes flat-looking, three dimensional. That is an exciting undertaking, as I can never see the three-dimensional elements in my work. I always feel the surface is so flat. The lines should look like they are coming and going, playing with each other and doing different things. They are moving around, talking and fighting. I want them to be truly animated. That is the thing which keeps me making work because I still have not achieved what I want and have yet to discover it.



Everyone is thinking of that (2022), dry pastel on paper, 18 pieces, each 16 x 23 inches, private collection, courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York | New Delhi © Sheila Makhijani

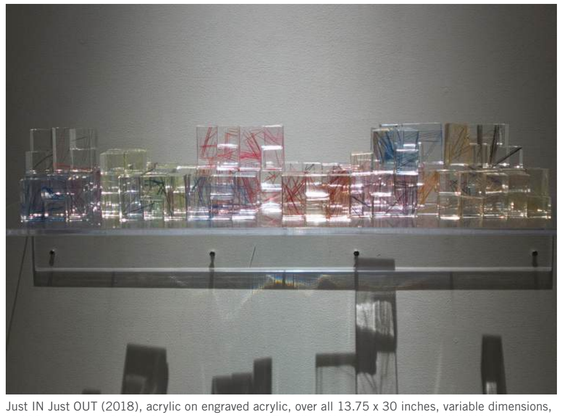


Flying High (2018), acrylic on wall of building

AAN Looking back, have there been any influential figures for you?
SM: I always try to see what I like in a work, even if the artist is not known. I feel that in every work there are aspects you like and others you don't. For example, I love Mrinalini Mukherjee's work. She was a friend, and with a friend, it is difficult to take a step back and see the works in a different light. But now, I can see the strength of her work. Beyond Mrinalini Mukherjee, I would name Arpita Singh (b 1937) and Anjum Singh (b 1967). I am fortunate enough to know all of them personally. I admire them for making me see what I did not see, letting me know what I did not know and making me aware of the resilience and perseverance required towards life as well as in making a work. How, without compromising your inner self, one must go on and on.

I just love any work that speaks to me regardless of if the work is by a new artist or an established artist. It does not matter to me. When I first went to Europe when I was around 24 years old, I was so impressed by Picasso! Of course, there were also Miró, Jean Dubuffet, Paul Klee, Gerhard Richter, and many more.

AAN: Considering your experiences of drawing and painting, are you at this stage teaching or mentoring any young artists?
SM: I am not teaching. I have taken a few classes, but I am the worst possible teacher. Why? Because I let the students do what they want. In my opinion, that is what art is all about. In addition, it seems to me that young people today are rather impatient, changing their medium as they get bored. It is very difficult to make them understand that you can get so much out of a medium. With some dedication, you can continue exploring one medium forever, always unlocking new possibilities and meanings.



Just IN Just OUT (2018), acrylic on engraved acrylic, over all 13.75 x 30 inches, variable dimensions, in 100 parts, each 2 x 2 x 1 inches, collection of The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA), courtesy Talwar Gallery, New York | New Delhi © Sheila Makhijani