

[Metroplus](#) » [Society](#)

Published: June 27, 2016 17:16 IST | Updated: June 27, 2016 17:16 IST Chennai, June 27, 2016

## Mapping memories

- [Naveena Vijayan](#)



The Hindu

Artist Sumakshi Singh Photo: K. Pichumani

# **Artist Sumakshi Singh speaks to NAVEENA VIJAYAN on her latest series, ‘In The Garden’, and the ephemeral nature of her creations**

"Sometimes, when I enter a studio, I wonder if I am mad. I find myself making a hole in the wall, doing embroidery for 18 hours straight, and trying to draw a table in 3D space, and I stop and ask: ‘For what?’" says artist Sumakshi Singh, with genuine disbelief.

"I start thinking I'm crazy because I never know what I'm going to do next. But then, there are people to indulge my craziness; galleries that say, ‘We don't know what you are doing, we understand you don't know what you are doing, but we trust you to figure it out by the show date.’ And, it is a privilege to work with people like that; I can't think of any other field that lets a person do that," says the artist, who has made it to almost all the top art venues in the world, including the Kochi-Muziris Biennale; Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon; and MAXXI Museum, Rome.

The list is commendable, given the artist is just 36. Sumakshi spent her teenage (Classes VII to XII) in Chennai, before leaving for Baroda to pursue her Bachelor's degree at Maharaja Sayajirao University, and later, Masters at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 2001. She worked as an instructor in the same school for five years, gave lectures at the University of Oxford, Columbia University and The Chicago Humanities Festival, and mentored residencies for the Victoria and Albert Museum, The WhyNot Place in 2010 and 2011, and was a visiting artist advisor at KHOJ Delhi.

The opening of her show ‘In The Garden’ at Art Houz, Chennai, recently, was a throwback to the summer of '97. It turned into a mini get-together with her batchmates joining her for wine and cheese, she laughs. The series is a collection of fragile flowers made of thread, placed in glass bottles and mounted inside glass frames, and a huge animation projection of a colourful garden on thin white screens. Sumakshi tells us the story behind the project, which includes her mother's handwritten letters and a Swiss hermit, and what keeps her on the move for over nine months a year.

Excerpts from the interview:

**You were part of the Kunsthau Langenthal, Switzerland, last year, and Kochi Biennale and Vancouver Biennale in 2014. How much do you travel for your art projects?**

Technically, I am based out of Delhi, but I live in India for not more than three months. The rest of the time, I am travelling across the world. Most of my work is site-specific installations — it takes me anytime between two weeks to a month-and-a-half to finish one piece. I usually have six shows a year — that means over six to seven months outside, plus the travelling. Things have been better since last year. I travel less. It is a conscious decision to stay put. It's very hard, though a lot of fun, to have a serious studio practice going on when you're shifting studios every month and starting from scratch. I did that for many years; now, I feel like staying grounded a bit.

**Any favourites among the projects you have worked on?**

The Kochi Biennale was one of the best I have ever seen, and I have been to most of them. The event encourages artists to push the envelope; it is gritty and grungy. You know that people are not trying to make neat pretty things; it's all about edgy creativity. For the biennale, I created an installation with projectors and 16 12-by-5 paintings in one month. I have no idea how I did that; I strongly suspect time is elastic.

**Did you always know you would become an artist?**

My dad is a chemical engineer, and my mom is a home science major in microbiology. But from the age of two, if anyone asked me what I wanted to be I would say without a missing a beat — an artist.

### **What inspired you to make the series, 'In the Garden'?**

I am not an artist who goes with a concept. Something just starts to happen, and then I start to understand why. The dialogue is between the artwork and me. With this series, I just started making flowers and plants in embroidery, didn't understand why. Suddenly, I started emulating my mom's letters in embroidery. It was only later that things got clearer as to why I was doing what I was doing. My mom would press flowers in between pages and send it to me by post. I was trying to flatten out, archive, preserve and record the memories.

What really triggered the whole concept was another incident that happened last November... I was close to a Swiss hermit, a joyful and full-of-life 86-year-old man. I would go every three months to visit him whenever I was in India. He had walked from Switzerland to India when he was 23, after reading Autobiography of a Yogi. He decided to spend the rest of his life as a sadhu, travelling from one place to another and begging a certain way.

When he passed away, and we were taking his body to the Himalayas to bury, that's when the idea germinated. (The series includes a couple of canvas paintings of the hermit.)

### **How did you convey the feel of the memory?**

If you see, the flowers I made are not attached to the ground. I made sure that they levitate and hover. Like dreams. In a few, the shadows are more present than the forms themselves. That's the quality of memories. It's not like a plumped-out feeling of an experience. For instance, the animation work (also a part of the series) gives the feel of a garden, the experience of walking through the light, beauty and colours. I have done another set of miniature paintings with plaster. They are like imprints — similar to how a leaf leaves a permanent mark on a rock. A fossil.

### **Memory has played an important part in a previous work as well, where you mapped your grandfather's living room using chalk, and made an art project out of it...**

It was called 'Mapping the Memory Mandala'. As a family, we moved across the country, and there was no place we thought of as home, except for our grandfather's in Delhi. Everything there seemed just frozen in time; I knew the story behind every object in the drawing room. When he died in 2006, I had an uncanny feeling walking through the room. I found that my perception of the things and my knowledge of them did not match anymore. I wanted to digest this feeling, so I mapped out the illusion of the living room in my studio in France. I drew it on chairs, cabinets, jars, on myself and on over 1,000 different surfaces, in such a way that from the entrance, it looks like the living room is actually there. But when you walk in, it all fractures apart. The drawings were made using chalk. Over the days, people walked into the studio and smudged the lines, until there was nothing left but the dust, which is at his memorial now.

### **How long did you take to finish the work, and how did you conceptualise it?**

Three hours of sleep every night for a month. About the second question, I feel you have to go with your gut feeling. You start with an idea; then the idea takes its own life. It's more like I am a midwife, helping deliver something, than creating. I have to be open and aware, and figure out what it's trying to become. Anything can happen at any point.