Scrapbook's Artists & Aesthetes series presents artist Ashwini Bhat

Artist Ashwini Bhat talks about her theme of myth-making, treading gently, and being in the moment

Renée Mathieu
Oct 18, 2021

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This week, I'm delighted to publish an in-depth interview with artist **Ashwini Bhat**. Her work falls into the nexus of ecology & body, myth & traditional craft, it's sound & place in California, it is a map that feels back to its self, uncovering layers through meditation, it's a practice of being in the world, it's a practice of being in the world with human nature as the other and the self as part of a complex whole. The which of Bhat's work could be said alongside Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*, and Donna Haraway's *Staying Learning Living*. I'm grateful for the time and attention Bhat put into her answers.

For the folks in New York, Ashwini Bhat will be showing at the Salon Art Fair (November 11-14) with *Deathness Warping Gallery*, so visit if you can and say hot new socks in person.

—Renée Mathieu

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What do you create, and what drives you to pursue this creative work?

Coming from a background in classical Indian dance, literature, and translation, I cross sculpture, installation, and video to think through the interconnections between body and nature, self and other. I come to find my place in this world, or contact with others, in search for the metaphysical, to hence understand myself and my relationship to everything around me.

Ashwini Bhat, *Tribute to Tribute*, installation view, Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer College

How do you interpret the relationship between myth-making and identity (and, in your case, the relationship between myth-making to the formation of new identities or the deconstruction of old ones?

My earliest memories around myth are of my sisters reading mythological stories to me and my crying a traditional dancer called Sakalaiyaru, grieving up to social workers today. As much of my formative years were spent learning Bharatanatyam, I wanted to be a dancer, but I was also a very shy child, and I found my voice through myth-making. This existing and muscle memory continues into my current studio practice. I find I can simultaneously deconstruct the old self and create new identities through my artistic practice.

Recently I've been fascinated by references to Yakshas, the nature spirits in Hindu and Buddhist cosmographies. But when I decided to incorporate them in my work, I found the source material was dominated by male Yakshas—and I felt that was inadequate. So I created my own Yakshas, the Yakshi series, which are feminine and hybrid human-half plant bodies, where the flowering heads of each Yakshi refers to the plants that grow in our gardens in Diamond Bar, in Northern California. Each is also a ball of self-protect. I find this kind of freedom in creating new identities through my art hugely liberating.

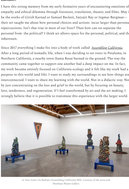
Ashwini Bhat, *Yakshi series #001*, Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D

What role do you believe art should play in fostering dialogue around ecology? Do you see your work as a tool for activism, reflection, or something else entirely?

I think art has always played a role in fostering and facilitating dialogues and it will always continue to do so in my practice. I'm interested in exploring whether spiritual encounters can be ignited by acts of attention. One of my pieces, Wetset Ecosystems, explores the interconnections between the human, the microbiome, and the environments of Mount Tamalpais, focusing on the microbiome around Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County. In the collaborative project with my partner, the artist Forrest Gander, the Wetset Cairns—a 12' Dove tree reconfigured as a kind of temple with satellite shrines celebrating the mountain.

Why Mount Tam? Not because it is supremely iconic, but because it is ordinary, and the ordinary can be charged with reference and honored, even recommitted. Mt. Tamalpais is a place of ancient Native American ceremony, and it is a place with—I assume—many other ceremonies, rituals, and meditations. Mt. Tam is a place with—certainly—many other and hermetically sealed spaces that are charged by this mandalas that are characterized-charged with karmic-historical of results. Circumambulation is a ritual of moving around a sacred object, a ceremonial practice that is a part of Hinduism and Buddhism.

Since 2020, I've been circumambulating Mt. Tamalpais along with Forrest. Together we've been extracting the stuff of the place Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Whalen call "the ten thousand things" and reassembling them into a kind of a mountain as a ritual meditation, inspiring unknown numbers to follow in the days. I was interested in seeing how through immersion in cities, sculpture, poetry, and the ritual of circumambulation, we could create a collaborative, relational, and experiencing to recall their own link to the non-human world, and to reevaluate the ground they stand upon, both physically and ethically.



Left Photo: Ashwini Bhat, *Wetset Cairns*, Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D

In what ways do you believe art can serve as a counter-narrative to the dominant cultural narratives around ecology? How do you see your work engaging with or resisting those narratives?

I think art has always practice comes to serve as a radical revision of our explanation and transcriptional relation to a world of complex interrelationships. Recently a poet friend I admire, Hoa Nguyen, wrote a reply to my studio newsletter: "Keep creating for the sake of the world, for the sake of the world as it is and as it could be and as it should be. In my focus on connecting on the low and grief in the world, but by focusing on beauty, love, tenderness, and regeneration. If I feel transformed by art and the art making, I strongly believe that it is possible to continuate this experience with the larger world.

Left Photo: Ashwini Bhat, *Wetset Cairns*, Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D

How do you think art can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the 'other,' especially in a political landscape where differences are often exploited to gain?

Scientists have uncovered and called about how interconnected we all are, we just between humans, but in the way, for instance, we share so much DNA with cows, we share so much DNA with trees. I think that the "other" is a kind of a mirror, and it's easy to slip into, or, in fact the ability to make people feel. But just about this and concern information, but to really feel the urgency and necessity to understand the "other."

My entire practice is thinking through questions of "what does singular identity even mean if we are composed of innumerable organisms?" to what extent have modern toward Gaia/ecosystem limited the breadth of our vision? How can art some perceptions of the "other" and how can it be a tool for activism? I'm currently reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding sweet* through most of the works, more self-portraits, I ritual the exhibition on Hoa Nguyen Jon My Barcant I wanted to focus on a third person, turning the idea of an individual and how something of a larger presence that invokes plural heterogeneous and interrelationships.

Ashwini Bhat, *Yakshi series #002*, Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D

In your view, what is the role of materiality in myth-making? How do you use materials in your work to challenge or support existing myths?

I attended a lecture by Donna Haraway, and she said, "Matter matters." I've been obsessed with the materiality of art for a long time, and I think it's the kind of thing I'm still trying to find your happiness". Finding one vine that the one. I've been drawn to forests for decades and recently started working in Sonoma and small. I love vast, I love all materials that go through immense transformation. Starting with the human body. My mother's body, my body, the bodies of my children, the bodies of my students. I've been long-time fellow for a part of the research trip, so whether the forming hundreds of pounds of clay in my studio, I'm always aware of my body as a main character, in constant collaboration with everything around me. I often can think extended clay skin over my form body—almost like draping them over me, imagining going under the skin of the clay, and then I'm thinking of the skin of the earth, the membrane, the phenomenon of the rift, the rupture, and the removal of nature, both, clay and soil. And through my tumultuous, video-dappled sculptures I find a connection between the fire and earthquake-altered landscape of California, and mythologies of Kali as a goddess of creation and destruction.

Ashwini Bhat, *Tribute to Tribute*, installation view, Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D

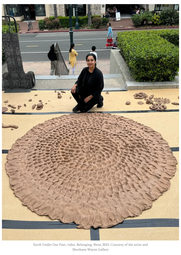
How do you personise the tension between the need for art to be accessible and its role in challenging or subverting dominant cultural narratives?

Do I feel need? I'm supposing I'm good?

Ashwini Bhat, *Tribute to Tribute*, installation view, Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Pitzer 3D

How do you see the role of art in the context of community-based narratives, particularly in terms of creating or reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared identity?

I'm been increasingly interested in community-based projects. I recently finished a number of interactive and interactive movement projects, one of them being an Sama Veda Chanting Ceremony, a ritual of the Brahmin community, and I was inspired by the Sama Veda's critique of ritual and practice. I had done a Sama Veda performance at MOCA in San Francisco in 2020 where it was accompanied by a more work that was BEING, LONGING, BELONGING, And at Santa Barbara I was developing this idea further. While the video was being played in a loop, I started creating a mandala out of clay and inviting people to come and contribute to the mandala, thinking of the idea of breath and each other's presence while theoretically sequing in the clay. The performance piece is titled, "Earth Under Our Feet" I borrowed it from George Oppen, an Objectivist poet from San Francisco. It gave structure to improvisation and what usually goes ignored by our human centric gaze. These guilty obsessions with the ecological, I'm interested in pursue community based projects to enforce a sense of collective identity.



Earth Under Our Feet, video, 3:45min, Bellingrg, Taiwan 2021. *Courtesy of the artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery*

Considering the concept of non-alignment, how do you navigate the challenge of creating art that is both politically resonant and independent of specific ideological frameworks?

I want to ask the questions even when I know the answers are complex, and perhaps not there yet. One of my most recent public art projects "What Will It Take For Us To Awake?" has now been seen in two locations. The first edition of this bronze sculpture is now a permanent installation at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, occupying a prominent location at the entrance of South Asia galleries. The second edition of this bronze sculpture is installed in the Regents Park in London, for Frieze Sculpture 2024, curated by Fawn Urock. Both these installations reference the sensual form of the calla lily as a symbol of growth and resilience while alluding to the emergency alerts of wildfire season here in California. For many years now I've been working with the motif of calla lily as a symbol for regeneration of female body and nature.

What Will It Take, For Us To Awake, Asian art Museum, 2024. *Courtesy of the artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery*

Bells have traditionally been rung through the centuries to raise the alarm for local communities or to mark significant moments of celebration. In Hinduism, Buddhist, and Jain temples, the act of ringing the bell is considered auspicious and believed to induce mindfulness. On the eve of the United Nations Climate Conference in Glasgow 2021 (the COP26 summit), many cathedrals joined in to create sacred noise by ringing their bells at 11 am to call out the 11th hour of awareness for climate action. This body of work metaphorically suggests a similar wake-up call, focusing our attention on the climate emergency, stressing the urgency for us to act more intentionally to tread lightly on this planet.

What Will It Take, For Us To Awake, Frieze Sculpture, 2024. *Courtesy of the artist and Shoshana Wayne Gallery*

In the age of polycrisis, where crises always overlap and magnify each other, do you think art has the power to address the complexity of these crises? How does your work attempt to untangle or reflect these overlapping crises?

I think we are living in a time where all crises are post-national, they are bigger than the human-made national geographic or political boundaries. When I lived in Chennai in 2006, trying to survive as a dancer while doing two other day jobs to pay bills, I lived in a small warehouse, where I had access to running water once a week on Tuesdays between 6 am-8 am. I had these large drums of water to collect water for the rest of the week. The shortage of water we are now facing in California, people in the developing world have been facing for the last 20 years so issue. But now the climate change and the various disastrous upheavals in nature are no longer just in developing countries.

Garden, Sculpture, Lotus Figure, and Silver Lepiote in Pentagram. Courtesy of the artist

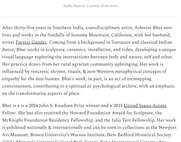
My partner and collaborator, Forrest Gander and I now are turning our garden into a California native garden with plants that are drought tolerant or native wildflowers, that are perennials. We removed the lawn and covered the ground with the lava rocks that came locally from St Helena. I'm truly interested in seeing how smaller communities can come together and help each other to be more kind to one another, so practice care for the animals, plants, and the surroundings. One of the things that my work focuses on is the connection of our human bodies with nature. I feel transformed by my exploration of California. I don't see much of a difference between the way I want to live and the way I want to create. For me, these two are extremely connected and linked.

As an artist, how do you confront the fractures and ruptures in society—whether political, social, or environmental—through your work? Do you see these fractures as opportunities for new forms of myth-making?

I've been increasingly wanting to be in the company of animals and crave a deep desire to be quiet with them while so much can be communicated through touch, a slow blink, a purr, or habitual rituals. I go on these long walks with my two cats—Jakhi and Jamuun. They are also my studio companions. I use them as my best friends, collaborators, and co-conspirators. I have learned so much about myself through them, and have learned so much about the garden through their eyes.

Jakhi and Jamuun, two rescue cats named after Indian events. Courtesy of the artist

I have learned a great deal from this land. How do I "other" myself in this equation? I find there's something so raw, personal, and spiritual in my studio process, in creating new forms of myth-making but is also accessex feelings that are universal. I've also had this extremely strong realization that I want to tread gently, and be in this world in a certain way. I think I was heading in this direction for a really long time now. But especially in the face of all human tragedies, this time of environmental crisis, I'm finding it extremely essential for my survival to be making art. It's through my practice that I have built a community around me. And it's through my practice that I create work that celebrates co-existence, that makes contact with and asks questions of others.



Studio Portrait. Courtesy of the artist

After thirty-five years in Southern India, transdisciplinary artist, Ashwini Bhat now lives and works in the foothills of Sonoma Mountain, California, with her husband, writer Forrest Gander. Coming from a background in literature and classical Indian dance, Bhat works in sculpture, ceramics, installation, and video, developing a unique visual language exploring the intersections between body and nature, self and other. Her practice draws from her rural agrarian community upbringing. Her work is influenced by syncretic shrines, rituals, & non-Western metaphysical concepts of empathy for the non-human. Bhat's work, in part, is an act of reimagining consciousness, contributing to a spiritual or psychological archive, with an emphasis on the transformative aspects of place.

Bhat is a 1/2 2024 John S. Knudsen Prize winner and a 2023 United States Artists Fellow. She has also received the Howard Foundation Award for Sculpture, the McKnight Foundation Residency Fellowship, and the Julia Tutt Fellowship. Her work is exhibited nationally & internationally and can be seen in collections at the Newport Art Museum, Brown University's Watson Institute, New Bedford Historical Society (USA); Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (Japan); FuLa International Ceramic Art Museum (China); Dungarpur Mahi Rathika Centre (Latvia); and in many private collections. Her sculpture also has been widely reviewed and featured in *Arts and Culture*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Bay Nature*, *Pacific Magazine*, *New City Mag*, *American Craft Council*, *Alta Journal*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Lana Turner: a Journal of Poetry and Opinion*, *Rise Material*, *Ceramic Art and Perception*, *Ceramics Ireland*, *New Ceramics*, *Caliban*, *Craft Arts International*, *The Studio Potter*, *Lapbook*, and *Ceramics Monthly*.

In 2023, Bhat became a certified Naturalist at the Fairfield Osborne Preserve, a research site for Sonoma State University's Center for Environmental Inquiry. She is represented by Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Los Angeles, USA, and Project 88, Mumbai, India.

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By Nevada Sweeney · Launched 3 months ago

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