

Documenting the everyday moments in women's lives

Increasingly artists are focusing on the unsung labour of women and the many inner worlds that reside within them

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For long, it was only significant female characters from myths, legends and history that formed the subjects of portraits by leading painters—and even those were perceived through a male gaze. Somehow, the women that inhabited the world around us—as seen in buses and trains, homes, factories, streets—were missing from the canvas. However, in recent years, artists such as Ketaki Sarpatdar, Varunika Saraf, Soma Das and Baaraan Jlal have documented everyday experiences—big and small—in women's lives, be it their response to politics, grief, leisure, community, and more. There seems to be greater focus within the art world on the unsung labour of women and the many inner worlds that reside within them—one saw such works at the India Art Fair 2024, the recent edition of Art Basel Hong Kong and at exhibitions at leading galleries across the country.

In an untitled work by Kolkata-based artist Soma Das, displayed at Emami Art in 2022, one could see a woman in a nightgown, her hair tied up in a tight bun, sitting on the threshold of her house, gulping down tea. The moment seemed like a brief interlude within a busy morning schedule—with one foot inside the house and the other outside, as if she was being tugged physically and mentally by the chores she had just accomplished and those awaiting her.

Meanwhile, the Instagram page of artist Baaraan Jlal, features, among other things, visual diary entries drawn from daily life. A post dated 2 May shows a young girl locked inside a tooth, symbolic of the excruciating pain of extraction, and another standing on a hill of teeth against a vivid red backdrop. The accompanying text reads: *Duani hoyi dard aur ghusse ka pahaal...* "On most days, my diary entries are a response to what I see and read, and to conversations with women around me. I feel the need to document that moment and how it was dealt with. That response



(left) Varunika Saraf, 'Jugni' (2022); and Baaraan Jlal, 'Diary Entries' (2021-23).

seems like a kind of a protest to everyday challenges," says Delhi-based Jlal. It could be a depiction of shared moments of humour, which a group of women manage to snatch while commuting to work; tiny embellishments that migrant workers adorn their one-room house with to give it a semblance of a home in a strange city; small protests against societal restrictions by asserting one's right to wander; or even as a means of self-expression for the artist herself, of finding hope in dark days on paper. "Most of the time, women don't see themselves

as the protagonist in their own stories. This is a space where they can and should be the main character," says Jlal. "When I started painting, somehow putting women first on a blank sheet of paper came naturally to me. I was painting people, who had bodies like my mother, aunt or me."

Not all artists started out by exploring the everyday world of women. It happened organically in their practice. Until the covid-19 pandemic, Vadodra-based artist Jayeeta Chatterjee used to depict interiors and architecture. Slowly, her focus shifted to domestic feminine politics. "Before I moved to Vadodra for my master's degree, I used to live with my parents in Santiniketan. During the nationwide lockdown in 2020, I was alone in Gujarat, managing all chores by myself. I began to appreciate and acknowledge the effort that my mother would put into those daily tasks," says Chatterjee, who started conversing with her mother a lot more about her daily routine.

After the lockdown opened, she headed home and began to document, through



COURTESY BAARAAN JLAL AND SHRINI RUPIRE

photos and text, the lives of women around her. She expanded on her practice of using woodblock print to include saris of women, whose lives she was documenting. Some of them, who hailed from middle and lower middle class, had gotten married early and had become early mothers. When asked, they had no idea about why they were performing a certain chore, and had little say in the matter.

In the process of research, she came across the ancient technique of *nabshi haatika*, in which old cloth was repurposed by women as quilts whenever they got spare time and formed a part of wedding trousseau. "She (Chatterjee) uses the embroidered stitch both as a metaphor and a technical overlay to create her art, telling the stories of her women..." states a note by museum heritage consultant Deepthi Sasidhara about Chatterjee's work, which was showcased earlier this year at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, as part of the exhibition, *An Eye Inside: Woodcuts and Thread*.

For Das, the woman as the central character in art stems from memories of growing up in a conservative family in Bengal. The time that she spent with women members during summer and Durga Puja holidays spent at her uncle's home in a tiny village, and with classmates—Das studied in an all girls' school—shaped her world view as an artist. Though she is inspired by the miniature painting tradition, she has turned the form on its head. Instead of painting mythological themes, she has chosen to paint everyday scenes. For her, inspiration comes from an object, figure or a sound, which harks back to childhood days.

Like Jlal, Das too maintains a daily diary, from which she transfers scenes and moments into her art. "The routine and the divergent are woven together to make the frame emerge. The frame that mostly celebrates daily chores of women, tends to magnify the content to the extent of making it appear almost like a performance," writes artist and curator Adip Datta about Das' work in his note accompanying a two-artist show, *Between the Self and Sit-honetter*, held at Emami Art in 2022.

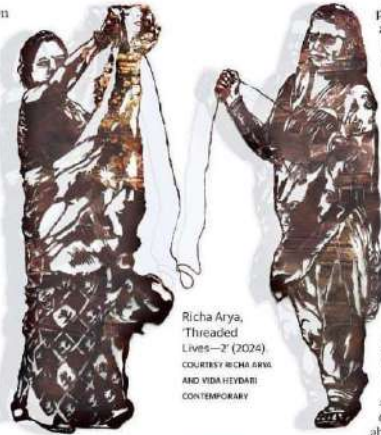
Young contemporary artist Richa Arya grew up in the industrial town of Samalkha in Panipat, Haryana. "All the waste material from Asia finds its way to our town to be recycled. I have seen so many women migrant labour working in the factories there," she says. Be it in the factories or at home, Arya found women resorting to stitching as a means to express themselves. So, she began to use stitches and textile as motifs, and interpreted them in the medium of metal sheets to show the strength of these women. "If you think of it, all women migrate at some point of their lives, be it for marriage or for work. I have looked at hegemony, or the lack of it, that they have in this movement across geographies and cultures," says Arya.

As part of the group show, *Scratch Beneath the Surface*, held at Vida Heydari Contemporary in Pune in December 2023, Arya also highlighted how the textile industry remains one of the most harsh markets for women. Her comment on the lack of unions and platforms to voice the concerns of women labour might seem political, but artists question why should everyday experiences be viewed as disconnected from politics. "There is a misconception, a widely held belief which is still prevalent, that politics is something external to our daily lives and is a very male realm," says Saraf, who feels that her work follows in the lineage of artists that have come before her (such as Nilima Sheikh, Nalini Malani and Anu Dodiya).

After all, the choice of food, clothes, and even friends is political. Even policies impact people differently depending on their caste, class and gender. "A lot of recent research shows how climate change disproportionately affects women," she adds. Inside the home and outside, Saraf maintains that a lot of her experiences are related to gender dynamics. "Isn't the 'private' life of women political? We have to make space for people to lay claim over their work and labour, and dismantle the power structures that enable such biases," she says. "In the last few years, feminist camaraderie has seen me through my darkest days, and that's what I am holding on to."



Detail from Jayeeta Chatterjee's, 'Became Known I' (2023).



Richa Arya, 'Threaded Lives-2' (2024). COURTESY RICH ARYA AND VIDA HEYDARI CONTEMPORARY

Artists question why everyday experiences should be viewed as disconnected from politics. After all, the choice of food, clothes and community is all political

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