

A dense mangrove forest with a body of water in the background. The foreground is filled with a complex network of light-colored, weathered tree trunks and roots, some showing reddish-brown hues. The background shows a calm body of water reflecting the green foliage and sky, with more mangrove trees visible in the distance.

sonia mehra chawla  
**SCAPELANDS**

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2015

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## **Mystery and Inquiry:**

### **Reflections on Sonia Mehra Chawla's 'Scapelands'**

#### **RANJIT HOSKOTE**

In Sonia Mehra Chawla's works, the artist persona often appears as an archetypal figure mediating between the enigmas of the natural world and the experimental protocols that science devises to investigate them. Her mixed-media paintings, prints and video works assume the form of encounters between mystery and inquiry. In her 2009-2011 series, 'Some Roots Grow Upwards: The Transformative Experience of the Biological Imperative: Both Desired and Despised', for instance, the artist persona takes a nap on a couch while a dream play involving the human body, stripped to nerve, muscle and bone, unfolds around her; neural electricity links her to a ghostly X-ray double, heavy with child, and to pensive skeletons drawn from the history of anatomical representation.

Her own bodily experiences, especially of pregnancy and childbirth, provide a recurrent basis for Sonia's reflections. Incrementally, during the last decade, she has developed a vocabulary of germination and gestation, phrased in placental and foetal forms as well as protozoan and plant images. In the 2011 diptych, 'The Sea Within' and the 2013 triptych, 'Embryonic Plant', she subverts the conventional symmetries of scale and detail in a gesture reminiscent of science-fiction scenarios of miniaturization; she inserts the artist persona into a universe dominated by the gigantically enlarged forms of micro-organisms, variously honeycombed, tasselled, tangled, globular or star-shaped.

When Sonia presents us with the complex and visually exciting micro-architecture of cellular structures, of ganglia and cortices, spores, packed seed-pods and streaming plankton, she draws us into an experience of abundant and versatile aesthetic stimulation but also into a visual regime framed rigorously by the optics of microscopy, radiography and nanography. On a preliminary viewing, it may appear that the primary impulse in Sonia's practice is a lyrical and expressive one, geared towards the production of tapestried images that celebrate the domain of organic forms invisible to the naked eye. Closer engagement reveals, however, that her practice is also sustained by a compelling conceptual orientation: a fascination with imaging itself, the constant translation of experience into image, as a key mode by which the human consciousness anchors itself in the world.

Sonia's receptiveness to the empirical and analytical aspects of scientific research may seem unusual in an artist educated in what is still residually a Beaux Arts visual arts curriculum in India. We must remind ourselves that, even while she was a student of painting at the Delhi College of Art, the artist socialized herself in the ethos of printmaking, putting herself through a substantial training in an art that melds the gifts of the artisan, the artist and the scientist. She served a formative period of apprenticeship with her teacher, the stellar printmaker Anupam Sud, known for her enviable mastery over diverse techniques and her emphasis on the female experience of the intimate and the public spheres. After her graduation, Sonia continued to explore printmaking at the Atelier 2221 Print and Edition Studio, founded by Pratibha and Dakoji Devraj, who were active in codifying the conventions of the graphic arts in India and making the glossary and finer points of printmaking accessible to a wider audience during the 1990s.

In India, where the still-enduring operational hierarchies of the colonial Beaux Arts system have assorted well with the apartheid psychology of caste, printmakers were until relatively recently

dismissed as practitioners of a lesser art. Often stigmatized under the sign of the 'applied arts', they are supposedly contaminated by their production of editioned 'multiples' rather than a unique 'original' and by their overt emphasis on technological labour. Such prejudices are palpably absurd. Formally and in material terms, the graphic arts are perhaps the most demanding among the traditional forms of art-making. Printmaking affords its practitioner a memorable combination of sensuous delight and scientific precision, but this is a hard-won prize. More than many of her colleagues, the printmaker must cultivate a keen awareness of the moods of chemicals and the effects of substances on each other; she must calibrate, delicately, the vagaries of plate, stone, ink and print surface; she must orchestrate a series of meticulous technical manoeuvres while bearing witness to the dramaturgy of her themes.

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In her ongoing project, 'Scapelands' (2014-2015), supported by a residency grant endowed by the Charles Wallace India Trust and the British Council India, Sonia carries her preoccupation with germinative and gestational energies into a robust engagement with the landscape. Instead of the micro-ecologies of the body's interior, she embraces the macro-ecologies of rivers, mangrove zones, rock formations and forests, studying them scientifically while translating them into the microcosm of the image. 'Scapelands' has also allowed her the latitude to deepen her research into the resources and possibilities of the axial element of her artistic practice, printmaking, at the London Print Studio, where she experimented with the photopolymer gravure or solarized intaglio fine art printmaking process.

"A photopolymer is a polymer that changes its properties when exposed to light, often in the ultraviolet frequency of the electromagnetic spectrum. Although photopolymers have been used in industrial processes for several years, their use in fine art printmaking is relatively recent," writes the artist. "A drawing or photographic image on transparent high-quality film is placed on the photopolymer plate and exposed to ultraviolet light in varying degrees. It is then developed and hardened at different stages before it is ready to print." [1] This process bears an affinity both to traditional engraving techniques such as aquatint, which emphasizes effects of tone rather than line, and to early photography conceived literally as 'drawing with light'. Sonia uses light-sensitive Toyobo KM73 polymer plates with a flexible steel backing, and hand-ground earth pigments as her inks to achieve a range of sepia and olive tones when the image is printed.

Fluidly combining the phases of expedition, research, documentation and meditation in 'Scapelands', Sonia moves outward into diverse terrains of the natural world and simultaneously inward into the history of artistic practice, renewing landscape as a genre. Her project title is instructive: she inverts the two elements of the genre appellation, 'landscape', generating a semantic shift. 'Landscape' announces itself as artifice, for it does not exist in nature; it is the artistic imagination's proposal of a particular way of representing or symbolizing the natural world, of transforming nature into subject. Its mirror twin, 'Scapeland', turns this relationship between subject and artifice around, making the '-scape' the focus of inquiry, engaging with the internalized aesthetic concepts and art-historical categories that form an integral part of our lifeworld. The resulting findings constitute a territory that belongs equally to the cartographer and the psychonaut, at once geographic and oneiric.

'Scapelands' is a sophisticated response to six locales: the Sundarbans in West Bengal and Pichavaram in Tamil Nadu, both mangrove estuaries that the artist has navigated; Goa and Pondicherry, where she has taken intricately commingled roots as her subject; the forests of Uttarakhand; and a riverine

course in Thailand. All these landscapes are premised on the matrix of origin, a site both of nurture and hazard: 'Scapelands' gestures towards the mythology of the hidden source. Sonia taps here into a deep stratum of belief, cultural experience and artistic representation, defined by the philosopher and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, following the Sanskritist R E Hume, as the 'Water Cosmology'. "A belief in the origin of life in the waters was common to many ancient cultures, and must have arisen very naturally in the case of peoples like those of the Nile, the Euphrates, or the Indus Valley, among whom water, in the form of either seasonal rains or ever-flowing rivers was the most obvious prerequisite of vegetative increase," writes Coomaraswamy. "The Water Cosmology conceives of certain powers of abundance who direct, or at least symbolize or represent the operations of life as it wells upward from its source in the waters." [2]

While exploring the Sundarbans, in West Bengal, the artist realized that the mangrove is not a species but a system in which diverse plant species adapt and reconfigure themselves morphologically as well as physiologically to survive in unpromising, even hostile circumstances that include high salinity, waterlogged and oxygen-poor soil, heavy tides and high winds. "Such adaptive mechanisms are seen in their reproductive strategies, probably the most unique in the plant world. Like most mammals and unlike most flowering plants, mangroves are viviparous, bringing forth live young rather than producing dormant seeds," observes the artist. "Once germinated, the seedling grows either within the fruit or out through the fruit to form a propagule or seedling. ... Once the propagule drops from the parent tree there is an obligatory dispersal period in the water. Once it is ready to root, its density changes. The propagule floats vertically rather than horizontally, and is more likely to lodge in the mud and take root." [3]

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Both in the Sundarbans and more recently in Pichavaram, Sonia has explored the watery labyrinth of the mangrove forest by boat, canal by narrow canal. Mangroves remind her of the networks of veins and arteries in the human body, and the water of the amniotic environment; her images articulate these analogies with startling clarity. Chance took the artist to Pichavaram, the mangrove wetlands located between the Vellar and the Coleroon estuaries near the legendary Chidambaram temple, dedicated to the worship of Shiva, in Tamil Nadu's Cuddalore district. Associated with the temple, Pichavaram incarnates the Water Cosmology at its most potent: here, water is a shrine, and anyone who enters the mangrove forest enters a sacred precinct or sanctuary.

Set in Pichavaram, Sonia's video and animation works convey the pervasive sense of a sacred zone, where time is slowed down to the most essential movements of breath, heartbeat, blink and the splash of oar in water. At the same time, they record a threat to the zone, which issues from a seemingly innocuous source: the water hyacinth. This beautiful yet sinister weed spreads out in floating nets, threatening to choke the canals in the Pichavaram mangrove zone. In these works, we find transmuted a strong preoccupation within Sonia's recent work: her almost baroque, even phantasmagoric pictorial evocations of algae, protozoa and plankton evolve, cinematically, into a restrained, graceful iconography of water.

Inhabiting a completely different locale, Sonia's Uttarakhand prints evoke the forest, documenting fallen trees and the growth of lichen on bark and rock. As in the Pichavaram video works, though, the clearing at the heart of an arboreal density plays a pivotal role here. In his 1964 essay, 'The End

of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', the philosopher Martin Heidegger defines such a site as a *Lichtung*, noting that "the clearing, the open region, is not only free for brightness and darkness but also for resonance and echo, for sound and the diminishing of sound. The clearing is the open region for everything that becomes present and absent." [4] Heidegger continues, "The clearing grants first of all the possibility of the path to presence, and grants the possible presencing of that presence itself." [5]

Sonia's works based on her expeditions in Goa and Pondicherry focus on the tangle of undergrowth and on fallen boughs; the Goa works attend to roots and the interweaving of large root systems, contoured by rich contrasts almost into ossuaries, relics of what had once coursed with life. These latter images remind us of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard's dream meditation: "At the border of two worlds, the air and the earth, the image of the root is animated paradoxically in two directions, depending on whether we dream of a root bearing to heaven the juices of the earth, or of a root going to work among the dead... The root is the mysterious tree, it is the subterranean, inverted tree." [6]

The 'Scapelands' project includes an excursus through a riparian landscape in Thailand, where the water alternately immerses and reveals a sequence of rock reefs. The image dwells on the interplay of surface and cavity, the pitting of erosion marking the passage of the geological calendar. As the eye widens to take in the panorama, it is the rapture of detail that seizes it. The images gathered together to form 'Scapelands' act both as entries in a journal, shaped within time, and as a cycle of archetypes standing outside the flux of time. 'Scapelands' challenges the pessimism with which the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss regards the possibility of quest in the modern world, on a planet unified but robbed of its mystery by technology. In his celebrated memoirs, *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss wrote: "Journeys, those magic caskets full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untarnished. A proliferating and overexcited civilization has broken the silence of the seas once and for all... and dooms us to acquire only contaminated memories." [7] Sonia Mehra Chawla's prints and video works elude the tourist's simple categorizations; instead, they record a pilgrim's encounters with a universe that retains a measure of unfathomable otherness.

#### Notes

1. Sonia Mehra Chawla, 'Photopolymer Gravure', project report for the Charles Wallace India Trust and British Council India, 2014-2015 (unpublished, 2015).
2. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Source of Life in the Waters', in Coomaraswamy, *Yaksas: Essays in the Water Cosmology*, ed. Paul Schroeder (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts/ Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 98-99.
3. Private communication: Sonia Mehra Chawla, email to the author, 30 November 2014.
4. Martin Heidegger, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', trans. Joan Stambaugh, in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 319.
5. Heidegger, p. 321.
6. Gaston Bachelard, 'The totality of the root image', in Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, trans. and ed. Colette Gaudin (Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 84.
7. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: The Modern Library, 1997), p. 29.





**Scapelands I-V**

Photopolymer Gravure

On steel backed Toyobo polymer plates

Size: 57 cm x 38 cm

Printed on Somerset Velvet (Soft White) 300 Gsm

St Cuthberts Mill United Kingdom

**Scapelands VI-XXIII**

Photopolymer Gravure

On steel backed Toyobo polymer plates

Size: 40 cm x 28 cm

Printed on Somerset Velvet (Soft White) 300 Gsm

St Cuthberts Mill United Kingdom

Scapelands I













Scapelands IV













Scapelands VII





Scapelands VIII





Scapelands IX



Scapelands X





Scapelands XI



Scapelands XII





Scapelands XIII





Scapelands XIV













Scapelands XVII





Scapelands XVIII









Scapelands XX



Scapelands XXI





Scapelands XXII



Scapelands XXIII





**Decadent Sublime** (series)

Archival Pigment Print

On Hahnemuhle Museum Etching Paper, 350 gsm

Size: 24 inches x 57.5 inches

2015









**Decadent Sublime** (series)  
Archival Pigment Prints  
On Hahnemuhle Museum Etching Paper  
350 gsm  
Size: 17 inches x 23 inches each  
2015



















## Lucid Dreams and Fluid Spaces

Sonia Mehra Chawla in conversation with Gigi Scaria

**Tell us about your interest in notions of the 'self', especially in the early phase of your artistic practice.**

As we move through life, we leave behind three or four significant images of ourselves, each one different from the others; we see them through the fog of our past, like portraits of our different ages. Personal identity and notions of the 'self' are fragile constructs that are constantly in the process of transformation. For me, these images become a kind of confessional; a context for looking into oneself or at oneself.

I think self representation is essential to any biography. It marks the beginning. A true self image is much more than what appears to the eye. At whatever level it is conducted, and flawed, inept or masterly as the result may be, it is inevitably an expression of a situation and a relationship sustained over time. The relationship between the artist and his/her 'self' is at its deepest level, one of unique and long sustained intimacy born of immediate, close and intensive scrutiny.

**The self imagery in your work, particularly between 2008 and 2012 is laden with layered psychological inputs. The manner in which the 'self' is re-constructed in your practice, opens up from a very intimate level to a generic understanding of womanhood. How do you understand and connect with feminist discourse in your practice? I am also curious to know more about your response to the maternal experience.**

The suite of works 'Some Roots Grow Upwards' and 'Metamorphosing Female' (2009-2011) was informed by my experience of pregnancy and childbirth. I began to perceive the world from the inside-out. In my practice, I more modestly limit myself to an aspect of feminism and motherhood that concerns me personally both as a mother and an artist. My practice is about a sharing of feminine experiences and articulating the fragile balance between life and death. The darker side of my work primarily concerns the internal mechanisms of visual imagery and how these mechanisms address the mind. Pregnancy and childbirth are life-altering and complex experiences for a woman. A mother experiences the strongest intensity of drives. She experiences emotions of attachment, aggression, fear, love and guilt. Her body is vulnerable, ephemeral and it becomes a site of transformations. I often use images of my body to portray such transitions of the flesh and of the mind. I feel that the body registers all emotions directly, and carries the marks.

The first phase of my works talked about the enigma of conception, gestation and growth, and referred to an intensely personal notion of motherhood...one that is physically excruciating, bodily, and ambiguous about the status of life and death in the process of birth. While, every day the life sciences are gaining growing mastery over the mystery of gestation, what follows is fundamentally in the realm of the unknowable. It is largely incomprehensible. Embryology is indeed the most sublime topology! Julia Kristeva says, and I quote: 'Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously duel and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on.'

There is simultaneity of death (here I refer to the mass of the afterbirth) and life in the birth of the child. There is also a certain degree of immortality in the experience of birth. Motherhood is complex as it generates emotions of both desirability and despicability. The latter experience is always concealed, obscured and remains unstated. Yet the marvel felt in experiencing the ephemeral through the maternal bond overrides this angst.

**There is a sense of collective consciousness of womanhood in the multiple channel video 'Becoming Light' conceptualized and filmed in 2011. You mentioned inviting a multiplicity of women at various stages in their life to take part. Could you elaborate?**

Becoming Light is a multi screen video and sound installation which enmeshes manifold experiences of women through verses of poetry. I invited a group of women at various stages in their life: youth, maternal and middle age, to recite a poem from 'Memory Bird' by Nandita Jaishankar Allana. The woman is at the centre of love, life cycles, growth and decay. The video is presented as a montage of moving images oscillating between three screens. Viewers enter an immersive environment in which they are compelled to make their own experiential journeys. The video sequence portrays the female form as it gradually emerges from the darkness and progresses from obscurity to light.

The viewer is confronted with the pregnant silences and deep penetrating gazes of a multitude of unknown women. As the sequence unfolds, the vocals expand and multiply in the gallery space. Gradually, the entire space is populated by the histories, memories, vulnerabilities and desires of these women, and in this space, the viewer becomes the one watched and observed. The work suggests an ongoing cycle of mortality and rebirth with the forms of the women simultaneously growing and shrinking, rising and falling, emerging from and dissolving into one another and into the very matrix of their origin. The female body transforms from a youthful exuberance to a middle-aged and portrayal. Aged, wrinkled and vulnerable, her maternity binds her to her roots.

**Apart from notions of womanhood and femininity, I can see your personal space is entangled with biomorphic forms as well as science fictions. It creates its own parallel universe. How do you transpose between many worlds?**

My work has often been inspired by utopian and dystopian literature, science fiction and ecotopian fiction. For me, science fiction is really a literature of ideas, and change, and change by definition implies that the present is perceived in relation to perceptions of the past and expectations of the future which shape that present. One of the recurrent themes in Science fiction that I connect with, is its exploration of 'spaces' and the articulating of human displacement within these labyrinthine and fragmented spaces. (I refer to both outer and inner spaces)

In my opinion, Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift is one of the most famous examples to use the convention of fantastic voyages to other lands to explore and examine human nature and tendencies. The narrative actualizes metaphors of size and makes a complex interplay of perspectives. Estrangement and association are both essential characteristics of science fiction and are recurring underlying elements in my work. (Here I also refer to the writings of Margaret Atwood and Philip K Dick)

As a young reader, I was introduced to and intrigued by terms like 'teleportation', 'terraforming', and futuristic concepts related to 'interstellar space travel'. I was always inspired to read about Journeys,



unlimited infinite expanses and uncharted terrains. Similarly, books like 'Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps' by Kees Boeck enabled new ways of 'seeing'. The reader journeys outward through space to the edge of infinity, then through decreasing scales of size to the atom's nucleus in a series of drawings and illustrations, each seen from a point ten times farther or ten times closer than the previous.

What interests me is how a fragmentary component of a biomorphic section reveals the colossal configuration in nature. I could say that my world comprises of and encompasses a multitude of worlds within it. I oscillate and travel between these Worlds.

**There is fluid buoyancy in the way these worlds float in your works. In my observation the fluidity of time and space is more of a mental construct than a 'pictorial reality'. But when it comes to visualising and constructing these realities in a two-dimensional space, how do you select and arrange your imageries? Where do they come from?**

I endeavour to transform everyday earthly images into phantasmagorical visions...landscapes that could be from Earth's primordial past or vistas from distant planetary surfaces we are yet to encounter. I attempt to create worlds, in which boundaries between the fictitious and factual, existent and imaginary are blurred and where strange hybrids and fantasy formations are the products of imaginary desires; where science fiction and futuristic visions might operate alongside more familiar accounts of the world. Often, the images are presented as a disjointed, dislocated sequence that fails to communicate any stable idea of narrative trajectory or space, but seems instead to create spaces or gaps through which to reflect upon certain recurrent themes and preoccupations.

Time and space are impregnated with a sense of heightened reality. Hybrids of plant, animal and polyp populate the surface and infuse a living vitalism. I maintain a rich archive of photographic images which I often refer to. The imagery is also inspired by microphotographs and electron micrographs of single-celled organisms exquisite in their ornamental morphology. They display complex patterns of growth, reproduction, movement and mutability. Within these simple configurations, the entire mechanics of evolution is revealed.

**What exactly do you mean by lucid dreams? How much of the world you have created through your art practice is in dialogue with the world you live in or inhabit?**

I often engage in lucid dreaming. By lucid dreaming I mean conscious dreaming. It is the state of mind between wakefulness and sleep, which has the potential to open deep phases of the mind. I have often allowed myself to be an observer rather than a participant as the dream sequences unfold. Other times, I have consciously manipulated my dreams with a greater degree of control over my participation where I have been able to manipulate imaginary experiences within the dreamscape. These dreams are often realistic and vivid. The fact that I am aware of the dream orientation, of the capacity to make decisions, of memory functions, of the dream environment, of the perception of time within this context, and that I have a clear memory of the waking world, enables me to be constantly recreate these visions in my artwork. For me, lucid dreaming is a conscious intervention of the self into the dreamscape.

**I would also like to know more about your interest in print media. In my understanding, print media requires a lot of technical knowledge and an in-depth understanding of the medium you work with. You seem to have created a balance between a highly technical devise and a world of imagination.**

My practice involves working intimately with various mediums like painting, printmaking and photography and video. Working consistently with combining these mediums helps me traverse the limitations of any single medium of execution.

I was essentially trained as a painter in college, but always had a deep fascination for the print media. I was introduced to the world of Fine Art Printmaking, particularly Etching through my Professor Anupam Sud. I worked under her expert guidance with processes such as Drypoint, Hard and Soft Grounds, Aquatint, Chine colle, Marbling, Spit Bite, and Sugar Lift. After Graduation, I continued my practice in the print media at Atelier 2221 Print and Edition Studio which was established by Devraj Dakoiji in Shahpurjat, New Delhi. The studio closed down a few years later and subsequently, I set up a working system in my personal studio to facilitate and continue my practice in photo based serigraphy. There is a lack of proper infrastructure in our country for practicing printmakers and a lack of community print studios. More recently, I also began to experiment with alternative photographic techniques on archival papers like albumen prints, cyanotypes, sodium carbonate prints, and Vandyke brown processes.

Working in the medium of Intaglio printmaking and other forms of Fine Art Printmaking requires discipline, attention to meticulous detailing, technical proficiency and precision. The medium is quite laborious and can be physically exhaustive. In addition, there may be a tendency to quite easily lose track of content due to overindulgence in technical nuances. I think one requires a certain kind of temperament to be a practicing printmaker and to excel in the medium. I enjoy the challenges.

**You were the International Artist-in-Residence at London Print studio in 2014. You mentioned working with innovative technologies in Fine Art Printmaking. What are the possibilities you explored and experimented with? What was your area of research as a Charles Wallace Scholar?**

I was awarded the Charles Wallace India Trust Award for Visual Arts by British Council in 2014. The award and residency grant facilitated my research in the medium of Non toxic intaglio printmaking, like Photopolymer Gravure with innovative and breakthrough technologies. As a Charles Wallace scholar and resident artist at London Print Studio, I was able to collaborate with the finest technicians. I was experimenting with advanced UV exposure techniques associated with solar plates and various processes of developing and hardening the photopolymer plate before the printing process. The medium itself is extremely intriguing with its possibilities to achieve meticulous details and penetrating depths of scale.

**Are there any connections with ecological concerns when you speak about the series of works titled 'Biomorphic City'?**

In an age characterized by pragmatism, utopian thought could be easily rejected as an inadequate form of daydreaming. I think the ecological utopias can truly function as a rich source of ideals for a different arrangement of contemporary society. In this post modern era as much as in any other, we cannot undervalue the innovative power of the utopian ecological imagination.



The 'Biomorphic City' series is an on-going project where I have created visionary prototype images of a self sustained mega city which attempt to addresses mega city challenges of energy management, nature, architecture, agriculture, urban spaces and quality of life. It is an ecology based evolution which looks at ideas of sustainability at its core. An effective system that does not reject high technology, but rather shows a conscious selectivity about technology. I call the images 'visionary' prototypes, as we are looking at evolving ideas of sustainability and futuristic designs. For instance, one of the schemes envisioned in the paintings portrays a radical concept in high rise and high density urban living. Towering above most congested motorway intersections, it is a vision of a completely closed metabolic cycle in which traffic exhaust emissions are harnessed via Carbon-dioxide collectors in order to feed algae grown in photo bio-reactors within the building's facade. Algae and natural by-products produced during algae cultivation are then refined to produce renewable energy sources. Bio-diesel produced using algae contains no sulphur, is nontoxic and highly biodegradable.

I would like to visualize 'Biomorphic City' as an effectively realised utopia.

**Is 'Scapelands' a departure from your earlier body of works? Where are these places? Are they real or imaginary? Are they imprints of an 'ideal' world where your consciousness rearranges the places you have already travelled to? Or are they dreamlands within which you can exercise a certain degree of control?**

In my view, Scapelands is a natural progression from my earlier works. Scapelands is an ongoing process that expresses my continuing engagement with the natural and organic world and is a result of several years of research and documentation of 'sites' in diverse locations. My artistic practice is often concerned with the investigation of nature that is defined not just as the physical world around us but also, and especially the conditions of our physical, metaphorical, and ecological interactions with it. Association and estrangement have been underlying elements in my practice. In a similar vein, several forms and elements return and recur to form an integral part of my visual imagery. The work is eventually an amalgamation of real and imagined territories, and a consequential blend of conscious and subconscious detailing.

**What drew you towards the mangroves? Are there any personal as well as mythical connections with this particular landscape?**

I was first drawn to the majestic anatomy of the mangrove plant. Gradually, deeper associations were invoked through my experiential journeys. Over the past few years I travelled into the lesser explored inner worlds of the mangrove forest biomes, marshlands and swamp habitats In India and abroad. I spent several weeks navigating through scores of narrow constricted canals. There is an impending feeling of wonder, desire, fear and death in these forests that draws the observer close. These scapelands are curated by light and validated by sound. For me, they become sites of history, memory and transformation.

The mangrove swamp ecosystems and habitats in themselves are intriguing. The plants themselves live in hostile environmental conditions and exhibit highly evolved morphological and physiological adaptations to extreme conditions. The mangroves invoke associations with bones, coiled and tangled intestines, networks of veins and arteries mapping the bodies' interiors. In a similar vein, the water pools in the mangrove swamps and biomes have associations with the Placenta site within the female body, Amniotic Fluid & its deepest pools, the Ductus Venosa and the entire systematic mechanics of

fetal circulation and growth within the female body. It is through the course of these systems both sublime and decadent, that the entire mechanics of evolution is revealed.

**How do you view and interpret the landscape?**

I have often viewed the landscape from the inside out. As an artist, I attempt to develop new tools and strategies through my practice that unsettle conventional wisdom about our relationship with and within nature. Such investigations take on a notion of turning inwards into a phenomenological experience of life. As a result, there occurs both a sense of disorientation and identification with the feeling one has of being inside one's own body.

With the landscape one is confronted with an 'excess' of presence and is enveloped by it. Ideas and perceptions of the self are left behind. The self is often too sure of itself and arrogant in the way that it puts things to scale. 'In order to experience a landscape you have to lose your feeling of space'. It establishes, despite the most intriguing artifices, its grip and hold on time. In fact, the landscape simply seizes time. Where and when the landscape takes place is not signaled. It leaves the mind desolate. Eventually, Scapelands become places without a destiny.

**Your present body of work leads you from a self-oriented personal space to a larger context of ecology and environmental concerns. Where is 'Scapelands' taking you from here?**

I am currently working with mangrove ecology. I am also interested in the study of biotic interactions within mangrove swamp ecosystems. A large part of the project involves site visits and research in diverse locations of the country particularly Sunderbans in Bengal, coastal areas of Tamil Nadu like Pichavaram and coastal areas of Kerala. During some of my previous visits, I found that a large part of these forests are steadily being reclaimed for human consumption. Here I refer to the rapid expansion of shrimp aquaculture and Coastal Agri-shifting Cultivation which breaks down the resilience of the ecosystem and leads to land deterioration. These factors have been an important cause of conversion of mangroves in the past decade. This is generating a great environmental concern. There is also a Systematic dumping of all kinds of waste and debris in the mangrove areas that leads to their degradation and inevitable destruction. Land reclamations and industrial effluents are also the major causes of mangroves degradation. In many instances, this is done intentionally to reclaim land for construction activity. I returned a few weeks ago from a trip to Kerala and site visits to the mangrove forests like Mangalavanam forests, Kumarakom forests and some areas in the Alapuzza district of Kerala. I hope to return to some of these sites where the mangroves are losing ground to rampant urbanization. I am in the initial stages of my research in these areas and am keen to observe new dimensions that may emerge in my practice.

**There is a search as well as research involved in this body of works. Search can be dealt with its larger dimensions and hope to explore the un-known territories of an inner-self. It can be an enquiry into the in-between spaces where mind pauses before its leaps into a destination. Whereas research pushes you to explore the territories once known to you only as information. Research invites you to be in the place, experience the width, depth and the vastness of it. It also prepares you to touch the ground and feel it with all the data you have accumulated about the place. The ground realities of the research and the inner realities of the search can be met in your lucid reveries again and again.**





**Decadent Sublime**

High definition video with sound  
Single channel, aspect ratio: 16:9  
Duration: 3.45 minutes (looped)  
2015





**Dappled**

High definition video with sound

Double channel, aspect ratio: 16:9

Duration: 4 minutes (looped)

2015





**Habitat**

High definition video with sound  
Duration: 4.04 minutes (looped)  
Double channel, aspect ratio: 16:9  
2015









**Moving Inwards (Bone Trees and Fluid Spaces)**

High definition video projection with sound

Single channel

Duration: 13.33 minutes (looped)

2015













**Crater/Fluids**

High definition video with sound

Single channel, aspect ratio: 16:9

Duration: 14 minutes (looped)

2015



















## BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1977 in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, Sonia Mehra Chawla received her Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts in 2001, and Masters Degree in Fine Arts in 2004 from College of Art, Delhi University, India. Chawla was the National Finalist for the Nokia Asia Pacific Contemporary Art Award (Emerging artist) in 2000, and Gold Medalist for MFA, Delhi University (2004). Chawla has participated in studio based projects at Tate Modern, London (2006-2007), Community Art Projects at Khoj International Artists Organization, New Delhi (2007) and public art projects at ET4U Contemporary Visual Art Projects, Denmark (2013). She was one of the invited speakers and International artists for SCAD deFINE ART 2013, organized by SCAD University of Creative Careers, and SCAD Museum, Hong Kong (2013). Chawla is the recipient of several prestigious awards such as the National Award for Painting, Lalit Kala Akademi, National Academy of Art India (2004) and National Scholarship, Ministry of Culture, India (2004). Chawla received the Charles Wallace India Trust Award (2014-2015) by British Council and Charles Wallace India Trust for her project *Scapelands*. The scholarship and research grant facilitated her research in innovative technologies in the medium of non toxic printmaking like Photopolymer Gravure. Chawla was the International Artist-in-Residence at London Print Studio, United Kingdom in 2014.

Chawla's solo projects include *Scapelands*, Exhibit 320, New Delhi in collaboration with British Council India and Charles Wallace India Trust (2015), *The Embryonic Plant & Otherworlds*, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hongkong (2013), *Metamorphosing Female: Roots Emerge Upwards*, Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi (2012), *Metamorphosing Female: Transition - Transfiguration*, Beck & Eggeling International Fine Arts, Dusseldorf, Germany (2011) and *Urban-Biomorphic* curated by Alka Pande, Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi (2008).

Chawla's Selected Group Participations and Projects include: *The Wave Project* curated by Klavs Weiss and Karen Havskov Jensen, ET4U Contemporary Visual Art Projects, Denmark, Scandinavia (2013), *Spell of Spill: Utopia of Ecology*, curated by Veeranganakumari Solanki, Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi (2013), *Artchiving-The Artists Perspective*, curated by Ranjita Chaney Menezes, Exhibit 320, New Delhi, *What Rules?* curated by Deeksha Nath, Nature Morte, Berlin, Germany (2012), *The Secret Life of Plants: Perspectives from India, China & Iran*, curated by Maya Kovskaya, Exhibit 320, New Delhi (2012), *India Awakens, Under the Banyan Tree: Recent Positions in Contemporary Indian Art*, Curated by Alka Pande, Kunst Der Gegenwart, ESSL Museum, Klosterneuberg, Vienna, Austria (2010-2011), *Global/Local: Time and Space in Contemporary Indian Art*, curated by Stefan Wimmer, Henn Galerie, Munich and Beck and Eggeling International New Quarters, Dusseldorf, Germany (2010), *Lo Real Maravilloso: Marvelous Reality* curated by Sunil Mehra, Gallery Espace, New Delhi (2009), *Re-Claim / Re-Cite / Re-Cycle*, curated by Bhavna Kakar, Bose Pacia, Kolkata and New York (2009), *Labyrinths Urban- Organic: Emerging Paradigms in Contemporary Indian Art*, 1x1 Art Gallery, Dubai, UAE, *The Second Sex: India*, 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hongkong (2008), *World One Minutes*, curated by Barbara Borcic and Dušan Dovic, Today Art Museum, Beijing, China (2008), *Identity and Masquerade: Staging the Self*, multimedia project, directed by Anne Braybone, Tate Modern, London, and Photographers Gallery, London (2006-2007), *CC:*

*Crossing Currents: Video Art & Cultural Identities*, Indo-Dutch Video Art Exhibition, curated by Yohan Pinajpel, Lalit Kala Akademi in collaboration with Royal Netherlands Embassy and Mondriaan Foundation (2004), *Carry on Drawing: A Growing Exhibit of Marks*, curated by Avantika Bawa at Serpentine Gallery, London, Royal College of Art, London, and Jehangir Nicholson Gallery, Mumbai. (2004-2006)

Chawla has participated in several International Art Fairs such as *Sydney Contemporary 13*, Carriageworks, Sydney, Australia, represented by 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hongkong, *India Art Fair (2009-2013)* represented by Beck & Eggeling International Fine Arts, Germany, and Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi. Chawla was a part of *Project Stage Asia Pacific*, the curated section of Art Stage Singapore in 2011, represented by Seven Art Limited, New Delhi. She participated in *ART HK: Hongkong International Art Fair* in 2009 and 2010, represented by Beck & Eggeling International Fine Arts, Germany. Other participations include *Art Cologne 2009*, Cologne, Germany, and *SH Contemporary 08*, Asia Pacific Contemporary Art Fair, Shanghai, China.

The artist lives and works in New Delhi India. Her works are a part of several significant collections worldwide.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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*Metamorphosing Female: Roots Emerge Upwards* published by Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi on the occasion of the artists' solo project. Essay by Deeksha Nath, 2011.

*Metamorphosing Female: Transition-Transfiguration* published on the occasion of the artists' solo project by Beck & Eggeling International Fine Arts, Dusseldorf, Germany. Essays by Katja Ott & Gerard Goodrow. Publisher: Beck & Eggeling Kunsterverlag, Germany, 2011.

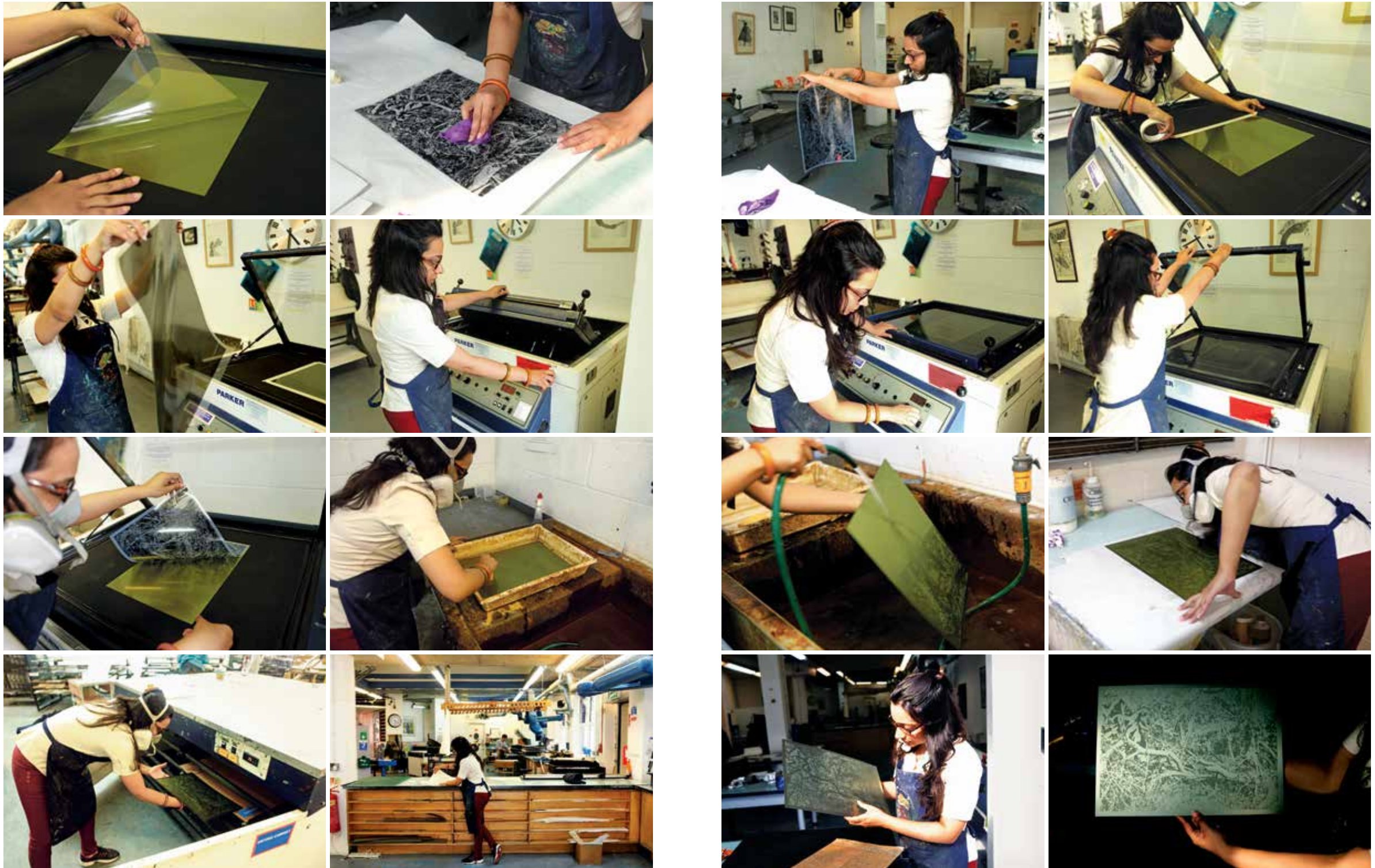
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*The Khoj Book of Contemporary Indian Art* published by Khoj International Artists Organization, New Delhi. (Interview by the artist) Publisher: Harper Collins, India, 2010.

*Lo Real Maravilloso: Marvelous Reality*, published on the occasion of the Marvelous Reality Exhibition and Cultural Festival by Gallery Espace, New Delhi. Lead essay by Sunil Mehra, 2009.





A Photopolymer plate in progress at London Print Studio, UK (2014)



## CONTRIBUTORS

### Ranjit Hoskote

Ranjit Hoskote is a Cultural theorist, curator and poet based in Mumbai India. Recognized as a seminal voice in Indian art criticism from the 1990s onward, Hoskote played an important role in shaping contemporary art discourse in India, and in registering multiple cultural issues, artistic domains, and moments of history. Hoskote was the co-curator of the 7th Gwangju Biennale 2008 in South Korea. He curated the first Indian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011. In his role as an art critic, Hoskote has authored a critical biography of Jehangir Sabavala, and also monographs on the artists Atul Dodiya, Tyeb Mehta and Bharti Kher among others. He has written major essays on other leading Indian artists, including, Bhupen Khakhar, Vivan Sundaram, Surendran Nair, Jitish Kallat, the Raqs Media Collective, Shilpa Gupta and Sudarshan Shetty.

### Gigi Scaria

Born in 1973, Gigi Scaria's videos, installations, paintings and photographs engage with the issues of the changing character of urban developments while keeping a close eye on social systems, migration and architectural spaces of contemporary India. Scaria has been a part of important residencies and workshops which include Pistaletto Foundation, Italy and MacGeorge Fellowship awarded by Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne. He participated in the Indian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2011), Singapore Biennale (2011), Prague Biennale (2010) and the current edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2015. Scaria is the recipient of the prestigious Inlaks and the Sanskriti awards for contemporary art. His works have found a place in prominent museums and collections worldwide. The artist lives and works in New Delhi.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ms Rasika Kajaria, Director, Exhibit 320, New Delhi

Mr Ranjit Hoskote, Cultural Theorist and Curator, Mumbai, India

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Ms Ranjta Chaney, Curator, Exhibit 320, New Delhi

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Mr Sarat Nayak, Mr Satpal Nirwal & Pankaj

Mr Bharat Chawla, Shiv Chawla, Veer Chawla & my family



Exhibit 320 showcases contemporary art from India and the subcontinent, creating a platform for exploration of artistic expression and dialogue. The exhibition space focuses on contemporary art, engaging with new thought and material.

Over the years, it has evolved to encourage and support growing, contemporary talent, as well as showcase some of the finest contemporary art practitioners in India and the subcontinent. Our aim is to promote an understanding of art and aesthetic through creative ventures which seek to explore new media, forms of expression and redefine visual language. We have been actively taking part in international art fairs such as Art Dubai, Art Basel Hong Kong, Art Stage Singapore, Shanghai Contemporary and the India Art Fair.

Exhibit 320 supports seminars, lectures, talks and discussions that contextualise art within a critical discourse. To further this endeavor of being more than a space that showcases art, Exhibit 320 formed a non profit initiative, 1after320.

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