



lounge

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 1 2025

THE MANY HUES OF DALI

Rare and stunning works of Salvador Dali make their way to the country for the first time as part of an exhibition, 'Dali Comes to India'. The collection will include around 100 tapestries, prints, etchings and watercolours by the surrealist.

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ART SPECIAL

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS ARE COMBINING TEXTILE WITH OTHER MEDIUMS AND DISCIPLINES TO EXPLORE PERSONAL HISTORIES AND QUESTION GENDER ROLES



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Kiran Nadar on the different forms a museum can take

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COURTESY NATURE MORTE



COURTESY MILAAYA ART GALLERY



COURTESY MONALI MEHER

(from top) 'The Blank Letter' by Ranbir Kaleka rendered in embroidery by craftspeople at Milaaya; in 2018, Monali Meher wrapped the staircases at Dr Bhanu Daji Lad Museum in red thread; and 'Dar Badar' by Mohd Intiyaz.

of Muharram processions). The stitches, in some of my works, became symbols for the superficial beautifications that take place in a city to disguise its actual face," he says.

One of his installations, *Dar Badar*, featuring metal and fibre casting and textile, is based on personal memories. It reflects on the number of hours that each child has to spend in certain villages to fetch water. "When so much time is spent daily on simply fulfilling basic needs, then how will children be able to think ahead about their future?" Intiyaz is also showing a specially commissioned outdoor project at the IAF, supported by Method Art Gallery.

TRANSCENDING DISCIPLINES

For the artists, every material and medium has a different energy, and by mixing and merging them, they are able to express original ideas. Monali Meher, who lives in Ghent in Belgium, works across video, sculpture and performance. However, the red thread runs like a leitmotif through each of these works. It was in 2002-03 that she started using woollen thread to wrap both personal and found objects.

"That was a time of transition, when one kind of technology was giving way to the other. Answering machines were being replaced by mobile phones. So, I wrapped an answering machine—I was not just preserving the object but also the messages contained within," she elaborates.

In 2005, she was invited to respond to the works by Viennese Expressionist Egon Schiele as part of the artist's retrospective at the Van Gogh Museum. For that, she created a video in which she could be seen covering a knife with thread. Soon after, she started wrapping public spaces.

In 2018, as part of the exhibition, *Connecting Threads: Textiles in Contemporary Practice*, curated by Tasneem Zakaria Mehta and Pooja Vaish, she wrapped the staircases at Dr Bhanu Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai in red thread. In the 2024 show, *He/Hem* at VHC, Meher created a series of mixed media drawings on risograph, titled *Minicapes & Scribble*, which emerged from her 2022 project, *Unwomen Landscapes*. She also marked the drawings with stitches.

Artists believe that textile adds a deep emotive quality to their multidisciplinary works. Phukan, who works with both painting and textile, finds each an extension of the other. "I paint during the day and create textiles at night. For me, fabric acts as the lyrics to my work and painting is like a song," she adds.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE COLLABORATORS

Textile-based art cannot be made in isolation. Visual art practitioners need to collaborate with craft practitioners to create monumental works, which take expertise and labour. And now artists and craftspeople are acknowledging each other as equal partners in this endeavour.

When Intiyaz made the shift towards textile works, he was very clear that he wanted to work with and support people who came from backgrounds similar to his.

"I would paint alone, but when it came to textile works, I started working with the local tailors and embroidery artists. The works are now a collaboration between all of us.

with cotton, tie them up with thread and make forms. Pen marks are a very important part of my work as I interchange them with stitches. My work lies between the seen and the unseen—between what is said and unsaid," she says. Mahajan was recently part of a show at VHC, *He/Hem*, featuring works by six artists who work with stitches on paper, for which she created works focusing on the uncertainties of the pandemic years and the idea of mortality.

Alamu initially painted in oil, but for the past five years she has felt that stitching and embroidery has become a flexible and comfortable medium of self-expression. She started creating portraits of friends and mentors, capturing nuances of their body language and facial expressions. Alamu has created evocative self-portraits, which showcase "moments of surrender, where I loosen myself and let go." One of these features her floating in water. "While floating in water, thoughts drift by. In rare moments of emptiness, I find a stillness, which I cherish and then capture in my art," she says.

At the India Art Fair, as part of Anupa Mehta Contemporary Art's showcase, she is showing *The Legacy of Melody Dorcas*. This is part of her series on the people who have touched her life. "Melody had a huge impact on my life. I wanted to capture a projection of what people see her as—a young and bubbly young girl—and how she actually is," says Alamu. So, in the portrait, you see Melody posing on a chair. But a mirror reflects her true self as this idealised self who is ready to fight for equality for people, irrespective of whether she knows them well or not.

Some of the artists are responding to having grown up around old textile traditions. Phukan, for instance, would keep going back to her ancestral village in Assam's Sibsagar district, where her grandmother would weave a *mekhela chador* on the loom at home. She would also visit the famous Fancy Bazar in Guwahati, where new designs and machine-made silk had started coming in.

She started to collect scraps, confused at first about how to use them. However, Phukan believes that discarded scraps symbolised a wound in her subconscious, connected with losing her father, and she would keep collecting them wherever she went. She moved to Vadorada for her bachelors at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, and started working on paintings. However, paint and colour did not satiate the artist in her.

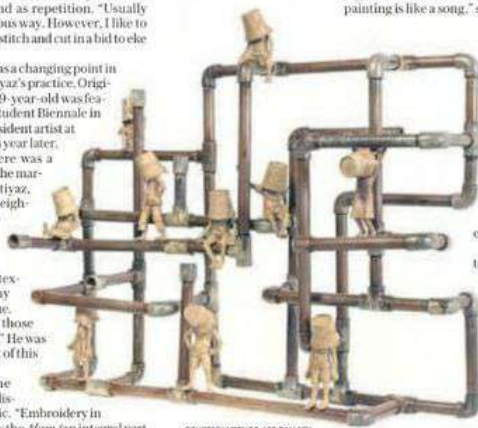
Around that time, Phukan visited the outdoor bazaars in the city and came across mountains of scrap fabric. "It

had a sculptural feel to it. I started making small three-dimensional forms out of fabric, layering them with painting," says the 25-year-old, who is now based in London. When she moved to the UK, she discovered many textiles from different cultures at charity shops.

She also started dissecting and cutting saris brought from Assam, with the red fabric giving her a new way of seeing thread as flesh and unknown shapes as bodies. She has since worked with multi-coloured fabric and textures like silk, velvet and leather in what she calls "constructed textiles." This helps her create "chaos in order". Her art responds to the tension between the familiar and the unknown. The use of forests as motifs in her work are symbols for her home state and for the "mysteriousness of unspoken influences". "The authentic nature of textile is not just about texture or colours but as art, carrying narratives of history, culture and lived experiences," says Phukan. Currently, she uses thread for mark making and as repetition. "Usually thread is used in a harmonious way. However, I like to scratch, dig through, repeat, stitch and cut in a bid to elude forms," she says.

The covid-19 pandemic was a changing point in Delhi-based artist Mohd Intiyaz's practice. Originally from Jharkhand, the 29-year-old was featured at the Kochi Muziris Student Biennale in 2018 and was selected as a resident artist at the Khaj Peers programme a year later. During the pandemic, "there was a shortage of material both in the market and in my life," says Intiyaz, who stays in the Tahirpur neighbourhood of Delhi. "The area that I stay in has had a long tradition of exchanging old clothes for utensils. I also had a background in textiles and embroidery as my brother was a tailor back home. I thought of bringing all of those influences into my practice." He was surprised he hadn't thought of this earlier.

Intiyaz started using the sacks in which rations were distributed during the pandemic. "Embroidery in my first work was inspired by the *alam* (an integral part



COURTESY METHOD ART GALLERY

And in the process of creating something together, each of our experiences and stories comes to the forefront," he explains.

Similarly, Alamu collaborates with specialists in *ari* embroidery. "Each work takes a lot of time—a minimum of two months. I start with a strong idea and then let it flow through the colours. My best collaborators are Bhupathi Anna and Itam, who specialise in *ari*," she adds.

IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

For art institutions and galleries, it is important to acknowledge the deep histories and knowledge embedded in textile traditions while also showcasing contemporary languages. According to Sahu of Enami Art, by focusing on specific techniques such as *kalamkari*, we can engage with the "sustainable, cultural, and environmental aspects of textiles" that are more relevant than ever today.

"Art institutions, in this sense, have the responsibility to amplify these practices and challenge preconceived notions about what constitutes 'high' art," Sahu adds. To achieve this, Enami Art recently showcased *The Bird That Sings Within*, which featured textiles by pioneering natural dye artist Ajit Kumar Das. The works showcased his deep connection to nature, evident through vibrant works inspired by flowers, plants, and birds.

Another show which is creating connections between history and the contemporary is *Surface: An Exhibition of Indian Embroideries and Surface Embellishment as Art* in Jodhpur. Curated by Mayank Mansingh Kaul, three chapters of the show, organised by not-for-profit Sattva-kala Foundation, are being displayed at the heritage venues of Achal Niwas, Anoop Singh ki Haveli and Lakshmi Niwas.

Each venue spotlights a different aspect of the ecology of Indian embroidery and surface embellishment. Especially interesting is the showcase at Lakshmi Niwas, which focuses on how thread work is translated into painting, sculpture and installations.

According to Mansingh Kaul, while embroidery being expressed as sculpture and installation is fairly contemporary, one cannot ignore the historical references to its textural qualities and tactility. "Look at the embroidery on heavy metallic objects such as shields, armour and elaborate animal gear and trappings. We tend to think of everything as recent, but even the contemporary stems from legacy and history," he says.

The selection of work in this segment is varied, ranging from a sculptural work by the Chanakya School of Craft and a classic circle dome by Chennai-based designer Jean Francoise Lesage. "Some works look at the idea of embroidery as a drawing. (Bengaluru-based artist designer) Swati Kalsi's large monumental work, featuring *ajami* stitches from Bihar, has a sculptural quality to it. Manisha Parekh, in her creation, instead of using thread, has employed strips of ribbon, with the base of the work being paper and board. It turns the idea of surface embellishment typically being made on cloth. The idea here was to challenge the idea of flat two-dimensional embroidery," elaborates Mansingh Kaul.

Meanwhile, Milaaya Art Gallery in Mumbai—established in 2024 by Gayatri Khanna—is offering contemporary art in hand embroidery by interpreting masterpieces in fibre art. Milaaya, a 25-year-old embroidery studio, has been working on embroidered interpretations of artworks. For its inaugural show, the gallery showcased textile renditions of works by masters such as S.H. Raza, Ram Kumar, and more.

At its recent show, *Terra: Unravelling the Earth's Story in Embroidery*, embroiderers have responded to works—both existing and new—by artists like Nikhil Chopra, Shaurya Kumar, Ranbir Kaleka, Manjunath Kamath and Rekha Rodwitiya.

Chopra—a New Delhi curator of the forthcoming Kochi Muziris Biennale along with HH Art Spaces—has responded to the landscape of Goa, his current home. His work engages with the artist's personal experience and collective history of the state. Chopra's layered narrative about Goa's colonial history and natural environment has been interpreted by the embroiderers in silk and cotton threads and a blend of knotting, satin stitches, backstitch, and more. The entire work has taken over 6,000 hours to complete. "This kind of work appeals to both seasoned collectors and new ones. The veterans have already been collecting work by these artists and want to add another dimension and layer to their collection. The emerging collectors are looking for something different," says Khanna.

As textile art reveals itself to viewers in new forms and languages, it is important to also look at how curators need to respond to this ever-evolving genre. Many feel that it is not just about displaying textiles as objects but framing them within larger cultural, political and ecological narratives.

According to Sahu, curators have the unique ability to create connections by allowing textile art to be seen through different lenses. "By embracing interdisciplinary approaches, curators can bring attention to how these works challenge, subvert, or engage with global issues. Additionally, providing a platform for artists who are working with textiles in non-traditional ways allows for an expansion of the medium's vocabulary, offering new ways for audiences to engage with it," she says.

Indian textile art comes of age

Contemporary Indian artists are combining textile with other mediums and disciplines to explore personal histories, question gender roles and respond to a changing world

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At the Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai, a set of absurdist, exaggerated fibreglass sculptures come into view. *Watching Reds Makes this Easier* shows a figure attempting push-ups while being immersed on his phone; another one, *I'm Like this only for Instagram*, features a person wearing a Chanel T-shirt, seated on a Louis Vuitton couch, petting his dog. Viraj Khanna's latest show, *Brain Rot*, is a satirical commentary on the hyper-digital lives that we lead, and the impact of the screen on the way we project our personalities to shape perceptions. On view till 9 February, it is not just the theme of the works that is interesting but its materiality as well. Khanna has been pushing the boundaries of embroidery and textile art with every show. And in this one, he has embroidered artificial leaves and flowers on astroturf before placing the sculptures on them. *Brain Rot*—a reference to Oxford Dictionary's word of 2021—features hand-embroidered textiles as well, which also contemplate the psychological impact of technology on our daily lives.

If Khanna innovates with embroidery, Varanasi-based artist Debashish Paul looks at the fluidity of textile forms to explore and express his queer identity. For performances such as *Me and My Pets*, the artist crafts sculptural dresses, which don't subscribe to any gender norms.

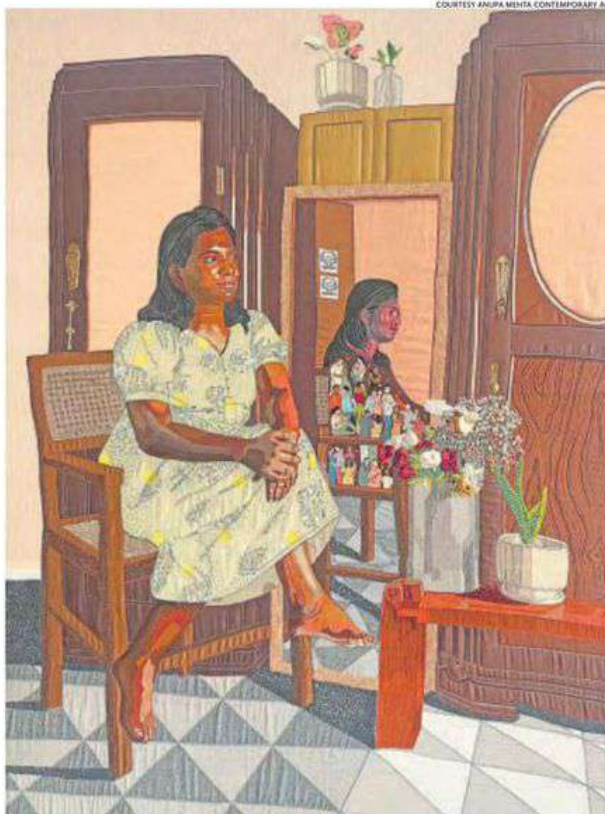
Artist Gurjeet Singh too uses textile to counter heteronormative stereotypes and queerphobia. In his soft sculptures, scrap fabric is stitched together in multiple layers to create a literal and metaphorical thick skin. His work, "seeks ways to build resilience... Singh's figures manifest as eccentric, phallic forms with exaggerated facial features. It demonstrates his realisation that reciprocating with anger is the least productive response to words of abuse. Capturing experiences of severe discomfort, his works simultaneously embody a quiet defiance," states a curatorial note by Chemould CoLab, Mumbai, which has been exhibiting the artist's work.

Contemporary artists are telling many a story through the crafts of stitching, darning and weaving. They are combining textile—and the immense possibility it holds—with sculpture, performance, video, painting, paper work, to create unique visual vocabularies.

The path was paved for this in post-independent India, with artists such as Mrinalini Mukherjee, Nelly Sethna and Monica Correa creating avant-garde art using fabric and fibre. They drew on the subcontinent's history of textile making and tried to blur the lines between high art and skill-based craft. Mukherjee's hemp fibre sculptures, Correa's rhythmic weaves inspired by the energy of nature and Sethna's mobile sculptures demonstrated layered practices.

While they were considered pioneers in this field, it is only recently that the number of artists actively working with textile art has risen. In a recent

essay, *Painting with the Needle*, accompanying exhibition of contemporary artist Alamu Kumaresan's textile portraits, art historian and curator Lina Vincent writes: "Embroidery and textile arts are often associated with craft, and relegated to women's domestic work. While the Arts and Crafts Movement led by William Morris in the mid-19th century brought certain primacy to stitching, it is only recently that these mediums are achieving the recognition they deserve as a means of contemporary artmaking. This is through the efforts and



Alamu Kumaresan, 'The Legacy of Melody Dorcas'; (right) Sagarika Sundaram, 'Source' (2023), hand-dyed wool, wire.

sustained practices of prominent artists like Sheila Hicks, Olga de Amaral, Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, Indian artist Mrinalini Mukherjee, Pascal Montell and younger generation practitioners like Jacqueline Qui, Ana Teresa Barboza and Faig Ahmed to name a few."

This renewed focus on textile was also the subject of Katya Kazakina's 2022 *The Art Detective* column for *ArtNet News Pro* in which she wrote about its significance at a time of broader cultural reckoning over race and inequality. "It's no coincidence that textiles are being actively and intentionally used by artists of color, who have also been excluded from the canon of art history. The textile arts have experienced a quiet but steady groundswell of interest in the last decades, and recently I've noticed that it feels as if it's kicked into a new, even higher level," she wrote. Today, this genre can be seen at every major art fair and biennials such as La Biennale di Venezia 2021.

In India too, textile-based practices are being used to explore personal histories, question gender roles and respond to ecological changes. The facility that the genre affords, along with the opportunity to evoke humour and deep emotion, has helped make complex themes more accessible.

Smriti Rajgarhia, director of Serendipity Arts Foundation, agrees that a growing number of younger artists are turning to textile, embroidery, stitching and weaving as powerful mediums of expression. These labour-intensive practices not only carry deep-rooted cultural and social markers, but can also be reimagined for contemporary subjects. The foundation has been supporting artists who engage with these materials to address themes such as displacement, identity and the climate crisis. This is evident in their projects like *Wefscapes*, *Infinite Forest* and *Abundance in Scarcity*, which celebrated regional textile traditions.

Practitioners of both visual arts and craft create a dialogue together on endangered traditions and techniques. Such practices are now being recognised by foundations and institutions. Asia Society India Centre, for instance, has announced its Asia Arts Future India Award for Bengaluru-based Jayeeta Chatterjee, who depicts the monotony of domestic labour in the lives of middle class women. Whenever she visits a place, she tries to communicate with the local women and document moments from their everyday lives.

What is interesting about Chatterjee's process is that she first prepares large woodblocks and then prints the visual on saris collected from the women she portrays in her work. She also makes use of the rural Bengal practice of *madhhi kantha* stitch in her work.

For its forthcoming edition, to be held in Delhi from 6 February onwards, India Art Fair will be showcasing textile-based works by two of its artists-in-residence, Imon Phukan and Liactuallee. According to Jaya Asokan, director of the fair, Phukan's practice draws from indigenous crafts, creating layered narratives that bring together personal history with larger cultural concerns. Liactuallee,

on the other hand, investigates the relationship between the body and space, often reimagining the concept of home as both a physical and psychological construct. Khanna too is showing a new series of paintings at the fair as part of Hyderabad-based Kalakriti Art Gallery's showcase. In the *lkhakha* paintings, he uses tracing paper used in the embroidery process. He seeps paint through the needle holes on to paper to create marks, and then further paints on it.

Galleries such as Vida Heydari Contemporary (VHC) in Pune and Emami Art, Kolkata, have also stepped up to showcase either theme-based exhibitions around textile art or to include these practices on a regular basis in group shows. VHC, for instance, recently held an exhibition by visual artist Monali Meher, who is known for her unique use of red thread in her video and sculpture works, and has another ongoing show of Kanan Koteswar. Both highlight how these artists incorporate textile into their multidisciplinary practices.

Emami Art has also shown artists such as Ujjal Dey, Sibaprasad Kar Chaudhuri and Aravinda Choudhury, who explore personal histories through textile and fabric, creating pieces around themes of memory, identity, and displacement. "One of the standout pieces was an installation by Ujjal Dey in his recent solo, *Duanta Dusik: A Silent Symphony*. The artist displayed raw material, method of making natural dye along with video documentation to express the complex layers of cultural history and environmental concerns," says Ushmita Sahu, director and head curator, Emami Art.

In Delhi, Nature Morte is showing the first ever solo in India of New York-based Sagarika Sundaram's works. Titled *Polyphony*, on view till 23 February, the exhibition spotlights just how intertwined music and abstraction are in the artist's practice. She works primarily with hand-made felt and dyes. "The dynamic process, during which rolls of raw wool fiber are transformed into monumental sculptures in the hands of the artist, is almost theatrical," states the curatorial note. "...The face of the work reveals itself only when she flips it over and she then cuts open the piece to reveal the layers within."

STEMMING FROM THE PERSONAL

Each of the artists—be it Alamu, Khanna or Aparajita Jain Mahajan—has a personal story behind their practice. Khanna grew up surrounded by art, textile and embroidery, while watching his mother, designer Anamika Khanna, at work. When he joined the family business, he looked after the embroidery and finance sections. "That taught me a lot about different techniques and materials. My current practice has developed from there—giving a contemporary spin to an ancient craft form. I have realised over time that I can express myself best with this medium. My work with thread is imbued with subtle feeling. The energy is more extravagant when I use sequins and beads," he says.

Alamu, who lives and works in Chennai, and Pune-

based Mahajan has age, they would see tiles. While Alamu make huge pieces—owned an apparel on Indian textiles, in boarding school.

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Mahajan attends majoring in film, a Students League i mending for a d jan started paintin and wire. She bega within these work mother. She starte id-19 pandemic.

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Sculptural work by Karishma Swali x Chanakya School of Craft being showcased at 'Surface' in Jodhpur. COURTESY SUTERAKALA FOUNDATION

