

# Rising South

Text  
Payal Uttam

‘It’s about time we started exploring this region,’ says Hong Kong-based collector Patrick Sun about his recent acquisitions from India. Sun is among many international collectors, dealers and museums who are now turning their gaze to South Asia. But while major artists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are gaining recognition around the world, many artists from the subcontinent remain under the radar; here, we profile five such talents to watch.

## MARTAND KHOSLA

Artist and architect Martand Khosla’s precarious sculptures, vivid installations and drawings made of crushed bricks delve into the dark underbelly of urban India. ‘I had a desire to try to engage with what’s happening in our cities,’ explains Khosla about his motivation for turning to art. ‘If we look at the city as a macrocosmic institutional space, there’s constant pressure between that world and what I call the mesocosmos: the migrants, the people living in illegal spaces, in the gaps that exist in between.’ Among his most striking recent works that touch on itinerant populations are installations such as *A City Awakens in Anger* (2019), an assemblage of miniature wooden chairs, doors, windows and other domestic items forming a sphere that appears to have exploded open. These displaced objects point to larger issues of forced demolition of homes, abrupt resettlement and what Khosla describes as the ‘dystopian energies’ that course through Indian cities today.

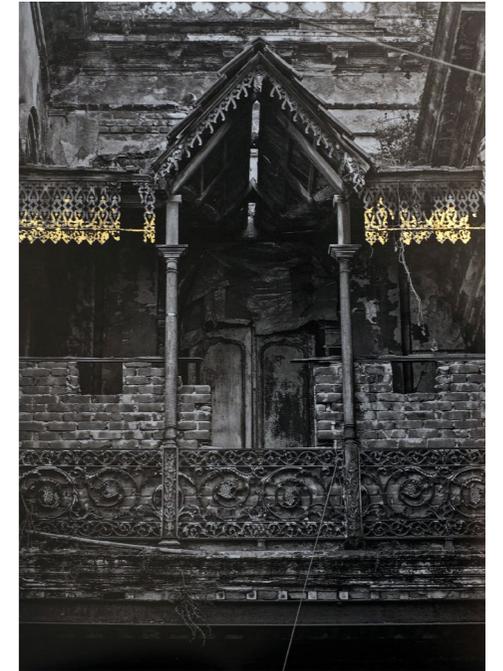
Top  
New Delhi-based Martand Khosla uses construction material and domestic items to explore urban issues. For *Upwards (reaching for the light)* (2019), he created a series of towers from steel and reclaimed wood

Bottom  
Martand Khosla, *Pascal 2* (2019). Wood, 128 × 155 × 58 cm  
Images courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte Gallery



Left  
Promotesh Das Pulak’s mesmerising flower-encrusted gas masks are made using a traditional technique. Pictured is *Untitled (Gas Mask for the Rich & Famous)*, 2019. Brass, copper, shola flowers, 32 × 15 cm

Right  
Inspired by the Japanese craft of *kintsugi*, Najmun Nahar Keya applies gold leaf to old photographs, as seen here in *Kintsugi Dhaka (4)*, 2019. Photograph on archival paper, gold leaf, archival glue, 43 × 33 cm  
Images courtesy of Aicon Contemporary



## PROMOTESH DAS PULAK AND NAJMUN NAHAR KEYA

Although Bangladeshi artist Promotesh Das Pulak created his flower-encrusted copper gas masks before the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, the sculptures have taken on new relevance today. ‘Bangladesh is full of pollution and corruption,’ says Pulak, whose delicate sculptures of guns, grenades and gas masks reference violence in modern society. ‘We wear masks to save ourselves, but we continue polluting and don’t think of others.’ In beautifying objects associated with war, he alludes to luxury, the division between wealthy and poor, and our culture of selfishness. To create the intricate white flowers that cover the masks, Pulak works with artisans skilled in the traditional *shola* craft, wherein the stem of *shola* plants, a pliable white material, is typically used to make elaborate headgear for weddings and decorations for religious idols.

Pulak’s wife Najmun Nahar Keya also draws on her surroundings for inspiration. She studied painting at Tokyo University of the Arts, and while in Japan also learned about the traditional craft of *kintsugi* (golden joinery). Her practice now involves applying gold leaf to the surfaces of old photographs of 19th-century architecture. ‘In Japan, if ceramic breaks, they fix it with gold dust and lacquer to make it more precious. Similarly, I try to fix broken architecture with gold leaf,’ she explains. ‘There’s an idea of *wabi sabi* here — though the buildings are broken and imperfect, they can still be beautiful.’

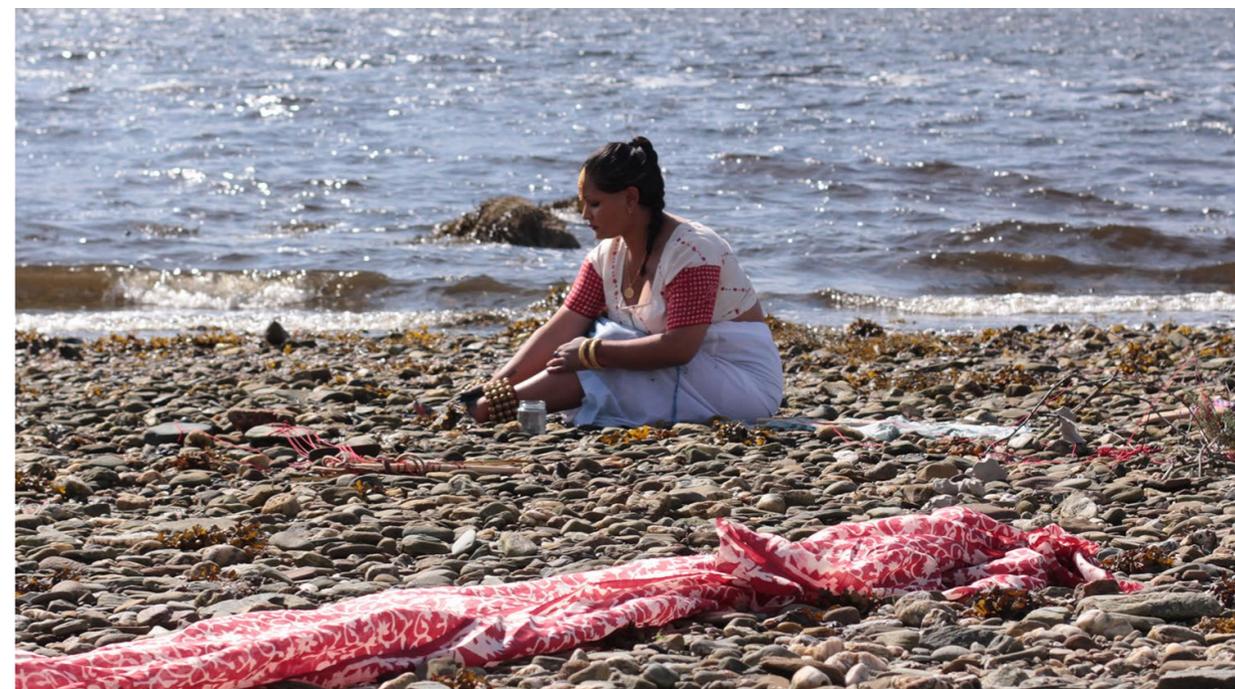
SOHRAB HURA

Delhi-based Magnum associate photographer Sohrab Hura is known for his poignant portrayal of fraught communities ranging from marginalised people in Mississippi to Kashmiri people suffocating under militarisation and state violence. The self-taught photographer describes his approach as multilayered storytelling, and the results are controversial yet candid insights into religious and cultural aspects of daily life in India. One of his early works titled *Life is Elsewhere* (2005–2012) is a deeply personal project that remains his strongest. It comprises gripping images depicting his mother's struggle with schizophrenia, including harrowing portraits, and shots of pills and the night gown she wore when she was forcibly taken to hospital, alongside heart-wrenching handwritten notes.



RAISA KABIR

UK-based interdisciplinary artist and weaver Raisa Kabir staged one of the most talked-about performances at the 2020 India Art Fair. Dressed in a traditional sari, she spent hours dyeing fabric in vats of indigo in a performance inspired by her research into colonial indigo plantations in Bengal where maltreated workers staged a major revolt in 1859. 'I'm interested in textile production, racialised labour, gendered labour and collective trauma that carries across different diasporas. A way to make that visceral is to place my body in the sites of making,' Kabir says of her process-driven performances. Her other works range from handwoven pieces exploring the shifting borders of pre- and post-partition India to dramatic durational dances such as *Build me a loom off of your back and stomach...* (2018), in which she pulled a heavy loom as she danced across the gallery and later used the soles of her feet as a loom. 'It was evocative of the pain and tension of migration,' she says of the performance. 'For displaced people, textiles become like an archive of stories. Often, they're the only thing they can take with them. We all have stories like this. It's universal.'



Facing page, left  
Images from Sohrab Hura's project *Life is Elsewhere*, for which he documented scenes from daily life that included his mother's battle with mental illness

Top  
A 2009 photograph (archival pigment print) from *Life is Elsewhere* (Set A)

Bottom  
A 2009 photograph (archival pigment print) from *Life is Elsewhere* (Set H)  
Images courtesy of the artist and Experimenter

Facing page, right  
Detail of interdisciplinary artist Raisa Kabir's handwoven work *It must be nice to fall in love...* (2016)  
Image courtesy of the artist

This page  
Kabir's performance piece *नील. Nil. Nargis. Blue. Bring in the Tide With Your Moon* (2019) echoes her earlier work on colonial indigo production, exploring anxieties around globalised neocolonial textile production and nationhood  
Image by Ashanti Harris