



Above left: Alpana Vij, **Fragment-1**, 2020, oil and wax on Arches paper, 26 x 18 cm. **Above right:** Alpana Vij, **Fragment-2**, 2020, oil and wax on Arches paper, 26 x 18 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

Everything Changed. Everything Remained The Same.

*Singapore-based artist **Alpana Vij**'s art practice includes painting, found objects, photography, and video through which she explores perception and 'objective reality.' She is inspired by the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* or emptiness, which focuses on the transitory nature and interconnectedness of all phenomena. Here, in this short essay, the artist looks at how the Covid-19 pandemic in Singapore touched her and how it impacted her art practice.*

As I stood on my balcony, looking out at the shades of green that seemed to glow in the late morning light, I marveled at the indifference of nature toward the pandemic that has turned the world upside down. Instead, nature seemed to

have taken on an added intensity—the birdsong seemed louder, the sky bluer than I had seen in a while, the usually well-manicured grass along the roadside was almost a foot high—wildflowers pushing through the ground. It was as if, while humans hunkered down, plants

and various creatures had returned to lay claim to what had been rightfully theirs.

Questions swirled in my mind. I wondered about the purpose of human endeavor—about our frantic way of living that can be distracting and destructive. How we go about paying scant

attention to the mystery of life unfolding all around us and to our place within it. Oblivious to our own transitory nature, it seems we are losing connection to the very earth that sustains us. And how, for all the tumult in humanity, the sense of space and time in the natural world has not shifted at all.

My daily walks became a ritual that helped ground me. Though worried thoughts were never too far away, I soon fell into a rhythm of endless days without deadlines. The future was uncertain; only the present moment seemed to matter.

My calling as an artist has been about awareness and recognizing the beauty of ordinary things wherever I am and to record it. I find inspiration in observing the passage of time in the marks made by nature ... in the erosion, rot, and rust that add a patina to our landscapes ... in the ever-changing phenomena. I was thankful that the lockdown in Singapore still allowed us the freedom of a walk in the neighborhood.

Writer Rebecca Solnit's words reverberated in my mind as I wandered

outdoors with a renewed appreciation of my surroundings: *"The surprises, liberations, and clarifications of travel can sometimes be garnered by going around the block as well as going around the world."*

Water, reflections, movement of a breeze, sunlight streaming in or being obscured by gathering clouds all provided material for the observation of ever-transforming phenomena. The fact that nothing is static or permanent was really brought home when I observed that even a small puddle of water changes from moment to moment. A small insect gliding across its surface, the drips from the wet leaves above creating ripples, or the sunlight creating myriad patterns—together created ever-changing moments and I observed the present dissolving into the next.

As the walks healed me, I was drawn to heal and repair some of the decaying or fallen leaves I came across. I started going on my walks with a needle and gold thread in my pocket, gently sewing the holes and imperfections in the leaves. The trees, plants, and leaves spoke to me of the eternal cycle of life. As I looked at the leaves, I saw the sun,

the wind, the rain, the soil, all the elements that came together to birth these now dying leaves. I thought of how they would soon mingle with the earth and rise anew. I repaired the leaves in gold thread ... a nod to the Japanese art of *kintsugi* ... as a way to celebrate and mark the ephemerality of the leaves, and of all our lives.

Somewhere in the midst of it all, a survey was published in the newspapers that suggested that Singaporeans considered artists as non-essential. It drew a buzz of consternation from artists and art lovers alike. But then, if there is one thing that this time had taught us, it is that it is meaningless to put labels and a monetary value on people and things. Essential or not, artists did find innovative ways to keep us connected during a pandemic that separated us. The *im-promptu* concerts from Italian balconies are an abiding image of the triumph of human spirit and creativity.

But there can be no doubt at all that some of the most selfless and life-giving work was done by the frontline healthcare workers, the ambulance drivers, the delivery people in our cities.



Alpana Vij, While I was walking-1, 2020, leaf and 24k gold thread, photograph, dimensions variable.



Alpana Vij, While I was walking-2, 2020, leaf and 24k gold thread, photograph, dimensions variable.

As I set up a makeshift studio in my balcony—supplies hurriedly gathered from my studio the night before the lockdown was announced—I felt deeply that any art created at this time should have a role to play in supporting the essential workers; in whatever small way it could.

With a shift to the small space I now had available, I moved from my regular large format oil-on-wood paintings to small paintings-on-paper. As I made them, I offered these works online in exchange for a donation to these causes. To me, there was something fragmented about that time—as though we were living from moment to moment, day to day. These small abstract works represented small chunks of time I was carving out in a day, so I numbered and titled them *fragments*. I was surprised at how different my works felt and looked on paper. Though my process was the same—I scraped, layered, dissolved, and repeatedly marked the layers of paint—the change in support from wood to paper brought out a gentler aspect of my work. I instinctively moved to letting more color find its way into these works ... perhaps an intuitive response to painting outdoors and seeking the optimism those colors provided.

There was a change, too, in the way I was drawn to art and activities that were more nurturing. Perhaps it was the realization of how much our earth and nature has always given us, and how much we take for granted. I immersed myself in working on small projects that required care and attention. Whether stitching leaves, rooting and growing herbs in recycled glass bottles, baking sourdough



Alpana Vij, *The whisper of leaves*, 2020, dried leaf and 24k gold thread, photograph, dimensions variable.

bread from scratch—there was a desire for rootedness and self-sustenance. Also, these small acts seemed like acts of love toward our earth and humanity and an understanding of the truth that there is no disconnect between art and life. Life itself is a creative act.

What stands out for me as I reflect on the days of the lockdown is the meaninglessness of how we view time. Time, as a linear construct, had little purpose in those days. When things slowed down, it seemed futile to count the days in seconds, hours, days, or weeks. Rather I marked time by the length of the roots of a basil sapling in water, the number of leaves I stitched, the neighborhood bull

frog's rasping call at dusk, the dryness of a layer of paint. The length of the days stretched and contracted with the emotions I felt. But who is to say that this way of keeping time is not as valid as living by the clock?

This uncertain time, for all its fears and worries, has provided an expanse of uninterrupted time to reflect—to open a door into a remembered place. The truth we seek is perhaps in the whispers heard in the silence. And I wonder if this pause will help us hear the call of our true nature that, in T.S. Eliot's words, is "*not known, because not looked for/ but heard, half-heard, in the stillness/ between two waves of the sea.*" Δ



The balcony studio.



Herbs in recycled glass bottles.