

“Your and My Elements Are the Same”. A Conversation with Vibha Galhotra

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Abstract Indian artist Vibha Galhotra's artwork spans painting, installation, public engagement, performance, and land art in order to encourage people, across all walks of life, to learn directly from Nature. This conversation with Galhotra explores a worldview that she deeply embraces, one which counters the anthropocentric, growth-oriented relational dynamic that causes wars, climate change, biodiversity crisis, and more. Along the way, the discussion ranges from how Vibha's own relationship with Nature has changed since childhood to emotionally moving encounters with religions across the world to an Indian philosophical point-of-view that is rooted in intimate connections between the material world of the cosmos and all life on Earth.

Keywords Environmental art. Conceptual art. Humanism. Cultural criticism. Public engagement.



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In the current era of climate and biodiversity crises, when a particular anthropocentric world view of human dominance over more-than-humans entrenches itself in much of popular culture and thinking, art serves as a potential tool to destabilize this power imbalance and to develop practices that re-establish equilibrium between culture and nature, or even to demonstrate the absence of a divide between them. In order to delve into this relationship and power dynamic, we spoke with Indian artist Vibha Galhotra, whose practice spans and often blends painting, installation, public engagement, performance, and land art.

Galhotra's artworks provide not just a global wakeup call but also a way for individuals to heed that call by directing attention from oneself and one's own society towards inner and outer material as well as communal relationship with Nature. Galhotra's interactive artworks encourage participants to engage their senses in order to learn directly from Nature about the state of the environment and how human processes co-create this state.

By weaving together cultural influences with societal and environmental concerns, Galhotra creates a visceral vocabulary of engagement with global environmental issues such as the devastation of war, politics of water, climate change, and dramatic shifts in biodiversity. When speaking about these environmental concerns as well as her artistic practice, she refers to notions like "listening", "reading nature", "one world", "reclaiming", "the five elements", "weaving", and "fabric". Doing so, she allows people to imagine and engage with a complex, interwoven reality created by many different beings, including human and more-than-human, who hold many different perspectives. She shines a light on how those perspectives result in complex repercussions on the individual, community, planetary and even cosmic levels.

The material of Galhotra's weaving includes what academics divide into disciplines like ecology, politics, philosophy, religion and economics. However, for Galhotra, together these form a holistic cosmos where they do not exist separately from each other. The resulting tapestry demonstrates how particular approaches to human relationship with nature and different systems of (il)logic lead to actions that create direct repercussions on all of the communities and natural elements within the environment. These consequences are never isolated.

In our conversation with Galhotra, her unifying perspective, non-dualistic logic, and community based approach come to life through not only her choice of words and their conceptual meanings but also

via her artistic practice and the world of her art. She depicts an animated tapestry that brings to mind what anthropologist Tim Ingold calls "a writhing mesh of lines". As he explains,

The Latin verb for "to weave" was *texere*, whence come our words "textile" for fabric, and "text" for writing... For the living world, in truth, is not connected like a net, but a writhing mesh of lines. Knotted in the midst, their loose ends never cease to root for other lines to tangle with¹

This tangling mesh of perspectives and their corresponding reactions, woven into the fabric of Galhotra's work and artistic practice, helps to forward the cause of securing our interconnectedness within this world where every being plays an essential role.

LAGOONSCAPES Vibha, please provide us with an overview of how your artistic process and your relationship with nature have evolved over time, including what first triggered you to create art around these interconnections.

VIBHA GALHOTRA That's a good question. It goes long back because I never planned to work on nature as such. My father held a transferable job, and so I often moved from one place to another. I used to find my friends in nature first, and then in people, or in my schools. I never thought that I needed to advocate for its safeguard because I always thought nature was more powerful than human beings. But, this reversed as I grew up. In India we believe "Yat pinde tat Brahmande", which is basically, 'what exists in the universe, it exists in you and me'. As in, we are all made of five elements. I come from that belief system. So, for example, when the harvest season comes, we have these festivals. In Punjab, Lohri is a festival when you make a bonfire to say 'bye-bye' to Winter. And then the new season comes in. If you come from that mindset or that thought process, how can you ignore nature?

When I came to Delhi and I encountered the river there for the first time - the same river coming from my hometown - I was completely devastated because I had seen that river in its full blown glory. I was completely shattered. I thought, "This is not a river. This is a drain. This is a cesspool". So that was it. Subconsciously, I started documenting. At that time, I did a lot of photography, so I started documenting the river three or four days a week. I think that then I just had a lot of leisure time. <laugh>

¹ Ingold, T. (2020). "Lines, Threads & Traces". *TOAST Magazine*, 31 March. <https://www.toa.st/blogs/magazine/lines-threads-traces-tim-ingold>.

As I was chatting with people there, I learned more about the river, where it comes from, how the state divides the river water, and how the nation divides the water. So, you know, that is when politics also began coming in. I started thinking that there is not just one thing I have to consider. At that time, conceptual art was not very popular in India. We came from the British model of schooling where making things spectacular was a key to making art. So, breaking through that and thinking about how I can create this narrative or take a social responsibility as an artist became really important for me. I started advocating that we cannot make the river dirty. I had no clue how I was going to pursue my art career, but socially, I wanted to do something for the river or the environment.

This is how I began my journey as an advocate for nature and as an artist. I thought, it is much easier for me to convey or express myself through art and to engage people more - and more people - through that practice.

LS There is one particular story that we found online about a man who you met by the Yamuna River. You discuss how that encounter shaped your own perception and artistic relationship with the river. Please share this story with us because when addressing environmental concerns on a community level, we often must surmount obstacles caused by perceptual differences.

VG When I was documenting the river that day, it really was like a cesspool because I think only 1% of the water was coming to the river at the time. And, in my concern, I stopped that guy and a woman, who do ancestor puja there every Saturday and Sunday. They don't view the river as dirty. You know, they might think of the river as dirty at a different corner but not when they are in puja or prayers mode.

So, there I was encountering this duality between belief and reality. I am seeing the river as dirty, and he's saying it's not dirty. And he came to fight with me, saying, "How dare you call my mother dirty?" That was the moment when I first reflected, "I have to do something here. I need to engage people on the riverbank itself".

So, I thought of doing a performative work, which was like action-painting. I took my canvases to the river and then started throwing the muck, or the sediment, from the river [\[fig. 1\]](#). That is when my actual shift in my practice happened. I had never performed before, anywhere. I had worked within the landscape before that occasion, but I never had performed for the public or in the public space. So in that public domain, when I worked, it was quite challenging. I learned a lot within that process because, you know, you cannot break a belief system.

My thinking was, "Okay, I am coming from logical thinking, so they don't see what I am seeing. And, my perception is different than theirs". It was a very interesting thing to notice or observe. From then onwards, I started looking at religion as another cultural aspect to add into my practice. I already was considering politics, economy, and ownership. Then, there was this addition of culture to my research.

LS Speaking of politics, religion and the other domains that you just mentioned, what is your opinion on the Anthropocene as a framework in the context of global environmental justice? Are there any gaps that you see in this particular narrative which you address in your work?

VG I think humans have impacted the earth a lot. I mean, we are not unaware of that. And, the extraction has, let's say from 1995, really accelerated. I don't know if I want to term it as Anthropocene or not. I think there is a big debate about what to call this era - 'Anthropocene', or 'Plastocene', or 'This-o-cene'. It's debatable as a word itself, but the human impact is not. Look at how wars are money-making machines for power houses. We need to look into these things, such as how we are being bluffed by the people who are in power. So the Anthropocene is one factor, and power is another. Then, there is ownership. They're equally weaved together. They are weaving a fabric, which is confusing the masses. And, there is yet another element - responsible journalism.

I think we need to start reading the environment like in India, where we say that a plant speaks for itself. For example, if it's unhealthy or when it changes colour during certain seasons. I think the environment can tell you a lot. I am more interested in speaking with nature or hearing from nature rather than looking into technical things and 'isms'. Artists are not speaking about isms. I'm not going to get into that. <laugh>

LS Is there a way that art can be de-anthropocentric? How could we address anthropocentrism in art in general?

VG As I mentioned previously, "Yat pinde tat Brahmande", is a very small phrase, but it says a lot. It speaks of a universe in itself. So, if I talk about the human-nature relationship - and if I can speak my mind here that people are fighting for religion - religion was meant to give people a sense of belonging. Hinduism is not a religion, right? Hinduism is a philosophy. It's basically written as a philosophy on how one should live on the planet as a person who can navigate his or her space within the natural environment. While this is how the whole text was

written, I think it was misread by certain people who confused Hinduism as a religion.

I was in Israel, where I did a work that asked people about the human-nature relationship. I went to all three of the Abrahamic religions and their experts – the religious gurus – who shared knowledge with me about what was written in the ancient texts on how one should live in equilibrium with nature. Every philosophy has written beautifully about this relationship—we need to respect nature, and only then, nature will respect us back. We started thinking that we are bigger than nature, which is not true. COVID-19 was a warning that even a little, little germ – a virus – can really mess with our bodies and with our societies around the world.

I was looking at situations and why we are not going back to that situation of one world. In Greek philosophy, they talk about how it's one world. If you go to Africa, they talk about Ubuntu, which is about a human-nature relationship. In India, we talk about this. It's like every religion has something to say. In Israel, they gave me a translation from Arabic – 'What is our relationship with water? What is our relationship with air? What is our relationship with the mountains?' Everything is like those five elements, which makes us those same five fundamental elements. They are important to safeguard. And right now, I think doing so is more important than anything else in the world.

I made a series of works called *Life on Mars* [fig. 2], which neither condemns nor appreciates that concept. However, it is an absurd idea, "I am not going to make this planet better, but I'm going to spend more money to go to another planet in order to colonize that space". Why are we not thinking instead that we can make this world better?

LS In reference to more work that you have done in the Middle East, like the installation *The River Jordan*, and how you used food as an artistic medium in order to stimulate discussion around water security and water issues—please tell us about why you chose food as the medium to achieve this.

VG That work, *The River Jordan*, was the second iteration which I created in Jerusalem, and it looked at the ownership of water. We consume water directly and also indirectly through the vegetables and animals that we eat. And, our bodies are composed of approximately 67% water. I regularly check data graphs which show where waterborne diseases are day-to-day sicknesses. This scientific research shows waterborne illness is being reported in high numbers by people who live near contaminated rivers in places such as Africa, India, and Mexico. In India, everybody's stomach is upset all of the time because the

food is not hygienic and neither is the water that is sprayed on the vegetables. Also, the vegetables are grown in this kind of water. So this is how and why I decided to speak about ownership of water through food [fig. 3].

In Jerusalem, I was talking about the Jordan River. So I looked at the political ownership of the water there. I looked at Palestinian practices and Jewish practices. We mixed Arabic food and Jewish food but took into account what food is grown where. The result was this fusion on the table as a map of the river. People could not really make out what we had done at first. Then as people experienced and conversed with me, they saw this map of the river, which is also a map of the food producers and what is grown in which area.

I didn't have to say much. People were in tears. And, while consuming food, they discussed what an ironic situation that we live within. We, as common people, do not want any kind of conflicts between us. We are just human to human, you know? I can be friends with you. I can be friends with others. He's black, brown, or white. It doesn't matter. We get along because our soul connects us. So, I think that this practice, this experience together around the table, reminded us of those connections. It was a very immersive practice.

I really enjoyed making that work because it was the beginning of my thinking about differences between human beings. I frequented the Old City, where it starts with one community, then you enter into another, then you enter into the centre where everybody is together, and then you go to another side where other communities live. And, it's such a beautiful city. I made friends all around the Old City, and they all fed me food. They all gave me gifts. I reflected, “My God, they're so warm. Why are they not warm with each other?” So, I thought, “Fine. It's a fight for land, or it's a fight for power”.

LS It gives chills to think about. The energy of Jerusalem is so incredibly palpable. And, when you think about food and breaking bread together and how this creates community among people of different cultures without anyone having to use words, it's really special.

VG I was there in the year of Shmita, which is the year when they give rest for the land to recuperate. Modern agriculture has forgotten that practice. So, in every culture, it has been written that we need to respect and give rest to the land. Otherwise, it will not produce. But with contemporary consumption, we do not offer rest to the earth. We extract big stones. We extract metals. We extract everything, creating this imbalance on the planet.

My new show, *Silent Seasons* [fig. 4], looks at how silently things are changing, but we ignore it. If you read the reports, jellyfish populations are increasing all around the world because seas are warming. When jellyfish populations grow, the marine diversity diminishes because jellyfish eat everything. If this diverse marine life goes away, the sea health will change. If sea health changes, it will change the seasons [fig. 5]. So, it's interconnected. It's very easy to understand, but we make it complicated. We need scientific data to prove this or that. For me, that's not required. The sea is telling me, "I'm changing".

LS It's really interesting to hear about your affection for nature and your ability to observe and work along with it through Land Art. Do you think the practice of Land Art is done differently today than when the art movement began?

VG Oh, that's a very interesting question. I never thought about it because land art works with the ephemeral. Whenever I'm in the landscape, I am very responsible with how I use materials. I often use found material that is biodegradable. I have used discarded fabric from all around the world. India is a second-hand clothing market. One NGO gave me clothing which they had to discard because the clothing was donated during the COVID-19 epidemic and so they couldn't use it. The clothes were in really bad shape, and so I repurposed the cloth to write this note through Nature, or by Nature, "you don't own me" [fig. 6]. After COVID-19, we immediately opened our markets. And now, if you come to India, the heightened consumption level is like a form of revenge. Revenge-buying is happening all around the world. India was flooded with things, and I thought "We have to do something". I chose a particular landscape for this installation because it is a place that is changing drastically since it was taken away from the indigenous people from there and then given to the whole of India. Anybody with the means can buy land there now, including big companies. And, you can see the endless growth that started happening in that place. This area's mountains are arid. However, when people started growing trees there, more rainfall began. With this rainfall - and where there are no trees - the mountains started eroding, which resulted in landslides. People, who are not from that land, did not account for this circle, this cycle. They just started making policies for a 'green revolution' kind-of-a-thing where. "Oh, we have to go green and we have to grow more trees". No, that place is not for trees. And, nature directly tells you this. This is why I wrote these enormous letters. They were 65-foot long and made of these discarded clothes to claim, by Nature, "you don't own me". A mountain says, "I'm gonna reclaim

myself. Your being there or not being there doesn't concern me. You are just another species on the planet". That's what I made the work for.

Ólafur Eliásson's work, which is a very different kind of practice, really turns heads. He also makes us think about these things, but the kinds of resources are very different from mine. I think his work has changed a lot of minds. He's changed me as a person, as a thinker. So, while there exists many different practices among land artists, I don't see much difference between past and present land art practices. Ultimately, the difference depends on your resources and your site specificity.

LS There is an opinion about Land Art being originally a very male dominated space and how some artists within the movement imposed their own imprint onto the landscape, for example, painting it. It seems like Land Art today has come to a different place?

VG It was the Sixties when Agnes Denes started her pioneering Land Art practice, eventually creating *Wheatfield - A Confrontation* in New York City. If you Google Land Art and New York, then her work comes up first. Barbara Hepworth really fought for her own space within a male dominated art world. As did Lynda Benglis. I think those people have done really important work. They have created the space.

I personally didn't experience that kind of discrimination between male and female except during my college days. Today, I think financially speaking, it's a male dominated place, but that's a very different debate. It's an interesting thought, but I never undermine myself thinking that I am female. I never take that as a 'thing', and I always do whatever I want to do. I expand myself. I expand my teams. I expand everything to go larger than life because, perhaps, that's my way of dealing with the male world around me. So I constantly have to prove myself. There were times when I thought that I was not being given the dues which I expected because perhaps people wanted to invest more in male artists for their market viability. Investors used to think that a female artist will become a mother and then vanish from the market, and therefore it is not wise to invest in her. The Indian art market is mostly supported by the commercial side of art and so, initially, there were much less funds for female artists. Now, there are increasingly more women artists in India, and they're doing brilliant, fantastic work. Artists like Nalini Malani, Nilima Sheikh, and Mrinalini Mukherjee have carved a lot of spaces for me.

LS Whether it’s the movement itself or the theory, does ecofeminism play into your practice?

VG As a female, I think there is extra care for everything. If someone wants to tag me as an ecofeminist, I am fine with it because I am an ecologically aware and concerned person. However, I do not wish to tag myself as anything. I am just a working observer in these times. I think historians or writers are doing their job by using this kind of term. If it’s your observation, I’m happy to accept that term. For myself, I advocate that it is a collective responsibility to bring attention to these things.

It’s one reason why I sometimes make larger-than-life work. For my recent work, *Future Fables* [figs 7-8], I used the rubble that results from demolition of houses around Delhi as well as illegal dumping of that rubble around the city. I gathered and incorporated this rubble into my work. In other spaces, like when I was looking at the pictures of war in Ukraine and Gaza, I saw only the element of trouble. The debris in those photos is evidence of what happened here. Or, for another example, if you go to climate affected areas, only the debris will tell you that something happened there. The houses are broken. People once were living here. There once was a life, but now, there is none. So, I wanted to consider those war affected areas. Forced migration occurs due to climate change, war, and the rise in real estate prices. India is experiencing the latter. Through collecting rubble from Indian urban zones, I am speaking metaphorically about the war zones and about the memories left behind. Stone tells many stories. Stone has a memory itself. Cement doesn’t have that. If you see *Future Fables* in person, you’ll see that there are many marks and several different kinds of materials. They tell a story of time and the people living in those houses, which are now broken. I was thinking, “How can we repurpose this waste material? What have we created as a heritage for the coming generation, as art?”

I don’t focus solely on the art audience because I want for the general public to engage with my work. I don’t want to make art only for those people who are already aware of the issues. So, I try to engage with students and different groups as much as possible. It’s not about 200 people showing up at my events. I really enjoy it if one person can change, you know?

It is very idealistic to say that big changes are required globally, rather than focusing on the ones needed in developing countries. In India’s smaller, tier-2 cities, you can see how people are dealing with day-to-day amenities. I worked on a research project in Punjab where the waters are so contaminated that people must walk 15-20 km everyday for clean water. This is literally an extra job for them. Here we are, living in the age

of science and encouraging our kids to pursue global studies. While simultaneously, some people must carry water like this every day. It's a waste of time.

There's another state in India called Maharashtra where there is the story of water wives, which the BBC has covered. There are many widows in the village because men were dying earlier than the women. A man, who is already married, will take a widow as an additional wife in order to take care of her. She then becomes the water wife, whose duty is to walk for two hours from home to gather and return with pots of clean water on her head and hips. This is her job. There's no love, nothing. Whether she produces children, or not, doesn't matter. If she produces a child, then the man will marry a third wife, who becomes the next water wife. Stories like these definitely will change you as a human being. These are the kinds of absurdities I play with and see where they go.

LS Speaking of stories, we want to ask you about utopia and your exhibition titled *Utopia of Difference*. How do you see the role of utopia in our contemporary culture, considering also the context of the Anthropocene?

VG In the last five or six years, the word 'utopia' has taken a backseat because nobody knows what utopia is. If you ask Elon Musk, his utopia is living on or colonizing another planet or creating these cars that will take you to space. I think that's the utopia I can talk about.

Politically in the world right now, the situation is dire. We don't know where we are. We don't know what we want. During COVID-19, as we were being given the vaccination, we were not sure whether to take it or not, but certain advertising made us believe that this will be good medicine for us.

I come from a pre-computer age. My utopia, at some point, was that I wanted to learn math. I wanted to learn certain things. Now, all of the knowledge is at my fingertips. I don't have much of a surprise element left for utopia. I think that's why the word utopia has taken a backseat. There are not any surprises left anymore. If I go to Italy, I will know where I want to go. I will not get lost in Venice. I used to get lost there, but now Google helps me to navigate. Navigation made things easy as well as killed the element of surprise. Sometimes you want to get lost. So, leave the phone at home. These are the things we need to think about.

Now, my utopia is that I find a space where I don't need to compromise on modern day amenities, but I can cut down on my consumption. That social acceptance of it has to be there because advertising tells you to buy this brand or that brand, this

car or that car. However, you just need a car to move. You don't need big brand cars. These are the things that we must eliminate. That's my utopia.

If I'm thinking anthropogenically, I also want to stop the unnecessary excavation of the earth. We are living in this age of science. We need to find a new kind of fuel or perhaps go electric, if the electricity can be produced by air or something else. I'm not the best person to do that, but that is my utopia. And, looking at food production, I think older methods, like wild farming, were equally good. We do not need a lot of chemicals to produce food. Governments need to think carefully about what benefits everyone, rather than just the top percent of the wealthy.

We are living in absurd times. I am perhaps middle aged <laugh>, depending upon the ultimate length of my life, but my idea is to tell the youngsters to listen to the environment. Listen to the birds, listen to which birds are missing from your own town. In the last twelve years, there are three types of birds that no longer live in Delhi. There are no weaver birds or sparrows there anymore. They might be in some remote areas or the forests. The environment can tell you these things very easily because we are part of it. We have to re-look into it, let it reclaim itself, and then just agree with it. If a natural calamity happens and I die, I am fine with it because I think we have abused nature quite a lot. It will reclaim itself. It's okay with me. <laugh>

LS <laugh> Transitioning from present day crisis to an origin story, "The Churning of the Ocean of Milk" with Vishnu, and your artwork that is related to this story, it appears that you created it on the same riverbank which you discussed earlier as the place where your art practice shifted? The myth itself is about all of these interrelationships and all that is born from the process of the churning. Please talk with us about it in the context of your artwork.

VG My family came from Kabir philosophy. So, they never told us these traditional stories. When I read about these stories in textbooks, I was very fascinated by them. These stories give you imagination. They make you think about the ultimate things, like death. They tell how the gods and goddesses came into being. I used to ask my father why we have so many gods and goddesses, "It's like 33,000 people with gods and goddesses - I'm confused!" <laugh> He said, "You need not think of all those,

you just follow the Kabir philosophy".² Kabir philosophy instructs, in the form of a story or in a little poetic way, how to live and what is the right way of living.

Everybody talks about these stories. I was very confused, "What is an avatar?". You know, there are ten avatars of god Vishnu. I may connect this story to the story of the man who actually caused me to change myself for the environment when I was in this theatre of belief and reality. I started thinking about these belief systems and looking at the stories, which are about human-nature relationship, and the Vishnu story of *Manthan* (churning) came up [fig. 9].

Manthan is basically a sea-churning episode that happened between demons and gods because they wanted to find the elixir of life, so they could become immortal beings. Lakshmi, the goddess of money, came from this churning process. As did a goddess of sexuality, a goddess of education and so on. They churned the whole sea, and everything came out of that. It is kind of an origin story- everything was water on the earth, and then everything evolved from the water itself.

I saw that what we believe is hypocrisy because what we are doing to the water now is completely different. That's why I wanted to remove the sludge from the river and use it as the medium to create the works in the series *Sediment and other untitled...* as well as feature it in my short film *Manthan*. It offered a way to connect with people from the masses in addition to the audience of so-called intellectuals or people who were already the converted ones. *Manthan*, the moment you mention it, is a story that everybody recognizes in India. Everybody can relate to it.

LS You've spoken about engaging different communities and groups of people. How can we integrate this type of knowledge that is produced in academic circles and the type of knowledge and the experience of people who don't come from such backgrounds? How can we establish an exchange that could be helpful?

VG Art is a really great medium to connect people. Social media is a very powerful tool as well because it can engage across the world. If you think creatively while using that tool, it's amazing. Nowadays it is very difficult to take people out of their houses, or out of their comfort zones, to actual sites. Social media

² The number 33,000 (or 33 *crores*/33 multiplied by ten million) of Indian deities is a metaphor indicating a real multiplicity, possible in universal terms, but incalculable by the human mind. Kabir is a medieval Indian mystic who lived in Benares in the fifteenth century; he differently advocated a non-dual doctrine in which the concept of God is defined as *nirguna* (distinctionless).

becomes the knowledge partner. I think responsible use of this tool can provide a great way to share knowledge and tell stories. I am always telling a story through my art. Social media is a place where one can condense a story into 20 or 40 seconds. It makes for quite the creative challenge because sometimes the art itself took one or two years to make. That's a very different kind of process. It's an interesting way to think, and it's a very important tool to engage people. My idea is that the heavy knowledge of researchers and thinkers can be transferred through social media. I am trying my best to spread the word through my art. As a visual artist, I prioritize the visuals to capture interest in the art and in the writing about it. Then a link directs them to more. Everything needs to be so quick.

LS In reference again to "Yat pinde tat Brahmande", or "Whatever is in the microcosm is also in the macrocosm" - we would love to hear about how it is specific to your work that addresses climate change and for example, in your choice of using ghungroos to create the work you based on mapping the "Great Acceleration" [fig. 10].

VG As I mentioned, your and my elements are the same. We breathe this air, and that is why we exist. When I started thinking about the five elements, I looked at the five platonic elements and how Plato discusses them like different kinds of molecular shapes which make everything in and on the planet. Thinking scientifically, those are the molecules that actually form you and form the universe. Thinking philosophically, the universe is made of the same material as what you are made of. And, you are made of the same material that the universe is made of. This is why we all are coexisting beings on the planet. Nature is constantly changing. Why? Because it's breathing. It is also a living being, and we need to consider that. I believe in this more than anything else. I feel that the universe and I are not two separate entities, but we are one. When I die, I will integrate into it and I will fossilize after a certain point.

The philosophies are observations from nature itself. It was not that somebody was born with that philosophy and just wrote about it. They were sitting and observing the trees, the light, the shades, the sky, the changing of colors. I think we have stopped thinking about those things.

So, ghungroos is a material which is very significant in my work. I previously used seeds, but seeds are a very ephemeral material and so nobody wants to buy seeds for their art collection. One of the collectors came to my studio and she said, "Who is going to buy this ephemeral material? India does not have the advanced kind of storage or archival housing that it requires. It

is going to break, and it is going to look like trash in the house". It really disheartened me because I come from a practice of land art where I use entirely ephemeral material. Eventually, I decided to encase the natural substance in synthetic resin. This was a very conscious choice.

After this conversation with the collector, I researched the ways in which certain tribal people used little bells in their jewellery to replace the seeds that they once wore to make sounds when they walked in the forest in order to alert other species of their presence. So, when I used this material to create the first work with it, I thought about how very fascinating that this same material, which makes sound for this group of tribal people, is silenced in my work. I used the material in this fashion as a way to express issues that are being silenced. It resonated with me. I also continued to use this resin because people want to buy glitter and gold, very shiny objects. In this way, the choice of material also comments on the market and viability of the art. It's a two-way commentary—one where the object's purpose to make sound is being changed in my work and the second is in regards to the artificiality of art markets. Otherwise, I would have used plain seeds, which would have been more organic, more human.

LS You use mediums with multi-layered meaning—like human-made resin beads which are also representative of seeds—in such beautiful ways, while at the same time demonstrating this complex interrelationship expressed in the "Yat pinde tat Brahmande" principle.

VG It is the beauty and the beast. The vulgarity. Sometimes, beauty also can be vulgar. This is where I come in. I use these subjects or photographs of the deterioration of the earth or deterioration of the water and then I convert them into this very beautiful, ornamented material. Because this is what my age is, I'm celebrating even the vulgarity of my time.



Figure 1
Vibha Galhotra, *Sediment and Other Untitled...* 2012.
Sediment from river Yamuna on board, 60 × 48 in

Figure 2
Vibha Galhotra, *From Life on Mars* (series). 2019.
Ghungroos, fabric, wood and steel, 72" dia × 3"

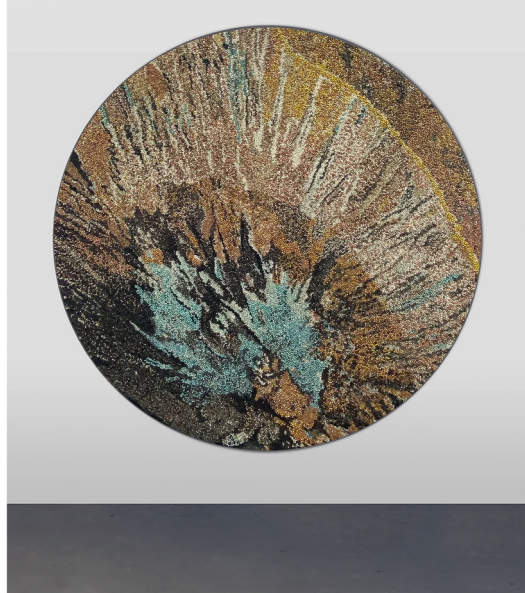




Figure 3 Vibha Galhotra, *Who Owns the Water? Interactive Dinner*. 2022. Jerusalem, Israel

Figure 4 Vibha Galhotra, *From The Silent Season: Un(promised)*. 2022. Film, single channel panoramic projection. 17:23ms

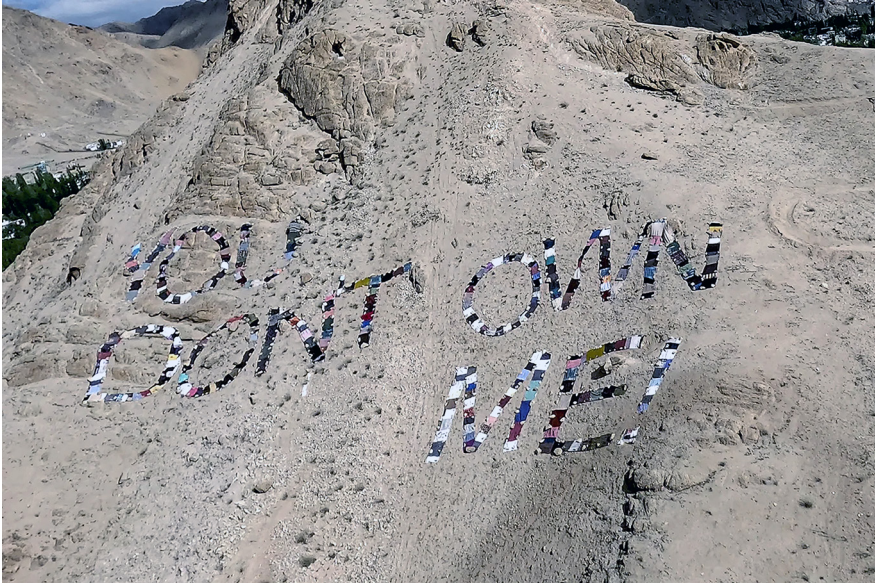


Figure 5 Vibha Galhotra, *Conference of the Invisibles*. 2022. Etched glass, 48 × 96 in in each of 13 panels

Figure 6 Vibha Galhotra, *You Don't Own Me!* 2023. Site specific, found material. Sa Ladakh, Ladakh, India



Figure 7 Vibha Galhotra, *Future Fables*. 2023-24. An architectonic sculpture, found rubble, metal

Figure 8 Vibha Galhotra, *Future Fables*. 2023-24. 6-channel video in loop, 32 in monitors each

Maria Kopylova, Stephanie J. Lindsay
“Your and My Elements Are the Same”. A Conversation with Vibha Galhotra

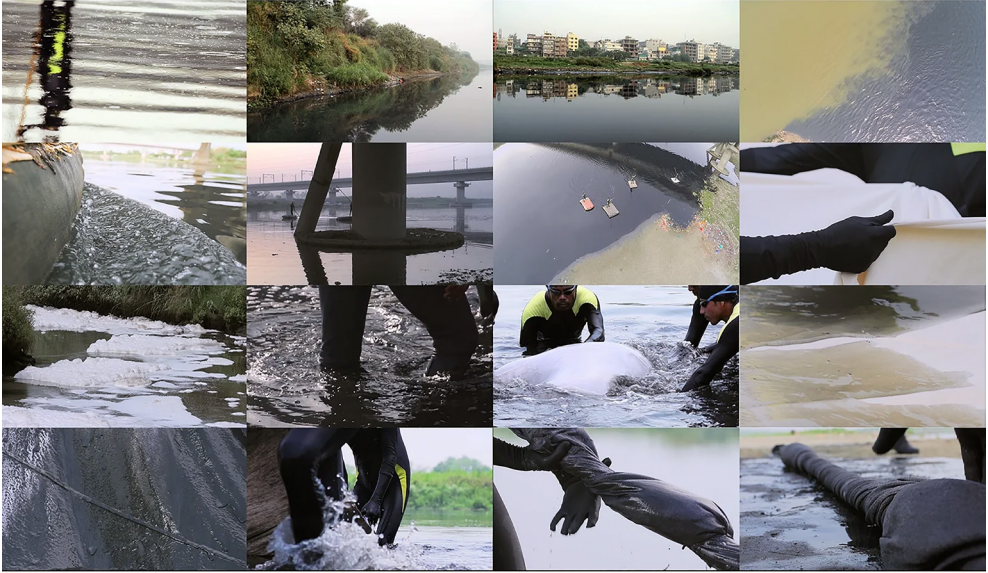


Figure 9 Vibha Galhotra, *Manthan*. 2015. Single-channel film, 10 min. 43 sec.

Figure 10 Vibha Galhotra, *Acceleration*. Ghungroos, fabric, wood, steel, 2" × 117"