

st. itch







*Debenham & Co.*

YORK.

Cabinet photograph, date estimated at 1890s.

Image Courtesy: Manchester Art Gallery

PREVIOUS PAGE: British Sampler, Silk on Wool, Second half 18th century. From the Collection of Mrs. Lathrop Colgate Harper, Bequest of Mabel Herbert Harper, 1957. Image Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

testsuite 19.3

# STITCH

AN EXHIBITION BY AFRAH SHAFIQ  
CURATED BY CYNTHIA TOLES



A PROJECT OF





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*testsite* 19.3 is unusual in that it included a month-long residency in the U.S. for Goa-based artist Afrah Shafiq. This residency was made possible in great part by the extraordinary generosity of Laurence Miller and Judith Wilcott in opening their home to Afrah for several weeks.

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Most of all, I am grateful for Afrah – for our new friendship, her patience with my shortcomings, and her beautiful and thoughtful work. I’ll always cherish the fact that she opened a “cold call” email from someone from Texas who had admired her work at Kochi and invited her to the other side of the world for a collaboration.





# st.itch

Multimedia Patchwork  
27 scannable QR codes  
4 channel video | 13 minute loop  
Single channel sound

Drawn in by an endless supply of images in the archives in the North of England of women sitting indoors, quietly, head bent, fingers busy, often alone—lost in what is being created with their hands, *st.itch* is a multimedia patchwork that explores where the mind travels to when the body is engaged in repetitive/endless/invisible/mechanised labour.

While women spent hours on end cutting vegetables, washing clothes, doing the dishes and sewing stitch after stitch, weaving knit after knit in their “free” time, the mind enters a deep daydream. What relationship does this deep daydream have to machine technology and artificial intelligence? How come early computer pixel graphics resemble cross-stitch patterns? Why is the centre of a ball of yarn called the “clue?” And did you know that the first computer programme was based on the logic of the weaving loom?

While abiding by a certain conduct have women also been living in code? Is there a glitch in the system to slip through the cracks of the physical realm? Can we decode this system through the archive?



## ARTIST STATEMENT

Using the process of research as an artistic playground, Afrah intertwines history, memory, folklore, and fantasy to create a speculative world born of remix culture. Her work moves across mediums, drawing from the handmade languages of traditional folk forms and connecting them to the digital languages of the Internet and video games. Animation, archival material, video, code, interactivity, sound and glass mosaic come to reveal through wit and irreverence the gaps in history, invisibilised experiences, ideas of belonging, fitting in, resistance, performing your true self and the inner workings of the mind.

Afrah began her journey into the world of media and art practices through the documentary filmmaking tradition, and she continues to draw from its approach to understand and make sense of the world. Archival material, stories from history, writing, facts, and statistics feature prominently in her work, bridging the world of the validated and authorized to a speculative world that lies between reality, fantasy, memory and feelings.

FACING PAGE: *An endless afternoon defragments, st.itch* (video still), 2018. Image courtesy of the artist



## MATERIAL LIVES

CYNTHIA TOLES

Women have sat indoors all these millions of years,  
so that by this time  
the very walls are permeated by  
their creative force

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

To know the history of  
embroidery is to know the  
history of women

Rosinka Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*

We slip out of intense heat into the cool darkness of an abandoned seventeenth-century Dutch spice warehouse. Dust blankets the timber beams. Modernity's only evidence is an old telephone in a deserted office and a massive tangle of electrical wiring, frozen in its pitched struggle. It's exciting to be in totally unfamiliar surroundings.

I'm at the Fourth Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018 (KMB), called *Possibilities for a Non-alienated Life*. More than halfway through my first trip to India, where I surrounded myself with Hindu culture, and saw fading traces of Mughal glory and over-worn vestiges of the British Raj, I am eager to get back into my normal travel pattern of trooping through contemporary art biennials.

## KOCHI AND MUZIRIS

Kochi was a fishing village until the fourteenth century; today it is Kerala state's most populous city and capitol. Kerala sits on India's Malabar Coast, an area whose history stretches back through antiquity to 3000 BCE, and with centuries-long commerce with Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, classical Greece, the Roman Empire, Jerusalem, the Arab World, the Far East, and the modern West. This ancient past is most apparent when observing Kochi fishermen operate massive cheena valas, an ancient type of rising-and-falling fishing net secured along the shoreline of Old Town. Another name for the city of Kochi is Cochin, and one of the most romantic word origin theories for Cochin is that ancient Chinese explorers called the settlement 'co-chi,' meaning 'like China,' upon seeing the fishing nets commonly used in their homeland—a poetic signal of the area's rich cosmopolitan past.



Chinese fishing nets (cheena valas) at Kochi, 2017

Credit: SteveAllenPhoto

The city of Muziris named in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale no longer exists. From the first century BCE it was a seaport south of present-day Kochi. Mud swallowed the entire



ancient city after a fourteenth-century flood and cyclone reconfigured the Keralan coastline inland by several miles. The same geological event that buried Muziris carved open Kochi's present-day harbor, and the former fishing village then succeeded Muziris as India's major center for the spice trade. Kochi was the first European outpost in colonial India, conquered first by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, then the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and controlled by the British from the late eighteenth century until Indian independence in 1947. In 2011, the McKinsey Global Institute identified Kochi as one of 440 "global cities" that will contribute 50% of the world's GDP by 2025.

#### THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale invokes both the modern metropolitan Kochi and the lost, legendary Muziris. The biennale was installed in sixteen heritage structures situated mostly in Old Town Kochi, many being disused shipping warehouses or offices on or near the water (which the biennale foundation is engaged in preserving). It was exhilarating to treasure hunt for art in these historical spaces, and refreshing to see so many works by Asian and Southeast Asian artists I had not encountered before. Aside from a few familiar names—Thomas Hirschhorn, the Guerilla Girls, Martha Rosler, and Marlene Dumas—most of the artists were new to me.

The 2018 biennale curator, artist Anita Dube, is a revered founding member of the Radical Indian Painters and Sculptors Association, a group known for their socially and politically conscious approach. Dube conjured a biennale as a space where social action could recuperate dialogue from dogma:

Imagine those pushed to the margins of dominant narratives, speaking not as victims, but as futurism's cunning and sentient sentinels. And before speaking, listening to the stone and the flowers; to older women and wise men; to the queer community; to critical voices in the mainstream; to the whispers and warnings of nature.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with its theme of non-alienation, the biennale felt unusually welcoming. Diverse locals flocked to the main venues, including the cheena vala fishermen we chatted with who were working their nets just a few steps from the main venue. According to a survey of local residents conducted by KMB, 80% of the respondents visited the biennale with family and friends.

Dube established a "people's pavilion" in Cabral Yard where anyone could show work, perform, speak or write. Embodying this spirit in the spacious courtyard of the main venue (Aspinwall House) was Vipin Dhanurdharan's *Sahodarar*, a free outdoor community kitchen which addressed continuing caste-based discrimination by welcoming biennale guests to prepare and serve family-style meals to friends and visitors.



Vipin Dhanurdharan working at the *Sahodarar* Community Kitchen  
Photo Courtesy of Kochi Biennale Foundation



## ST.ITCH IN A SITTING ROOM

In Old Town Kochi, in a converted seventeenth century Dutch residence called Kashi Town House, I came upon *st.itch*, by Goa-based filmmaker and artist Afrah Shafiq. A multimedia patchwork and interactive four-channel video installation, *st.itch* was commissioned by New North and South, a network of eleven arts organizations from across South Asia and the Northern England in a three-year program of co-commissions, exhibitions and intellectual exchange.<sup>2</sup>

During her residency, Shafiq conducted research in libraries, museums and collections in Northern England and Scotland, where she culled archival texts and images of domestic scenes of eighteenth-century Georgian and nineteenth-century Victorian women; their letters, diaries and artworks; examples of embroidery and lace on which they whiled away their time; and published texts on early women's movements. The archival materials reflect the era when the British East India Company (EIC) monopolized the importation of raw cotton from India, which they manufactured into textiles before selling fabric back to the market they held captive in India. The centerpieces of Shafiq's video sequences blend and transform archival and digital-borne imagery and technology. Shafiq states, "Formally, my work is an ode to remix culture—digging through the past and re-interpreting the familiar into newer forms and ways of seeing." Shafiq's videos mash-up the historic with the cybernetic by weaving together period images of domestic scenes and embroidery, along with Biblical and feminist texts, using digital code, animation, pixilation, sampling and video game technology.

Shafiq installed *st.itch* on the wall in front of a spare wooden bench centered in a room of Kashi Town House. Looking like a large board game, the surface reminded me of old,

heavily-stained homespun fabric printed with a dense grid of blocks. With some blocks filled with black, the board resembled a gigantic cross-word puzzle or a patchwork quilt; or, even, a highly magnified cross-stitch embroidery



*Installation view, st.itch, Multimedia Patchwork, 2018  
Photo Courtesy of Kochi Biennale Foundation*

pattern. Non-blackened blocks featured archival woodcuts of women performing a litany of never-ending household chores: spinning thread, sewing, dusting, sweeping, washing, and ironing. Four video monitors were "quilted" into the patchwork surface.

The room likely was once a sitting room of the town house, just off the entry hall with Vermeer-like light streaming through a large pane glass window. Window seats cozied into a deeply recessed structural window casing, a configuration that would have provided the European ladies of the house with both natural lighting for their needlework and a perch for gazing at the front garden and keeping an eye on neighborhood goings-on. This seventeenth-century colonial sitting room was perfect for



Shafiq's video installation, which focused on privileged women of the same period busy at their needlework. Shafiq's playful and reflective *st.itch* imagines their inner thoughts, dreams, and impossible narratives, all while set within walls "*permeated by their creative force.*"<sup>3</sup>

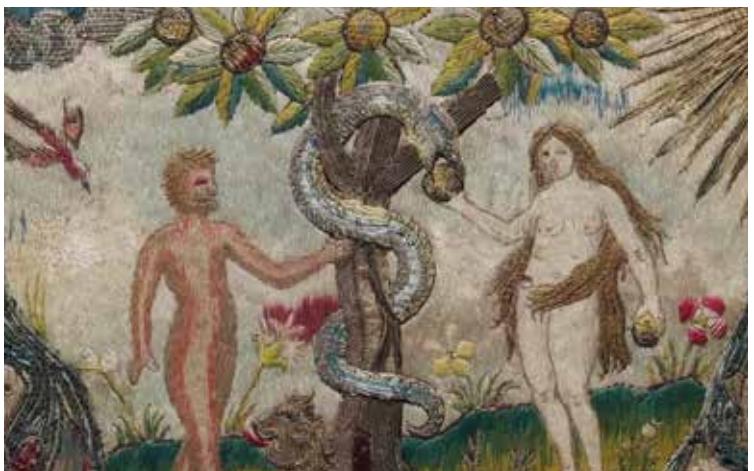
### STITCH

Some might say that string is more important to the history of humankind than the wheel. Archaeologists have found evidence of string and rope dating as far back as 300,000 years, while the human origins of twining, stitching, looping and knotting remain unknown. Rope and cordage made seafaring possible, as well as the domestication of animals, increasingly productive farming, and the raising of ancient monuments. Textiles woven from spun fibers appeared in the Middle East during the late Stone Age, changing clothing, domestic decoration, and the transportation of goods. Beginning in the second century BCE, luxury fabrics were the predominant trade product on the Silk Road. Following the introduction of Indian cotton into Britain by EIC in the late 1600s, Northern England eventually became the world's leading textile manufacturer.

Shafiq's *st.itch* inserts us into this world of threads—of spinning, weaving, handwork and clothing—during the rise of British Empire, a time when this elemental material was inescapable in women's circumscribed lives. In *st.itch*, genre paintings and etchings of sewing women proliferate, along with their ubiquitous crocheted samplers<sup>4</sup> and handmade lace; portraits of aristocratic women in elaborate finery; and early feminist texts such as a treatise on the Dress Reform Movement.<sup>5</sup> Through her self-described "homage to remix culture," Shafiq splices, shuffles, and re-assembles her chosen images, then animates them, bringing her women to life by proposing underlying thoughts and

playing out subversive alternate realities. Her digital cutting or "sampling" is an act analogous to the very subject matter being manipulated and transformed: stitching and sewing. The digital realm has even adopted the language of sewing and thread: we refer to the network as the web, and to email strings.

In the beginning of *st.itch* the "snake" from the 1970s arcade game gobbles up woodcuts of working women to reveal a serpent woven into an elaborately embroidered Bible cover of Adam and Eve with the Tree of Knowledge. The embroidered Garden of Eden erupts into life and Eve finds a surprising new attitude and storyline; rather than



Bible Cover, Satin worked with silk and metal thread, Robert Barker, 1739  
Image Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

departing Paradise in shame, Shafiq's Eve is giddy with her newfound knowledge of Good and Evil. The Bible opens and Eve walks into the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, then is airdropped in front of a quaint cottage on a sampler. She triggers a chain reaction by flinging the forbidden fruit through a window where, in a scene switch, it lands on a sampler that a woman in a painting is embroidering.



*Sew you in another realm, st.itch* (video still), 2018

Image courtesy of the artist

Eve's apple sets the woman in motion. She begins a monotonous afternoon of inserting her needle then drawing the thread. We see her subconscious longings and desires as the figure of a cross-stitch girl teleports into the woman's daydream, where the girl ventures out into nature for a carefree walk through a stitched forest until she is interrupted by a video game challenge of oncoming crowns. The crowns symbolize the stratified class structures and tacit societal codes that dictate every aspect of life during the colonizing epoch. These are the codes of conduct that

forced little girls to sit still indoors, in spotless frocks, rather than run and play. Upon the girl's defeat, Shafiq returns the viewer to the theme of monotony, repetition, and waiting by depicting women alone, reading, staring off into space, cutting and arranging flowers, and mourning—slowly going insane. Images pixelate and dissolve into a nightmarish video game featuring the same cross-stitch girl, now seen against a night sky which, disturbingly, is a piece of handmade lace made partly of human hair. In a *Perils of Pauline*-style video game sequence, the girl finds herself assaulted by Victorian corsets and the steel-hooped cage crinolines denounced by the Dress Reform Movement as unhealthy. Like Super Mario, the Nintendo series hero, the girl bounces her way forward only to be swallowed by a crinoline cage. Shafiq conflates early computer game characters and the cross-stitch figures they resemble, which are themselves nothing other than analog coding systems based on a system of binary logic.



*Level Three: The Dress Reform Movement. st.itch* (video still), 2018  
Image courtesy of the artist



All at once, the entire world dissolves. We witness the dawn of a new universe which explores “Woman as Machine.” This time, the black monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* appears in the shape of computer pop-up screens displaying house management cooking and cleaning tips in real time as computer source code, possibly written by the finger of a programmer god. These programming instructions are then reformatted as a code poem or psalm, a virtual Fifty-Five Commandments, which effectively code female “software” to run on the female body or “hardware.”



*Are you a Robot? st.itch (video still), 2018  
Image courtesy of the artist*

Here, the cross-stitch girl appears atop a mechanized spinning wheel; she runs like a hamster to keep up until she falls into an advanced level computer game where she again is defeated. The scene switches to the 1950s where women responsible for “mastering” this glut of rules transmute into a different genus: the machine women. Black-and-white commercial photographs show women operating massive industrial looms amid the unrelenting cacophony of the factory floor.

## TEXAS CODA

After inviting Afrah to exhibit at *testsite* in Austin, our conversations confirmed that, indeed, centuries-old forms of needlework and weaving, and modern day industrial looms share much in common with early computer technology: both were limited to two-dimensional grids of “pixels” representing binary choices. I also learned that the large grid pattern of *st.itch*’s surface, the array of woodcut images and black blocks, was in fact itself a code: a gigantic QR code (abbreviated Quick Response Code or two-dimensional matrix barcode). In addition, numerous QR codes are “hidden in plain sight” within blocks in the all-over grid pattern of the surface, each QR code containing a quotation or passage imagining the inner lives of sedentary and isolated women. Having the layers of *st.itch* de-coded has been an exciting revelation, and this de-coding seems particularly important for this work. Shafiq uses (or has used) her considerable knowledge and familiarity with digital code to explore the analog coding women have done for centuries in their private realms, even while restrained by strict behavioral and societal codes.

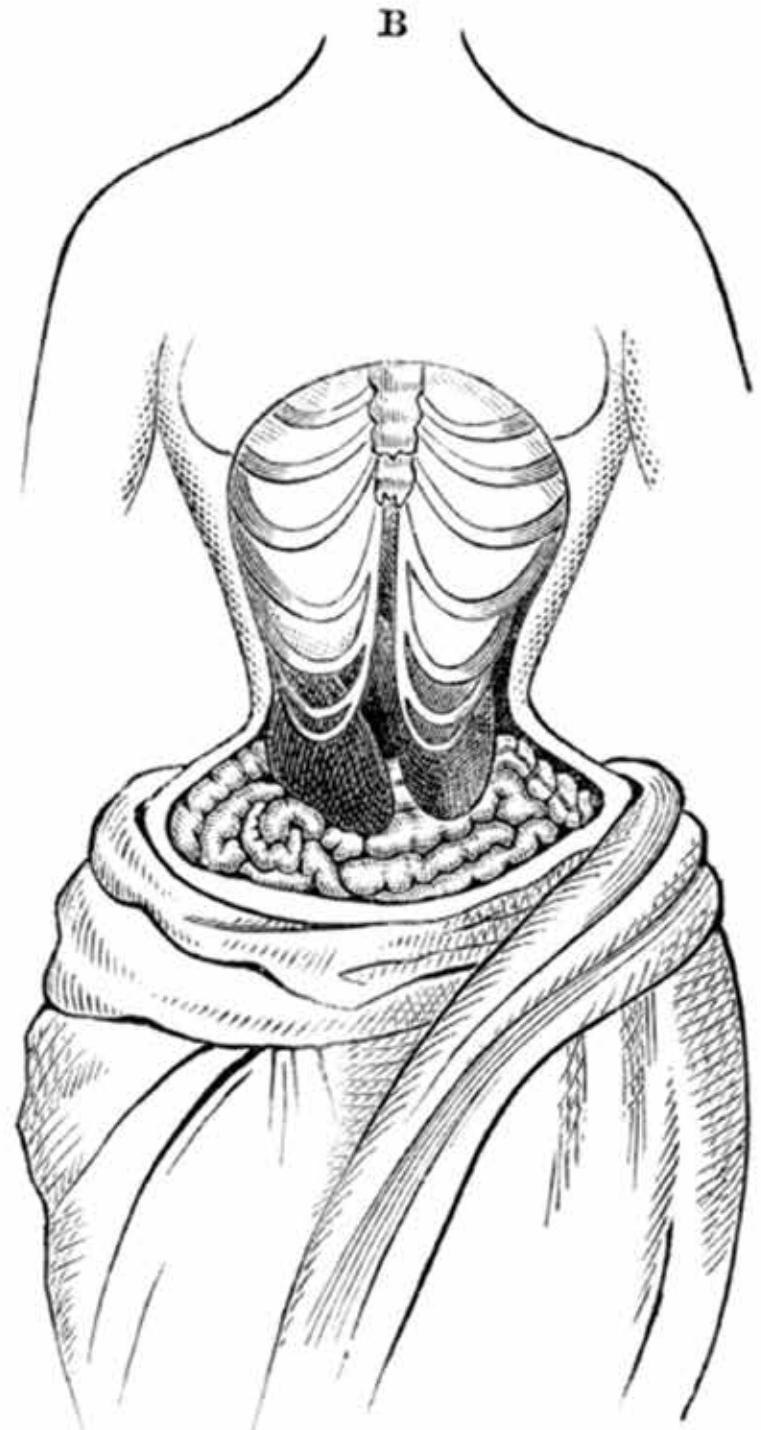
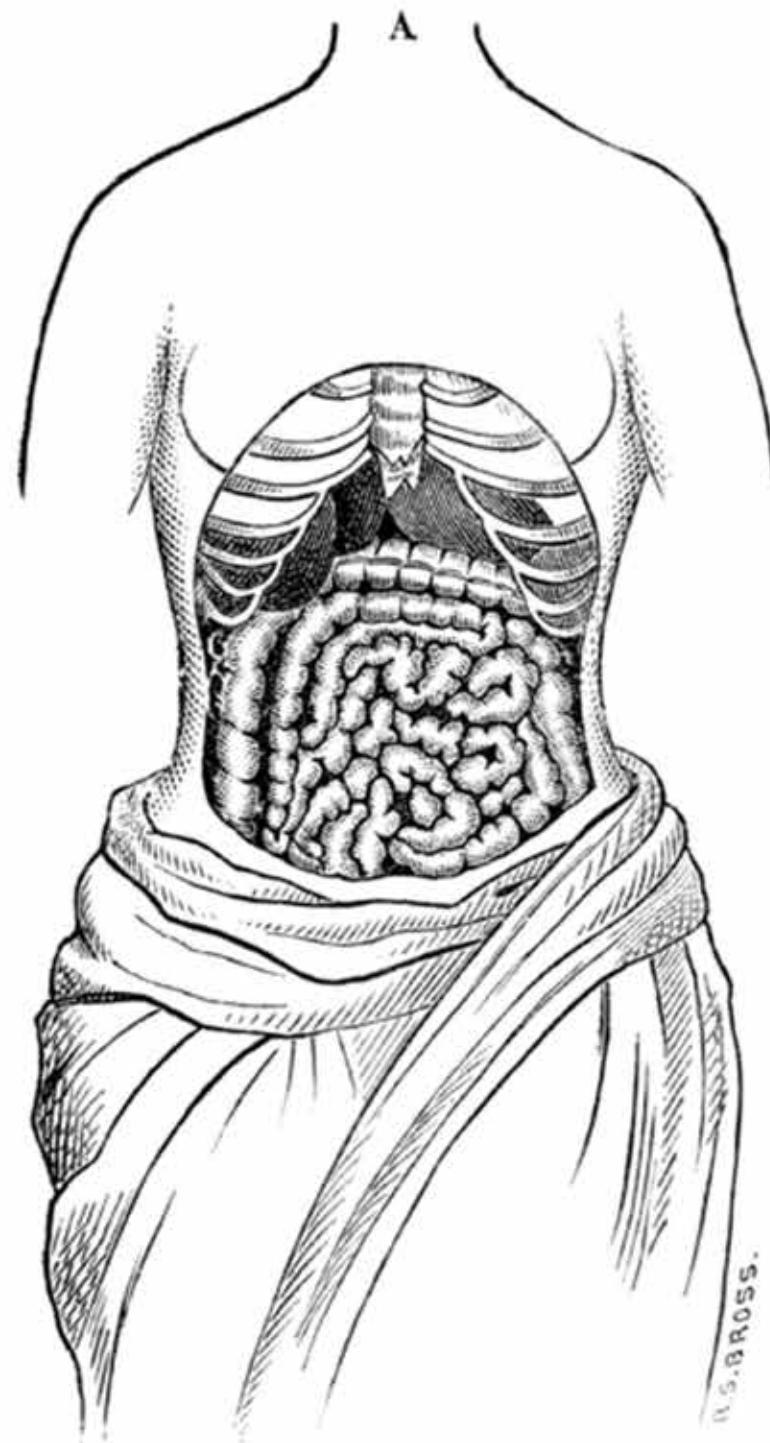
Contemporary artists who deal with actual historical and archival materials can re-tell established stories, and reveal new truths. Shafiq has taken overlooked archival images and objects of and about women’s handwork—so of their time—and turned them into something of our time. Her interactive video installation subverts the original limitations placed on her subjects and gives us an alternative reading of these women’s metaphysical depths. Shafiq speculates about the nature of their thoughts and the worlds they might have imagined. It has been my great pleasure to engage in ongoing dialogue with Afrah Shafiq’s *st.itch* and to be part of presenting this complex, engaging, serious, and humorous art work to Austin.



Woman operating ring doubling, c.1950s  
Image Courtesy Manchester Central Library

FACING PAGE: Twee naaiende vrouwen, Geertruydt Roghman, 1721 - 1866  
Image courtesy Rijks Museum

PAGE 25: Illustration depicting a woman in a crinolene skirt, Walter Crane, 1865, Image Courtesy The Whitworth Art Gallery



*Effects of corseting and tight-lacing*



## A Conversation between Artist Afrah Shafiq and Collector Cynthia Toles, June 2019

*Cynthia Toles: When we first started talking about your testsite residency for Fluent Collaborative, your thought was to research Latin American folk art with a view toward a new work to be completed possibly in 2020. Tell me about that initial proposal.*

**Afrah Shafiq:** I've always been drawn to folk and bazaar art, popular prints; things that are made, looked at, and bought and sold on the street; things made by communities together, made outside of gallery structures and the art school. Apart from being a visual treat and bursting with *rassa*<sup>6</sup>, folk art also has so many stories and practices and histories embedded within it that unearthing the reason why a particular object is made in a certain way, in a certain season, or by a certain community, makes it even more alive. Latin America is so rich in its folk art practices and I've drooled over ex-voto paintings, retablos, milagros and so on. So when you first approached me for a research-based residency in Texas, I knew I wanted to do something around the folk art of that region.

Parallel to this, I have for some time been interested in the symbol of the moon and its connection to fertility, transformation, marriage, magic, miracles, synchronicity of dreams and this realm of myths, religion, mysticism and the feminine. So what I had proposed was to look at folk art to see what it would reveal to me in connection to some of these ideas.

At the very beginning of a project I always enter the research stage casting quite a wide net. In my mind I can somehow see the shape and feeling of what I would like to make, or the world I would like to deep dive into, but I don't like to make it too specific at an early stage. This approach



leaves more room for happy accidental stumbling and for the material to reveal itself to me. In that sense research for me becomes like a journey I cannot predict the outcome of before I begin.

For instance, for one of my past works I entered the archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSSC) in Calcutta looking in their collection of visual material for “cheeky women”—women who subverted what was expected of them, those who defied conventions and turned them on their heads, who used wit and irreverence and a beautiful kind of protest to live life outside of their available options. What I ended up making at the end of this journey is an interactive web story called *Sultana's Reality*<sup>7</sup>, which is about the relationship between women and books in the early colonial education movement in India. So it definitely has within it plenty of stories of these cheeky women and how and why they did what they did, but the project ended up being about education and books—something that was wholly unintended at the outset.

*CT: As often happens with what you describe as your research methodology, “Archive as Playground,” did the initial seed branch into newer directions during your residency in Texas? Describe that.*

**AS:** Archives can be beasts! Spending time with them can be very exciting but it can also be a total dark hole. Sometimes you don't find what you are looking for and it is very easy to feel lost. Or you find too much that interests you and you don't know what you should focus on. The logic of the archive and the way it is arranged, catalogued, digitized and all its metadata adds to the experience. So yes, what I am basically saying is that when I ended up at the archives in Austin, I really didn't find too much folk art. There were some collections but they were not too accessible and folk art was definitely not the strength of those collections. However, I think I have spent enough time in archives by

now to understand that all of this is part of the process and to submit to what lies in them.

When I began looking at the archives of the Harry Ransom Center, I realized that they held one of the largest archival and rare book collections on the history of magic and illusion, so of course I was excited to spend time with that! This included images, essays, journals and memorabilia around magicians, illusionists, the Spiritualist Church, clairvoyant mediums, studies of talismans, and lycanthropy. The scrapbooks of the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini were another big part of this collection. However, much of this material was centered on magic as performance art, as well as debunking fakes and unpacking the tricks of clairvoyants, quacks, and psychics. So not a lot of magic in the magic section overall, but the advertisement images in it were amazing!

An unexpected and truly moving set of materials that I spent a lot of time with in Austin were the Gloria Anzaldúa papers at the Benson Latin American Collection. I was already familiar with her published writing but there was something very special about going through her personal correspondence; her unpublished notes and essays; and letters she received from a whole community of writers, artists, and poets who were women of colour, queer, and just trying to authentically take into their creative control the way they were represented and imagined in the larger mainstream. I couldn't stop looking at this material and even though it isn't directly in line with any of the themes I proposed, this exercise, in a sense, got me thinking a lot about the nature of creativity and its connection to spirituality and even fertility, and this more philosophical exploration is something I intend to take forward in the new work.

And the third most significant moment in my archival stumbling was to decide almost overnight to visit the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Its collection



blew my mind! I was particularly drawn to all the various imaginations of Mother Mary in folk art the world over. There were also some fantastic fantasy figures and patron saints for just about everything that I feel very interested in.

So in some sense, the research directions were not a straight path leading to what I thought I wanted to study; but I am now holding onto all these various superb findings as pieces of a puzzle, and I look forward to fitting them all together in the work that follows.

*CT: If I had to come up with one word to describe your artwork, it would be subversive. You take archival imagery of all kinds of women—the working poor/the peasant class, as well as the privileged women of the house in Georgian and Victorian England—and turn conventional narratives and histories on their heads. Can you talk about that.*

AS: Sure. I think subversion is definitely something that binds all my different work together. But it is really not coming from this place of intentional rebellion in some way. I am interested in looking at a narrative, or a moment in history, or something that is widely accepted and taken for granted—and then breaking it apart. For instance, when I was looking at the material in the visual archives in Calcutta, it struck me that so many images had women in them as subjects, but hardly any of those images were made by women themselves. So it was almost like all these female characters in the images were stuck doing things and playing roles that they didn't really choose. I began to wonder if the women in those images were given life to perform in the way they chose, what would they do? And when they did come to life in the animations, it was as if the women themselves chose to subvert - it had nothing to do with me!

But jokes apart, I feel that if we really pay attention to inner lived experiences, accounts by those who are not part of the dominant discourse—conventional histories and

narratives—do get turned on their heads. Our lives and histories and how we got where we are, are not so neat and easy to catalogue or even digest and understand. People, experiences, and histories are multiple and sometimes contradict each other and I am interested in exploring that.

*CT: Moving toward some questions about the work we are showing here in Texas: st.itch in many ways has to do with the pointless cycle of repetition in traditional women's work. Talk about that and how it shows up in the work.*

AS: The year before I started making *st.itch*, I was feeling quite taken by domestic work for some reason. Closely watching women around me doing it, really paying attention to it when I was doing it, reading about what different women had to say about it—and what other popular perceptions of it were ... there are many opinions floating around. I guess the mainstream perception is that keeping house is this cute little boring thing that women do and it involves no skill or no expertise. Everyone undervalues housework, including women. I have so many times heard women who keep house say apologetically “nothing” if they are asked what it is that they do. Of course, questioning this mindset is nothing new. Angela Davis’ writing in “The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework”<sup>8</sup> is an important one for instance. Feminists for generations before me have been engaging with the idea of domestic labour being just that—labour; about the unpaid, unacknowledged nature of it ... but domestic labour is also repetitive and endless and does not always need to use the cognitive brain in a very present way. There can be something very meditative about it; or something quite hypnotic and trance-inducing about using the body in this cyclical manner. So I began to think of all these women doing their domestic work entering a state of a mechanized being—of morphing into machines. And while their bodies are physically present inside the walls of the home, cutting or washing or sewing, where do their minds travel?



The form, pace, and style of the animation in the work mirrors this exploration. It is what I like to call “slow burn” animation. Sometimes the same thing happens for so long that you are just standing there watching endless task after task, someone sewing stitch after stitch, until it all defragments. And then what happens to your own mind?

*CT: That boredom and fragmentation brings up madness as a theme in your work. You reference a particular author who influenced you.*

AS: One of my favorite texts is the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins, an American writer from the late 1800’s. It is in the form of a series of journal entries written by a woman writer in an enclosed room with yellow wallpaper, and her slow journey into madness. It isn’t exactly referenced in my work, but as I started to read about women’s experiences of domestic work from their letters and diary entries in the archives I thought of that piece. It was quite a strange coincidence, actually, that the day I thought of that work and re-read it I was at the Whitworth in Manchester, which has the largest collection of wallpapers in the country! Anyway, that connection initially made me want to make *st.itch* into a form of wallpaper, something with a recurrent pattern—and that led to its current form of the code in the piece as it now stands.

*CT: You are interested in the merger of woman and machine, but also the roots of programming and machine automation in ancient women’s work, such as weaving.*

AS: Yes. It’s my speculative hypothesis that women’s work and the way they have been programmed to do it over so many centuries has some very close ties to cybernetics, computer programming, code, machine automation, and the world of the Interweb. I looked at so many cross stitch samplers sewn by young girls in England and all of them looked like early computer pixel graphics. We all know that Charles

Babbage made the Difference Engine, but Ada Lovelace is the one who wrote the programme or the code for it. She got the idea from the Jacquard Loom that weavers used. If you look at the notes made by pattern girls who were employed by cotton mills, they are nothing short of complex formulaic codes. Knitting is in many ways like building a formula in your mind. A weft and weave arranged in different combinations will generate different patterns much like the logic of ones and zeros in binary codes. Surely all of this cannot be a coincidence?

*CT: You have so many fascinating interests and insights having to do with women. What is the origin of these interests for you?*

AS: I am not sure I know the exact answer to this. I like how Louise Bourgeois said, “My feminism expresses itself in an intense interest in what women do” and I think I feel that way too.

*CT: You have come to the art world from a career in documentary filmmaking. How did this occur and how does filmmaking inform your artistic practice?*

AS: My art practice is perhaps an extension of my love for documentary films. I am not talking about these straight, informative, often very boring films that usually come to mind when someone says that word. I was exposed to some amazingly complex, experimental, stylistically novel documentaries as a student, such as the works of Chris Marker, Trinh T. Minh-ha or Agnes Varda, and after my Masters I had the opportunity to work with senior feminist filmmakers in India like Paromita Vohra and Madhusree Dutta. These experiences taught me to craft work that is conceptual and hybrid in form, moving between reality, fantasy, and memory. But of course apart from documentary films my practice also draws from many other things like folk art, comic books, technology, and video games.



**CT:** *Talk about your love of research—when it all started, how that happened.*

**AS:** I haven't been to art school. I am a student of literature and I've always been a bit of a bibliophile, even while growing up. I hated to play or go outside and I pretty much always had my nose in a book. I think I lost several years of sleep when the Internet reached us and you could read up on anything. I do love research. I love looking at facts and feelings, both in an equal way. I also feel sometimes that research can be very dense and heavy and difficult to access; it can be so full of jargon and concepts that not everyone has a hold of. So making work that isn't alienating and that gives a life to research material is a very big part of my quest as an artist.

**CT:** *When you visited me in my home and saw my collection, you made the observation, which really pleased and surprised me, that I seemed to approach collecting in the same way you approach the archive—as a playground. What struck you as some of the parallels?*

**AS:** Looking at your collection was one of the highlights of my residency! There seemed to be this one common thread through the artworks and I'm trying hard to find a way to explain that. None of the work could be categorized by medium or idea, but all of the artworks had the same spirit in some sense? It felt like there was an abstract, difficult to pin down, yet very lucid logic that drove your collection. They were poetic, funny, witty, sometimes sad and painful, sometimes pissed off, but always very truthful and unpretentious. A miniature gallery door asking you to fuck off and come in at the same time or a guardian angel trapped in a little bottle so she can't run off for a smoke instead of protecting you, or a tiny crumpled unmade bed in all white made of wax—the collection had this 'either you get it or you don't' kind of mood to it. Something about that reminded me of how I approach the material in the

archive, and I was thinking perhaps that's how you ended up acquiring the works you did. A work may not be what you sought out to get, it may not even make sense initially, but it "speaks" to you and something very certain in your gut leads you to it.



## NOTES

### MATERIAL LIVES

<sup>1</sup> Anita Dube, "Curator's Note," in *Possibilities for Non-Alienated Life* (India: Kochi Biennale Foundation, 2018) 24.

<sup>2</sup> Initiated by organizations in Manchester, England, where the city is 13% Asian, the commissioning of South Asian artists was seen as a way of reimagining more equitable relations between the North of England and South Asia, given the imperialist legacy between the two parts of the world.

<sup>3</sup> Rosinka Parker, "The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine," in *New Socialist*, no. 20 (1984) 28-31.

<sup>4</sup> Needlework samplers are a recurrent element in Shafiq's narratives. Samplers were meant to demonstrate needlework skill in executing the alphabet, numbers, animals, figures and Biblical text. They were a highly-prized indication of virtue and attainment of the feminine ideal, a necessary step on the way to 'making a good marriage.' While girls were confined to the home with such busywork, boys ventured into the world for school and work.

<sup>5</sup> Founded by Amelia Bloomer in the 1840s, the Dress Reform Movement proposed women eschew fashion for comfortable clothing.

### A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ARTIST AFRAH SHAFIQ AND COLLECTOR CYNTHIA TOLES, JUNE 2019

<sup>6</sup> A concept in Indian arts about the aesthetic flavour of any visual, literary or musical work that evokes an emotion or feeling in the reader or audience but cannot be described. The nearest word to describe the feeling could be "juicy."

<sup>7</sup> [www.entersultanasreality.com](http://www.entersultanasreality.com)

<sup>8</sup> Angela Davis, "The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective Women," in *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981.)

FOLLOWING PAGE: *Women operating spinning machinery, c.1940s*  
Image Courtesy Central Library, Manchester City Council

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