

**HOME**

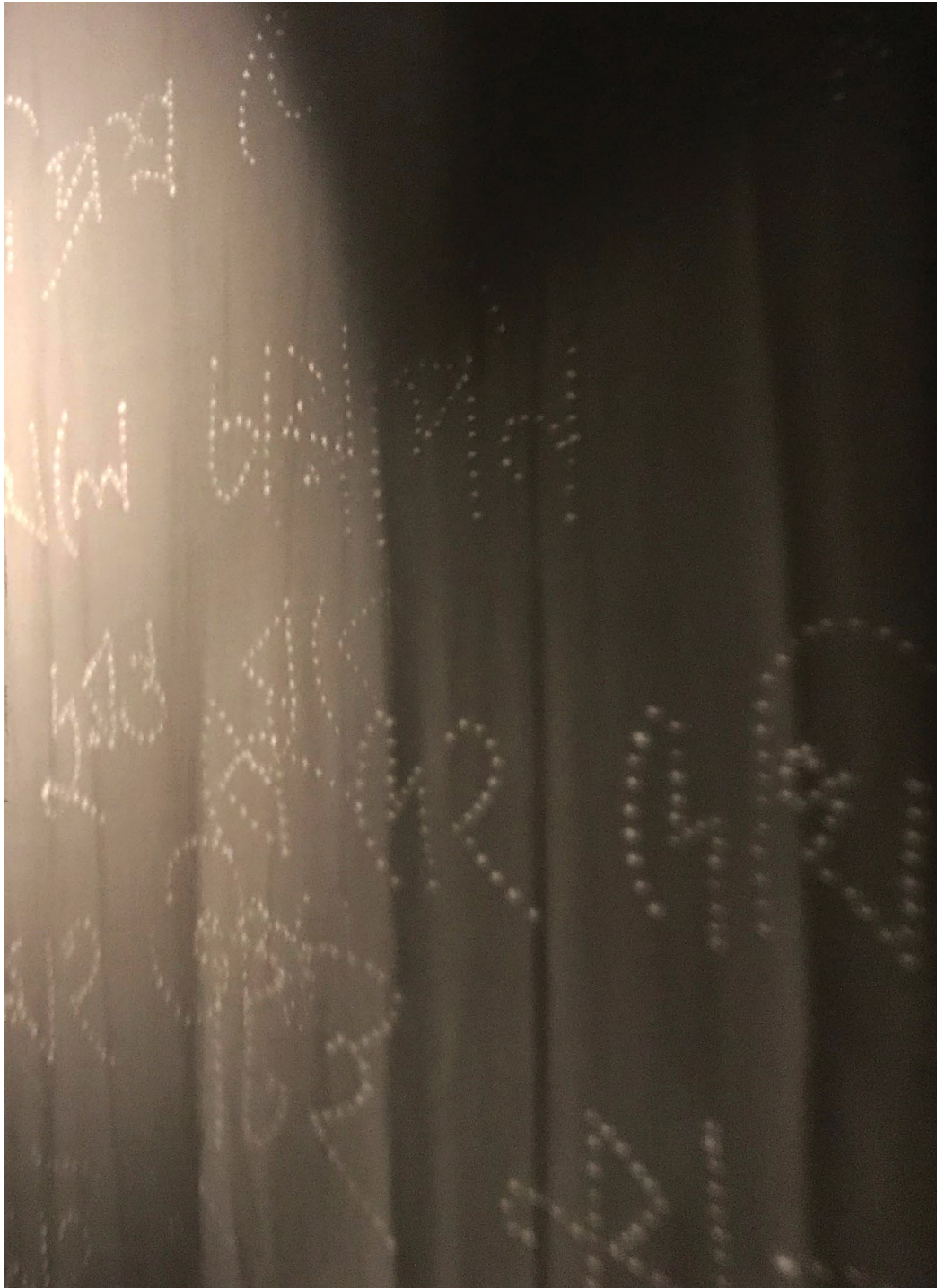
SHREEVATSA NEVATIA examines recent exhibitions across India that explore how 'home' is no longer just haven, but a fragile scaffolding of small things that hold together belonging.

**IS**

**WHERE**

**THE**

**ART IS**



Martin Heidegger rejected René Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore I am," asserting instead that humans live through both body and mind, seeking spaces where they feel at ease—"I dwell, therefore I am." Decades later, Homi K. Bhabha introduced the concept of the "unhomely," describing a postcolonial condition where boundaries between home and world blur, and the private and public intermingle, causing disorientation. These philosophers inform artist Mithu Sen's reflections on home. She says, "Home is a myth, and an illusion. It can be a fantastic place that offers love and care, but it is also a philosophy. And, sometimes, home is also a joke—say, you're in your hometown, but are having to stay in a hotel."

Sen had an itinerant childhood. She moved with her parents from one rented accommodation in North Bengal to another. She finally felt rooted in Santiniketan, where Kala Bhavana, the arts faculty of Visva-Bharati University, started to feel like home. During a year-long postgraduate programme at The Glasgow School of Art, Sen saw her ideas of home transform. "Home was no longer something cognitive for me. It fast became more of a sensory experience." The smells of an Indian restaurant, for instance, brought comfort. When Sen heard someone speak in Bengali, she felt she was home again. Having found belonging in language and the nonsense Bengali poetry of Sukumar Ray, Sen sometimes feels discomfited when asked to articulate her thoughts in English: "Much like patriarchy, English stops me from living in my home the way I'd want to."

From 29<sup>th</sup> of January to 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2025, Sen's *Burnt by the Sun* was on display at TRI Art & Culture, a gallery in Kolkata that was celebrating its first anniversary with an exhibition art patron Lekha Poddar had titled 'HOME?! বাড়ি घर'. Having selected the work

of 20 artists from her Devi Art Foundation collection, Poddar transformed TRI's galleries into surreal domestic enclosures. In a dark corner on the first floor, Sen's 2004 installation served as a bedroom. Using burning incense, she inscribed black silk veils with a Bengali poem about Behula, who sails to the heavens with her husband's corpse, seeking his resurrection. Lit from within, the charred fabric evoked a mosquito net, its shadows suggesting that even in sleep, words offer shelter.

Walking through TRI, you encountered several familiar objects whose form had been tweaked to challenge their function. The chair in the salon was made of welded locks. Plates in the dining room were shrouded in webs of white lace. A shirt in the dressing room was made of cement. The three untitled sculptures by artist Sudarshan Shetty in the study playfully infused everyday items with new life. Seven half-full glasses see-sawed on a kinetic table, five pairs of acrylic shoes danced to an inaudible beat, while a few dozen seemingly fragile eggs were perched precariously on a wooden bench. "I use a lot of domestic objects in my work," says Shetty, "and I do this to ask—what is domestic and what isn't? We think of homes as architectural enclosures, but the word 'home' also makes us think of an inside and an outside. Is there really a difference? Every time you define 'home', its meaning slips away farther."

Before the two-storeyed building on 53/2/2 Hazra Road came to house TRI Art & Culture, the 70-year-old heritage property long served as a private residence. Poddar wanted visitors to think *HOME?! was a Matryoshka doll of possibilities, enabling them to find homes within homes. "I understand that the idea of home sometimes connotes loss and displacement, but I didn't want viewers to go away feeling melancholic. I wanted them*



[ Page 34 ]  
MITHU SEN  
Detail  
*Burnt by the Sun*  
Black silk veil with burnt marks, inscribed poem  
using incense stick, enclosure with six-panel doors  
350 cms x 400 cms x 300 cms  
2004

[ Above ]  
SAKSHI GUPTA  
*Untitled (Chair)*  
Metal, locks  
70 cms x 30 cms x 100 cms  
2005

Images courtesy of TRI Art & Culture

to be happy, to laugh, to leave with a smile on their faces. I wanted them to tell their friends they saw something crazy at TRI.” The aim of the exhibition, says Poddar, was to comfort, and also confound. “Is this home? Can this be my home? What is home? These are the few questions I wanted them to ask.”

Five years after the Covid-19 pandemic-induced lockdowns, curators and artists across India seem to be asking the questions Poddar intended for her Kolkata audience. By incorporating disparate ideas about home and belonging, several recent exhibitions have explored how the domestic experience has taken on new meaning for people across spectrums of class, caste, religion and gender. Now, more than ever, the idea of home has come to exceed rigid definitions of intimacy and safety. Contemporary art shows us home is where the heart is, but also where hurt can be.

Forcing one to ‘hunt’ for houses, real estate makes predators of us all. In the early 2010s, Mumbai-based artist Anjana Mehra stood her ground when a ruthless developer came to raze the two-level Byculla house she shared with her in-laws. Refusing to buckle, she used a handy-cam to document the illegal demolition of her home, even as police and municipal workers stood by. A few years later, in 2020, she exhibited these photographs and videos. She titled the show *The Nail House*, a term used to describe properties whose owners stubbornly resist pressure to vacate. “When your own safety is threatened, when your four walls and roof won’t support you, that’s when you understand what ‘home’ means,” says Mehra. The demolition shook her out of apathy. “I understood what millions of underprivileged citizens go through, what it was like to be rendered homeless.” From the 14<sup>th</sup>-floor apartment where she now lives, Mehra has

an aerial view of the city. This luxury planted seeds for her current exhibition.

On view at Mumbai’s Nine Fish Art Gallery from 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2024 to 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, Mehra’s show, *Four Walls One Square Foot A Piece of Sky*, continued the themes of *The Nail House*. Her collage-paintings layer images of glossy towers with legal documents from her case against the deceitful developer. “Each building houses 100 to 150 families, but you don’t see a soul—just black holes. Lights flicker on at night, then vanish,” she says. In contrast, old Bombay’s rooftops still show signs of shared life—clotheslines, open corridors.

These themes of desire and memory that Mehra grapples with also surface in *Pottery House*, an exhibition of Mansi Bhatt’s video and photographic work, on view at The Guild in Alibaug from 12<sup>th</sup> of January to 29<sup>th</sup> of March this year. In 1946, Bhatt’s grandfather established the Khodiyar Pottery Estate in Sihor, a historic town in Gujarat. Four generations of Bhatt’s family lived in a large house built on the 28-acre property. Born in 1975, Bhatt resided here for the first 15 years of her life. “Whenever I think of home, even now, I go back to that place,” she says. Sadly, Bhatt can only return to Khodiyar in her imagination. Years after the pottery plant and its buildings were demolished, the abandoned terrain is today being fought over by the state and former factory workers, its future uncertain.

In the film that forms the centrepiece of her show, Bhatt reinhabits her childhood home by constructing a set whose props resemble elements of its original architecture. She uses make-up, prosthetics and body extensions to become characters who once peopled Khodiyar—an aging patriarch, a groom on his wedding day, an actor playing Shiva on a

makeshift stage. Her body becomes an archive of place. “Just as we regenerate cells, we also regenerate memories. I wanted to recreate a space in which my body could go back and navigate memory in a physical way. Through that process, I found I had created yet more homes and identities.”

Both Mehra and Bhatt resist the suggestion that their art is driven by nostalgia, but artist Chetan Kurekar feels the word aptly describes his homesickness. Kurekar, 28, grew up in Chandrapur, a district in Maharashtra where coal mines are in abundance. “I lived there from 1996 to 2009,” he says, “and every time I go back, I see that mining has usurped yet another memory of my childhood [...] Home has become a sign of emptiness. Something I search for.” Displayed at Fulcrum, an art gallery in Mumbai, Kurekar’s sculptures, oil paintings, charcoal drawings and video work all seemed to grapple with a question he now asks repeatedly: “Where is my home?”

The miniature homes in Kurekar’s debut show, *At the Shore*, are all in ruins—crumbling walls, collapsed roofs. While researching, he interviewed a grandmother who, like him, lived in Chandrapur and couldn’t nap through the daily afternoon blasts. “Our homes shook every day, ready to fall apart,” recalls Kurekar.

Until his retirement in December last year, Kurekar’s father worked as a machine operator in Chandrapur. The artist recollects watching him stage sit-ins with fellow workers, demanding relocation. Though these protests didn’t yield results, Kurekar believes it’s vital to acknowledge the power of dissent: “Even if it is slow, change can happen.” That same spirit of conviction and patience defined the thousands of farmers who gathered at New Delhi’s borders in 2020 to protest against the



[ Above ]  
ANJANA MEHRA  
*Untitled*  
Mixed media on canvas  
14 1/2" x 14 1/2"  
2024  
Image courtesy of Anjana Mehra and Nine Fish Art Gallery





[ Page 39 ]  
 MANSI BHATT  
*Parallel Home: Groom*  
 Photographic print on Pearl archival paper  
 20" x 14"  
 Edition | 1 of 5 + 2 A/P  
 2024–2025  
 Image courtesy of Mansi Bhatt

[ Above ]  
 CHETAN KUREKAR  
*Chronicles of Erasure-III*  
 Mixed media  
 18" x 26" x 15"  
 2024  
 Image courtesy of Chetan Kurekar and Fulcrum

Union government's contentious farm laws. Over the course of a year, they endured searing heat and biting cold, holding their ground until the laws were repealed. Photographer Gauri Gill captured this unusual resilience in *The Village on the Highway*, her visual chronicle of the protest, exhibited at New Delhi's Vadehra Art Gallery from 4<sup>th</sup> of February to 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2025.

For Gill, however, the deepest transformation was emotional. The protest site, in its temporary togetherness, became a new kind of home. "I saw them [the farmers] weep as they said goodbye to each other," she recalls. What had started as strangers sitting on asphalt had, over months, become a deeply bonded collective. Gill's eye lingered on small, telling details—a mirror, a flower, a broom. These objects, she says, symbolise "the determination to go on, to somehow hold yourself together, even as you face terrifying structures of oppression."

*In World, But No Home*, a group show on view at Mumbai's TARQ last year, curator Kaiwan Mehta reconsiders what we take for granted about domesticity and belonging. Rather than treating home as a given or a lost sanctuary, he sees it as a construct that must be questioned. "Home is often seen as an automatic haven," explains Mehta, "but that's an assumption we've been fed from childhood." His exhibition proposes a shift—from fixed notions of identity and place to a recognition of shared spaces where the boundaries between home and world begin to blur. "The world is not black and white," says Mehta, underscoring the importance of liminality when navigating freedom, dignity and human expression. "We must not expect others, or us, to fall into straitjacketed silos."

Through works that span photography, painting, performance and installation, the exhibition reflects uneasy negotiations of modern life:

where aspiration turns to nostalgia (in Rajesh Vora's visual documentation of rooftop water tanks in Punjab), where civic protest becomes a domestic ritual (in Ita Mehrotra's Shaheen Bagh drawings), and a train ride is a space of private interiority (in Chirodeep Chaudhuri's photographs). For Mehta, artist Vishwa Shroff's window works distil the domestic into a single architectural element that both "connects and disconnects" the interior and exterior. He sees her minimal compositions as evoking a magical uncertainty: "You don't know whether it's night or day, whether you are inside or outside."

For artist Abir Karmakar, home is a motif, one that appears in his work repeatedly. In his exploration of domestic interiors, the artist has consistently attempted to "blur the binaries of private and public, past and present, masculine and feminine, moral and immoral." Reflecting on his own middle-class upbringing, Karmakar sees home as an evolving idea: "It manifests in different ways, and I'm always trapped in between." Growing up in Siliguri and later settling in Baroda, he identifies deeply with middle-class homes, spaces imbued with memory, rooms filled with carefully preserved objects—plastic containers, steel almirahs, glass bowls. "The middle class can't let things go," he says, "but I have found hoarders all over the world, not just in India."

*In Home*, Karmakar's exhibition at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2016), he recreated the interior of a modest home from Kutch within an abandoned Portuguese bungalow, highlighting middle-class life through hyperreal, floor-to-ceiling trompe l'oeil paintings. "When the viewer enters [the exhibition area], they should feel they are entering someone's private space," says Karmakar. "I manipulate architecture and scale to make the viewer a participant, not just an observer." Created for the Asia Society





Triennale in Newark (2019), Karmakar's *Passage* juxtaposed interiors from a Bengali man's home and a Catholic household in Baroda inside a colonial American space. "When I exhibited that work in Bombay, viewers felt nostalgia, but for Americans, this was all alien culture. By shifting contexts, meanings change dramatically." Karmakar's paintings offer us nostalgia, not as comfort, but as complexity, where memory and identity collide. "Home is often an illusion," he says, reminding us that belonging is rarely permanent. In his world of shifting walls, home is more question than sanctuary. To belong is to search, not settle. [•]

[ Page 42 ]  
GAURI GILL  
*Untitled (78) from the series The Village on the Highway*  
Archival pigment print  
24" x 16" (size variable)  
Edition | 5 + 2 AP  
2021

[ Page 43 ]  
GAURI GILL  
*Untitled (28) from the series The Village on the Highway*  
Archival pigment print  
65.25" x 43.5"  
Edition | 5 + 2 AP  
2021

Images courtesy of Gauri Gill

[ Pages 44-45 ]  
ABIR KARMAKAR  
*Displacement*  
Installation view  
Oil on canvas  
102" x 237" and 114" x 168" (far right)  
2016-2017  
Image courtesy of Abir Karmakar and Galerie  
Mirchandani + Steinruecke

[ Right ]  
VISHWA SHROFF  
*Night Window*  
Ink and powder pigment on paper (Set of 18)  
9.8" x 7" (each)  
2024  
Image courtesy of Vishwa Shroff and TARQ

