

THE SINDHU PROJECT:

ENIGMA OF ROOTS

New Works by Mahwish Chishty and Gunjan Kumar

Curated by Lise McKean, Ph.D.



Gallery view of *The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots* at the South Asia Institute in Chicago.

The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots

Mahwish Chishty - Gunjan Kumar

Curated by Lise McKean, Ph.D.

Journeys and conversations launched *The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots*. Through their conversation in 2016, Mahwish and Gunjan learned of shared family histories. The Partition of India in 1947 uprooted their families from their homes in the Punjab. Mahwish's family moved from Amritsar in India to Lahore in newly created Pakistan, and Gunjan's family made the opposite journey from Lahore to Amritsar. *The Sindhu Project* embodies each artist's personal explorations of ancestry and home, place and time.

The works also are inspired by their journeys in the Sindhu or Indus River watershed, an expansive region in South Asia: Gunjan's visits to archeological sites associated with the Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization (3300 BCE to 1300 BCE); and Mahwish's visits to sites surrounding Taxila associated with Gandharan architecture and art (300 BCE to 400 CE). With this body of new work, Mahwish and Gunjan bring ancient forms and materials into lively conversation with contemporary art.

The Sindhu Project was conceived as a multi-site collaboration to debut at the South Asia Institute in Chicago in June 2021, and then be reconfigured for simultaneous exhibition at Exhibit 320 in New Delhi, India and at the Zahoor-Ul-Akhlaq Gallery at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan in November 2021. *The Sindhu Project's* ethos of conversation and collaboration resonates in the exhibition and across these pages.

Lise McKean



Artists Mahwish Chishty (left) and Gunjan Kumar (right) with curator Lise McKean (middle)

Lise: Gunjan and Mahwish, let's start with hearing about your sources of inspiration for *The Sindhu Project*. What motivated you to undertake a project that is so ambitious in terms both of the scale and amount of experimental new work you made for it, and the process of creating a multi-site collaboration?

Gunjan : A personal journey that captivated my imagination inspired *The Sindhu Project*. My curiosity about the Indus Valley Civilization dates to 2013, when I visited the excavated site of Dholavira, near Bhuj in Gujarat. Later I visited Sanghol in the Punjab near where I grew up. The local guide pointed out key features of the site's urban design, including a grid layout and a water management system of reservoirs and drainage. The site came alive when I saw marks of human touch on scattered pots, sherds, and bricks. An understanding dawned on me that the Indus Valley Civilization is a foundation of South Asian culture, value system, and daily life.

The history and materials at this site felt in every way the *mool* or root of our lives today. This idea of *mool*, of roots—the hidden that makes possible the visible—is

at the base of my work as an artist. Living in the United States has heightened my interest in and need for this connection with roots.

A second inspiration is my family's history and stories of Partition that I have heard since childhood. When I saw the relatively short route of my family's migration on a map, I realized the stories spoke of an unfathomable distance, one not measured in miles or kilometers. My works for *The Sindhu Project* approach the Indus Valley Civilization from the perspective of a personal journey into roots, a retracing of steps and digging below the surface. At the same time, I continue to explore the dynamic between the process, mediums, and sensory experience that characterizes my previous bodies of work.



Top: Photo taken by Gunjan during her 2013 visit to Dholavira, India.
Bottom left and right: Photos taken by Gunjan of sherds found during her 2017 visit to Sanghol, India.



All images above: Photos taken by Mahwish during her 2019 visit to Taxila, Pakistan, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980.

Mahwish: Inspiration for creating *The Sindhu Project* with Gunjan can be traced to several chance events. Meeting and talking with each other made us realize the similarity of our experience of Punjabi culture despite the Punjab's division between India and Pakistan. Another inspiration was an unplanned visit to Taxila with my family and learning that my mother had lived there as a young woman. Experiencing the archeological sites of Taxila also inspired me to think about what is unseen all around us, including the untold histories and life stories that lie beneath our feet.

More generally, sources of inspiration for *The Sindhu Project* flow from my life experiences as a Pakistan-born artist, who grew up in Saudi Arabia and later studied art in Lahore, the city where I was born. In Lahore I specialized in Miniature Painting because of its rich cultural context and its emphasis on stylization using hierarchical proportion, storytelling, and reference to historical events. My experience as an American citizen is shaped by regular travel to Pakistan. The intersection of these two identities run through my work, as does the tension of combining traditional materials and techniques with more conceptual and experimental approaches to art making.

The shadow play on the screen and the painted scrolls, the embroidery and other kinds of rural art conjure up and trace images inwardly seen. They adumbrate and illustrate the other world so that it may find its place in this world and through its form in art enter the pattern of life.

Stella Kramrisch
Unknown India

Lise: Thank-you both for sharing your thoughts on the project's rich backstory. With this in mind, Gunjan, let's hear about your process of making the works for this show. Take us from concept to execution, and how you went about selecting and working with your materials.

Gunjan: The mediums and processes relate to my fascination with roots and modes of working that allow discovery of deeper layers of oneself. For *The Sindhu Project*, I use mediums that are associated with the Harappan era: terracotta, riverbed soil, handwoven cotton, muslin, and organic pigments. I allow each medium to tell its own story and generate its own associations.

In terms of process, forms based on inferences from the Harappan script, city grids, and pottery sherds emerge through repetitive acts of inscribing, digging, excavating, etc. Both form and process investigate ideas about time and age, presence and absence,

what is lost and what remains. The elements of earth, water, and fire are used to make the works and to modify them through erosion and destruction. This elemental process of mark-making suggests environmental contingencies such as floods and drought, scorching winds and heat.

Each series conveys facets of my journey to create a visual language for my experience of the archeological sites and my exploration of ancestral and cultural roots.



Top and bottom: Gallery view of *The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots* at the South Asia Institute in Chicago.



Top and bottom: Gallery view of *The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots* at the South Asia Institute in Chicago.

Lise: Mahwish, it's your turn to tell us about your process from concept to execution and how you went about selecting and working with your materials.

Mahwish: From the outset Gunjan and I divided *The Sindhu Project's* exhibition space into two parts because we planned to create separate yet complementary bodies of work. Gunjan's work would hang on the walls and my two large installations would occupy the space framed by the walls. Gunjan and I began talking about this project nearly two years ago, so some of my work responds to hers. We made our works in series form. That is, each work consists of multiple components. This modular design allows for each series to be divided when *The Sindhu Project* travels to India and Pakistan for simultaneous exhibition.

My new work for *The Sindhu Project* ranges from two large installations made of laser cut and engraved sheets of clear acrylic, five mixed-media drawings on found atlas pages, and a set of ink rubbings on paper. I begin each project with an experience or idea, and then experiment with media, scale, and form to communicate the concept. If my goal is to draw the viewer toward the work for close observation and interaction, I create intricate details using techniques of miniature painting. Larger installations allow for the viewer to enter the work and become a part of it.

The work I started making in my studio in Delhi was finally my work. I returned to woodblock prints, but instead of carving blocks, I made prints from found wood. I would pick up old wood, eaten by insects, from the side of the road. I'd bring it home, clean it up, oil it, ink it, and print it. I saw myself in that wood.

Zarina
Directions to My House

Lise: Now that you've given us background on *The Sindhu Project* and an overview of your process and materials, Gunjan, please describe and include details about specific works.

Gunjan: *What Remains* is inspired by the Harappan script and clay tablets. I observed the script's numeric elements and then scribbled them from memory onto a clay-smeared cotton panel, from right to left as the original script is believed to have been written. The scribblings are subsequently broken down and covered with clay dust. The three panels of the series *What Remains* oscillate between forms that are actual and adopted, what is lost and finally, what remains. Their composition gives rise to any number of readings.

Age Drawings is linked to the compositions of *What Remains* and similarly might suggest the Harappan script or city grid. The pigment is made from turmeric, thought to have been first cultivated during the Harappan era. Two surfaces are at play in *Age Drawings*, whereby the mark made on the top sheet of mulberry paper forms a shadow-like mark on the sheet beneath. The pair are then displayed side by side. As time and age act on these drawings, the communication between the original form and its shadow, between the past and the present continues to evolve.

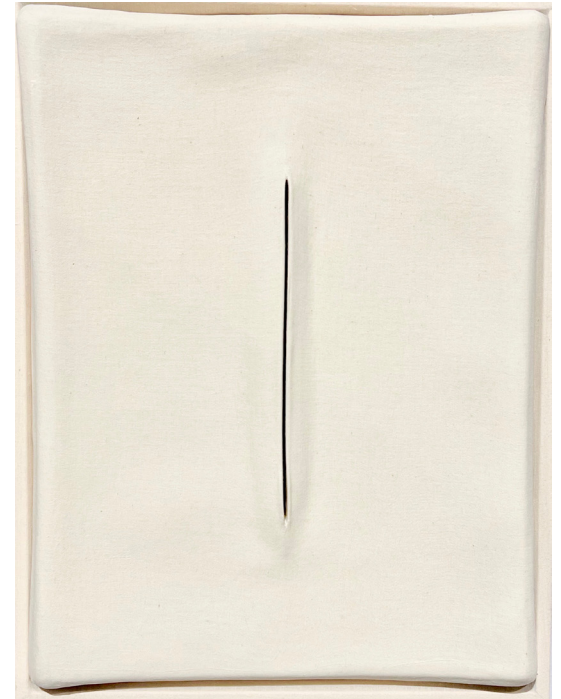


Top: Gunjan Kumar, *What Remains*, 2021. Clay on handwoven raw (kala) cotton, 3 panels, 36" x 48" each.

Bottom: *What Remains* (detail of panel 3)



Top left and right: Gunjan Kumar, *Broken Whole*, 2021. Clay, 6 tiles, 20" x 16" each.
Bottom: *Broken Whole 6* (detail)



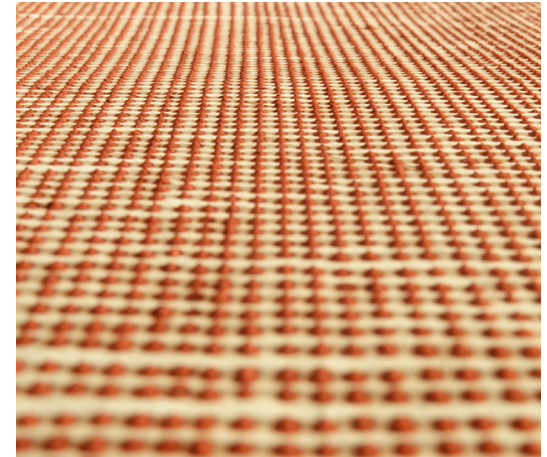
Left: Gunjan Kumar, *Void Structures*, 2021.
Muslin, 6 panels, 12" x 16" each.
Right: *Void Structures* (detail)



Broken Whole is a series at the heart of my work for *The Sindhu Project*. Ancient clay sherds I saw dotting the Harappan site during my first visit lodged in my memory. I began to imagine how such sherds once formed a complete pot, how this pot once was full with daily life happening through and around it. *The Broken Whole* series transfigures the idea of a whole pot, using clay tiles and resembles an image of a large undivided landform. The complete tiles are broken and covered with the clay loosened from breaking them. Where does the land end and pot begin? How do creation and destruction depend on each other? At the same time, the empty space within the frame gives shape to the piece of tile that is missing, intimating the form of a whole pot or an undivided expanse of land.

The *Void Structures* series brings to life the act of digging and its effects. Archeological excavation creates hollow spaces, and the sites I visited are full of them. The deep empty forms of Harappan wells also suggest void structures. The medium of *Void Structures*, cotton, references local history: the oldest fragments of spun and woven cotton are associated with the Indus Valley Civilization. Affixing layer upon layer of cotton muslin, collected from various parts of India, parallels the painstaking process of excavation, while individually incising each layer intensifies the perception of depth and mystery.

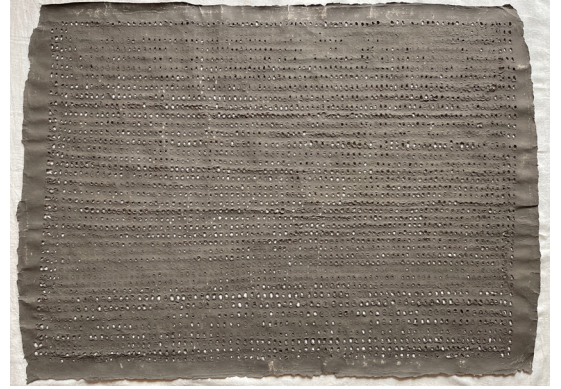
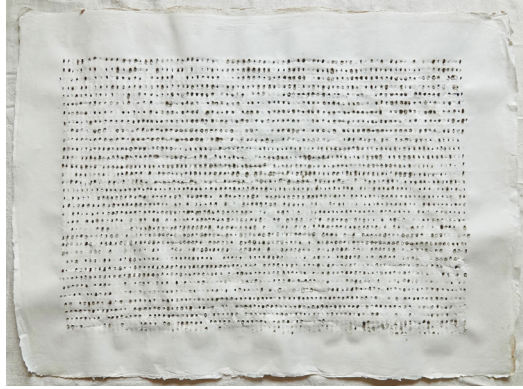
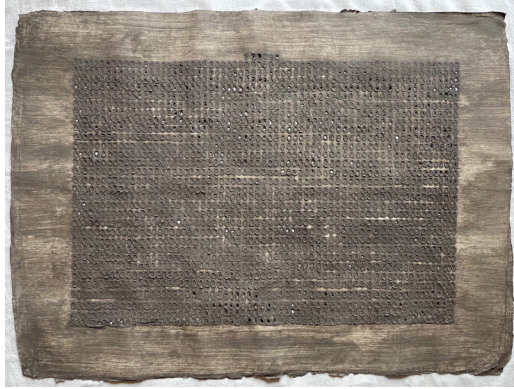
Left: Gunjan Kumar, *Age Drawings*, 2020. Organic pigment on mulberry paper, 9 drawings, 16" x 20" each.
Right: *Age Drawings* (detail)



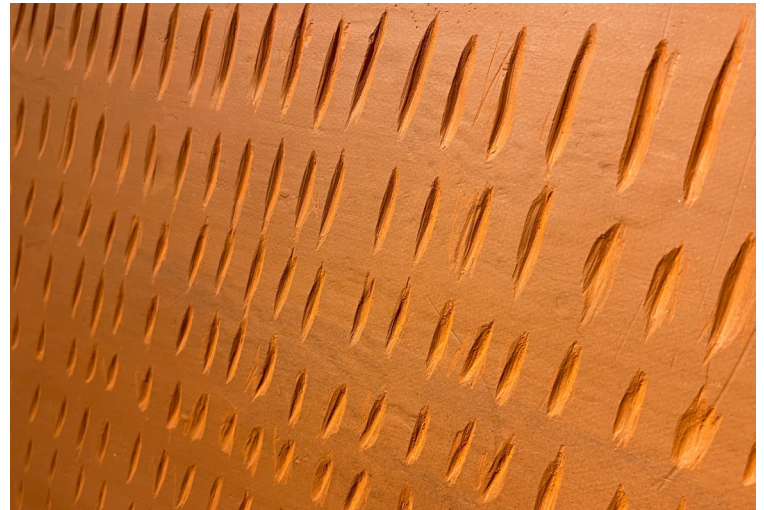
Eent / ईंट / اینٹ (*Brick*) investigates an essential component of Indus Valley Civilization and its ubiquitous form in the proportions of 4:2:1 Bricks convey the sense of a foundation and what is built upon it. *Eent's* sun-dried bricks are handmade in my studio and then eroded with water over months, and finally riverbed soil is applied to their surface. This process evokes the transformative effects of time and the erosion wrought by the elements at sites of the foundational Indus Valley Civilization.



Top: Eent / شنی / شنی (Brick)
2021. Clay, 6 bricks, variable
sizes.
Bottom: Eent / شنی / شنی
(Brick) (detail)



Top: Gunjan Kumar, *Dig Drawings*, 2020. Dig marks by pottery sherd with riverbed soil on handmade (*wasli*) paper, 3 drawings, 35" x 28" each.
Bottom: *Dig Drawing 1* (detail)



Top: Gunjan Kumar, *Dig Structures*, 2021. Clay, 3 Tiles: 15.5" x 11" (Tile 1); 12" x 9" (Tile 2); 14" x 10" (Tile 3).
Bottom: *Dig Structure 1* (detail)



Top: Mahwish Chishty, *Chhaap* (left wall); *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* / این دا ہی دو جگ اٹھہ سناپا (center pillar); and *At This One Point, All Talk Ends* / وچ گل مکدی ہے (on the floor).

Bottom: Mahwish Chishty, *After Dharmarajhika* (left wall); *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* / این دا ہی دو جگ اٹھہ سناپا (center pillar); and *At This One Point, All Talk Ends* / وچ گل مکدی ہے (on the floor).



Lise: Gunjan's reflections on her materials and process add another dimension to our engagement with her works. Each of you establish your own distinctive visual rhythm that together generates sensations of depth and wholeness across the exhibition. Mahwish, would you describe and give us more details about your works?

Mahwish: Inspired by a votive Buddhist stupa at a Gandharan site in Taxila, *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* rises vertically from floor to ceiling as a series of paired discs. Its engraved patterns cast intricate shadows on the adjacent wall and floor, adding volume to this flat and transparent material. The size and spacing of the discs align with the stupa's proportions and evoke the contours of its sculptural form.

The titles of the two large installations, *At This One Point, All Talk Ends* / ایک نقطے وچ گل / مکدی ہے (اس دا ہی دو جگ اطہہ سانا) and *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* / (اس دا ہی دو جگ اطہہ سانا) are from poems by the 17th century Punjabi Sufi poet, Bulleh Shah. Sufis of Sindh and Punjab and Sikh gurus alike drew on his verses, which remain widely revered in Punjabi culture.

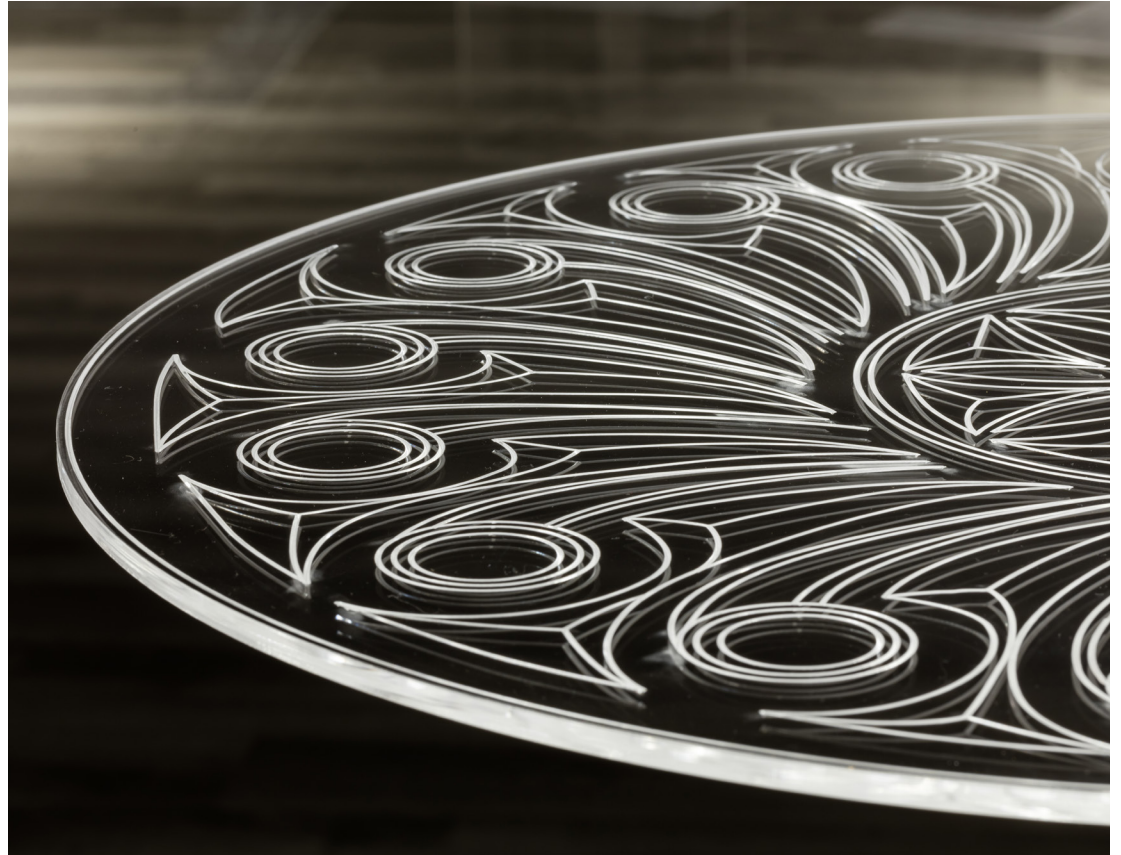
For these two installations I use laser-cut and engraved clear acrylic. As a reductive process, engraving parallels archeological methods such as digging and scraping. The process of engraving also evokes my sense that both physically and metaphorically, I am only beginning to scratch the surface of age-old concerns.

My reflections on time and heritage as an intertwining of past, present, and future are also expressed in the historical sweep of sources for the engraved patterns. Some patterns derive from photographs of decorative elements associated with Gandharan pots and Ajrak (block-printed) textiles of Sindh as well as photographs of masonry and sculpture at Taxila sites. Other sources include motifs traversing centuries of miniature painting and architectural elements from the Lahore Fort, rebuilt during the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century to showcase the empire's wealth and syncretic style.

The organic shape of mango and peepul (*ficus religiosa*) leaves adds rhythm and delight. A subset of patterns resembles watermarks. Stylistic preferences engraved in these installations flow from and into the visual language of contemporary South Asia.



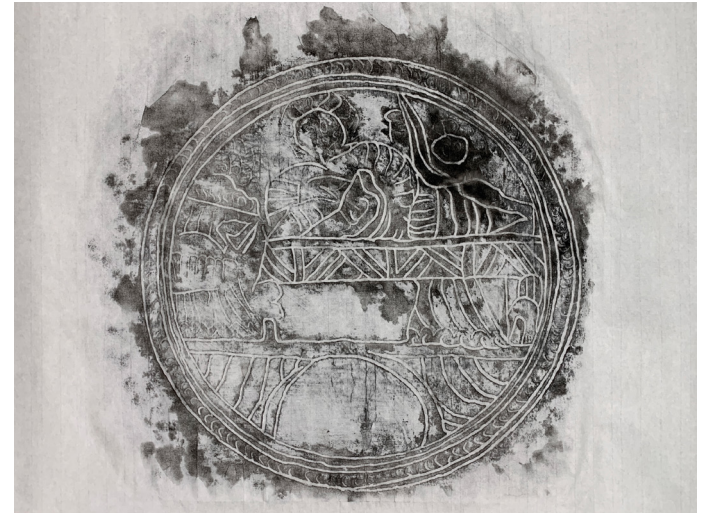
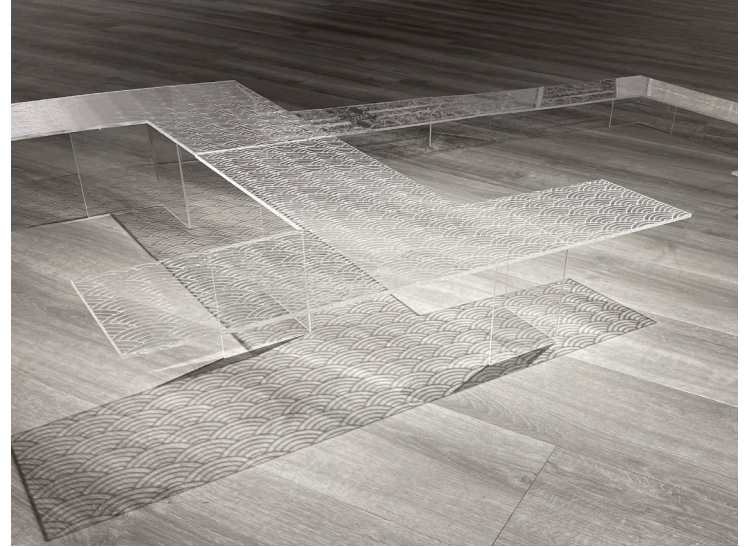
Mahwish Chishty, *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* / اس دا ہی دو جگ اٹھے نسایا
2021. Laser cut and engraved clear acrylic, 156" x 42" x 21."



Left: Mahwish Chishty, *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* / اس دا ہی دو جگ اظہہ سایا

2021. Laser cut and engraved clear acrylic, 156" x 42" x 21."

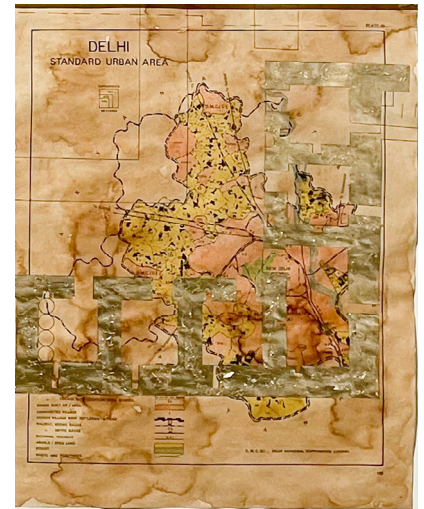
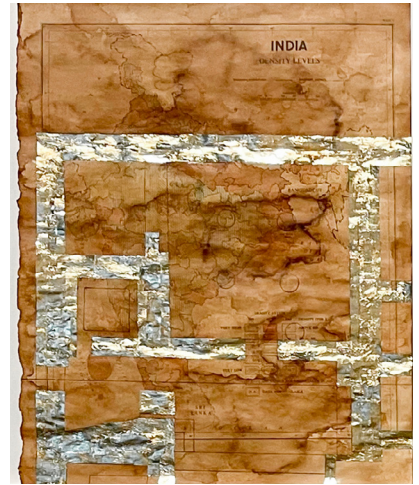
Right: *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds* / اس دا ہی دو جگ اظہہ سایا
(detail)



Top left: Mahwish Chishty, *At This One Point, All Talk Ends* / ایک نقطے وچ گل مکدی ہے / 2021. Laser cut and engraved clear acrylic, 41' x 36' (variable heights). Top right: *At This One Point, All Talk Ends* / ایک نقطے وچ گل مکدی ہے (detail)
 Bottom left: Mahwish Chishty, *Chhaap* / چھاپ (*Impression*), 2021. Ink on paper, 96" x 40." Bottom right: *Chhaap* / چھاپ (*Impression*) (detail)

At This One Point, All Talk Ends, my large horizontal installation references the floorplan of the monastic chambers encircling the Dharmarajika stupa at Taxila. This installation creates a circular form within the gallery for viewers to walk within and around that traces the ritual movement of circumambulation associated with stupas and other objects of devotion. I place segments of the installation at one of three levels, with each signaling the era of the engraved pattern.

Chhaap (Impression) is inspired by the tradition of ink and charcoal rubbings, a process for creating a reproduction of the texture of a surface. Rubbings are valued tools for the study and commemoration of immobile objects. Ink rubbings themselves are potential works of art. The rubbings in this series are based on patterns created for *His Shadow Is on Both Worlds*.



Left: Mahwish Chishty, *Taxila: After Jaulian*, 2021. Tea stain, ink, and gold leaf on found atlas pages, 49" x 42."
Right top and bottom: *Taxila: After Jaulian* (detail)

Each of the five works or drawings in the *Taxila Series* consists of six intricately-painted found atlas pages. I altered the surface of the pages using techniques of collage, image-transfer, and painting. Each drawing translates the floorplan of a site I visited in Taxila in 2019. These works bring my background in traditional miniature painting into play with contemporary methods, expressing a visual rapport between my past and present.

Taxila: After Dharmarajika draws on the floorplan of the monastic cells encircling the Dharmarajika stupa. The layers of materials applied on top of the six pages allude to the land and levels of excavation, with older layers farther from the viewer.

Like other paintings in the series, for *Taxila: After Jaulian* I configure a floorplan of the site onto six found atlas pages. Applying gold leaf to a tea-stained surface is a traditional technique in miniature painting that introduces complexity and luminosity.

The intricately painted black lines in *Taxila: After Sirkap* disappear with distance and gradually emerge as the viewer moves closer to the work. This interplay of seen and unseen was inspired by my experience of Sirkap, whose partial excavation made me wonder what else might be beneath the surface.



Mahwish Chishty, *Taxila: After Sirkap*, 2021. Ink and tea stain on found atlas pages, 32.6" x 63."



Mahwish Chishti, *Taxila: After Dharmarajika*, 2020. Tea stain, photo-transfers, and gouache on found atlas pages, 49" x 42."



Taxila: After Dharmarajika (detail)

I grew up in an old culture, which has its own aesthetic for the time frame we lived in. I never thought of the grid as a modernist intervention and therefore never felt the need to separate it from the spiritual realm. I became familiar with grids by experiencing architecture.

Zarina

Zarina: Paper Like Skin

Lise: Thank-you Mahwish and Gunjan, first for imagining and realizing *The Sindhu Project*, and for glimpses into why and how you went about creating it. As suggestive as words and photographs may be, they're used here above all as an invitation to viewers to engage the sensuality of the *The Sindhu Project* with their own imagination.

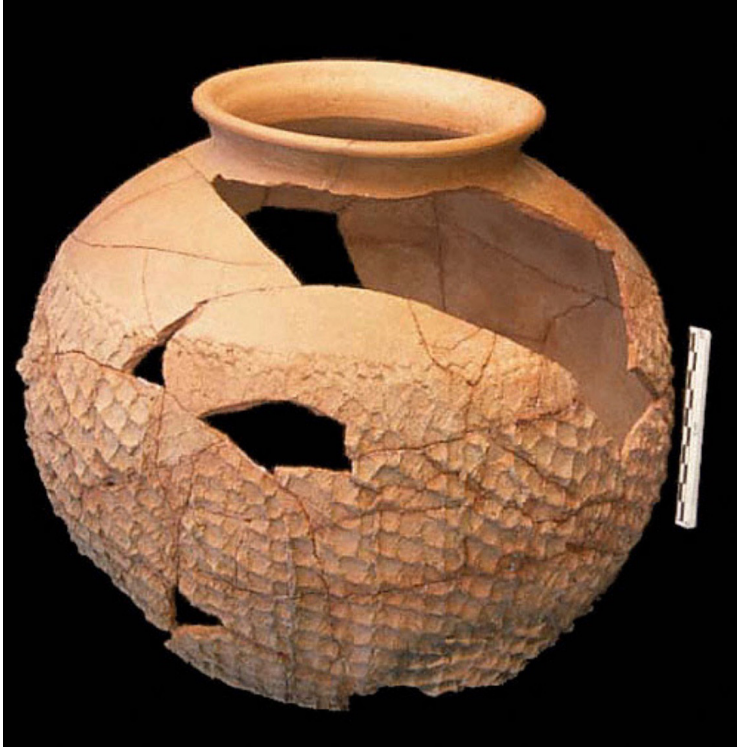
For millennia people from the Sindhu river basin journeyed in all directions to distant lands for exploration and trade, just as other peoples traveled there from near and far seeking livelihood, fortune, and glory. In closing, let's return to inspiration and journey. What do you envision *The Sindhu Project* communicating to contemporary audiences as the exhibition—and its multimedia emissaries—make their way into the wide world?

Gunjan: I hope the exhibition's mediums and rhythms encourage each viewer to set out on a personal journey to their roots, and especially audiences from the region that inspired *The Sindhu Project*. I want them to identify these mediums as their own in the context of their lives past and present as children of the Sindhu.

As we continue to reassemble our own broken pots, I hope that all of us, across the length and breadth of our lives, are able to see ourselves encompassing a larger identity, an identity that is the root of our present.

On that note, I would like to dedicate this project to my grandparents who were living examples of this complete pot, instilling in us as children there is more joining us together than pushing us apart. May the experience of *The Sindhu Project*, in whatever form, continues to move us toward this realization.

Mahwish: Gunjan and I have similar ideas and hopes for what the exhibition communicates. Drawing on our parallel journeys and familial roots, we bring contemporary art-making into dialogue with excavated forms that reimagine the landscape inhabited by our ancestors. By sharing this project, I hope to open up a dialogue about our roots and newly discover the similarities that connect us.



Left: Late Indus reconstructed pot. Photo courtesy of Harappa Archaeological Research Project and harappa.com.
Right: Pottery sherd, photo taken by Gunjan during her 2017 visit to Sanghol, India.

Grateful Acknowledgements

The catalogue for *The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots* is made possible by the generous support of Patricia Crosby, Christine DeRosa, Pat Healy, Mary E. McKean, and David Vidaver.

Mahwish Chishty acknowledges grants and other support she received for *The Sindhu Project* from University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Research Council Grant and the Ohio Arts Council.

A special thanks to her studio assistant Katherine Verdickt and to the Advanced Digital Design and Fabrication Lab at University of Massachusetts, Amherst for access to laser cutting facilities.

Gunjan Kumar acknowledges grants and other support she received for *The Sindhu Project* from The Propeller Fund in Chicago and the South Asian Arts Resiliency Fund of the India Center

in New York City. She also thanks Park West Ceramics and artist Amanda Gentry for opening their studios and sharing their knowledge for the terracotta clay works. She would also like to put a word of appreciation for her husband and daughter for their cooperation while this entire series with all its demands, was made in a shared corner of their apartment during the entire run of the pandemic.

Thank-you to Drs. Afzal and Shireen Ahmad, the founders of the South Asia Institute for hosting *The Sindhu Project: Enigma of Roots* and SAI's team—Asad Jafri, Urooj Shakeel, Ludvig Perés Jonathan Castillo, and Öykü Kolat— for their enthusiasm and assistance. The artists and curator are grateful to gallerist and artist Stano Gredzo, the installation consultant who helped realize our vision for the exhibition at the South Asia Institute.

Catalog Credits

Front cover: Gunjan Kumar, *Broken Whole* (detail)

Back cover: Mahwish Chishty, *Chhaap / چھاپ (Impression)* (detail)

Design: Ludvig Perés

Photography: Johnathan Castillo, Mahwish Chishty, and Gunjan Kumar

Editing: Lise McKean

Printer: Able Printing Service, Berwyn, Illinois

© 2021



Google Earth view of Dharmarajika site in Taxila.

