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In 2018, the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) commissioned Detroit-based artist Neha Vedpathak (b. 1982) to create a large-scale work in her signature “plucked paper” medium (fig. 1). Made through a technique she invented, in which she carefully separates the fibers of Japanese handmade paper using a pushpin, her lacelike works are at once delicate and sturdy. Called *Still I Rise*—a nod to Maya Angelou’s poem of the same title¹—the DIA work consists of multiple sheets of plucked paper sewn together into a square approximately seven feet long on each side. After assembling the work, Vedpathak painted it in gradations of red and yellow—colors she associates with sunrise and sunset, and which are rich with cultural meaning in India, her country of birth.² Sewn onto a metal armature, which is then attached to a wall, when displayed, the work appears to float, and the plucked paper casts shadows that become integral to the viewing experience (fig. 2).

Vedpathak was born in Pune, Maharashtra, in western India, and graduated from the city’s Abhinav Kala Mahavidyalaya

(Abhinav College of Art) with a degree in fine arts in 2005. Initially focusing on nonrepresentational painting, she began to expand her practice in 2008, experimenting with different mediums. She moved to the United States in 2007, living in Indiana, Dearborn, Chicago, and Phoenix before settling in Detroit in 2016. Each place has made an impact on her oeuvre; drawing inspiration from her surroundings, she has taken visual and material cues from her environment to create works as varied as handmade rocks, meticulously shaped mounds of snow and earth, and plucked paper compositions inspired by the colors and shapes of local architecture. Her works and practice are also informed by philosophical and spiritual concepts drawn from her upbringing in India and from her intellectual engagement with topics as wide-ranging as twentieth-century poetry, Indian aesthetic theory, and social and gender politics.³

The DIA first approached Vedpathak in the summer of 2017, when staff from the Curatorial Division and the Department of Interpretation were planning the reinstallation of the museum’s Asian collection in an expanded suite of galleries. Seeking to connect our new installation to the global present, the team prioritized the inclusion of modern and contemporary art in each gallery, to be displayed alongside

FIG. 1 Neha Vedpathak (Indian, born 1982), *Still I Rise*, 2018, handmade Japanese paper, acrylic paint, and thread, 83½ × 88 in. (212.1 × 223.5 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, G. Albert Lyon Foundation Fund, L. A. Young Fund, and Asian Art General Fund, with funds from Gibbs-Williams Fund; gifts from Robert H. Tannahill, Roy D. Chapin, Jr., by exchange, 2018.76. © Neha Vedpathak

Revisiting *Still I Rise*

Katherine E. Kasdorf in Conversation
with Neha Vedpathak

FIG. 2 The Padma and Raj Vattikuti and Family Gallery at the Detroit Institute of Arts, with *Still I Rise* on display, November 2018.



FIG. 3 Neha Vedpathak, *So Many Stars in the Sky, Some for Them and Some for Me*, 2018, handmade Japanese paper, acrylic paint, and thread, 80 × 80 in. (203.2 × 203.2 cm). (© Neha Vedpathak. Photograph by Clare Gatto)



the historical works that form the core of the collection.⁴ Having recently joined the DIA as Assistant Curator of Arts of Asia and the Islamic World, I consulted with my colleagues in the Department of Contemporary Art—Laurie Ann Farrell, then head of the department, and Taylor Renee Aldridge and Lucy Mensah, then assistant curators—and they introduced me to Vedpathak.⁵ Together, we selected *Still I Rise* from the proposals she presented,

and the work featured prominently in the Padma and Raj Vattikuti and Family Gallery of Indian and Southeast Asian Art when the DIA opened its Robert and Katherine Jacobs Asian Wing in November 2018.⁶

In this interview, Vedpathak and I revisit *Still I Rise*, reflecting on its initial conceptualization, Vedpathak's process in making the work, and its place in her oeuvre. From its beginnings, a central theme of the work has been resilience—an idea

Vedpathak explores through color, process, and the deep connections her work has to place. World events since 2020 have expanded the significance of this theme in ways no one could have predicted in 2018, and we consider how the profound changes of the recent past might impact viewers' responses to the work. To Vedpathak, *Still I Rise* offers hope and harmony in times of uncertainty, and its meaning continues to evolve.

Katherine E. Kasdorf (KEK): When the DIA approached you about the commission, you were in the midst of creating a series of works that responded directly to Detroit and its physical landscape (fig. 3). Much of your prior work had also been connected to place. How did your experience as an artist living and working in Detroit impact the conceptualization of *Still I Rise*? How does place factor into this work?

Neha Vedpathak (NV): Yes, since returning to Detroit in early 2016, having previously lived here briefly in 2007, my intention as an artist was to better understand my surroundings and the city that I now call home. I had a sense that the story of the city was a multilayered and expansive story. I wanted to absorb, learn, and reflect on what it meant to be a Detroiter, being fully aware that I was a new resident, and my instinct to get my bearings was primarily an artistic pursuit. Urban landscape and architecture became my entry point to unlocking the complexity of Detroit and grasping the tenor of the city and its residents. The abandoned homes and lavish grand buildings alike became a stand-in for its people; they also highlighted the city's past and present economic disparities. My sympathies and politics lay with Detroit's residents who face multitudes of adversities and injustices with resilience and defiance, many of whom I have come to know personally in the neighborhoods of my home and my studio.

I created a three-part series of work related to the city of Detroit, going from broad to specific in my focus. The research and work related to it were emotionally and physically challenging. And in the midst of it, while I was on my second installment of the Detroit series, is when we met and

you approached me about the commission. As you will remember, some of the earlier ideas I presented were directly linked to Detroit's landscape in their specificity. Detroit was front and center on my mind during the conception of *Still I Rise*, and I knew I wanted to reflect on that particular time in 2017–18 in the story of the city, to capture the sense of resolve and the energy that was palpable to me. I also wanted to take a long view and develop an idea of optimistic, stoic distance for the viewer and myself. Distance sometimes allows a place and opportunity to introspect, celebrate successes, and mourn failures, while holding the knowledge that every moment passes and that change is imminent and constant. The image and symbolism of sunrise and sunset came to my mind and *Still I Rise* was born, created primarily for the people of Detroit.

KEK: Of course, *Still I Rise* is connected to more than one place: you've described one of its central themes, resilience, as a common quality shared by both Detroit and India. Could you say more about that? How do you see Detroit and India as similarly resilient? And how do you explore the idea of resilience in *Still I Rise*?

NV: The resilience that I see in Detroit reminds me of India. As a person who grew up in India and now lives in Detroit, in my observation the people of India and Detroit have a lot in common and they share a similar spirit of resilience, although the histories of the two places differ. India has had its share of difficulties related to colonization, patriarchy, and post-Partition reconciliation.⁷ Detroit, on the other hand, is reeling from social and political inequalities, postindustrial divestment, and the impact of a shrinking population. I'm speaking broadly here, but what I have learned and seen from my interactions with people from different walks of life here in Detroit and back home in India is that systemic inequity exists within the social structures of both India and Detroit, making them challenging places to survive and thrive in. And yet, I have seen people of both places show a certain grit and pride that possibly comes from surviving

constant adversity, and I'd associate that with resilience. I see an abundance of confidence, will, creativity, and cultural richness in both societies. It may be speculated that within the difficulties of life one finds one's own underlying character. Often it is uncomfortable to talk about these glaring injustices and inequalities, but my job as an artist is to be an honest observer and contemplate what I see and experience. And here, I see strength in people. I see their defiance, their will to survive, and their conviction to make tomorrow better for themselves and their children. And what can be more symbolic of resilience than the metaphor of sunrise and sunset? Within this metaphor is an idea that darkness is followed by light, but also that darkness follows light—the cyclical nature is both a respite and a caution. *Still I Rise* attempts to capture all these complexities while taking a long view. My attempt was to create a work that is hopeful but honest.

KEK: The gradations of yellow and red that characterize *Still I Rise* have multiple associations. In some of your earlier works (fig. 4), you employed these colors in reference to turmeric and kumkum (vermilion-colored powder), two substances that factor into many religious ceremonies and everyday practices in South Asia.

In *Still I Rise*, these colors also evoke sunrise and sunset, as you've mentioned, referencing an ongoing cycle of time. Could you say more about what these colors mean for you? And what about that thin, white stripe at the center of the work? It's marked by an absence of pigment. What sort of meaning do you invest in that detail?

NV: As you point out, turmeric and kumkum are infused with meaning within the Indian context. Turmeric has plenty of health benefits that the Western world now understands and embraces. In India, turmeric also symbolizes prosperity, health, good luck, and fertility. Kumkum, which is traditionally made of a turmeric and lime mixture, is associated with auspiciousness, energy, and the third eye chakra.⁸ Traditionally and culturally, turmeric and kumkum together are quite a team of pigments with an ability to conjure powerful meaning in their symbolism. It is very interesting to observe how a material thing becomes infused with so much meaning and virtue over a period of time, transcending its physical properties—quite similar to how a work of art gathers layers of meaning over time, separate from those of its author.

I had worked with turmeric and kumkum prior to *Still I Rise* from 2009 to 2013. At the time, I was navigating my identity as

FIG. 4
Neha Vedpathak,
Snowmass, 2010,
snow, turmeric, and
kumkum, dimensions
variable with each
mound approximately
6 in. (15.2 cm) in
height. (Photograph
courtesy of the artist)



an artist, specifically the part of my identity that is often labeled “Indian artist.”⁹ I was trying to make peace with knowing that it is how I am seen within the American context, as opposed to merely being viewed as an “artist.” I was also reckoning with the notion and meaning of an “Indian artist living abroad.” These are questions of semantics, but they can get quite complicated, and negotiating them can be messy, especially because as an artist all I want is to defy labels, categories, and boxes. And yet, counterintuitively, I have learned that with time, a certain measure of acceptance comes too; as the world around me thinks differently about these identities, my stance evolves as well. So, when I arrived at the idea of sunrise and sunset as the central visual cue for *Still I Rise*, I knew the colors of turmeric and kumkum would work well conceptually and aesthetically. *Still I Rise* was being commissioned for the South Asian gallery at the DIA, so the context in which the work would be shown and seen (at least initially) made the choice of using this iconic pairing of colors even more meaningful and relevant.

As for the thin white section that remains unpainted in the center of the work, I was initially reluctant to talk about it or to unravel the personal meaning I had attached to it, but as some time has passed since I made the work, I think I can discuss it a bit. To me, the thin white strip is what makes the work, both conceptually and visually. I imagined the little sliver of the unpainted area of paper as the elemental core—not only the core of the work, but, to expand this idea further, it represents the common elemental fabric that connects us all fundamentally and is beyond the temporal details and complexities of life. I touch upon several different topics through the work, but possibly it is this reticent, ambiguous part that is most potent and laden with meaning.

KEK: I love that: the central, unpainted section represents something essential that is beyond representation. Visually, it also reveals the essence of the plucked paper. This brings me to my next question: Can you tell us more about your process? You invented a technique you call plucking,

which yields a beautiful, lacelike paper medium. For larger-scale works, you sew together multiple sheets of plucked paper. How many sheets of handmade Japanese paper did you use for *Still I Rise*? What kinds of physical and mental energy are involved in creating your plucked paper?

NV: In late 2009, after a period of trial and error, I invented a technique in which I manipulate the surface of a sheet of Japanese handmade paper, using a tiny pushpin to separate its fibers (fig. 5). The vision of someone plucking a rose off a rose shrub initially came to mind—just as one has to be firm yet delicate to pluck a rose from its thorny branches, my process required similar dexterity and focus, and I thought my reward for it would be as sweet as a fragrant and beautiful rose. I loved this poetic vision and, inspired by this idea, I decided to call the new technique “plucking.”

It took some time to translate the initial inspired idea into a more dependable technique. My plucking technique is a slow, long, laborious, and repetitive process. Time, or more precisely the time required, is an inherent part of the work. I find it most satisfying to see what the use of an alternative tool (a pushpin) and a simple, mundane, repetitive action (plucking) together can achieve. I always start by

FIG. 5
Neha Vedpathak working in her signature plucking technique using a pushpin, 2010. (Photograph courtesy of the artist)





FIG. 6 Detail of fig. 1.

plucking individual sheets of paper, which are roughly twenty-one by thirty inches, and I often sew multiple plucked paper sheets together to create a large-scale work. It takes me roughly a week to pluck one sheet of paper. And if I remember correctly, about sixteen sheets of paper were sewn together to create *Still I Rise*.

The last part of your question is slightly more difficult to answer. I like to compare the stamina required for plucking to that of a marathon runner's endurance—if one is running for almost eight hours a day most days of the week. My practice is anchored in daily physical discipline and mental concentration. The rigor of the work can be demanding and sometimes it is even brutal, but thankfully I have the temperament for it. The process is especially challenging if I am away from plucking for a few days. However, once I am in my “zone,” the actual

plucking process has an almost meditative quality where the perception of time distorts and shifts.

KEK: What about those small areas of unplucked paper, or the places where the edges of multiple sheets of paper overlap to create more opacity, as in the upper left corner of *Still I Rise*? What were your reasons for creating those details?

NV: I often like to include some unplucked areas of the paper in my work. I think the contrast between the plucked and unplucked areas highlights the textures and the plucking process. It allows the viewers to see how the paper looks before the plucking is done. The overlapping layers of paper and multiple layers of paint build up the surface, making the work opaque in varying degrees (fig. 6). *Still I Rise* has

a highly pigmented surface and several layers of acrylic paint were used to achieve its particular color intensity. I wanted to create a work with rich, vivid hues that, to me, represent the vitality, exuberance, and strength of life itself. The scale of the work also motivated me to build up the surface in this way. The multiple layers of acrylic paint strengthen the work, allowing it to better support its own weight.¹⁰

KEK: It's been just a few years since you created *Still I Rise*, but so much has happened since then. We have all lived through a pandemic, which at the time of this writing is still ongoing. You have become a mother. The world has changed profoundly, on both global and personal scales, for so many of us. How do you view *Still I Rise* in light of these changes?

NV: I think the title, *Still I Rise*, is a good entry point into the work, and a good place to come back to or reenter with. Thinking about *Still I Rise* in 2022, when so much has happened and changed, feels somewhat restorative. As an artist, I strongly believe that the meaning of the work constantly evolves and expands beyond the intention with which it was conceived and created. I also recognize that the viewers bring their own narrative and life experiences to the work, and the same viewers are constantly changing as well. So, even though the work may remain the same physically (discounting the material aging itself), it can still grow and have the most dynamic interpretive life.

Having said this, from my perspective, the core meaning of *Still I Rise* still endures and resonates, but the narrative can be read in reference to current events—struggles of the global pandemic, the social justice movement that came to the fore during the summer of 2020, and the fear of constant uncertainty and instability. The following words of Maya Angelou's poem say it best: "Just like moons and like suns, / With the certainty of tides, / Just like hopes springing high, / Still I'll rise."¹¹ It conjures the image of bravery and courage that we have witnessed in the last two years in the face of death, injustice, disease, and chaos. The visual image of *Still I Rise* continues to

be powerful and meaningful for me, and even perhaps a needed image that can help us bear the weight of this moment.

On a personal level, being a new mother and a working artist during the pandemic has brought its unique challenges in many ways. Yet, having a young baby in one's life is inherently a hopeful and beautiful event, and thankfully like the original intention of the work *Still I Rise*, I have my own personal reason to be optimistic and joyful even in these very dark and exhausting times.

KEK: What impact have the events of the past two years had on your work?

NV: I fear the impact of the last two years is still unfolding in many ways as we continue to struggle with the pandemic. But this period did significantly challenge me and my practice, as it challenged us all in ways big and small. When the pandemic broke out, I had just opened my show in New York¹² and was in the process of starting a new body of work. This is hard to do in normal times, but in 2020 it was especially challenging to create and find a voice that felt relevant and truthful, as so many fundamental aspects of daily life were rapidly changing. In time, though, I was able to put this horrific pandemic in perspective with all the other tragedies we have collectively faced as families, as citizens of respective countries, and as humans on this planet. This insight permitted and propelled me to keep doing what I know and love, which is to make art. Working in the studio during this time had its ebb and flow for certain, but on the whole it helped me cope and develop a degree of normality.

On a personal level, I was pregnant just before the pandemic broke, so emotionally, physically, and hormonally I was a mess. It was a scary time on many levels. Keeping track of time, disease, and death around the world while carrying a life within me was challenging. But somehow life persists. Spending time in the studio and finding a way to be authentic and transparent through the work was helpful. It allowed me to channel my worries into my practice and into work that hopefully speaks of its time. And now, being a new mother, time management inside and outside the studio



FIG. 7 Neha Vedpathak, *Loop* series. Left: *Loop 1*, 2021, handmade Japanese paper, acrylic paint, and thread, 35 × 33 in. (88.9 × 83.8 cm); center: *Loop 2*, 2021, handmade Japanese paper, acrylic paint, and thread, 36½ × 29½ in. (92.7 × 74.9 cm); right: *Loop 3*, 2021, handmade Japanese paper, acrylic paint, and thread, 33 × 35 in. (83.8 × 88.9 cm). (© Neha Vedpathak. Photographs by Heather Jackson)

seems to be the main matter of contention. It has forced me to be very precise and efficient in my practice, at least for the moment.

KEK: The Flint Institute of Arts (FIA) recently featured your work in a solo exhibition called *Time (Constant, Suspended, Collapsed)*.¹³ How does your exploration of time in *Still I Rise* relate to this more recent work?

NV: Aside from the element of time inbuilt in the plucking process, the works at FIA and *Still I Rise* conceptually overlap in a few ways.

When *Still I Rise* was created, I was studying and reflecting on the decades of shifts and weathering of a place—Detroit. I was taking into account its accrued past and simultaneously looking ahead, imagining an optimistic future, notwithstanding the ebb and flow of life. *Still I Rise* plays with and emphasizes the cyclic pattern of time through the imagery of sunrise and sunset. The works exhibited at FIA, on the other hand, were made in the context of the larger global pandemic and the events of 2020. From that perspective, the show deals with the altered perceptions of time and space that so many people experienced during that period, where the past, the present, and the future seemed to have collapsed onto one another. *Time (Constant, Suspended, Collapsed)* explores the concept of time on both a universal scale and a human scale. This body of work and *Still I Rise* are connected in their outward long view, and in their similar mustered-up will and courage to overcome and transcend the

challenges faced by humanity. But they differ in tone. In the FIA show, the works titled *Loop 1*, *Loop 2*, and *Loop 3* (fig. 7) speak especially to the surreal tendencies we have experienced in the past two years, where the idea of time collapsing doesn't seem far-fetched. This perspective is a significant departure from the measured tone of *Still I Rise*, which reassures us with the predictable cyclic rhythms of sunrise and sunset.

KEK: Thinking about your practice over the past ten to fifteen years, and thinking about future directions, how would you describe your working philosophy?

NV: I have come to recognize that alternating my focus between a specific concept and an ambiguous notion, and between what is temporal and what is nonmaterial, has become a mainstay of my practice. For example, in *Still I Rise*, I consider the history of Detroit from the twentieth century onward in particular and simultaneously draw attention to larger cyclic patterns, through the imagery of sunrise and sunset. At the same time, I also hint at my connection to India. This way of approaching a subject from multiple viewpoints, creating nuance, and making space for contradictions to coexist has become a recurring attitude or philosophy of my work.

Ultimately, I want my work to hold a degree of truth, and to capture the essential energy of a place, object, or idea.

- 1 Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise," from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems* (1978), Poetry Foundation website, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>.
- 2 See below for further discussion of the significance of color in *Still I Rise*.
- 3 For further discussion of these ideas, see Shaurya Kumar, ed., exh. cat. *E/MERGE: Art of the Indian Diaspora* (Lombard, IL: National Indo-American Museum, 2021), pp. 44–47, and the National Indo-American Museum website, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://www.niam.org/emerge/neha-vedpathak/>; Simone DeSousa Gallery, exh. cat. *Neha Vedpathak: Many Moons, Same Sky* (Detroit: Simone DeSousa Gallery, 2019), with essays by Taylor Renee Aldridge, Juana Williams, and Timothy van Laar; and Fred Sasaki, "Bhabha/Neha Vedpathak" (Chicago: Poetry Foundation, 2016), exhibition pamphlet; see also the exhibition entry on the Poetry Foundation website, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/exhibitions/74563/neha-vedpathak>.
- 4 Laurie Ann Farrell also discusses this initiative in her essay in the present volume, pp. 18–19.
- 5 Aldridge had recently published an article on Vedpathak's work: Taylor Renee Aldridge, "Meditative Rigor: The Work of Neha Vedpathak," *Art21 Magazine* (May–June 2017), accessed December 17, 2021, <http://magazine.art21.org/2017/06/19/meditative-rigor-the-work-of-neha-vedpathak/#.YbuoaRPMKuW>.
- 6 Due to the light-sensitive nature of works on paper, *Still I Rise* is not on permanent display. To protect the work and to prevent its colors from fading, the DIA keeps it in a custom-built case in storage when not on display.
- 7 When India gained independence from the British in 1947, the country was divided into the nations of India and Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh, then called East Pakistan, was part of the latter). This Partition led to widespread sectarian violence and displacement, as many Muslims migrated to Pakistan and many Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India, often by force. The trauma of Partition endures, as do tensions between the nations of India and Pakistan, despite efforts toward reconciliation. Sectarian violence in both nations also persists, having escalated alarmingly in recent years with the rise of religious nationalist groups.
- 8 Many yoga systems describe a series of *chakras*, or energy centers, located at specific points along a vertical axis at the center of the body. Chakras are associated with healing practices and each one can serve as a focus point for meditation. The "third eye chakra" is located between the eyebrows and is commonly marked with kumkum, especially in contexts of Hindu worship.
- 9 See Kumar, ed., and the National Indo-American Museum website (see note 3). For broader discussions of artists from the Indian diaspora in the United States and elsewhere, see Shaurya Kumar, "Art of the Indian Diaspora," in Kumar, ed., idem, pp. 8–11; and Karin Zitzewitz, "Surviving Abstraction through Abstraction: Frameworks for Art of the Indian Diaspora," in Kumar, ed. idem, pp. 32–35.
- 10 When the work is on display, it is also supported by its custom-built metal armature.
- 11 From Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" (see note 1).
- 12 *Surface Rhythm: Sohan Qadri and Neha Vedpathak*, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York, February 27–March 28, 2020. See exhibition website, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.sundaramtagore.com/exhibitions/surface-rhythm>.
- 13 *Time (Constant, Suspended, Collapsed): Neha Vedpathak*, Flint Institute of Arts, October 9, 2021–January 9, 2022. See exhibition website, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://flintarts.org/events/exhibitions/time-constant-suspended-collapsed-neha-vedpathak>. See also "Detroit-based Artist's Meticulous Process on Display at Flint Gallery," *Model D*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.modeldmedia.com/features/VedpathakInFlint.aspx>.