

On finding a form for what's inside your head



Artist and designer Somnath Bhatt discusses creation as a quest, the importance of maintaining a consistent artistic output while working full-time, and interrogating the mythic qualities in his work.

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As told to Willa Köerner, 2555 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Day jobs](#), [Time management](#).

How would you describe your creative approach?

I'm driven to use drawing as a way to enact an extended sense of anticipation. I see the forms I create as *in search of something, or in anticipation of something*.

When I'm composing drawings, I'm after a specific feeling. Usually a type of intensity which can be blurted out from inside of me on a blank surface. It's a quest to find a visual form for what's happening inside my head. *What is the tastiest version of that particular headspace I can get to?* This sounds a bit abstract, but that's honestly what's happening when I'm putting pencil to paper.

Do you actually draw with a pencil on paper? For some reason I assumed you worked digitally.

Usually I start off with tiny sketches on paper, and then I'll expand them digitally. But the initial gesture does start with a graphite pencil on paper.

Overall my creative tools are simple, even once I'm working digitally. I'm just drawing with a stylus at the lowest resolution possible, and then I have these shortcuts that I apply in Photoshop, which tend to bring out unintended effects. I also use a lot of layering.



Steps of Somnath's drawing process

Did you teach yourself Photoshop?

I first learned Photoshop as a teenager, on online forums. I'd find step-by-step instructions for things like, "How to make a gradient," and "How to add custom brushes."

Then in art school, I learned Photoshop for what it was intended to be used for: editing photos. I studied design, so I was using Photoshop to edit images for that, too.

After graduating there was a point where I thought, "I don't want to just work with existing images. What if I started a drawing in Photoshop from scratch?" Starting from literally a single pixel felt like a self-initiated way to make discoveries.

How and when did your signature pixelated drawing style start to emerge?

I think it emerged in 2020 thanks to a project I did with a risograph collective, [TXTbooks](#). They reached out to me to make a zine, and I was debating whether I wanted to make a traditional zine with laid-out text and images, or if I wanted to go in a totally different direction, and make it 100% drawing-based. I ended up doing the latter, and it was the first time I did something that's in the visual language I use now.



Aflame, 2021 Digital textile print on cotton

I'm curious to hear you talk about your fine art practice versus your illustration and design practices. A lot of artists struggle to know how much to mix their paid and unpaid work stylistically, or how to draw a line between the two practices.

To me, it's all interrelated. I think patrons or galleries usually want artists to have this compartmentalized and clean separation between a fine art practice and paid work, but I personally think that betrays the reality of being a working artist today, where it's not sustainable or even realistic for one person to only be doing one thing or the other. It's often impossible to attain this mythic image of a master artist in his atelier.

Are you paying your bills from freelance illustration and design work these days?

No, no. My income comes from three different sources. One is freelance illustration, design, and writing, another is making and selling my art. But I also have a day job.

Can I ask what your day job is?

Well, last week my friend Evan Chang gave me the advice: "Try not talking about work with new people." But, I'll tell you anyway: I do art direction for Bloomberg Businessweek.

I think Evan's advice came from wanting to help me find new approaches for looking at my practice. He said, "Not talking about your job for a while will help you see what other kinds of conversations pop up about your creative practice." Also, it would just help to nurture the inner voice I need to channel in my practice.

Did he give you this advice in the context of networking conversations? Like when you're introducing yourself?

Yeah, exactly. To not have a conversation be so scripted, like, "Hi, I'm Som, I do X, Y, Z at Bloomberg Businessweek." I'm currently in week two of trying not to talk about my day job. But here we are! [laughs]

Although, I would like to note that the roster for illustrators that art directors reach out to is usually pretty

narrow, meaning the same 10-ish people get most of the jobs. These people tend to be based in the U.S. or in Europe. I love to keep non-western illustrators on my radar. My friend [Arsh Raziuddin](#) is amazing at this! My advice to other art directors would be to hire more non-western people for editorial jobs as a way to bring new voices to the space. My day job is very rewarding in that regard—I get to act as a magnet to pull in new voices and talent.

It's interesting, because I only know you through your art practice, I didn't even know you had a day job! Do you feel like having these two different parts of yourself is sort of giving you a split personality?

Now that you mention it, it's possible. I think a lot of people don't know that I have a day job, and a lot of people don't know that I have an art practice.



Cover illustration for Bloomberg Businessweek's May Tech Issue

You must be working a lot if you have a full-time job and you're doing all these art-and-design projects.

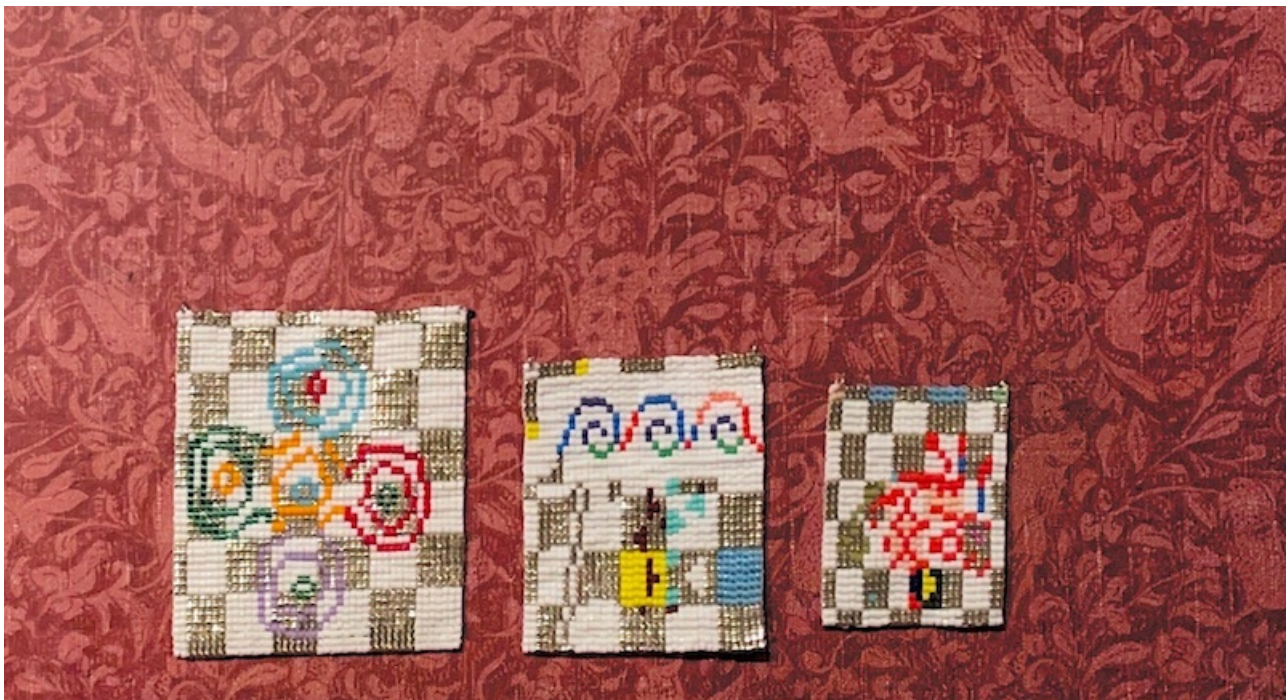
Yeah, but it still never feels like enough.

How do you put up boundaries around your job so that you still have time and mental space for your creative practice?

I've tried to build up a discipline where I'm doing certain things every week. And I'm slowly learning to say "no" more.

Overall, the things I want to make can feel vast, which is daunting—especially when trying to chip away at them on top of my nine-to-five. My practice has no end vision, which is why when you asked me how I would describe my creative approach, I said it's "always in search of something." This inner drive is what holds it all together.

But having said that, I do try to make three physical things every 15 days. That's one specific guideline I've given myself, which stemmed out of some advice I got from another friend, Sunitha Kumar Emmart. She said, "You should always be creating output from your own practice. Even when you're working full-time, you need to keep making things." So even when I'm not sure how it all ties together, I just try to make my three objects. Having this little goal keeps me in search of new physical forms, and helps my drawings not just be .pngs on my hard drive.



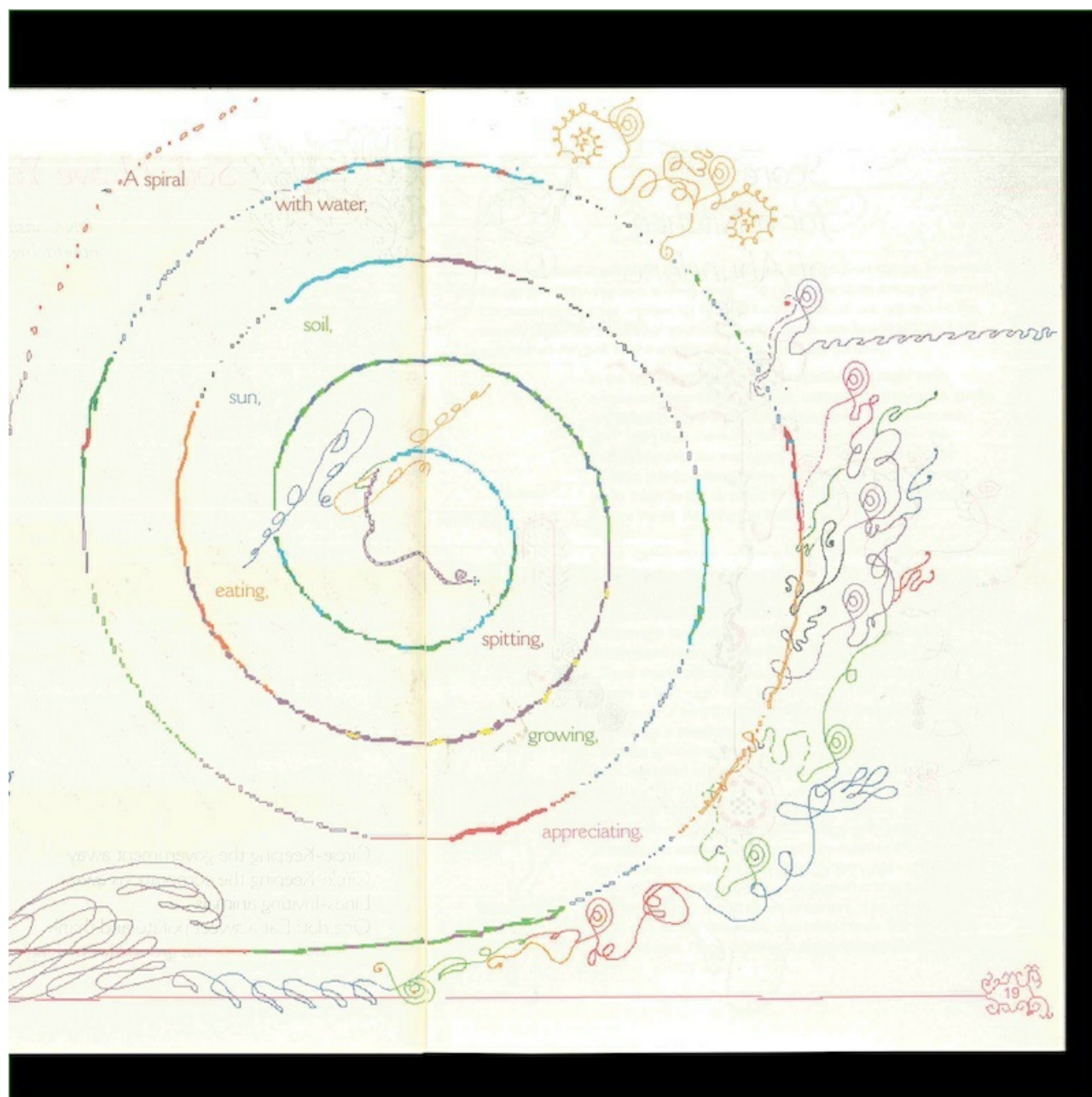
Drawings made into bead ornaments with Wade Winslow that show expansion of ornamental forms

You've created some really beautiful collaborations with some of my favorite people, like the Compendium project you designed with Yasaman Sheri of Serpentine's Synthetic Ecologies Lab, and Scores for a New Earth, a zine project for LinYee Yuan of MOLD Magazine. Were you friends with them before you worked with them, or did you work for them and then become their friends? How does friendship play a role in who you work with?

It's always recursive. I met LinYee at a book fair, and then we stayed in touch and ended up working together, as well as becoming friends. And then I was friends with Yasaman's friend Alexis before she reached out, and we ended up working together, which in turn helped us become friends. A working relationship can start from a

friendship, or it can start as a work relationship, and then we can end up being friends.

I always feel more interested in working on something if there is that added value of working with friends. I mean, it would be nice to be friends with everyone you work with.



Spread of *MOLD Magazine's* Scores for a New Earth

I see a lot of mythic qualities in your work, and I know you've been focused on interrogating the role mythology plays in contemporary society. Can you share some of those nascent ideas?

I've always felt a little bit uneasy or uncomfortable about the mythic sensibility people perceive in my work. I'm drawn to a certain aspect of mythology, but it's not like I'm constantly thinking about myths. Lately I've been compelled to interrogate that perception.

I've felt more and more that, with the rise of global fascism and the current socio-political climate, the mythic is becoming extremely rigid, even outright dangerous. With modern-day religion, fanatical ideologies, online trolling, parasocial relationships, algorithms, all of it together—I feel like the mythic appears in all of these arenas. It's also tied to a simplistic approach to image production, and how we consume culture. These are all very vast spheres, but I think our ideas of the "mythic" are becoming less and less transcendent and expansive, and turning into something cruelly inelastic.

I've been wanting to understand what it means when the mythic is used for rigid and violent impulses. Displacement, destruction, and the glorification of violence as a way to invoke a mythical past is one of the many examples we see unfolding in our present. Promises of reconstructing mythic pasts motivate so much violence; in my own homeland, Hindu-nationalism in India, Zionism in Israel and America, the newly ultra-right European parliament; these are just a few places where such feelings run high.



■■■■■, gouache, pigment ink, ink transfer on cold pressed paper, 2022

Do you see your work as mythic?

My hope is that the mythic sensibility in my work can evoke a transcendent feeling, which is something that I'm always reaching for: to make feelings of joy and sorrow from long ago feel close to our current joys and sorrows. But I want to ask, "What can be mythic to someone who doesn't wish to return to the past?"

I feel like the alternative of the “mythic” might be diffusion, and playing with different intensities and perspectives, versus having one authoritative voice. When I was first trying to draw, I was inspired by unconscious or pre-conscious ideas—thoughts which are present in our minds, but which haven’t yet surfaced. That’s why I tend to start my drawings with forms or ideas that don’t necessarily have a very discreet reason to be together—because I like seeing what kinds of meaning can emerge. The mythic to me is the closest analog to the unknown. It allows us to sit with discomfort and face it in a beautiful way.

When I studied design in school, everything was discreetly laid out, and felt too rigid. It made me wonder, “What is the anti-matter behind all of this?” I got more and more excited to experiment with interpretation, diffusion, and alternate forms of visualizing. I wanted to get away from concrete, planned-out meaning and explore areas that felt completely open to interpretation. Areas that can be more emotionally generous, regardless of style, and always in anticipation of something more.



A Skin Where Many Worlds Fit , bead, vellum and plexiglass, 2024

To switch gears, I wonder if you could share what it's like being on a visa and working in the U.S.?

I'm on an artist visa that expires every three years. This means that every three years, I need to prove to the government that I am a "person of exceptional talent," for one thing, but also that I am of economic value to this country. I also need to prove that I'm able to continually produce work; that I'm not just sitting around idly. So I have to show a current portfolio, reference letters, and any new press mentions.

It must add a lot of stress when you're constantly feeling the need to hustle for this visa, and keep being "exceptionally talented."

I used to see it as almost a game, where I was maneuvering around all these expectations. But at the same time, it is a good motivator to take my artistic instincts seriously.

I saw that you're designing a mural to be installed in the West Bank. Will you tell me about that project?

The architect brothers Youssef and Elias Anastas run a studio called Wonder Cabinet and a radio station called Radio Al Hara. They reached out last year about making a mural together. I have long admired their practice, so I was excited to do the project. I first knew them through their radio project, as they let me be a resident and air monthly mixes. Now I've been designing this mural for their physical space, which a group of 10 students and the muralist Ayed Arafah are currently painting.

I very much see the project as a collaboration, where I make adjustments based on what's possible to paint, and then they give feedback, and it has kept building from there. But the idea behind it is that it's a "mural of makers." Going back to the mythic, or the idea of reimagining the present, I feel like through the mural, I came to realize that makers hold the power to reimagine the world and show a new way forward. I wanted it to be an ode to people who make—to re-enchant the existing walls of this world, while also imagining another one.



Process of the Mural of Makers at Wonder Cabinet , Bethlehem with Ayed Arafah

Somnath Bhatt Recommends:

A huge ceremonial Ikat textile that the textile conservationist Edric Ong showed me at the Santa Fe Folk Art Market. The textile was by an unknown maker of the Iban community in Sarawak region of Indonesia. The textile depicted the marriage between the Indian prince Rajatambi and the Sarawak princess Kumang Iban.

The history book Peasant Pasts by Vinayak Chaturvedi, documents peasant revolts by the Dharala community in the village Chaklasi, before the actual independence struggle against the British started in India. I recently found this book on the artist 5yearplan's bookshelf and it blew me away. Because, the village Chaklasi in Gujarat, I have been once before and I had no idea it was home to such vivid and rich history - especially from a labor, anti-caste and subaltern historical perspective.

The artists Madhukar Mucharla, Thamshangpha 'Merci' Maku, Wade Winslow, Hexorcismos, Nikita Shah, Maia Ayerza Taber, Ru.afza and Jena Myung.

Talking with my brother Rameshwar on the phone about music, poetry and dating

Dancing with my friend Prabal Gurung to dhinchak bollywood music.

Name

Somnath Bhatt

Vocation

artist and designer

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