

On trusting in your art and in your process



Multi-disciplinary artist Suchitra Mattai discusses working intuitively, making time for what you most want to do, and growing along with your process.

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As told to Eva Recinos, 2542 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Education](#).



Photo by Scott Lynch

Your work uses multiple mediums, including embroidery, weaving, and fiber. You've talked about how those mediums honor the practices that you learned from your grandmother. Is embroidery, or crochet, one of your earliest memories of art-making?

Yes, yes. Sewing, embroidery, and crochet were my first moments of making that I remember, although I do remember drawing, also, as a young child. So that combination of an impulse to draw and make with my hands was always there, but definitely nurtured by my grandmother, and my mom.

Do you remember what kinds of things you drew when you were a kid?

It's funny because in terms of drawing, I immigrated to Canada at a young age from Guyana, and I remember always drawing these palm trees and the water, thinking about or remembering what it was like to live in Guyana. And so for a long time, a lot of my images were of landscapes. And then in terms of crocheting, when I was about eight, my sister was born and right before, I made a blanket for her, like a pattern blanket through crochet. I remember that being my first large scale craft-making project.

I read that you got your MFA in painting and drawing, you also got an MA in South Asian art. What informed your decision to get both degrees?

I think that as an immigrant, and as a South Asian immigrant, there wasn't a lot of space for understanding what an artist is, and could be. I never really knew, in a way, how to do it—how to be the artist that I wanted to be. I was always very, very interested in connecting back to my past. So in my 20s, I visited India, I researched a lot of temple architecture and ancient objects. It felt natural for me to study South Asian art. I actually focused on contemporary South Asian art when I did that work and it definitely informed the art-making that I do now.

But in my third year of my PhD at the University of Pennsylvania, I was sitting in a class and I just had this epiphany, or this readiness, I guess—because I always knew I was going to be an artist. But the question was when was I going to jump into it with the confidence and courage that it takes to be one? At that moment I realized that I just had to do it. So I left that program and applied to grad school.



Photo by Scott Lynch

I'd love to hear more about that shift in your focus.

I had always been making. In undergrad, I had done something like 57 credits of studio art. I studied more sculpture when I moved to New York. I worked for Pratt, so I could take more post-bacc classes in sculpture. I had this wide background, but I wasn't ready to commit. It wasn't until I was in this PhD program and I just had this epiphany that this is not what I wanted to do. I needed to make every day, and so I jumped ship.

You've talked a lot about this idea of coming to your practice later in life and feeling like you're almost making up for the time that you weren't doing art full time. Do you have any insights for others who might be wanting to take that creative leap? What did it take to make that decision?

Even after grad school, I didn't really work as an artist. I taught at college, I raised my children. And it wasn't really until I was in my early 40s that I came to the practice that I have now. And the advice that I would have—I am not one to give advice generally, but I think that being an artist ultimately is about searching for a kind of freedom, a freedom of spirit, and a freedom in making. The moment when that is possible comes at different times for different people. You should never give up, because being an artist—there's no one path to it. It's not like some other fields. If you're an artist, you're always an artist. It's just about finding that moment when you are willing to give it what it needs—to nurture those abilities and those possibilities.

It sounds like one thing you're touching on is trying to break out of limiting beliefs or strict definitions of what it means to be an artist. I think folks sometimes feel like, "Oh, well, that's not what I'm doing right now, so I can't necessarily call myself an artist at this point in time."

I think being an artist is something you know that you are, and you might not recognize it for a long time because, you're right, I think there are these preconceived ideas about what it is to be an artist and engaging in a professional practice. But the thing is, as we all know, it's super complicated to be an artist. How do you have the time to make all the work? How do you fund the work? How do you grow your practice? These are all things that, when I was younger, seemed like a mystery. I think if you just trust in the art and the process, that is the only thing you can control. And the other things fall into place. I know that sounds maybe silly, but I do feel like whatever limited time you have, whatever resources you have—if you use that time to make, and to make your work better, and to develop new ideas and curiosities, that's super important too.



Photo by Scott Lynch

I read that you have a studio in Los Angeles and a team consisting of a studio manager and assistants. How does it feel to think about where you are now compared to when you first decided to take that leap?

When my children were young, I was basically drawing at night when I could. It feels so different now. I'm so grateful for what my practice has evolved into. It's all still quite new for me, the team that I have, the studio manager. When I moved to LA in 2022, I was working alone. My practice has just grown exponentially, and it's super exciting for me. I worked in such a solitary fashion before, as many artists do, and I think it's about learning to trust—not just in the process, but in the people around you. I work very intuitively, and so a lot of the projects that I do, I might have visions for them or they come to me in different ways. The translation of those ideas and the collaboration that comes with working with the team has been something that has changed drastically and has really enriched my practice.



Photo by Scott Lynch

One thing that I'd love to touch on is the way that you work on a large scale, especially with projects like your Socrates Sculpture Park installation. Clearly, your process is really time intensive and multilayered. Are there times when your original vision doesn't pan out with the final result? How do you work through that feeling?

When I say that my practice is intuitive, what I mean is there's very much an emphasis on a call and response process. Even though I might plan something like, let's say, Socrates [Sculpture Park]—that installation had to be planned because part of it was fabricated and outside of the studio. It was more planned than most projects, I would say. But still, when you work with others, and you work with fabricators, you don't have as much control, in a way. You do have to make a lot of plans. But, for me, I am really excited about the process... I never have a preconceived notion of what something will be, because that takes the fun out of it for me as an artist.

I might set up with some parameters like, for the Socrates project: Each of those pods embodies two colors and the colors shift from one to another, and then get picked up in the next pod. But how those blends happen and the kind of patterns that are chosen, and the moments of surprise that happen—you can't control those. There's always, in the creative process, this giving way to that lack of control. That's a very mystical thing for me. I feel as though it's something that I want to always have as part of my practice. I always want to have that element of surprise or undoing or a lack of control.



Photo by Scott Lynch

Are there certain approaches or influences that have helped you cultivate that?

I have found, for me, that working intuitively generates ideas and lets me trust myself, in a way. When you make, you really need to have a sense of trust in yourself and in the process. And that intuition that I rely on and cultivate, it's what gives me the ability to have ideas, and to trust in the ideas... I was making in what I considered a static way before.

I felt as though I wanted my work to fit into, maybe, a Western framework of making. And then when I had, I call it my "rebirth" in my 40s, I basically decided that I wanted to work in a way that felt more natural and more organic. I didn't want to have preconceived ideas of what an exhibition looked like, or what materials I would use. I let materiality kind of lead me into the making... I could be pushed and pulled and swayed and inspired by all these different processes and materials.

Speaking of materials, you work with vintage saris that family, friends, and even strangers give to you. You also incorporate family heirlooms. How do these materials also influence your process?

There was a moment when [someone], maybe it was a curator, said that the work was feeling nostalgic because I started to use materials like that. And I thought to myself, "Yes, the work is nostalgic." I'm telling stories about my family and ancestors and people that I know. And it's very personal, it's very intimate, and it just made sense to use materials that already had their history within them. And so yeah, when I use my mom's sari, there's a very direct link to me in the work. I often list the materials, because the materials are important to the work and the intimacy. And the stories that those materials refer or allude to are very important to my work, because I think of my practice as storytelling.

Another thing I was thinking about in terms of your practice and especially the Socrates Sculpture Park pieces

was that I saw there's going to be performances by a dance company happening as well. Why was it important for you to incorporate dance? Are there other ways that you incorporate other modes of expressions, besides visual art, into your practice?

Yes, this is new for me. I grew up around dance, both my sisters are trained dancers. With the new work—the work for Socrates and other upcoming projects—the tapestries have become very architectural and tectonic. I really thought that it would be amazing to collaborate with a dancer and to activate these works through dance, through performance... I met this dancer, [Barkha Patel](#), and I really was drawn to her work. Not just her skill in traditional kathak dance, but her interest in expanding and using that dance to create a more contemporary version. In many ways, my practice draws on tradition, but reimagines the materials and practices just like her [practice] does. I thought it would be such a great idea to collaborate with her because of that.



Photo by Anna Maria Zunino Noellert. Courtesy of Socrates Sculpture Park.

What was the process like in reaching out to her and planning everything?

I actually attended a performance of Barkha's here in Los Angeles. She's based in New York, and we very much bonded on a personal level and had dinner and chatted. I knew that I was doing the Socrates [Sculpture Park] project, and I already had a sense of what was going to happen there—the very large scale installation. Even at that moment, I had just met her but I felt a connection and so I asked her if she would be interested.

Then we had sort of a back and forth, over the last year—actually a little bit less than a year—just about possibilities. For her, until she saw the installation, it was very much abstract.

She came by when I was installing in May and I think things changed for her at that point. Because you can plan—I gave her drawings—but there's an element of surprise within something that goes from paper to the reality of it.

I would imagine that sort of collaboration was also interesting for you—to see how a dancer could engage with your work.

Yeah, totally. And I think Barkha also works with a sense of intuition. That is something that we share. I felt a certain trust I think because I had seen her performance and heard her talk about it. It felt very much in line with how I think about the creative process, so I think that's why there was a lot of trust.

How do you find time for rest amidst all the projects and exhibitions you're currently working on?

It's all very new for me. One thing I've learned is that you do not accept four exhibitions in a three-month period. But there's always a lot going on. Rest has not been a part of my life for the last number of months, but I'm definitely planning some rest. Part of it, when everything is new, is that you don't know how to say no to things, and then everything is very exciting. And then, of course, dates change and all of a sudden you have three openings in one month. As I grow as an artist, and my studio grows, it's about planning. It's about making time for rest. Because it is really important. And I have a family, so making time for everything that I want to balance and to enjoy and to be committed to—everything needs its time.

Suchitra Mattai Recommends:

The short story collection of Talia Lakshmi Kolluri, *What we fed to the Manticore*, poetically and empathetically speaks about our environment and the human condition through the lens of animals, creating beautiful myths along the way.

I'm loving the edgy desi inspired clothing from Doh Tak Keh, based in Mumbai.

Toyin Ojih Odutola's breathtaking drawings at the Kunsthalle Basel are on my mind and I wish I could see them in person.

Name

Suchitra Mattai

Vocation

multi-disciplinary artist

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Anna Maria Zunino Noellert