



SHE BUILT THIS CITY

Artist **Avantika Bawa** chooses a gallery and creates non-objective art experiences by drawing on the history of its district, discovers **Vishwas Kulkarni**

In the gigantic expanse of Gallery Maskara, Avantika Bawa is working with a jumble of grey boxes, most of which have been neatly stacked, even if claustrophobically so, to give the illusion of a shipping warehouse. For almost a decade now the artist has been working with site-specific 'interventions' by which the gallery viewer is made aware of the geography, the architecture and the historicity of the space in which her exhibitions are mounted. At the point when we meet her, a thin row of white bricks, diagonally canted against one another, leads towards a mini-metrop-

olis of imagined freight, all draped in a uniform shade of grey. Avantika Bawa steps forward, apologises for her paint-splattered t-shirt, and gets talking.

"My father was in the Navy, and I lived in Navy Nagar when in Bombay. That informed my decision to work with Gallery Maskara. Navigationally, it is a gallery in Colaba that functions as the mid-point between the regimented monotony of army life and the sensory assault that Bombay represents once you leave the safe confines of this cantonment. Therefore that line of bricks, it's the lull before the storm so to speak," says Avantika Bawa, while supervising a mini-army of labourers creating some more grey boxes. But the hammering gets too loud. So they are told to stop for now, so that we may have space.

The US-based artist calls her work non-objective art, objects that dodge functionality or even ownership; it is a luxury that even an installation sometimes can not afford. Her carefully-mounted experiments are usually dismantled after the show with clinical dispassion. How must that feel? All that effort rent to shreds? "It's like an awesome one-night stand; I don't have any regrets about the fact that there is nothing to retain post the experience."

Why are the boxes grey? "These are a very specific grey. They are chromatic greys." And what is chro-

matic grey? "They are made from a mixture of colour. It isn't a grey that is merely a merger of black and white, which, in turn, are achromatic colours. I take colour theory very seriously. I taught colour theory for many years at an art school in Georgia. More importantly, this grey is once again a reference to army life. This is a very specific grey that I draw from my past in Navy Nagar. It is rooted in a specific historicity, that is personal and on a larger scale, social. Coming back to form, the boxes and crates allude to Colaba as a port, its historicity as a dock."

Installing the show has meant dealing with day wage labourers for almost a month. They are perplexed with the idea of mounting something as eccentric as this. "Yes, this has been quite an experience, but the gallery was very clear that a hands-on exercise such as this would require at least a month here. There is no sense in hastily mounting something for the sake of it. And the experience has been rewarding. In India, we work with labour, so it is authentic in that sense. And since most of my work is based on how we intervene with a space, and turn it on its head, there are no complaints," says the artist, before the clang of nails being hammered into grey-coloured wood echoes once again through her make-believe warehouse.

6 The grey is a Navy Nagar past. The crates allude to Colaba as a port, its history as a dock