

How to process a history of violence

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Delhi underwent a series of preparatory constructions and makeovers in the build-up to the Commonwealth Games in 2010. Although insufficient for the games themselves, it did affect civic life extensively. Over a conversation with Delhi-based artist Priyanka Choudhary, I learnt that the scramble to host the event was also symptomatic of a latent anxiety that propelled the city out of its lazy slumber. With a



Priyanka Choudhary in the middle of the performance piece Shroud Reader (2012)

keenness to explore this pronounced overgrowth, she digressed from painting and spent the next year or so working at construction sites, actively participating in the making of "boundaries". As the city builds vertically, encumbering its supporting infrastructure, Choudhary paradoxically notices a similar anxiety in the barren lands of Rajasthan, the home of her maternal family. Here she observes small plots in the desert, marked by barbed wire fencing, appearing quite unnecessary and completely awkward. The landscape is but a reflection of who we are and to Choudhary the degree to which we build around us indicates the extent to which our freedom is limited. The shards of glass, cement or plaster walls, thorny shrubbery and so on, that we raise to secure ourselves ostensibly reflects, our insecurity.

But is it not necessary to protect, I ask, for we do not live in an ideal world. She agrees, but informs me of her intention to study more deeply the land we occupy and the ways in which it occupies our lives. We continue talking as we view some of her work; canvases punctured by nails, some ripped, others slashed, and a few more infested with thorny bush, dust or clay. These and others like the bamboo scaffolding installation titled *Pubic* (2010) or the red-coloured shards of glass sandwiched between two concrete walls titled *Don't Make Me Yell* (2012) are themselves an outgrowth of her observations and experiences at sites of construction. In 2012 began a rather accidental yet obvious progression into performative pieces with a work titled *Shroud Reader*. Choudhary had already begun to physically place herself in situations she desired to investigate. Here, she lies on one of the two beds placed under a loosely draped sheet pierced with nails, with an open invitation to anyone from the audience to lie beside her. She claims it was not a premeditated intention but as the piece took shape, composed by the architecture of the small room of the gallery she felt the need to place herself within it, accenting its fragility and emphasising its temporality. She describes her vulnerability in the presence of watchful eyes of strangers while staring up at hundreds of nails restrained by the simple weave of thread. The resilience of being is never so dramatically real and the experience prompted a series of performances in spaces of historical unrest. Through 2013, she participated in a series of residencies and projects that took her from Zokalo in Mexico, Ground Zero in New York, Soweto in Johannesburg, Jallianwala Bagh in Punjab, and Ypres in Belgium. Each of these sites has endured a history of violence and injustice that shows no residual presence today. Disturbed by how easily the past is forgotten and relegated to history, Choudhary decided to explore the latent violence of the space by inhabiting it and engaging with the local people.

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Her sole companion is the *charkha* (spinning wheel). As she sits spinning amidst the bustle of a square or side street, the constant act of spinning thread arrests her attention; admittedly a sort of meditative action. As the thread grows longer, she begins to wind it around her face and body, metaphorically binding herself to the site. As she spins, more people take interest, inquire and some even begin to narrate stories. The theatricality of her work is attractive to say the least, if not borderline shocking. Using the newly woven and wound thread as a clean canvas, she urges people to write, to express their acceptance and their resilience of the past in scribbles of "yes". It is difficult to describe an experience, or a specific underlying desire that drives it, she finally confesses.



Choudhary declines the label of performance artist although she feels strongly about the medium that connects her to places and people through the simple thread of thought and energy. She is also reticent to consider her work in the lineage of Arte Povera artists although she admits aesthetic and theoretical resemblance. She finds her inspiration in everyday observations and draws from those that move her the most. As I wind up to leave, I look around her home where we both have been chatting, sipping on our iced teas and ask her about the many figurative sketches adorning her walls. They are a part of her; of course they are, but not simply in the manner of a thought put on paper. They are a window to knowing her, an expression and materialisation of self in a specific time wherein like all her works, life and art seamlessly flow into one another.