

PRANEET SOI IN CONVERSATION WITH SHALINI PASSI

Born and schooled in Kolkata, Praneet Soi left Bengal in 1990 to move to Baroda, Gujarat. He lived there for 6 years, and did his Bachelor's and Master's degree in Painting from MSU, Baroda. Close interactions with his teachers, Vasudevan Akkhitam, Suresh B.V. and Natraj Sharma were vital in the development of a painterly language. In Kolkata, critic and writer Pranab Ranjan Ray, and artist Chittrovanu Mazumdar were extremely supportive of him in his formative years. Subsequently, he attended the University of California in San Diego on a scholarship programme, where he was mentored by the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin, and attended lectures by David Antin and Babette Mangolte, among others. His education in America widened his understanding of contemporary art. Later, at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam he met his wife, Irene Kopelman, also an artist, and they decided to base themselves there. Since then, he has been working between Amsterdam and Kolkata, and this oscillation has impacted his practice greatly.



Praneet Soi, *Maquettes*, cardboard and inkjet prints, 2011
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi

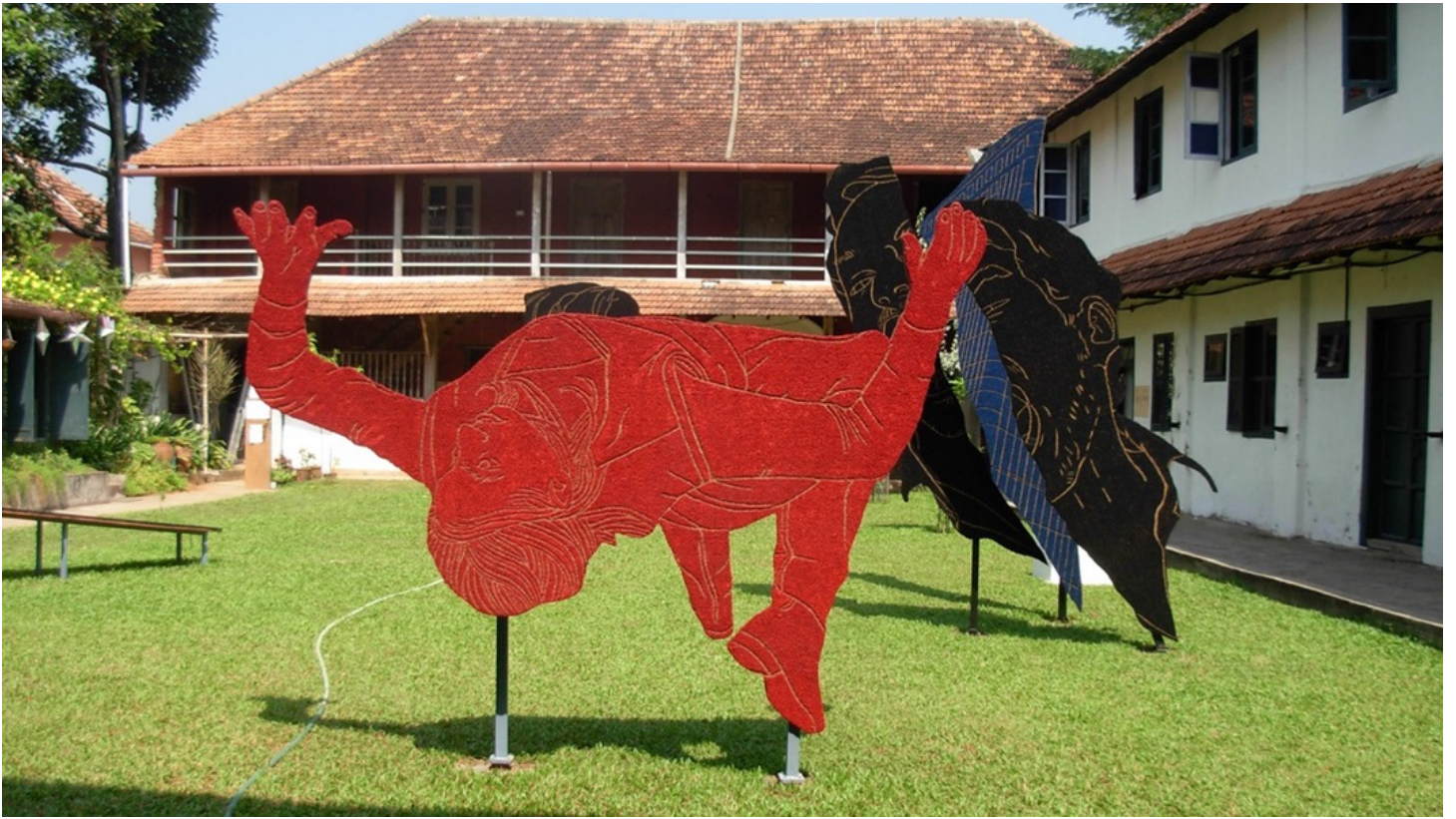
SP: You have been practising art for nearly twenty years now. Could you give an insight into your artistic process? Do you feel your experience of relocation has impacted your artistic sensibilities?

PS: Relocation has been a recurring condition, as you correctly point out, and I have learned to use it as a motor that drives my work. Relocation, if I think of it as a condition, allows me opportunities to learn things. I place myself in an environment which is new to me and requires to be understood to move ahead. New relationships are forged. Skills are shared and therefore learned. An understanding of the environment is thus expanded through dialogue.

However, this understanding took time to develop. Initially, when I left India to study in California, or subsequently, when I left California for the Netherlands, my practice broke down completely and it took years to build it back.

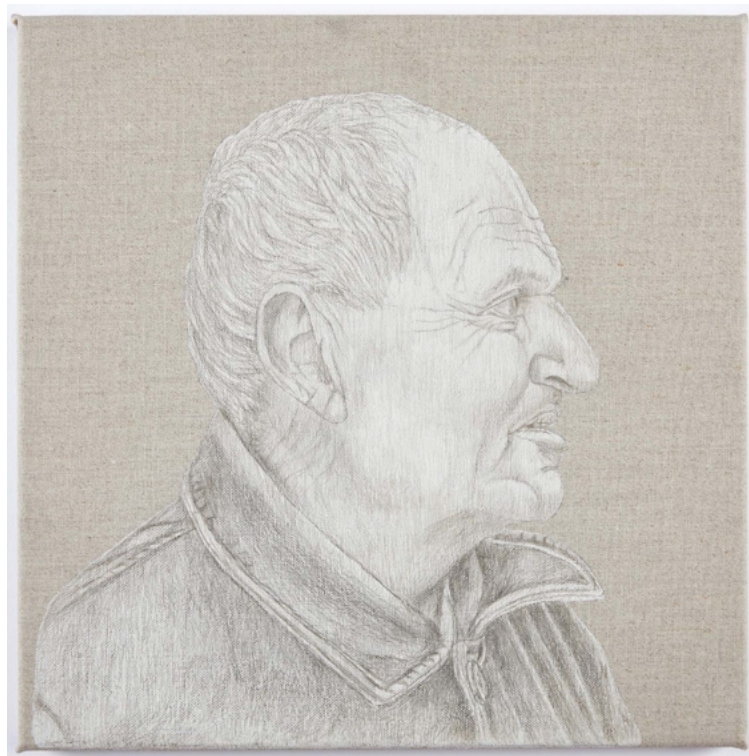
SP: How do you choose your mediums and techniques for each project?

PS: It's always interesting to explore a new medium. In 2016 I was invited to Kochi-Muziris Biennale by Sudarshan Shetty, curator of the 3rd edition of the Biennale, to expand on a set of maquettes I had been working on, related to my drawings from the news media. I began thinking of a material that was particular to the region to build them large-scale. The coir industry is vital to Kerala and a wide variety of products are made from this material. I was taken to a sprawling export-oriented Cocotuft coir factory where the foot-mats that we see so often, placed at the doorstep, are made. The director of the factory heard me out and gave me access to his unit, cautioning me of the limited possibilities for what I had set out to achieve. I spent a month working with the staff assigned to me, systematically problem-solving as we focussed on transferring my drawings onto the rubber-backed coir carpet usually used for mats. I realised that using a brush to draw my imagery onto the rough coir surface was close to impossible. Noting my problem, the team introduced me to traditional craftsmen that manually cut patterns into the coir mats. We employed them to cut my drawings into the coir, thus allowing the line-work to retain the trace of the hand. None of these steps would have happened without constant dialogue. It was through such interactions that the work grew and attained its final shape. I think it is through the desire for the work to equally express its materiality and content that problem solving occurs and this is the most important aspect for me.



Praneet Soi, *Astatic Garden*, 3rd Kochi Biennale (2016-2017)
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi

SP: Your work *'Anamorphosis'* delved into Palestinian territory and gave a sense of occupied territories through landscapes, farms, and factories. Your works are known to interrogate the themes of migration, conflict and displacement. How do you navigate these themes through your art?



Praneet Soi, *Farmer, Beit Omar*, 2019
Photo Credit Praneet Soi

PS: I try to explore local narratives and as these narratives unfold, they pull in stories and information including what is not directly related. I call it "Notational Methodology". In Kochi, it was this methodology that allowed for the work to unfold along the lines it did. In Palestine, I suggested to the director of the Mosaic Rooms, Rachael Jarvis, that I would travel across the West Bank and meet with farmers, owners of small businesses and as well large state-of-the art factories, to understand the difficulties of people working in an occupied land. We planned the route by road, including within the journey stunning landscapes that are suffused with history and myth that are not usually depicted in the media. This opened up a parallel viewpoint and proved vital for the narrative that unfolded.

I felt that it was only through a personal investment of my resources, as a human being, that I could picture this country, home to one of the most difficult of political conflicts in the world today.



Praneet Soi, *Three Landscapes*, 2019
Photo Credit Praneet Soi

SP: In your recent presentation at the India Art Fair with Experimenter, you presented an oeuvre using handmade Papier-mâché tiles. What drew you to this medium specifically? What challenges did you face while working with this medium?



View from Zaina Kadal onto the tomb of Miran Zain, Srinagar, 2024
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi



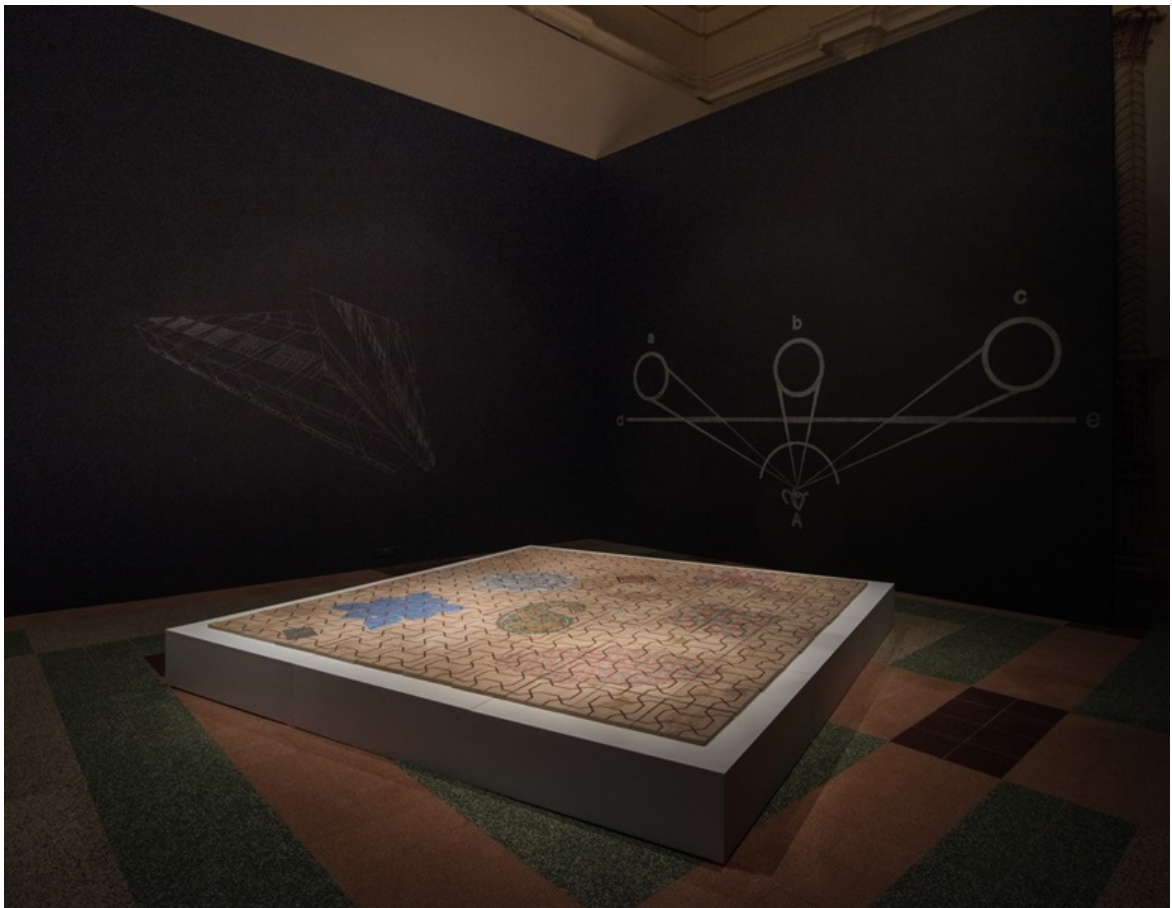
Praneet Soi, *Cut-Out of Decorated Pillar*, Khanqa or Shah-e-Hamadan Masjid
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi

PS: I am often in Srinagar, a city which has about 2000 years of lived history. Kashmir was an important centre for Buddhism — the 4th Buddhist Conference was held in Kashmir under the rule of Kanishka in 72 AD. Recently I learned a large stupa existed in the centre of the city, of which no sign remains. This accretion of culture is what I am exploring, which is representative of a rich diversity of form. Papier-mâché, a popular craft, was introduced to Kashmir by sufi preachers from Central Asia and Iran, such as Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani (1312-1385). They taught their believers craft techniques as a means for them to keep their hands busy and therefore closer to god. Thus, the craft of papier-mâché objects such as caskets and jewellery boxes decorated with finely painted motifs spread across Kashmir. While I had seen such objects since I was a child but never imagined they were made of papier-mâché. I thought of translating this material into tiles, like a canvas, to paint on. It sounded reasonably simple a task, but took a long time, a year in fact, before we could have a surface that could be painted upon. I chose this material in much the same way that I chose coir in Kochi. It is a material that is closely related to its environment. Engaging with it allowed me an insight into the region, located on the northern periphery of the country where upheavals caused by the partition of the country decades ago continue to reverberate.

SP: "*Notes of Labor*" is a seminal work interrogating the notion of labour and politics around it. Working with local artisans in Kumartali, Kashmir, Guangzhou and other artisans around the world, in general, what kind of impact do you envision?



Praneet Soi, *Notes on Labour*, Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, 2018
Collection of Bhau Daji Lad Museum
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi



Praneet Soi, Notes on Labor, Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, 2018 Collection of Mrs Sangita Jindal Photo Credit: Praneet Soi



Praneet Soi, *Notes on Labour*, Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, 2018
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi

PS: Across the bodies of work that comprise *Notes of Labor*, the common thread is that of engaging with a landscape through the lens of craft. Being an artist myself, there is a language I share with artisans. I was keen on building a platform that would allow us to share our knowledge and work together. Working with local artisans, I found myself learning their motifs as well as absorbing their stories. I also tried to insert their way of working into my own imagery. To me, the essence of materiality lies in translation. And translation can only happen when people feel the need to communicate. This is not always smooth, as conflicts occur. But they can be overcome, and to me this is a metaphor for a world in which dialogue is possible.

SP: *Landscape{s}* ventured into the cultural history of Kashmir, you previously experienced working in Kashmir. Have you witnessed any discernible evolutions in your visual vocabulary concerning Kashmir?



Praneet Soi, *Landscape{s}*, 2023
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi

PS: I have been returning to Kashmir since 2009. I began working with Fayaz Jan, a master craftsman based in the Shia enclave of Hasan Abad, in 2014. I continue working with him and this allows me to gradually develop the narrative I am exploring. As I mentioned before, the region is seeped in history. I am slowly delving into these layers and opening them to images and personal narration. In *Landscape{s}*, as the name suggests, I juxtapose not only different vistas but also different hands — their fine motifs with my rough brushstroke. The floral detail on the right is a detail from the Bharhut Stupa, dating to the 1st Century BC, displayed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata. It is a Jataka scene. As I had mentioned earlier, Buddhism flourished in Kashmir and was the dominant religion during the time of Ashoka, who ruled from 268-232 BC. The bark of an oak originates from a path I often used while cycling to my studio in Amsterdam. It is fleshed out in rough brushstroke by me and provides texture to the composition. The geometric shapes the images are painted within relate to *khatambandi* patterns that are ubiquitous across Kashmir.

While in Kashmir, I may be remembering a landscape familiar to me from Amsterdam or vice-versa. This is what the Notational Methodology prioritises — the linking together seemingly disparate imagery, which are linked by personal experience.

SP: What advice would you like to share with the young and emerging artists who are navigating the art world and finding their artistic voices?

PS: I would say to engage with the world around, to actively chase experiences. This is what the filmmaker Mani Kaul once explained to me, talking about his life after leaving India. Experiences happen when we put ourselves in a situation in which we are forced to become inventive. This does not mean one is required to travel physically, of course. It could also be a very internal journey. The Palestinian educationist, Munir Fasheh, explains it as finding a soil that sustains us. We then need to nourish this soil. What that this entails is different for each of us!



Praneet Soi, *Red Landscape*, 2023
Photo Credit: Praneet Soi

Image Courtesy: Praneet Soi

Find out more about the Artist and his artworks:

<http://www.praneetsoi.info/>

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