



Arpita Akhanda

Arpita Akhandia



আমি উদ্বাস্তু নই
(I am not a refugee) I
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Arpita Akhanda's practice is firmly rooted in research and develops interdisciplinary lines of enquiry on the meaning of body, belonging, home and migration. Akhanda creates nuanced politically and socially charged multi-dimensional works that raise pertinent questions about colonial and post-colonial history for a generation that has only known this through handed-down memories or written texts.

Her ongoing research around the history of partition and inter-generational pain is explored across mediums; Akhanda constructs relationships between the past/memory and the present through her staged photographs, paper weavings, drawings, writings, performances and videos. In addition, she offers significant social commentary by taking on various roles, such as that of a photo documenter, a mender/weaver, an empathetic viewer, and sometimes even a silent forgotten protagonist from the past.



The Fall
Paper weaving of pre and post
partition map
60 x 126 inches approx.
Image Credit Exhibit 320
2021

Photo performance plays an essential role in her oeuvre. Enacting characters from her grandfather's photo albums, Akhanda conceives tableaus that inform her paper-weaving works, one of her primary modes of expression. Cutting and weaving together different images, texts, and maps from across for instance, the work 'The Fall', a pre-partition map of India incorporated with a post-partition one, challenges ideas of vulnerability, impermanence and erasures in present political climes. In a recent work from 2022, 'Perhaps we are all immigrants trading one home for another', Akhanda uses the trope of a Bengali traditional woven *pata* (mat) to trace her grandparents' journey as they fled across the river Padma. Here, too, she enacts the roles of the refugees fleeing their land.

Rather than merely recreating memory, it becomes a complex movement of threads, an inquiry into past traumas weaving our present. Similarly, Akhanda's 'আমি উদ্বাস্ত নই (I am not a refugee)' series manifests a profound exploration of language, longing, and anxiety tied to displacement and migration. She revisits undocumented moments from her familial past through paper weaving and archival prints, employing staged photography and *mise-en-scène*.

In Akhanda's practice, the performative and performance ebb and flow into each other. She has embraced performance as a method for scrutinizing and revisiting institutional and personal histories, memories and archives encompassing a myriad of colonial and post-colonial recollections. These include her family's collection of poems, photographs, documents, letters, telegrams, postcards, oral histories, and travelogues, meticulously preserved by her grandparents and parents since the partition of India. These archival treasures have significantly influenced her comprehension of India's independence and partition, shaping her perspective on their enduring impact on the present. Akhanda's artistic practice responds to the imperative to de-colonize and reinterpret these memories.

Transitory Body: The Memory Collector
Site-specific interactive and durational
performance
4 hours
Piramal Art Residency,
Mumbai, 2019-20





240 Hours
 Photographs, Site specific
 photo-performance and text
 Part of শরীর Körper : The Memory Collector
 Kunstrum, Aarau, Switzerland 2021

360 Minutes of Requiem
 3 hours, 2 days
 Performed at The Studio, India Art Fair Ground
 2022

In '360 Minutes of Requiem', the bare-handed artist tries to deconstruct 360 feet of barbed wire. The performance resonates with the pain of multitudes who have crossed borders or continue to do so. Even though Akhanda's works explore partition from a specific geo-political context, its discourse is far-reaching, cutting across human-made borders.

'The Transitory Body' extends the boundaries of her thematic exploration. The interactive and immersive nature of these performances, involving stamping dates, sharing memories, and engaging in whispered exchanges, orchestrates a metaphorical migration of memories and invites viewers to partake in the artist's reflections.

Her interdisciplinary approach extends to '240 hours', a site-specific photo/poetic performance developed during a 10-day quarantine in Aarau, Switzerland. While emphasizing the temporality and fleeting nature of her existence within the space, this exercise captures the nuanced transformation of the self, melding seamlessly with the new environment as it undergoes a shape-shifting evolution. ■



*Whispering Memories, confessing past
and holding secrets*
Paper weaving, Archival ink on Tyvek
177 x 150 inches approx.
2023



Akhanda's 'আমি উদ্বাস্তু নই (I am not a refugee)' series manifests a profound exploration of language, longing, and anxiety tied to displacement and migration. She revisits undocumented moments from her familial past through paper weaving and archival prints, employing staged photography and mise-en-scène.

In *Ami Utvastu Noi*, which means I am not a refugee in the artist's mother tongue, Bengali, Akhanda dresses up in her grandmother's white saree in the traditional *āāt poure* (eightfold) style, posing in front of barbed wire mimicking fenced border landscapes. She uses this photographic image as the primary warp thread, weaving it with the map of river Padma that her grandmother had crossed as a refugee fleeing from Barishal (present-day Bangladesh) to Kolkata, West Bengal, during the partition of India.

The work's title appears in Bengali alphabets woven on the upper border of this large paper tapestry, which also has traditional motifs from Akhanda's grandmother's sarees. The central image is framed by the river maps of Odisha, the region where Sabita Rani finally settled after years of travelling in search of a place to call home. This frame or border resembles a *chatai* or reed mat traditionally used for the floor. Further referencing Sabita Rani's interest in stitching and signing her textile pieces with place and date, Akhanda weaves in Barishal in Bengali and Cuttack in Oriya at the base of the work, marking the cities where Sabita Rani was born and passed away.

আমি উদ্বাস্তু নই
(I am not a refugee) II
Detail





আমি উদ্বাস্তু নই
(I am not a refugee) I
 Paper weaving with archival print on Innova smooth cotton
 high white 100% cotton 315 gsm Fourdrinier acid free,
 archival museum quality paper
 63.7 x 57.4 inches approx.
 2023



আমি উদ্বাস্তু নই
(I am not a refugee) II
 Paper weaving with archival print on Innova smooth cotton
 high white 100% cotton 315 gsm Fourdrinier acid free,
 archival museum quality paper
 63.7 x 57.4 inches approx.
 2023

This work is in the permanent collection of the K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf



Dearest thākumā,
 Do you remember the sultry, sleepless power-cut nights, when I would sleep next to you, the breeze of the rotating hāth-pākhā (hand-fan) in your hand, creating a relaxed background rhythm to the stories of partition you would tell us. As we travelled with the night into a deeper darkness, your stories wove themselves through my sense of being. These are the indelible memories of home, memories of belonging and my childhood.

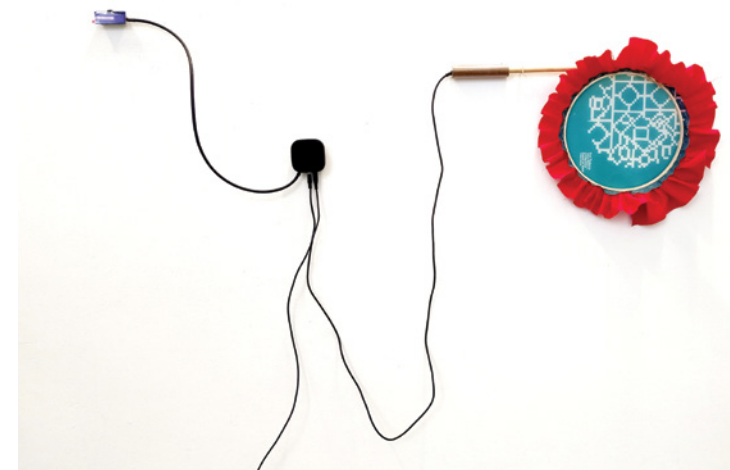


Image from '*Hath-Pakha (Hand-fan)*',
 Silkscreen print, hand fan, speaker, digital screen
 2023

Instructions for the viewer:
 Rotate the hāth-pākhā (hand fan) to listen to Bani thākumā's memories. This work is a documentation of the memories of our home through the oral recounts of the women in my family who came to India during/after the partition.



*Perhaps We Are All Immigrants Trading
One Home for Another*
Paper weaving
36 x 102 inches
2022



Recreating my grandmother's character based on her oral retelling

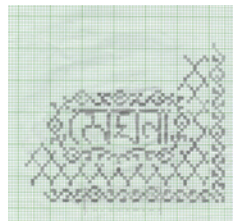
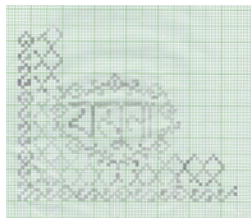


Recreating my grandfather's journey across the Padma



The base photograph

Digital photo-manipulation for the paper weaving
Perhaps We Are All Immigrants Trading One Home for Another
 Paper weaving
 2022
 Assisted by Ruma Choudhury & Ujjal Dey



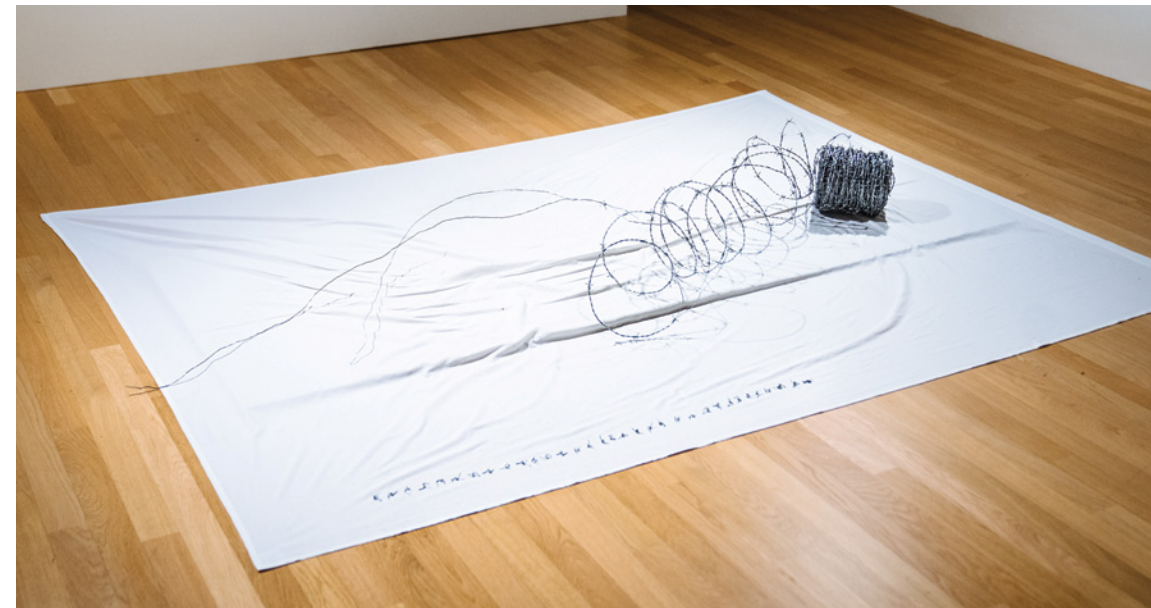
The graph for weaving developed from traditional saree and chatai (floor mat) motifs from pre-partition Bengal

Performative photography forms the core of Akhanda's artistic practice. She employs mise-en-scène as a tool, embodying various characters, both known and unknown, friends and relatives that inhabit her family's photo albums dating back to the partition of India. Her grandfather Ashim Akhanda, a freedom fighter, an artist, and an avid photographer, moved from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) to India with these albums and his camera. These were among the few possessions he could bring across the border. These precious memory capsules form the core of Akhanda's family archives, inspiring her examination of the meaning of 'home-land'.



360 /180 Minutes of Requiem explores the notions of nationalism, borders and partitions through the act of deconstructing 360 feet of barbed wire fence over a 360-minute-long immersive performance staged over hours or days, allowing viewers to witness the hard work and labour involved in undoing historical and psychological barriers that divided us.

180 minutes of requiem
3 hours
Part of TRESPASSING: An (Un)
Intended Unity
Curated by Puck van der Werf
and Humie Pourseyf
Huis Marseille Museum of
Photography, Amsterdam
Photographed by Tibor Dieters
2023



‘When we share our memories with each other, a metaphorical migration of memories occurs.’



Transitory Body
K21 Encounter
At K21, Kunstsammlung NRW,
Dusseldorf, Germany
Photographed by Linda Inconi
2023

Instruction for the viewer:

1. Think of a date that reminds you of a memory related to partition-separation-division-dissection-detachment-displacement.
2. Create that date on the stamps provided.
3. Stamp your particular date on my body.
4. Whisper in my ears the memory attached to the date
5. In return, I will whisper a personal memory in your ear.



You cannot step into the same river twice, Performance by Arpita Akhanda, Cristina Flores Pescorán, and Rehema Chachage, part of *Murmuring Matter: On the Cosmopolitics of Materials*, *Museum Night*, Maastricht, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Netherlands, 2023



The performance titled, *The Transitory Body* was followed by a lecture by the artist and interaction with the viewers.

Transitory Body
AAIE Center for Contemporary Arts, & Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma, Rome
2022



Arpita Akhanda's
Lecture Performance at K21
Photographed by Linda Inconi



The living scar
 Performance video
 and text from artist diary 04:54 minutes
 Part of শরীর
 Körper: The Memory Collector
 Kunstrum, Aarau, Switzerland.
 2021

The living scar
 Installation view
 Still from video



Scan to
 see the video



How would you feel when you open your eyes in the morning, thinking of being independent only to discover that you no longer belong to your home/land?



The Living Scar is a video documentation of a performance on tattooing the Radcliffe Lines on my body. On August 17, 1947, the Radcliffe Line was declared as the boundary between India and Pakistan following the Partition of India. The line divided Bengal into Indian-held West Bengal and East Bengal, which became East Pakistan in 1955. The line was decided by the Border Commissions headed by Cyril Radcliffe, who was to divide 175,000 square miles (450,000 km²) of territory with 88 million people.

My act of carrying these two historical scars puts forward the question:

The Living Scar
Display of documentation of the performance process



The Living Scar
Documentation of the process

5th June 2021,

I became the living object.

Day : 03
 5th June 2021
 10:20 am : Two jet crossed each other
 01:50 am (IST) : wind.
 01:00 pm : A sound I can't identify
 04:30 pm (IST) : known but unknown
 here but nowhere
 similar but dissimilar
 12:24 am : My heartbeats
 04:04 am (IST) : I wonder
 if the city can hear.



IMG20210609111650
 Day: 04
 7th June 2021
 11:10:14 AM
 4000x1800 Pixels
 F5.00mm
 ISO 118
 No Flash
 External light used.
 Exposure time : 1/50s
 Performance time : 10s.
 Location : Kitchen
 Objects used : artist body,
 laundry rack,
 cloths.
 Discarded images : 17
 Total time : 10s x 18 clicks
 = 180s.

Day: 04
 7th June 2021
 07:46 pm : : creaking noise!
 07:16 pm (IST) : some one ran down the
 wooden stairs
 earthquake?
 fire? and I can't
 04:30 pm (IST) : accident? identify
 freedom? not unknown
 here but nowhere
 similar but dissimilar
 04:16 pm : I hear music
 07:46 pm (IST) : I opened
 all the four windows
 and
 the skylight
 to fill my tranquil
 room
 05:00 pm : Silence.
 08:30 am (IST)

240 hours
 Photographs, Site specific photo-
 performance and text Part of শরীর
 Körper : The Memory Collector,
 Kunstrum, Aarau, Switzerland.
 Installation view
 2021

240 hours was developed during my 10-day quarantine when I reached Aarau for a residency. Spending the first few days behind closed doors in an unknown city and house where I had just arrived, without meeting anyone, I started to generate a relationship with the town through the sounds from the windows and the skylight. I looked at my body

as a living object surrounded by the objects that constituted the house's character. Each day, I began documenting the unfamiliar sounds in poems/ texts and documenting my presence in the space in the form of photographs.



‘I was born in a city of rivers; I live in a city of rivers, and my family crossed cities, towns and rivers in search of a home. I got very attached to the river Aare during the residency; I felt that was the only place I connected with the foreign land.’

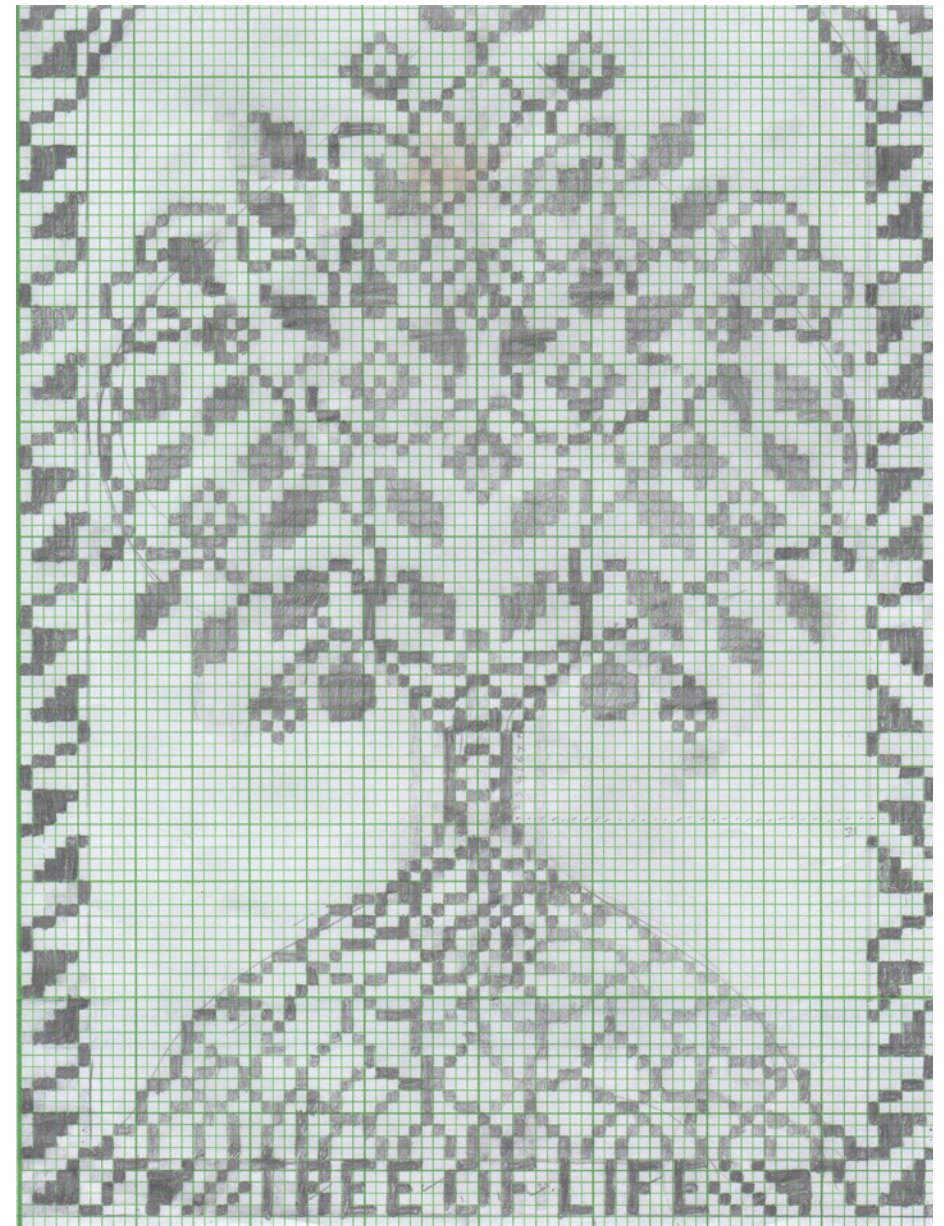
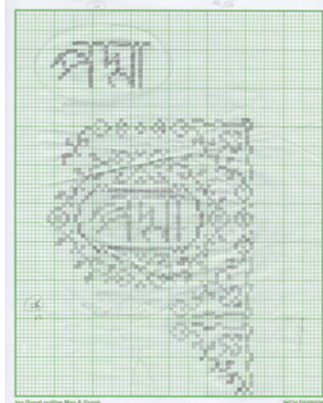
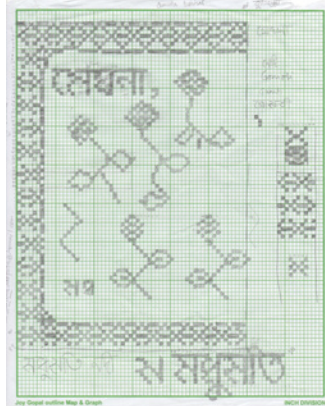
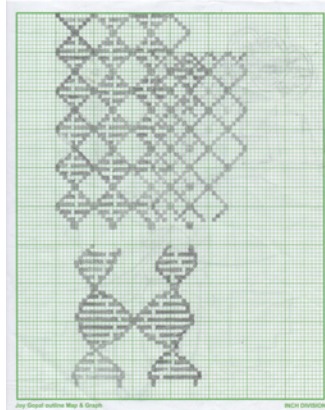
Body of Water I is a series of photo-performance and paper weavings developed from a poem I wrote during my regular visit to the river Aare. I tried to weave the biological, historical, mythological, and physiological bond between water and body. This work explores the idea of the water body as a carrier of migration flow and settlement.

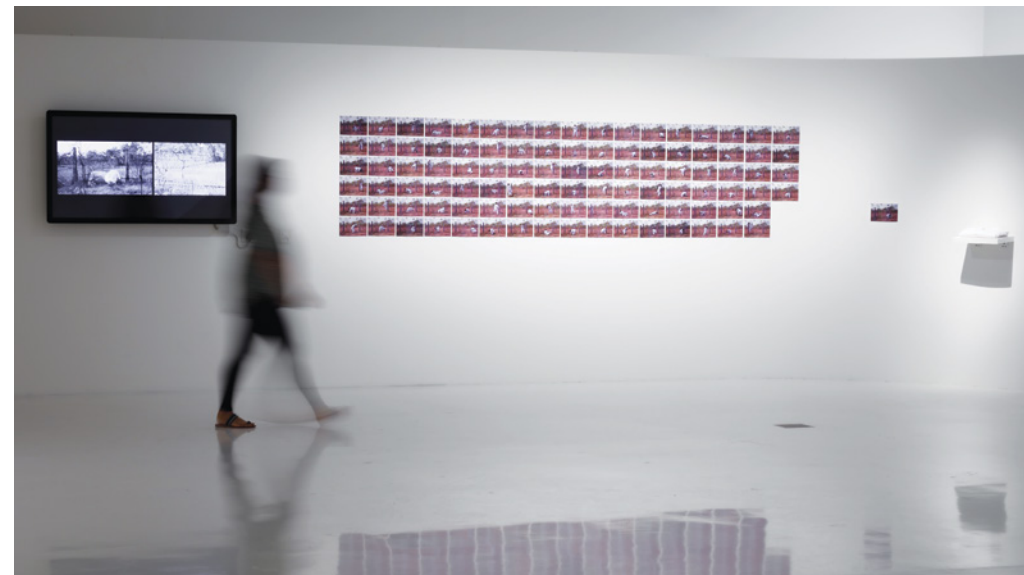


Body of Water I & II
Photoperformance and maps of rivers,
Paper weaving on archival print on Hahnemuhle Photo Rag archival paper
16.5 X 12 inches each approx.
Part of শরীর
Körper: The Memory Collector, Kunstrum, Aarau, Switzerland
2021



Body is Home
Paper weaving on archival print on
epson enhanced matte paper
75 X 56 inches
Part of শরীর
Körper: The Memory Collector,
Kunstrum, Aarau, Switzerland.
2021





The last leap: 101 ways of crossing
 Installation with video, photographs,
 dress worn during performance.
Part of Liminal Beings and Other
Spaces, curated by Ushmita Sahu,
 Emami Art, Kolkata.
 2020

The Last Leap is a site-specific performance that references the oral recounts shared by my grandfather of the last step he took in Bangladesh while moving into India during the India-Pakistan division.

He could never forget that he had to choose between the two lands. Via the act of crossing, I tried to develop a relationship with the fence which superficially divides a piece of land, giving birth to the notion of the other - 'Epar ba Opar' (this side or that). From one land to the other- from one border to the other- from one identity to the other, addressing the question- Why do we have to choose? How do we choose? Whom do we choose?



Scan to
 see the video



24/03/2020-14/04/2020
 Paper weave on xerography
 11.5 x 8.25 inches each
 (Set of 24 works)
 2020

In 2020, during the first lockdown - waking up every day to heartrending news coverages of mass migration throughout India -people walking in search of home/shelter, I found myself comparing this mass migration my generation witnessed to the migration of the partition we have only heard or read about. By positioning myself as a witness to the situation,



I weaved together images of my portrait with pictures collected from the internet about both relocations. Limited by the lockdown, I explored xerography as my medium, as it was the only printing source readily available to me during the pandemic.

Contextualizing this facsimile as a language of mass

replication, I approached each piece like a diary entry from 24/03/2020 to 14/04/2020, arranging them in the same calendar order. Each motif draws references from history-memory-politics and explores the idea of home in multiple contexts.



Arpita Akhanda, born in 1992, completed her B.F.A & M.F.A in painting from Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati University, 2015 & 2017. She has been brought up in a family of artists who migrated from Bangladesh during the partition and moved through many locations in India before settling in Cuttack, Odisha.

Akhanda has performed at various national and international spaces, including The Prince Claus Fund Biennial Symposium 2023, Sri Lanka; K21, Dusseldorf, Germany; Huis Marseille, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2023; 'Transitory Body: The Memory Collector' at the opening ceremony of group exhibition 'Rivers and Roads: Meandering Stories of India', curated by Valeria Contarino, Pranitha Joseph and Zhu Yaning at AAIE Center for Contemporary Art, Rome, 2022-23; '360 minutes of requiem' at India Art Fair 2022, New Delhi; 'Transitory Body: The Memory Collector' at Piramal Art Residency, Mumbai, 2019-20, 'In between the living and dead', Texting Being Theertha International Performance Platform, curated by Smitha Cariappa & Jeetin Rangar Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2019; and 'Creating to destroying, Human Ecology and Art', 3rd Multidisciplinary Art show, curated by Chhatrapati Dutta Chittagong, Bangladesh, 2017.

Akhanda's two solo outings include 'শরীর | Körper: The Memory Collector', Kunstrraum Aarau, Switzerland 2021; A Walkover Senses, solo show at JANUS center for visual and performing art, Kolkata, 2018. Some of her notable group exhibitions include Art Dusseldorf 2023; India Art Fair 2023; 'Rivers and Roads: Meandering Stories of India', at AAIE Center for Contemporary Art, Rome 2022 – 23; 'You cannot step into the same river twice', Performance by Arpita Akhanda, Cristina Flores Pescorán, and Rehema Chachage, part of 'Murmuring Matter: On the Cosmopolitics of Material's, Museum Night Maastricht, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Netherlands, 2023; AD Design show 2022 in Mumbai, Hub India, Artissima International Fair of Contemporary Art at Torino, Italy, in 2021; 'Of Liminal Beings and other spaces', curated by Ushmita Sahu, Emami Art gallery, Kolkata 2021; The Trifecta of Movement curated by Advait Singh at Exhibit 320, New Delhi, 2020; The Lay of the Land, Exhibit320, New Delhi.

Arpita Akhanda is a recipient of the 2022-23- Prince Claus Seed Fund. She has also been selected for Jan Van Eyck Residency 2022-23, Netherlands. She was part of India Art Fair Artist in Residence program 2022, New Delhi; Artist in Residence program 2021 Gästeatelier Krone, Aarau, Switzerland in association with Khoj Kolkata; Inlaks Fine Art Award 2022, Emerging Artist Award 2020, FICA and Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation 2021; Piramal Art Residency Mumbai 2019-20; State Award Fellowship in New Media from Prafulla Dahanukar Art Foundation, 2019 and is also a recipient of National Scholarship by CCRT Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India in Painting 2016.

Akhanda has conducted several talks, presentation, workshop, screenings including the screening of 'The Living Scar' as part of the Transitions, Special program: selected works from the Jan van Eyck Academie screened at Lumière Cinéma, Maastricht NL; 'Understanding Body as Home', Talk and Workshop at Central Saint Martin as part of Subcontinent Divided Bringing communities together, A critical reflection on Independence 75 years project led by steering group at University of the Arts London (UAL), UK; Memory collector, Talk and Workshop as a part of Skillz Week in the Illustration programme at Camberwell College of Arts, UK; 'The Living Scar & The Last Leap' screened at Young Collectors Hub at Bikaner House, as a part of India Art Fair (IFA), Delhi.

Her works belong to major museums, private collections and art foundations, including Museum Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen K21, Piramal Foundation, Emami Group.

Emami Art is a leading Indian contemporary art gallery and a platform for cultural production. Established in 2017 in Kolkata, Emami Art represents emerging, mid-career and established artists and organises a dynamic programme of exhibitions and public seminars. Since its inception, the gallery has curated and hosted intimate and large-scale exhibitions and regularly participates in national and international art fairs and conferences.

With a focus on a future-forward, complex, multi-dimensional approach that echoes South Asian history, the programme explores socio-cultural and geo-political narratives in relation to visual art practices today. As part of its knowledge-sharing and archiving activities, Emami Art regularly hosts talks, seminars, panel discussions and conversations between artists, curators and audiences to create a safe space for critical engagement.

Deeply committed to promoting a regional, national and international agenda through innovative and alternative programming, the gallery places emphasis on knowledge production and socially conscious themes. Emami Art aspires to be a catalyst of change, research, innovation and inclusivity and welcomes all sections of society.

EMAMI ART

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