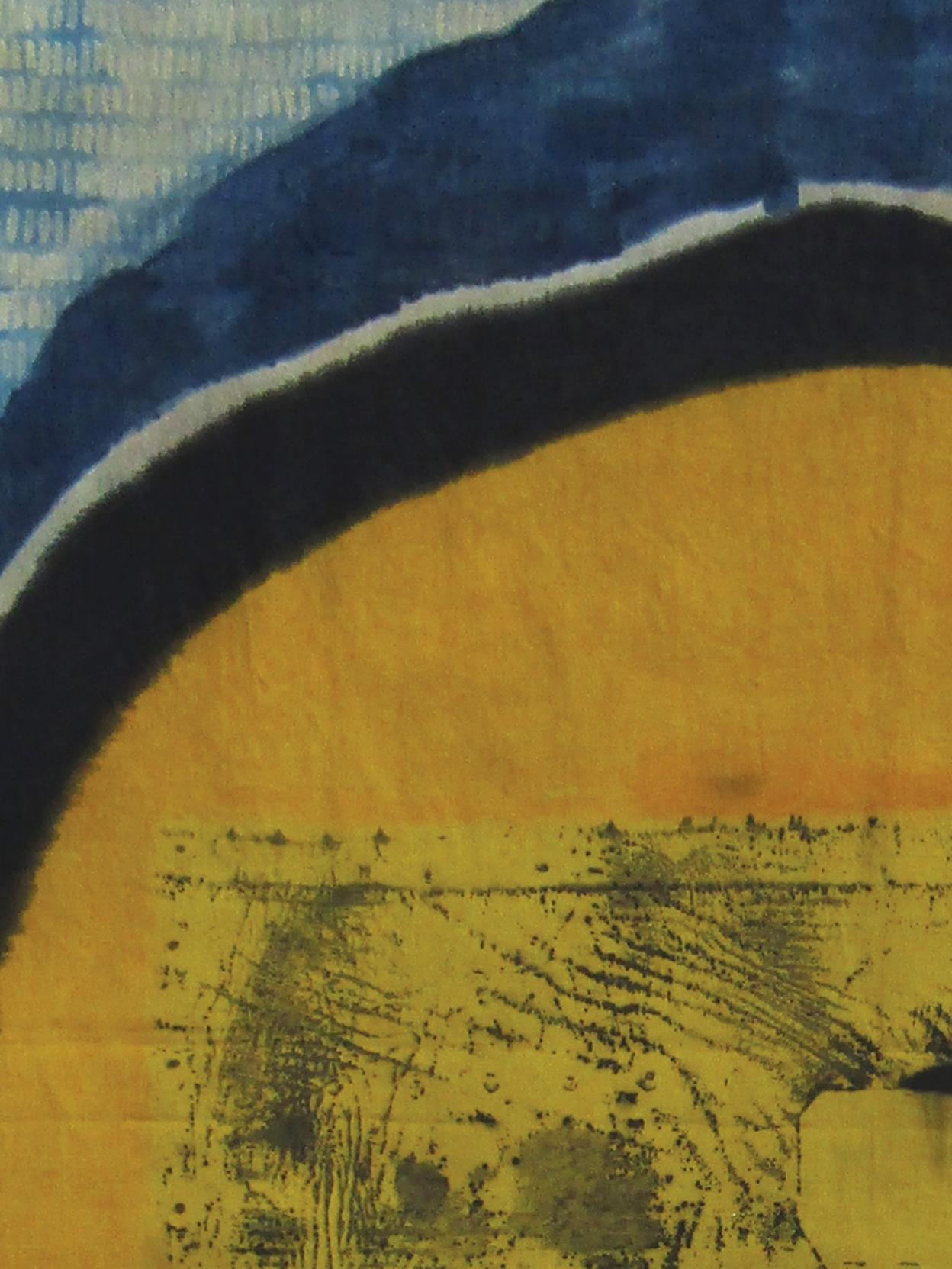




Ujjal Dey

**Ujjal
Dey**

EMAMI ART



Sakāla (Morning)
Detail

Artist Ujjal Dey, born in Bihar, India, in 1992, lives and works in Santiniketan, a small semi-rural township in West Bengal, famous for the university founded by the Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. The undulating laterite landscape, flora and fauna particular to the region, its unique socio-cultural heritage, and the local Santhal (tribal) communities provide essential knowledge resources that inform Dey's oeuvre. Presently pursuing a PhD focused on diverse knowledge systems and sustainable methods of natural dye in contemporary art, Dey produces research-based art that is informed by a varied, multilayered understanding of the history of textile traditions in South Asia.

Dey studied textile art, much to the disappointment of his father, who would have liked his son to have studied engineering or medicine. Moreover, textile arts have traditionally been considered a feminine domain, hence deemed a domestic craft unworthy of serious consideration and lacking in earning potential; unsurprisingly, male textile or fibre artists in Indian contemporary art are rare. However, Dey has resisted familial pressure and continues to prevail against the odds, citing a childhood fascination with his grandmother's crafts practices as his motivation.

One of the artist's earliest memories of his maternal grandmother is of her smearing their mud house floor with a mix of cow dung and clay. Known as *lepā* in his mother tongue Bengali, this age-old daily ritual has served the dual purpose of maintaining the floors and walls of mud houses while also having religious connotations. As mud houses are slowly becoming a rarity, examples can be seen mostly in rural or indigenous communities where the typical rhythmic semi-circular arc marks left by the swabbing motion of the arm are identified as 'moon marks'. However, Dey also recalls his paternal grandmother's *alapanas* (religious abstract and geometric patterns floor patterns derived from foliage and natural motifs), which are hand drawn on the floor using *khori maati* (a paste of pale-yellow sedimentary rock with a high level of calcium that dries white) or rice paste.

His recent series, which was on view at the Whittaker during the British Textile Biennial, references both - the rigorous physical mark-making and mud as a material. He uses a thick paste of *khori maati* mixed with liquid gum Arabic as a mud-resist, an ancient technique associated with the *Dabu* and *Akjrakh* textiles from Gujarat and Rajasthan dating back between the 8th century



Natural dyestuff - Myrobalan, Madder, Bastard Myrobalan (*Bahera*), Indian gooseberry (*Amla*), Onion skin, Pomegranate peel, Marigold flowers, Flame of Forest (*Palash*) flowers, Eucalyptus tree bark, Jackfruit tree wood drying in the Sun to prevent fungus and insects due to moisture.



Medoli 1 & 2

Lepā in progress by dipping a cotton rag in local mud from Santiniketan along with arabic gum and kalamkari ink (iron acetate)
Medoli in the regional dialect is a semi-circular pattern of mud and cow dung often smeared with cloth/broom on the gateways/doorstep/courtyard of houses in rural Bengal. This keeps the area insect and germs resistant.

AD to the first century BCE. Although wax and mud-resist are both popular, Dey prefers mud, as it is readily available all around him; it allows a degree of freedom to add and remove layers by simply washing the cloth in running water while lending a soft-edged smudged effect that he prefers. He is also experimenting with Japanese rice-resist methods.

Dey is also an avid gardener with a comprehensive knowledge of indigenous plants. Other areas of his research thus include the extraction of raw materials from locally available natural resources, developing mordants, dyes and pigments from seeds, leaves, flowers, skins, and bark of different materials such as Myrobalan, Madder, Marigolds, Mango, Pomegranate, Palash Flame of the Forest (*Butea Monosperma*), Onion, Catechu, Annatto, Indigo, Tea, Eucalyptus tree, and Jackfruit tree bark. He also diligently experiments with traditional dyeing, block-printing methods, painting, and resist techniques on paper and fabric.

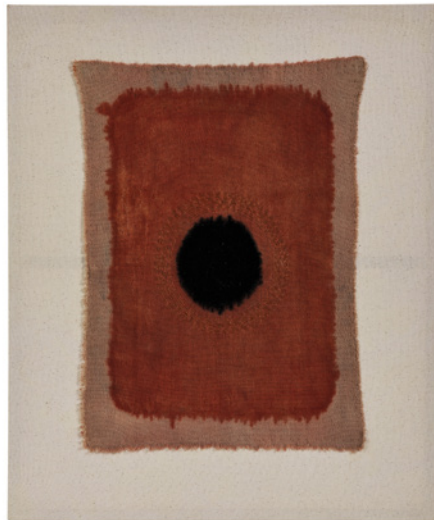
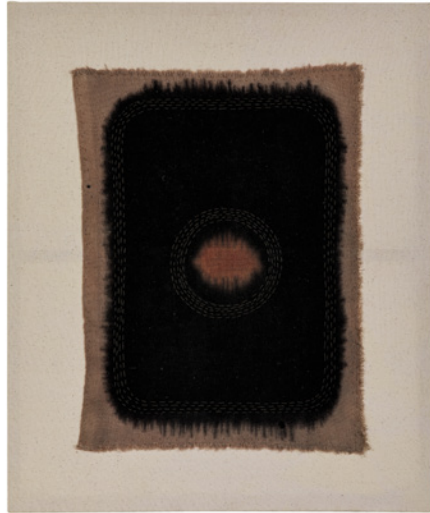


Dey washing away the mud rest after in the Kopai river, Santiniketan.
Photography: Tanmoy Chakraborty
Copyright: Ujjal Dey
2023

Dey notes that preparing the dye is quite an elaborate and challenging process: Firstly, the dye materials (leaves, petals, seeds, fruits, roots, skins, bark etc.) are foraged locally or bought from the nearby city of Kolkata and, at times, other places within India. Then these are either used fresh, as in the case of marigold, or dried, a process often hampered by the prolonged monsoon season in Bengal that can sometimes last six months. After checking the material for impurities, Dey soaks them in water for up to two days.

Secondly, each pigment is boiled at specific temperatures not to destroy the molecular structure of the dyes that bond with the material. The vessel for boiling is usually non-reactive such as steel or earthenware, as iron vessel would darken or dull the colour. Dey sometimes uses copper or aluminum vessels to soak the dye materials to get different shades. Finally, the dye solution is finely filtered using a non-reactive sieve. Over the years, Dey has learnt what to avoid, and his process is slowly becoming more intuitive – creating a seamless bridge between the artwork's medium, process, and concept.

Each work encompasses various stages that can take anywhere from several weeks to months, depending on its size. This process begins with sourcing regionally produced handwoven cotton that is washed to remove starch and then mordanted with myrobalan. Sometimes Dey adds buffalo milk to the myrobalan extract; this acts as a binder. There is a lot of scope for direct experimentation on the fabric at this stage. For instance, by placing rusted objects directly on the cloth, Dey has taken impressions of discarded articles, such as a *chulha*, a traditional metal cooking stove. The iron reacting with the tannins in the myrobalan results in grainy black imprints, which Dey calls memory prints.



Lepa - 3
Myrobalan, kalamkari ink, madder and alum as mordant on
khadi cotton, hand embroidery with natural dyed cotton yarn
11.5 x 18 inches each
2020

He also introduces hand drawing and direct painting with kalamkari ink. He makes this traditional black ink by fermenting iron dust and jaggery, unrefined sugar in a clay pot over several months and thickening it with gum Arabic or tamarind seed glue. The drawings are dried in sunlight for several days, after which the cloth is washed in running water. In Dey's case, it is Kopai, one of the local rivers in Santiniketan. This first wash removes the excess inks leaving behind the myrobalan base and the impression of objects. The cloth is then dried flat.

Next, Dey introduces several overlapping steps of mordant, resists, and dyes to create complex, layered imagery. The introduction of coloured pigments, such as red (from concentrated madder dye solutions or alum mordant applied to cloth then boiled in a madder dye solution), brown (from catechu), blue (from locally sourced indigo) and yellow (from turmeric, marigold petals, or pomegranate and onion skin or a mixture of all of the above) are done by hand brushed calligraphy or boiling the fabric in the solution. For drawing, Dey uses a traditional *kalam* (pen) made from a sharpened bamboo reed with a cloth rolled over it and secured with cotton thread which acts as the inkwell.

At times he also introduces stitching, harking back to the Bengali women, who make *kanthas* or quilted fabrics by layering old sarees held together and decorated with running stitches. Primarily used as bed or floor covers, kanthas were usually made between household chores, sometimes singlehandedly and sometimes as collaborative community praxes, thus taking months to complete. Dey equates the repetitive action of the hand and needle movements to iterations of daily mundane activities – similar yet slightly different; an engagement with rituals and mark- making while raising questions about gendered labour. A visual encapsulation of vanishing traditional methods, each gesture for him lies at the collective and muscle memory collision point.



Colour is an intrinsic part of Dey's works; it drives the narrative schema and the abstract, primary forms that are sometimes situational, accidental or intentional. *Daag* or stain is another interesting conceptual framework for Dey. The word can have negative connotations in vernacular languages, yet, he chooses to think of stains in a positive light – gnarled female hands stained yellow with turmeric from cooking, stains of *sindoor* or vermillion powder used by married Hindu women in the parting of the hair, stains of soot from washing utensils. The notion of stain connects to his childhood, home, and the women of his family.

Ujjal Dey's resplendent textiles emerging from a specific geocultural context merge an inherited past with an ecologically sustainable approach universal in its respect for nature and the land of our forbears. ■

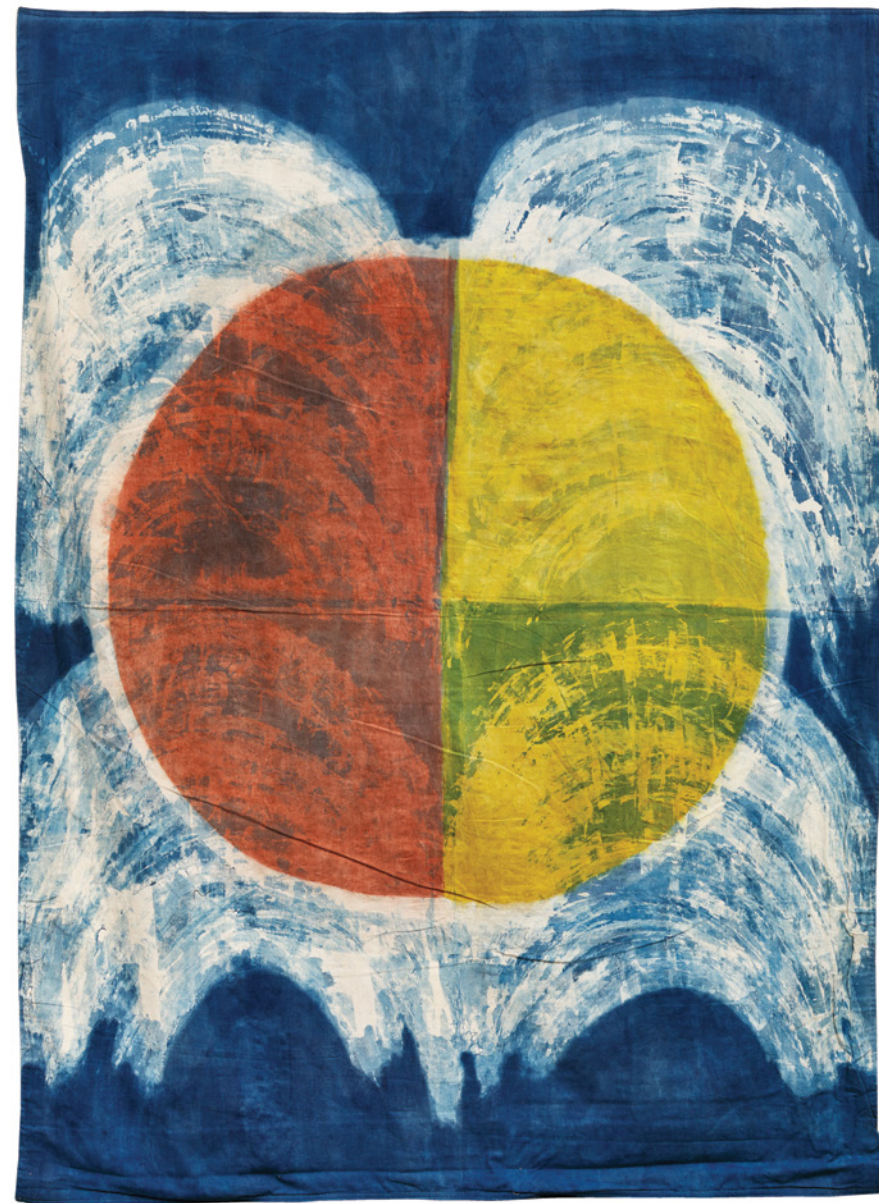
Ushmita Sahu
Director & Head Curator, Emami Art

(This text originally appeared as *Mud and Madder* in *Selvedge Magazine*, Issue 114 Regeneration. 2023)

Tools of drawing, hand painting, printing - locally handmade and self made bamboo pens with/without cotton ball at the tip, paintbrushes, batik pen (Tjanting), Round wood block, Wooden mould for local sweets turned into Wood block
Image Courtesy & Copyright: Ujjal Dey



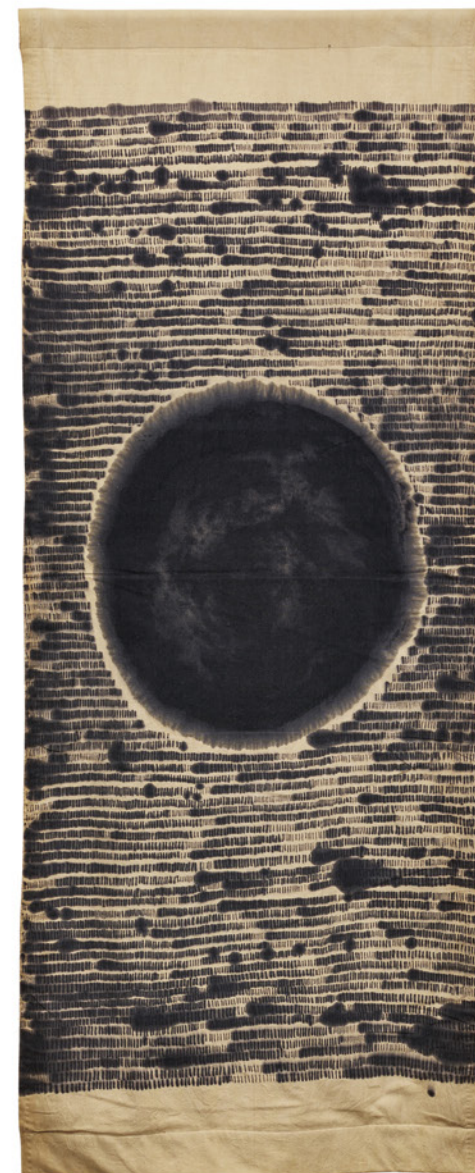
Medoli 2
Cotton, myrobalan, kalamkari ink, mud resist
and hand painted with indigo and madder
70 x 57 inches
2022



Medoli 1
Myrobalan, mud resist hand paint with
indigo, madder and turmeric on mill cotton cloth
75 x 56.5 inches
2022



Medoli 1 & 2
Photograph: Jack Bolton
Display: *Fragments of Our Time*
Curated by Uthra Rajgopal for British
Textile Biennial 2023 at the Whitaker
Museum & Art Gallery, Rosendale



Daag: Where Past Meets Present
Kalamkari ink on cotton cloth dyed in myrobalan
36 x 72 inches each
2022

Photography: Arpita Akhanda
Image Courtesy: Emami Art
Display: Fragments of Our Time
Curated by Uthra Rajgopal for British
Textile Biennial 2023 at the Whitaker
Museum & Art Gallery, Rosendale



*Daag: Where Past
Meets Present*
Detail



Daag: Where Past Meets Present
Installation view
Fragments of Our Time
Curated by Uthra Rajgopal
for British Textile Biennial 2023
at the Whitaker Museum & Art
Gallery, Rosendale UK
Photograph: Arpita Akhanda

Dey constantly tries to revisit the indelible memories of his childhood in his work, comparing them to the faded remains of old, but familiar stains.

Making of Daag: *Where Past Meets Present*
Application of Kalamkari ink (iron acetate) with bamboo pen (kalam).
Photography: Gourav Dey
Copyright: Ujjal Dey





Memory Scape I
Kalamkari ink, alum
mordant painted, mud
and lime resist, catechu,
madder and indigo dye
on myrobalan dyed khadi
cotton cloth
90.5 x 45 inches
2023

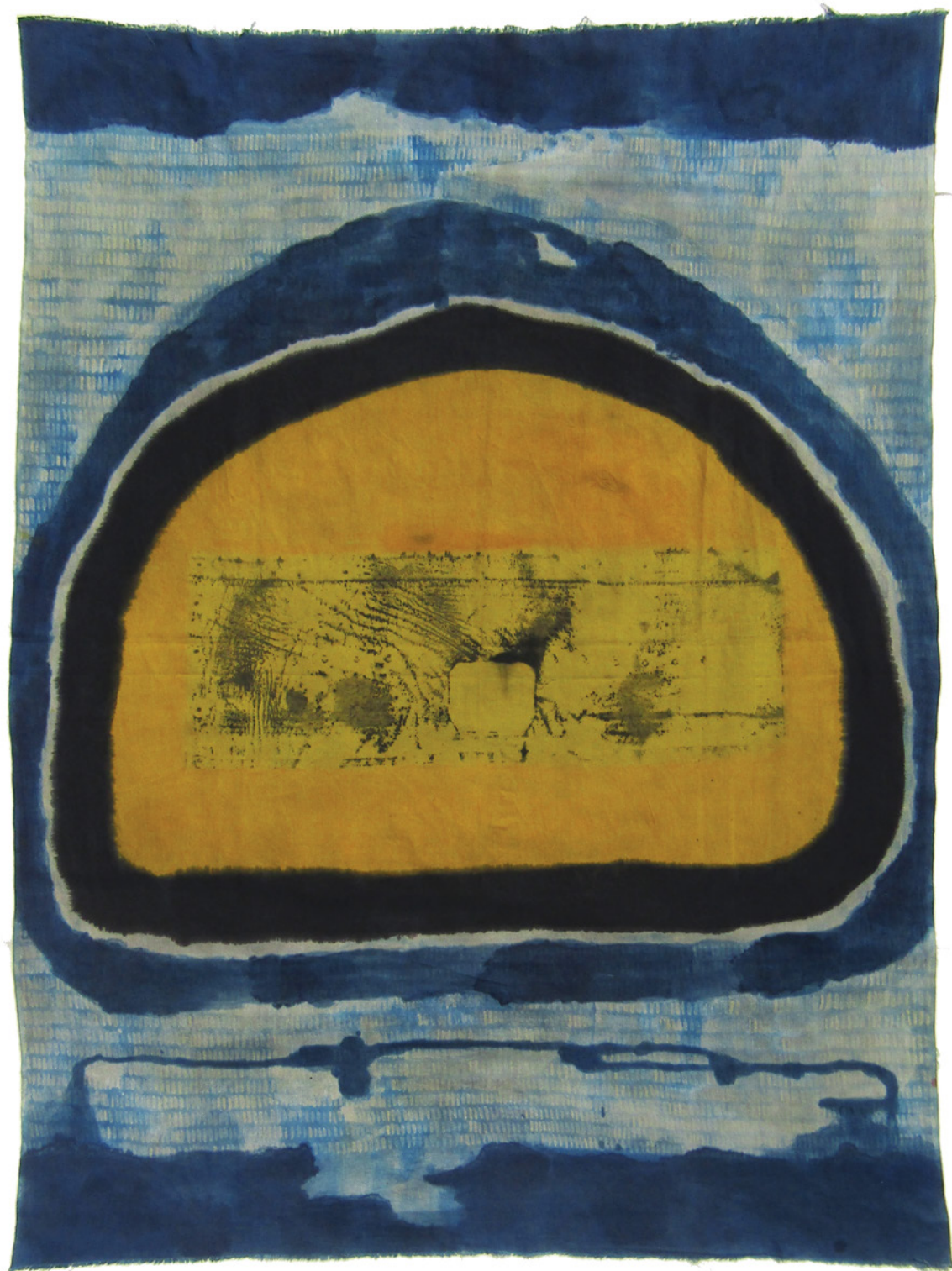
Memory Scape II
Kalamkari ink, alum mordant
painted, mud and lime
resist, catechu, madder and
indigo dye on myrobalan
dyed khadi cotton cloth
89.5 x 45 inches
2023





Detail

Sandhyā (Evening)
Iron rust transfer, drawing with kalamkari ink, hand-painted
with catechu and madder on myrobalan dyed cotton cloth
62 x 42.5 inches
2022



Sakāla (morning) and *Sandhyā* (evening) showcase the processes of iron rust transfer and hand-painting in natural dyes. The work depicts the hours when women in rural households traditionally prepare the earthen stove for cooking. The forms in these works are also impressions of old rusted *chulhās*, underscoring the leitmotifs of repetitiveness of mundane household activities

Sakāla (Morning)
Iron rust transfer, drawing with kalamkari ink, mud resist, hand-painted
with indigo and turmeric on myrobalan dyed cotton cloth
62 x 42.5 inches
2022



Sight of a Memory-site
Kalamkari ink and Indigo dye on myrobalan
dyed cotton cloth
55 x 41.5 inches
2020

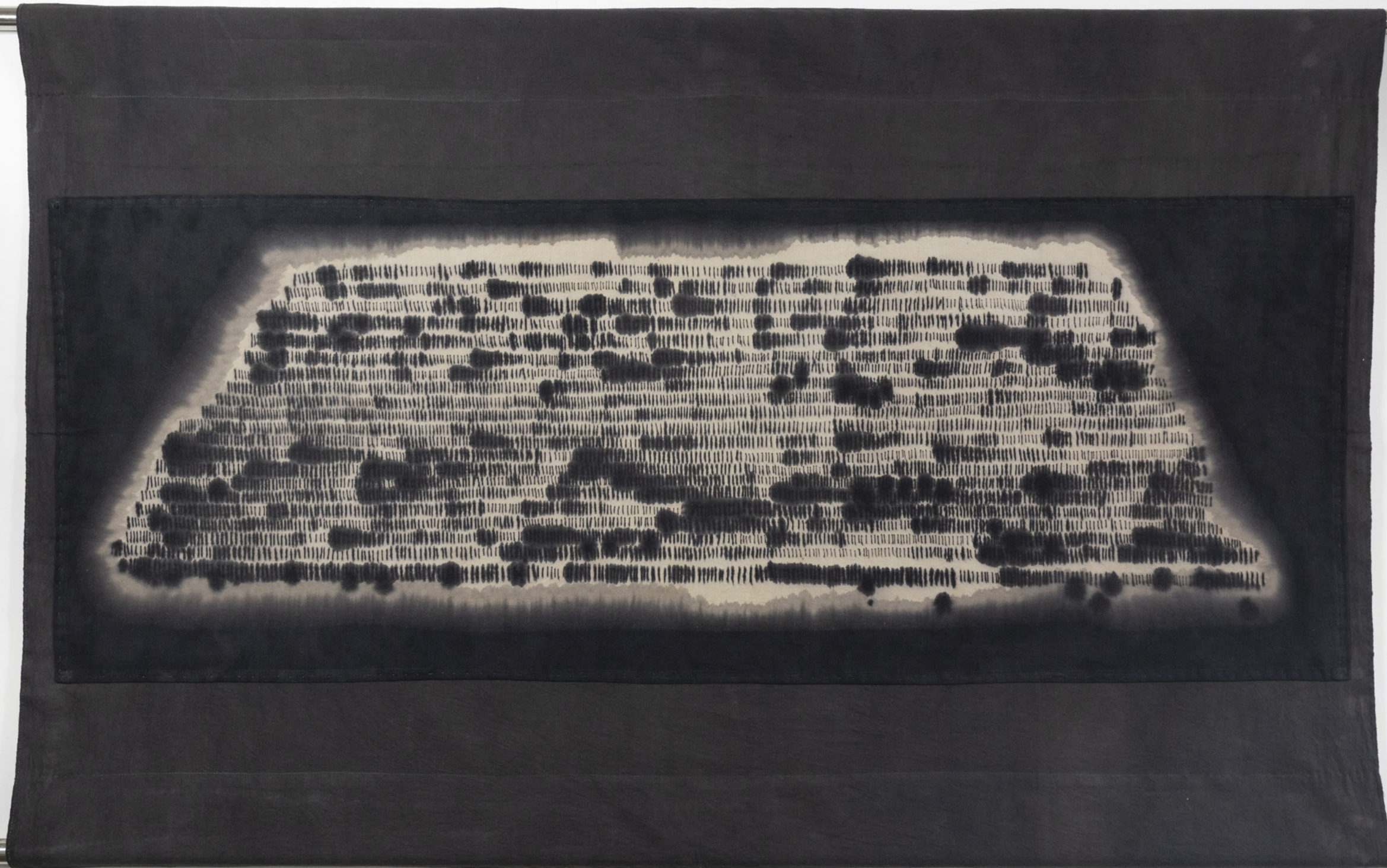


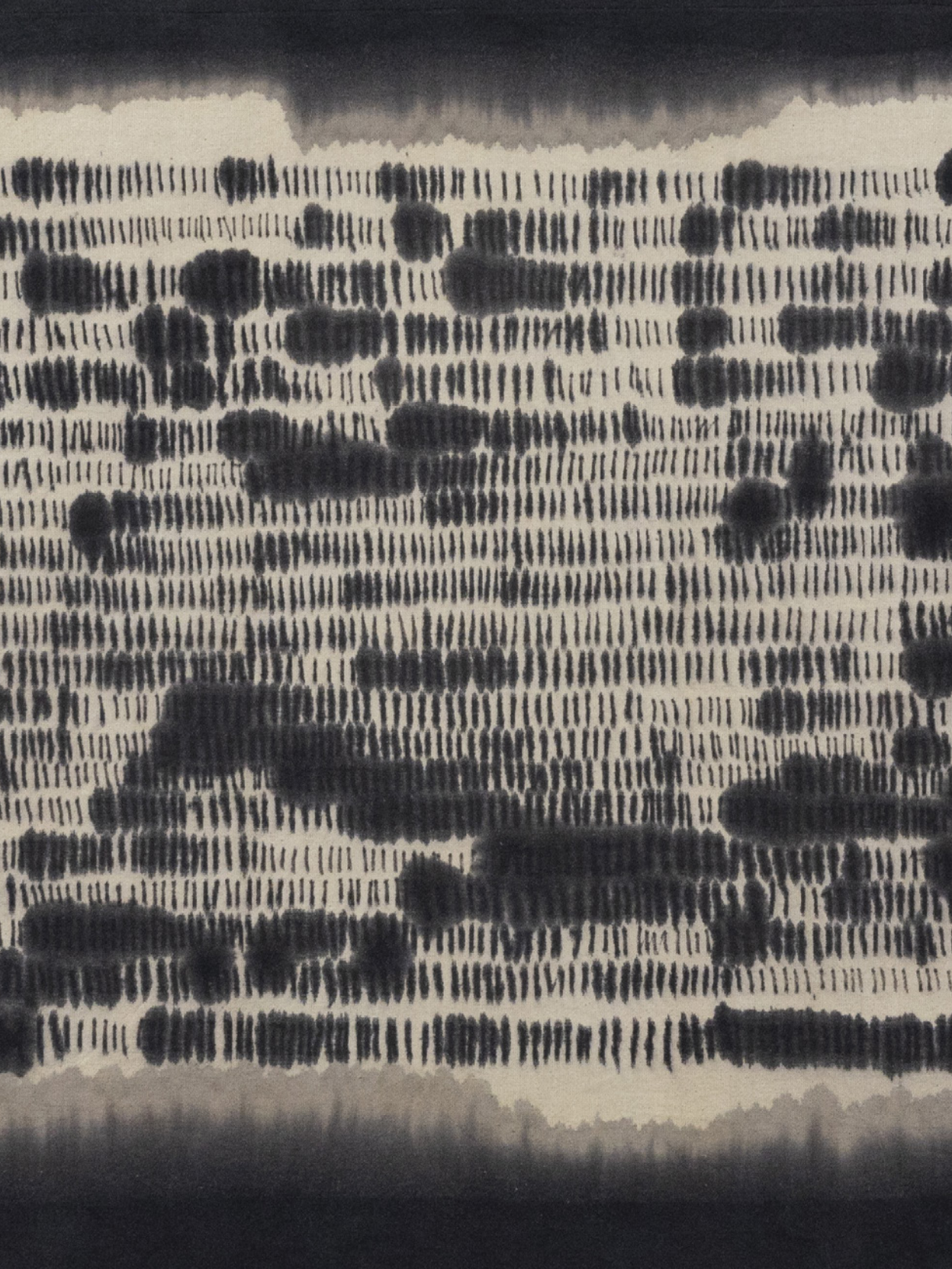
Dey working on *The Sight of a Memory-site*, a work that has the imprints of object such as parts of a portable *chulhā* and gas stove.



Zameen: The Land in Between - 2
Iron rust transfer, drawing and hand-paint with natural
dyes on myrobalan dyed cotton cloth
34 x 33 inches each
2020

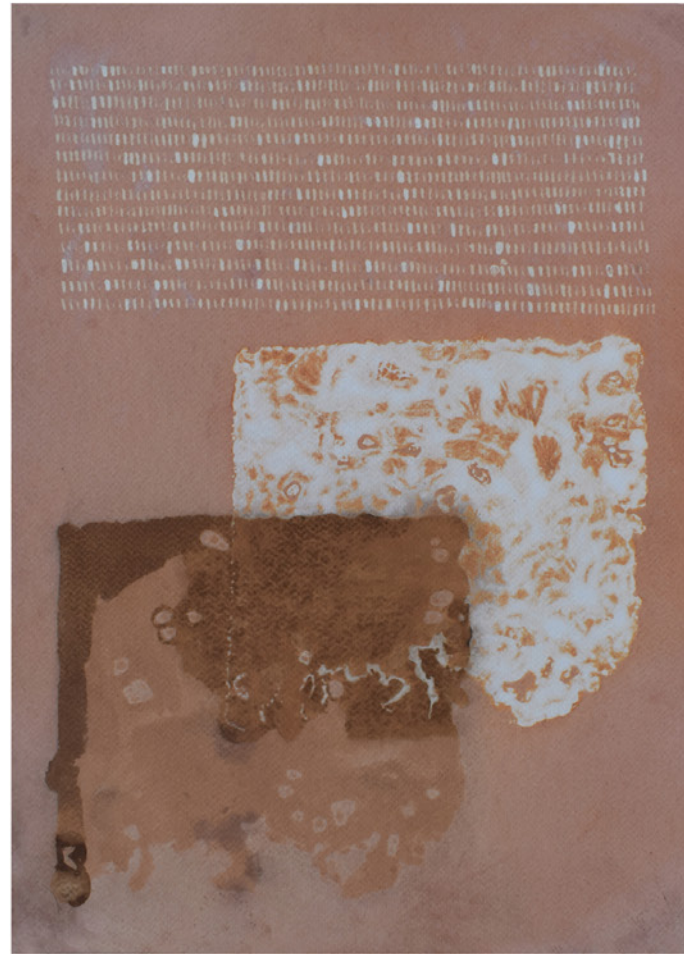
Overleaf
Zameen
Drawing and hand-paint with natural dyes
on myrobalan dyed cotton cloth
56 x 22 inches
2020





Dey endeavours to connect the memories of his village upbringing with the contemporary reality of the loss of natural resources like land and water. The themes of loss and anxiety permeate his works, reflecting larger ecological shifts and cultural amnesia.

Zameen
Detail



Mapping the Root III
Kalamkari ink, alum, *khori maati* (white clay), lime and madder on paper
11.7 x 16.7 inches each
2023



Trade- Winds II
 Kalamkari ink, alum mordant, mud and
 lime resist, indigo, madder, and catechu
 on myrobalan-dyed cotton cloth
 83 x 45 inches
 2023

Dey's recent work navigates the history of mercantile exchanges in South Asia in the 17th and 18th century. He is also researching the traditional dyeing techniques and block-print methods, focusing primarily on the history of trade and the category of textiles known as 'trade textiles'; Dey explores the story of materials used for making pigment and printing techniques tracing back to the early days of trade and transactions within and beyond the Indian Ocean world. Until Europe emerged as the locus of global mercantile transactions, South Asian trade hotspots held the monopoly of trade and maritime exchanges, especially regions such as Gujarat, Coromandel and Bengal. Good quality cotton was exchanged for commodities, including luxury items, horses, and slaves. The popularity of Indian textiles and their demand and global circulation played a significant role in shaping modernist provenance.

Dey's research on pigments, raw materials and the history of the circulation of 'local' knowledge of printing techniques and dye-making methods within and beyond the subcontinent engages with the stories of movements of materials, appropriations, paradigms and global connections. He attempts to look at sustainability through eco-sensitive thinking, experimenting, and innovating widely used printing techniques across many South Asian regions since pre-industrial times.



Detail

Trade- Winds I
Kalamkari ink, alum mordant, mud and
lime resist, indigo, madder, and catechu
on myrobalan-dyed cotton cloth
83 x 45 inches
2023





Root- Map
Kalamkari ink, alum mordant, mud and lime resist, indigo,
madder, and catechu on myrobalan-dyed cotton cloth
33 x 22 inches each
2023



Born in 1992 in Ranchi, India, Ujjal Dey is a contemporary textile artist pursuing a doctorate from Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan. He graduated from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, with a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. in textile and design in 2015 and 2017, respectively.

Dey's recent solo shows include *Dawn to Dusk: A Silent Symphony*, Emami Art, 2024 and a Solo Project held at the Cromwell Place, London, UK, in 2023. His works have been displayed at various exhibitions in India and internationally including *Transforming Traditions* at the InKo Centre, Chennai 2024; *Fragments of Our Time*, curated by Uthra Rajgopal at the British Textile Biennial, UK in 2023; International Fiber Arts of Time at Nandan Gallery, Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 2022; *GOONJ: An Abstract Continuum*, curated by Jesal Thacker at Coomaraswamy Hall, CSMVS, Mumbai in 2022; *100 YUVA SAMBHAVA*, by Raza Foundation, a show of 100 young artists of India curated by Akhilesh and Manish Pushkale in 2022; *Retinoblastoma: An Artistic Expression*, an online exhibition at L.V Prasad Eye Institute in 2021; *DEPARTURE* conceptualized by Prasanta Sahu at Ganges Art Gallery, Kolkata, 2020; Young Santiniketan Artist Exhibition at SSVAD, Santiniketan, 2019; the Annual Exhibition at Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata in 2018 and *The Shape of Things*, curated by Ushmita Sahu at Ganges Art Gallery, Kolkata, 2017; among many others.

Dey's works have also been shown at Art Dusseldorf 2023 and India Art Fair 2023, 2024. He participated in the International Art Workshop at Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati in 2022; In-Field Studio, a collaborative art, architecture and performance workshop at Kheledanga village, Amar Kutir, Santiniketan, 2017; Malaysian Batik workshop at Tagoreland Batik village, Phuldanga, Santiniketan and Patkar Painting workshop at Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, 2016 and *Tana - Bana*, a workshop on natural fabrics and handlooms in India at Sambhaavnaa Institute, Palampur, Himachal Pradesh in 2015.

He was awarded the Certificate of Appreciation for Textile at the Young Santiniketan Artists' Exhibition, Santiniketan Society of Visual Art and Design in 2019, and is the recipient of the Junior Fellowship (2018-2019) and the National Scholarship (2016) by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

Ujjal Dey lives and works in Santiniketan, West Bengal.

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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