

# ASIAN ART

THE NEWSPAPER FOR COLLECTORS, DEALERS, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES · MAY 2012 · £5.00/US\$10/€10

## Yamini Nayar

By OLIVIA SAND

Whereas in painting and sculpture the artist's hand is generally recognisable, the medium of photography seems to make it more difficult for artists to create a language specifically their own, unique, yet identifiable and setting them apart from a large community working with the lens. Yamini Nayar (b. 1975) is such an artist. She has built a vocabulary that draws the viewer into her universe where photography, sculpture, and architecture collide. With no reference to a human presence, her work presents a space that feels equally familiar and unknown, inviting, yet mysterious. Based in New York, Yamini Nayar spoke in depth about her work with the Asian Art Newspaper.

**Asian Art Newspaper:** You started a residency last autumn. Is it ongoing?

**Yamini Nayar:** Yes, it is. In September of last year, I started a residency with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC). They give artists residencies for nine or 12 months and the programme takes over unused spaces that are usually either in transition, or made available for rent. My space is on the 14th floor of an office building. Some of the artists and some of the writers have small offices as their studios, and some artists have raw shaped spaces, which is what I have. It is a huge loft-like space with exposed concrete, without carpet or furnishings.

**AAN:** When applying, did you have to submit a project you wanted to complete?

**YN:** Not really. Like a number of residencies in the city, they do not expect you to create a finished body of work. They just want to give artists the opportunity to work. One of the LMCC's goals is

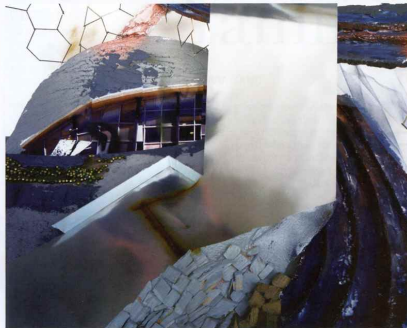


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to make sure that the space is being used. Having a space in Lower Manhattan is fantastic: it is alive with a lot of energy. We are right near Wall Street. It is a very specific kind of energy, and there is a lot happening there. I really like it.

**AAN:** As an artist based in New York, what is the advantage of such a residency in the city?

**YN:** They LMCC gives free studio space in Lower Manhattan, which is a fabulous location. Also, they provide a lot of support for the artists, bringing in curators and critics to review your work, organising studio visits throughout the year. In addition, we have open studios. They just give us so much support with a grant for production, building a large platform for our work towards a larger audience.



Cascading Attica (2011), C-print, 40 x 50 in, edition of 5 (+2 AP)



Fluster (2011),  
C-print, 20 x 24 in,  
edition of 5 (+2 AP)

AAN: Once this residency comes to an end, would you contemplate another one?  
YN: Yes, definitely. There are so many residencies. I had done a residency two years ago in Woodstock at the Center of Photography, which lasted for only one month. There is something to be said about shorter residencies where you can go in with a plan that you want to execute in a certain way. However, it is really nice to have a longer residency because it takes so much time to get settled into the space, and to get started.

AAN: You were invited to give the prestigious Lightbome Lecture at the Cincinnati Art Museum. What topics did you address?  
YN: I spoke about my process and how the work was actually made. The audience was mixed, but there were a lot of students from the Art Academy that I was also working with while I was there (I had a residency there as well). I was teaching and working with them. Consequently, I really wanted to get into the process. The lecture spoke about my work, the process of my work, and how it has evolved.

AAN: Can you elaborate on the process?

YN: In my work, I combine photography, sculpture, and installation. I make photographs, constructed photographs that are documents of spatial constructions that I build in my studio. Scale is an element in my work. I primarily work on tabletops, but the scale varies. I photograph with a large format camera. After the photograph is made, I discard the actual object. The object is really just for the lens. As I am working, it is very much a collaboration; physically constructing an object, then also looking through the lens, and essentially creating an image. It is very important that the object itself be discarded because I want the photograph to be considered the actual object,

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also a document, a record, and ultimately really as an artwork.

AAN: When did you initiate this process?

YN: Years back, when I was an undergraduate, this is when I really started to work in miniature. At that time, it was much more a kind of diorama like space, and I was seeing it as a strict relationship, but now, the work is much more free-form and not 'boxed'. Today, depth is very much a part of the process as well. It is about creating a space.

AAN: What type of materials are you using in order to create the space?

YN: I work with very low-tech materials. When I had my studio in Brooklyn, there were a lot of businesses that would build furniture, and I would go through their off cuts and, at the end of the week, I would take the things I could use. I work from a lot of found materials, and urban materials. Then, I also work with plaster and construction materials.

AAN: Has it always been that way?

YN: I have been working with very low-tech materials because at the end of the day my goal is to have a photograph. Therefore, I was not so interested in having preciousness in the materials themselves. It is about the photograph, consequently I use Styrofoam, *papier maché*, very simple materials, found materials, magazines, and personal images.

AAN: Once the space is built, is it a solid construction?

YN: It actually brings up a crucial point about the relationship of photography to sculpture. The objects are not meant to exist as sculptures. So they are completely fragile. They are popped up, and they are held together by thread and tape. They are not objects, and they could never be transported anywhere, they are completely for the camera. That is an important question because if you are taking a photograph of a sculpture or an object, then why not show the actual object? What reason does one have to show the photograph or to think of the photograph as the final form?

AAN: Do you retouch the images in any way afterwards?

YN: Not really. I shoot four by five, and I scan in my negative. I have chosen to stick to four by five because it is sculptural, it is

architectural, and there is so much you can do. In terms of working digitally, I do colour correcting, and I like the digital process too. I work in editions of 5 with 2 artists proofs.

AAN: During art school, was your focus already directed towards photography?

YN: Yes, I studied photography and sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Then, I did my graduate studies in photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York.

AAN: Why did you decide to leave sculpture behind?

YN: Because I came from a photo background, and I studied sculpture in photography, but my major really was photography. I came into photography as a documentary photographer, as a straight photographer as I was very much interested in street photography. I actually began doing constructive photography while I was at the Rhode Island School of Design. Towards the end of my time there, I had been taking all kinds of pictures, trying all kinds of things in terms of photography. Originally, my first project working in miniature was a recreation of spaces from the 1970s. Apartments or spaces that were domestic spaces, immigrant spaces. I was working from found photographs, personal snapshots from my own family and other people's snapshots. I was looking at how the spaces were created, and how objects, from a point of origin, were negotiated. I recreated these spaces physically, and then would take the camera in and create studies in a sense, fragments of these spaces. It was really about how photography mediated memory, mediated reality, and mediated history. However, that was just a starting point. It was somewhat conceptualized, but it also came very naturally to me as a way of understanding my own history, and from there, my work evolved step by step.

AAN: Do you see yourself going back towards documentary photography?

YN: I love documentary photography. I still take pictures, my own studies. I frequently photograph spaces, and sometimes I draw on the spaces. I was doing a project in Detroit where I photographed abandoned factories or dilapidated spaces. These are my straight photographs, and then I draw the architectural renderings into the

space. Using the photograph as a starting point, I find points within the actual photograph that I had taken in order to create what could be in the space architecturally. That is an ongoing series.

AAN: You were born in the United States with both of your parents from India. Does your family history have any impact on your work?

YN: Yes. My mother is from Bengal, and my father is from Kerala. I grew up going to Delhi, Kerala, and Calcutta where a lot of my mother's relatives live. Throughout my life, that has always been a big part of my thinking. Maybe going back and forth, being in flux, encouraged me to consider the issues of migration and immigration, what it means to be with one's identity in a new space, or in a different culture.

AAN: Would you consider keeping a studio in India in the future?

YN: I may do a residency there. I would love to have a studio there. My family has a flat in Delhi, so it is very easy for me to go there, and I do have this fantasy of having a space and working there.

AAN: The introduction to your lecture in Cincinnati brought up the point that many people still consider photography as such an easy medium where anyone is basically capable of handling a camera.

YN: Photography is about the whole idea of the iconic moment, of the decisive moment. In that sense, photography is very challenging. It also depends on what type of photography you are doing because for some photographers, collecting images, extracting and creating a whole large collection of images and the editing is really where the challenge comes in. For another photo-based artist, it may be from the inside out where they are working more like a painter or a sculptor like in my case for example. Then, it is much more about creating something that is purely for the camera, and it is more of an inductive process than an extractive.

AAN: Your work is deliberately void of human presence. Why?

YN: Yes. My work is about memory, about spaces that are inhabitable. I work with interiors and architectural spaces as a way to create images that can be entered. So much can be said about the space and the absence of

objects, and sometimes it is what is not shown which speaks volumes.

**AAN:** One observation that is recurrent about your work is that it refers to a 'post-apocalyptic' vision. Do you agree with that interpretation?

**YN:** I think the work is obviously up for interpretation: for me, it is much more about how time and experience impacts space, and how space impacts human beings, that kind of relationship between the two. Just in terms of what inspires me, I am interested in how idealized structures are changed or shifted through human behaviour or through time, how we make our mark on our surroundings, and how our surroundings make their mark on us.

By 'post-apocalyptic', I think what they meant was probably this idea that you are starting from a point of ruin, and you wonder what comes next? Is there a transformation? What is the next moment in the sense that we are living in some sort of timeline. Also, I believe we are actually living in a moment of complete change, flux, and transition, and that change is part of my work. When you think about space, you inevitably think about cities, and architecture. In Detroit, so much of the city is loosing its spaces. Delhi is also getting built-up. That is something to which I am sensitive. I am wondering whether that is what they were talking about with the idea of transition and that in this 'inbetweenness', spaces are shifting – shifting from one entity into another.

**AAN:** Your photographs carry interesting titles. How important are they to you?

**YN:** I like to use the titles as an entry point, which adds another layer to the work. Maybe it is a psychological state or a moment or something that will not close down the meaning, but rather open it up, and speak directly to the piece in a open-ended way, like a framing device.

**AAN:** What do you consider the main challenges in your process?

**YN:** For me, one of the main challenges is deciding when the moment is right within a structure or within a scene. What is the moment that will be the photograph, the object? That is a challenge for me, and that is something I am constantly processing. I work in drafts, almost the way a writer or a poet works. Indeed, it is a challenge. I guess any artist goes through that: when do you know that something is finished? Maybe that question is generally more associated with a painter and a sculptor although in photography, you are building up the tension and you need to decide when to stop.

**AAN:** Would you agree that over the past year, your work has become more abstract?

**YN:** Yes. Definitely.

**AAN:** Where do you see your work going from here?

**YN:** Working in abstracted spaces, constructing abstracted spaces, and thinking of space as not being tied to something that represents reality has freed me up a lot. I think that my work has been moving in that direction over the past few years. I had produced work, but I hadn't done a solo show around that. I enjoy this space where I am in now where I am just thinking much more about the dialogue between photography and sculpture, drawing architecture and drawing from the history of modernist architecture. There is so much to think about and to rethink, but not having to be tied to real spaces or not having to convey reality in a sense, is completely liberating.

Also, my work has become much more tactile, and in the photographs rough edges are visible. You can see the plaster, etc, which is something I want. It is about that honesty and that transparency about what a photograph can be. So much about photography in the digital age is so polished and pristine, but I am much more interested in its tactile quality, the transparency, and the honesty. I am working with different materials. For my solo show in India (spring 2012), I have been working with glass which I like working with. I want to explore what it looks like in the photograph, there is so much potential. I am a photographer, and consequently, I also simply like to see what something looks like in a photograph. Also, I want to address

the implication of glass in history of modernism. I would find recycled glass, a windshield that broke from a car, all kinds of things. The works are new, but they are building up on earlier steps. It is a continuing project.

**AAN:** Whom do you consider your main influences?

**YN:** I love the work of Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, the new Bauhaus, the constructivists. I was really influenced by De Chirico, by the way he used space and the enigmatic absence. It does not necessarily resonate with my work, but it contributes to the way I think about constructing an image, and what an image can contain.

I like the work of James Casebere, and Thomas Demand is an artist who comes up a lot in connection to my work. However, I feel my work has just a difference: it is about complicating, layering rather than the opposite. It is not the same process between him and me. The genre of constructed photography is so vast with artists like Demand, Casebere, even the work of Ellen Brooks, there are so many that are working in constructed photography, especially from the 1970s and late 80s.

One photographer that really influenced my work and me is Eugene Atget – specifically his interiors, the Parisian interiors, and the domestic spaces. I remember seeing these works and being very impacted by them. Also, I am impressed by the flattening of the photographic space, how these different objects and things in the spaces would relate to one another. I would realise that seeing certain objects that were in one photograph and then in another photograph were actually staged. That had a profound influence on my work.