

A chaotic cityscape kept in line

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Chetnaa Verma at work in her studio

Having lived in Delhi for most of my life, I have learnt to get around the chaos and get things done. It still is the most frustrating thing. So I was pleasantly surprised to meet Chetnaa Verma, a Delhi-based artist who draws her inspiration from the city's roads. We decided to meet at Café Turtle over lunch on a hot afternoon, and I grumbled all the way there — bypassing metro construction dividers and multiple potholes, painfully slow autorickshaws, whizzing motorcyclists and annoying pedestrians who popped off sidewalks with a hand raised to warn cars to stop. And this only accounts for the human traffic on the roads!

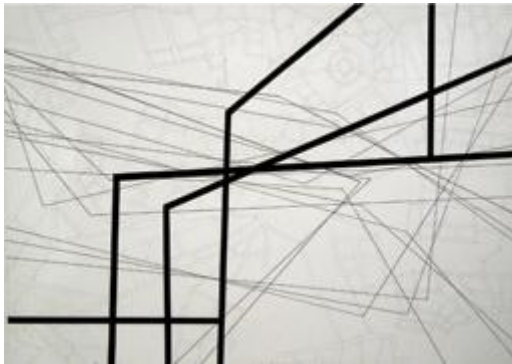
For anyone who lives in or around Delhi, commuting takes up a big chunk of time. What Verma does is manifest the daily monotony of getting from one point to another in line drawings by tracing the movement of a single point. It is a personal journey, perhaps the point represents her moving as she reflects on the city's architecture, mentally deconstructing it into horizontals and verticals. Either way, the result is a clever abstraction of those memories into linear compositions.

Chetnaa sat patiently waiting for me as I arrived, a tad harrowed and apologising for my late entry. We began to chat about her practice as I flipped through a file of samples of her work. Drawn on paper were black lines of varying density, some thick and bold, others fine and fragile, some that ran parallel, others that intersected. I wondered how such simplicity could be derived from the madness I had just witnessed.

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She spoke of how often she was questioned about the underlying story that people believed would facilitate a reading of her work, and confessed that the works spoke for themselves, without needing any long-winded narration to support them. It was true; each piece revealed a harmonious order in the layering of maps, lines and angles — drawn on and threaded through the paper, resilient and tenuous all at once. There was no explanation to why a line was overlaid over another in the manner that it was. Chetnaa had managed to abstract the cityscape to a form of minimal geometric purity that could be visually consumed in an instant.



I notice a recurring square grid in many of her drawings; she explains that it exists as a window to escape the disorder, the mundane journeying, and the seemingly endless distances that need to be traversed.

The works I'd seen thus far were all black-and-white, with the occasional (and more recent) use of thread and gold leaf. As we spoke, I discovered that her early works reflected the emotive use of vibrant colour bars that created vibrations of excitement and energy in the viewer. Chetnaa's work is, however, not limited to paper and canvas. She also experiments with video animation and laser light installations, both accommodating her abstractionist sensibilities as well as allowing her to exploit spatial dimensions more penetrably.

It is no coincidence that she was recently voted Emerging Artist of the Year by Glenfiddich and Bestcollegeart.com. Consequently, she begins a three-month residency in Scotland this July with other young artists from around the world. As her practice evolves, I discern a more astute conceptual minimalism in the lines and angles of her making. For the moment, however, I am curious to see what she makes of the Scottish landscape, and look forward to meeting again on her return.