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# PROCESSING CONSTRUCTION

**In the Studio with Yamini Nayar**

Interview by Erandi de Silva

Photographs by Mary Kang

Yamini is a New York/New Delhi-based artist. Influenced by architecture and psychoanalysis, she constructs emotive spatial images through modelmaking and assemblage, resulting in layered work that shifts between flatness and volume. Often using building materials as she creates contemplative psychological spaces, her work echoes the empathetic themes of Modernism's social interests.

### **Why are you interested in Modernism?**

I reference many ideas and works from the Modernist period. There is a push-and-pull relationship characteristic of that time that I am drawn to: the idea that architecture can have a heavy hand, but also have some kind of positive impact on the individual and the community. I'm very interested in the reciprocal relationship of how we shape architecture and how it shapes us. The Modernists thought a lot about how we navigate space, and their belief that social good can arise from within the context of spatial and building design is inspiring to me. I also appreciate their attention to materiality—their economic and industrious use of it.

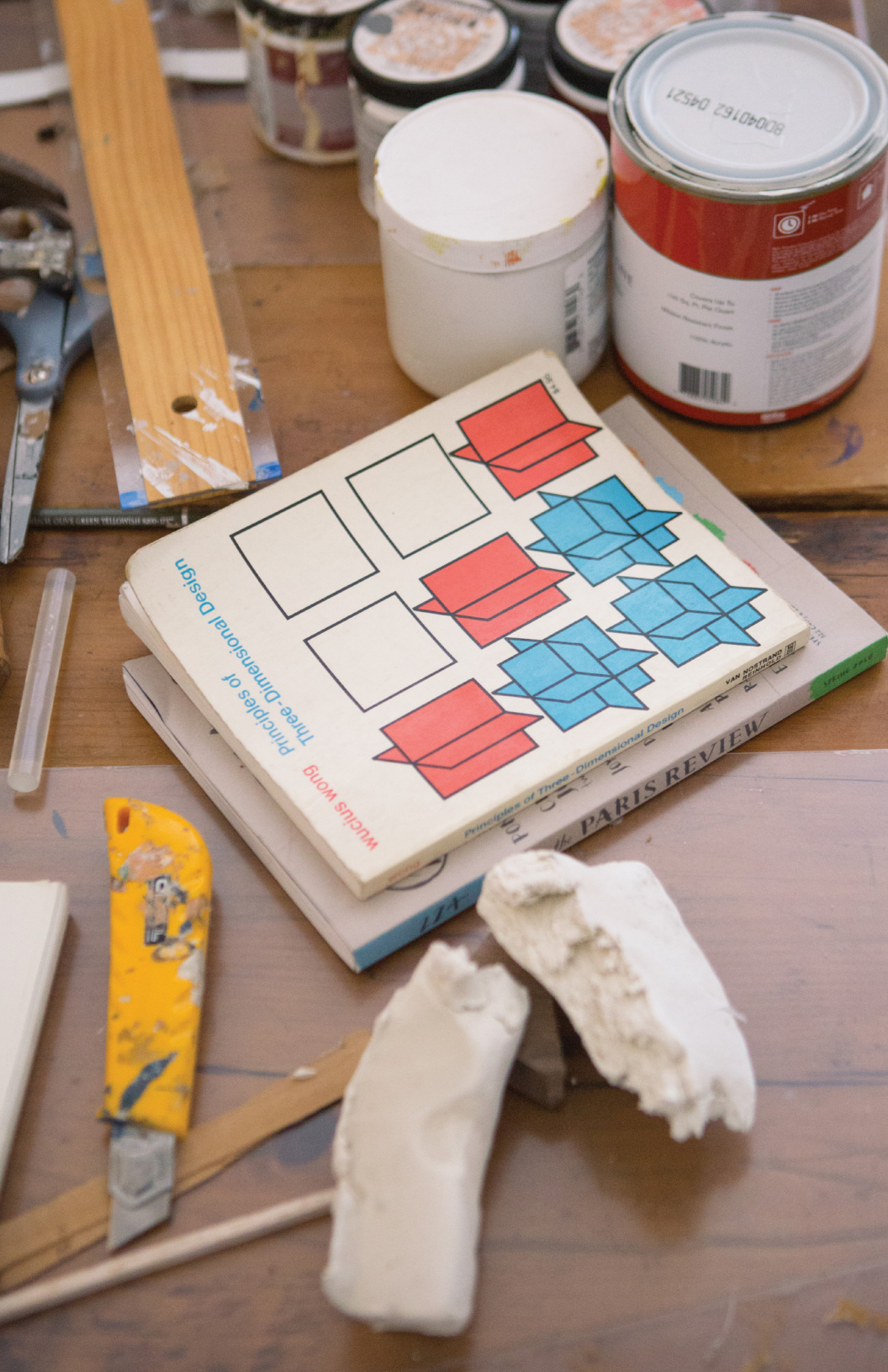
My entry point is much more from a conceptual place, rather than a nuts-and-bolts one. I'm interested in the psychological space that these structures produce, and how we can carry these ideas through the present and into the future.

On a personal note, my mother is a psychoanalyst. Psychoanalysis and therapy have always shaped my way of thinking. I don't want to say that I'm interested in using spatial design as therapy, but there is something there.

### **How do you begin to produce a work? Is there a concept that you start with? Or is it more about focusing on process?**

For me, a primary way of working is from a source image. Often it represents a moment, within a timeline of history, and re-imagines it, lifting it out into a new context. And then the image becomes a conversation around memory, abstraction, metaphor, dream space, psychic space ... There will be recognizable elements that directly relate back to the original image. But then there's a lot of building that happens as a kind of abstraction and a way to illustrate use, to make it lived in.

I work with images that I source primarily from art and architecture books. Those are the starting points for my sculptures and constructions. I do a lot of experimenting where I build structures, create photographs, and then print those out. Sometimes these prints become a material that works its way into a more successful structure. So, the works become a conversation of renewal and process



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as an idea develops, similar to the way a writer works in drafts. There are no failed experiments; instead, ideas are cultivated as the less compelling constructions work their way into new structures. I believe that making is a form of thinking, so my process is also really about an *assembling* of varied materials and the development that happens when a complex, layered three-dimensional sculpture is photographed and flattened into a two-dimensional print that is then worked back into a three-dimensional object and documented, and so on.

**What about the physical content of your work? Where does that come from?**

I usually use materials that are associated with building construction. I source the materials that I work with from various businesses around my studio, acquiring their cast-offs. I also source from hardware stores and incorporate studio detritus.

**Can you tell us about the *objectness* of your photographs?**

I make studies that are usually printed at 11 inches by 14 inches, in black and white. My larger works are not usually magnifications; they are typically 1:1 in terms of what I'm building. The sculptures themselves are actually 5 feet tall. And the resulting photographs are slender: 40 inches by 60 inches, which is a more human scale—a conscious decision. The smaller works take something larger and shrink it down.

I work with a large format 4-inch by 5-inch camera. It's also the camera traditionally used to photograph buildings: a tilt shift. You can really play with perspective. I think of it as a very sculptural photographic tool. I process the negatives, scan them, and then produce Light-Jet prints, or digital C-Prints. These are chemical processes that use a digital exposure. I don't do inkjets. I have been thinking about switching over, but I haven't yet.

I always work with matte images, not with papers that would add reflection and push the viewer away because I want to create the most intimate relationship possible. Where I can, I present without glass.

### **Where does 'the body' exist in your work?**

Much of my work in the past few years has involved thinking about space and the language of architecture and the body, and really trying to integrate the body in different ways.

I think of architecture as a metaphor, but also as an experience. When I think of an emotion or a gesture, I often consider how it can translate to space or the built environment. So, for me, there is such a close relationship—buildings as an extension of the human being, or the body.

Then there's the process of working and that becomes an exercise in locating the body. I usually start with a piece of wood. That's like the spine of a body. From there I work outward. In doing that, there's a real negotiation of the body. It becomes part of the image, part of the three-dimensional work. Locating the body can take different forms ...

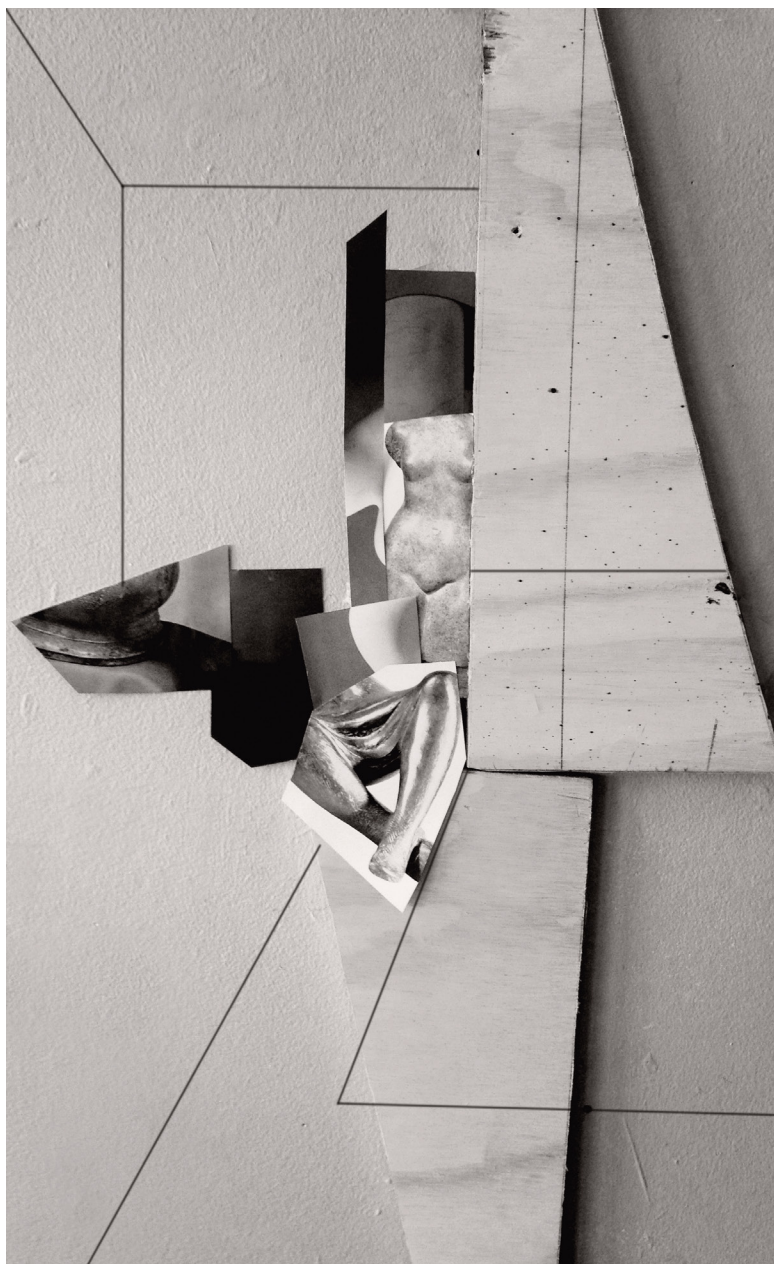
### **Does the viewer play a role defining where 'the body' fits into your practice?**

Yes and no. One of the reasons I began working with spatiality is because the viewer navigates, even in a photograph. But the photograph itself is a body, as it can communicate both mass and volume. So there's a conversation that takes place. Much of my work also has a kind of built-in barrier. I have heard the words 'threatening' and 'sharp' used to describe it, for instance. I also like the term 'illegibility', which is compelling because it brings about the question of reading versus understanding. The space between photograph and object can be as complex as a human being, and the space between viewer and object can be as complex as an interaction between two human beings. There are infinite openings and boundaries.

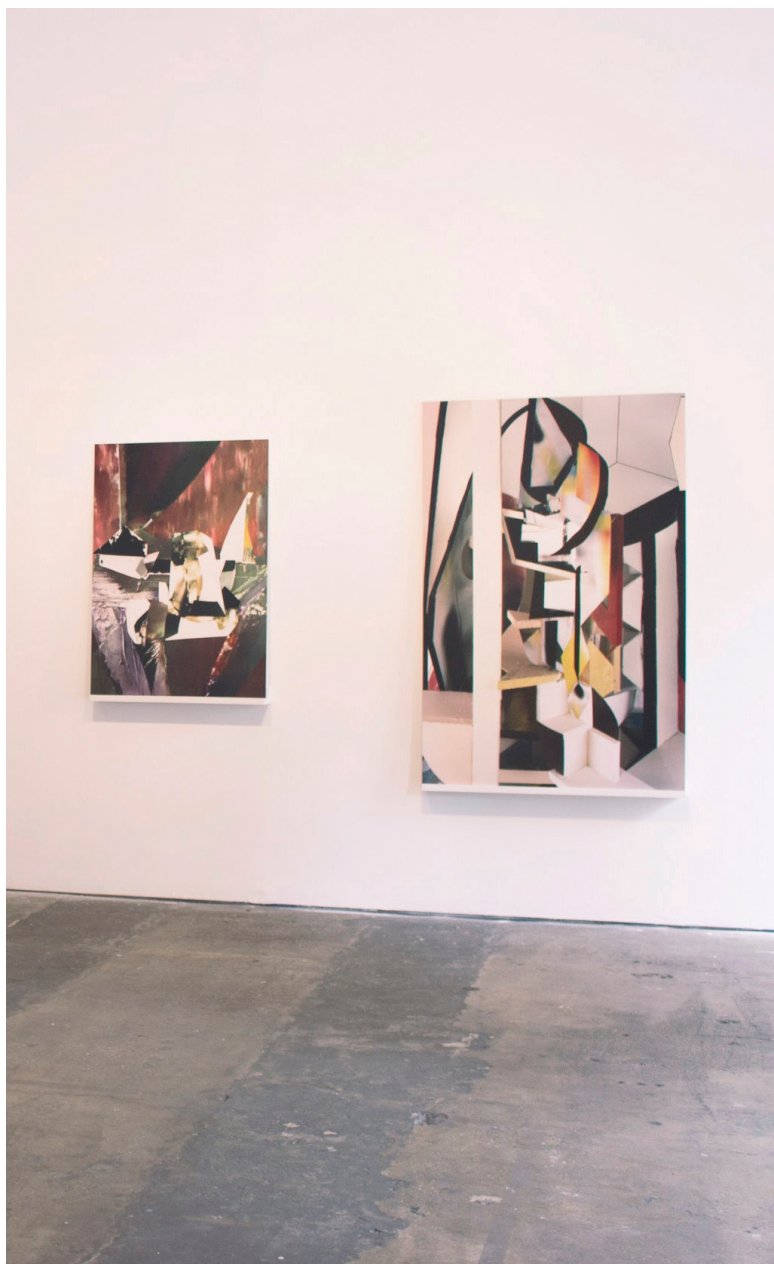
### **Where does this impulse for presenting boundaries come from?**

I was thinking about ideas around Modernist architectural language around tropes like *transparency* and *repetition*. But also thinking about their opposites, so rather than *transparency*, instead *opacity*. Edward Glissant writes about something he calls the 'right to opacity', or the idea that one has the right to be private, resistant,





*Bodies*, Yamini Nayar, 2015



Works by Yamini Nayar in the New York-based Fridman Gallery's 'Aspirational Architectures' show in 2018.



and illegible. Much of my work considers the idea that a photograph doesn't have to reveal itself immediately, or even reveal all of itself.

**Is it important that your final result is spatially and materially flat?**

The constructions or sculptures are never meant to live on as independent objects. It has always been about the image. I come to artmaking through image-making and I'm very interested in how the camera mediates our relationship with reality. That core concept has been embedded in my practice from way back.

Physicality is also important. I'm interested in the photograph as an object, as something that's not just a document.

At a recent presentation at the Fridman Gallery I showed C-Prints mounted on Alu-Dibond on shelves, which are flush with the sides of the photograph. There is no frame, just a slightly leaning image, sitting on a lip. Because these are sixty inches high, there is a slight curve to them. So it's almost like a body leaning against a wall.

**Because you have this structural aspect to your work, it's interesting to play with it in the presentation. To have a shelf is also architectural, but unlike a frame, it manifests a different set of connotations.**

On a very physical level, we changed the relationship to the work and it transforms what the work is doing. Moving forward, I would really like to present in this way where it also brings it back to what it is in the studio. I'm often building out. Sometimes the sculptures are hanging from the ceiling, but often they are propped up on something—for example, a stand, so that they are at my height—so there is a kind of transparency that starts to emerge.

**How does time materialize in your work?**

In the same way that I'm talking about using architecture, I also consider time—in particular, the way that a space functions over time. I photograph my sculptures at different stages of their development and often the final image might be made of several images that are physically layered. I really want to get away from the idea that build-

ing is completely linear. You will see aspects of the past and the present in a single work.

### **And scale?**

Scale is a tool. There are the ways in which we orient ourselves through scale and also ways in which we disorient ourselves. I play with scale quite a bit and I don't see it as limiting. Scale is malleable within the world of images.

### **Bringing it back to the Modernists, do social issues influence and manifest in your work?**

Modernist architectural space has historically been represented as non-inclusive and devoid of human presence. Much of my motivation is to imagine architectural spaces—past and present—as inclusive, plural, and alive. In my environments that become photographs, it's important that the image functions as an empathetic object. By this I mean that it has tactility and a strong materiality. I connect these qualities with something akin to a human relationship. It's the difference between a surface reading and having a deeper understanding of something much more complex, but not necessarily knowing the rules.

Each body of work I show is naturally a response to my experience of the world. 'Head Space' from 2011 was essentially a response to the housing crisis that ensued post-2008. 'Axe for a Wing-Bone' 2013 began to parse out this relationship between labor, architecture, and the body. My work moving forward has pushed deeper into these issues and the hand continues to be a strong part of my practice in its traces and labor.

There's a thread running through the ways in which architecture is imagined in terms of its construction and the role that the laborer plays. In the Late Renaissance there was a split where the architectural drawing was elevated to the level of philosophy, literature, and writing, whereas model-making was relegated to being a workshop activity. I think there's something there—the way that construction labor is thought of in the context of building and architecture. Is there a need for the hierarchy, or can they exist on more equal footing?



