

Women on the Edge of Time

In 1976, Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* imagined Connie Ramos, a poor Mexican-American woman institutionalized against her will and subjected to invasive psychiatric experiments that strip her of autonomy over her own body. Confined to a ward, medicated and observed, Connie is treated less as a patient than as a problem to be managed. Her poverty, her ethnicity, and her anger at the world were all read by the institution as symptoms rather than as reasonable responses to a life lived at the bottom of several overlapping hierarchies. Through psychic contact with a woman from the future named Luciente, Connie glimpses a feminist utopia in which gender roles, motherhood, and patriarchy have been dismantled entirely, a world rebuilt from the ground up around land, labour, and kinship held in common, where children are raised collectively, where no one owns land outright, and where the violence done to Connie's body would be structurally unthinkable. Piercy's novel remains a landmark feminist critique of medical control over women's bodies, of class oppression, and of racism. It is also a novel about ecology, labour, and what we might learn from women's lineages in order to build a more equitable future.

This exhibition takes Piercy's title, and her questions, as its starting point, bringing together nine women artists, five of whom built their careers in the Indian Subcontinent, and four based in the United Kingdom, across a sequence of rooms that moves from the laboratory to the street and back to the land, tracing a path from clinical confinement towards collective testimony, and from there towards land, myth, and inheritance. The exhibition unfolds across installation, painting, drawing, and photography, refusing to settle into a single medium or a single geography, much as Piercy's novel refuses to settle into a single timeline.

Room 1

The exhibition opens with Chhachhi's installation *Ajab Karkhana (Strange Manufactory)*, an assemblage of some six hundred pieces of laboratory glassware accompanied by sound. Chhachhi has described the work as addressing 'the toxicity promoted by Big Pharma and their greed to convert medicine to poison'. The environmental contamination the work speaks to is explored through glassware, the very apparatus of clinical observation and experiment that recalls the instruments used on Piercy's Connie without her consent, but here it is reclaimed and reordered by an artist's hand, transformed from a tool of control into a fragile, glinting archive. Arranged in a dense constellation and set against a soundscape, the piece asks the viewer to encounter vessels that stand empty as witness to a history of extraction and experiment. It is the starting point for an exhibition centered around what happens when the tools of institutional power are taken up by the women they once oppressed, and are instead repurposed and recontextualized.

Rendered as a sphere, the six hundred pieces of glassware (flasks, pipettes, distillation units, funnels, burettes, test tubes) evoke the processes, methods, and modes of enquiry enacted within the site of the laboratory, a space the installation both honours and indicts. That ambivalence is not incidental;

it is written into the history of the laboratory itself, and into one substance in particular that haunts *Ajab Karkhana's* glinting archive: Prussian blue.

The story begins in Berlin in 1706, when the German colour maker Diesbach accidentally created an intense blue pigment while working in the laboratory of Dippel, an alchemist in search of a universal panacea. Prussian blue, ferric ferrocyanide, was the first chemically synthesized colour, and it moved swiftly into large-scale commercial production, reaching Hokusai in Japan within the century. But the same chemistry that yielded this pigment carried a darker inheritance. In Malmö in 1767, the Swedish apothecary Carl Wilhelm Scheele discovered that adding sulphuric acid to Prussian blue produced a clear, colourless, and poisonous acid: prussic acid, more commonly known as cyanide. It was from this chemical that Nazi scientists later developed amethyst-blue Zyklon B, used with devastating efficiency in the gas chambers of Treblinka and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Medicine, paint, poison; transformation, accident, experiment; quest, scientific curiosity, murder. What began as chymistry (the term once used to describe alchemy) hardened over centuries into chemistry: magic, art, and science, once creatively intertwined, gradually splintering into isolation, extraction, and specialization. The story of Prussian blue reads almost as an allegory for the uncanny trajectory of this no longer 'natural' science, one Chhachhi's installation asks us to sit with. It is a history the artist has traced back further still, to Maria the Prophetess, the first woman alchemist, working in first-century Alexandria: from her investigations into the transformation of matter, through the ancient alchemists' pursuit of nature's workings, to the industrial conversion of petrochemicals into products for human use, to today's patented, sponsored research generating synthetic chemicals for the pharmaceutical industry. Across that long arc, the pursuit of knowledge mutates from scientific and spiritual ideal into the manipulation of knowledge for profit, the very drift *Ajab Karkhana's* empty vessels stand witness to.

Room 2

Jai Chuhan's paintings depict female figures in closed interiors rendered in vivid colour. She has described these spaces as relating to ideas of 'refuge, home and unhome'. Doorways, half-drawn curtains, the corners of rooms, and unsettling perspectives recur throughout her canvases, giving the sense of interiors that are never quite settled, spaces glimpsed in motion rather than inhabited at rest. Chuhan describes her own project as bringing a 'female gaze' to the tradition of Western painting she most admires, particularly British artists Francis Bacon and Frank Auerbach, who historically depicted the nude body through a male lens. Her figures are staged within what she calls 'networks of power', in which a woman's expression of self, desire, or sexuality carries a charge of transgression absent from equivalent depictions of men. Chuhan has described her paintings' feminist bent as relating to 'notions of voyeurism, eroticism, race and the gaze', a rethinking, from the inside, of exactly the visual conventions of art history. She has spoken of her work moving, across four decades, from an early focus on motherhood, birth, and the erotic toward a more ambiguous and ambivalent rendering of the female form, bodies that resist being fully laid bare or fully clothed, caught instead in the process of asserting an identity rather than submitting to a gaze. This is feminism

practised at the level of paint itself: not a subject illustrated but a way of looking reclaimed, brushstroke by brushstroke, from within a painterly tradition that rarely offered women authorship over their own image.

As Deborah Smith writes in *A Moment in Time: In Conversation Jai Chuhan and Deborah Smith*, Chuhan's paintings unfold across decades as a sustained enquiry into presence, identity, and the limits of representation. She approaches painting not as a declaration but as a form of interrogation, where gesture, surface, and tone carry both emotion and knowledge. Focusing on the female figure, particularly South Asian women, her work is neither simply autobiographical nor literal. Instead, it holds time, memory, and lived experience within the frame, inviting viewers into nuanced encounters with identity and selfhood. Across her practice, questions of empathy, tension, and moral urgency emerge through her distinctive handling of paint, producing works that are at once intimate, demanding, and socially resonant. Representation and cultural responsibility are deeply intertwined within her practice, which insists on making visible lives, experiences, and histories that have too often remained unseen.

Madonna II (2026) shows a mother, a South Asian goddess rather than the demure Madonna of Western art, comfortable in her body, in a dance-like movement, with a radiant expression of love and protection. Rippling painted colours and marks create the suggestion of sensuality in *Figure in Interior* (2011) and in moments of existential stillness in *Girl* (2012) and *Seclusion* (2025).

The room also features a work by Leela Mukherjee, one of the first women sculptors of modern India, active from 1949 to 1982. Mukherjee treated her own modernism not as rupture but as continuity, fusing Indic, Western, and African sculptural traditions into a singular, quietly independent language, largely without seeking recognition beyond a close circle in her lifetime. The single carved wood sculpture included here sits as a representation of labour, pleasure, and joy, rendered in the same rounded, softly modelled forms that recur throughout Mukherjee's carving: bodies smoothed and simplified into curve and volume rather than anatomical detail. Placed beside Chuhan's paintings, that vocabulary of form finds an unexpected echo: the swelling, organic shapes that emerge from Chuhan's linework, her figures caught mid-movement in dance-like poses, share something of Mukherjee's own instinct to render the female body as rounded, continuous mass rather than fixed outline. Where Chuhan builds that form in colour and gesture on canvas, Mukherjee carves it directly from wood, the two practices meeting across medium and decades in a shared sculptural sense of the body. Yet the quiet independence of Mukherjee's work is its own kind of statement, too, made by a woman working outside the institutions, movements, and markets that might have shaped or constrained her practice.

Room 3

A new body of works on paper by Arpita Singh recall her abstract compositions of the 1970s and early 80s. The drawings are monochromatic, built almost entirely from mark-making rather than colour or form in any traditional sense. But there's a rhythm to them, the marks aren't static or evenly distributed. In some passages, the lines are thin, almost hesitant, spaced with room to breathe.

Elsewhere, that thinness gives way to fuller, more organic shapes that seem to swell up out of the linework, disrupting the delicacy with something rounder and more physical. The page becomes a kind of shifting terrain of density, tight then loose, sparse then clustered.

Looked at one way, the tangle of fine lines and clustered forms starts to resemble a map, the kind of improvised cartography where roads, borders, and territories emerge from nothing more than accumulated marks. Looked at another way, the same drawings suggest something cosmic entirely: scattered points and denser knots reading like constellations, or the gravitational clustering of matter across empty space.

Ashfika Rahman's *Dheu*, comprised of stone marbles and threads, stands as a memorial to the people of Bangladesh's Delta region who have lost their lives in flooding that shifts and often erases the landscape in which they live. Rahman collaborated with local children, who each collected a marble and dedicated it to a person whose life had been lost. The marbles are bound in silk thread and installed so that they flow across the room, mirroring both the movement of water and the constant flux of a life lived under the threat of climate disaster.

Singh's improvised cartographies find an unexpected echo in Rahman's work in the same room, where mark and thread trace geographies of their own. If Singh's lines accumulate into territory on the page, Rahman's marbles and silk threads chart a landscape that is being lost even as it is mapped, each knotted thread a trace of a life and a place the Delta's floods have already begun to erase. Both artists, in their own register, treat the line not as decoration but as a way of holding ground: a means of fixing what is otherwise in flux, whether that is the abstract terrain of memory or the literal, vanishing land of Bangladesh's Delta region.

Room 4

While the artists never met, there are great synergies between this selection of work by Anju Dodiya and Gurminder Sikand, which explores, across geographies, women's relationship to the natural world. A monumental new drawing by Dodiya draws on the Chipko movement, the 1970s ecofeminist campaign in which women from Uttar Pradesh physically embraced trees to stop them being felled, bodies interposed, quite literally, between capital and the land, in one of the earliest and most enduring images of feminist environmental resistance.

Dodiya, who has described her work as 'fictional self-portraits', works in watercolour, but pushes the medium to its extreme: working at a large scale and juxtaposing washes of colour with the hard, dark lines of charcoal. She has spoken of these interventions as following a desire to 'no longer make the image so precious', mirroring her often confrontational relationship to the practice of being an artist. That same hard-lined charcoal cuts through the watercolour of this new drawing, staging the Chipko protesters' embrace not as a soft or decorative gesture but as a bodily confrontation, delicate stain set against decisive, unsteady line.

Dodiya's work is paired with a series of works on paper by Sikand, whose work combines influence from Western painting traditions, from Giotto to Marc Chagall, with the stylized forms of Mithila and Kalighat art and the softer palette of Pahari painting. Throughout her career, Sikand centered women's experience and almost exclusively depicted female forms. Her dreamlike imagery positions women as deeply connected to the natural and spiritual realms; indeed she developed her own series of Chipko works in the late 1980s. In this body of work from the 1990s, some of Sikand's women appear grounded and clothed; others are rendered as serene, disembodied heads or cosmic manifestations. Sikand held deep fascinations both with psychology and the goddess Kali. Where she represents women with multiple heads, she refers not only to Indian folk-art traditions but to the coexistence of creation and destruction. Together, the two artists suggest that the fight for bodily and psychic autonomy and the fight to protect land are not separate struggles but the same one, waged at different scales, the tree and the body of the person embracing it treated, in this room, as continuous rather than distinct.

Room 5

Moving to the upstairs galleries, the exhibition turns to direct political testimony and legacies of colonialism. Sheba Chhachhi's *From the Barricades* is a selection of the artist's protest photographs, taken in Delhi between 1980 and 2000, documenting the grassroots work of feminist activists in the city. Their presence in a gallery setting now is itself a kind of translation of images made of and for the street, for immediate and urgent circulation, re-encountered here at a remove of forty years and situated within the context of current political uprisings in Delhi and beyond.

In *From the Barricades*, Chhachhi revisits her archive of documentary images made between 1980 and through the mid-90s and explores the construction of subjectivities and collectivity as part of resistance processes. The photographs start with images from the Anti-Dowry Movement in New Delhi, which peaked in the early 1980s, gaining momentum after the dowry-related femicides of Shashi Bala and Jaswanti. The Anti-Dowry Campaign led to legislation, the establishment of women's cells in the city, as well as general social stigmatization of the practice. While many of the images presented document the Indian anti-dowry movement, others depict Indian women's demonstrations and awareness-raising campaigns against various other forms of oppression, such as rape, religious fundamentalism, domestic violence, and state violence. Key figures of Indian women's rights activism appear in Chhachhi's photographs, such as Bharti Roy Chowdhry (1949–2011), activist in the women's and land rights movement; Shanti & Devi, activists with Action India, a foundational organization of the autonomous women's movement; Moloyshree Hashmi, a performer who co-founded the Jan Natya Manch New Delhi street theatre company; and Maya Krishna Rao, a theatre and street performer, educator and activist.

The work is accompanied by Lifetools posters. Founded in 1980 in New Delhi by Sheba Chhachhi and Jogendra Panghaal, Lifetools was, at its heart, a research-oriented media and design practice built on the idea that design could be put to socially useful ends, working with and for urban and rural communities, activist groups, and people's movements. In many ways, it marked the earliest

stirrings of what would become Chhachhi's artistic and activist worldview. Lifetools output ranged widely: product design developed alongside artisans, and communication design produced during the earliest wave of HIV/AIDS awareness in India. But its most enduring legacy was a series of feminist posters made in Delhi in the early 1980s for the women's movement, deliberately wordless, so they could speak across barriers of literacy and language. Among the best known were *All Religions Are Patriarchal* and *Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian: The Veil Is the Same*, the latter built from a drawing originally made by a local group, both produced for the Saheli Women's Resource Centre.

Mumtaz Karimjee's *My Mothers, My Sisters* (1987) completes the room: fourteen portraits of Indian women, mothers, activists, and workers, spanning generations of anti-colonial resistance. 'To find my own home,' Karimjee has written, 'I have needed to reclaim the stories of my mothers and my sisters, stories which have been made invisible by colonial and patriarchal history.' Placed alongside Chhachhi's protests, the room becomes a portrait of labour, kinship, and resistance carried across borders and generations, an argument, made in images rather than in prose, that inheritance can be claimed as deliberately as it is sometimes erased.

Chhachhi and Karimjee's presence in the same room is not only thematic but historical. In 1988, the year after developing *My Mothers, My Sisters*, Karimjee invited Chhachhi to London to take part in *Four Women Photographers* at the Spectrum Photography Festival, a show Karimjee later described as 'a breakthrough in the monopoly of who is "allowed" to show their images of India in Britain'. The friendship and collaboration between the two women, forged across the distance between Delhi and London, is itself a small instance of the matrilineal, cross-generational solidarity this exhibition traces throughout: women passing each other platforms, images, and permission to be seen. That this exhibition reunites their work almost four decades later, in a room built around the same questions of visibility and authorship, is a continuation of the conversation they began.

Room 6

Jasleen Kaur closes the exhibition with work that comes from the histories of direct feminist and anti-colonial action explored in the work of Karimjee and Chhachhi. *Women hold up half the sky* (2019) reworks a 1936 archival photograph of Sikh soldiers of the 2nd Royal Battalion performing a gymnastics pyramid in Waziristan. Kaur repeats and inserts her mother's hand beneath the men's feet, supporting a colonial military tableau from which women were otherwise erased. It is a small, almost surgical intervention into the archive, one hand, repeated, that nonetheless reorders the entire image, making visible the invisible labour that propped up a history told without women in it. *Promises* features a photograph of land restitution between the Muslim and Sikh community in Moga, Punjab, in 2021, on which ceramic cast feet are placed.

Aunties, made from Parian, a fine, unglazed porcelain used in the production of domestic figurines, turns to the material of the home rather than the archive: a re-imagined, humble domestic object, refined into ceramic and set alongside the residue of ritual and everyday devotion. Where *Women hold up half the sky* excavates a documented past, *Aunties* dwells in the present tense of family life, treating the smallest, most repeated objects of women's domestic labour as material worthy of the

same permanence as porcelain. Across her work, obscured traces of family, friendship, and sisterhood, shaped by histories of colonial violence and migration, are deliberately left unresolved and opaque, as a form of respect and protection.

Ending here, with Kaur, brings the exhibition's earliest and most recent generations into the same conversation. Her practice of reclaiming the archive, inserting her mother's hand into a colonial photograph, holding family ephemera up as its own form of history, answers Piercy's central question in the present tense: what do we owe to the women who came before us, and what future can still be built from that inheritance? Like Piercy's Luciente reaching back through time to Connie, Kaur reaches back into her own lineage not to resolve it but to keep it in motion, a hand extended backward that asks what the present still has to learn from generations of women's ingenuity, strength, and resilience.

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Curator
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