

Shrimanti Saha: Among Things That Grow and Return

By Beatriz Cifuentes Feliciano

'I build worlds in my work that are partially fictional. There's always an aspect of storytelling and narrative, with events unfolding in ways that aren't strictly descriptive but often uncertain, even esoteric. It's like a personal mythology that accommodates many references, an alternative history of sorts. It's about world-building in an open and disruptive landscape, where interiors and exteriors fuse together. Mentally, it's a whole, inspired by many of my favourite things.'

Shrimanti Saha

To speak of painting as world-making is to recognize that images do not merely depict but also invent. In the exhibition *Among Things That Grow and Return*, Shrimanti Saha invites us into spaces where memory, ecology, architecture, and fiction converge, producing landscapes that feel at once familiar and estranged. The exhibition borrows its title from one of her large-scale canvases, a phrase that suggests cycles, continuities, and the regenerative force of nature. Things grow, things return: plants sprout in ruins, shells cling to stone, figures reappear across canvases. For Saha, painting is both a process of building and of remembering, a way of inhabiting worlds that hover between the real and the imagined.

'The ideas of "grow" and "return" signify larger cycles of life, decay, memory, existence, and reflection, underlining the imagery and connecting it across scale and narrative.'

Shrimanti Saha

Saha often describes her practice as akin to writing – she begins with fragments, scenes, or characters that proliferate across a surface in a chain reaction, gradually expanding like an organism. A composition starts from one corner and unfurls outward, accruing layers, details, and unexpected encounters. This method, rooted in drawing, mirrors the process of storytelling. Titles, she notes, often act like entry points in a narrative, anchoring the viewer before they wander through multi-perspectival landscapes. Within

a single painting, we may encounter overlapping episodes: interiors colliding with exteriors, plants with machines, and figures engaged in mechanical and leisurely activities.

World-building here is not a single act of invention but a porous, ongoing accumulation. Saha's works absorb influences from diverse sources – art historical traditions, literature, film, natural history illustrations, and personal memory – to generate hybrid universes that refuse to stabilize. In their simultaneity of scenes, her canvases recall both the complexity of Indo-Persian miniature painting and European medieval and Renaissance traditions. However, these echoes are never mere citations; rather, they mutate within her painterly logic, interwoven into environments that appear both historical and futuristic.

Saha's process is profoundly organic, unfolding without preparatory sketches. Each canvas begins with a drawing phase that expands to cover the blank surface, after which images proliferate by adjacency: one form triggers another across the picture plane. In terms of her compositional strategies, flattened perspectives and multiple vantage points allow for simultaneous narratives. Conceptually, the works engage with ecological cycles, feminist mythologies, and speculative histories. Plants, shells, and corals gesture to submerged pasts and emergent futures, suggesting landscapes that evolve beyond human temporality. The figures embody different modes of existence and appear suspended in enigmatic, often esoteric activity.

Born in West Bengal, Saha is a visual artist who trained in painting at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, where she completed both her bachelor's and master's degrees. The move from Kolkata to Baroda unsettled the academic realism present in her early training, exposing her instead to a plural, experimental framework that embraced film, animation, and multiple approaches to narrative. After her studies, she worked as an illustrator and in animation studios, experiences that deepened her drawing-led practice and sharpened her interest in translating text into image.

Equally formative are the literary and intellectual influences that enter her visual language. George Orwell's *1984* provides a reference point for the recurring figures of uniformed men, absorbed in acts of construction and labour. Eco-feminist writing and speculative fiction animate her vegetal motifs, where plants exceed human structures and reclaim terrain. Visits to the Natural History Museum in New York further expanded her visual vocabulary, sparking a fascination with botanic illustrations and feeding into her cross-ecological landscapes, where marine life-forms such as coral and shells merge seamlessly with terrestrial growths.

Saha's first solo exhibition at Vadehra Art Gallery, *Reveries in the Atelier* (2023), presented large works on paper alongside smaller canvases and video works, foregrounding her drawing-based approach and her own presence as an artist figure within the studio. For

Among Things That Grow and Return, she returns with monumental oil paintings and smaller canvases, marking a material and formal shift.

‘This hasn’t taken me away from my drawing-oriented, very detailed earlier works, which were almost like dense cartographies of images. The shift seems to be less about abandoning drawing than about stretching it into another material register.’

Shrimanti Saha

With *Among Things That Grow and Return*, Saha consolidates recurring motifs while also expanding into new terrain. While her thematic vocabulary continues – women in motion, men in uniform, fragmented architecture, plants as insurgent forms, and more – the move to oil on canvas introduces a new painterly depth. The surfaces are richer, more layered, and more sensorial. Working in oil, she explains, changes the very quality of the brushwork and alters the sensory charge of colour. Her palette remains muted and earthy, punctuated by contrasts, but in oil these tonalities gather an emotional and atmospheric resonance that transforms her already intricate worlds into fully immersive environments.

If *Reveries in the Atelier* emphasized introspection and the solitary space of the studio, *Among Things That Grow and Return* opens outward, foregrounding cycles of growth, return, and ecological entanglement. Plants, drawn from memory, illustration, and imagination, act as connective tissue across the series. The exhibition unfolds in two registers: the large canvases and the small ones. While the monumental works immerse us in expansive environments rather than illustrations of scenes, the smaller paintings hold space for intimacy, ensuring that personal memory and lived experience remain central.

‘The large works are macro narratives while the smaller ones could be the excerpts. They are open-ended, surreal narratives that could be post-human landscapes, with different groups of characters engaged in various activities. There are ruin-like architectural fragments and numerous organic forms that create an interaction between the natural and the man-made. These landscapes are conglomerates of numerous references that I absorb from my personal archive of images and text, and sometimes even personal experiences get camouflaged into them through coded imagery. The smaller works are more

autobiographical. They could be memories, reflections or anticipations of things that might have happened. These are more about real-life characters rather than the imagined ones in the larger works; figures who live and exist in diorama-like setups made of organic forms and compact architectural interiors.'

Shrimanti Saha

The painting *Among Things That Grow and Return*, which lends its title to the exhibition, serves as an anchor for the series. One of the larger-scale works, it depicts a landscape in flux, where water intrudes upon land, plants grow unchecked, and seashells appear scattered around the terrain. Fragmented architectural forms punctuate the composition, mediating between natural and constructed worlds, while figures recur across the canvas: long-haired women in motion, uniformed men engaged in various tasks, and a central, witness-like protagonist threading through the narrative clad in jeans and a white shirt. Saha describes this as a refuge, a space in which she exists 'among things', living within the imagined world she constructs.

Other large canvases expand on similar dynamics, as coralline plants emerge as though from once-submerged lands; skies within ruins recall Romanesque ceilings studded with stars; and architecture is rendered with a tension between ruinous fragility and futuristic precision. In each, Saha orchestrates simultaneity: aerial perspectives, flattened architectures, and layered episodes converge into intricate, map-like cosmologies. The viewer's eye wanders as through a novel, passing from one scene to another, tracing a narrative that is never singular but always proliferating.

The smaller paintings function as intimate counterpoints to the monumental canvases, depicting interiors, designed spaces, or figures drawn from real life. These works are more autobiographical, reflecting encounters, observations, or reflections. Collage plays a key role in these compositions, echoing Saha's background in animation and her early experiments with cut-outs, flat shapes, and Photoshop composites. She assembles elements from diverse sources layering them into harmoniously integrated backgrounds for her figures. This approach allows her to bring together the real and the invented, the quotidian and the fantastical, in a single frame, creating scenes that feel simultaneously grounded and dream-like.

A striking example is *The Conversation on the Way*, a small work set on an airplane. The painting captures the fleeting intimacy of shared journeys: passengers talking, forming transient bonds, and moving through the space together. Yet the scene is not purely literal. Plants creep into the composition, intruding into the environment in a distinctly fantastical manner. The work exemplifies Saha's collage-oriented practice, merging real-life gestures with imaginative, constructed settings. Here, the personal and the

composite coexist, demonstrating how the smaller works allow for a concentrated exploration of narrative, memory, and world-building on a human scale.

Another example among the smaller paintings is *Old Friends*, which depicts three women seated against a waterfront landscape that takes inspiration from Marine Drive in Mumbai. A dramatic wave sweeps across the horizon, and scattered debris and shells mingle with the tetrapods, emblematic of the Mumbai coastline. While the work references a real place, Saha does not intend it to be prescriptive; the location serves merely as a point of departure, a framework for her imaginative reworking of forms, gestures, and interactions.

Meeting with Artist Friend evokes the intimacy of a shared moment rather than depicting a literal scene. The work draws on a visit from a friend of Saha's, a fellow artist from South Korea, capturing gestures of conversation and the presence of a cat observed during that meeting. The surroundings are imaginatively reworked: diner-like elements and compositional details are added to create a setting that feels both specific and fluid. *Mother Reading* presents a surreal, imagined studio scenario. A figure carries a stretcher for a canvas, while the space is populated with doves, a dog, fantastical plants, and other organic forms. Another figure appears seated, reading a newspaper. The architectural elements are entirely invented, creating a setting that exists outside of literal experience. These paintings exemplify Saha's method of using memory and observation as departure points, allowing real-life encounters to merge with inventive, collage-informed constructions.

Across Shrimanti Saha's *Among Things That Grow and Return* series, layered, ever-expanding worlds unfold and circle back, weaving together memories, imaginative invention, and a deeply perceptive understanding of the world, informed by both historical and contemporary sources. The exhibition is a continuation, a chapter in a practice that continually absorbs, transforms, and proliferates. In inhabiting these spaces, the viewer encounters not only Saha's personal mythology but also landscapes that resonate collectively, inviting interpretation, reflection, and wonder.