I was born in Delhi India. My father was an army officer and we travelled extensively in my younger years. Our travels were from Kashmir in the North to Assam in the East. India is a country of diversity and these exposures as a child impinged images in my mind that I reflect on till today. In 1994 I moved to South Africa and had the opportunity to travel extensively in Sub Saharan countries. The color and movement of Africa has deeply impacted my artworks.
The severity of migrants is apparent to us on a daily basis today in India. Our heart melts for those who are struggling to get back to their villages. They are homeless and helpless. Their plight is currently the largest crisis being faced by our country. These daily wage earners in all major cities of India have been caught unawares between the coronavirus lockdown imposed by the Indian government, and have no jobs to support themselves and their families. They have no money, no food and are unable to pay rent so have now no homes either. Most of the migrant labor took the decision to walk all the way home to their villages as no form of transportation was available. These migrants are cause for great concern and their plight is heart-wrenching.

This migration leads me to explore the word ‘migration’ from a deeper societal and humane perspective.
Through the understanding my organic migration from India to Africa, I try and unravel migrations from a more personal yet universal perspective. My own experiences lead me to dividing migrants into two broader categories of voluntary and involuntary.

The involuntary migrants are pushed by circumstances beyond their control like wars, famines, political turmoils, climatic upheavals, earthquakes and genocides.

The voluntary migrants on the other hand (including myself) may choose to travel and settle in foreign lands so as to widen their horizons. The sense of adventure and a desire to explore new avenues, to experience new worlds and a chance of improving lifestyle.

In this regard, artists who also have an ever-inquisitive mind and sensitivity to nature, and a desire to taste the unknown, are likewise exploring, as an essential characteristic for inculcating new ideas to absorb them into their creative work. Sometimes the artists do this independently and very often in communes. Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, for example, are prime examples of how brilliant art emerged as they explored newer terrains.

In my artistic journey, I had travelled to South Africa just a couple of weeks after Apartheid ended, and witnessed the birth of a new country unfolding during its initial stages.

I lived in Johannesburg for over two decades and travelled extensively into Sub Saharan Africa.

Some images of South Africa at in 1993 when the artist migrated there.

1993 Nobel Peace Prize Winner South Africa President Nelson Mandela Silver World Celebrity Commemorative Coin Collection

Mandela for President

Titta Fasciotti (South African Artist 1927-1993)


#premilasingh chaupalspeaks theenvironmentalsituationroom kalachaupal Allrightsreserved- May 2020
In the first few days when I arrived in Johannesberg, I would hire a taxi daily for travelling and discovering South Africa. The taxi was driven by Dixon who was a migrant from Democratic Republic of Congo and who had an academic background as a Professor of Botany back in Congo.

He escaped to South Africa from the political upheaval in his own country. Aside from driving the taxi he would supplement his income through importing artefacts made from malachite and to sell at the Rosebank flea market on Sundays.

It was only through him that I started meeting with a number of artists and artisans who came to the market for economic necessity and to sell their products in South Africa. Over time they decided to settle in SA and make it their home.

Dixon finally went on to work with me full time and became my educator in my travels and learnings of the interior regions of South Africa, where I may not have ventured if left alone.

With Dixon, I had the opportunity to visit the Rosebank Rooftop Flea Market in Johannesburg for the first time in the 1990’s.

To my eyes, the market was an explosion of colour, music and dancing. The culinary smells emanating from the market are impossible to describe.
Title: A Face in the Crowd, 30x 40" Oil on canvas, Painted in Gurgaon, 2011
Title: Flower Seller- 24" x 36", Oil on Canvas, Painted in South Africa 2008
Title- The Drummer- 36" x 30", Oil on canvas, Painted in South Africa 2008

Title- A Himba woman with child - 32 "x2 8" Oil on canvas, Painted in South Africa 2008
The market comes to life every Sunday, and is a cultural melting pot of African migrant artists/artisans and visitors from all over the world. Considered to be the largest of its kind in Africa, artists, artisans, musicians, dancers from all countries of Africa congregate to perform, exhibit and sell their wares. The diverse and various African art objects are handmade and painted exquisitely. There are carved hollowed ostrich eggs, jewellery designed from ivory, sandals made from animal hides tanned in traditional African styles, delicate trees and birds handcrafted from semi-precious stones, African textiles, exquisite beadwork ornaments, zebra skins, crocheted laces, leather belts, furniture made from indigenous trees and whittled in ancient designs, roughly hewn malachite bowls and straw baskets, and an array of wooden masks.

The most dramatic are the wooden sculptures. From small penknives to immense pieces depicting animal and human figures, their beauty is spell binding. No two pieces are alike. I could spend many Sundays looking at each piece individually, sometimes polished to perfection, and often left in a natural rough form. And then the two-dimensional artworks, such as paintings made on handmade paper by artists who had never had any kind of formal training.

Their paintings depict the primitive tribes of hunter gatherers, beautiful sunsets, children playing in front of their huts, old men and women smoking their long pipes. Each artwork brought alive a history and culture of the region of origin.

The Importance of Cultural Congregations for the Growth of Micro Economies are an Important Aspect of ‘Migrations.'
And of course, the background to all this jamboree was the beating of drums and playing of African instrumental music. At intervals there would be dancing by Zulu warriors or heavy boot dancing by miners. Food counters serving a variety of African cuisines were tucked into corners, the most popular being the Indian samosas. (A South African version very different from ours in India).

Just below the flea market is an Arts and Crafts market which is open every day. I used to speak to the artists and sculptors who would be creating their beautiful artworks on a daily basis. Most of them came from adjoining African countries but also from West Africa, Mali, Kenya and as far away as Egypt.

These migrant artists have now settled down in and around Johannesburg and have formed a thriving community. Not only have they found a haven for creating new works, but also a ready-made market which provides them their livelihood. They live harmoniously, finding a common platform for their creative energies. It is wonderful to see this melting pot of many African cultures.

As I joyously remember this African experience, I also feel overwhelmed by the comparative cultural upheaval now affecting those who are living a migration story in India.
MEMORIES OF THE CULTURAL VIBRANCY IN INDIA THROUGH MIGRANT FAIRS LIKE ‘NAUCHANDI’ AND ‘NUMAISH’

The nearest parallel I could have drawn to the Rosebank Arts and Crafts market would have been if there was a global village of all Asian countries conglomerated in a specified area in any one Asian country. In the absence such designated area the nearest parallel that can be drawn are arts and crafts shops at Janpath and travelling fairs in India in cities like Meerut, Aligarh and Bulandshahr, where they are called Nauchandi and Numaish respectively.

‘I enjoy color and movement and love to paint people going about their daily chores in their daily lives’.
http://www.millenniumpost.in/colouring-the-seasons-212129?infinitiescroll-1
This fair consisting of artisans, craftsmen, circuses, music and dance groups, theatrical performances which are more burlesque in nature and appeal to the rural population who form the biggest audience to these bawdy, slapstick comedies. The more elite audiences are treated to stage shows of national artists. Though the former are free the latter are ticketed shows. Nauchandi and Numaish are held during the spring season in India. Agricultural shows, Flower shows, fancy dress competitions for children, dog shows etc form a major part of the festivities.

The most Important aspect of these fairs is that it brings the artisan and craft community of India to come together to display and sell their wares directly to the public without middlemen taking a major chunk of their profits. There are stalls filled with wooden toys and basic kitchen items of utility from Haridwar. Also beautiful carved furniture from Saharanpur. There are handcrafted puppets from Rajasthan and live demonstrations given to an audience of delighted children. The bio scopes are another form of entertainment for children and adults alike. Handwoven sarees from Varanasi, Kolkata and Kota are magnets for women of all walks of life. Perfumes from Lucknow and Aligarh are sold in elegant bottles. Bangles from Ferozabad attract women from villages and towns alike. Blue pottery from Khurja, fabrics and garments from K gadima Bhandara, sports goods from Meerut, all make their presence felt.
The star attraction is the culinary delights from various corners of India. Nankhattais are butter biscuits made in a traditional manner putting trays over coal ovens. They are melt in your mouth quality and if anyone has tried them will forever return for more. Large Khajlas, sweet and savoury sell like hot cake. Muglai style kababs and rum Ali rotis are a hot favourite and are in competition with kachoris and aloo sabzi from Haridwar. Kulfi from Delhi and Banarasi pagans round off a good meal.

These fairs bring comrade to artisans and traders who form a migrant group and live like one large family. They set up their little stalls within three days and dismantle them in the same amount of time and move to another town or city. These fairs need to be supported as a large part of the society in India is still Agrigarian. These are small scale enterprises and should not be swallowed up by the Mall culture which is fast spreading in our country.

It is extremely important for us to support our artists, artisans and craftsmen.
A LEGACY TO BE REMEMBERED FOR RESURRECTING A CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Aligarh Exhibition (Numaish) : A 135 Year Old Tradition

Posted on February 15, 2015 by Rashid Faridi

The Famous Aligarh Numaish (exhibition) was initially started as a horse fair for Nawabs to display their wealth and lifestyles. In 1880, on suggestion of Raja Harinarayan Singh the event was named the Aligarh District Fair’ during the rule of the collectorate marshall. It is now called the ‘Rajkiya Krishi Udyog Pradarshini - Aligarh’. It is part of the life of the residents of Aligarh city. The exhibition is held every year from 26th of January till 15th of February. This is awaited by the people of Aligarh with passion and excitement. Many families await this occasion for purchasing variety of stuff and fanciful items while the charm for the students of AMU has its own meaning.

The impact of the fair was so unique that it has inspired many writers and poets to pen tales of the Aligarh Numaish. Majaz, Shakeel Badayuni are some of the poets who have written about the Numaish.

The fair continues to inspire poets and writers. Johny Foster, a music instructor in AMU wrote the ‘Aligarh Numaish Sadbhavana Geet’. The Aligarh Numaish Sadbhavana Geet has been adopted as Numaish tarana, said Foster. This is perhaps a unique incidence when a Tarana has been written for an exhibition. In the Aligarh Numaish Sadbhavana Geet, Foster writes: “Aligarh ke logon jahan ko bata do, khuda hi mohabbat hain, aur mohabbat khuda hai.” He adds: “Aligarh should always show its Ganga Jamuni tehzeeb (communal harmony) and that is what my song reflects.”

From Aligarh, the Numaish goes to Bulandshahr. In Bulandshahr also, it was started as a Horse show in 1881. Rich people built different gates. Nawab of Chhattari built first gate, Nawab of Pahasu built another magnificent gate. These gates are more than ninety year old now.
Premila Singh is an Artist/Author who lived in South Africa for over 20 years. Premila is the co-trustee of The Kala Chaupal Trust and currently resides in Gurgaon, India.

She has recently released a book on Africa called ‘A Country Forgotten’ of a Greek family that migrated to present Zimbabwe which was in the past referred to as Rhodesia. The book is available for purchase internationally as a digital book on Kindle and as a paperback on Amazon.

To know more about Premila Singh’s work you could contact her directly on premila999@gmail.com