

## ***Spandita Malik: Jālī—Meshes of Resistance***

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art

Curated by Krista Alba

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**S***Spandita Malik: Jālī—Meshes of Resistance*, a small but impactful exhibition at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, affirmed the continued relevance of traditional forms of craft in present art practices. The featured work, a syncretic composite of textile, photography, and social collaboration by Spandita Malik (b. 1995, India), brought attention to current women’s issues using time-honored embroidery techniques. Tucked away in a quiet gallery, the exhibition included nine textile portraits from Malik’s series *Jālī*. Near the entrance, a monitor with headphones played a short looping video of the artist explaining her process. The installation emphasized the works’ materiality; textiles were tacked to wall-mounted planks, allowing them to drape and respond to movement in the air. Portraits were labeled only with title, date,

and medium, encouraging viewers to acquaint themselves with the subjects by closely studying the works.

Malik explores issues such as resistance, agency, and community in her art using a socially engaged practice based in photography. Since her graduate work at the Parsons School of Design in the late 2010s, she has focused on issues of gender-based violence and what she refers to as the “colonial lens.”<sup>1</sup> She strives to document the lives and experiences of Indian women in a way that empowers her subjects. To create the most appropriate visual language for this task, she pushes the boundaries of various creative forms, including photography, textile art, documentary, and social practice, extracting parts from each and blending them together. The objects she produces are mixed-media photographic textiles that result from a process

of community engagement. The works extend beyond their physical boundaries in an invisible network of solidarity and shared experiences.

*Jālī* emanates from a body of work called *Nārī*. For these series, Malik traveled to the North Indian states of Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, each of which is known for a distinctive embroidery style. There, she connected with local organizations that support survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault. These centers encourage survivors to use their embroidery skills, passed down through families and communities, as a means of attaining financial independence. Malik came to know the women she met there, spending time in their homes, learning their languages of needlework, and meeting other women through them. She wove a network of survivors, connecting them through group texts and phone calls. The concept of *jālī*—openwork in architecture, metalwork, and stitching<sup>2</sup>—shaped this aspect of her practice. In Malik’s work, *jālī* comes to signify a communal system of support.

Malik received permission to photograph these women in their private spaces. She used a heat transfer emulsion process to print their portraits on local fabric and then invited each work’s subject to

embroider it in whatever way she chose. Malik says that she “was thinking a lot about documentary photography in India, and as we know, it has been very much colonized through a Western eye. We have these photographers who go to India and come back with photography of poverty. I wanted to do the opposite; I didn’t want to become a colonizer. These women with their portraits, they had full agency. They chose to cover their faces, they embroidered themselves with gold jewelry, they adorned the walls behind them in gold.”<sup>3</sup> The resulting works are a dynamic balance between Malik’s intimate photography and the lush colors and textures of her collaborators’ embroidery.

The *Jālī* series blends communal and personal modes of expression. *Meena II*, for instance, utilizes *phulkari* needlework, the regional embroidery style of Punjab. The work’s red-and-gold border demonstrates the reverse-side darning stitch that can often be found in *phulkari*. Intricate botanical motifs appear to spring from the walls of Meena’s bedroom, their perfect uniformity suggesting the use of a stencil. Other stitched areas follow the photographic image: embroidered lines pick out the bedspread’s floral design and, most notably, Meena’s garment,

accessories, skin, and facial features are sheathed in rows of silk stitches that form a protective armor. The figure is a block of gold and red thread that suggests her general contours but obscures details. Her likeness becomes iconic rather than photographic. Meena allows the viewer a glimpse at some intimate parts of her life—the bed where she sleeps, the pictures that hang in her room, her teddy bear—but effectively bars visual access to others. We see Meena according to her stitching. Her intervention in Malik's photograph functions as a powerful symbol of agency, self-possession, and community connection.

Though *Jālī—Meshes of Resistance* was a small show, the Kemper worked to amplify its impact. The exhibition was a feature of many tours, and it inspired well-attended public programs like *Beyond the Lens*, a series of artist talks by local photographers. It also connected formally and thematically with other Kemper exhibitions. *Sarah Zapata: So the roots be known* and *Hangama Amiri: A Homage to Home*, for instance, both featured the work of artists who use textile methods to communicate women's experiences. Taken together, the three exhibitions made a strong statement about the innovative work women artists are doing to harness the

enduring power of textiles as a form of expression. The conversation that *Jālī—Meshes of Resistance* staged about autonomy and empowerment felt particularly timely in this moment when women's rights are precarious throughout the world. Malik's collaborative work offered a compelling visualization of the power of women's communities, systems of knowledge, and modes of creative expression.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “Meshes of Resistance,” *Aesthetica*, December 12, 2023, <https://aestheticamagazine.com/spandita-malik>. Malik further explains, “Growing up in India, I often felt that the photography surrounding India, for a long time, was picturesque images of poverty through the lens of the outsider. This project [her series *Nārī*] became a very important part of my understanding of my country, of the women of my country through a decolonized perspective.” Quoted in “Women’s History Month: Spandita Malik,” interview by Yuhe Yao, *Musée*, March 12, 2020, <https://museemagazine.com/culture/2020/3/17/woman-crush-wednesday-spandita-malik>.

<sup>2</sup> “Spandita Malik: Jālī—Meshes of Resistance,” Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.kemperart.org/exhibition/spandita-malik-solo-exhibition>.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in “These Beautiful Images Are A Harsh Critique of Gendered Violence In India,” interview by Pia Peterson, *BuzzFeed News*, Nov. 9, 2021, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/piapeterson/spandita-malik-photography-women-india>.