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My Sitayana: Sewing Seeds of Empowerment

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My Sitayana: ‘Sewing’ Seeds of Empowerment

By

Dhea Kothari

* * * * *

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Department
Visual Arts.

UNION COLLEGE, June 2022.

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Abstract

KOTHARI DHEA My Sitayana: ‘Sewing’ Seeds of Empowerment.

Department of Visual Arts, June 2022.

ADVISOR: Chris Duncan

This thesis is an exploration of sculpture and installation. My project depicts a narrative of generational emancipation of women. The narrative was inspired by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel, ‘Forest of Enchantments,’ in which she rewrites the ‘Ramayana’ with Sita, the female character, as the protagonist instead. The Ramayana is a popular Hindu mythological story that revolves around Prince Rama’s quest to rescue his wife Sita from the perils of the villain Raavana. This story encapsulates the undertones of the patriarchal culture in India. This My thesis installation stands as a symbol of generational transformation of love and what it means to be the woman in a marriage. The process of making this work has included steel welding, plaster modeling, woodshop tools, textile work, and installation.

The installation involves a model, representing myself, sitting at a traditional foot-pedal sewing machine. My grandmother’s saree glides off the table and extends towards the ceiling; as if almost flying in the air. The saree is inscribed with one of Sita’s golden statements, as written by Divakaruni, “I bless my daughters who are yet unborn, I pray that if life tests them, they will think carefully and understand when they need to compromise and when they must not.”

Drawing inspiration from George Segal, Alison Saar, Zoey Frank, Marta Pérez García and Dhruvi Acharya, I was able to create an ‘environment’ installation. I used plaster strips to create a reproduction of my model; the process is similar to using paper-mâché. Welding and woodwork were used to build the environment for the figure and textile work was used for the narrative script.

My Sitayana: ‘Sewing’ Seeds of Empowerment

Meaning

The first step in this thesis was to decide what I wanted my work to embody, and how I wanted to construct that image. I was inspired by Sita and Ram, the love story. I’ve grown up listening to the tale of the three brothers, a cosmic monkey, the incredulous Raavana monster and my dear Sita. The story of separation; I’ve recited it in languages from my home and I’ve idolized their love. Over the pandemic, I read Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s book, “The Forest of Enchantments,” a novel based on the Ramayana written in inverse with Sita as the protagonist. India is known to have a flavor for masculinity and patriarchy; therefore, it was refreshing to read my favorite tale through Sita’s record. As I read the book, I felt so many emotions. I felt sorrow for the women, anger for the patriarchal society, embarrassed for Lord Ram and even resentful towards Sita. It turns out that the story I knew as a kid was incomplete or rather, I lacked the maturity to understand the more serious tones in the story. After reading the story again, I feel that Ram was over glorified, and Sita was desultory. After reading Divakaruni’s empowering and candid version of the mythological story, I wanted to scream Sita’s story to everyone. I knew that my thesis would largely be inspired by Divakaruni’s courageous audacity to concentrate on the female perspective.

Initially, I wanted to recreate the traditional Indian miniature paintings that were placed alongside the original script of the Ramayana from Mewar as illustrations (figure 1). I began by making sketches of the defining scenes from

‘The Forest of Enchantments.’ I had decided to use oil paints as my primary medium for this project. I needed some sort of reference to paint the figures in my paintings. So, I created source images to work from. I utilized Jackson’s Garden and the basement of the library in Union College to set my scenes. I cast Professor Randy Wyatt as the sage Valmiki, who wrote the original Ramayana, and my dear friend, Dhara Shukla as Sita. The plan was to create a diptych of the moment where Sita protested Valmiki’s Ramayana and started working on writing her own story. I wanted to frame this moment of Sita’s empowered transformation. However, after experimenting with this idea, I felt that my work was a visual reproduction of Divakaruni’s work. I wanted my project to include a more personal aspect as my art has usually involved a personal narrative or been related to political issues that are relevant to my life. My art has always stemmed from my personal experiences and illustrating Sita’s story did not feel like my own story.

During the break, I met with Al-Qawi Nanavati, who is a young artist in Mumbai. Over an afternoon tea, we discussed the purpose of our art and she prompted me to dig deeper and research the patriarchal and transformational events in my own roots. So, I began to interview my mother and my grandmothers about their life before marriage, their wedding, their married life and love. After gathering some great information about the lives of women in my family, I realized that the marital relationships around me do not make me wishful for marriage. This is probably due to the stereotypical gender roles of women lacking agency in most partnerships. I do not speak for all families in India but the gender

roles in my family follow the stereotype of the working husband and stay-at-home wife. The family income comes from the family business, which is related to the chemical side of the textile industry. Women have never been part of the textile business; they are responsible for taking care of the children and managing household duties. When I interviewed my father on his perspective of gender inequality in his working space, he was adamant that there is no gender inequality. He said they have female employees in the office. However, I noted that there are no females at high positions, and this is true at the ownership level too.

Furthermore, his argument for the tones of patriarchy in our culture is that it is tradition, and it is disrespectful to try to change it. However, over many conversations about specific events, he has come around to see the consequences of these traditions on women. Traditions and culture are very important to our identity. However, there is a need for them to change and evolve with future generations so that they are purposeful and not a barrier for women's growth in society. In retrospect, my father remembered that when he was a young adult, his older sisters were not encouraged or pushed to join the family business. He mentioned that "The times were different back then. My father's sisters were not interested in joining the business, but it may have been because society did not require them to be independent or career focused." Furthermore, my maternal grandmother mentioned that her parents never taught her how to manage her finances. I believe that financial freedom is the most prominent barrier to women's agency. My grandmothers, aunts and my mother do not know how to

handle finances, which makes them dependent on their partners. While our family worked in the textile business, it is ironic that I have fond memories of my cousins and I sitting with my grandmother for hours, learning how to sew clothes for our dolls. This points to the stark difference in the types of things women and men are encouraged to do. I knew I wanted to rework these realizations into my thesis.

Since I am focusing on love, partnership and marriage, I was also considering revamping the Hindu marital oaths the bride and groom take while making seven circumambulations around a fire altar. I'm not trying to shame the old customs but rather create my own version of them. For this subpart, I wanted to create something that requires a rotational movement from the viewer. This would emulate the seven circumambulations a couple must take around a fire pit to get married. Therefore, I decided that my work needed to be an installation piece. The seven promises translated from Sanskrit belong to another generation and do not resonate with today's modern ambitious women. Leaning towards an image of an equal partnership, the oath I use in my piece (Sita's words from Divakaruni's book) is not an oath no to my partner but rather to the unborn daughters in my family. I do not want them to feel the anxiety and burden I felt when I thought about the unequal compromises I would have to make for my own marriage. I want them to feel encouraged to break social rules that don't serve them anymore.

After much brainstorming, I had decided that my project will primarily demonstrate transformation and metamorphosis. Using historical stories from my

family and my own personal reflections as a source for creating an installation or series of objects that reflect my own patriarchal family history transforming into a new wave of open-mindedness. The idea for my first installation is to have a girl (my own reflection) sitting at a sewing machine. I want her to be a life-size human form made of raw materials like steel, plaster, and jute. The idea of using raw materials is to show imperfection but also to draw a connection between the old and new generational backgrounds.

The sewing machine and the table at which the model sits were made of steel, pointing to the industrialization that comes with the modern world, however the ‘act of sewing’ and using textile fabrics symbolizes the history of women working with textiles. This relationship formed between materials like jute, raw silk fabric and colorful threads depict the female, and the industrialized textile business is depicted through steel and plaster.

In my piece the figure is shown rebuilding what it means to be ‘feminine.’ Sita’s quote, “I bless my daughters who are yet unborn, I pray that if life tests them, they will think carefully and understand when they need to compromise and when they must not,” is used to embellish my grandmother’s old saree. The saree stands as a symbol for the ancestral history of the women in my family. The quote is also dyed red to point towards love and marriage. Furthermore, the saree falls from the table and glides into the air. Almost as if the saree has taken on magical properties due to Sita’s quote. This refers back to the Ramayana story and its magical and mythic nature.

Inspiration

The initial idea and the meaning behind this project came from Divakaruni's book, 'The Forest of Enchantments,' but the form of the project developed by looking at Dhruvi Acharya's work 'What once was, still is, but isn't' (Figure 7). Dhruvi Acharya's work has always had a narrative and personal quality, which she usually expresses through painting. On the other hand, her installation work had an even more powerful storytelling and transformative effect on the viewer. The entire room in the gallery was transformed to resemble the bedroom that she once shared with her late husband. She also used the floor of the gallery as her canvas as she manipulated the floor with an uneven stitched carpet. Walking on this carpet allows the viewer a glimpse of her memories and feelings. The rawness of her work channeled her emotions into a physical presence that could create a deeper understanding of the narrative for the viewer. I too had used painting as a primary use for my narrative works. Dhruvi Acharya's 'What once was, still is, but isn't' piece opened my eyes to narrative installation art and challenged me to experiment with it.

After hearing about my narrative installation proposal, Professor Chris Duncan introduced me to George Segal and Alison Saar's work. My process was largely inspired by George Segal's figurative sculptures (figure 4). I learned about his technique and adapted it for my own work. His sculptures are stark white that stand out in an environment, encourage introspection and seem to be in a distant universe or memory.

I also enjoyed Alison Saar's figures' narrative nature which point to social challenges like racism and sexism (figure 4). Alison Saar distinctly portrayed feminine strength and power. The composition, position and consistent motifs of her sculptures inspired my composition. The works that I was inspired by shared their narrative, personal and humanistic quality. Dhruvi Acharya, George Segal, and Alison Saar were my main inspirations but I also looked at Zoey Frank's 'Girl with Inflatable Dolphin' (figure 6) and Marta Pérez García (Figure 5).

Process

The idea and mental representation of the work was solidified at this point. The next step was to bring the visual image to fruition. I broke down the installation into smaller parts: the sewing machine, stool, table, human figure, and saree.

Sewing Machine

I began by working on creating a steel sculpture of a traditional Singer sewing machine. I was adamant on creating an exact replica of the sewing machine. This was difficult as it is hard to bend steel sheets to emulate the rounded end of the machine, so I ended up making a squared-off one. I cut out a cardboard model with the three surfaces of the sewing machine (front, back and top sides) and then glued them together. Since I was satisfied with the model, I repeated the process with steel sheets. Creating the sewing machine first was useful as it guided the size and proportion of the rest of the piece. I traced the surfaces of the cardboard model onto the steel sheet, cut them out using the plasma-cutter, and welded the surfaces together. Even though I decided to

continue with the square shape, I wanted it to resemble the traditional Singer machine that my grandmother owned. For that effect, the top surface needed to be bent in order to create the irregular shape of a curved sewing machine. I also ground the edges of the steel surfaces to create a clean look. Furthermore, I ground the entire surface of the cut-out metal sheets before welding them together. I did this to give the sewing-machine a shiny reflective surface, which gave it an industrial look and referenced the nature of my family business. I had previously used the same process to create other man-made items such as a rocket and an autorickshaw. Therefore, the sculptural aspect of the piece was cohesive with my style. Additional stylistic details for the hand wheel of the sewing machine were added on by welding random found objects and scrap material. For the base, the sewing machine was attached to a cut-out sheet of steel, which was then screwed onto the table.

Stool and Table

The stool and table were made using found items as well wood and steel. I've consistently used found items in my sculptures to bring in storytelling icons. Each of these pieces had a story or function before they were utilized in my art and given a new purpose. Furthermore, found items have always added more character to my pieces. For the stool, I had found four clarinets to replace the legs of an ordinary stool. I cut a square piece of plywood, traced a circle to the size of a stool, and then sanded the square piece of wood down to a circle. After this, I drill four equidistant holes so that the clarinets could be pushed into the holes. The holes were not drilled all the way, just enough for the mouth of the clarinet to

enter half an inch into the plywood. I struggled with fixing the clarinets into the holes as I did not account for the mouths of the four clarinets having different sizes each. In order to solve this problem, I planned on using the epoxy glue to stabilize the clarinets. I drilled long screws into the holes so that the epoxy glue mixture can attach to the screws for further stabilization and then pushed the clarinets into the holes. Once the glue dried, I noticed that there was still some imbalance, and I used a hammer to bend and straighten the other end of the clarinet that rests on the floor to fix the balance issue of the chair.

Constructing the table required similar materials and skills. Along with plywood and steel, I used a cycle tire, rope, and chicken wire. I cut a piece of plywood to the length of the table. Traditional sewing machine tables tend to be longer in length and shorter in width for efficient sewing. I glued a thin border of wooden strips to the edges of the plywood. The corners were then sanded down to rounded edges for safety. This gave the surface of the table a sophisticated and realistic look. The legs of the table were made by cutting a square steel tube into four pieces of the same exact length. This was very hard to achieve but I managed to get them close enough. I bent quarter inch steel bars and used them to provide stylistic features that emulated a traditional sewing-machine table. Each pair of legs were attached together with a small rectangular sheet of steel. These sheets had four holes drilled into them. This was done so the legs could be attached to the surface of plywood using screws. For the foot pedal, multiple quarter inch bars were welded together to create a similar texture as that of an actual foot pedal. This welded piece of bars was welded onto a grid of bars with three bars

going across the back of the foot pedal and one longer bar was welded along the length of the welded piece. The long bar was the length of the distance between the legs so that the foot pedal could be attached to the legs. I attached a cycle tire to one side of the legs to resemble the wheel of a traditional sewing machine. The sewing-machine I'd fabricated was screwed onto the surface of the table and two holes were drilled near the end. I passed a rope through the table, along the hand wheel of the sewing machine down to the cycle wheel. The rope was attached in place using chicken wire.

Through this process I realized that furniture designing is easy but making the furniture useful and safe is very hard. This is because furniture items have amazing balance, which requires technical skills and precision that can often only be achieved perfectly at a large-scale industrial level. Therefore, this process taught me the value and limitations of handmade products. Also, I learned to live with imperfections as sculptural art doesn't need to be a perfect imitation of real-life. It is art for a reason.

Human figure

The human figure in my piece was to be a life-size figure. I began by making sketches of someone sitting at a traditional sewing machine to understand the posture and position of the figure. I also looked at images of Indian tailors. I had no experience in making figural sculptures, so I went to Professor Chris Duncan for some advice. He mentioned that it would make sense to try and build a simplified armature of a human figure, by welding steel rods and then building on the armature with more material. I looked at the Jack Howard-Potter sculpture

that we have in Jackson's Garden as he used a similar process to make figurative sculptures. I experimented with this process by building an armature for one arm using two steel rods and then stuffed the armature with newspaper and then wrapped it with burlap. The resulting model of the arm was heavy, which made the portability challenging. Furthermore, I predicted that using this process would later cause issues in terms of joining the different body parts together as the angles or postures of each body part may have individual differences in angles and may not form a cohesive figure.

I considered making the human figure using the packaging tape method by wrapping the model in saran wrap, then wrapping the plastic packaging tape around the person, cutting a slit from one side so the model can be freed, retaping the mold and packing it with newspaper or packing material. This method would not provide facial or gestural details and might yield a rather ghostly visual, which would not fulfill the purpose of the figure and might distract from the meaning. So, I continued to brainstorm and research different processes and materials used by other figural sculptors like Kiki Smith, Alison Saar, Zoey Frank, Marta Pérez García and George Segal. I looked at papier-mâché, alginate molds for plaster, bronze casting and a wood cut using a CNC machine. None of these processes aligned with my need for portability, visual imagery, economic resources and skills.

Finally, I was inspired by George Segal's process of using "medical-scrim" or plaster bandages that are used by physicians for making plaster casts for fractures. These bandages are dipped in water and then wrapped around the model

gently. George Segal noted that this process is more efficient and less painful for the model when the body is cast in three sections: the upper body (torso and arms), the lower body (legs) and then the head. Once the plaster hardens, it takes the shape of the model, and a slit can be cut to free the model. The plaster can be rejoined using more bandages. This method would provide me with a light-weight shell of a figure which maintains facial and gestural details. It is also relatively easy to attach the fragmented body parts together. Therefore, I decided that this method would be the most useful for my purposes.

Natalie Berg-Pappert, a junior visual arts and art history major, agreed to be my model for this experiment. In order to solve the releasing problem that George Segal faced, I provided the model with a tight polyester bodysuit. Once Natalie wore the suit, we applied Vaseline gel on the suit and on other exposed areas of her body that were not covered by the suit. This was done to ensure a smooth release. The model was posed to be sitting at a traditional sewing-machine and was cast like that. This was done using mock models of the table and stool of the same height as the final table and stools. The process was broken down over a period of two weeks. The following order was followed over the two weeks: the arms, the legs, hands and feet, and finally the head. The arms, hands, feet, and the head were cast as one piece. Unlike George Segal, I divided the casting into further sections by casting the front of the torso and legs, separately from the back of the torso and legs. This was done to maintain the shape and avoid denting the cast when the model is freed. The plaster bandages took about 15 to 20 minutes to semi-dry, after which, I cut the slits and Natalie was freed. The slit was re-

plastered, and the shell was left to cure for two days. After two weeks, I had parts of the body ready, and I needed to join them together. This was done once all the sculptural parts of the piece (sewing machine, stool, and table) were finalized as the human's position and posture would depend on the position of the table and stool. I was very happy with the final product. I was able to get facial details of the eyelids, lips, ears, and nose along with gestural details of the hands and feet. The figure radiated a life-like presence in an empty room. I also considered painting or embellishing the figure with mosaic pieces but finally decided to leave the figure as is, in its white raw quality as it resembled a kind of alienation and loneliness that reflects my feelings and doubts about love and partnership. However, the bare figure did not show a sense of Indian identity or culture, so I draped one of my grandmother's plain white sarees over the figure. This maintained the white visual and provided the figure with an Indian identity. The draping was held in place using small white push pins.

The Saree

I collected a few old sarees from my grandmothers to use as some sort of medium for my art. A saree is a kind of traditional clothing item worn in South-Asia. It is a long fabric that can be simple or decorated with patterns and prints. This saree is elaborately wrapped around the body. Wearing a saree for me symbolizes becoming a mature woman of marriageable age. Sarees are passed on like an heirloom and inherited across generations. Therefore, a family's history is imprinted onto these sarees. In my project, the saree symbolizes a connection to

the women in my family. It is the shared connection of being a woman. I used the saree to write a love letter to my future generations.

The text on the saree ties together the meaning behind the whole piece. The text was adapted from Divakaruni's novel, 'The Forest of Enchantments.' The text is a quote from the female protagonist Sita. The quote is, "I bless my daughters who are yet unborn, I pray that if life tests them, they will think carefully, understand when they need to compromise and know when they must not." This text is very important to me as it notes that women have always had to unfairly compromise their dream or agency for their family, husband, and children.

I wanted to inscribe this text onto the saree with jute rope, but it was hard to make the jute rope hold the shape of the text. I dipped small segments of the jute rope in a glue synthesis that was dyed red. I used red to connote the idea of marriage and love. After the jute was soaked in the synthesis, I placed the rope onto a plastic sheet in the form of the words. I used small weights to hold the rope in place till it dried. Once the whole text had dried, I self-stitched the text onto the saree. The saree is placed onto the table so that it falls from the table and glides into the air. Almost as if the saree has imbibed magical properties due to Sita's quote. This references back to the Ramayana story and its magical and mythic nature.

Exhibition Preparation

The exhibition is to be held on May 20th, 2022. Since I will be in Florence, Italy for a term abroad at that time, I needed to prepare and pack my work for a feasible installation. I installed my work and took reference images of the whole

piece and details for specific positions. I shared these images with Professor Chris Duncan and the studio technician Jack Shaefer as they agreed to help install my work for the studio show. I also made installation marks on the work to make it easier for them. I then packed my work so it could be put away until the show opening. To protect the piece the figure sculpture was carefully wrapped in a sheet of plastic to avoid dust collecting on the white sculpture. The figure was tightly wrapped to also ensure that the saree does not unravel. The sewing-machine table and the stool was also covered with a plastic sheet. Lastly, the saree needed to be carefully packed as the inscription was very delicate. Portability was kept in mind when the saree was inscribed. Deliberate breaks were made in the cursive text so that the saree could be folded at those breaks. The saree was also covered in a plastic sheet. Furthermore, the folded saree was placed in a cardboard folder for extra protection. The details of the installation were also shared with Frank Rapant, the exhibition technician and supervisor.

Overall, I am very happy with my thesis work. The visual environment I created matches my initial idea and serves the purpose of the piece. The work has a story to tell and engages the viewer to understand my personal journey as a woman. I had once heard from someone that exceptional art can be identified by the ones that hold the longest conversation. While the narrative is not apparent, every aspect of the piece is intentional and meaningful. I believe that my thesis work draws from history and unpacks cultural themes to explore gender in society. Furthermore, it was a great learning process for me. I gained invaluable problem-solving and decision-making skills from the installation and sculptural

art. I got to explore a non-traditional medium, which helped to be more open and fluid to explore a new direction for my art. My previous work focused on two dimensional narratives through painting and sculptures of inanimate but recognizable everyday objects which include found objects as a part of them so that each piece has a story to tell. Through this thesis project, I have now learned how to translate narrative art in an environment in installation form. This narrative or storytelling nature of my art will continue to inspire my art in the future as well. Creating art has always been my therapeutic window as it helps me resolve feelings of unrest. Therefore, my art resembles a psychological journal filled with physical manifestations of my thoughts, feelings, and inner searching.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Chris Duncan, for guiding me through the process over the past 4 years. Special thanks to Jack Shaefer and Abigail Golodik for their technical knowledge and advice. Also, thanks to Professor Sheri Lullo and Professor Laini Nemmett for additional mentoring and along the way.

Appendix

Source Images

Figure 1

A page from the Mewar Ramayana

Sahib Din

Watercolor on paper

1588



Figure 2

Dancer II

Jack Howard-Potter

Steel

2019



Figure 3

The Dinner Table

George Segal

Cast plaster, wood, ceramic, mirror

1962



Figure 4

Grow'd
Alison Saar
Cast bronze
2019



Figure 5

Nameless

Marta Pérez García

Handmade paper, wire, nails, metal spikes, hair and teeth

2022



Figure 6

Girl with Inflatable Dolphin

Zoey Frank

Hydrocal, cement, burlap and metal

2021



Figure 7

What once was, still is, but isn't

Dhruvi Acharya

Raw cotton fabric, synthetic filler, aluminum wire, synthetic polymer paint, ink
and paper

2016



Figure 8 and Figure 9

Source Images for painting

Models: Randy Wyatt and Dhara Shukla

2021



Final Thesis Project Details

Figure 11

Table and Sewing Machine
2022

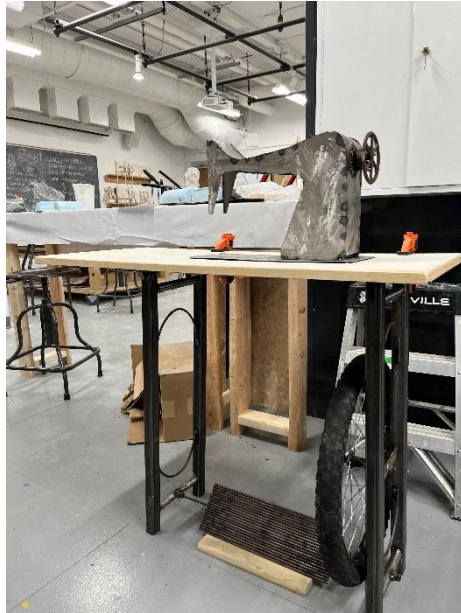


Figure 12

Sitting Stool
2022



Figure 13

Head Plaster Cast

Model: Natalie Berg-Pappert

2022

**Figure 14**

Rear View

2022



Figure 15

Text Inscription Process
2022

**Figure 16**

Text Inscription
2022

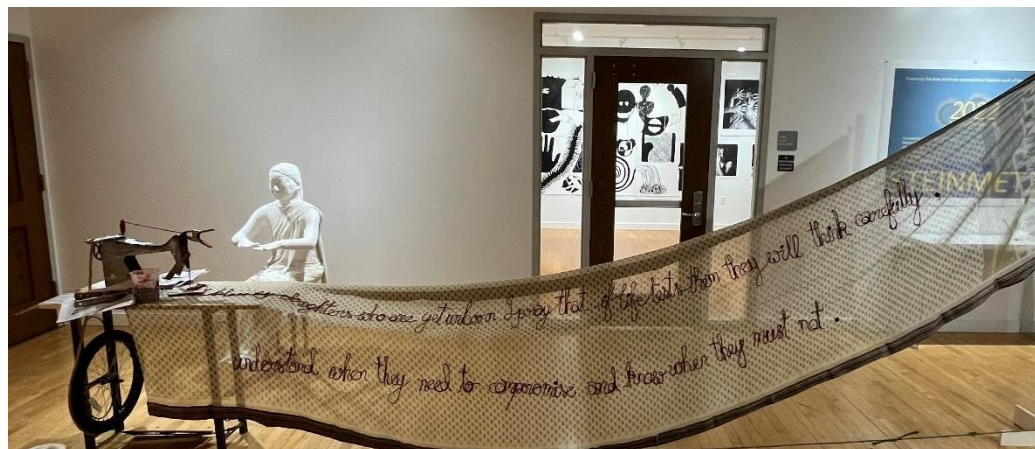


Figure 17

Final Piece Detail
2022

