



**Thinking Aloud in Pattern**  
**Sarah Shin**  
on  
**Madi Acharya-Baskerville**

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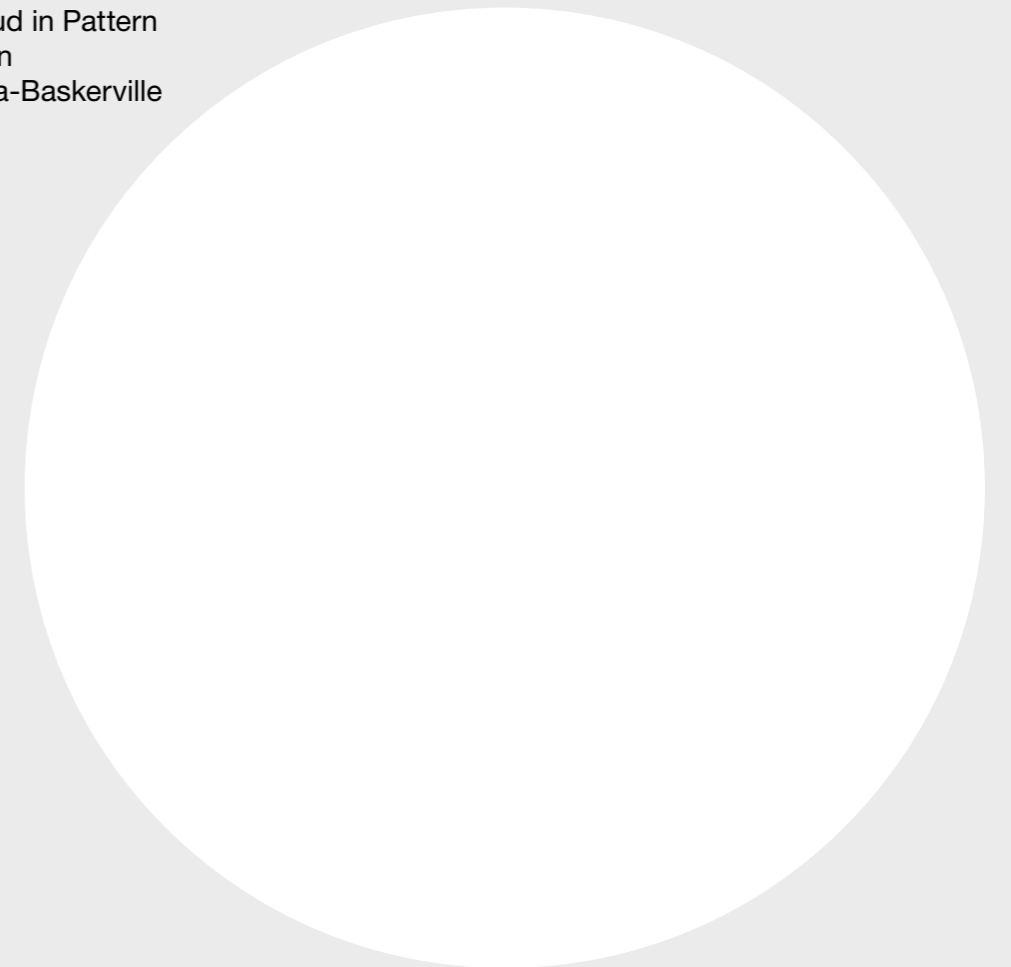
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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that will engage 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England and Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combines artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections—not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through peer networks of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

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Like water, Madi Acharya-Baskerville receives and moves with the world around her. Living by the coast in Wales, her proximity to the sea opened her imagination to how the water has touched many different shores, and to the journeys made across it. The experience, she says, “ignited something, a fire for the search of materials from the coast, which has continued in my practice ever since”.

The primordial shapeshifter, long associated with the unconscious, water brings objects and stories to the surface from its depths. When she is scavenging along waterways, she is also walking this shoreline between the unconscious and conscious. Working primarily with found objects and materials, Acharya-Baskerville is guided by intuition to meet what she needs in synchronistic ways. Sometimes, she will imagine something and, later, come across the pieces with which to realise her vision. “When you’ve been collecting for long enough, things match up—they find me”, she tells me. Over the last few years, she has been visiting the Dorset coast regularly, going for long walks along Chesil Beach: “under the expanse of the sky and the seemingly infinite shoreline of pebbles, I come across large chunks of twisted wood and, sadly, many pieces of plastic, fishing net debris and sometimes dead birds. There are huge storms on Chesil, which bring all of this matter, almost presenting it to me. This is where my work begins.”

The transformative, weathering qualities of water inform and mirror Acharya-Baskerville’s practice, which has at its core an interest in the aesthetics of erosion—the fading by the elements, the imprints of time. And, like the artist, who is in constant exchange with her environment, water is itself changed by its conditions, cycling through solid, liquid, vapour, plasma and the quantum state of Bose-Einstein condensate. “Water is the medium of transformation before I get there”, she says.

At Woking Palace, fragments of Tudor artefacts found their way to Acharya-Baskerville to be renewed and their histories woven with contemporary meanings. The former palace was built on higher ground near the banks of the River Wey in Old Woking. The first house on the site was likely erected in 1217, with a manor house first recorded on the property in 1272. More buildings were built over several centuries to form a substantial palace complex that became a favourite of Henry VII, the first Tudor, who acquired the Manor of Woking in 1485.

During her residency at Woking’s The Lightbox, for UAL Decolonising Arts Institute’s 20/20 commission, Acharya-Baskerville explored the museum’s collections to make work from objects that have been excavated from the palace. Broken pieces—of Valencian tiles, metalware, oyster shells and toys—provide the prima materia for the artist to create narratives of hybridity through a lens informed by her South Asian heritage and ideas of exile and migration.

“We are confronted by fragments of our lives, whether we like it or not”, she offers. Fragments imply an absent past and an originary whole, while, at the same time, are complete in themselves. Decontextualised, they offer possible new identities, future stories or parallel universes. Acharya-Baskerville takes this potential of the fragment and turns it towards opening up history to a multiplicity of memories that have been lost or never made.

In her creations, Acharya-Baskerville recasts found fragments and “decommissioned objects” into new forms that seem to have been there all along. She often plays with scale and brings together disparate elements to introduce a sense of the uncanny, at once familiar and unfamiliar. A key she made from black clay, for example, is inexplicably large, amplifying the questions raised for her by the original metal key, from Woking Palace, that it is based upon. What was that key for? What did it open? Carved and painted with a white pattern from Indian carpentry, Acharya-Baskerville’s key unlocks a door—a connection—that brings a pattern-language from one domain, textiles—silks and embroidered materials that have been handed down through her family—into another, ceramics. The doorway is to a place within the artist’s creative memory:

I build new narratives from various existing sources, my own drawings and photographs, found imagery, memory of places and conversations. I start with the surface which, being found, has unique lines and blemishes. For me these pre-existing marks conjure up different memories and experiences. Quite often the imagery is from far away but significant places juxtaposed with patterns and images from the everyday, the idea that nothing is too far away and that this incongruity is part of our existence.

As with patterns and motifs, Acharya-Baskerville combines materials, for example, fusing acrylic with wood or textiles with clay, and sometimes using horsehair and bones with South Asian textiles. Inspired by the fallen leaves along the Basingstoke Canal (which runs parallel to The Lightbox), she has been making leaves in different kinds of clay. One, in porcelain fired with green stoneware glaze, wears a coral and turquoise embroidered braid, similar to the embroidery on saris, like a sash, in the way that a sari drapes diagonally across its wearer’s body. Acharya-Baskerville leverages contrast to bring out the latent qualities of an object as she makes it: the leaf’s personhood is accentuated by a pair of green glass fragments, which have been embedded into the clay and melted with subsequent firings to look like weeping eyes. As she worked with the aquamarine leaf, it also became more oceanic, accumulating parts of fishing nets and fishing lines, whose colours—green and pink—complement the existing palette of the leaf.

Motifs and forms recur across Acharya-Baskerville's pieces, like spore prints of the artist's imagination, undoing the separation of species-beings. Leaves and foliage climb up the legs of a ceramic horse, while ocular shapes reappear on a mask-like sculpture inspired by oyster shells: two small holes look back from a lustre-finish shell, painted with autumnal, organic patterns drawn from Valencian tiles in The Lightbox's reserve collection.

Receptacles and containers are natural forms of interest for Acharya-Baskerville, whose practice is one of "carrying together" for journeys of various kinds. As well as the mask form, the oysters favoured at Tudor feasts become porcelain bowls, echoing the abundance and pleasure at Woking Palace, once used as a royal weekend retreat. Further, in her hands, the palace's fourteenth-century Valencian floor tiles take on another dimension to become pouches or bottles that feature shapes and patterns from both sides of the tiles.

A Bartmann ('bearded man') jug found in the Heritage Collection inspired Acharya-Baskerville's versions of the salt-glazed stoneware. Produced throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mostly in western Germany, the jugs frequently featured a bearded face motif that referred to the mythical 'wild man' popular in northern European folklore of the period. The jugs were thus connected with the masculine, embodied by the wild man—but they had another gendered usage. During the early modern witch hunts, the Bartmann jugs—which usually carried food or drink—were sometimes used as witch bottles to protect against malevolent spirits: items to harm witches, such as hair and nail clippings, menstrual blood, bent pins, needles and urine, were placed into the bottles, before they were sealed with a cork and hidden or buried.

Acharya-Baskerville constructs an alternative narrative to the story of the exalted wild man and the demonic, monstrous woman. One of her jugs bears a blue pattern engraved into the ceramic as if it were shaped into sand. On the lower half is a curved shape that evokes Ana Mendieta's earth-body art and the ancient goddess paintings that influenced her syncretic work. Here, Acharya-Baskerville remakes the Bartmann jug into a carrier of the intimacy between the feminine, the earth and the body so demonised by the witch hunts.

She realigns conventional, modern hierarchies to tell different stories about relationships among humans and non-humans, and upends usual notions of value conferred upon finery or fragments, flotsam and jetsam. Nothing is either-or for Acharya-Baskerville; her own consciousness and agency emerges as only one part of a polymorphous flow of directionalities and desires. When she looks at objects and fragments, they look back at her, and tell her if they want to be a part of her world—or not—as collaborators in a gentle practice sensitive to what they do or do not want to become. Her storytelling is entwined with her process of "thinking aloud in

pattern"—making meaning from correspondences and differences—to reflect and re-pattern the world around her. When she walks around, she says: "there is a commentary going on in my head. It's something that is beyond consciousness—there's a magical aspect of something going on that's broader than me. The broad process is pattern recognition: what informs us, how we do things and why it should make sense. I feel very in tune with everything—I'll take it in and it might become a part of my work."

She is constantly scanning her environment for pieces—for textures, forms and surfaces—and analysing them to investigate their innate qualities in a partly scientific, partly artistic process. Placing one next to another creates a scale of association—similarity and difference, like metaphor—which enables greater understanding of each, which piece might be able to merge with another, and for its integrity to withstand the process of merging. When Acharya-Baskerville works with objects in this way, she glimpses what has happened in their world—the trials, journeys and weathering they have been through. She considers collecting "an act of rescue" and spends a lot of time categorising and storing the found fragments in her studio to shelter them "from the elements, preserving them from further harm".

The collection in Acharya-Baskerville's studio museum is underpinned by a deep care for the fragments that we are left with once the past erodes away. Here, objects have their own path, which she facilitates in a form of homeopathy:

I do think it is a form of love for the materials. Once they have a physical place in my studio, I feel I am caring for and nurturing them... I care a lot about these fragments and objects: how something that has been damaged and broken heals. And, in human terms, how we heal has parallels with working with materials in a way that doesn't force things, but work out as hybrids that seem like they always existed.

An affiliation with rituals and offerings that tend to the spirits of the past imbues Acharya-Baskerville's work. Bridging time, places, materials and symbols, she seeks to remake relationships between all beings for change in the longer term. Through this quietly radical encounter, she is herself changed, becoming more reflective, more relaxed. Like water that finds its own way, she becomes more herself.





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