

Cambridge Art Galleries
IDEA|EXCHANGE



MEERA SETHI
Outerwhere + Cotton Exchange



Meera Sethi, **Cotton Exchange** (detail), acrylic on linen, 2023.
Photograph by Karly Boileau.

INTRODUCTION

Cambridge Art Galleries, Idea Exchange is pleased to present three distinct bodies of work by artist Meera Sethi in two solo exhibitions at our Queen's Square and Preston locations. While each exhibition functions independently, they are connected through Sethi's use of found imagery and objects to investigate the multi-layered and complex relationships among racialized and gendered bodies, clothing, and textile.

On view at Queen's Square Gallery is **Outerwhere** in which Sethi alters and adorns the inner linings of 12 winter coats. The winter coat is the first-acquired and single-most important item of clothing for newcomers when landing in cold climates. Presented within a circle, **Outerwhere** shares stories related to diasporic South Asian experiences and themes of migration, identity, historical trauma, resilience, and memory.

On view at Preston Gallery is **Cotton Exchange**. These works use the concept of image reproduction or 'copying' to focus on and disrupt assumptions related to the labouring bodies involved in cloth and garment manufacturing. In **Cotton Exchange**, Sethi translates into painting a 1936 Art Deco bas relief sculpture found on the exterior of the historic Cotton Exchange Building in Mumbai. In **Articles of Clothing**, Sethi reverses the process of fast fashion and the news cycle by engaging in a slow, durational process of drawing the clothing of protesting garment workers. By looking at the colonial period and present-day garment industries together, this exhibition illustrates the exploitation at the heart of what we wear.

Front and back cover: Meera Sethi, **Lord Clive** from **Outerwhere Series**, 2023. Mixed Media. Photograph by Karly Boileau.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Meera Sethi is a contemporary artist with an intuitive and research-based practice that moves across painting, drawing, fibre, illustration, performance, and social practice. Her work sits at the intersection of the subjugated body and histories of cloth with a particular focus on South Asia and its diasporas. She is interested in the making, wearing, and disposing of cloth; clothing as a form of self-expression and resistance; and the ways by which textile is constituted over vast geographies. Through her work, she delves deep into our understanding of the self, the body, cloth and clothing, including its histories, resonances, and possibilities.

Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and can be found in the permanent collection of the Royal Ontario Museum and the Wedge Collection. She lives and works in the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, and Mississaugas of the Credit River.

(R): Meera Sethi, **Safety Catches** from **Articles of Clothing Series** (detail), 2020, pencil on paper. Image courtesy of artist.



TOLD THROUGH TEXTILE

Natasha Bissonauth, Ph.D.

York University

For almost fifteen years, visual artist Meera Sethi has engaged the politics of dress. Given her background as a graphic designer, earlier work framed the South Asian diasporic figure as a conduit for queer style. Her interest in textile graphics lead to various projects including an abstract mural in Toronto's Gay Village which venerates intersecting queer histories. More recently projects on reuse, ecologies of migrant labor, and brown settler accountability on Indigenous lands continue to address the sartorial by focusing on the handmade.

Two independent shows in separate spaces hosted by Cambridge Art Galleries certainly find a seam in their attention to textile. In the Preston Gallery, sixteen drawings titled, **Articles of Clothing** (2020), are inspired by visual documentation of garment workers protesting fair wages and safeguards. As the artist hones in on details of clothing, she recreates the design in exacting ways through the hand-drawn. In doing so, Sethi attempts to slow down time in a world governed by fast fashion. This careful (and care-filled) process of copying and translation allows her to spend time with the image, and by extension, the issues at hand. From the 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh that killed over 1,100 workers and injured thousands more, to the COVID-19 global pandemic labor crisis that forced workers to make masks or locked them out of work without compensation, fast fashion's record for health, and safety in South Asia has been dire. However, as Sethi's aesthetic process takes the time to witness, everyday wear incites a political message. Furthermore, her attention to abstract patterns in pencil, oil pastel, and ink are imbued with an affective connection. Approaching the act of drawing as an act of care, she indexes the dissenting bodies of these women and urges her audience to "refocus our vision on the labour exploitation at the heart of the global garment industry."¹

1. Artist Statement on **Articles of Clothing**, 2020

In the same space Sethi installs **Cotton Exchange** (2023), seven acrylic paintings that recall the colonial legacy of India's textile industry. These works on linen replicate a 1930s bas relief sculpture on the exterior of The Cotton Exchange Building – the historic site for cotton stock trading in Mumbai. Beautifully carved in the Art Deco style, the frieze offers exquisite detail to the story of cotton, which Sethi was able to document using a digital camera and binoculars. From land to ship, the original sculpture shows the different steps involved in tending to the plant, storage, and export, centering the laborious process of growing and selling cotton. Like **Articles of Clothing**, these linen paintings reproduce exact copies, however this time, as a form of archiving; Sethi's painterly precision reorients us towards this visual record, preserving this important history. Copying plays an important role in the history of textile trade as Europe feverishly copied Indian pattern wear, reproduced them in the motherland, and sold products back to the colonies at a larger profit. This is just one of the many ways in which empire's racial capitalism desecrated the textile industry in South Asia.² Importantly, there is a section of the frieze that Sethi was unable to document because parts of the overall structure are obstructed from view. As a result, one of her seven paintings comprises a black square centrally located on the wall. Conceptually registering that which is obscured, Sethi generates aesthetic encounters with archival fragments to hold that which cannot be preserved or remembered. She also marks how fast fashion's current processes are often concealed by corporate unethical sourcing and consumer apathy for where materials come from. Thinking alongside art historian, Anna Arabindan Kesson, cotton is a material with memory that contemporary art practice can reanimate while also constructing meaning for the present day.³

2. The story of cotton and the labor exploitation that haunts its production affected countless colonized populations, not least, Black people across the Americas both before settlers severed ties from their respective crowns (to maintain slavery) and long after Emancipation as well.

3. Anna Arabindan Kesson, **Black Bodies White Gold**. (Durham: Duke UP, 2021).



Finally, as we enter Queen's Square Gallery, **Outerwhere** comprises a series of twelve winter coats displayed in a circular formation. Unlike the artworks in Preston, these soft sculptures are more intuitive in conception; though they gesture towards the archival, nevertheless. In Sethi's words, "the winter coat is the single-most important garment of survival in Northern climates, offering a physical and metaphoric layer of protection in inhospitable environments." Sourced from the artist's personal collection as well as second hand finds, Sethi's coats attempt to suture across communities and generations. Through collage and bricolage, the coats' lining and exterior layers are reworked, fragmented, and embellished by hand. Her attention to material seams ultimately illuminates stories she wanted to commemorate as a queer child of immigrants living on stolen lands. For example, the 'The Hudson Bay' coat lays out important bridgework across Indigenous cosmologies and South Asian immigration. Sethi takes an original Hudson Bay coat from a thrift store as her point of departure – this very Canadian object that is part of settler mythos that recalls the blankets carrying pox from Europe to the Americas. She then uses the coat to enrobe a representation of a regional, oppressed caste goddess of smallpox, Shitala (AKA Mariamman). Her face is old, fierce, and wise, holding multiple generations of rage (note the garland of colonial beheadings) alongside multiple forms of grief. Sethi's rendering intentionally borrows from Indigenous mythmaking to complete the image. The goddess's antlers do not derive from South Asian epistemologies, however, in various Indigenous cosmologies, the stag is king of the forest and serves as a protective figure. And so, through shared myth, the artist moves beyond 'what is' in order to imagine 'what could be.' Because what if we did combine our pantheons? What form of shelter and protections might emerge? What if we have been sharing them all along? Sethi crafts such visionary possibilities.

(L) Meera Sethi, **Tragic Number** from **Articles of Clothing Series** (detail), 2020, pencil and paper. Image courtesy of artist.

Outerwhere

Cambridge Art Galleries, Queen's Square
September 30 to December 17, 2023

Cotton Exchange

Cambridge Art Galleries, Preston
September 30 - November 26, 2023

Works by Meera Sethi

Cambridge Art Galleries

1 North Square, Cambridge, ON
ideaexchange.org/art

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Cambridge Art Galleries respectfully acknowledge that we are located on the traditional territory of Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and Neutral peoples. We recognize that this land is part of the Haldimand Tract, extending 10 km on either side of the Grand River. We are grateful to share, learn and create on this land and are continuing the process of understanding how we can be better treaty partners.

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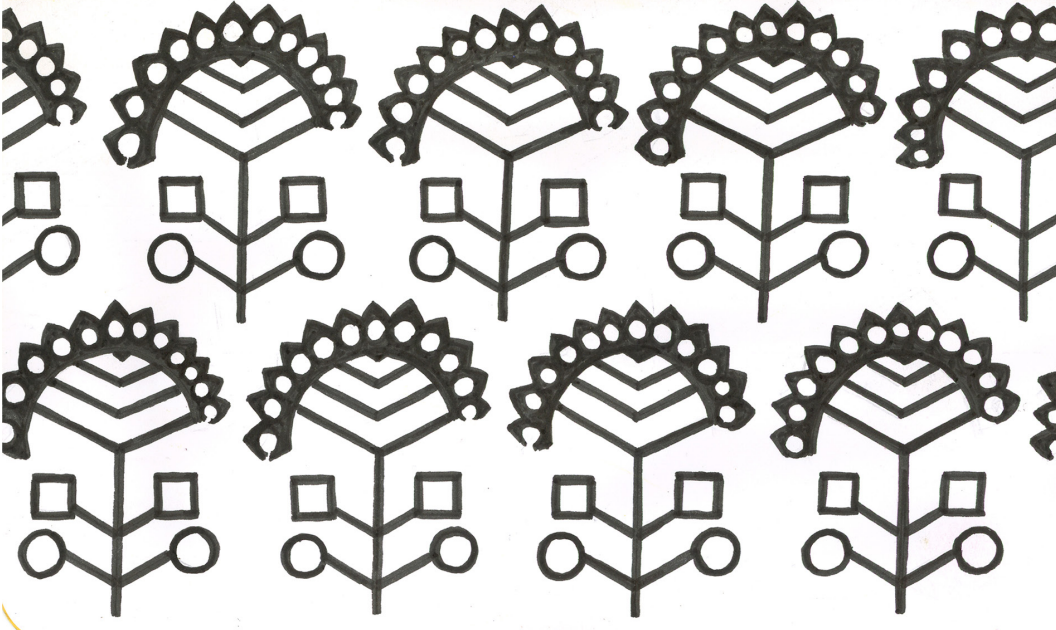
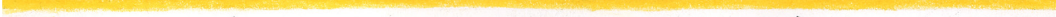
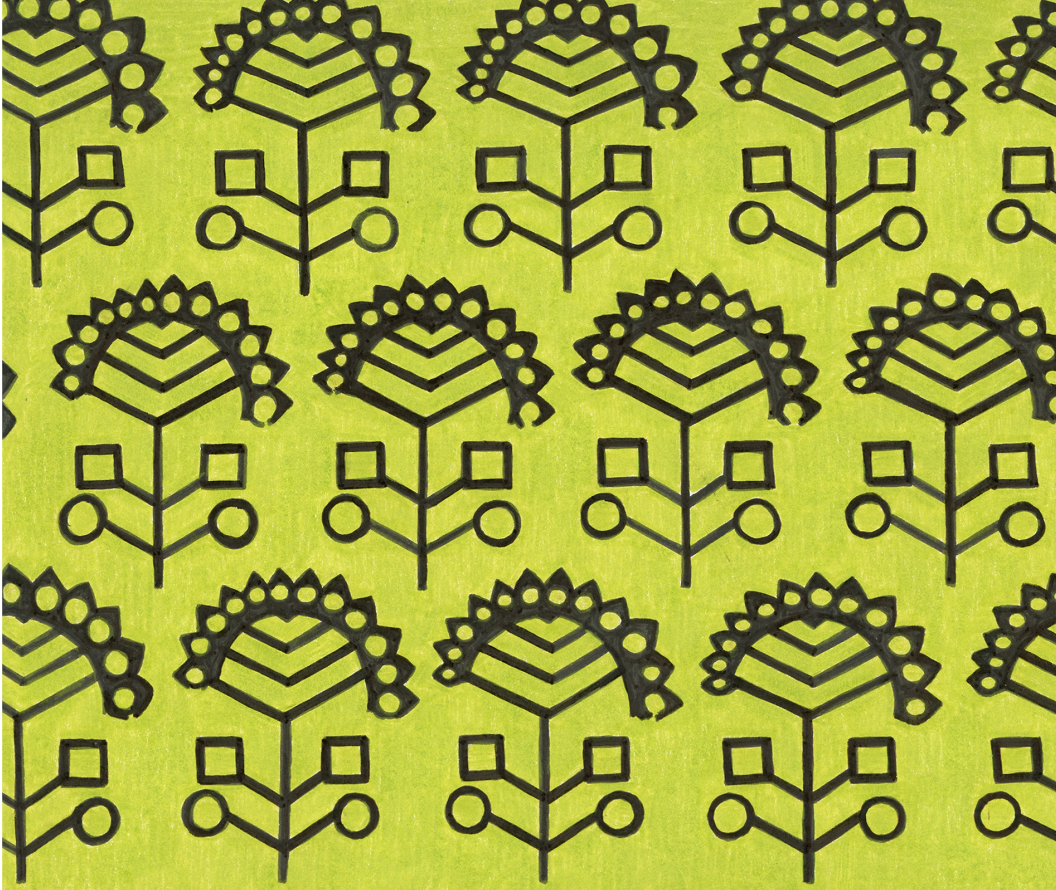
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(R) Meera Sethi, **Factory Fire** from **Articles of Clothing Series** (detail), 2020, pencil and paper. Image courtesy of artist.





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