

The Potato, the Mark, and the Body

Usman Ansari

August 1986. I am at preschool.

Aunty Sheila holds a large potato in her hand before slicing it in half. She then proceeds to carve into the inside with a fruit knife.

"What is the colour of a heart?"

"It's RED!"

In one swift motion, she dips the potato on to a palette, lifts it and presses it firmly on a piece of paper. Her fingertips turn white with the pressure she is exerting. When she's ready, she lifts the potato and the paper with a flourish, punctuated by our gasps of awe. On the paper is a heart with crisp edges in thick red pigment; the indelible mark that will stay like that forever. The inside of the potato has the same shape, although the edges of this heart are bruised, the pigment pink and bleeding beyond the boundary of the carved stamp.

"Wow..."

When our gasping has subsided, she hands me the potato and announces, *"Your turn."*

I am about to become an Artist.

January 2017. I am at a site.

Two masons are stacking blocks over a blurry red line on an unfinished floor. Another is using a plastering trowel to apply mortar in between each unit. One labourer is carrying concrete blocks to the incomplete wall. His palms are chafed from their roughness. Yet another mason is mixing cement, sand, and water in a dented, shallow bowl.

*"When will this wall be completed? It *still* has to be plastered and painted!"*

I turn around and leave before they can answer.

Later that day. I am at the office.

I sit before a computer screen, churning out a package for a tender for an eighteen-storey building, having wasted half a day looking at untreated masonry blocks. After more than a decade into the practice, I know how to translate my vision into a set of construction drawings. I understand the raw materials used to construct spaces, and how to engage them in dialogue to form polished assemblies. I direct craftsmen as they use their tools to produce finished products to my exact specifications. I choose to celebrate completed spaces that come closest to my original vision. I decide which surfaces speak and which are silenced forever.

I have become an Architect.

November 2020. I am neither at the site nor at the office.

I am still an architect but no longer build physical spaces. I am, however, still restless to create art, and plagued with questions.

"How will I make art without formal education in the discipline?"

"What will my art say? What language will it speak?"

"What materials and tools will I use?"

"What techniques would I need to teach myself to realise my vision?"

"How much will I rationalise my intuition?"

Unsure where to begin, I turn back to my architectural past for answers. What remains of that life are bleary visions of the construction site and the lingering memory of how these would evolve to become complete spaces. I decide to pay a visit.

December 2020. I am at Space No.1.

I enter a construction site which is far from becoming a finished space. It is a world of painfully exposed, untreated, and coarse textures. There is the familiar wall of raw masonry blocks, oxidising steel bent to provide shape to the staircase, the crumbling mould of wooden planks, and splashes of red oxide markings covered in footprints. I photograph the unattended sharp edges of discarded corrugated metal sheets, a half-complete scaffolding of bamboo, and stacks of porcelain tiles resting in the shade. My camera captures the friction between the comb and



Space No.1 – Discarded corrugated metal sheets. Photo by author



Space No.1 – Splashes of red oxide markings. Photo by author

Top Left: Space No.1 – Rusted steel, bent to provide shape to the staircase. Photo by author



Top Right: Space No.1 – Formwork, while it is being filled with concrete. Photo by author



Bottom: Space No. 2 – The underbelly of floors. Photo by author



the wet bathroom wall being scored to receive ceramic tiles. The floor being whipped by the taut nylon string, leaving a sharp line that is either red or yellow. The sound of metal lathe being nailed at the threshold between the beam and the wall. The vibration in the wooden rafters holding in place the formwork while it is being filled with concrete. My phone records the loudness of both, cacophony and chorus alike.

December 2020. I am at Space No. 2.

The second incomplete space is nearly complete. It is quieter than I had imagined. The salted coarseness of the masonry blocks has been slapped into silence with smooth cement slurry. Painted walls stand over the red and yellow markings. The high-pitched, rusted ridges of the bent steel are buried deep into a beam. The slippery skin of the ceramic tile has rendered the deep incisions on the bathroom walls inaudible. Planks of wood and metal formwork that had earlier constrained the walls and held up the underbelly of floors are nowhere to be seen, no bamboo scaffolding to be climbed on anymore, no grains to be mixed with paint. All dialogue has been hushed. In disappearing the tools, entire stories have been erased. I hear nothing.

I had forgotten how we worked to manipulate things into stillness, and how deceptive that quietude was. In an attempt to seek answers to questions that plagued me earlier, I have discovered that the voices of raw materials, untreated surfaces, and the tools of the craft are suddenly audible to me. I am struggling to hear finished and polished surfaces.

"Was it because I no longer had a preconceived vision of the finished product?"

"Did I feel map-less because I hadn't authored the construction drawing that dictated the final product?"

"How would I now be able to discern the complete from the incomplete?"

January 2021. I am at various construction sites.

I want to hear them again, these migrant tools of the trade and trappings of the craft, outside the realm of the incomplete space. I frequent more sites, scavenging yet feeling like a rescuer with every bit of paraphernalia brought back to my studio.

1. *Nylon and Jute Strings*
2. *Bent Steel*
3. *Block Masonry*
4. *Wood and Metal Formwork*

- A. Taghari⁶
- B. Tile
- C. Jaali
- D. Sarya
- E. Chunnai
- F. Dori⁷
- G. Furma⁸
- H. Gurmala
- I. Baans⁹



5. *Metal Lathe*
6. *Plastering Comb*
7. *Trowel*
8. *Bamboo*
9. *Corrugated Metal Sheet*
10. *Sand and Gravel*
11. *Tile* 12... 13... 14... 15...

Detached from their past assemblies and outside their original context, they are no longer engaged in dialogue with each other. Indifferent to the absence of an audience, they announce, independently, who they are, where they have come from, and how they are complete on their own. I had known these materials and tools to serve a specific purpose. A change in context has now triggered a change in perspective. Now through their prolonged monologue, I begin to understand their character very differently.

"Why did their dialogue on site become a monologue in my studio?"

"How would this monologue now turn into a dialogue with me?"

At this juncture of unravelling how to use these materials to create differently, I decide to explore them. The *chunnai*¹ is incredibly heavy and has rough edges. Lifting it once, chafed my palm. The *sarya*² is impossible to bend by hand. The rear side of the tile has a pattern of rough teeth. The *chaadar*³ loses its rigidity at the slightest pressure. The *gurmala*⁴ has sharp, knife-like edges. The *jaali*⁵ pricks my palm every time I try to pick it up. Somewhere along these tactile explorations, the preschooler in me finds the potato all over again.

January 2021. I am at the studio.

It is time to introduce the canvas and the potato to each other. The canvas is stretched; the first potato slice, the block, is painted. It is then placed on the taut fabric. As soon as they meet, the block tears into the sheet. With all my strength I lift the block immediately, only to discover that it has left no mark on the surface. I paint the steel a deep turquoise and let it sink into the whiteness of the cloth. Yet another failed encounter.

"Why were these two refusing to speak to each other?"

After two unsuccessful introductions, I reach for the nylon string. It is slippery and endless. After dipping it into red oxide pigment, I straddle the canvas, stretching both limbs out to the



Linear splash across. Photo by author



In the form of a relief. Photo by author

full expanse of the sheet, and ask my studio assistant to pull and release. One whip leaves a linear splash across the length of the cloth. Without changing posture, I shift and ask for the string to be pulled and released again. This time around, the mark is contained and recognisable. Reaching for another material as limber as the string, I pick the metal lathe. It immediately tells me that it cannot be pressed onto the canvas, nor flicked like the string. I lay it on the canvas and bury it in a thick coat of paint. After the pigment dries, I peel it off gently. The lathe has left its imprint on the cloth in the form of a relief.

"Had I comprehended the monologue of the lathe and the string better than the others?"

Now, I had to rehear the voices of all the potatoes, adapting to multiple locutions at the same time. The metal lathe and nylon string had already articulated that they would only converse with stretched canvas. The bamboo, block, tile, and wooden planks had an earnest discourse; they could only rhapsodise with un-stretched canvas. The monologues are turning into a dialogue, conversing directly with the emerging creator in me.

March 2021. I am at the site.

As the marks around my studio grow, so does the urge to go back to the construction site.

"What other materials and tools could I dig up from the debris?"

"How were the impressions I had made on canvas different from the ones on the unfinished floor and wall?"

A labourer carries blocks towards an incomplete wall; the calluses on his palms, although more numerous, are similar to my own. Two masons stretch a nylon string over a bathroom floor. A third pulls it, then releases. With every flick, the mark on the floor becomes more contained and recognisable, like it had on my canvas. Another mason, who has just nailed a metal lathe sheet, rubs his hand where the mesh punctured his skin. Before I can even search for more tools and materials, I am struck by a thought...

"How was the emerging creator in the studio different from the masons on the construction site?"

I had replaced a concrete surface with canvas. The masons and I could both hear the monologue of the raw material. We were both using the trappings of the craft to produce a final product.

Seasoned masons flourish on under-construction sites; without their skill, the polished assemblies that I had celebrated for over a decade wouldn't exist. It was never just me who determined which surfaces would speak. Their vision and agency not only realised my vision but furthered it. The difference now was that the masons on site still had a vision to pursue. I was searching for one.

They were craftsmen; I was trying to become one.

Same day. I am at the studio.

The architect has returned to the studio having had many new realisations. The emerging craftsman can better see how the relationship between the un-stretched canvas and the building materials could evolve. In light of these revelations, the possibilities seem endless. If the wooden plank meets the canvas with too much enamel on its body, the mark it leaves will be fuzzy. If the jute string is left in paint for too long and then flicked, its print will be ambiguous. The block and the bamboo soak up copious amounts of pigment before leaving an indelible mark on cloth.

"How much paint was too much and how much was not enough?"

The steel has to be painted gently, with shorter bristles. The rear of the tile has to be rollerbladed with pigment. Before every meeting, the stamps have to be lathered up, scrubbed, and rinsed. The cloth needs time to cherish the memory of the last meeting. From one union to the other, their association continues to mature and, just as most relationships evolve through continued contact, so does the one between the stamp and the canvas. With each scrub, the stamp refashions itself. With each mark, the disposition of the cloth changes. The process leaves as much an impact on the stamp as it does on the canvas. They have both come very far from where they had started.

Nestled within the process is an older question that still remains unanswered:

"What will my art say and what language will it speak?"

What truths are being revealed as I peel off layers from the material world I had been constructing around myself and others? No longer seeking only the pristine exterior, I have now found in the debris the signs and sounds of everything that was underneath. By creating multiple layers of marks on canvas, I am celebrating the workings and trappings of craft that are integral to the construction of our built environment, yet remain destined to be hidden from sight, touch, and ultimately appreciation.

Top: Process work for the piece titled *Dori 1*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author

Bottom: Process work for the piece titled *Furma*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author



"Will we look, or simply look away?"

April 2021. I am at the studio.

As my vision starts to take shape, so does the level of intervention in existing crafts on under-construction sites. To ensure that all marks on the cloth are as close to the original material as possible, I use my own body. Previously, when *sarya* and *taat*¹⁰ met for the first time, both parted without leaving any impact on each other.

"What tool could I use to apply pressure to their union when they meet the second time?"

Instinctively, I use the base of my palm to apply force along the length of the steel. At times, also my fingertips. The teeth behind the porcelain tile only register on canvas under the weight of my heel. I have to knead the cloth draped over the *furma*¹¹ with my elbows for a distinguished impression. The block is adamant. Despite the efforts from all my ligaments, it remains unconvinced.

"What tool other than my body could I now use?"

Upon listening intently, I realise that the *gurmala* has been drowned out by the voices of all the others. As soon as its hard and shiny underbelly meets with canvas under the weight of my body, the block yields. However, no matter how much pressure I apply, the prints carry many imperfections; they are indistinct, almost like a memory of the original material.

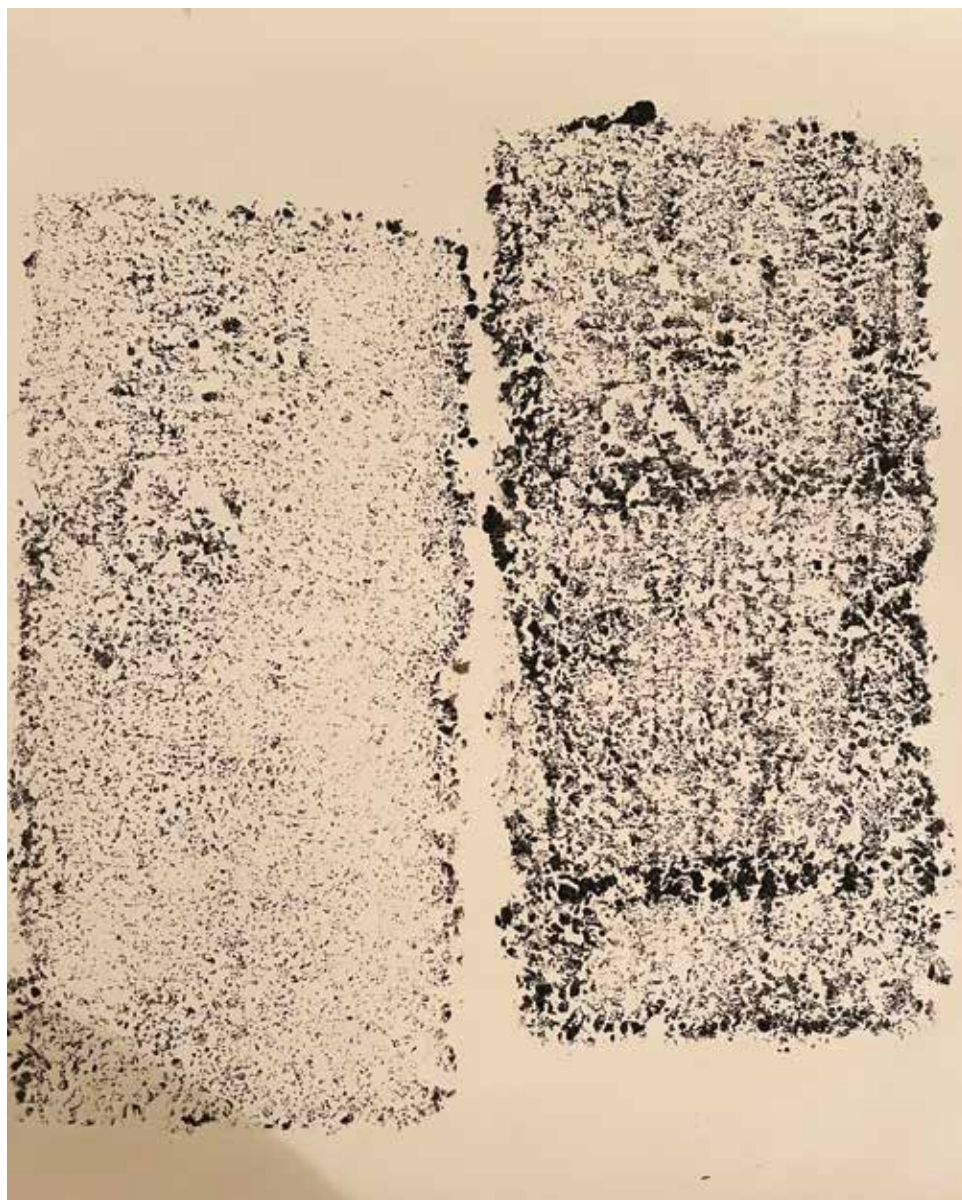
"Will these prints always be constrained, just like the body being used as a tool?"

"Do they have to be accurate to be finished?"

They are whole on their own, just like the raw materials in my studio.

In the process of pressing my body to material and canvas, a soliloquy ensues. My body has always been there: as a shadow that interlaced with gravel and sand on the ground, as an obscure outline on the lens capturing the journey of each painting, and as a reflection of the imperfect mark.

"Will all impressions converge in the monologue of the body?"



They were indistinct, almost like a memory of the original material - Impression of masonry block on canvas. Photo by author

I want to include the body as a final layer over all impressions. *Dori 1*, an ode to the *dori patakha*¹² by craftsmen on floors before erecting walls, receives the marks of the underbelly of my shoes and bare feet. To celebrate the textured teeth behind the porcelain tile, I dip my hands in buckets of paint and press them over the impression of the teeth. All body positions while working over, under, and beside the canvas are drawn and superimposed on the piece that glorifies bent steel. It is eventually titled *Sarya*. The stretching, retraction, and repose between working postures is also important. In superimposing the story of the hands, feet, and muscles that had stretched and compressed along with each medium, a cadence forms, its tempo a labouring beat now heard on cloth.

14th October 2021. Opening night of the solo art show titled *Unsung*.

An established architect is frozen in front of the piece titled *Dori 1*. A seasoned printmaker is moving closer and closer to the piece titled *Chaal*¹³. A mason is touching the protruding textures of *Chunnai*. I know his name is *Atiq*.

Architect: *Which art school did you attend?*

Me: *I was trained as an architect. I taught myself how to paint.*

Architect: *Oh! Do you still practise? Or do you just paint now?*

Me: *I don't practise architecture anymore.*

Architect: *That's unfortunate. Being an architect is nothing like being an artist. Do you know the difference between the two?*

Me: *Still trying to figure it out.*

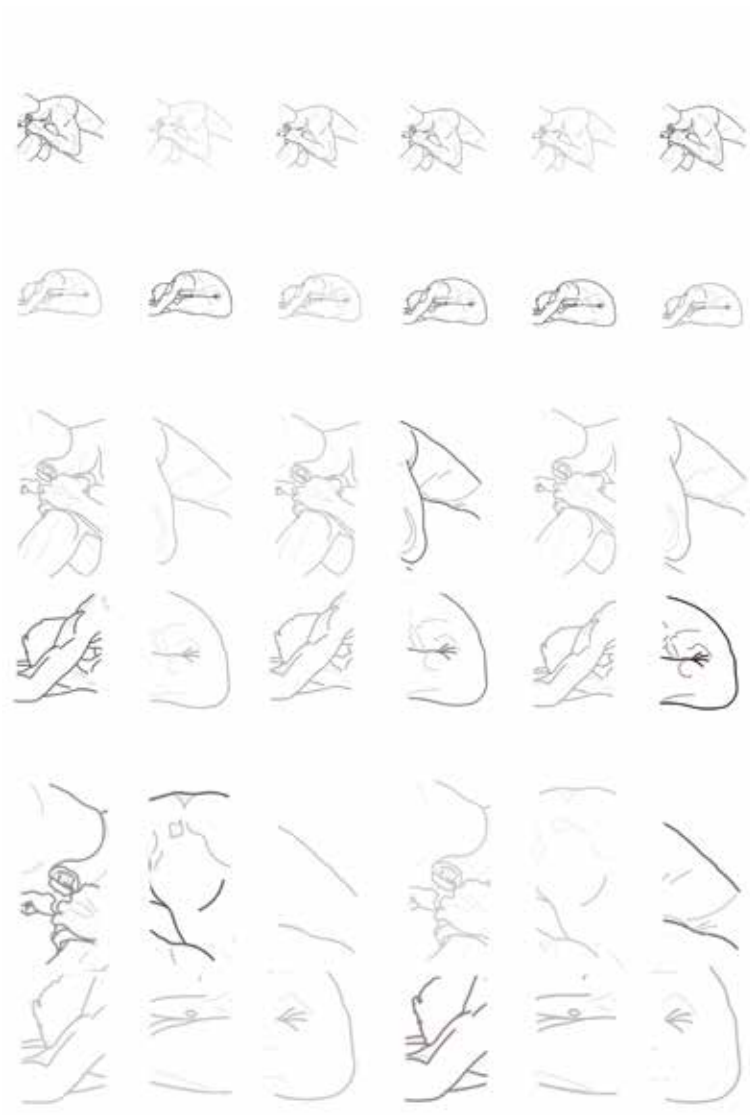
Architect: *Come see me. I will explain the difference to you in detail.*

Me: *Thank you.*

I move towards *Chaal*. The printmaker is looking for a description next to the piece.

Printmaker: *What is your work about?*

Me: *I've used physical objects from under-construction sites and taken their impressions on canvas.*



Process work for the piece titled *Sarya*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author



Process work for the piece titled *Dori 1*, displayed at the show titled *Unsung* at the Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by author

Printmaker: *Oh, so you're a printmaker. I am one too.*

Me: *I don't think I am a printmaker yet. I have spent most of my career being an architect.*

Printmaker: *I always find it funny when architects try to become artists. Do you have an etching press in your studio?*

Me: *I didn't use a press.*

Printmaker: *How did you make these prints, then?*

Me: *I used my own body weight.*

Printmaker: *No wonder these prints are foggy. I recommend that you enrol yourself in a printmaking class immediately. You should learn how to create prints the right way first.*

Me: *Thank you. Will keep that in mind.*

Printmaker: *You're welcome.*

From the corner of my eye, I see Atiq heading for the exit. I rush towards him.

Me: *Atiq bhai! Mera kaam kaisa laga?* [Atiq bhai, what did you think of my work?]

Atiq: *Samajh main nahin aaya.* [I couldn't understand it.]

Me: *Aap hi ki ek site se main ne block uthaya tha, jis se woh tasveer banayi jo aap abhi dekh rahay thay. Main ne uss painting ka naam bhi Chunnai rakh diya.* [I had taken a block from one of the sites you were working at to create an impression for the piece you were looking at. I also named the painting Chunnai.]

Atiq: *Mujhe tasveer banana nahin aata. Magar us tasveer main block kahan tha?* [I don't know how to make a painting. But where was the block in it?]

Me: *Mujhe bhi tasveerein banana nahin aata.* [I also don't know how to make paintings.]

Atiq: *Magar ab to aap artist ban gaye hain.* [But now you've become an artist.]

Me: *Pata nahin kya ban gaya hoon.* [Not sure what I've become.]

Atiq: *Main mistry hoon aur meray liye woh kaafi hai. Mujhe yahan bulaanay ka shukriya. Allah Hafiz.* [I'm a mason and that's enough for me. Thank you for inviting me here. Goodbye.]

Later that night. I am at the studio.

The studio is now empty. There is more room to find answers to questions I was met with earlier that day. My process had been intuitive at times and rational in other instances, but non-linear throughout. The preschooler had taken his turn to create the indelible mark of the red heart. The architect never waited around for the raw masonry wall. The craftsman had chafed palms and red oxide stains under his nails. The artist had intervened in an existing craft with the help of the architect and the craftsman. They had empowered each other through empathy.

"Will they continue to thrive within the boundaries they create for themselves?"

Absolutely. However, choosing to blur the boundaries between these disciplines and bringing all four individuals into the studio had given me the freedom to truly realise a vision. All four were connected in my studio through the act of making. The artist used multiple mediums to put forth for the world to see, hear, and touch what it could not detect or understand. The craftsman used his hands to produce a distinctive product while employing traditional methods. The architect used his knowledge of materials and anthropometry to construct the space of the canvas. The credulous preschooler gasped in awe even at his failed attempts at mark-making. The song of the unsung materials and discarded tools rang in my ears very clearly. I was revisiting the difference between the complete and the incomplete. I wanted audiences to realise the completeness of the unfinished product. Suddenly, there was so much more to see, so much more to hear, and so much more to say.



Usman Ansari, 2021, *Chaal*. Art Chowk Gallery, Karachi. Photo by Humayun Memon

Notes

1. Masonry: can be brick or block.
2. Steel Bar: used to reinforce structural members such as columns, beams, etc.
3. Sheet: corrugated aluminium or steel sheet typically used to cordon off under-construction sites.
4. Plastering Trowel.
5. Perforated Screen: a metal mesh/lathe either used to reinforce plaster or stapled at the threshold of a beam and a wall to avoid cracks.
6. Mixing Bowl: shallow, usually made out of steel.
7. String: could be cotton, nylon, or jute.
8. Mould/Stencil: to cast concrete or similar materials in place.
9. Bamboo.
10. Canvas.
11. Mould/Stencil, into which concrete or similar materials are cast in place.
12. To snap or chalk line/reel. An efficient and accurate method of marking across long distances.
13. When all the labour/craftsmen from different trades on an under-construction site have enough direction to continue working towards completion.