

The Fig Tree and the Field

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July, 2025



I sit beneath a fig tree.

The fig tree is of course no mere fig tree. It already embodies parallel futures hanging beside each other, in place of one another, many templates of lives one person may lead.

One fig is being a practicing artist, living at home, working in isolation, surrounded by big silences and bigger canvases stretching across the high walls of a government quarters apartment in Bombay. Another fig is having finished a design degree that was started and left midway and hoping that despite this, I would somehow find my way to contemporary art many years later and make sense of a strange world from the outside. Another fig is working a corporate job, being completely removed from the field, all the while telling myself that I will practice on the side; while another is working as a freelancer and not being sure where the next month's rent will come from but owning all your time. Another fig is teaching students in an art school, surrounded by new ideas and fresh perspectives, learning to articulate my own thoughts and wishing my voice was loud enough for them to hear me. Another fig is working in an arts organisation or cultural institution, being able to find one that supports and helps one as an artist, being able to work part-time and having a slice of your week as your own, another is working in an art gallery and perhaps letting it own all your time. There are more figs hanging on branches above, too far to see. Each fig is in itself a negotiation, a way to keep hanging on to the tree. I sit at the root of this fig tree trying to figure out which one of the figs I will choose. I go on to wonder whether it is possible to exist as an artist without or outside this framework of figs.

There were a few brief months after I graduated with a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Painting, from Rachana Sansad College in Bombay, when I was home, doing nothing, and trying to figure out *what does it mean to be in the art field*, or how to hang onto its branches. I felt as though I had arrived at the eerie expanse that would be

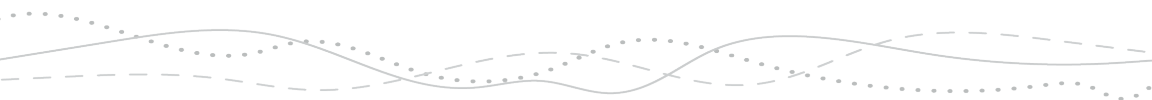


the rest of my life, which may likely resemble nothing from my life before. This is the moment from which I am writing this piece, when I did not know what was to come.

All I remember of this moment is I couldn't get rid of the feeling that I had almost nothing of value to show for the last four years, when peers graduating from engineering colleges had placements and a degree that seemed far less shaky than mine. I thought about the last four years and felt I had somehow breezed through them. It seemed like there were no real consequences for doing anything or failing to do anything. There were gaps in the institution of course, in infrastructure, an outdated syllabus, faculty and the general administration of the college as well. The syllabus covered how to acquire certain skills, but not how to frame a question, not how to take a work forward, examine it critically and historically. The art world, with all its contradictions and complexities, was spoken of, but never opened up in ways we could truly engage with or understand.

By the time we were students in the fourth year, just one year away from graduation, we were not shown how to write about our work, how to apply to anything, how to build a portfolio in Photoshop, or even the basic skills of how to use the software, something every artist must know and will likely use in some way or another throughout their career. Moreover, there was no sense of urgency and no scaffolding around us, as we were about to enter the art world. This seems true of many art colleges: a deep inability to prepare students for what is to come, to arm us with methodologies that help to figure out ways to practice, and to keep practicing, to keep the energy up and to enable us to create situations in which we may push ourselves to make some movements.

If I am being honest, I do not know how much blame to share. On one hand it seemed like there were some answers I had to go and find on my own that I failed to do, and on the other hand the fact



that I had to go searching for something outside the walls of the classroom had never occurred to me.

The question continues to resurface: *What does it mean to be in the art field?* Some open call applications are contingent on having been in the field for x number of years, as though that can mean anything coherent, or ever be a stable category. Four years in an art institution should mean that you find yourself with the minimum amount of skill or knowledge or preparedness, and perhaps that is true for some universities, but it is certainly not the case for many fine art colleges around the country. For a long time I didn't really know what I was doing. Some kind of rationality urges you to walk away, to find a more stable place in the world, rather than float indefinitely. *How long have you been merely floating about in a field?*

For me, the question is often asked by me, to me, for no other reason than to let myself drown in some sort of paralysing dread and self flagellation— *How long have I been doing this? Surely, I should have figured it out, or at least been better at it by now.* I don't really know how to arrive at an accurate number to answer the question. *Are the years I spent in a fine arts college really counted as being in the field or had I not entered it yet? If I take away the years that I was stagnated, not practicing or not learning or in depression, how many years would I then be left with?* Perhaps retroactively, they must all be included but at the time, it did not feel like I was walking some path that made sense in the future. I think the truth is that many of us, throughout the course of our career, move in and out of the art field, leave it behind completely and return to it maybe more than once. Perhaps this is something to be thought of as a symptom or consequence of its structure, the fact that barely any fresh graduates choose to stay. Staying is not the norm, it is an anomaly, a negotiation.

Within a few months after my graduation, I began working at an office (and since this moment I have continued to work, except for



two years that I did my MA). That same year, I became involved in an art space in Bombay called Clark House Initiative. At the time, the city did not offer much to young artists or fresh graduates. For the first year at CH, I was merely an observer, a visitor, but then the space pulled me in. I would go on to spend nearly two years moving in and out of this space. It was uncharted territory for me. Clark House was not the traditional white cube gallery. The work produced here by young artists was different, much more political and experimental than the work displayed in formal galleries settings of South Bombay. Clark House was a collective of artists who lived and worked in the space. For me, just out of college, it was a place to see artwork that I could relate to, and that actually excited me. It was a place to build relationships with artists who were recent graduates like me but also artists that had been practicing for many years and thus, in this process, I saw many ways of traversing the art world. I also saw, closely, how a space like this functions, how an exhibition is planned and installed, all of it done by the artists working in the space. It was the learning that happened after the four years of the art institution, and I am quite certain I wouldn't still be in the art field without it.


The space wasn't perfect of course, there were problems in its very structure and hierarchies that the structure created, all of which had to be navigated. But the learning that happened there felt more real than anything I had known inside the institution. More importantly I saw the value of a space where a community of artists could gather and make work. While the physical place had its own magic and made me feel an almost tangible connection to the people who had passed through CH many years before me, it was the people I met and friends that I made through those two years that were the most special. Many years later, I would move to Delhi and find myself around similar spaces.

In Bombay, the gap between graduating from art college and becoming a practicing artist felt like a vast, empty valley. In Delhi, however, young artists, graduates from Ambedkar



University, SNU, and other colleges, had identified this gap and actively created networks to bridge it. Moving out of the institution into the world can often be a jarring experience: the sudden absence of deadlines, no longer having access to a studio space, and working alone at home, without peers or mentors, can be deeply disorienting. When I graduated from my MA, the situation felt markedly different from what I experienced after my BFA in Bombay. A network of artist-run spaces and certain institutional spaces already existed. Places like FICA, Asia Art Archive, Khoj Studios and similar spaces specifically supported young artists and recent graduates. The FICA Reading Room not only hosts workshops but also provides accessible space for artists to read, think, and work. Both FICA and Asia Art Archive maintain generous libraries in a city where space and resources are hard to come by. Furthermore, young artists had turned their own apartments into studios or jointly rented small spaces with friends. Unlike Clark House, these spaces were shaped entirely by the artists themselves, without the presence of an external institution determining the kind of work that could be shown or made.

Jangpura Studio/s, firstdraft, Terrace 6464, and Studio A68 are some spaces that are open for artists to use, to gather, to share ongoing works, experiments, and performances. These were not just homes converted into studios, they fostered a porous, supportive network of people who showed up regularly for open studios, readings, performances, and conversations. The imagination I had after my BFA, that becoming an artist is defined by exhibiting and being represented by a white cube gallery, no longer holds true. I've seen some of the most exciting works: lecture performances, sound pieces, artist books, unfinished projects, emerge from these so-called 'alternate' spaces. And that is precisely why I don't see them as precursors or stepping stones to the gallery. Their existence feels essential for artistic practice to flourish. It is of course difficult to sustain any space, but it is through continuous effort and a network of friendships that the



spaces persist. After graduating from Ambedkar University, and stepping out of the institution setup once again, far away from home, I was unable to leave Delhi specifically because of the existence of these spaces, because I would yearn to be close to them, and eventually found that I had become, in some ways, part of these communities. And this became the most invaluable thing for me.

I remember the words a friend said to me, several years ago, “If you are able to stay in the field for some ten years maybe, *then* you will get somewhere.” I don’t know how true this statement is, or if the act of staying yields some result, it is perhaps the first step. Still, I have returned to these words many times over the years, especially in moments when I’ve felt myself drifting, working full-time, unable to have any energy or excitement leftover to make or even think about creating work. But staying doesn’t always have to mean making work constantly.

The space, whatever form it takes, may become a way to maintain a relationship with the art world. For the better part of two years, I showed up and spent time in such a space, met artists who came to visit or participate in residencies, had long conversations or simply coexisted with people with whom I would go on to develop close friendships. Since I was working a job, sometimes it became difficult to be consistently involved or actively make any work. For long periods of time, when work took over my life, I would merely manage to make appearances. But in fact, it was in these times that the connection, with the space, with a community, with friends, became a negotiation for me to stay in the field.

The fig is a strange fruit. From the outside, it appears neat, intact, whole, but cut it open and there is a harrowing mouth with tentacles waiting for you. I didn’t know what it meant to be an artist for many years after I completed my degree. I believe this is especially true for those of us who had no relation to the field, no connections, no artists in the family, it is hard to imagine what life



would be like. It is hard to anticipate the myriad of occupational hazards, instability, isolation, fear. The biggest one of all for me is to figure out ways, physical, financial and philosophical, to continue to be here. Staying is the hardest thing of all. What I have realized is that to stay is not a stable state. It is a repeated act, a continuous negotiation, to keep hanging on to the tree. If there is anything this piece offers, it is the reflection that the field is not merely entered, it is built and rebuilt by those trying to stay.

