



Threadmistress

For many artists, wool is simply a means to an end, the raw material needed to bring their vision to life. But for New York-based Sagarika Sundaram, it's the life force that sustains her soft sculptures. By RADHIKA IYENGAR

From afar, Sagarika Sundaram's sweeping textiles appear as abstract paintings teeming with colour and movement. There are flourishes of orange and red with tumultuous splashes of yellow and teal. It's all very Pollock-esque. Upon closer inspection, however, the paint reveals itself to be felt, meticulously crafted by hand over many months.

There is a wild, untamed power to 38-year-old Sundaram's sculptural, often airborne tapestries, an energy possibly inherited from her labour of making felt from scratch. It involves an elaborate performance of dyeing sheep's wool: tearing the sun-seared, colour-stained raw material into slivers, splaying and crisscrossing the sections across a flat surface to create a composition and then soaking it in soapy water before subjecting it to friction and pressure. The resulting artworks produce fantastical forms, sometimes resembling tongue-like flaps with wild woollen streaks, other times mimicking portal-like openings in muted colours.

At her spacious, light-filled studio at Silver Art Projects, New York, Sundaram climbs atop one of her large-scale compositions sprawled across a table. Barefoot, she assesses it with a measured gait. She then lowers herself to her haunches and tears the fibre into wispy tufts, layering them one over another with a focused flair—a repetitive, almost meditative act. This is how she 'builds' her art.

Born in Kolkata, Sundaram's childhood memories are suffused with moments of watching her grandmother fold a sari in half and hang it to dry on the clothesline, or her father tie his veshti at home. At age 11, while she was a student at Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh, Sundaram experimented with textiles for the first time, producing batik works that captured her imagination. It was two decades later, in 2017, that she first made a palm-sized felt orb in London. Intrigued about the sphere's interior, she cleaved it with a knife, revealing nested rings of coloured felt. "Cutting it open felt like discovering a secret inside," the artist says. Today, as a quasi-ritualistic act, she continues to cut open the folds of her felted canvases to reveal their hidden complexities.

Sundaram's compositions take anywhere between three to seven weeks to complete. "The more layers and folds in a work, the longer it takes," she clarifies. Other times, a composition emerges purely from compulsion. "I might have only three colours I have dyed that I can use, and that determines a very tight colour palette." With a ceiling as high as 12 feet, her studio space also gives her the freedom to work at scale and witness her compositions take ambitious dimensions. 'Source', an earthy



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FEELINGS ARE FELT

At her studio in New York, Sundaram poses in front of *Iris* (2023) and a scale model of Delhi's Nature Morte gallery. *Opposite page:* *Kosha* (2024). On the opening spread is the artist with *Released Form* (2024)

brown felt piece marked by ivory-hued veins and blots of cayenne, will dwarf you. Its giant anatomy was inspired by a wind-borne seed, which Sundaram saw as a student at Rishi Valley. “It was like the seed of a drumstick fruit,” she explains. At her recently concluded solo exhibition titled *Polyphony* at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery, ‘Source’ was the largest piece on display.

Although several of her works have a wild, frenzied appearance, Sundaram labours in a controlled environment. Her studio space, which overlooks the calm Hudson River and has floor-to-ceiling windows, is remarkably organised. It accommodates several tables and shelves brimming with clumps of dyed wool belonging to different breeds of sheep. In a corner is her reading nook, where she sometimes develops small maquettes in paper and fabric while the sun sets behind her.

At home, Sundaram dyes about four kilos of wool a day and maintains a book to record colour recipes and swatches. “Dyeing is precise and methodical, but also playful. It’s about building colour in the way that one thinks of developing flavour in cooking,” she says, holding up a DIY shade card featuring ringlets of burnt ochre, rust and aubergine wool. “A true test of a dyer is not whether you can make colour, but if you can make the same colour twice.”

Sundaram has recently added glass tile mosaics to her oeuvre. Made of tiny glass chips, they bring the intricate details of her textiles to life in a different medium. “The mosaics mark a shift in the work from soft to hard,” she explains. Sundaram will not stop experimenting there, of course. “Maybe once I burn through all of the colour I have, I’ll do a show that’s all white.”

ANITA GOES

