

The family

In 2011 while doing background research for my PhD project in nomadic painting in Lahore, I met Safia, a woman from a family of *Jhuggi wallahs*, the name by which squatters are known in Pakistan. Safia was living in a tent on the footpath, and I sat down to talk with her. We hardly spoke each other's language but we connected, and for the next few months I hung out with Safia, her husband Amanat, and her family of six children every day. I became fascinated with their life, with their struggle against discrimination and oppression in Pakistani society, and with the idea to voice their story through painting.

Two years later, I returned to Lahore and reconnected with Safia on a wintry December morning. I had rented a room nearby so that I could spend as much time as possible with her and her family, the better to learn more about their life, and work with their story.

Understanding through drawing

I was fascinated by Safia's *jhuggi*, or tent, a complex construction that over time revealed itself as a logical, evolving structure. I learned about the *jhuggi* through making observational field drawings, a process of investigation through line. My drawings were of a kind described by writer John Berger as arriving out of a series of confirmations and denials which "bring you closer to the object until finally you are as it were, inside it".¹



Michal Glikson, *Safia's jhuggi: IndoPak scroll III: Australindopak Archive 2012-2016*. Detail. Watercolour, oil, graphite, found material, gold leaf, shell silver, paper, embroidered panels. 10mx25cm (entire).

¹ Berger, Berger on Drawing.

The jhuggi was a mosaic of the found and the recycled. A collection of old handbags, hung out of reach of small children, contained medicines; an old yellow shawl tied hammock-style stored pots and dishes. The floor was a large piece of found carpet, the comfortable seat I sat on had come off a bicycle. The fireplace was built of found bricks, and filled with broken crates, ready for cooking the next meal. For me the jhuggi was more than a home; it was a symbol of ingenuity and ecological architecture.



Safia's jhuggi. Film still from documentary. Photography: Michal Glikson 2014.

Agency and painting

With Safia's family I learned to film in the way of the 'unprivileged camera' - an ethnographic style where the filmmaker takes up normal and available positions.² My films allowed me fetch up details for paintings. They also inadvertently became a way of witnessing and recording injustice. One day I arrived at the jhuggi to find it surrounded by a mountain of bricks. The family had been ordered to stack and 'mind' these by the plot' security guard. I filmed Safia and her children moving the bricks before helping.

² David MacDougall, "Unprivileged Camera Style," *RAIN* 50, no. 50 (1982): 259.

The film helped me to construct a painting which highlighted the family's vulnerability to being subject to exploitation.

I found myself thinking of Arturo Lindsay, a Panamanian-American artist and ethnographer who during research began wondering whether he had a responsibility to help his host community achieve self-determination.³ About his dilemma Lindsay said, "I only know that I could not just observe without becoming involved."⁴ In response to things I was witnessing with Safia's family, I realised that like Lindsay, I wanted to assist in any way I could on their behalf.



Michal Glikson, *Safia and the Bricks: IndoPak scroll III: Australindopak Archive 2012-2016*. Detail. Watercolour, oil, graphite, found material, gold leaf, shell silver, paper, embroidered panels. 10mx25cm (entire).

Filming, drawing and spending time with Safia and her family immersed me in their life and I learned about their hopes and dreams. One of these was to buy land in outer Lahore, where members of their community had settled. Safia showed me a contract she and her husband had been given, but without literacy or legal advice, she was unable to understand it. I had a copy of the contract checked by a friend

³ Lindsay, "The Research Methods of an Artist Ethnographer on the Congo Coast of Panama," 57.

⁴ Ibid., 157, 58.

with experience in real estate. As he explained to the family, their contract was fundamentally flawed through lack of a plot number. For clarification, we travelled to the realtor to discuss the contract. Stopping to see the plot, I noted the lack of infrastructure for families who were all living in tents. At the realtor's office the agent admitted that the land had not yet been legally subdivided, posing great risk for the buyer. The contract had other implications through 'flexible' repayments that gave the seller the right to alter the amount. Although not within my capacity to advise the family, advocacy entered my practice as I used my connections in Lahore to assist their decision-making process about buying the land.

Agency developed as I observed Safia's children drawing on the road. Wanting to encourage them to draw off-road, I brought paper and crayons. I also located a playgroup to which I took the children regularly. Safia and Amanat were enthusiastic as they saw this contributing to schooling for the children. Challenges came as the playgroup catered for Urdu speakers while Safia's children spoke Punjabi. This was also the children's first experience in an upper class house and they were shy, refusing to come unless accompanied by my translator or myself.



Children making a scroll painting in Safia's jhuggi. Lahore 2014. Photography: Michal Glikson

Advocating for the family added to the complexity of trying to portray their life in paintings, but I felt that it contributed in important ways to the story emerging. Witnessing Safia's family's search for stability through attempts to acquire land and education for their children helped me to make paintings that contradicted societal perceptions of the family as 'lifestyle gypsies'. Thus advocacy, and agency became

not only my way of contributing, but also furnished material that gave the paintings complexity and dimension.



Making drawings with Safia in her jhuggi. Field documentation, 2014. Photography: Michal Glikson

The relly motif

With Safia's family I discovered how the combination of artistic and anthropological methods could connect me firsthand with a cultural design of significance and complexity in the form of the *relli* or quilt patterns that encapsulate the life and history of Safia's community.

I grew to understand Safia's quilts through witnessing the family's life. In winter, quilts kept the family warm, but on sunny days, hung out to air, they became colourful beacons in the grey urban wasteland, announcing the family's presence. To harass the jhuggi wallahs, city authorities would confiscate the quilts and hold them 'ransom'. In spring, Safia began stitching a new quilt from recycled fabrics. She explained the quilts were heirlooms, passing from mother to daughter, who was marriage-ready when she could make her own. Safia's designs were inspired by the tiling on suburban houses, and I wondered if these expressed her longing for a house of her own. Asking if she sold her quilts, I learned that Pakistanis rarely buy them because they bear the stigma associated with jhuggi-wallahs.



Safia stitching a quilt. Video still from documentary. Photography: Michal Glikson.

Agency came through the idea to bring one of Safia's quilts to Australia to raffle at my PhD exhibition. The six hundred dollars it raised for her family represented six months of family income. For me, witnessing the living relationship of a quilt-maker and her family to their quilts allowed me to see their patterns as a cultural voice, a language of belonging. As advocacy and agency have become part of my art practice so have Safia's quilt patterns given me visual vocabulary for talking about homelessness and dispossession.



Showing Safia's quilt to textile students during exhibition at the School of Art and Design, Australian National University, 2017. Photograph courtesy SOA, ANU.

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