The Evolution of Screen Printing as Fine Art Practice in Gujarat: A Study of Baroda, Ahmedabad, and Surat

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Abstract

Gujarat, which is located in the western part of India, is known for its rich history and textile production provided a strong material and technical foundation for the development of screen printing in the region. Historically, screen printing is mostly used in commercial reproduction, textile printing, and industrial design, gradually evolved into a meaningful fine art medium. This paper explores the historical and institutional development of screen printing, individual art practice and the role of art studios in the major art centres of Gujarat like Baroda, Ahmedabad and Surat.

The Baroda School played a vital role in the development screen printing as a fine art practice by encouraging experimentation and conceptual engagement with the medium. Alongside academic developments, art studios in Baroda functioned as important centres of production, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, extending screen printing beyond institutional settings. These studio initiatives further influenced the growth of screen printing practices in Ahmedabad and Surat, where regional conditions and proximity to textile and printing industries shaped localised approaches.

Going through archival research, literature review, interviews with artists and practitioners, and documentation of studio practices, this study maps the regional and material conditions that supported the expansion of screen printing as a fine art practice. The research contributes to regional art histories by highlighting the pivotal role of the Baroda School and independent studios in shaping medium-specific practices within Indian contemporary art.

Key Words: Art History, Screen Printing, Indian Art, Baroda School, Printmaking

1.0 Introduction

Screen printing, or serigraphy, has gradually evolved from a commercial printing process into an important art medium. It was initially used in the industries for making posters, textiles, and advertisements, mainly due to the ability to produce clear and repeatable pictures (Fiegel, 1965). However, in the twentieth century, artists started to discover the artistic possibilities of screen printing. This method allowed them to create works using vivid colours, flat picture planes, and overprints, which could have been easily achieved using their old methods of printmaking, like etching and lithography (Lengwiler, 2013). Over time, screen printing has become accepted in the art schools and studios and therefore set itself as a legitimate fine art medium instead of a technical process.

The history of screen printing as a means of fine art in Gujarat is inevitably associated with the cultural environment of the place and the evolution of art education. Gujarat has rich traditions of textile printing and craft, where printing such as block printing and stencilling have been practiced over centuries. The result of such traditions was the natural accustomedness to printed images and surface design that contributed to the ultimate accustomedness to screen printing by the artists. The establishment of the art institutions after independence played a great role in the advancement of printmaking techniques. It was especially the Faculty of Fine Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda that made artists experiment with other forms of printmaking, such as screen printing in an academic environment. This gave artists the view that screen printing was an artistic medium which could express art (Mukherjee, 1998).

The cities of Baroda, Ahmedabad, and Surat have contributed to the growth of screen printing as an art form. The city of Baroda has become an important centre for printmaking education, where artists were encouraged to explore technical as well as conceptual ideas. Ahmedabad, being an important centre for commercial printing, has provided a platform for traditional knowledge to come into contact with modern design approaches. The city of Surat, being an important centre for commercial printing as well as textiles, has provided an environment where printing has become an important part of artistic practices. Thus, all these cities have provided an environment where screen printing could grow as an academic as well as an artistic movement.

The importance of the growth of screen printing as a fine art medium in Gujarat has not yet gained much attention from scholars. The existing literature on this topic has mainly focused on global approaches to the history and technology of screen printing. Thus, it has become important to understand how this medium of fine art has grown in Gujarat.

This study follows a historical approach to understand the evolution of screen printing as a fine art movement in Gujarat, especially in the cities of Baroda, Ahmedabad, and Surat. It includes the impact of art institutions and studios on the evolution and practice of the medium. This study is based on the analysis of archival data, interviews, and relevant literature. By exploring the interlinked spaces of screen printing, the researcher aims to examine the evolution of the medium

in academic and professional spaces and the role of studios in the establishment of screen printing as a fine art movement in Gujarat.

2.0 Literature Review

The emergence of screen printing as a fine art form resulted from the development of technology and the gradual acceptance of the medium by art institutions. In the book A History of Screen Printing: How an Art Evolved into an Industry, Guido Lengwiler (2013) provides an extensive history of the development of screen printing from a stencil technique to a fine art form. The book states that the medium is flexible and accessible, which led artists to explore the medium in an unconventional manner. In the book Silk Screen Techniques, Eisenberg and Kafka (1957) discuss the early technology developed for screen printing and the prospects of the medium being used in an artistic manner. These studies are only limited to the Western world and the development of screen printing technology, but they lack the development of the medium in Indian art institutions.

In the context of the development of the medium in Indian art institutions, the studies on printmaking have been more comprehensive than the development of screen printing. In the book The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking, Sengupta (2010) discusses the development of printmaking as a commercial activity in colonial India and the transition to a fine art after independence. According to the book, the medium has been promoted by art institutions. In the book Indian Art: An Overview, Sinha (2003) discusses the development of printmaking in the context of the broader developments in modern Indian art. According to the book, the development of printmaking has been overshadowed by the focus on other media, including painting and sculpture, in Indian art institutions.

Institutional research further highlights the role played by academic institutions in the development and promotion of printmaking as a medium. Mukherjee (1998),An identity in modern art, Baroda, gives detailed idea about the development of printmaking in the Baroda School. Yadav (2015), The growth of printmaking centres in India: A study of prominent printmakers also highlights the role played by academic institutions in the promotion and development of printmaking as a medium of art. Though the books have provided important information on the role played by institutions in the promotion and development of printmaking in India, the focus has been on the promotion and development of printmaking as a medium of art in general and not screen printing in particular.

Regional studies also offer valuable information regarding the role played by Western India in the promotion and development of printmaking practices. In Printmaking in Western India: Baroda, Bombay, and Ahmedabad, Pnikkar (1984) indicates the role played by Baroda in the promotion and development of printmaking education and experimentation in the region. Similarly, Jain (2013) also offers valuable information regarding the role played by Bombay/Mumbai in the promotion and development of the region's art and the influence it had on the region and the rest of the world in Bombay/Mumbai.

Although the authors offer valuable information regarding the role played by the region in the promotion and development of printmaking, there is a lack of detailed analysis regarding the role played by the region in the promotion and development of screen printing specifically.

Sheikh (2003) offers valuable information regarding the role that was played by the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, in the development of interdisciplinary experimentation in Contemporary Art in Baroda. However, such valuable information regarding the role that was played by the fine arts department of Ahmedabad, as well as the fine arts at Surat, cannot be found. There is a scarcity of research that has focused on an investigation of the role of screen printing as a fine art medium in the region of Gujarat, especially in a comparative context with Baroda, Ahmedabad, and Surat. The research aims to fill the gap in the research regarding the role that the factors played in the evolution of screen printing as a fine art medium.

3.0 Development of screen printing in Baroda

The printmaking department at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, started in 1950 as a subsidiary course along with painting and sculpture (Mukherjee, 1998). The course was established under the guidance of N. B. Joglekar, but it faced a lot of challenges in the initial years due to a lack of materials, technical knowledge, and facilities. At this point of time, screen printing was absent in the department, and it was perceived as a foreign or commercial technique. The artists were more interested in working on woodcuts and lithographs.

A major shift occurred with the appointment of K. G. Subramanyan as a lecturer at the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1951. He introduced the ideas of Santiniketan along with his own experimental ideas, which helped in the development of the new structure of art education in Baroda. His ideas emphasised the need for the artist to interact with artisans in the field and understand the techniques of art-making. This influenced the development of the Fine Arts Fair. In 1955, Subramanyan won the British Council Research Fellowship to study at the Slade School of Art, where he was exposed to various printmaking techniques. During this period, he produced one of his earliest screen prints, Rooster (1958) (Fig.1), considered among the earliest documented screen-printed works linked to the Baroda School (Subramanyam, 2003).

By the end of the 1950s, while the introduction of the process of screen printing had not yet been formally introduced in the department, the knowledge of the process had been informally disseminated. In 1957, Damodar Gajjar, who was a classmate of Jayant Parikh and had an established family commercial printing business, introduced the students to the techniques of stencil printing. In 1961, the initiative for an informal setting was taken by Joglekar and V. S. Patel, who began experimenting with the process of screen printing, mainly printing cards, Calenders and certificates. The activities were conducted outside the hours of formal classes, and the process of screen printing had still not been formally introduced in the curriculum (Parikh, 2023)

Subramanyan, along with Sankho Chaudhuri, introduced the Fine Arts Fair in 1962, which was an initiative inspired by the Santiniketan model. The initiative provided the students with an

opportunity to work in association with the community and engage with different forms and techniques. The students gained an insight into the application of different techniques and forms with activities that included the making of banners, posters, toys, masks, and other objects. (Fig.2) (Souvenir, 1974)

An important event in the history of the introduction and development of the process of screen printing at Baroda occurred in 1964 with the arrival of Demy Hunt, who was a Fulbright scholar and introduced the students to the techniques of multi-colour screen printing. The Graphics Department, at that point in time, had already been encouraging the students to experiment with different techniques, and Bhupendra Karia had already been encouraging experimentation in the department (Sheikh, 2003). As a result, V. S. Patel, V. R. Patel, and Jyoti Bhatt came together and established the process of screen printing, which further enabled experimentation with hand-drawn stencils and the use of photographs (Mukherjee,1998). It was also in the same year that Jyoti Bhatt was awarded a Fulbright and Rockefeller Fellowship, allowing him to attend Pratt Institute in New York, where he was able to hone his skills in intaglio printing and also acquire a keen interest in hand-drawn screen printing (Fig. 3) . Upon returning to Baroda, he was a key figure in advancing the technical and artistic potential of screen printing in the department (Bhatt, 1993).

Throughout the mid-1960s, Fine Arts Fair continued as a major space for experimentation. In 1967, K. G. Subramanyan created a screen-printed invitation card, which, when folded, revealed multiple images (Fig. 4). From 1969, Subramanyan started creating children's books through screen printing for the annual fair. This print studio was a space of active collaboration each year. The children's books were later reprinted by Seagull Publication (Fig.5) (Sheikh, 1970).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists like Bhatt, Feroze Katpitia, V. S. Patel, Vinodray Patel, and P. D. Dhumal collectively contributed towards strengthening screen printing as a medium of art. Dhumal, who joined as a student in 1965, remembered that early screen printing depended largely on hand-cut stencils before photographic methods became accessible. After completing his master's degree, he established a commercial serigraphy studio, which functioned both as a site for commercial production and artistic experimentation. In 1971, a postgraduate course in printmaking was initiated, and Dhumal became the first student to specialise in printmaking (Dhumal, 2023).

In 1972, Bhatt's brief experience in a Mumbai printing factory further expanded his understanding of industrial screen-printing techniques. On returning to Baroda, he and his colleagues set up a more advanced silkscreen unit, which allowed for greater control over colour separation, tonal variation, and layered imagery. At that time, Dhumal's commercial screen printing workshop became a center of experimentation (Fig.6) (Bhatt, 2004). At the same time, interdisciplinary collaborations such as the literary journals Kshitij and Vrishchik integrated screen printing into Baroda's wider cultural and intellectual life (Sheikh, 2003).

By the 1970s, serigraphy had become an important part of Baroda's artistic identity, visible in workshops, collaborative projects, and major print portfolios, including the 1973 workshop

collection (Fig.7) (Fig.8) and the 1975 Silver Jubilee portfolio (Baroda Portfolio 1975) (Fig. 9) (Fig. 10). But the formal recognition of the medium followed between 1974 and 1977, when screen printing was introduced into the curriculum with the support of Dean Ratan Parimoo, and later P. D. Dhumal was appointed as a teacher within the department (Prospectus, 1976-77).

Although the 1980s saw a shift in emphasis toward intaglio and etching, screen printing retained its pedagogical and artistic significance. But this era also saw the expansion of private studios in Baroda. Rini Dhumal after returning from Paris along with P.D Dhumal, established an independent printmaking studio that supported workshops and collaborations throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Apart from institutional initiatives, another important centre for printmaking was established in Baroda in 1999 on a cooperative basis. Known as Chhaap Studio, its primary objective was to promote original printmaking practices and provide artists with access to professional facilities. The studio was initiated by Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Vijay Bagodi, and Kavita Shah. Conceived as a shared working space, the studio offered opportunities to emerging artists and facilitated interaction with international artists through residency programs. The facility was well equipped for etching, dry point, and woodcut, and played an important role in sustaining experimental printmaking practices in Baroda (Yadav,2015).

Chhaap has been primarily involved in creating print portfolios, conducting workshops on print making techniques. It also holds talks by eminent and visiting artists, promotes print making techniques as well as print exhibitions internationally and nationally (Fig. 11). However, support for screen printing at this studio remained limited. The emphasis was placed largely on intaglio and relief techniques, with screen printing receiving comparatively less attention. Despite this limitation, the studio remains a significant site for printmaking practice and experimentation.

Another important printmaking initiative emerged in 2005 under the Uttarayan Art Centre. This printmaking studio was established through the initiative of industrialist Rakesh Agrawal, with active support from the artist P. D. Dhumal. The studio developed one of the most comprehensive printmaking facilities in the region and actively promoted a wide range of printmaking techniques. In addition to providing scholarships to young artists, it also offered residency opportunities, enabling sustained engagement with the medium (Yadav,2015). Unlike earlier studios, this centre made a conscious effort to promote screen printing by organising several workshops and camps dedicated to the technique (Fig.12). These initiatives contributed to expanding technical knowledge and renewed interest in screen printing among younger practitioners.

Apart from this, there are many independent and collective studios where artists were active in the city that supports the individual mediums. Litholekha, founded by Subrat Behra, an alumnus of the Baroda School, is solely dedicated to lithography and offers a dedicated space for artists working in this medium. Similarly, Vichitra Studio, founded by Dushyant Patel, also an alumnus of the Baroda School, is mainly focused on intaglio printmaking, catering to both professional artists and new entrants in the field.

Mimesis, founded in 2018 as a collective with six core members, operates as a collaborative printmaking space with a major focus on intaglio, and also offers screen printing facilities when needed. However, screen printing does not require a very specialized and dedicated setup, making it possible to be done in flexible shared studio spaces. Apart from this, shared spaces such as Visa-Vis and Shimisha also offer printmaking facilities as a part of their interdisciplinary studio practices, alongside painting and sculpture.

4.0 Development of Screen Printing in Ahmedabad

The Seth C.N. College of Fine Arts is one of the oldest educational institutions in Gujarat, which was established in 1926. It offers a diploma in drawing and painting and was founded during the period of the Mumbai Presidency. As a result, its curriculum and syllabus are almost the same as those of the J.J. School of Arts in Mumbai. In 1952, the college began offering a diploma in Applied Arts and painting to train teachers for working in schools and colleges (Yadav,2015).

After the formation of the Gujarat state, the curriculum and infrastructure of the Seth C.N. College of Fine Arts were changed very slowly, but the specialisation in printmaking was not there. The specialisation in printmaking at Baroda played a very important role in the development of the printmaking techniques at C.N. College of Fine Arts. Mafat S. Patel, who did a post-diploma in printmaking from Baroda, joined the faculty of C.N. College of Fine Arts and taught the students about the techniques of woodcut and linocut (Yadav,2015).

In the case of screen printing, the exact date of introduction is not known, but it came to the department very late as a kind of workshop for applied students to get the idea about commercial printing. These workshops were a great way for students to explore the world of commercial printing. Over time, screen printing became a key component of the introductory sessions, mainly for applied arts. Students who are eager to learn and work with this technique often find that participating in commercial workshops gives them valuable insight and a deeper understanding of the medium. Dushyant Patel was an alumnus of C.N. College before joining at M.S. University, Baroda for the post-diploma in printmaking he also worked in these commercial workshops to gain a full range of knowledge about screen printing and then established a wide practice in the medium (Patel, 2023).

Apart from C.N. College in Ahmedabad, the private studio like Kanoria Centre for Arts became a significant alternative in terms of art training, and they also provide space for the artists to develop their art practice. It was founded in 1984 by Urmila Kanoria and Kailash Kanoria as a workshop-based studio to provide artists as a formal education in art. Later in 1987, the graphic section was opened, and it provides facilities related to lithography, woodcut and screen printing with artist residency program for one to two years (Fig. 13) (Yadav, 211). These residency programs are really helpful in the development of the screen printing scene in Ahmedabad as the fully equipped studio space provides ample opportunity to artists in experimentation and production of the artworks. These are mostly those artists who are in the early stage of their careers, and artists like Debnath

Basu, Ajit Dube, Kavita Shah, Rabindranath Gupta, Prakaash Chandwadkar, Yogesh Rawal, and Mita Biswas worked in different mediums of printmaking, including screen printing (Yadav,2015).

Artists are also involved in fundraising and awareness programs, for this, not only printmakers but also painters and sculptors are involved in this and create one or two screen printed cards, bags and other collectable items occasionally to support this initiative. Also, along with this artists were also involved in conducting screen printed workshops during the CEPT festival in 1990s, these workshops helped result in making portfolios and collectable items. Also, portfolios were created in etching and later in lithography with limited editions (Yadav,2015).

Walter D'souza, an alumnus of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, took printmaking very seriously. He contributed a lot to the studio by making all the required infrastructural and technical facilities of the workshop better. It helps in the development of a workshop at the studio, and it creates a wonderful space for the artist to grow in the medium of screen printing with other mediums too. It's because of the vision and involvement of Walter D'souza that the Kanoria Centre for Arts developed into a wonderful space where artists are able to delve into the medium of screen printing and other mediums of printmaking as well. The Kanoria Centre for Arts continues to play an important role in the nurturing of the medium of screen printing and other mediums of printmaking as well, and it functions as a very important platform for the development of the medium of screen printing in the field of Indian contemporary art.

Other than studios and Art institutions, the role of Anil Realia is very much prominent in the development of screen Printing in Ahmedabad. He is an alumnus of Fine Arts, Baroda and the founder of Archer Art Gallery. He started his career as a graphic designer and also an expert in screen printing, exhibiting his works across India. Later in the 1980s, he started his commercial screen printing business, where he provides all kinds of commercial printing services like wedding cards, visiting cards, greetings and many more.

A major shift occurred after he met with M.F Hussain in 1994, who encouraged him to stop working for commercial purposes and start contributing his skills to the art community (Fig.14). And in end of the 1990s, he completely left commercial screen printing and shifted to work with artists (Relia 2024). From the beginning of the year 2000, Relia continuously working with artists. His workshop provides a working environment where older and younger artists can collaborate using screen printing as a form of creativity. His workshop has produced the works of some of the most well-known artists, Indian artists like M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, Manjit Bawa, the late Bhupen Khakhar, Haku Shah, Jyoti Bhatt, Amit Ambalal, Jogen Chowdhury, Thota Vaikuntham, Madhavi and Manu Parekh, and K. G. Subrahmanyan (Fig.15) (Relia, 2024). His works went a long way towards cementing the screen printing techniques in Ahmedabad and making a significant contribution to its status in the modern Indian artistic community. Along with this is also a well-known art collector and honorary director of the Ahmedabad ni Gufa, which was designed by the M.F Hussain and architect B.V Doshi.

5.0 Development of Screen Printing in Surat

Surat is known for its textile industry, where screen printing is part of the commercial printing process. Designers and artisans are working with screen printing, but totally for commercial purpose and for a long time, there was little engagement with the medium as a fine arts practice. Even the fine arts education in Surat began very late as compared to Baroda and Ahmedabad in Gujarat. The Surat School of Fine Arts was started in 2006 under the umbrella of Veer Narmad South Gujarat University. The initiative was led by Jagdeep Smart, an alumnus of Baroda school who had bachelor's and master's degrees in painting in 1974. Surat School of Fine Arts is the second college in Gujarat which provides degrees in Fine Arts. School offers bachelors degree in Painting, Sculpture and Applied Arts (Yadav,2015).

Printmaking was formally introduced at the school in 2008 with the establishment of a dedicated studio. However, it has largely been taught as an optional subject for students of Painting and Applied Arts rather than as a separate specialization (Smart, 2023). The school takes screen printing very seriously and every year, it organises extended screen printing workshops conducted by experienced practitioners. These month-long workshops focus not only on technical processes but also on introducing students to contemporary screen printing practices within fine art contexts (Fig. 16).

Over time, these academic initiatives have contributed to the gradual development of a printmaking culture in Surat. Several alumni of the Surat School of Fine Arts have gone on to specialise in printmaking and are now actively working with the medium. Alongside these academic developments, artist-led studios are gradually emerging in the city, providing important spaces for artists to work, experiment, and develop their artistic journeys. These studios, though still limited in number, are beginning to support sustained engagement with screen printing and printmaking, further strengthening the growing fine art print culture in Surat.

6.0 Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis of the developments in screen printing as a fine art practice in the cities of Baroda, Ahmedabad, and Surat reveals that the growth of screen printing as a fine art practice in the state of Gujarat has not followed a singular or similar path. Rather, it has developed through different trajectories that are the results of institutional frameworks, individual efforts, industrial contexts, and availability of technical infrastructure. In all three cities, the practice of screen printing has gradually transformed from a commercial practice to a fine art practice through the processes of experimentation, innovation in teaching practices, and artistic studios.

In the city of Baroda, the practice of screen printing as a fine art practice has developed through the strong academic context of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. The early practice of experimentation with screen printing gradually led to its recognition as an academic practice. The experimental teaching practice introduced by K. G. Subramanyan and the efforts made through the Fine Arts Fair led to the collaboration of artists with the practice of screen printing. The

international experience of artists like K. G. Subramanyan at the Slade School of Art and Jyoti Bhatt at the Pratt Institute also contributed to the growth of screen printing as a fine art practice. Though the practice of screen printing declined as an institutional practice in the 1980s due to economic constraints and the popularity of intaglio printmaking, it has continued as an independent practice and has re-emerged as a strong practice in the late 1990s with the efforts of the younger generation of artists working with photographic images.

In the case of Ahmedabad, the path was different, with screen printing emerging outside the realm of specialisation. C.N. College of Fine Arts offered limited exposure to the medium, while independent studios were instrumental to the growth of screen printing. The Kanoria Centre for Arts acted as an alternative space for the medium to grow. Another important figure was Anil Relia, whose move from commercial screen printing to artist-led collaborations in the late 1990s contributed significantly to the growth of screen printing as an important medium for the production of fine artworks in Ahmedabad.

Surat is an example of the later stages of the growth of screen printing as a fine art practice. In spite of its commercial printing prowess with screen printing for textiles, the medium was limited to commercial use for several decades. The introduction of fine art education under the banner of Veer Narmad South Gujarat University in 2006 marked the beginning of the growth of screen printing as an artistic practice. In spite of screen printing being offered as an optional subject under the university curriculum, workshops held regularly by experienced artists contributed to the growth of the medium among students. The growth of artist-led studios also indicates the early stages of the growth of screen printing as an important fine art practice.

7.0 Conclusion

This study reveals that the growth of screen printing in Gujarat, as a fine art practice, has not been a uniform path. Instead, it has grown through the collective contributions of various art institutions, individual artists, and independent studios. The Baroda School emerged as a pioneer where screen printing was first introduced in the context of fine art practice. However, the acceptance of screen printing in the context of fine art has been a slow process, influenced by the dynamics of change in the context of contemporary art, technical limitations, and the dynamics of change in the context of pedagogy.

This study also reveals that the growth of screen printing in Gujarat, outside the context of the Baroda School, has been a phenomenon through the contributions of individual studios and individual artists in Ahmedabad and In Surat, screen printing was introduced to fine art much later, primarily through workshops and new art studio spaces, influenced by the city's high commercial and textile art background. The growth of screen printing in Gujarat has been a phenomenon through a decentralized process, where institutional recognition has been a post-artistic phenomenon. Thus, the study has revealed the journey of the growth of screen printing in Gujarat through Baroda, Ahmedabad, and Surat. The study has also revealed the context in which screen printing has found a place in the context of contemporary Indian art.

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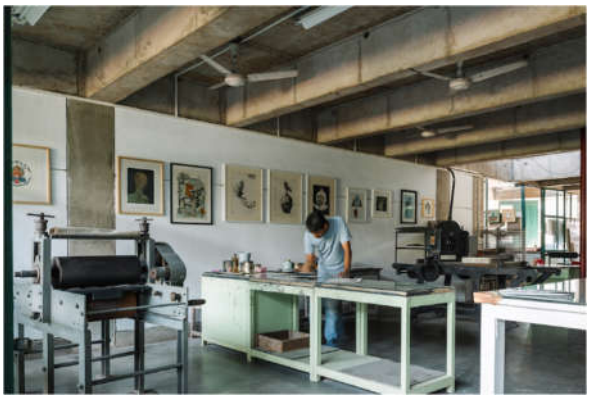

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