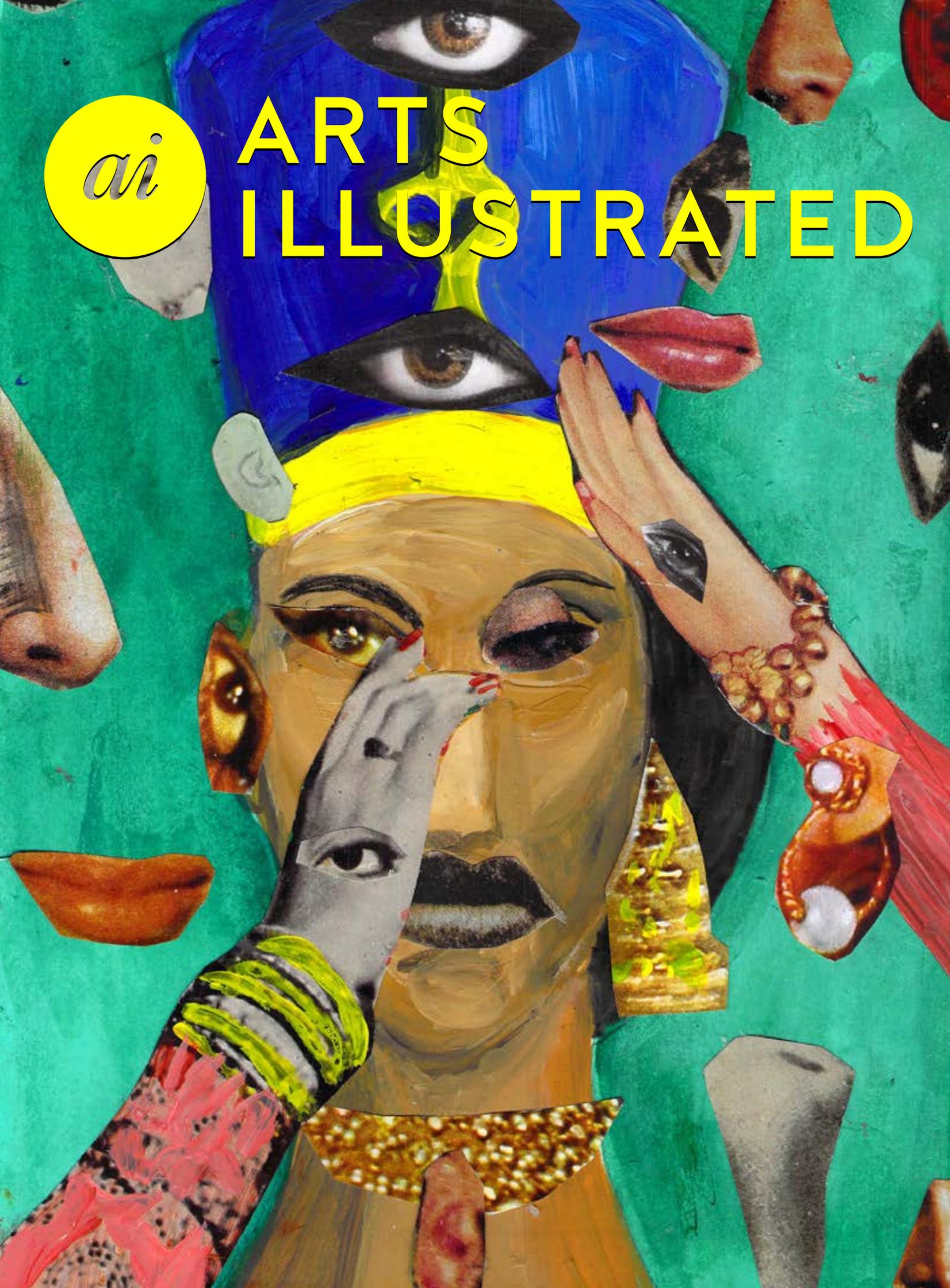




ARTS ILLUSTRATED





The Colour Blue

Starting with the blue of the sky and the ocean, of the vast and the beyond, we traverse through the many moods and textures of the colour blue as it weaves in and out of the personal and the public, eventually creating unforgettable patterns

SIDDHARTHA DAS

I woke up to a blue sky this morning and it was rather disorienting. Whatever happened to my all-too familiar sooty Delhi sky? I reoriented myself to my Goan surroundings and walked by the ocean as the sky became inky blue. The water took on a darker shade and the frothy white surf seemed jewel-like. It felt like it was straight out of a Van Gogh painting. I think I never realised how much I have come to like the colour blue in all its myriad shades and hues. As if in a film, many images flicker past in a rapid cinematic flashback, disjointed and only connected by the colour.

I closed my eyes and went back in my mind's eye to my teenage life and seeing the legendary film-maker, Kieslowski's *Three Colours* Trilogy: *Blue*, *White* and *Red*. The trilogy films, notionally themed on the French flag, made the colours a protagonist in the film. Over the next two decades I saw the films as many times, and gesturing mildly towards it, I write this piece on the colour blue or *nila*.

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As a 20-year-old apprentice to a family of dyers and block printers in Rajasthan, I ended up washing a hundred sheets in the local pond and then dyeing the fabrics in the natural dyes at the workshop. The dye that I was most nervous to work with was indigo. To create the indigo dye, one had to mix *chuna* or lime with the dye in a vat. It was a fetid concoction that felt like you had your face to a sewer and the lime seared through the palms at the mere touch of water. Despite the pain, it was one of the most thrilling times of my youth, and indigo as a colour and a protagonist kept rearing its head through it. The same indigo of Champaran, Bihar, that Gandhiji brought into the limelight 100 years ago, that made him from Mohandas to Mahatma.

While indigo was always considered Indian, it sadly eludes us in its natural form. So, I was thrilled when two decades later the pigment once

again came into my life, this time in all its splendour in a tiny village in northern Andhra. I was in a village, whose name I forget, near Chennur, to document the revival of natural dyes pioneered by the inspiring Uzamma, founder of Dastakar Andhra with her collaborators of weavers and dyers. I spent hours in the village photographing the weavers hunched over their frame looms, the room filled with the rhythmic beat of the oscillating shuttle that takes the fragile blue yarn rocketing across the tensioned warp.

Weaving, like many professions that we seem to be oblivious to, is completely awe-inspiring. It usually takes a day or two for a weaver to set the warp and then possibly up to a week to weave a mere two metres of fabric, and that too only if it's a simple fabric. So, while I was in Chennur, I visited the dyers and weavers in the nearby villages who resurrected the use of the natural indigo and began to dye their yarns in it and then weave them into this magical blue fabric.



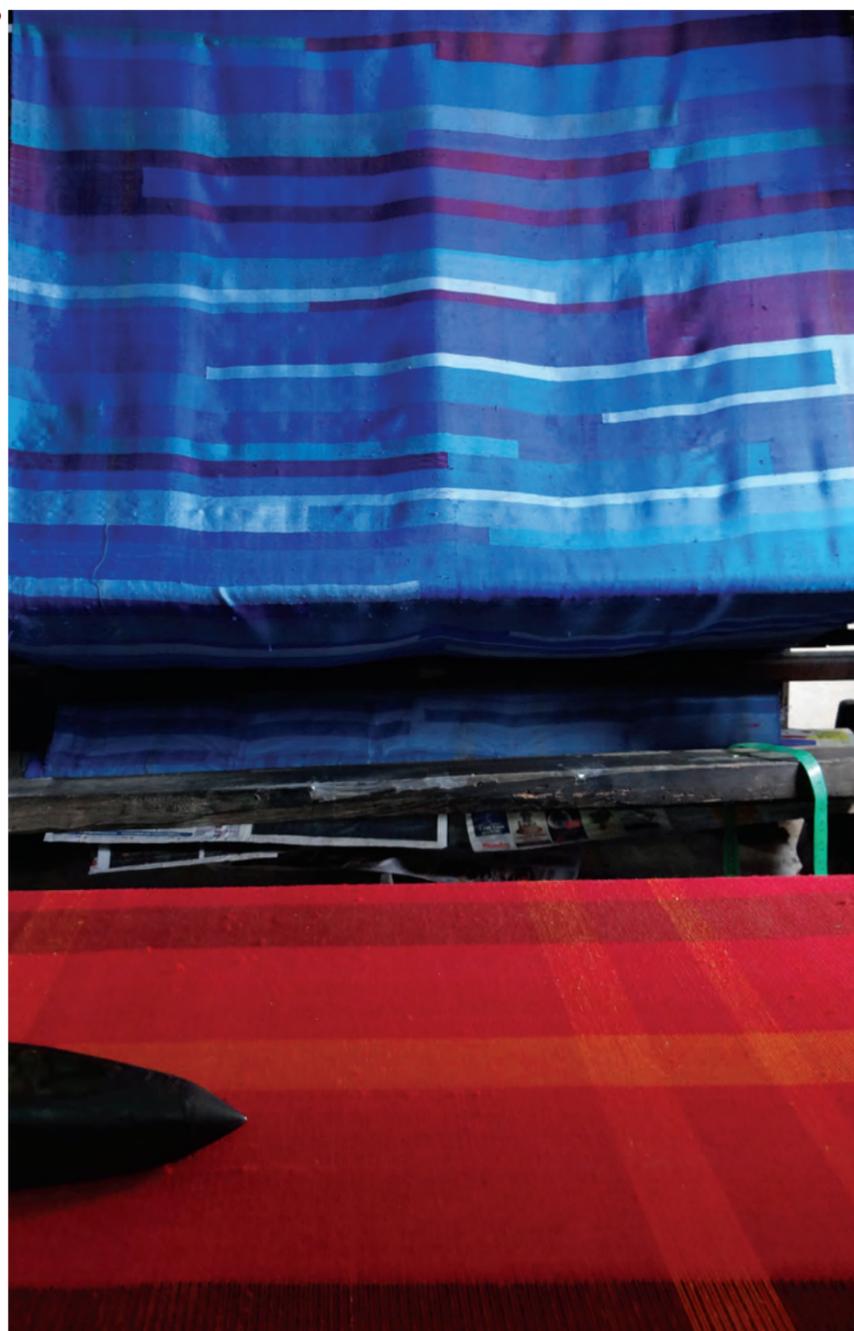
Bobbins of indigo-dyed yarn on the loom, Chennur, Andhra Pradesh

● Blue and red tapestries conceived by me on the loom at Kurma Rao's workshop, Ahmedabad

● Cheong Fatt Tze's Blue Mansion, Penang Island, Malaysia

● Hokianga Harbour, New Zealand

Two years ago, while creating a bevy of installations for a building, I conceived a blue woven silk tapestry. The tapestry was inspired by a section from the 16th century poet, Keshavdas' poem, *Baramasa*. I tried to capture the notion of the rains in about 14 shades of blue mulberry silk yarn. It took us all of 11 months to get the colour and the piece right, after umpteen iterations, and it finally hung with pride in all its silken glory against a wall in Ahmedabad.



● The blue of the indigo has fascinated me beyond boundaries and media. Six years ago, while on work in Mexico, I visited the iconic house of the architect Luis Barragan. I was heartbroken that one couldn't photograph in the Casa Luis Barragan, the home he built in 1948 and lived in for 40 years. Today, it is a World Heritage Site. I must admit that I also feel slightly embarrassed

that I have this innate need to photograph everything I like, to create this repository of images of all things special. In any case, after wandering through this cinematic house I came up to the terrace, which is completely walled in, and the guide finally said, 'You can photograph the walls and the sky'. And so I did, as the walls seemed to frame the sky, but photographs did it no justice.

On the following day, I visited the house of the artist-couple, Diego Riviera and Frida Kahlo – *Museo Frida Kahlo* or more simply called *La Casa Azul*, the Blue House. I had seen the fabulous retrospective of Frida Kahlo's at the Tate Modern, London, a while before and Salma Hayek's redeeming rendition of Frida, so seeing Diego Riviera's work completely flabbergasted me.





● Blue glazed tiles, Lisbon, Portugal

● Detail of the celestial beings

● Celestial beings on their vahanas in the clouds and the seas, conceived in collaboration with miniature painters of Jaipur, Jal Mahal, Jaipur

The sheer variety and scale of his work as one of the fathers of Mexico's muralist movement at the Palacio de Bellas Artes would make anyone his fan for life. So one can imagine my excitement to visit the Blue House. The house is like a set for a fabulous Mexican film, with beautiful vistas of the garden, peppered with soulful stories of Frida Kahlo's art and loneliness. The brilliant cobalt blue walls of the house are placed around a central courtyard and a garden that famously housed Leon Trotsky when he fled Stalin's Soviet Union. This has special significance for me as someone who grew up on *Doctor Zhivago!*

A year or two earlier, and separated by oceans and thousands of kilometres, on work at the island of Penang, Malaysia, the government graciously hosted me at the roughly 100-year-old Cheong Fatt Tze's Blue Mansion. The mansion bears testimony to all the things considered majestic in that era, and it feels like it is out of a cult Chinese film. That, with the heady mix of Penang food and sites, is something to look forward to.

● The sea, immortalised in my mind by Neruda's poems and by Hemingway's stories while growing up, has always held this magical hold over me and appears repeatedly in my photographs... be it the picturesque Hokianga Harbour, New Zealand, or set behind the Iberian ceramic tiles in Lisbon, Portugal. Vast, always changing, sometimes kind and welcoming and at other times with all its fury. This innate preoccupation found



its way subconsciously into some of my work. While conceiving a textile piece I themed it on the idea of morning light on the sea, and the ever-changing quality of light and the ocean. The work progressed at various stages over a torturous period of six months, and I felt tempted to stop at each of those stages as it felt imbued with life much more than I imagined. I know now how it feels when you love the work you must part with, and I remember that it was tough to cut that umbilical cord.

Yet another series of blue works are now at the Jal Mahal, a historical pavilion on the outskirts of Jaipur. I conceived a series of miniature paintings with a dozen traditional miniature artists that depict the romance of clouds in the parched landscapes of

pleasure pavilions such as the Jal Mahal. Kalidas's *Meghaduta* or the Cloud Messenger finds the pride of place in the pavilion. All the blue swirls, with celestial beings showering fragrant flowers with sequined lights, immortalised and yet transiently painted on the walls, wait for visitors to come and witness the blue of the sky and the ocean, of the vast and the beyond.