

**Amrita Gupta-Singh**

Final Evaluation

This grant supports research towards the setting up of an online archive which will document the visual cultures of the Northeast, focusing on contemporary arts practice in Shillong, Guwahati and Silchar. The research will re-calibrate the centre-periphery dichotomy, often used to engage with the art history and practice of the Northeast, by looking at the 'regional modernisms' of the region in the context of its geographical and cultural affinities with South and South East Asia. The online archive will function as an alternative resource to supplement currently available pedagogies of art history and criticism. Grant funds will pay for research and documentation costs including travel, accommodation, purchase of books and other secondary materials, interview recordings, website creation and maintenance costs, an accountant's fee, and honorarium.

If one starts thinking of the North East regions of India and its culture, one is often faced with a void. Popular references to the area happen either through the mystic folk or caricatures of an 'other' to the Indian mainland. Despite being the homeland for many rich cultural and artistic traditions, the region hardly features in art historical debates in India. The naming of a diverse, multi cultural region as the 'north-east' itself signals a lack of understanding and deeper engagement. Geographically speaking, it shares international borders with more neighbouring countries than any other part of India. It is also located at a crucial point in the map of Asia acting as the meeting point of South and South-east Asia. Historically the region has been ignored, neglected or vilified by colonial and post-colonial rulers alike. In many ways the existence of the region is seen as a sore thumb to the mainstream imagination of the Indian state.

Amrita's project set out to re-calibrate this centre-periphery dichotomy. While taking an interdisciplinary approach to visual art history, she aimed to place its modernisms/contemporary practices as an[other] site of practices that developed simultaneously (particularly in Assam) with other rhizomatic modernisms of India. She started this work with a focus on Guwahati, Shillong and Silchar with an online archive in mind. The archive was to be created via interviews, field visits, collecting first hand artworks and research. Once created it would serve as a platform for the understanding of visual arts and a greater knowledge exchange between the region, India, Asia and the larger world. One would assume this is a fantastic possibility of discourse generation and will help clear much of the mist surrounding the artistic practice of the region.

Till midway into her grant, Amrita did conduct her research very diligently and collected a lot of material despite a few hurdles. There were issues of political unrest that hindered her progress and availability of artists was not an easy thing to work out. However, based on the materials she gathered she produced one short and one long essay, copies of which she has already submitted and the final versions are awaiting publication. Her identity as an insider/outsider has proved helpful. People from the region hesitate to

open up to the outer world due to the many years of misrepresentation and caricature. They were much more responsive to Amrita who hails from the region as they found trust and confidence in her. In Guwahati she found a rich modern art history and wealth of material dating beyond her focus period. Hence she could expand her research to a much longer period. Silchar however has a different kind of history owing to the strong identity politics and cultural movements of the Barak valley. She found her hometown Shillong to have a more recent history in terms of art while the traditions and practices of the Khasi tribe was found to be more veering towards the folk and oral, rather than visual.

Her progress however started faltering from June 2014. She went through a series of medical emergencies in her family which seriously affected her work. She had to cancel many field trips and could complete only a part of the interviews she wanted to do. This situation continued till the very end of the grant period. The most damaging of the effects of this period of sporadic and often stalled engagement with the field has compromised the online archive altogether. She has completed two essays and is awaiting publication. Her work has actually scaled up and expanded beyond the promised level and now it looks like a life-long project for her. The online archive however, is not in any shape to be presented in any form. Amrita has bought a domain and started working with a designer, but she still wants to visit Shillong and gather more material. She aims to bring the online archive alive by November 2015. She also wants to create e-monographs on specific artists and will submit all of that to IFA when they come out. She also wants to develop this work into a PhD thesis. Although the project didn't achieve some of what it had set out to do, one can say the learnings have been rich in the face of various personal and socio-political obstacles. She had to make modifications to her budget to make the best of the changed scenario, but that seems to have worked positively for the interest of the project.

**Shubham Roy Choudhury**  
July 2015