

Nature Trails

Sarah Bodman talks to artist Radha Pandey at a new book arts centre in Halden, Norway

Radha Pandey's beautiful artworks bring elements of the botanical world to our attention through intricately illustrated and letterpress printed artists' books that often incorporate her handmade papers.

I caught up with Pandey as she and her partner Johan Solberg were installing the printmaking presses at Halden Bookworks, their new book arts centre in Halden, Norway. It's based in an old cotton factory full of artists' studios, with Halden Bookworks occupying half of the top floor as a fully equipped book arts studio with spectacular views. Accomplished printmaker and papermaker Pandey, was about to begin waterproofing the floor to add a papermaking studio.

I reconnected with Pandey recently via Tia Blassingame's Book/Print Artist/Scholar of Color collective, where I noticed her new collaborative artist's book project *tentatively titled Flora of Mughal India*. She was in India when Covid 19 struck. She explains: "I was planning on taking a workshop with a miniature painter, and then the pandemic hit throwing Delhi into lockdown. I had spoken to him earlier however, about working with me to finish up prints, for example to add highlights or change the printed page with his brush any way he wanted. Having no studio access due to lockdown, I began with a lot of reading and drawing. I drew all the flowers and plants around me at the time and did some research online, reading up on native and non-native species."

I asked Pandey about her love of historical books and the time she has spent researching in libraries, drawing inspiration from publications concerning the history of book production and the wider arts of the book. "John Martin Rare Book Library at the University of Iowa was one of the first places I found inspiration for two of my books: *Anatomia Botanica* and *Absence*. The British Library of course has Islamicate manuscripts I have seen in person. The Wellcome Library too has a beautiful book from Japan of illnesses in which the paper has been manipulated and textured to illustrate various ailments. I have also scoured the website of the Chester Beatty Library and their phenomenal collection. I would love to be able to visit someday to see their manuscripts in person."

For *Flora of Mughal India*, her new plan is to print the wood engraved illustrations at the studio in Norway and then post to the miniature painter to work on in Delhi. "Once they are complete, I will incorporate them into the book alongside letterpress printed text. My uncle is also writing couplets in Urdu about each plant. These will be made into plates and printed alongside English and Hindi translations to form part of the text. The endpapers for the edition will be cut in a *jaali* pattern by traditional *sanjhi* craftspeople using a pattern that I have designed. The paper for the entire book will of course be handmade by a traditional mill in India working in the style used in the 14th Century. I anticipate it will be completed late 2022."

Handmade paper is important to Pandey, "It has to add to the entire idea or concept of the book whenever possible. If I am making it, I try and think about the time period I am trying to represent or the subject matter and then research the type of paper produced during that time, or perhaps the plants used in its making. These factors lend another layer of depth and presence of the finished book. For *Deep Time* (2017) I studied historical uses and recipes for dyes in India. It is a vast topic and there isn't much written on how to dye paper, so I learnt by doing and adapting techniques that may not necessarily be used for paper. My research has led to preparing to publish a book tentatively titled *Paper & Colour*. It will be a collection of essays on historical uses of natural dyes on paper from various traditions in India, China, Japan, Africa, Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines." Pandey's research has also fed into some new classes such as the *History of Papermaking* which she will run online from her studio, and in person at Penland School of Craft, USA. Pandey and Solberg are hoping to take artists on Book and Paper educational tours of India (@indiabookartstour) again this year.

In Norway, Halden Bookworks will launch in April as a letterpress, bookbinding and papermaking studio. Pandey and Solberg plan to run workshops this Spring and an artist's residency programme will open for applications from December 2021 for 2022. For information and some beautiful scenic views of Halden visit: <https://www.haldenbookworks.no> and for Pandey's bookworks see: <https://www.radhapandey.com>