

A Letter from Dayanita Singh

Dear Mrs. Gardner,

The week before I came to Boston I had been in Calcutta, photographing chairs and empty rooms in the homes of the families I had photographed on earlier visits. Where a chair was placed in relation to the window, to a painting, the texture of the light it reflected, I was a bit saddened to leave all those chairs and empty rooms, peopled with unseen generations. And then to find myself in the Gardner, I think I have photographed almost every chair in your museum among the windows and the paintings. Calcutta continued into Boston it seemed initially.

I would like to thank you for your extreme generosity in hosting me as Artist-in-Residence, at your carriage house. As it turned out, it is one of the most beautiful gifts I have received in my life, it was the gift of time, to pause in one's hectic life, and the gift of the light moving through the carriage house. What made it different from other gifts/grants was that you hosted me in your museum, you paid for my time to be there and you asked nothing in return.

I suppose I could have used this 'pause' time to sleep through the days, explore the world of dreams, instead I woke up each morning, my head bursting with ideas for projects, and my work moved into completely new areas. So I started to make little fold out books, with tiny photographs, from being a photographer that worked very large, the shift in scale was dramatic. I suppose I felt I was not being judged in anyway, and I started to explore more and more the journal style. I did not quite start sticking flowers in my little books like you did in your journals, and they are still there, but I started to photograph flowers! I have not reached my home in India as yet, I seem to have found another language, of being a mobile photographer and book maker, traveling, photographing, printing and making little books on my journeys. Tiffany York understood immediately the gadgets I required and found me the tiniest cutting board suitable for my travels. I wish I could show you these little books, like little photographic notes. Perhaps being surrounded by all your art intimidated me, or humbled me, I do not know, but I enjoyed very much being able to follow a certain flow...

Being in the Monks garden, felt like a nunnery to me, or a very palatial monastery, I hardly wanted to leave the Museum, and it turned into a very inward experience for me. I came to the residency because I was obsessed with photographing house museums in India, and yet once I stayed I started to photograph flowers and my own reflection in Bellini's *Christ*. I was looked after as though I was your personal guest, and on the last day, the curators even found your purple shoes for me to photograph. I am not a words person, and normally I would say I could speak better with photographs, yet the experience of being at the Gardner does not fit into either of those mediums. Something shifted within me, someone nudged me along, very gently...

I wonder about following your journals from India, of trying to find some of the places you had photographed, and then I wonder about creating a very small museum, in a place like Goa, with the family photographs and objects of these Indo/Portugese people. I think you would have liked to visit such a place, and then I would invite artists to 'pause' there, in a very simple modest way, but in the spirit of the Gardner. Some of the artists I would like to invite were your guests too.

Thank you Mrs. Gardner.



Photo taken by Dayanita Singh at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, showing the artist's reflection over *Christ Carrying the Cross*, circle of Giovanni Bellini, ca. 1510.

Dayanita Singh was an Artist-in-Residence at the Gardner in April 2002 and will be back at the Museum this May for a special *Eye of the Beholder* lecture with Jyotindra Jain (May 29, 2003). She wrote this letter shortly after her stay.

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

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