



Research Paper

# Earth, Identity and Belonging: The Sculptural Ecology of Trupti Patel

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**Abstract:**

*Trupti Patel, a sculptor of East African-Indian descent, exemplifies the globalized Gujarati artistic sensibility through her explorations of material, place, and identity. From her academic foundation in Vadodara, where she did her Bachelors and Masters Degree from Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S.University of Baroda and later did Masters in ceramic sculpture at the Royal College of Arts, London. A cross-continental career, Patel's art investigates the tactile and philosophical relationship between human beings and the earth. Her site-specific installations such as Geopolitical Drops (India Art Fair, 2025) and participatory eco-projects like the Bhuj Project reflect an evolving practice that fuses politics, environmental concerns, and socio-cultural memory. Drawing from indigenous materials and geographic specificity, Patel's work posits sculpture as both archival and living, intertwining themes of cultivation, belonging, and resistance. This paper studies the tactile metaphors of her work, situating it within broader dialogues of postcolonial identity, ecological sustainability, and collective memory.*

**Keywords:** Materiality in Art, Geopolitical Art, Environmental Art, Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Identity, Diaspora and Art, Earth Pigments, Ecological Art Practice, Bhuj Project, Community-Based Art, Landscape and Memory, Political Ecology, Architecture and Sculpture, Social Practice Art, Agricultural Identity, Art and Environment, Feminist Art Practice, Trupti Patel, Contemporary Indian Sculpture

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## I. Objectives:

1. To analyze the significance of Trupti Patel's use of organic and geographical materials in relation to identity and cultural memory.
2. To explore how Patel's installations, engage with socio-political themes such as caste, agriculture, and environmental consciousness.
3. To evaluate the pedagogical and ecological impact of her participatory projects like the *Bhuj Project*.
4. To examine the interrelationship between form, material, and metaphor in her major series such as *Geopolitical Drops*, *Adore*, and *Homeland*.
5. To position Patel's work within the broader framework of contemporary eco-feminist and postcolonial sculptural practice

## Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this study, readers will be able to:

- Understand how sculpture can serve as a mode of political and ecological commentary.
- Recognize the intersection of materiality and identity in contemporary Indian art.
- Appreciate the role of indigenous knowledge and traditions in shaping artistic expression.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of community-engaged art practices in education and environmental activism.
- Contextualize Trupti Patel's contributions within the global discourse of land art and environmental sculpture.

## II. Main Discussion:

Trupti Patel's practice embodies an intricate dialogue between land and self. Born in Nairobi in 1957, she received her art education in Vadodara and London, yet her work consistently returns to the Indian landscape and its layered meanings. Her works are tenuous relation between material - often organic matter, clay, seeds, and earth pigments - and the human body, a tangible witness of our lived political realities. For the artist, material morphs into a dynamic metaphor - not only as a symbol, but also a corporeal sensation - that compels a deeper perspective into social structures. Each sculpture invokes an intimate, sensitive encounter - despite their large scale - as her materiality alludes to the irrevocable, mortal cycles of time, nature, and humanity.

In her seminal installation *Geopolitical Drops*, Patel uses earth pigments from 28 Indian states to construct sculptural drops, each embedded with wheat kernels—symbols of sustenance and political invisibility. These fragile terracruda forms are not just objects but affective metaphors of nationhood and the fraught condition of Indian farmers (India Art Fair, 2025).

Her approach to material—as both medium and message—is central to her philosophical inquiry. As Patel asserts, “Humans come from the earth, live off food from the earth and go back to it,” encapsulating the ontological symmetry between body and land (Patel, 2023). This visceral connection is evident in *Moments of Matter*, a 2023 ceramic installation in South Korea, which juxtaposes human fragility with elemental forces through native clay and botanical imprints, invoking an archival logic of place through glaze and form.

## III. Material as Metaphor and Witness

A key feature of Patel's work is the transformation of organic material into metaphor. Clay, seeds, ash, and earth pigments are not mere mediums; they are agents of meaning. As she herself articulates, “humans come from the earth, live off food from the earth and go back to it” (Patel, 2023). This cyclical relationship between human life and the environment becomes the axis of her creative expression. In *Geopolitical Drops* (India Art Fair, 2025), she uses soil from 28 Indian states to construct sculptural drops—each embedded with wheat kernels—to address the politics of agriculture and nationhood. The use of terracruda, an unfired clay, renders the works fragile and temporal, highlighting the precarity of farming communities and the transient nature of political borders.

This installation bridges aesthetic form and socio-political critique. The kernels—symbols of food, life, and sustenance—are embedded into the very structure of the drops, suggesting how agriculture is intrinsic to both individual survival and collective identity. Her process of sourcing pigments from specific regions imbues each drop with the topographic memory of that place, turning sculpture into a vessel of geographic and cultural consciousness. Moreover, the use of bronze-cast human fragments like a hand within the installation adds a corporeal presence, reminding viewers that behind every political issue lies a human cost.



Trupti Patel, Geographical drops, India Art Fair 2025

Her work titled 'ADORE' (2006) which is in multiple of 30 exhibited in Sakshi in 2007, is an apt metaphor as the herb is ancient symbol of scents associated with social and religious ceremonies in India.

Patel revives sweet basil (*Damro*) as a fading symbol of Indian wedding rituals. The sachets of viable seeds distributed with the artwork underline her belief that “art is an extension of life,” challenging commercial expectations by offering participation over possession. The piece was misunderstood by galleries but is critically potent in its blending of aesthetics, ecology, and memory (Sakshi Gallery, 2007).



Trupti Patel, *Adore*- multiple of 30, samples of sweet basil (damra) Sakshi Art Gallery 2007

Between 2005 and 2013, her *Homeland* series further probed ideas of prejudice, caste, and exclusion. Through fragmented architectural forms—columns, windows, gates—she interrogates societal structures and the idea of belonging. Her sculptures transform these architectural fragments into metaphors of vulnerability and cultural aspiration, inspired by the symbolic language of Indian temple architecture. The Artist feels the weight of such prejudice, Identity and loyalty and questions judgemental attitudes of exclusion/inclusion. Her works are exploration of what it means to belong. Her sculpture combines native geographical materials and human forms to symbolise the inter connectedness of human existence and the environment, transcending physical representation.



Trupti Patel, “You’re to keep this water in your home” Instructed my mother, Ganges water sealed copper pot. Composite stoneware-Indian Earths, minerals and oxides, 2012.

In contrast, the *Bhuj Project* (2023–25) expands her practice into participatory, site-responsive environmental work. By planting indigenous trees with schoolchildren across eight Indian states along the Tropic of Cancer, Patel repositions landscape as cultural identity. This collaborative eco-art initiative not only fosters environmental stewardship but also reintroduces local biodiversity into daily consciousness. Each sapling is adopted by a child, blurring boundaries between ecological action and artistic ritual (Patel & Nair, 2025).

This multidimensional approach is not simply aesthetic—it is activist. As art historian Geeta Kapur has observed, artists like Patel “bridge the sensory and the symbolic to address contemporary anxieties with poetic precision” (Kapur, 2011). Her ability to fuse raw geography with sculptural nuance elevates environmental art into a space of political reckoning and pedagogical potential.

### **Sculpture as Political and Sensory Terrain**

Patel’s sculptures invite intimate engagement despite their conceptual density. Her works elicit sensory responses—through texture, scale, and tactility—while also urging critical reflection. In the *Differentiated Totality / Indian Landscape* series, Patel offers relief drawings made with 29 soil layers—each tied to a political state. Interestingly, the inclusion of 29 layers references the pre-2019 geopolitical map of India before the bifurcation of Jammu & Kashmir, underscoring how political realities reshape even cartographic identities. The porousness and delicacy of these drawings paradoxically convey the weight of political violence and exclusion.





Trupti Patel, *Differentiated Totality/Indian Landscape* (12 Units) Terra cruda Paper Relief, Earth 29 Political States, New Delhi, Ash, Gold Leaf, 234 cmx312 cmx10 cm, 2018-19.

A recurring theme in Patel's work is **belonging and marginality**. Her *Homeland* series (2005–2013) interrogates caste, race, and the prejudices surrounding origins. Using forms inspired by architectural elements—doors, windows, gates—Patel draws attention to mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. These symbols of passage and enclosure serve as metaphors for social hierarchies, cultural gatekeeping, and the fragility of home. The isolation of these architectural elements from their context prompts viewers to consider them not just as functional structures but as ideological constructs.

Her temple-inspired forms further complicate the discourse. Temples in Indian culture represent both sanctity and exclusion, reverence and patriarchy. By abstracting and recontextualizing these forms, Patel explores how sacred architecture can embody contradictory narratives—of spiritual transcendence and rigid societal stratification.

#### **Environmental Art as Activism: The Bhuj Project**

One of Patel's most radical contributions is her community-based environmental artwork—the *Bhuj Project*. This initiative goes beyond the white cube of the gallery to engage directly with schoolchildren in ecologically sensitive regions near the Tropic of Cancer. By planting indigenous trees and teaching children about biodiversity, this project transforms land art into a living, growing entity. It reflects an expanded definition of sculpture: not merely as a physical form but as a **social act**, a performative gesture of environmental stewardship and cultural revival.

This is where Patel's belief that "art is an extension of life" (Sakshi Gallery, 2007) becomes most literal. Rather than merely exhibiting objects, she plants experiences and cultivates memory in collaboration with communities. This model resists the commodification of art by prioritizing care, collaboration, and ecological regeneration. Each child naming and caring for a tree exemplifies how art can nurture empathy and responsibility in young minds.

Her collaborator Varsha Nair's documentation of the project adds another layer of meaning, extending the project's reach while preserving its ephemeral beauty. The Bhuj Project reminds us that art, when grounded in ethics and ecology, can foster enduring connections between people and place.

#### **Global Dialogues, Local Roots**

Despite her international training and exhibitions, Patel never departs from her indigenous reference points. Her 2023 solo project *Moments of Matter* in Gimhae, South Korea, is deeply rooted in local context. By collecting botanical specimens and pressing them into native Korean clay, she creates a tactile archive of the environment. The use of Korean celadon glaze pays homage to local traditions while her inscriptions—"If you want to understand nature, climb a mountain. If you want to understand life, meet people"—underline the universality of her inquiry.

Even here, Patel's work embodies a cross-cultural ecological poetics. Her juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces within a curved wall evokes vulnerability, enclosure, and cohabitation—universal themes rendered through the specificities of place.

#### **IV. Observations**

- **Materiality is both symbolic and sensorial** in Patel's work. She doesn't just use materials; she **listens** to them.
- **Belonging, identity, and marginality** are not abstract concepts—they are viscerally and architecturally enacted through sculpture.

- **Sculpture, for Patel, is alive**—it grows, decays, breathes, and remembers.
- Her **community-driven practices** redefine authorship and challenge traditional art economies.
- Patel's **work sits at the crossroads** of ecofeminism, postcolonial critique, and environmental aesthetics, engaging with both **global discourses and local ecologies**.

## V. Conclusion:

Trupti Patel's oeuvre exemplifies how contemporary sculpture can navigate the terrain of identity, ecology, and memory through material engagement. Her use of local clays, seeds, pigments, and architectural fragments makes a compelling case for sculpture as a living dialogue between the human and non-human worlds. Through works like *Geopolitical Drops*, *Homeland*, and the *Bhuj Project*, Patel foregrounds art's capacity to reflect, resist, and regenerate. By connecting viewers and participants to the soil beneath their feet and the socio-political narratives embedded within it, she transforms sculpture from object to experience—an immersive, transformative act of cultural remembrance and ecological consciousness.

Trupti Patel's artistic practice is a profound testament to how materiality and cultural memory can intersect in sculpture to tell stories of identity, belonging, displacement, and ecological consciousness. Her works not only reflect personal and political narratives but also embody them through material choices and spatial forms. This embodied storytelling is central to Patel's sculptural language.

Her training at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Vadodara, followed by a Master's in ceramic sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London, provided her with both indigenous and international perspectives. However, despite the geographical shifts, her work remains rooted in the Indian subcontinent's material culture, reflecting a deep-seated concern for the land, its people, and their shared stories.

## In-text Citations:

- (India Art Fair, 2025)
- (Patel, 2023)
- (Sakshi Gallery, 2007)
- (Patel & Nair, 2025)
- (Kapur, 2011)

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