



When Place Becomes Material

Material Place-Presence Theory in the Paintings of Sunil Kumar (Suri), Himachal Pradesh

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23119035>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 16-07-2026

Accepted: 15-08-2026

Published: 25-09-2026

Keywords:

*Contemporary Painting;
Material Place-Presence;
Soil Art; Materiality;
Place; Material Memory;
Earth Pigments; Himalayan
Art; Material Provenance;
Practice-Led Research;
Site-Specificity*

ABSTRACT

Contemporary painting has increasingly challenged the conventional separation between pictorial representation and material reality. Artists working with soil, earth pigments, minerals and locally sourced substances have demonstrated that material can function not only as a technical medium but also as a carrier of cultural, ecological and historical meaning (Feller et al., 2015; Wessolek & Toland, 2024). Yet an important theoretical question remains: when material originating from a geographically identifiable place becomes an integral component of a painting that represents or evokes that place, can the material itself participate in the artwork's relation to place? This research investigates the question through the contemporary painting practice of Indian artist Sunil Kumar (Suri) of Himachal Pradesh. His Echoes of Earth body of work incorporates natural soil obtained from different parts of the region into paintings concerned with landscape, cultural heritage, traditional architecture, environmental change and memory. The study employs a practice-led qualitative methodology combining literature review, material-centred analysis, visual analysis, interpretive analysis and reflective examination of five selected artworks: स्मृतियों का आला (The

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

Earthen Niche), अकेली शाम (A Solitary Evening), सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth), विरासत के स्वर (Voices of Heritage), and बदलाव की परछाइयाँ (Shadows of Change). The paper does not claim that soil in art, material memory, or place-based practice is new. Instead, it identifies a narrower conceptual gap at the intersection of materiality, geographical provenance and place identity. It proposes Material Place-Presence Theory: when geographically sourced material is physically incorporated into an artwork and intentionally connected to the represented or invoked place, it may function as a material trace through which that place participates in the artwork's identity and meaning. The framework distinguishes material place-presence from material memory and conventional site-specificity and proposes three analytical conditions: geographic provenance, physical incorporation, and conceptual/artistic connection. The paper further introduces Carried Place as a sub-concept describing the persistence of a material relationship with place after geographically associated material has been moved into an artwork. Because the study focuses on one artist and does not include laboratory provenance testing or controlled audience-response research, the theory is presented as a practice-based conceptual proposition rather than a universal causal claim. The Himalayan case is used as a situated context from which a broader international question can be developed: how can the geographical origin of material become an aesthetic and semantic property of an artwork?

1. Introduction

Painting has historically been one of the principal ways through which artists have represented places. Mountains, rivers, villages, houses, roads and landscapes have been transformed into visual images through pigment, line, composition and perspective. In this conventional relationship, the place exists outside the artwork, while the painting produces a visual representation of it. Contemporary artistic practice has increasingly complicated this relationship. Artists have incorporated soil, earth pigments, minerals, stones and other natural materials into artworks, challenging the assumption that painting material is simply a



neutral vehicle for representation (Feller et al., 2015; Wessolek & Toland, 2024). This development creates a significant question for contemporary painting: What happens when the material used to construct a painting physically originates from the geographical place that the painting represents or evokes? The question becomes particularly important in the practice of Sunil Kumar (Suri), an artist from Una, Himachal Pradesh, whose work engages with cultural heritage, landscapes, traditions and environmental transformations. In his *Echoes of Earth* practice, natural soil collected from different parts of Himachal Pradesh is incorporated into the canvas. The artist describes the canvas not merely as a surface but as a living document of homeland. The present study does not treat regional origin as sufficient evidence of place-presence. Rather, it examines the relationship among the material's stated geographical provenance, its physical incorporation into the paintings, and its conceptual connection to the places and cultural environments invoked by the works. This distinction is necessary because soil can be used for colour or texture without necessarily producing a meaningful relation to place.

2. Research Problem

The use of natural material in art is not itself a new phenomenon. Scholarship has examined soil as artistic material, ecological substance, symbolic matter and carrier of memory. Research has also examined relationships among material environments, memory and place. Therefore, this paper does not claim that soil has never been used in art, nor that soil and memory have never been studied.

The research problem is narrower: How can the geographical origin of physical artistic material become an active component of the meaning and place identity of a painting?

This distinction is the foundation of the proposed theory.

3. Research Questions

Primary Research Question

How does geographically sourced material transform a painting from a representation of place into a form of material place-presence?

Secondary Questions

- How does the geographical origin of soil contribute to the meaning of a contemporary painting?
- How does Sunil Kumar (Suri)'s use of Himalayan soil challenge the conventional separation between representation and materiality?
- How does soil operate simultaneously as medium, material trace, cultural reference and geographical marker?



- How does the material relationship between painting and place differ from conventional site-specific or landscape-based practice?
- Can Material Place-Presence Theory provide a useful framework for analysing geographically sourced materials in contemporary painting?

4. Objectives

- To examine the relationship between materiality and place in contemporary painting.
- To review scholarship on soil, earth pigments, material memory, material culture, site-specificity and practice-led artistic research.
- To analyse the role of geographically sourced soil in selected paintings of Sunil Kumar (Suri).
- To examine how material provenance contributes to the cultural and geographical identity of the artwork.
- To distinguish material place-presence from material memory, landscape representation and conventional site-specificity.
- To formulate Material Place-Presence Theory as a practice-based conceptual proposition.
- To position a contemporary Himalayan painting practice within wider international discussions of materiality, place and artistic research.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Soil as Artistic Material

Feller, Landa, Toland and Wessolek (2015) demonstrate that artistic appropriations of soil extend across many periods and forms, including painting, installation and film. Their review establishes soil as material and symbolic substance and provides an important foundation for contemporary research on art made about, in and with soil. Wessolek and Toland (2024) further distinguish symbolic references to earth from artistic practices that contextualise soil as a distinct geophysical and cultural body. Their work strengthens the case for treating soil as more than a technical pigment. The present study extends this discussion by asking what changes when the soil's geographical provenance is intentionally connected to the place addressed by the artwork.

5.2 Earth Pigments and Indian Art

Sharma and Singh (2021) review historical earth pigments used in Indian wall paintings and document the long use of naturally derived earth colours, including ochres and other mineral materials. This historical



background demonstrates that earth material and painting have long been connected in Indian artistic traditions. The present study addresses a different condition: the shift from earth as colour source toward earth as geographically meaningful material provenance.

5.3 Materiality and Material Agency

Materiality scholarship challenges the assumption that materials are merely passive carriers of human meaning. Miller (2005) brings together approaches showing how material forms participate in social and cultural life, while Ingold (2011) emphasises materials, making, movement and the formation of environments. These perspectives support an understanding of soil as an active participant in artistic making without requiring the stronger claim that soil possesses an automatic or universal cultural agency.

5.4 Material Memory and Practice of Place

Material memory provides another important theoretical field. Høgseth (2026) examines the relationship among terroir, material memory and practice of place, showing how material environments can be understood as sites where memory, knowledge and lived experience settle. The present study shares this interest in material traces but makes a different analytical distinction. Material Memory asks primarily how material relates to memory; Material Place-Presence asks how geographically associated material contributes to an artwork's relationship with place.

5.5 Site-Specificity and Locational Identity

Kwon (2004) demonstrates how site-specific art challenged the autonomy and transportability of artworks by making location and context constitutive of meaning. Material Place-Presence differs in a specific respect: the artwork need not remain physically at the originating site. A geographically associated material can move from place into artwork and continue to sustain a conceptual relationship with that place. The framework therefore complements rather than replaces site-specificity.

5.6 Practice-Led and Artistic Research

Practice-led and practice-based research recognise artistic practice as a mode through which research knowledge can be generated and articulated. Smith and Dean (2009) examine the iterative relationship between creative practice and research, while Gray and Malins (1993) provide an early methodological framework for research procedures in art and design. The present study consequently treats the selected paintings as primary practice-based evidence rather than merely illustrations.

6. Research Gap

The literature establishes several existing research areas: soil in art, earth pigments, materiality, material memory, place-based art, site-specific art, environmental art and material provenance. The gap identified in this study lies at their intersection. Existing scholarship largely asks: What does material represent? What memory does material evoke? How does art relate to place? How does site affect the meaning of an artwork?

This research asks: Can the geographical origin of material itself become part of a painting's place identity?

The novelty claimed by this paper is not the physical act of using local soil itself. Contemporary artists already work with geographically specific earth materials. The proposed contribution is the theoretical interpretation and conceptual vocabulary of Material Place-Presence developed through the Himalayan case study of Sunil Kumar (Suri).

7. Theoretical Framework

7.1 Material Place-Presence Theory

Material Place-Presence Theory proposes that when material physically originating from a specific geographical and culturally meaningful place becomes an integral component of a painting, that material may function not only as medium or symbol but as a material trace through which the originating place participates in the artwork's identity and meaning.

For analytical clarity, the theory is defined by three conditions:

1. Geographic provenance: the material is associated with an identifiable place or region.
2. Physical incorporation: the material is materially incorporated into the artwork rather than merely depicted.
3. Conceptual/artistic connection: the artwork intentionally connects the material's provenance to the represented, remembered or invoked place.

The presence of soil alone does not establish material place-presence. The concept emerges when provenance, incorporation and artistic meaning converge.



7.2 Four Conceptual States

Condition	Conceptual Relation
Represented Place	Place → Image
Remembered Place	Place → Memory → Image
Materialised Place	Place → Material → Artwork
Material Place-Presence	Place → Material → Artwork → Place-Presence

7.3 Material Place-Presence versus Material Memory

Material Memory focuses on Material → Memory: how material retains, evokes or communicates memory. Material Place-Presence focuses on Place → Material → Artwork: how material originating from a place contributes to the artwork's relationship with that place. Memory may be one consequence of material place-presence, but it is not its defining condition.

7.4 Material Place-Presence versus Site-Specificity

In site-specific practice, Artwork ↔ Site and meaning may depend strongly upon physical location. Material Place-Presence proposes Place → Material → Artwork. The physical material can travel away from the originating location while retaining a conceptual relationship with it. In this sense, place can travel through material.

7.5 Material Provenance as Meaning

Material provenance is commonly associated with identifying the geographical or historical origin of materials used in artworks. Scientific conservation research can investigate material provenance through analytical techniques. The present study proposes a conceptual application: provenance can also become part of aesthetic meaning. The shift is therefore: Provenance as evidence → Provenance as meaning → Provenance as place-presence.

7.6 Artist Profile: Sunil Kumar (Suri)

Sunil Kumar (Suri) is a professional artist from Una, Himachal Pradesh, India. His artistic practice is rooted in the culture, heritage, traditions and landscapes of Himachal Pradesh. He works across painting, mud painting, mixed media, mural art, cartooning and illustration, and explores traditional themes through a contemporary visual language. His paintings frequently combine natural materials, mud, textures and



mixed-media techniques, with a particular interest in memory, cultural identity, changing landscapes and the relationship between traditional environments and contemporary development. Kumar holds an M.F.A. from the College of Art, Chandigarh, Punjab University, and a B.F.A. from the College of Art, Delhi, University of Delhi. His professional practice includes exhibitions, workshops, art camps, mural and public-art projects, and cultural design initiatives at national and international levels. His documented professional engagements include the Shimla Art Festival, International Shivratri Festival and Jamboree Art Festival in Mandi, Lalit Kala National Art Camp in Chamba, and the Himachal Pradesh Tableau for the Republic Day Parade. He has also undertaken projects involving murals, exhibition design, illustration and cultural visual communication. The present research treats Kumar's artistic practice not merely as an object of external art-historical description but as practice-based evidence. His Echoes of Earth (माटी की गूंज) body of work is especially relevant to this study because it incorporates natural soil obtained from different parts of Himachal Pradesh into paintings concerned with memory, cultural heritage, traditional architecture, environmental change and the transformation of place. His stated artistic approach positions the canvas as more than a pictorial surface: it becomes a material record through which memories of homeland, earth and changing cultural environments can be reconsidered.

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Approach

The study uses a practice-led qualitative methodology combining practice-based research, visual analysis, material-centred analysis, interpretive analysis, reflective artistic inquiry, literature review and comparative theoretical analysis. The artist's completed artworks constitute the primary practice-based evidence.

8.2 Artist and Practice

Sunil Kumar (Suri) is not treated merely as an object of external art-historical analysis. His artistic practice itself functions as a form of research. His practice is concerned with Himachal Pradesh's culture, heritage, landscape, natural materials, mud, textures and contemporary reinterpretation. The Echoes of Earth statement identifies natural soil from different parts of Himachal Pradesh as a material component of the paintings.

8.3 Selection of Artworks

Five artworks are selected because together they demonstrate different aspects of the proposed theoretical framework:



1. स्मृतियों का आला (The Earthen Niche)
 2. अकेली शाम (A Solitary Evening)
 3. सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth)
 4. विरासत के स्वर (Voices of Heritage)
 5. बदलाव की परछाइयाँ (Shadows of Change)
- These works contain recurring relationships among soil, memory, traditional architecture, birds, cultural heritage, modern construction, ecological transformation and geographical identity.

8.4 Analytical Procedure

Each artwork is analysed through the same sequence so that the five cases can be compared systematically:

- Material: What material is physically present in the work?
- Provenance: What geographical origin is attributed to the material in the artist's documentation?
- Visual representation: How is place represented through imagery, composition and pictorial signs?
- Cultural reference: Which architectural, ornamental or symbolic elements connect the work to Himalayan contexts?
- Material function: Does soil operate only as pigment/texture, or does its provenance contribute to meaning?
- Place relation: How does the material create or reinforce a relationship between artwork and place?
- Mobility: What changes when geographically associated material is moved from its originating environment into an artwork?
- Interpretive result: Does the convergence of provenance, incorporation and conceptual connection support material place-presence?

8.5 Evidence and Scope

Artwork photographs, titles, dimensions and material descriptions are drawn from the artist-supplied portfolio documentation accompanying the study. The research does not include laboratory compositional analysis of the soil, independent geographic sampling, or controlled audience-response experiments. Statements about provenance are therefore treated as documented artistic provenance rather than independently laboratory-verified geochemical provenance.

9. Analysis of Selected Paintings

9.1 स्मृतियों का आला (The Earthen Niche)



Figure 1. Sunil Kumar (Suri), स्मृतियों का आला (The Earthen Niche).

Size: 24 × 36 inches. Medium: Natural soil from Himachal Pradesh and acrylic on canvas. Photograph reproduced from the artist-supplied portfolio; dimensions follow the portfolio documentation.

The Earthen Niche examines soil, memory and changing domestic environments. The aala, traditionally a small niche within a mud wall, becomes a metaphorical container of memory. The bird within the niche represents a surviving fragment of remembered life, while fading birds and changing environmental structures suggest disappearance and transformation.

From the perspective of Material Place-Presence Theory, the soil is equally significant. It does not merely represent an old mud wall; according to the artist's documentation, natural soil from Himachal Pradesh

forms part of the painting's surface. Mud-house imagery therefore provides representation, while the geographically associated soil functions as a material trace. The argument is not that the soil literally contains the entire Himalayan place, but that its provenance becomes meaningful within the work's visual and conceptual structure.

9.2 अकेली शाम (A Solitary Evening)



Figure 2. Sunil Kumar (Suri), अकेली शाम (A Solitary Evening).

Size: 24 × 36 inches. Medium: Natural soil from Himachal Pradesh and acrylic on canvas. Photograph reproduced from the artist-supplied portfolio; dimensions follow the portfolio documentation.

The painting presents a solitary bird, electrical wires, an iron structure and moonlit space. The work establishes a contrast between natural memory and modern construction. The soil surface evokes traditional mud houses and a historical relationship between human habitation and nature.

The material therefore participates in the temporal structure of the painting. Modern elements appear upon an earth-based surface: Earth = remembered environment; Iron = contemporary transformation; Bird = threatened natural presence; Painting = meeting point of these temporal conditions.

9.3 सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth)



Figure 3. Sunil Kumar (Suri), सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth).

Size: Not specified in the supplied artwork documentation. Medium: Natural soil from Himachal Pradesh and acrylic on canvas. Photograph supplied by the artist.



Footprints of Truth presents the life of Mahatma Gandhi and his continuing journey of truth and non-violence through a simple yet meaningful visual language. The earthen surface is not merely a background; it signifies the relationship among earth, human existence and time. The sequence of green footprints moving across the canvas becomes a visual metaphor for Gandhi's journey. The footprints move beyond the literal traces of an individual walking and suggest the continuing presence of ideas that leave an imprint on collective memory even after the person has passed. The green colour evokes life, hope and continuity, while the progression of the footprints presents the journey of truth as an ongoing process.

A significant visual contrast is created between the quiet, earth-like surface of the painting and the clearly emerging footprints. This contrast establishes a dialogue between memory and the present, the individual and the idea, and momentary presence and lasting influence. The natural soil surface provides a material ground for the historical journey of Gandhi's ideas, while the footprints give that journey a sense of movement. In this way, the material surface and ethical memory become interconnected without suggesting that soil itself automatically transmits cultural memory. From the perspective of Material Place-Presence Theory, this work functions as an important boundary case. According to the artist's documentation, natural soil obtained from Himachal Pradesh is physically incorporated into the artwork; therefore, the conditions of geographic provenance and physical incorporation are present. However, the direct subject of the painting is Gandhi, truth and non-violence, rather than the representation of a specific Himalayan place. The conceptual/artistic connection with the originating place is therefore less direct than in some of the other works. This distinction clarifies an important boundary of the theory: the use of locally sourced soil alone does not automatically establish full material place-presence; rather, provenance, physical incorporation and a place-oriented conceptual connection must converge.

9.4 विरासत के स्वर (Voices of Heritage)



Figure 4. Sunil Kumar (Suri), विरासत के स्वर (Voices of Heritage).

Size: 30 × 40 inches. Medium: Natural soil from Himachal Pradesh, acrylic and folk ornamentation.

Photograph reproduced from the artist-supplied portfolio; dimensions follow the portfolio documentation.

This work provides the strongest practice-based evidence for the proposed theory because it combines natural soil with folk ornamentation and cultural imagery. The artist explicitly states that bringing soil from Himachal Pradesh into the artwork means that the artwork does not simply speak about Himachal but physically carries its earth. This is the conceptual transition identified by Material Place-Presence Theory. The work combines geographical matter, folk ornament, cultural memory and painting. The material therefore functions as medium, cultural trace, geographical marker and pictorial substance. The artwork becomes simultaneously a painting and a material archive of place.

9.5 बदलाव की परछाइयाँ (Shadows of Change)



Figure 5. Sunil Kumar (Suri), बदलाव की परछाइयाँ (Shadows of Change).

Size: 30 × 40 inches. Medium: Natural soil from Himachal Pradesh, acrylic and mixed media. Photograph reproduced from the artist-supplied portfolio; dimensions follow the portfolio documentation.

The painting juxtaposes traditional architectural references with iron structures and birds. It examines the transformation of traditional environments under modern construction and urban development.

The soil surface creates an important material foundation for this contrast. The painting establishes: soil ↔ iron; traditional ↔ contemporary; nature ↔ construction; memory ↔ transformation; place ↔ changing place. The material is consequently not an independent technical choice; within the artist's stated practice, it participates in the conceptual structure of the painting.

10. Cross-Analysis

Dimension	Function in the selected paintings	Theoretical relevance
Soil	Physical material and surface	Material incorporation
Himachal origin	Geographical relation	Material provenance
Architecture	Cultural and historical reference	Place representation
Birds	Ecological presence and change	Environmental memory
Modern structures	Transformation and development	Changing place
Folk ornament	Cultural identity	Cultural localisation
Surface texture	Embodied material experience	Materiality

The addition of सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth) broadens the case set beyond landscape and heritage imagery. It shows that geographically sourced material can enter a painting whose primary narrative concerns a historical and ethical figure, thereby allowing the study to test more carefully when material provenance becomes place-presence and when it remains primarily a material or documentary relation.

The five paintings reveal a recurring structure: GEOGRAPHICAL PLACE → MATERIAL → PAINTING → CULTURAL/ENVIRONMENTAL MEANING → PLACE-PRESENCE.

The cross-analysis indicates that the theory is strongest where all three proposed conditions converge: the material has a stated geographical provenance, it is physically incorporated into the artwork, and the artist's conceptual framing connects that material to the place represented or invoked. सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth) functions as a useful boundary case: it clearly demonstrates provenance and physical incorporation, while its conceptual connection is directed primarily toward Gandhi, truth and non-violence rather than a specifically represented Himalayan place. Its inclusion therefore strengthens the analytical distinction between material provenance alone and full material place-presence.

11. Findings

- Soil exceeds a purely technical function. In the selected works it participates in the conceptual construction of place.
- Geographical origin becomes meaningful when the artist intentionally connects material provenance to the place addressed by the artwork.
- Representation and materiality become interconnected: the paintings depict aspects of place while materially relating to that place.
- Material provenance can become semantic rather than remaining only documentary or conservation information.
- Place can become portable in a limited conceptual sense: a material relation to place can travel with the artwork when geographically associated material is incorporated into it.
- The painting can operate simultaneously as image, material object, cultural trace, geographical reference and memory structure.

12. Discussion

The significance of this research lies in challenging the conventional separation between what a painting represents and what a painting is materially made from. In conventional painting, material supports representation. In the proposed framework, material can participate in the representation and interpretation of place.

The theory should not be interpreted as an assertion that soil possesses an automatic or universal cultural memory. The material relationship is relational and contextual. Geographical provenance becomes significant because the artist identifies, incorporates and conceptually frames the material as connected to a place. This boundary is important to the academic validity of the proposition.

The distinction also clarifies the difference from site-specificity. A site-specific artwork may depend on its physical location; the works examined here can remain transportable while retaining a material relation to place through the soil incorporated into them. The concept therefore offers a complementary framework for discussing place-oriented art.

13. Theoretical Contribution

Material Place-Presence Theory can be stated formally as follows:



Material Place-Presence = Geographic Provenance + Physical Incorporation + Conceptual/Artistic Connection

When these three conditions converge, geographically associated material may function as a trace through which place participates in the artwork's identity and meaning. The theory is intentionally modest: it does not claim that the material literally contains an entire geographical culture. It proposes instead that provenance can become an active component of artistic meaning.

14. Carried Place: A Sub-Concept

The research further proposes the concept of Carried Place as a sub-concept within Material Place-Presence Theory. A Carried Place is a condition in which physical material associated with a geographical environment is removed from that environment and incorporated into an artwork, allowing a material relationship with the originating place to persist elsewhere.

PLACE → MATERIAL → MOVEMENT → ARTWORK → CARRIED PLACE

Carried Place should not be treated as a second or competing theory. It describes the mobility mechanism through which material place-presence can persist after the material has moved from its source environment into the artwork. The concept may be relevant beyond soil to clay, stone, minerals, volcanic ash, sand, natural pigments, plant matter and other geographically identifiable materials.

15. International Significance

The importance of the research is not restricted to Himachal Pradesh. The Himalayan case provides a specific regional context through which a broader international question can be explored: Can the geographical origin of material become an aesthetic and semantic property of an artwork?

This question has potential relevance to Indigenous and land-based art, ecological art, diaspora and migration studies, heritage studies, conservation, material culture, contemporary painting and practice-led artistic research. The contribution of the Himalayan case is not that it represents a universal model, but that it provides a clearly situated case from which a transferable analytical framework can be tested.

16. Alternative Interpretations and Theoretical Boundaries

A critical question remains: if viewers are not told that the soil originated in Himachal Pradesh, will they perceive the work as materially connected to that place? The present study cannot answer this empirically



because it does not include controlled audience-response research. This question is therefore treated as a boundary condition rather than as evidence against the theory.

Material place-presence may operate at two levels: a material level, in which the material is physically associated with a place, and a perceptual/interpretive level, in which viewers recognise or understand that association. The present study primarily addresses the first and the artist-mediated second level. Future audience research is required to examine how knowledge of provenance changes interpretation.

17. Limitations

- The study focuses primarily on one artist and therefore does not claim that Material Place-Presence Theory is universally applicable.
- The theory is presented as a practice-based conceptual proposition requiring comparative research across artists, materials and geographical contexts.
- The study does not scientifically claim that soil automatically transmits cultural memory.
- The stated geographical provenance of the soil is based on the artist's supplied documentation; no laboratory geochemical provenance analysis was undertaken in this study.
- No controlled audience-response experiment was conducted to determine whether viewers perceive place-presence without being told the material's origin.

18. Future Research

- Compare geographically sourced materials across multiple artists and regions.
- Examine whether different materials—soil, clay, stone, mineral pigments, ash or plant matter—produce different forms of place-presence.
- Conduct audience studies comparing responses before and after disclosure of material provenance.
- Investigate how material provenance influences perceptions of authenticity and cultural connection.
- Examine the framework in Indigenous and land-based artistic practices with careful attention to local cultural protocols and ownership of materials.
- Use scientific material analysis alongside artistic research to examine provenance where appropriate.
- Study whether digital documentation can communicate or reproduce aspects of material place-presence when the physical material is absent.
- Test whether Material Place-Presence Theory can function as a broader interdisciplinary framework linking art, geography, material culture and conservation.

19. Conclusion

This research began with a simple but fundamental question: What happens when a place becomes material within a painting?

The examination of Sunil Kumar (Suri)'s Echoes of Earth practice suggests that the relationship between painting and place can operate beyond conventional landscape representation. Across स्मृतियों का आला (The Earthen Niche), अकेली शाम (A Solitary Evening), सत्य के पदचिह्न (Footprints of Truth), विरासत के स्वर (Voices of Heritage) and बदलाव की परछाइयाँ (Shadows of Change), natural soil from Himachal Pradesh is materially incorporated into paintings concerned with memory, cultural heritage, traditional architecture, ecological change and transformation.

The study does not claim that soil itself automatically contains or transmits cultural memory. Instead, it identifies a more precise condition in which geographical provenance, physical incorporation and conceptual connection converge. Under these conditions, material provenance can become part of the artwork's aesthetic and semantic structure.

Material Place-Presence Theory therefore shifts the question from 'What does the painting say about the place?' toward 'How does the material of the painting participate in the presence of that place?' The related concept of Carried Place describes how this material relation can persist after the material has moved from its originating environment into the artwork.

The theoretical contribution is consequently not a claim that the Himalayan case is universally representative. Its contribution is methodological and conceptual: it offers a vocabulary through which researchers can examine how geographically sourced matter participates in the meaning of contemporary painting. In this sense, when place becomes material, the painting does not merely depict where something is; it can carry a trace of where its material comes from.

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