



CAAD Alumni **Shruti Balasubramanian
among the top outgoing students of MICA,
Maryland, USA**

**Featured in the esteemed Baltimore magazine,
BMore Art, for my work.**

BmoreArt

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & CAREER

Five Emerging Artists to Watch: MICA MFA Graduates III

Studio Visits with Songyhun Moon, Shruti Balasubramanian, Sara Austin, Ashton Phillips, and Arson Navarro

July 19, 2023

Words: Cara Ober

Photography: Jill Fannon



Shruti Balasubramanian, [Graphic Design MA](https://shrutibalasubramanian.com)
Web: shrutibalasubramanian.com

Where were you, geographically, creatively, and/or professionally, before attending MICA?

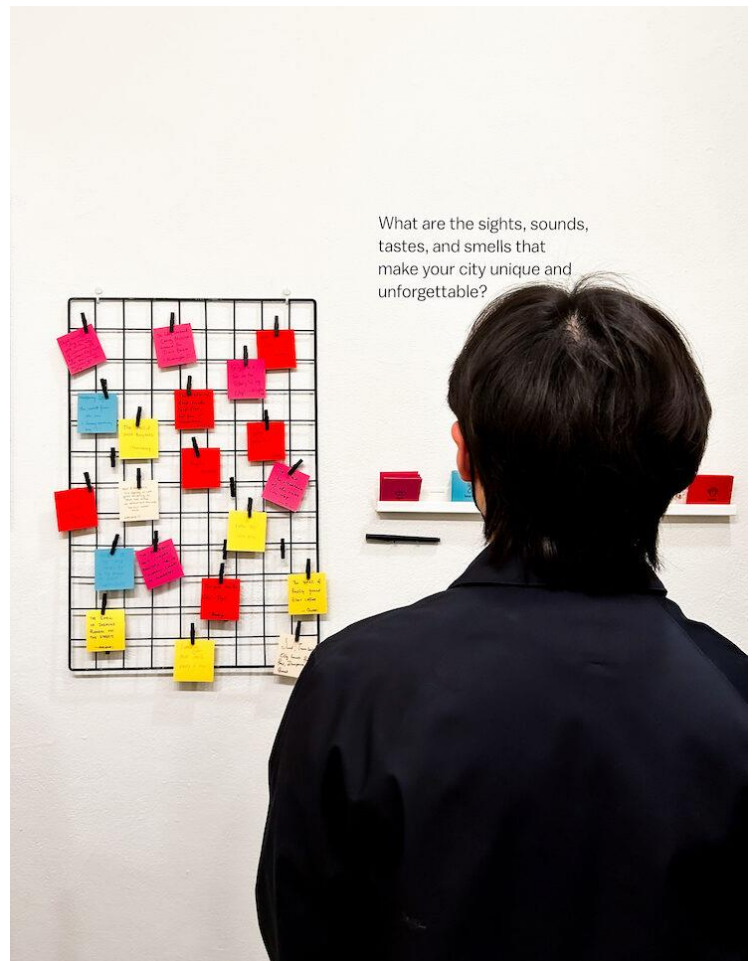
Before attending MICA, I was geographically based in Chennai, India, where I completed my undergraduate degree in architecture from Chennai Academy of Architecture and Design. Creatively, I was exploring different aspects of design, particularly in architecture, and realised my love for graphic design. I started freelancing back in India during my 5th year of architecture and realised that's where my heart is. This was a turning point where I decided to switch to graphic design while still building on everything I learned in architecture.

Professionally, I have completed a few internships in architecture firms in India. Yet, I was seeking to expand my horizons and explore other avenues in the design world. That's when I decided to apply to MICA's graphic design program, which I believed would offer me an excellent opportunity to learn and grow as a designer.



Why did you select this particular program?

As someone who didn't study graphic or communication design as an undergrad, I found it challenging to create a portfolio for a master's program at a prestigious institute like MICA. However, MICA's exceptional curriculum, including design theory, history, and practice, caught my attention. I knew this program would shape me and give me the creative, critical, and technical skills I desired.



After speaking with MICA alumni about the program, I was convinced it would add more character to my design work and process. Collaboration is crucial for designers today, and this one-year course requires a dedicated effort, but the collaborative environment with my cohort makes it all possible.

The faculty and mentors at MICA have a very subtle way of imparting knowledge. Being renowned designers and leaders in the field, their humility sets an excellent example for every budding designer. The electives offered by MICA give us a great opportunity to specialise in areas of our choice. MICA strikes a balance in electives by including a lot of essential courses for the present and future and practices from the lost art of screenprinting to motion and emerging media.



Tell us about your work. What are your primary materials? What are the main concepts you explore in the work? How do your materials and concepts intersect?

My work explores the intersection between architecture and graphic design and how combining the two can create an immersive experience for visitors. The main focus is on designing for the senses, with touch boards containing objects carefully selected from Baltimore's streets, symbolizing the attributes of Chennai, India. By allowing visitors to interact with the objects, curiosity is sparked, which is further elaborated in the accompanying publication. The use of touch as a learning tool makes it easier for people to remember and learn about the city.

In addition to the touch boards, the branding of the museum is enhanced through posters featuring patterns derived from Kolams- rice flour designs drawn in front of homes in Chennai to welcome prosperity. These patterns are also displayed through a hand-made terracotta hanging installation using air-dry clay and laser-cut acrylic panels, creating a three-dimensional representation of the city's vibrant colours.

The highlight of the project is the prompt wall, where visitors can share memories of their own cities and relate them to Chennai through the senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. Through this interactive display, visitors can engage with the exhibit on a personal level and further immerse themselves in the experience. This interactive element creates a sense of community and shared experience, leaving a lasting impression on visitors.

What have you learned from living in Baltimore? How has your perception of the city changed – from before MICA until now?

As an international student from India, moving to Baltimore for my studies at MICA was a daunting prospect. I was worried about how I would adapt to a new country and whether my own cultural influences would remain unobscured by Western influences. However, Baltimore surprised me in the best way possible.



The city has so much character and celebrates different art styles and cultures, making it an incredibly inclusive place to live. As a person of colour, I never felt like I didn't fit in, which can be a familiar feeling for international students in their first few months.

Despite the program being just one year, Baltimore has given me many great experiences that have helped me grow as a designer. The Inner Harbour specifically caught my eye with its distinctive historical and modern architecture blend. By exploring the architectural details, I gained insights into how historical and contemporary styles can be combined to create innovative and visually striking designs. The waterfront promenade allowed me to connect with the local community and artists showcasing their talent. The stretch of the street around the Washington Monument was one beautiful place that made me feel I was in a historical time with its well-preserved grand mansions, churches, etc. Overall, my perception of Baltimore has changed drastically since before MICA. It's a fantastic city I'm proud to have called home for a year.



What is the title of your thesis show? Please give us a sense of depth and breadth of the show, where it is, and how you want it to resonate with viewers?

The Rove of MAA is a living museum that takes visitors on a journey through the rich history of Madras to Chennai, from when it was under British rule to what it is today. My thesis focused on developing a comprehensive 3D model walkthrough of the museum and designing impactful branding and wayfinding signage to enhance the overall visitor experience.

The project's central theme centres on using metaphorical objects to help visitors connect with the city's history. By drawing parallels between the museum's artifacts and the visitors' own city, the design aims to create a more profound sense of connection and understanding. This was achieved by strolling the streets of Baltimore to collect various sensory objects, which visitors can interact with through touch boards that allow them to shake, smell, and hear the objects. This interactive approach enables visitors to connect with the objects more personally, facilitating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the city's history.

My thesis aimed to develop an exhibit on a smaller scale from the living museum I had designed as part of my architecture thesis. The thesis was showcased on MICA's Fox 3 Gallery from March 24- April 9, 2023. The objective of my show was to bridge the gap between architecture and graphic design by incorporating sensory design and branding elements. These elements were crucial to completing the thesis, creating an immersive visitor experience.

Overall, my design aims to provide an immersive, sensory experience that engages visitors and encourages them to connect with the city's rich history more profoundly and meaningfully. By creating an interactive exhibit that draws parallels between different cities, I hope to foster a greater appreciation for cultural diversity and understanding.

What are your post-graduation plans?

After graduation, my goal is to gain experience in the field of design and continue to develop my skills in both spatial and graphic design and use my knowledge to create more immersive and engaging environments for people. In the long term, I aspire to start my own design studio where I can work on projects that I am passionate about and have a positive impact on communities. I believe that design has the power to shape our environments and influence our experiences, and I want to be a part of that process.

To achieve these goals, I plan on networking with professionals in the industry, attending design conferences and workshops, and constantly learning and keeping up with the latest trends and technologies in design.

CAAD Alumni Testimonial

Shruti Balasubramanian

I'm excited to inform that I graduated from MICA recently and completed my thesis successfully.

Building on my BArch thesis at CAAD, I designed an exhibit that brought a smaller-scale version of my living museum to life. The show garnered immense appreciation, and I was featured in the esteemed Baltimore magazine, BMore Art, for my work.

For my graphic design thesis, I delved deeper into my B.Arch special study, sensory immersion in architecture and designed an immersive experience for the visitors that activates all five senses.

Thank you Director Vinodh Vijayakumar sir for all your help throughout my undergrad. I'm happy that I've carved out a niche for myself trying to bring in the best of both worlds in all my designs. I owe it to you and all my mentors, especially Ezhil ma'am for pushing my boundaries my thesis. I'm very happy that the thesis project didn't just end with my undergrad. I hope to create and dig deeper into many more exhibit designs, making it a complete project that showcases the history of Madras to Chennai through the senses, in the future.

