Varanasi was described to me as a small city- a centre of pilgrimage and most definitely the “real India”. Funeral pyres by the side of the Ganges were also mentioned but when I first encountered these it came as a bit of a shock.
I’d never been to India; this was one of many quite staggering things I saw in the first few weeks. I confess I was a bit daunted by it all at first.

We arrived at the Alice Boner House by negotiating rickshaws, chaotic traffic and cows. Then more cows on the ghats meandering between people when I had my initial walkabout.



And on street corners



Further along the ghats I discovered the golden boat- an amazing image of a vessel glowing in the foggy light- used for very special occasions I imagine.



Regular trails of different religious castes and groups streamed on foot along the main Banaras Road near to the Alice Boner Institute – all heading towards the holy ghat of Assi which is the southernmost ghat. There were also regular bands of drummers and wedding parties to see from the studio window- all on their way to bathe in the holy river Ganga.



View from the top floor studio



Street procession collecting gifts and money.

My guide called Varanasi the place of “burning and learning” in a reference to the funeral pyres by the Ganges combined with the double centres of Hinduism and Buddhism- the first Buddhist sermon having taken place at nearby, Sarnath.



Dhamekh Stupa at Sarnath

There’s also huge Muslim population. I was taken there to see the hand loom weavers and dyers who turned out to be mostly the Muslims.



Dyers



Talking to the hand loom weavers with one of my drawings to see if it might be possible to use one to make a piece of weaving. Yes but so complex to plot using the computer then make unfortunately it’s for another time..

The first-floor studio in Alice Boner Institute



I bought pigments from the market, but they really were unusable and needed fixing.



Some unfixed traces..



Boy with kite getting ready for the annual kite festival on 15th January.



The freezing fog meant I started making small works on paper quite quickly.



The morning yoga sessions ensuring an early alarm call!

I made watercolours on the roof when the weather improved, and photos of the local Langur colony.



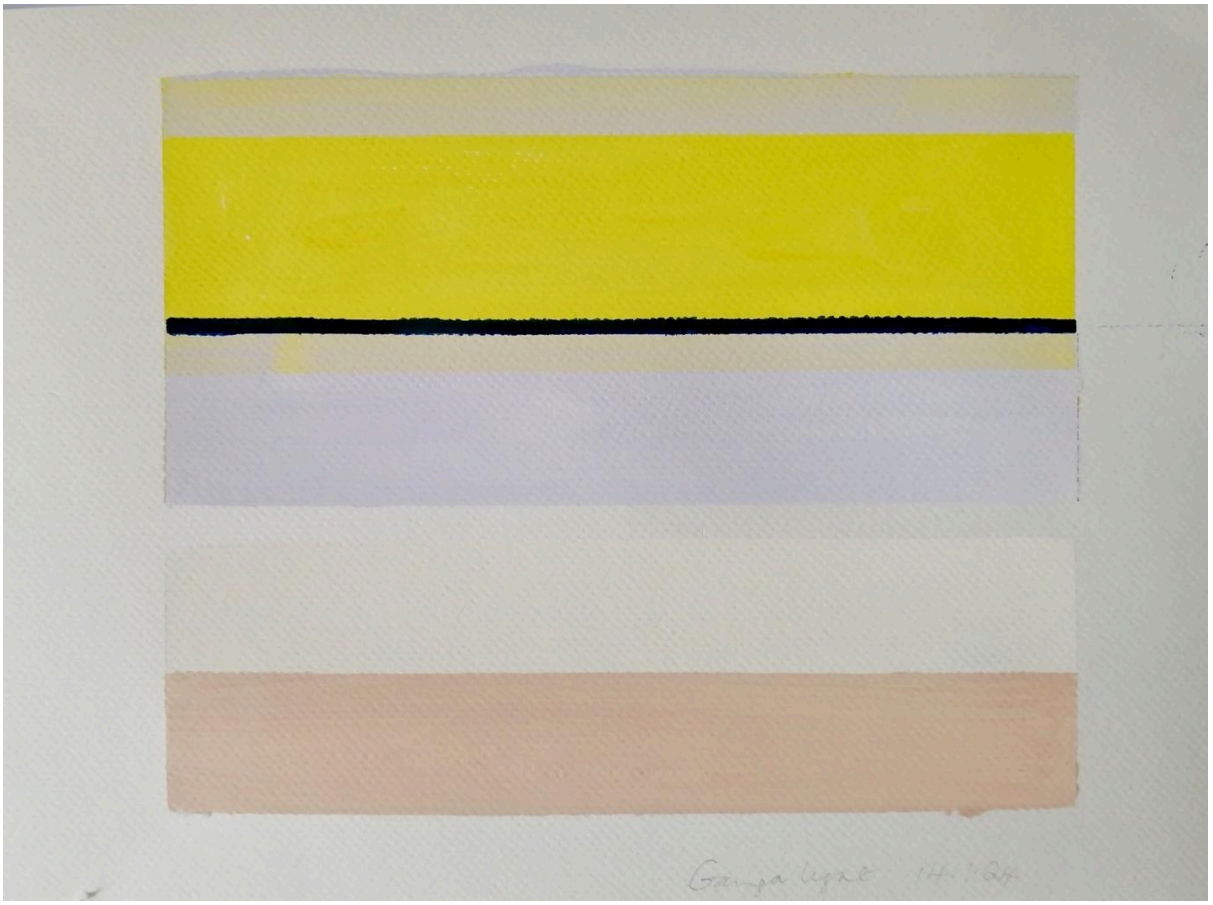
Hanuman





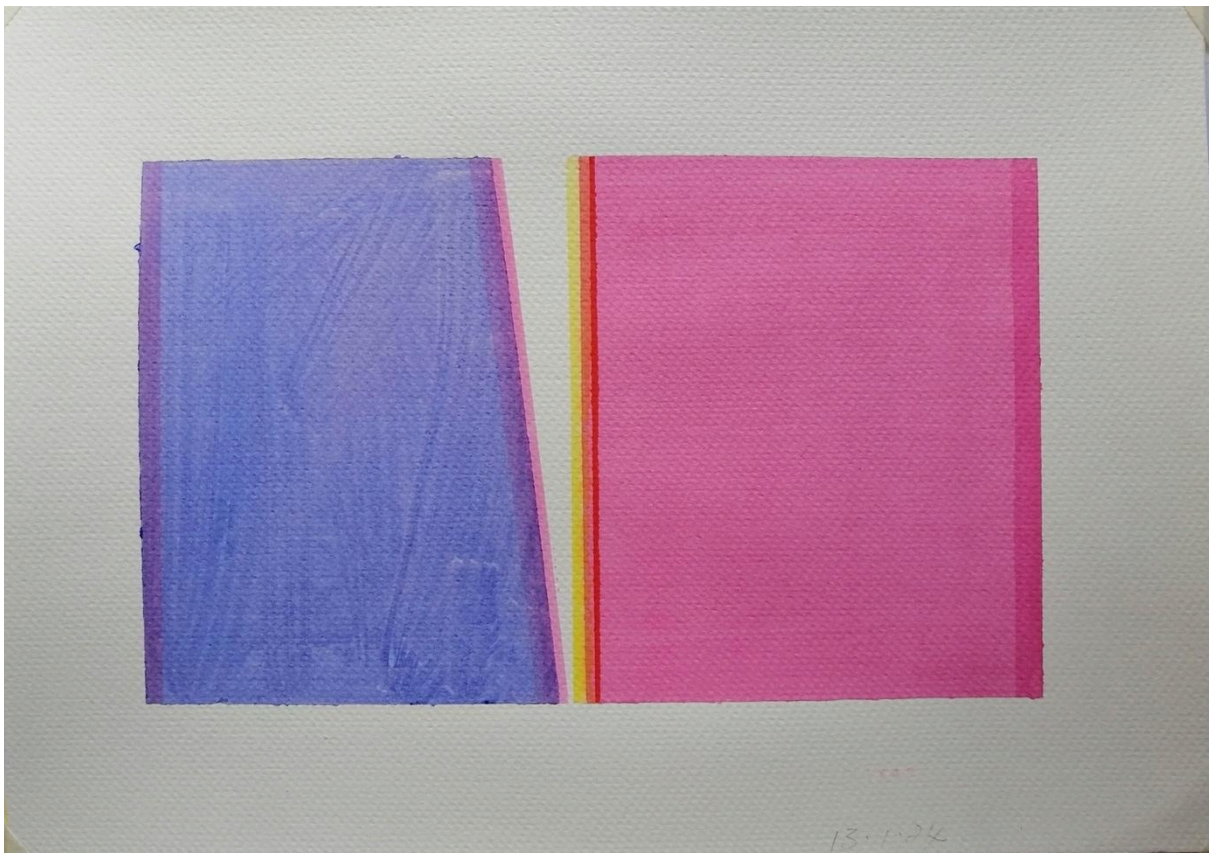


Pages from sketch books including views across the Ganges from the roof.
The permanent river mists and fog meant there were no real sharp outlines, so I translated theses as various admixture bands. I felt I had to start with the language I knew and where I left off from in London.

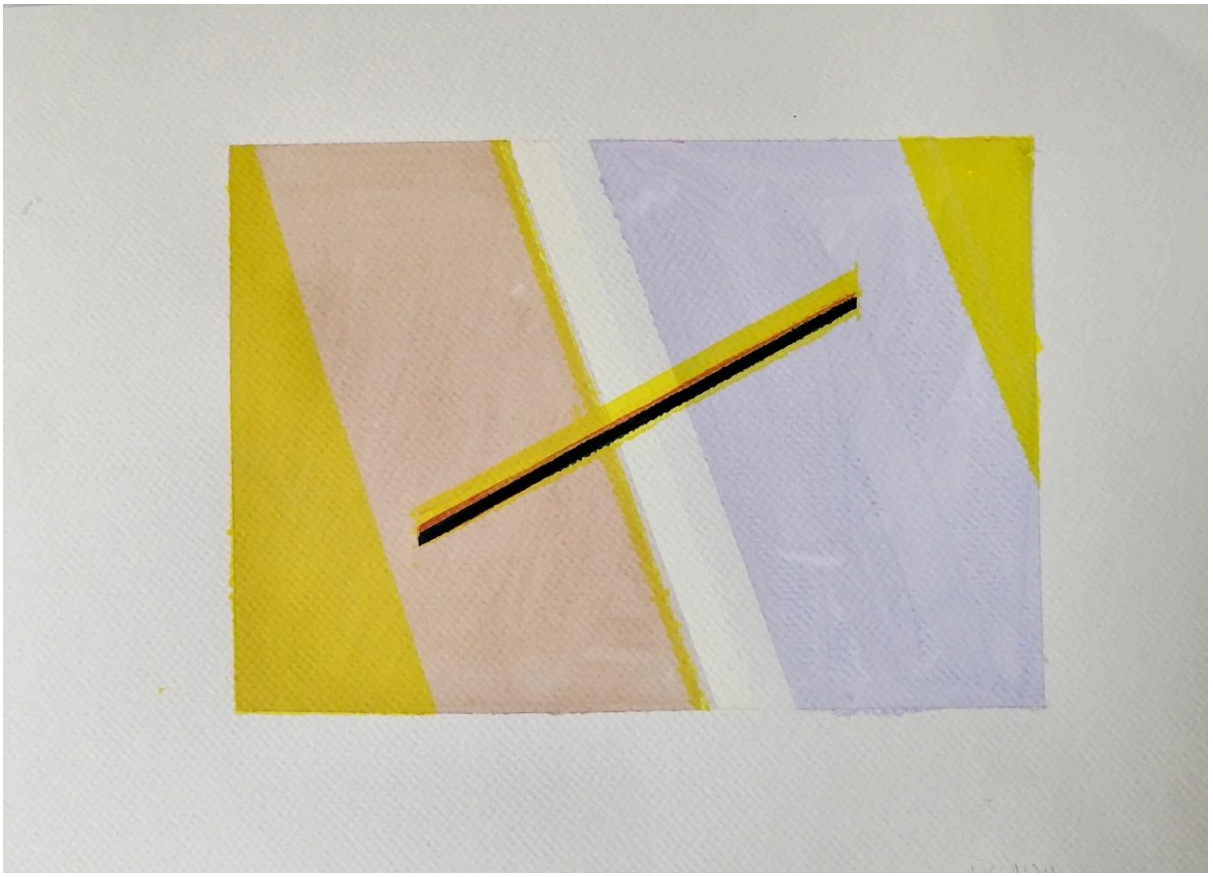


Ganga Bands gouache on paper January 2024

So, there was the indistinguishable light and fogs making silver grey vapours and then the vibrant saturated colours of the fabrics and clothing and temple paints. I decided to make two distinct groups of works on paper.

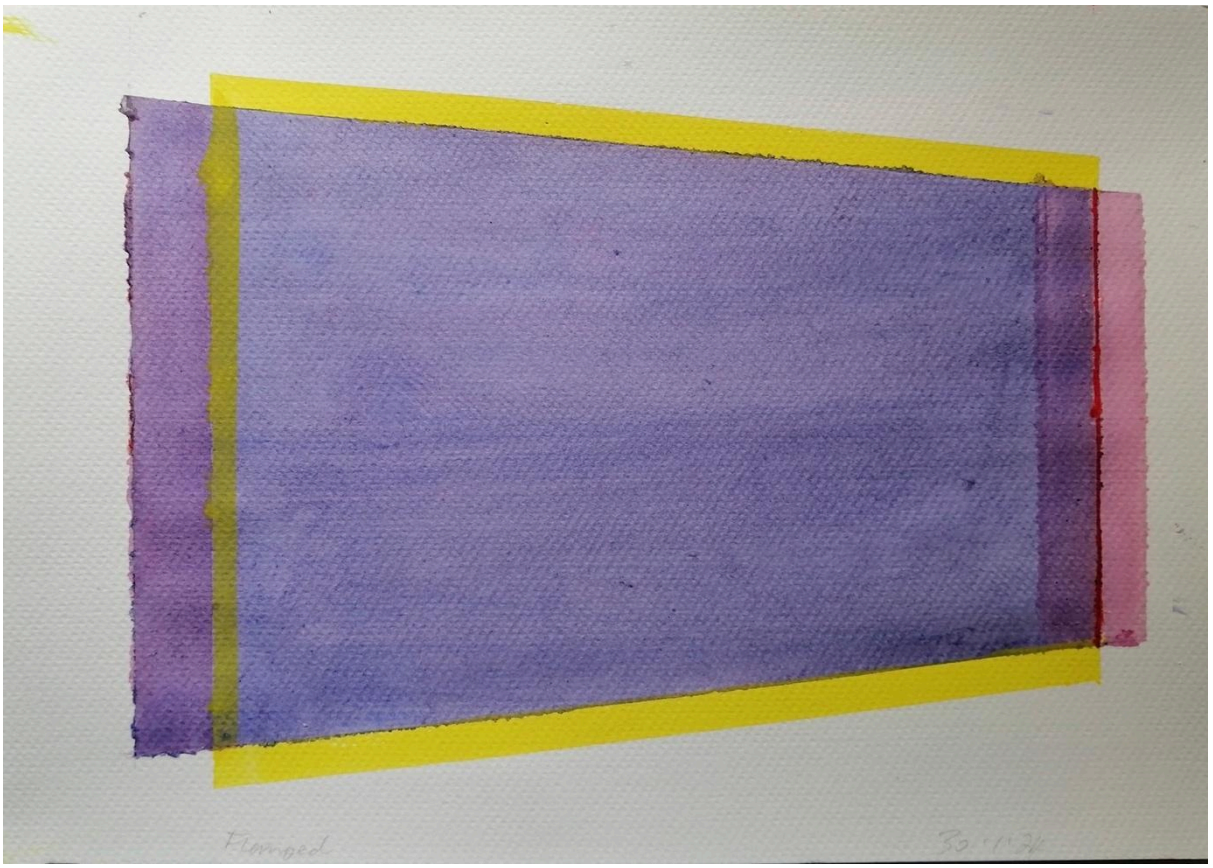


Untitled acrylic on paper January 2024

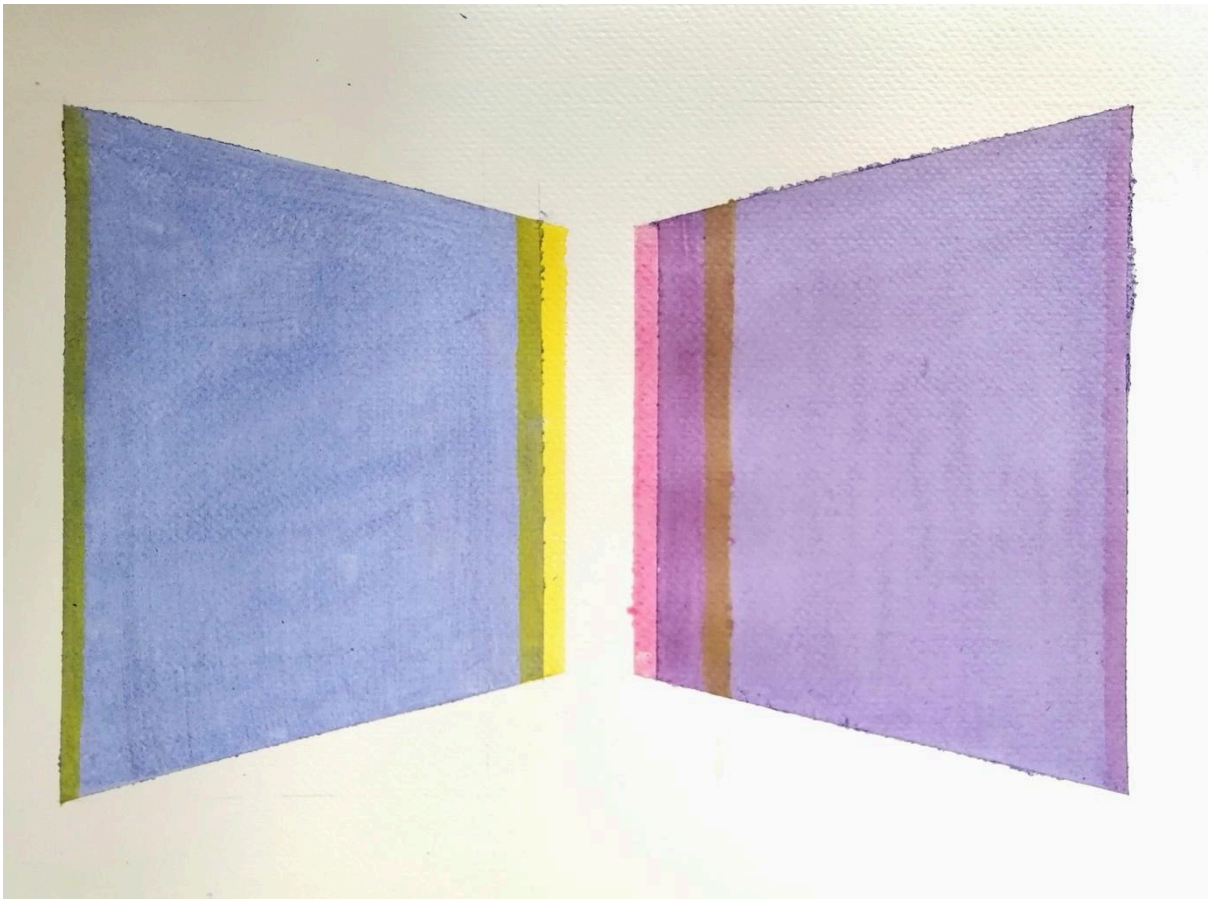


Untitled acrylic on paper January 2024

There was a constantly glowing screen too. Part of Modi’s development of life on the Ghats (which include the morning yoga sessions).



Screen, acrylic on paper February 2024.



The screen was always seen from and angle.

More Modi initiatives meant

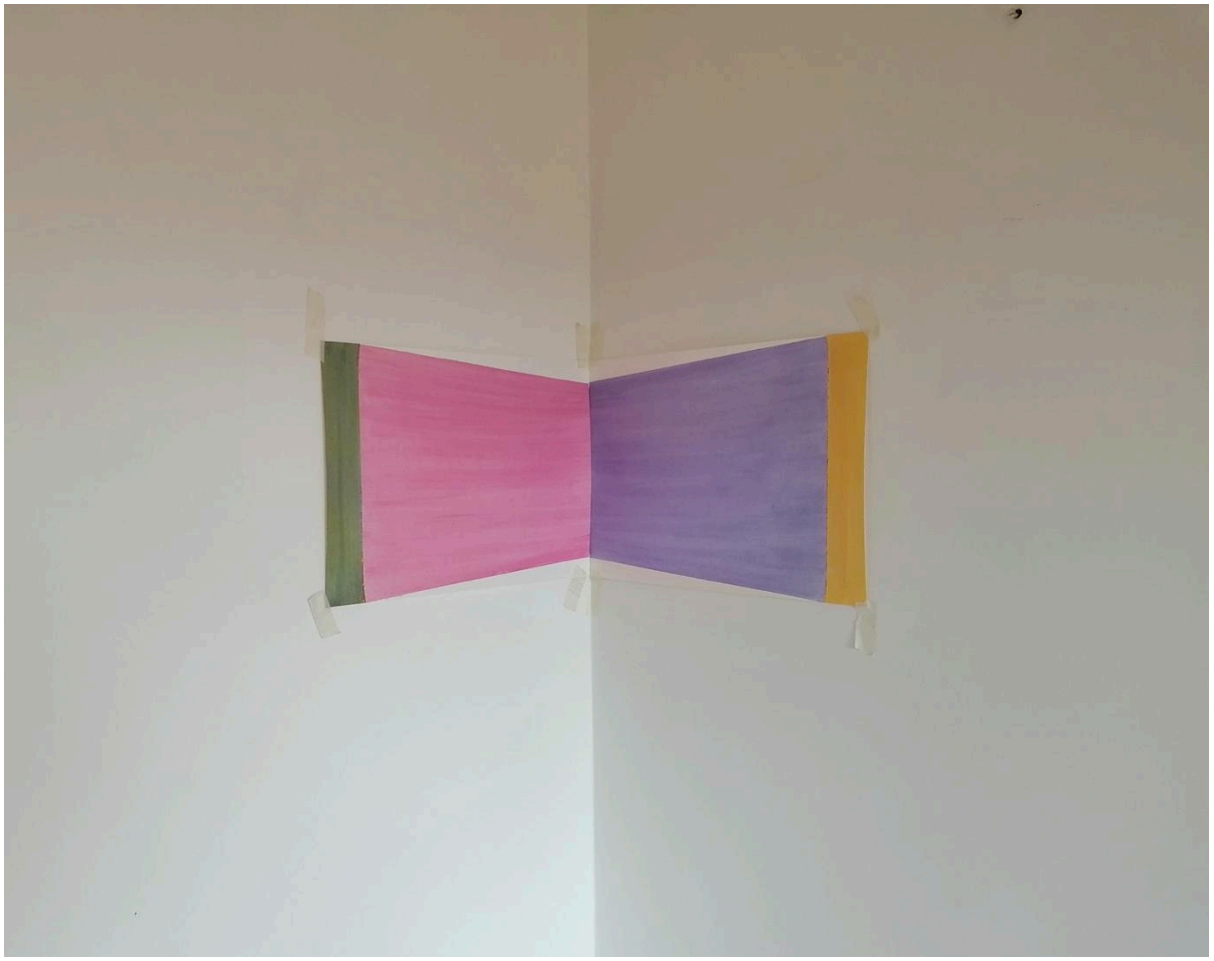


- free classical concerts and dance.

I moved studios after three weeks to the top floor



I began working on installed corner pieces. Something I’m developing now back in London.



The Ghats were a constant source of wonderment and colour





Red House at Lanca

As were the boat trips







February 11th, 2024. With Umesh and Shivnath at my Open Studio event.

With much gratitude and thanks to all the staff at Alice Boner House, including Anoop Kumar, Harsha Vinay, Umesh, Shivnath and the brilliant cook, Pushpa.

And with many, many thanks to The Shelagh Cluett Trust for sending me on this life changing journey.

Sharon Hall 9.3.24