Indian Artist Explores Absence Through Presence

MUMBAI — For many artists, the creative process is about making something from nothing. But Neha Choksi seeks to do just the opposite: to make nothing out of something.

“How do you form nothing? How do you perform absence?” Ms. Choksi, 39, said in an interview at her home in Mumbai. “These are all repeating questions.”

To address these questions in “Echo of the Inside (Column Cube I),” shown at the Frieze London Sculpture Park in 2011, Ms. Choksi first cast a 50-centimeter, or 20-inch, cube in cement grout and built a single mold around it with latex and cheesecloth. The mold was then cut, yanked off the cube in pieces and reassembled. This process was repeated until the bits of the mold could not be put together again, for a total of seven cubes stacked on top of one another.

“I actually am valuing presence through acts of erasure and absenting,” said Ms. Choksi, who works mainly with sculptures and video. “To make the sculpture, I had to somehow dematerialize the mold. That double tension...
between making something and diminishing something — that exists in most of my work.”

That process is also on display at the Frieze Art Fair in London, which opens Thursday and where the Mumbai gallery Project 88, which has represented Ms. Choksi since 2008, is showing prints from the artist’s “Houseplant and Sun Quotation” series. The prints were made by placing leafy plants near paper that had been photochemically treated with palladium salts. As the sun’s rays fell on the vegetation and paper, shadows were captured as pale shapes, making a negative impression of the plants.

Ms. Choksi’s work, which has been bought by the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in New Delhi and the University of Southampton in England, among others, does not leave those collectors unmoved. “The emotive force in her work, the way she uses images, draws you very much closer,” said Roobina Karode, curator of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, who acquired Ms. Choksi’s short film “Leaf Fall” after seeing it at the India Art Summit in Delhi in 2009. “Even though her images are about erasure and absence and loss, they make you think about renewal.”

To demonstrate absence in her art, Ms. Choksi remains very much present. In the name of her work, she has lost consciousness, fallen silent for 10 days and submerged herself in a lake.

“What struck me most about her practice is the risk she takes and the vulnerable positions she often forces herself into,” Vikki McInnes, director of the Margaret Lawrence Gallery in Melbourne, said in an e-mail. As part of a recent exhibition, the gallery showed Ms. Choksi’s short film “Minds to Lose,” for which the artist had herself anesthetized.

Ms. Choksi’s interest in absence and erasure does not stem from a minimalist impulse. “It’s simply a desire to clarify life in materialist terms,” she said. “The business of living is the business of dying, and how do you make sense of all that? I guess this is my way of making sense of it, this grappling with materials, stuff, even with the quick of life.”

Born in New Jersey, Ms. Choksi moved to Mumbai at the age of 4 but returned to the United States to attend the University of California, Los Angeles, as an undergraduate and later Columbia University in New York for a master’s degree. She began working in Mumbai in 2006, when a friend invited her to help shoot two films for the first Indian entry for the Venice Architecture Biennale. After splitting her time between Los Angeles and Mumbai for four years, she moved to India in 2010.

In Mumbai, she found a home at Project 88. Sree Banerjee Goswami, owner of the gallery, first met Ms. Choksi in 2007, when the artist was working on a theatrical exhibition at the gallery with Rehaan Engineer, an artist based in New Delhi whose judgment Ms. Goswami trusted.

“What’s striking about Neha’s work is her persistent and slow engagement with processes of time and change and consciousness,” Mr. Engineer said in an e-mail.

Impressed by Ms. Choksi, Ms. Goswami gave her free rein for an installation at Project 88, and since then the gallery has showcased her works in a number of solo and group exhibitions. This year is the fourth Frieze London for Project 88 since 2009, and the gallery has shown Ms. Choksi’s work each time.

In 2007, Ms. Choksi began developing a video trilogy centered on the idea of absence. “It was a period of time when I felt it was important for me to figure out a way to perform absence and to delete myself,” she said. “I wasn’t going to obviously end my life, but how do I approach that sort of sense of ending in a creative way that allows for a multiplicity of meanings for the onlooker?”
Ms. Choksi bought two goats, a donkey and a sheep at a market and filmed them at a farm in Delhi as a veterinarian fed them an anesthetic. She also filmed herself being anesthetized by a doctor, drawing parallels between her state of unconsciousness and that of the animals.

“I wanted to put myself into the category of animal,” she said. “The simplest level of being that I could think of at that point in time was to have very few needs and wants and to live in the present and not to have access to grammar and syntax and what that implies — which is a sense of time and a sense of loss.”

At the 2008 Khoj Live Performance festival in New Delhi, Ms. Choksi took a sedative for her piece “Petting Zoo,” which left her unconscious on the floor of a tent for two hours. Milling around her were the same domesticated animals she had bought, as well as a doctor and veterinarian.

Attendees were free to touch all the creatures. “Some people tried to tickle me,” Ms. Choksi said. “Some people petted me, some people tried to wake me up or to get a rise from me, like trying to get the funny spots where you would automatically jerk, but of course I didn’t because I was drugged out.”

Footage from the farm and from “Petting Zoo” was incorporated into “Minds to Lose,” the first of a video trilogy, which was included in this season’s Artists’ Film International by the Whitechapel Gallery in London.

Of all Ms. Choksi’s pieces, “Minds to Lose” might be the one most likely to provoke anxiety in viewers. It shows the animals taking shaky steps after eating the sedatives and slumping to the ground, glassy eyed, as the drugs kick in. Ms. McInnes of the Margaret Lawrence Gallery recalled watching the video with a visitor who cried, “Is the goat going to be slaughtered?” (For the record, no animals were harmed.)

In the second video of the series, “Leaf Fall,” which was acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia for its seventh Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Ms. Choksi had actors strip the leaves off a peepul tree, which is sacred to Hindus and Buddhists, until a single autumnal sprig was left at the top.

“The only way to appreciate that particular leaf was through the absence and the elimination of the other leaves,” Ms. Choksi said.

The final part of the trilogy, “Iceboat,” is being shown at Project 88 and at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, California. For that artwork, Ms. Choksi made a boat out of ice and filmed herself rowing it in an Indian lake for 45 minutes until the ice melted.

“At some point I’m actually rowing in circles, which is part of the point,” she said. “Perhaps it’s a way for me to talk about the joys as well as the exasperations of daily living, and a way to talk about the body and all the pressures that a body is succumbing to through this extension of my body, which is this boat.”