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QUICK 7 WITH SONIA MEHRA CHAWLA

Text by Zaral Shah

Winner of the Lalit Kala Akademi's National Award for Painting, Sonia Mehra Chawla's creations are often intensely coloured by her relationship with and scrutiny of nature. In conversation with Verve, she talks about finding beauty in fragility and her upcoming projects in India and abroad



Crater Fluids



Scapelands IV



Sonia Mehra Chawla at London Print Studio, United Kingdom

1. What sparked your interest in art?

I was passionate about drawing and painting since childhood. Fine arts was one of my subjects in school, and it seemed natural for me to gravitate towards a higher education in visual arts. I got a few interesting opportunities to exhibit my works, a few important residencies that helped my work evolve and then one thing led to another.

2. What is your working philosophy?

I embrace the fragile, vulnerable, fearful and deathly aspects of nature. I am inspired by a way of living that finds beauty in imperfection and accepts the natural cycle of growth and decay. It is the fragility and impermanence of things, and the idea of finding growth in loss, which make them more beautiful.

3. How would you define the challenges and advantages of your field?

To a great extent, there is a creative freedom in our field, one that allows us to think, express and articulate our thoughts and concerns — which, I would say, is an advantage. Being creative is not simple, and every artist encounters a creative block at times. The challenge is to keep oneself inspired while exploring new dimensions and possibilities within one's practice.

4. What inspired you to travel to the natural reserves and biospheres in India?

Several years ago, as a young adult, I was drawn to the majestic anatomy of the mangrove plant. It lives in hostile environmental conditions and exhibits highly evolved morphological and physiological qualities. It forms an integral part of our coastal bio-shield. Gradually, deeper associations were invoked through my recurrent experiential journeys into the vast wetlands.

5. *Scapelands*, your upcoming project, explores our tryst with and within nature. Tell us about this exhibition.

Scapelands is an ongoing project. Comprising photopolymer etchings, photography, videos, and paintings in mixed media, the body of work presents my continuing engagement with the natural and organic world. The works are a result of several years of research and documentation of 'sites' in diverse locations. My artistic practice is often concerned with the investigation of nature that is defined not just as the physical world around us but also comprises, in a sense, our physical, metaphorical and ecological interactions with it.

6. How would you say India's contemporary art scene is changing?

I can see positive developments and am extremely happy to see a younger generation of artists focussing on the content of their works, and evolving their practice through critical thinking. The last decade has seen the emergence of dynamic art galleries which are pushing boundaries and conventional norms by showcasing art that is both interesting and engaging.

7. What are you looking forward to in the future?

There are several projects in the pipeline for me. I am currently working on *Critical Membrane*, a project in collaboration with M.S. Swaminathan Research Institute India and British Council. The ongoing project is an extension of *Scapelands*, with a focus on the coastal ecosystems of India. In addition, I have been invited by printshop Atelier Tom Blaess to be a part of their *Special Projects* in Bern in Switzerland in 2016. I will also be collaborating with master printer Tom Blaess to produce a body of work which involves layering six diverse printmaking techniques, on a single surface.

Scapelands is on display at Tarq, Mumbai (F35/36, Dhanraj Mahal, Apollo Bunder, Colaba) from August 20, 2015 to September 16, 2015.

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