

RELATIVE VALUE: FAMILY SKETCH

By Anuka Roy, Mumbai Mirror | Updated: Apr 8, 2018, 12.00 AM IST



Graphic designer Sameer Kulavoor, who has recently started working with new media, and his typographer sister Zeenat discuss acrylics and Urdu calligraphy.

Sameer Kulavoor has a story to share about how he discovered the old-world office space — with a slanted ceiling and single, attic-style window — that houses Bombay Duck Designs, a company he founded in 2008 and which he now runs with his sister Zeenat, a typographer, calligrapher and graphic designer. “I was talking to the guy who runs the pan stall in my neighbourhood in Mazgaon and he told me ‘ek jagah hai sir, dikhau kya?’ (I know of a space, should I show it to you?) Though dimly lit, the property had so much character — that immediately decided it for me,” he says.

Sameer is fascinated by ‘character’, how traits can combine, like colours in a palette, to render a subject unique. It’s also the theme that connects the artworks he’s created for A Man of the Crowd, his ongoing solo exhibition at Colaba’s Tarq art gallery. The show is a celebration of the distinct identities of various cities and their colourful residents. And, with the show, the graphic designer and illustrator — months ago, he was in the

news for creating a first-of-its-kind virtual reality experience linked to the design of a celebration can for an energy drink — has made a foray into the world of acrylic paintings and terracotta figurines.

“If Sameer were to say ‘let’s make a film’ tomorrow, it wouldn’t surprise me,” says Zeenat. It’s not a complaint. “Sameer’s spontaneity and his experiments inspire my work too,” she says.

Reminiscing about their earliest collaborations, Zeenat says, “When we were children, we would do these fun, summer art projects, depending on what materials we could get our hands on — once we discovered a pile of leftover tiles, and we painted over them, and another time we made a tree out of cotton rolls.” Sameer adds, “When the film Titanic released, we chiselled a piece of thermocol into a cruise liner. In hindsight, we can see how the pastime shaped our passion for art.”

Though both Sameer and Zeenat attended Sydenham College and then the JJ School of Art, they were drawn to different subjects. Zeenat has, thus far, focused on Arabic calligraphy. She has worked on the script that adorns Mozez Singh’s furniture line for premium lifestyle store Good Earth, and, in collaboration with Divya Thakur’s design firm Design Temple, on the Urdu lettering for the title of Mira Nair’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Zeenat says she learned how to read Urdu when, as a child, she was briefly made to attend a madrasa. “Later, when I was at JJ (School of Art), I got a chance to revisit the language. We were assigned a project on Indian scripts, and since everyone seemed reluctant to take up Urdu, I picked the language. This was almost a decade ago, and over the years, perfecting Nastaliq calligraphy (the Perso-Arabic script that Urdu is written in) and interpreting it in different mediums has become something of a passion.”

Though there is a tendency to link the language to Islam, Zeenat points out that her projects never have a religious slant. Her latest installation, titled *Harmony*, created for Facebook’s Hyderabad office, is an arrangement of the words of a Nida Fazli poem (its title translates as ‘The world is as much yours as it is mine’). Carved out of wood, the words, ‘Ek hi dharti hum sab ghar jitna tera utna mera, dukh sukh ka yeh jantar mantra jitna tera utna mera’ serve more than an ornamental purpose in the office; they also double up as shelves.

Together, the Kulavoors also publish zines; their first projects in this area were *Xeroxwallah* (a tribute to the city’s photocopiers, 2010) and *The Ghoda Cycle Project* (2012) which documented the cycle culture of urban and rural India.

A fan of the acclaimed British fashion designer Paul Smith, whose love for cycling is well known, Sameer mailed Smith a copy of *The Ghoda Cycle Project*. Smith surprised him with a hand-written reply, and Sameer and Smith subsequently developed a line of T-shirts together.

In 2017, Sameer and Zeenat worked on public art projects. Sameer created an imaginary high-end perfumerie (Parfum Sassoon Showroom) for the Sassoon Dock Art Project — using the fish stench of the dock to mock the culture of consumerism. Zeenat, on the other hand, worked with Karachi-based Sanki King (Abdullah Ahmed Khan), for a project titled *Pehle Aap*, a sort-of conversation between the two cities through wall murals.

The siblings don’t believe in longterm plans. “We only plan ahead for the next five days,” says Sameer. “And sometimes even when we get started, we have no idea if what we’re doing is really going to go somewhere. If either of us is inspired by something or decide to take up a project, the only thing we know for certain is that we have each other’s full support.”



Sameer (34) and Zeenat Kulavoor (29)