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In Conversation With Nibha Sikander

Monsoon Malabar



NIBHA SIKANDER, LITTLE YAM HAWK MOTH (DECONSTRUCTED), COLOURED PAPER, ARCHIVAL PAPER, PAPER-CUT

Having spent a considerable amount of her childhood — and currently living — in the coastal town of Murud-Janjira, Maharashtra, artist Nibha Sikander's fascination for the natural world comes as no surprise. Her practice involves using layer upon layer of intricately cut out, coloured card paper to create lifelike critters, birds and moths — both real and imagined — in all their marbled and mottled glory.

At a time when the ominousness of climatic concerns looms large, Nibha's work — propelled by a meticulous, almost meditative process, like a patient observer making field notes — attempts to quietly engage with the larger question of preserving the wonders that nature offers. We were introduced to her work at TARQ, Mumbai, where her solo exhibition titled *Wandering Violin Mantis* was held in 2019.

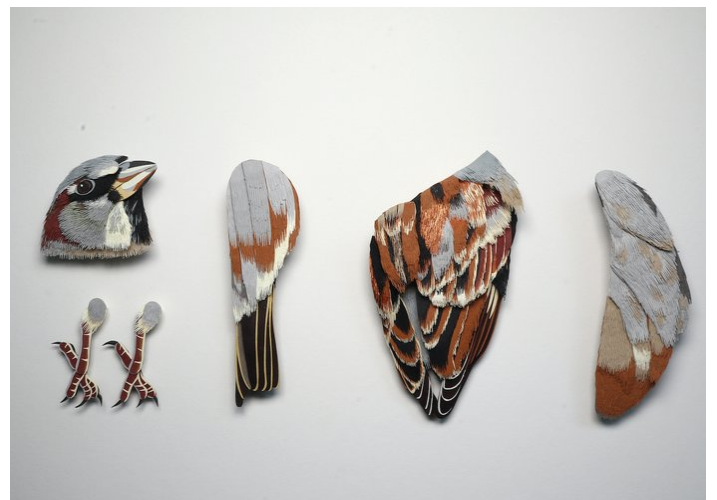
Nibha tells us about her current work, her detail-driven process, and how she is inspired by her surroundings.

When did you first start working with paper?

I have been using a self-taught 'paper-cut technique' for the last 20 years. When I first started cutting paper, I made simple, abstract forms and shapes from a single sheet, like a stencil. After a while, I tried sticking paper cut-outs one below the other to create layers. These two-dimensional pieces worked for me for some time but I wanted to see how far I could push the medium of paper, so I began to experiment by layering paper. As I moved ahead, I also experimented with having thick layers of paper sandwiched between the cut-outs of two sheets of paper. The work now had the body and could be viewed in relief which made the forms more realistic. Thus when I did start working with my series on insects and moths, it was much easier for me to imagine what the subject would look like [sculpted] in paper.



NIBHA SIKANDER, ORANGE UNDERWING SNOUT TIGER, COLOURED PAPER, ARCHIVAL PAPER, PAPER-CUT



NIBHA SIKANDER, HOUSE SPARROW, COLOURED PAPER, ARCHIVAL PAPER, PAPER-CUT

What draws you into recreating insects and other creatures inspired from nature?

A couple of years after graduating I felt I needed to re-think the work I was doing at the time and look at myself and understand what made me the person I am. I realised the answer lay in where I

came from, my formative memories and experiences, the places I grew up in, and my family's history that has shaped the way I look at the world around. As a child, and subsequently as an adult, I've spent a lot of time in my family homes in Kihim and Janjira, located along the Konkan coast [in Maharashtra's Raigad district], surrounded by nature, which obviously has had a big impact on me, more than I had initially thought. I come from a family of naturalists who have been deeply involved in protecting and preserving the natural habitat. I feel this has subconsciously rubbed off on me, and later, has also led me to create my paper-cut works based on studying birds, moths and insects.

**How do you go about researching and planning each series?
Could you describe your process?**

Well, it really does help that I live in Murud-Janjira. We have the coastline running right in the front of our house and the highly biodiverse Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary at the back, and so our place gets a host of birds, moths and insects, depending upon the time of year. This allows me to observe the species up close. My process usually starts with photographing and documenting the moths/insects, which then becomes my reference material while I am working. Birds are difficult to capture and observe in detail so I usually have books as well as images from the internet that I refer to. On the other hand, the process is much easier with moths and insects because I'm able to take the photographs myself, from all angles, including the many magnified details which aid me a lot in my process, helping to recreate them as realistically as possible.



NIBHA SIKANDER, INSECT PARTS, COLOURED PAPER, ARCHIVAL PAPER, PAPER-CUT

Tell us about your insect collection.

Most of my references are from photographs and images from books and not so much looking at the real species. While I have, in the last year, been collecting actual specimens in the hope of learning insect and moth preservation, it is in its very early stages so I don't really know where it will lead me to but I am really excited at the prospect of learning the preservation technique.

What inspired you to set up your studio in Murud-Janjira?

My family has had a home in Murud-Janjira for many years, so I have been coming here since I was a child. I love being here and always found myself sad to leave, so about five years ago, my husband and I moved here. It was perfect for me because I would be able to observe the biodiversity up close which has helped my process and work immensely.



MOTHS AND OTHER INSECTS

**Has the pandemic affected your practice or process in any way?**

Unlike most people in the city who have been confined to their homes, I've been able to move about freely within our property, which is like a jungle in itself. So my process — which includes documentation of these various species — has not really been affected. As I live far from the city, I have developed a habit since the last few years of stocking up all the art material I might need, so thankfully I did not run out of anything during the pandemic, and was able to work without my practice getting affected much. The effects of climate change definitely impact our environment directly, and, in turn, the species that inhabit it, which I am aware of. This makes me feel that it is even more necessary to document them.

What are you currently working on?

The works I am currently working on are a continuation of my last series. I am enlarging the moths and insects, which allows me to go into even more detail. I am not only studying the forms as I was doing previously, but also abstracting further and looking into the textures, patterns and colours of each form with a more magnified view.

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NIBHA SIKANDER, NEGATIVE, COLOURED PAPER, ARCHIVAL PAPER, PAPER-CUT

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