



lounge

SATURDAY, JANUARY 27 2024

THE MIDDLE EAST AS AN ARTS HUB

The location of the Middle East—and its rich diaspora community—makes it a unique intersection of the West and the Global South. The art that is showcased here offers a window to best practices from across the globe

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HIGHWAY BUILDING TO GET ₹50,000 CRORE BOOST | PAGE 16

THE ART SPECIAL

ART, DESIGN AND CRAFT ARE NO LONGER BOUND BY SILOS. A GROWING TRIBE OF ARTIST-DESIGNERS IS BLURRING THE LINES THROUGH THE EMERGING GENRE OF COLLECTIBLE DESIGN



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Everything you need to know about India Art Fair 2024

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A NOTE FROM
THE EDITOR

SHALINI UMACHANDRAN



A part of 'Silken Passage', a 28x8ft multi-layered brass mural by Vikram Goyal Studio. COURTESY VIKRAM GOYAL STUDIO

A season for art and artistry

Art always stirs curiosity—whether we are touched or baffled by an artist's work, we are inquisitive about what prompted them to create it. Sometimes it's a piece of text or a discarded item, at other times the inspiration is current affairs or nature. All of these concerns of artists are reflected in the pages of our art special, timed as usual just ahead of the annual India Art Fair (1-4 February) in Delhi. We go a little further this year, as our arts writer Avantika Bhuyan, the driving force behind this issue, visits the studios of artists to understand what goes on inside and how everyday materials acquire such powerful meanings in artists' hands. With technology, design, speculative architecture and gaming entering the world of art, the studio is no longer a space filled with paint-spattered canvases, but more like a laboratory for hard

work with hard drives, gaming consoles and welding tools. On a similar note, our deep dive into the trend of collectible design, which is finally catching up in India, lays bare new ways of looking at design—where innovation, creativity, form and materiality combine with function to create everyday objects that are works of art. In some ways, these objects—conceptual chairs, benches, lamps, mirrors and more—are more accessible to people, who are able to quickly grasp its use as well as its artistry.

A little further from home, the Middle East has become one of the most exciting places to be as an artist, a curator or a gallerist. It is not just Dubai, but cities such as Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Sharjah and ALUla that are buzzing with art activity. Biennales and art show-cases, massive museums and art and cultural institutions are turning the focus on modern and contemporary art from West and South

Asia and North Africa. Our report examines the factors that have resulted in this transformation and the ethos of collaboration that pervades art institutions in the region.

The best part about art, though, is not reading about it or collecting it. The best thing is its power to move us and make us feel like we're seeing an emotion brought to life. As Toni Morrison said in a 2013 speech, "Art reminds us that we belong here." And so, once you're done reading all the stories in our art special, go out and see an exhibition or visit a gallery in your city—and to help you do that, we've got a list of the best shows across the country that are opening this week.

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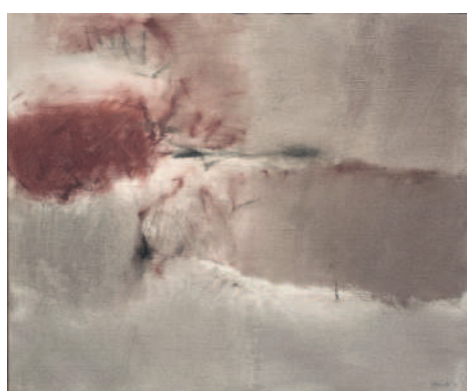
YOUR GUIDE TO
ART SHOWS TO VISIT

From internationally acclaimed Alicja Kwade's solo exhibition to the third edition of Jaipur Art Week, a compilation of the shows you must not miss



A GODDESS FOR ALL TIMES

1 A fearsome goddess, a divine mother, a champion for the disenfranchised, and a symbol for freedom...the idea of Goddess Kali and what she signifies has changed with time. DAG's exhibition, *Kali: Reverence & Rebellion*, draws upon artworks from the 1800s to the present period to trace the deity's pervasive influence in the country down the ages. The exhibition, as curator Gayatri Singh shares, is divided into sections that chart this evolution. On display are a range of works from sculptures to miniature paintings and prints. At DAG, 22A Janpath Road, Delhi, 3 February-22 March, 11am-7pm.



A HARMONIOUS DIALOGUE

2 Threshold Art Gallery's ongoing exhibition, *Anunada: Between Space*, features works by artists Rajendra Dhawan and Pandit Khairnar. On the face of it, the artists couldn't be more different. Yet, as the name of the exhibition—Sanskrit for consequent sound—alludes, their language of abstraction echoes a similar tone. Earth tones dominate their canvases, conveying a harmonious dialogue. At Threshold Art Gallery, Sarvodaya Enclave, Delhi, till 1 March, 11am-7pm.



AN ODE TO CREATIVITY

3 The city of Jaipur prepares for a grand week-long celebration of contemporary art with Jaipur Art Week: Edition 3.0. An open and free event for all, it will be held across multiple venues. The art week's programming includes exhibitions, site-specific installations, performances, architecture and food walks, artist-led exhibition tours and workshops with artists and artisans. With Indian and international artists participating, highlights include the unveiling of Shilo Shiv Suleman's sculpture, *SHANKHA*; Hasan Shah-ruk'h's immersive solo exhibition, *Bhavamagari—A Journey Into Mythological Science Fiction And Accessibility*; and the announcement of *Hindolo*, a new public artwork by Jaipur-based artist Bhimanshu Pandel. At Albert Hall Museum, Jawahar Kala Kendra, Hawa Mahal, Annapali Museum and Golcha Cinema, Jaipur, till 31 January.

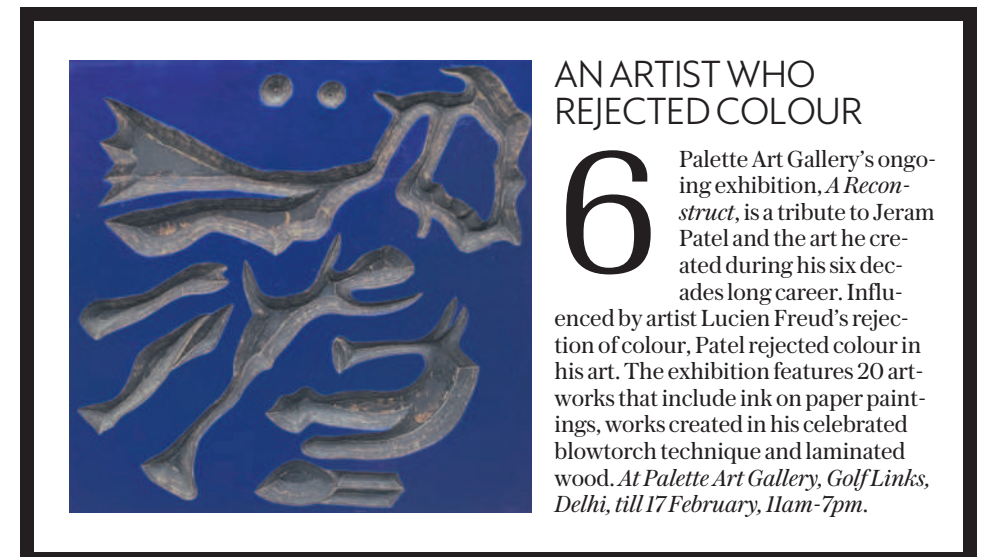
STILL LIFE IN FRESH STROKES

4 Art Alive Gallery's current exhibition is a solo show of eminent artist Shibu Natesan's recent paintings. Titled *Four Favorites And Other Works*, this is a landmark show considering it's Natesan's first in Delhi after 11 years. Being held in parallel to the India Art Fair, the paintings on display, in a departure from his signature style, are smaller and depict objects that represent the debris of our culture, be it a fragment of a head from a doll or discarded figurines of gods and goddesses. The artwork at the heart of the exhibition is *Four Favorites*, a still life of a stack of monographs on four pre-eminent artists from Western art history: Frans Hals, Goya, Manet and John Sargent. At Art Alive Gallery, Panchsheel Park, Delhi, till 2 March, 11am-7pm.



A NEW LANGUAGE

5 Gallery Espace will be hosting *Shakethu Shalpakha*, a solo exhibition of artist Manjunath Kamath's works, coinciding with the India Art Fair. On display will be a body of large works by Kamath, including sculptures in his chosen medium of terracotta and paintings on canvas and paper. The latter are site-specific works conceived in response to Bikaner House's high-ceilinged rooms and arched doorways. At Centre for Contemporary Art (1st floor), Bikaner House, Delhi, 29 January-16 March, 11am-7pm.



AN ARTIST WHO REJECTED COLOUR

6 Palette Art Gallery's ongoing exhibition, *A Reconstruct*, is a tribute to Jeram Patel and the art he created during his six decades long career. Influenced by artist Lucien Freud's rejection of colour, Patel rejected colour in his art. The exhibition features 20 artworks that include ink on paper paintings, works created in his celebrated blowtorch technique and laminated wood. At Palette Art Gallery, Golf Links, Delhi, till 17 February, 11am-7pm.



AN ELUSIVE PURSUIT

7 Berlin-based artist Alicja Kwade will be presenting her first solo exhibition in India titled *Matter Moments*. Presented by Nature Morte, the show has Kwade delving into the pursuit of knowledge and unravelling the paradoxes that while we relentlessly seek it, it often eludes us. Underpinning this concept are four sculptures titled *Know-ledge*. At Nature Morte, 287-288, The Dhan Mill, Delhi, till 3 March, 11am-7pm.



GIRL BEHAVIOUR

8 Contemporary art gallery Pulp Society is all set to present *Sit Properly*. Chicago-based artist Jasjyot Singh Hans's debut solo exhibition in India. An artist whose practice explores ideas of morality and gendered norms of "good behaviour", *Sit Properly* is Hans's critique on how girls are expected to behave in a subservient manner that doesn't draw attention to themselves. The show will be dynamic, with Hans visiting the gallery and drawing works on certain days. At Pulp Society, Okhla Phase I, Delhi, 28 January-30 March, 12pm-6pm.



WHY COMPARE?

9 Visual and installation artist Raihan Vadera's exhibition *Upamana* opens this weekend. A portmanteau of Sanskrit words, *upa* and *mana*, the show explores the concept of comparison and its impact on our perceptions and our daily lives. Vadera has used installations, visual art, sound and lighting to make it an immersive experience for the viewer. A soundtrack created for the show will introduce viewers to each room. There are curated daily walk-throughs, too. At Bikaner House, Delhi, from 28 January-4 February, 11am-7pm.

—Compiled by Mahalakshmi Prabhakaran.

A map to the India Art Fair 2024

With an expanded showcase, the 15th edition aims to capture art trends shaping discourse in the next decade

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If the India Art Fair 2023 was reflective—acknowledging the various shifts that took place in South-East Asia in the last 15 years, be it a discourse on sustainability, the use of technology in art, or the growing representation of queer artists—the forthcoming edition (1-4 February) is a forward-looking one. It is trying to capture trends that are likely to shape art discourse in the next decade or so. The new section featuring collectible design, for instance, is one such attempt. It looks at the cross-pollination of art and design happening across the globe, the rise of the artist-designer, and the opening of newer galleries dedicated to collectible design.



To be held at Delhi's NSIC Grounds in Okhla, the art fair continues to acknowledge and platform emerging artists. For the 15th edition, it has partnered with London-based talent and creative agency MTArt to launch an inaugural prize that will offer a global canvas for one such Indian artist. This time around, the MTArt Agency and India Art Fair prize is being awarded to Sajid Wajid Shaikh, a Mumbai-based multidisciplinary artist, who is known for his engagement with contemporary sociopolitical concerns.

Every year, the fair facade is one of the highlights of the event, showcasing the depth and versatility of a contemporary artist's practice. This year, it has been designed by artist duo Thukral & Tagra, and has been envisioned as colourful pixels. "To ensure a life for the facade after the fair, the artists will collaborate with Chamar Studio, run by members of the



COURTESY ANANT ART GALLERY



COURTESY SHRINE EMPIRE

(clockwise, from top) 'Untitled' by Abhishek Narayan Verma; 'Boots With Long Lace' in stainless steel by Tayeba Lipi; and Jaya Asokan.

Dalit community, who will repurpose it into an edition of collectible bags," says Jaya Asokan, director, India Art Fair.

The India Art Fair 2024 will continue to carry forth elements that have been its signature for the past several years—ranging from a robust talks programme and outdoor projects to a celebration of living traditions of India in the "Platform" segment, and the exploration of tech in art.

As in previous years, the fair will have braille guides, tactile artworks, accessible seating and workshops for people of all needs programmed by Siddhant and Nirali Shah of Access for ALL, which is trying to bridge the gap between cultural heritage and disability.

So, if you want to see digital artists at work, browse through the expanded exhibitors' showcase, or simply walk through the outdoor exhibits while soaking in the last dregs of the winter sun, here is a guide to all that you can do at the India Art Fair.

NEW PARTICIPANTS

This year, 30 new participants have been added to the list of exhibitors, taking the

number up to 108. This includes 72 galleries, regional and international art institutions and seven design studios that are part of the new collectible design showcase.

The mix in the latter segment includes both Indian and global studios such as Vikram Goyal, Atelier Ashiesh Shah, Gunjan Gupta, de Gournay and the Carpenters Workshop Gallery. According to Asokan, there are no boundaries when it comes to creativity, and the inaugural collectible design section is built upon this fundamental principle (see pages 8-9).

The galleries in the main exhibitors segment are presenting a mix of modern and contemporary art. Besides well-known masters such as Jamini Roy, Ram Kumar and Ganesh Haloi, galleries such as DAG and Chatterjee & Lal are also shining the spotlight on lesser-known modernists like B. Prabha, Radha Charan Bagchi and Rustom Sisodia.

Artists from the Global South with a strong international presence, such as Gauri Gill (Vadehra Art Gallery), Dayanita Singh (Nature Morte), Ayesha Sultan (Experimenter) and Mithu Sen (Chemould Prescott Road), will also be part of the showcase. "There is no single South Asian

aesthetic, and our work is to show that South Asian art and creativity cannot be siloed. There is a dizzying range of work being produced by artists and designers today, and our aim is to represent as much of this diversity as possible," elaborates Asokan.

Fifteen institutions—foundations, collectives and organisations—are also displaying a range of projects. The highlight includes an immersive installation, *Antumbra* by Jitish Kallat, which is partic-

ularly pertinent to the times. Inspired by former South African President Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment, the work, presented by Foundation of Indian Contemporary Art and JSW Foundation reflects themes of resilience in the face of challenges.

THE FUTURE OF ART

To be hosted at the auditorium, the talks programme, titled *Art Across*, led by researcher Priya Chauhan, looks at critical dialogue taking place in the South Asian arts space today.

Culture shapers such as museum heads, curators, collectors, artists, architects and market experts will be part of the panels. "The programme will feature the first African-born and black director of the Berlin's famous HKW, Prof. Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, the head of arts at CERN, Geneva, Mónica Bello, the director of collections and learning at the Royal Academy in London, Rebecca Lyons, and more," says Asokan.

Some of the other names include Sabih Ahmed, associate director of Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai, Tasneem Zakaria Mehta, director of the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, and artists Rana Begum and Ghulam-mohammed Sheikh, who will be talking about power and responsibility of art institutions as agents of change in the world. "The programme is built on the principle of engaging in open and critical dialogue across geographical and disciplinary boundaries, to be able to actually build new ways of thinking and new ideas for the future," she explains.

DIGITAL ARTISTS AT WORK

There has been a growing discourse in recent years about the role of technology in art. When it comes to digital art is the artist the creator or the machine? This question is still being debated across the globe. Meanwhile at the fair, the second edition of the Digital Residency Hub, titled *Forces Of Nature*, is trying to showcase the power of human creativity and potential of tech as a medium—intersections between the natural and digital world—through immersive experiences.

Artists such as Dhruv Jani of Studio Oleomungus, sound and graphic practitioners MYLES and Ameya, and illustrator

Sadhna Prasad are working on themes of ecology, advocacy, and tech in their projects. While Jani is working on a multi-level game that takes one through layers of sediment and combines poetry with a graphic interface, Prasad is presenting two probable futures—of discord and harmony—in her digital illustrations.

MULTI-SENSORIAL PROJECTS

Outdoor projects and performance art will tackle themes such as the climate crisis, urbanisation and pluralities of living. Artists Jyothidas K.V., Manmeet Devgun and Sajjan Mani will use their bodies as a medium backed by techniques of ritualistic movement and immersive soundscapes to pose provocative questions to audiences on questions of gender, caste and class.

Materiality and message will come together in Sashikanth Thavudoz' multi-sensory installation, *Symphony Of Nature*. Winner of the third *Future Is Born Of Art* commission (2024), in collaboration with BMW, the artist carries forth his engagement with marble quarries and iron smelting towns in this work. "He uses natural and manufactured materials to speak about the fragility of the ecological balance. The hope is to trigger an intuitive and emotional response. The rationale of *Forwardism*, the theme of the commission, is progress with conscience and purpose, and Sashikanth's project exemplifies the concept—giving us a hopeful vision of a beautiful future while reminding us of our collective responsibility towards achieving it," says Asokan.

Sustainability runs as a thread through the large-scale outdoor installations. For instance, artists Skarma Sonam Tashi and Philip Frank, supported by Ladakh-based art organisation sa Ladakh and the German embassy, will use recycled plastic and reused bamboo to create a large mountainscape in the fairgrounds. (see page 11).

Sajid Wajid Shaikh, will create a dynamic installation of moving "ears" that will follow movements of visitors in an ominous reflection on mass surveillance. "And a project by Howareyoufeeling.studio will explore the ephemeral nature of art through a large ice sculpture, which will melt over the four days of the fair," explains Asokan. "We are proud as a fair to be able to support and amplify artists' voices as they address the world with sensitivity, nuance and courage."



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The new vocabulary of street art in India



COURTESY SOHIL BELIM AND ST+RT INDIA

Protest poetry, Augmented Reality and typography make the invisible visible in the modern realm of public art

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At the Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls School in Rajasthan, the walls of a class room are alive with three-dimensional alphabets. They appear like optical illusions, combining Roman and Devanagiri scripts in rectangular blocks. English alphabets are on one side, and their pronunciations in Devanagari on the other. These visuals make learning engaging and fun—students can trace the alphabets with their hands. “They are meant to be like learning blocks,” says street artist Siddharth “Khatra” Gohil, 30, who created the typography mural in November. Gohil, who has trained as a graphic designer, plays with typography in his signature bold style.

RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACES ANEW Gohil is among the handful of Indian muralists giving a new language to street art in India. Today, the form is no longer confined to murals and graffiti splashed across flyover pillars or on roadside walls. Artists are exploring new vocabularies, reviving age-old wall art, putting out fearless messages in a bid to reclaim public spaces of all kinds—ranging from schools and government buildings to art districts.

Take for instance Sadhna Prasad, whose vibrant murals of fellow Mumbai citizens are unmissable. One of her recent artworks is on a large wall of the club house at the Mumbai Port Trust. It portrays the everyday life of the neighbourhood, depicting fisherman, children playing cricket and cats stretching leisurely. Indigenous artists have joined the street art club, with the likes of Putli Devi, Malo Devi and Parvati Devi of Jharkhand championing the exquisite tribal art form of Hazaribagh. They have translated the centuries-old wall art form on to paper and canvas with acrylic paints for urban homes.

GOING PHYGITAL

At a time when technology is seeping into all forms of art, street art has not been left behind. In fact, Augmented Reality (AR), QR codes and filters have entered the space to create an immersive experience.

In Delhi’s Lodhi art district, one can see a massive photo-realistic mural of Pandit Birju Maharaj. It was made by muralist Ruchin Soni a year ago in collaboration with public arts organisation St+rt India, and is embedded with AR. Use a phone to scan a code for an animation of Maharaj dancing accompanied to music. “It’s a joyful experience,” says Arjun Bahl, co-founder of St+rt India.

Perhaps one of the first murals with AR was done for the feminist comic series, *Priya’s Shakti*, in 2014. The central character is the female superhero Priya, a sexual



assault survivor, who fights evil with her companion, a flying tiger named Sahas. Her character is inspired by the mythological depiction of Durga.

Ram Devineni, the creator of the series, conceptualised murals—of a woman sitting on a tiger—in places like Dharavi in Mumbai and Connaught Place in Delhi. He collaborated with street artists, and those artworks were elevated with AR through the app Blippar. All one needed to do was download the app on a phone or tablet, and place it over the mural to make it appear three-dimensional with dialogue bubbles. “The idea was to give the experience of a pop-up comic book,” he says. Currently, the New York-based Devineni is working around the theme of climate change for the comic series.

MAKING OF ART DISTRICTS

In March last year, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) along with St+rt India organised a two-day street art festival in the Lodhi art district. The highlight was a shadow installation by urban artist Daku, an anonymous artist who has been active since 2008 and plays with text, light and shadows for his cynical satires on consumerism and politics.

This first-of-its-kind festival highlighted the importance of public art in urban spaces. Bahl points out that several

(from top) The typographic mural by Siddharth “Khatra” Gohil at Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls School in Rajasthan; Pandit Birju Maharaj’s AR-embedded mural in Delhi; and Fearless Collective’s mural of children in Gaza.

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neighbourhoods across India have been reimagined as art districts through large-scale murals. There’s Ukkadam art district in Coimbatore and Kannagi art district in Chennai. Delhi’s Lodhi art district has the highest number of public art with over 65 murals by more than 25 urban artists.

These artworks instil a sense of identity and belonging by representing the city’s inhabitants and communities. One such example is a recent work titled *Instante* by Mexican artist Paola Delfin at Lodhi. It has black and white portraits of people she encountered in the city; from flower sellers and slum dwellers to a street child tenderly holding a puppy.

An art district also becomes a tool for soft diplomacy, says Bahl. The makeover of the leafy-green Lodhi neighbourhood into an art district began in 2015, when St+rt India collaborated with Alliance Française. In was followed by a visit by the first lady of France, Brigitte Macron, in 2018. Last year, more murals were added as part of the G20 Summit in September.

A FEARLESS FEMINIST TAKE

Street art is not a solo endeavour, and visual artist Shilo Shiv Suleman knows this. She started the public art activism movement, Fearless Collective in 2012. “Our motivation is to work with communities—often those that are marginalised—and get them to be able to articulate their story,” says Suleman.

In 2020, the Collective worked with the women of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi amidst the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill. They created a mural of women in hijabs with dialogue bubbles that said, “*Ishq inqalab* (love rising)” and “*Mohabbat Zindabad* (long live love).”

Last year, the Fearless Collective was in COP28 in Dubai in solidarity with Palestine. They created a mural dedicated to the children of Gaza, and Suleman read out a protest poem by Palestinian poet Hiba Abu Nada. She believes their public art shares synergies with the feminist movement, because both aim to reclaim public spaces.

At the India Art Fair, Gohil’s 3D typography will be printed on the official tote bag; and Prasad will lead a workshop, *Reimagine The Natural Order*, based on her new interactive digital mural titled, *I’ll Be Back*, that depicts a planet where nature rules. Harnessing imagination with digital tools to create interactive public art is the way forward—one where the viewer is also an active participant.



STREAM OF STORIES

RAJA SEN

You say drama, I say comedy



‘The Bear’ is a meditation on grief and loss, on family and fragility.

The *Bear* is not a comedy. The sensational series—streaming in India on Disney+ Hotstar—may have won several Emmy awards and Golden Globes this month in the Comedy category, but *The Bear* gave us arguably some of the most devastatingly depressing TV of last year. Christopher Storer’s series is a show about a sandwich shop trying to go gourmet—which, I grant, does sound like an admittedly sitcommy setup—but the series is a meditation on grief and loss, on family and fragility. It’s a relentless, intense and powerful series.

The Bear is so harrowing, in fact, that the reason the protagonist Carmy, played by Jeremy Allen White (who must have run out of mantelpiece room after sweeping all those awards for Best Actor in a Comedy Series), has to take over the aforementioned sandwich shop is that his elder brother, who ran the shop, killed himself and left the shop to Carmy. That, dear academics, is a pretty good sign: most comedy premises aren’t constructed upon suicide.

Suicide, in fact, brings me to possibly the first American series to have blurred the boundaries between Comedy and its pinstripe-wearing older brother Drama. Larry Gelbart’s *M*A*S*H** (1972-83) borrowed its theme-tune from Robert Altman’s 1970 classic film of the same name. The film featured the song *Suicide Is Painless* but while its bleak lyrics—*The sword of time will pierce our skin / it doesn’t hurt when it begins / But as it works its way on in / the pain grows stronger, watch it grin*—weren’t borrowed for the show’s opening credits, the melancholia found its way through.

Set in a makeshift army hospital during the Korean War of 1950-53, *M*A*S*H** was an incredible show about the futility of war, a series that castigated US Army interference, and yet had American doctors trying to do the right thing—all while goofing off with nurses and distilling gin in their tents. I bring up *M*A*S*H** because the DVDs of the series have my favourite DVD-extra of all time: the ability to turn off the laugh-track. Mandatory during the show’s run, *M*A*S*H** is a different beast without the piped-in laughter. It’s unafraid and dark and often deathly serious. So is it a Comedy or is it a Drama?

This one-or-the-other distinction comes from a different time. Network television in America gave Drama shows longer running time—1 hour, truncated by commercials to 42-45 minutes—as opposed to Comedies, which came in at 22-23 minutes for a half-hour of TV. Dramas were longer, bigger budgeted and taken more seriously, because (most) Comedies followed a straightforward and unambitious sitcom format involving a location, a bunch of familiar characters, catchphrases and a basic return to the status quo.

Distinguishing between apples and oranges may have made sense at the time, though I firmly believe Comedy has never been less accomplished than Drama. Giving out separate awards has always been about appeasement, about bringing more stars to the shows and pleasing more viewers.

Now, we live in times of streaming where shows can have half-hour episodes alternating with 50-minute episodes, all dropping to viewers on the same day. Comedies frequently feature more ambitious and groundbreaking storytelling, while Dramas end up reliant on pithy and quotable lines. What is *Beef*? What is *Fleabag*? The apples and oranges live in the same salad now.

The last bona-fide hits to have laugh tracks were *The Big Bang Theory* and *How I Met Your Mother*, which ended in 2019 and 2014, respectively, while the last successful comedy that felt like it had a laugh track was *Modern Family* (2009-20). The classic sitcom format has become so dated, in fact, that its only remnants now are on animated shows parodying the sitcom, shows like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* (both streaming in India on Disney+ Hotstar). Not to say that animated shows are necessarily comedies, of course. *BoJack Horseman* is full of animal puns and sight gags and yet may be the deepest, most bawl-worthy series of all. So why does a show have to be one or the other?

(A quick aside: *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane has a new series out, *Ted*—streaming in India on JioCinema—which is a prequel to the two *Ted* movies starring Mark Wahlberg with MacFarlane voicing a foulmouthed and inappropriate teddy bear. Set in the 1990s, the show is a defiantly old-school comedy, full of political incorrectness and excessively bad behaviour from its underage protagonist. I laughed through the first season—even though none of it was memorable—and I believe the reason *Ted* works is simply because it authentically feels like a throwback.)

I think it’s time to break down this reductive line between Comedy and Drama. Yes, some shows are obviously funny. Yes, some shows deal with more depressing content. Yet the best comedies are dramatic and the best dramas have an excellent sense of humour—why else would we keep quoting *The Sopranos*?

Speaking of quotability, television’s most acclaimed (and awarded) Drama series is, to me, its top Comedy. *Succession* might involve a sadistic patriarch dangling an inheritance before his inept children, forcing them all into abusive oneupmanship, but you and I both know that Jesse Armstrong’s magnificent series is actually all about the lines. Those prickly, poetically profane put-downs. Tom Wamsbans is a pathetic character, but really, how pathetic can he be if, spotting someone with a particularly large handbag, he says, “She’s brought a ludicrously capacious bag. What’s even in there? Flat shoes for the subway? Her lunch pail?”

Swap the trophies. Better yet, let’s call the whole thing off. Break down the silly distinctions. Let Roman Roy and Carmy duke it out. Comedy is Drama, Drama is Comedy. That is all you know, and all you need to know.

Raja Sen is a screenwriter and critic. He has co-written *Chup*, a film about killing critics, and is now creating an absurd comedy series. He posts @rajasen.

STREAMING TIP OF THE WEEK

Even stand-up comedy specials have now become unclassifiable. Jacqueline Novak’s blistering *Get On Your Knees* (Netflix) is a fiery show that pretends—rather effectively—to be about blowjobs, but really delivers a philosophical treatise on sex, power and life. It’s an absolute must-see.

Out of disintegration, something new can emerge

We jealously guard pieces from the past, calling them heirlooms. But an artist can create an entirely new conversation from this frayed past



Some people count sheep when they cannot sleep at night. My mother, Reba, counts saris. She rarely wears them anymore. Like many elderly Indian women she has adopted the unofficial Indian national costume—the nightie. But she cannot bear to part with those saris. Sometimes at night she loses sleep wondering where one went. “Then I get up. Until and unless I find it, I can’t go to sleep again,” she admits. “I can’t lose any of my saris. Saris are my first love.”

A couple of years ago, my sister and I persuaded my mother to donate one of her old saris to an artist friend. Those days Benigna Chilla split her time between her studio in upstate New York and Kolkata. My mother and she had never met. But my mother chose to give her a yellow silk sari with little red and green birds woven on to it. It was coming apart, but my mother had held on to it for years. Like each of her saris, it had its own story. My grandmother had presented it to her when she was pregnant with my sister. My mother had worn it. In time so had my sister. Perhaps even my niece. But its heirloom days were drawing to a close.

The sari, frail and frayed, could not be trusted to the postal service. It was tenderly hand-carried from Kolkata to New Delhi to Doha to Berlin to New York before it finally got to Chilla. She remembers unwrapping it in her studio. “It was so deteriorated, I wondered how I was going to use it,” she said. Last month, I finally got to see what she had done at her solo show *Absolutist*

Approaches at Nature Morte gallery in Delhi. The piece, about 36x56 inches, is called *Birds And Flowers For Reba*.

The sari had fallen apart. “But I tried to save the birds,” said Chilla. She painstakingly extracted the little birds once woven into the fabric and reused them in the piece on canvas. She dyed the canvas yellow with turmeric and saffron to match the original sari. “Then I felt like I should integrate my mother into the piece,” said Chilla.

She found lace curtains that had belonged to her mother back in Germany. Chilla had no idea why she had saved them and carried them all the way to the US from Europe. Chilla, who is in her 80s, has lived through World War II. For her generation and my mother’s, which had been through war, famine and deprivation, saving, hoarding and reusing came naturally. They just didn’t call it upcycling.

“You don’t know why you are saving things,” she said bemusedly. “I had absolutely no use for them.” The flowery designs of the crocheted curtains became a sort of stencil through which she printed right on to the canvas, creating an artistic conversation between two women who had never met, one in India and one in Germany.

That conversation, to my surprise, was not pickled in nostalgia. The nostalgia, if any, was all mine. A museum might have tried to preserve what was left of the sari and those curtains. Chilla, as an artist, embraced their disintegration.

“I liked that it was falling apart,” she told me. “It was taking on a different life.” I always thought the only way we could cling to beauty was to somehow stave off decay. We do not fear death (which is inevitable) as much as we fear decay. But Chilla could see the beauty in the decay.

“I used to photograph things like a dead bird, or things lying on the beach, the cactus flattened by the car,” she reminisced. “I love to look at flowers



Benigna Chilla and her work ‘Birds And Flowers For Reba’, at Nature Morte, Delhi in 2023.

that are on their way out because there is a different kind of beauty to them. It’s the way they become more organic.”

In a way, in her piece, Chilla had taken the fragile little birds trapped in the weave and very gently set them free.

As I marvelled at the brightness of the yellow of the canvas, she said she had no idea what the colour would look like in 10 years or a hundred. “That turmeric colour is a bit of a fugitive. It can disappear over time,” she said. “In 100 years it could be gone. But that is

alright, that’s fine too.”

In a world where it seems we are obsessed with preserving every moment of our existence on social media, where our Google storage has to be upgraded to terabytes to store our photographs for posterity, such equanimity feels startling. We want to hold on to our past because we feel without it we will become unmoored. We want to hold on to our past because we want to remember that once we were glorious. And we want to hold on to the past because we fear our own erasure. So we jealously guard pieces from the past, calling them heirlooms, establishing our copyright over them. Of course sometimes we also want to erase the past because we want to rewrite history and we build new monuments, new temples, erect new statues we hope will leave future generations awestruck with amnesia. In that case, we are creating a new past. Either way, the past is a territory we all want to conquer, so that we can have it at our disposal.

But what Chilla had done was something different. She was resurrecting the sari by allowing it to disintegrate. Most importantly, she was being utterly unselfish about it. For example, she used the border of the sari in her piece. But she chose the reverse side. “I turned it over and found such beauty in it. All those threads and the beautiful weaving but on the side you were not supposed to see. I could never paint something like that,” she said. Those borders ended up “wrong” way around in the final piece.

She admitted however to being unsure about how my mother would regard it all. I was not sure either.

As a boy I had been packed off to painting class in Kolkata. There we had to slavishly copy what was placed before us—a vase with gladioli, apples and oranges. The more exact the replica, the higher the praise, whether for a scenery or a portrait or a still life, was always, “It

looks almost real.”

Birds And Flowers For Reba looked nothing like the real sari my mother had known and loved. My mother could not travel to Delhi to see the exhibition. So Chilla came to meet her in Kolkata before the show. She gave her a small piece of artwork of her own—using some of the birds from the sari and part of her mother’s lace handkerchief, a snippet of the larger conversation as it were. It was the first time the two women had met. Both put on their hearing aids for the occasion. My mother wore a sari and sprayed herself with the “special occasion” Chanel No.5.

As they drank tea, Chilla confessed she had been a little nervous. “I really wasn’t sure,” she said. “I didn’t really know you.” My mother beamed and replied, “I was honoured. Nobody honoured my sari like that before.”

She looked at my sister and me and shook her head and said, “They don’t care about my saris. But you really admired them. Thank you.”

Whenever my mother travelled, she would find a sari shop. Even when she went to Paris long before I was born, she bought a French chiffon. She was not that excited about going to viewpoints to see mountain sunrises or walking around art galleries and museums for hours. But she always had the energy for retail therapy. And if it involved saris, all the better.

We would roll our eyes at my mother’s zeal for sari-shopping while we snobbishly wanted to go get some culture in a gallery. Now she was having the last laugh. Her sari had become part of a work of art.

Benigna Chilla’s work will be exhibited by Nature Morte at the India Art Fair in Delhi.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

THE WORDS OF ARTISTS

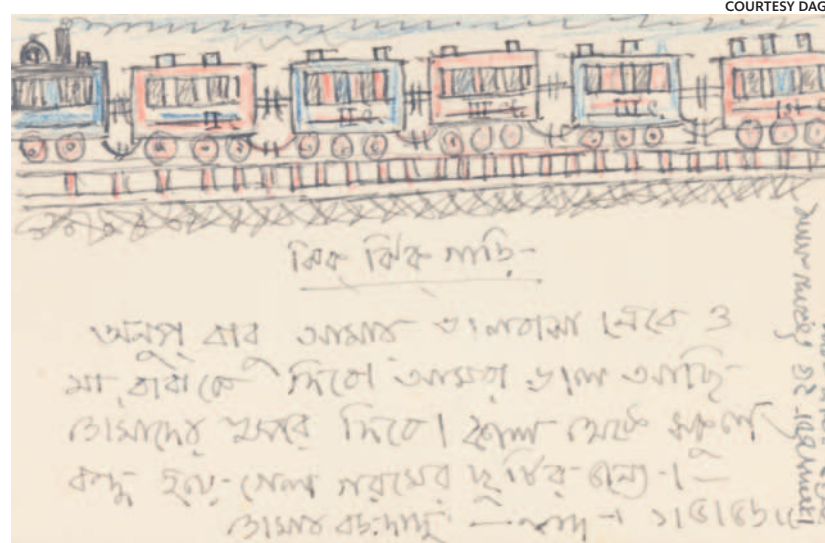
Letters dispel the notion of the artist being a solitary genius—there are many ways to approach and understand art

Shalini Umachandran
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When Chemould Prescott Road turned 50 in 2013, Shireen Gandhi, who heads the Mumbai-based gallery, organised a series of five exhibitions, *Aesthetic Bind*, to mark the anniversary. They were curated by celebrated art historian and critic Geeta Kapur but neither the artists nor the curator met to bring it all together. “It was all done on email,” says Gandhi, who took over the gallery from her parents, Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi, in 1988. “We discussed everything threadbare on email.”

There was so much detail in the correspondence with the 21 artists, who included Mithu Sen, Vivan Sundaram, Gigi Scaria and Anju Dodiya, that Gandhi decided to reproduce all the emails alongside the images of the artwork in the exhibition. “It became an important form of how exhibitions are made. It gives you a sense of how artists think, how curators and gallerists work with them,” she says. “Communication in writing tells you so much more about relationships, triggers, the value one gives to the other.”

Letters written by artists—to friends, family, lovers, collectors, patrons, gallerists and fans—and frequently illustrated with quick sketches or whimsical caricatures, provide an extraordinary wealth of information on their lives, passions, struggles and relationships. They have been an essential resource for scholars—biographers of Michelangelo, for instance, have drawn on a trove of 1,390 letters, about 500 of which were written by him and the rest to him. In an article in the journal *Renaissance Quarterly* in 2005, Deborah Parker writes that they provide information on “the sculptor’s many-sided existence, from his complicated business affairs, his family



COURTESY DAG

trials, his anxieties over the obstacles which hindered his many projects to the fabrics he preferred for his clothes”.

Handwritten letters and carefully crafted emails are a rarity now as we text, leave voice notes and send memes to communicate. Fragments of ideas that we scatter in different places. What letters do is draw together these many ideas with the quirks and inclinations of the artist-writer shining through. Nandalal Bose, for instance, the collection in the DAG gallery archives show, sketched or painted to illustrate the postcards he sent, covering them with the things he saw (like a lion from Junagadh forest or a “ku-jhik-jhik gadi” or train for a grandchild). Bhupen Khakhar was wont to scribble in all the margins, squeezing postscripts into the space between the flaps on aerogrammes as one can see in the collection of retired

Washington DC-based professor and collector Brian Weinstein. Also in Weinstein’s collection is a crisp note sent in 1996, condemning the attacks on M.F. Husain.

These letters dispel the notion of the artist being a solitary genius, and are testament to the broader creative community that supports art. They are also proof that there are many ways to approach and understand art.

“All the senior artists wrote to one another in those days (1940s-1980s). Most of them were in Europe and either wrote to people at home or to one another,” says Arun Vadehra, founder, Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi. The gallery has published three books on S.H. Raza’s correspondence—*Maitri: Letters Between Sayed Haider Raza & Ashok Vajpeyi* (2016), *Geysers: Letters Between Sayed Haider Raza & His Artist-Friends* (2013) and *My Dear: Letters Between Sayed Haider Raza & Krishen Khanna* (2013). These books are a result of the thousands of letters Raza carried with him when he moved



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY CHEMOULD PRESCOTT ROAD

(clockwise from top, left) Nandalal Bose’s postcard to grandchild Anup Patel; S.H. Raza and Khorshed Gandhi; and a letter from Raza to Khorshed Gandhi.

back to India from France in 2010, “representing a deep understanding of the careers and beliefs of so many artists”.

The letters are a window to a more innocent version of these master painters, when they were not household names commanding exorbitant prices, and when no one really understood what they were trying to do. “There are postcards, letters, cards—all document the struggle they went through to make it, and are a record of post-Independence Indian art. It shows their deep commitment and passion for art, pursuing that career irrespective of monetary gain,” says Vadehra, giving the example of Ram Kumar, who had a degree in economics from St. Stephens and gave up a bank job in 1948 to pursue art. When Ram Kumar told his father about his intention to abandon a life of settled comfort to paint, he was given a one-way ticket to Paris and told not to return.

“The letters from those seven years Ram Kumar spent in Paris are so poignant, so determined, so personal,” says Vadehra. “When I started the gallery in 1987, these

The letters are also a window to a more innocent version of these master painters, when they were not household names commanding exorbitant prices

artists would all sit together and work, talk, criticise, sometimes they’d be polite, sometimes not, but it was all about the art—everything came from their passion for art. Later, sadly this passion became converted, there was competition...,” he drifts off, before continuing, “The main thing is these letters bind the artists in a friendly manner, and that is important.”

Not all letters that artists write make for thrilling reading. One of Khakhar’s letters, for instance, is filled with minutiae about customs duty and invoicing for paper, no doubt crucial to his work but not particularly fascinating to the modern reader. “It’s not necessarily significant to collect all letters of all artists but Bhupen’s revealed his ideas about relationships; the letters in Gujarati contain stories to children of other artists,” says Weinstein, who first met Khakhar in the 1990s. The letters Khakhar, who was gay, wrote to his partner who was married, are particularly poetic. “I was shown the letters but the price was ridiculous so I refused to buy them, but they are beautiful. He wrote in English to express his deep love so that the man’s Gujarati family would not be able to understand.” They say as much about the relationship as they do about society at a time when condemnation and criminalisation of homosexuality was widespread.

For Kiran Nadar, chairperson of Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, the correspondence between Nandalal Bose and his two most important mentors, Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore, which they have in their collection, is particularly special. “It provides an invaluable insight in the workings of Santiniketan and Visva Bharati University in its most important nascent period. They reflect the complex roles Bose played as an artist, an artistic adviser to the political leaders of an emergent nation, and as an educator to a new generation of artists,” she says. “Handwritten letters... are like time capsules that freeze a moment in one’s life... an archive that art historians, writers and scholars keep going back to when one is studying an artist and their practice in depth.”

All artists let their work speak for them, expressing themselves through canvas, which is, of course, enough—but letters are more personal and provide glimpses of habits and interests outside of art. Among the many letters Raza wrote to Gandhi’s mother Khorshed are details about planning a trip to Mumbai, which reveal his favourite haunts. “My mother was highly articulate and communicative. Raza would respond philosophically, light-heartedly, seriously... theirs was a deep friendship, based on respect and a sense of mentorship,” says Gandhi.

At a time when phone calls were prohibitively expensive, people wrote copiously, and when read together, these artists’ letters paint a rich portrait of life. “Now we don’t have letters, we have articles, we have interviews, we have social media to tell us what to think of the artists but it’s not as interesting as their own words,” says Vadehra.

The studio as the key to THE ARTIST'S MIND

A visit to the studios of seven leading contemporary artists helps us understand the objects and encounters that have informed their unique visual language, from sculpture to painting, gaming, design and sound

What goes on inside an artist's studio? How does everyday material acquire a powerful language in deft hands? These are some of the questions that cross viewers' minds every time they visit an exhibition or behold an artwork. Studios often hold many clues to an artist's mind. They contain objects that have served as inspiration for a work and borne witness to the frenetic activity that precedes the completion of a

project. Today, as artistic practices expand in scope and disciplines—bringing in technology, design, speculative architecture and gaming into the fold—the nature of each has also become fluid and amorphous. The usual image of a studio no longer holds true.

As the art ecosystem in India undergoes rapid changes, with new dynamism, mediums and vocabularies coming in, leading contemporary artists are now offering a glimpse into their studios to help us make sense of the transformations.

While for some the workspace is a sanctuary, for others it is almost like a laboratory. And for some others, the studio is a mobile space that they carry within themselves. The artists also hope to demystify the romanticised notion of a studio that many of us carry—as a site of glamour and mystique. Rather, they give a lowdown on the logistics, the daily rigour and the laborious processes behind their practice—whatever the medium be, coding, video, painting or installation—and what keeps them going.

—Avantika Bhuyan

VALAY GADA'S GARDEN OF BEGINNINGS

Delhi-based artist Valay Gada has long explored the fragile relationship between man and nature in his work. Be it his triptychs or large sculptures, each looks at small ways in which nature reclaims the urban scape. His 2020 series of paintings, *Seeds For An Uncertain Future*, made use of ink on photographic paper and featured abstract forms, sediments and seeds. It was a message of hope and resilience in a world under threat from global warming and was featured by the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, Norway. From the onset, Gada has realistically rendered remarkable botanical forms. His 2023 work *Cymbidium tigrinum* is one such example, with exquisitely shaped petals and pistils of polyurethane paints on brass.

The inspiration comes from the microcosm of wilderness that Gada, 44, has created within a space in Sainik Farms, Delhi, which serves both as his home and studio. These days, you can find him pressing bougainvillea flowers to make paper, or sitting in the garden making maquettes and painting his sculptures. Gada moved to this rented space three years ago, and was fascinated by its landscape, built areas, some in-between plots and pockets of vegetation. For someone born and brought up in Mumbai, this space came as a sanctuary. "The tallest things in sight are trees and not skyscrapers," says Gada, who works between design and art, and is increasingly moving towards the latter.

Over three years, he has added a green touch by growing lots of plants there. "At the time that I moved here, my practice was undergoing breaks, as post-covid-19 lockdowns, a lot of uncertainty had crept in. I was questioning which direction I was heading towards. I have always been interested in gardening. It's amazing how that has emerged as a big thing in my life now."

Unlike the manicured gardens of his neighbours, Gada prefers the wild touch of nature. Plants that gardeners throw out from other homes, he sows them. "In a way, my garden is a salvaged one. There are lots of DIY elements in it; for instance, I have built my own arches," he says. On one of his walks through the adjoining biodiversity park, he found a fibreglass bathtub. He brought it back and planted water lilies and lotuses in it. "It has become a microcosm. While you let the plants grow, you also have a bit of control in their nurturing, giving me a semblance of order in a chaotic life."

In the past few years, gardening and art practice have become intertwined. Take the bathtub, which serves as an inspiration for his forthcoming show opening on 22 March at Gallery Espace in Delhi. Over time the water got covered in algae. Whilst cleaning it, he couldn't stop thinking of the term "cloud pruning", which means shaping hedges into spherical cloud shapes. "To me, cloud pruning is a mental thing. Clouds tend to obstruct vision, so when you prune them, you achieve clarity," he says.

—Avantika Bhuyan



PRADDEEP GAUR



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY VARUNIKA SARAF

VARUNIKA SARAF THE STUDIO IS A PLACE OF RECORD

For most artists, their workshop is both a creative retreat and a professional necessity. After years of working out of her family residence in Hyderabad, Varunika Saraf is finally enjoying the freedom of having her own studio for the first time in her life. In 2018, she bought a 1,500 sq. ft. flat in the same building as her parents' home. Saraf, 42, typically works on large-format watercolour tapestries, which are labour-intensive, and this new space is perfectly tailored to her needs. "It's functional and I don't waste time commuting," she laughs.

Saraf is not the kind of artist who waits for inspiration to strike. "Ideas come in the course of everyday routine," she declares. In the otherwise dignified calm of her workspace, a subversive visual detail stands out—a pinboard playfully dubbed the "Purgatory". On any given day, the so-called Purgatory is teeming with pieces of embroidery she loves, newspaper clippings, archival photographs or the works of one of her favourite artists, Nancy Spero. In a sense, it functions as an incubator where she keeps "a record of ideas not yet born".



Drawing from her experience as an art historian specialising in Indian miniature traditions, Saraf has made the use of *washi* (handmade paper) central to her practice. The recent Asia Arts Game Changer Awards India winner grinds her own pigments and prepares *washi* herself in the studio—a laborious process that involves transforming thin sheets of paper into a thickened surface muscular enough to withstand several cycles of watercolour washes. The sophisticated symphony of colour that you see in her paintings is a result of the artist applying and experimenting with layers of various tones and shades until she finds the precise colour that corresponds with the "feeling" she wants to convey.

Even though Saraf's art is bold and optimistic, its true power lies in its unflinching commentary on contemporary India. From the searing scars of Partition in 1947 and the Bhopal chemical disaster of 1984 to the struggles of farmers and dissenters, here's a voice constantly dreaming of a better world—perhaps a testament to her own restless conscience. Yet, she refuses to be pinned down as a "political artist". Instead, she says, "Everything we do is inherently political. It's reflected in all aspects of our life and the choices we make, including our interpersonal relationships. Even taking an 'apolitical' stance is a political choice."

—Shaikh Ayaz

AFRAH SHAFIQ CODING HISTORIES IN GOA

Lush greenery leads up to Afrah Shafiq's home-cum-workspace in Torda, north Goa. In a 90-year-old Portuguese bungalow, Shafiq, 34, has converted one of the rooms into a studio of sorts. On most days, you can find the artist sitting in her gamer's chair, sifting through digitised archives—both institutional and informal—to find new perspectives or challenge existing ones from within historical narratives.

She combines text, sound, textile motifs, animation and code to create interactive and immersive atmospheres in her work. For instance, in the ongoing exhibition *I Fell Asleep Believer And Woke Up An Atheist* at Experimenter, Hindustan Road, Kolkata, she has based a narrative video game, *Nobody Knows For Certain*, on the illustrated children's books from erstwhile Soviet Union that made their way to India during the Cold War years. This stems from a long project around archival material related to Soviet history. "I usually look at large volumes of archival material, find gaps, trace connections and piece together stories, which might not be apparent. In this case, the archival material lay in the books themselves, after which I looked at the changing idea of a nation, and how a child's mind gets embroiled in that," she elaborates.

Since her work is animation and code-based, most of the day finds her in front of the screen. Her collaborators on sound, music and video have functional studios of their own, and they all connect remotely. In such a scenario, the studio location helps her to take a break from the screen. She can see the Torda creek from one of the



COURTESY AFRAH SHAFIQ

windows and a large *bimbli* tree in the garden from the other. "The area allows me to breathe and let my mind zoom out," says Shafiq, who moved to Goa from Bengaluru seven years ago; and to this house six months back.

The move to Goa led to several new research interests. One of these stemmed from the diverse representations of Mother Mary. Shafiq began to notice the various titles that were attributed to her—ranging from "Our Lady of Good Health" and "Our Lady of Perpetual Glory" to some quaint ones like "Our Lady of Workers". The iconography varied as well, with some portraying her in a sari, and in rare cases, showing her as a black Madonna. "The same icon had different attributes. So, I started building an archive of Mother Mary in all post-colonial nations, while also creating parallels between pre-Christian deities in those regions," she elaborates.

For Shafiq, organising data is extremely important, since she works with a large amount of it. In her studio, she has something that looks like a mini-fridge, but contains numerous hard disks containing archives of each project. "Even when I start a new project, I will make sub-folders out of archived data. And sometimes the ideas and humour within the artwork begins to take shape with the naming of the folders," says Shafiq. For one archive, which contained thousands of images of women from the same period but portrayed in different mediums, she created sub-folders named "Daydreaming" and "Mansplaining". It helps her make sense of large volumes of data.

—Avantika Bhuyan

FOR BAARAAN IJLAL, THE SELF IS THE STUDIO

"I feel the studio for me is wherever I am," Baaraan Ijlal, 46, says over the phone from her home in Delhi. She pauses, as if to gather her thoughts: "A studio space for me has become myself only now." The statement seems apt coming from an artist who believes that art is an extension of the self and especially the body, which carries both memories and scars.

Born and raised in Bhopal, Ijlal is primarily self-taught and oscillates between painting large canvases informed by miniature tradition and oral testimonies (for which she requires a studio) and working as a sound installation artist, where she deploys her persuasive skills to get rank strangers into sharing their personal stories (most of which takes place outside the studio).

"My work is about listening and creating spaces for mutual dialogue," Ijlal says. Since 2018, she has used her ongoing sound project *Change Room Archives* to document thousands of diverse voices, particularly



COURTESY THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

those of women, queer and transgender individuals. In *Change Room Archives*, she offers participants not only a platform but total freedom to share fearlessly and anonymously. In her interactions with people from different walks of life, she has noticed something in common—nearly everyone starts telling their stories from the beginning. "Childhood trauma is so unresolved for everybody. When a 50-year-old mother starts talking about memories of the past, you can see the raw vulnerability on her face. Suddenly, this woman has become a six-year-old all over again," says Ijlal, who grew up hearing heartbreaking tales about the Bhopal gas disaster of 1984.

In *Change Room Archives*, Ijlal steps into the role of "first witness", as long-buried memories are at last set free and reach a sort of closure for the first time. She hopes that this project will lead to collective healing.

—Shaikh Ayaz



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALIL MIRASHI, COPYRIGHT SAVIA MAHAJAN

SAVIA MAHAJAN'S PRECIOUS CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

In December, I saw artist Savia Mahajan's engagement with time, materiality and memory in *Amino Soup*, her solo exhibition at Tarq Mumbai. Through lyrical ceramic series such as *Tempus Fugit*, made with varnished terracotta pot, verdigris pigment made in her studio from copper waste, coins and sheets, Mahajan, 43, created a metaphor for the "corrosive nature of time". It's ironic that such meditative and delicate works are created in a studio in one of the most chaotic parts of Mumbai.

Mahajan's workspace is situated in the heart of the industrial belt in Andheri East, which is home to the plastic production industry. "The area is called Paper Box after the corrugated paper boxes manufactured there. And I sit right in the middle of that grungy place," says Mahajan. "That's because I need a furnace for my ceramics and this is the ideal place for it." The ceramicist has been working in this studio for the past six-seven years. The location is convenient as it is barely 20 minutes from her home. That allows her the flexibility to work late hours.

Mahajan calls it a shape shifter of a space—becoming a sanctuary for meditation in between series, and a place of frenetic action when firing her ceramic works. "I would it the way I want. There are days when it looks like a mad scientist's lab, when I experiment with found material. Things either keep coming or getting discarded. Because of its location, I am surrounded by the hum of the working city, and the machines," says Mahajan. While working on a series, she can be found



loading the gas furnace, firing it for a day and then letting it cool down. On such days, Mahajan likes to be thorough and disciplined. Though she likes to work alone, when the series requires mixing large quantities of clay with fibre and other found material, she invites helping hands. On other days, the studio transforms into a zen space when she wants to simply sketch, draw or plan the next series of works. "You can see a rainbow effect—every mood and season here is different. It depends on what I am working on and what shape I want it to take."

Though her studio is equipped with the latest equipment—from the furnace to the slab rollers, which she calls extensions of her hands—there is space for quirks and oddities as well. Take, for instance, Mahajan's cabinet of curiosities, which contains pebbles collected during childhood, and soil, bark and leaves picked up during travels. "I have a strange relationship with these objects. They are like talismans. I have a long-standing association with the *raddi ualas* (scrap dealers) so you will find all sorts of paper material such as bill books coming in. Recently, I have become obsessed with eucalyptus leaves, and there are always some lying around. My studio is in a constant state of churn," says Mahajan. Certain materials such as burnt crackers, which might have been lying in her workspace for years, suddenly transform into a work or become inspiration for one. "I don't know which direction the material is pointing to until one day there is a eureka moment," she says.

—Avantika Bhuyan

A FLUID SPACE FOR GIGI SCARIA'S PRACTICE



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY GIGI SCARIA

Usually artists buy a studio space and then a home, but with Gigi Scaria, 50, it has been the other way around. "I have always had my own home in Delhi, ever since I could afford it," says the multidisciplinary artist, whose practice spans photography, painting, sculpture, video and installation. But he finally got his own studio space in Greater Noida only one and a half years back. "The answer, perhaps, lies in my practice. I never thought I would want to stick to one medium. There were lots of ideas floating around, so one didn't feel the need for one particular space to create work. However, now that I have my own space, I know what I was missing out on. I have realised that mental space and studio space are interconnected."

The studio, which he shares with his artist wife, Prerna Sharma, allows him not just to increase the scale of his paintings, but also gives an opportunity to display some of the new works. Sculptures and paintings that come back from shows can now be categorised and stored properly. "With its high ceiling, it offers a nice open working area, and has a very nice vibe. This also adds to the thought process. Unless you come to a space like this, you wouldn't understand its importance, as one is used to managing with the bare minimum," he says.

Scaria's multidisciplinary practice, which has always focused on movements and migrations within the urban cityscape, has emerged organically. When Scaria—who's from Kothanallor village in Kerala—moved to Delhi at the age of 22, he would work out of a one-room set-up which doubled as home. The table was the workspace, where he would write, scribble and draw. After enrolling in Jamia Millia Islamia, the workspace shifted to the institution. "I got an Inlaks scholarship in 2002 to work in Italy for six months. There, the practice became more concept-oriented."

On returning to India, however, he struggled to find work. That period saw him leave the studio practice of painting and drawing and move towards video art. "All one needed was a camera, desktop and editing software. This went on till 2005. Finally I got a solo show, *Absence Of An Architect*, featuring my paintings, photographs and video works, to be held in 2007 at the Palette Art Gallery, Delhi. To prepare for that, I rented a studio space. It was not ideal, but at that time I couldn't afford a big open space in an industrial area in Delhi," Scaria says. The



ensuing years saw him working out of a roadside property in Rohini with shutters in front, and other makeshift places in residential areas.

Meanwhile, the scope of his work expanded. Though the thinking and ideating still took place at home, he started to hire a video and a photo editor in Khirkee village—they continue to collaborate even now—as he needed expertise with colour correction and printing on archival paper. Scaria also started making bronze sculptures five-six years ago, for which he needed a foundry. "I connected with one such foundry in Jaipur. I would rent a room in the city for 10-15 days and create models in clay. The people there would then assist me in moulding, waxing and casting. So, the idea of the workspace was fluid—I was navigating through many of those," he says.

Finally, when he moved to Greater Noida, his wife started working out of a shared space with other artists close to home. When he saw the impact that a dedicated space can have on one's mental peace, Scaria realised it was time that they bought a studio. "This is my 12th working space," he laughs. For sculptures, he still heads to Jaipur, but he can now return to his first love, painting, in a big way. "The dimensions and visual dynamism have changed. I am working on a new body of work—large-scale paintings—for an exhibition at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, to be held later in the year. I am simultaneously working on sculptures and videos to be shown at the show. Instead of working on one medium at a time, now I can multi-task on several altogether."

—Avantika Bhuyan



DHRUV JANI CRAFTING INTERACTIVE FICTION

The first thing that catches your eye at Dhruv Jani's studio in Chala, Gujarat, a few kilometres from Daman, is his collection of board games. From the Czech classic *Lost Ruins Of Arnak*, which takes you on a quest for artefacts through jungles, to *Small World*, an award-winning creation about fantasy races, the gamer-artist has board games that vary in difficulty levels and take anything between a few hours to a couple of days to play. These share space with a host of books—collections of essays, tomes on colonial histories, literary fiction by Jorge Luis Borges and Nayyer Masud and post-colonial writing by theorists like Edward Said.

Jani, 34, one of the Digital Artists in Residence at the forthcoming India Art Fair, specialises in interactive fiction (IF)—a concept of text-driven games that is still at a nascent stage in India. At Studio Oleomungus, a game design studio that he co-founded with creative coder Sushant Chakraborty, Jani creates links between post-colonial histories, speculative architecture, art and games. "My studio actually bisects my office of my father, who is an architect. He has his space outside and I colonise the rooms within. It is a very quiet space, and I usually work alone in the studio. And when I am collaborating, it is mostly done remotely," he says.

His artistic practice involves two key processes—writing the story and game building. The writing itself happens at the studio. During that time, you can find Jani walking outside, observing people and places. The game-building part is the more tedious process, involving making of meshes, creating hypertext, programming and then compiling the game. This part of the practice requires him to be in front of the computer for several hours for



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY DHRUV JANI

days together. For any project, both of these key processes take up equal amounts of time. "Jani creates visual elements as textures, found images or illustrations in Adobe Photoshop on iPad Pro with Apple Pencil, collaging together brightly coloured architectural and pop-cultural elements from colonial and post-colonial India," mentions a note on the India Art Fair website.

In between projects, Jani ends up reading a lot of literature, especially nonsense fiction and regional Indian writing by Dom Moraes and Arun Kolatkar, or playing board games with his family. Jani has inherited a few of these games from his family, and some in his collection

are no longer in print. "I buy them for the underlying systems and not the narrative, because the latter, more often than not, are deeply disrespectful to the regions that were once colonised or economically manipulated. I like figuring out the mathematical structure, which can be maddeningly complex and elegant. These might not always translate into my work, but are elements that I don't want to lose touch with."

Jani, who studied exhibition and spatial design at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, is a self-taught game designer. He found IF a good medium for telling barbed and broken tales in a coherent form.

As a Digital Artist in Residence at the India Art Fair, he has created a multi-level labyrinth set in the ridges of the north end of the Western Ghats, which was once covered by dense forests before industrialisation took over. Like all his work, this too has a fable-like quality. He tries to visualise geological movements and sedimentation in the region, and find out what stories emerge from the interaction of these forces. "What is the relationship between language and landscape? To explore this, we look at the time when Gujarat and Maharashtra split from the Bombay Presidency. A border was carved out, thus carving out a plethora of histories as well. It is fictitious of course," he explains. The game, 'It Takes a Long Time to Grow a Mountain', is played as a three-dimensional labyrinth. Each time you dive into a column of bedrock, a page from a diary is shared with you, which is by an author, who had surveyed the lands before the border was carved out. "This format allows us to platform erased histories," Jani says.

—Avantika Bhuyan

THE RISE OF THE ARTIST-DESIGNERS

Collectible design finally finds its feet in India as more designers and galleries focus on creative design that doubles as art

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Eight years ago, designer-architect Ashiesh Shah showcased a version of his *Liminal Bench* at the booth of a leading gallery at the India Art Fair (IAF). Inspired by the form of the *lingam*, the bench, sculpted in marble, brought together design, functionality and craft. Created in limited edition, this was an early example of home-grown collectible design—but nearly no one recognised it as that. “Even though it was sold later at the fair, it was seen more as a piece of furniture to support the art on display and not as a sculptural design to be viewed as art by itself,” says Shah, 43. “I told myself that one day I will have a booth at the fair dedicated just to collectible design.” Shah has finally realised his wish of seeing a dedicated collectible design section at the forthcoming IAF.

The genre of collectible design—which lies at the intersection of pure creative art and functional design objects—has had quite a trajectory in India in the last 10 years: from not being understood at all to having made inroads into the art collector’s consciousness. Recognising its potential, both as a creative form and as an investment, the 15th edition of the India Art Fair has, for the first time, added a collectible design segment to its programme.

“In 1917, sculptor Marcel Duchamp put a porcelain urinal, *Fountain*, in the middle of a white cube space, stating that everyday objects are art too. Everyone was shocked but we have come a long way since. I feel that collectible design will become the art and investment of the future,” says Shah. He has not only curated a section there in collaboration with the Carpenters Workshop Gallery, a premier gallery dedicated to design globally, but will also be represented by them henceforth.

IS IT ART? IS IT DESIGN?

So, what is collectible design? For one, it is created in limited editions or single pieces as opposed to the more mass-produced product and industrial design objects. The idea is to push the boundaries of form, concept and materiality, while retaining functionality—which is the basic and classic principle of design. “Collectible design is backed by a narrative and hopes to evoke an emotional response or provoke people just like art does,” says Vikram Goyal, who together with Shah, Roohad Shroff, Bijoy Ramachandran and Gunjan Gupta, is considered one of the pioneers of the genre in India.

Additionally, the aura around the designer and their design language becomes a reason why people want to acquire their work. A 2017 piece by Hugo Macdonald on the auction house Sotheby’s website states that based on their skill and status as pioneers, certain contemporary designers such as Marc Newson, Ron Arad and Zaha Hadid have always belonged to the collectible category. “Extreme craftsmanship, like the work of Pablo Reinoso and Studio Job, and extraordinary, innovative uses of material, like Joris Laarman and Oskar Zieta, fit comfortably into the mix. Sometimes poetic, intangible beauty is enough, like Kam Tin’s coffee table and Jonas Bohlin’s zinc shelves,” writes Macdonald.

Goyal’s work too becomes highly coveted



due to his inimitable stamp of craftsmanship and lyrical design language. At his studio, the Delhi-based product designer creates sculptural forms and topographies from molten, beaten and hammered metal, cast brass, repoussé and inlay work. “In some of the collections featuring repoussé work, no two pieces are alike. Their demand, and therefore value, has gone up considerably in the last few years,” he says.

At the IAF, Goyal will be presenting an arc of his practice through limited edition collectible furniture, mirrors and screens. Besides these, he will also be showing an immersive piece, *Silken Passage*, a 28x8ft mural in the studio’s signature repoussé language inspired by the exchange of goods and ideas along the Silk Road.

GLOBAL OUTLOOK

The international ecosystem for the genre has had

The idea is to push the boundaries of form, concept and materiality, while retaining functionality—which is the basic and classic principle of design.

at least a 20-year headstart on India, with auction houses, fairs and galleries focusing on collectible design in major cities like Milan, London, Paris and Miami. In fact, one of the most significant of galleries, Nilufar, was started by Nina Yashar in Milan as early as 1979 as a hub of contemporary and historic design, attracting collectors from all across the world. Seeing the growing interest in this discipline, the gallery opened a new exhibition space in 2015 in Milan, spanning 1,500 sq. ft, to present contemporary limited edition design pieces alongside iconic works. Goyal has shown some of his works at this space in recent years.

Carpenters Workshop Gallery, founded in 2006 by Julien Lombard and Loïc Le Gaillard in London, too has emerged as a major player. It has spaces in Paris, New York and Los Angeles, and opened a vast gallery space in London in 2023. “The gallery’s score

Making craftspersons equal stakeholders in design

Many would argue that India has been witness to an exchange between art and design for centuries in the form of its rich craft heritage. In fact, India is one of the few countries perhaps which adds that unique dimension of craft to design. Craft revivalists have been trying to maintain the traditional ethos of certain forms, but the works are still being showcased at *haats*, bazaars and state-owned museums.

In an effort to change this, galleries such as 47-A and æquō offer craft-led design the same curation and treatment that any fine art work would get. Meanwhile, designers such as Vikram Goyal and Swarup Dutta are trying to make craftspersons equal stakeholders in contemporary collectible design. The former works with *karkhanas*, or workshops, and uses design intervention to change the way artisans

engage with brass. “Let’s make a console that doesn’t look like one. Let’s change the way we look at light, a table or a screen. Together, we bring a strong artistic narrative to something functional through craft,” says Goyal.

The same holds true for the work Karishma Swali has been doing at the Chanakya School of Craft in Mumbai, where women graduate artisans and master artisans work alongside to create a new language through an interplay of fine art, craft with an interdisciplinary approach.

At the India Art Fair, they are showing three series in collaboration with the Galerie Lelong Paris and French artist Barthé-

lémy Togo and with Galleria Continua and French artist Eva Jospin.

“Chanakya’s purpose is to highlight the infinite potential of craft and tell compelling stories of our collective identities. The series, *Belong*, is an extension of this philosophy and a spontaneous immersion into the eternal connection between man and the natural world,” explains Swali. From this exchange, emerges a fantastical universe.

The interplay of hand-spun yarn and layering techniques, along with micro-variations of needlepoint techniques, including couching, bullion knots and stem stitch, bring to life a layered narrative that honours craft and its role in

culture, community and preserving collective identities. “Complementing this narrative, the series also features handmade sculptures hand-crafted using bamboo, terracotta, and basket weaving techniques—a tribute to the enduring spirit of the feminine,” says Swali.

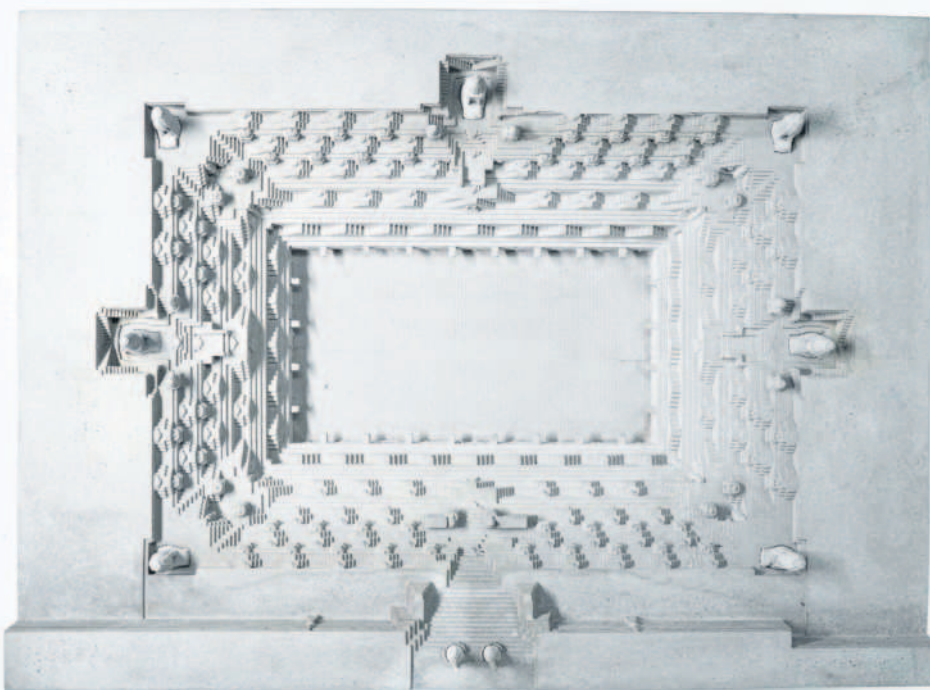
Dutta has been working with the craft sector as part of his developmental practice. “Often, the real maker—the craftsperson—becomes invisibilised when it comes to mass design. However, in certain collaborations, when they are given the space to express themselves, some very interesting ideas emerge. I am quite interested in that possibility, and am looking at ways to nurture it,” he says. “We have recently started on a *kantha* project in the realm of collectible design with women craft practitioners of Bengal, and I am very interested in seeing the potential of the process that goes in.”



Karishma Swali of Chanakya School of Craft; (right) ‘Belong IV’



IGNITER



(from far left) 'Channapatna Stambh' and 'Multi-ball Stambh' by architect-designer Ashiesh Shah, who has curated a design section at the India Art Fair with Carpenters Workshop Gallery; (above) 'Surya Kund' from the exhibition, 'A Place in the Shadows' by Material Immaterial Studio at 47-A, Mumbai

ethos is to offer artists and designers a platform to explore and look beyond the limits of their creative expression, while also committing to the preservation of traditional craft," state the founders in an email interview. Numerous design fairs such as Design Miami showcase artistic expressions in design, and such creations are also doing exceedingly well at auctions.

India is slowly beginning to reflect this trend. Jaya Asokan, director, India Art Fair, feels that there ought not to be any boundaries when it comes to creativity and artists of all kinds have always been in dialogue to broaden their practices and generate new ideas.

For her, the presentations by the design studios in the section perfectly exemplify this—be it (Mumbai-based architect-designer) Rooshad Shroff showing work made in collaboration with artist T. Venkanna, Karishma Swali's Chanakya School working with master textile artisans, Vikram Goyal's brass works, or Gunjan Gupta reinterpreting everyday Indian objects like *mudhas* and *gaddas*.

Today, India is not just mirroring the global ecosystem when it comes to pushing creativity, but also in the opening up of spaces dedicated to this genre. In 2022, Mumbai-based *aequo*, conceived by Tarini Jindal Handa and Florence Louisy, became the first gallery dedicated to collectible design.

In early 2022, Crasto Bungalow in Mumbai's heritage village of Khotachiwadi transformed into a design gallery, 47-A, founded by Mortimer Chatterjee and Tara Lal of Chatterjee & Lal and Srila Chatterjee of Baro Market, an online marketplace that showcases crafts heritage. Last year, India Design ID, an annual design showcase held in Delhi, introduced a collectible pavilion curated by its head of strategy, Misha Bains, and featured works by design labels such as BeatRoot, DeMuro Das, klove Studio, Phantom Hands and Stem.

According to Shroff, due to lack of design galleries earlier, collectible design would get exhibited in the art gallery format and get misunderstood as art. Today, 47-A and *aequo* have brought a different curatorial approach—one that is backed by a design historical context.

At Chatterjee & Lal's existing art gallery space in Colaba, Mortimer and Tara have always been drawn to artists-designers, whose work in the post-independence era was blurring the boundaries between art and design. In 2018, they curated an exhibition, *Impact*, which looked at the work of National Institute of Design and the Weavers' Service Centre, both of which were initiated to further the nation-building process and support craft-based practices.

"That moment in the 1960s—when cross-disciplinary thinking was so active—didn't get enough visibility during the 1990s and early 2000s. Till the last couple of years, these binaries of art on one side and design on the other continued. When we were looking at the Weavers Service Centre for *Impact*, we came across major artists such as Haku Shah and Prabhakar Barve, who were employed as designers there," elaborates Mortimer. Fast forward to late 2021, when the duo, together with Srila, realised that in order to have a conversation about design that does justice to its histories, it would be helpful to not mount exhibitions within the fine arts exhibitions spaces.

Design often gets looked at through an art history lens and not through a design historical lens. "I guess that is the reason for the genesis of 47-A," he says.

We have finally arrived at a maturity of discourse, wherein art and design can now be shown in the same space, with each being read for their own important histories. "Design no longer needs to look like an artwork to sell. We have come a long way in the last two years, and I would like to believe that 47-A has helped in shaping the discourse. We are now in a new phase, wherein collectible design is being treated as an independent entity by platforms like India Design ID and the India Art Fair—both being important moves," he adds.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

When Greg Foster, former editor, *Architectural Digest India*, and now the artistic director of luxury carpet company Jaipur Rugs, first came to the country from Paris nine years ago, the design scene was at a nascent stage at all levels. Brands, which had earlier dabbled in white label exports, had started to launch their own labels. Only a tiny community knew what collectible design was.

To understand what fuelled the rise of this genre in India in the past decade, it might do well to take a look at the parallel growth of the art market as well. "In the last 10 years, the art market in India has exploded, with a huge number of new artists, new galleries and price points that went through the roof. Interestingly, one of the most important buyers of collectible design are also the drivers of the art market—interior designers," says Foster. They would take their clients to design fairs across Italy to buy furniture. As they were doing that, the interior decorators and their clients started to discover design galleries such as Nilufar.

"I have witnessed this myself. Nilufar specialises in Brazilian modernism. And it was fascinating how suddenly these Brazilian modernist chairs were beginning to turn up at homes in Mumbai and Delhi," he reminisces. That's how the journey of collectible design started in India—with objects coming in from global spaces. Slowly, clients began to look at home-grown designers as well, who were specialising in what most called "functional art".

"At the magazine that I was the editor of, we would cover furniture and interiors. All of a sudden, there was a buzz around pieces that blurred the lines between art and design. Look at the incredible work by Bijoy Jain that is currently being exhibited at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. Functional, sculptural or simply beautifully made, this type of col-

lector isn't just buying a chair," says Foster.

Today, the conversation has evolved and been extending forward by brands such as Jaipur Rugs. There, Foster and his team actively work on limited collectible editions created by artist-designers using age-old carpet-making techniques. "Fusing new ideas from global design studios with traditional weaving techniques from across India will lead to innovation and limited edition masterpieces. Our contemporary carpets will become as collectible as any antiques," he adds.

According to Arvind Vijay Mohan, founder of the art research and advisory firm, Indian Art Investor, though India is still a relatively young market, it is likely to develop a growing line of collectors over the following decade, as the industry matures.

For the cult of the designer-artist to truly be entrenched—as has been seen in evolved markets—it is imperative for India's homegrown talent, both established and emerging, to be nurtured, supported and marketed intelligently. "The ecosystem is evolving but a long distance is yet to be covered," he adds.

JOURNEY OF THE DESIGNER-ARTIST

Each designer has had his own journey with this genre. For the past two decades, Goyal has been extending the boundary of base pairings and conceptual narratives while creating bespoke commissions for hospitality, private residences and architects.

Meanwhile, Shah has honed his eye by collecting objects ranging from the ubiquitous pebbles to paintings right from his childhood. Everything in his collection—miniature paintings and white woven *pichvais*—has had an impact on his practice. Added to that is his fascination with Brutalist tribal architecture and the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi*. His style of designing collectible objects is to say "the maximum through minimalism".

Shah calls his showcase at the IAF his boldest, bravest and toughest yet. For the first time, he has opened up his entire warehouse of collections and created objects of design with some of them. "Within those, you will find objects that date back in time. This showcase carries different pieces of me from the last 20 years or so. The other collection that I am working on at the Atelier Ashiesh Shah (in Mumbai) is *Casa Luna*." We are using the form over building blocks such as lamps in the collection," he says.

Meanwhile, at his studio, Shroff, 42, likes to play with furniture to push boundaries of tactility, form, creativity and functionality.

As a designer, he likes collaborations that highlight and leverage the strengths of all those involved to create pieces that have a unique voice and identity. For the India Art Fair, he has collaborated with artist T. Venkanna.

"Quite a few mediums that we work with—in this case marble inlay—lend themselves to a very graphic treatment. We like working with artists, who bring a different sensibility when it comes to print design. In this particular collaboration, we are working with an artist, who is not just prolific in different materials and mediums, but also in the way in which he addresses his subject matter," says Shroff.

The field of collectible design also brings within the gallery, those who might never have entered the white cube space—scenographers, product designers, and more. Kolkata-based photographer, designer and scenographer Swarup Dutta is one such person. He is gearing up for a show at 47-A, to be held later this year. His design vocabulary is influenced by folk traditions, meta modernism and the confluence of cultural experiences in life.

An architect, who recently found himself exhibiting at the gallery in November last year as part of the exhibition, *A Place In The Shadows*, hailed from Material Immaterial Studio. The Mumbai-based studio is built on the basic principles of bare beauty of materials and works with cast concrete. "They showed two series, one was called *Recast*, featuring abstract architectural forms as blocks, which when put together would create either decorative or functional objects such as benches, tables and more. The other one, *Sanctum*, recreated nine stepwells of India as table tops.

It is a perfect example of a design studio that has gone deep into the materiality of concrete and pushed the limits of what is possible to do with it," says Mortimer.

An ecosystem, which is slowly discovering itself, is always an exciting one. Innovation with materiality, unique ways of balancing form, tactility and function, new ways of looking at design—and different ways of infusing it with soul—are just some of the aspects that are likely to make the space of collectible design a vibrant one in the next 10 years.



Julien Lombraill (left) and Loïc Le Gaillard, founders of Carpenters Workshop Gallery.

Carpenters Workshop Gallery comes to India

The acclaimed global design gallery, Carpenters Workshop Gallery, with centres in London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles, is all set to showcase its curatorial process in India. In an email interview, the founders, Julien Lombraill and Loïc Le Gaillard, discuss the role of technology in collectible design and the kind of visual language they look for in artists.

Edited excerpts:

How does the gallery's inaugural booth at the India Art Fair carry forth its ethos, which is to celebrate crafts of a region?

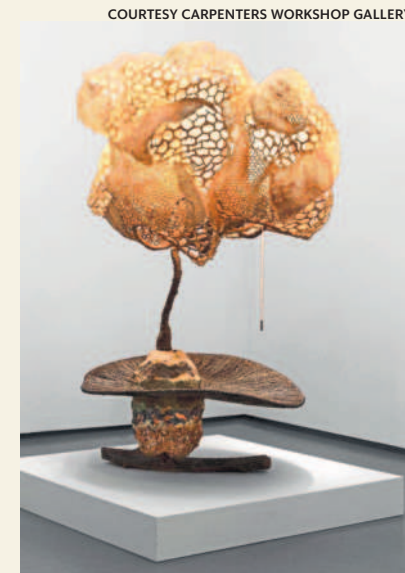
The gallery's core ethos is to offer artists and designers a platform to explore and look beyond the limits of their creative expression, while also committing to the preservation of traditional craft. Our inaugural booth at the India Art Fair is an example of this commitment. Collaborating with Ashiesh Shah brought a unique perspective to the table. Shah, with his extensive background in architecture and design, shared a common vocabulary with us. Everywhere we go, we aim to create a community of people that embody the ethos that Carpenters Workshop Gallery has come to represent.

What is the kind of visual language and interdisciplinarity that you look for in artists?

Our journey began with a shared passion for design and art. We gravitate towards creators, who challenge limits, while crafting pieces that are both visually stunning and conceptually rich. We're always visiting new studios and considering new talent, and are incredibly proud of the roster of artists that we have brought together over the course of the last 17 years.

While art has emerged as a safe choice for investment and as a collectible, design is still viewed from a functional point of view. How is the design-art object emerging as a viable collectible now?

There is a growing global appetite for contemporary collectible design, and we are very tuned into that. The lines are becoming more blurred between art and design. For example, increasingly contemporary art galleries are exhibiting works by talents that are traditionally better known as designers. The contemporary art market is, of course, more mature now. Compared to that, while the contemporary collectible design ecosystem is growing quickly, its starting point is evolving. Now, it is trying to catch up with the former, and collectors are embracing these design objects not only for their creativity, but also for their conceptual intent and artistry. We cater to a diverse range of collectors as design possesses a more democratic appeal than visual art and is, in certain instances, more accessible to consumers. The works that we offer are neither singularly art nor design, they are the perfect mix of both.



Nacho Carbonell, 'Lily Pad Tree', (2018); (below) Wendell Castle, 'Above Within Beyond' (2014)

What is the kind of expression that you are seeing emerge, particularly in the Global South?

Today, the key to leaving a mark in design is to blend traditional craftsmanship with modern innovation. In regions like India, the landscape is marked by a fusion of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary aesthetics, resulting in visually striking and culturally resonant pieces. Designers are drawing inspiration from their heritage, incorporating traditional motifs, craftsmanship techniques and locally sourced materials. As a gallery committed to pushing boundaries, we find this intersection of tradition and modernity in design particularly compelling, as it adds a unique dimension to the global conversation on collectible design.

What is the design of the various spaces of Carpenter Workshop Gallery, and how do they contribute to the different expressions of design?

Initially, we aimed to create a space that encouraged artists and designers to think outside of conventional methods, where functional objects become sculptural pieces and techniques of making are celebrated. It made sense for us to pick an unconventional space, which was true of our original carpenter's workshop in Chelsea and still is today for Ladbrooke Hall, our new flagship space in London. Since then, the design philosophy behind the spaces at Carpenter Workshop Gallery has been rooted in creating dynamic environments that not only house art but also become a part of the narrative. Our galleries are meticulously curated to adapt themselves to the varied expressions of art and design, ensuring a seamless integration between the space and the exhibited works. Each gallery is a carefully crafted backdrop that is staged to enhance and reflect the essence of the works within.

What is the role of technology in the way artists respond to design?

Technology is providing a platform for experimentation, innovation and the realisation of intricate concepts. Whether through digital modelling, advanced fabrication techniques or interactive installations, technology enables artists to push the boundaries of traditional design, fostering a dynamic landscape in the intersection of art and technology.



(above) 'Palazzo Console' by Vikram Goyal; (right) a collaborative art project between Swarup Dutta and bamboo artisan Vinod Pakre.

The vibrant arts ecosystem in the Middle East



Most major cities in the Middle East are buzzing with art-related activity, be it the opening of museums or setting up of grants to foster innovation both in the West and the Global South



Shirin Abedinirad's 'Reflective Journey' (2023), installation, land art, to be shown at the digital segment of Art Dubai 2024.

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For the past five years, the Ishara Art Foundation in Dubai has been hosting talks and exhibitions of leading contemporary Indian artists such as Navjot Altaf, Amar Kanwar and Jitish Kallat. These days, it is hosting a new show, *Sheher, Prakriti And Devi*, which marks photographer Gauri Gill's first extensive curation. Featuring works of artists that she shares an affinity with—such as Chiara Camoni, Ladhki Devi, Rashmi Kaleka and Mrinalini Mukherjee—she continues to offer a unique lens to cityscapes as spaces shared by multiple life-worlds. The exhibition is on display till 1 June at Alserkal Avenue, Dubai.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city—the Madinat Jumeirah—preparations are on for Art Dubai, which has been an integral part of the international cultural calendar since 2007 and has regularly featured Indian artists. It is now the first major international art fair to create a section focused purely on digital art. At the third iteration of this digital segment, curated by Alfredo Cramerotti and Auronda Scalera, the focus will be on female artists, who are pushing the boundaries of art and technology, among other things. The fair will be held from 1-3 March, with previews on 28-29 February.

It is not just Dubai, but most major cities in the Middle East, such as Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Sharjah—and even the ancient region of AlUla in north-west Saudi Arabia—are buzzing with art-related activity. Work is afoot to get the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi ready in the Saadiyat Island cultural district—which is a complex of art and cultural institutions—by 2025. When it opens, it will be the largest of all the Guggenheim museums across the world and will focus on modern and contemporary art from West and South Asia and North Africa. Saadiyat Island is already home to another major museum, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened in 2017.

Benedetta Ghione, executive director, Art Dubai, draws attention to the range of programming happening in the Middle East in February alone. It ranges from a new design biennial in Doha, the annual March Meeting—Sharjah Art Foundation's annual convening of artists, curators and art practitioners to explore critical issues in contemporary art—in Sharjah, to Art Dubai and its flagship Global Art Forum (a Dubai-based annual, transdisciplinary summit), and significant cultural activations and festivals taking place in Abu Dhabi. "The result is a moment of focus on the region, and a real sense of excitement," she says.

What's more, a new biennale related to contemporary art is all set to be organised between 20 February and May, at the JAX District in Diriyah, a town adjacent to the capital city of Riyadh and home to the Unesco World Heritage Site of At-Turaif.

Rahul Gudipudi, an India-born researcher and storyteller, is one of the co-curators of the 2024 Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, which hopes to foster dialogue between Saudi Arabia and the world through exhibitions that

span formats such as performance, sound, research-based practices, and digital forms.

According to Roshini Vadehra, director, Delhi-based Vadehra Art Gallery, the location of the Middle East—and its rich diaspora community hailing from different parts of the world, including India—makes it a unique intersection of the West and the Global South. The art that is showcased here offers a window to best practices from both spheres of the globe. And with artists often practising in countries facing growing geopolitical conflict and uncertainty, some parts of the Middle East become a neutral canvas for them to express their views without fear of ostracisation. All of this makes the arts ecosystem in the region unique.

A CONDUIT FOR IDEAS

Historically too the region, with port cities such as Sharjah and Jeddah, has been an important hub in the exchange of ideas and goods. According to Nawar Al Qassimi, vice-president, Sharjah Art Foundation, it is only natural that a place that is so "central" and connected to the rest of the world has emerged as a strategic arts platform with major biennales and fairs. "There was always a flourishing arts ecosystem in the Middle East, perhaps one that didn't necessarily get international attention earlier. Artist-run initiatives and biennales have been taking place in Baghdad from the 1970s and Sharjah from the 1990s," says Al Qassimi, who was in India recently for the Mumbai Gallery Weekend. It is these events and moments that laid the groundwork for the spate of art-related development in the region today.

From the early 2000s, specifically in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the setting of government-supported institutions such as the Sharjah Art Foundation, and the increasing global presence of events such as the Sharjah Biennial, have further driven this change. In the past two decades, the Sharjah Biennial, for one, has become a place for commissioning works by some of the most important



artists of our times.

There has been significant investment in high-quality cultural infrastructure across the Middle East in the last 20 years, with the expansion of the art district of Saadiyat Island. Art spaces are coming up in newer neighbourhoods. According to Ghione, while the first commercial galleries and auction houses in Dubai located themselves close to the financial district, today several new clusters have come up around the city, including in Alserkal Avenue, and Al Quoz.

A WINDOW TO SOUTH ASIA

The Global South has emerged as a major focal point for fairs and institutions in cities such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. "The Global South is part of our unique DNA and this year's programme at Art Dubai will reflect that more than ever, with over 65% of our exhibitors hailing from there," says Ghione. "We began with a regional focus, before expanding to a natural area of influence that reflects both the cosmopolitan nature of Dubai and, importantly, our increasingly diverse communities."

Priyanka Raja of Experimenter, Kolkata and Mumbai, has been part of the Art Dubai committee for some years now and, in the course of time, has noted the many factors that make the Middle East such an attractive space for artists, exhibitors, collectors and art enthusiasts from India. The ease of travel—with simpler paperwork required—is one of these.

While the region is seeing the opening up of new institutions, some older organi-

(top and above) An installation at Art Jameel, which was established in 2003 to nurture artistic communities.

The location of the Middle East—and its rich diaspora community from all across the world, including India—makes it a unique intersection of the West and the Global South

sations such as the Sharjah Art Foundation—a contemporary art and culture foundation in the United Arab Emirates—have been consistently working in this space for over 15 years. This mix of the new and the consistent is creating an important tapestry for art in the region.

"Several curators and scholars of South Asian origin such as Sabih Ahmed (Ishara Foundation), Nada Raza (Alserkal Avenue) also Sandhini Poddar, who is part of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi team, bring a certain nuance and experience that has created an understanding of wider regions—ones they are working in and also those they may be rooted within," says Raja. Over the years, she considers herself lucky to have witnessed some seminal showcases of artists from southeast Asia such as Bani Abidi, Ayesha Sultana and CAMP in several galleries and institutions in the Middle East.

At AlUla, where work is underway to transform this heritage area, once connected to the ancient Incense Road, into a destination for culture and heritage, several programmes have been conceptualised to showcase global creative voices, including those from India. For instance, Arts AlUla and the French Agency for AlUla Development (Afalula) launched a new season of six artist residency programmes last year. These ongoing residencies span the fields of visual arts, design, botanical landscaping, heritage, and innovation. This diverse gathering of artists includes Dushyant Bansal and Priyanka Sharma, who set up Studio Material in 2016 and work between London and Jaipur. Specialists in spatial and product design, their work focuses on the geologies of the desert plains of western India.

DRIVERS OF CHANGE

A mix of public-private patronage has resulted in the transformation of the art ecosystem in the Middle East. One of the most prominent leaders of this change has been the Jameel family (Saudi Arabia and UAE), which has had a legacy of supporting communities. Art Jameel, which was established in 2003, carries this ethos of nurturing artists and communities forward. It comprises two institutions—Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai, UAE, and Hayy Jameel in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and both embrace a collaborative model.

"Prioritising arts and education across both institutions, the programming includes thoughtfully-curated exhibitions focused on pertinent themes in the region, festivals and symposiums, and educational programming that nurtures upcoming UAE and KSA creative talent," says Dawn Ross, head of collections, Art Jameel. Along with Al Qassimi, Ross was part of the talk, *Curatorial Futures: Art*

Foundations In The UAE, at the Mumbai Gallery Weekend.

The organisation has been trying to find niche and pertinent fields to collaborate on. Through its Anhar: Culture and Climate Platform (in collaboration with British Council), Art Jameel offers grants for artists, collectives and organisations based in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region to create, engage and raise awareness for climate change. It is also part of The World Weather Network, a community of artists reporting on weather and climate. "Art Jameel is one of 28 arts organisations from around the world, forming a global 'weather reporting' project, starting June 2022," says Ross.

Another private institution making a mark is Ishara Art Foundation founded by Smita Prabhakar in 2019 in Dubai. It goes to show that the Indian diaspora community in the Middle East is not just an avid consumer of art but also a driver of change. Prabhakar has been collecting modern and contemporary Indian art for over two decades, and in the course of time, she realised that there was no platform outside of the subcontinent that showcased contemporary art from the region. "There was also the awareness that in all these years, the Gulf has been a place of confluence for so many nationalities, especially those from South Asia, thereby full of potential for such a diverse demographic to engage with art. All these factors were the impetus behind setting up Ishara as a meeting point for different voices, experiences and histories," says Sabih Ahmed, director, Ishara Art Foundation.

All of these institutions are not working in silos, but constantly conversing and collaborating with one another. For instance, Art Dubai and Ishara have collaborated on artistic commissions, while the latter has worked on workshops and talks with Art Jameel and Gulf Photo Plus. "In 2024, we are excited to partner with Sharjah Art Foundation for the first time in co-presenting a performance for Perform Sharjah. We are also partnering with *TAKE On Art* magazine (by Delhi-based Bhavna Kakar) on a special issue that interrogates what is South Asia, and, with the Han Nefkens Foundation on a South Asian Video Art Production Grant along with Prameya Art Foundation," says Ahmed.

The region has potential to weave many new threads of cross-cultural dialogue in the coming years, bringing together artistic perspectives on diasporic narratives, migration, impact of new economic models, and more. As the world goes through drastic changes—geological, political and climatic—the Middle East, perhaps, offers a platform for artists, curators and thinkers to make sense of these changing realities and offer their take on it.



The Museum of the Future in Dubai

ISTOCKPHOTO



COURTESY SĀ LADAKH

Emerging voices in the arts ecosystem

Leading art galleries and institutions pick the next generation of artists to watch out for

COURTESY FOUNDATION FOR INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART



'Place And People', hand-stitched leather, by Madhukar Mucharla; and (below) 'Untitled' work by Mayur and Tushar Vayeda.

Abhilasha Ojha

Gallerists and art experts are betting big on a select number of young artists with a fresh and distinctive voice. While this is in no way an exhaustive list, the artists, chosen by some leading organisations and galleries, are a pointer towards the continuing significance of contemporary art in India. With a majority of the artists practising for roughly five years, their visual storytelling is compelling in that it creates a direct dialogue with the viewer.

ZAHRA YAZDANI (Suggested by: Gallery Latitude 28, Delhi)

Zahra Yazdani, 38, who studied fine arts at Soore Art University in Tehran, Iran, uses photography, videos, and book-making as mediums to make a profound connection between the body and the surrounding environment. She photographs individuals in both private and public spaces and constructs visual narratives around the human body and its gestures. According to Bhavna Kakar, founder and director, Latitude 28, Delhi, Yazdani's art is special because her visual storytelling is so fresh and distinctive. Through her art practice—mostly inspired by the concept of collage—Yazdani responds to situations of crises and struggles, creating work that juxtaposes painting and photography in a way that makes her art surreal. For the India Art Fair, Yazdani's exhibition, *Scriptures Of Signs And Symbols*, probes the human body through the effect of distortion and layers.

MAYUR AND TUSHAR VAYEDA (Suggested by: Ojas Art, Delhi)

"We recognised Mayur and Tushar as Ojas Art Award protégés at the Jaipur Literature Festival in 2019," says Anubhav Nath, director of Delhi-based Ojas Art, that uses the approach of fine arts to help in the rehabilitation of underprivileged sections of society. Nath feels that the Vayeda brothers' work is important for the contemporary expression that they unravel through the indigenous, folk medium of Warli painting, the community to which they belong. The stories that they tell through their artistic practice are of folklore and mythology associated with Warli art but communicate the concerns of sustainability, climate change, and water scarcity, among other issues. The duo, who are in their 30s, designed the façade of the India Art Fair last year, further revealing how the artists use the basic grammar of their inherited style of painting while adapting it to the unknown. As part of residencies in Japan, France, and Switzerland, they are taking the indigenous art form of Maharashtra to the world.

JAYEETA CHATTERJEE

(Suggested by: Chemould CoLab, Mumbai)

Highlighting the issues within the domestic and monotonous lives of middle-class women, particularly from lower-income groups living in small towns, Jayeeta Chatterjee's process is unique in that she combines printmaking, fabric, and stitching. Chatterjee, 29, completed her BFA in printmaking from Santiniketan, West Bengal. Last year, she completed a residency with Chemould CoLab, the second gallery by Chemould focusing on contemporary art. Shireen Gandhi, director, Chemould Prescott Road, says the artist's exceptional skill lies in her "facility of the deftness of drawing, the main ingredient in her work, which, when combined with woodcut process and applied on material allows for masterful storytelling".

JUNAKI PAUL (Suggested by: Space 118, Mumbai)

Junaki Paul, 27, one of the Space118's Grant Winners of 2023-24, will be showing her recent works at the India Art Fair. Founded in 2009, Space 118 provides studios and residencies to emerging art practitioners. Paul's raw and emotive exploration through drawing, painting, soft sculpture, and performance photography, is an artistic journey into self-exploration. The artist from Tripura sheds light on the societal limitations faced by women there and engages with the viewer to have conversations about identity, gender, and the female experience. Kolkata-based Paul utilises everyday objects such as fabric, mattresses, mirrors, in her work.

MADHUKAR MUCHARLA (Suggested by: Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, Delhi)

Telangana-based Madhukar Mucharla practice positions leatherwork in an interesting dialogue with tradition and craft while exploring the issues of discrimination. In 2022, he was one of the 10 artists to receive the Emerging Artist Award from Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, a not-for-profit foundation that encourages, promotes and supports innovative work in the field of contemporary visual arts. Having studied fine arts at Jawaharlal Nehru Architecture and Fine Arts University, Hyderabad, Mucharla belongs to the Madiga community, traditionally leather workers or tanners. Through his art, he explores the material of leather in a more contemporary manner while also creating a dialogue about communities that are discriminated against over the generations.

SUPRIYA DONGRE (Suggested by: Serendipity Arts Foundation, Delhi)

Describing herself as a passionate storyteller, Supriya Dongre is a researcher and a visual artist. "My practice," says Dongre, "lies at the intersection of research and trans-disciplinary design." She desires to create compelling human experiences and bring behavioural change by interrogating complex social problems. The recipient of Serendipity Arts Residency in 2022, Dongre's work, according to the spokesperson of the Serendipity Arts Foundation, is interesting for it offers a deep understanding into the emotional turmoil of the human mind. Her work developed at the residency, *Reserved*, was an enquiry into the identity and Dalit representation. Mostly, Dongre's art is a cathartic investigation into human conditions, looking closely at trauma, grief, and reconciliation. In her late 20s, the chemical engineer-turned-artist puts herself at the centre of her investigations into art, diving deeper into her Dalit identity and gazing at discrimination from that lens.

Unique modern voices from the Himalaya

The spotlight on contemporary art from the Himalayan belt augurs well for an underrepresented region

Abhilasha Ojha

Skarma Sonam Tashi, 27, is keeping busy hours these days. For the India Art Fair, he is collaborating with Germany-based artist Phillip Frank to create an installation, *Transformations*. It is an immersive landscape, resembling a littered mountain range, and has been made with egg cartons, cardboard boxes, papier-mâché, clay, and brought alive by light projections. Supported by Ladakh-based art organisations sĀ Ladakh and Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), along with the German embassy, New Delhi, the work by the two artists reflects on the rapidly changing climate, water scarcity, dwindling wildlife, and other environmental issues.

In the past, people from across the country have had some level of familiarity with traditional Himalayan art and sculpture, with its religious motifs and iconography. However, in the last three-four years, contemporary art from the region, such as the work by Tashi, has started getting recognised as well.

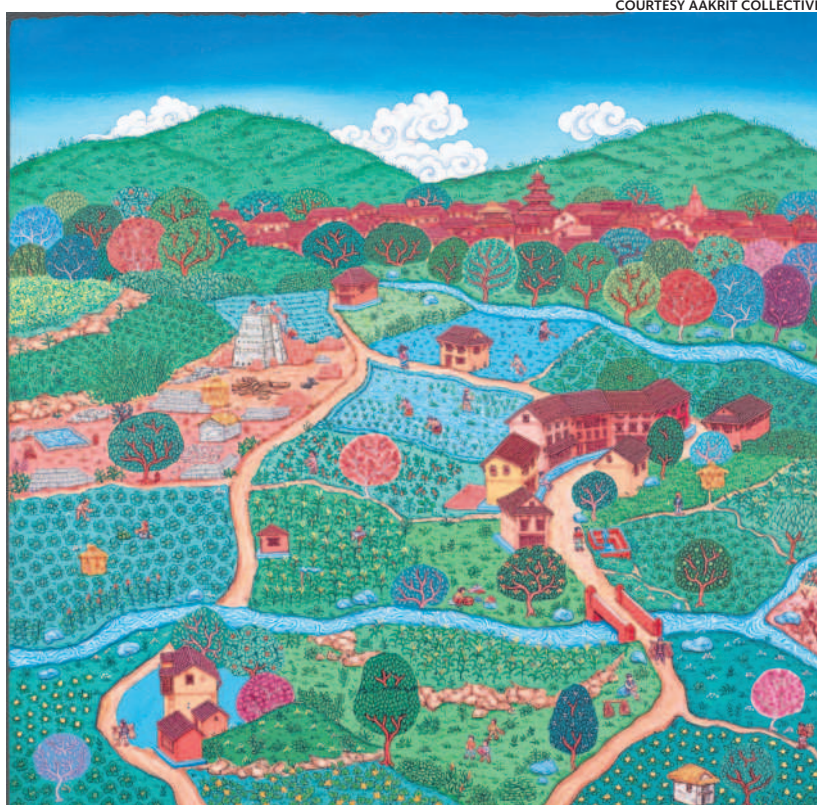
NEW PLATFORMS

Tashi, a master's degree holder in art from Santiniketan, West Bengal, whose artistic practice is less than three years old, came into the spotlight with sĀ Ladakh, South Asia's highest-ever contemporary land art group exhibition that took place last year in Disko Valley Bike Park, Leh, at an altitude of 3,600m. The inaugural show was rooted in the rugged mountainous landscape, its people and resources. It was a collaboration between various stakeholders, including artists, local communities, corporates, art organisations and galleries, all coming together to promote art from the region. Instead of showcasing traditional art, sĀ Ladakh brought to the fore young, contemporary voices that talk about the climate crisis, rapid urbanisation and rampant tourism, much of it destroying the ecosystem in the name of development.

Besides Tashi, one got to see works by local artists Tsering Gurmet Kungyam, Anayat Ali and Arunima Dazess Wangchuk. The exhibition is now all set to become an annual feature and an important platform for contemporary voices. Raki Nikahetiya, artist and co-founder of sĀ Ladakh, confirms that work for the festival's second edition (1-10 June) has already begun.

UNIQUE VOICES

People from the arts ecosystem are of the opinion that contemporary practices from the Himalayan regions of Ladakh in India, Bhutan, Nepal and sub-Himalayan regions of North-East India—parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Sikkim—are becoming more eclectic with each



COURTESY AAKRIT COLLECTIVE

(top) 'Untitled' by Skarma Sonam Tashi (below); and (above) in 'Narrating The City', Hitesh Vaidya borrows expression from the Paubha paintings of Nepal.

passing year.

According to Anubhav Nath, director of Ojas Art Gallery, Delhi, which specialises in folk and indigenous practices from across the country, the art of this region has a language of its own, is individualistic, and reflective of a deep-rooted culture while focusing on pressing issues.

Art critic and curator Georgina Maddox too notes that the practices offer a visual analysis of the artists' quest for heritage and identity. At the India Art Fair, she is curating a segment, *The Importance Of Loss: Migration, Memory And Continuity* with Aakrit Collective, a four-year-old group formed by five young fine arts graduates from Nepal, in collaboration with the Unnati Cultural Village. The latter is a multidisciplinary arts centre supported by the Nepal-based conglomerate Chaudhary Group.

During her travels across the mountainous country, Maddox has noted huge efforts being made by art institutions to promote young artists. Galleries such as Siddhartha Art Gallery, Gallery McCube, Bikalpa Art Center and the Taragon Contemporary Art Gallery, among others, now regularly offer residencies and grants to promising young artists. And institutions like Unnati are taking these contemporary expressions to the world—its founder Surabhi Chaudhary is helping Tate Modern, London, curate exhibitions and promote art from the region.

Then there is an ongoing exhibition, *Nepal: Contemporary Paintings And Early Photographs*, at the Leonard Pearlstein Gallery of Drexel University, Philadelphia, US, making it the first ever showcase of contemporary paintings from Nepal in the city. It features works by artists like Sabin

Acharya, Sabita Dangol and Prithvi Shreshtha. The artists grapple with questions of belonging, the impact of globalisation, and the preservation of cultural heritage in the face of rapid change.

COMMUNITY STORIES

The reasons for this emerging ecosystem across the Himalaya are many: a continuing rise in tourism, an increase in the number of annual events and exhibitions focused on art from this region, and artists willing to tell stories of their respective communities. According to Monisha Ahmed, co-founder of LAMO and co-curator of sĀ Ladakh, the interest in Himalayan contemporary art is a result of certain developments from the past decade. Many young artists from the Indian states and neighbouring countries in the region started studying fine arts, some going abroad to prestigious institutions to pursue the discipline. "Many of the artists who did residencies with us, were those who came back, set up their studios, and discovered their visual language to tell stories," says Ahmed.

There is a corporate push as well, with brands collaborating with local art organisations to offer opportunities to emerging artists from the region. This stems from their own interest in the Himalayan belt. Royal Enfield is a case in point. The multinational motorcycle manufacturing company has, especially in the last three years, accelerated its corporate social responsibility initiatives with a clear mandate to support contemporary artists from the Indian Himalayan region.

According to Bidisha Dey, executive director, Eicher Group Foundation, Royal Enfield's CSR arm, promotion of the arts has now become a core value of the brand. It has collaborated with sĀ Ladakh and LAMO, among other local NGOs in the region.

Last year, it announced the Himalayan Fellowship for Creative Practitioners, offering grants of ₹3-4 lakh each to 10 upcoming painters, sculptors, printmakers, photographers, musicians, and filmmakers. "The Himalayan region is an integral part of our social mission programme and we are focused on collaborating with artists who are still underrepresented and belong to some of the remotest areas of this region," says Dey.

Contemporary practices from the Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Bhutan, Nepal and sub-Himalayan regions of North-East India are becoming more eclectic

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21ST CENTURY 'THANGKHAS'

Bhutan-based Serenity Arts is an arts forum founded in 2016 by Delhi-based Arjun Sawhney and Thimpu-based Tania Lefebvre to increase visibility of Bhutanese *thangka* paintings in the international arena. With exhibitions such as *Whispered Wisdom* (2023, Bikaner House), *Tara: 21 Avatars Of The Goddess* (2016, Delhi; 2018, Mumbai) and the forthcoming *Wheel Of Life* at the India Art Fair, Serenity Arts stresses on the reinvention of age-old techniques of *thangka* paintings.

"The reinvention," explains Lefebvre, "happens without messing with traditional forms. We can experiment with the backdrops but never with the story, form, or the technique." While her art company is focused on reviving the traditional techniques of *thangka* paintings, she is seeing an increasing number of young artists dabbling in current themes.

One such organisation working in this area is Voluntary Artists' Studio of Bhutan (VAST), which was founded in 1998 to promote contemporary art in Bhutan. Last December, at the international airport of Paro, it exhibited works by young artists of the country. The founder of VAST, Karma Tenzin Choten, 28, is an artist herself. A political science graduate, she expresses personal memories through her work.

Just like the Himalayan landscape—with its beautiful vistas, which change with every season and fold—the art that is emerging from this fragile ecosystem seems to mirror this as well. There is a certain delicate and ephemeral quality to the works that are being created by young contemporary art practitioners. It remains to be seen whether the artists will get to extend the boundaries with both themes and materiality, or they will be pushed back by market forces into the realm of traditional art. For the time being, the contemporary art language seems to be holding its own.

Abhilasha Ojha is a Delhi-based art and culture writer.

A collective rooted in the land

The way of living and practice of the members of the Gram Art Project collective is informed by their village of Paradsinga

Zeenat Nagree

When I call artist Shweta Bhattad, founder of Gram Art Project, a collective in Paradsinga village in Madhya Pradesh, she is out foraging for grass. These plant fibres will be boiled, beaten, and ground to a pulp to be turned into paper. If it holds, and the surface can absorb ink, the paper will be put into production and sold online to customers looking for sustainable alternatives to everyday products.

This description makes Gram Art Project seem like a small rural business—which it is under the brand Beejpatra—but it is far more than that. It is an amorphous entity, whose members are hard to count or describe as a uniform entity. Some farm, some forage, some work in *anganwadis*, others as veterinarians and lawyers, and only a few are trained in universities as artists. What binds them all is that they live in Paradsinga, a village of roughly 5,000 residents, close to the border of Maharashtra, where genetically-modified Bt cotton and pigeon pea is grown. Together, the collective members have built installations, presented performances, and held land art festivals.

When the collective first emerged as an idea in 2013, Bhattad, who is a trained sculptor and has a master's in visual art from MS University of Baroda, did not live in Paradsinga. She grew up in Nagpur but has ties to the village—her grandparents farmed and owned land there. Unlike her contemporaries, who were leaving for larger cities, Bhattad started organising residencies in Paradsinga. Of those early years of collaboration with villagers, Bhattad recalls, "We wanted to make things in conversation with people. We did not want to bring in alien materials like paint and canvas and make art."

This philosophy continues to inform the way in which Bhattad and others of

Gram Art Project work—to be neither exploitative nor extractive. Bhattad moved to Paradsinga after two years of travelling back and forth. Bhattad's interest in preserving indigenous knowledge of the land, encouraging organic farming and multi-cropping, and overturning cycles of domestic and sexual abuse forms the core of the work undertaken by the collective. Dialogue with its varied members is a key component of their methodology, offering compelling possibilities of how art can be made and what it can do.

"I believe in living the process," Bhattad states, encapsulating how Gram Art Project's work is embodied—there is little disjuncture between the way in which the members live and the values they espouse in their art.

This embodied approach was central to how five members of the collective devised and presented a performance in Delhi in 2022, titled *Cotton Stainers*, to share their own stories as average rural Indian women. Apart from Bhattad, the other women were Lilsagar Katre, a seed-saver, Pushpa Sable, a self-taught screen printer, Roshni Narnaware, now working full-time with the collective, and Sapna Dongre, a farmer. In the beginning, they used to meet in the village *anganwadi* in order to create a space to share experiences that they would not have related to others. Soon, they realised masks would allow them to narrate incidents of pain without shame and hesitation and so emerged a performance in which these women are also animals and birds.

During the performance, the women wear clothes spun from indigenous cotton symbolising aspects of each of their shared struggles while inhabiting the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers. Narnaware wears dungarees dyed with shapes of various objects from the kitchen. Several times during the hour-long presentation, she gets up from a stool and begins enumerating a list of years—from 2001-20—while holding a rolling pin. The connection, although not explained directly, is that the object triggers memories of violence Narnaware endured at the hands of her own family. In the performance, she uses it to tell her own story. When I call Narnaware at the end of her work day at Gram Art Project's paper manufacturing unit, she says performing has been a transformative experience: "What was repressed came out at last."

Every time I speak to a member, I am left feeling that I have not quite grasped



COURTESY GRAM ART PROJECT

the texture of the world they inhabit. To understand the ideas and activities that constitute their practice—emerging from a rural life and rooted in land—I need to imagine concerns and challenges that are distant for a city-dweller, and which do not accord with how artists usually make work in studios.

In *Cotton Stainers*, the women move in ways that align with the lexicon of contemporary performance art. They learnt the vocabulary of standing, sitting, walking and holding the audience's gaze during a workshop with Delhi-based choreographer Mandeep Raikhy. Coded in this way, *Cotton Stainers* would seem familiar to gallery-going audiences but when it was conducted in neighbouring *anganwadis*, led to confusion and laughter and, finally, discussions about the audience's own experiences of abuse. The renewal of

(above) 'Cotton Stainers', a performance; and Rangoato Hlasane and Gram Art Project's 'Tilling The Mountains... Mining The Farmlands', an exchange between Johannesburg and Paradsinga

The authorship of the seed paper, just as the ownership of the seeds, cannot be defined and it is in such instances that the collective energy of the project is felt



COURTESY VIDYA SHIVADAS

the performance at different sites, and its differing relevance in each of them, makes Gram Art Project transcend the challenges of operating outside the centre—and, more importantly, their work is not propelled by validation from it.

Since the daily practice of living and dialogue surrounding it are such an important part of the work of Gram Art Project, what part of it constitutes art can seem slippery. Delhi-based curator Vidya Shivadas, who has been working with the collective through various exhibitions and events organised by non-profit Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art (FICA), where she is the director, says that she finds the collective is singular in nurturing individual energies within it. "We were not perturbed by the question whether this is art or not. It is a practice," she says. "My idea of the exhibition and the exhibitory has changed a lot. I see it as a node in a process that can be built further on," she adds. For Shivadas's last exhibition in Goa as part of Serendipity Art Festival in 2023, Gram Art Project exhibited papers that had seeds embedded within them and featured silkscreen prints by South African artist Rangoato Hlasane.

The collective also sells seed paper as a product, dispersing material knowledge in the form of indigenous plants. The authorship of the paper, just as the ownership of the seeds, cannot be defined and it is in such instances that the collective energy of the project is felt in its full force, whether these products are shown in a gallery or used at home.

Some of Gram Art Project's products, in

particular the seed bands or seed *rakhis* made from indigenous cotton fibre and which can be planted after use, generate part-time work for as many as 250 women in Paradsinga and 10 other villages around it. Through their effort, 60,000 seed bands from Paradsinga have travelled elsewhere. This immeasurable reach of Gram Art Project's work makes it hard to define the contours of its audience and the engagement it has led to.

Yet, Bhattad says that Paradsinga has become an assembly point in itself with artists, and experts in medicine, sanitation, law visiting the village to share skills and learn together. This helps "energise" the collective. Bhattad explains, and infuse new ideas. The collective's project to address open defecation has been ongoing for 10 years, with the plan of building a toilet that adapts the social experience of going to the fields to the need for privacy and safety. The design of the prototype toilet, by Vadodara-based Shakti Bhatt, ensures that the waste transforms into fertiliser for crops and does not have to be released into water bodies. These toilets will be operational in a month in Paradsinga and a neighbouring village, Satnoor.

Bangladeshi curator Sadya Mizan who organises community art initiatives herself under the banner of Uronto, and who attended Gram Art Project's first week-long residency on sanitation in 2014, tells me how inspirational the collective continues to be for her own practice. "What makes them unique is that they are rooted," she says.

Zeenat Nagree is a writer and curator living between Mumbai and Montreal.

Thukral and Tagra's green mission

Artist duo Thukral and Tagra's forthcoming exhibition will see art, science, policymaking and climate action on one dedicated platform

Nitin Sreedhar

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For the last two decades, artists Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra, collectively known as Thukral and Tagra, have worked on projects that focus on everything from consumer culture to social issues. In recent years, however, the duo has created interactive art around ecology and climate change.

Their latest work as curators will see them bring art, science, policymaking and climate action together, collaborating with policy research institute and think tank Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) for the inaugural Sustaina India art exhibition at Bikaner House in Delhi from 2-15 February.

"We have been working actively as a studio for almost 21 years... but our practice from the last five-six years has been about how to reduce waste and work with an efficient carbon footprint," Tagra says during a video interview. "This understanding of climate change and sustainable life came with the dialogue we had with the farming community."

Sustaina India is a platform where science will meet art to inspire collective climate action. At its core, the exhibition will feature work from three emerging artists, all Sustaina India fellows for 2023-24—Debasmita Ghosh, Manjot Kaur, and Rachna Toshniwal. Ghosh will showcase her action-oriented research about the change in the ways of life of the Kondh community in Odisha because of climate change. Kaur will present an immersive video installation on forests—the world's largest natural carbon sinks—and fertility, capturing her forest visits in different parts of India and the world. Toshniwal will present tapestries and other elements woven with ocean waste that washed up on the shores of Alibag, Maharashtra, advocating for a new approach towards



COURTESY PALLOV SAIKIA

waste.

The exhibition, co-curated by writer and curator Srinivas Aditya Mopidevi, will also feature works by Gaurav Jai Gupta, Pallov Saikia, Goa's Edible Archives restaurant that works with indigenous rice varieties, Bhaskar Rao, Shilpa Bhawane, Richi Bhatia, and Climate Recipes, an art project by Mopidevi and Srinivas Mangipudi.

The complete body of work will be a mix of sensory installations, performances, conversations about sustainable, seasonal food and how a detailed understanding of everyday materials can realign our relationship with the environment. Gupta, for instance, works at the intersections of textiles and carbon, while Saikia, an artist, photographer and archivist, plans to archive the land and life in Rohmoria, a region in Assam that has been severely impacted by erosion caused by the Brahmaputra.

Mopidevi says the exhibition is coming to life at a time when the importance of climate-based conversations is rising in India and other parts of the world. Creating awareness and impact around sustain-



(top) Pallov Saikia's ongoing project 'The Rahmaria Archive'; and Sumir Tagra (left) and Jiten Thukral, co-curators of Sustaina India.

ability requires joining forces across disciplines and demographics, he adds. "Echoing this vision, the first edition of Sustaina India will emphasise the magical potential of materials to create awareness through sensory experiences for the audience. These engagements generate new conversations around food, clothing, waste, architecture, forests, and non-humans. In

a nutshell, the exhibition emphasises sustainability as a gradual and decentralised process that begins with letting go and reorienting material habits intertwined into our everyday fabric of life," Mopidevi says in an email.

According to CEEW data, eight out of 10 Indians now live in districts vulnerable to extreme climate events such as cyclones, floods and droughts. Globally, 2023 was the warmest year on record. Mihir Shah, director, strategic communications, CEEW, says despite an increasing body of evidence on the severity of the climate crisis, and clarity on what needs to be done to preserve and rejuvenate planetary health, progress in climate action has been slow due to ineffective communication with the public. "We need intersectional and powerful storytellers for climate action, and that's where art and artists play a crucial role. They can distil complex science into engaging formats, present impactful on-ground stories, and imagine a better future with a fresh lens," Shah says in an email.

Shah says the aim is to engage distinct sets of audiences through the exhibition:

art lovers, storytellers, content creators, scientists, sustainability and policy experts, and young people, including school and college children, who are increasingly aware of the climate crisis and eager to contribute to the solution.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

For Thukral and Tagra, this exhibition will mark another step in a journey of evolution that started with tracing their family histories of migrating from Punjab to Delhi. "Working with the idea of migration and diaspora changed our perspective," says Tagra, describing how the idea of simple landscapes from their families' past in Punjab, as compared to the urban landscapes they live in now, has also inspired the eco-friendly design of their studio in Gurugram, Haryana, which is equipped with solar panels and a rainwater harvesting system.

They have also dabbled in technology and gaming, painting, archiving and publishing through their studio. While Tagra talks about games like *2030 Net Zero* (2022)—which questions our everyday movements, habits, what we eat, and how we live, and its impact on climate events—Thukral highlights some examples of games that they have developed with farmers, like *Verbal Kabaddi* (2021); a card game with tongue twisters) and *Weeping Farm* (2022), a 40-minute survival board game that explores the daily trials and tribulations of women farmers.

"We have done some five-six games just with farming community, to highlight the problems they face, especially to the urban audience," Thukral adds. "The games allow us to connect communities," says Tagra. "It's a part of our DNA (as a studio)."

Tagra says many artistic spaces and practices think about climate action, crisis and injustice at a conceptual level. But these ideas are completely forgotten when it comes to the final exhibition. "For instance, a piece of artwork that talks about wetlands in crisis, is bubble-wrapped. Attention to detail is still missing," he explains. "It's still a long way to go. But these conversations can happen when we have a dedicated platform. Art communicates what other larger reports and essays may not... It can be a catalyst to communication. That can then turn into a larger change."



Airbus for sustainable fuel partners in India

Company's sustainable aviation fuel head says tie-ups being explored

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European aerospace major Airbus is open to entering into partnerships with Indian companies for production of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) as the company aims to support the green fuel ecosystem in India. Airbus head of sustainable aviation fuel and fuel efficiency, Julien Manhes, said in an interview.

"In Australia, we decided to co-invest with Qantas in a project to produce sustainable aviation fuel... We are looking for such partnerships in India. We want to work with the magic triangle of airlines, producers and the government. We are looking at such memorandums of understanding in India," Manhes said.

In 2022, Qantas and Airbus had set up a \$200-million fund to help the airline meet its goal of using at least 10% SAF by 2030.

The two companies had then announced a joint investment of \$1.3 million in a bio-fuel refinery, which would convert agricultural by-products into SAF.

In India, the civil aviation ministry is developing a strategy for the adoption of SAF by Indian airlines, with recommendations expected to be provided from 2027, Mint reported exclusively earlier this month citing minister Jyotiraditya Scindia.

India had earlier considered mandating blended SAF use by airlines from 2025, beginning with 1% green fuel and increasing to 5% by 2030.

"This shift indeed indicates there is no local production of SAF in the short term, that is, in 2025, so it makes sense if you want an obligation to be relying on local production. We welcome that India is defining a SAF policy, which could have an obligatory part, and we hope that it is



India had earlier considered mandating blended SAF use by airlines from 2025.. MINT

not only the obligatory part, but there are other measures that will come to help the SAF ecosystem to develop," he said.

While the International Civil Aviation Organisation is endorsing various methods for producing green fuel, potential SAF sources in India include cooking oil, municipal solid wastes, agricultural residues, cane molasses, syrup, and hydro-

gen technology. Airbus sees huge potential for Indian green jet fuel at a global level on the basis of cost advantage as compared to foreign peers.

"When we look at projects in India, we can see some price differential which is coming from raw materials, labour, infrastructure. Foreign airlines will be happy to pay for SAF in India because it is likely that it will be cheaper than Europe," Manhes said.

The European aerospace major is working with regulators, industry bodies and other stakeholders to increase the permitted limit on blending of SAF to beyond 50%, but reiterates that the current bottleneck for this industry is production of the sustainable fuel.

"We are working with fuel producers to raise the bar and go up to 100%. That may need some modifications to the aircraft. But right now, that is not a bottleneck; availability of SAF is," he added.

GREEN SKIES AHEAD

IN 2023, global production of sustainable aviation fuel doubled to 600 million litres

THE civil aviation ministry is working on a strategy for the adoption of SAF by Indian airlines

POTENTIAL SAF sources in India include cooking oil, cane molasses, hydrogen tech

In 2023, SAF production in the world doubled to 600 million litres, representing 3% of all renewable fuels, with a forecast to more than triple in 2024 to 1.875 billion litres. This increase would account for 0.53% of aviation fuel needs globally, and 6% of renewable fuel capacity.

Investors expect the Fed will cut rates this spring in part because inflation has declined much faster than the central bank anticipated.

US inflation's cooling trend extends ahead of Federal Reserve meeting

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Inflation remained mostly subdued in December, an encouraging sign for Federal Reserve policymakers as they debate when to begin the rate cuts they have planned for this year.

The Fed's preferred inflation measure, the personal-consumption expenditures price index, rose 0.2% in December from the previous month, the Commerce Department said Friday. That was up from a 0.1% decline in November but still consistent with subdued inflation.

December closed out a year in which inflation declined markedly. Prices were up 2.6% on the year—well down from the 5.4% increase at the end of 2022. Core prices, which exclude volatile food and energy costs, rose 2.9% on the year, a slowdown from the prior month.

On a three-month annualized basis, core PCE inflation slipped to 1.5% in December from 2.2% in November. On a six-month basis, it was 1.9%, unchanged from November. Both figures are below the Fed's 2% target.

Investors expect the Fed will cut rates this spring in part because inflation has declined much faster than the central bank anticipated. Core inflation in the fourth quarter came in significantly lower than they anticipated just last June.

"We expect the Fed will have enough confidence to begin cutting interest rates at their late April/early May meeting," Michael Pearce, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics, wrote in a research note. "Though the backdrop of a strong economy means they are likely to cut rates only gradually this year."

Policy statement could change Fed officials are on track to hold interest rates steady at their two-day policy meeting next week but could remove



Investors expect the Fed will cut rates this spring in part because inflation has declined much faster than the central bank anticipated. REUTERS

from their policy statement language that has said their next interest-rate change is more likely to be an increase than a cut.

At a monthly annualized rate, core price readings in six of the last seven months have been running at a rate equal to or below the Fed's 2% target. If that progress continues in the coming months, 12-month inflation rates would be closing in on the Fed's goal by the time officials meet at the end of April.

Normally, the Fed only cuts interest rates because of concerns the economy is slowing more sharply, but officials have said they would consider cutting rates this year if inflation is convincingly falling to their target. That is partly because they are concerned that holding rates steady as inflation declines will lead inflation-adjusted rates to rise to levels that unnecessarily restrain economic activity.

Most officials have indicated that they made their final rate increase last July, when they lifted their benchmark rate to a range between 5.25% and 5.5%, a more than two-decade high. Fed officials expect to cut rates three times this year, according to projections from their

last meeting in December.

Robust consumers Friday's report also showed Americans' spending rose 0.7% in December from November, after an upwardly revised 0.4% gain the prior month. Consumers spent strongly on services like healthcare and insurance as well as on vehicles and gifts like jewelry and watches. Consumer outlays make up the lion's share of U.S. economic activity and Friday's report suggested demand remained strong headed into 2024.

Incomes, however, rose a slower 0.3% last month after a 0.4% November gain.

December was a strong month for Besa, a restaurant in Detroit, with sales up roughly 10% from a year earlier thanks to holiday and corporate events, said managing partner Gerti Begaj. Guests are also increasingly willing to spend more, he said.

"The sense that I'm getting is that people are ready to pay for value," he said. "Prior to Covid there were times where guests were price-shopping a bit more; now attention is toward value."

American Express got a boost last quarter from cardholders' appetite for spending

on restaurants, Chief Financial Officer Christophe Le Caillec said in an interview. Across all spending, Le Caillec said growth is normalizing after last year's big bump from the postpandemic travel boom. He said the company expects spending to be roughly in line with the growth seen in 2023.

Visa said Thursday that profit climbed in its fiscal first quarter, citing resilient consumer spending.

Consumers headed into 2024 on a strong footing thanks to a healthy labor market, cooling inflation and steady wage gains. Those factors helped the U.S. economy defy most economists' expectations for a recession last year.

Forecasters expect the economy will continue to grow in 2024, albeit at a slower pace, according to a recent Wall Street Journal survey.

"It probably gets a little more challenging for consumer spending as we get deeper into 2024, but so far that momentum for consumers continues," said Eric Freedman, chief investment officer for U.S. Bank's Asset Management Group. Higher interest rates for consumers are like a ramp on a treadmill, and over time the ramp means they "start to atrophy, they slow down," he said.

Hoteliers seek infra push for hospitality

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With tourism emerging from the pandemic's shadow, hoteliers have urged the government to prioritize infrastructure development and tax reforms in the upcoming budget to unlock the potential of the hospitality sector.

"The government has set an ambitious target of 100 million tourists by 2047 and this requires massive accommodation. We hope the budget will announce infrastructure development plans for hotels and tourist destinations," M.P. Bezaruah, secretary general of the Hotel Association of India.

Infrastructure status, something the industry has been seeking, comes with a bunch of perks for developers, particularly when it comes to financing their projects, like easier access to bank loans, cheaper development costs and tax benefits for projects.

Bezaruah pointed to last year's budget proposal to develop 50 new tourist desti-



Infrastructure status for the industry comes with a bunch of perks for developers, particularly when it comes to project financing.

nations, a plan which remains largely unimplemented.

"We need much more development to achieve a \$1 trillion tourism contribution to GDP, which the government has set its targets on," he said, highlighting the potential for sustainable tourism growth, and showcasing India's diversity.

"We have so much to showcase to the world too, it would be a great addition to have 50, or even more new tourist desti-

nations. Otherwise, many destinations like Agra, Jaipur etc., could see over-tourism and would be at risk of becoming unsustainable."

Bezaruah acknowledged the limitations of a vote on account budget in an election year.

"Significant changes are unlikely, but we hope the government will consider our suggestions in the long run," he said.

One key area of concern is

the goods and services tax (GST). "The current 18% GST rate on hospitality is higher than other sectors, and rationalizing this could boost revenue for both the government and the industry," he added.

Another hurdle is the differential GST rate between restaurants in hotels and those that are independent, creating an uneven playing field. Bezaruah urged the government to address this disparity.

Revamping the 'Incredible India' campaign also figures prominently in hoteliers' wish list. "Inbound tourism hasn't recovered fully and renewed marketing efforts, both online and offline, are crucial. Vietnam's successful campaigns show the potential to us and the rest of the world."

The government's recent cuts to overseas promotional budgets, from ₹524 crore in 2021-22 to a mere ₹67 crore in 2024, have worried the industry.

While acknowledging the benefits of digitization, Bezaruah said traditional offline campaigns in attracting tourists shouldn't be ignored.

INDIA SURGE INTERIM BUDGET 2024

Outlook robust for Indians travelling abroad

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Increasing numbers of Indians are set to travel abroad in the coming years as their disposable income grows in tandem with more direct flights, improved visa processing for nearby countries, and a likely growth in flights by Indian airlines, travel platform MakeMyTrip said.

"All the aircraft orders that have been placed to bring new fleet into the market. Over the next 3-5 years or more, significant chunk of new orders are expected to be deployed to

open up some foreign destinations or to grow (outbound) for these foreign destinations," Rajesh Magow, co-founder and group chief executive officer of MakeMyTrip said in a post-earnings conference call.

Indian airlines such as IndiGo, Air India, Akasa have more than 1,500 aircraft on order. Akasa Air ordered 150 Boeing B737 MAX family aircraft as recently as last week.

"From a demand standpoint, I see middle to upper

middle class to high net-worth individuals, the way the disposable income is growing... that is going to be other driving force for outbound

destinations to grow," Magow added.

The company expects the demand to be strongly supported with more direct connectivity between Indian and short-haul international destinations. This has also intensified the competition in travel choice between a domestic

destination and a short-haul international city.

Recently, IndiGo started direct flights to Tashkent, Baku, and Vistara has commenced direct flight connectivity to Bali.

"... Key international holiday destinations like Thailand, Sri Lanka and Malaysia have announced waiver of visa for Indian travellers. This is likely to fuel greater demand for these international destinations in the times to come," the company management added.

The company also continues to witness a growth in demand for business and premium economy air tickets.

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