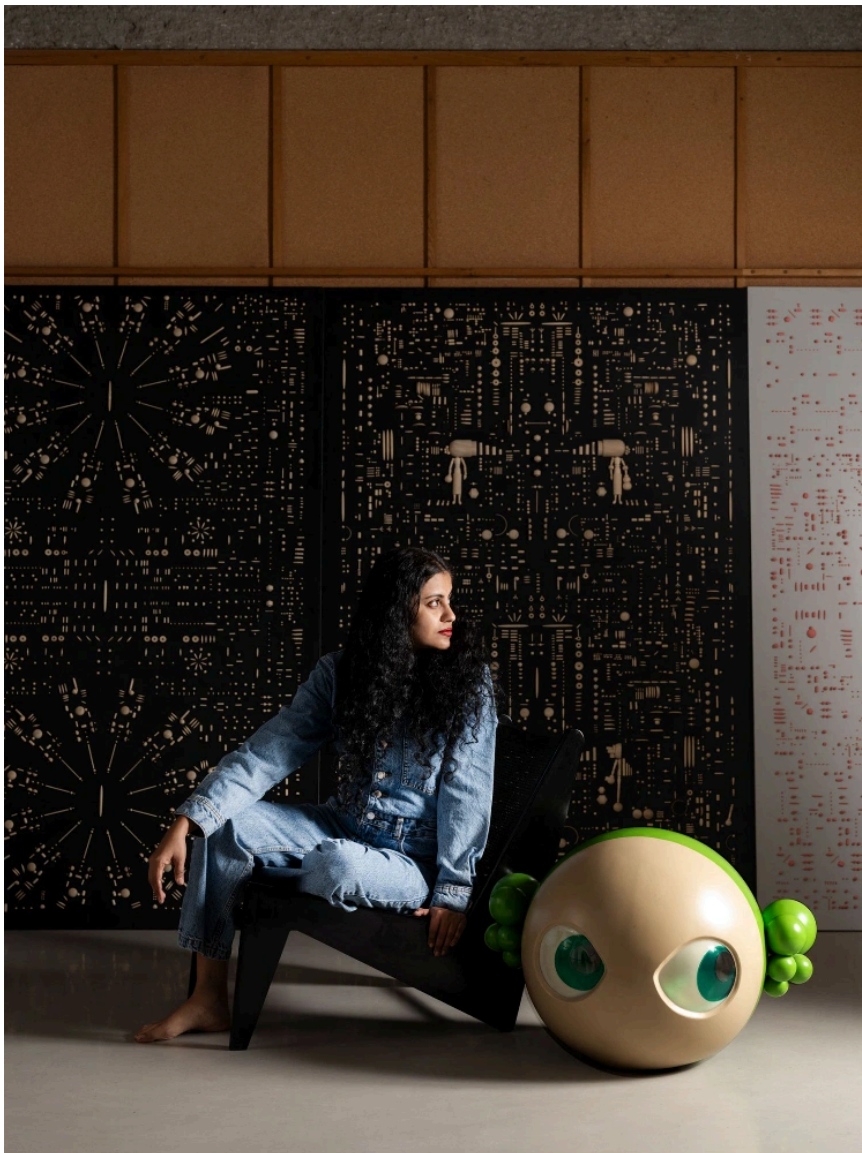


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After 16 years, Princess Pea is ready to shed her iconic headpiece

With her new exhibition in Mumbai, artist Natasha Preenja makes a public appearance showcasing works using marble, block printing, and even kajal made in her own kitchen

BY NIDHI GUPTA



Gurgaon-based artist Natasha Preenja steps out from behind the green bobblehead to reveal the woman long known only as Princess Pea



There's something deeply enigmatic about the anonymous artist. From George Eliot to Elena Ferrante in literature, the Gorillaz (initially) to Glass Beams and Talwiinder in music, and Banksy to the Guerrilla Girls in art—every era and universe has its share of creators who've let their pencils, brushes, and instruments do the talking. To court fame without wanting to be famous: it's a curious paradox and, in our follower-obsessed, post-digital world, a deft sleight of hand.

"Being anonymous is like seeing the world through a viewfinder—focused, intentional, and quietly distant," says the artist Natasha Preenja. Sitting in the conference room at Tarq Gallery in Fort, Mumbai, on the opening night of her new exhibition, the Gurgaon-based artist is trying to patiently answer the one question she's presumably already tired of hearing. She is, of course, Princess Pea, the multifaceted and thus far anonymous artist best identified by her green bobblehead-like headgear, who has, through two decades of prolific work, interrogated femininity, invisibility, and the crushing expectations placed on women in patriarchal India.

This is probably the first time in 16 years that Princess Pea has appeared in public without that iconic oversized headpiece—the "living toy" that defined her alter ego who could not speak, smell or hear, existing somewhere between fairy tale and harsh reality. Turns out, under that headgear lies a mop of curls, a ready smile, and those liquid anime eyes that, in her youth, evoked consternation and comments about "staring".

"It wasn't like a scheme, or a plan, or a career move," she laughs. In fact, back then, she invented that headgear to protect herself and her sister from criticism for their appearances as they began to venture beyond the safe environment of the army cantonment in which they grew up. Later, it became methodology: a way to understand herself while creating space that belonged only to her.

Over time, the mask travelled from body to body, and that intimate space has expanded to include hundreds of women—artisans, housewives, survivors of abuse, those wrestling with mental health and body image—as they went about their lives, "a silent choreography of pleasing and proving". The decision to reveal herself now, Preenja suggests, reflects how she and her practice has evolved: "From a girl to a woman, and now a mother. We play roles, we change, we age, and we expand our own selves into more: more care, more resilience, more ways of being. With my growing inclination toward community practice, I feel that Princess Pea has also expanded, no longer a single self but infinite women."

The exhibition, *वज़न*, itself marks a material departure for Preenja. Where her earlier work centred on performance and digital manipulation ([the satirical Vague series featuring doctored magazine covers](#)) and small turned-wood toy sculptures made in collaboration with artisans from Etikoppaka village in coastal Andhra Pradesh, *वज़न* introduces marble and hand wooden block printing.

The new marble sculptures, titled 'Mothers, Bodies of Stone', depict women bearing invisible weight—the accumulated burden of expectations, domestic labour, and silenced pain—carved in a material historically associated with masculinity. "Over the years, I have made thousands of drawings, many of which were later chiselled in tree bark. I wanted to expand their scale and explore another material language," Preenja says.



Works from the Drawings Studies 3 series, made using kajal on banana paper



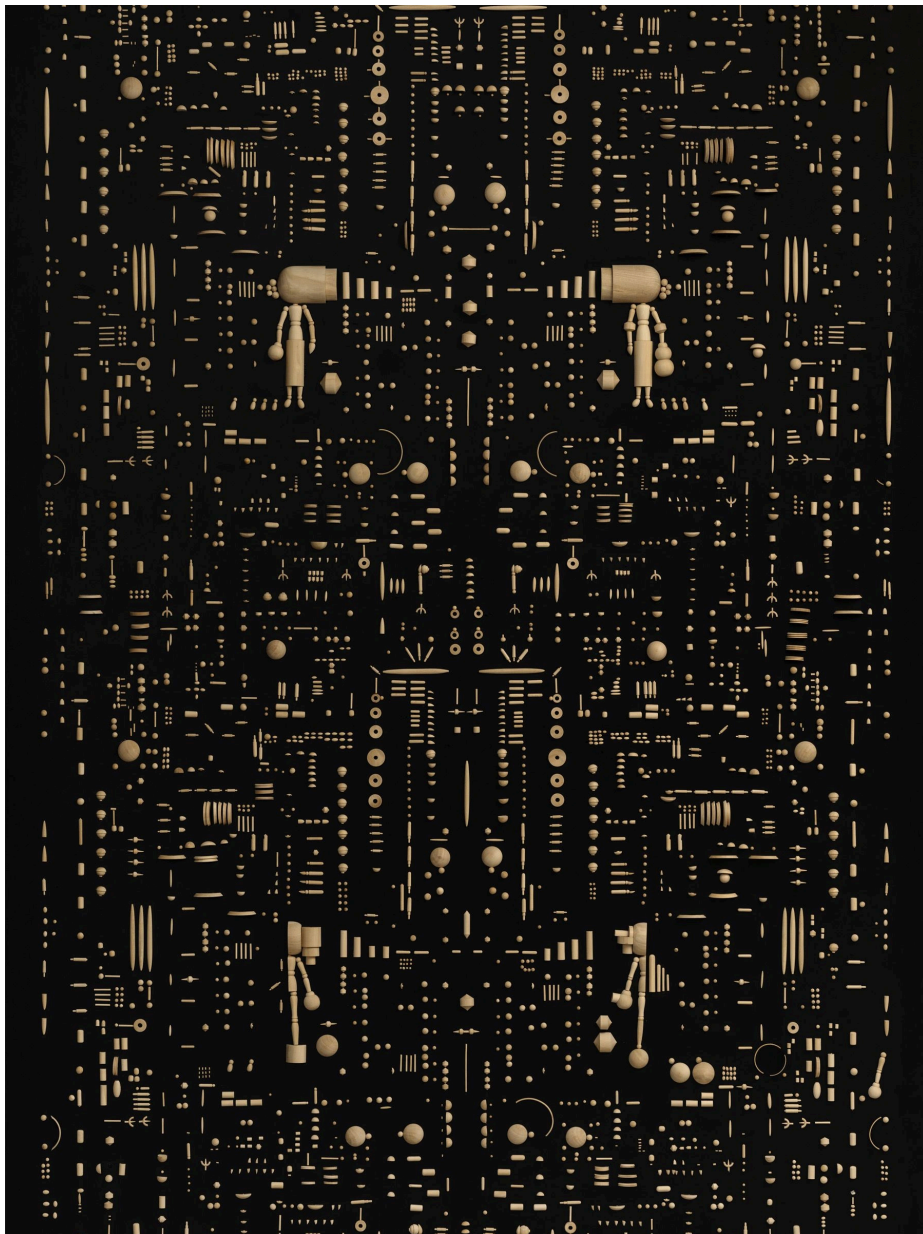
The marble sculptures, titled 'Mothers, Bodies of Stone', depict women bearing invisible weight; In the background, the Rituals series made using Kumkum, acrylic, linen, moli and ankudu wood

“The drawings were enlarged and carved from Indian marble, allowing them to acquire a new weight and permanence.” This choice of marble is confrontational. By carving female subjects in stone—the medium of monuments, of male power—Preenja reframes women “not as muse or passive form but as a site of endurance, resilience and quiet strength”. She continues to challenge the order of things in the series ‘Backwards’, her foray into traditional wood block printing, inspired by British poet Warsan Shire’s ‘Backwards’. “Each mark I make on the cloth becomes part of a rhythm—a movement that goes beyond block printing,” she says.

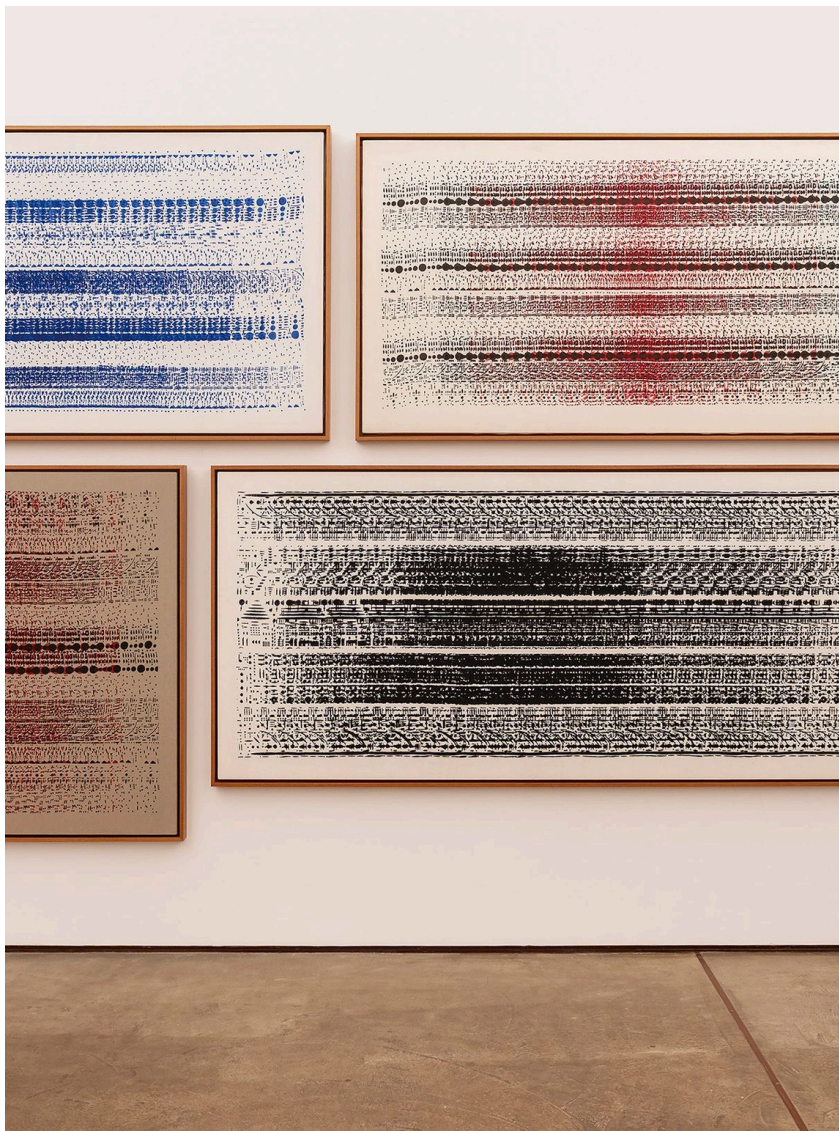
The works are painted with kajal prepared from ghee in her own kitchen, with kumkum and sacred thread—materials from her daily rituals—becoming new elements. “This time I wanted to return to the surface itself, to find a way for wood and ink to act as brush and canvas,” she explains. “I began experimenting with hand wood block printing, a traditional technique, as a means to reimagine the painted surface. For me, these paintings made with wooden blocks open up new possibilities of seeing, transforming familiar traditions into fresh, contemporary form.”

The ‘Hymns for Mothers’ series continues Preenja's decade-long collaboration with turned-wood toy artisans from Etikoppaka but pushes beyond traditional

figurine forms. Composed of thousands of tiny, individual turned-wood pieces mimicking the paraphernalia of domestic life (such as rolling pins and grindstones), each work resembles—depending on how you see it—a visual letter in Braille or a computer motherboard, “echoing the intimate ties between labour and creativity”.



Hymns for Mothers 2 (2024)



Works from the Backwards series (2025)

Two of Preenja's works will be exhibited at the Tarq booth at Art Mumbai this weekend, but right now she is thrilled to have been able to get the team of artisans themselves to attend the opening. In a corner of the gallery stands the master craftsman Nagesh Rao in a shirt and panche—the anonymous talent she discovered in 2011 through a commission to the Andhra Pradesh Museum in New Delhi, and whose own real identity she discovered by pure chance when she went looking for him at Dilli Haat and Surajkund Mela. Next to him stands his wife in a white-and-gold sari. She's training to join the police right now, Preenja tells me with quiet pride.

In an art world obsessed with individual genius and market value, Preenja has built something else entirely: a practice rooted in listening and collaborative making. Her projects with women in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and soon with the decades-old Tharangini Studio (a wood block printing studio in Bengaluru) have focused on creating safe spaces for vulnerability as she also does her bit to sustain traditional Indian crafts.

It's what she's also done in an ambitious project that exists outside the gallery: the 'Days' carpet collection, created in collaboration with Jaipur Rugs Foundation, released the same day as this new exhibition. Titled 'Un Dino' ('Those Days'), the four carpets directly address menstruation—the days when women are often excluded from their daily lives and deemed impure. "I wanted

to reframe that narrative," Preenja says, "transforming these days of isolation into moments of reflection, strength and collective care." The carpets were co-created with women weavers over months of conversation exploring themes of reproductive health and mental well-being rarely discussed openly in India.