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Why Natasha Pea Won The First Swali Craft Prize

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The inaugural recipient of the Swali Craft Prize reflects on her alter ego Princess Pea, the privileges and paradoxes of creative anonymity, and the insatiable artistic impulse to question gender norms and societal stereotypes

It was in 2009 at the India Art Summit held in Delhi's Pragati Maidan that the masked figure of Princess Pea first made her indubitable debut—a large, anime-style doll head with green hair on a human body, silently observing the world through oversized painted eyes. After nearly 17 years of carrying the literal weight of her persona through creative collaborations and projects that highlighted the “burden” of gender norms, the mask was placed aside, albeit temporarily, as multidisciplinary artist Natasha Preenja stepped forward to claim her moment in the sun earlier this month, at the same event, now rechristened the India Art Fair (IAF).

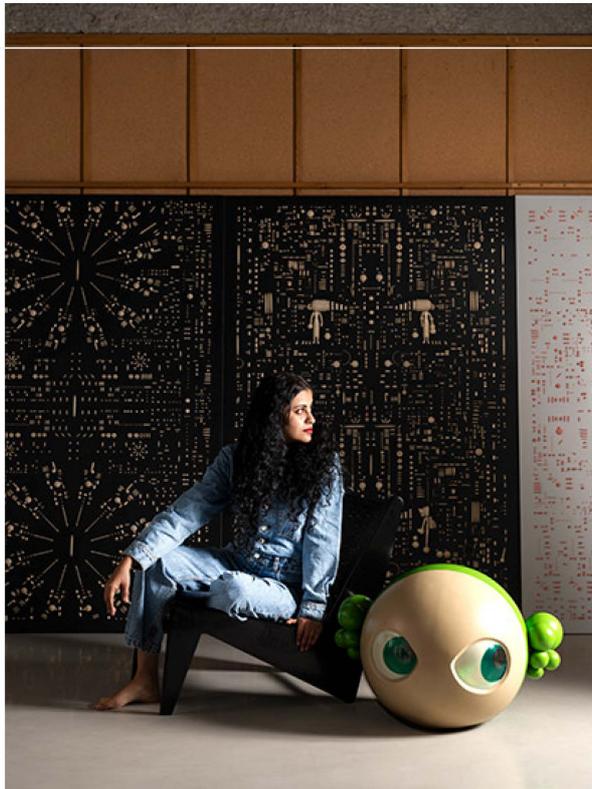
In a poetic full-circle moment, Preenja, the 2026 recipient of the Swali Craft Prize, stood not behind the protective anonymity of her alter ego, but as herself. The prize, founded by Karishma Swali and the Chanakya Foundation in partnership with IAF, was instituted to “recognise craftsmanship as a precise skill and a profound mode of expression”.

Princess Pea, is now navigating a new chapter—one that bridges the distance between the solitary artist and the collective power of community.

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Natasha Preenja poses with her alter ego Princess Pea's mask.

Anonymity and Perspective

"The whole idea of Princess Pea came from my personal history, which resonates with every woman. It's a character which was built in relation with my sister and I, when we were often judged and compared on the basis of our physical appearances," says Preenja. That oversized head, initially sculpted from clay before being made in fibreglass and later engineered in lightweight industrial plastic, became a means to question binary stereotypes of a patriarchal society. "I call it a headgear; it's a tool for me, which is symbolic of the weight of societal expectations, body-image policing and beauty standards that women have carried on their shoulders since posterity," she explains.

For years, Princess Pea was an enigma. She straddled the worlds of art, fashion and craft with equal ease, appearing in projects that defied easy categorisation. All the world knew was that she was a Gurugram girl, born in Ferozepur, who studied at the Delhi College of Art. But on November 6 last year, Preenja made an unpredictable pivot by disclosing her identity at her solo exhibition *Vazan* at Tarq Art Gallery in Mumbai.



shine that had been concealed by the deadpan visage of her conceptual headgear.

Fabric Of India Intersections

"I often say that anonymity is luxury because you get your own time and you can work at your own pace," Preenja admits. "But in November I felt that, okay, maybe now is the time that I can be available to answer more questions, to meet people".



Natasha Preenja's limited-edition sculptures made from ankudu wood from Etikoppaka, Andhra Pradesh.

This shedding of the mask was not a rejection of Princess Pea's performance art, feminist thoughts and pervading principles, but an evolution of Preenja's artistic devices and avenues of advocacy. *Vazan* marked a material shift, introducing weighty marble sculptures alongside the delicate *ankudu* wood toy-like shapes she has been co-creating with the artisans of Etikoppaka in Andhra Pradesh as part of her practice. The marble pieces were manifestations of various dichotomies—necessarily masculine in connotation, but dealt in a light hand to create feminine shapes, soft in appearance yet heavy in reality—and served as stand-ins for the woman forced to shoulder the invisible weight of grief and ignominy.

Preenja's new Narratives

Yet, even as Preenja steps into the spotlight, her practice remains deeply rooted in collaboration and the collective female experience. "I think it's very important to listen and learn through that. Listening and witnessing is something I've been doing throughout my practice, and now that I'm 'out' I continue to collaborate with different bodies and crafts... The only thing that has changed is that I'm more available and visible now," says Preenja.

In the course of time, while the Princess Pea mask went through different iterations and colours and travelled through different communities and craft clusters—from women artisans, survivors of violence, to housewives and differently-abled women—Preenja also



and assemblage—mughal miniature art from Odisha, block-printing from Jaipur, and marble sculpting from Rajasthan. “I grew up with this intergenerational knowledge of so much craft around me that I feel the need to keep learning more,” she says.

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Her winning entry for the Swali Craft Prize, a larger-than-life sculpture titled *Lotus Headed*, is testament to this enduring ethos. Created over a two-month residency in collaboration with Karishma Swali and the Chanakya School of Craft, the sculpture draws from the mythic iconography of Lajja Gauri, an ancient embodiment of fertility, whose grounded *uttanapad* (squatting) posture is intimately tied to birth, labour and domestic ritual.

“The idea of *uttanapad* also carries a political charge as a gesture of protest, reclamation, and endurance,” Preenja notes. The sculpture, a synthesis of Preenja’s turned-wood fragments and the Chanakya atelier’s incredible material knowhow, weaves together two distinct craft traditions. “My wooden, handmade lathe pieces were knitted and stitched onto the sculpture. It talks as much about mothers who carry generations within them, as it does about women empowerment, community and collective creativity,” says Preenja.



A St+art India collaboration saw Princess Pea interacting with women from Lodhi Colony.

Community and Continuity

This commitment to the “unacknowledged craftsmanship” of women has long been the beating heart of Preenja’s work. Whether she is working with the appliqué artisans of Bihar for a women’s healthcare initiative in



"I'm not somebody who just conceives something and starts drawing," she says, recalling her project in Delhi's Lodhi Colony with St+art India. "I went around the neighbourhood with the headgear, knocking on people's doors. The women invited me in for tea, and we spoke about who I am and why I am here".

It is in these intimate, domestic spaces that Preenja finds her most profound inspiration. Her collaboration with Jaipur Rugs, titled *Un Dino* ('Those Days'), directly addressed the taboos surrounding menstruation. "We went to the village, did a lot of documentation. The women wore the head, they made me wear a sari... and by the evening they were like, 'Come with us, we'll take you to a wedding,'" she recalls. "They were excited that somebody was actually asking them about their lives. Nobody has ever asked them because when they're weaving, it's almost like making rotis. How many rotis did you make in your lifetime? It's difficult to calculate the invisible labour of women."



Princess Pea has served as muse and collaborator for fashion designer An

Sharing is Collaborating

Preenja's ability to traverse the often-segregated worlds of "high art" and "craft" comes from her refusal to be pigeonholed. She respects the movement and energy of fashion, having served as muse and collaborator for designer Aneeth Arora's Fall-Winter 2015 collection, where she also created miniature Princess Pea turn-wood dolls for the ramp and audience giveaways, turning her signature *ankudu* wood sculptures into her versions of the Pero dolls. For Summer-Resort 2018, she collaborated with Lovebirds Studio on an art performance titled *Born of Fire* that sought to spotlight defined notions of beauty, appearances and genders in contemporary lifestyles.



Lukoppaka, Preenja seems more determined than ever. The mask may be off, but the mission remains unchanged. "Princess Pea will never go away. The headgear was my sanctuary, and it's now a tool to pass on to other people so that they also feel safe... I have a larger community to work with now. And I don't think I have the power to hold on to it anymore because it's travelling, and women are enjoying it and embracing it," says Preenja.

Banner: Multidisciplinary artist Natasha Preenja with The Lotus Headed sculpture, realised through creative dialogue with Karishma Swali and the Chanakya School of Craft as an exploration of mythic iconography and contemporary collective practice.

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