

DESIGN INDIA

POOL 114

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CHANGE
MAKERS



***Dr. Naushad Forbes* pg 12**

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NATURAL INSTINCT

Nibha Sikander's 3D figures of birds and insects are intended to draw attention to the wonders of nature. She tells Sonalee Tomar of 'The Indian Curator' how she was drawn to the art of paper-cutting.



Left & Above: House Sparrow

Take us to the beginning of your story.

NS: I started cutting paper over 15 years ago and when I first started, it literally involved taking a single piece of paper and cutting it into abstract forms. This developed into more stencil-like forms using colored paper. Almost six or seven years ago, I developed this technique of laying paper from the top and adding thicker paper in-between, to add more body and make it more relief sculpture like.

Tell us about the evolution of your practice over the years.

NS: I find that my work itself speaks to my commitment to paper. Each work takes me several days to complete and is a complete immersion in the paper, and the paper-cutting process, which has allowed me to reach this level of technical ability. I feel that paper has the ability to be flexible as well as stiff when required, which really does help me in the process of creating my various natural forms.

What were your biggest learnings and hiccups along the way? Which is the most memorable moment?

NS: I guess I would have to highlight the technical side of my work. I do learn and discover new things as I work. As I work, in this case with birds, moths and insects, I make mistakes. When each work progresses, I am able to correct my mistakes, and sometimes I can add or subtract the paper as I go along. It is this process that I enjoy the most when I'm working.

The hiccup came when I opted to pursue Visual Arts (Painting) at the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara, and felt like I had to conform to the structure

of painting with watercolor or acrylic or oil. I struggled to find a way to incorporate my paper-cutting technique into such a rigidly structured undergraduate degree. Though I did experiment with paper a bit in the fourth year of my Bachelor's and my Master's as well, upon graduating I gave up other mediums to focus on paper.

What inspires you? Take us through your process and continuous frameworks of reference.

NS: I come from a family of nature lovers and have been surrounded by books on birds and trees, as well as conversations about various species my entire life. Talking about my current body of work, one of my most memorable moments is connected to my trip to Kaziranga with my family. We visited Nameri, a bird sanctuary, and I saw the Great Indian Hornbill for the first time, and it completely mesmerized me. I had never seen a bird that size, and also when it flew above us the wings were so massive that it felt like

the wind was displaced. After that I started to observe and buy books and research more about birds and other species extensively. My family has had property on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra for many years, so I have been visiting these places since I was a child; I am most comfortable in nature. About a year ago I moved to our home in Murud-Janjira, where I currently reside. Right behind our place is the Phansad wildlife sanctuary, where a variety of moth and bird species live - they inspire my work.

What is the primary role of an artist?

NS: My role is to highlight nature and the species that inspire me. My work enables people to challenge their perceptions of overlooked creatures in nature.

How do you balance art and life?

NS: I would say that my life and art are very much intertwined. I live in Murud-Janjira and my studio is in my house



itself. Being surrounded by nature I am dealing with these insects and moths on a daily basis, so I find no real need to separate the two.

How do you deal with the conceptual difficulty and uncertainty of creating work?

NS: For my most recent show, the concept was clear very early on. Once I started with the birds, the moths and insects simply followed. Since I encountered these creatures every day it was much easier for me to observe, photograph and recreate them. Hence, I had the conceptual aspects mapped out for these particular series.

How does your audience interact and react to the work you put out into the world?

NS: People react differently to the materiality and the three-dimensionality of the works. The images online make the works appear to be flat, however upon seeing them right before your eyes, you are able to uncover the layers and appreciate the life-like appearance.

Who or what has shaped your own creative process? Who are your maestros?

NS: I would definitely say my mother, who is an artist herself, has been a huge influence in my journey with art. More importantly, crafts



Moth Series



have had a major impact on me, like the Andhra leather puppets, *Sanjhi* rangoli stencils, Mexican, Chinese and Polish paper cuts. My maestros are varied, from Goya and Paul Cezanne to Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse, especially towards the end when he started experimenting with paper cut outs like the *Blue Nudes* series. Benode Behari Mukerjee and his paper cut out that he started when he was losing his sight have been a great influence. As have Bhupen Khakkar, Andy Warhol, and M.C. Ecsher among many others.

*Crimson
Spotted Emerald*

How do you feel about commissions?

NS: Often for me, commissions become a vibrant space and opportunity to experiment with the medium. For example, when I worked with the Arvind Indigo Museum I was made to work with paper of a particular thickness that was dyed different shades of Indigo. Interestingly here, I was working with shades of one particular color palette as opposed to the multiple colors I am used to. I do feel that commissions tend to challenge my notions and usual ways of working.



What are you working on now?

NS: I want to pick up from one work named 'The Abstract Kingfisher', where I have played around with using different cutout forms, creating a completely new abstract form of the kingfisher. I am definitely not done working with the full form of birds, moths and insects but I want to try and push my work more into the abstract so let's see what happens.

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(Sonalee Tomar studied at NID and worked as the Editorial Director of Pool Magazine before founding 'The Indian Curator', a platform to support creative outliers with liberating resources)