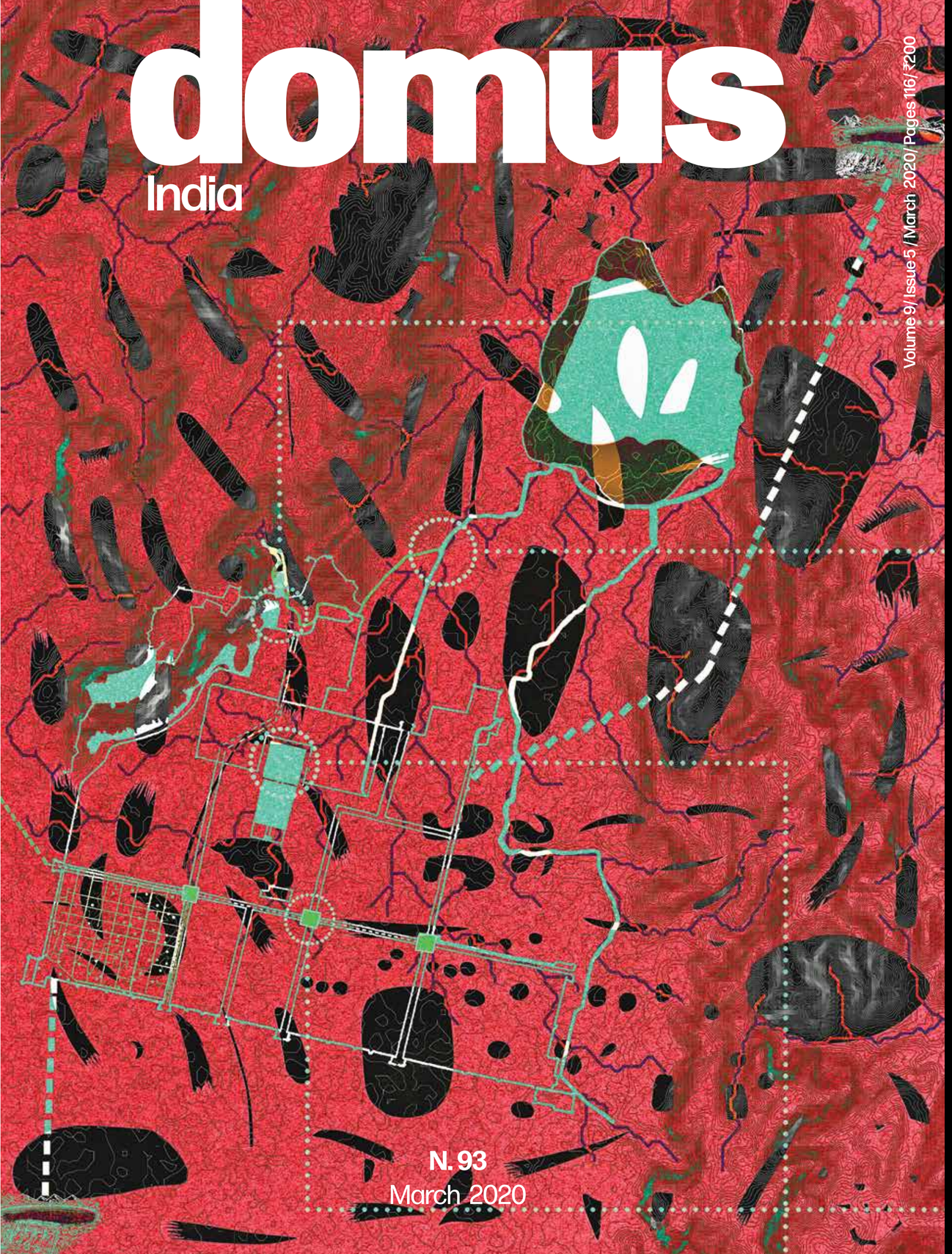

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The Architect in Public Life

Text Kaiwan Mehta

With this issue we join the *DOMUS* team worldwide in welcoming David Chipperfield as the special editor for the ten issues though 2020. It was an exciting 2019 with Winy Maas highlighting how the city is about people, and 'people are urbanism' along with a focus on nature and climate change across design practices. This issue indicates how the next ten issues will discuss the complex life of planning and cities, the nature of practice and its avatars, as well as account for the many reflections on design and nature, or the world as we see it through architecture, art, design, and city studies.

It is a time in India when after long the fraternity of architects seems agitated collectively about an issue and is actively working on alliances with professionals and intellectuals from other fields. Yet what remains is shaping a language for conversations with civil society. The issue at hand is the reimagining of the New Delhi central vista, which currently houses the Rashtrapati Bhavan (House of the Honourable President of India), the Parliament, as well as government offices and other institutional buildings within a sprawling space. Many Indians may not have visited this location physically, but it sits within their imagination – sharp and strong – a solid image where every 26th January, the Republic Day of India, a grand parade performs the military strength as well as the cultural diversity of India, its federal states and the people – witnessed by visiting dignitaries from other countries and a large gathering of people from across India. It would be a ritual for many Indians, in their private homes or in gatherings in public places, pouring over a shared television set of a local club or a rich neighbour, viewing the Republic Day Parade on television. This may have lost popularity since the advent of satellite television with countless – and often pointless – channels, yelling news anchors who often think they are political analysts. But yet the image of the space is etched in the mind of several Indians. On other days, the residents of a dense city such as Delhi come out to these sprawling maidans for a stroll and 'to eat the air' as they would say in 19th-century colonial India; other Indians visiting Delhi would land up at the Rajpath or around Rashtrapati Bhavan to see if what they saw on television is actually the same in 'real life', enjoying being tourists around India Gate. This gateway is a public icon for a nation through wars and struggles, finally achieving independence from colonial rule through the historic non-violence movement led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who died a year after Independence trying to convince people about the values of truth and togetherness that shape human civilisations and nations; who died struggling to shape an a nation built on the central value of Hindu-Muslim unity, the two religions that comprise maximum Indians.

The central vista and its complex designed during colonial rule was built only about 25 years before India achieved Independence. The scheme got adopted easily by Independent India's government, but what was transformative was that the vast space within the complex surrounding these monumental and governmental buildings was occupied from the day of Independence itself – images of crowds occupying the space are strong markers of the moment of freedom from colonial rule and transition into self-rule, and till date, even if those larger masses are not allowed to easily occupy these arenas, there is a pleasant sense of public life that continues in this complex. Strolling, lounging, 'making picnic', taking selfies, yoga groups, laughing clubs, just hanger-ons across the maidans are iconic and public in good measure. The new imagination of this complex aims to centralise government functions using much of the open lands here, in the hope that efficient physical planning and super-functional architecture will make the bureaucracy more efficient and the government will function better – much hope here – but has this not been a classic debate? Does architecture and planning so directly influence people occupying those buildings such that efficient planning will make an efficient bureaucracy? High efficiency in space design will result in highly efficient ministries? As if all these years when the governmental offices were accused of inefficiency or slow progress: the only reason for this was not good design of buildings and a government complex! The increase in density of built volumes in this complex, hyper-rise in flow of ministers and bureaucrats as we read the recent proposals for the reimagination could indeed make these sprawling grounds into an Acropolis ; above all, for the holy and privileged few? Should not 21st-century democratic governments decentralise towards an erasing out of hierarchies rather than centralising the machinery as a central Capitol citadel? The reimagination may not wish for this, but does run a high danger and risk of this.

But amidst all of this what we see is finally is architects in their everyday life debating a public project not simply in terms of who got which commission and why, but on the nature of relationships between people and places, and the public and architecture in a government and public commission. Where often some of us critics and historians were seen doubtingly on our emphases on the political nature of architecture and the political complexities in design process and form, aesthetics and poetics, today the politics of design, planning and architecture is becoming a common refrain in Whatsapp messages on the project. The pages of this magazine, while celebrating the diversity and role of design in public life and cultural and political formations, has constantly asked why the architect has receded as a public figure, with public roles and responsibilities. This question was magnified in *The State of Architecture: Practices and Processes in India* curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote and Kaiwan Mehta, as the research and then exhibition developed the chief question – that of 'the role of the architect' and why is s/he becoming either a service-provider, subservient to populist taste, or a lifestyle organiser, and why not a public-professional figure that has a political stand with contributions to public and professional discourse and shape public debate through one's professional expertise and opinion? That there is no poetics without politics is an important component of architectural practice, and in 2017, one penned an essay titled "If not political, it is not design". In trying to build a professional opposition to the reimagination of the central vista in New Delhi today, it is clearly the architect trying to regain her/his public place and voice. However, the efforts need much more thinking and better organisation, simply because many architects would still prefer armchair activism on Whatsapp as opposed to being out in public, loud and clear, and very few have consistently fought public arguments. Thus the experience of public engagement will have to be built up piece by piece. But these are interesting and important times for all of us...

Negative 24 by Nibha Sikander
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut; 2019
(Courtesy of Nibha Sikander and TARQ)

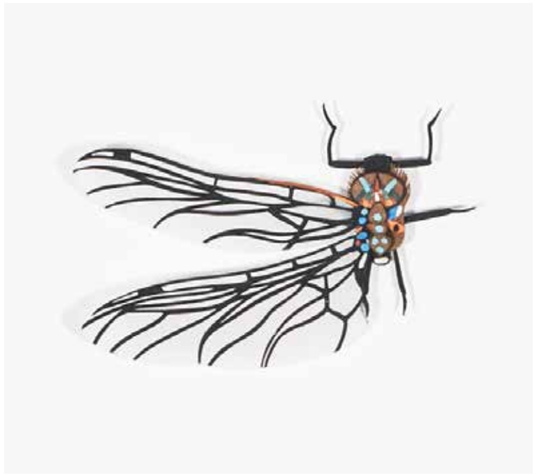
Design and Art

In this section we consider the needs of contemporary society in terms of objects both practical and aesthetic. This month, guest contributor Alice Rawsthorn posits László Moholgy-Nagy as the archetype for contemporary designers working in a broadened field.
While every month Jasper Morrison will look to precedent to illuminate the way forward, this month he considers Enzo Mari as the acme of the designer. We also explore the intricate work of artist Nibha Sikander, who brings a miniaturist's eye to bear on the extraordinarily intriguing sculptures of insects, moths and birds that she creates with the simplest and most minimal means.

Notes on nature and art

Wandering Violin Mantis

Text Ranjit Hoskote
Photographs Courtesy of Nibha Sikander and TARQ



In a recently concluded exhibition, artist Nibha Sikander creates stunningly lifelike creatures – birds, insects and moths – all handmade from paper. It is her preternatural rendering of the natural in all its gorgeous detail that summons forth, in the viewer, a wave of rapture.

'The violinist's shadow vanishes.
The husk of a grasshopper
Sucks a remote cyclone and rises.'
- Ted Hughes, 'Cadenza' [1]

Nibha Sikander brings a miniaturist's eye to bear on the extraordinarily intriguing sculptures that she creates with the simplest and most minimal means, shaping them from layers upon layers of card paper with an X-Acto cutter. Wrought with unerring accuracy, and with a heightened attentiveness to delicate and often elusive detail, Sikander's moths and birds testify to the dazzling enchantment of the natural world as well as to the magic of taxonomical science. Presented in segments, as a row of *disjecta membra* laid out from wing to beak and head, her birds make a graphic transition from field guide to portrait gallery. They come across, not primarily as representatives of a species, but as sharply individual denizens of a world menaced by predators, surly winds, changing weather patterns. Her moths, speckled, streaked and richly coloured, bring the shimmering warmth of their nocturnal ethos into the sobriety of the specimen case or vitrine.

The works brought together to form Sikander's first solo exhibition are a testament to the curiosity of the naturalist, the patience of the observer, and the devotion of the artist to species that we too often treat as incidental or decorative. Ephemeral as insects may seem, they guarantee the robust longevity of the processes of ecological regeneration, and provide early warnings of impending environmental catastrophe. At a fateful moment of global 'insect

This page: *Blue Darner*
1 work with 6 individual paper cut parts of the Blue Darner bird, 2019
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut
Opposite page: *White Throated Fantail Flycatcher*
1 work with 5 individual paper-cut parts of the bird, 2019
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut

This page:
Common Kingfisher
1 work with 5 individual paper cut parts of the Common Kingfisher bird, 2019
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut
Bottom: detail of a work underway at Sikander's studio

This page:
Little Yam Hawkmoth
1 work with 2 individual paper cut parts of the Little Yam Hawkmoth, 2019
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut

apocalypse', when thousands of insect species are approaching extinction or have already been wiped out, Sikander's jewelled moths remind us of the crucial importance of the overlooked.

*

Walking from one insect, moth, or bird – and some of Sikander's moths and insects are species of her own invention – we find ourselves drawn into the sensuous delight of pattern and colour. We are captivated by the umber streaks and sienna pools that mark the wings of the Large Eyed Owl Moth, the rich green spread of the Crimson Spotted Emerald, the cerulean splash on the wings of the Little Yam Hawkmoth, the grey spots and luminous green markings of the Pomegranate Fruit Piercer. We dwell on the long digger beak of the Hoopoe, the wise guide of Attar's grand Sufi poem, *Mantiq at-Tair* ('The Conference of the Birds'), sequenced as an exploded diagram of wing, beak, eye, and crest. The burst of sacrificial red in the otherwise restrained costume of the Red Whiskered Bulbul leaps out at us. The artist translates the Flower Mantis – that beautiful, cunning predator, which camouflages itself to look like flora – as a segmented portrait, a choreography of head, abdomen, legs in yogic posture, antennae, and exoskeleton.

Again and again, it is Sikander's preternatural rendering of the natural in all its gorgeous detail that summons forth, in us, a wave of rapture: we pause to consider a rain of filaments here, the tension in a pair of clenched claws there; we consider the sleekness of a proboscis, the celadon fuselage of a dragonfly; we lose ourselves in the sumptuous glory of marbled, herringbone, and pied bodies and wings laid out before us.

Sikander's studio is like a laboratory. The means by which she achieves her wondrous effects are austere: an X-Acto cutter as her chief instrument, and, as her material, card paper of 150 gsm thickness, bought from her

This spread:
House Sparrow
1 work with 5 individual paper-cut parts of the House Sparrow bird, 2019
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut

local stationery shop in Bandra, Bombay, the suburb that is her childhood home. This card paper is the medium for all her work, except for the Luna moth, which she has rendered in translucent, coloured Gateway tracing paper. The residues of her work are what she calls her 'negatives': effectively stencils, these are the card-paper sheets that remain after she has cut out the elements that go into her moths, birds and insects, with negative spaces where wings, legs, crests and other limbs have been cleanly marked and removed.

*

Sikander's current work has a firm contextual anchorage in the research to which she devoted herself, while preparing the dissertation for her master's degree in the visual arts, at the M S University, Baroda. She engaged with the aesthetics and varied cultural histories of the paper cutout, in India, Japan, China, Norway, and Poland; in the practice of modernist masters such as Henri Matisse and Benode Behari Mukherjee. Of special importance to her was the use of découpé and collage techniques by the increasingly infirm yet resurgently imaginative Matisse in his late work, and by Mukherjee, as he fought blindness, the literal and figurative dying of the light. She attended to the use of templates and stencils, shadow and light, the vital relationship between positive and negative space, in the Shi'a tradition of the Taziya, a model of the tomb of the martyred Imam Husain in Karbala, and in the Sanjhi tradition of paper cutouts used in the worship of Sri Krishna in Mathura and Vrindavan.

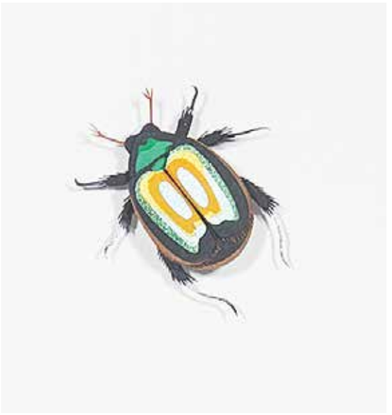
Focused and accomplished, Sikander's art is conceptually as well as formally rigorous. While her creations may be regarded as figures of fantasy, almost all of them – with the exception of the species she has invented and inserted among nature's productions – are absolutely real. The artist feels, keenly, the responsibility of representation, both for reasons of scientific accuracy and because these species did not ask to be represented, did not ask to become objects of our delectation. Almost all the moths featured in the present body of work bear a 1:1 correspondence in scale to their originals in nature. A few of them are somewhat smaller than they are in nature; some have been slightly enlarged. Sikander has chosen, also, to work only with moths that she has personally encountered in Murud-Janjira, the coastal zone south of Bombay where she lives and works.

As we marvel at the hours and hours of sustained attentiveness and artistic labour that have gone into the making of these paper sculptures – into the processes of observation, research, scaling, cutting, placing, gluing, and layering – we are reminded that, at the foundation of Sikander's art, lies the ethical decision not to kill the moths to whose inexhaustible splendour she responds with such intensity. Sikander may well draw on a tradition of scientific display in museums dedicated to natural history, by placing her moths and birds in vitrines – but her works do not simply mimic a lepidopterist's collection of pinned specimens or album of wing prints incorporating scales from the wings of moths or butterflies. They take a more arduous route to celebration, at the vexed intersection between nature and culture, science and art.

*

In retrospect, we see that salient biographical factors have informed the direction that Sikander has chosen in her explorations. Her entomological and ornithological preoccupations began early. She belongs to an extended family of distinguished naturalists that includes, across several generations, the legendary ornithologist Dr Sálim Ali, the conservationists Laeeq and Zafar Futehally, and the nature writer Zai Whitaker. The artist grew up reading their books, and recalls how family picnics and holidays were punctuated by a lively exchange of knowledge, with various relatives identifying bird sounds and comparing notes on their recent expeditions and discoveries. Equally pertinently, another branch of this family has long been prominent in the visual arts, and includes the artists Nasreen and Altaf Mohamedi, Navjot, and the artist's mother, Shrilekha Sikander. Many of Sikander's childhood summers were spent in Murud-Janjira and in Kihim, with which the family has had a deep and strong association: the coastal ecology and natural environment of these towns have remained largely unspoiled, until recent years, by the clamour of the popular tourism industry and the kitsch metropolitan culture that it brings in its wake.

More recent stimuli that drew Sikander towards her present line of artistic inquiry include the decision that she and her husband,



This spread:
Insect Series 1
1 work with 10 individual paper-cut insects, 2019
Coloured paper, archival paper, paper-cut

the gifted ceramicist Sukhdev Rathod, made to base themselves in Murud-Janjira, at a safe yet not insuperable distance from Bombay, with its distractions and anxieties. This decision plunged them into continuous interaction, and a process of mutual accommodation, with a diversity of other species. Sikander's focus on birds as a possible subject was prompted by trips she made to the Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks in Assam, during 2011-2012. Nameri is home to such legendary species of birds as the White-winged Wood Duck and the Great Indian Pied Hornbill.

Both Kaziranga and Nameri are threatened by an escalating conflict between the interests of animal species that are being cornered and poached, on the one hand, and, on the other, the ceaselessly burgeoning demands of humankind – that most demonic apex predator, the only species on the planet that devotes itself to the destruction of its own habitat. Sikander's expeditions to these endangered sanctuaries convey a subtle elegiac resonance into her work. Gradually, we realise that the segmented portraits of her subjects are not simply a mode of presentation; cutting against their own

The exhibition Wandering Violin Mantis *featuring the works of artist Nibha Sikander was on display at TARQ, Mumbai from 28 November 2019 to 4 January 2020. All images and texts featured here are with the permission of the gallery.*

This spread: Nibha Sikander's studio space in Murud-Janjira, located along the coast of Maharashra
Next page: *Study*, 2018

loveliness, they encode the barbaric violence that we have enacted upon the other species with whom we share this planet. As we drive ourselves purposefully towards the sixth mass extinction that our planet has suffered, in the epoch of the Capitalocene, we sense, in Sikander's exquisite paper sculptures, the thrum of the remote cyclones that Ted Hughes invokes in the lines from his poem, 'Cadenza', which acts as epigraph to this essay.

As viewers coming to Sikander's work for the first time, we might well take a cue from an observation that Dr Sálim Ali makes, in his Introduction to *The Book of Indian Birds*. "In rapid accommodation of the eye, the bird surpasses all other creatures," he writes. "The focus can be altered from a distant object to a near one almost instantaneously; as an American naturalist puts it, 'in a fraction of time, [the bird's eye] can change itself from a telescope to a microscope.'" [2] Nibha Sikander's objects invite us, too, as viewers, to cultivate this gift – which, more than a gift arrived at by grace or happy chance, is the vital outcome of an evolutionary game of fight and flight, predator and prey, played out over the millennia: a survival skill.

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1. Ted Hughes, New Selected Poems 1957-1994 (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 57.
2. Sálim Ali, The Book of Indian Birds (Bombay: Bombay Natural History Society, 10th edition, revised and enlarged, 1977), p. xvi.