DESIGN INDIA

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CHANGE MAKERS



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Designindia was founded in 2002. It was started as a platform for interaction for the design community in India and abroad. Over the years it has grown into a forum spread over many social and professional networking domains, linking design professionals into an active, interactive and thought leading community.

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Hollow Brands

We know that industry engages in mass production and businesses solve mass issues; they address a mass audience, and want their brand to talk to more people. The purpose of business is to make a profit and make more of it, and for this they need to sell to more people. That's what we mean by mass. Industry amplifies brand communication and messaging, and reaches out to more and more customers - in this process, it lands up diluting the product or service to appeal to more people. This creates what I call a 'hollow brand'. Most mass brands land up being hollow brands. Though they use brand terms, they don't mean them.

This is not restricted to consumer companies; it happens even in B2B companies. You may have noticed how many companies articulate their brand values and company culture, which sound just like those of other companies, and do not relate to their work or output in any way. Words like Quality, Innovation, and Trust are hollow; even customers don't heed these anymore. Companies use them because everyone else is using them. At one time, this would have meant something and made a difference to the business. Not anymore.

These are the hallmarks of hollow brands - businesses that think they are brands, but in reality they exist as commodities and survive because of lower prices.

This is where a good design company can turn them around. Suppliers, traders, IT companies, and so many others could begin by recognizing their hollow brands and then seek help from professionals. Filling up a hollow brand would get them better recognition and better prices; they would become purposeful and add more value to society and the economy.

Sudhir

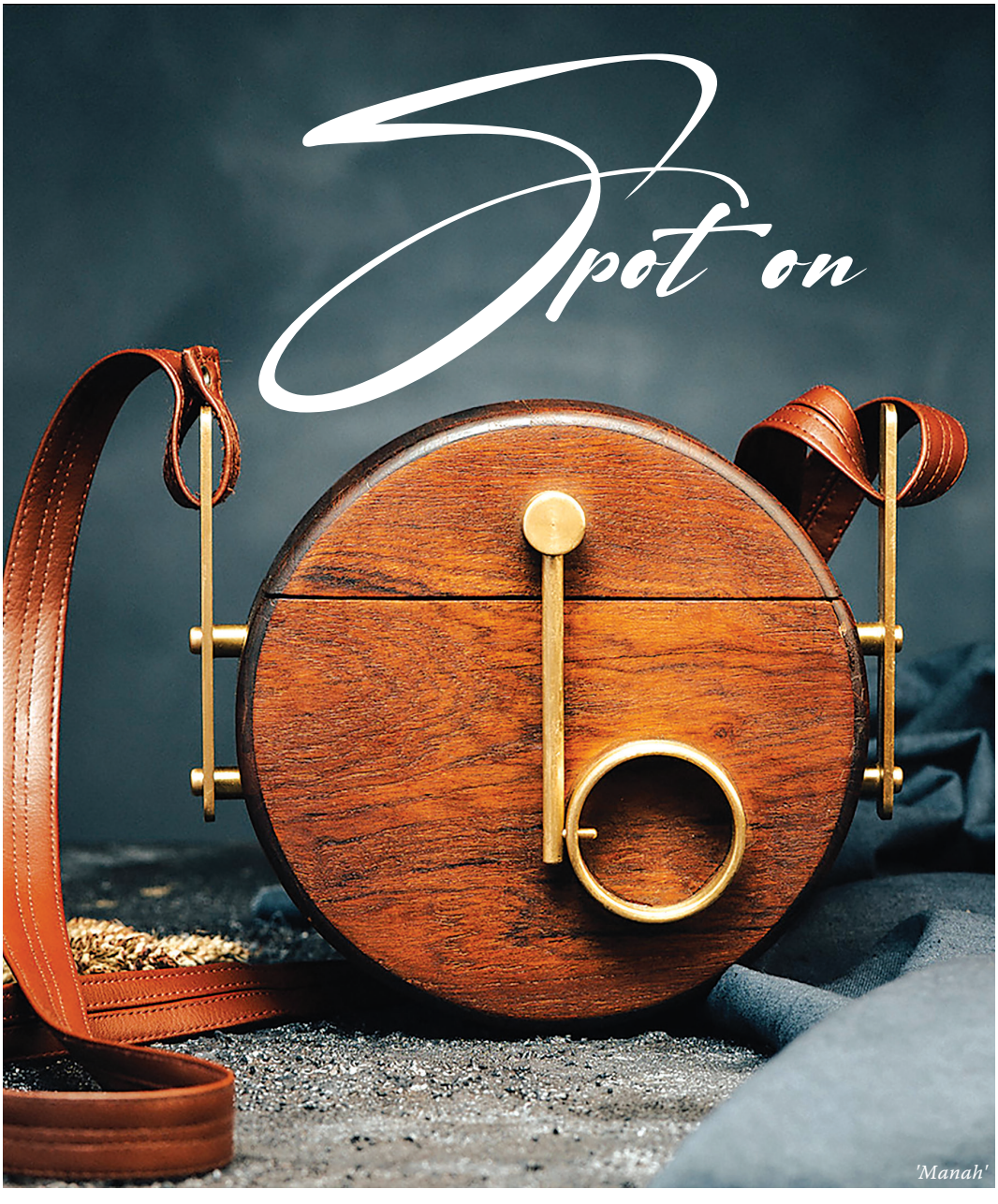
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Saloni Mehta and Veeram Shah's *desire to bring art into lifestyle products has resulted in a unique design language*

Spot on



'Manah'

What is the story behind Dotto?

SM: The idea behind Dotto was to 'design sans scale'. It emerged from our need to create all kinds of lifestyle products inspired by our interpretations of art, architecture, literature, and other forms of artistic expression. I'm a furniture designer and had worked on projects with Ar. Veeram Shah. The idea of starting a new design studio came into the picture when we both felt the need to design smaller-scale objects for the masses. Dotto is our small effort to bring art into everyday functional objects. 'Dotto' signifies a dot, *shunya* or *bindi*, intrinsically signifying singularity, and metaphorically, a point where the whole universe resides.

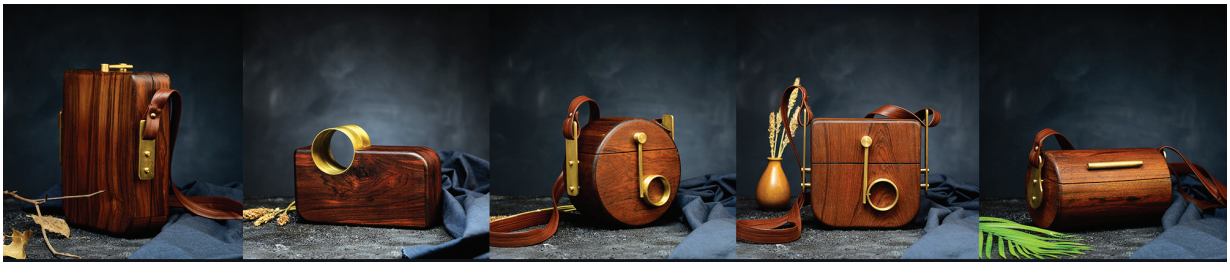
What makes this partnership work?

SM: Being a small firm, we both actively engage in all tasks, dividing the work efficiently. Having worked together for this long helps us assign roles effectively and thus harness each other's strong points whenever necessary. Communication is the key to making our partnership work smoothly. We have created a balance of roles and responsibilities that help us tackle challenges efficiently. Having a timeline and effectively delegating work keeps us on track of all aspects of work.





'Sia'





Below: 'Karaali'



Describe Dotto's design language.

SM: It is a reflection of art, music, and functionality being in harmony with each other to create something which has character and emotional value. With a deep understanding of these values, our designs can balance art and functionality. We have been inspired by the works and lives of several creators, whether it was in the field of art, film, or architecture. For our first collection, we tried to interpret the ideas and principles behind the works of greats like Le Corbusier, S.H. Raza, Carlo Scarpa, and Satyajit Ray. The idea was to understand the concepts that drove them to create such magnificent works of art. We reinterpreted these ideas in the products we designed; for example, S.H. Raza's *Bindu* as a representation of the fundamentals of life, and the importance of minute details through cinematic works such as *The Fall.*



Above: 'Deveshi'. Below: 'Saumya'



Give us a glimpse of your design process.

SM: Our process usually starts by deciding which category of products to work on. A lot of our creations are a reflection of our experiences and observations through different media, so the next step is to do our research and arrive at some concepts and interpretations. After a lot of dialogue and discussion with our team, one idea is selected. Generating forms and shapes and creating several sketches is an important part of the process. Each product might go through a different development process and it is also important to keep in the mind the usability and functionality of the product. Selecting materials and finishes through experimentation is imperative to the process. We work closely with our artisans to achieve the perfect blend of design and craftsmanship.

Which materials do you enjoy working with?

SM: In *The Naari Collection,* our only one so far, we explored brass and teak wood. It was an interesting experience to blend materials that are fundamentally opposite in nature, yet when used in the correct manner, complement each other a lot. The materials we use in our products have a value to them, materials that have been reclaimed or reused, materials that aren't conventionally easy to work with. We spend a lot of time understanding how the material behaves in different scenarios, and its efficiency. Our team of carpenters in Navsari (Gujarat) sources wood from the old Parsi houses in the area. The advantage of using reclaimed teak wood is that it has already weathered for 50-100 years and won't further react to any temperature change. For our upcoming collection, we are inclined towards using terracotta, ceramics and fabric.





Left to right: 'Shulini', 'Vaishnavi'. Below: 'Trariti'



Which has been one of your most memorable creations?

SM: The wooden jewelry box 'Deveshi' is closest to our hearts. True to its name, the piece reflects the grace and power a Goddess wields through her many arms.

How do you market your products?

SM: In India, our marketing works primarily through our social media profiles, which we have carefully curated to showcase our brand efficiently. Social media not only helps us advertise our products and services, it also helps people take a look into the environment and structure we work in. By letting people see the effort and work that goes into creating a product, a great value is added to their complete experience of buying and owning a Dotto product.

We also have a website that functions as a window to the range of products we have designed. We have collaborated with a few design curator websites where products from our range are on sale. These websites also



'Padma'

help market our products. On a global scale, we currently have plans to expand our horizons and have spent a good time understanding the market.

What are your thoughts on combining leisure with work?

SM: Our creative process begins with our experiences and observations, so it is important for us to experience and learn new things as a part of our everyday activities. Our studio is more of a community and our relationships are beyond designations and formalities. We often combine business and leisure, whether it is in the form of movie nights, leading to creative inspiration for our designs, or indulging in great music on an everyday basis.

What changes do you envision in your domain in the near future?

SM: The current pandemic has drastically affected a lot of small businesses. On the other hand, it has made people appreciate the smaller and finer things in life. We believe that we can further contribute to that in many ways. With a lot of industries shifting to local manufacturing, home-grown brands will take center stage in the near future.

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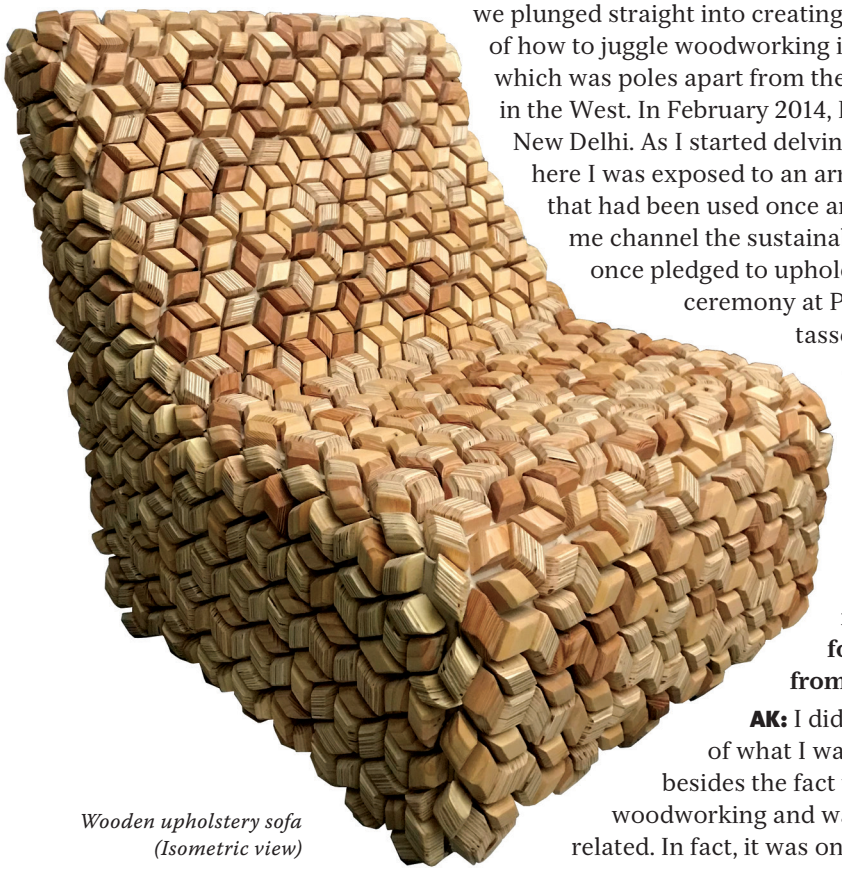
***Aakriti Kumar** believes in bringing used and discarded wood back to life through alternative pieces of furniture that will endure through time*

When were you first drawn to furniture design?

AK: I had no connect with furniture before I got to Parsons School of Design in New York to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Product Design), and started creating furniture pieces with my own hands in the wood shop. That's where my love for the material grew, and with it, my understanding of how to convert a once living material into a product that could stand the test of time. The biggest takeaway from my time at design school, apart from understanding the nuances of woodworking, was the importance of having a sustainable outlook in our design philosophy. It was up to us as designers to create consciously and understand the impact our products could have on the environment we live in. From that time onwards I was sure to question what I put out in the world and whether it could have a positive or devastating impact on it.

What led you to set up Differniture?

AK: Once my interest in woodworking grew I was sure I wanted to pursue it as a career somewhere down the line. When I returned to India in 2013 (after spending some time as a research and development trainee at an automotive manufacturing company in Germany) I started to dabble with different designs and asked my parents if I could borrow their carpenters during one living room renovation phase. I retained them post the renovation and we plunged straight into creating, and my learning phase of how to juggle woodworking in the Indian context - which was poles apart from the way things were done in the West. In February 2014, I set up Differniture in New Delhi. As I started delving into how things work here I was exposed to an array of sources for wood that had been used once and discarded. This made me channel the sustainable design process I had once pledged to uphold at the commencement ceremony at Parsons. The green tassel on my graduation cap signified that I would follow a sustainable approach in my design process no matter where my career path took me.



Wooden upholstery sofa (Isometric view)

What did you initially have in mind for Differniture, apart from sustainable design?

AK: I didn't have a definitive idea of what I wanted for Differniture besides the fact that I felt a connect with woodworking and wanted to do something related. In fact, it was only once I decided to

follow the approach of sculptural sustainable design that I coined the name 'Differniture' for the company. Each product I designed was my little way of staying true to the name; I also took on the challenge to constantly make 'different furniture'.

What makes your designs sustainable?

AK: I work primarily with reclaimed wood. I have acquired raw material from all sorts of sources, be it trees that have fallen in storms, scrap yards that sell dismantled shipping container crates, and even wooden floorboards and beams from renovations. There is such incredible material out there that is begging to be re-looked at after it has served its purpose - one just has to have the knack of finding it! Once I was able to get my hands on the 'imperfect' wooden pieces scarred with screw holes and iron nail marks, the possibilities of converting this once live material into its new life was a very exciting metamorphosis. Along with using reclaimed materials, the finish of a product is equally important; we polish our products with non toxic oils and waxes, rather than harmful finishes such as polyester and other plastic finishes, to continue our focus on the sustainable design process.

Give us a glimpse of your design process.

AK: Since I use salvaged and reclaimed wood for my products, a lot has to do with the restraints one is bound to face when using material that has been cut to a specific size or shape but used for another purpose. The beauty of the material not being a blank slate is what makes the design process exciting and challenging.



Stripe wooden upholstery sofa



Folding swing

Working around the dimensions, the nail and bolt marks and holes, the exposed weathered parts of a log, the live edge of the fallen tree – all these things result in the transition of the raw material into the final product. Most of the time it's the material itself that governs what it wants to be - a live edge slab from a fallen tree can turn into a beautiful rustic outdoor bench, while 4" x 4" pine planks used to build shipping container crates transform into a unique end grain book chair.

What is your take on form and functionality?

AK: Form and functionality must go hand in hand when creating a product. Esthetics and practicality can't be looked at in a vacuum. At Differniture, the



Soundwave coffee table

premise is always to create a sculptural product that has an equal standing in practicality. Although a lot of our pieces can stand alone as sculptural works of art, they all in some way provide a use to the consumer, be it in the form of a chair, table or even lighting.

What inspires you to create your designs?

AK: The furniture industry is an age old one, and while no one is out there reinventing the wheel, one can revisit the approach to creating furniture. From learning with ancient joinery to working with new age materials, the field of woodworking needs some shaking up, specifically in India where we live in a culture immersed in craft and the handmade. It is up to the designers to direct our extremely talented craftsmen into creating for the modern age. My approach was simple - find carpenters and artisans who have a deeply rooted heritage in handcraft and direct them with my vision of design for the future, all the while using the same techniques and materials we have been using for hundreds of years. A lot of my inspiration comes from nature, be it the topography of a hill or flowing waterfalls and even ripples in water!



Dot chair
(Wooden upholstery)



How has the experience of studying and working abroad shaped the way you design?

AK: The importance of understanding how things are made and how they work is paramount to take design to the next level. This idea of knowing the basics and questioning how things work from within was one of the takeaways from my time studying abroad. We were given detailed insights into why things work the way they do and how one can efficiently create something by going into the skeletal structure of any product. It was through my hands-on knowledge of creating prototypes in the woodshop at Parsons that I am now able to direct artisans to turn ideas into tangible products, as well as study traditional ways of making and turn them on their head! For me the biggest giveaway was to see the conversion of a design in my mind into a physical product made with my own hands. I worked



Web table



briefly in the automotive industry in Germany, which focused strictly on manufacturing and mould making that had to be very precise and thought out. It gave me the invaluable experience of making sure my ideas can in fact be produced. This resulted in the prototype-heavy phase within my design process.

How did it feel to be featured in the 'Forbes Asia 30 under 30' list in 2018?

AK: It's a conscious decision to take the road less traveled and deal with the uphill journey with a smile because it's a path that is truly your own, no matter how against the grain it may seen. It's during journeys like this that the recognition one gets along the way just validates that the trek is heading in the right direction. I am grateful for the support I have received in this field along the way. It is a good way for me to stop and think about how far I have come. I also can't forget the email informing me of my acceptance: it ended with 'On behalf of everyone at Forbes, I again congratulate you on what you've accomplished. The process to get on this list is rigorous. So take today to celebrate. And then get busy again changing the world'! At the end of the day changing the world is what drives anyone passionate about the path they have set out for themselves.



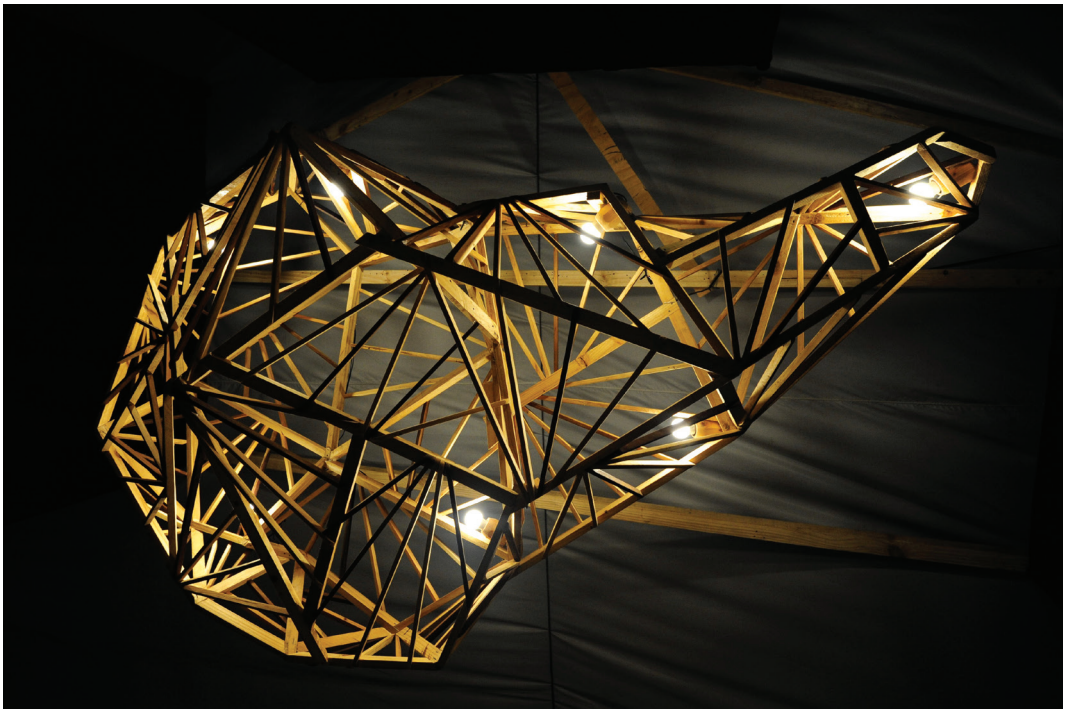
3D side tables

How did you come up with Tessellate by Differniture?

AK: Tessellate is something that was born out of necessity. My idea of following a sustainable approach to design meant that not only did I use reclaimed materials and non toxic finishes but as far as I could help it, I had to design by considerably reducing my waste, if not eliminating it all together. When working within the constraints of an interior or architectural project and designing for a specific space, the zero waste philosophy was difficult to uphold, and this resulted in a pile up of small staggered pieces of wooden waste and scrap. It was at that point a few years ago that I realized that I may not always have the power to control the amount of waste I generate while making products but I can channel that waste into creating something new. Along came Tessellate, which means to use one geometric shape and replicate it over and over until it creates a complex pattern. So, instead of getting rid of the small



Tessellate coffee table



Web cloud

and insignificant pieces, I started designing with them in mind. This resulted in the wooden upholstery collection where I would pick one geometric shape and create a wooden fabric that would adjust to someone's body by moving along the contours when it was sat on.

Which have been some of your most memorable projects?

AK: Each one has a close connect to my heart. For instance, the wooden upholstery series where I questioned the preconceived notions we have about comfort, and decided to make a rigid material like wood feel comfortable and flexible when sat on. Or the foldable swing that had an interactive feel - one could open up the backrest of the swing to whichever side they wished.



How do you strike a balance between creativity and the commercial side of it?

AK: I am always creating and exploring new avenues of woodworking and design and creating finished products is a way for me to showcase my design capability to potential customers. The more products I have, the more clients get to see and mix and match them with their requirements. Some clients need things immediately while others want something custom made. We are there for either requirement since it is important for the product to fit into the space and constraints of the design philosophy of the client.





What differentiates your brand in such a saturated market today?

AK: Most of the furniture brands focus on mass production and creating in large numbers. At Differniture, our products are works of art that serve a function. Just like the art world, we cater to a niche clientele (some asking us to make a product exclusively for them) that is not ok with replicating what is readily available in the market and wants the things they put in their space to be a true reflection of their avant-garde style.

What has been the most challenging part of your journey so far?

AK: Having come up to Dhanachuli, a small hamlet in Uttarakhand, a few days before the nationwide lockdown was announced, I was compelled to stay here without any plan in place related to my business. My manufacturing in Delhi had come to a standstill since my workers wanted to go home and be with their families; overnight I was left without anyone to produce my designs and me stranded in a remote part of the hills for the foreseeable future. It was during this time that I had to think in a different way if I was to salvage what I had been doing all these years.



Slowly I was able to find local carpenters who lived in the same village I was in. Although they were apprehensive at first when they saw my previous work, I slowly encouraged them to create more than just door and window frames. It has been three months since we started





Dhana working together and the glint in their eyes when they finish a product or an order is something that makes this difficult phase worth it. Having spent more than six months here in the hills during the lockdown has given me the chance to design for the specific climate and requirements of the hills, as well as take my passion project - Tranquil by Differniture - that much closer to reality.





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Tell us more about Tranquil by Differniture.

AK: Tranquil by Differniture is a project that's very close to my heart – it involves creating cabins for sale in the hills for individuals who enjoy solitude and tranquility. I use my sustainable approach, employing local masons and artisans from the villages around, and creating a community where likeminded people can enjoy the peace of the hills as much as I have.

How, in your opinion, has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted interior and furniture design in India?

AK: Every aspect of the economy has been hit hard during these times and interior and furniture is no exception, especially in the commercial space. Residential demand is something that can never die down altogether but the slump is definitely visible. Furniture, not being part of the organized sector, is heavily reliant on manpower, which has dispersed with migrant labor moving across the country. So, thinking and acting locally is the only way to move forward.

What's next?

AK: Having spent so much time in isolation and being far removed from the daily paranoia of COVID-19, I understand the value of having a place in the hills, and more and more people are getting the appeal of moving away from over populated and polluted cities in this new culture of working from home. The next step is to flesh out Tranquil, my project in the hills, and spend more and more time up here as required to execute it.

differniture@gmail.com





Dhana



Dhruv at Facebook

What does it take to shape a delightful design experience for a consumer today?

DD: Dieter Rams drafted 10 truly timeless principles of good design, and the one that appeals to me the most is 'Good design is thorough down to the last detail'. Today the world around us is full of products and services that are designed to make our lives easier. What applies universally to each of those artificial products, systems and services is the chance that an experience will be interrupted - either because the user shifted their focus, or they had a very peculiar use case, or their internet was broken, or they landed in an unintelligible state while using the interface. For instance, there are a vast number of paths a user can take when using a simple coffee machine. There is a huge



Food Computer

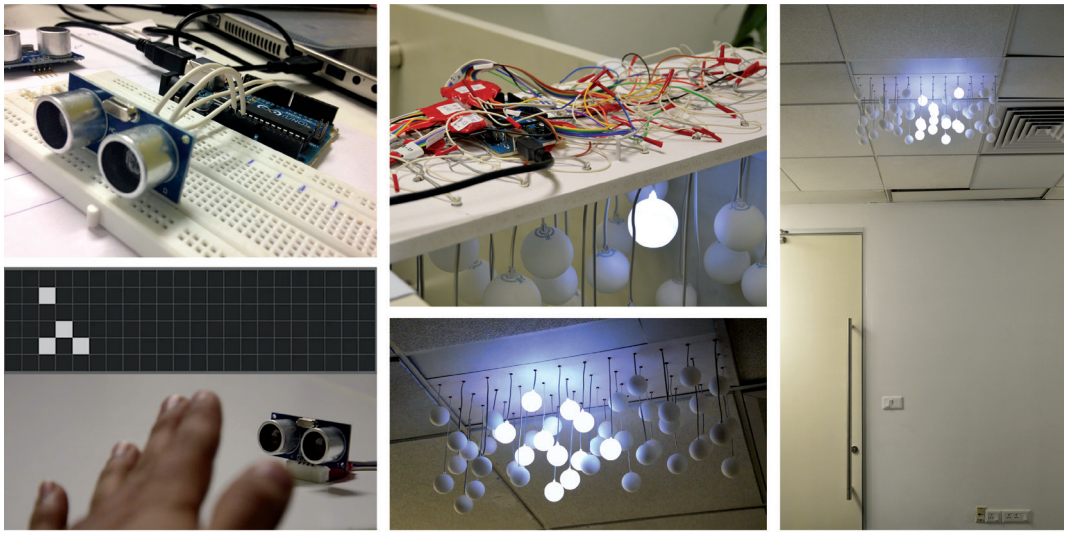


***Dhruv Damle's** journey from engineer to product designer has literally taken him places. Working with Facebook in California gives him the chance to truly understand how people interact with each other and their environments.*

number of variables involved when a user is using an online payment tool. Generally, the awful experiences stick in users' memories a lot longer than the awesome ones! In my opinion, it takes solving as many of those tiny details as possible to shape a delightful design experience for a consumer today. And it is a designer's responsibility to advocate for and solve for those details, more so in the scenarios where other disciplines forgo the details.

How did your tryst with design begin?

DD: There are two parts to it - the first is my love for esthetics. Sketching and painting is something I've always done. Participating in theatrical performances and trying various paint mediums fueled that esthetic sense. The second part is the constant curiosity towards my environment. As a kid I spent a great deal of time thinking about people, scenarios, and objects around me. Later, when I started my first job working as a software engineer, I was amazed to see the ability of designers to convert abstract ideas into tangible interfaces. That made me start thinking about this whole new dimension of being able to comprehend and articulate concepts that are intangible at present. For example, how would have you described a camera to someone back in the 14th century? Or how would have you described Facebook to someone back in 2000? That kind of thinking totally shaped the course of what was coming next in my career. And I joined the National Institute of Design!



Above: Philips prototype with table tennis balls – LEDs
Below: Philips Hue Exhibition



What role has formal education played in your career?

DD: I have an engineering degree (computer science) and played around a bit with creative coding before formally switching to design. Using algorithms as the creative medium was quite a thrilling venture, and that's how I fell in love with the notions of New Media. Unfortunately, the schooling system I grew up in encouraged scoring more than understanding concepts. NID was the first place I ever attended where the scorecard didn't matter over the ability to implement learnings. I believe that the more geographically and politically away you are from an opportunity, the more difficult it is for you to grab it. Formal education is a bridge that can help you close these gaps.

I was an interaction design intern with Philips India Ltd in 2014 and worked with and learned from two veteran mentors, Rahul Pradhan and Abhimanyu Kulkarni. I realized how design can do wonders when coupled with other fields like architecture, lighting and music, and I wanted a global perspective. I wanted to take that leap into going global. I had job offers with Philips and the Samsung design team in India, but opted to study design abroad. I decided that studying further at one of the best schools outweighed the risk of declining those tempting job offers early in my career. In retrospect I believe it paid off. I could learn from teachers like Tom Igoe who co-created Arduino, and from Dan Shiffman who

contributed to creating Processing, which was a phenomenal experience. And, being a student in New York City (where I pursued Interactive Telecommunications) was an unparalleled experience that allowed me to visit countless museums and art conventions.

What were your major takeaways from your time as interaction designer at Bose Corporation?

DD: I was part of a small design team that included interaction designers, industrial designers and content writers. My first takeaway is that content writing is tightly coupled with UX, and professional writers can bring in a magical dimension to design. Secondly, I was amazed to see the amount of responsibility the company handed over to me as a new member on the team. I led the design process for the next flagship noise canceling product, Bose Headphones 700. My initial self-doubt was soon swept aside by a sense of care, pride and responsibility. I realized that you'll grow exponentially when you're placed in a high risk, high responsibility setup. Bose Headphones 700 is the highlight of my career so far. This project showed me what it means to be a designer in a world class brand, and how tremendous responsibility can lead to tremendous growth and confidence. This project strengthened my belief that being bold can lead to more opportunities.

Bose was a unique place where both software and hardware products existed under the same roof, and I enjoyed coworking with Harvard managers and MIT engineers, which is so iconic to living in Boston. I'm grateful that the experience gave me the confidence to stand up and advocate for my users, to be direct in my communication, and to be bold in my actions. Another big takeaway is absorbing ideas from everyone but vetting them with designers and researchers.

What has been the most challenging part of your role at Facebook?

DD: My journey at Facebook began with two strong motives: the first was to scale up my design process to reach a billion users. Bose made me hooked on to the number of users as one of the metrics to gauge my success. In the case of Bose headphones that number was in the millions. Facebook really took that to the next level with billions of users! The



Dhruv at Bose

second motivation was a strong drive I felt about the Silicon Valley. San Francisco Bay Area has been attracting me as the birthplace of what's 'recently possible', with closely knit headquarters of Google, Facebook, Apple, Netflix, Uber and many more.

As product designer at Facebook, I work on the latest problems that social media is facing these days; that includes addressing the strategic areas across all brand entities such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Messenger and Oculus. Largely, my role includes enabling trustworthy relations between individual users, organizations and businesses in the social media landscape. This landscape is still evolving, and we are still pretty much the zeroth and first generation of consumers. In a domain so young and so popular, there will always be urgent, emergent, and previously unarticulated problems that need to be addressed early on from a design perspective. I enjoy how my role blends in closely with business strategy.

The most challenging part of the role at Facebook is ramping up exceptionally fast while still adding exceptionally great value. That's a crazy negotiation between the two extremes, and what resonates with me the most is the quote from my week one orientation at Facebook - "This is your company now." Being bold is the only way forward! I wholeheartedly believe that designers must have opinions, and continuously try to get better at effortlessly expressing those, while being open to processing disparate ideas.

How do you approach a project?

DD: In formal setups, it is critical for me to understand the timeline right at the onset. I hold my product manager accountable for defining and communicating it, the same way I want them to hold me accountable for the design process and deliverables! Next, I typically audit the current state of the product. Is there a production version? Why do we need to design this? Who are the users and what good is the new design going to bring in? In short I prioritize the why over the how, and constantly strive to tally it against the success metrics.

I take advantage of all tools I can use for better productivity of the entire team, such as chat threads, meetings and regular check ins. My most used tools are whiteboards and in-person conversations! Good processes generally yield good results. There seems to be a tendency among designers these days to produce super smooth, neatly crafted, polished experiences; but that's not the only design deliverable at the end of the day. I showcase my in-progress works to my stakeholders, which allows non-designers to raise their concerns and thumbs ups early on. This gives the designer a sneak peek into what's a desired experience versus what's needed to be ironed out from engineering, business, policy, branding, legal and any other teams. Multiple design directions and in-progress explorations serve as discussion points and conversation starters in most projects.

Introduce us to the Smartpool Application.

DD: Smartpool is a self-initiated side project I worked on in 2016 while I was an intern at Hewlett Packard Labs in Palo Alto, California. I traveled a lot on public transport and shared cabs like Uber and Lyft while working there. It was a time-consuming deal that many were going through. I attempted to build a conceptual design solution where coworkers and neighbors could travel together to work. In essence this was a similar matchmaking model between riders and drivers, but tied to office commute in the usual morning and evening hours, with better trust, reliability and convenience.

I came across a startup called Scoop, which was solving a similar problem. I was able to



Interactive headphones

Which have been your most memorable projects over the years?

DD: The number of failures is dramatically higher than the number of projects that are worth showcasing! There were many interesting ones however. At NID, I built my first interactive project called 'soundscapes'. It was a pitch dark, empty room that created an aural illusion of basic geometric shapes using sound as a medium. It was as if the user was standing at the center of an invisible yet discernable shape: a circle, a square, a triangle or a line. This project was fun to explore and play around with. It neither had a clear purpose nor did it address any clear problem or opportunity. Interestingly, what I struggled a lot with was how to document and share this auditory experience! I realized that it is the story that people remember, not the mechanisms behind the experience.



reach out to the Sadow brothers, Rob & Jon, who were the co-founders of this startup, and showed them my designs. Interestingly they were at a similar stage and I offered to help on a few aspects of their designs. I was of one of the many who helped them and today I'm happy to see Scoop being a proud startup that caters to thousands of office goers.

As an intern at Philips, I worked on my thesis project for MDes, 'Lighting Redesign for Terminal 3, New Delhi International Airport'. That was a long-term speculative project with a number of high-profile parties involved in it. I spent more than half of the duration on research and decided to be bold and proposed solutions that were interactive, rather than using static fixtures. Eventually only some of those solutions came to life. As a designer, the lesson I learned was, there will always be a huge number of discarded ideas and prototypes, and that's not an indicator of a bad design process – it's an indicator of you being an open-minded designer.

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At NYU, my thesis project was around indoor food harvesting without soil or sunlight. I built a modified version of MIT's 'food computer', which is an indoor greenhouse with controlled climatic parameters that can grow any plants inside it. This was an experiment that led to more and more learnings around modern farming, and I made a few promising connections into Indian and western startups that produce food in this fashion.

A quick but impactful project I worked on at NYU was the interactive headphones that altered volume and panning of the music in real time, based on the user's head movement to up-down and left-right respectively. I exhibited it at Tisch School of the Arts' annual exhibition of interactive projects, and the visitors enjoyed it a lot. There was a quick joyous outcome for the user, with no time invested in learning the how-to.

How do you overcome a creative block?

DD: I want to start by acknowledging that the creative block is a real thing! We all need regular mental breaks to hit the restart button. I resort to various activities in order to keep myself sharp, such as routinely reading non-fiction, cooking, and taking care of my houseplants. I dedicate a few hours every week to working on various explorations around penmanship, calligraphy, watercolors, and sketching. I listen to instrumental jazz or Indian classical instrumental music while working. I keep moving around between various setups like sitting desk, standing desk, and working from various areas of the house - that induces a good change to my environment and thinking process. I've also been trying to be regular at physical exercise. I run marathons - it's pretty similar to the design projects. Set a long term target and timeline, have a roadmap to reach there, and routinely put effort into it!

How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the field of design?

DD: Working remotely is something I've been exploring a lot even before COVID-19 hit us. I've noticed that I'm a bit more productive, much more relaxed, easily adapting to various processes, and making full use of my time while working from home. As a designer I think a large push our community needs to drive is normalizing the practice of working from home.

In my opinion, the world is coming to the realization that while we stand in the frenzied storm of automation, creative fields are the ones where machines cannot replace us. I hope this realization serves as a silver lining post COVID-19.

Share your goals and aspirations.

DD: On the personal front I prefer to set short term, measurable goals. My goals, dreams and aspirations continue to take shape over time. For example, I've come a long way from being an engineer to working as a coder to being a designer focused on tangible interactions to being a designer focused on complex, abstract problems. Extrapolating that curve, I totally see myself wearing more hats in future! This truly is the time to be a global citizen and experiment the best of risks and perks.

On the creative front I have multiple long-term threads that I like to parallelly work on. Design education is something I deeply care about, especially in Indian communities. I run a website (istudydesign.com) to spread awareness and preparation tips for enthusiasts. Over the last few years I've mentored hundreds of aspirants and encouraged them to think of design as a potential educational and career path.

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ROOTED IN TRADITION

***Madhumita Nath's** striking creations tell stories inspired by indigenous fabrics, dyes and ancient hand weaving techniques*







Autumn 2019





How were you drawn to fashion?

MN: Being a student of Textile Design pulls you organically to both the cloth and the clothing - we cannot undo that natural connection. So, it was very natural and intrinsic for me as a designer to create products that drape the human body. I find it interesting how we can manipulate a humble piece of cloth, embellish it in varied ways and treatments and transform it into a garment.

How has your formal education impacted your career?

MN: My formal training at NID (Post Graduate Diploma in Design) has definitely been very impactful. The emphasis on craft and its social and environmental aspects was a very crucial factor at the Institute. The valuable insights I received back then led me to choose to work with crafts; they helped me understand the connection of the artisans with their art/craft, their abilities, skills, influence of geography, social behavior, customs and beliefs. The cloth that they create is a reflection of all this and much more. At NID, I learnt to consider design and business as part of the bigger picture, part of a system.

What is the story behind 'Ek Katha'?

MN: When I decided to set up my own brand in 2016, I wanted to choose a name that gave me the freedom to create with varied concepts and materials and did not specifically bind me to a certain medium or method. Though the clothing does primarily revolve

around the indigenous organic cotton of Gujarat known as Kala Cotton, I love to incorporate other handwoven fabrics unique to different parts of the country since India has such rich textile traditions.

'Ek Katha' means 'A Story' and the idea was to be able to tell stories through our creations, which are rooted in craft. From the very inception I knew that this has to be the core around which I would construct the brand's identity. There needs to be a reason why one would like to work and create a brand - for me it was definitely not the business aspect, but the whole process of creating in a certain way, and the journey involved. Being a self-funded venture I was always ready to go 'slow' and wait for things to grow organically and gradually.

What is the design philosophy of your brand?

MN: 'Ek Katha' stands for handwoven and handmade with a strong belief that slow design is a result of slow, traditionally rooted processes and is the only way of creating conscious clothing. We use traditional eco-friendly techniques like plant based dyeing and hand block printing. We favor natural materials like organic cotton (rain fed) and silk cotton blends, and also believe in upcycling the waste into newer products on a small scale.

Summer 2020

The authenticity of the processes can be ascertained only when one makes an effort to see and learn the origin of the craft first hand and know every process







of the chain. We have two 'Craftmark' Certifications awarded by AIACA (All India Artisans and Craftworker's Welfare Association); for Batik and Plain Weaving of Kala Cotton, both practiced in Kutch, Gujarat.

Tell us more about Kala Cotton.

MN: Kala Cotton is an indigenous species of rain fed cotton and by default it is organic in nature, which basically means it requires no pesticide. This is one of the oldest cotton varieties in India and samples from the Indus Valley excavations have confirmed that it was grown almost 4,500 years ago. This handwoven cotton cloth in muted and earthy colors has a beautiful rawness and tactile feel. The cotton beautifully absorbs the natural dyes and the two are a match made in heaven.

Give us a glimpse of your design process.

MN: The craft and its limitations are always a creative challenge and I do keep that in mind while creating something new. I begin with a concept, build on it by working on patterns in prints and weaves, and then work on the style and pattern of the garments. So, it is basically an amalgamation of batik prints, weaves, colors, some minimal surface embellishment, and easy silhouettes, which all come together to bring across the mood and feel of the concept or story we would like to narrate.



How is 'Ek Katha' contributing to the Indian craft industry?

MN: The most beautiful part of the process is definitely the visits to the location of the artisans - soaking in the slow life, and the steady and relaxed way of working combined with the home food and banter. The design process with the artisans has become easier with them being technologically savvy now. There is a natural sync in our work relations, which is very important to us.

Ek Katha's contribution may not be a very significant one, but we are in the right direction, sourcing and creating, keeping our parameters of ethical production intact. We have made conscious choices and in course of time, as we expand, our artisans will benefit too. I believe that in whatever capacity we can sustain our crafts, it is worth it, as it has a larger social, economic and environmental impact. To help artisans do what they are skilled at, in their own homes and geographical locations, instead of living in ghettoes in big cities, is the least we can do.

What makes 'Ek Katha' stand out in the Indian fashion market?

MN: The brand is essentially positioned as a luxury sustainable brand. Our efforts have been to keep its esthetics distinct, have a visual imagery we can call our own, a palette of muted hues, and patterns of seamless batik prints. The look and feel is earthy and raw, reminiscent of our handcrafted roots.

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LFW Gennext Runway-Summer 2019

How do you strike a balance between creativity and commerce?

MN: This has always been a challenge. When you are not compromising on methods of production, you pay a generous price to artisans and their craft to motivate them to go back to traditional ways of creating. Hand weaving, hand spinning, hand block making, hand printing and all other manual processes are laborious, time consuming and hence expensive; thus the products created also cost more than those created by machines and synthetic materials. With fast fashion at its peak, the task to be competitive is an uphill one. It can get tough to convince buyers but the awareness has definitely increased and consumers have started making conscious choices.

How, according to you, will the fashion industry change post the COVID-19 pandemic?

MN: Consumer behavior has obviously changed - we are already seeing reduced sales and the overall behavior has changed from want- to need- based buying. In the present scenario, the fashion industry should ideally question creating 'too many' and 'too often'. The nature of the industry has been to create for two seasons and small capsules in between seasons. This has never been a practical approach for anyone working with slow design processes. Slow fashion cannot cope with the constant pressures of creating new collections at a rapid pace. Small batches, relevant, classic designs and fewer collections would or should become the norm for all creators instead of taking the fast fashion route.

How do you plan to expand your brand?

MN: We would like to work more on building a stronger network of artisans to work with. We want to create raw materials and prints for both export and domestic buyers, and venture into wholesale activities. We will maintain a small unit creating clothing in small batches with reduced dead stock. Newer stories and collections are coming up – we are excited about introducing varied textiles such as Chanderi and the weaves of Banaras.

info@ekkathaclothing.com

A Fine Balance

Licensed to practice as an architect in the US and India, ***Aashti Miller*** *also has a parallel career in graphic design, and often finds the lines between the two blurring*



'Living Windows III'



Aashti at Pickard Chilton

What does it take to juggle careers in architecture and graphic design?

AM: Although I have found that architecture and graphic design are complementary (it's hard for me to think of one without thinking of the other), it is extremely time consuming to juggle both. Working with clients around the world has resulted in me keeping strange and inconsistent hours. As an anxious creative, this tends to be very challenging for me, and I am still learning to manage my own expectations.

How has a formal education in architecture impacted your dual career?

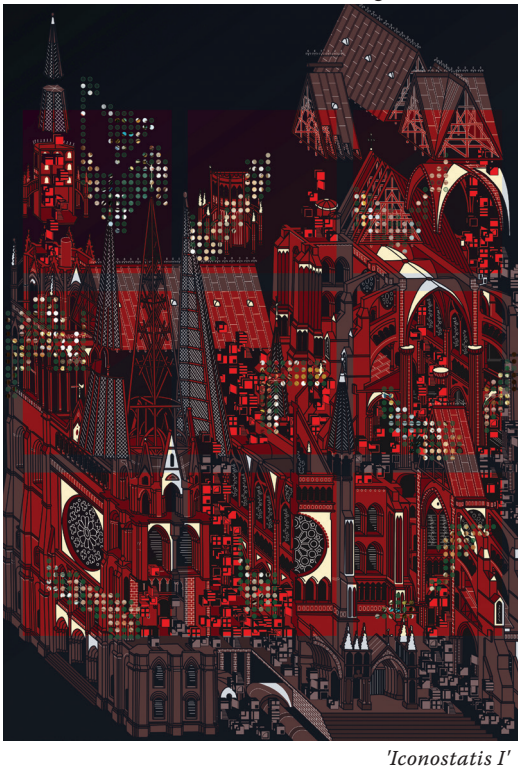
AM: I simultaneously loved and hated architecture school! I loved it because I met a group of radically different, yet likeminded people, skilled in so many unrelated creative fields. I hated it because I didn't feel like I stood out, and for a long time I was drowning in my insecurities, doubts and missteps. It took me a few years to discover the upside of this love-hate relationship; it forced me to find my voice and develop a style that I am proud of. I began to understand that the most important trait to have during this process was the willingness to learn. My academic background pushed my esthetic to evolve into detailed drawings that tread the fine line between constructed and painted, digital and analog, two- and three-dimensional. It's no longer enough for me to fulfil any assignment, task, deliverable, or job just as required.

What were your major takeaways from working as an architect in the US?

AM: After graduating from Cornell University College of Art, Architecture & Planning, I joined Pickard Chilton in Connecticut as an architectural designer. I was lucky enough to find a workplace that encouraged me to simultaneously pursue my specific passions within design and broaden my architectural



'Living Windows IV'



'Iconostatis I'

education. My mentors and colleagues were encouraging, warm and familial, which created a very open learning environment. This was especially important for me being so far away from home. Thanks to this work culture, I pursued and received my licence to practice architecture in the US within two years of joining the firm. On my first day at Pickard Chilton, I was assured that there are no stupid questions, which ended up being my key takeaway from my entire time working there—curiosity is as important in a professional setting as it is in an academic one, and making yourself heard (even when you feel uncomfortable doing so) is essential.

Why did you decide to move back to India?

AM: In late 2019, I decided to move back to Mumbai to be closer to my family. My father is an architect, and I thought I would join him upon my return. Pickard Chilton extended me the fantastic opportunity to continue contracting with them remotely. Hence, I was juggling both jobs for several months when I moved back, and it was a struggle to keep switching between these two modes of working. In the US, the 'how, where, why and when' of a design challenge is thoroughly considered with every stakeholder involved at each stage of the design. It is there that I learned how to critically and rigorously evaluate a problem. In India, project timelines are so compressed, that there isn't even time to consider basic questions before the work begins. On my first mini project in Mumbai, I spent 48 hours on site, calling up vendors and painters, scrambling to complete a job that we had been offered just the week before. Through experiences like this, I learned how to be efficient and decisive.

How did MillerInk come about?

AM: At Pickard Chilton, I found that I enjoyed working on diagrams and presentation layouts, and I discovered my affinity for graphic design. The design partner and project managers I worked



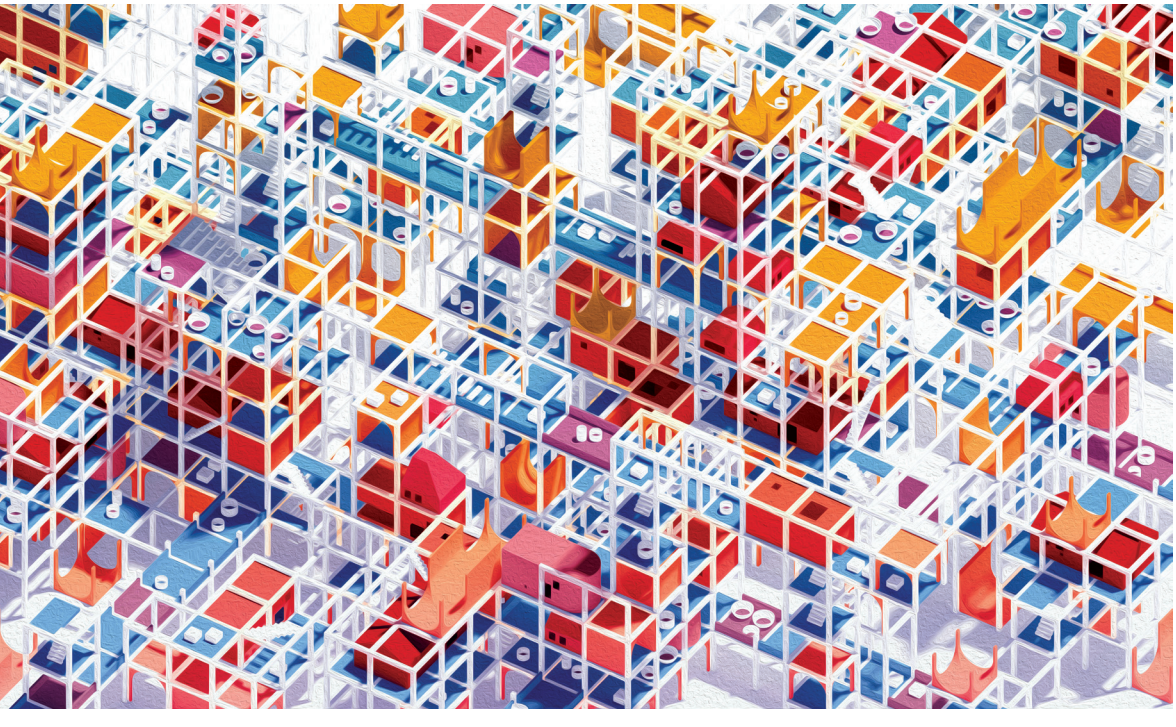
under recognized this, and gave me the freedom, means and guidance to explore exciting ways to present information to our clients and collaborators. Most of my weekends in Connecticut were spent drawing for design competitions, creating wild and speculative illustrations that once again trod the fine line between architecture and graphics.

When I returned to India, I wanted to pursue this further, and so I started MillerInk, an independent graphic design and illustration studio. Within a few months, it has grown beyond my wildest expectations. I've had the opportunity to work with some amazing clients on projects ranging from branding to wall murals. I make sure that a brand is the right fit for my style as much as I am for its values, culture, and mission. For me, it is equally as important to have a 'client is always right' philosophy, as it is to maintain my own esthetic and be proud of the outcome. Synergy and open communication are the only way to ensure this authenticity.

Which have been the most exciting projects you have worked on so far?

AM: My most exciting projects are the ones where my love for both architecture and graphic design collide in an unexpected medium. I recently completed a project for an Australian singer/songwriter's new album, delving into themes of the cosmos and introspective feminine folklore. I am currently illustrating a children's book, which highlights accomplished Indian women, to provide role models for tiny activists, mini feminists and little girls ready to take on the world. Another exciting in-progress project is designing the medals for the next marathons in India.

'Terra Incognita'









Above: 'Self Care Isn't Selfish'
Left: 'The Future is Food'

Does your cultural background impact your design language?

AM: Most Indian designers have a truly unique language, born out of the rigor of our upbringing and formative education, and then evolved by the revolutions, ideals, and struggles that we live through. The rhythm of Mumbai was probably my first creative inspiration when I started drawing, and it trickles into all of my work even today. Watching the city and the people within it is calming and stimulating at the same time. I'm always trying to make sense of it, and just when I feel like I am a step closer, I discover something that pulls me ten steps back.

What else inspires you?

AM: Spaces, places, faces – architecture, the context it occupies, and the characters that occupy it. It intrigues me that none of these can exist without the other. When a specific subject or occurrence piques my interest, I instantly make a note of it for the future. I inevitably discard about 95% of these ideas but it's incredibly useful for me to have that 5% when I am looking for new concepts.

How do you deal with a creative block?

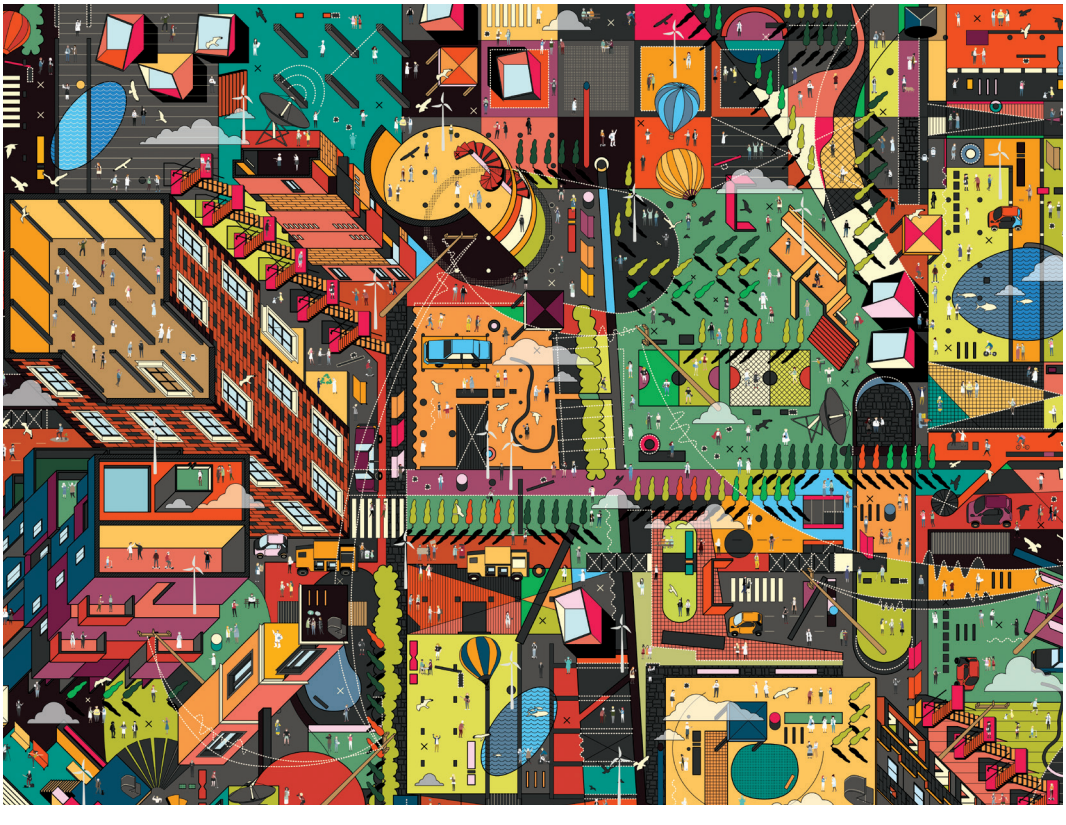
AM: I have prolonged creative blocks, which typically stem from switching between so many different projects and working long hours. Over the years, I have tried several strategies to find my way out of these; what works best for me is engaging in activities that stimulate my mind and imagination without stressing me out, like knitting, puzzling, and reading. These require me to be present in the moment, while keeping my anxious hands busy. Compiling to-do lists and completing tasks that I have been putting off, first thing in the morning, are other strategies that have proved useful.



Tell us about the bespoke puzzle line you are currently working on.

AM: Kess Puzzles is a 3rd generation toy company that is the largest supplier of hula hoops in the world. They have begun to expand into the puzzle business and have approached five artists/illustrators to create custom designs to kick off their 2020 line – I am fortunate to be one of them! The idea is to manufacture bespoke artist puzzles that are available at an accessible price point. I am an avid puzzler myself, so this is the perfect opportunity for me to showcase my work to a wider audience through an unexplored and exciting medium. I personally enjoy puzzles that are very detailed, confusing, colorful, and seemingly repetitive but with every piece being unique; and that's how I approach every drawing as well.

Above: 'Grand Complications'
Below: 'The Post Office'



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Conrad Collaboration

What's next?

AM: What's next for me in the short term is designing a website, selling prints of my work, growing MillerInk beyond my bedroom, and teaching. In a larger sense, I aspire to find balance, but I suspect that my lack of balance is what drives me!

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'Feeling Stuck'

material girl

***Kritika Gattani** has a penchant for creating what she terms 'eccentric designs' that transform items of everyday utility into sustainable works of art*







Above: Cane magazine holders. Right: Crimson torches



What drew you to design? How has formal education influenced your career?

KG: I pursued a course in Fashion Merchandising and Production Management at Pearl Academy of Fashion, which helped me develop an intensive understanding of sourcing, marketing, branding and designing, and how important it is to critically analyze complex issues and have a compatible solution. Every semester we had to undertake a compulsory industry project for a month. This helped me to experience first-hand challenges and how to resolve them.

I went on to work at Triburg Sportswear in Gurgaon for a decade, where I handled merchandising and production for Calvin Klein and Phillips Van Heusen. Working as a merchandiser taught me the importance of paying attention to details, and understanding who the end-user or buyer is before starting any project.

It was during this period that my love for exploring new fabrics and experimenting with designs really surfaced, and I felt drawn to product design. I realized my love and passion for working with different materials and creating beautiful things. Playing with different forms and integrating two materials to create a product has always been my design handwriting.





Labyrinth wall mirror

How did Opaque Studio come about?

KG: Whilst I was in the process of revamping my own house seven years ago, I realized the lack of affordable, chic, minimalist furniture in the market. I yearned for furniture that would be useful, but also esthetic, minimal and fresh to look at. Since I couldn't really find something in the existing market, I decided to go 'DIY'!

I always had a fondness for handcrafted products, and when I discovered the lack of bespoke, bold and classy space utilities, I became determined to bridge the gap. I am a firm advocate of creating products that draw inspiration from objects around us. I have always had a strong interest in rural development, and a belief that art from these areas has a unique value and personal connect. The potential demand for such products, the scope for up-cycling, and the demand for customized new-age furniture all compelled me to start my own product design studio, Opaque, in 2019. Working with sustainable, renewable, and natural materials, we produce an extensive range of handcrafted furniture and home décor.

Tell us about your experiments with different media.

KG: I like everything that is raw, earthy, organic and rustic. We try and integrate traditional art forms and techniques from rural India with modern design. Terracotta and cane are my favorite raw materials to play with because they are beautiful and evoke nostalgia. They create the character. These materials make me relive happy times - my grandparents lived on a farm in a small town in Maharashtra and whenever I visited them I used to make clay. It was free hand, creating what came to mind, expressing how I visualized different forms. I am recreating those memories with a little twist of what today's consumers would like.

Take us through your design process.

KG: Our research starts with understanding the need for a product in the industry. We try to work out the functionality and form through sketching, and then create a prototype using materials that need to be integrated. The team uses this prototype for two weeks before we launch the final product to the consumers to check for durability and usage. On the fun side, you will often find our team in fields and villages, and in junkyards, collecting waste pieces. Our idea is to get inspired from objects in our surroundings.

What makes your products stand out in the market?

KG: At Opaque Studio, we love all things different. Our products are styled with love and passion for art. We design and make chic, upbeat and minimalist furniture and home décor, marrying utility with appealing esthetics. We create affordable products that infuse traditional techniques into modern designs. Our products are a mix of work from artisans in rural India, and modern designs. We focus on quality over quantity. For us, the consumer experience is of prime importance. A consumer draws a personal connect with the product before buying it, and we make sure that they are completely happy and content before (and even after) they make the purchase. We offer customization at no extra cost.

How do you approach up-cycling?

KG: Even as people prefer niche and exquisite furniture, the price justification of up-cycled products poses a challenge. Buyers tend to draw a price comparison of an up-cycled product with a brand new commodity and question the same, which leads to apprehension in their buying pattern. The testing ground here is to make masses comprehend that the pricing of an up-cycled product constitutes factors like time,



Rustique wall mirror



material, labor, artistry and craftsmanship involved in refurbishing something old. The effort to create an up-cycled product is almost double than that required to make a new product from scratch. Up-cycled furniture has a simple, lustrous and fresh utility value at half or quarter of the environmental cost.

How do you tackle entrepreneurial challenges?

KG: Building a business takes time. I try to enjoy the process rather than run against it. While working on our own business, we have to set our boundaries straight. I believe that a steady and incremental growth is a blessing and the way to move forward. Take one step at a time and set your foot in the industry.



Fuji bark planter



Cane photo frame



Caravan bark mirror

What does it take to balance the commercial and creative aspects of your work?

KG: Commercial and creative aspects go alongside each other. Without marketing, your product's esthetics will not work. Our team has a free hand to design what they like keeping in mind the preferences and requirements of the end users.

How has the pandemic affected the way you work with artisans?

KG: There is immense potential to showcase different art forms from India on a global platform by collaborating with artisans. We have been able to create designs beyond the ordinary by integrating their art with our work. However, the craft sector in India has been hit hard by the pandemic. Earlier, craftsmen were able to promote their craft through exhibitions, and through exports, which for now has slowed down or stopped. With no means to travel, craftsmen cannot communicate and show their work to designers. The channel of sourcing products will have to change. Designers will now

have to go to the craftsmen rather than the other way round. The good thing is they will get to see and experience the life and hard work behind a craft. They can then present the process and tell the story to the world through the digital media. We all can help to build the craft sector back. A lot of brands and start-ups have already realized the potential in our craft – this will open new channels and markets globally.

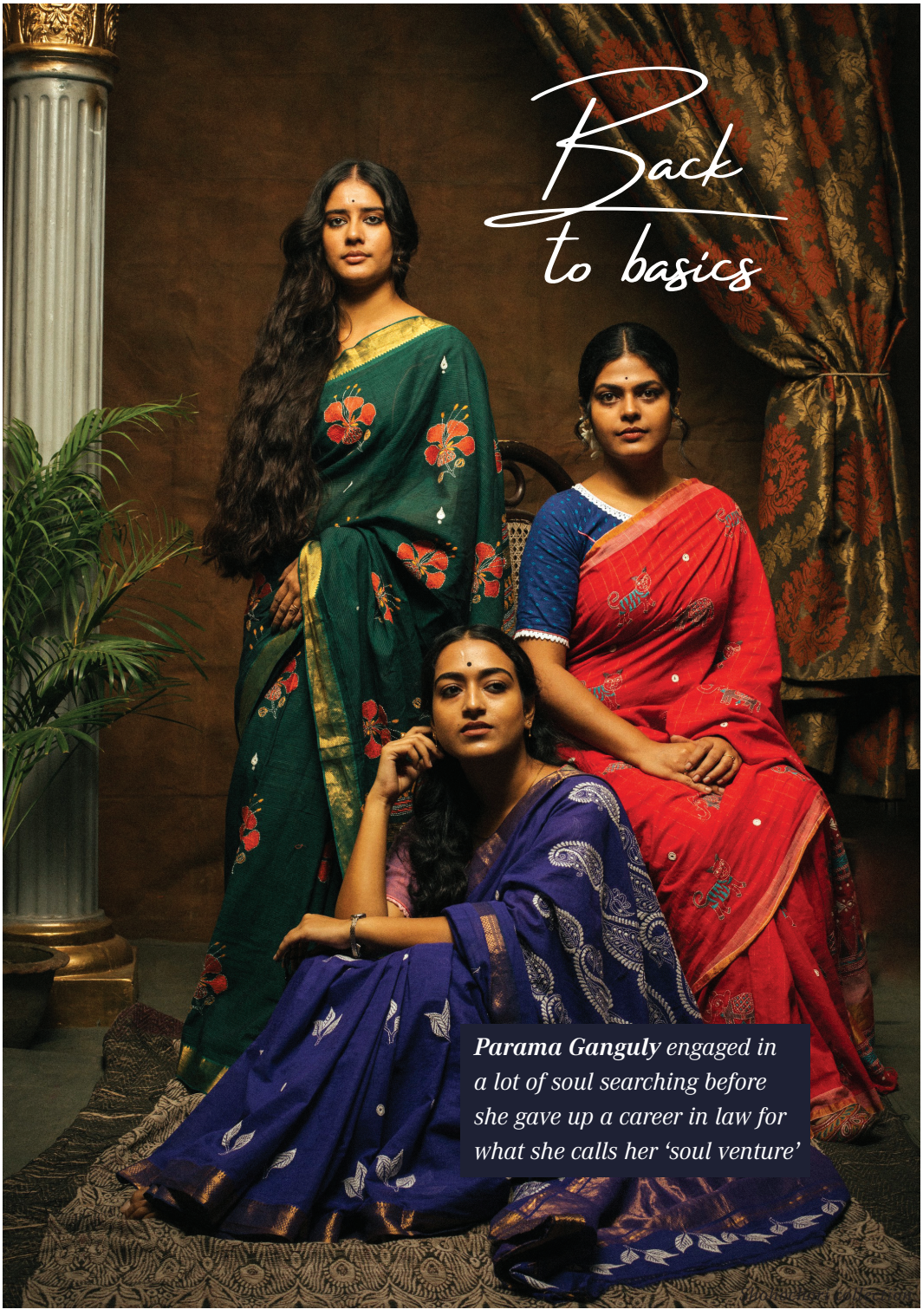
How do you plan to expand your brand?

KG: Given the current interest in artistic work in the rural areas, I feel there is scope for Opaque Studio to create fusion products and help spread the art of our craftsmen and artisans. It is exciting to re-imagine and give a modern twist to their art and focus on creating a brand that talks about the different crafts of India and the people behind it. Opaque Studio is an e-commerce brand that will design products that push the boundaries of materials and decorative processes, build innovation, and sell globally.

connect@opaquestudio.in



Back to basics



***Parama Ganguly** engaged in a lot of soul searching before she gave up a career in law for what she calls her 'soul venture'*

How did you think of translating visual stories into apparel design?

PG: I believe stories never die. It is very easy to celebrate the extraordinary, but what attracts me the most are ordinary stories. I felt ordinary stories needed to be woven in the warp and weft of fabric. Ordinary never goes out of fashion. I started telling the story of everyday, the mundane, on fabric through weaves and embroideries. I always wanted my clothes to be conversation starters. And what could do that better than stories? For me, clothes were never a piece of fabric; they had a deep humane element to them, of a connection between people and places.

How did 'Parama' come about? What made you swap law for a more artistic career?

PG: Like every other Bengali child, I pursued art since childhood. It is strange how a race that thrives on art and literature dreads making careers out of them. I gave up a ten-year-long full-time career in law, and though it had taken me years to take the final call, I realized that my true calling was art. Fat pay checks often see undernourished souls, which happened in my case. Through my soul venture, Parama, I found love. We focus on back-embroidered blouses – the idea was to tell stories about ordinary things on fabric.





'The Devi Jamdani Saree', an adaptation of Satyajit Ray's film poster



What inspires you?

PG: My inspiration is 'everyday'. I find magnificence in the mundane, inspiration in the ordinary. Things, scenes, fresh flowers and pressed flowers, books, posters, grille patterns, old jewelry catalogues, everyday



Tassar with Kantha Gulmohar

conversations... the list is serpentine long. I started Parama with the sole/soul purpose of telling stories on fabric. I infuse a lot of color and words in them and make embroidered versions of those stories. Calcutta, the city that I live in, is my biggest muse and inspiration.



Give us an idea of your design process.

PG: Most of my work is impromptu, eclectic and does not follow a strict pattern. My initial designs were based on what I saw around me. Most of my collections have an underlying theme of nostalgia. During the festive seasons I always try to bring in their innate characteristics through embroideries. Once the design idea is ready, we either get them embroidered on fabric or get them woven through traditional methods. I closely work with female artisans of Shantiniketan, Bolpur who do the kantha embroidery; and with weavers from West Bengal who translate the motifs into fabric. I also have my own unit of embroidery in the outskirts of Calcutta with artisans who specialize in intricate traditional forms of hand embroidery like zardozi, ari, etc. I started my venture with kantha, which still forms an integral part of my work. I have tried to incorporate traditional kantha embroideries on indigenous weaves from all parts of India. The needle work from Bengal found place in Sambalpurs, Pochampally and Mangalgiris.

The local artisans and weavers I work with are the backbone of my business. My designs are quirky though I use traditional embroidery and weaving methods. When I wanted taxis or Satyajit Ray's posters

on garments, my artisans and embroiderers were completely new to that idea. It was a huge break away from the traditional designs. The jamdani weavers hadn't done a watermelon or a cactus on a jamdani before. What is amazing is how they adapted so fast. The enthusiasm to try new things, to laugh at me for my weird ideas but smilingly execute them all, is heartening.

What makes your brand stand out in such a saturated market?

PG: While I cannot claim to have 'invented' back embroidered blouses, I can however quite confidently say that the kind of embroidered stories that we started telling were completely new and fresh when we started. We embroidered ordinary flowers, old forgotten songs and sparsely-watched movie posters on blouses. I hadn't seen them on blouses before. I think initially we enjoyed the first mover advantage in terms of novelty.

Making ready-to-wear blouses also came from my own personal necessity. Between finding God and finding a good tailor, I always felt the latter was way more difficult. I think we eased that age-old problem to some extent in our own way. And it was heartily accepted. In the last five years, what started as a small idea grew. I sometimes feel I created my own Frankenstein when I see the number of copy brands, but I also feel creativity and honesty to your art and passion cannot be copied. And that gives you an inimitable edge. A brand that is genuine in terms of ideas and business practice survives even in a saturated market.

How do you market and distribute your products?

PG: We sell though our social media platforms and will be ready with our website very soon. We also retail through Baro (Mumbai) and People Tree (Goa). We have our own studio in Lake Terrace, Calcutta where we are open to clients through appointment. We have exhibited our products in all major Indian cities and in Singapore; however things have changed after the pandemic.

How do you strike a balance between creativity and the commercial side of it?

PG: If I had to choose between law and what I am doing, I would choose creativity and art thousand times over. However, it is my years in law that have trained me to think 'business' like an entrepreneur. While designing is the backbone of the work that we do, I feel very strongly that a venture does well with the right mix of creativity, design, sense of business and communication. Law taught me the last two.



The commercial side calls for mixing your creative ideas with the usability and necessity of a product. What might have worked brilliantly in pre-COVID days as a business idea might see a setback in the present scenario. I have seen brands launching home linens alongside clothes because home is where we are spending most of our time.

How does social media influence the fashion and wardrobe choices of people in India?

PG: It plays a major role. For instance, the '100 sari pact' created a huge resurgence of sari-wearing among women and indirectly created a huge market for saris. Hashtags like #sareenotsorry, #NationalHandloomDay, and #whomademyclothes generate a lot of interest. People actually make an effort to ask for details about what they are wearing - the kind of fabric, weave, whether the fabric is hand woven or machine made, what is the condition of the weavers who are making them, whether they are rightfully paid. I believe social media plays a huge role in making conscious wardrobe choices.

What is the most crucial factor for you when it comes to designing clothes?

PG: Their longevity, comfort, and wearability. More than trends, I think the clothes should be versatile, breathable, useful and sustainable. A client had posted a photograph wearing a Parama blouse and said it is her 25th wear. I have several pictures of her teaming that same blouse with different sari. After that post, she reordered the same blouse in the same fabric and design. Nothing made me happier than this. This, according to me, is the most crucial part of designing. In an age where people used to buy mindlessly for the sake of photos on social media, 'mindfulness' is most crucial.

Tell us about the entrepreneurial challenges you have faced so far.

PG: While things of the heart always grow at their own beautiful pace, I shall be honest that in phases, I missed formal training in fashion. I had to work extra hard because I had no education in fashion. I am completely self-taught. What others may have learnt in four years at a design school, I had to learn on my own and I often felt under-confident. In the initial year and a half I juggled between a full time law career and my newly found



venture and when I look back I can only see a night owl brushing her teeth every two hours so that she didn't fall asleep while working for Parama.



However, I think no challenge can ever be compared with people copying your ideas, making cheap (and expensive) rip-offs of your design and in the absence of ease of legal remedies, one has to just go on doing one's work and keep quiet about it (please note, this is coming from someone who was a lawyer). It is often disheartening but I think over the years, one learns to deal with these heartbreaks. I also like to believe that imitation comes from the fact that people like your work and your ideas are working.

How do you plan to expand your brand?

PG: We have many new projects in the pipeline. We would love to work with various weaving and embroidery clusters of India. I feel the lockdown brought in self introspection in a way nothing has before. I utilized this time not to find ways of doubling my company's revenues but to work on my deficiencies, improve on the finish, innovate according to changing times and needs. I have also spent hours studying about fabrics and designs. I don't seek expansion that takes away the joy of creating. I have seen extremely successful entrepreneurs with no time for themselves or for their soul. I've left law and found love here. For me, expansion would mean the expansion of a balloon - which makes it fly without carrying a burden.

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Hand embroidered vintage jewelry

Retaining Lustre

*Photographic artist **Bindi Vora** enjoys reusing and recycling materials to create new narratives that preserve links to past works*

What brought you to the world of art?



Photo by Laura Hensser

BV: I came to photography in a very organic way. As a child of seven or eight, I would insist on being in charge of the family camera. On my tenth birthday my parents gave me a Polaroid camera. I remember being incredibly careful of this object – the film was expensive and I can recall really thinking about why I was photographing something. Looking back, it was probably one of the first moments that I began to think about image making and framing. That summer we visited my family in Kenya and went on safari, and I have this collection of Polaroids documenting my holiday, family, wildlife, and people. Some of these photographs have appeared in later works such as *Ex-Libris.*



'Lustre' (2013)

My practice has evolved over the years. During my BA I really began to experiment with analog processes. I spent months on end in the darkroom experimenting with the enlarger and exploring how far color, space and perspective could be stretched. By fusing a myriad of analog processes with inspiration from my everyday surroundings, I began to look at the subtle marks and pigments within the materials I was using, such as negatives and photographic paper. This often resulted in vast spaces of color, light and subtle detail that contemplate ideas of perception and representation of the photographic print. This can be seen in *Lustre.*





wore 654 worm

wore *past of* **wear**.
work /wɜk/ 1 *n.* application of effort to a purpose, use of energy; task to be undertaken, materials to be used in task; thing done or made by work, result of action; employment esp. as means of earning money; literary or musical composition; *in pl.* all such pieces by an author or composer etc.; doings or experiences of specified kind; things made of specified material or with specified tools etc.; *in pl.* operative part of clock etc.; *sl. in pl.* all that is available; *in pl.* operations of building or repair; *in pl.* (often treated as *sing.*) place of manufacture; (usu. *in pl.*) defensive structure. 2 *v.* make efforts, engage in work; be in action, do appointed work; be craftsman *in* material; operate or function, esp. effectively; carry on, manage, control; put or keep in operation or at work; cause to toil; produce by result; knead, hammer, bring to desired shape or consistency; do or make by needlework etc.; (cause to) make way or make (way) slowly or with difficulty; gradually become *by, into, to* motion; excite artificially *into* mood etc.; solve sum by mathematics; purchase with labour instead of money; be in motion or agitated; ferment; have influence (*on, upon*). 3 **workaday** *a.* ordinary, everyday, practical; **work-basket** basket etc. for holding sewing materials; **workday** day on which work is usu. done, work-force works engaged or available, number of these; **workhouse** *hist.* public institution for maintenance of paupers; **work in** find place for in composition or structure; **work-load** amount of work to be done; **workman** man hired to do hard labour; craftsman, person who works in specified manner; **workmanlike** showing practised skill; **workmanship** degree of skill in workman or of finish in his product; **workmate** person engaged in same work as another; **work off** get rid of by work or activity; **work out** solve (sum) or find (amount) by calculation, be calculated *at*, have result, provide for all details of; **work-out** practice or test or performance of exercises; **work over** examine thoroughly, *colloq.* treat with violence; **workpeople** people engaged in labour for wages; **workshop** room or building in which manufacture is carried on, place for concerted activity, such activity; **workshy** disinclined for work, lazy; **work to rule** follow rules of one's occupation with pedantic precision to reduce efficiency as form of protest; **work up** bring gradually to efficient state, advance gradually *to*, elaborate or excite by degrees, learn (subject) by study.
workable /'wɜkəbl/ *a.* that can be worked or will work or is worth working. **workability** *n.*
worker /'wɜkə(r)/ *n.* manual or industrial etc. employee; neuter bee or ant.
working /'wɜkɪŋ/ 1 *a.* engaged in work, esp. in manual or industrial work; functioning; able to function. 2 *n.* action or way of functioning; mine or quarry. **working capital** capital used for current business, not invested in buildings etc.; **working class** class of those employed for wages, esp. in manual or industrial work; **working day** weekday, part of day devoted to work; **working knowledge** knowledge adequate to work with; **working order** condition in which machine works; **working party** committee appointed to advise on some question.
world /wɜld/ *n.* the earth or a heavenly body like it; the universe, all that exists; time or state or scene of human existence; secular interests and affairs; human affairs, active life; average or respectable people or their customs or opinions; all that concerns or all who belong to specified class or sphere of activity; vast amount of (*out of this world colloq.* incredibly good etc.; *think the world of* have the highest possible regard for; world-famous known throughout the world; world war one involving many important nations; world-wide covering or known in all parts of the world.
worldly /'wɜldli/ *a.* temporal, earthly; engrossed in temporal affairs, esp. pursuit of wealth and pleasure. **worldly-wise** prudent as regards one's own interests.
worm /wɜm/ 1 *n.* any of several types of creeping invertebrate animal with long slender body and no limbs; larva

'Ex-Libris' (2012)

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

BV: In 2013, after graduating from University of Westminster, I remember feeling quite at sea. Gone were the darkrooms, facilities, staff and peers – I went from spending a year in the studio with a 5x4 camera making *Lustre,* to a small desk in my flat. I wasn't sure what my practice could look like without the equipment I had become so used to. It took me a long time to make work again after this point.



'In the blue light we failed' (2014)

Whilst moving houses, I came across the boxes of images, folders of negatives and piles of ephemera that I had been collecting. These were significant for me; I often go back to these early tests to see how an idea has evolved, failed or never really started. And more often than not, these pieces of ephemera have provided the genesis for a new work to grow. It almost weaves together a number of works – almost like interconnected tissue.

A year after graduating I began working on what would eventually be my first self-published artist book - *In the blue light we failed* (2014). The premise of the work was to bring together a collection of failed images from my practice all produced at various stages of image making. From camera failures, to processing errors – the images were sequenced by pattern, color and each archived within the book in their original format, i.e., 35 mm negative reproduced in the same size. I ended up with a kaleidoscope of fragments all merging in one place. It was quite cathartic as it paved the way for making work again. The book has been acquired by *The Women's Art Library,* Goldsmith University; The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University; Franklin Furnace Artists Book Archive, USA; amongst others.

Since that point, my practice has become more fluid; it sits alongside my full-time curatorial work at Autograph, London. I will pick things up at various points and then leave them to rest at others – bodies of work may take between two to five years to complete. From conception, to testing to what will eventually be the final series or image. I appreciate the way in which my practice expands and contracts, as I feel the time something takes to develop is incredibly important, now more than ever.

Tell us about your commitment to your current medium.

BV: Although my works are predominately rooted in the photographic, I sometimes borrow from other mediums. Work like *Plane Paper* (2017- ongoing) has firm conceptual and visual connections to the principles of *Lustre* (2013) and *Film Ends* (2012-ongoing) but the concept is really expanded to encompass mark making. By taking a sheet of unexposed photographic paper, and sculpting it around rocks, and other objects, it really becomes something being carved out of nature. As the paper begins to respond

to the light, it reflects on the topographical changes we observe over time within the landscape. Whilst the pigments inscribed into the images reference the light embodied from their environment, it marks the plane of the paper once more. The use of the fabric further elevates the performative action of the changing surface of the landscape, creating endless possibilities for light and movement to encounter the work.

What were you working on when the lockdown was announced?

BV: At the time the lockdown was being contemplated in the UK, my partner and I were just returning from Morocco from what should have been a restful break but turned into an incredibly harrowing experience. We were incredibly lucky to return home. We went into a self-imposed 14-day quarantine; during this time we fell sick with what we now suspect to be mild coronavirus symptoms. It took us a long time to recover; it was a sickness and fatigue we have never experienced before.

At the beginning of the year (having moved once more recently) I inevitably began to look through the negatives and works and debris that inevitably came with me. I went back to a set of negatives that I had found near Camden Arts Centre in 2012. Over the years I would look at this damaged set of 35 mm negatives where fragments of the emulsion had disintegrated over time through exposure to weather, dirt and debris. I have held onto these for so long as I feel a strong responsibility towards them and the people depicted in these frames. Although I can't be certain, they appear to be taken in either North Africa or the Middle East. I am slowly working on these negatives, and really looking into the notion of care, collaboration and authorship. I feel a desire to retouch them. This is a really slow project and it could still be another few months before the work is ready.



Mountain of Salt (2020)

How has the lockdown affected your practice and plans?

BV: I have found this time inspiring in some ways. During the UK's daily lockdown briefing and subsequent analysis, I became intrigued by the way in which politicians, journalists and individuals were talking about the virus – I began to write down the phrases that were intriguing or provoking.

Mountain of Salt initially responded to the unfolding of COVID-19; it looks at the way language can have a physical presence and its effect upon each of us. Since that time, the work has developed. It encompasses countless moments that have affected us all beyond the virus – conversations around oppression, racism and witnessing of trauma. Each of these appropriated texts has been paired with a found or sourced image. The use of shapes is related to the semantics and origins of what these forms represent - togetherness, unity, etc. This is very much an ongoing work; there are approximately 125 works in the series but it continues to grow. At the moment, the work is purely disseminated on social media but I am

working closely with Carrie Scott from CS&P to develop an exhibition and debut this work in the future.

What inspires you? Let's talk about your frameworks and references.

BV: I feel the breadth of the photographic medium is boundless; what we recognize it to be is constantly changing, developing, and evolving. Everyone dissects and takes something different away. I am really interested in how the medium can intersect with another, how artists use materials, archives and images within their work. For instance, artists such as Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who skillfully combines painting, drawing, fabric and found images to create dense, complex works on paper. Her series *The Beautyful Ones*, for example, draws on the complexities of the artist's Nigerian heritage and her contemporary life in the USA. Or artist Dayanita Singh, with her 'moving still image' *Mona and Myself.*

Seeing work, looking at work, experiencing works are of course the fundamental way to understand how something can move you. Shows such as *(mis) understanding photography* at the Museum Folkwang were quite pivotal in my practice and hugely inspirational. There are many artists that I look to for inspiration, points of reference, and whose practice I am intrigued by. Some are peers, some are established artists, but all have been making work that is important and each one uses images, archives and processes in a variety of ways - Mohini Chandra, Gauri Gill, Lubaina Himid, Hannah Hughes, Patrick Pound, Kalen Na'il Roach, Deborah Roberts, Lorna Simpson, Clare Strand, Cherelle Sappleton, Dafna Talmor, and Justine Varga, amongst so many more. What I appreciate with all these artists is that there are no prescribed boundaries for photography; it can react to another medium and create a hybrid. It evolves, changes, and morphs.



Sheltering in Green (2020)

What are you working on now?

BV: At the moment, I am using this time to concurrently develop several works such as *Mountain of Salt, Sheltering in Green,* and *In the Third Hand.* In September, I will be participating in an auction for Hospital Rooms via Hauser & Wirth.

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

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