DESIGN INDIA

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CHANGE MAKERS



Sonal Dabral ***pg 12*** | ***Photographed by Avinash Gowarikar***

Manasi Agarwal **02** Satish Moladiya **26** Srishti Dube **32** Pururaj Singh **38**
Arushi Parakh **46** Madhulika Mehta **54** Visakh Menon **58**

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INDIA'S BEST DESIGN AWARDS 2020

JURY IN PROGRESS

Thank you for your overwhelming response to IBDA 2020. It's Jury time! We will let you know when and how results will be announced this year.

Stay tuned!

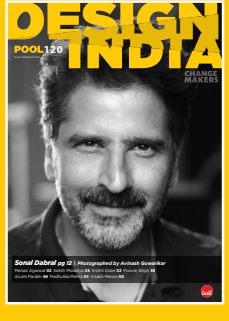


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Editor in Chief | **sudhir@indidesign.in**



At the National Opera House of Ukraine in Kiev during a visit in 2019



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DESIGN INDIA

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.

http://in.groups.yahoo.com/group/designindia

Professional at Home

It almost sounds like the joke we often make in our country – World Famous in India – but it is no longer a joke. You can be world famous in India, and you can be a professional at home. Being professional is an attitude, and you do not need to compromise on that at all. Give your 100% with what you have, in the time required. Many of us have decided not to even think of working from the office till next year. That means organizing ourselves in a better way. Here are some tips from my own experience on how to be professional at home:

Tools of the trade: Get a table and an office chair where you can sit long hours; if possible, face a window, so you can look outside often. Get a bigger screen, a better camera/microphone, and a table lamp or other suitable lighting. Definitely get good speakers... as much as possible, use speakers, but keep a noise-canceling headphone/microphone unit close by. An echo spot or a timepiece will help tremendously to set alarms for meetings. Plan for two internet services for sure.

Work by the calendar: Organize your time better. Set a time to start work. I sit in my chair by 9 am but only get to work by 9.30 am. Schedule your time and activities, both work as well as personal, on the calendar.

Plan for the future: Going ahead, you must have a spare room to work in (office at home), so when you buy/rent a new apartment, think of getting an extra bedroom. For now, rent a room in your neighborhood if you have a tight living space. Sharing this room is not a good idea.

Leave work behind when it's time to wrap up: Don't eat at the same table. Set aside your devices once you are off work. Switching off and switching on in the same space will take some time but it becomes easier with practice.

The work from home concept suits many of us; it is also good for our planet. Once you find the right balance, it turns out to be more enjoyable and productive.

Sudhir

ValueLabs

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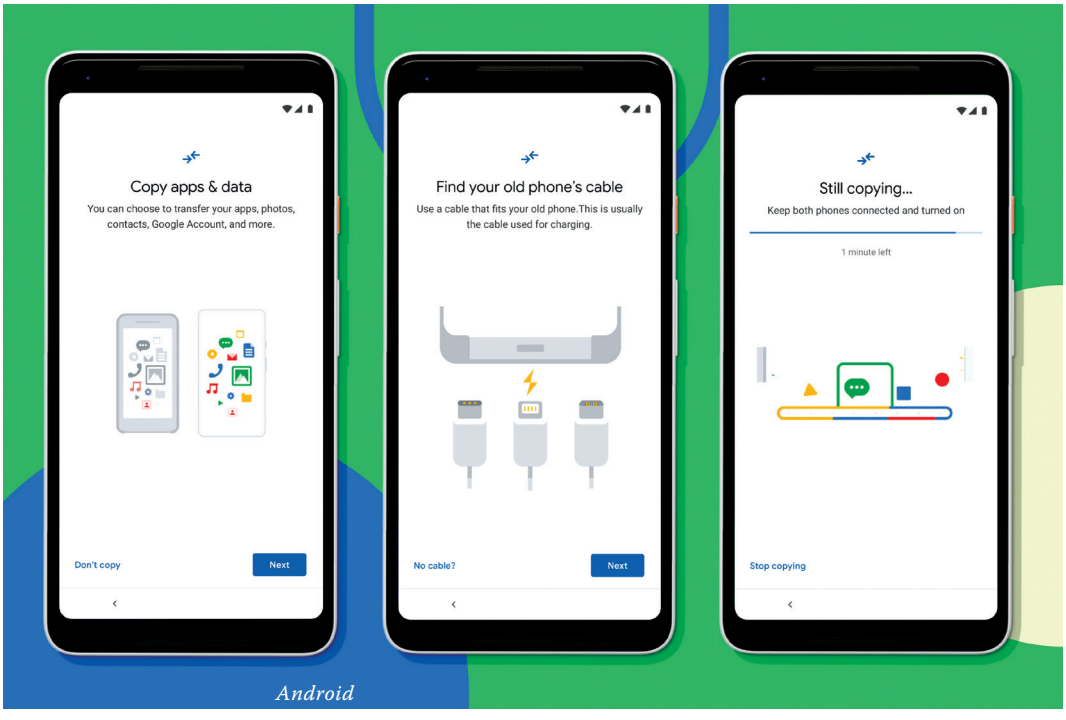
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Floating staircase, Google London

Technology aside, what interaction design means to ***Manasi Agarwal*** *is caring about the world in general, and people in particular*

making LIVES BETTER





How were you drawn to design? How has formal design education influenced your career?

MA: As a child I was fond of drawing, sketching and making stuff with my hands. I was very interested in math and science too, and was assessed by our Indian education system to be fairly good at both. I guess the obvious progression of thought was toward architecture. However, I found myself more drawn to visual arts and spent hours on MS Paint and later CorelDraw in the early days of getting used to computers. Graphic design became a natural choice for me. Formal design education, first at Symbiosis Institute of Design (Pune) and then at NID (Ahmedabad), has certainly helped my career progression, though I'd attribute the most growth and learning to the people I met there and the networks that were formed as a result. The most important thing I learned was that learning itself should never stop, and is a lifelong pursuit.

What made you swap graphic design for interaction design?

MA: I don't really think of myself as one or the other; there's something to be said against getting yourself tangled in the nomenclature of the different streams or types of design and constructing a sort of rigid identity around them. I believe that core design principles and objectives largely remain consistent across graphic, product, interaction or any other design stream of expertise. Most practising interaction or UX designers today have had a range of different, and at times non-design backgrounds, and the field is richer as a result of this. There were very limited courses for what we call 'interaction design' around ten years ago anyway.

I did, however, choose to do my Master's in New Media, because the possibilities of merging digital media, art, and technology in general excited me at the time and my experience thus far had been fairly focused on brand and print design. I consider my decision additive, rather than it being a fork in the road between one or the other. Being an interaction designer means being interested in working at the intersections of technology, psychology, art, design and even policy. As somewhat of a generalist, the idea of feeding a bottomless curiosity about the world, of absorbing information from various fields of expertise to create objects, products, services and systems that make life a little bit better for people in whatever way they can is what keeps me engaged in the field.

Share your experience of working with Adobe. What were your major takeaways?

MA: Adobe was my first tryst with a Silicon Valley product company, so it is close to my heart. As an experience designer, I had the opportunity to work with some amazing people, really inspiring in so many ways. Given that it was the first time I was working within an in-house design team at a large product company, I learnt a lot. It felt like a very close knit group of people, very supportive and always willing to help. My biggest takeaway was that product teams work best when they have a shared vision, and design as a function is most powerful when there is a feeling of mutual trust and dependability between cross functional peers. It helped systematically untangle the naive, young designer ideal of design being the center of all product development.

How has your experience as interaction designer at Google been so far?

MA: Since March 2018, I've been working as interaction designer at Google London, Android platform UX. The most rewarding part of being a designer at Google is the knowledge that the work we do has the potential to impact millions of people across the globe, in all walks of life. The range of product and services we offer also makes the internal design team discourse very engaging, with new patterns, insights or debates that emerge almost on a daily basis. It's also a privilege to work in a company with so many passionate, driven and extremely smart people who are a great source of inspiration and definitely keep me grounded in the reality of how much more I have to learn and grow.

A persistent challenge is the scale and complexity of the problems we have to deal with. I've lost count of the number of times I've felt like something could be easily done and fixed, but as I dig deeper, I realize that it isn't as simple as I had initially thought. Getting all the stakeholders on board with the proposed solution also takes a fair amount of time and multiple iterations to address varied concerns. Before Google, I guess I hadn't fully understood what 'sweating the details' truly meant.

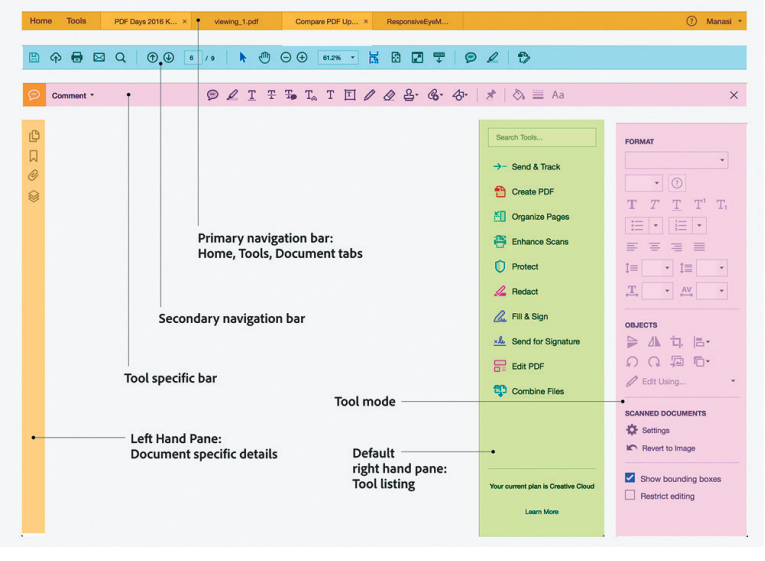


Acrobat wireframe

How do you approach a new project? Give us a glimpse of your design process.

MA: I wouldn't say that I follow a very specific, prescriptive sort of approach to every new problem that comes my way. The key, to me, is to let the process be somewhat emergent on the basis of the many different vectors and characteristics of the project itself.

That said, there are a few 'steps' so to speak that seem common to most projects. Building a shared understanding of the problem space between your team and incessantly questioning why we want to build something helps get onto the same page. Design isn't an activity that can take place in isolation, and it is important to factor in the perspectives that peers bring to the table. As designers though, we have the privileged place of being the 'voice of users' in the room where things get decided. It becomes our responsibility to try and include research as much as possible into our process, and try to be ceaseless advocates of a potential user's needs, goals and desires. Situating the project within larger contextual networks of interconnected spaces, people and systems can help avoid focusing too much on the single tree, and losing sight of the forest.



Acrobat desktop framework

Finally, there's always the case for making experience prototypes, iterating and getting feedback in a constant goal of further improvement, to really get a sense of how the solution fits into the multiplicity of contexts that users tend to belong to.

Which have been your most unforgettable projects?

MA: At Adobe, I remember working on a project to make PDFs more mobile friendly. This was a mammoth task, in that we had to reimagine the structure of a document, from an A4 print based format, to one that reflowed seamlessly on the small screen. Relationships between elements of the document had to be inferred and many philosophical arguments were had on the nature of PDFs as a 'final' layout and how or whether we should attempt to override some of the creator's intent. I learnt a lot about typography, document semantics and the value of iterative prototypes.

At Google, I recently worked with a fact checking charitable organization in the UK in a 20% project, which was super interesting and enlightening. We thought about how we could make the lives of fact checkers easier by creating a simple, assisted and automated system to parse and check incoming information. Reducing the amount of time it takes to manually research and fact-check a piece of information, which unsurprisingly takes 12+ hours at times, was also a goal for us. In this day and age, the work that such NGOs do to prevent the spread of misinformation is massively relevant, and I enjoyed the opportunity that was provided to me via the 20% project fellowships.



Acrobat DC release

Lastly, I held an open elective at the NID Bangalore campus in 2016 alongside two of my New Media peers, Suvani Suri and Simran Chopra. The theme that year was Indian railways and we constructed a two-week workshop that was centred around the ideas of time and experiences of passengers while they wait. Transit spaces as 'nonplaces' have a lot of potential to engage people and reduce the perceived wait times. The students came up with a range of expressions, artifacts and interventions that can fit into this context, mostly informed by their own prior



Acrobat UI detail



experiences. They were extremely responsive, sensitive, perceptive, curious to learn more, and most importantly, questioned the status quo. As instructors, we learnt a lot from them.

What challenges does an interaction designer face?

MA: I think interaction design and research are having a bit of a golden moment these days, boosted by a sense of techno utopianism that has pervaded our lives over the last decade or so. The challenge then is a more reflective,

internal one: we have to be increasingly conscious of the power we have to influence product decisions and think deeply about the kind of impact these products and services can have on people, now and in the future. It is a question of drawing a balance between being either too risk averse to try anything novel, staggering under the weight of the responsibility of its possible legacy, or focusing so much on building, shipping (and that Silicon Valley favorite term, 'disrupting'), that short term goals totally cloud your judgment as gatekeepers of what is allowed to see the light of day.



UX reseaarch synthesis

How are the principles of universal design applicable in interaction design?

MA: Before the term 'universal design' was formalized in our lexicon, we were still taking into account prior research in ergonomics, cognitive and behavioral sciences, accessibility and information design. So, I feel old already, in that I would say the mindsets and approaches of universal design were basics of all types of design for me, anyway. I guess having these recent principles, easily chunked and organized, can help young designers to get a quick summary on all that past knowledge and guide their processes.

All design - of objects, spaces and messages, digital or otherwise - should be built with the range of humanity and human ability in mind. Edge cases only define the limits of what we care about, and as interaction designers our domain is to make technology as accessible, inclusive and understandable as possible.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected interaction design worldwide?

MA: There will definitely be some knock-on effects on the way we do our work and the nature of problems we deal with. I think designers need to be careful and considerate about the potential social, economic and political impact of any product or project they help release into the world. In the practical realm, with more of us having the privilege of working from the safety of our homes, we need to constantly remind ourselves of the people who don't have that choice at all and be sure to include their constraints and perspectives in the stuff we help build.

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Internal Google workshop

On a day to day basis, I have noticed collaborating getting a bit harder, and we need to get better at asynchronous decision making to help mitigate some of the issues. Writing about your own work and learning how to effectively articulate your thoughts is going to be an even more important skill going forward. All the while we also have to juggle the balance of our own wellbeing to prevent burning out in our currently context collapsed lives.

What are you presently working on?

MA: I can't really go into the specifics, but broadly, I'm working on finishing up parts of the UX in the Android 11 release, which went to beta a month or so ago. Alongside we're also starting to think about the things we want to improve for our users in the 2021 update. I am part of a team that works on the onboarding and out of the box experience for Android users, so it's a critical user journey that changes and evolves every year. I learn something new every day!

And what's next?

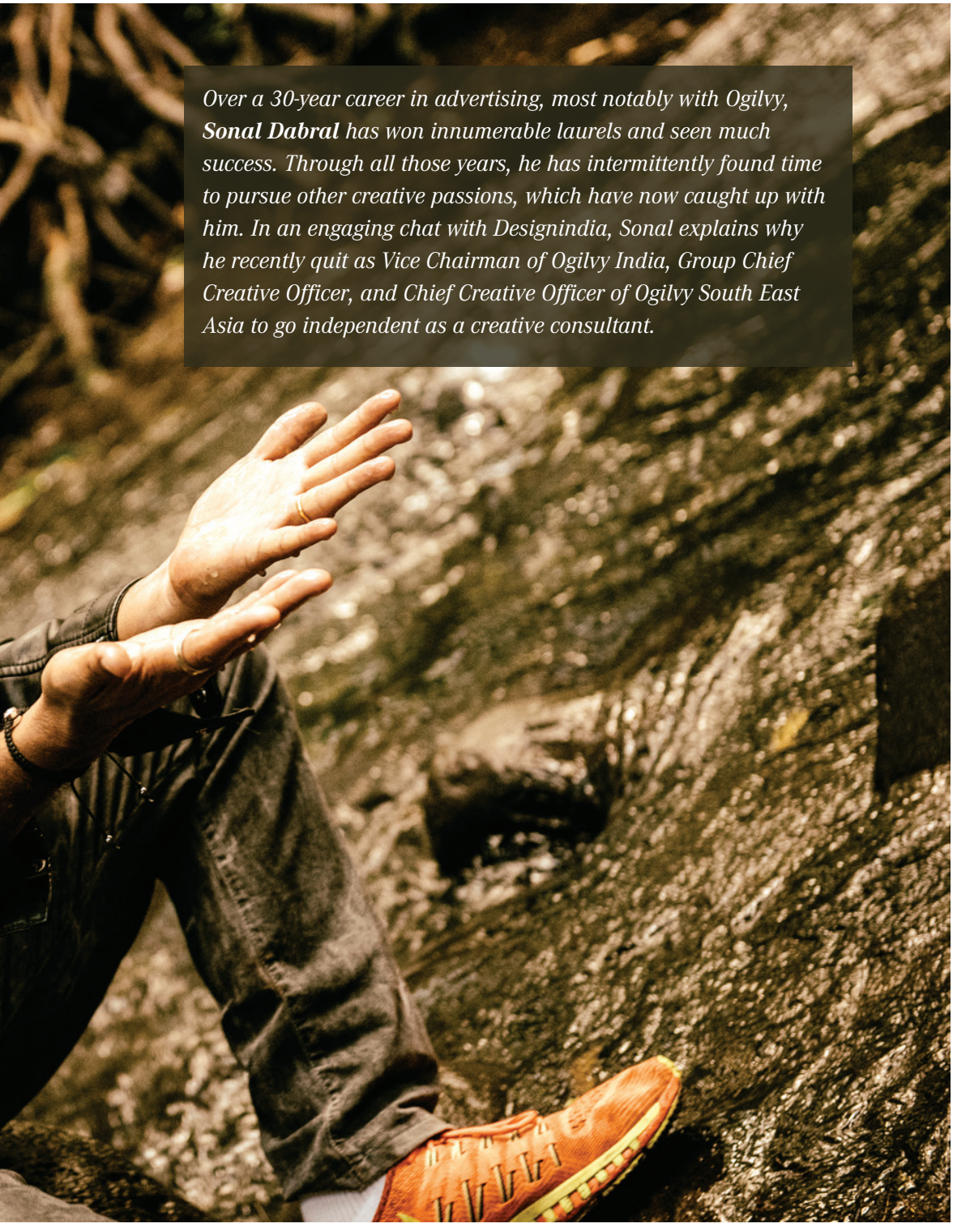
MA: I don't think now is a great time to be making plans, to be honest. I'm taking each day as it comes at the moment; it helps me stay sane and get stuff done. Long term of course, I'd like to keep learning and growing, taking on new and bigger challenges at work and continue to be a part of projects and endeavors I believe in. I also enjoy teaching and taking workshops, and will continue to try and make time for that.

manasiagarwal27@gmail.com



The Lure Of Storytelling

Directing the McDowell's ad



Over a 30-year career in advertising, most notably with Ogilvy, ***Sonal Dabral*** *has won innumerable laurels and seen much success. Through all those years, he has intermittently found time to pursue other creative passions, which have now caught up with him. In an engaging chat with Designindia, Sonal explains why he recently quit as Vice Chairman of Ogilvy India, Group Chief Creative Officer, and Chief Creative Officer of Ogilvy South East Asia to go independent as a creative consultant.*

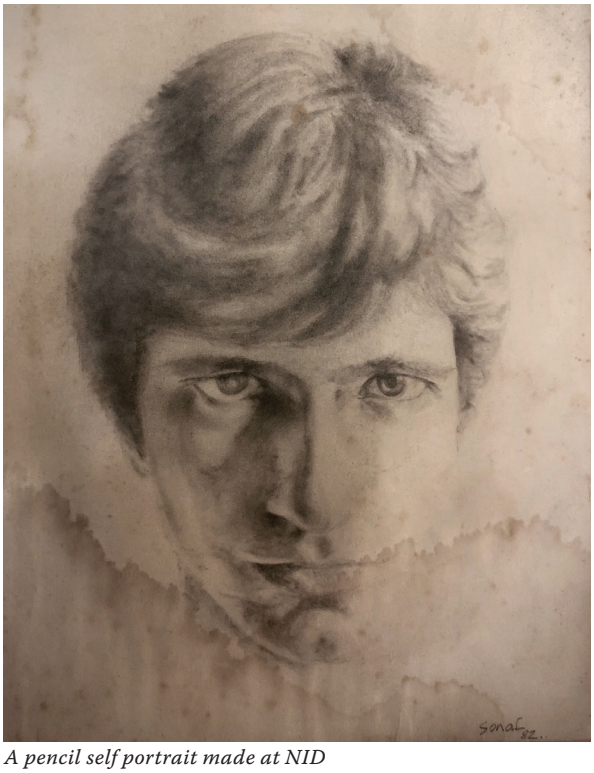


Performing at NID

What was your earliest exposure to design?

SD: Most of my childhood years were spent in Agra. I recall my first visit to the Taj Mahal at age 10 or 11. I was heavily into my big passion, drawing and painting, so loved anything and everything creative. I remember the first sight of the Taj overwhelmed me. Its amazing form against the open skies was out of this world. I remember listening to the guide intently as he described how the architect had made use of perspective, so the 'Quran Aayats' inscribed at the bottom part of the wall, though smaller in size than the ones on top, looked equal to the human eye. I was fascinated by the amount of thinking and creativity that had gone into building the Taj. There were many eye-openers for me at the other historical masterpieces in Agra too, such as The Red Fort, and Fatehpur Sikri.

Around the same time, one of my aunts, Rekha Mausi as we call her, got married to Satish Dabral, a very bright, award-winning architect. Every time I spoke to him, I used to pick up some lessons in design. My architect uncle, seeing my passion for the arts, told me that I should aim to become an architect. So, from that day, all I wanted to do was to become an architect. There were no ifs and no buts. How I would accomplish that I didn't know, or even bother to ask, but I knew I would be an architect one day. Then one evening, just a couple of years before I was supposed to take my School of Architecture exam, a seemingly small moment changed everything I had planned in my little head for seven long years. That fateful evening as I took my textbooks out to dust and clean, a sheaf of A4 sized, green, cyclostyled papers wedged between two books fell out. God knows how long they had been there. I almost threw them into the bin but something



A pencil self portrait made at NID

made me look at them again. It seemed like an application form of some sort. National Institute of Design, the title said. I sat down to take a closer look.

For the next half an hour, I was totally immersed in those old sheets. Strange courses like Ceramic Design, Product Design, Graphic Design, and Animation stared at me and I could feel an odd sense of excitement. 'Efficiency in drawing is considered an asset' a line said. This was destiny calling. Drawing and sketching were all I did in whatever free time I had after school and soccer. Ever since I was eight years old and won my first art contest, I had won every single art and painting contest in my small city. Now there was this strange institute that was telling me that they considered something I loved an asset? I knew at that moment where I was heading. I kept in touch with NID and thankfully got accepted into it.

As I found out much later, one of my uncle's friends had asked for the NID application form for one for his niece. When she decided to pursue medicine instead, the girl's uncle left the form at his friend's house and forgot all about them. This was destiny calling, indeed. So, this is how, even without knowing what design was, I first encountered the concept of design and design thinking. Of course, it was when I stepped into NID to study Visual Communication that it really dawned on me what a fascinating and vital subject design was.

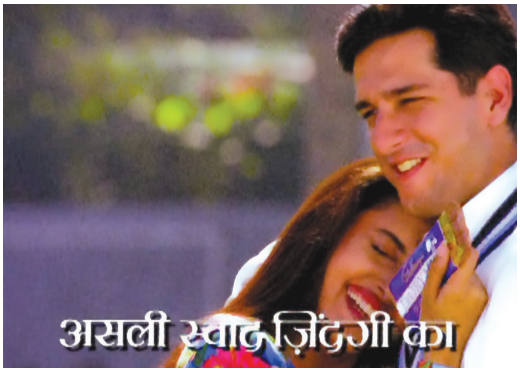
How did your journey in advertising begin?

SD: I discovered advertising as a profession at NID. Since the institute's DNA was all about 'design for social good', advertising was not given enough importance, both within our curriculum and also as a career of choice by the students. Mistakenly, advertising has always carried an image of glamour, parties and some amount of false pretence. I guess that played on everyone's mind. With me, it was different. Right from my school days, I had a keen interest in theater and performing arts, which became even stronger when I joined NID. So I acted, and I directed. I liked the idea of playing different characters and getting into the shoes of the characters I was playing, in my prep for the role. I discovered that that's what people did in advertising every single day - get into their target audience's lives and their shoes while working on ideas to communicate with them. And they were getting paid to do it. I must admit I did enjoy the glamour part of it too! By the time I was in my second year at NID, I had decided that advertising would be my choice when I graduated. I went on to apply to the two top agencies in Delhi, JWT and Lintas, and got offers from both. I opted to join Lintas.









Which have been some of your most memorable projects?

SD: The first piece of work that comes to my mind is the logo for NIFT. I was barely a couple of years out of NID when I designed this logo. The Indian government had invited the dean of FIT New York, Richard Streiter, to come in as a senior consultant to help establish a new institute for fashion studies. Lintas won the pitch to do the initial work for the institute. I worked on this project and, with Richard Streiter as the client, I designed the logo and all the other collaterals for the brand new institute, which was named National Institute of Fashion Technology or NIFT for short. I remember for the first prospectus that I designed for the institute I had also done some fashion illustrations. Mr Streiter liked them so much that he asked me to sign the illustrations and that's how they appeared on the mailer and the prospectus with the signature of a young visualizer. Mr Streiter kept the originals and years later, when I visited him in his office in FIT, I saw them hanging on the wall behind him. It was a proud and moving sight for me.

One other favourite of mine is the Cadbury Dairy Milk campaign I worked on in the mid-nineties at Ogilvy Mumbai. It was a daring campaign because, for the first time, the product was targeted at adults. No chocolate brand had done that before. The insight we worked on was simple - there are many things we love to do, but we stop ourselves because we worry about what the world will think about us; for instance, enjoying

Released in 1993, the iconic Cadbury's Dairy Milk film showing a girl dancing on the cricket field is one of Sonal's favorites





On the sets of the Cadbury's Dairy Milk commercial with model, Shimona. When the Bollywood pigeons refused to fly as required, it was Sonal's duty to scare them into taking flight!

Cadbury's Dairy Milk chocolate. At the time when chocolates were meant for children, adults felt odd buying it for themselves or eating it in public. That thought gave birth to the 'Real Taste of Life' campaign. The film that showed a girl dancing on the cricket field after her boyfriend hits a six continues to be loved even today and is one of the iconic chapters of Indian advertising history.

Then there is the Indian Panga League campaign for Virgin Mobile. The challenge was two-fold. How do you participate in the IPL with a budget that is minuscule compared to the biggies? Second, how do you talk about the low inter-state tariff in an engaging Virgin Mobile way? I thought one

way we could do it was to create a parallel Indian Panga League - the idea of friends who are loyal to different teams calling each other to take *pangas*. Once we had the 'big idea', we generated close to 300 scripts and finally shot 105 short films – each featuring banter between two close friends, riling each other on their favorite teams. The campaign was released only on the web and became an instant hit. It not only won the hearts and minds of millions of cricket fans and our target audience but also won us a slew of awards. That included an Abby Gold and the Yahoo Big Idea Chair for the best digital campaign in India for that year.



'The Journey'
This anti-smoking ad film won multiple awards

The other memorable project for me is an anti-smoking commercial I wrote when I was in Malaysia, where I was the creative head of Ogilvy at the time. I was on my way, with a senior colleague, for a rather difficult meeting. It was a hot day, and the AC in his car was on full blast. Being a chain smoker, I asked him if I could smoke. He looked at me and replied with loads of sarcasm, "Let me be nice to you." Then he lowered the windows. Here, I was polluting his car and,



The hugely popular India Panga League campaign for Virgin Mobile in 2010

there he was, being kind to me. My mind got into top gear, and I kept wondering why, if I'm polluting his car, is he being nice to me? There was conflict and drama in the line. By the time we reached the meeting, I had a script idea in my head. An old man offers his seat to a young guy who has just lit a cigarette in a crowded bus. Voice Over kicks in and says, "A person loses seven minutes of his life every time he lights a cigarette. Be nice to smokers because they don't have much time left." When it was released, it made instant news. It was a big award winner too, including the Grand Prix at the Media Awards' Spikes, a prestigious regional awards show, where it was declared the best of show.

I believe music is a potent tool that brands can use for memorable branding. One of my favorite pieces of music based work was the campaign I worked on for McDowell's No.1. Close friendship among friends had been a long-running platform for the brand. One evening while working on the new campaign for the brand, I had a thought - one moment of truth in deep friendships is when friends leave a college or company or club. We give gifts, and we do farewell videos which are almost always, very heartfelt, however raw in their finish. I thought what if this brand, McDowell's No.1 creates a new friendship anthem that becomes the soundtrack for all deep friendships in India. That's when I wrote the song 'Yeh No.1 Yaari Hai'. The song was all about deep friendships and how they help us navigate our lives through thick and thin. The song and the campaign became a massive hit. The platform idea of No.1 Yaari was then used for all the campaigns and work under the brand. It continues to get great love from consumers. The biggest success for me is the fact that many farewell videos on YouTube are using this anthem as their soundtrack.









Above: McDowell's No.1 Waterfall film
Left: Judging entries with Oliviero Toscani at D&AD Awards 2015

And my other memorable piece and a recent one is the anthem I wrote for UBER for the 2019 Cricket World Cup in England. The song was called 'Way-O Way-O' and music director Mikey McCleary composed it. It featured singers from five countries, including the famous band Sanam from India. It became a bigger hit than the official World Cup anthem, and that worked very well for the brand Uber. I watched the India-West Indies match in Manchester, and it was a thrilling experience for me to hear the anthem play in the stadium with crowds dancing to its beat.

I'm also fond of some of the print campaigns that I worked on over the years for brands like Le Sancy, Perk, Cadbury's Dairy Milk, Coca Cola, Duracell, and Matchbox to name a few.

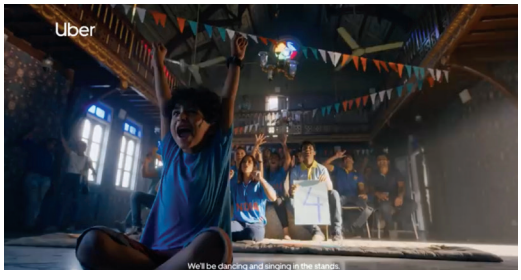


While 'Way-O Way-O' was being played during an India-WI match in Manchester

What was the most challenging part of your role as Group Chief Creative Officer and Vice Chairman of Ogilvy India?

SD: Creative leadership of such a large agency as Ogilvy comes with its own set of challenges and opportunities. I personally love teaching and mentoring, so I have always enjoyed creative leadership roles, where I can nurture and mentor talents every day as part of my job. Being a creative leader means that you have to do a few things well - mentor teams and inspire them to not settle for the second-best, and build a culture where you are not afraid to fail, a culture where set yourself a high bar but more importantly have fun and laughter while you do so. Creativity bereft of joy never takes you anywhere. A happy place will be a more creatively successful place. As a creative leader, you need to not only constantly learn but also create, so that you are always on top of your game. The most challenging part for a creative leader, of course, is to spot great ideas, nurture them and protect them throughout the process that can sometimes kill them if one is not careful and experienced.









Left: With Mr Bachchan and Director Shoojit Sarkar at a shoot

Below: Explaining a shot to A R Rahman and Virat Kohli at the shoot of Premier Futsal Anthem



How do you balance the commercial and creative aspects of your work?

SD: To me, more important than the creative idea is the client brief that leads to the creative idea. Coming up with great creative ideas is not our real job. Our real job is to solve a client's business problem. Everything starts from there. No creative solution can be creative for creativity's sake. If we keep that in mind, it becomes easy to balance the commercial and creative aspects of the project. It's not two opposing forces; one leads to the other.

As creative people we need to remember this every day of our lives. In fact, I believe one great way for us creative people to really feel this idea work is by investing some money, as small or big an amount according to our risk appetite, in our client's stock. Then every time we work on a brief for the client, we are working for our own business. It's a great reminder of the real purpose behind our creativity. I've been following this for years. Thankfully, stocks of some of the brands I have had the privilege to work on have all been big winners.

How can you bridge the gap between what a client wants and what is best for him?

SD: What a client wants and what he needs is a discussion that should happen upfront. It must be discussed and thrashed out even before one begins working on creative ideas. And the best way to do it is through conversation, dialogue and discussions. We should use all the tools we have, like appropriate examples and cases from the past or from other categories, to drive home

the point. There are times when what the client wants is the right solution, and it's us who are seeing it wrong. In such cases too, a discussion upfront and deep thinking can help both the client and the agency get on the same page.

How do you overcome a creative block?

SD: Creative blocks affect each one of us. There are times when it threatens to remain with you not just for hours but days, and it can get a bit frustrating. When that happens to me, I go back to the drawing board. I re-read the brief; I try to find out as much as possible about the product. I look at the brand and the problem with new eyes. Ideas can come from anywhere, sometimes from the history of the brand, sometimes from something unique in the packaging or sometimes even from the way the product is used. Basically, anything or everything about the problem could give you the solution too. Sometimes I just take a break and look at great creative work that has happened in the category I'm grappling with or even other categories. When nothing else works, I sit down and stare at the blank paper in front of me and just start to write or type on my iPad or laptop. There's no one thing that works - it's a mix of things. Something or the other unlocks the ideas. I firmly believe that when the mind is ready inspiration strikes and you get the ideas, but when you don't, you should take a gun and go after them and hunt them down from wherever they are hiding.

How do you measure success?

SD: For me, success comes in various forms. When I create an idea, and it moves the cases in the market that's success, if something I have created is loved by the people that's also success for me. Winning an award for something I have created or have been involved with is also success for me. My teams, my agency, my people winning is also success for me. The most significant success for me is when I see creatives who started their careers with me or spent the early years of their advertising life working with me successfully heading agencies and winning accolades.

There has been a significant leap from print to digital media. What would be your mantra for brands struggling with this shift?

SD: Now we can't even say that there's traditional advertising and there's digital advertising - everything is digital. Technology is now omnipresent, and that's the mind-shift that needs to happen. The current crisis has only accelerated that change. We are now more immersed in tech than we ever were. Many marketers and the brands they are helming have realized that. However for many the shift is slow and the struggle is real. The first thing they need to do is to understand and embrace the change that's taking place and then put in the right investment behind it. Investment in people, in training and even investing in agencies



The first ever Clio that Ogilvy won in the early '90s



At Kancil Fest Malaysia

and people that 'get' this shift. Projections show that by 2023-24, digital will equal and overtake TV ad spends in India. Start investing for that future, today.

Where is the advertising industry in India heading?

SD: Indian advertising is in a flux right now. In India, TV and print advertising has been huge for a long time as they've been the most efficient way of reaching our massive population. Because of this and also because we are country which is inherently rich in storytelling, our advertising too has been rich in storytelling. We have some outstanding talent working in advertising, creating branded storytelling which has been entertaining the audience and selling the products for decades now.

But the scenario is rapidly changing. Advertising is losing talent to India's exploding OTT industry. On the other

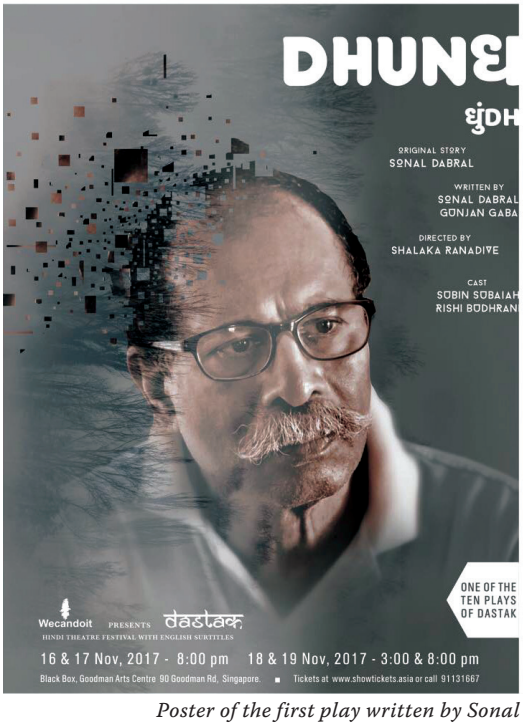


Cannes Lions Film Jury 2008

hand, with mobile internet penetration exploding and social media taking over our lives, forms of storytelling are also rapidly changing. Now the marketers and creators are not leading the change; the audience is. With social media tools in their hands, the audience is becoming the creator, and at times even better than some of the agencies. Take a look at some of the user-generated videos on YouTube and Tiktok, and you will see that agencies have to do catchup now. It's an exciting period, a period of change. Most agencies have already embarked on strengthening their capabilities to face the digital world, and the ones who are not able to change fast enough will probably disappear.

What do you foresee changing in the design and advertising domains post COVID-19?

SD: With the rise of digital media and its transient nature, agencies were asked to turnaround work, faster and cheaper. Now with COVID-19 striking us, pressure on time and budget is only going to increase. This would mean that agencies and design houses will need to get leaner and more entrepreneurial in their approach to work. This change will be tougher for bigger agencies. Still, one way they will be able to expedite the change will be by having many entrepreneurial units working within their large system so that without compromising on quality, they can respond to the demand of the times.



Poster of the first play written by Sonal

What advice would you give to young designers and entrepreneurs?

SD: One could have never foreseen the times we are living in. Though this has meant a real setback to everyone, it has especially hit the younger generation hard. Jobs are at stake; earnings are low, which in turn can affect anyone emotionally. My advice would be to take it on your chin and remember we are all creative people. Our job is to be innovative and come up with creative solutions to any problem given to us. Consider the current times as a problem thrown to you. Think creative. Be innovative. Is there a new skill you can learn? Could you add an extra source of income through any special hobby, passion or skill? Whatever it is, the last thing you should do is to feel hopeless or down in any way. It's a cliche but it's the truth. This too shall pass.

You have successfully outlived various career roles, from acting to scriptwriting and film making to advertising. What's next for you professionally, and personally?

SD: My post advertising plans include being a filmmaker on weekdays and a pro Blackjack player on weekends. All along sipping my favorite single malts!

Seriously though, I have always been a curious person and loved dabbling in quite a few creative pursuits. I feel that at the end of it, they are all connected. Whether in acting, writing, film making or pure advertising, we

are all storytellers, trying to create stories in various forms and formats that will engage and influence our audience. That's what gives the purest joy.

I quit Ogilvy recently and went independent because I wanted the freedom to tell stories in many different formats - storytelling not just restricted to brands. Thankfully, after years of creating one kind of storytelling in advertising, as an independent creative consultant, I am now enjoying the freedom of doing multiple types of creative projects. I'm letting the flow decide which direction it will take me. As long as it's creative I'll be the happiest.

Currently, I'm developing a feature film story and also working on a web series. I've also launched my own chat show on creativity in advertising, marketing and beyond, called 'Streaming with Sonal Dabral'. I love advertising and am doing a few advertising projects. I've enjoyed many years of life in pure advertising in big agencies. Now it's time to explore new worlds, new mediums and boundless creativity.

sonaldabral@mac.com



Speaking on his three passions and what they've taught him during his talk at Spikes Asia (Singapore)



Above: Speaking at the Rebels and Rulers Branding Conference (Bucharest, Romania)



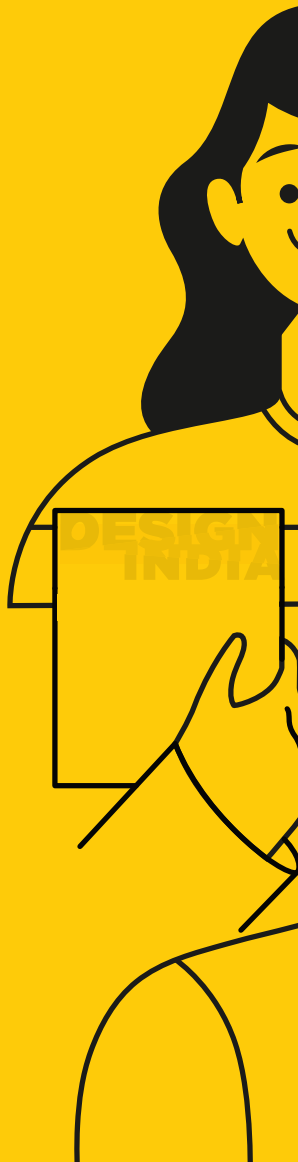
Right: Holding the Cannes Gold (2008). Sonal was the CCO at Ogilvy Singapore, which became the world's third most awarded agency at Cannes

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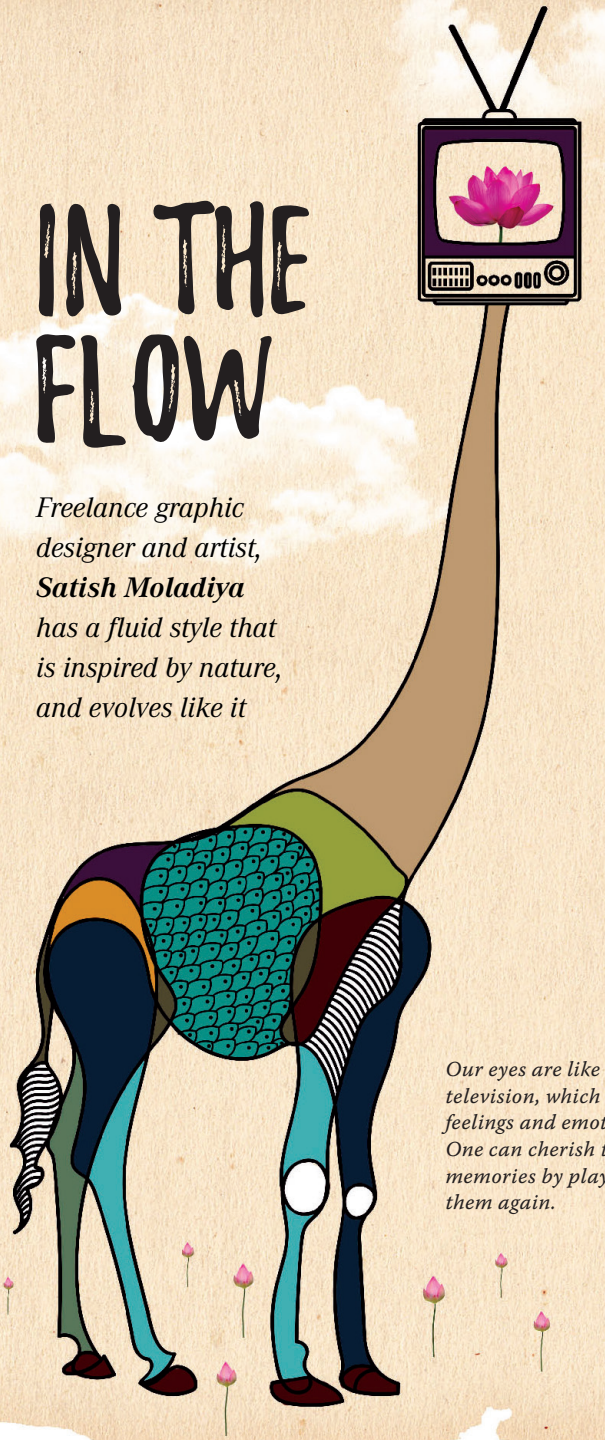
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IN THE FLOW

Freelance graphic designer and artist, ***Satish Moladiya*** *has a fluid style that is inspired by nature, and evolves like it*



Our eyes are like a live television, which records feelings and emotions. One can cherish the old memories by playing them again.



The ocean of music is vast and is able to make people swim in it



The light of knowledge

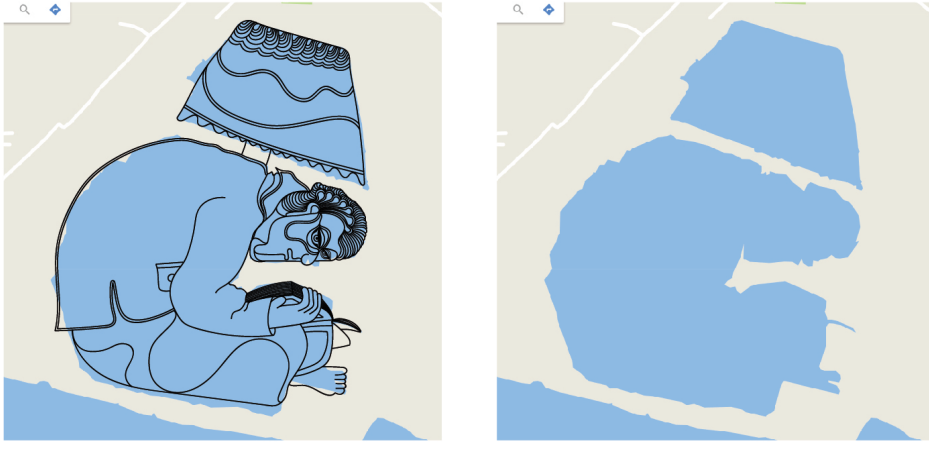


How were you drawn to illustration?

SM: As a kid I used to paint as a hobby and participate in competitions. I had these thoughts in my mind - visuals where the art would be a combination of different personalities and attributes. Soon my creative visualization involved characters, which had the features of humans, but the beauty of terrestrial beings. I started to draw the world in the form of fiery illustrations. While commencing any personal work or project I still tend to study and observe various great creations of Mother Earth and think about how I can transform them into the artistic encyclopedia.

I pursued a Bachelor of Visual Arts degree at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, which opened many routes and paths of explorations and creations. I went on to work with a design studio in Bangalore. At present, I work as a freelancer and take up various graphic design projects including advertising, social media design, publication print design, packaging design and brand identity design.

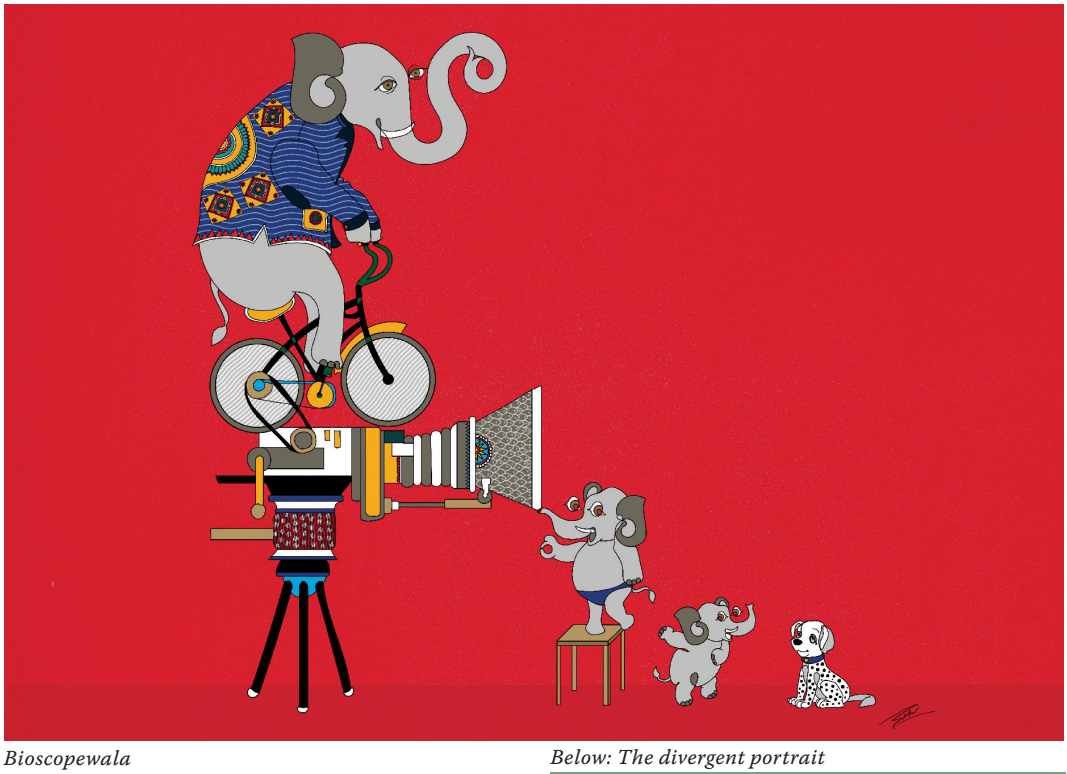




Musafir

Define your style. What inspires your innovative ideas?

SM: Being an artist I consistently try to explore and venture along new paths of creativity – this makes me create a new style every time I draw. I tend to get inspired by people on the streets and the vivid expressions and motifs found in nature. I also find inspiration through travel and diving into the world of enchanting music.



Bioscopewala

Below: The divergent portrait



How does an illustrator find his voice?

SM: Once you start illustrating the thoughts and ideas swirling inside the mind get woven into unbelievable stories and at that time the artist starts to feel his self.

Give us a glimpse into your creative process.

SM: My passion for art and design has made me realize that everything is interlaced and intricately woven with the threads of innovation and creativity. I tend to visualize ideas into different perspectives and find the connections, which make the design thought process unique each time.

Which have been your most memorable projects?

SM: I am more amazed by my creations than proud of them. However, among the really memorable ones are the illustrations I made using Google maps as a tool, and ink illustrations depicting divergent portraits.

World's First Design Wall Magazine

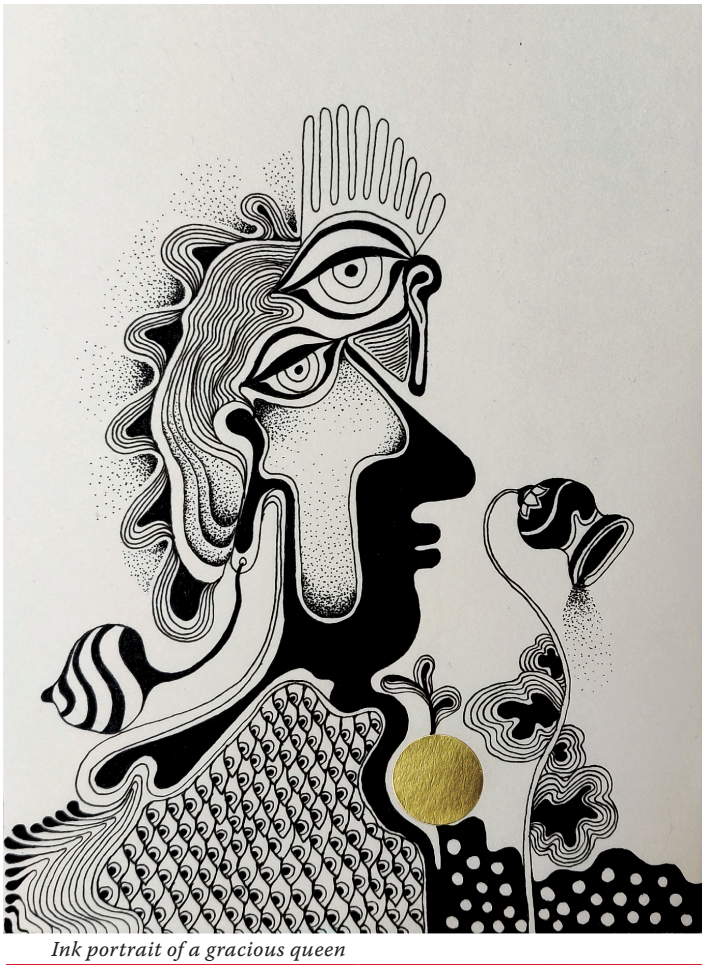




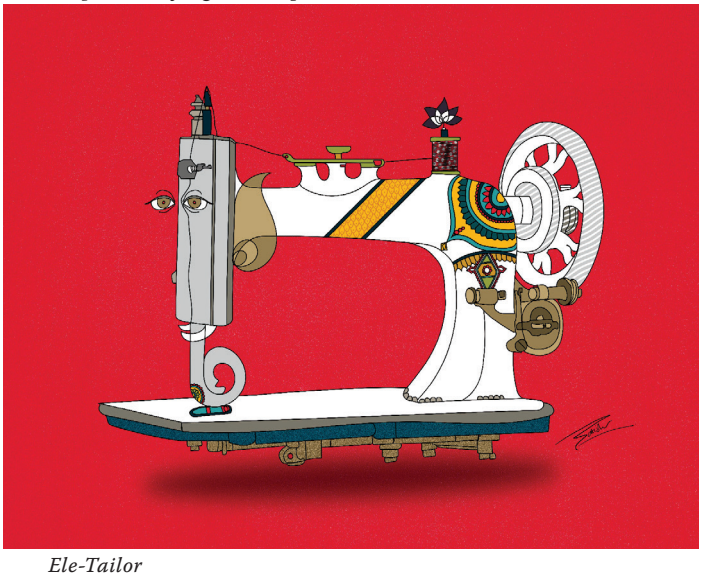
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Ink portrait of a gracious queen



Ele-Tailor

How do you balance the commercial and creative aspects of your work?

SM: I believe that both the aspects of work are interrelated. The commercial work has to be creative to stand out in the market whereas any work done for the satisfaction of the inner soul will always remain a creative learning step.

What, in your opinion, are the pros and cons of freelancing?

SM: The biggest benefit of freelance projects is the flexible timings and freedom to explore various thought processes. I always try to flow with the situation and transform limitations into challenges.

How do you overcome a creative block?

SM: I have not faced creative blocks so far as I continuously nurture and nourish my thoughts - they keep on changing forms and mediums.

Share your goals with us.

SM: At present I am still at the learning stage and wish only to become a better artist in the future.

Tell us about your creative pursuits during the lockdown.

SM: I keep on moving on my carved path despite the circumstances but I do accept that the lockdown has definitely changed my perspective of visualizing trends and situations.

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Beauty
THAT
LIVES ON



Srishti Dube *uses ceramics and glass to create objects that endure and are imbued with meaning*



Left: Poppy Pods
Above: Perch tealights

What took you from design to ceramic art?

SD: I have always been drawn to the malleability and tactile nature of clay. I wouldn't say I have moved away from design, but rather I have leant to apply it in a manner that works best for my practice. The years spent at National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, pursuing a B.Des. (Ceramic and Glass Design) helped me develop and nourish my creative voice.

How did your style evolve?

SD: For my final project at NID, I spent most of my waking hours in the college library (KMC) doing research and trying to develop my own language. In the process, I was exposed to the works of Shoji Hamada and Soetsu Yanagi, which led me to the Japanese concepts of Wabi-sabi and Shibui. As most of my knowledge comes from English texts, there is always a risk of certain meaning being lost in translation. So, it's more of my interpretation of these concepts that have moulded my personal design philosophy of focusing on the emotional connect of materials and objects. My style is to make use of organic forms and material textures by grasping their characteristics rather than pursuing reality. The objects are allowed to be a little bit different, having their own imperfections and character.



Nerikomi plates



Ceramic shot glass

What led you to start your own brand/studio?

SD: After working in the industry, I reached a stage where I wanted to flex my creative muscles and continue to grow as an artist as well as a person. The space to work independently and freedom to define what works best to my strengths was also a major driving factor. I started my brand in July 2018 with just 10-15 designs in hand.

What inspires you?

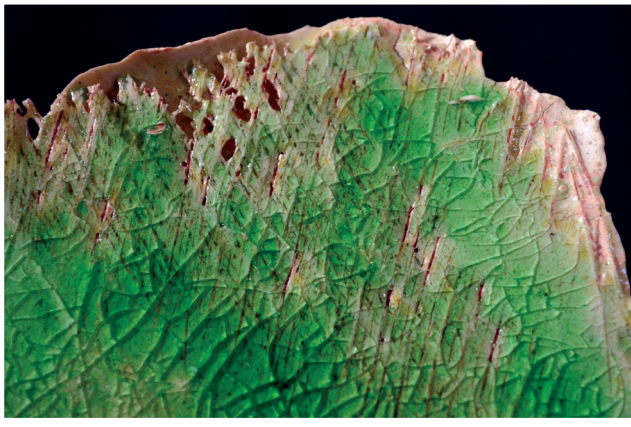
SD: My mother is an avid gardener so I grew up in a green, natural environment, collecting and arranging seeds, leaves and flowers into compositions and imagined landscapes. These botanical, naturalist influences have always been a major inspiration. I also like reading about plant biology and looking up botanical drawings. Presently I am fascinated by Ernst Haeckel's illustrations and Karl Blossfeldt's close-up photography of plants.

Introduce us to your design process.

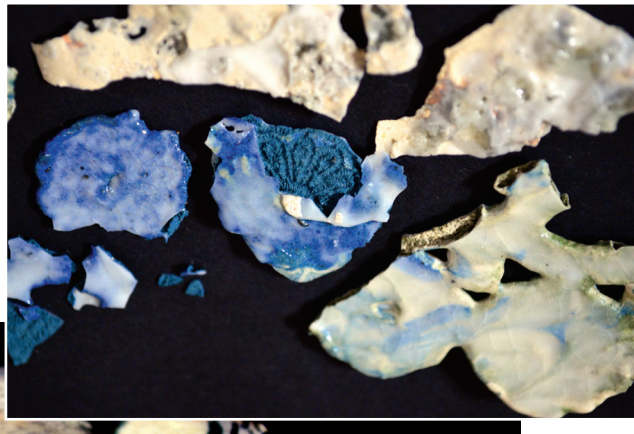
SD: I have been working on what I think of as lifelong collections, not limited to a particular season or trend, but living, breathing and growing as time passes. As in a garden where you discover bits and pieces over time, leaving it open to evolution. It's an intuitive process, where I live with multiple ideas, shaping them in my head and finding a tangible expression in glass and ceramic.

What has been your most memorable project so far?

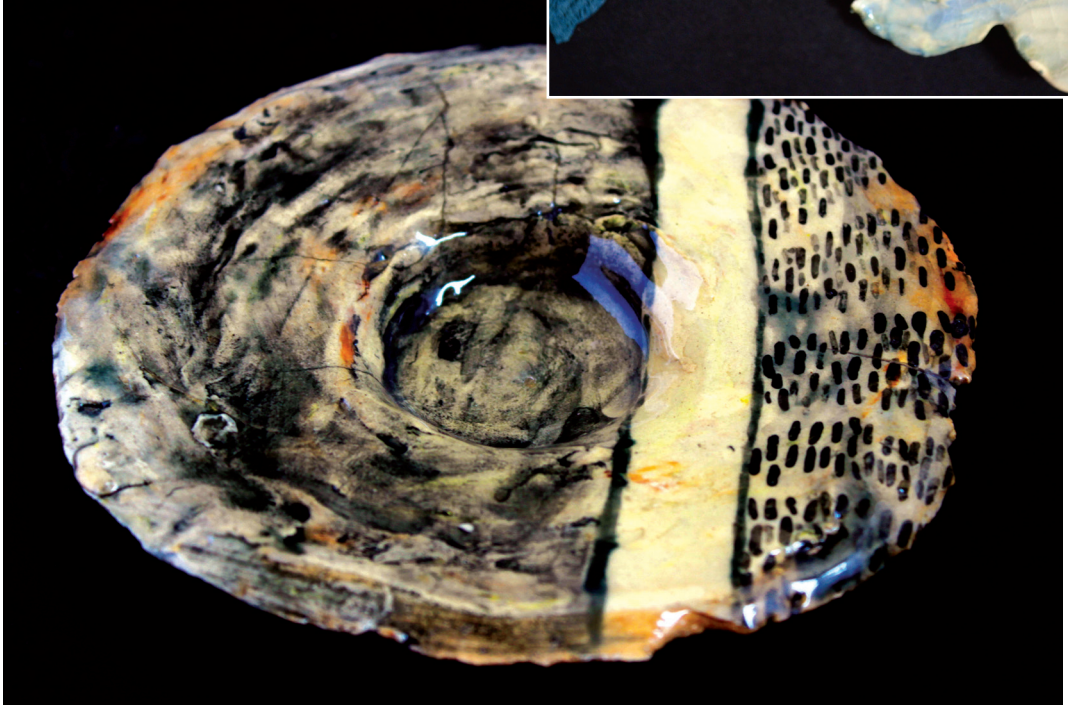
SD: For 'Remnants', I explored the possibilities of ceramic as material. Dipping materials like cotton, lace, and coir amongst others, in stoneware slip and firing. It was interesting to see the relationship between thicknesses, porosity and strength of the material. There was a piece of lace, dipped in a colored slip, which had to be broken down to reveal the intricate knit inside.



Remnants



Stoneware paperclay plate



Tell us about working with glass artisans from Firozabad.

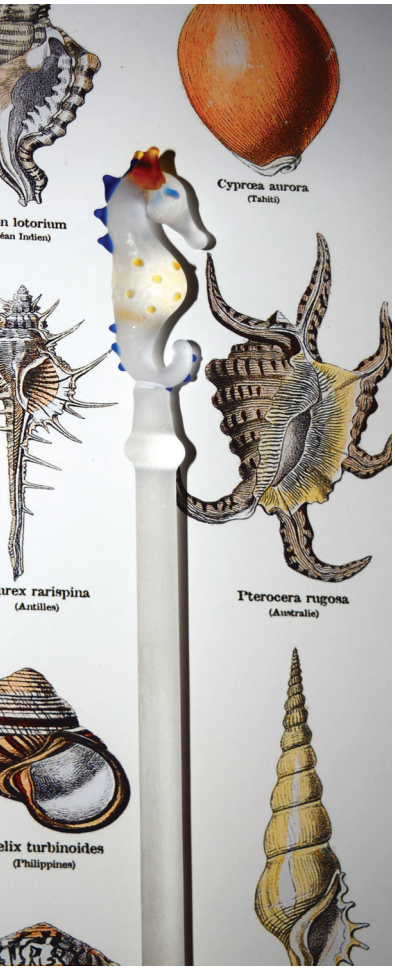
SD: When I was approached to exhibit in India Story, 2017, I collaborated with glass artisans from Firozabad to develop my first commercial product, 'Poppy Pods'. Since then I have worked with them on multiple products, using flamework and lathe blowing as primary techniques.

How did you approach the Indore Airport installation project?

SD: The installation was a 30 x 15 ft wall, dotted with ceramic planes and glass clouds, based on the brief by the Airport Director. The planes were slip casted in Bone China and hand painted with inspirations from Gond Art, a tribal art form practised by one of the largest tribes of India, the *Gond* from Madhya Pradesh.

Is it difficult to balance creativity with the commercial side of it?

SD: It's not always an easy task, but I seek to stay true to my creative side. Even though it might take longer, you always find an audience that resonates with your work. I have been encouraged by the response so far.







Left: Seahorse Stirrers; Above: Poppy Pods



Glass fusing

How do you market and distribute your products in India, and globally?

SD: So far I had been selling through exhibitions, some online stockists, my website and Instagram. A line of products was set to be listed with multiple stockists, but that has been put on hold for the next few months due to the Covid-19 situation.

What expansion plans do you have for your brand?

SD: I am working on diversifying more into functional objects and jewelry as product categories. I would also like to cross collaborate and explore other materials including textiles and wood.

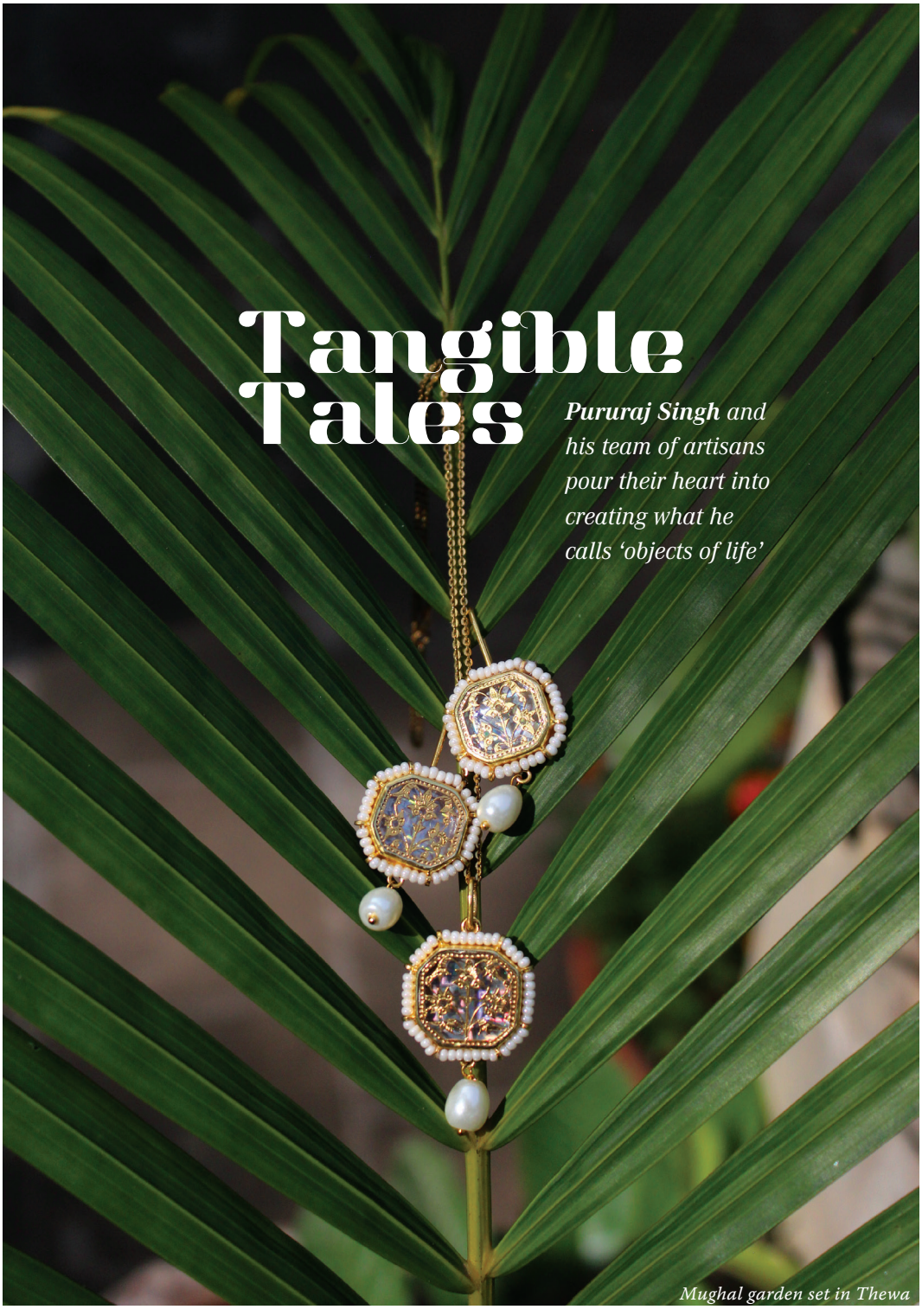
Where do you see ceramic art in India heading in the next few years?

SD: The last few years have seen greater appreciation for ceramics not just in India but world over. With platforms such as the first ever Ceramics Triennale in Jaipur two years back, ceramics is being recognized as an art form in itself. Its potential and scope is being explored beyond just a technique or a means to an end. Newer techniques such as 3D printing of ceramics have also opened up new possibilities.

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Tangible Tales

***Pururaj Singh** and his team of artisans pour their heart into creating what he calls 'objects of life'*



Mughal garden set in Thewa



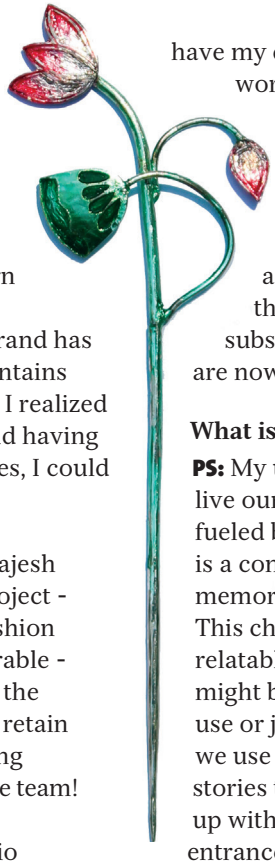
Thewa inlaid box and binder



How were you drawn to designing objects? How has formal design education impacted your career?

PS: I come from a defense background, and as children we were subjected to a lot of moving around. It was this lifestyle that taught me the value of objects. In a defense household one can find pieces from around the country; to an outsider these are just things but to us these are memories of great value, of time spent with loving and caring people of different backgrounds but with the same purpose.

As a student of Accessory Design, I was exposed to a lot of aspects that are a part of product designing. During the course we discovered design, art and identity and were made to reflect on it. The most important thing we were taught was to design anything - not just accessories or garments or products. I'm extremely thankful to all my teachers for introducing me to this beautiful world of craft and design, this ecosystem where mutual support is key. They also helped me explore and build new esthetics for myself.



Share your experience of working in industry.

PS: In 2017, I did my first internship at Rajesh Pratap Singh's and learned so much over a short time. From there I went on to Arvind Lifestyle Brands where I was the only intern for accessories at Arrow. I mostly learned and experienced how a brand has its identity and the relation it maintains with the consumers. This is when I realized I wanted an identity for myself and having worked in two different hierarchies, I could choose which one to work in.

After graduation I went back to Rajesh Pratap Singh; this was my first project - doing footwear for the Lakme Fashion Week Collection. It was incomparable - the decisions, how to be one with the sanctity of the collection and still retain a little bit of individuality, receiving feedback and collaborating with the team!

I went to work with a design studio called Wari Watai, where things were very carefully thought of, everything revolved around the consumer's point of view, in terms of usage, lifecycle and happiness inflicted by a product. Everyone on the team contributed to each design. Everything at Wari Watai is a fine tasteful blend of amazing material, techniques, craftsmanship and humane values.

I did a lot of freelancing projects after this. Through all this, I learnt that there is always room for improvement.

What did it take to venture out on your own?

PS: Having worked with so many people gave me an insight on how to be better, how to envision designs and how to have them made. By this time I had also realized that there was enough skill wherever I looked to have my designs come to life; so I started to work on a few pieces and they turned out fairly well. This gave me the confidence to start out on my own; of course, all the crafts people were with me, helping out at each step. It took some time and a lot of reflection on whether or not things would work out but it became substantial in a few months and here we are now working on new things!

What is your design process?

PS: My upbringing has taught me that we live our life around objects that are portals fueled by memory. While designing, it is a constant effort to make something memorable, humble and full of character. This character comes either from a relatable thought or a simple desire, it might be a very common object that we use or just an emotion that surfaces while we use any object. For example, I use stories told by my grandmother and come up with jewelry or use my dad's old office entrance as a trim.

Above: Meenakari Pichwai Pin in silver



Tri leaf ear pieces in Thewa







Left: Cane safari backpack; Above: 'Erode' watch

Then comes the part where it is all made - people who give these ideas form and forge them with their experiences. This involves artisans and craftspeople or even people who can manipulate the materials for this, practiced and practical people. I love when they contribute to the design, give it a personal touch and articulate it in their own way and style. The flaws are either the nature of the material or an effort to make the product better - they speak of the effort that goes into making an object. When all of this is put together, it becomes an 'Object of Life', not because it was made by hand or there was an interesting backstory to it, but for the sole reason that everyone who contributed to it poured their heart into it.

Which materials do you enjoy working with?

PS: I love and accept whatever I can get my hands on. I make sure that I explore and try to understand the material before I even think of giving it a tangible form. I believe that knowing how the material behaves in different situations and conditions is crucial. I try to imagine the material five years down the line - I love to see the effect of time on things such as leather and metal.



The box series

I absolutely love materials such as clay and leather because of their ability to be manipulated, but at his point I am looking for locally-sourced options that are more eco-friendly. I also love metals like copper and silver because they feel so harmonious.

How do you market and distribute your products?

PS: Recently I started approaching local boutique stores and stores that cater to our desired audience. Other than this I go by word of mouth and of course Instagram advertising. I've also started looking for spaces in trade shows and fashion weeks so that there is a wider audience. I'm trying to get a website functional which would be enabling for reaching out.

Which have been your most memorable projects?

PS: One of my academic projects was just supposed to be cluster visit and documentation of the process but my mentor pushed me to do a small collection with the craft. This was the time I wanted to learn about Thewa, a mystic and unique craft that is practiced in only one place in the world and by one family. I planned a short trip to Pratapgarh, met with Mr. Rajesh Soni, who told me whatever he could and accepted what I wanted to try without apprehension and expectation!



Mrig meenakari earrings



Vegetable tanned leather batik wallet

Another time, we went to Channapatna and were being helped out with the lacquered wood turning by Maya Organic. I distinctly remember people of various ages and backgrounds coming together to create and learn. Everyone discussed their future plans and what they wanted to do for the community. They wanted the craft to propagate and came together for this purpose; it was such a pure hearted effort.

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

PS: My journey has been very short and I'm expecting a lot more challenges but what remains constant is the space and identity one must create and maintain. It takes a lot of effort to put together a design but it's a lot harder to convince someone to try out something new. On the design front it's time consuming and laborious to convince an artisan to make what is being envisioned but it is also very satisfying. It is difficult to be responsible while bringing a design to life; environmentally I want to be fair and reduce the carbon footprint but that sometimes creates a financial challenge. I try to get as many benefits for the people who support this venture. These challenges have given me the foresight to be prepared for what is to come, and seek new options that are more responsible in all aspects.

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'Maa-tea' terracotta

How, in your opinion, will COVID-19 impact the way craftsmen work?

PS: Recent times have been an eye opener for everyone. I hope to see and contribute towards an attitude that promotes a better lifestyle for the craftspeople, where health is more important than produce. I think we desperately need to retrace our footsteps and find ways and resources that are sustainable for all. As of now the financial resources have diminished and people are out of jobs, and it is for us to test our morals and support our people and our skills and grow as a community.

What's next?

PS: I was in the middle of a collection/exhibition and was prototyping some pieces when everything came to a halt due to the lockdown. I hope to continue with this and will try to safely exhibit soon. I also would like to reach out to as many people just to show the work and share the feeling of it all.

I would also love to collaborate with designers and artists to better understand collections and objects and how these make a difference in the lives of their owners.

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*For **Arushi Parakh**, designing jewelry is all about helping the wearer bring her personality to the fore*

minimal but *meaningful*





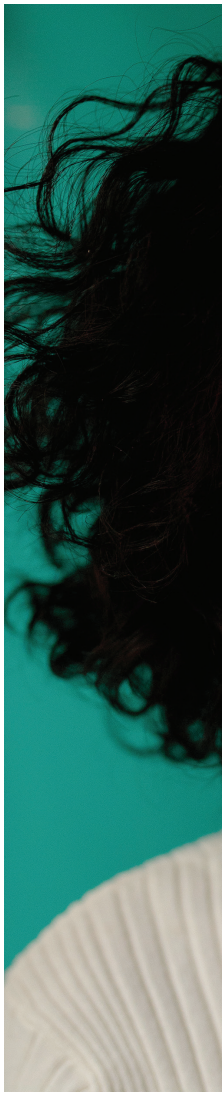


Briefly share your professional journey from stylist to jewelry designer.

AP: I trained to be a stylist at Pearl Academy of Fashion in New Delhi. I started off my career as a stylist with *Marie Claire* magazine; followed by *ELLE* and *Harper's Bazaar*. I was styling editorials and celebrities for magazines. This amazing exposure to designers and other creative people in the industry helped me realize the importance of accessories in creating a look. And what better accessory than jewelry?

I enjoyed creating things by hand and started slow by designing a few pieces. I began to make jewelry on the side as a hobby, while doing my editorial styling job. It involved hours of drawing and fiddling with different materials. My whole idea was just to create jewelry that I loved and could actually afford. Things just picked up from there and it soon grew into a full time profession and passion, and Melt (a fine jewelry studio) was born in New Delhi in 2018.





Was it an easy transition?

AP: I have always been interested in visual design, lines and form, light and shadow, exaggerated proportions and balance and through styling I found a way to express that. Now with jewelry, it's another medium to explore that same thought. Coming from a styling background, I also knew it's all about your own personal style and collecting elements that mean something to you and trying to say something about who you are in the process. I wanted to explore that further.

Introduce us to your design process.

AP: Melt's jewelry is characterized by a vocabulary of simplified graphic shapes with clean lines and a strong emphasis on balance. I want to show personality and emotion through my work. A project usually begins with research and the design process starts by visualizing the styling. Finally, I gradually strip it down to jewelry. Aside from the choice of medium and concept, color takes precedence. Creative practices are fluid and interdisciplinary. For instance, we have the

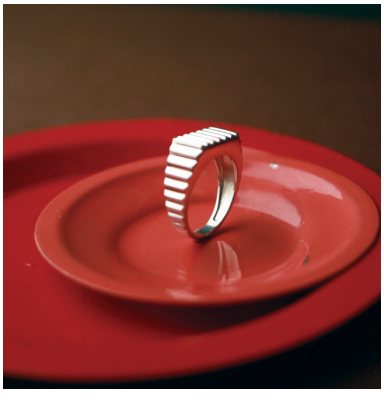
Moon Necklace, which is very simplistic in its design but the idea started from having a dot on your body/clothes. The size, the heaviness of the weight, the length of the chain, the lightness of the chain is all a part of the ideation process.

How do you balance modern and minimalist designs with traditional methods?

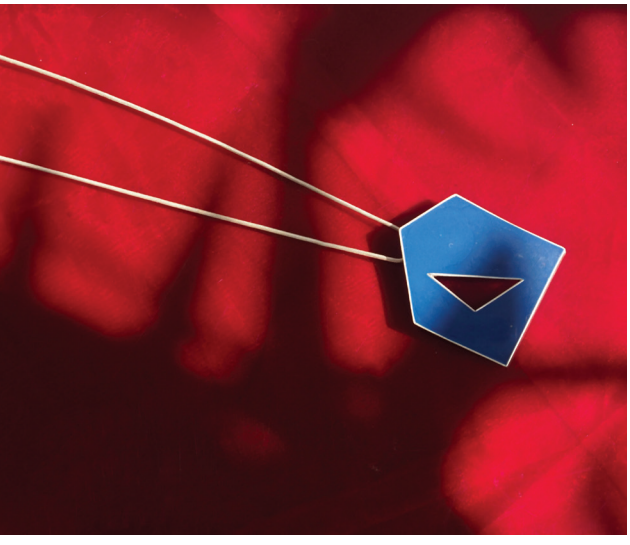
AP: This is the most fun part of the job! Connecting past and present creates the perfect nostalgia. Jewelry is for nostalgia -











from the first pair of earrings your parents bought you to the first chain you bought with your first salary. My sensibilities are modern and simplistic but I love to use traditional techniques like minakari in my work. All my jewelry is handcrafted and each stone is cut by hand and on the same simple machines that generations before have used. This adds the love and care I want my jewelry to present to its user.

What has been the most challenging design you've ever worked on?

AP: Each project is a unique opportunity that allows me to flex different muscles. I love the challenge of doing something I have never done before. One such piece was a custom piece in gold intended to be an heirloom piece that a husband wanted to gift to his wife on the birth of their baby. The concept came from a Matisse painting and we translated that into a beautiful necklace with engraving. The story and the thought behind it was so special. I'm clearly a sucker for a sweet story!

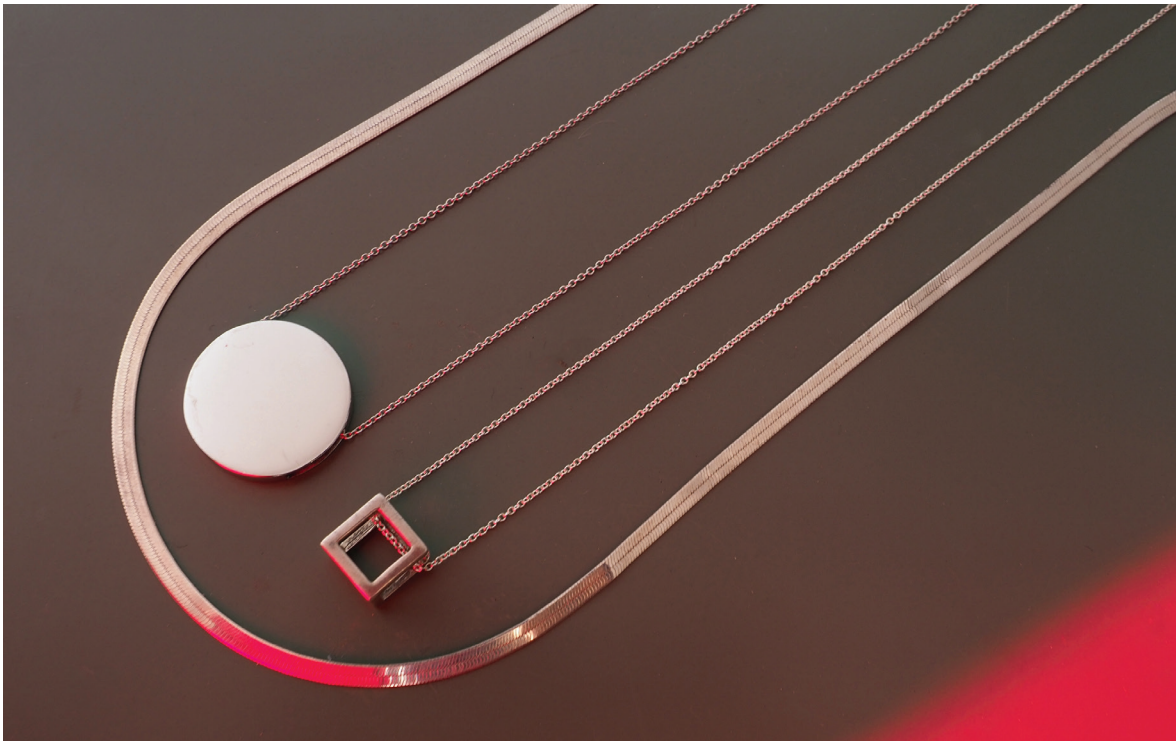
How would you define the Melt woman?

AP: The Melt woman (or man) is someone who wants to express themselves and their personality through jewelry. It's digging a bit deeper into your personal style and what it communicates to the world. From the necklace you bought with your first paycheck, to the hoops you never take off, every Melt piece is a small celebration of your big wins.

How do you balance the commercial and creative aspects of your work?

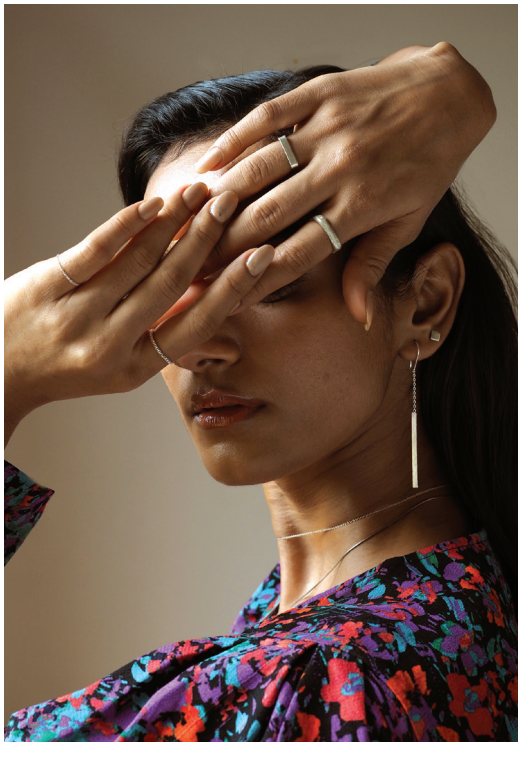
AP: Every day is a learning process in balancing the two. As of now, during the COVID-19 lockdown, mornings are reserved for the commercial aspects of brand building, getting in touch with customers, managing our e-shop and sending out orders. The evenings are for the creative aspect - where I can design, draw and ideate and paint (that really helps me unwind) and let the creative juices flow.





What would you advise fledgling jewelry designers?

AP: Start simple, as it takes time to find the sweet spot of it all coming together - design, quality, quantity, price point, customer relationship. And then, keep at it – persevere, do it all responsibly, and trust your gut!



What can we expect from Melt after the current lockdown scenario?

AP: We have been an eco-conscious brand from the inception but the lockdown has given us time to evaluate and re-evaluate a lot to make more changes across all our processes - we feel a greater sense of responsibility as an independent brand towards our *karigars* and their livelihoods and the cycle of codependency. We will be evaluating the impact of each and every action that is a part of the process more closely now. Be it digitizing our direct work with *karigars*, and using paper tape instead of plastic for all our shipping orders to

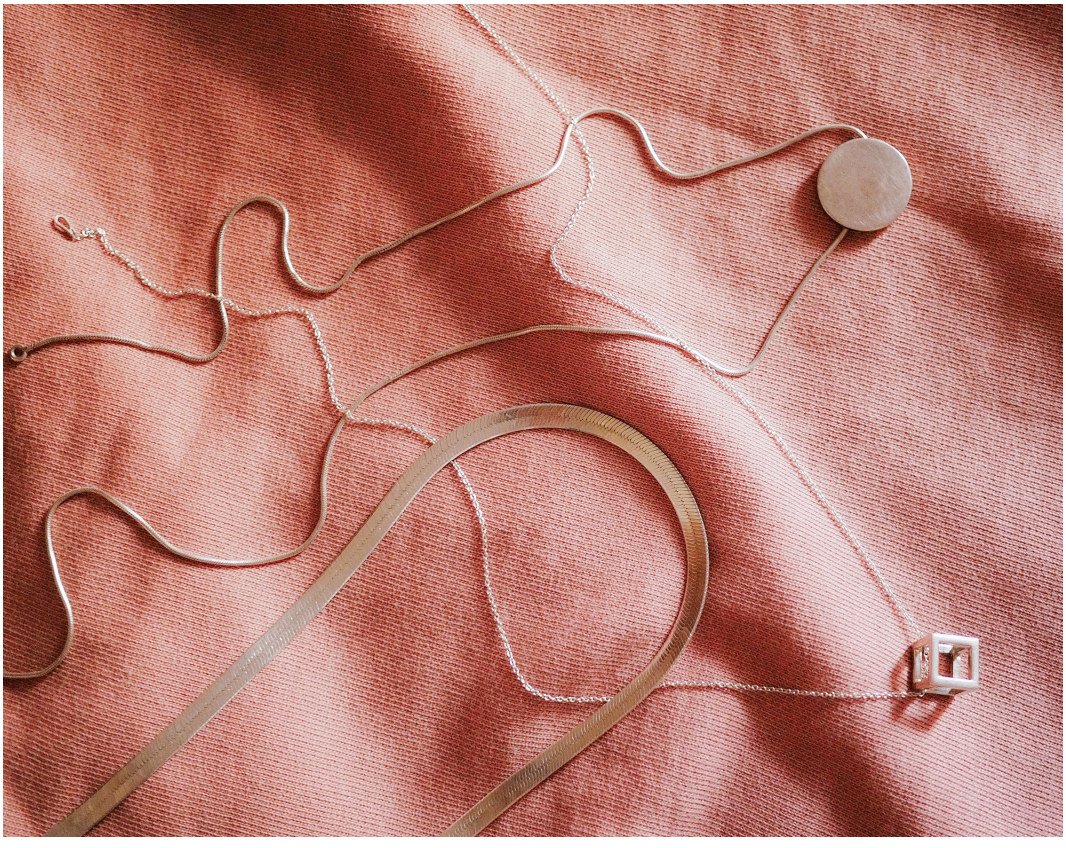
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re-using chains from broken pieces (during the making process) to create smaller rings. We will also be encouraging our customers to get their pieces repaired by us and repurpose their older jewelry. We want to be a thinking brand that functions in a considered way. We believe that slow design is everlasting.

The lockdown has also brought to the forefront the importance and need for human connection. Jewelry connects generations. It becomes a way of moving the human story forward. It's a way of remembering special moments and presenting them in future to our loved ones. It's how a grandchild might know their grandmother even if they have never met.

writetomelt@gmail.com


CUT OUT FOR LOVE





A chance encounter with a kind stranger on a train gave ***Madhulika Mehta*** *the courage to follow her dreams*



How did you discover your passion for fashion?

MM: I am a commerce graduate and was planning to pursue law. I did not have the slightest inclination towards fashion and got into it through pure happenstance. On a train journey to Jodhpur, I met a businessman called Ram Lashkari. I was in my late teens then and confused about what to do next. Mr. Lashkari suggested that I use my flair for creativity in the fashion industry. He steered me in the right direction and under his guidance, I found my passion for fashion. I also went on to complete an executive program in Sales & Marketing from IIM-Calcutta.

What did it take to establish your own fashion brand?

MM: Firstly, I had to convince my parents, who weren't initially supportive of me straying from the conventional path and trying my luck at something where the chances

of succeeding were slim. Eventually they did come around. SatinVogue is the result of my four and a half years of toil. I wanted to blend fabrics and fashion, and thus the name SatinVogue. It took well-planned moves, an eye on the right goals and audience, organization, and a determined plan of action to set it up. Knowing the target audience and gradually building the brand was not a cakewalk. After the initial learning curve, it got a little easier.

Describe the SatinVogue woman.

MM: The SatinVogue woman epitomizes the contemporary woman, who is comfortable in her own skin and celebrates the spirit of womanhood. Her style is an amalgamation of ethnic and western fashion with captivating ensembles that are flattering to the body.

What is your approach to designing a collection?

MM: Before creating a unique design that appeals to the customers, a great deal of R&D goes into looking for the right fabric, deciding on the color and keeping up with the trends. Step one is the crucial bit. This is the part where I decide on the fabric I want to go with and eventually base an entire collection on. Other than the show-stopping fabric, I also combine other materials, and then play with the cuts and entwine signature embellishments with intricate details.

What makes SatinVogue stand apart?

MM: We are not just another 'label'. When it comes to SatinVogue we believe in customization while not losing our real and elegant touch. As a fashion entrepreneur, I attempt to create clothes that are functional as well as esthetically pleasing.







How do you market and distribute your products?

MM: Social media marketing, advertising on a mass scale through shows and exhibitions, and multi-designer stores are some of the methods I use.

What are the challenges you have faced so far?

MM: The fashion industry is primarily a male-dominated one but with changing times, women have also made their mark here. Other than being part of this patriarchal industry, where you need to prove yourself every step of the way, I have handled challenges ranging from rejections to non-payment issues. I have seen it all and what keeps me going is faith in myself and my work.

How do you plan to expand your brand?

MM: Some B2B exhibitions are in the works, as well as frequent B2C international exhibitions. I already have a niche clientele for my clothing line, and I will continue to style Bollywood celebrities.

satinvogue@gmail.com

An active design practice is what allows ***Visakh Menon*** *to stubbornly refuse to compromise his art*

NO ROOM *for interference*



What brought you to the world of art?

VM: I started out in advertising as a graphic designer and continue to work as an art director/designer and design educator. Art is something I always made but moving to New York in 2007 changed certain aspects of art making for me. I got my first studio, found a welcoming community of artists to engage with and also started showing my work, something I had never done while I lived and worked in India. Moving to NYC also gave me the chance to see and experience in-person so much amazing art, especially the masterworks at the museums, works I had only seen before in books and magazines. I spent the first week here going to museums like the MOMA, MET, Guggenheim, and Frick, and that was awe inspiring but also terrifying.

What is the primary role of an artist? How do you describe yourself in the context of challenging people's perspectives via your work and art?

VM: Challenging other people's perspectives interests me less than challenging my own perspectives. I am deeply interested in the impact of technology on society and the ramifications of online discourse. As for the primary role of the artist, it was best said by one of my favorite writers, James Baldwin, "There are, forever, swamps to be drained, cities to be created, mines to be exploited, children to be fed. None of these things can be done alone. But the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place."

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

VM: Having a varied set of conceptual ideas within a framework in place to play around with helps. I am always experimenting with

new materials, reading and watching as much as possible, and pushing the dials on process to help move my work along. As painter/TV host Bob Ross said, “We don't make mistakes, just happy little accidents.”

What would you call your style?

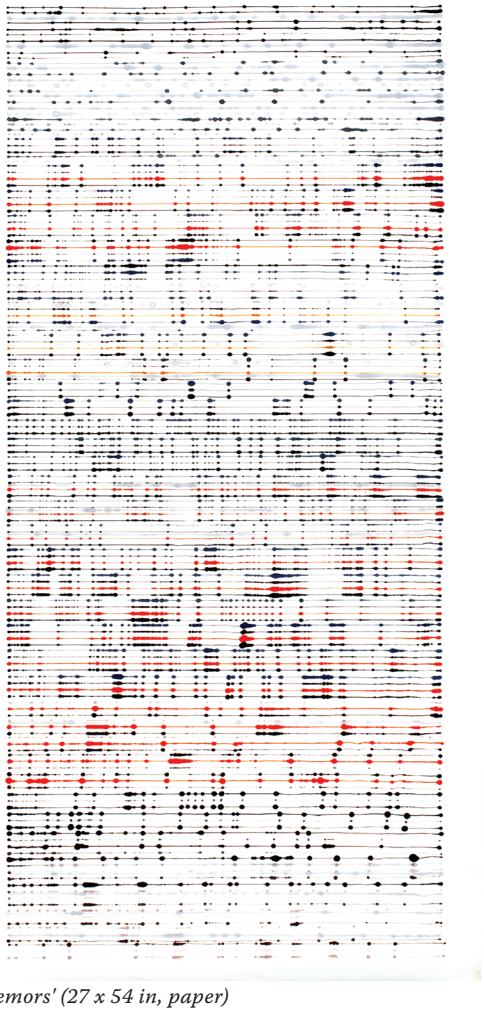
VM: I believe styles are fleeting. I like to think of my work as a continuum of exploration in ideas of geometric abstraction and color field paintings.

Let’s talk about the evolution of your practice over the years. Tell us about your commitment to your current medium.

VM: I started out with making videos and installations in graduate school at the Maryland Institute College of Art and then transitioned to conceptual drawing about 10 years ago. I still make video/media work sometimes. Drawing is my safe space, I rigorously draw every day. My drawings and paintings are all tied together by process driven, repetitive mark making. I maintain a fluid studio practice and constantly sketch and experiment. Normally it takes about six to eight months for me to work out a process for a new series before I actually start to make the work. Lots of stuff gets discarded during this phase until I hit the right notes. I like working on different series of artworks at any given time in my studio as it gives me the mental space to switch things. Right now I am also working on some 3D printed sculptures and VR works, which are still in a nascent stage.

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

VM: It’s always interesting to see how people react to my work especially because it is abstract and I am not making any social or political commentary with it. At first sight folks assume my work is made digitally (as in a digital print) and then there is always an ‘aha moment’ when they realize it is actually handmade; this is especially the case with my ‘Interference’ series. This reaction always fascinates me as it goes back to the conceptual root of the work itself, and raises questions of labor, manmade versus machine made and the laborious process involved in making my work.



'Tremors' (27 x 54 in, paper)

What was your first sale? Do you handle the commercials yourself?

VM: My first art sale was to a friend although I have been selling illustrations and graphics since I was teenager. I have some works available via a few galleries in the US and one in India. I don’t currently have a commercial

gallery representing me full time. Lately I've been surprised by art collectors reaching out directly via Instagram!

Think of the biggest professional risk you have taken. What helped you take that risk?

VM: Working on paper I think is a huge professional risk for me from the perspective of galleries and curators. Unfortunately the substrate often determines the 'value' of the work commercially.

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

VM: How does human machine interaction impact perception? This has been the conceptual framework of my interdisciplinary practice over the last decade. My current series of abstract drawings and paintings focus on the visual language of digital artifacts and the esthetics of glitch, error and noise. The term 'esthetics of failure' plays a crucial role in how I think about my work, alongside elements of chance and randomness. In my current 'Interference' series, I start with digital images and sketch via the process of glitching and exploiting data errors using custom programs and brute force methods of destroying and manipulating image data. This iterative process is driven by chance as I have very little control on the output as the various methods and programs yield surprising results. With that as a starting point I move to a drawing and painting process, although it's never a one to one translation of the digital to physical. Compositionally these works are inspired by geometric abstraction and color field paintings, and driven by the notion of repetitive mark making as an act of meditation. The algorithmic esthetics of these works pushes into focus both the functional (generative) and dysfunctional (glitch) nature of code as a tool for expression.

Artists often experience contradicting motivations. How do you strike a balance between commercial and creative?

VM: I don't experience any contradicting motivations between commercial and creative; on the contrary, I am quite stubborn and uncompromising about my art practice. Running an active design practice also helps to navigate the commercial versus creative contradictions for me.

Are you more of a studio artist or naturally collaborative by nature? How do you feel about commissions?

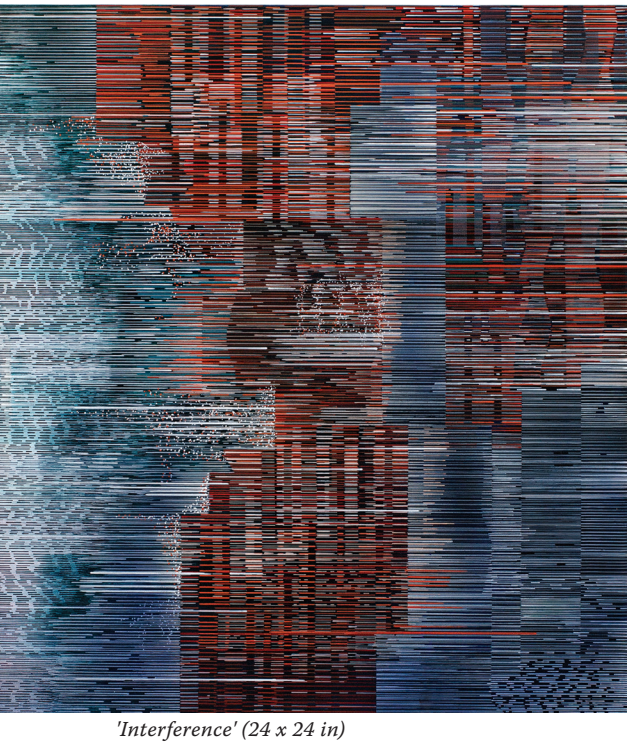
VM: My studio practice is solitary. I have collaborated a few times with artists whose work I admire. I do work on commissioned projects if the project/space and client are in alignment with my vision and they give me the creative freedom.

What kind of place is your studio?

VM: My studio is located in Long Island City in Queens, NY. It is a 70% art making space and 30% design studio. I am usually there five or six days a week for about eight to twelve hours each day. Depending on my workload with design projects I try to spend at least half the day making art, sometimes more. During the day I share the space with a friend and fellow graphic designer.



Artist Portrait Project (2019). Photographed by Maxim Ryazansky



'Interference' (24 x 24 in)

I have been in my current studio space since 2015 and had a few other spaces in the same neighborhood before that.

What are you working on now?

VM: These are tough times and I have not been at my studio since March due to the pandemic. I had a solo show with SL Gallery in Manhattan that was scheduled to open in June but is postponed for the time being; I'm hoping that happens later this year. Currently I am working at home, making new drawings and hoping to be back at my studio soon.

Is there any topic that you would like to be mentored on?

VM: Lately I have been interested in the topic of Neuroesthetics. Why do we find certain things beautiful or pleasing and how does our brain process this decision making when it comes to Art? I am currently reading *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art* by Dr Anjan Chatterjee.

What are you looking for when you look at other artists' work? Which shows and experiences have shaped your own creative process?

VM: One of the great joys of living in NYC over the last 13 years has been the variety of work I have got to see and experience at the fantastic museums and galleries around town. Recent memorable artists/ shows include Agnes Martin, Hilma AF Klint Paintings at the Guggenheim, Nasreen Mohamedi's drawings and works by Vija Celmins at the MET Breuer, William Kentridge video works at MOMA, James Turrel's light installations at the Mass MOCA, Bruce Nauman at MOMA PS1, and the Rothko Chapel at the Menil Collection in Houston. Whenever I am seeing or experiencing work, I like to rate it using a simple scale that I call the 5Cs: Concept, Craft, Creativity, Clarity and Chutzpah. Although this is very subjective! There is so much amazing contemporary art out there right now.

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Flux Factory Gallery (2019)





(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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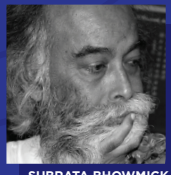
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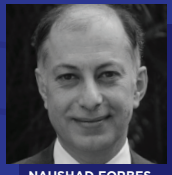
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