

For The Love of Art

118, Wadi Bunder Road, Mazgaon, Mumbai-10, an old family warehouse in the heart of the city's industrial district now stands as a sanctum for the dynamic exchange of ideas, cross pollination of aesthetics and eventual evolution of design. Saloni Doshi, Director of Space 118, talks about the only artists' residence in the city and the 'artistic connections' she has formed along the way.

By Karishma Rajani

As envisioned, Space 118 finally emerged as a sanctum for the dynamic exchange of ideas, amalgamation of aesthetics and eventual evolution of design, fuelled by proximity to the creative clan—painters, designers, illustrators, enthusiasts, collectors and gallerists included. But its greatest strength is the freedom it renders from the pressures of marketplace values and commercial viability.

"We have a very simple criteria for taking on artists—they must be open to new experiences, willing to take risks and tread on uncharted territories. That said, we value processes over finished products and support emerging and mid-level artists. Mentorship programs conducted by a sound advisory board, which includes the likes of Jitish Kallat, Shilpa Gupta and Nancy Adjanja, ensure the artists are guided towards the realisation of their goals," she elaborated.

Close to a decade ago, after serving as the Brand and Product Manager at Times of India for five years, Saloni Doshi quit her job, almost on a whim, backed by nothing but an idea.

Such is the lure of art! Her journey with aesthetics began at an early age; summer breaks spent in her grandmother's house in Kolkata were inspiring in more ways than one. "We frequented galleries and museums, while studying the artists of the time, most of whom belonged to The Bengal School. Suffice to say, these visuals remain etched in my memory and form a special part of my collection," she mused.

But it was a visit to Baroda in the early 2000s—where she witnessed the flourishing art scene and the role of artists' residences—that fuelled

her passion. She quickly learned that after Bhulabhai Studio that formed the hub of the Indian Progressives, such institutions had surreptitiously been absent from the art map of the city. In an endeavour to support young and upcoming talent in the field, she transformed an old family warehouse located in the heart of Mumbai's industrial district into an artists' residence—the only one of its kind in the city. Space 118 was born.

"Setting up anything in India is a challenge, particularly in the arts!" Saloni reiterated. As a private initiative, initial challenges included understanding best practices followed by studios and residencies across the world, unarmed by formal education in the field. Closer home, her only reference point was Khoj, which runs on private-public funding.



Saloni Doshi

Photo Courtesy: Mifmal Parab





In exchange, Saloni accepts only a piece of art from their current or previous body of work. Since the very beginning, she has resisted adopting a business model. Last year, for the first time, she put the entire Space 118 collection for sale, to acquire funds for the upkeep and maintenance of the studio space.

Even as a collector, she often alludes to the unconventional. "Collecting is not a whimsical act. I take to art depending on the connections it sparks or even obscures between my immediate environment and I. My collection mostly consists of Indian contemporary art and various styles of Indian Folk art, with a focus on Kalighat from Bengal and Gond from Madhya Pradesh. The question I ask is: Do I see myself living with the piece? Only objects that are both challenging and thought provoking, or create intervention of some sort that garner a response in the affirmative. Very early on, I made an informed decision to collect the art of my times, so I can grow with the works and the artists," she explained.

Who then was the first artist to secure a place on Saloni Doshi's shelf? 'Laxma Goud,' she smiled. "A small etching acquired from Hyderabad at the age of 25."

A master of the balancing act, she has been very particular about maintaining the studio's collection separate from hers and only hopes it continues to grow and evolve with the space. But right now, she has bigger plans to focus on. "I want Space 118 to evolve into an art school that offers long and short term courses, workshops and activities (even for kids), while posing as a residency and a gallery," she said.

Earlier this year, Space 118 hosted its first workshop—printmaking by Pratap Modi, a former resident of the studio. Despite the initial hesitation, the workshop brought in 75 inquiries and 45 attendees. The exercise was so successful that they held another in the following weekend. The calendar now showcases a covetable line-up: acrylic painting, origami, bookbinding and metal enameling, spray painting amongst others. It is safe to say Saloni is going to be both busy and inspired. ♦