

Small Talk: At home with art

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Purvai Rai

Small Talk with Purvai Rai

Noted photographer Raghu Rai's younger daughter uses materials, especially jute, to express her creativity

Shortly after the lockdown came into effect, Saloni Doshi, founder, Space118, posted a series of artworks on her social media streams in a bid to support 20 up-and-coming artists that she believed held great promise. So tremendous was the response she received that Geetha Mehra, director of Sakshi Gallery, suggested Doshi turn the Instagram exhibition into a physical one. The works sold out, and the show titled 'All Is Not Lost 20:20:20' was later put up online as it continued to drum up interest among collectors and art enthusiasts. One of the 20 artists whose works made a powerful impact was Purvai Rai, the unassuming daughter of renowned photographer Raghu Rai and conservation architect Gurmeet Rai. While Purvai's older sister Avani has been gaining recognition for her photography and films, Purvai's search for a medium to express her voice and vision led her to art.

That was around the beginning of 2019. Before that, she was working with her father on Creative Image, a magazine she co-founded with him in 2015. Then in her third year at Srishti Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Bangalore, where she was working towards a major in graphic design and a minor in contemporary art, Purvai found herself meeting artists, photographers and galleries "to understand what they wanted and needed," she says. She didn't think of herself as an artist back then even though she'd spend her evenings painting or sketching. "I had grown up around the arts and that was just a way of life," she says, looking back.

But around the start of 2019, Purvai started taking her own work to gallerists, too, "just to show them that I create as well." Unwittingly, it generated a buzz around her work, and by September that year, she had a show with Delhi's Art Alive Gallery. "That's when I became more conscious about what I was making and why I was making it," says the 25-year-old, whose works centre on themes like identity, inclusion and socio-political issues.

Her creations tend to involve repetitive motions like weaving, as it's a metaphor for the patterns in our lives, "actions that happen over and over again," as she puts it. But the medium — her choice of fabric — is just as germane to her message. Purvai works with natural materials like jute, cotton, and yarn as she believes that, much like a photograph, a piece of fabric, too, captures the essence of a moment. She explains: "My father had this labada — a calf-length kimono-like garment made of unprocessed sheep and goat wool — which he picked up in Himachal Pradesh while shooting shepherds there ages ago. He used to wear it when my sister and I were children, and the two of us would play hide and seek in the yards of fabric. So, when I started my art practice, the coarse fabric of the labada became, for me, a sort of symbol of belonging. The closest thing to the texture was that of jute, so that's what I favour," says Purvai.

Her mother's work has also had a profound influence on her. "Her work wasn't just about restoring monuments. It involved looking at the communities her constructions would impact. It drove home the point that you don't create in isolation; it's vital to consider what your work does, who it affects," says Purvai.

Conversations at the family dinner table were always about people and communities, "not so much about what we were going through," Purvai recalls. Right now, therefore, she's been mulling over issues like the protests around the Citizenship Amendment Act and the Babri Masjid verdict. "That's how the year started, but then came the lockdown, which demonstrated that every space you were claiming was not really yours to claim. There was no question of being in a temple or in a masjid, because all you could do was stay at home."

During that period of home-confinement, too, Purvai felt the need to reach out to others. Along with Delhi-based artist Ayesha Singh, she launched Art Chain India, a peer-support movement for visual artists. Artists were invited to post works under Rs 10,000 on social media, and their peers would circulate these images, leading to sales. When an artist earned Rs 50,000, he or she was requested to purchase one artwork from a fellow artist "and continue the chain". Purvai says the idea behind the project was to ensure that little-known artists did not fall prey to the pandemic. "It's a very privileged thing to say that sales aren't important," she says. Next on the cards is a tech start-up that takes the same idea forward, "to serve as a platform for the creative and cultural industry," says Purvai. This, she hopes, will allow artists who have opportunities and who know how to create a space for themselves in the art world to assist and mentor those who don't.

After all, as Purvai says, "It's very nice when people say your work is great, but a whole other thing when someone invests in you as an artist. Because remember, art is not a commodity; someone who buys it is investing in your voice."

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