



Indian contemporary artist Sakshi Gupta wows the international art scene with her elaborate metal sculptures and wall pieces. Exploring the troubling issues of modern existence through her work, she shares her experiences of spending time in the bleak landscape of rural Rajasthan with MARWAR.

Text: NIYATI PATEL

The art of transformation



A slew of young artists have taken their work to the shores of art hubs in the West such as England and France, riding the wave of contemporary interest in Indian art. Among them is Sakshi Gupta, a sculpture artist from New Delhi, whose metal works have been shown at some of the most prestigious exhibitions abroad. This year, Gupta's work titled *Landscape of Walking Memories*, a seemingly soft quilt that turns out to be an uncomfortably jagged lookalike made of galvanised wire, mesh and chicken feathers, found its way to the Serpentine Gallery's group exhibition *Indian Highways* at The Musee d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, while the collection of works titled 'Nothing is Freedom, Freedom is Everything, Everything is you' (a collection that uses iron locks, nuts, bolts and even bicycle chains) were featured at the Paris-Delhi-Bombay group show held at the iconic Centre Pompidou in Paris. What's more, in 2010, Gupta's works were featured along with the stalwarts of contemporary art, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Atul Dodiya and Jitish Kallat at the Saatchi Gallery's exhibition, *The Empire Strikes Back*.





From the collection, 'Nothing is Freedom, Freedom is Everything, Everything is You' (2007)

Early days

Her successful career in art began rather poetically as a child who was chided for drawing on walls of her family home in Delhi. "My earliest memory of something artistic as a child is of nibbling off the wall! In fact, I had almost carved out a neat line into the wall with my fingernails. My mother tried several ways to stop me from doing it but in vain. Finally, she resorted to filling in that line with chilli powder," she remembers, adding that the "sensorial and visual memory of it has stayed with me ever since." Over the years, the precocious young girl took to art with flair, completing a Masters from College of Art in Delhi after Bachelors in Fine Arts (Sculpture) in Chandigarh. While Gupta says that she was creatively inclined towards art, sculpture was "quite by chance". Gupta stumbled into a sculpture course in Chandigarh when she wasn't able to secure a spot in an advertising course (her preference at the time). However, her creative talent saw her through to becoming a critically acclaimed sculpture artist.

Transforming wreckage to art

Sakshi's works are known for their ability to unnerve the viewer and challenge the viewer's preconceived notions about ordinary things—some even as mundane as a broken down, rusty photocopier. Critics are often impressed by the depth and nature of her work. Rebecca Morrill, the exhibition curator at the Serpentine Gallery who had worked on both Indian Highways and the Paris-Delhi-Bombay group show, has described Gupta's work as provoking "spiritual contemplation" through the recycling of "scrap metals, often with industrial origins to produce sculptures that transform the meaning of the materials". One of Gupta's most incredible sculptures, a bestial metal fan (a part of a collection titled 'Some Beasts'), which seems like it is in the process of moulting, exemplifies the process of transformation that forms an important part of her works. Similarly, the unshelled, wrecked photocopier with its inner machinery rendered outside, which was exhibited at the Saatchi Art Gallery in London, is also a testimony to the technique of transformation that is so uniquely Sakshi Gupta's

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style. "My approach involves reconstituting my materials by helping it escape from the associations it comes branded with. Often composing my works from discarded scrap, my sculptural process re-engenders this 'waste' to compose pieces in which the material transcends its mundane, often industrial, origins. This allows me to probe deeper into my investigations of the internal and the external, while questioning the useless and the useful, and recognising the need for 'transformation', which in turn is a very stabilising experience," she explains.

The issues that Sakshi grapples with in her work, she adds, are the eternal questions of who we are and what is our purpose. Indeed, the contradictions such as between decay and rejuvenation that are inherent to her work mirror the polarities that Gupta says she wishes to explore. "I talk about the obvious polarities that we observe in nature as also seeing opportunity in the face of decay and death, exploiting the potential present in mundane objects around us that we often take for granted and the feeling of solitude in the midst of chaos."

Inspired by rural Rajasthan

In 2005, she participated in the workshops run by artist Chintan Upadhyay in his native village of Partapur, Rajasthan. Gupta talks about how she was inspired by jute sacks to create



Some beasts (2008)

an in situ sculpture in Bori, a village near Partapur that used to be fertile about 250 years ago and was the source of high revenue for the district authorities because it produced large quantities of *boris* (jute sacks). Gupta soon learnt that very few of the village's inhabitants were aware of its history. She says, "It was interesting for me as an artist to bring this forth in a visual form. I decided to choose the main bus stand of the village as the site to execute this work." In fact, intrigued and encouraged by the artists' work, Gupta says that three villages around Partapur started their own museums, "where an object from each home in the village has been collected, catalogued, labelled and displayed."

While Gupta refrains from saying that her Marwari roots have shaped her career and her ideas, particularly because she says that she is "not sure if belonging to a particular sect can shape one's practise as an artist (unless one is a folk or tribal artist)," she does talk about the connection she feels with Rajasthan. After participating in the workshop and staying in Rajasthan, Gupta says she was very influenced by rural Rajasthan and its barren landscape. She adds, "Working in the midst of the rural part of Rajasthan, which is still very raw and fairly untouched by technology, was very refreshing and inspiring for a person like me who is born and bred in a fast-paced city like Delhi. It taught me the important lesson of slowing down to soak in the details in order to make them a part of the work."

Like any young and successful artist, one would expect that Sakshi Gupta would be full of grand plans for her career. Surprisingly, Gupta is reticent. "I prefer not to make any big plans, though I hope to grow even more both as a person and as an artist as I continue my practise." As her work continues to find coveted spots in exhibitions nationally and internationally, we look forward to seeing her experiment with materials, creating work that forces viewers to question accepted attitudes toward life. 🌱

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