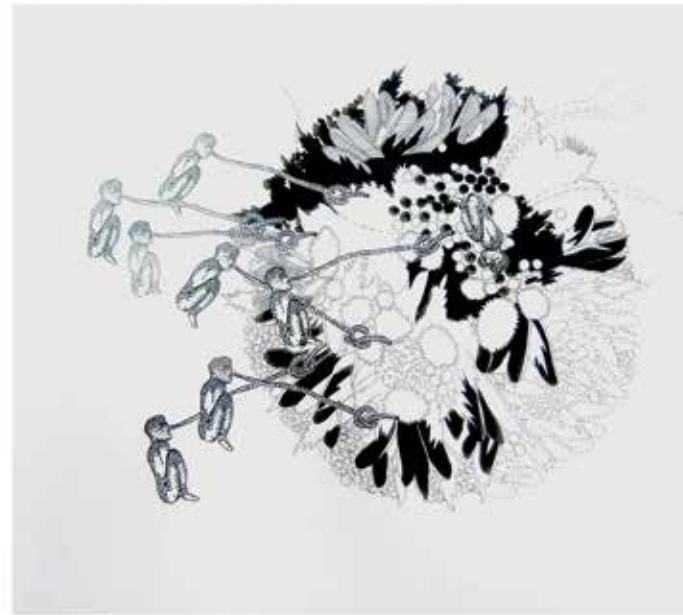


First Among Equals

Samanta Batra Mehta didn't begin as an artist, but she sure is one right now—and quite a stellar one at that.

■ BY AARON RODRIGUES



All images courtesy Samanta Batra Mehta and Sakshi Gallery

MEHTA'S ART IS A DISTINCTIVE EXPRESSION THAT INTERTWINES HUMAN CONDITION AND NATURE, OFTEN USING THE BODY AND ABSTRACTED FORMS AS A METAPHOR FOR LAND, EARTH AND PEOPLE.

Clockwise from opening image:

Dharma/Artha/Kama/Moksha, 2013—ink, graphite, collage and 22K gold leaf on mylar (four-part set).

The artist, Samanta Batra Mehta.

Continuum (Diptych), 2013—ink, tea wash, 22K gold leaf on acid-free paper.

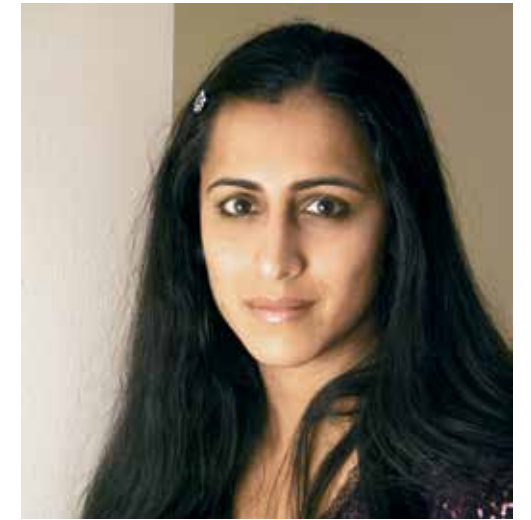
Antonym: Synonym: Homonym, 2013—decoupage on painted wooden objects (chowki and mirror box).

An art exhibition is taking place in Mumbai's cultural hub, Colaba. The gallery is filled with people, from appreciators to students, from critics to collectors. A bunch of art aficionados gather in an enclosed setting to adore, learn, evaluate and, in some cases, even to gain inspiration from. It's a standard setting in any art exhibition.

Unusually, there are two children—a boy and a girl—in the gallery; they are the children of artist Samanta Batra Mehta, whose exhibition it is. "Being a parent has definitely transformed the way I make art—right from exploring themes surrounding the body, germination, fertility and more, as well as examining the sociocultural and political contexts of parenthood," she says.

It's her second exhibition, her first in India. With *A Journey of Secrets*, Mehta delves into her family history, childhood nostalgia and parenthood. She stretches and moves to the personal, exploring gender constructs, sociocultural order and post-colonial theory.

She discusses her journey as an Indian artist living in New York, underlining issues of identity, dislocation and migration: "There are certain things about me that are probably deemed Western and certain things about me that are very Indian. I think it's difficult to peg one into mutually



exclusive binaries. Both the yin and the yang can coexist quite happily in the same person!"

Mehta's art is a distinctive expression that intertwines human condition and nature, often using the body and abstracted forms as a metaphor for land, earth and people. Her work involves an array of influences, which embrace history, myth, the natural world, medieval illustration, religious iconography and mystical philosophies.

Born in New Delhi in 1975, Mehta is largely a self-taught artist. She holds degrees in



The Artist's Journey



Above: The age of magic and reality (3 chairs), 2013—decoupage on painted wooden chairs.

Top: Memory Box series #2, 2014—mixed media (vintage wooden box, glass bottles, antique daguerrotype, antiquarian maps, vintage photo, prints, collage, 23K gold leaf, etc.)

Economics and Information Systems from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and the prestigious London School of Economics. Yet, the artist within her would take out a notebook during long commutes, thinking analytically while drawing naturally. Over the years, in her attempt to become an artist, she attended various art-making classes and workshops, including the year-long Aesthetics of Indian Visual Art at Mumbai University and summer school in life drawing and painting at the Central Saint Martins, London. In mid-2008, after years of working in the fields of banking, venture capital and international shipping, Mehta followed her calling.

Her work has been exhibited at numerous international venues, including Queens Museum, New York; The Elizabeth Foundation

for the Arts, New York; Hunterdon Art Museum, New Jersey; Visual Arts Center, New Jersey and Taubman Museum of Art, Virginia. In 2010, she was invited to make a 24-ft-long site-specific mural at the Salon du Dessin Contemporain (contemporary drawing fair) held at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris.

Not bad for someone who used to be a banker.

Here's an interview with the artist herself.

From being a banker to becoming an artist, the change seems quite drastic. How did such a transformation happen?

I am a self-taught artist and have always made art even while I worked in the corporate world, but moving to New York was the real catalyst. I also focused my energies on engaging in the cultural scene that New York offered. I attended many exhibitions in museums and galleries; immersed myself in reading every book I could buy or borrow from New York's plentiful bookstores and libraries; attended workshops, lectures and classes; visited artists' studios and engaged with artist groups. During my long commute to work every day, I would draw, write poetry and lose myself in thick tomes on art and critical thinking. I started developing a visual vocabulary and a voice. It was through this intense period of learning that I felt ready to show my work to galleries, and the response was fabulous.

What is this exhibition, *A Journey of Secrets*, all about?

A Journey of Secrets encompasses prints, drawings, installations and photography. My work journeys through experiences in and observations of family history, childhood nostalgia, parenthood, and, moving beyond the realm of the personal, towards themes in gender constructs, sociocultural order and post-colonial theory. As an Indian artist living in New York for the past decade, I reference issues of identity, dislocation and migration.

How is this exhibition different from your previous one?

Each collection of work builds on the one prior to it, so there are definite continuities with my previous body of work.

PRIZED ART

Samanta Batra Mehta's works are included in private collections all over the world, including the impressive Fondazione Fotografia Cassa di Risparmio di Modena in Italy.



I THINK ARTISTS ARE BORN WITH THE DESIRE TO CREATE, TO SHARE, TO MAKE. IT'S A FIRE AND AN INEXHAUSTIBLE ENERGY.

Above: Passage, 2015—11 vintage wood shoe inserts.

Top: A Space in Between #1, 2015—archival hahnemühle bamboo print paper (Edition of 10)

How much of this exhibition is a reflection of your life?

I view art as a language, a means of expression, a point of view. It is an idea, a narrative, a story, a discussion, a provocation, a point of departure. All of us have a primary need to express ourselves. My own need for expression translates into art-making, and thus is a reflection of my observations, feelings and interests.

In New York, how do you see the Indian art scene?

Even though the last decade has brought many changes, there is still an oligopoly of galleries. However, the rise of art fairs in India has provided a really fantastic platform for those engaged in art.

Which artists have inspired you?

There are so many. I love Peter Doig's paintings for their raw beauty, yet the ability to evoke unease; Maya Lin's pared-down conceptual pieces; Nilima Sheikh's rich and engaging narratives; the poetry of Rumi; the rich prose of Isabel Allende; the organic architecture of Geoffrey Bawa... the list goes on.

In a few words, why do you love doing what you do?

I think artists are born with the desire to create, to share, to make. It's a fire and an inexhaustible energy. This feeling goes beyond love. It's a need. It fulfils yet depletes; it propels, it rejuvenates.