

## **AAF OCT 2021**

### Meet the Artist

Ahead of our Battersea Autumn Fair this October we caught up with artist Natasha Kumar, with Artshouse (Stand ??), to learn more about her work and inspiration.

Where did it all begin for you, as an artist?

I'm very fortunate. I've always known what I wanted to be and do. Art is in my genes. My English grandfather was an established artist, and he encouraged me enormously. I have a picture in my studio called Blue Hydrangea, which captures him at work on a still life of flowers with a classical Greek plaster head. It shows all the concern for thoughtful composition and understanding of subject which he taught me. My first show was a Royal Academy Summer Exhibition when I was 17.

My inspiration comes from India though, via my father's Kashmiri and Afghani heritage. India has always been an artistic treasure box for me: my earliest childhood memory is a vivid turquoise room with a poster of a scary looking Krishna. I've been fascinated with it ever since.

But India is so vast and varied, how do choose your subjects?

I'm at my artistic happiest in India *en plein air*, watching the swirl of a market, or small town street life. Working outside in India can be tricky - a crowd gathers at the drop of a turban, full of advice, but I love the kaleidoscope of colour, an essential part of Indian cultural existence. I find colour compelling, and it takes me to all sorts of different places artistically, from the abstract #68 *ideas*, works that use pure colour to conjure mood and Indian experiences, to my *Three Graces* triptych of lorry portraits, a celebration of technicolour Indian folk-art and cultural messaging. Colour informs my architectural pieces too, creating a sense of place around intricate jali windows, crumbling palaces, but especially *chhatris*, the ubiquitous Mughal canopy of stone, a theme that I return to again and again. Above all though, colour in India means people for me, and specifically women.

Why do you find you're so drawn to Indian women as a subject?

At first I was attracted to their difference, I think. The fold and fall of the sari, the vivid, mesmerizing colour combinations that we don't see in the West. But what started out as observations of women going about their lives, in private or public, evolved into something much more meaningful to me, a narrative of the roles available to Indian women. Take Dipti from the first Indian Women series, splendid in a hot-pink sari, bearing her votive oil lamps. It's her role to lay them at the entrance to a home and welcome the goddess of wealth – Lakshmi won't enter a dark home at Diwali. But

bearing dipti gives her another role too. The tea-lights are lit to banish the shadows of ignorance. So she's also woman as a standard bearer of enlightenment, lighting a path to knowledge.

Then I noticed that that the women often appear in my work in the Rajasthani manner – veiled and glimpsed, elusive. It dawned on me that through them I was asking the great unanswerable question that many second generation British Indians will recognise: what can I know of their lives, that might have been mine?

That question is there in *Diya* and *Fired Earth*, but especially in *Three Sisters*, the women I met resting in the shade of banyan tree. They were carrying baskets of firewood, on their way to a potters' village. A timeless role, a journey repeated over thousands of years, but I wondered when I worked up the sketches at home, would they be doing it still in a decade, and would their village survive the pressure of change. We're all on a journey, one way or another.

That's another strong theme in your work, that feeling of a journey, isn't it?

It comes from the same place as my big where-am-I-from question, but in the sense of where am I going? All my subjects male or female seem to be heading somewhere. Occasionally I know they're *Going Home*. They might be waiting for a mystery to unfold, in *Paheli*. Sometimes, as in *Charika*, the cricket-playing Buddhist novice monks on the top of a mountain in the Indian Himalaya, are in search of spiritual enlightenment.

But I think all my journeys are towards an uncertain future. In *Third Pole*, the monks head into the fluid confusion of Himalayan glaciers melted by climate change, the largest source of freshwater outside the polar regions. Shared across Asia, but currently being dammed by the Chinese. On that journey we share their destiny.