

Natasha Kumar | Recent work

Her first showing was at the age of 17, the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Since then via London galleries, the art fairs and a solo show at the Southbank, Natasha has acquired an extensive following among discerning collectors in the UK and worldwide. In 2018 Soho House bought her work for its latest premises in Mumbai, and she was awarded Rise Arts International Screenprinting Award, judged by Harland Miller.

Her passion and inspiration is India. She's half-Indian, Kashmiri on her father's side and English on her mother's side, so the sub-continent is there in her genes. In her work it comes out as a riotous collision of colour and characters, palaces and people, local Coke adverts and holy cows. The contemporary Indian everyday, with not a Taj Mahal in sight.

It wasn't always so. As a child her relationship with India was more love-hate than love-love-love. *Endless journeys visiting aunties squashed on the back seat of an Ambassador car. An equally endless diet of boiled eggs, dhal and rice en route. But then suddenly, there would be a village where dancing bears and tiny children acrobats performed impossible tricks in the heat, by the dusty roadside. Totally fascinating. I had to be dragged away.*

The fascination has remained with her, and as she has developed as an artist it has evolved too. Over the years it has grown to encompass the architecture and sculpture of India, capturing a sense of place through depictions of intricate, stone-fretwork *jali* windows, crumbling palaces and eerie step wells. A major motif in her work has been the *chhatra*, the quintessential North Indian stone-canopy. But in her attempts to capture some sense of such a vast and varied place, and communicate it, she has come to realise her work is equally about capturing her own sense of identity. After all every artist ultimately paints themselves. If that doesn't sound too #.

The thought is particularly true of her Indian women series. Begun as simple observations of women going about various tasks, private or public, the works became Natasha's observations on the roles available to women in India, ultimately evolving into a narrative

of an Indian everywoman's journey to empowerment. Take Natasha's *Dipti* woman, bearing a tray of votive oil lamps, splendid in her hot-pink sari as an example. It's the woman's role to lay the little lights at the entrance to the home, to welcome the goddess of wealth – Lakshmi won't enter a dark home. But the *Dipti* woman has another role too. The lights are lit for the festival of Diwali to banish the shadows of ignorance. So the work transforms the Indian woman into a standard bearer of enlightenment, lighting a path for women to knowledge and prosperity.

As she developed the series, Natasha noticed that more and more often the women that were her subject matter appeared in the Rajasthani manner veiled, glimpsed, elusive. Without her realizing it they had become part of an artistic exploration of her own heritage, as well as theirs, an exploration that many second generation British-Indians will recognise. *In each painting I was asking the great question what can I know of their lives, that might have been mine?*

The *Dipti* woman, and her sisters Cosmic Change, Woman and Cow and the Three Sisters started out life as watercolour sketches, aides memoire capturing the essence of a scene which caught Natasha's eye. Painting outside in India is tricky - a crowd gathers at the drop of a turban, happy to share their thoughts on the work's progress, so she has to get things down quickly. Only later in her farmhouse studio in rural Staffordshire are sketches are worked up into paintings or etchings, with the help of photographs of details that she might otherwise forget.

Despite those local difficulties, *en plein air* is where she's at her artistic happiest in India, observing the swirl of street or market life as it takes place. Above all, it's colour which she loves, as an essential part of Indian existence. Everyone knows that pink is the navy blue of India, but not that, unlike for us, colours come loaded with cultural significance. Sensual red is auspicious for weddings; green signifies life and happiness, black kohl around a baby's eyes works as spiritual protection. Natasha brings them all to her work, in bold and compelling signature colours, evoking mood and feelings in vivid, mesmerising combinations.

Love of colour and street life lie behind her recent decision to create a triptych of lorry portraits. Not an obvious choice of subject matter at first, you might think. But in India every flat surface is a potential canvas, she says. If it stays still long enough to be painted on, it will be, with a mesmerising mix of folk art and cultural messaging. Lorries are the plus-size epitome of that, a visual cacophony in technicolour trundling across the subcontinent.

Almost invariably, the tailgate is painted with the imperious advice *Blow Horn*, offered as a warning and an encouragement to overtaking drivers. The alternative, no less ubiquitous shout-out from the rear of the lorry is *Great India* set among a cloud of patriotic curlicues. This Natasha has adopted as the title of her latest work, appropriately enough, a striking montage of the characters and images that populate her creative imagination, a retrospective of the street life observed by her over the last decade. It is in a way the ultimate expression of her artistic identity to date.