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Georgina Maddox : Sun Aug 30 2009, 12:38 hrs



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Their work is smart, innovative and cutting-edge. We pick five young artists to look out for

PRINCESS PEA, 27

Training ground: Delhi College of Art

First spotted: In a 2005 group show, where she first created the character of Princess Pea.

Style statement: An imaginary character made real by this performance artist, who dons a large plastic head, jacket and becomes Princess Pea.

Wow factor: "I responded well to her work and like it because it's fun yet thought-provoking," says Mallika Sagar, former Christie's India representative and now independent art consultant

For someone this petite, Princess Pea has thought a lot about the issue

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of weight. “In school, I was skinny and my sister was well-built. It seemed that neither of us was perfect. This led me to draw a lot of skinny women with big heads. I would doodle on magazines and affix these large round heads on models. I never knew it would become part of my art,” says the artist, who is being promoted by Rob Dean Gallery, a UK-based gallery that also operates out of Delhi.

Princess Pea, who refuses to reveal her real name, began her career by painting and sketching Barbie-like figures. “I was not happy with this work and felt there was something wrong. Then I invented Princess Pea, a character who could walk and talk unlike the drawings I was making,” she says. She then designed a costume for her character. The large head that transforms the girl-next-door into a fantastical creature from a fairytale world is crafted out of plastic. There is a special bolero jacket that completes her outfit.

Princess Pea features in digitally painted canvases, bright yellow-and-green statues and an installation of large blue tear drops. The idiom that Princess Pea employs is one of pop culture and design. We see her in a world of make-believe, documented through photographs of her in the swimming pool or at breakfast.

By placing an odd character with a thin body and a big head in everyday settings, the artist is trying to make people think about



notions of perfection and beauty. The bright colours and the plastic finish that characterise her work make it appealing to the little girl in all of us.

VED GUPTA, 26

Training ground: Maharaja Sayaji Rao University's Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda

First spotted: In 2007, when he received the H K Kejriwal award and Kashi Art Award, back-to-back, for best visual artist

Style statement: Large-scale sculpture that is sarcastic yet fun

Wow factor: Gupta's work has an element of surprise, says Dinesh Vazirani of Saffron Art Gallery. "I love the play with scale, the pinch of humor and the innovative way it's put together," he says.

Growing up in Narkatiaganj, Bihar, Gupta would have been an engineer if he had heeded his family's word. Instead he ended up in Rajasthan, taking lessons from a sculptor. Now based in Baroda, his work takes pot-shots at caste politics and a corrupt political system but he is not another angry young artist from Bihar. His critique is light-hearted and tongue-in-cheek. "While I see my art as the work of someone passionate, I do realise I cannot afford to be angry in my work. I cannot be so literal," he says. His 14-foot, spotted boxer dog, made of resin and beads, was displayed at the India Art Summit last week. It symbolises the state of democracy in India, yet it is a big smiling pup. The title says it all: Dog democracy.

Gupta has been a sculptor since the late 1990s and done several group shows and one solo. His work involves a face-off between human and animals and is usually rendered in fibre glass. "In ancient Indian sculpture, deities are always larger than the common man. This continues with politicians whose larger-than-life cut-outs are designed



to intimidate. My work seeks to reverse this hierarchy in size,” says Gupta. “I have made man smaller and the dogs bigger than us,” he says. His next project will be a series of sculptural busts that resemble certain politicians. Mayawati might be interested.

REMEN CHOPRA, 29

Training ground: Delhi College of Art

First spotted: At a group show by curator Alka Pandey, titled Cross Polynations, in 2006.

Style statement: Photo-based works that are drawn, mutated and finally printed on glass.

Wow factor: “Remen’s approach to imagery is quite unique and her underlying narrative is strong,” says Shalini Sawhney of Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai.

Chopra’s layered drawings and prints on glass are unique to say the least. She converts images from everyday photographs into something ethereal and insubstantial. “I begin with a photograph. Then I sketch around it, create layers, pixel the image in Photoshop and finally I am ready to print it,” says the Delhi-based artist.

The photographs she uses are of theatre artists in New York, whom she met during a residency at the School of Visual Art, NY. “I got them to my studio and then captured them in a static pose,” says Chopra, who is not averse to working with found imagery as well.

She layers her narratives in a manner that is not linear or easy to follow; one image is layered over the other in the same way thoughts layer and overlap. The black-and-white nostalgia of her images is inspired by film-makers like Satyajit Ray.

Chopra knew she would be an artist since she began painting at Lawrence School, Sanawar. After Delhi College of Art, a trip to Rotterdam Art Fair and the residency in New York gave her the

international exposure she was seeking.

The artist believes she speaks to people living fragmented and isolated lives in a post-modern world. “Peace and security are strangers today. My work tries to infuse this reality with hope and a prayer to arrive at wholeness. That is why most of my work looks at the feminine, the shakti energy that has the capability to harmonise all these warring forces,” she says.

SATHYANAND MOHAN, 32

Training ground: College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum and Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda.

First spotted: A three-man show at the Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai. This was followed by a solo at the same gallery in April.

Style statement: Paintings, photographs that look at the pathos of the human condition.

Wow factor: “Mohan is among a generation of artists who produce art of significant standing,” says Jitish Kallat.

If one saw Mohan’s solo show, Reliquary, at The Guild Art Gallery in Mumbai in April, one would know from the series of paintings that this young artist broods on solitude and death but not in a defeatist manner. “It was, at one level, a stock-taking, and a look back at my linguistic and aesthetic choices as an artist, trying to set them out more clearly in order to locate their own limits,” he says.

Mohan’s new work is in a new medium and comprises photographs that document Mumbai as a city of dreams. Displayed at the India Art Summit, it had separate images placed in relationship to one another. Each image may be viewed separately but when they are read together, they create a dialogue.

The first is a triptych that consists of images of the Gateway of India flanked by two images of young working-class men diving into the

water. The relationship of the working class with the city of dreams is established in this work. The gateway is also a reminder of our colonial past and together these symbols form a strong statement on the nation.

The other is a diptych that captures a working class man in a moment of waiting. He is sitting next to plastic chairs piled one on top of the other—an implication of a gathering of the middle class, for a wedding or a conference. The man is clearly one of those who work tirelessly behind the scenes of such events. The image placed next to this arresting photograph is a street signage in Mumbai and it locates the previous image, pinning it down to the metropolis.

“I do not want my photographs to be similar to my paintings. These photographs should complement my canvases,” says Mohan, who has been shooting photographs for as long as he has been painting. “I was persuaded by Shalini Sawhney (of Guild Gallery) to show these and I am glad I did since it adds a dimension to my work. I will continue to explore this medium but I intend to experiment with photography. Currently I am satisfied with the documentary mode,” he says.

SUCHITRA GAHLOT, 30

Training ground: She is a self-trained artist who studied humanities at Hansraj College, Delhi

First spotted: The artist hosted a show at her own studio and the Delhi-based Shrine and Empire Gallery liked what they saw. The Indian Art Summit, 2009, was her first public exhibition.

Style statement: Unconventional mediums that expose personal feelings

Wow factor: “Her work is unconventional. She is a thinking artist and challenges notions of what is art,” says Swapan Seth, a Delhi-based collector.

Perhaps Gahlot's advertising background primed her better to experiment with mediums since none of her work can be termed conventional. She lives in Gurgaon and works for the advertising firm, Ogilvy & Mather. She burns the midnight oil with a parallel art practice.

Gahlot does mainly conceptual installations. Like some days I wake up thinking is there really a god?, which consists of upside-down ice cream cones made of resin that lie fallen on the ground, a forlorn comment on mortality. Another installation, titled all I have ever really wanted is a nice cold shower, is made up of a shower stall that has blue silk threads falling from the shower head as if it were a cascade of water. It speaks subtly of human loneliness.

A few months ago, Gahlot held an exhibition at her studio, where she invited gallerists. The Shrine and Empire Gallery picked her up for her first exhibition at the India Art Summit, 2009.

For her latest venture, A thousand tears, displayed at the summit, she labelled a thousand small vials of saline solution, the equivalent of human tears, with stickers that enumerated reasons for why a person last cried. She explains how she thought of the work: "I used to get severe migraines and I had to retreat to a dark, quiet room. Sometimes the pain was so severe I would find tears rolling down my cheeks. It was quite a clinical process of crying. So I was curious about the many reasons for a person's tears," she says. Gahlot then circulated a questionnaire through a network of friends for almost a year to collect answers from a 1,000 people to the question—why did you last cry?

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