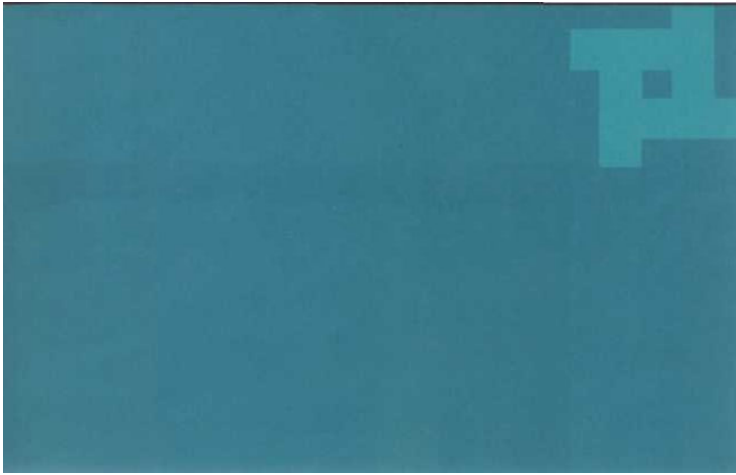


CREATIVE BOUNDARIES

Creative work that encompasses design represents the art of the future, writes Gopika Nath





Facing page and left :
Glass work by Srila
Mookerjee

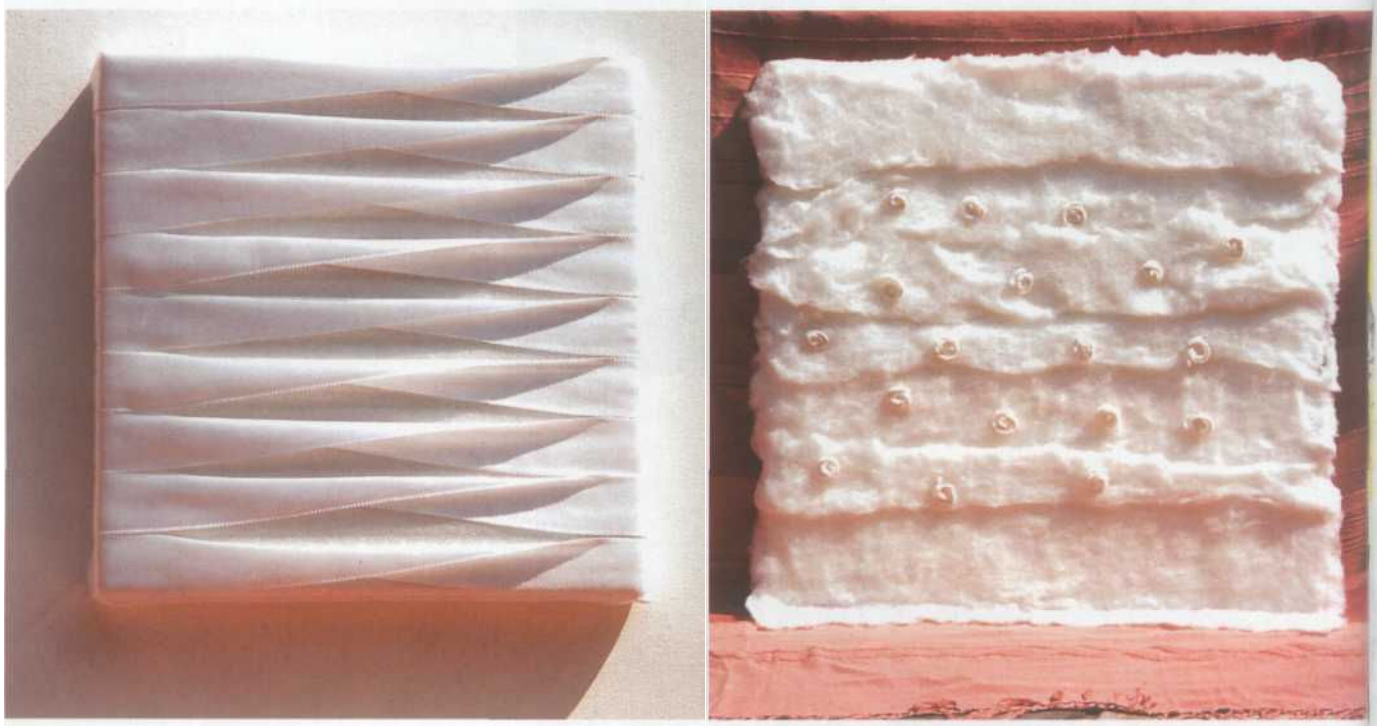
SRILA MOOKERJEE. Kavita Jaiswal, Kalam Patua, Sandip Paradkar and Shobha Broota shared the same platform recently when their works were exhibited by Art Heritage, Gallery Espace and Apparao Galleries in Delhi.

It was interesting to view simultaneously works styled in glass, large painted canvases and drawings on paper, along with contemporary Kalighat paintings, and experimentation in media using elements of textiles as the 'canvas'.

Viewing designs and folk art in an art gallery as opposed to a shop or the Crafts Museum, as has been the norm in the past, raises many questions. My response to the diverse works favoured the more fragile, less intense, less per-

manent, but no less aesthetic values and visuals that were crafted and created by ceramic/glass artist Srila Mookerjee. Kalam Patua's simply executed, candid and insightful paintings 're-staging....ancient myths in a contemporary middle-class urban space', were thought provoking, as were the experiments with thread, fibre and fabric by Shobha Broota, Sandip Paradkar and Smriti Dixit. With all of this to dwell upon, the large scale, more intense works on paper and canvas by Jaiswal, Ashok Teewari, Chitravanu Mazumdar, Bimal Das Gupta and others from the Alkazi 'Master collection' (Art Heritage), did not elicit much attention.

The world and language of contempo-



Above: *Homage to Solitude*. Works by Shobha Broota. On left is ribbon on canvas, on right is cottonwool on canvas

rary art seems to be changing. The medium and idiom that artists are presenting to the public, are creatively evolving to critically diminish the boundaries that have hitherto delineated Art from Craft and Design.

In ancient India, these differentiations did not exist. Sanskrit has no word for 'art' in the way we understand it today, and Indian literature indicates that the 'Shilpas' or professional arts and the 'kalas' or avocational arts, included every kind of skilled activity from music to painting, weaving, cookery and horsemanship without hierarchic distinctions. All surviving works of art reveal the same quality of creative expression, whether it is a small textile fragment or elaborate temple architecture.

Dr Jyotindra Jain, who curated the Kalam Patua show at Gallery Espace, states, that artists like Patua, Gangadevi and others working from within a folk tradition of painting have been discrimi-

nated against in the belief, that "such art does not have anything in common with contemporary art". In 1978, their work was rejected by the Lalit Kala Akademi for participation in the fourth Triennial of International Art in New Delhi and he says, that the practice of such discrimination, on an "uncritical premise", continues even today.

Kalam Patua belongs to the patua community of traditional story tellers and painters of Bengal. He learnt the art of painting narrative scrolls from his uncle and received acclaim for his work at the age of sixteen.

A commission from the Alliance Francaise in Kolkata was a major turning pointing in his work, where he had to interpret a 'script' based on French history, for which there was no precedent in the vocabulary of the patua tradition. This opened up possibilities for pictorial expression pertaining to issues of the modern world, which were further



Above: *Nectar of her body*. Work by Kalam Patua. Watercolour on newsprint paper
Above right: A work by Smriti Dixit

developed when he started studying original Kalighat paintings. Fascinated by scenes of contemporary urban life depicted by his ancestors, he thought of pursuing this (as opposed to copying the old masters) to represent the social life around him. In paintings such as *Enchantress* and *Nectar of her Body*, he adeptly turns "popular myths into metaphor relocating it in the modern urban space suffused with references to the male gaze, body and sexuality."

The works are very simple in their representation, but what engages the viewer is the simplicity of form, the depth of understanding and thought, all the more so, when you consider that the artist is not someone with a college education and some foreign degree. Kalam studied in a village school up to class X and is a postmaster at Chandpara Post Office in West Bengal. He is an artist by virtue of his intellectual and creative ability.

In writing an introduction to Indian



Art (1913), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy wrote: "Indian art has always been produced in response to a demand: that kind of idealism which could glorify the artist who pursues a personal ideal of beauty and strives to express himself, and suffers or perishes for lack of patronage, would appear to Indian thought far more ridiculous or pitiable than heroic".

The world of contemporary Indian art may well differ with what he said, but precisely because of what he did say, the work of Srila Mookerjee and other designers/artists like her, gains significance. Working within the parameters of utility, her handcrafted pieces, retain some of the tone of the kind of aesthetics reflected through the writings of Coomaraswamy.

Srila studied at NID, Ahmedabad and also with master glass blowers and artists in London. In working by hand, to blow or throw a pot or plate, an object



Above: *Musical melting.*
A work by Kavita Jaiswal
Above right: A work by
Chitravanu Mazumdar

of everyday use, artists like Srila lend dignity to the whole concept of hand-crafted, which has been lost to those working within the traditional (rural) ethos of hand-crafting. According to Christine Michael this is the result of "western thought" which "distrusts the body and its underlying cognition as a source of valid meaning...."

Sandip Paradkar, Smriti Dixit and Shobha Broota are artists who come from the tradition of 'Fine Art'. In the works curated by Dr. Alka Pande, they have deviated considerably from traditional media in their use of thread, gauze bandages and knitted fabric. The very idea of diverse elements of textiles being used, instead of the usual 'fabric' canvas, is interesting. In doing so, these

artists are in effect, taking apart the seams of this 'traditional' canvas and reconstructing it.

These exhibitions indicate that the world of contemporary art in India is undergoing a transition. In a world that is fast-paced and habituated to SMS, aesthetic values expressed through a pot, a glass or a shawl—or everyday living objects—would be more accessible than something the viewer must mull over for hours to grasp its deeper meaning. Creative work that inculcates an artistic sensibility through everyday living, is an essential premise of design. This, within the resurgent practice of hand-crafting, seems ideologically and aesthetically well located, to represent the 'art' of the future, of our inherited past. ■