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FEATURE'S SPOTLIGHT

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## A STITCH IN TIME

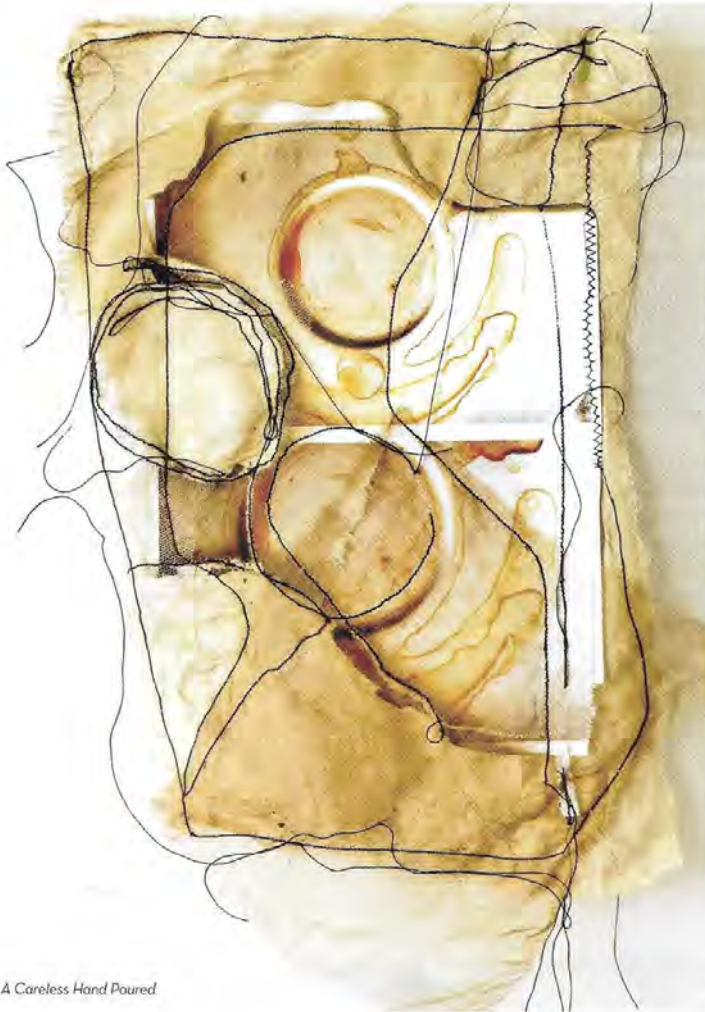
*Redefining the parameters of art, **Gopika Nath** uses needle and thread with nuanced dexterity. Her multi-dimensional works express her inner feelings and her relationship with the environment, finds Shradha Jahagirdar-Saxena*

**H**er creativity finds expression on fabric through a needle and thread – rather than on a canvas with a brush and paints. And the Gurgaon-based artist-craftsperson (as Gopika Nath prefers to call herself) has, in her own way, raised handcrafting

and embroidery to the level of an art and has created an awareness of the various ways in which a fabric can be used. Nath has often questioned the existing definitions of art and has tried to redefine its parameters through her idea of 'Art for Wear', even as she simultaneously works towards a personal iconography through which

she can present ideas that are globally appealing and are yet also deeply rooted in Indian culture.

An alumnus of Central Saint Martins, London and a Fulbright scholar, Nath dons several hats – she is a textile designer, fibre artist, writer, poet and teacher. Her fascination, and thereby her association, with



A Careless Hand Poured

textiles began in 1976 and since then she has worked with several leading designers, creating fabrics for the likes of Rohit Bal, Gitanjali Kashyap and Ashish Soni, among others. A leader in her field, the design professional specialises in the use of embroidery as a tool – elevating it to an art form – and seamlessly merges the age-old ideals of handcrafting with a modern-day environment. And Nath firmly believes that in India textile art is a vital element in shaping the future of the country's heritage and handcrafting legacy.

The two-artist show featuring Nath, *Fragments and Fragmentation*, recently concluded in New Delhi and her solo show *The Piercing Needle* will open at Kolkata Gallery Sanskriti, Kolkata (October 24-November 24, 2015). Her Gurgaon high-rise residence has a *mélange* of her works mounted on the walls – each expressing a different emotion. So, while one showcases her feelings at the sudden crash of the Sensex, another reflects her angst at the raucous noise in her environs. And while one creation may span almost half the wall, another

one still-to-be-completed is of almost minuscule dimensions. Our conversation, over cups of hot masala chai – she has a deep interest in the brew – spans a spectrum of subjects that range from her inspirations to her intricate work.

#### HOW DID YOU CONCEIVE OF EMBROIDERY AS AN ART FORM?

Our traditional *shilpas* do not make any distinction between art and craft. An artist was not considered a special person. Emphasis was not on what you did, but how you did it and *that* made it an art form. But, gradually, influenced by Western thinking, the idea of self-expression crept into art. But, self-awareness comes from knowing yourself first, and only then can that awareness translate into self-expression.

When I returned to India decades ago, I was very keen on doing something that required an intricate skill, but it took me a few years to start my embroidery. During that time, the stock market crashed. I was restless, and realised that I had to do something that expresses who I am – and where I am. In the initial stages of my work, I was just doing embroidery, but I became an artist in the true sense when I began to take the environment into account. I work with needle and thread as an artist-craftsperson. The material and process are integral to my practice as an artist, as also to the evolution of artistic concepts.

#### THE PIERCING NEEDLE IS SELF-EXPLANATORY. WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF THE TITLE FRAGMENTS AND FRAGMENTATION?

I had been working on the project for some years. It goes beyond embroidery and fabrics in its meaning. Exploring the stains in my teacup, the marks of leftover dregs, I found myself making a correlation between these marks and the marks in one's mind. Those marks of embarrassment, guilt and shame that judge and diminish the sense of self became the focus of my work and evolved through a

process that was both meditative and cathartic. For, ultimately, memories are fragments of collected moments of life. I started using photographs as recorded memory and wondered if the memory would be erased if the photograph was burnt. So, sometimes my work is about expressing the inner emotions; at other times, it is about alleviating an emotion.

**HOW DOES THE ENVIRONMENT HAVE AN IMPACT ON YOUR WORK?**

When I moved to Gurgaon, it marked another major leap in my exploration of threads. I got very frazzled by the distance, living with people above and below me, and the constant noise. I used stitches to express my feelings and that was liberating. And that kind of 'emotional' work received more interest because it spoke a contemporary language as opposed to something that was neatly done.

**WHAT IS YOUR WORKDAY LIKE? DO YOU FOCUS ON ONE CREATION OR WORK ON MULTIPLE CREATIONS?**

My daily life is deeply rooted in a spiritual practice of mastery over the mind, healing and evolution, which is complemented and supported by the slow pace of embroidery and its contemplative nature. I work on several things at one time. I write, I pen poems, I do art reviews, I teach, I give talks. There is never a designated time to do a particular task. It all fits into place like a jigsaw puzzle. And, I'm a healer too, so the first four hours of my mornings are concentrated on self-cleansing and healing.

**HOW DO YOU PICK YOUR FABRIC FOR A WORK?**

When I first started, I was feeling very fragmented. So, I just took normal *kapda* mainly because I was tearing and stitching it. I didn't want to work with something expensive as I wanted to take something that I could be brutal with. Since then I have used a variety of fabrics. I like using organza for its transparency and translucency. The work has holes and it can't be

pasted on a board. So, it is mounted on organza which becomes integral to my creations. The deconstruction of the fabric is akin to deconstructing the fabric of being, my life and its thought patterns, to unravel, to understand and reformulate in an attempt at better mind-management.

Embellishing fabric allows for something beautiful to emerge from the wounds and burns – embellishment manifests after the catharsis, when the mind is cleansed or healed and the essence of the spirit pervades in a celebration of what was, which has been transcended.

**WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF HANDCRAFTING TODAY?**

As an Indian textile artist, I am particularly proud and extremely aware of, and concerned about, the fragile existence of handcrafting in this country. Unfortunately, our digitally powered electronic era has rendered the hand a mere adjunct to the

machine, when it should be celebrating the hand that has been instrumental in creating much of the physical world and its marvels. My background is in textile design – I worked as a textile designer for two decades before gravitating towards fine art. For me, creatively using textile techniques allows me to bring attention to the finer nuances of handcrafting. My work therefore is as much a celebration of what the hand can do, as it is a lament of the value attributed to handwork today.

**COMING BACK TO THREADS AND THE NATURE OF THREADS....**

I use the needle and thread as I would use the pencil or brush, without the constraints of this weighty lineage, but contrarily deconstructing the fabric and then restructuring it through what are traditional embroidery styles and stitches. I am not interested in replicating stitches or following traditional sewing techniques.

*“WHEN I MOVED TO GURGAON, IT MARKED ANOTHER MAJOR LEAP IN MY EXPLORATION OF THREADS. I GOT VERY FRAZZLED BY THE DISTANCE, LIVING WITH PEOPLE ABOVE AND BELOW ME, AND THE CONSTANT NOISE. I USED STITCHES TO EXPRESS MY FEELINGS...”*



***"I DON'T THINK IN TERMS OF TECHNIQUE, I JUST DO WHATEVER COMES TO ME. I WILL PULL THE FABRIC, TEAR IT, CUT IT, SEW IT. I DYE IT – I MAY BURN IT. I OFTEN PUT TEA LEAVES ON THE FABRIC AND BURN IT IN THE OVEN, SO THAT IT GETS A NICE DARK COLOUR."***

**SO, DO YOU DO EVERYTHING ONLY BY HAND?**

I use machines also, it's one of the things which you come to terms with – can you ignore technology? So if I'm using the photograph and also printing it, then, I am using technology. It has its own place, so I learnt how to use the machine as well.

**THREAD CONNECTS PEOPLE. THREAD IS ALSO SUTRA.... SO, JUST AS A SUTRADHAR TELLS A STORY, WOULD YOU SAY EMBROIDERY TELLS ITS OWN TALES?**

Embroidery through the ages has talked about life. Look at *kantha*, *sanchi phulkaris*. When women in villages sit together for hours to do work, they talk, gossip, exchange stories. They are translating all these into their pieces. They may not necessarily be linear narratives, but they do express their own emotions. Events in day-to-day lives influence the creation too. If there is a birth, it is of one colour, if there is a death, it will

take on another hue. These are very subtle and personal changes.

**WHEN YOU BEGIN A PIECE OF WORK, IS THE TECHNIQUE PREDETERMINED?**

I don't think in terms of technique, I just do whatever comes to me. I will pull the fabric, tear it, cut it, sew it. I dye it – I may burn it. I often put tea leaves on the fabric and burn it in the oven, so that it gets a nice dark colour.

**WHEN YOU SPEAK OF THREADS, YOU CANNOT IGNORE KNOTS.**

Once, I was in a hurry. And I thought I would be able to sew faster with a longer thread. I was wrong. It got into a twist as soon as I pulled the needle through the fabric. I wasn't ruffled. After all, knots are part of threads. When I inserted the needle into the centre of the knot to carefully open it, I realised it wasn't just one knot there. It was as if three of them were nestled together. Unravelling them was trickier than anything I'd tackled before. I could

have cut my losses, started over, taken a shorter thread. But I'm stubborn. I like to finish whatever I've started and rarely cut knots out of the thread. And I soon found that the thread was nearly long enough to go round the perimeter of the fabric – like a parikrama or walking around a sacred space. Parikrama symbolises the cycle of life.

**ANOTHER DIMENSION OF YOUR LIFE IS REFLECTED IN YOUR INTENSE PASSION FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF TEAS AS WELL.**

My interest in teas has grown over the years. All of the teas have a different texture or leaf. The jasmine leaves uncurl their sly tendrils under the influence of hot water, looking suspiciously serpent-like. Remnants of various condiments of a rich masala chai stain the cup with lines so evocative that I have spent the better part of two years recording them, photographing marks left in the cup, half-drunk or emptied of all the liquid content. In the process I have also studied dimensions of the cups and mugs that I have drunk from. I pondered on these images for a long time, wondering how to translate them into something I could share, and decided to have them digitally printed onto fabric. I then worked with layered images, using the 'stains' to reflect a state of mind. **V**



ANSHIKA VARMA



Smouldering Cauldron