

Gopika Nath's Stitch Chronicles

BY ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE | MARCH 09, 2016



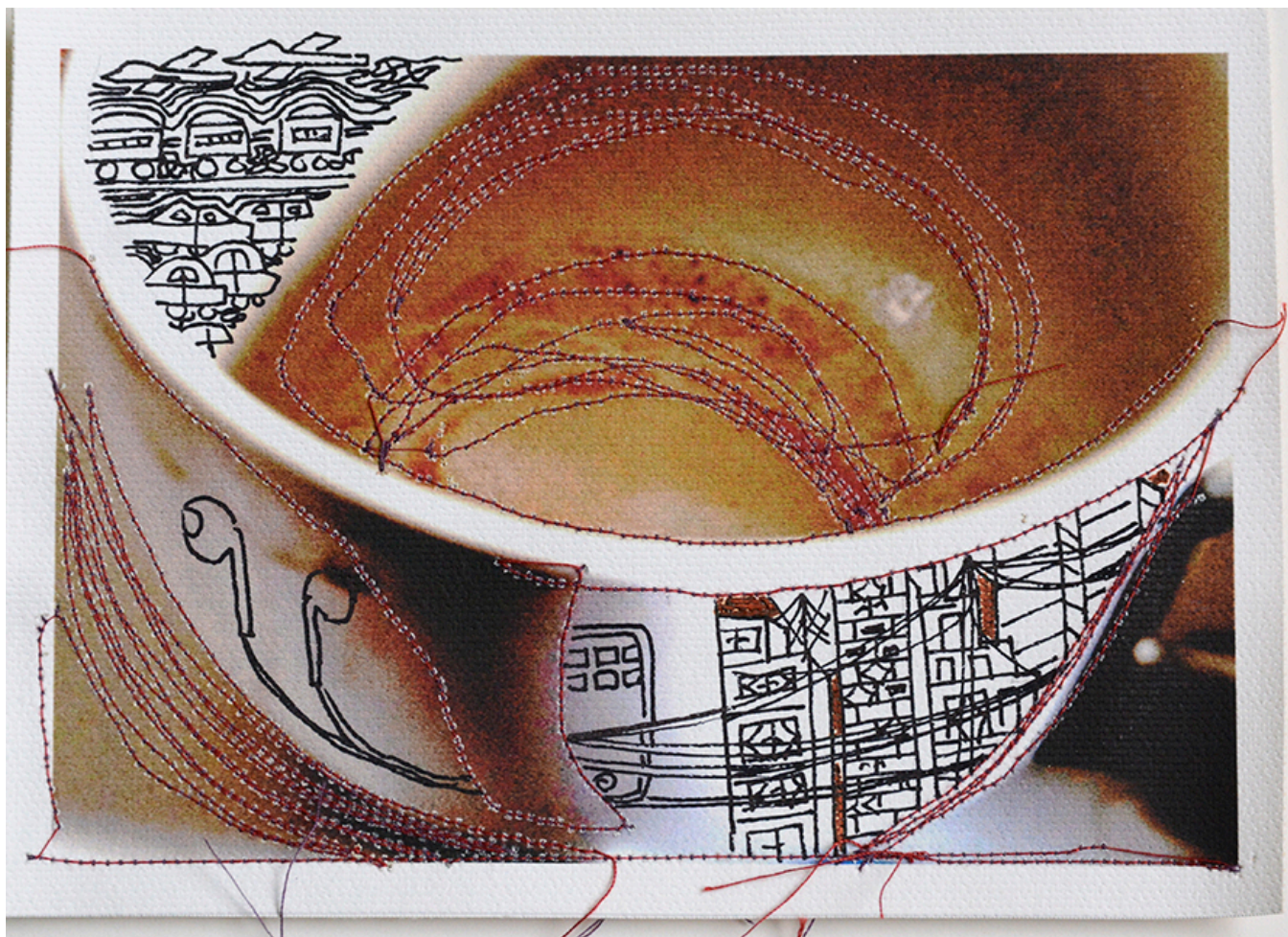
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"The Universe in my Tea Cup," a set of 30 pictures of work in embroidery and tea stains, by Gopika Nath (Amitabha Bhattacharya)

Embroidery and women have for so long engaged in an intimate conversation with each other that the craft, and women too, have respectively suffered a sort of gender profiling that is not exactly justified. Textiles, historically, have evolved with equal efforts of both women and men, even though some gender compartmentalisation does continue to this day. It isn't a surprise, therefore, that the artists using embroidery as one of the mediums for their creative expression are largely women — at least the ones

that I have encountered; my last interview with an artist using embroidery was with New York-based Zoe Buckman, whose exhibition “Every Curve,” showcasing her path-breaking and seriously innovative work, opens at Papillion Art in Los Angeles on March 12.

Closer home, Kolkata’s Gallery Sanskriti recently hosted a stunning exhibition by Gurgaon-based artist Gopika Nath, titled “The Piercing Needle.” Nath uses embroidery and stains left by tea to enter those recesses of her mind that allow her to discover who she is. “Embroidery has been an integral part of my thought process — even though I didn’t initially practice it — because I’m a textile designer by training and have worked for 40 years with the crafts sector, the corporate world, designers, and painted with dyes and other stuff,” says Nath, a Fulbright Scholar and an alumnus of Central St. Martins, London. She uses cross-stitch and the running stitch [Kantha, as it is known as India, especially in Bengal].



The stains entered her work when Nath started pondering over the marks left behind in her morning tea cup that had more meaning than what was apparent. She started taking pictures of the marks. After thinking it over for sometime, she decided to have them digitally printed on the fabric in order to share her thoughts with others. In a write-up on this project, she shares, “These marks became evocative of guilt, shame and blame, the kind of thoughts we carry around us that come under self-reflection or introspection; of thoughts mulling over a cup of tea.”

And when the two combined, it became a powerful medium for Nath to express her deepest thoughts. “While stitching is a highly meditative experience and helps me concentrate, sipping tea and mulling over your life is a personal exploration of the self. It’s completely for myself, a dialogue with my inner self, an expression of my feelings that I cannot express otherwise,” she adds. She finds a stained cloth evocative of the fabric of being, an entity that is alive because of the memories it contains of a living person.

Nath’s practice is also evocative of how women over centuries must have engaged with the craft, as an intimate exercise of engaging with one’s deepest self when self-expression, as we know it today, was denied to most of them. Working the needle in and out of a piece of cloth must have been so cathartic, liberating and fortifying. No wonder, embroidery and stitching have often been used to express some of the strongest issues such as gender politics.

In Nath's work, this expression achieves a new meaning when she uses fabric that has been torn, burnt, pulled and 'brutalized,' and stitches the pieces together, reconstructing a piece of cloth that gets a new shape, even though it continues to carry the remnants of hurt and trauma. Doesn't that sound like the innermost experiences of so many of us — how we get hurt, insulted, torn apart, and may be even 'brutalized' — and yet, pull ourselves together by stitching back the pieces and moving ahead in life? And through a simple needle and thread, Nath achieves this strenuous process of self-reconstruction, which she calls "one of the most difficult jobs in the world." An equally big achievement, perhaps, is how an ancient art that has been at the receiving end of historical politics is turned around to create absolutely contemporary art.

The work is heavily referenced with the couplets of India's famous saint poets (*dohas*), some of whom were weavers too, and who used many similies from their looms in their poetry. Nath's catalogue for her exhibition at Gallery Sanskriti says, "The textile-saint-poets Kabir, Namdev [Maharashtra] and Dariya Sahib of Bihar have referred to the stains or 'daag' in the mind as something that must be cleansed to find passion for living."

The artist also maintains a Stitch Journal on the evolving contemporary language of embroidery, through her blog (<http://gopikanathstitchjournal.blogspot.com>). "I started it in 2013. It's all about a stitch that changes the complexion of a fabric on which it is made. That's what our lives are, every stitch (experience) brings about some certain change in the way we live," she says. She calls it 'a visual record of the journey of a mind exploring itself, through the language of stitch.' It makes for an absorbing read.

Even though it is about stories born out of Nath's experiences, the blog nudges your mind to look at all the stitches that have made your story.

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