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## ART CONNECT

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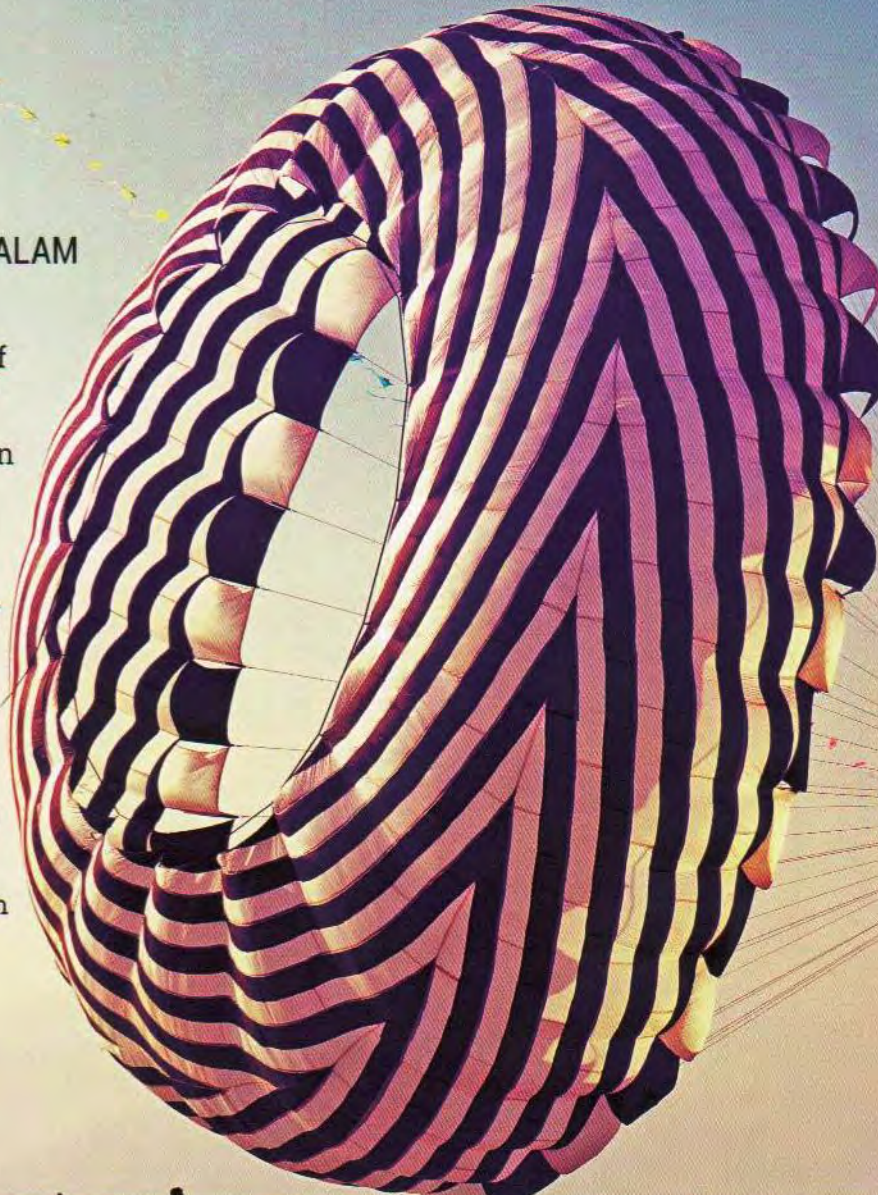
# 5

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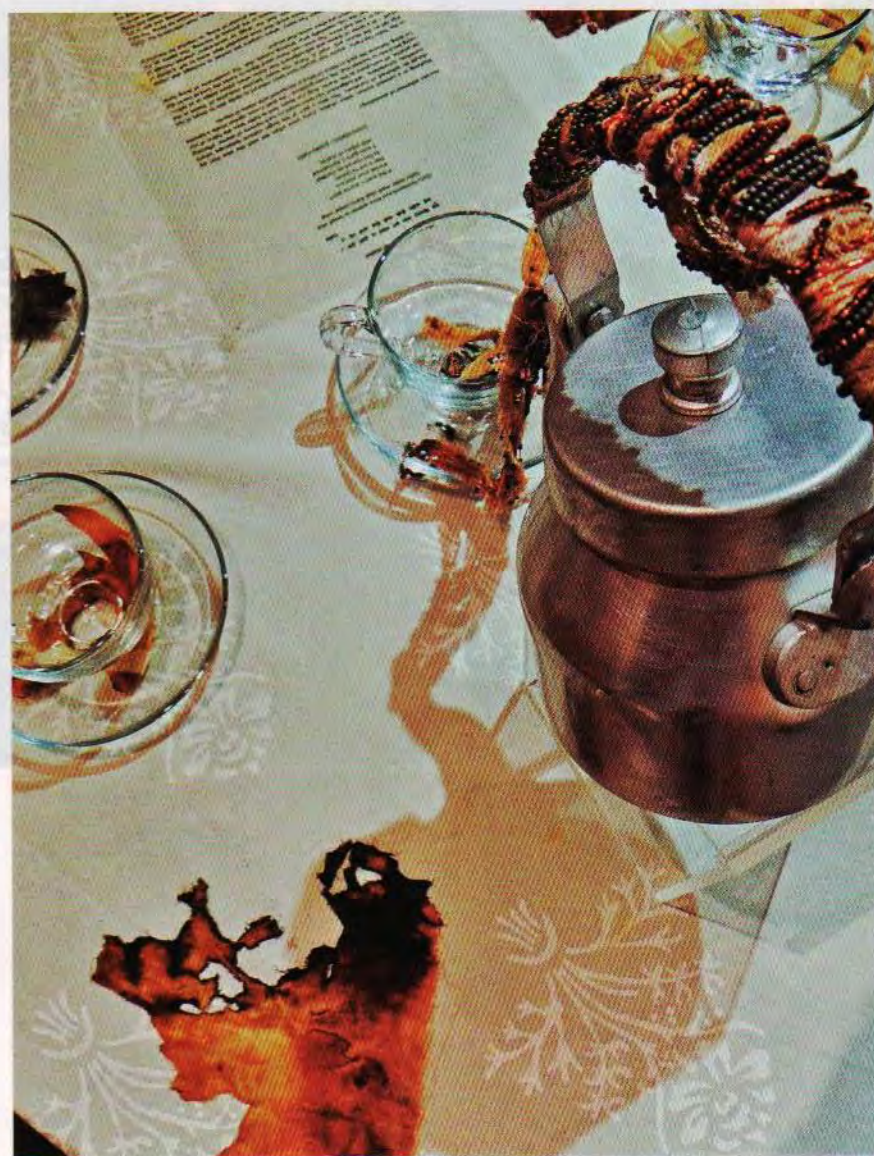




# A stitched NARRATIVE

Gopika Nath's solo show 'The Piercing Needle' at Gallery Sanskriti, Kolkata, draws its inspiration and impetus from left-over marks in her tea-cup

Ina Puri



**T**racing the history of textiles in India, it is interesting to see how practices gradually broke away from the traditional space to occupy centre stage for some contemporary artists. The needle became the brush, seeking to illuminate, provoke and create an identity (for itself) that went beyond the feminine domain. Needlework, associated for long with the feminine and domestic embroidery, now became experimental and contemporary. A genre recognised for its unique place in the art scene.

In her recent exhibit, as one of the leading practitioners, Gopika Nath has struck out in a new direction which is both provocative and innovative. She has used photography, digital printing on fabric, along with techniques that involve burning, layering, shredding, as well as embroidering on cotton voile, silk organza and other ephemeral fabrics.

Gopika has re-contextualised the notions of stitching as an art. Deeply autobiographical, her technique is the use of cross-stitch and running stitch (Kantha) to add texture to the fabric that is stained with tea. She





## About the artist

Gopika is an artist who embroiders, rather than paints. She adeptly imbues her work with the same aesthetics as found in fine art painting.



(Clockwise) Work in view: Self Doubt; Foreground - Patterns of Transformation; and The Universe in My Tea Cup (set of 30 works)

has stitched in delicate cursive hand, hurtful insults often heard and ignored 'liar/slob', turning them into delicate motifs, elegantly embroidered on her cloth fragments.

The chronicles of the *chaiwallah* begin with the ceremonial pouring of tea that seeps into the material, leaving a dark stain on the cloth. It is as if the *chai* patterns hint at personal geographies, as they spread out, mapping uncharted courses. These are two separate acts — the initial spontaneous spillage, followed by the other action, the stitching and the cutting, which are conscious acts, carefully considered and executed.

"My work is all about memories, which I also refer to as stains," she shares, adding, "I've been working on/with the idea of tea stains in my teacup, for the last seven years. The idea of using

photographs to represent memory began with a little experiment which led me to see that memory isn't an accurate representation of what occurred, but what we feel as things unfold — embellished with our own fantasy or dread, as the case may be. It is the memories that haunt us, which we carry as karmic patterns, or soul memory, or more recent memories of a conscious experience."

Working within the ancient framework of embroidery, Gopika acknowledges that she has been deeply influenced by the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Her own work as a textile designer as well as her personal experience of working with craftsmen from various places, led her to explore dimensions of hand-crafting, transcending its existence as mere labour — a return towards the ideas presented by Coomaraswamy.

Through colonial influences, embroidery has become associated with the feminine, but Gopika's art transcends this, using thread, fabric and stitch to speak the language of contemporary art. Deeply autobiographical, her work presents art as cathartic and healing through searing honesty in the microscopic examination of self. In sharing the textures of her wounds, she reaches out towards healing macro dimensions of the universe.

"To me the essential sacredness of working with textiles, is not only that it is the garment that clothes the body which can be likened to the essential garb of the soul, but, to make this fabric or do anything with it requires a lot of time and discipline and this also becomes a meditation on life," she says.

(The article is an extract from Gopika's conversation with Ina on her exhibition)