



Ketna Patel | I am a Goddess

KETNA PATEL STOP! INDIANS AHEAD

"Art is about interpreting the world in a different way. As an observer or participant, these voyeuristic vistas take me out of my conditioning and expose me to new realities, thus facilitating many subjective and societal realisations on the road to self discovery. It is never boring!" says Ketna Patel; Singapore based, Uganda born, British educated artist who left her job as an architect to pursue a career in art. She is represented by Indigo Blue Art at India Art Summit. He Sujin profiles this diaspora artist.

At a glance, what stands out most in Patel's art and hits you is the dizzying array of sights and vibrant colours that explode in a dynamic and bold stream of visual narrative. Yet amidst these fields of intensity—revelatory insights can be observed. A closer look reveals a strong narrative with multiple metaphors; dense with details and imagery. To study Patel's compositions is akin to travelling through the streets of Asia (more aptly for this series, India). Patel collects images of sites, signs and people during her travels to different places. Using them she collages and strings together a narrative that documents societal changes happening around us. Patel regards culture as an integral element of human life and fears that cultural life in existing Asian streets is evaporating. The notion of the 'Street' represents the vital organ of human needs and embodies the collective identities of people living in that area. However, the heritage and uniqueness of the Asian streets are being dissolved dramatically as the effects of mass consumerism and globalisation become more prevalent. In her attempt to map the changing nature of the heritage and culture of the streets, Patel records every available aspect of it in her compositions. She says, "I feel I need to validate the

existence of the 'invisible'; to speak up for the minority groups, as even though they are not visible to the public, they belong to this larger community". Born in Uganda of Gujarati origin, educated in England and based in Singapore for the last 17 years, Patel herself is no stranger to being part of the minority group. "I did not belong to any 'dominant' group and because of that, I feel more sensitive to differences between people and can offer an objective perspective". Patel describes herself as "happily culturally schizophrenic, yet deeply grounded in an evolving Asian culture". The diverse range of cultures, and the stories associated with each culture she was exposed to, stirred in the artist a curiosity about the various lifestyles that people had. Patel's mixed media collages and the intensely active narrative therein are, in fact, her observations transformed into a symphony of street conversations; different textures and colours converging and juxtaposing in a boisterous stream of movement. Patel refers to these multifarious compositions as "visual noise". For Patel, the interest of her art also lies in the effects of Globalisation, Consumerism, Advertising and 'instant' communication perceptible in our daily lives. Similarly, the volatile nature of Asian streets, with the bombardment of advertising and billboard signs, is very much affected by popular culture and consumerism. Patel communicates this through her deliberate choice of medium - acrylic screens - to produce a mechanical feel. The quality of this technique produces a slick and reflective surface which resembles actual billboard signs. Not surprisingly, Patel works with a carefully chosen palette of colours that are popularly used in advertisements. Her colour palette holds a symbolic significance that contributes to prevailing questions addressed in her works: *Where does Advertising stop and Art begin?* Similar to the ideals that early Western Pop artists had confronted, Patel challenges our preconceptions and pretensions about art. To break free from the clichés of cultural definitions and in line with her narrative, Patel will be presenting a TATA Nano car wrapped in her 'pop art' imagery. The Nano car, dubbed the "people's car", is a recognisable icon that has served the masses and is at once accessible to India's mass public. The imagery created by the artist has been transferred onto the car in Mosaic style. Using a method similar to that employed by artisans of the Byzantine period, SIGIS, the world leader in Mosaics, has carried out the execution of the mosaic artwork in their factory in Italy.

This unique collaboration has resulted in converting the new iconic Tata Nano car into a symbolic 'Jewel for the masses'. In addition to the car, a collection of artwork comprising 3D collages on wood and limited edition acrylic screen-prints, together with non-traditional forms like furniture will be exhibited at the fair. Other highlights include a barber's chair, itself a poignant metaphor for dying street culture everywhere in the world.

Suman Aggarwal of Singapore based gallery Indigo Blue Art explains her decision to bring an artist of Indian origin back to India. "Diasporic artists have the luxury of accessing a culture which despite being their own, can be zoomed in from a unique viewing vista, entirely different from someone living in that environment. As an outsider looking inwards, they are more sensitive to people, topography and even social and political issues. With this alternate gaze comes the ability for a different level of 'story-telling' through their art."

Could you tell us more about the works that you will be exhibiting at the Fair?

The collection of work in this Art Fair attempts to prod at the tenuous yet volatile relationship between China and India in the context of the "Super Power" shift. While China seems to have dominated the headlines, India has been making tracks in the background. Both countries operate on a different emotional frequency. At the risk of generalization, China is logical, practical, strategic; very 'Confucian' in its approach. India on the other hand is chaotic, emotional, democratic, expressive, 'right brained', steeped in religion, superstition and the caste system. The head on collision between the past and the present in both these countries is creating huge changes and upheavals in people's habits, lifestyles, their values and the ways in which they negotiate their own identities. *I believe that the cerebral process, the thoughts behind your narrative are vital in appreciating your works. How do you balance this intellectual process with the aesthetic quality of your art?* I am often labelled a political artist for whom all art is a statement. This is far from the truth: For me, personal identity and the liveliness of everyday culture is integral to a healthy, changing society. The older I get, the more I understand

how intricately connected everything is. We are all in transition. Over the past decade, I have changed as a person, and my relationship with the world I occupy has also changed as a result. Many times, I only understand aspects of myself once I catch myself reacting to situations. I think this has been reflected in my work and methodology. Increasingly, my objective is for the artwork to have the ability to tap into a larger, collective memory bank so that art might help to become an extension of an individual's identity honoring their memory of habitat and space. If I can do this then some sort of communication is taking place. *You believe in Art for the Masses. Where would be the ideal space for your works?* As per the original manifesto behind Project 'ASIA POP!' I have been open to all alternative 'surfaces' as vehicles for cultural messaging. With so much technology around us, it is fun to experiment with different applications and usages. Many of us are having a bit of an identity crisis. We are fast losing control on how to express the 'real' us, as we become increasingly enslaved by fads, latest phone models etc. It is a consumerist trap. I would like to hijack this mindscape by bringing my work into public places, where people literally 'stumble' across it. I am particularly attracted to spaces which symbolise cultural crossroads; waiting rooms, airport lounges, streets, taxi interiors etc are perfect transient galleries where I could insert my vocabulary. Also, by marrying my work with utilitarian applications, I deliberately try and blur the lines between high art, popular art, design and lifestyle, so that Art is not only showcased in elite galleries, but becomes part of a larger public conversation. *What is your dream Art Project like?* To coalesce the disparate singular 'Asian' identities into a plural, collective 'Asian' mirror through which we can all look at ourselves in a different light. For example, I would love to document and archive the people, their lifestyles and stories of as many as possible villages of India (starting with Karamsad in Gujarat, from where I hail), and to showcase these to the rest of the world through various lenses, frameworks and applications. The attempt is not to romanticize the past, but rather 're-validate' it by showing the interconnectedness between our past, present and future. I see these stories as umbilical cords between us and our larger collective identities, and these threads are rapidly disappearing, or are very tenuous at best. ☺



Ketna Patel | Drive slow Village ahead