

Perceptual artist

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FEW would expect petite young artist Sumakshi Singh to make profound assertions about perception, reality and art. But Delhi-based Sumakshi, who feels, "Today virtual has become our lever of negotiating with reality," not only explores what is real and how we recognise it but also translates her artistic statement into engaging art works dabbling in several mediums, from sculptures to site specific works to installations. Not surprising, her artwork, which she calls a perceptual installation and titled it "Animated Suspension Halfway Through," was a show-stopper at the third edition of the India Art Summit in New Delhi. Not only did it find an instant buyer but also involved the viewers in a dialogue. In effect, she made the viewers enter her artwork as participants, as they could actually walk through her installation and see fractured drawings, their own image and much more. The work that had autobiographical tones is actually a reflection of her own room in New Delhi to which she had returned after a stint at The School of The Art Institute, Chicago. She quips, "The idea was to create a work that everybody, not just art collectors and critics, could experience. Our perception works in a fractured manner yet we want to control it. I wanted to convey the link between illusion and reality but not in a heavy-handed manner, rather gently and actually the entire piece is based on certain perceptions."



Sumakshi Singh's work at the recent India Art Summit in New Delhi Photo: Manas Ranjan Bhui

In fact, she has been probing the perceptual space since the last two years. An alumnus of MS University, Baroda, and The School of The Art Institute, Chicago, she says that both her alma maters have impacted her, albeit differently. In Baroda, the home of great Indian masters like Bhupen Khakhar, she says, "Art criticism always hovered around subtexts while at Chicago the

visual and the concept mattered more, as often teachers would try to find the cultural context and Indianness in me." As she groped with this new dilemma of "cultural expectations" the Indian in her reacted but not in a linear simple manner by harking back to tradition. Unusual creations called micro interventions came about as a reaction to the spruced up surroundings of Chicago, where

not even a single blade of grass grows beyond the prescribed length, where you never see a flower die a natural death. She adds, "The perfect surroundings, manicured landscaped vision evoked images of India and of tree trunks growing out of walls." And presto, works made out of miniature structures of painted polymer clay along with moss, fungi, plants and other organic materials began to define her imagery.

While her work by self-admis-

sion is a kind of perversion of "neutral" space of the museum, it hasn't stopped her from exhibiting at the best galleries around the world. Her art has travelled to Galeri Kashya Hildebrand, Switzerland, Mattress Factory Museum of Contemporary Art, Pittsburgh, Van Harrison Gallery, New York, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and more recently her works are part of the prestigious exhibition Indian Highway IV show, which includes celebrated signatures of contemporary art like Subodh Gupta and Sudarshan Shetty. To be in the hallowed company, to enjoy significant moments — a lecture at Oxford, art residencies at Camargo Foundation, Cassis, France and at New York and Chicago — she thanks God and others for "indulging me so much."

Of course, it's not indulgence that is taking her places but an innate desire to move beyond the tried and tested and to re-evaluate the existing philosophy and prevalent observations of "what is art and what is not." For someone so young not only are her ideas acutely perceptive but equally innovative is the execution of her thoughts. If at Baroda she learnt the all important lesson, "Don't dictate or bully your canvas, listen to intuition instead", today she avers, "An artist can be true to oneself and art only if one comes out of the intellectual white box into everyday situation to reevaluate the familiar givens." Thus, whether she challenges the perfection of sterile surfaces or dwells on the notion of *maaya*, she lends new meanings to art viewing.

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