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Simrin Mehra Agarwal's 'The Hidden Courtyard'

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Simrin Mehra Agarwal juxtaposes vestiges and memories of royalty with present-day India to narrate the tale of an unkind passage of time

By Jyoti KalsiSpecial to Weekend Review
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GULF NEWS

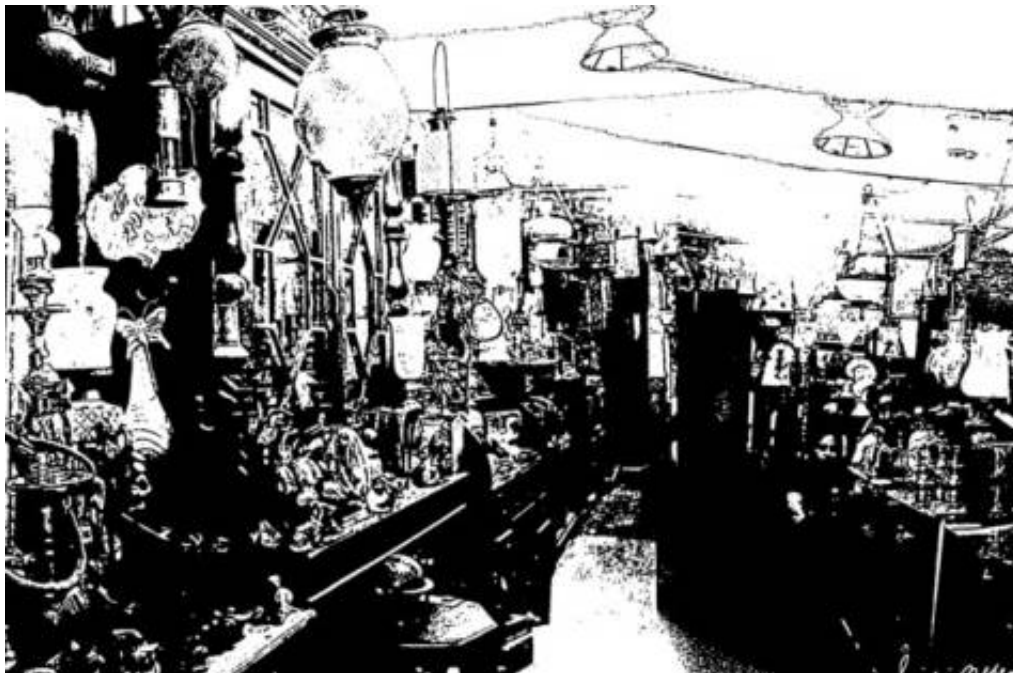


Image Credit:

Simrin Mehra Agarwal has first-hand experience of the

opulence, power and lavish lifestyle of Indian royalty because her mother belongs to the royal family of Jhargram near Kolkata. But she has also witnessed the decline in the fortunes of former maharajas after they lost their kingdoms in independent India.

Her maternal family still lives in the Jhargram palace, but like most of the magnificent palaces of those times, some sections of this one too are in a state of decay. The palace, which is filled with happy childhood memories for her, now fills her with a sense of nostalgia and loss.

As an artist, Agarwal is interested in examining the transition in India from royal grandeur to decline, from the medieval to the post colonial era and from monarchy to democracy. And she does this through the prism of her own family's history.

She weaves memories with the reality of the present to create multiple narratives about decay, fossilisation, the passage of time, changes in society, the relationship between man and nature, and between inner and outer landscapes. Her first solo show in Dubai, curated by Italian Indologist Caterina Corni, titled "The Hidden Courtyard" features a variety of artworks inspired by an inner courtyard in the oldest, uninhabited part of the Jhargram palace.

"This show is about changing times, old memories and the people who lived here. Even though they are not here anymore, I can feel their energy and spirit. And I can see beauty in the decay as this crumbling structure gradually merges with nature. This hidden courtyard is like a fossil that holds traces of the past, and I want to reveal its secrets," says the artist.

She does this in many ways. In one series of works, she has created light-boxes featuring detailed black and white digital drawings of various portions of the hidden courtyard, such as the magnificent dome,

filigreed ceilings and spiral staircases. But also visible is the moss on the pillars, the plants growing out of cracks in the walls and the verandas entwined by branches.

“This series maps the journey of these man-made forms from conception to degeneration. And there is an undercurrent of animism in the way I have shown these antiques as objects that are in transit between an inanimate form to a living organic one, gradually developing into a hybrid being with a new identity. I used light-boxes to create the surreal effect of the energy and spirit,” she says.

The relationship between man-made structures and nature is further highlighted in a series of woodcut relief drawings on paper. Here Agarwal draws attention to the similarity between mechanical forms and decorative patterns found in the palace to wildflowers and other organic forms growing around it. The works on white paper, handmade in Sicily, are designed to look like fossils that carry barely visible traces of past memories and offer a link between seen and unseen, past and present.

Agarwal’s colourful paintings of postage stamps issued by the erstwhile royal states of India are a vivid reminder of the grandeur of the past, and the present circumstances of the royals featured on the stamps. In a more personal piece, she has used photographs of several generations of women from her own family. The faded, sometimes damaged, pictures, mounted on light-boxes offer a rare glimpse into their private lives.

“These were strong, modern women, and these pictures give us an idea of changing traditions and the changing role of women in India. They are like fossils, frozen in time and filled with memories,” she says.

The antiques, artefacts and decorative items lying neglected in the palace also carry innumerable

memories. They appear in Agarwal's pencil and charcoal drawings and acrylic paintings as amorphous blends of inanimate and organic forms.

A recurring motif in her work is a grand chandelier. "This chandelier has been hanging in the central atrium for centuries. It is a witness to the lives of the people and to the passage of time, and has many stories to tell," she says.

A painting of this chandelier is the centre-piece of an installation containing an assemblage of acrylic on wood paintings of various objects in the palace such as carpets, chairs, latticed windows, lamps, clocks, murals and even a set of ancient keys. While some of these paintings are bright and sharp, others appear hazy.

"These are fragments of my memories — some vivid and others dim. And this work examines the different hierarchical systems of memory, the various levels of clarity within our memory and the process of fragmentation and filtration of information through which we manipulate or alter our memory. These objects are painted as they evolved and formed various links in my memory. By placing them randomly, out of their original historic context I want to bring out the geometry and grandeur of these ancient structures, which were once appreciated, but have now become pieces of junk," she says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts enthusiast based in Dubai.

The show has been organised in association with 1x1 Art Gallery and will run at Empty 10 and JAMM galleries until October 14.