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Art of the matter

Artist, stand-up comic, writer, poet, graphic designer and illustrator, Jenny Bhatt's work is a cultural critique. **Dhanishta Shah** talks to the self-styled social commentator

PICS: SHANTANU DAS



IT'S not everyday that you get to scribble on the walls of an artist's room! Jenny Bhatt's paintings may radiate colour and be intricately designed, but the walls of her room have been intentionally kept bare. This is the canvas for her friends and visitors to doodle on!

Jenny was born into a traditional Gujarati business family. While her family exposed her to the nuances of Indian heritage and culture, it also nurtured an environment where she found the wings to explore her own creativity. That she chose a creative field is not surprising. Her mother's family is into filmmaking, direction, cinematography, writing and designing. Though her father's side of the family are business people, they have always been inclined towards the arts. Her grandfather, in fact, was an avid photographer. Not surprisingly, the heritage residence that she lives in is adorned with books and artefacts that point to an appreciation of all things beautiful.

Needless to say, art was her favourite subject at school and so she went on to study visual communications at the Sophia Polytechnic. She worked with a couple of ad agencies, Lintas being one of them. It was there that she devoured books on pop art and soon her focus turned to art. "I realised that I was an artist not a designer," she says.

Jenny has over the years fused the distinct worlds of digital art and painting, earning along the way the scepticism of purists, but as she states,

"There are bound to be biases, but that's not my problem. I can't educate people in a day!"

The technology of art

How do the two worlds of art and technology merge for her? While art has been her forté, her graduate studies and work experience have fuelled and sharpened her technical expertise. "It honed my craft well. The precision with which I paint now—there are very few fine art artists who can paint that way. I can also paint text in font!" states Jenny.

Journeying in tandem with these two worlds has, of course, not been without its share of challenges. Much earlier, when she created a collection of digital lithographs, galleries were hesitant to exhibit it. But for Jenny, technology was just another tool that afforded endless possibilities. "I created interactive art as well. There is a lot that's possible. But, at the moment I am being a little realistic," she states.

There came a time when her mother's illness led to her reading a lot about healing and energy. From this experience, sprung the desire to influence people's lives through energy—more specifically, though colours. "We don't realise it, but what we see around us affects our minds, and what affects our minds affects our bodies," she says. She thus used only positive imagery, which also evolved into meditative work.

Her art is featured on items such as T-shirts, mouse pads, mugs, figurines and so on. This meets her desire for her art to be accessible to all as opposed to her canvases which only a select few can buy.

Jenny's relationship with art is deep rooted. She confesses she gets bored easily. Maybe it is this that leads her to explore the endless nuances of her creativity. She always has one foot in uncharted territory.

From paintings, prints on objects, interactive art, shows and written works, her thoughts colour diverse areas. "I could make meditative art all my life. But, that's a machine doing it, not a mind. If the mind has to grow, things must change, evolve. That's the reality of life. Either I am multi-faceted or I am commitment-phobic!" she says with a smile.

Another facet of her personality, which is, in a way, connected to her art is the element of humour. Following her mother's prolonged illness and death, she started attending stand-up comedy shows to de-stress. This is when she realised the healing power of humour that is also not "that esoteric that it alienates a whole section of society". The world of stand-up comedy beckoned and she does select comedy shows when she can.

Humour has been a constant feature in her paintings. Take for instance, the series *Moksha Shots*. The concept has evolved into a series of art-shows, the latest of which is called *Episode 12, The Conquest of The Mind*. It deals with how people, institutions even traditions try to control and conquer a person's mind. They are all represented through the *mandala*, which is something that is a part of the collective consciousness of Indians. It helps them connect to the theme since the visual language is familiar. The series has interesting concepts such as the "nostalgia *mandala*" or the "E-commerce *mandala*". Not only do they make one smile even laugh but they also set the viewer thinking—an unlikely combination in a traditional Indian setting!

Jenny takes her responsibility as an artist seriously. "My concern now is to make people think about their own reality in a different way. Somebody is always trying to conquer your mind or influence you. Once you become self-aware, you have won half the battle," she says. "I can only be instrumental in making people think."

She had a cartoon strip in a magazine when she was just eighteen that ran for five years. "The protagonist was a barefoot artist and all the other characters were parts of his personality," she says. These characters can be seen all over her paintings today.

Jenny has also written extensively on art, humour and spirituality and has had poems published in literary journals including *The Little Magazine* and *The Brown Critique*. She has also illustrated nine children's books and written a book on humorous art.



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Art engulfs her world, but the passionate artist also likes to travel whenever she can. She has participated in several group exhibitions including those in New York, Sydney, London and Amsterdam.

What is it that feeds her creativity? The answer is everyday life. Her influences range from Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, trance music and quantum physics to surreal, pop and psychedelic art. "I have started using very personal experiences through art. I got encouraged to do that on the comedy circuit. When you take up something very personal, it is also very universal," she asserts. Everybody connects to these experiences, more so "in a society that does not give its members a voice". The result is that it is therapeutic for the artist and for the listeners or viewers.

"I resisted beauty in my work for the longest time," she says looking back. But, beauty has crept in now and is even celebrated. She has also learnt to appreciate the beauty of culture, which again comes across passionately in her work.

Our conversation reverts to work again. "If I don't work, I'll think myself into falling sick!" she confesses. Thank God for that! We wouldn't like to see Jenny retire anytime soon. She still has to catalyse a lot of thinking! ☺