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Stories in paint

Celebrated artist Rekha Rodwittiya talks to **RAMYA SARMA** about her work, feminism and political views.

With the new government settling in, everyone has a different view on what it will do for the nation and for individuals. Rekha Rodwittiya — who has a penchant for all things bright and brilliant, a passion for family and an abiding involvement with cats — has her own definitions of politics, change and being a woman. And she is immensely quotable, sometimes enigmatically so. Excerpts from an interview

"I've always identified with things that are marginal." You were responding to a question on your feminism...

The marginal is a space of life that holds, in my definition, many areas of human existence that fail to receive the attention that they require, often due to prejudice and the lack of sensitised awareness for issues that are not comfortably comprehended or populist in nature.

I was born a much-desired girl child in a middle-class family and grew up covered by a mantle of empowered confidence that my parents inspired. My own personal choices have always been outside the prescriptive dictates and so the attitudes of traditional mindsets that prefer conformity continuously make a challenging backdrop. My preoccupation as an artist is with human existence, where one observes how areas of the marginalised are the ones most fraught with tensions, and which are the most problematic to bring inclusiveness to; yet it is these precise energies of conflict that provide greater possibilities of clarity to be finally realised through the endeavours of focus. India, with its converging histories from over the centuries that include diverse and varied influences, makes for a huge tapestry into which contemporary life reflects many worlds of differences, suggesting that plural co-existence is accommodated and straddled within this multicultural society as a proud heritage.

"My perception is sewn into the fabric of Indian life and politics." Given how Indian politics is changing, is your perception evolving too?

I came back to live and work in India after completing a two-year MA program at the Royal College of Art in London in 1984, turning down a lucrative invitation to begin my professional career as an artist in the U.K. This was a choice motivated by my political beliefs to situate my life within my own country, and to engage with its progress as a participant, with a clear idea of the areas that were of concern for me.

To contextualise who I am within the evolving changing spaces of Indian life and politics is what determines how I understand the territory of the concerns I am examining, and to know what is required from me to negotiate this space to keep it real and effective.

"Culturally and historically, colours signify something." You use colour with intelligence and subtlety, but what do they mean to you?

My colours are strident, almost insistent of attention. The colour palette that feeds my art works is informed by cultural traditions and fac-

tors of influence that correlate to the ideas I wish to deliver.

"India now is a cacophony of multiple roars." Does this 'colour' your art and your life?

I believe that mature art holds radical positions that contextualise and examine prevailing issues of its time. Art is a space that strategises arguments, problematises as a method of introspection, is confrontational, is often used as a subversive tool, and is not a space that is designed to entertain the consent of another to validate its existence. This is what independent authorship and artistic autonomy must mean within a democratic space of a secular nation. The world that we place ourselves central to becomes a tapestry patterned by incidents and histories that demand our participation willingly or otherwise. As artists, we often become the chroniclers of larger narratives that hold both the particularity of our lives as well as a wider world of information.

You said that you like exploring "the politics of relationships". There have been many changes in your own world of relationships. How has that affected your work?

I was attempting to highlight that, in my own life, I hold myself very strictly accountable to the personal politics that governs my existence at all times. Though gender equality is not a reality in this nation, there is nonetheless a multitude of voices that stridently call to attention the need to dispel the bigoted stereotype of gender bias, and seek to accommodate the changes that we know to be possible and real.

However, if I am to address the politics of relationships I share and value, I have never found them to be in conflict with the values I have chosen to determine how to live my life. I understood that as an artist the most liberating lesson learnt is that one's own sense of belonging is held in multiple histories that form the stories of the world.

What are you working on these days?

My art often employs myth and legends as territories of references from which the notion of life, viewed as a journey of assimilation, is explored. The photographic image reappears after I put down my camera 28 years ago.

A series of personal occurrences brought back the connection — I had to take photographs once again. The bodies of my female protagonists now become the site of retrieval of personal histories. The painted faces of these figures become the masks to an otherwise intensely personal space of deliverance.