

# Black Poetry



PHOTOS COURTESY: NIKHIL CHOPRA AND CHATTERJEE & LAL

As he sheds regal finery to play a female warrior, performance artiste Nikhil Chopra brings the past into the present

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OVER 70 years ago, Subhas Chandra Bose had launched an armed struggle against the British with his popular war cry "Give me blood and I will give you freedom". Goa-based artiste Nikhil Chopra uses this line as the title for his performance art as he assumes the character of a female warrior. Willing to sacrifice her life for freedom, the ominous battle will continue for 50 hours, with Chopra emerging as a victorious black monster in the climatic finale. The battleground is the 2014 Singapore International Festival of Arts beginning on August 14, the eve of India's independence.

"Bose sought support from the larger Indian community, across Southeast Asia, including Singapore, Malaysia and Japan. Women played an important role in the Indian National Army," says the artiste, who, for the performance, is referring to Rani of Jhansi as a "symbol of empowerment". "There is an interesting dichotomy, with regard to split ideas during the freedom struggle and the alliances Bose sought. I am also looking at the economic success of Singapore after the second World War, the way maps were drawn. I'll bicycle as part of the performance — the imperial army cycled between Japan and Singapore," says the 39-year-old. In Mumbai, an appropriate costume is being designed and the lights for the sets too. Unlike his usual venue which is an art gallery, in Singapore the platform is theatrical.

To think of stage fright is preposterous. Chopra was a masters student at the Ohio State University when he



(From top left) Nikhil Chopra in scenes from *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing VI*, 2010, inspired by his grandfather; and in *Blackening*, 2013 at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

conceived *Sir Raja* in 2003. A stereotype of the Indian prince from the colonial era, the character was at the end of a 350-foot red carpet, seated at a table with food, fruits and flowers, urging viewers to question the excesses. In 2005, he was surrounded by velvet drapes and adorned in silk and jewels for *The Death of Sir Raja III*. He resurfaced though in 2013, in an "introspection" of sorts, at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. For this much-acclaimed performance in UK, Chopra had endorsement from Marina Abramovic, one of the biggest names globally in performance art. Over 17 days, Chopra played numerous characters, from a loin-clothed native gobbling chocolate cake to Sir Raja and The Queen, wearing a lacy dress. He was also *Yog Raj Chitrakar*,



the protagonist loosely based on his paternal grandfather Yog Raj Chopra. Educated at Goldsmiths, University of London, in the 1920s, he was a landscape painter who captured the grandeur of Kashmir Valley. Nikhil projected him in various guises, from an explorer to conqueror and painter. He even used one of his paintings from the 1930s as the basis of his own wall-drawing for *Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing VIII*.

It was his grandfather who discovered the artist in him, when he found the class 10 student doodling in his notebook. The commerce graduate was encouraged to travel and two years later he was studying art at MS University of Baroda, followed by the Maryland Institute College of Art in the US. He returned home with *Sir Raja*. "I conceptualised him in the US, but was eager to bring him to India to see how he is received. It was a packed house. It's the artists who are perhaps reluctant to experiment, not the audience in India," says Chopra. That was 2005. There has been no looking back since. If in 2009 he was at the 53rd Venice Biennale, in 2008-2009 he pitched a tent outside Serpentine

Gallery in UK for *Indian Highway*, where Chopra walked about as a fur-coated gentleman, as an Ottoman general. At the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art last year as part of the series *Blackening* he engaged with the mall environs of the museum. More recently, in February 2014, at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in the UK, Chopra broke the usual practise of remaining silent during his performance, interacting with the audience who posed for a portrait. "Each performance is sight specific and this called for interaction, the people posing were immigrants, each with their own story," says Chopra, adding that by not naming his characters now, they have more of him than earlier.

For now, the Singapore outing awaits. One can expect the usual — drama, art, theatrics, action — and the unusual as charcoal drawings replace ink. "There is a history to it. Ink is associated with the region and also in the more potent sense of ink and blood in literature," says Chopra. The climax will have him doused in ink. "The intention is not to be a tragic hero, rather poetic, like black poetry," he says.