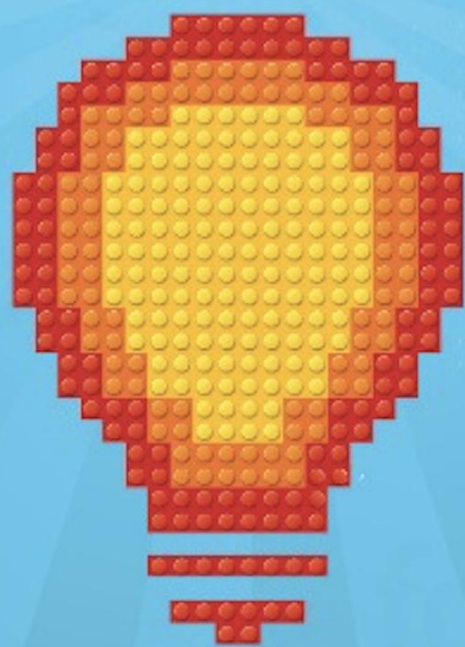


A WORKING GUIDE FOR CREATIVE PROFESSIONALS

THE
Smart
ARTIST



artbuzz

The underlying concept in my work is that everything begins and ends at a point and when this point moves, what it leaves behind is a line. Apart from that I have no other stories, messages or hidden meanings in my visual language.

When did you first decide to take up art as a career? What steps did you take to become an artist?

I was a commerce student and while pursuing my Bachelors in Commerce, I started working in a business intelligence firm. Just as I was finishing my studies, I realized that I wanted to take up art as a career instead. I always had an interest in art, but I didn't get the right kind of guidance early on. Once I decided to pursue this line, I started researching on how to become an artist and found out about the BFA program at the College of Art in Delhi. The first time I applied, I didn't get through, and I kept re-applying for the next two years without any luck. Meanwhile, Amity School of Fine Arts was also opening and I decided to enroll in their arts program. Even though going to Amity wasn't my first choice, I have to say that I got the right teachers at the right time. Once I finished my Bachelors, I was still keen on going to the College of Art, so I applied for their Masters program. To my surprise, I got through in the first attempt!

Do you think receiving a formal education in art has helped you in your career?

Yes, I think it's very important to have a formal education because when you study about art, especially history or aesthetics, it helps you to build your practice. If you don't have that base, it's more likely that you'll see something online and start aping it. That is not how your visual language evolves. It has been a decade

Chetnaa is a deeply intuitive artist whose work falls under the category of non-representational art.

Her imagery is largely inspired from the landscape and architecture of her city, expressing keen observations of the metropolis translated into an eloquent schematic of lines and markers. Born and brought up in Delhi, Chetnaa completed her MFA in Painting from the College of Art. The artist received the AIFACS All India Drawing Award and was named Emerging Artist of the Year by Glenfiddich in 2014.

In this interview, she tells us about her artistic journey so far and how she switched careers to become a professional artist.




since my Masters and my language is still evolving because, every now and then, I take time off to read. In my opinion, higher education teaches you how to do proper research and go deep into a subject or a medium. Not just in art, but in any field.

For someone who hasn't studied art, what do you suggest they should read?

For a self-taught artist or someone who is beginning their journey as an artist, I feel it's important for them to know the history of art. I would seriously recommend young people to read about Indian as well as global art history because in all probability what you are making right now has been done before. So it's good to know the history and how a particular style came into existence. And if a certain style, period or artist influences you, then get in-depth knowledge about it. I'm positive it will improve your practice in one way or another.

As far as I understand, your work is an amalgam of geometry, minimalism and abstraction. How did you develop this distinctive style?

After I completed my Bachelors, I had a year off before I could apply for my Masters. I started reading and researching about Bauhaus, Wassily Kandinsky and non-representational art and slowly found myself being drawn to abstract art.



In my opinion, higher education teaches you how to do proper research and go deep into a subject or a medium.

I started exploring the latter, produced a large number of works in that one year and continued my experiments with abstraction during my Masters as well. My professor, Abhimanyu VG really helped me to develop my visual language. He introduced me to artists like Zarina Hashmi, Nasreen Mohamedi and Agnes Martin whose work had a huge impact on me.

You specialized in painting, but you've branched out into installations and experimental works.

I've created installations with laser lights, neon and regular lights. I think these experiments are parallel to my practice since I make geometric works that are quite linear, mostly playing around with straight lines. I got the idea of using laser lights when I was at

a party and saw these lasers falling in a straight line. I felt that it was a great way to bring my drawings to life and give them a three-dimensional feel. Eventually, I created an infinity laser installation in which there was only one source of laser, and I strategically placed mirrors around it. The result was wonderful with thousands of lines intersecting or diverging from each other.

Did you figure that out on your own or did you have help?

I did it myself. My first laser installation was showcased at the inaugural edition of United Art Fair at the VIP entrance. I rented a programmable laser machine which was obnoxiously priced and also hired a specialist to set up the program and handle it for three days. More than the result, I really enjoyed the process of producing such work. For my static installations, I use a medical laser, which is harmless.

Tell us about your creative process. How do you conceptualize your works?

I usually start by making a small sketch and then I convert it into a larger work. Initially, this process was much slower, and I would spend ages playing around with lines and experimenting with compositions. I take references from the city I live in. I use a lot of road maps, street wires and poles that follow you

everywhere. The underlying concept in my work is that everything begins and ends at a point, and when this point moves, what it leaves behind is a line. Apart from that I have no other stories, messages or hidden meanings as part of my visual language.

Do people try to find hidden messages in your work?

Yes, they do. In the beginning, many people used to come up to me and ask, "What is this?" or "What does this mean?" Nowadays, I feel like the general public is much more familiar with non-representational art. Compared to others, my art is very straightforward and self-explanatory. For instance, this year at the India Art Fair, I created a set of White-on-White embossed works, and when I wrote the concept note, I kept it very simple: "What you see is what you see" by Frank Stella. There is no hidden message. It's the play of material and the method, the decomposition of basic shapes.

Do you think having your own studio space is better than working at home?

I've recently taken a 1-BHK on rent and I work from there. I would say that if you can afford a studio, then you should go for it. I worked for many years at home and had someone who would take care of the day-to-day business so that I was free to focus on my work. But after shifting my

work to a studio, I feel like I've developed a proper routine. It's as if I'm going to a temple every day. Having a studio can bring you a sense of peace and calm. I clean it myself and do my work however I want to. Moreover, if you want people to come and see your art, it's much more convenient and professional to call them to a studio rather than your home.

Are you a full-time artist or do you work on the side?

Currently, I am a full-time artist. I have done a lot of teaching in the past and taken up part-time, visiting-faculty jobs. I have taught at an architecture college and in schools, and conducted one-day workshops with corporate offices and colleges. I feel it's important as teaching gives you a lot of ideas and keeps you up to date with your subject. And it also helped me to support myself. If your work is not selling, you need money to pay the bills, and teaching is a good source of income!

When you started selling works, how did you set your price points?

Initially, I was pricing my work very high. In hindsight, I think it's more important to ensure that your work goes places. If it's hanging in someone's house, you know that there are people who love it and who want to get up to it every morning. At the end of the day, that is more important. To all the young artists, I would like to say: don't worry about selling or making

money early on. Rather, you should concentrate on making good works and pricing it just right. Try to set a price point where you feel happy and the customer who is buying will feel equally happy. Sadly, in my case I started with a high price, and it wasn't appropriate for me to bring down my prices once people had bought my works. Even so, over time I have reduced it.

You received the Glenfiddich Emerging Artist Award in 2014. Tell us about the whole journey, how did that happen?

Someone who was in the previous year's competition suggested that I should apply for the award. I went online and uploaded my work on their website along with my artist statement. After two weeks, I got a call informing me that my work has been selected for the final jury. Out of more than two hundred online applicants, I was among the top five artists who were selected. During interviews with the jury, they asked me, "What is the story behind your work?" I was very honest about my work and I told them that there was no story. Surprisingly, they were so excited that they finally had an artist who had no story! When I won the award, they interviewed Andy Fairgrieve (curator of the Glenfiddich Artist in Residence program) and others about why they selected me. They said that, firstly, they found honesty in my work as well as



Initially, I was pricing my work very high, but now I think it's more important to ensure that your work goes places.

my narrative and, secondly, if they were to put my work alongside that of someone from the US or anywhere for that matter, it will not look country-specific. It was universal. And I think the fact that I could speak well also worked in my favor. Now, I often mentor finalists who get selected for the award on what to say and how to present their work.

Since we're on the subject, how do you tackle concept notes and artist statements?

I do a lot of research and keep an eye out for artists who are working in the same visual language as me. For instance, I did a set of etching prints and embossed prints. To write about those works, I studied about minimalism and brushed up on the history of the movement. During my

research, I came across Frank Stella and his work, and that gave me inspiration to frame my concept note. I think that the background of BFA/MFA training, especially writing a dissertation, is an experience that lasts your whole life. It's always there and forms the basis of your research. Even now, if I have to write anything, the first thing I do is to read.

Have you ever felt that you were heavily inspired by another artist's works?

Yes. Last year at the India Art Fair, I displayed the set of fifty-one works that I made during my residency in Scotland. A well-known art critic and curator came up and said, "I see a young Zarina emerging here". I took it as a compliment because I admire Zarina's work and I like what she does. And while I may be inspired, I do think there is a difference between her work and mine. She is working with 'displacement' and exploring memories of her past through non-representational medium, while I am working with dissecting 'space' and 'shape'. I guess there are similarities in our practice when it comes to conceptualizing and producing a work. So, for a viewer, it's possible to see influences of her work in mine.

Do you have an online portfolio or do you keep printed catalogues of your work?

For my first solo, I had printed catalogues.

For my second, I did an e-catalogue. And now I have a PPT or PDF which I usually send to gallerists who inquire about my work. It's arranged chronologically by year. I've put my line drawings, monochromatic works and light works under separate categories, and now that I have done ceramics there is a different category for that as well.

Do you feel that working with different mediums and materials has helped you to grow as an artist?

Yes, I believe it has. I worked with ceramics for two years, and if I want to go and produce a body of work in ceramics tomorrow, I can. I experimented with embossing on an etching press, and I can produce work in that medium as well. In fact, I took up a project recently with the Print Club in Delhi, where I experimented with Linocuts and Cyanotypes. I was a bit apprehensive at first because it was a month-long commitment which meant that I had to stop my practice and take on something that I hadn't done before. But after the first two weeks, I got the hang of it. The fact is that even if you don't end up making works in these media, at least you have the skill. It's there with you, and you can try something different whenever you get stuck in a rut or want to branch out.

Do you have a mentor or an advisor?

For the past 8 or 9 years, I have been

associated with Kavita Nayar. She is my mentor, my go-to person for everything. She is a well-known print maker and runs an NGO called Kala Sakshi Memorial Trust in memory of her daughter. We give out scholarships to students who are still studying, either pursuing their Masters or in their final year of Bachelors. I was one of the first students to receive this scholarship, and I have been working with them ever since.

When you make new works, do you run them by her?

Yes, I do tend to seek her approval. Sometimes she says something very strongly about my work, and then I stop working for a week! But it always helps me to steer myself in the right direction. While you're in college, everyone is working together, and you can talk to your professors and your peers on a daily basis. But once you're working in your own space, you have to search for that kind of interaction. Otherwise, you'll assume that whatever you are making is good, but in the end it might not be. Someone else's observations from another perspective always helps. In my journey, I also met Kanika Anand, a curator who is now a dear friend. She is another go-to person whenever I'm making new works. It's good to have someone like that who will give you an honest opinion.

Can you share an instance where you've benefited from an interaction in your professional network?

It has just been a year since I got in touch with Anupa Mehta, an independent curator and art consultant. When she asked to see my work, I sent her an e-catalogue from a previous exhibition. She politely scolded me via e-mail, saying that after practicing for so many years, I shouldn't still be sending out e-catalogues. So, with her guidance, I prepared a presentation listing all the works neatly in categories and arranged chronologically. Recently, I sent this PPT to a gallerist and she was so happy that she almost offered me a solo show! Only then did I realize that extra effort in making a PPT portfolio actually made a lot of difference. It might not work every time, but in this case it definitely left an impression. I was very grateful to Anupa for helping me at the right time.

What advice would you give to young artists who are starting out, or transitioning from an art student to a professional artist?

My sincerest advice to young artists would be to have perseverance. Don't get influenced if a work that you made sells. It doesn't mean that you have to keep producing that type of work. For all you know, it might be a phase in your practice. I had a phase where I was making layered *trellis* or *jalis*, like window designs, and



My sincerest advice to young artists would be to have perseverance. Don't get influenced if a work that you made sells. It doesn't mean that you have to keep producing that type of work.

they were in demand. But after a certain period of time, I outgrew them and moved beyond them to a new language. It's important to constantly evolve and move out of your comfort zone every now and then. ■