

Rooted in Nature

French filmmaker Agnès Varda once famously said, “If we opened people up, we’d find landscapes.” Artist Nibha Sikander’s practice, since she moved seven years ago to her ancestral home in Murud-Janjira along the lush Konkan coastline, has evolved from creating close-to-real paper sculptures of moths and birds in their entirety, to focusing on their specific parts. Deconstructing and magnifying bits of her choosing, set apart from the complete body, her latest creations resemble abstract forms—a script perhaps and most definitely landscapes—bringing alive Varda’s thought.

Sikander’s unique work is a confluence of her familial inheritance—one of nature lovers and artists. It now finds a language of its own, as she prepares for her upcoming solo, her second with Mumbai-based Tarq art gallery. On a visit to her cosy studio, housed within her abode by the sea, one encounters boxes full of bird feathers, insects whole and remnant, books, work material and tools, all neatly arranged in stacks and drawers—truly an artist’s laboratory. Here, over a generous rendezvous, one also meets her process and her journey.

Words & Photographs by TEJAL PANDEY

With the monsoons, fresh runnels of water flow across the verdant property^[1] where artist Nibha Sikander lives with her artist husband and their two dogs. One can hear the sea from the patio. Right after the rains, says Sikander, is the best time to document the moths. But over the years, with environmental changes and light pollution, their numbers have considerably dwindled, and she often finds herself turning to her earlier records, grateful for having photographed them copiously. With birds too, Sikander studies what she finds in her immediate environs. Images and angles they've been shot in become important references. She relies just as much on memory, recalling details that pictures might distort, but those that her mind's eye has retained. These help with crucial decisions like picking the right paper, which can sometimes take half a day, and impacts the final artwork immensely. How else does one show iridescence? Sikander beams, pulling out a sheet of shiny pearl paper, as though in response, sourced from Hong Kong last year, where she exhibited her work at Art Basel 2023.



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Paper is the prime ingredient in Sikander's works, and hence the most cherished. Even the tiniest bits that look like fur, dots, or specks—easily mistaken for paint—are all paper cut-outs.^[2] Her negatives, the leftover sheets after she cuts through them, have previously been displayed as artworks too, and stand proof of her intricate process. For volume, Sikander uses paper again, built up with glue, moulding it to the shapes she desires. To create a shaded effect, she layers papers of different colours, creating a paper merge. Her tools—a Japanese exacto knife, which is a gift from her husband's travels and which strangely resembles a bird with a beak, has been a "life changer," as has the Fiskars cutting board and an array of ceramic trays and bowls to hold the fragments in one place. On a good day, she gets in about seven hours of work, till daylight lasts, with a break or two for lunch and sundries. So, with a set of six exacto knives, each meant to last her a decade, she is "covered for the next 60 years," she claims, very matter-of-factly. The board, however, though equally efficient, takes on most of the work pressure (quite literally), and so needs a switch every few months.

For Sikander, cutting is much like drawing, only with a cutter or a design knife. Although as a student at the Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU) in Baroda, Sikander did explore painting and figuration, it was paper-cutting that she felt a tug towards. Her earliest works, as a Masters graduate, were an amalgam of both painting and cutting, and involved reworking images from popular culture. The shift to a nature-focused practice happened closer to her move to Murud, and rather organically. She reoriented herself with a place of childhood summers, and to an environment familiar to her. She recalls being surrounded by books on birds and trees while growing up, owing to the many tree lovers and birders—including well-known ornithologist and naturalist Salim Ali—as close relatives. A moment that has stayed with her is the sighting of the Great Indian hornbill on a family trip to Nameri National Park in Assam, organised by the Bombay Natural History Society.

Books remain a great source of learning material for Sikander^[3]. Her copy of *Field Guide to Indian Moths* by entomologist and educationist Dr. V. Shubhalaxmi, with hordes of little notes jutting out, is her "Bible". Image displays in natural history museums also interest her

deeply, especially the way insects are mounted, which find resonance in her own framing and compositions. Since working on a complete set for a show takes about two years, Sikander sometimes feels distanced from work made right at the onset. This is why she schedules creating her compositions—something she enjoys passionately—only for later in the process, saving the best for last. The deeper she explores her own practice, the more the range of possibilities that emerge. And the more abstract her art becomes, the more essential it is to articulate the several parts of the whole in a language that primarily makes most sense to her. A single composition can have thousands of layers^[4], often presented as diptychs and triptychs or a single-line display, set within a frame. Creating these as well as placing them within a certain flow is a process that demands complete dedication, to which Sikander is well-adapted by now.

Uninterrupted work can mean hours, days, weeks and months of structured time. This leaves Sikander little energy to expend on social media pursuits. But the one new-age indulgence she allows herself is watching crime thrillers and detective mystery shows on over-the-top platforms. An ardent fan of British crime, she is currently watching *DCI Banks*, with American show *Homicide: Los Angeles* already topping her next-to-watch list. David Attenborough is another perennial favourite. When the weather is fine, around February to early March, she loves unwinding with a swim in the ocean, a short walk from her studio. As the visit comes to a close, we make our way to the beach, with Sikander's dogs for company. What meets the eye is rain-swept swathes of grey sky and stormy waters^[5]. No day for a swim. Sikander points to a hillock in the distance where, in kinder weather, one can trek up to catch the sunset and a single mangrove at the other end which, Sikander shares, her mother tended to for years in the hope of ridding it of washed-up plastic. Both feel like memories from just yesterday. [•]



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