

Coronart: How isolation is inspiring Indian artists

Whether it's capturing loneliness on a canvas or the sounds outside their locked-down homes, artists are responding to the pandemic in their own unique ways

Sonam Joshi & Himanshi Dhawan | TNN

Dhruvi Acharya had been worrying about the coronavirus since mid-February, when she and her son returned from Cape Town and the US respectively. On the day of the janta curfew, the Mumbai-based artist and her family had already been in self-isolation for 10 days. So she decided to go to her studio every day and just paint out her mental preoccupations.

Her pensive watercolours are numbered by the days of the lockdown. In one, migrants carry their belongings on their heads, while another shows a woman lying on a bed of roses with the virus symbolically attacking her respiratory tract.

As Covid-19 sends the world into a tailspin, art has provided succour to many. People recreated famous paintings and photos from their homes, and made classical art memes (think Mona Lisa in a mask). Artists are making sense of the chaos through their work — even famous graffiti artist Banksy shared photos of a bathroom decorated with his signature rats.

We turn to art when we are in need of some comfort, says Acharya. "My paintings are about the psychological, social and physical impact of the pandemic — fear of touching anyone or anything, social distancing, loneliness, vigilance against the virus, and fears of the disease and its effects on the human body," says Acharya, 48, whose series titled *Painting in the Time of Corona* is now being exhibited and sold online, with the proceeds going to charities.

BRUSH WITH HUMOUR

Gurugram-based artist duo Jiten Thakral and Sumir Tagra have started an online social distancing handbook titled *Solitude*, which comprises 21 "single-player games that can be played in a confined space". Some are tongue-in-cheek, such as *Car Yell* which encourages you to release your anger by going to your car and shouting, while the more serious *Mask Match* offers guidance on making your own cloth mask. "We wanted to take away people's burden using humour," say the duo, who've had multiple exhibitions and residencies cancelled. "It has also kept us busy and is our personal journey."

SOUND OF QUARANTINE

Other artists are also using social media to reach more viewers. Delhi-based Tanya Goel usually works on abstract paintings, but has recently been recording videos



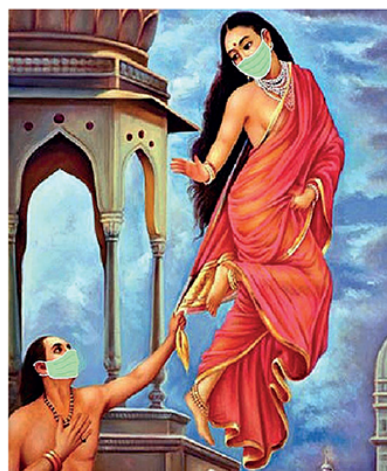
ART AND SOUL: Dhruvi Acharya's *Painting in the Time of Corona*; (right) A Raja Ravi Varma painting gets a makeover

that explore the idea of reconnecting with nature, the sounds and sights of her garden during her home quarantine. The interactive project has got responses from around the world, in the form of poems, videos and photos. "I haven't had such a visceral response to any art I've made," Goel says. "This pandemic made me realise how art can help us resolve anxiety and confront our fears."

Her work is part of the online *Surviving Self-Quarantine* series by Goa-based arts centre Sunaparanta. "As we spend time isolated and separated from people, we wanted to question art's purpose," says curator Leandre D'Souza. "Can it be a tool to reconnect us to what it means to be human by reminding us of the simplest things in our daily lives?"

SKETCHING LONELINESS

It also features Mumbai-based Kedar Dhondu who invites people to send their photos, which he turns into pencil drawings, and Pallavi Paul, a video artist and film researcher who started a participatory archive of sounds called "share your quiet." Sounds of birds chirping, the call of a muezzin to the faithful blend in with the sounds of vehicles and the sea. "With the janta curfew and the taali, thaali instruction, sound became a marker of public spirit and a reflection of collective action. But there were some of us who chose to withdraw from it. It was not silence. It was a quiet and I wanted to create space for that," she says. The call for entries has been met with a flood of recordings from China, Italy, US and India.



LAUGHTER MEDICINE

For Mumbai-based graphic designer and illustrator Sid Mishra, art was a way of puncturing some of the intensity and seriousness that has surrounded people during the pandemic. So on her Instagram handle @smishdesigns, social distancing is portrayed through Raja Ravi Varma and Mughal paintings and hand sanitisers have become the new gods. "I could feel fear hanging heavy in the air and I wanted to channelise that in my work but with humour," says Mishra.

Nostalgia and isolation appear to be part of Tara Anand's artistic response. In Mumbai, having left her art course in New York midway, Anand, 21, started drawing her friends as she FaceTimed them. She ran out of material, substituting pastel pencils with ink, chalk and crayon. "It started as fun, but later I tried to capture my memories of my favourite teachers or my friends making faces. I realised that seeing them on screen is the closest I'll be to them in a while," she said.

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