

Top of the Line

An exhibition of sketches by architects listens to the sound of imagination

SHINY VARGHESE

SWISS-GERMAN ARTIST Paul Klee spoke of the relationship between the buried roots and the visible crown of a tree, suggesting that nobody expects them to be identical. As one strolls around Gallery 1 AQ in Delhi, this statement seems to pronounce itself in the drawings and sketches of architects. On display are the primary sketches of iconic projects and the final building on the ground. Every now and then, one might see a glimpse of the finished structure through a drawing, but most of them only present the germ of an idea.

The "Voice of Sketches" exhibition, curated by Delhi-based architects Verendra Wakhloo and Rachit Srivastava, takes a look at the primordial spontaneity of sketching, the first impulse for most architects and designers. Hosted at the India Arch Dialogue, organised by FCDI, a FCML Design Initiative, last year, there were models of projects on display. This year, over 20 international architects, many of them Pritzker Prize winners, present their exploratory sketches for their landmark buildings.

"For an artist, the hand is the head; with it, he explores unknown areas. The exhibition title tells that sketching is a voice — the voice of the imagination," says Wakhloo. That sound emerges in utter stillness in the spiral drawing of Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto's design of the Musashino Art University Museum & Library. "Fujimoto's library is like a mandala, it is an ordering principle. In his diagram, you can interpret where the openings could be, the circulation — you see the potential of the space," says Wakhloo.

As British architect Peter Cook says, "A sketch allows one to battle with the line as it changes a corner, get behind a wall, see light filter through the trees, and even watch its shadow." In Portugal-based architect Manuel Aires Mateus, one sees strict compositions, in Swiss architect Mario Botta's sketches of the TCS building in Hyderabad, one sees the monolithic structure scooped out in the centre, with sharp, clean edges. Kengo Kuma's pineapple cake shop in Tokyo takes the shape of a bamboo basket, while Jordanian architect Rasem Badran's realistic watercolours are an ode to local themes and materials.

As psychologists of space, architects are known to daydream through sketches, speculate, manipulate, and sometimes even posit an argument. Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas shows it well in Fiera Milano. In his sketch, the fabric-like quality of the glass canopy takes flight in shades of grey, as they swing in and out of folds. He shows light flooding the central spaces in white, giving the appearance of grey birds above white clouds.

In inconsistency lies the merit of a sketch. "Very often a drawing doesn't materialise into a finished project, and it affords the possibility of the ambiguous. While a computer-generated drawing expects definitive measures, a hand drawing can go wherever the mind wanders. It's often an oscillation, a dialogue one has



(Clockwise from above) Fiera Milano by Massimiliano Fuksas; Musashino Art University Museum & Library by Sou Fujimoto; panels by Indian architects and designers Tashi Tobgyal



with oneself. It has a generative power, which is lost when a project is drawn on the computer; that is assemblage," says Wakhloo.

The sad reality, though, is that most Indian architects do not sketch. Except for a few exhibits that have project drawings, the others are computer renderings or finished projects.

"One cannot find fault. Indian architects don't sketch because they can't build them," says Wakhloo. He points to Fujimoto's library project with its double-height bookshelves that climb 9m high, and says, "In India, one were to do this, the client would object, since it's space 'wasted'. Architecture in India is often

Feather Fine

Artist Sarika Bajaj's works are inspired by her love for birds and the important place they occupy in mythologies and spiritual practices from around the world



POOJA PILLAI

SARIKA BAJAJ has long been fascinated by birds and, for several years, been collecting the discarded feathers of pigeons and crows, drawn to the perfection of their form and the almost mystical role they have played in cultures across the world. "Most people consider these birds to be pests, but there's so much to admire about how they have survived in the city alongside us," she says. "Historically, bird feathers have played an important role in religious rituals around the world, since many cultures see birds as symbols of transcendence." This symbolism is what inspired her to create a series of works using pigeon and crow feathers, which are on display in an exhibition called "Flight" at the Anupa Mehta Arts and Advisory (formerly known as The Loft) in Lower Parel. "With these works, I feel like I'm drawing attention to the birds that are often overlooked in the urban environment," she says.

While most people might not share the 41-year-old's fascination with the birds, there's no doubt that the works Bajaj has created out of the discarded feathers are eye catching. Meticulously organised and assembled into geometric patterns, they have an almost hypnotic effect, thanks to her clever use of the natural tones in the feathers.

Historically, of course, an elaborate language of symbolism has developed around feathers, quite like it has around flowers. Depending on the context and the type of the feather itself, they've been seen as symbols of fertility, or a gift of the gods, or even vanity. In her work, Bajaj invokes the connection of feathers to shamanistic rituals in cultures around the globe. She says, "Feathers are considered sacred and known to belong to the upper world in shamanic lore, where they are loved, nurtured and worshipped." At the same time, one can sense in these works a homage, perhaps, to humankind's earliest artistic attempts when feathers were perhaps highly prized for their bright colours and iridescence.

Bajaj, a graduate in Fine Arts from Rachna Sansad in Mumbai, reveals that when she first began to use feathers to make art, she hadn't realised the quantity she would require. "That occurred to me slowly and, for many years, I have been going to intersections across Mumbai where the birds commonly gather and pick up feathers. I clean them and freeze them in order to get rid of any germs that might be there. After that, I have to spend many days sorting them according to size and pattern and, only then, can I make a work. In some ways, I feel like I'm giving these discarded feathers a new life."

At Anupa Mehta Arts and Advisory, Lower Parel till February 14

