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Between art and science

SANGEETA BAROOAH PISHAROTY

Where do art and science meet? What can come of this intersection? Four artists chase such questions at a residency programme organised by Khoj.

"Art still means painting to most people."

Photo: Shanker Chakravarty



At the Crossroads Joanna Hoffman, Nick Turvey, Rohini Devasher and Abhishek Hazra in New Delhi.

If one is identified with the head, the other goes well with the heart. If one banks on reason, the other arouses your emotions.

Science and art can never meet. So we have learnt. But this age-old debate continues. At different levels. In different parts of the world. Without an end in sight though. For, if there are numerous people who think art is art and so science is science, there are also enough ready to "show reason" when the twain do meet.

Such an experiment is at play presently at Khoj, a Delhi-based artists' association, which is conducting a residency pilot programme on "Intersection Between Art, Science and Technology". With four artists drawn from diverse backgrounds the 'probe-and-produce' exercise ends in a daylong exhibition here next week.

If Londoner Nick Turvey is an architect-filmmaker-artist specialising in the relationship between the organisation of physical matter and consciousness, Joanna Hoffman is a visual artist from Proznan region of Poland, exploring relations between micro and macro scales of the Universe. Another participant, Abhishek Hazra, is a graphic designer, writer and art critic from Bangalore interested in "sociology of scientific research", and Delhiite Rohini Devasher is hooked to the Chaos Theory.

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The hope of interacting with this interesting blend of minds takes you to Khoj, inside Khirki Extension in South Delhi. A dusty, creaky two-storey structure, Khoj lives up to its literal meaning for a first-timer locating it in this matchbox colony with no proper numbering of houses. Sitting on a bamboo stool, working on a computer placed on a wooden plank that hangs precariously from a wall, a sure-footed Rohini Devasher is the first participant one meets. Rohini, who has worked on Chaos Theory during her various residencies and study in the U.K. and Kenya, says she is "extremely interested in structures and forms." To the extent that all things around her first look to her as forms.

"My primary artistic curiosity is on principles of growth, the rhythms, the patterns and the tensions that arise from the vital order of living nature," she says. Showing her earlier works on the computer screen, she says, "I try to understand the underlying structure and morphology within nature's complexity. Even in this complexity, you will find some simple rules and that fascinates me." Her work from this residency will emerge from her "interest in pollen" for which she has had "meaningful discussions" with some biologists here.

Dichotomies

Taking the passageway to the other side of the building, one catches up with Abhisekh Hazra, a friendly young Bangalorean, who shows his earlier work first rather reveal what he will show on the Open Day this Wednesday. His work is a captivating mix of word and image that shows the bigger tensions, the dichotomy through mundane situations. Abhisekh, during the residency, is focusing on spectroscopy with Ram Ramaswamy of the Department of Physical Sciences in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Sharing the workroom with Abhisekh is Joanna Hoffman. The residency has placed her in the Department of Mammalian Biology at the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biology here. Joanna will exhibit three works, two of which will be on the HIV and SARS viruses. "My work is to translate scientific data into everyday personal experience," she says, showing a sample of her earlier work on her laptop, gripping enough in expressing one's personal relation with the Universe.

Nick Turvey, the fourth artist, seems to have not quite found what he looked for in the programme. Groping his way through Delhi's "high pressure environment" which he feels has seen "a collapse of empathy", getting into creative mode is less easy for him. "I had a difficult start but I am getting used to it," he says with a smile. Nick though has just returned quite impressed from visiting C.S. Unnikrishnan, a scientist at Mumbai's Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. On the Open Day, "My piece of work will be recognisably a part of my old work," he says, showing stills of some impressive multi-dimensional pieces of coloured blown glass from his earlier collection. Nick's specialisation is light, and he looks at how it might be represented through imagery.

But interestingly, a chat with the participants convinces you it is easier for art to venture into science than vice versa. Their works prove this belief. It also makes one feel most artists can get caught up in the beauty of things under a microscope. And even if one is brave enough to tread that extra mile, artists still have to find "the right person" on the other side of the fence.

Art still means painting to most people, both Nick and Joanna say. That "life is now a gene" has dawned on these artists, but the question is, how much can such thoughts fight the age-old, restricted mindset that art is art and science is science?

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