

Photo: HEMANT BHATNAGAR

**Nature and the City:
Celebrating Balance**

**with Indian American Artist
Delna Dastur**

By ERICA LEE NELSON
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Though Delna Dastur creates her art in extremely different locations—one being a tranquil, tree-shaded studio in Alexandria, Virginia and the other a high-rise apartment balcony in Mumbai—she does not necessarily let her unique lifestyle define her work.

“My work is totally imaginative,” she says. “I would say whether I work in the States or whether I work here, it makes very little difference to what I put on canvas.”

Yet, she remembers the one aspect of her art that has always been commented on as setting her apart.

“Other artists have said to me, ‘Where do you get your sense of color?’ So I have to think about it...I am guessing that being raised in India, color must have entered my way of thinking in some different way.”

That special way with color can be seen in the bombastic blossoms scattered throughout the centerpiece collection in Dastur’s first solo show in India. Shown at Gallery Art Motif in New Delhi in February, this exhibition consists of 14 works entitled “Conflict Series—Nature vs. Machinery,” with man depicted as both friend and foe to the vegetation that surrounds him. Other portions of the show include works inspired by aerial views and metallic paints.

The practice of art

On the theme of conflict, she writes in her artist’s statement, “Shears, clippers and saws display their teeth, yet the tiny fruit in the form of berries resiliently survive.... Flowers and fruits strive to flourish in spite of the constant expansion of cities into surrounding fields and gardens.”

Spurred by the sadness she experienced when a housing developer cut down a tall, old tree across the street from her house in Virginia, Dastur spent many months exploring this theme. And despite keeping the narrative of flowers emerging victorious in their battle with machines, Dastur asserts that “there is a message, but that is not the only thing I am looking for at all.... I want each picture to be seen as art.”

Dastur says she does not plan her paintings, but lets them grow and lead her through intuition. Free flowing paint and lines provide the foundation on which she builds layers of gesso (clear primer), prints from Rajasthani wood blocks, charcoal, pastels and paints. This is combined with unique textures and patterns created with everything from homemade paper and thread, to imprints of radiator grates and tools from the hardware store. When witnessed in person, this multi-dimensional work unfolds in a series of details and discoveries.

Being abstract art, one piece can hold multiple meanings. “It’s a joy when people interpret a painting in a way that I hadn’t seen,” she says. In India, the reception of abstract work like Dastur’s has been improving. Art Motif owner Mala Aneja held her first all-abstract art show in 1995, and did not sell any pieces. Now, she reports that Dastur’s show—at a price range from Rs. 15,000 to Rs. 1,50,000—is selling well, and that Indian audiences are becoming more receptive and interested in this type of art. “The more they see, the more comfortable they get...and more confident in their responses,” says Aneja.

Life in broad strokes

Aneja describes Dastur's work as being full of "energy," and that description is apt for the artist herself. Now in her 60s, Dastur's enthusiasm shows no signs of flagging. As a faculty member at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and The Art League of Alexandria, she often teaches three-hour-long classes. She pushes students to think beyond traditional definitions of art, saying, "Don't try to make beautiful paintings, try to learn something."

Her life in the United States began in 1969 when she started her B.A. in art history at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. Immediately after graduating, she was married to her college sweetheart from Mumbai at a friend's home in New Jersey. Her husband then got a job in Virginia, and they stayed on while she pursued her Master of Fine Arts in oil painting at American University in Washington, D.C.

Dastur's positive educational experiences in the United States are being put to good use as she gives back to needy and disabled children in India. In Mumbai, she teaches art and language skills at The Central Society for the Education of the Deaf. This school provides hearing impaired children with not only diagnosis and treatment, but the skills to read lips and understand spoken words in order to eventually integrate into the normal school system. While encouraging them to explore their creativity, Dastur also works on teaching them words for colors, emotions, painting items, etc. She also supports ChildRescue, a Goan charity for abandoned children, and plans to start teaching art there as well.

As for family, one of her children has brought the Indian diaspora journey full-circle, and now lives and works in Mumbai. With a life spanning two continents and many passions, Dastur knows a few things about how to achieve balance. Though she entitled her works "The Conflict Series," it's clear in the final celebratory pieces that man, city and nature have found a way to co-exist. "We can't get rid of the city," she says. "Yet we have to celebrate what grows naturally. And if the two can live happily together, wouldn't that be nice?"



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