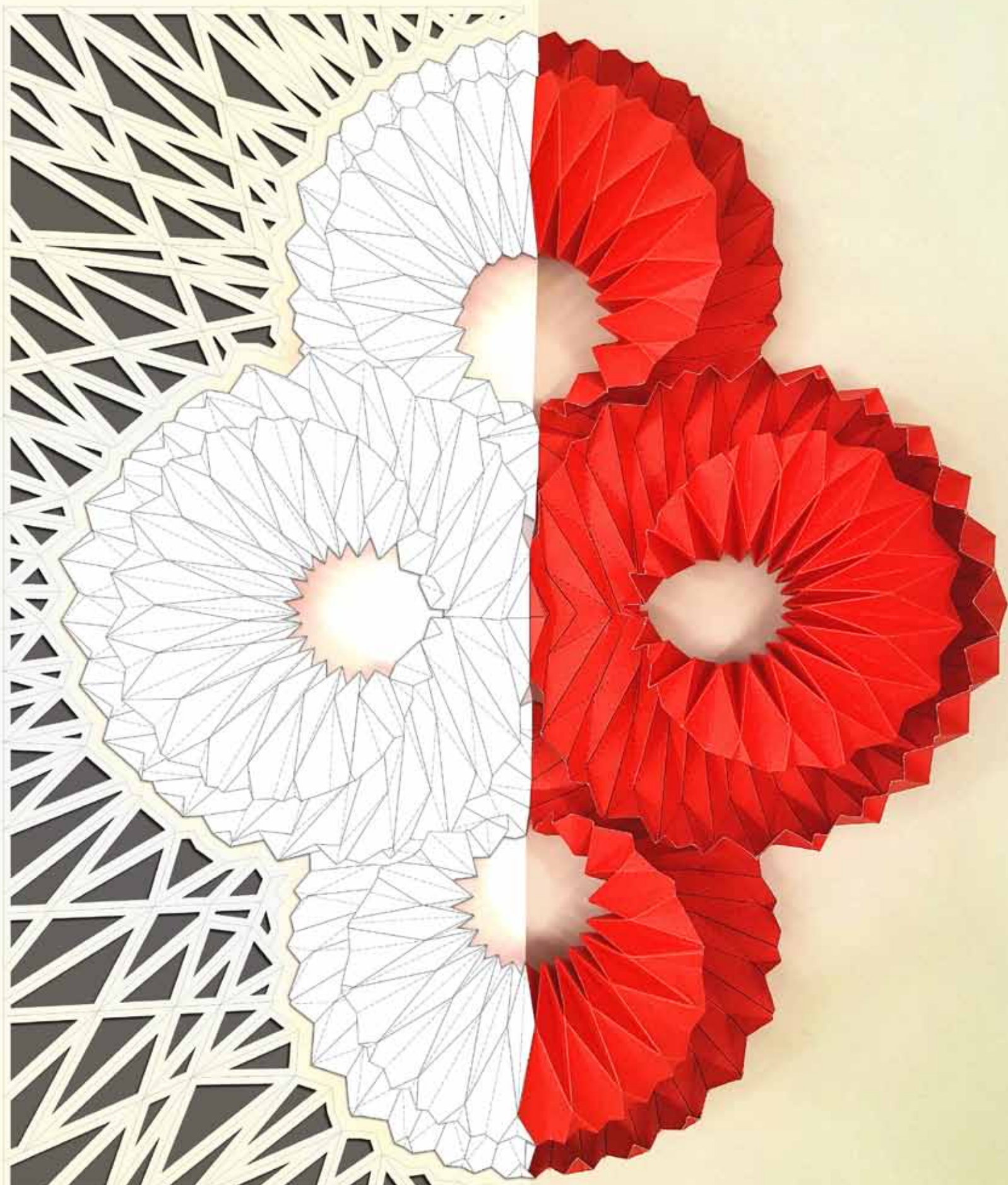




ARTS ILLUSTRATED





This Design of Mine Is Oh so Fine!

Five artists who redefine the aesthetics of design talk to us about their individual journeys into the world of art, and why art designed a certain way, in a certain language, can instantly become exciting, accessible and deeply invested in the everyday

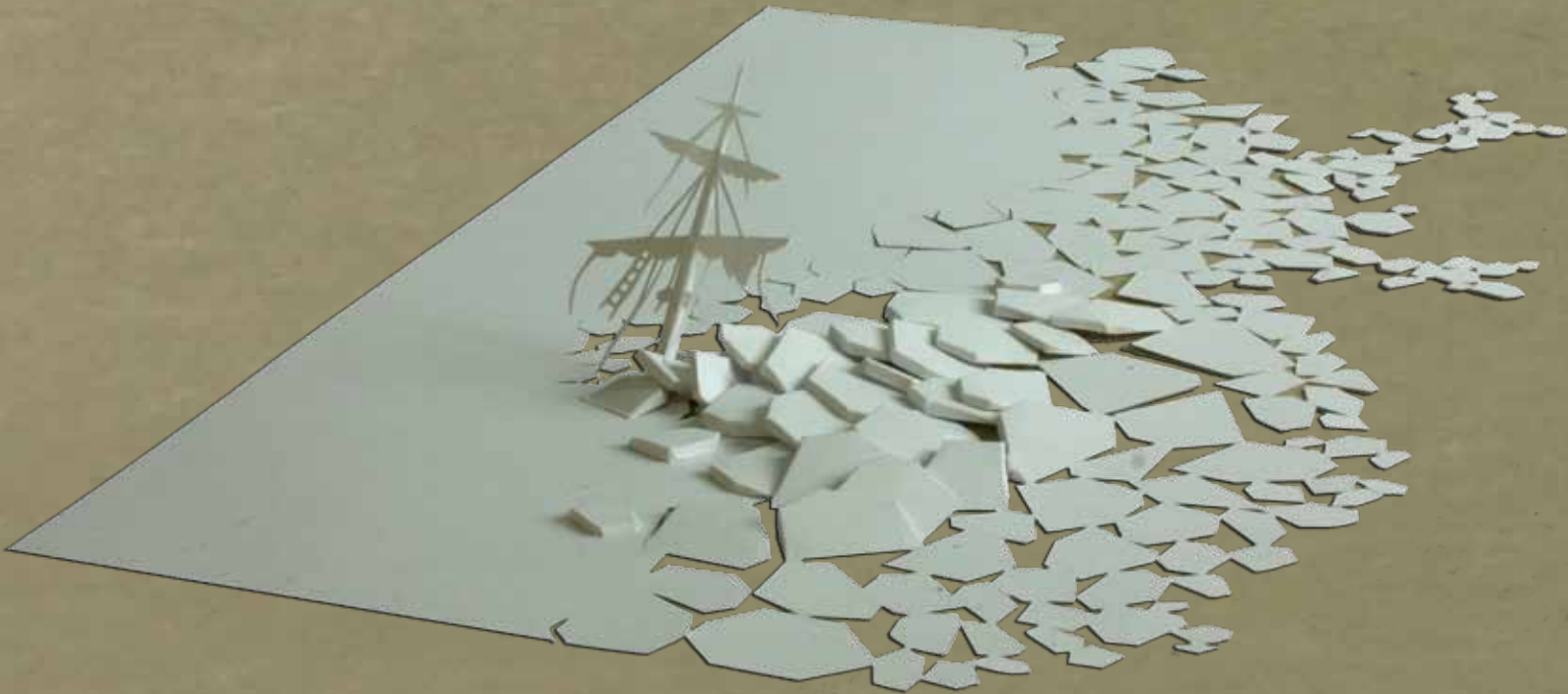
PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

The fundamental truth about design is that it is always more than what we think it is. Much like how it is hard to define what constitutes ‘good art’, it is equally hard to define ‘good design’. Probably much harder as it permeates every aspect of our lives, figuratively and literally. When we think art, the first thing that would invariably come to mind is a painting. When we think design, that first thing could be anything – textile, fashion, automobiles, technology, social media, the virtual world, furniture, layouts, patterns, illustrations, installation, accessories, jewellery – it’s an ocean of possibility, and if you believed there was a way to steer your ship of thought, then, well, there isn’t. It is such an intrinsic

part of our daily lives that most times we aren’t even aware of it. Only when it is removed from our everyday space and put within the walls of a gallery or a show or an exhibition do we see it, and not when we, say, hold it as a device in our hands. Wasn’t it Steve Jobs, that master designer of technology, who once said, ‘Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.’ And how it works includes how *I* experience that and therefore what *I* build into the meaning of design. The subjective experience leads us to an objective understanding, which in turn feeds the experience the next time round – it’s a vicious circle of enlightenment that leaves us where we began – that design is

always more than what we think it is.

If contemporary art is breaking out of its traditional constructs and embracing myriad forms of expression within its tenets, and design is climbing its way out of a forced lacuna of preconceived notions, then in my head, it is like ink on blotting paper. One drop of art and one drop of design and the circles that grow out in haphazard patterns merge into an unexpected, undefined form. In the realm of aesthetics then, design thrives, and in the realm of functionality art becomes more accessible. And most times, the fun isn’t in seeing the two apart but in discovering something new.



Peter Callesen, **Eismeer III**, Acid free A4 80 gsm paper and glue, 2006. A4 Papercuts, part of the exhibition **White Worlds** Image Courtesy of the artist.

The Right Moves

Chinese artist Li Hongbo, former book publisher, did just that. His natural inclination towards paper – its quality, durability, malleability, characteristic and style – might have come from the hours he spent designing books. But it was also connected to an ancient Chinese art form of paper gourd making, used to make festive decorations. Li Hongbo's paper sculptures, which follow that same, ancient honeycomb technique – from full-body figures, to tree trunks, to coaster-shaped and gun-shaped sculptures – move. They expand, stretch, contract, bend and retract, challenging us the viewer to go beyond what the eye can see. 'At first, you don't think they can possibly move, but when

you open it or provoke it, you discover a change. This transformation might have a greater impact,' he said in an interview to Crane TV. The process also has a great impact. In the multiple fascinating videos available online, you watch Li Hongbo, dressed like someone in a high-risk, confidential molecular biology lab, stacking and gluing sheets and sheets of paper, with a precision that is tedious to even comprehend. It is hard to imagine how one keeps the sanctity of the original form and the to-be-sculpted form intact, without resisting the temptation to lose oneself in the details. But Hongbo tells us, 'With my paper sculpture artwork, I hope to break through the inherent external form of all

objects and things. To expand or even change the cultural connotation and symbolic meaning of its attachment, then give it a new interpretation, and turn it into a game of possibilities. In that way, my concern is always the possibility of change. To be detailed and precise is only an external form of its expression; it is not a temptation to me at all. As a result, I have a definite intention to present the details and then break and expand it.'

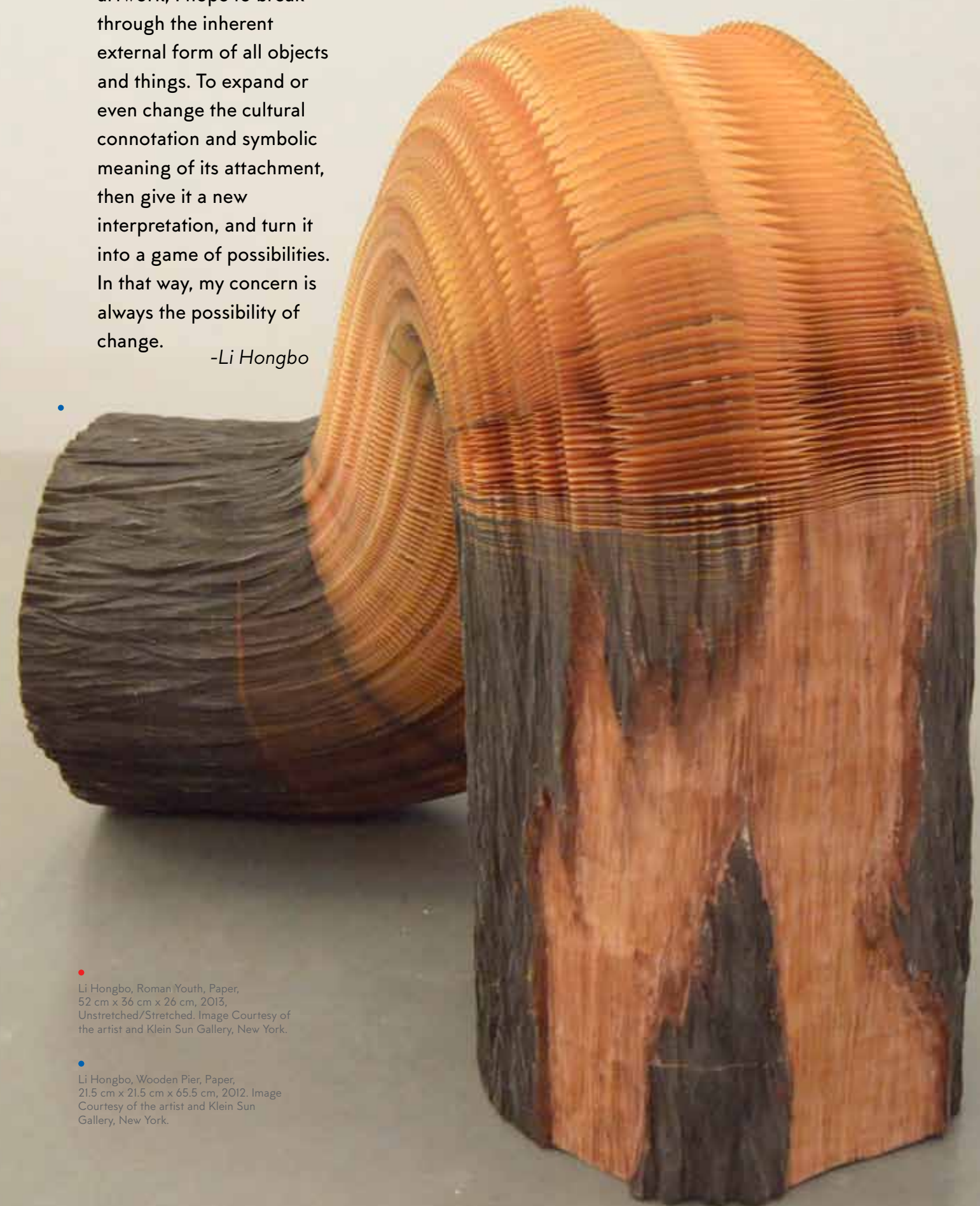
Hongbo's various interpretations of paper and the reinvention of the material's form are to be seen to believe and then seen again to dispel the disbelief of what we were actually seeing.



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-Li Hongbo



Li Hongbo, Roman Youth, Paper, 52 cm x 36 cm x 26 cm, 2013, Unstretched/Stretched. Image Courtesy of the artist and Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

Li Hongbo, Wooden Pier, Paper, 21.5 cm x 21.5 cm x 65.5 cm, 2012. Image Courtesy of the artist and Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

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When I was younger I would always say, “I want to be an artist, because I like making art”. Going to design school, and being exposed to the world of art and design changed a lot about the way I approached the two. The way I see it, the space where art and design meet is when something almost fantastical gains a purpose or an intent. The kind of work I want to be creating is to be within that grey area where a very personal inquiry or sentiment takes the form of a design practice or solution.

- Annushka Hardikar

Oh Nari,
So Sanskari!



Zing, Zang, Zine

You can almost hear the voices of the women who populate Pune-based artist, Annushka Hardikar's satirical e-zine, *Oh Nari, So Sanskari*. The high-pitched, melodramatic dialogue bubbles perfectly capture the rampant hypocrisy of our times – now and then. Based on the women from India's grandest epic, The Mahabharata, Hardikar's loud, colourful, playful designs and typography are the perfect foil to the serious rendering of women in the epic, who although central to the story, are always portrayed in the context of their more powerful men. 'The Mahabharata was one of the first stories in Indian mythology that I was exposed to,' explains Hardikar. 'Be it my grandma narrating the stories, the TV series that aired every Sunday or exploring the *Pancharatna* volumes when I began reading. One thing I remember distinctly was that the representation of the characters did not undergo much change

through all these mediums. Since visual representation was the most evident, I noticed similarities in the way the characters dressed, expressed or voiced their opinion. The portrayals were almost as though set in stone, leading me to firmly believe growing up that this was how the characters actually were. It was only later, while working on this e-zine and researching different versions of the stories from different parts of the country in various languages and mediums that my perspective began to change. I found a massive gap in relatability.'

The panels that Hardikar hand draws and designs are exciting for two reasons – one is in the way they capture the current image palette of our technology-driven worlds, and two, the way they bring our attention to this now-undecipherable creature called feminism (thanks, Aziz Ansari) purely through visual constructs. Bushy 'manbrows', the fallen,



shameless woman who talks about 'sex' or the one who says she doesn't want to have children, hairy and comfortable in your own skin, obsession with virginity... and my favourite – the fashion guide for 'Draupadi's outfit for when you want to be fashionable but you may be dragged and disgraced in front of the royal court any time' and 'Kunti's outfit for when you have to reveal to your son you're his mother and the Sun God is his father'. 'Most of the work I create has an underlying need for change. It comes from an inquiry and a need to provide a bridge between communities. I think that as long as I am creating work that leads to people asking the right questions, I am doing okay,' she adds.



Works by Annushka Hardikar. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Embedded Realities

Open Beds – an exhibition about the patriarchal rules of love by Spanish artist Julia Navarro is a video art with a difference. It reads part-documentary, with 112 different people in India talking about marriage, sex and desire, while sitting on their beds in their own bedrooms, and it is part art, with how the space is lit, where the subject is placed, and the things one sees around. ‘When I recorded the testimonies in more than one hundred bedrooms in India, I decided to use static and medium wide shot for all interviews. This decision made it easier for each bedroom, each object located in that room, each posture, each silence and each word to take centre stage, and to match all the testimonies as one in the audience’s mind. The control of light, not limiting the time of the responses, inviting people to speak in their own

language and not interfering in the sequence were also style decisions for aesthetic coherence,’ says Navarro. *Open Beds* became a reality when it won the public tender offered by the City Council-managed cultural heritage space, Valencia’s Almudin in Spain. But the seed for the project was sown at a hotel room in India, when Navarro travelled through India after nine grueling years of PhD study in Spain. ‘Actually, at the beginning of a project, I try not to think. I just have to recognise the idea when it appears and give it credibility, which is not a small goal. When the idea becomes conscious and I believe it, I start acting without thinking too much. When ideas and results begin to be found in a tangible way, it is time to provide coherence and share the seed to make it grow,’ she adds.

At the exhibition in Almudin, Navarro played the video on loop on two opposite screens in a wide room. Between the screens was a 24-metre bedcover handmade with saris, allowing people to sit, lie down or walk bare feet to feel old traditions and energy. ‘To balance this, we used light, indigo and white, and shadow. We summoned the emptiness and the fullness, the sound and the silence, solar and lunar energy, the comfortable and the uncomfortable, always harmonising through the sense experience. For me, the space where art and design intersect is the generous place where the flesh, the soul, the intention and the self-will to communicate come together in a revolutionary form.’ The exhibition is yet to come to India.



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When art is honest, it is born to transform people, relationships, language and also the artist and the work itself. To make ideas come true, one needs to put in a great effort of faith, be focused, clear, and to follow one’s instinct. Definitely my creative experience, also based on the values of art therapy, is to learn how to believe and accept the process when ideas, images or instructions need to become a reality, however great or absurd.

- Julia Navarro



Julia Navarro Coll and Cristina Cucinella, OPEN BEDS. An exhibition about the patriarchal rules of love. Collage by Patricia Merayo and Julia Navarro. Image Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Baul de Fotos.

Julia Navarro Coll and Cristina Cucinella, OPEN BEDS. An exhibition about the patriarchal rules of love. Image Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Baul de Fotos.

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I think, what drives me personally, is art for self-preservation. I got into illustration solely because I love colour, illustrations and products. Sometimes I think it's a bit selfish, but I like to think I make others happy too, so it's a bit of a win-win.

- Alicia Souza



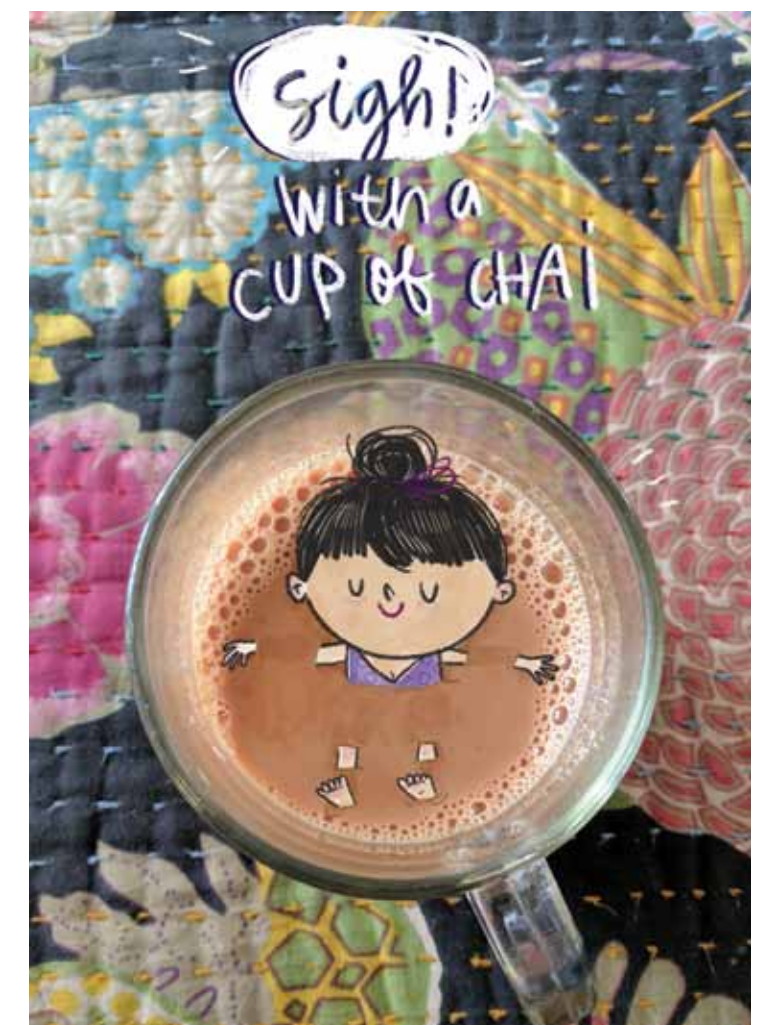
Works by Alicia Souza. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Everywhere I Look

The first time I came across Alicia Souza's work was in a pair of make-your-own-colour-combination rubber chappals by the brand, Methiyadi. This was for young feet, with motifs of happy monkeys and bananas and sunshine traipsing through the footwear. And then I discovered this entire galaxy of Alicia Souza products, and illustrations and comic strips, and there was no turning back. This Bengaluru-based artist's rounded figures somehow bring back memories of childhood – of Phoebe's happy places, of carefree days, of racing the sun through playgrounds and fields. The sheer range of her work and her delightful social media updates, make Souza's artwork easy to love. It is personal – there is a lot from her own life that comes into her creations – but also quirky and whimsical, with the lightness of a feather and the vivid charm of aesthetics different spaces invite. 'There are two ways an illustration gets on a product. One is that the illustration is done and then used on a product that we deem fit, is in demand or requested and the other is creation of an illustration for a specific product. I, of course, love the latter because the illustration when started already has a specific purpose. I think of a product at its end use, and also who would use it. The colours then make a difference and how the product is used. For example, when illustrating for a mug, realising that one side of the mug will be seen by others and one covered, but that also depends on whether the person is right-handed or not. Little things like that are considered,' she says. 'If I had to imagine a space where

design and art intersect, then it would be artist toys because they involve both. I would love a toy that is a bit interactive and perhaps something that can be pulled apart a bit. Where I would come in would be at the creation and conceptualising stage and also in fine-tuning of the manufacturing, that is, working with prototypes to fit the illustrative design at hand.'

That toy I would gladly play with, because irrespective of form or function, there is also this energy of positivity that her designs generate, like an unconscious smile or the sudden burst of warm sunlight on a wintry day, that you want to hold on to in some form or the other. For now, I will make do with a mug.



Pop Goes this Circle

Which brings me to Ketna Patel and her *Asia Pop* series, because the allure of pop art is that it runs in circles – one reading of the visual is never enough, and multiple readings throw up multiple interpretations. With Patel's work, however, it also inhabits all the spaces we use on an everyday basis and therefore interpretations become that much more complex, and exciting. 'The *Asia Pop* series was conceived as a versatile visual vocabulary that can be configured for a variety of applications. Our world and its communication processes have changed in so many fundamental ways. Advertising and mass media, lifestyle and fashion have interrupted people's perceptions of themselves, and "packaging" has become more important than the content. I wanted to find a way in which the above aspects could overlap to produce a range of artworks or applications that would be a utilitarian extension of identity,' explains Patel.

So we have cars, cushions, rugs, chairs, clothes, tables, posters, shelves, cabinets and wall art brought alive through Ketna's use of vivid colours, symbols, popular personalities and text. 'Our new world has blurred the lines between art, design, lifestyle and utility. Where does our private life end and public life begin? I am trying to insert a bit of storytelling in our domestic spaces. The objective is also to celebrate popular Asian street culture. We are in danger of erasing our folk stories, wisdom, crafts, architecture, working

methodologies, and so on in favour of breeze-block, instant gratification, bubble-gum lifestyles that are relentlessly pushed down our throats,' she adds.

There is a vein of urgency running through Ketna's work, as if there isn't enough time and too many things to be said. Her works are crowded with references, but not in a way that it takes away from its aesthetic appeal but in a way of a choir – there are many voices singing, sometimes as a solo, sometimes in harmony and sometimes as a background score. 'My belief is that our collective visual conditioning is becoming increasingly homogeneous. Are

we witnessing the demise of the individual? I really want to experiment with these thoughts by producing the same narrative using different techniques. That is where Pop Art comes in. It is an expression derived from unselfconscious manifestations of society through its popular culture; the culture of everyday people.'

And if that's where the answers lie, then there is bound to be more than what we think it is. Oh wait, isn't that where we began?



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The label “pop art” was penned by an English art critic in the 1950s. Its definition is not in the colour or the technique, but more in the re-appropriation of images and objects that already have a history and context. Pop art can be a powerful mirror reflecting us back to ourselves. By taking certain references and re-appropriating them in new contexts, we can give meaning to the unspoken stories all around us.

- Ketna Patel

