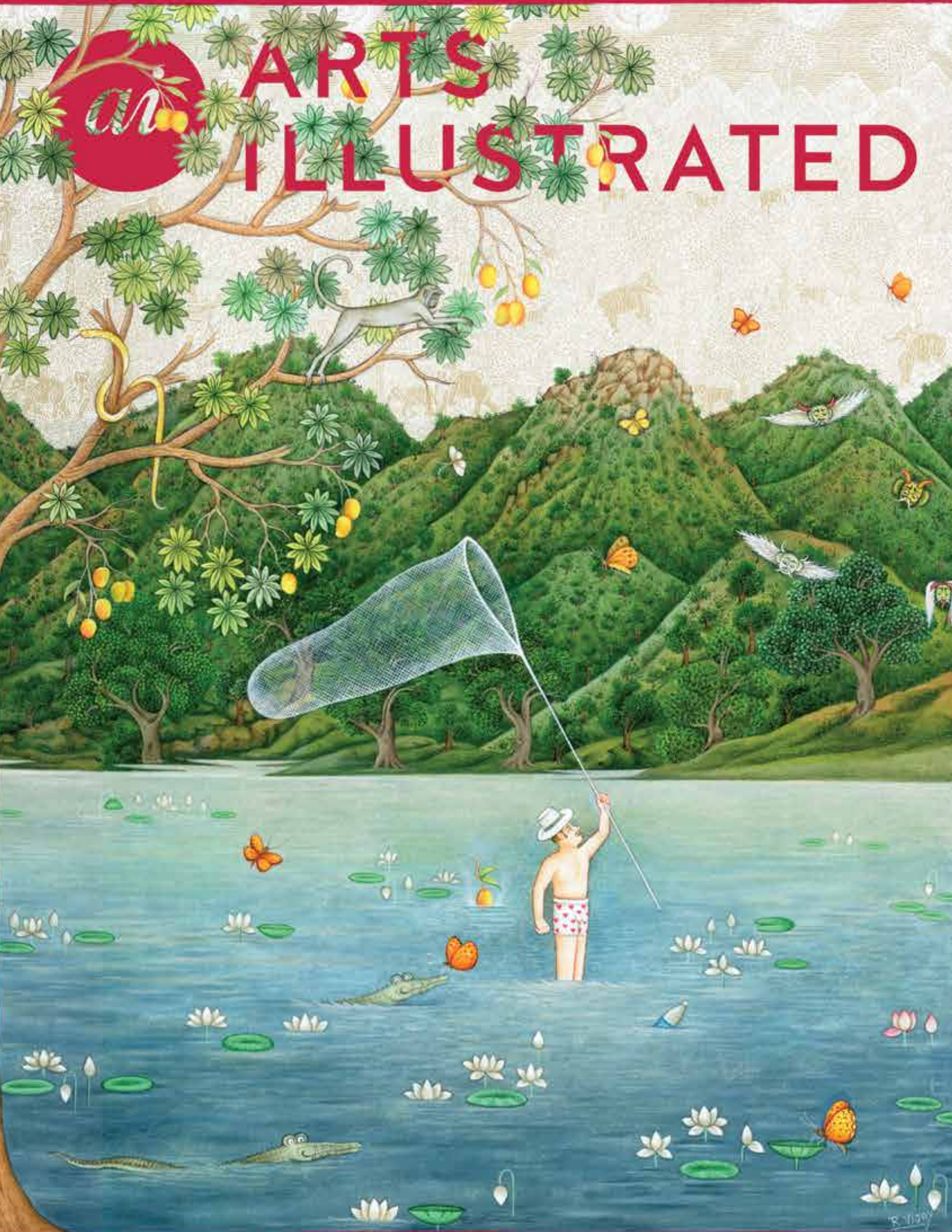


ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Stills from *Lonely Sound*, Animated music video for Artiste Srinidhi's single, directed by Shalini Shankar and produced by Hermitage Records.



Design Q & A

Those Mysterious Ways

Sandhya Prabhat, graphic designer and animator, talks to us about the unpredictable world of design as it flits between stillness and movement.

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

There are no such things as coincidences. And, so, when I bump into Sandhya Prabhat a day after requesting time for an interview at a storytelling session for children, I find it completely natural. It is the fantasy issue, after all, and, as Chandler once said, 'It's jo-incidence with a c'.

I first came across Sandhya's work when she collaborated with singer Srinidhi Venkatesh on her single, *Lonely Sound*. The animated video (directed by Shalini Shankar) with its warm colours and understated aesthetics, seemed to flow with the lilting melody of the song like a soft breeze through afternoon rain. I found the video just as riveting as the song, and somehow couldn't separate the two – the song would seem incomplete without the video and the video

wouldn't exude the kind of magic it did without the song.

As I discovered more of her work – including one of my favourite children's books in recent times, *The Colour Thief* – I found that this was Sandhya's quality – the ability to disappear into her work like an actor disappearing into her character. In one of her projects, the *A to Z of Female Characters*, in response to an Instagram challenge, I felt the same sense of casual fluidity, and her characters encapsulated not just the experience of the character in the book but, in a wildly improbable way, my own response to the character as well. No coincidence (ha!) then that her series was widely appreciated. 'The challenge was called #36daysoftype (www.36daysoftype.com)

where one had to create letters and numbers for 36 days in a row based on the English alphabet. I designed it based on my personal favourite female literary characters. I didn't attempt to curate a 'perfect' set of characters. This was a personal series and it gave me great joy. I ended up connecting with thousands of readers online, who shared my favourites,' she said over an e-mail interview.

And she also assured me, almost apologetically, 'I don't really work in wise and mysterious ways, so my answers are pretty straightforward, just as I usually am. I hope that's all right.' I did an all-knowing smile, much like Phoebe did in response to Chandler, like the mystery and its hidden wisdom and humour, if at all, was so wisely and mysteriously unraveled.



Excerpts from the interview

I often feel there is a distinct line between imagination and what we call 'fantasy', and that they suffer the effects of being misunderstood. I was curious to know how you would define the two. Do you see them as distinct entities or do you find, in your work across several genres, that they are constantly merging and conversing with each other?

Fantasy could work as a subset of the Imagination. While it's possible to imagine fantastic worlds, it's also possible to imagine worlds rooted in perceived reality. However, to be honest, I find it nervous to draw with too much thought

about genre, although this is a really interesting question. I typically focus on the content and design only, while creating. The end product then gets categorised into the various genres, but I'm not affected by this as a creator. In other words, if I find that a bunny in a spacesuit must be drawn, I draw one. This would, I think, be considered 'fantastic'. If I find that I must design an astronaut, that might be considered imaginative, but not fantastic, necessarily. But, why bother?

As an animator, how differently do you feel about reality around you when you are essentially creating the 'other' reality that

deliberately looks different from our world and is yet rooted within the aesthetics of our world?

It's liberating that anything can happen in animation. Rules of physics can be broken. New creatures can come alive. Impossible stories can be told. But starting with a blank slate and being unfettered is daunting. Therefore, designing becomes a two-step process. One first establishes the rules of the playground. Then, one plays.

Taking off from the previous question, when you imagine these different worlds, how much of your own reality do you unconsciously put into it, and then consciously find in retrospect?

From the series **Female Characters in Literature A-Z and O-9** for 36 Days of Type (#36daysoftype), 2018.



More often than not, while I have a vague idea of what my drawing would be, I don't really know what it would exactly look like, until it happens. A client brief or an idea are like ingredients of a dish I'm cooking. I might cook by recipe, but the taste of the completed dish might still surprise me. It might be better than what I anticipated, or worse, or different than what I'd imagined.

'Deadline' especially spoke to me, as I assume it would with anyone who has ever faced a deadline! Do you think creativity often arises from last minute panic (as Calvin says) or in moments of being compassionate with oneself?

I think the Idea is like a person in one's head, that has his/her own mind. One needs to let one's Idea breathe and take form. Sometimes the Idea comes alive last minute. Sometimes, the Idea is a rather dull collaborator. Sometimes the Idea just dies without giving one any notice.

I feel animation is the perfect amalgamation between the moving image and design. It can be cinematic and it can be deeply nuanced. How do you bridge that gap? Is that even a conscious concern?

I think I was fortunate to study animation formally. It is a craft as much as it is an art form. It needs constant learning, practice and trial and error. The rules of cinema apply here as do the rules of visual design. I had extraordinary teachers while studying my Master's degree in Animation from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. They laid the foundation for



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me to understand the medium. I'm still learning, by studying film-making, storytelling, literature, painting, music and, heck, even physics, to the best of my ability!

Between a static image and a moving image, how does the story change for you? Does the static become liberating because it moves in very specific ways (one page after the next within specific boundaries) and the moving image overwhelming because it can step out of the page, so to speak?

I work on projects that involve static and moving images. One kind of work informs the other. They're totally different approaches to storytelling, and yet are overlapping. Neither is

just liberating or overwhelming. When I'm able to portray the content well and deliver the matter successfully using either moving or static imagery, that creates satisfaction.

Since images are the language in which we speak in today, how do you then find your own distinct grammar of colours, lines and textures?

I suppose it's like a musician trying to find her voice. She just keeps singing.

And, finally, what is the world you would rather (secretly) belong to – this one or the ones you create?

Are they really different from one another?

