

For artist Sheila Klein, the world is a “skeleton waiting to be dressed”

THE CITY AS OZ

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Sheila Klein, 59, a visual artist from the US, believes in blurring the boundaries between art, architecture, sculpture, theater, fashion and textile design. She wants to dress the world. Klein was in India recently to visit the textile hub of Ahmedabad, and teach a two-week workshop at the National Institute of Design. A peek into her architectural installations, textile projects and public artworks gives one a glimpse into how she has achieved her goal of fusing seemingly disparate fields. She achieves this through a unique aesthetic of “bringing a feminine touch to the primarily masculine world, so rather than architectural erections, my work focuses on the curve, or shapely environment”.

Her *Underground Girl*, for instance, builds a softscape inside a hardscape, turning the MTA Hollywood Highland Station in California into the abstracted insides of a woman. The design has won many US awards, and the Los Angeles metro station has used it as a backdrop. Another work, *XX Marks The Spot*, a 1995 piece, points out the natural and technical location of the air traffic control tower at the Los Angeles International Airport. A two-floor high artwork shaped like the egg of an El Segundo butterfly, an endangered species found in the western dunes of the airport, features runway lights. There are two stages: the first reveals a radar-scope filled with aircraft and the second stage a blue butterfly. Klein fondly calls this “the womb of the tower”.

But to merely read her work as feminist



Klein, who is not a formally trained architect or textile designer, initially started as a theatre person. She had been a hippie, travelled the world, and says grandly, “If you ask me what is my inspiration to work, I’ll have to say my whole life till now. It is not a singular influence, but a spectrum of things.”

One of her most well known series of artworks is called *Hall of Architecture* and has been exhibited in different parts of the world. “When travelling through Rajasthan in 2008, I found the perforated lacy window walls to be so much like crocheted architecture formed by a series of posts and interstices creating a geometric hierarchy.” One of the works in this series — *Textilewallah* — is in crochet knitted with tea dyed cotton seine twine, which is 100 per cent cotton thread twisted into a strand, and reflects the window patterns. Another creation is a lattice-like net which she calls a version of Indra’s net. In Buddhist philosophy, this enormous net has glittering jewels attached to each of the knots, and each jewel reflects the other jewels — thus signifying the deep interconnectedness of life.

MATERNAL FORCE: In ‘Leopard Sky’ (left), Klein uses animal spots on the ceiling of the GBI Airport in Houston and in ‘Underground Girl’ she turns California’s MTA Hollywood Highland Station into the interiors of a woman’s body

don’t think I can adequately describe the amount of pleasure I have derived from its simple elegance over the years.”

Klein believes that the aesthetics that shape her public installations are inspired by her visits to Asia, particularly Rajasthan in India. “I was inspired by my honeymoon trip to Asia in the late ‘70s, looking at how

people here adorned themselves and the way they decorated their buildings,” she says. “Compared to here, US cities were epitomes of banality.” Following this, she started experimenting with trying to turn ugly spaces into aesthetically pleasant ones. “I am a crusader for giving the city some living room,” declares the artist who lives in Bow, Washington, on a farm with her husband and two sons. “I am an eradicator of the banal, boring, and bland. Yet, I love the pedestrian. I truly believe the city is a kind of Oz.”

Columnnesseum, designed in 2007, is an underpass covering ten acres, which connects Roosevelt and Green Lake, two adjacent north-Seattle neighbourhoods. It was a dirty, dark, unpleasant patch till Klein transformed it. The transformation happened with nothing more extraordinary than parking paint and concrete columns. The white circular shapes, again very feminine, on the yellow columns, not only reflect light to brighten the space but form a series of receding moon shapes that are pleasant to the eyes. It won a national award for one of the most successful and innovative public artworks in the US.

“Civic projects are competitive, and once I get them, my mind works towards making them memorable,” Klein says. “I was a the-



atre person to begin with. I create an environment using diverse materials, and then, people have the scope to participate interactively with these around.” This interactive atmosphere is also true of her textile work. One of her structures is called *Yr Room* and is made from layers of curtains that add volume without weight. The dramatic changing of layers that a viewer experiences while manually navigating them makes for a unique experience for each person.

During her NID stint, Klein paid tribute to Ahmedabad’s famous *jaali* in her crochet work, and showcased a few of her architectural installations in a city gallery. She loved interacting with the students and Portable Net, her textile workshop sessions became very popular. Students could be seen in huddles, knitting under her encouraging eye, responding to her probing questions about cultural myths, and discovering fascinating connections through narratives. ■



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agenda is to reduce it. “I work in layers, and hence it is possible to interpret a work in different ways,” says the vivacious artist who stands out in a crowd in her loosely tangled bunch of hair, or her occasional gypsy head scarves. “Like the X feature of the lighting in the air control traffic tower may also reveal the female chromosome. What is important for me is that these works should always be memorable in a viewer’s mind space.” Going from what a United Airlines pilot wrote to her in 2006, they evidently are. He wrote: “I have marvelled at the complexity of the patterns and colours. I



DANGLING CONVERSATION: In ‘Palm Tree’, the artist gives a tree a pair of earrings

KIM ARORA
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Most viral campaigns complete their life cycles within the confines of the World Wide Web. Tamil actor Dhanush’s *Kolaveri* went way beyond. It’s not without reason that the success of the song is a hot topic of discussion at B-schools. As an internet meme, the pidgin song broke all cultural barriers and was

appropriated not just by different Indian languages, but even internationally. With this one four-minute song of her film *3* uploaded on YouTube, director Aishwarya Rajinikanth has ensured the kind of publicity most Hindi film stars can’t be sure of after spending millions on promotional tours.

Here’s a look at various *Kolaveri* spin-offs and how the ‘murderous rage’ spread all over the country and beyond.

Road Safety

KOLKATA POLICE | Why this *Herogiri ji?*

The Kolkata Police’s latest traffic safety campaign rode pillion on the success of this hit song. The posters for this campaign feature a man and a woman on a motorbike without helmets, with ‘Why this herogiri, herogiri, herogiri di?’ emblazoned across.



Scam Up-u

Slap Tadka

Unfortunately for politician Sharad Pawar and luckily for Dhanush, a slap-happy protester attacked the food and agriculture minister close on the heels of the song’s release. One of the first adaptations to come out, the Slap-u song video used the footage of Pawar getting slapped along with a still of the attacker who appeared to be lip-synching to *Scam up-u/Country thap-u/Time to speak up-u*

Simply love-u, copy-u di



The ridiculously catchy tune from Tamil Nadu has become a useful public anthem to poke fun at everyone from dictators to reckless drivers

Corruption

PUBLIC | Why this *dhokhadhari ji?*

This one got popular as a slogan at the Anna Hazare sit-ins for the Lokpal bill in the capital. A video for the same exists on YouTube, albeit with a dismal viewer count of a little over 200

CLIMATE | Why this *koyla-mining ji?*

The YouTube description attributes the video to the NGO Greenpeace. A similar video was shot in a recording studio with shots of the keyboard and guitar being played but with the performers dressed in tiger and bear costumes. While Dhanush in the original signalled the ‘tune change’, here the tiger singer alerts the ‘mama’ to ‘climate change’. The video ends with a call to action, asking people to sign a petition against coal-mining in forests

Videos

DUTCH ATHLETES

A video featuring Dutch athletes dancing, exercising and play-acting to the original audio track came out earlier this month

AUCKLAND | Flash mob

A group of Indians in Auckland, New Zealand, gathered in a flash mob in a market square and danced to this song

Language Adaptations

PUNJABI | Ik kudi Pinky Moge Wali

From *thayir saadam* (curd rice) to *rajma chawal* (kidney beans and rice), the song is more or less changed entirely in this version with bhangra beats and new lyrics. But it manages to retain the framework of the original with the interjections and interludes at the right place

GUJARATI

Poking fun at the Gujarati stereotype of the spendthrift girlfriend, the song, with the suitor lamenting that his bank clerk father can only afford a bike while the girl wants a car, asks, *Why this chhokri always kharcha di?*

BENGALI

Quite a few versions exist in Bengali, with at least two having retained the in-studio style of the original

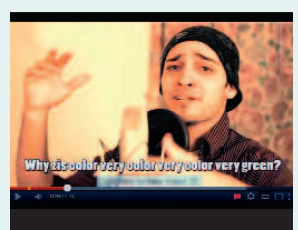
HINDI | Neevan Nigam

Standing on a chair to reach the microphone, Sonu Nigam’s son Neevan too sang *Why this Kolaveri Di?*. This was one of the early adaptations to surface on the Internet. Mindful of the singer’s tender age the word ‘scotch’ from the original is substituted with ‘milk’

ENGLISH R&B MIX

The English R&B version by Sri Lankan London-based Arjun Coomaraswamy retains the basic tune and the theme of the song, but gets an R&B makeover with

the guitar and silky-smooth vocals. The lyrics go, *How could you do this to me, do this to me, do this to me?* It has nearly 4.5 million hits on YouTube



EGYPTIAN ARABIC MIX

This version has a young man singing *Why zis colour very, colour very, colour very green?* to an excited audience of two people, ostensibly family. The song also has Arabic lyrics rounded up by a slapstick dance sequence

PHOTOS COURTESY: YOUTUBE



Freedom

PAKISTAN | Where is democracy ji?

Five men in Pathani *salwar kurtas* sing *Where is democracy ji?* against the backdrop of a monument. The video features a photoshopped Musharraf amongst others and lyrics like *Empty jaib/ Misaail come-u/ Life-u reverse-u gear-u*