

'ART IN DENIAL'

He turned commercial calendars into works of art and his frames share space with master painters. Photographer and artist Rohit Chawla talks about art, artists and the media with his trademark candidness

Having spent close to two decades in the advertising world, Rohit Chawla eventually found mainstream advertising to be suffocating and therefore the need to gravitate to a wider canvas. Though he still runs a design and film production company, fine art photography remains his enduring passion.

You are a photographer, an artist and have been involved in the art scenario. How was the journey?

Indian art is in a confused space now, it continues to be in denial, expecting the earlier insanity and euphoria to return. Mercifully, sundry socialites turned curators, and the incestuous mutual backslapping among the few chosen galleries can no longer put a collective blindfold over the discerning buyers. And to top it, there is also the media's continued obsession with inflated auction prices as the only barometer of good art. Also, the dissonance, alienation and the disruptiveness, reflected in most contemporary art today, is completely derivative of the western art milieu. It perhaps rings a trifle false in the Indian context. I prefer to keep my sanity, and distance and not become a performing clown in the contemporary art circus. Perhaps, a most telling comment on the art scene came from a well-respected curator who said, "The problem with your work Rohit is that it is so eminently likable."

Would you term yourself a purist?

No, I am certainly not a purist when it comes to photography. Post digital, there has been a welcome proliferation and democratisation of fine art photography. The imagery has become a lot more creative and technically nuanced. Disappointingly, when it comes to fashion photography, everybody is trying so hard to be different that they are actually beginning to look the same.

You have taken the commercial calendar into a unique league by marrying art and glamour. What inspired you?

I outgrew bikinis and pin-up photography a long time ago. I believe great art has longevity and the series on old masters was an attempt to recreate an interest in them. And not getting carried away by this whole contemporary obsession with urbanisation and completely derivative work, reflecting a lost and confused society. Hopefully, it's still not a sin to create beautiful art liked by all.

You chose two very different artists (Gustav Klimt and Raja Ravi Verma). What made you choose them?

With Ravi Verma, I was trying to exfoliate our past visual heritage. Photographing today's women perhaps gave our past a sense of the present. In any case, I find that contemporary fashion imagery is in a great hurry to jettison our visual history as it's not considered cool enough by the younger generation of photographers. And here I was commissioned to do this series by my sponsors, the Bird Group, who promote photographic art.

Tell us something about *The Fine Art of Food* book.

The launch of *Le Cirque* and *Megu*, at The Leela, Delhi, provided me the perfect opportunity to play with food and create design and form centric unplated images of food, almost like a visual haiku with food on a white canvas. In these images, the food is the hero with no props and unnecessary distractions. These food images are about form and graphic design, and the fact that they were eminently edible, was an added impetus. Finally an art installation that you can actually consume with your eyes closed.

How do you want to be remembered? An artist or a photographer?

Photography is certainly art and like most artists of my generation, I would like to embrace mixed media, continue to experiment and hopefully not fall victim to a particular style and brand of imagery. All artists hope to survive the vicissitude of time and taste, and only history is the final judge of one's longevity. &c.



A CREATION BY ROHIT CHAWLA

Words **Geetha Jayaraman**

Was creative director of JWT India

His recent solo exhibitions were 'Wanderlust', 'Tribute to Raja Ravi Verma', 'Klimt - The Sequel', 'Wearable Art Series', all of which received critical acclaim

Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles Correa and Richard Avedon are his inspiration

