Society Achievers Special

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Art & Culture

# "Spirituality is a thread that connects us all"

## Describing abstract art as the language of the soul, Laila Khan Furniturewalla, who recently showed at Art of India 2024, discusses her art with Nichola Marie.

**Art of India 2024 features your symbolic works Ganesh XVI & Gauri I, embodying divinity, new beginnings and mystical energy. What makes these works thought-provoking and how fulfilling is this for you as the artist and creator?**

Spirituality is a thread that connects us all. My work embodies this meditative abstraction which has manifested due to my personal experiences of life and my reflection of its temporary aura. Divine search is also very subjective and I feel it should be sought without any boundaries or barriers. This series of works are abstract renderings of Lord Ganesh, the elephant God, which embodies my search for the divine. Gauri embodies deep feminine power and energy. The movement towards formlessness is very fulfilling at the moment.



**You describe your art as 'meditative, reflecting a quest for the mystical and divine without boundaries'...**

Abstract art is the language of the soul. Part of what the work does is, it allows that which is not visible and already there to become visible and experienceable. Hence, I'm moving towards formlessness in the study of abstraction to the point of purity and refinement. I use metals, light, sand and paint, all elements of the earth reflectively which radiates that.





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**Can you take us briefly through your journey and growth as an artist?**

I hail from a very artistic family, my father Feroz Khan being an actor, filmmaker, editor and writer, my mother Sundri a fashion designer, both appreciated and loved art; they also collected art.

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In my late teens, I loved and was challenged by the sole control of expression one held while painting. In art, there are no half-truths as your work becomes a mirror of your intention and the most important factor in art is your intention.

I never underwent rigorous formal training in art school as I was extremely definite and individualistic in my thoughts and couldn't follow any direction. I felt formal training would rob me of my raw instinct. Though, in 1993, after my graduation in English Literature, I went to the Slade School of Fine Art in London, UK, and did a short course in life form from the nude and fresco painting. In 2009, I went to St Martins School of Art & Design in London, UK, to study creative and expressive painting for six months. There, under the tutorage of Ewa Gargulinska, a renowned artist, I learnt how to achieve limitless creativity in the visual expression of self, using painting as a medium.



I held my first solo show after nine years of painting at the Visual Art Gallery in New Delhi in 2001. In this series, I sculpted sand on canvas and used oil and charcoal to represent the fragility and impermanence of human life against the timelessness of architecture. Here, I depicted the female nude in most of the works.

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Opinions were rife that I wouldn't be able to sell any works as very few people would hang nudes in their homes. But this was my true expression; my family saw it as an artistic necessity and never discouraged me. I sold most of my work in that show.

**What is your impression of the current art space in India?**

The last five years have seen the Indian art market boom, culminating with the success of the India Art Fair, the largest art event in South Asia which reached its crescendo in early February this year when it hosted its biggest event to date. They sold at the highest rates the world has ever seen. This is an exciting time for Indian artists who have long felt their practice has been overlooked culturally.

India is at a fascinating point in its market evolution, with art spaces opened up across the country such as the NMACC, Hampi Art Labs, and the Brij Museum in Delhi. This has drawn a great deal of interest from international art advisors and collectors. There is also a rise in younger collectors who are showing a growing understanding of art as a lifestyle choice. Unfortunately in India, there are hardly any grants or government support for artists.



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**Beyond your canvas expressions, you also lead as the creative head of Furniturewalla, a leading name in India's décor and furnishing. How does your artistic bent impact the design choices in this space?**

Furniturewalla was founded by my husband Farhan in 1999. Thirteen years ago, my husband Farhan and I decided to reinvent Furniturewalla to a lifestyle brand that sells furniture, accessories, art and lighting personally sourced by both of us from all over the world in the newest home fashion trends. We have maintained value prices keeping a rich contemporary look, design and quality intact. I also have a passion for interior design; hence, I think I have contributed to the artfulness of the store. I lend my artistic sensibilities to the selection of art, accent pieces, and decor to complement our furniture beautifully. This is very important in any interior store.

**How has your husband Farhan Furniturewala spurred your journey as a creative artist? And what would you say is the art of achieving a successful marriage?**

Farhan is extremely supportive and encouraging of my work. He has a great passion for art and design, so I can depend on his honest critical appreciation. He respects my space. I think it's important to be friends in a marriage because when the physical passion dies, you're left with companionship that satiates your heart and life.

(Responding to the second part of the question): Love above all because marriage needs nurturing constantly to live and thrive, when you love you give without expectations.

**You and your brother Fardeen are very close and are both artistically inclined. Can you shed some light on your bonding with him and your respective creative spark?**

Yes, my brother is also very artistically inclined but we are both extremely individualistic in our approaches. Art is definitely what we bond on and share thoughts and feelings on certain artworks we purchase or which are mine. He is very supportive, very honest with his views on my work, and is extremely happy that I have come back to my art full-time.

**Your cousins Farah, Simone and Sussanne are also designers in different spaces. Do you all inspire, motivate and support one another?**

We absolutely do! We are fiercely independent women, all with a very artistic bent of mind, and what's very interesting is that we are from different spaces of art and design. We are very close-knit, respect each other's identities and support each other 100%. We get this from our mothers who have been very successful and individualistic, they were our torchbearers.

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