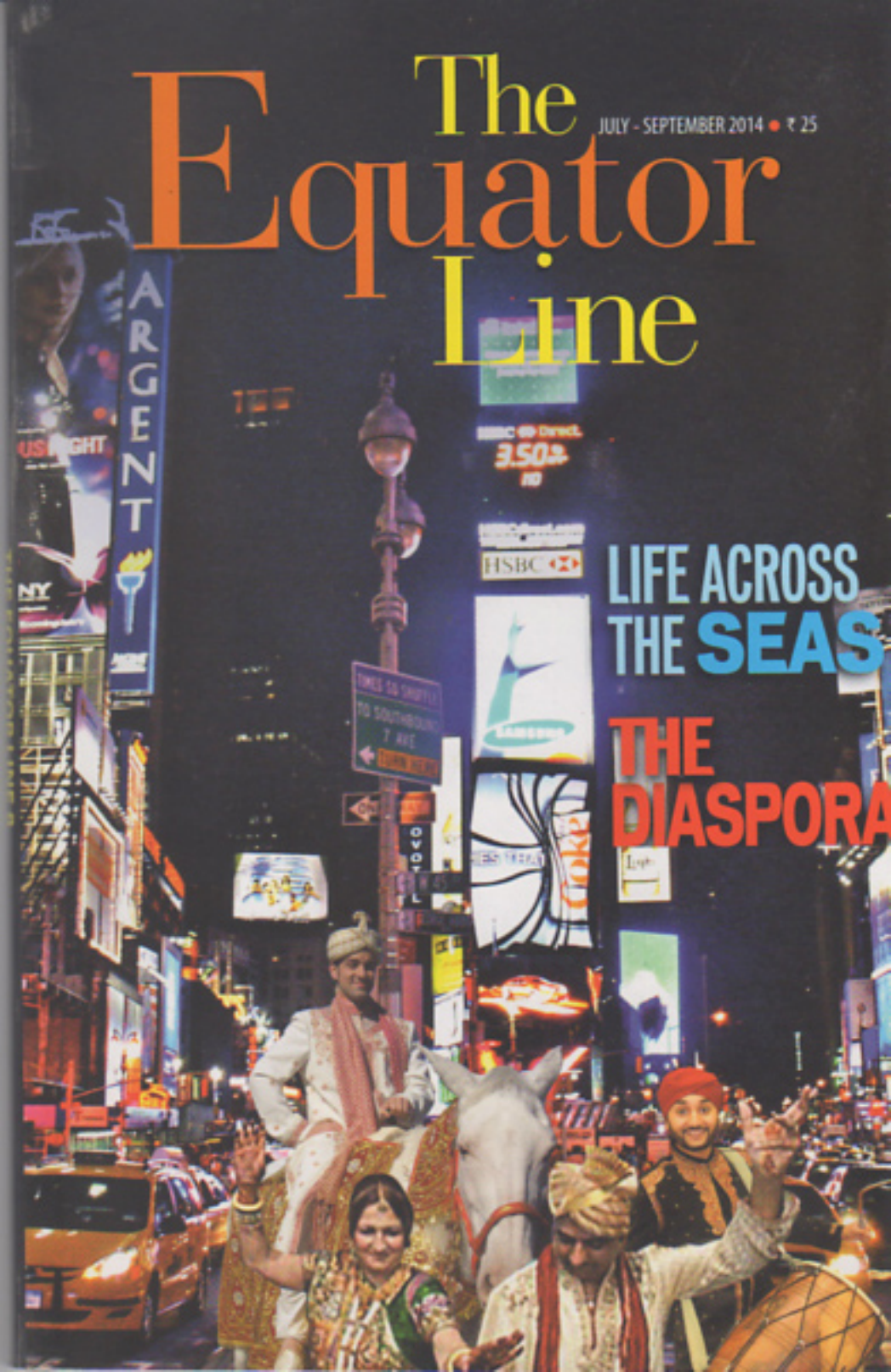


The Equator Line

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LIFE ACROSS
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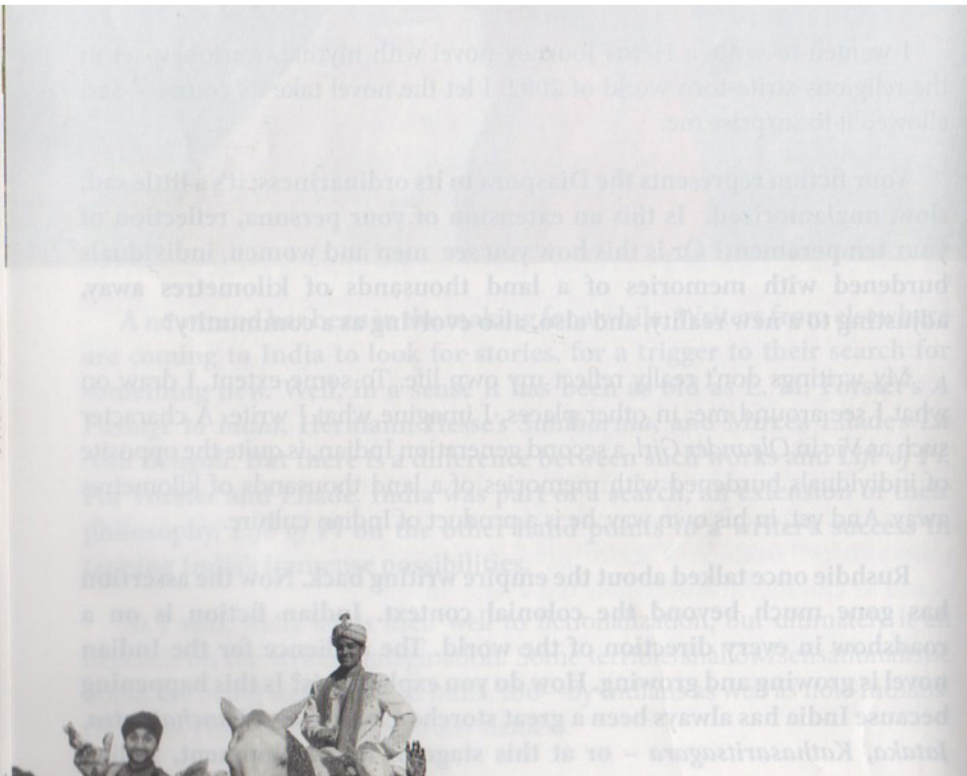


I went to the seaside to eat sandwiches coated with marble dust from the workshop.

Working hard for my own idiom, to set the right tone for my creative expression, it took me a long time to find my own voice and to find the right words to describe the world around me. I felt that I had to explore the boundaries of my own language, to find a way to express the things that I felt were important. I had to find a way to say what I wanted to say, to find a way to say what I felt was true. I had to find a way to say what I felt was beautiful. I had to find a way to say what I felt was meaningful. I had to find a way to say what I felt was important. I had to find a way to say what I felt was true. I had to find a way to say what I felt was beautiful. I had to find a way to say what I felt was meaningful. I had to find a way to say what I felt was important.

A JOURNEY INTO JUTE AND MARBLE

Simona Bocchi



I had heard a lot about India — from the people in the West who had had a chance to explore the country. However, their opinions varied so radically that I never had a clear idea as to the nature of the vast landmass which had cradled an ancient civilization. This made me curious and I yearned to learn more about that distant land which had celebrated cultural diversity much before multiculturalism became fashionable as an idea in the West.

I have always firmly believed in experiencing things and exploring the unknown on my own. Instead of being guided by others and led by conventional wisdom, I trusted my own instincts. *Let me depend on my intuition; if I make mistakes I will not regret them.* That's what I have always told myself. This I-could-not-care-less attitude has made the journey of my life far more intriguing and interesting. When I look back today I know it's a call from within that brought me to India to discover a rich tapestry — schools of philosophy, art, and a long tradition of religious tolerance and accommodation.

In Italy my life as an artist was fully preoccupied with tough targets I set for myself and many commitments. It was not easy to take time out for a journey into my own self, for my own enlightenment. I wanted to break free to get out there without any inhibitions. This long trek, I told myself, was meant to discover myself.

My life in Italy in those years revolved around frequent trips from Monza, my hometown near Milan, to Carrara, the place of my inspiration, and to Verona where I moved in 2007. During those days I was completely dedicated to the arts and art lovers.

I paddled a bicycle to reach the laboratory of marble and art foundries. My life followed a familiar trajectory: long days of hard work punctuated by a lunch break when

I went to the seaside to eat sandwiches coated with marble dust from the workshop.

Working hard for my own idiom, to set the right tone for my creative expression, I turned to the many-splendored Roman tradition and came under the spell of the Italian Renaissance. The grandeur of Roman sculpture, the breathtaking creations of the old masters simply ravished me. I felt grateful that I had the opportunity to grow up in Italy and imbibe its many influences. I spent my days at the marble quarries which had beckoned the artists since the Roman era. The Renaissance master, Michelangelo, had sourced the raw material for sculpting from the same marble quarries. A huge block of marble provided to him from a quarry in Carrara, a town in the picturesque Apuan Alps in Northern Tuscany, turned into *David*, his fabled masterpiece. Feted as the ultimate symbol of male beauty, *David* has evoked awe and admiration from viewers down the centuries as the finest specimen of Roman sculpture.

Continuous extraction of marble has changed the appearance of the place — from the hypnotic rolling hills circled by a lush green countryside to badly mauled white geometries of sharp peaks, like gaunt, bare crags.

Another site I chose for my work was a small town called Pietrasanta in the province of Lucca, dotted with artists' studios and workshops and home to several art foundries. It was less soothing and panoramic than Carrara, but the town remains conscious of its Roman past, and a part of the ancient Roman Wall still exists there. More importantly, artists, since the age of Michelangelo, have recognized the superior quality of its marble.

In those studios, we breathed a sense of creative energy and unparalleled inspiration. Away from the glare of publicity, some of the greatest masters had spent their days in those laboratories, creating ageless sublime art. More prominent among them are Henry Moore, Miró, Sint Faal, Fernando Botero and Igor Mitoraj. The artists, moved by their creative impulses, have ceaselessly worked in those studios along with their assistants. From my desk I watched some of them pore over a figure with a magnifier in hand.

The Italian experience gave me a knowledge base, which would prove to be invaluable in the years to come. One can find in my work nuances of classical Greek, Roman, and even Egyptian art. If an art student or an artist who is just coming up asks me where to start learning, I will say, "Go to Italy to read art at the places hallowed by the masters." I am singularly fortunate

that I began there, and now I can travel around the world imbibing many influences and dipping in many streams. That's how I landed in India one day. But my Indian odyssey had a long start too. As a child, I had heard many stories about India from an Indian help who worked in our home. I was extremely fond of her; she was my only bridge to India.

I read ancient Sanskrit texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and learnt about inspiring personalities such as Swami Vivekananda and Osho. Despite my self-indulgent Italian life, I was aware of an inner quest, a restlessness deep within for a new experience, discovery of a land that had always existed within me. The unknown gave me insistent calls, and I knew India was throbbing inside me like a second heart.

With a one-way ticket, it all became, as they say, 'a tangible reality'. I



wanted the long flight to end as quickly as possible because my dear friend, Carpenter, was waiting for me in Delhi. On the plane I remember writing so much that I finished almost all the pages of my diary. Throughout the journey I had a strange sensation – this move to the East would be a turning point, a decisive moment in my life. Perhaps my own urgency was pervasive; we touched down at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport ten minutes before the scheduled time.

Coming out of the airport I took a deep breath: the tropical air with a mix of exotic smells and stenches stunned me.

Welcome to India, I quietly whispered to myself.

Since that day, many years have passed but that mix of many smells has stayed with me, a part of my being. I must admit though that the early days in my promised land – the process of settling down – were not a smooth cakewalk. A complete stranger in Delhi, I met the Italian ambassador, who suggested I look for opportunities to give my works of art as much exposure as possible. New to this city, I did not know many people here who could help me, refer me to the galleries, art critics and connoisseurs. From an independent and emancipated woman, I found myself living in a Punjabi family that was into marble business with Italy. A friend back home had introduced me to them.

My life entered an interesting phase.

The sculpting tools, however, were stuck in customs for six months, and my impatience to explore and give shape to my creative impulses in Udaipur was turning acute. The long wait for the equipment left me with no choice but to look for other avenues for my creative expressions. That's how I discovered the magical jute. The accidental discovery of the golden threads really opened up a new vista for me. It was a new medium and it unleashed my creativity. I was drawn towards the material with an excitement I had rarely felt since my days at the studios in Carrara. Excited, I began to plan what all I would do with jute. In Italy, I had created portraits of jute bags that had once contained coffee or potatoes. In Udaipur, jute was everywhere. Jute is soft, shiny, durable – and for me – a natural, recyclable material. With jute I could send out a message in defence of sustainability. I had already explored the theme of sustainability in some of my creations – trees in bronze shared with human figures isolated and transfixed in contemplation.

I got in touch with the dyers of fabrics in Udaipur and with them began

to colour the jute and give the raw material a new connotation – making it more lively and lustrous – inspired by rich, saturated hues. I went from a world of interaction and sharing in Italy to long months of complete solitude in India. I lived ten kilometres from the centre of Udaipur but during the day, I was mostly in the city. On Sundays, when the workshop was closed, the children with whom I was sharing the house would take me for a walk to the lake. I had heard about the city of lakes but really did not know that the waterside palaces could be that alluring.

One afternoon, I left the house and started walking aimlessly for the sake of solitude. Suddenly, three men on a motorbike drove in close to me and one of them struck me with his fist. I fell down but quickly regained my senses and stood up. I glared back at them. Surprised by my defiance, they cowered and retreated. I recalled the warnings from friends that it was dangerous to be alone in India.

I hurried to the nearest bus stop where I heard about a crafts fair going on at Shilpagram. I reached the *mela* ground and was exposed to a world of gypsies who were playing drums, flutes and string and percussion instruments all around the place. There were artisans from across the country spreading out their colourful creations made exquisite with inlay and mirror works.

As I was moving around like a wonderstruck child discovering a new rainbow around the ground, I could not escape the eyes of the cook in the household where I was staying as a guest. He took me back home shortly afterwards. My brief hour of freedom ended with a mild reproach from my hosts who were worried because I had ventured out all alone. The next day I went back to the workshop to continue my affair with jute, both excited and energised.

It was a hot afternoon in May when I received an unexpected phone call. The secretary to the Maharana of Udaipur invited me to the palace for a meeting with Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar. They had heard that an Italian artist had been in the city for several months and perhaps they wished to welcome her. I was touched by the gesture from the erstwhile ruling family. I was unsure, however, as to how they had managed to find my contact number; I had made sure very few people knew it.

I rode my shining new red bicycle up to the palace, which so far I had seen only from the outside. I was hugely impressed by the palace, its grandeur,

its exuberant architecture. The magnificent structure, once the symbol of power and glory of the royalty, dominated the blue skyline. The sky over Udaipur is crystal blue because monsoon clouds rarely gather there.

While waiting in an elegant living room, I took in the views of the sprawling courtyard where I saw a Jack Russell terrier running around, just like my dog back home in Italy whom I had been forced to leave behind while coming to India.

I was called into the Maharana's office. Awed by the trappings of royal power (which was no more) I minded my steps walking in. But the scion of the erstwhile royal family was a cheerful man who shed light on the mystery of my closely guarded telephone number being available to him. He had actually got my number from an art critic in London who, in fact, had met me in Delhi. Perhaps wisely, he had thought that it would be sensible on my part to meet and know the Maharana while living in Udaipur. Our friendship grew over the years and it was through him that I could learn more about the many facets of Indian art traditions and history, something that is difficult to document in a book. In fact, I never stopped discovering and being amazed at the immense land of India, its breathtaking diversity and a complex social code, its many customs, cultures and languages.

Only later, through my work, I came to know other places where I had to go and stay. I learnt to live in the present and not worry about the future all the time. I learnt that it is important to forget disappointments and unburden my mind of bad memories, of things which had not turned out the way I had expected them to.

An important lesson in the art of living came from Sher, a rickshaw-wallah in Udaipur. He often paddled me around the city. One day, when I was going to the workshop, perched on the backseat of his rickshaw, I remember, the man sharply turned the handlebar jerking the rickshaw. I held the sides of the seat tight fearing I would fall down. Sher perhaps saw my puzzlement in the rear-view mirror and looked worried. "Madam-ji, you are always lost somewhere else, in some other time, I have noticed that. Excuse me for saying this. But we have to live in the present, not in some unforeseeable future."

Coming from the humble man, it was an invaluable piece of wisdom. The rickshaw-wallah told me what many books of philosophy could not explain with such brevity.

A Journey into Jute and Marble

After having lived for two years with the family on the outskirts of Udaipur, I decided to relocate into the city. Thereafter, I integrated with the locals to make preparations for, and celebrate Diwali and the other festivals on the Indian calendar. I began to call children to my house, asking them to stay and paint. I gave them paint, paper, crayons, brushes, and told them to explore their minds and discover themselves. The idea was a great hit. Without the rigour of a formal school, they picked up the brushes to make sensitive, brilliant strokes. Those images were the only language of communication between the children and me.

At last, I got back my tools – cleared by the customs – and started creating new figures and objects in stone, sandstone, and marble.

In 2009, I was called to create a monument for the first international stone sculpture symposium in India. I spent a month at the Uttarayan Museum Foundation in Baroda giving shape to my new creation – an ode to Shiva and Parvati in marble. A monolith of about three metres, it was made of a particular type of black marble called Beslana. It was an interesting experience that I found entirely satisfactory. A sense of calm saturated me when I looked at my creation which was my way of fusing the otherwise non-reconcilable opposites.

On the breast of Parvati, I created a sundial on a concave volume but it was treated as if it were convex, through an optical illusion that pushes all of us to linger in our search for the truth. Through the experience of the slow passage between the light and dark, change happens in total harmony. That passage, masculine and feminine, or yin and yan, is also present within us. Our consciousness supports our desire for ambiguity, to not clearly define the boundary but to let the process of natural mutability acquire acceptance without judgement, because the forces are naturally different but dependent on each other for their existence.

When I returned to Udaipur, another surprise was waiting for me. Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar asked me to organize a solo exhibition at the palace. I engaged the craftsmen who had worked for me to train me in the local techniques. The exhibition was titled 'When Traditional Meets Contemporary', Rang 2011.

In the West, India is synonymous with its hoary spiritual tradition. Many people come here for a spiritual experience. Busy inside the art world, I did not realize when I too had what they call an 'inner calling'. I went with



a great desire to meet Ramesh Balsekar in Mumbai. Reading about him, following his teachings, brought a great awakening into me. Unknowingly I had come under his spell. In a moment of personal crisis I turned to him, and he calmed me with a few simple words ridding my mind of every persistent question that had tormented me. I have a picture of the two of us placed on my desk, which shows me crouched next to him in a tender embrace. I left the room with Ravi, a child from Udaipur who lived not far from my house. His mother went to work every morning and would come home only in the evening. My place became Ravi's second home.

He had never stepped outside Udaipur. I had brought him with me after taking his parents' permission. His father was very ill. I thought that visiting a big city like Mumbai would distract his mind from all the worries. I took Ravi to Marine Drive for his first view of the sea. Deep inside the northern heartland, for the people in Rajasthan, the sea is a distant dream. Ravi was thrilled looking at the quiet flow of the Arabian Sea. There was absolute silence between us. We could only feel each other's emotions. I was deeply moved by the child's delight looking at the waves mildly crashing, leaving a white line of surf on the beach before receding back to the sea. He took in with his curious, innocent eyes, as much as he could – endless water, coconut palms, fishing boats at a distance bobbing up and down. I was

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happy that Ravi was with me. Moments later a feeling of sadness washed over me – I would have to part ways with Ravi. My exhibition in Delhi was an important event, a crucial step towards my recognition as an artist in India and beyond.

The exhibition, 'The Process of Unknowing', was inaugurated on 18 September 2012 at the Italian embassy. Among those present were Italian Ambassador Giacomo Sanfelice di Monteforte and Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar.

I am aware of the restless girl who lives inside me. She cannot settle down, she has an itch for the road. She is me.

Later, I left for the Maha Kumbh Mela at Prayag which happens once every twelve years. It was a spectacular gathering at the confluence of the three rivers – Ganga, Yamuna and the mythic Sarasvati. The atmosphere was electrifying with thousands of saffron-clad sadhus descending on the banks of the Ganga. People came from all over the world – millions of them. I was swayed by the outpouring of faith. I was annoyed by the sadhus who pestered me for money. I was amused by the Nagas who wore nothing other than faith.

Brimming with new energy, I trek on... ■



Simona Bocchi, an Italian sculptor, came to India in 2006 for inspiration. As someone who had started her artistic career at the art studios in Carrara, Tuscany, she went to Rajasthan looking for the familiar medium of marble. Additionally, she discovered jute in Udaipur as a medium for her new creations. Her book about the Indian experience will be published in 2015.

