

ON BEAUTY

The *On Beauty* exhibition indulges in sensory delight. The featured artists dialogue on the timeless desire to decorate our spaces and adorn ourselves using materials at hand—flowers, fabric, paper, paint. The presented works of visual art further employ music, fragrance, taste, and touch to stimulate and thrill in the moment but also to evoke memory of people, places, and things that have brought pleasure and value to our everyday experiences: the sun emerging from the clouds and warming the skin, earrings purchased impulsively at a market, a naughty fistful of pink jasmine plucked from a neighbor's yard, the flap and flutter of material drying on a line.

Nirmala Thangam was drawn to silk painting as an adult and became so consumed by the art form that she seeks out workshops and mentors in every city she visits, continuously learning and developing new skills. She deviates from established techniques and materials to suit both the goals of her practice and her jet-setting lifestyle—for example, fixing her dyes using a bamboo steamer from Bangkok on a stovetop in San Francisco, combining watercolor and fabric painting techniques to produce new effects. Her wearable art is inspired by a childhood in South Bombay spent examining and marveling at her fashionista mother's collection of saris and perfumes.

In parallel with their unabashed celebration of the senses, the artists explore personally meaningful themes which may emerge for the viewer only upon longer communion with their work. Floral designer Sophia de Young takes us along on her path of self discovery as she elevates that which is often taken for granted or dismissed, generously illuminating her experience with a personal essay and poetry.

Michelle Sindha Thomas revels in juxtapositions—literal and tactile but also interpersonal, social, cultural. In the *Desi Chic* and *Diaspora Chic* pairing, she shows how the elements of a traditional groom’s veil are interpreted and claimed by a youth of the Indian diaspora grasping to understand and define her identity by claiming the “exotic” and constructing a narrative of the history from which she has been detached by circumstance—even if that narrative proves to be an imagined past informed by incomplete sources, by Hindi cinema, and Sabyasachi on Instagram, with little context beyond the aesthetic and an inexplicable tug at the heart.

On Beauty honors the quality of humility and dedication to improving one’s craft, to mastering the elements and principles of design before deconstructing or reconstructing them to communicate in a new language that is intelligible and accessible and relevant to the current discourse on art and design—but also personal with layers of meaning that are held private. The presentation offers an alternative to the naive aesthetic that has flooded the contemporary visual landscape with its focus on sentiment, often eschewing technique altogether. It also offers an alternative to the opposite end of the spectrum: images generated by artificial intelligence, quick and slick, uncanny, lacking in nuance and personality and soul. The artists of the *On Beauty* exhibition are balanced, deliberate, putting their best foot forward to articulate themselves with polish and precision, pushing the limits of how pencil and paper and paint and petal can support their expression and our pleasure in the encounter—they are by turns righteous and petty, brooding and tongue-in-cheek, trembling and lush, abundant, confident, contemplative and esoteric—all while retaining their sincerity and essential sense of delight in the natural world.