



Inspired from the street life of India for Trafalgar Square Festival



Part of Mumbadevi Collection

*"I am very nostalgic," Chavan says. "I love the simplicity of old school living, old school life -- I'm holding on to this in the face of the speed of modern Mumbai."*

*- Little Shilpa*

Where does one begin when describing the ubiquitous work of artist, milliner, and designer Shilpa Chavan; free-spirited, inventive, robust, ambitious and unafraid of circumstance and ceremony, Chavan buzzes with ideas, runs through lists of influences that make little or no sense, and intentionally rattles our sensibilities, as she deliberately up-turns our view of everything in order we have multiple disciplines and styles fused together before us, as an utterly post-modern experience. Influenced as much by the tribal and tradition as she is by modernity and the mega city, Chavan pours over her district and city with a forensic tooth-comb, for colours, styles, objects, prints, paper, and fabrics, new and dilapidated, in order to find a new formula; an elemental spirit that defines and re-defines her work. Little Shilpa is positively animated by the potential creativity of juxtaposing multiple military lapels with florescent bangles; pinning vintage war medals with garish threads of fabric that appears as a traditional head-dress. Alternatively of having a striking female's head sprouting from a decorated dining table, as though the pièce de résistance of a William Burrough's style meal. Recalling American William S. Burrough's Naked Lunch, Little Shilpa's work is difficult to define in terms of a linear narrative; instead her clothing appears as a series of scenarios

# STEALING BEAUTY



Part of Rainbow Totem Collection

that riddle one's imagination as plausible and implausible antidotes to the detritus of ultra modern living; and like Burrough's Naked Lunch, Little Shilpa invents an alternative time and space from which to appreciate these corrosive visions of fashion and beauty.

"I don't plan the collections," Chavan has said, "I pick up things because I feel they are interesting and then I hoard them. I let them lie for a while until I start feeling strongly about what I can do with a piece, and it can take years to figure that out."

For Shilpa Chavan or Little Shilpa, as she is better known, design is as much art as it is fashion; clothing for the designer acts as a second skin that should be applied to the body, pinned into place, and not worn as a garment. Radical for her thinking, her works are as avant-garde as her British influences; notably Tatler editor Isabella Blow, and designer Alexandra McQueen, who successfully juxtaposed strength with fragility. Turning so many influences and ideas over in her head, Chavan is a young woman positively blurring the boundaries between couture clothing, conceptual

art and design. Introducing a theatricality and verve to her work as she clearly sees everything as an influence upon everything else; and for her audiences, whether as designer or artist, it makes for a life affirming experience when given to looking over Little Shilpa's works; as the designer introduces something other to the all-encumbering appreciation for full-scale modernity in a sub-continent hell-bend on change.

**Art&Deal:** When one looks over your work there appears to be an incredible verve and uncompromising vigour to your practice that elevates it; releasing it almost from its original cultural heritage. How have you gone about conceiving and creating works as objects and ideas? How significant is your cultural identity to your practice? Has India's liberalism and industrious economy allowed you to look well beyond the Indian sub-continent to Asia and across the water to America and Britain for your influences?

**Little Shilpa:** I am very influenced by my surroundings, and I am nostalgic about my local up-bringing, the beauty attached to the simplicity of it. This overnight modernisation makes me want to hold onto my visual imagery from the streets. There is always a weird juxtaposition of the old and the modern as you look through the city; and my work shows it as well. I endeavour to create this rich co-existence by combining the past with the present, decadence with clean and simple design.

Courtesy of the artist Little Shilpa





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**A&D:** As a designer are you influenced by the rise and fall of contemporary Indian art?

**LS:** Not really, I like to be aware of what is going on but I try to always be a step away, in my own zone, individual.

**A&D:** Can you explain about your label, 'Little Shilpa Design', are you seeking to create a whole series of pieces or a particular style?

**LS:** Little Shilpa is a hand made accessory collection based on local influences and observations.

A collection that takes a vintage thought and transcends it into a modern product through the usage of various raw materials. The inspiration of Little Shilpa comes from travelling and interaction with various cultures. I consider it a unique concept that does not transcend time; it takes shapes and juxtaposes them through fabric, trimmings, metal and acrylic. The essence of the brand is that each piece is handmade and each piece is a one-off. I do create a series of pieces but for a very particular and peculiar style.



*Little Shilpa Collection*

**A&D:** Who are your influences currently and historically? How are you received as a designer in the Indian sub-continent now?

**LS:** Where do I begin, Amadeus, the film, fuels gnawing desire to keep creating; late British designer Isabella Blow, she defined the pieces she wore and not the other way around, and she carried style and design and introduced impracticality and cleverly quirked them all together. British hat designer Philip Treacy, for being so unbelievably creative and then so humble whilst doing it. Another designer Hussein Chalayan, I consider it amazing how he manages to tap into technology and attach art to fashion, in the present; draw on the past and look to the future, and lorded British designer Alexander McQueen, the impeccable presentation of his collections, the emotion you feel when you watch his shows; astonishing. As a designer here in India, I guess there is always a curiosity linked with my shows, and a whole set of influences.

**A&D:** Fashion and Design have a real international make-up about them that have projected your works out onto a global fashion scene; has that allowed for major collaborations? Which of those collective workings have proved most significant?

**LS:** In a strange way, although I studied fashion, I started as an installation artist, that's when I first realised that it was my fashion that gave me an opening into art, because crucially I don't see fashion as functional or wearable, for me it is about how it works around the body or a personality,



Courtesy of Designer Little Shilpa

I think this collaboration of fashion and art, the opportunity to show my fashion works in art spaces and galleries, that is such a significant moment.

**A&D:** There is a real sense that you have armed yourself with a European vision of the Indian sub-continent that has allowed you the will to design your pieces through a historical and cultural looking glass, creating references that you are part of a new generation of post-modern, referencing everything in and outside of India now. Does your eclectic practice prove thoroughly rewarding with regard to promoting new ideas for you?

As an art critic when I look over your works, your practice even, I consider there to be a quite brilliant dexterity about it. You have a sophisticated eye for designing a second aesthetic skin for all of your anatomically perfect figures. Though it might even be suggested you are less concerned for beautifying your models but challenging their anatomy?

**LS:** Having a fashion background and having worked as a fashion stylist I am always thinking of my pieces or designs in terms of pictures, and I am very interested in how objects and shapes work around the body, seal the body. There needs to be a human connection, everything needs to be sculpted together.

**A&D:** The wondrous visual configurations that have a three headed adolescent figure clutching an umbrella hovering over milk coloured background appear to be your signature style, how did you come to such a visual conclusion with your work? And was drawing always the best medium for such a parallel universe?

**LS:** I am not really creating for someone in particular; it is just a process without really thinking of the end result. If I start thinking of end results I will stop creating. Tellingly a lot of my accessories are a scaled down version

of my installation work. I see them as pictures in my head first; then sketch them out before I start to build the piece. The process of the creation of a piece is more exciting than the complete piece.

**A&D:** Contemporary artist Jitish Kallat regards his greatest influence as the streets of Mumbai, or 'the University of Life' as he regarded it, where do you look to for your initial ideas? Where do the majority of your original drawings come from?

**LS:** I am inspired from life experiences and what surround us all, the streets of Bombay, the difficult and inventive lives people lead; the films I watch, nostalgia for something other. I am inspired from all that they call street and having worked as a stylist helps to manifest that image in a more realistic and edited form. My pieces are like a canvas as they personify an aspect of my visual influence from observation to execution. I design on intuition and the challenge is to arrive as close to what I have imagined as I possibly can.

**A&D:** You have clearly succeeded at generating works that the rest of us might never have done, where does such a gifted ability come from?

**LS:** The gnawing desire to always push the boundaries and look at things around me from a different perspective;

to be mesmerized by the magnanimity of the pieces and to create another world; a deliberate fairy tale out of all my pieces. I have a real need to really push boundaries, and to be able to create more than what I can imagine, if it can be imagined it can be done.

**A&D:** Your works are influenced by such a diverse diaspora of mediums and messages? How do you retain clarity with what you are saying and how you go about saying it?

**LS:** Balancing design and function comes from balancing originality. Being a science student who wanted so desperately to design; there was a time when I was in two colleges at one time, until my parents found out. I noticed geometry always working well with my design sensibilities; yet it also influenced my designs, with a greater technicality, interrupted new directions.

**A&D:** What medium and which works do you consider your most significant?

**LS:** I work with what I am inspired by at that point in time; my Mumbadevi installations and my multi-hat pieces have been by far the most challenging for me.

**A&D:** Interestingly as I alluded to earlier, you have an interest 'in the space between art and fashion'; is there a greater freedom to your ability to be able to move between



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the two disciplines?

**LS:** My collections and pieces are actually smaller versions of my larger installations. My work has been categorised as fashion-art; I have always been in this in-between space. There are small collections but there are a lot more art related exhibits; be it installations or photography or even customised dramatic headpieces for a show or a shoot; anything that allows my work to follow no rules and be sculptural. I always think of my pieces as a whole, and as an installation or a complete picture when I am designing them. I don't really think of myself in a space, whether art or fashion, that stagnates or restricts you; imposing too many rules to follow or have to acknowledge. I endeavour to just create, rather than define.

**A&D:** In terms of art and literature, whom do you consider significant for you? Do you draw greater motivation from American culture? Is your thrilling originality between these two positions?

**LS:** I think I draw more from an English and Indian culture, not so much as American.

**A&D:** Is the sexuality of your work significant to you? Is clothing a skin that you feel that you can add and subtract very easily?

**LS:** I work in a zone, with passion, and I get deeply involved; also most of my pieces are shot on women, hence you always get this sense of a deep involvement between the pieces and the people that shoot with them, it's subconscious.

**A&D:** Is there a greater liberalism to generating works and ideas that of an industry that promotes sexuality?



Battle Royale (2009-10) Collection

**LS:** Absolutely, there is definitely freedom in just acknowledging one's sexuality.

**A&D:** You appear to have archived a great deal for someone relatively young, what is the motivation for your exhibiting so extensively? How many of those exhibitions and collaborations took place outside America?

**LS:** I still have not shown in America. I have done shows with some art, some fashion, some both art and fashion in France, Barcelona, Kuwait and London.

**A&D:** What do you make of the phenomenal rise of contemporary Indian art? Did you consider yourself more Indian than American when included in the recent survey of contemporary Indian art at Saatchi Gallery in January 2010?

**LS:** I've always been a product of India

**A&D:** How important is the feminist discourse that you generate through your pieces, to you? Do you consider there to be a great deal of politics, social and gender, to your practice?

**LS:** It is only very recently that I find I have been influenced socially and politically; and it suggests a sense of subscribing to a specific school of thought and I am not sure I want to yet.



**A&D:** In terms of collaborative works, who would like to work with next, given the opportunity?

**LS:** Hussein Chalayan

**A&D:** What for you next? Do you regard yourself as an actionist or more a re-actionist?

**LS:** I aspire to be able to make possible everything that I make possible to think of or dream of.

**A&D:** Finally can I ask; are you creating an alternative universe with your works that should be regarded as an alternative to reality, or are these works a second skin?

**LS:** I've always been in awe of Indian gods adorning their huge crowns giving them a surreal omnipresence; also, growing up watching Mary Poppins slides on my hand-held slide viewer. My work is a very obvious juxtaposition of so many influences. My love for millinery comes from somewhere there. Not everyone comfortably wears a headpiece or even a hat. It takes a strong personality and I say this after having spoken to quite a number of people. Some wear hats to hide under them, some for stature, some out of sheer habit or norms. My designs are for someone who defines the pieces that they wear. It is definitely an alternative universe that eventually becomes a second skin.