>> Instead of canvas, artist Louise Despont uses a ledger book for her artwork. She tells us more about her strong connection with India and her artistic endeavours

Madhuriya Saikia | HRM

A DESI CONNECTION

American artist Louise Despont, who is exhibiting her work in the city, talks to Dev Goswami about her Indian connection and her views on Indian art

On entering Gallerie Isa, we see American artist Louise standing in the middle of the gallery, looking right at home. And that could very well be the case as Louise keeps coming back to India since her first visit three years ago. She began her artistic excursion while studying art semiotics at Brown University, where she started collecting vintage accounting ledgers. Her work is unique because she uses these ledgers instead of canvas. She travelled to India for the first time on a Fullbright Fellowship and has since fallen in love with the country. We talk to her about her passion for India and views on Indian art.

Tell us about your connection with India.
I visited India on a fellowship three years ago and came across many different forms of art that I truly connected with. I thought that they spoke the same language of art that I did. I came across tantric meditation drawings, which are done on old Indian paper and I connected with these paintings as they had two forms which were merging together. Then I came across the Warli paintings, which I felt were exactly similar to what I was doing, but on a different, bigger scale. Similarly, the art at Jantar Mantar too talked the language of geometry. I felt connected to that too, because it was the same language as mine, in a sculptural sense.

What do you think sets Indian art apart from the art present in other countries?
I've paid attention to traditional Indian art, so I will not comment on contemporary art. Traditional art is quite different. The extent of detail and refinement that I've observed here is hard to come across anywhere else. For example, if you see the wall art in a Jain temple, every inch is decorated with intricate carvings. This has a totally different energy that I haven't seen anywhere else.

You talked about the tantric meditation drawings which are done on old Indian paper. Similarly, your work is done on old ledger paper. What made you choose ledger paper over canvas?
I've been working on ledger paper for about a decade now. I first came across a ledger book when I was in school and used it to maintain class notes. Over time, I also started drawing on it and realised how private it was. Because, I could just close the book and the paintings would be gone… no one would know about them. So, I felt an immense personal connection to my paintings.

After a few years, I began to cut pages out of my notebook, placed them on the floor and suddenly the scale became much larger. However, unlike with canvas, I didn't have to have a set idea about the size of the work before I started. For example, I could just make a drawing on four ledger pages and then, if I wanted to, I could just add more paper and make that drawing bigger. Also, needless to say, it is perfect when I am travelling and working abroad because it is a book. I can draw, shut the book and put it away.

You seem to have learnt a lot while in the process of creating your paintings. Does that still happen to you with every new creation?
Definitely. Each drawing teaches me something new. There is a constant process of evolution and change that happens every time I draw. Also, with my kind of art, it gives me more opportunities to learn something new, as every limitation is a challenge. For example, I can't realistically paint a tree on ledger paper. That makes me look for ways of portraying it symbolically and so, I learn something new.

I notice you're wearing mehndi on your hands which, like your paintings, has geometrical shapes. Is that the reason…
(Laughs) Well, actually, I just got married a few days ago…

Congratulations! Did the wedding happen here, in India?
Thank you. Yes, we first met in South India three years ago and we both love this country. So, since it is a special place for both of us, we decided to call our friends and family and get married here.

What does the future hold for you and your relationship with India?
Well, I have very grand hopes from my life, but I don't think I'll share them (laughs). However, seriously, I am now going to start working on my London exhibition that will take place next year. And as far as India is concerned, I will always keep coming back here. There is always more to learn and more projects to do. And I'm happy that I'll get to share that with my husband.