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ART

## Sculpting the Psyche: Sakshi Gupta's artistic reflection on freedom and restraint

Shweta Shiware discovers the brilliance of sculptor Sakshi Gupta's "grotesque and seductive" new metalworks 'Spaces of Being'.

By Shweta Shiware

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Photos: Abner Fernandes, courtesy of the artist and Experimenter.

Sakshi Gupta's 89-by-117-inch sculpture, *Spaces of Being*, is a terrific decoy, evoking human vulnerability, but also latent strength. Walk round the plain façade made of scrap, and there stands carved in a coop a claustrophobic parade of eyeless chickens stacked one above the other, brooding over eggs for hatching, peering, napping, meddling, coexisting. Look closer, and there's a pheasant sitting at the base, its long wisps of curvilinear metal wings flapping within the confines of the cage. Here, Gupta sees the human spirit in

lepidoptera to reflect on questions such as: What is freedom? What does it allow? What obligations does it impose? Who does it exclude? The sculpture pushes some essential life-likeness button, or rather mirrors the shushed commotion we all hide within the cracks of our mind, trapped like birds in the metal fences of a cage. “While there is an inherent need in us to categorize and organize our thoughts, I also feel that breaking out of certain thought patterns is almost as difficult as breaking out of a coop. Which is why I thought it’d be interesting, visually, to use a chicken coop as a motif,” explains Gupta.

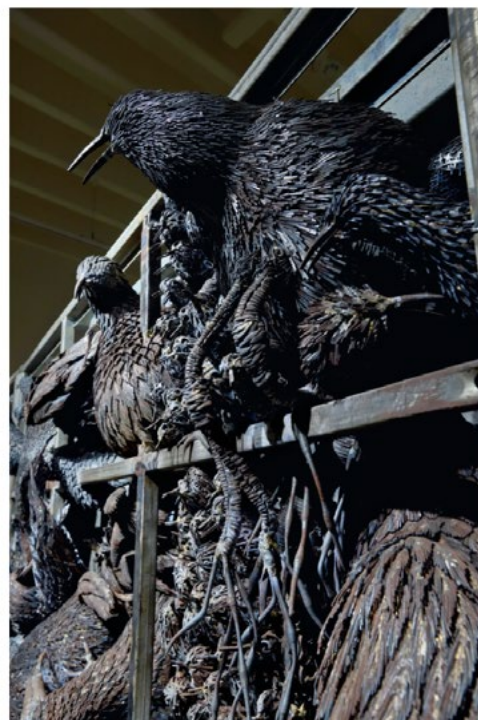




It is projected as a continuous loop of lairs and labyrinthine towers and torsos of many sizes, body proportions, postures and plumage styles. From modelling armatures to bricolage and low temperature brazing all done at her studio in Mumbai's Reay Road, the sheer variety of gravity-defying, interlocking forms made from found materials at the city's Saki Naka scrapyards, is extraordinary. As a sculptor, Gupta reuses everything, throws nothing away, circles her obsessions endlessly. "Scrapyards are quite wild!" she says. "I feel for discarded material... It's got so much potential and crazy energy, which fuels me." All of Gupta's 13 metal installations, which made their debut in September, 2023 at Experimenter gallery in Colaba, Mumbai, is a mad trail of parentheses, puns and stories within stories. The show's title itself, *If the Seas Catch Fire*, takes inspiration from EE Cummings's quote about the importance of following one's heart, even when the going gets tough. In another work, *Give Yourself to the Air, to What You Cannot Hold*, a Rainer Maria Rilke quote, there's a metal human spine twirling around a couple of palm leaves like a departing spirit. "[Palm leaves were] one of the first things I reacted to after relocating from Delhi to Mumbai.



*Close- Up Of The Different Parts Of The Installation* Photos: Abner Fernandes, courtesy of the artist and Experimenter.



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They were hanging so peacefully, almost resting, although detached from the mother plant. I integrated the human spine to talk about how we push the human experience outside of our bodies and extend it to things, people and places around us,” says Gupta whose sculptor heroes include the late Mrinalini Mukherjee and Antony Gormley. Gupta, 44, didn’t pursue a sculpting career right away; she tried other “creative” things like advertising and mass communication. “If it weren’t for my father [Naresh Gupta], I’d have given up my BFA seat at Chandigarh’s Government College of Art. He instilled a sense of empathy as well as discipline,” says Gupta, who got her MFA (Sculpture) from New Delhi’s College of Art in 2004. But her real introduction and ongoing relationship with sculpting happened during an artist residency programme in Rajasthan, where a `900 budget proved to be transformative, inspiring Gupta to explore life-size sculptures with recycled materials. “[Each new work is] like finding yourself in an intoxicating new relationship and discovering things about yourself and finding each insight endlessly fascinating.”