

GENTLE MAN

the art of living



Photographs By MEENAL AGARWAL

Four years ago, he watched in open-mouthed wonder as Anoushka, his first-born, made her enthusiastic entry into the world.

A couple of years ago, he was in Bharatpur (Rajasthan), gasping as he watched the rare sight of the earth's shadow, eclipsing the glorious light of the sun. When I tried to fix up an appointment with him, he was dashing up and down from his home in Walkeshwar to the NCPA (National Centre for the Performing Arts) complex at Nariman Point, to take in all the international films he could possibly digest. A permanent fixture at jazz *yatras* and performances held in Mumbai, he met his wife Seema at one of them. When his daughter asked for

a doll's house, he made one for her himself. On weekends, he invites a few friends over to sample his experimental cooking and perhaps watch a movie together on his home theatre system. And amidst the December chill last year, he was back in the delivery room, providing warmth and comfort to his wife as she laboured through the birth of their second daughter.

Life, for Jaideep Mehrotra and the lucky few who have chanced upon the secret of living, is a voyage of discovery. The day dawns bright and clear, energy levels are at their peak, God's in his heaven and all's well with the world. Never mind if he's an artist with no studio (his home theatre becomes his studio by day), he has had to move house three times in three years, his four-year-old has smudged his freshly painted canvas, or the film that he travelled all the way to town for – has been cancelled!

That evening I met him over a cup of tea at his temporary residence at Walkeshwar, where the Mehrotras moved recently, after the lease on their Breach Candy apartment expired. As in their previous home, here too, the door bears no name-plate, but the artist's characteristic 'J' and a paint-laden brush reveal the identity of the inhabitants. It is interesting to see how the Mehrotras have tastefully combined their furniture with paintings illustrating the different stages of

Jaideep Mehrotra

is the antithesis of the one-dimensional artist.

He crafts a mean doll's house, experiments with lithographs and sculpture, delights in jazz *yatras* and gamely tosses an impromptu meal. Always garnering everyday experiences into his work, that is fuelled not by pressure, but passion. Here is a man who needs to be constantly challenged, says **Maria Louis**, of the first Indian artist to be captured on a website

Mehrotra's growth as an artist – to create a living-room that doubles up as a personal gallery. "We have kept one painting from each exhibition he has held," discloses Seema, "and these are part of our own collection." Among these prized paintings is the one Mehrotra presented to Seema as a wedding gift. A few small sculptures are strewn on the coffee-table, while the bigger polyester resin and metal figures enliven the corners.

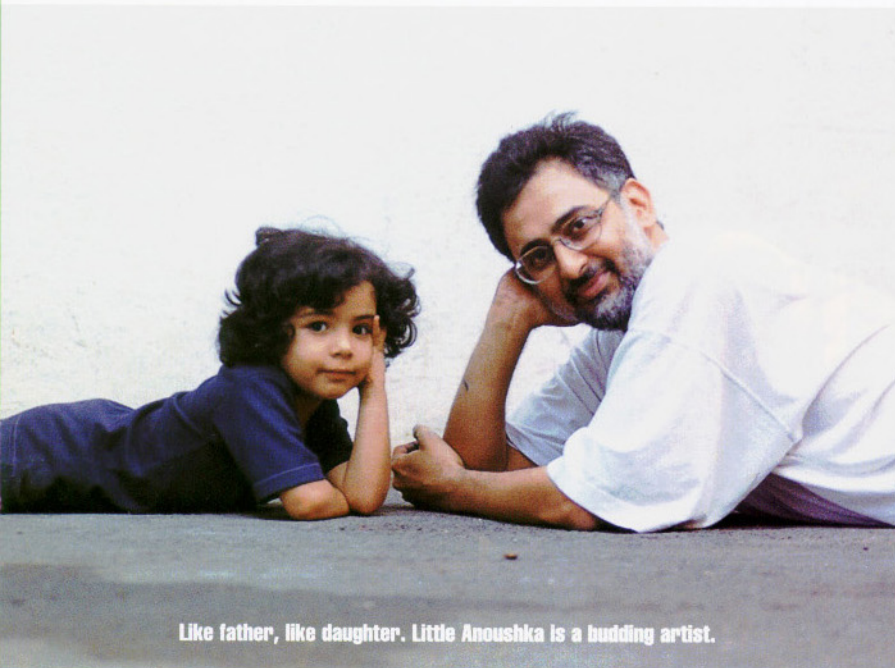
Mehrotra's voyage into the field of art began way back in 1965, when he was but 11 years old. Fortunate enough to have a mother who encouraged his inborn talent, he held his first exhibition at the Chetana Gallery as a 12-year-old. Continuing to paint as a hobby while he was in school, he exhibited his paintings every three to four years. After school, however, pursuing his muse became an uphill task. "There

were circumstances, it's a long story... court cases (about property) and stuff like that," he explains. "We had no money and I had to work. There was no way I could pay for my own education without working."

So he would wake up early in the morning, reach college by 6.30 a.m., attend lectures from 7.00 to 9.00, reach office by 9.30, work the whole day, then sit with the lawyers who were handling the court case, and return home by 8.30 p.m.! At one point he was working for a construction company.



"I used to have such little sleep because of this late night and early morning routine, that I used to doze off on the train or bus. Some days were so exhausting," he exclaims. And yet, he would devote his weekends to painting – just to put together a show. Then came eight rigorous years abroad, four in Africa and four in the Middle East. During these years he often had to work 20 hours in a day. Not surprisingly he couldn't bring himself to paint.



Like father, like daughter. Little Anoushka is a budding artist.

The years of hardship finally paid off when the case was settled out of court and that's when he began painting in earnest once more. "I set up a studio space for myself and started painting, sculpting and doing things I really wanted to do." But he also kept working at the building side by side – trying to get the municipal plans passed, searching for an architect, and other such mundane and thankless jobs. By the end of '84, he had his first show after returning from Africa. It did very well and he got several orders from banks and corporate houses. "I was just lucky," he says today. "But I always had my quirks, even then, about taking orders. Somehow I'm not dependent on that stuff and I don't want somebody to pressure me into doing something. I do what I want to do."

Struck by the fact that he wasn't giving his all to either art or business, Mehrotra suddenly arrived at the crossroads of his life. "I had to make a decision," he recalls. "Either I paint full time or I do this other work." He calculated that he could live comfortably for two years on the money he had put aside from his earnings – and made his decision. Opting for the road less taken, he gave himself two years to make it as an artist, and has never looked back since then.

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A nonconformist to the core of his being, Mehrotra certainly believes in following his own (he)art rather than pandering to the mart. Long before the technology to make it happen arrived here, he began vociferously campaigning for the potential computers held, as an artist's tool. But that didn't stop him from carving on wood, dabbling in water colours, painting in oils or experimenting with polyester and resin. Side by side with his other creative pursuits, he began to explore the possibilities of digital lithography.

His fabric and polyester resin sculptures earned him a large fan-following, but he refused to play to the gallery. When people came to him and said, "This is perfect, why don't you do more sculptures like these?" – his reply was, "That era is finished, it's gone, you've missed it. You'll never see that again!" Here is an artist who needs to be constantly challenged – or, as he puts it, "It becomes a formula. I just have to fill in the blanks." The fear of stagnating seems to loom large on his horizon – probably harking back to the culture-dead days he spent while struggling abroad.

The same attitude of doing what he wants to do, when he wants to do it, is evident in the way he single-mindedly devoted himself to winning over his wife, Seema. He relentlessly called her up every day to ask her out on a date, till she finally said "Yes" out of sheer exhaustion. After that, convincing her to marry him was a breeze. Besides a shared interest in music (especially jazz) and films, they both enjoy travelling.

Recently, they toured the countryside of Scotland in a rented car with Anoushka in tow, and memories of their trip still bring a happy glint to Mehrotra's eyes. "To me, painting is a learning experience of all this stuff – you travel, you see things, you meet people... it's a great way to break away from your routine," says the artist whose work is coloured by his experiences and emotions.

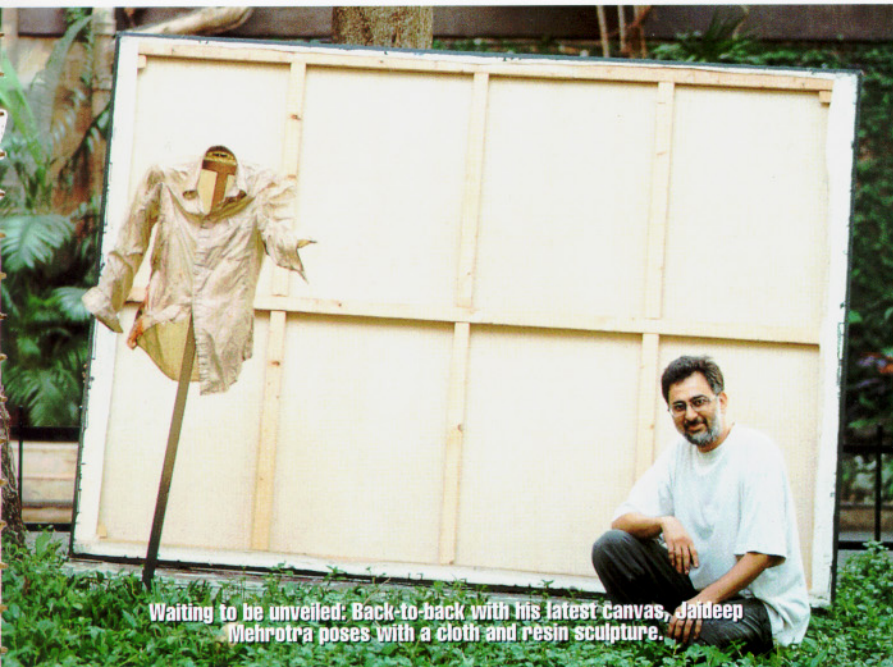
“LIFE IS

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It may be difficult to believe it today when you see the lithographs he has created on his computer, but it was Seema who first introduced him to the marvels of this machine. His first computer, by his own admission, was a very basic one – but still very exciting for him. “I’ve always been a gadget person,” he explains (needlessly, I may add, as he has already introduced me to the various components that make up his home theatre system). Over a period of two years, he worked on 12 to 15 different ideas – sketching, doing the scan-ins.

His computer-generated paintings have brought him the criticism that he is taking the easy way out by making a machine do his job. Isn't it true (I ask him) that working with mechanical tools, rather than the tactile feel of brush and paint, stifles creativity?



Waiting to be unveiled: Back-to-back with his latest canvas, Jaideep Mehrotra poses with a cloth and resin sculpture.

Mehrotra is inured to challenges of this nature, for he has faced them ever since he began advocating computers as the medium of art in the new millennium. “It depends on what you call creative and what you call technical,” he explains, once more, with feeling. “It’s like an artist making a sculpture. His symbol may be a series of boxes. So he has to sit down and make each of the boxes. Now you’ll say – isn’t that technical? In fact, he may not even do it himself. He’ll get a carpenter to do it and he’ll just place the boxes and paint them over and say: ‘This is sculpture.’ Where is the art in it?”

“Art is a creative experience,” he continues. “Whether you use 10 people to do it or one person, whether you do it yourself or not, as long as you’re behind the idea and you make something tangible...” Before he can end one sentence, the quicksilver mind goes on to another. “It may not even be tangible any longer!” he exclaims, citing the example of an American

artist who paints with pollen and, when his “exhibition” is over, sweeps it all into a bag and goes home. And that’s the end of that painting! “It’s like life, you know,” he points out. “Life is totally impermanent. Everything is going to disappear, so what is so special about art? It’s just an experience, a momentary pleasure.”

It seems unusual for an artist to say that. If a painting or a sculpture is not worth preserving, it is certainly not worth buying. And Mehrotra knows that better than anyone else. Besides, where would that leave the poor artist? Probably painting on the pavements with the impermanent medium of chalk? Come to think of it, that wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all!

Mehrotra, as usual, has a better idea. Pavements are passé and museums are on their way there; the latest venue for viewing his art is the website. The first Indian artist to create his own website on the World Wide Web, (<http://www.artisttree.co.in>) he continues

to scale new frontiers in the world of art. The nine lithographs he eventually created, depict the versatility of the medium, as each one works on a different principle. But there’s one common thread among them all – the layers of meaning that can only be unravelled with time. Mehrotra’s long-term plan is to make movies on the computer, which probably explains why he sees so many films.

A month after his page was launched on the internet, almost two years ago, 400 people had visited his site, an artist from New York enquired about his work, and he received appreciative e-mail from people in India and overseas about his concept and page. “The internet allows unbelievable access,” admits Mehrotra. “I hope to reach out to a larger international market.” Gauging from the response to his website from internet users in India and abroad, all we can say is – he’s virtually there! ■