

Gazette

Anoushka's Ascent

BY LAURA HILGERS **May 1, 2021**



Photo by Hillary Jeanne – The past year has been a prolific one for the artist, who transformed a rented garage into a work studio near her Russian Hill apartment.

BY NOBHILLGAZETTE

San Francisco–based artist and ally Anoushka Mirchandani left the tech world and found her true north. Now she is committed to amplifying other South Asian artists along the way.

Anoushka Mirchandani always assumed that the opening of her debut solo show would be a festive affair. The San Francisco artist pictured crowds of people milling about and hoped that her parents, who live in India, would be among them. That was what she and **Cecilia Chia**, owner of San Francisco's Glass Rice gallery, envisioned when they met at the end of 2019 to plan Mirchandani's show. By the time the exhibit *Note to Self* opened at Glass Rice last August, the world had turned upside down. The show still

featured Mirchandani's intimate figurative paintings alongside her multi-layered, transparent abstracts. Instead of a packed opening party, though, only a few people at a time were allowed to enter the gallery. Those who did wore masks. But this barely dampened the buzz. People lined up down the block to enter the gallery and see her work. The monthlong show was completely sold out, and the response was so enthusiastic that it seemed out of proportion to the length of her career. A self-taught artist, Mirchandani, 33, had begun painting in earnest only three years prior.



The artist at work: Anoushka Mirchandani draws inspiration from nature to create her colorful abstracts and figurative paintings (Photo by ILLARY JEANNE)

Ayesha Bulchandani, a New York City art collector and trustee at the Frick Collection in New York, touts Mirchandani as an “international emerging artist.” Art collectors in the United States, Europe and India own Mirchandani's paintings. Closer to home, the artist has two more shows planned in California this year. One is a show with artist **Taylor Smalls** at Legion Projects in Healdsburg in late June. The other is a group exhibition of South Asian artists at Glass Rice in December. In between, in September, she will have her first solo show in London.

If her rise in the art world has been rapid, it may be in part because she has such a rich life — and inner life — to draw upon as a foundation for her work. Mirchandani grew up

in Pune, a city of 7 million in central India, where her father was a real estate developer, and her mother an interior designer. “I had a really beautiful and magical childhood there,” the artist says, “so I can’t complain at all.” She bristles, though, at the restrictions placed on women in India. “As a young girl there, you’re taught at a very early age to constantly be looking over your shoulder and asking yourself: Am I showing too much skin? Is my skirt too short? Am I inviting unwanted attention? There’s a lot more shaming culture in India than there is in the U.S.”

I also had cultural expectations, where art isn’t seen as a serious career, especially if you have an education. *Anoushka Mirchandani*

Mirchandani, a delicately framed woman with wavy hair that cascades below her shoulders, came to the United States in 2006 to attend Denison University in Ohio. As a South Asian woman, though, she says she felt “like a fish out of water, like I really didn’t fit in.” She continued to feel this way when she moved to San Francisco to work in tech, landing jobs at FunMobility and, later, Eventbrite.

She also saw her art as merely a hobby. “I was always painting on the side because I never truly believed art was a viable option for me,” she says. “I also had cultural expectations, where art isn’t seen as a serious career, especially if you have an education.”

After her job at Eventbrite ended in 2017, Mirchandani applied to a three-month program at the Aegean Center for the Fine Arts in Greece to study old-masters-style figurative oil painting. She decided to do it, she explains, “just to get this [art] out of my system.” It proved to be a transformative time, pointing her toward her true north. When she returned to California, she picked up freelance tech work to support herself and painted whenever she could.

Mirchandani now paints abstracts, drawing upon forms from nature, and figurative paintings, mostly of women. She’s known for her distinctive color palette of neutral oranges, yellows, browns and pinks, punctuated by bright pops of color like deep red or aqua blue.

Her paintings show women at ease in their bodies, reflecting the freedom Mirchandani feels in the U.S. Gallerist Chia puts them in perspective. “I’m a Chinese American woman,” Chia notes, “and I think it’s not just Chinese or Indian women, but women in general, who are shamed for wanting to celebrate their bodies as Anoushka does in her paintings, and not have them be sexualized, but rather acknowledging that these bodies are something we all have and that they’re not only for the male gaze.”

But Mirchandani’s paintings also explore the immigrant identity. “So much of my work is an examination, or investigation, of my journey as an immigrant, artist and woman in the United States,” she explains. “Identity is very much an overarching theme. Because I feel like I have such fractured identities and I codeswitch a lot between living here and in India, I think about identity a lot.”



The past year has been a prolific one for the artist, who transformed a rented garage into a work studio near her Russian Hill apartment. (Photo by ILLARY JEANNE)

Mirchandani paints in a rented tandem two-car garage, a few blocks from the Russian Hill apartment she shares with her husband, **Conor Mehan**. It’s a stone’s throw from the

Maritime Museum, and when she works with the garage door up, neighbors and Dolphin Club swimmers often stop to chat or admire her work. Earlier in the pandemic, she threw herself into painting, working 10-hour days for months to prepare for her solo show. Now, she's doing the same.

“This story is just starting for her,” says **Arthur Lewis**, creative director of United Talent Agency Fine Arts and UTA Artist Space in Los Angeles, who discovered her work earlier this year, “but it's going to be a great one because she's incredibly talented and very conscious of what she's creating.”



Anoushka Mirchandani's *A Moment to Myself* was one of the works on display in last year's solo show *Note to Self* at Glass Rice gallery.

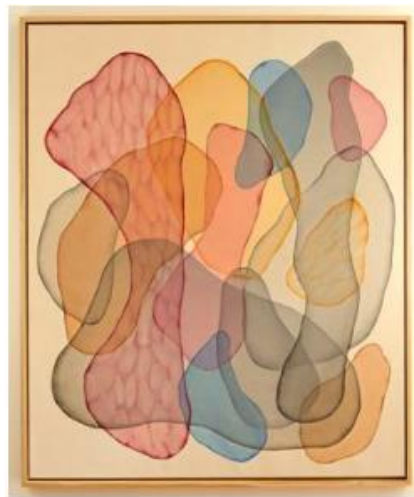
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As Mirchandani rises in the art world, she's passionate about bringing other artists with her. She's finally able to support herself with her art, and each time she sells a painting, she puts money aside to buy the work of another artist, particularly South Asian artists or other artists of color. When offered her second solo show at Glass Rice, she insisted that it be a group show with other South Asian women artists. And she's been cheered by the recent Bay Area Walls exhibit at SFMOMA and the de Young Open, which feature local artists.

“I work with a lot of artists who are at a place where they are seeking more amplification,” says **Sadaf Padder**, a Brooklyn-based independent curator and Mirchandani’s choice for co-curator of the December Glass Rice group show, “and when I shared about these artists with Anoushka, she was just full force and so excited. She’s interested in not just amplifying, but telling a story around these artists who are all South Asian and have very varied backgrounds.”

Mirchandani hopes that one day her work will appear in a museum, too. “I can barely name 10 South Asian female artists that are of that stature, and I want to help change that narrative,” she says.

“I look at artists like **Rina Banerjee** and I know it’s important for women who look like me to see that it can happen, that it’s possible, that our stories are important. When an artist is collected by cultural institutions, it makes you feel like your art is having an impact on the people and community around you, and that it’s culturally relevant for that moment in time. I think that’s the goal.”



Mirchandani’s *Almost Human*, 2020, is a 30-by-36-inch canvas featuring acrylic and sage leaf imprints.

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