

GAME OF THORNS

Sandilya Theuerkauf's works of art are both beautiful and unsettling, and compel the viewer to ask uncomfortable questions about humanity's relationship with nature

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Thorns are seldom considered heroes. In Sandilya Theuerkauf's works though, they occupy front and centre, at once unsettling and intriguing the viewer, and beckoning closer for an intimate conversation. And once drawn, they engage the viewer in unusual and uncomfortable dialogues.

Drawing heavily from nature, Theuerkauf's works induce

a sense of anxiety. Scattered around the room – on horizontal and vertical surfaces – are rough-hewn planks wearing the passage of time through lines, crevices and ruts. Worked into their gnarled surfaces are concentric rings, snaking paths, gorges, basins and wreaths of thorns of various sizes and shapes. More arresting is the gigantic hollow of a former tree, standing several feet tall with its façade covered in flowing rows of short, stubby thorns. There's a certain order, symmetry and undeniable beauty to their arrangement. But close on the heels of that thought is the unmistakable attribute of the thorn: the sheer profusion of sharp edges, some short, others elongated and still others hooked, convey a sense of foreboding. And compel the viewer to examine one's own connections and associations with nature.

For Theuerkauf, nature is something he's known his whole life, having grown up in the vicinity of a hilly rainforest with streams and wildlife for company. This proximity has resulted in various kinds of engagement with nature, but at the heart of it all has been observation. This has gotten more acute over the last several years as the Deccan's stark rocky scrub forest just outside Bengaluru became his home. "It was an

observation of the shape and form of one particular thorn that sparked the process of creating these pieces. I was drawn to the thorn's claw-like shape and character, and slowly started to notice both more thorns and the plants they protected," he explained, adding, "This arid landscape I have walked for years suddenly opened up to me, and its stories were abundant."

This observation led to noticing the several shapes and sizes that thorns come in and their fundamental duty of protecting plants and trees. The stories they told became compelling enough for him to begin collecting them, venturing into

forbidding thickets and casting aside scrapes and bruises. As the collection grew, so did ideas of assembling them and using them to structure works of art. And with it came other lessons, including the test of his patience. "The sharpness of the thorns make the consequence of inattention particularly immediate and clear and I value the meditative quality that comes with the concentration required to weave and interlock them together," he said of his process.

This series is the result of fashioning what he has collected for years and has been many years in the making. It speaks of his close connection with earth and nature, and his deeply saddened response to mindless destruction and disappearing habitats. "The destruction is cascading into something dangerous because of our growing alienation to our natural world," he said. But the journey of creating these works afforded him an avenue to connect with it. "This process has been my way of building a language with the earth and its creations," he said, while adding, "I want to honor the places I inhabit as they are." It's also a journey he wants to share with everyone so they can attempt something similar – "I'd like to think of these works as my grand invitation into the thicket, into a world outside the white cube."

Watch the exhibition at Bangalore International Centre, Domlur 2nd Stage, from 11am to 7pm, on till February 19

