

Artists are increasingly showcasing nature rather than simply taking inspiration from it

BY & FOR NATURE

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Recently, a tall, hollowed out tree trunk was propped in the centre of Bangalore International Centre's large foyer. Despite its proportions, the incongruity of the tree trunk was not in focus. Instead, the attention was captured by small pointy thorns carefully enmeshed into it. Visitors touched and felt the thorns, amazed and startled by their appearance. Sandilya Theuerkauf, the man who created that 'sculpture' and several smaller ones made with found wood slabs, may have felt vindicated with the interest the thorns garnered because although it had taken him five years to create the pieces, foraging from the shrub land just outside Bengaluru, the excitement the bristles caused was worth the umpteen scratches he wears as a badge.

All artists, at some point, look to nature for inspiration. But rarely does one see works where art takes a step back and lets the flora and fauna take center stage. In his maiden show, Trail of Thorns, Theuerkauf wanted to bring attention to thorns, hoping that his labours of love bring attention to the qualities he had been drawn to. "I have tried to be sensitive to what these thorns lend themselves to, so I would like the viewers to look closely at those qualities." He is never tired of reciting the names of the eight varieties of thorns he has used: *Flacourtia montana*, *Fluggea leucopyrus*, *Canthium parviflorum*, *Catunaregum spinosa*, *Pterolobium hexapetalum*, *Phoenix Sylvestris*, *Caesalpinia sp*, *Acacia nilotica*, *Acacia suma* and *Dendrocalamus strictus*.



An Interspecies Music Collective session under way

dendrocalamus strictus.

In layman language, these are the thorns of common varieties like bushweed or *hennu samplige*. "The sharpness, colour, texture and arrangement on the branches of these thorns, apart from other qualities like their smooth, shiny, claw-like shapes make up their character," Theuerkauf says. All one needs to do is sit down and observe nature, he says, to appreciate its beauty.

Art by Nature

Not formally trained as an artist, Theuerkauf belongs to a growing legion of artists who are showcasing nature through itself rather than using other props. Masterplants Orchestra, a group of musicians who are touring the country, have been showcasing the music of plants.

Calling it an Interspecies Music Collective, Benjamin Andersen, Tritone Crisantemo and Zigola Ploppo helped invent the 'Sym-

REPRESENTING NATURE THAT MATTERS TO YOU

Nirupa Rao, who recently released her book *Hidden Kingdom* illustrating the flora of the Western Ghats, says that climate change has been one of the biggest issues she has grappled with. Her book, which chronicles the fantastical plants of this region straddling across six states, is not about the decorative elements as much as it is about their significance. "My criteria for the plants (to be featured) were mainly about their being representative of the Western Ghats and having interesting stories to tell rather than just aesthetic appeal." Going through the tome, one gleans information about the rotten-smelling elephant yam flower, a relatively unknown category of sundews found across the Western Ghats, and other interesting varieties.



An illustration of Neelakurinji flowers by Nirupa Rao

phony Device' which is a plant-to-MIDI interface that measures the bio-signals in the anatomy of plants and converts it into musical notes. Crisantemo explains the project as a way of reconnecting a humanity that has deviated from its own nature and in large parts has lost connection with nature itself, both physically and spiritually. "We use plant music as a bridge between plants and humans using the language of human music so that humans can re-experience the ancient and intrinsic connection with nature we are all born with," he says.

When arranging a concert, they typically request their hosts to provide the plants. Two electrodes are connected to each of these plants (one to the leaf and one to the soil), which measure the minuscule electrical resistance in the plant's anatomy and then the Symphony device translates it into notes, which can be used by any electronic instrument with a MIDI input. In this way, the plants are given access to the language of occidental human music and can change the musical notes by changing the resistance in their plant bodies. Masterplants Orchestra concerts, which were held in the city as well, are extremely popular and pique the interest of both adults and children. "It can be considered like a hearing aid to a humanity who for most parts, have grown deaf and does not hear the calling of Mother Nature's voice."

These youngsters are following the footsteps of a group of researchers from Damanhur, a community in Piemonte, Italy, who began to develop the technology

bridging the connection between plants and humans in the '70s. Masterplants Orchestra believes that they are at the artistic vanguard propelling the limits in both technological advancement and the creative use of the technology.

Observation: The Key to Knowledge

"Only when you sit beside a plant and journal it will you really understand it," says artist Sangeetha Kadur who has devoted her career to wildlife art. This, she says, is a better way than the 'aim and shoot' photographs with little regard to details. Apart from having a larger treasure trove of seeds, one of her contributions as an artist to the cause of nature has been the curation of the Nature Centre at Hollemati in MM Hills. Wildlife expert Sanjay Gubbi had entrusted the small building to her for creating art that's educative as well. As she says, even the locals had not really observed the nature around them - a classic case of 'plant blindness', a term coined by botanists Elisabeth Schussler and James Wandersee, to explain why humans fail to notice the plants around them owing to lack of visual cues.

"But the power of art is such that we can compose in a way,

which will draw the attention of the viewer by highlighting stories," Kadur says. At the Nature Centre, she and a team of artists have illustrated a common non-forest plant as well because of its relevance to the region: The pumpkin! The farmers in the neighbourhood were delighted at

seeing the illustrations of the local crop. "But even they didn't know about the male and female pumpkin flowers and the pollination which results in the fruit. They were intrigued."

Art vs Reality

Answering the question of who would buy sculptures embellished with thorns, Namu K i n i o f Kynkyny.com, an online art gallery that hosted Theuerkauf's show, says, "I would love to have one of these in my house." Priced at an average of Rs 1 lakh, it will be interesting to see the response. Will owning a piece of nature, which is aesthetically altered, be the next big thing? Will art based on the flora and fauna of one's neighbourhood be appreciated? While that's hard to predict, given today's static nature of the art market, Kadur is optimistic. She has been doing murals on wildlife for a while and conducting nature journaling classes for a decade now. "It is picking up."

Millennials are making an impact in this genre especially since environmental coverage has migrated from scientific journals to mainstream news. Be it nature films by local filmmakers, nature walks or animals and birds census, these domains are increasingly occupied by the younger lot. Crisantemo speaks for all of them when he says, "We all need to come together to untangle ourselves from the mess we have created here on this planet. We should see ourselves being in complete unity with the rest of nature and spend a whole lot of time studying her incredible complexity in order to act in harmonic accordance with the rest of the whole." Art projecting nature is a good place to start.



Sculptor Sandilya Theuerkauf with a found wood slab creation of his; (top right) A found wood slab installation by the sculptor