

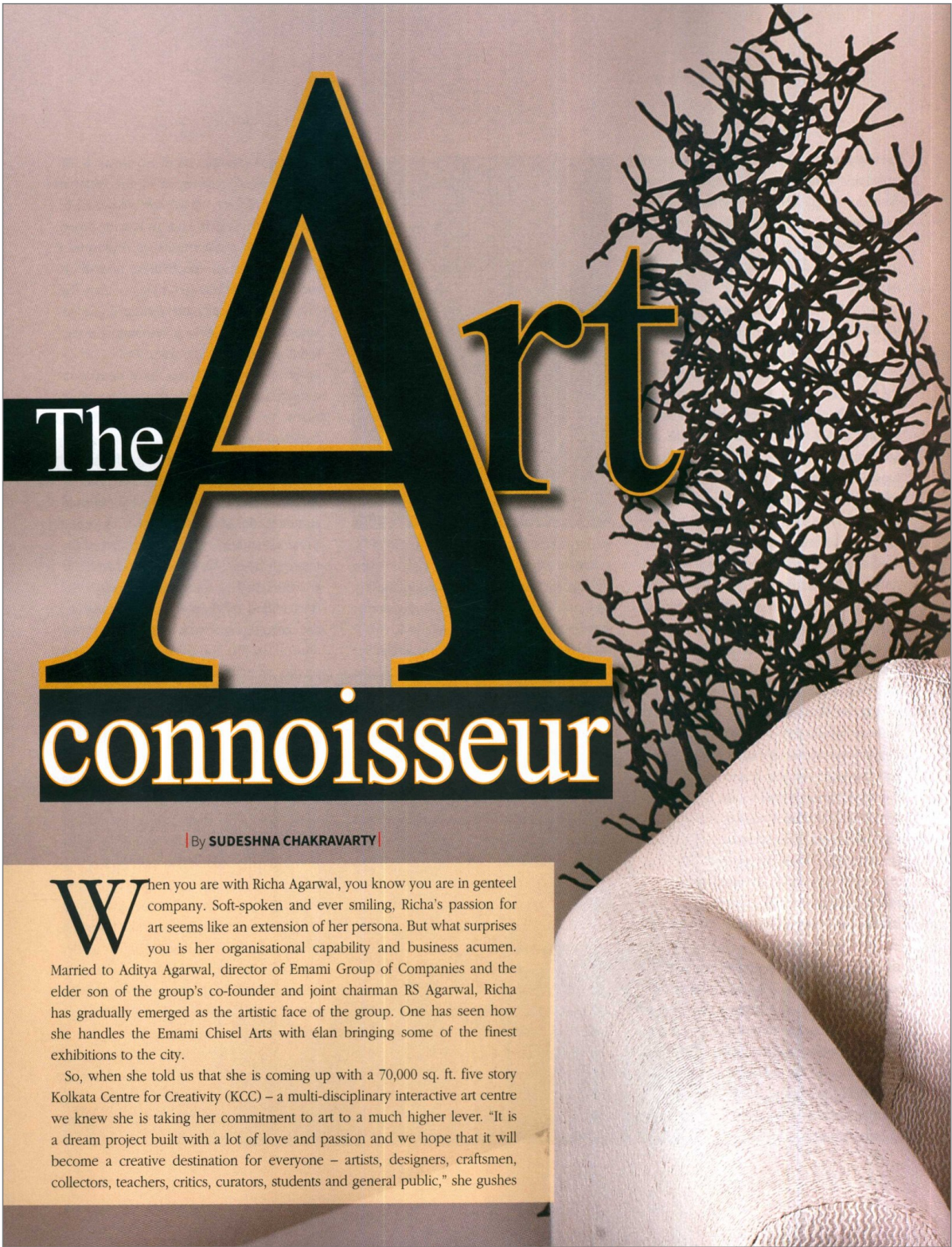


THE ART CONNOISSEUR

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Richa Agarwal launches a 70,000 sq. ft. five story Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC) – a multi-disciplinary interactive art centre in Kolkata. She speaks about providing a platform for creativity.

By Sudeshna Chakravarty



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When you are with Richa Agarwal, you know you are in genteel company. Soft-spoken and ever smiling, Richa's passion for art seems like an extension of her persona. But what surprises you is her organisational capability and business acumen. Married to Aditya Agarwal, director of Emami Group of Companies and the elder son of the group's co-founder and joint chairman RS Agarwal, Richa has gradually emerged as the artistic face of the group. One has seen how she handles the Emami Chisel Arts with élan bringing some of the finest exhibitions to the city.

So, when she told us that she is coming up with a 70,000 sq. ft. five story Kolkata Centre for Creativity (KCC) – a multi-disciplinary interactive art centre we knew she is taking her commitment to art to a much higher lever. "It is a dream project built with a lot of love and passion and we hope that it will become a creative destination for everyone – artists, designers, craftsmen, collectors, teachers, critics, curators, students and general public," she gushes

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PHOTOGRAPHS: BISWAJIT CHATTERJEE

when we meet at her well-appointed office at KCC.

She further adds that the centre is a result of the visionary patronage of her father-in-law and RS Goenka – the co-founder of Emami Group. “This is a multi-dimensional centre showcasing several expressions of art to highlight their common creative core,” she stresses.

As she takes me around on a recce of the centre, she informs that the place has been designed by renowned architect Pinakin Patel who is also the creative director of KCC. Emami Art, a sprawling art gallery, occupies the ground floor. “We will hold four exhibitions in a year and will be showcasing the works of Late Dashrath Patel at the inaugural exhibition. Dashrath Patel was an artist who like this centre, explored a range of disciplines and found the common creative thread between all works he produced.”

The first floor is an interactive exhibition space which leads to the next level by a flight of steps which double for an amphitheatre. Richa tells, “In the opening show, we will have international art and international handicraft all placed together. On a special evening, we plan to have *baitbaks* and *adda*. Here the visitor can digitally interact and generate a living dialogue on how to improve the culture of life.”

She shows me the screens where there the visitor's questions are answered. “The idea is to leave all the clutter in the mind behind when you enter this space,” smiles Richa. “We are also working with the local artisans to give us the traditional handicraft then we are producing in a more contemporary way to suit the current palate and generation. It is a very ambitious project. We have got Bidri work from Gujarat which are made from an alloy of zinc and copper and have got it inlaid with silver. Once you add silver it becomes expensive. We made crockery and dailyware out of it. Let us see how it is received. This is how we want to bring back our traditional art back to our lives and give respect to the traditional art

forms. We have a little space where the karigars can come and work.”

There is something very interesting on the second floor. It is called an Imagination Area. “Devdutt Pattanaik will be introducing works of national award winning graphic novel author Amruta Patil. Marvin Rinas will bring the lush and playful narrative to life by his state of the art technology. So when you are walking into the room, you are walking into the story, as if you are part of the story. It will experience in its own,” she promises.

As we enter the third floor, the bright painting of Bose Krishnamachari greets us and as we turn in the corridor there is a series of Souza's paintings on display down the passage. “There is a big conservation of art studio here. The place will conserve and restore paintings, sculptures, tapestry.”

On the top floor we have something called the creative lab, with a material library. It will encourage users to develop skills as well as prototype ideas on digital and 3D printers and laser cutters.

There is also an auditorium, dance studio, restaurant and art shop. Richa feels, “Creativity touches every part of our lives but we are defining it as art of the wall. Creativity is everywhere – in what we do, what we wear, what we eat, how we live and even how we talk. It is part of our being. At the centre, we try to address all aspects of creativity. We will have plays on and off and dance classes have started. We are having art classes and music classes will start eventually. We want to talk to doctors, physicists and scientists and address different subjects so that all of us get a chance to express our own form of creativity. It is so important that we nurture our minds.”

I quip Richa about how her interest in art began. “My interest is very organic. I grew up watching my mother paint since I was very young. She ensured all her kids learnt to paint and I was also taught all the forms of painting though I was more interested in

the traditional forms of painting like Tanjore painting and glass painting. So, after marriage, when Agarwalji, our chairperson, thought of making our corporate office – The Emami Tower, he wanted to do it differently. He said ‘let's do something which is more meaningful to all of us. Let's do something keeping in mind that we want to give back to the city because Emami has been born and brought up in Bengal, more specifically Kolkata’. That is when I really started getting in touch with a lot of artists because we wanted to put up paintings in the Emami Tower. So I used to go to their studios, talk to them, understand them and one artist would introduce us to another. Then we realized that as a family and a group we could do a little more for the art community.” Richa's dormant love for art again resurfaced and now she took the lead in promoting art.

So, she came up with an auction house, a publication and a gallery to start with. “That is how the Emami Chisel Arts came up with Vikram Bacchawat as a partner. We had three extremely successful auctions with 92% sales which had works of artists like MF Hussain, Swaminathan, and G Ravindra Reddy. But we realized that auction was not something we had in our agenda. We rather wanted to promote art and artists and giving them a good platform,” she says. So, she started dreaming bigger.

For Richa, who is a homebound person and loves spending time with her children and reading or cooking, dabbling with the temperamental artists was a daunting task. “I was





scared because I used to be intimidated by them. So, initially I used to be quiet and listen to them. Then I realized that they are as insecure as most of us today, as they are creating something. Anybody who is creating something wants appreciation and it is not about money. It is about how much you recognise the effort and the thought that has gone into it. If you look beyond the craziness, you can learn a lot from them. They are very nice people. One of the very well-known artist with whom we are working is so large-hearted that he has given me his entire data base of collectors and artists friends; he has gone all out to help and it is something he does not need to do."

But she says that though her interactions she learnt a lot from them. "I was not only honing my understanding in art but was also learning lessons of life. It is a beautiful selfless experience."

So I ask how her interactions with artists were. "I remember meeting Bikash Bhattacharya at the time when he was very unwell and what he was creating was magical. But when I looked at him, I felt that do artists get to enjoy their own works in their lifetime?" she says thoughtfully. I was quietened by the reflection of her words. But then Richa smiled reflecting, "G Ravindra Reddy is such a sweet person. He is so quiet and look at the power and magnitude of his work! I went to his studio about a year or two ago where he was working with these

local men and women. When we go to their studios and how simple they are. He draws so many nudes. So I asked him that 'you draw so many nudes are the women okay with it'. He said that 'only you city people think like that. They see it as art and have no hang-ups. They are absolutely happy to do the work'. There was a lady who was first helping him with the work as a model and then when we were having lunch she quickly came and made dosas for us. I realized indeed it so simple."

Richa's interaction with Jogen Chowdhury was also very nice. "He is also a sweet person. He called me at 9 o'clock one day saying, 'I know you sleep early but I had to call you.' He had a Japanese collector and wanted to give me his details and we organized a show with him the next day. He is always ready to help," she smiles.

However MF Hussain's interaction with them gives a little tweak. "I remember when we were doing a whole range of beauty secrets with Madhuri Dixit during the *Gaj Gamini* days. Hussain Saab used to come to our house every day and used to do thousands of drawing on any paper he found before him because he was so quick. At that point our exposure as a family to Hussain was little limited and we used to give away these works to anybody who would ask for it or remove them. We later realized the value of these works which we don't have any more. Hussain Saab used to come regularly for meetings with Agarwalji as he was designing the packages. Coming from there what we are doing today is a very big leap forward," she laughs.

I ask her finally about how she will make her mammoth art infrastructure viable. It will be a challenge, she agrees. "But when thoughts are clear, our goals are easy to achieve. We are taking each day as it comes. We might make mistakes but we will learn from them. But we will keep promoting art."

So, what is her philosophy? "Keep it simple," she says, "be it in art, and be it in life." Here's wishing Richa Agarwal the very best with this ambitious art project. **S**