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SAMEERA RAJA

When your work is something you love, you're the luckiest person in the world.

Sameera Raja, curator of inarguably the country's most breakthrough contemporary art gallery, Canvas Art Gallery, has built her life upon her love for art. Her gallery is testament to her passion - its winding passages and floors displaying portraits and landscapes, realistic sketches and abstracts, the risqué and the chaste, in vivid colour and stark monochrome. Very rare to the city of Karachi, it's a space that encapsulates the many facets of art, displayed together under Raja's discerning, refined eye.

"There are no art museums in Karachi which is all the more reason for local art galleries to act not just as commercial ventures but also as museums," observes Raja. It was her belief in the need to make art accessible to the populace, as much as her love for the field, that prompted Raja to set up Canvas, 16 odd years ago.

"Canvas pays my bills, yes, but I have never gotten fixated by monetary considerations," she says. "At my gallery, I have always shown what I have liked. It may be a collection by a well-known local artist or a debut line of paintings by a fresh graduate. If it sells well, I'll be happy. If it doesn't, I'd still believe in it and I'll be satisfied that at least I managed to display it in my gallery."

Yet, Raja's gallery does exceptionally well,

frequented regularly by art aficionados, students and curious passers-by who walk in, having heard of Canvas' repute. "Selling a work of art is secondary. For me, it is more important to draw people into the gallery and to make them aware of art for the very first time. I consider it a form of 'social service', a way of giving back to the field I love. I want to shake people out of their reverie and let the art seep into their consciousness. One can't really criticise a lack of art sensibilities when you don't allow people to see and experience the wide variety that exists in the field."

When Canvas first ventured into the scene, there were hardly any other galleries in the city. As a single mother, the gallery served as Raja's rather unconventional way of making ends meet. "I did not want to do anything run-of-the-mill and I had faith that with my strength and knowledge of the arts, hard work and honesty, I could make the gallery a success."

Her background as an architect graduate from the prestigious National College of Arts in Lahore helped, as many of her fellow students, seniors and juniors were struggling artists. Raja picked up what she liked and brought it to her gallery. The infamous Rashid Rana had his very first exhibit at Canvas, displaying his 'I love Miniatures'. "People dismissed the work back then, saying that it was just a print and there was nothing special about it," recalls Raja. "It's sad that we don't embrace our local talent until it receives the western stamp of approval. That's something that we need to overcome."

From Ayesha Khalid to Hamra Abbass, Quddus Mirza, Afshar Malik, Iqbal Hussain, Ijaz ul Hassan, Rashid Rana and Imran Qureshi... over time, Canvas has played host to the country's most illustrious artists and it continues to do so. In 1999, the fledgling Canvas gallery was a tiny shop on main Clifton road. After shifting thrice since then, the gallery today is a three-

floored purpose-built treasury of the local arts. In the initial years, the guest-list for art exhibits consisted of a mere 30 people; today invites are sent out to nearly 7000 potential clients.

"The gallery just gained recognition gradually," says Sameera. "Artists who would exhibit would tell their friends and family, who would proceed to tell others. It was a ripple effect and luckily, clients often came back. I'll never sell something for more than I think its worth and I am always there at my gallery, from morning till night, attending to clients' particular queries and even guiding the art students that drop in almost every week."

On the whole, it seems like the perfect success story; the art-loving gallery owner's steady rise to fortune and recognition and yet, as it always is in life, Raja has faced her fair share of demons. "There were many hitches, of course, but I have always believed in remembering the good instead of the bad," she smiles.

One such obstacle arose when she was diagnosed with third stage breast cancer eight years ago. "I went through chemotherapy and radiation and even though I overcame it, it was a tough time for me. Rather than going through denial or succumbing to depression, I chose to focus on how I could battle away the disease. I'd be back at my office after every chemotherapy session. I don't think I missed a single working day."

Passionate and resilient, Sameera Raja is a rarity. What motivates her to keep striving? "My work is not a burden for me," she explains. "I enjoy it and revel in it. The artists I work with are also my friends and the work I display at Canvas continues to stimulate me. When your work is something you love, you're the luckiest person in the world."