



# Bunny hop in Colaba

With her first solo show in India, New York City's AIKO brings her signature icon, stencils and radical style to a city she adores



Give Me street sign by AIKO



The artist works on an artwork in the studio



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ONE never understands the snobbery of looking down at street art. From the walls of Santa Cruz, Argentina with its hand imprints from the Stone Age, to the works of Shepard Fairey, to Keith Haring and Banksy in New York, the streets have offered artists freedom, space and expression. AIKO knows that better than most. Having travelled to New York in the 1990s, she fell in love with the graffiti culture of the city, its radical opinions and courage. This week, she brings it to Gallery XXL in Mumbai for her first solo show in India, Follow The Bunny.

This is not her first trip to the Subcontinent. "I have had a long-distance relationship with India," the artist laughs. "I visited the country for the first time in 2015. It was wonderful, but last year, I was invited by the legendary Martha Cooper just to accompany her while she was working in Mumbai. It was amazing to watch the work that people were putting in," she shares.

**'Myself, Banksy and the others were nobodies. We survived on graffiti'**

AIKO

So, when the opportunity arose to exhibit a solo show, it felt natural to her. The artist has always been a free spirit. She says, "I came to New York City with a suitcase and a dictionary. There was no Instagram or any social media platforms to reach out. I could not turn to Google for translations. The street became my best friend."

It was here that she met legendary names on the city's scene like Banksy, Shepard Fairey, FAILE and BAST among them. With a style that blends Japanese wood-block printing influences, symbols and references to punk rock and hip-hop, she blended into the world of free art. "Back then, graffiti was not popular. It was being done by a small group of people. That's what I like, doing things no one else is. Myself, Banksy and the others were nobodies. We survived on graffiti. None of the big galleries would ever give us space, so we had to create our own, build our own industry," she chuckles.

Twenty-five years later, she finds herself halfway across the world in Mumbai hosted by a gallery that she has, literally taken over. Gallery XXL director Joe Cyril points out, "When we wanted AIKO at the gallery, it was not just the artwork, but her using the gallery as her studio." This, of course, includes her iconic signature — the bunny.

To that end, the artist has transformed the South Mumbai gallery into her own canvas. "The show is an introduction to myself through



(From extreme left) Bunny with Blue Heart; Follow the Bunny - 7; (above) the gallery walls with AIKO stencil work. PICS COURTESY/ARTIST; GALLERY XXL

my iconic bunny," she shares.

The show, open to public on March 14, will feature two sections featuring nearly 60 works; one of stencil art and canvases that highlight AIKO's signature style, bunnies and Japanese influences, and another of rugs and textile prints of her art, Cooper's photographs of the artist at work and limited-edition prints.

One of the key elements is an homage to city culture, spraypaintings on subway maps, that AIKO carries with her. "I am like Basquiat [Jean-Michel] in that I spend a lot of time on the street collecting trash. This time, we found interesting street signs and subway



A mural by AIKO in New York City. PIC COURTESY/MARTHA COOPER



Joe Cyril

maps with locally-found elements. My tools are knife, paper and spray paint. How simple is that?" she exclaims.

The experience of the local culture is also something the artist greatly enjoys. "Sadly, graffiti is

now an offence in New York since 9/11," she says, adding, "I work and live in Lower Manhattan. The place is filled with franchises; it is almost like an airport. It has become gentrified." This has sent AIKO on a journey across Europe, the Balkans and to Asia. "I am 49 years old, and I don't know how long I can keep working on graffiti. But in the past, my legendary brothers and sisters have helped me, and that is what I am here to do for the next generation," she points out.

"Earlier this week, I was spray-painting the bunny on the gallery walls, and kids were cheering me on as they watched. The symbol is my chant. It keeps me healthy, and it is my way of communicating with people," she says.

As for the show, it is a by-product of the city for the artist. AIKO declares, "Mumbai is one of the best canvases I have ever seen. For me this city is so beautiful, and seductive."

**FREE** ON March 14; 6 pm (preview); March 15 to April 25, 11 am to 7 pm **AT** 21 Arsiwala Mansion, first floor, Colaba. **LOG ON TO** @xll.gallery to RSVP



# Let's ideate in Andheri

An innovative creators' studio offers digital content creators seven themed sets under one roof. We explore the space to check if it cracks the vibe test

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THE monotonous sights of muddy dug-up roads paired with worn-out yellow barricades stretching all along Andheri West's Link Road lead us to a newly-opened creator studio. A complete shift in visual scenery follows. A room inside a room, seven of them, in fact. Grieb's Media Studio, Assam-born music composer Chakir Hussain's new 1,000 sq ft content creation space is a multi-themed, multi-purpose space that claims to be the one stop solution for the evolving creators' obsession with 'aesthetics'.

The studio opens to what looks like a replica of a nook of a Rajasthan palace. "This section is called Jharokha," Hussain points out, adding that the idea was to bring a minimal version of the grand palaces for dancers and musicians. "We kept it minimal to allow artistes and their teams to bring their props and place them without it looking too cramped," he adds. Sukanya Kashyap, creative director, and the brains behind the design, reveals that the set was made using wood blocks



The team sets up a retractable green screen at the studio

and Plaster of Paris (PoP) motifs. When asked about longevity of the sets, she explains that they were put together within two months; while the PoP and paints are bound to chip and erode with usage, a bi-annual revamp is part of the maintenance plan.

Right across Jharokha one finds Sukoon, a homely, vibrant space marked by Turkish-inspired décor, and Wisdom, a podcast space that stands out, ironically, with its muted tones and some classic reads on a bookshelf. Kashyap informs us that this set was designed using up-cycled wood from discarded tables and chairs, and the furniture was sourced from local artisans from Behram Baug in Jogeshwari. "We shaped these sets to suit certain kinds of creators in our mind, but they have sur-



(Left) Wisdom, the podcast set (right) Rhythm Lounge, a compact dance floor. PICS/NIMESH DAVE



prised us with their creativity," Hussain smiles, adding that the podcast space has been getting booking queries from short-form infotainment creators and news presenters.

As we pivot once again, our heads almost spinning with the changing visuals, we're now facing the Rhythm Lounge, a compact dance floor with a speaker that stands tall in a corner. Su-

shant Pawar, who has just shot a short dance Instagram reel at the set gives us his review, "The great part is that the lighting has been taken care of. It saves us a lot of time. The floor, while made compact to fit the space, might seem a tad restrictive if you're planning to dance with a crew of more than two." Hussain agrees, adding, "The space is still in its experimental stages for both us and the creators. The sets might be small; however,



(Above) Sukanya Kashyap explains the set design of Jharokha; (left) Chakir Hussain (in green) with the technical team of the studio at the Flame set

without industry level audio. In an age where your production value directly dictates how much of the viewers' 15-second attention span is yours, you can't overlook these details," Choudhury shares. To that end, the studio provides complete post-production assistance to its clients.

But with a space that houses seven sets together with no partitions, would one have to walk in with seven ideas at a time? Hussain informs us that currently, a booking offers creators access to all seven sets. "Renting out a single space at a time becomes impossible owing to the plan of the space. On the other hand, we have seen creators use this to their benefit by shooting a month's content in a day. The diverse spaces can also spark some creativity. Having the same visual tonality around you can sometimes be a setback," Hussain signs off. As we make our way back through the dug-up roads and yellow barricades, a tad more worn out by now, we couldn't agree more.

**AT** Grieb's Media Studio, Bhagwati Complex, Veera Desai Industrial Estate, Andheri West.  
**TIME** 10 am to 9 pm  
**LOG ON TO** @griebmediastudio  
**COST** ₹3,000 per hour (includes post-production fees)

# Be the change

A hard-hitting podcast dives into the lives and philosophies of several inspiring leaders who are doing phenomenal work to bring social change from the ground up in India

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AT the heart of the Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies is the philosophy of "strengthening samaaj (society), sarkaar (state), bazaar (markets) to our collective purpose of a good society". We can gauge from Nilekani's work in the past that the first pillar bears a greater urgency than the other two. She writes in her book, Samaaj, Sarkaar, Bazaar, "We are all citizens first, rather than simply subjects of the state

or consumers of the market." It is understandable, then, why the organisation would begin a podcast that gives a platform to leaders of social movements to share their stories. They are often the ones working at the grassroots level and shaking things up to create a real difference in society.

Rightly called the Grassroots Nation: Lives in Service, the podcast has had 13 episodes so far, featuring ecologist Dr Madhav Gadgil, social activist Aruna Roy,

conservation biologist Dr Kamal Bawa, literacy frontrunners Dr Madhav Chavan and Rukmini Banerji, to name a few. Barring the latest one, each episode runs between 45 and 80 minutes. This duration is ideal as it allows the featured guest to go deeper into their background and contextualise their work for the listeners.

The recent episode, where writer Suchitra Shenoy speaks

to Dr Ravi Chopra, a research scientist and the founder of People's Science Institute (PSI), is particularly riveting. It shows how Dr Chopra's contribution cannot be defined by his involvement in one organisation. We learn that he has, in fact, been instrumental in founding and accelerating many projects that range from disaster management to disability rights. In the first segment, he speaks about growing up in the 1950s in Bombay, when the city looked different from what it is today. During this time, he learnt the

value of discipline, which has guided him over the years. We get an insight into the political and economic turmoil that followed in the 1960s, a time when nation-building was a top priority for most citizens. Dr Chopra takes the listener through India after Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, when Lal Bahadur Shastri stepped in as the Prime Minister, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, and the Bihar drought of 1966-67.

The drought, in particular, had affected him deeply. While still a student at IIT, he had begun to offer his services, along with a group of friends, to organisations which needed engineering skills to survive the crisis. Meeting his mentor professor Mehta, who ran FREA (Front for Rapid Economic Advancement of India),

was a turning point for him as it allowed him to participate in several development projects like setting up latrines for better sanitation in villages, forming student volunteer bodies, circulating a newsletter, and organising a march in the US to inform Indians abroad about the prevailing conditions in their country. It pushed him to start PSI later too. It was touching to hear him mention, at each stage, those who inspired him and those who joined hands with him in his journey. Here, he echoed neontologist Dr Armida Fernandez's words from a previous episode that no one can achieve anything alone.



Suchitra Shenoy



(From left) Rohini Nilekani; Dr Ravi Chopra. PICS COURTESY/A SUITABLE AGENCY/DR RAVI CHOPRA'S LINKEDIN

**LOG ON TO** Grassroots Nation on Spotify