Pass the Parcel
Gary Singh

Based in Mumbai, India, Avani Aggarwal never received any formal training in digital art or even computers. It was not a drawback. Instead, she says the lack of training helped her grow into the art practice in her own unique fashion. Trial and error became normal. Experimentation was key. In what’s now a familiar path, she started out dabbling with traditional mediums like ceramics, oils, acrylics, charcoal, and pastel, but after learning Photoshop, she was hooked. With digital tools, she can create at her own pace, work furiously for hours and then abandon a piece and return to it months later. She can store hundreds of images on her hard drive and then come back and use them as source material at a later date. No more paint drying too early. No more pastel flakes escaping from the paper before she has a chance to add fixative.

In the beginning, she says, “I had no idea how this new form of art creation would consume me. It became a part of my very being. I enjoyed this new form of art and found it to be exciting and liberating.”

Aggarwal also began to take photographs wherever she went, knowing she could use them for her Cityscapes series. Everything went into her treasure chest of odds and ends. To this day, she finds herself pulling out images from her collection, using anywhere from five to 20 layers to create an image, all with different filters for different effects. Sometimes she adds hand sketches, a nod to her analog past. Other times, she incorporates fractals.

“It’s like a game of pass the parcel wherein bits and pieces are added each time the parcel gets moved,” she says. “Each permutation and combination adds to the value, taking it forward, toward its end result.”

Cityscapes
The cover image, Living in Harmony, reflects a yin-and-yang style harmony of digital and nature. As a child, Aggarwal’s parents encouraged her to develop an appreciation and deep respect for Mother Nature, a fondness that informs her journey as a digital artist to this day. Living in Harmony is part of Aggarwal’s Cityscapes series, digital collages in which the natural world collides with the urban fabric. In understated fashion, nature superimposes on the manmade world or vice versa.

Aggarwal created Living in Harmony with Photoshop and Gimp, so we see an abstract silhouette of a rose superimposed against a color sketch of a photograph—a transparent watercolor-style image strategically faded to make the building appear to emerge out of the flower. Thus, nature comes first. From nature, the urban fabric emerges.

“It is my way of expressing the inevitability of progress and development, at times, at the cost of Mother Nature,” she explains. “And yet, the rose in all its delicate beauty will always signify resilient love and hope that nature lavishes in spite of all the transgressions committed by the ‘civilized world.’”
Another image in the same series, Cityscapes #22 (see Figure 1), presents even more levels of abstraction, this time inspired by expressionist artists Lyonel Feininger and Egon Schiele. From Aggarwal’s perspective, every image already tells a story, so something about cityscapes and urban fabrics create entire conversations taking place between their own individual elements. Each building might have its own character, its own history, or some fascinating secret to reveal. And they might be talking to one another. Fueled by Feininger and Schiele, Aggarwal saw one particular building as an impressionistic painting.

“[It] looks like a tenement of sorts,” she explains. “An ordinary structure, decrepit perhaps, even a bit crumby, however, teeming with life, with hopes and dreams of a bright and plentiful future, perhaps one of glory and fame. A future that defies its present.”

She created Cityscapes #22 using a photograph converted into a sketch. Other layers in the piece use transparency filters for colors or forms to elicit background structures to make the cityscape more dense. And just as any dense impressionistic cityscape would require, a subtle hint of sky emerges up top.

A Marriage of Image and Music
Aggarwal often works in series, sometimes even abandoning an entire sequence of images for as long as a year before returning to the material. One of her series, Painted Music, produced Nights in White Satin (see Figure 2). Even though the image is based on the famous Moody Blues tune, Aggarwal says Dr. Seuss inspired the series as a whole. In one particular interview, Seuss likened words and pictures to yin and yang and explained that a marriage of the two produced progeny more interesting than either parent, almost like alchemy.

Beginning with two fractal images in Apophysis, she fused them in Photoshop with an image of a white rose depicting unconsummated love. Then she used filters to enhance the luminance, creating ephemeral, evanescent, mirage-like atmospherics.

“This was one of the rather difficult pieces to portray as it had to resemble white satin and at the same time convey a sense of the song, of the uncertainty of love, the beauty of that love, the longing for the love that keeps one awake at night,” Aggarwal says.

Phoenix Rising (see Figure 3) is another image from Aggarwal’s Cityscapes series, this time an image of the Taj Hotel in her hometown of Mumbai. The site of the horrific terrorist attack in November 2008, the hotel became a symbol of Mumbai as it rose from the ashes, mirroring the resilient spirit of the Mumbai people following the attack. Aggarwal’s finished image presents the hotel as seen from the Gateway of India, a historical landmark in Mumbai. She created the image by applying various filters to an original photograph, transforming it into a poster painting, and then using multiple images as layers to create fire and smoke effects.

“It symbolizes the change in ‘Life as we knew it,’ before the devastating terrorist attack on our soil in November 2008,” she says. “Like a phoenix, it regained its glory.”

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