“Something that Makes Me Happy”

Posted on

Nelun with her friends all draped in her black and white saree collection at the fashion show

Nelun Harasgama is an artist, the medium she uses may differ but the art that she creates is unique and intriguing. At first glance the design may seem simple but you soon realize that there is a deeper meaning, one that the artist refrains from presenting yet is garnered through the minds eye…

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe

A creation of art, raw silk

Nelun studied graphic design at Nottingham University in England. Textile design using graphics was part of the course. Following the completion of her degree she

returned to Sri Lanka to start working at an advertising firm. Thereafter Nelun joined Barefoot where she has been designing fabric and clothing for more than 23 years.

As an artist Nelun painted her view on Samasara, the eternal circle of life. She was able to capture the suffering and sadness that was prevalent in day to day life that may be deemed as the norm. More often than not her paintings were news flashes and she always stressed that her paintings did not give a message or an opinion but was merely a depiction of an event. While she used oil on canvas, Nelun also produced serigraphs using the technique of screen printing. “As I got older I felt that painting was not always a happy thing. You always seem to have to paint unhappy things. I realised that I must do something happy,” and that was the beginning of Nelun’s journey of creating raw silk, batik and patchwork sarees. “My mother used to sew and as children we loved to watch her stitch our dresses, this in a way inspired me too,” said Nelun.

“It was a very joyful thing for me because each pattern and design can be different, whereas with painting I could have only one style”, says Nelun. Raw silk and cotton were used to create patchwork and batik designs. The current collection is inspired by old and contemporary masters where the interpretations of their paintings have been reproduced on cloth. Art by names such as Jackson Pollock, Klimt and even Indian tribal designs have taken shape on Nelun’s new canvases.

“Valli at Rithihi gave me the first chance by organising an exhibition and sale of my sarees at her store,” explains Nelun. This created an interest and Nelun soon had a clientele that appreciated what she was doing. The second show was held thereafter. This was the beginning and with the increase in demand a quaint boutique named Ohe Island opened its doors so that not only Nelun’s collection of sarees but also clothes, shawls and bags were made available for the discerning.

> “When I was not painting I felt that I should do something that makes me happy…

The Sinhala term *‘Ohe’*, which means without a thought or agenda was selected for the store to reflect Nelun’s creative freedom. And, for clients too Ohe Island is an unpretentious space that relieves one from the mundane routine of daily life. “The bags are made of leather or thick material such as corduroy. The current clothing

line, which is dedicated to the famous Opera singer Maria Callas is made of raw silk and cotton,” explained Nelun.While Nelun has refrained from using bright colours for the collection of sarees and clothes, the richness of the shades white, black, gold and grey have been incorporated in an elegant and sophisticated manner. But the next collection may have a few surprises with a splash of colour where necessary.

Each item is an original and is unique. While the designs of the sarees and shawls are not repeated, the clothes are available in different colours. Closely supervised by Nelun the sarees, clothes, bags and shawls are all handmade. Each and every detail is done with care and passion thus producing the most beautiful art.

“When I was not painting I felt that I should do something that makes me happy…This was a like progression or may be a regression from painting. For me it is like creating art not making a saree… ” reflects Nelun.

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