

WEALTH ARABIA



Michelle Poonawalla at her home, admiring her latest works.



BUILDING YOUR SACRED SPACE

Michelle Poonawalla walks *WEALTH Arabia* through her home, revealing her history as an artist

Perhaps it was fate that Michelle Poonawalla would find success in the art world. After years as a successful philanthropist and businesswoman, Poonawalla has found international success as an artist, following in the footsteps of her legendary grandfather, Jehangir Vazifdar, whose art and architecture are still legendary in Mumbai and beyond long after his passing. While the iconic buildings he designed are more visible, his contributions as an artist gained new prominence with the publication of *Jehangir Vazifdar – Artist and Visionary* in 2016, bringing renewed appreciation for his contributions to South Asian art.

Since then, Poonawalla, the wife of billionaire Yohan Poonawalla, has seen her global profile as an artist skyrocket—even gifting a piece to Prince Charles

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to celebrate his birthday. She had her first show in 2016 at the Gateway School in Dubai and by 2017 she launched *Khushi - India On Canvas* in conjunction with Sotheby's, New Delhi, 2017; *India Art Story*, Kolkata, 2017; *Elephant Parade*, Jaipur, Delhi, Mumbai and London, 2017 and 2018; *What If You Fly*, a solo exhibition at Vis A Vis Gallery, New Delhi and Spazio Gallery, Pune, 2018; *Moving into the Future – Harvest 2018*, a group exhibition at Stainless Gallery, New Delhi, 2018; and a project at the Parma Art Fair, Italy with Gallery Marco Antonio Patrizio, 2018; *Born Free* at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, 2018 and *Introspection*, a collateral project at Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018.

Though she is an accomplished painter, Poonawalla, who splits time between the UAE, the UK and India, has ventured outside her more traditional art as of late, presenting her latest her multimedia project, *Introspection*, as a part of the guest projects at 42 Alserkal Avenue Dubai during Art Week 2019.

The installation was most recently exhibited at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018, Fort Kochi, Kerala, India. *Introspection*, as a piece, bring together sound and digital mapping to create a pointed commentary on the apathy with which images of violence and displacement are consumed today in endless news cycles.

Poonawalla walked *WEALTH Arabia* through her life, art, and the interior design she has created in order to create, live, and thrive.

Could you tell me about the space in which you work?

I have a wonderful, sun-lit studio in an annex on our family property. I designed the studio myself, to make sure it was exactly what I had in mind – lots of natural light and a leafy vista to inspire me. I have a comfy leather Chesterfield couch that I can sink into with my sketchbook and enough space for my canvases and easels. Sometimes my kids join me for an afternoon of painting, which is always special. My studio is definitely my sacred space.



Poonawalla's art adorns her home, which also serves as her primary studio.

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When did you first fall in love with art?

Art has been an integral part of my life for as long as I can remember. Growing up in London, I remember frequent visits museums, galleries and auction houses, getting to know the rich history of art from across the world. I studied Interior Design at university but made sure I kept my connect with art alive. Another major influence was my grandfather, Jehangir Vazifdar, who was a prolific architect and artist. He encouraged the artistic fire in me and I'm honoured to carry on his legacy.

How has your artistic expression evolved?

My artistic expression has evolved from a more classic oil on canvas style to more digital technology-driven, large-scale installations. The strong visuality in my work continues across mediums. I started picking up my paint brushes after being inspired by my grandfather, who passed on his very special technique of oil painting to me. In his memory, we launched a lovely coffee table book and hosted an art exhibit of his works in Mumbai in December of 2015.

The process of putting the book together made me become aware of the legacy I had been left and I had to do something about it. In 2016, I had my first show with a group of special needs children at the wonderful Gateway School (Mumbai). We picked the theme of Spring and Summer, which is where the butterfly motif I often use, first came about.

A few months following, I began working on my first solo show in New Delhi, where the curator Swapna Seth encouraged me to explore the boundaries of the medium I work with. The show ended up carrying 3D paintings, sculptures and digital art.

With the project *Introspection* at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018, I went for a large-scale, immersive art installation. The process of working on such a scale has been tremendously exciting.

What do you find most fulfilling about each of the approaches you take to your work, be it multimedia or oil painting?

My art practice is an amalgamation of the traditional paint on canvas style with experimental digital technology.