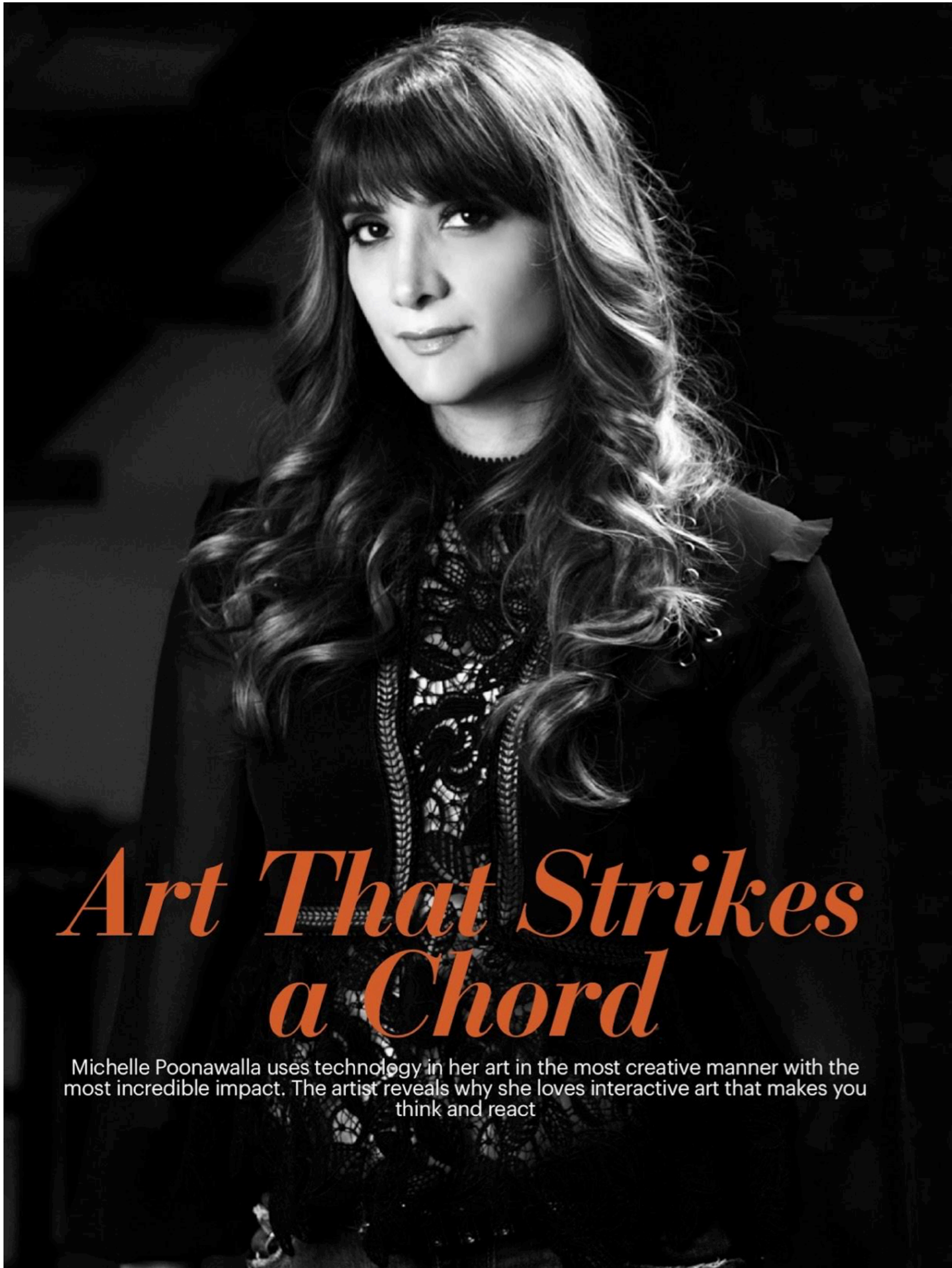


# Masala!



## *Art That Strikes a Chord*

Michelle Poonawalla uses technology in her art in the most creative manner with the most incredible impact. The artist reveals why she loves interactive art that makes you think and react



# Masala!

Lifestyle **M**

She believes in creating art that makes you sit up, take notice and think. And that's exactly what happened at the recent Art Week in Dubai where Michelle Poonawalla's multi-media installation titled 'Introspection', a unique work where technology meets art to create awareness toward a burning issue, was displayed. Combining audio clips from newsreels with motion sensor technology and digitally mapped visuals, 'Introspection' was a unique piece that was intensely physical, immersive and at some points, disturbing. The soft-spoken Michelle, hailing from the illustrious Poonawalla family, believes in art that urges you to think, contemplate and feel the emotions.

Growing up between the UK and India, art has been an integral part of her life and over the last few years, Michelle has conducted a number of solo and group shows in India and abroad, including the famed Kochi Biennale last year. This has been her first step into the Middle East art scene and that's when we caught up with the artist whose creativity is but a means to voice her concerns about the world we live in...

## What has been your exposure to the Middle East Art scene?

This was my first visit to Dubai Art Week and I was pleasantly surprised. Especially some of the art galleries at Al Serkal were quite impressive and I enjoyed the energy. My own installation, 'Introspection', got a good response. I didn't have much exposure to Middle East art before this.

a spring-summer exhibition where artists used to create something with kids. She requested me to collaborate. So we did this rainbow and butterfly artworks to suit the theme. Everyone loved the concept and that's how I veered towards it. Thereafter, I met curator Swapan Seth who wanted to do a show with me in Delhi based on the butterfly theme and I developed an entire collection around it. It was Swapan who suggested I use technology in my art. Being someone who believed in art having drama and showmanship, I took up the challenge. First he sent me a picture of a video screen with a butterfly which didn't make any sense. As I explored further, I came across video mapping technology which allowed me to make the butterflies fly out of the painting by having it motion sensed. So when you go to a particular point, if the butterflies are shown sitting on top of the frame and you go close to it, they fly away and come back! I was fascinated and started practising it.

## With the use of technology, don't you think the personal touch goes missing in art?

Initially I felt that but now I believe that technology adds to my art lending it a magical quality. That's what I did with the 'Introspection'. The installation brings together sound and digital mapping to create a pointed commentary on the apathy with which images of violence and displacement are consumed today. I used sound and technology for the piece. So when you enter, you stand under a sound shower and hear actual reports of people who have faced terror or violence. You walk into an immersive room of red rain that's pouring down and you have these white butterflies flying through it. It symbolises peace and war and pain, all at once. The idea is to make a person feel overwhelmed.

## What does the butterfly symbolize for you?

It does different things at different times. The meaning depends on the piece. I have one called 'Circle of Life' where I make butterflies fly in a circle; another one is called 'Twilight' where butterflies fly in a twilight kind of colouring and because of the motion sensor, you get a barrage of butterflies at twilight. So sometimes the butterflies are hopeful, sometimes they reflect freedom.

## Do you believe in art that disturbs and questions or art that comforts?

I believe in both. Art should be a powerful tool for your message. Perhaps my next one would be on air pollution; it's a huge problem and I want people to stop and think. The one after that would be more reflective and force people to look within.

## Do issues come naturally to your art?

No. I have tried to keep it universal and neutral, not political. I don't want people getting upset about this or that. The message has to appeal to all yet evoke a strong reaction.

## How necessary is it to have Instagrammable art?

I don't think you will do your art to be Instagrammable. But if it happens, then well and good! Social media has been a boon for me. Last year, a lady messaged me on Instagram requesting me to be a part of an art show for the Prince of Wales Trust Charity. I found it interesting and then she offered me a chance to do an elephant with the elephant parade. That's how I did that project which also went to London. So yeah, social media has its pros and cons but it can get you anywhere in the world.

## What is next on your plate?

I don't take things slowly, I have done three shows back to back! I am very particular about where my art goes. When I started out, people advised me to go to London and do a show at a gallery but my art is not about show, it's serious. So wherever I go and what I do next should be taken in that context. It has to be accessible and should make people think and react. **M**

## Who was your earliest influence when it came to art?

I have always been inclined towards art though never got around to practising it professionally. My grandfather was a famous architect and artist whose contemporaries were people like (MF) Hussain and (FN) Souza but he never sold his art since it wasn't something he did for money. Grandpa had his own theories about art and its philosophies. He also had a special technique for oil painting which was 'fakeproof' because only one single piece could be created using it. I was the only person he shared his technique with. After his death, my dad put together a book on his works. At the launch event, I gave a speech and that's what set me thinking – should I not do anything about my grandfather's legacy? Coincidentally, around that time, my daughter who was nine, had started writing a book and I began illustrating for it which was appreciated by people. In a way, my re-entry into the art world began then.

## Butterflies are your recurring motifs in your work. What's the story behind it?

One of my friends who owns a school for autistic children used to have

