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Malika Garrett: Bringing India to America

By Deepa Agarwal

“Every child is an artist,” said Pablo Picasso. “The problem is how to remain an artist when you grow up.”

As a little girl in Calcutta, Malika Garrett loved to paint. Intrigued by different shapes and fascinated by colors, she would put paint on paper and smudge it to create her own unique designs. She would then sell her “paintings,” albeit mostly to her grandmother, and send the money to Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity in an early combination of art, commerce and charity. Today, Garrett is still a lot like that little girl.

Her contemporary paintings are hard to ignore. She uses a palette knife, instead of a paintbrush, to build layers of vivacious colors. It is this unique technique, coupled with her attention to the minutest detail, which gives her work its signature look. It’s hard to believe that Garrett was once reluctant to share her paintings with the public.

After earning a degree in fine arts from Wesleyan College in Macon, Ga., Garrett built a thriving career in sales, working with companies such as The New York Times, Coca-Cola, Häagen Dazs and Kodak. Despite her success in corporate America, she continued to paint on the side.

“Painting has been my passion since I was a little baby. However, it was a side of me that only my family and friends knew,” Garrett admits. “Each of my paintings meant the world to me. And as spunky, wild and risk-taking as I am, I was scared that if I got them out, somebody would stomp them.”

Her secret came out earlier this year when she was featured in the February issue of *Southern Living* magazine. Since then, Garrett has been on a roll. Her paintings were recently shown in the Center Space Gallery at the Memorial Arts Building of the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta as part of the “Celebrate Diversity through the Arts” program. The exhibition honored the vibrant colors of India on the country’s 57th Independence Day.

“India has a lot of meaning for me. Whenever I go to India, I am constantly taking pictures,” says Garrett. “The biggest thing about India is the colors. You get to see them in all their hues.”

Most of Garrett’s paintings are essentially portraits of strength, simplicity and courage. Each layer and shade of oil paint has a story to tell. “Almost all the subjects of my paintings are from India. They are those who live in abject poverty and struggle to make ends meet. But despite the challenges that they face, they are very happy people,” explains Garrett. “This is what I am trying to show through my paintings — the goodness, simplicity and the beauty of their lives in the midst of harsh circumstance.”

Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to her work, Garrett intends to devote even more time to painting. But that doesn’t mean she’ll leave her business savvy behind. “My sales and marketing skills have really come in handy. My background has helped me get my paintings out for people to see,” says Garrett with a smile. “I am one of those artists who walks into her sponsor’s office ready to deliver a PowerPoint presentation of my work.”