

Object creation

In a *Vogue* India exclusive, India's leading performance artist, **Nikhil Chopra**, digs into his archives to recreate his iconic gender-defying personas. The result? A series of post-pandemic avatars—dishevelled but stronger, finds **Shahnaz Siganporia**

Photographed by **SHIVANI GUPTA**

A decade ago, in a quiet corner of Mumbai's Colaba in the darkened gallery of Chatterjee & Lal, a bright spotlight shone atop a solitary drummer. He sat there with absolutely no idea how to play the drums, and over five-hour sessions, every day, for five days in a row, the nameless player tried to 'master' the instrument. As his proficiency grew, he shed the anonymous black full-length bodysuit and slid into gold, silver and sequinned spandex. In turn, the performance went on to explore the transformation from obscurity to a fantastical sort of stardom, with Freddy Mercury meets Ziggy Stardust vibes in place. "How do you create zero, in terms of characterisation? The bodysuit defines shapes in my body that are not traditionally masculine, but I also have a hairy chest. And this allows me to create an androgynous figure without definition. >

Nikhil Chopra as one of his recurring personas, the Victorian dandy, Yog Raj Chitrakar



CALL BACK
Chopra recreates personas from his 2010 performance, *Drum Solo*



Costumes: Tabasheer Zutshi (first page), Loise Braganza
Art direction: Niyati Mehta



PAST FORWARD
Chopra morphs into the freedom-fighting warrior Lakshmi Sahgal



“The bodysuit allows me to create an androgynous figure without definition. Man, woman, either, neither”

Man, woman, either, neither,” says Nikhil Chopra, as he looks back at *Drum Solo* (2010) and his experiments with the bodysuit, that has gone on to claim pride of place in his oeuvre. Each performance sees the artist transform from one persona to the next. Costuming (the bodysuit was made by his long-time collaborator and designer, Loise Braganza) helps him navigate his chameleon-like personas that range from fading rock stars to lifeless maharajas.

MAKE AT HOME

His repertoire is vast, ranging from live art and theatre to painting and installations, and his performances usually meander between identity and implicating his body into his work. With his performances at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009), Documenta14 (2017), and his residency and nine-day long durational performance *Lands, Waters, And Skies* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2019), Chopra has found his space within the echelons of the contemporary greats.

But the 46-year-old artist isn't concerned with the trappings. He remains focused on his practice: “Performance is at the core of my artistic pursuit. I'm using this medium to expand on my sense of self,” he says. The slight squeals of children playing and the excited barking of dogs

soundtrack our phone conversation. Chopra, like the rest of us, is at home. Nestled away in Goa with his wife, Madhavi Gore, also an artist, and his two children aged 12 and 7, he is enjoying the bustle of domesticity through this lockdown—even as his packed schedule of art shows and performances across the globe are postponed indefinitely.

For *Vogue India*, Chopra creates a series of transformations, to take us through the process of “un-gendering” that empowers most of his work. But rather than creating a new narrative, he carries forward an old one and picks out the archetypal masculine, feminine and androgynous personas from his archive. “Personas, not characters. A persona is an extension of who you are,” the artist differentiates, not in the Stanislavski method actor kind of way, but more in the Brechtian sense. Chopra carries on: “If I think of them as characters, I feel disembodied from them. But as personas, they are part of me, and that has led to an expansive understanding of gender, sexuality and Indianness. They also help me embrace a queerness that a lot of us are afraid to embrace, and that helps dismantle power structures.”

TIME TO PLAY

If the bodysuit frees him from gender, the bowler hat, handlebar moustache and

stirrup pants help him embrace the Victorian dandy (loosely based on his grandfather) who first appeared as Yog Raj Chitrakar in 2007 at Delhi's Khoj International Artists' Association and numerous other times through Chopra's 15-year-long career. “I didn't want to present him with reverence as I've done earlier, he's ruffled up a bit now.” In times of crises, it only fits that the gentleman has to re-examine ideas of masculinity and finds himself rattled out of the established world order.

With the feminine, Chopra channels lost or once lost relationships. He was separated from his mother for several years when his parents were in the middle of a divorce. He has reconciled with her since, but he lost his sister tragically in a car crash in 1999. He explains: “When I look at myself in the mirror with a wig, lipstick and eyeshadow on, I find the women I am looking for.” Here, he channels a freedom-fighting female warrior Lakshmi Sahgal from his 50-hour-long *Give Me Your Blood And I Will Give You Freedom* performance at the Singapore International Festival of

Arts in 2014. In the pandemic-struck world, she has an ink stain splashed across her heart, the pen becoming mightier than the proverbial sword.

For Chopra, playing the gender spectrum and making the binary fluid through his performances is empowering. His personas almost exist to negate Chopra the person. “I intentionally don't gaze at the audience, but at the MET, for instance, I would look directly at the audience because I was the only art work there who could. I want them to turn me into an object so a critical discourse can emerge. As my kids say, “This is not papa, this is a performing papa.”

While Chopra may not be performing before a live audience over the next few weeks or months, he is settling into the role of artist-maker and is creating new work even as he revisits his archives. For him, this is a phase of fruition: “I think the focus right now should be on making new art. Work with what you have, not with what you don't. It's time to look back to move forward.” ■