



MEET THE MAN WHO TURNS BATH SOAPS TO SCULPTURES



We love when artists take ordinary things and make them extraordinary. Meet Qatar resident Biju Chandrika Gangadharan, who creates wonders by making sculptures from bath soaps

By Katya Hvass

Living in Qatar reminds me daily of what a unique place it is - a microcosm, a condensed version of our planet itself, a melting pot of experiences, interactions and human stories. Today, my Doha journey led me to Biju Chandrika Gangadharan - an artist and creator of magical little sculptures which emerge unexpectedly from the humble everyday soap bars. We spoke with him about his life and art, as well as the broader subjects of inspiration, self-expression and the nature of creativity.

Biju had worked with several types of unconventional media in the past such as foam, sand and pencil graphite. His artistic creativity is closely connected with his professional interests in 3-visualisation: taking a flat image and expanding it into the 3-dimensional object. He does it at work using computer applications and in his spare time - with his hands dealing with the physical matter.

I had to ask Biju about the impermanent quality of the materials he chooses for his art with the extreme example of the beach sand sculptures that only have a 'life-span' of a few hours with all the time and effort invested in designing and creating them. His reply was that it did not matter, and the appreciation he receives from the viewers of his creations is a reward in itself regardless of how long they might exist in the real world.

The soap is his favourite medium, and he is proud to be the unique artist working with it. As this craft was new, Biju had to develop his own method and technique - starting by using just a small sharp-edged screwdriver and later progressing to the use of the clay modelling tools. The soap sculpting is a tactile process with the sense of touch playing just as an important role as the vision.

Soap bars are easily obtainable, cheap and convenient to use due to their size. They present a more flexible medium during the crafting process compared to, for instance, clay that sets in 3 to 4 hours. Soap can also be an unforgiving material that does not allow a second chance, if a

mistake is made. One careless movement, and the whole project has to be started again from scratch. The pieces are difficult to keep intact, and Biju had to devise a custom-made container and special maintenance methods for displaying and preserving his art.

What emerges as a result are incredibly delicate, amazingly intricate, out-of-this-world creations diverse in colour, texture, essence and spirit. They exude warmth and energy, with the creations out of clear soaps looking beautifully luminous introducing the added visual dimension from the changeable penetrating light.

Biju's subjects are as varied as the life itself - cultural symbols, wildlife, human faces, magical creatures, etc. They are real and imaginary, deeply personal and cultural, multicultural and simply universally human: an enchanting miniature world free of restrictions and limitations.

Biju shared with me that it was hard for him to come up with ideas from his own imagination. His choice of theme is influenced by the objects and visual images he comes across, and he is always on a lookout for the new subjects to give life to in the 3-D form. They often come from the internet, but they are not mere copies: Biju often re-invents them by merging two images together, introducing various changes. There is a profound and sincere part of him present in his every creation not just technically, but through the patience and care he takes in the process.

One source of inspirations originates from Biju's cultural background and the traditional Hindu art form from his native Kerala, India called Kathakali. It is a fascinating style of performing art, a dance-drama involving characters in elaborate costumes and makeup employing detailed gestures and well-defined body movements presented to music.

When I touched on the subject of creativity, Biju was unsure about it and used the word with caution and modesty. He said that he often absorbs the energy from the creative and proactive people. According



Biju Chandrika Gangadharan



The soap is Biju's favourite medium, and he is proud to be the unique artist working with it.

to him, a particular mood is required to sculpt successfully, otherwise "it does not work." The carving process has a meditative quality and makes him feel more relaxed and at peace. His creativity

provides him with a helpful respite from the pressures of everyday life.

He does not consider himself a natural talent and thinks that what his artistic

achievements are largely the result of patience and determination. Biju is grateful to his father for showing him the importance of persevering and hard-work and for helping him gain the inner-confidence



that enables him to maintain his focus and not to be deterred by setbacks.

The message that Biju would like to convey through his art is that we are capable

of achieving anything we want, and we should not be afraid to go out there and to share our passions and creativity whatever form they take. In short: "You can do it!".

Biju is positive and ambitious, and I got an impression that these qualities in him are rooted the deep-seeded sense of self-worth and clear purpose, and not, as if often happens - the opposite way round - when we anxiously engage into the competition with the world to prove our value to ourselves and others.

It is important for Biju to share his art so more people are able to enjoy it. One of his aims is to be included into the Guinness Book of Records. Although, there is no current category for the soap sculpture in the Book, the publishers would consider creating one if an application is submitted. Achieving this is the next challenge he set for himself.

The first exhibition of the soap sculptures took place at Al Dosari Park, Shahaniya in July 2016. It was an important milestone for Biju as an artist, and he is hoping to exhibit again in the future at the Katara Cultural Village.

Biju believes in it continuously challenging himself in order to develop and grow. His plans include creating a large-scale soap sculpture and trying his hand at the candle-wax modelling Madam Tussaud style.

During our short meeting with Biju, I felt uplifted and truly inspired by this artist's and person's courage, the quiet spirit of determination and confidence to achieve his goals without letting the pressures of the outside world and other people's opinions to sway him from his chosen path ●



Katya Hvass

is a Doha-based writer who loves living in Qatar and has a passion for communication, language and working with words in all its forms - writing, editing, translating, speaking - and the sharing and connecting that emerges through it.