



Artists in their studio

CHILA KUMARI BURMAN

FIONA MCKENZIE JOHNSTON and photographer JOSHUA MONAGHAN visit the spaces in which she explores aspects of cultural identity and femininity through her eclectic work

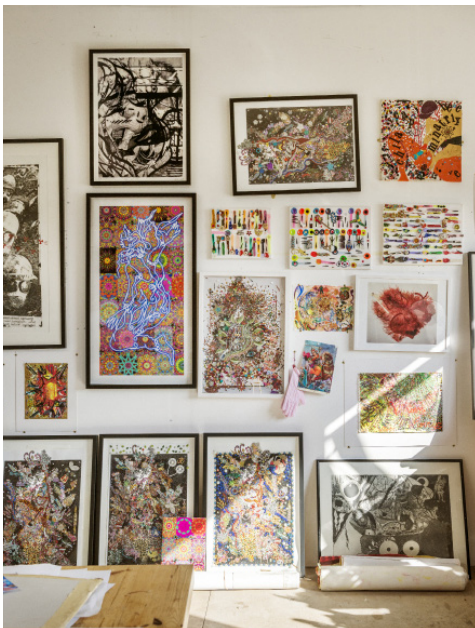
Lee Miller described Pablo Picasso as less a collector than someone who never threw anything away; when one home was full, he simply closed the door and moved onto the next. Chila Kumari Burman's attitude is not dissimilar – at least when it comes to studios. The artist, whose pop-bright, culture-fusing neons lit up the façade of Tate Britain during the bleak winter 2020/21 lockdown, and who has several works in the *Women in Revolt!* exhibition at the same gallery, has at least three separate units in the Space Studio-run building in Homerton, east London, where she has worked for the last 20 years.

Two are currently in use: paintings, drawings and photographs cover the walls, and the tables at which she

'snips and Pritt Sticks' are littered with magpie-worthy treasure – bindis, sequins, gem-encrusted costume jewellery. Crossing either room involves negotiating colourfully upholstered chairs, overflowing crates, a shop mannequin and a skateboard from her recent collaboration with the cult streetwear brand Palace.

The kaleidoscopic amalgam is autobiographical. Chila is first generation British-Punjabi, born and raised in Liverpool. The pastel-hued plastic spoons and glitter-covered cones speak of her father's job selling ice-creams on Freshfield Beach, and the baubles and bling represent, she explains, a 'typically traditional South Asian upbringing. If you're not allowed out at night, you will have seen all the Bollywood films. I used to spend my evenings dressing up and dancing around my room.' ▸

ABOVE LEFT Chila in one of the two light-filled studios in east London that she is currently using, surrounded by some of her own works, materials and sources of inspiration. She uses the racks attached to the ceiling for finished works on paper that can be rolled up and stored away safely. **ABOVE RIGHT** Her eye-catching mixed media text piece, *Chill Pout Rest*, made in 2021



But that is where tradition ends for Chila. ‘Art school was an alternative to an arranged marriage,’ she explains, and it was while she was studying for an MA at the Slade School of Fine Art that she created the *Body Prints* that are among the works hanging at Tate Britain. ‘I was looking for texture, so I covered myself in paint and lay against the paper,’ she recalls. Then, gesturing towards some more recent paintings based on an image that she found ‘in a sex shop in Hoxton’, referring to the Kama Sutra and mentioning that she has a purple belt in martial arts, she explains, ‘I’m subconsciously exploring different facets of myself, what it is to be a woman, and the contradictions between stereotype and reality.’

At the time of our visit, Chila is preparing for multiple exhibitions and installations, including two large solo shows

scheduled for late 2024 and 2025, the second at a major institution. Such a programme highlights the stark contrast between the chaos of her work environment and the order that comes from it, which is aided by the fact that the neons and prints – though designed here – are made off-site. ‘The newest studio was meant to be exclusively for painting,’ says Chila, wryly. ‘But that hasn’t happened – I need another room’ □ *Women in Revolt!* is at Tate Britain, SW1, until April 7: tate.org.uk. A new neon work by Chila, *The Shining Lights of Service*, is on display at Brighton Pavilion until January 28: brightonmuseums.org.uk. She is one of the artists included in *The World That Belongs to Us* at The New Art Gallery Walsall until June 9: thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk. Chila’s solo show of recent work will open at Compton Verney on October 26: comptonverney.org.uk

TOP ROW FROM LEFT *Big Trouble Ahead*, collage and acrylic paint, 2021. Chila. *Jungle Elixir*, collage, 2023. BOTTOM ROW A variety of her works from different series, including *Ice Cream Spoon Paintings*, 2021, and *Black Panther Bindi Girl*, 2015 to present day. *Cornets and Screwballs*, glitter, wafer biscuit and plastic, 2018. The blueprint for her installation on the façade of Tate Britain during lockdown