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Cultural patron Pooja Singhal: ‘I want to make Pichwai a household name’

Between leaving the family home in her forties and building her ‘dream’ retreat, a town house in ritzy Lutyens’ Delhi is a Vastu Shastra stepping stone

Pooja Singhal in her Delhi home

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Praachi Raniwala / Photographed for the FT by Devashish Gaur

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At the India Art Fair in 2017, Pooja Singhal had a *coup de foudre* in the booth by Delhi’s Gallery Espace. Spotting the display of abstract and graphic works on paper by Indian-American artist Zarina Hashmi, the then-novice contemporary art collector turned to gallery owner Renu Modi — a longtime family friend — and exclaimed: “Renu Aunty, I’ll just take the whole wall.” Singhal laughs at the memory. “She pulled me aside and asked, ‘Do you even know how much this costs?’ A lot of people might not admit this, but I didn’t know who Zarina Hashmi was back then. I just loved the work. I had a physical reaction to it; I had to have it.”

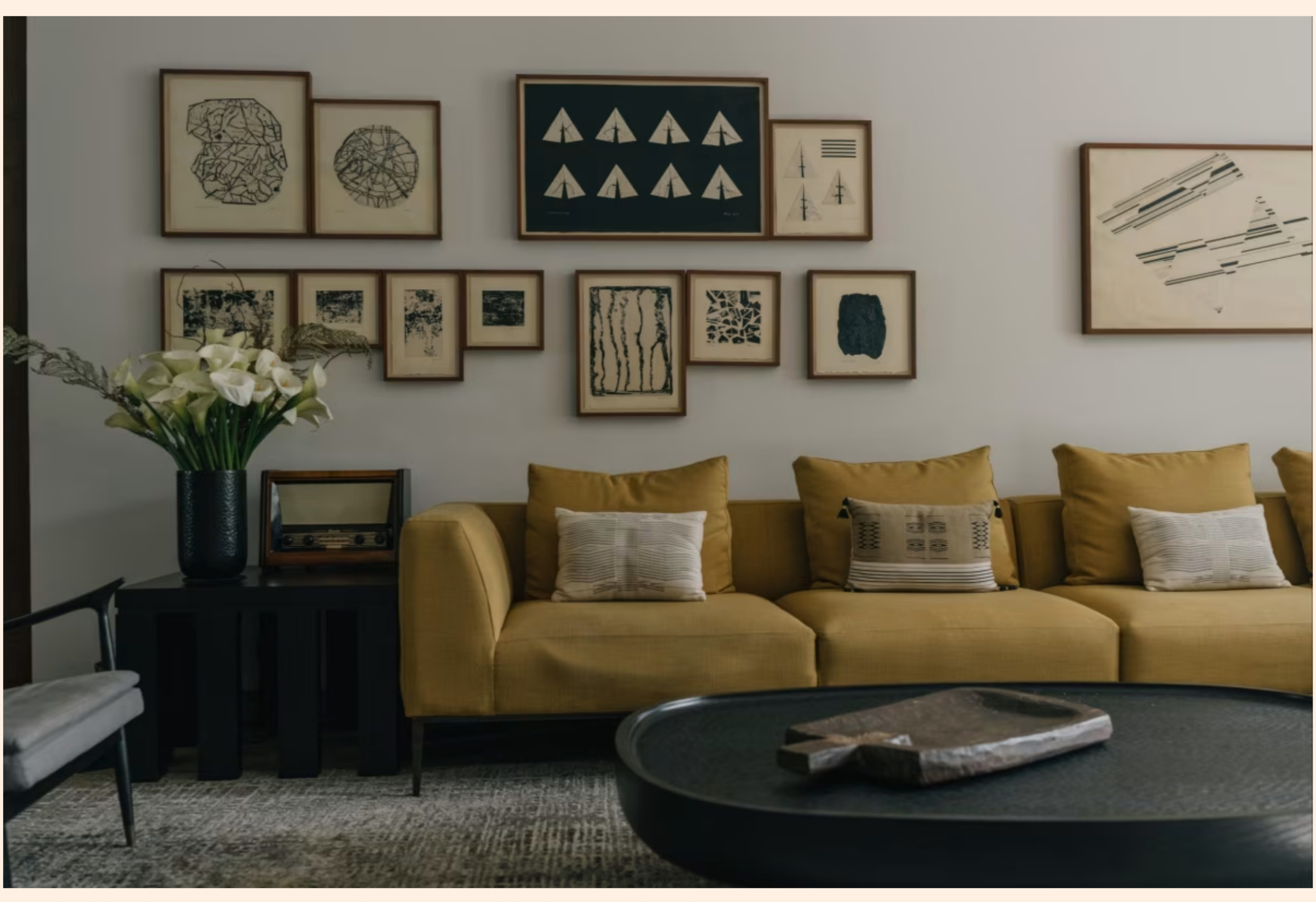
The purchase kick-started an obsession with contemporary South Asian art that intertwines with a long-standing love of traditional Indian craft. A mix of works now hangs on every wall of Singhal’s four-storey 1980s town house home, formerly a yoga centre, in the Lutyens’ Delhi neighbourhood of Jor Bagh — home to diplomats, high-ranking professionals and government offices. In a city that has no dearth of ritzy zip codes, “Jor Bagh is as good as it gets”, says Singhal.

In the informal dining room, a Pichwai painting, the 17th-century genre that Singhal champions and is reviving

The more formal dining room upstairs is for entertaining

Fifty-year-old Singhal describes herself as “a serial entrepreneur” and “a recent collector”. She is also the third generation of one of India’s most prominent business families. Her father is billionaire Salil Singhal, chairman emeritus of PI Industries, the agrochemical company founded by her grandfather in 1946, and of which Singhal is a silent shareholder. Yet while she studied economics and business administration (at Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh), the path she has carved is one of artistic patronage.

A particular passion is Pichwai: a form of traditional textile painting that dates to 17th-century Rajasthan, when they were created for Hindu temples, to be hung behind the idol of the Indian deity Shrinathji. Examples were hung in Singhal’s childhood home and today her own collection contains more than 400 works, ranging from rare historic masterpieces to contemporary iterations — pieces that have been exhibited in Mumbai, Delhi and now London. This week a show of 400 of Singhal’s Pichwai paintings opened at London’s Mall Galleries — the city’s first major display of this Indian art form. “I want to make Pichwai a household name,” she says.


A wall of works by Indian-American artist Zarina Hashmi, the purchase of which fired Singhal’s love of South Asian contemporary art

A decade ago she set up Pichvai: Tradition & Beyond, an atelier in the Rajasthani town of Kishangarh that employs a core team of 30 artists to preserve and teach this dying craft. “Now anyone who wants a good-quality Pichwai should know they can come to me for it,” says Singhal. The London show also sells “Pichwais under £200” created by the new generation of artisans being trained at the atelier, “to make it more accessible”.

We settle into her honey-yellow living room sofa in Delhi; on the wall above are some of the Zarina pieces that wooed her at the India Art Fair. In front of us is a wonderfully eclectic mix: an intricately carved wooden Chinese cabinet (a housewarming gift from her brother); an atmospheric figurative painting by contemporary American-Pakistani artist Zaam Arif; a charcoal and graphite mural by Indian artist Prabhakar Pachpute; and African artefacts that she picked up on her recent 50th birthday trip to Kenya. It’s a diverse ensemble, selected on instinct.

A fabric work by Danish artist Alke Reeh in one of Singhal’s two bedrooms; she lives in the master one and sleeps in the other…

… as advised by a consultant in Vastu Shastra, India’s ancient architectural code that balances spatial layout with energy flow

“This is how I hang — there are layers, it’s exciting,” she says, her manner forthcoming, her company relaxed, and conversation bursting with personal stories. “I am so proud when I look around, because it’s a mix and match of everything I’ve collected over the years. I styled it all myself, no one was hired for it. This house had to be all me.”

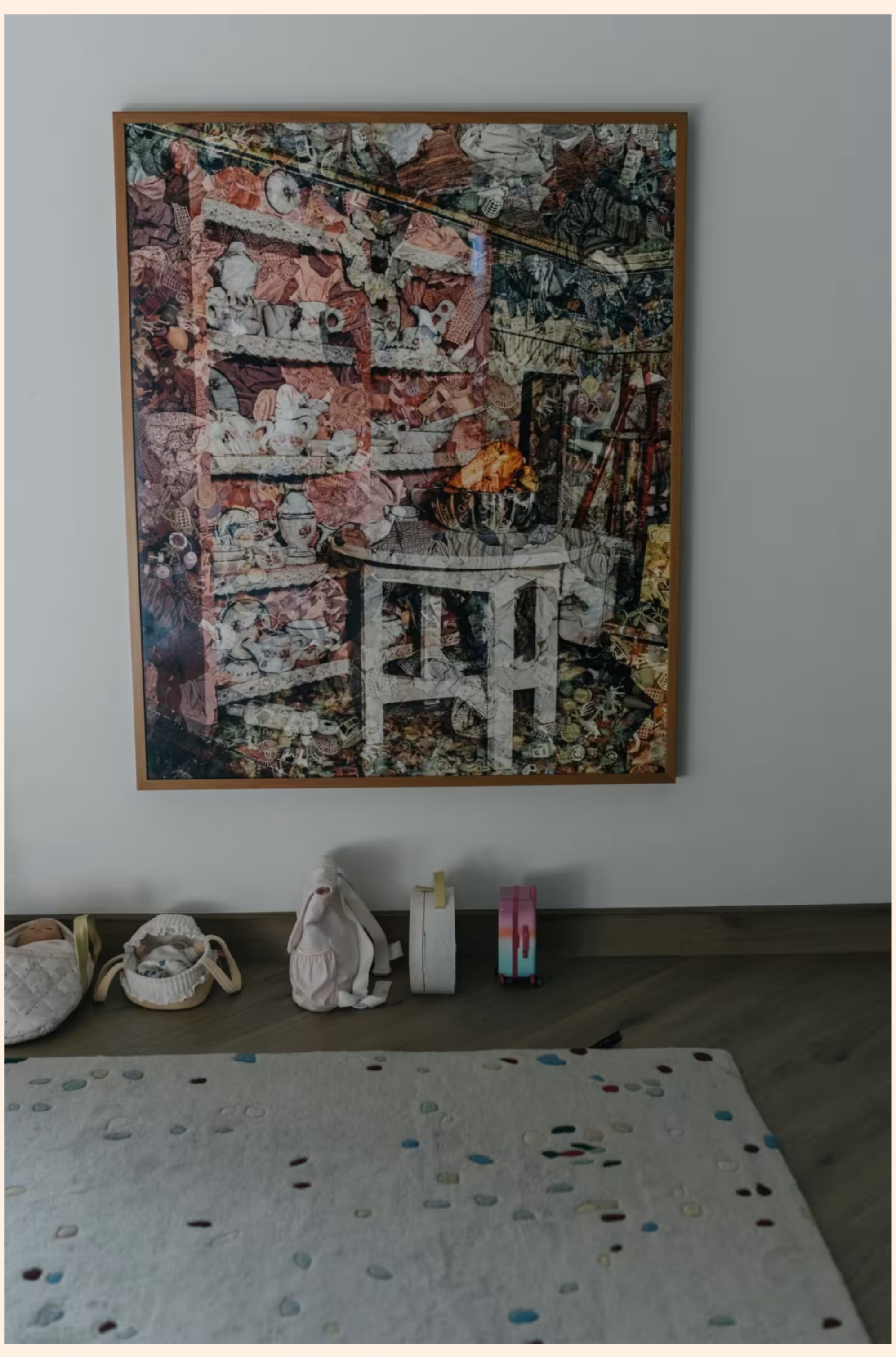
Singhal moved into the rented home two years ago. The 7,200 sq ft space in fact has two living rooms. The other one, on the top floor, is more formal, designed for entertaining, with an adjoining dining room and pantry. There are also two playrooms for her two children and Singhal has two bedrooms; she lives in the master one and sleeps in another, as advised by a specialist consultant in Vastu Shastra — India’s ancient architectural code that balances spatial layout with energy flow. There’s a sense of calm across the floors, every corner framed by the greenery outside.

The pantry features a photograph by Ketaki Sheth

Singhal had actually lived in the apartment building next door in her early forties, when she first moved out of her parents’ sprawling Delhi farmhouse. This was followed by an eight-year stint in the private residence wing of Delhi’s The Lodhi hotel, where she started off in a studio apartment and eventually took over four floors. “I come from a traditional family, and have lived with my parents for most of [my life], trying to find my own direction,” she says.

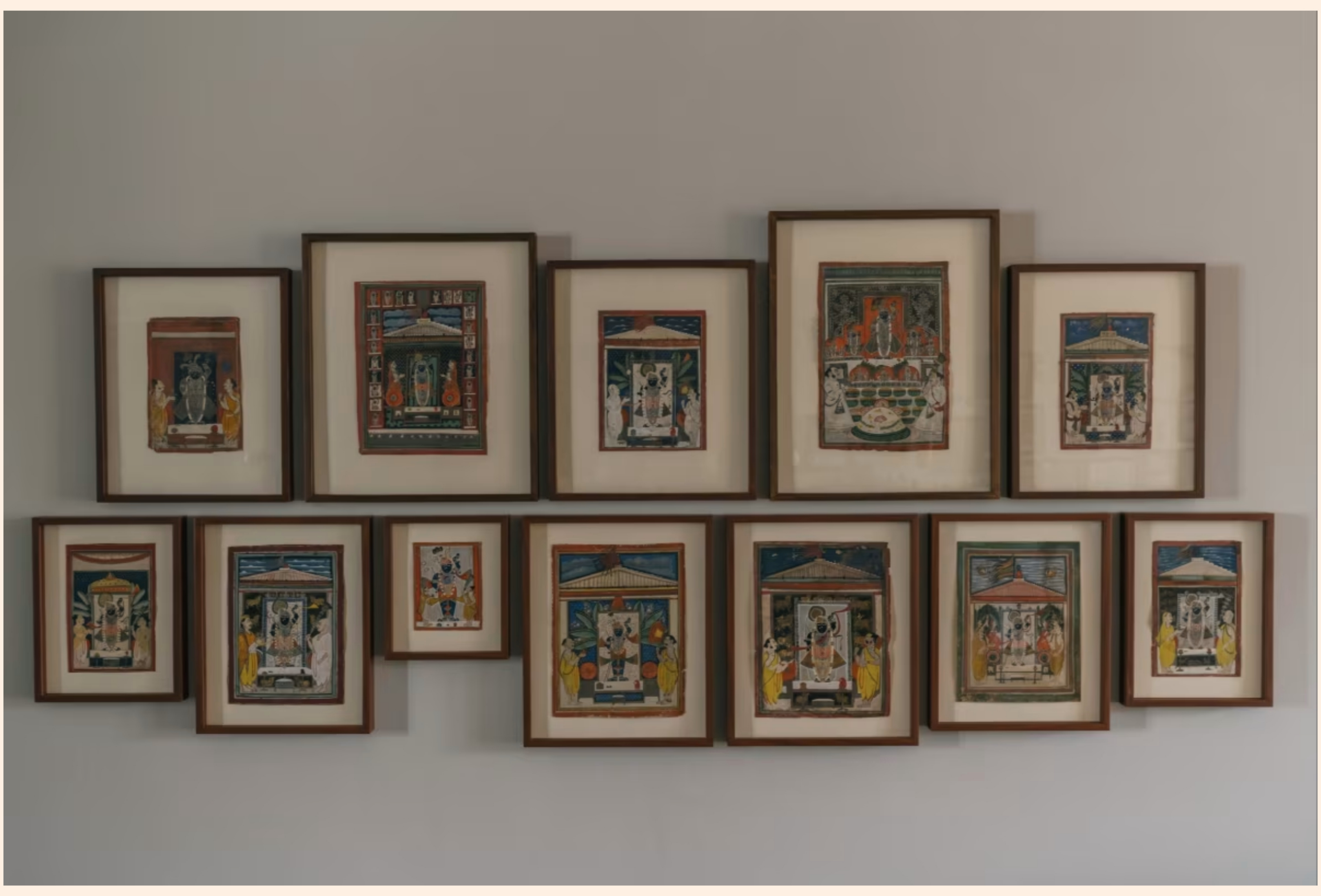
Five years ago she made a bold decision; in a society that’s still often governed by traditional expectations she adopted her son Kian and her daughter Kaira — a journey she embarked upon as a solo parent. “I’ve enjoyed everything money can buy, but all of it pales in comparison to what my children have brought to me,” she says. Every room has a dedicated play corner for them — but, she laughs, "there are rules of engagement too. They can't jump on my bed, though they're welcome to do that on theirs!"

One of the playrooms; there are two, one for each of Singhal's children


A work by Abir Karmakar in a child's bedroom

She now collects with her children — and her sister's two kids — in mind. Case in point: her prized set of 36 antique miniature paintings based on the Indian epic poem *The Ramayana*, so that "each child can have at least eight", as well as four embroidered and mixed-media artworks by Avinash Veeraraghavan — one apiece.

Her love of art and craft — and her desire to support its practitioners — can be traced back to her own mother, Madhu Singhal. A collector as well as a celebrated aesthete, she decorated the family home in Udaipur, a landmark mansion on Fateh Sagar Lake where Singhal grew up, with Jaisalmer stone and traditional art, and turned it into a lively salon of sorts. The place was often buzzing with visiting artisans displaying their wares.


A collection of heritage Pichwai paintings

Singhal never wanted to resign herself to a conventional role. Her CV includes a collaboration with Delhi-based fashion designer Rajesh Pratap Singh, as marketing partner for his brand, and in 2004 she founded Ruh — a fashion label and social enterprise dedicated to reviving and modernising handloom weaving. Along the way she has supported initiatives such as the Delhi Crafts Council, the Sahachari Foundation, a women-led charitable trust dedicated to socio-economic welfare and cultural events, and the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art.

Her own collection now reveals a roll call of contemporary Indian artists: photography by Dia Mehhta Bhupal, trompe l'oeil-like paintings by Abir Karmakar and the terracotta sculptures of Manjunath Kamath. In the top-floor living room, colourful ceramics in a wide array of shapes are stacked on a shelf, the work of Lubna Chowdhary. Above a bed, a series of black and white photographs of people and places are by Dayanita Singh, while a brutally minimalistic burnt-wood dining table by young Belgian designer Arno Declercq — who she visited at his Antwerp studio — is placed alongside a large Pichwai painting.

Singhal's office, with an artwork by Dia Mehhta Bhupal, 'Bookshop'

The Jor Bagh home is a stepping stone; she signed the lease at the same time that she purchased a plot to build her dream house in the leafy neighbourhood of Shanti Niketan, closer to her siblings and parents. She also has a house in Goa, bought during the pandemic.

Her art collection seems to be a window into the trajectory of her life. "You know, I do feel that way," she says. As for that booth of Zarina pieces, it remains one of the largest cheques she's ever written. But "in retrospect," she says with a smile, "I wish I'd bought the whole wall."

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