

Silk shirt, pants and jacket; all prices on request, **Payal Khandwala**. Leather heels, **Christian Louboutin**

Rana Begum

BETWEEN the LINES

Artist Rana Begum and fashion designer-artist Payal Khandwala are both master minimalists and mutual admirers who don't disguise their love for clean shapes and bold use of form and colour. They talk to Neville Bhandara about what inspires, enrages and drives them to create

PHOTOGRAPH VIKRAM KUSHWAH STYLING RAHUL VIJAY

London-based artist Rana Begum is not an easy woman to track down. She's notoriously busy and rarely gives interviews. When we reached out to her in November last year, she was juggling home and studio renovations, as well as multiple ongoing projects—she has seven shows lined up this year, from Cambridge and Cornwall in the UK to Germany, Philippines and the US. Mumbai-based fashion designer-artist Payal Khandwala has had a busy 2018 as well. The year has already seen her open a dazzling new Bengaluru store and begin working towards an online retail presence. But our idea to get the two of them together, a creative coup of sorts, piqued their interest. The award-winning artist (Begum won 2017's Abraaj Group Art Prize) is a fan of Khandwala's deceptively simple aesthetic. So, we flew to London—where Begum opened up her studio to us on a cold, grey December day—and styled her in Khandwala's striking signature fashion. And via a cross-continental conversation, we got them both to open up on the ideas and emotions that are vital to them and their work:

ON BEING AN ARTIST:

Rana Begum: "I feel privileged to be a practising artist. I wake up each day and think about how lucky I am to still be doing what I love. I owe this to so many people: the team at the studio, my gallerists, my family and my friends. Without their support and understanding, it would be impossible. The need to create is always there; everyone needs a mode of expression. I took a visual route. It's not necessarily one that people always understand, but I am happy with it. Even though sometimes, I may not be sure where I'm going, I feel confident that this road is taking me somewhere."

Payal Khandwala: "I think it's a blessing to be able to express how you feel. Nothing is more enriching or therapeutic. To be able to create something that is personal and speaks to another is a powerful thing. Being a painter and a clothes-maker allows me to give my ideas a voice—and that I make a living doing what I love is a bonus I don't take for granted."

ON CREATIVITY IN A FRAUGHT POLITICAL CLIMATE:

RB: "There is a buzz in the current political climate that makes us all feel motivated; a call to action. Whether it's Brexit, #MeToo or Trump, these upheavals highlight the possibility for things to change, and most importantly, they have people talking and reacting. It's all in the open. Experiencing Brexit first-hand after coming to the UK (in 1985, from Bangladesh) has opened my eyes to what has been going on under our noses and the climate that allowed this to happen. It is a tough lesson in the danger of complacency! My work has never been politicised, but it feels like an interesting time to practise, because art can find a way of communicating or capturing a certain mood or will in ways that other mediums cannot."

PK: "You have to stay true to what you believe in. But remember that being creative comes with a responsibility; being reckless in the name of artistic freedom is wholly unnecessary. My work has never been political, but sometimes you have to dig in your heels. I was once asked to take down some artworks, inspired by the *Kama Sutra*; they were a part of my solo show. The gallery was afraid we might attract the attention of troublemakers. But I saw no reason to be backed into a corner by a hypothetical threat (even though I understood their concerns). So, I stood my ground and the show went up as planned, and without any disruptions. >

elements in my work. I prefer my designs to be minimal, but I can be inspired by almost anything—music, painting, philosophy, even a carpet or a flower. As long as I can find a way to make it abstract and graphic, I'm open to all points of inspiration."

Perhaps making the changes would have been less risky, but it wasn't really an option for me. And it wasn't because I was trying to make a point. I did it because the alternative just didn't feel right."

ON IDENTITY:

RB: "My identity and creativity are inextricably bound. I aim to produce pieces that transcend the boundaries of race, religion and class. However, my heritage, and being the mother of two mixed-race children, highlights the complexity of identity in post-Brexit Britain and Trump's America. Identity has become tangibly quantifiable. When my children ask me about their parents' history, culture, religion and childhood, the answers I give them suddenly feel more loaded and heavily weighted than they did a few years ago."

PK: "Having a studied point of view is indispensable. As a creative tool, a distinct voice is half the battle won. Having an identity sets you apart from the clutter in a world overrun by social media. The vocabulary with which a creative person communicates his or her philosophy, opinions and beliefs ultimately becomes the DNA of the artist or the brand. It can transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Identity is the soul of an artist's work."

ON INSPIRATION:

RB: "My constant inspiration both as an artist and a mother, is my surroundings. I am surrounded by incredibly strong, inspirational women who give me the strength I need as a single parent. I live in a city that is in a constant state of flux, and its shifting nature throws endless challenges that cause me to question everything. I try to find answers through my work, through the tangible engagement with the material at hand."

PK: "I am inspired by colour. I've painted my whole life, and my journey with it goes back to when I was a little girl. But I'm also deeply inspired by proportions and architecture. I love line, shape, geometry, origami, the simplicity of math, and logic. And I try to use these

"I've always admired Rana's use of space and lines, as well as her vivid palette. I feel like some of our preoccupations with origami and geometry must overlap. She has such restraint, yet her art is just as spontaneous as it is meticulous. I love that there is something so fierce about her work, but that it's also very feminine"

—PAYAL KHANDWALA

always there, but among them are moments of joy; when, by doing the smallest thing, you bring a smile to your child's face. In those moments, it becomes clear to me that being a good parent doesn't come from reading books or researching solutions online; it comes from accepting that you will mess up, and each time that happens, you have to learn from it and continue. I want my children to see my struggles and my successes; I want them to learn from their own mistakes in the same way that I do. In terms of balance, even though I have a good routine, and created a life where I feel I am not neglecting my children or my work, I do struggle—with finding the time to push my work and wanting to spend all my time with my kids. Both drive me equally mad."

PK: "It is a work in progress. There are times it feels like a tightrope walk—there aren't enough hours in the day. But, on most days, I can extract myself to pursue things I care about. I am not a workaholic, my work doesn't define me. I find it fulfilling to spend time doing things I enjoy, like doodling with my daughter or watching a film with my husband." 🍷

ON FEMINISM:

RB: "I love what feminism has achieved so far. But I personally see being female as only half the battle. Growing up, not only did I face gender issues, but also with the colour of my skin and my culture. And in the UK, experiencing racism was simply a part of life."

PK: "Feminism is nothing more than being treated as an equal. Women must have the freedom to choose, even if that choice is not something you approve of. Being a true feminist is sometimes understanding that having the luxury of choice is more important than the choice itself."

ON MOTHERHOOD AND THE ELUSIVE WORK-LIFE BALANCE:

RB: "Motherhood is one of the toughest jobs. The fears are



Cotton T-shirt, ₹3,800, silk sari, ₹16,500, pleated flower neck-piece, ₹3,500; all **Payal Khandwala**. Metal ring, Khandwala's own

Payal Khandwala