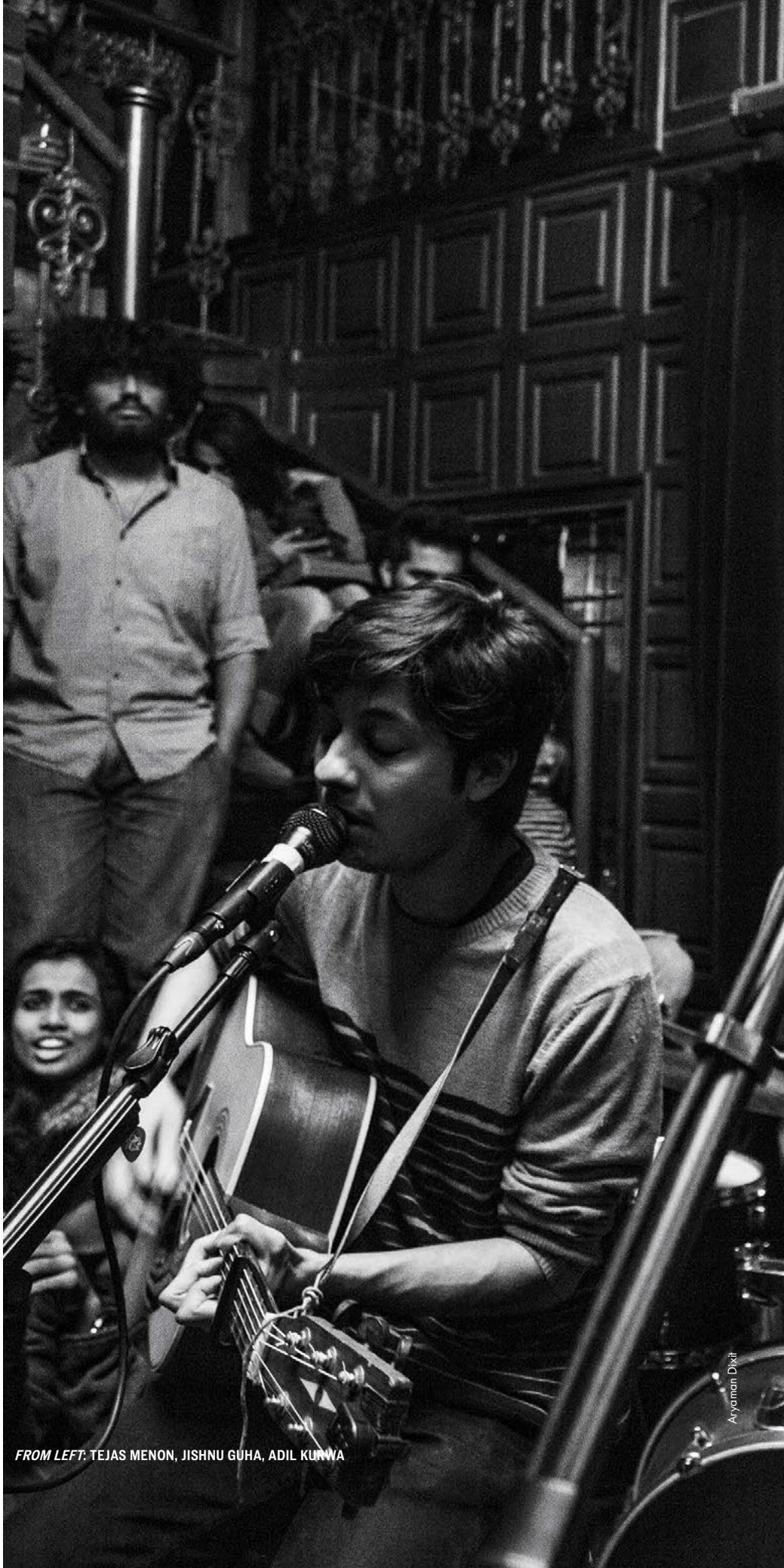


# THE PRADDAR



FROM LEFT: TEJAS MENON, JISHNU GUHA, ADIL KUNWA

Aryaman Dixit



**TEJAS MENON, 27**  
SINGER-SONGWRITER

You probably recognise the band Tejas from a viral video last year. Stuck in their car outside a venue during the rains, the members filmed themselves playing their single, 'Wine'. It helped that they're unabashedly pop. "What's great about pop is that it isn't rigid and can be done a million ways," says Menon, who is joined by Aalok Padhye on percussion and keys, Jehangir Jehangir on drums, Adil Kurwa on bass and Jishnu Guha on guitar. He believes at least part of their success is down to location. "Mumbai allowed me to thrive. But I think it's important to go beyond the scene and introduce ourselves to people who have no clue what independent music is."

For instant **indie cred**, casually drop one of these names into conversation. **Neville Bhandara** scouts 20 great acts before they go mainstream

# OFFBEAT GENERATION

Indie culture is, by definition, eclectic and vibrant. Art and music are the most obvious spaces to foster individual expression, but the fields of fashion, publishing, theatre and comedy are seeing furious innovation as well. As part of our 20th anniversary special, we set out to find 20 creative people across India who are taking the harder, less predictable, more rewarding route to the top.



**SAHIL VASUDEVA, 30**  
CLASSICAL PIANIST  
AND COMPOSER

The Indian indie scene is currently reeling under an electronic music storm, a landscape in which someone like Vasudeva really stands out. He counts Chopin as one of his chief influencers. "There is a creative and technical genius to this 300-year-old music that cannot be replicated. The structures within Western classical have given rise to almost every existing musical form." Vasudeva has been playing since he was a child and after briefly working a corporate job in New York, he returned to Delhi and his old love. For his solo project Opus, he is composing a piano act that will incorporate elements of film, photography, theatre, light and sound design.

**KAJAL 'DIZY' SINGH, 23**  
GRAFFITI ARTIST

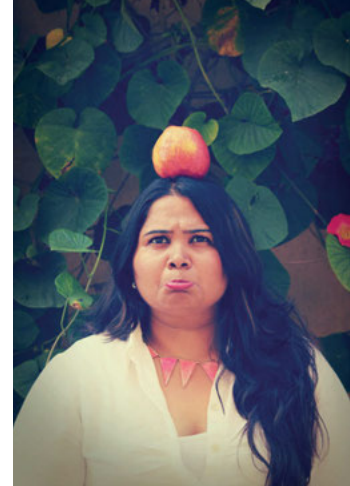
It was during a YouTube binge that Singh found her calling. Watching hip-hop and breakdance videos, she fell in love with old-school New York graffiti for its bubble lettering and 3D shapes. In 2012, her own work with the spray can came to the attention of the Indo-German Hip-Hop Urban Art Project and she was invited to Germany to participate. "The current state of the graffiti scene in India is like the European scene of the '80s—it's still growing," says Singh. She hopes the form is recognised for its artistic merit here too, citing a project she worked on in Novosibirsk, Siberia, as an example: "Ten artists got together to paint the city's local trams—with the full support of the authorities."





**ANUSHKA LEWIS, 28**  
HARPIST AND  
SINGER-SONGWRITER

It was in 2009, when she was at Chennai's KM Music Conservatory as a vocal major, that Lewis had her first brush with the harp. "Our theory and history professor, Alison Maggart, is a harpist and I got to watch her at one of the school's performances. The instrument alone was so majestic and seeing her play sparked a curiosity," she says. Soon, Lewis changed her major. She describes her music as filled with "darkness and surrealism", but also confesses to a slight obsession with John Mayer. The Mumbai-based artiste's first EP, *Fused*, was out last year and she's working on her next, when not teaching music.



**SUMUKHI SURESH, 29**  
COMEDIAN

In the sausagefest that is the Indian comedy scene, Suresh is a welcome change. "The humour we're exposed to on TV is very misogynistic, that's why it seems normal to a lot of people. The only way this can change is if there are more comics who are women and more women in the audience," she says. Suresh has two sets: one for her regular stand-up shows, and another called *Disgust Me*, which is a secret show for women, by invitation only. The first is trademark Suresh, the comedian we've come to love in YouTube features like 'Maid interview' and *Better Life Foundation*. But the second is more special. "It's a safe space for women to enjoy comedy that's specifically tailored for them without having to worry that they're being judged for laughing at things considered 'unladylike'."

**APURVA KOTHARI, 41**  
FOUNDER, NO NASTIES

This former software engineer runs a "social enterprise disguised as a fashion brand". It all started when Goa-based Kothari came across an article that dubbed India's famous cotton belt the "suicide belt", referring to the rising death toll of desperate farmers. "My research showed that there was a growing organic and fair-trade movement globally, supported by international brands. But no one in India was working on it. So we launched No Nasties with the goal of creating a consumer movement for ethical fashion." All their products are certified by the Global Organic Textiles Standard, which means the fabrics are organic and the entire production process—from dyeing to printing to packaging—is eco-friendly.



**UPASANA MAKATI, 27**  
FOUNDER, WHITE PRINT

Three years ago, when Makati founded India's first English lifestyle magazine in braille, she was really just trying to level the field. "In a world obsessed with technology, it was still difficult to find reading material for the visually impaired." A monthly magazine, *White Print*, is published at Mumbai's National Association for the Blind and circulated across the country. India Post delivers these stamp-free, but it's still a struggle to make profits. "There is a perception issue, apart from the functional, infrastructural problems the community faces on a regular basis. There is a lot of work to do, like improving access to public places, transport, education and entertainment. Our mindset towards the visually impaired community needs to change." ▶



**DEVIKA SRIMAL BAPNA, 31**  
FOUNDER, KANABIS

When Bapna gave up using leather years ago, she struggled to find good, stylish and affordable vegan footwear. So the former chartered accountant decided to make her own. Her brand is called Kanabis, since it uses a lot of canvas, which was historically made from hemp—which comes from cannabis. The result is India's first PETA-approved brand of footwear. The Delhi-based entrepreneur says, "Consumers are becoming more conscious about their choices—what they're wearing, where it's sourced from and whom it's impacting. We're glad the message for ethical fashion is trickling down," she says. A year-and-a-half down the line, Kanabis has 60 styles across wedges, boots, espadrilles and sneakers.



**HARNIDH KAUR, 21**  
POET AND AUTHOR

A student of public policy in Mumbai, Kaur is the author of this year's *The Inability Of Words* (Writer's Workshop), and '84, an online series of 20 poems chronicling the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. "It's not political agenda. It's not sponsored news. It's a culmination of my education, training, context and experiences. My community has given me everything. I'm just giving back in the best way I can," she says. Her poetry is unfettered by expectations; it's honest, angry and hopeful. The prolific poet is currently editing an anthology of narrative poetry, putting the finishing touches to her next title, *The Ease Of Forgetting*—slated for a January 2017 release—finishing her dissertation and starting her first novel.

**SAUBIYA CHASMAWALA, 26**  
ARTIST

Paper cuts are probably an occupational hazard for Chasmawala, who creates art by wielding a surgical blade over cartridge paper. "It's fragile and not acid-free, so it changes with time, leaving scope for accidental marks and creases, which I think is so important," says the young artist, who captured the attention of art lovers after her show at Mumbai's TARQ gallery earlier this year. Pictures of the architectural ruins of Lothal, a prominent city of the Indus Valley civilisation, formed the foundation of this collection. Her work explores the perspective of being a female artist from the Alavi Bohra Muslim community. A recipient of the Inlaks Fine Arts Award for 2016, this Vadodara native is one to watch.





**UTE WIEMER, 25**

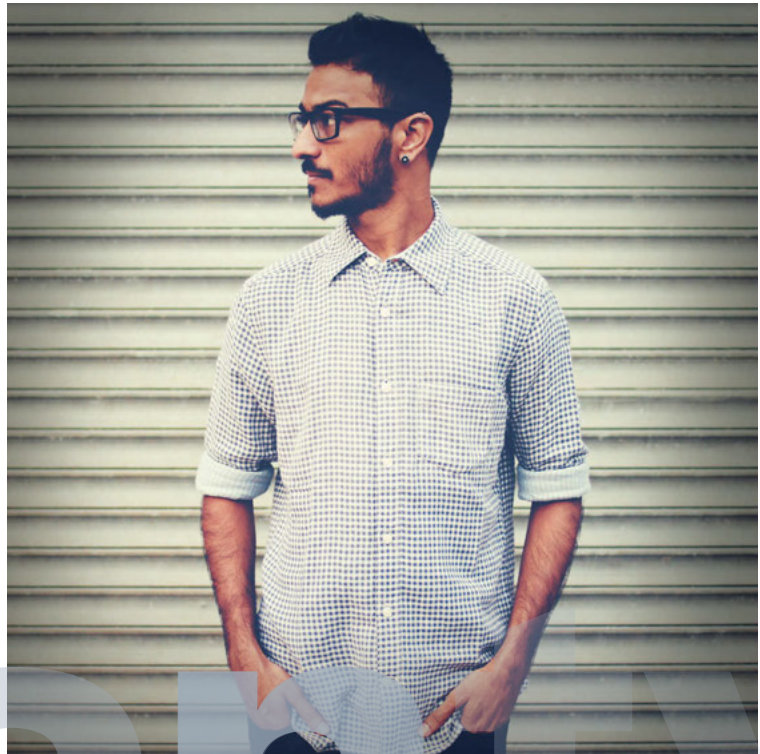
CO-FOUNDER, *LOVETREATS.IN*

Berlin native Wiemer came to India to work with an NGO and had her "European myths" busted when she met women here who spoke about sex uninhibitedly. And Balaji Vijayan, 34, who worked in the video game industry, had his a-ha moment in Amsterdam where he noticed how open the attitudes were towards sex. Their catalytic meeting happened in 2014 and they soon launched *Lovetreats.in* from Bangalore. The website sells a range of sex toys and other pleasure enhancers for men, women and couples. Your order arrives discreetly in a plain brown box. They've also teamed up with a free online counselling service (*Lovedoctor.in*) as well as two sex-ed initiatives (*Lovematters.in* and *MakeLovenotporn.com*) to offer expert advice to shoppers.

**ANIRUDDH MEHTA, 26**

GRAPHIC DESIGNER AND ARTIST

Chances are you've come across Aniruddh Mehta's Instagram personality: The Big Fat Minimalist. Primarily a digital artist, Mumbai-based Mehta's interest in art and design grew thanks to his brother, Aditya Mehta, who was in advertising. "I was fascinated by what he was doing, but it wasn't until much later that I decided on graphic design as a career. I was never really very good at drawing as a child, so my first year in design school was a journey of self-discovery," he says. Some of his most notable creations include artwork for the Eden Art Festival, an open-air music and arts event in Mumbai, and TaxiFabric. His next project strays into the fold of fashion as he prepares to imprint his signature style on to T-shirts and other apparel.



**KAVERI GOPALAKRISHNAN, 29**

COMIC CREATOR, ART DIRECTOR  
AND ILLUSTRATOR

Gopalakrishnan, an NID graduate, has been publishing comics regularly on her blog (*Kaverigeewhiz.tumblr.com*) and is the co-founder of *UrbanLoreComics.com*, a collection of graphic stories. "I like to create personal, humorous stories on the conflicts in urban spaces, natural worlds and human relationships," she says. "I knew I wanted to draw and write my own stories for a living since I was given my first crayons, but I didn't imagine that would turn into comic-making. I grew up on my father's extensive library of *MAD Magazines* and *Asterix* comics, and always felt drawn to sarcasm and satire." Her work has been published in books like *Drawing The Line* (Zubaan Books, 2015) and *First Hand* (YodaPress, 2016). The Bangalore-based artist's first graphic novel, *Two*, will be out soon. ▶



**NUPUR JOSHI-THANKS, 34**  
FOUNDER, PAPER PLANES

"The idea of indie print magazines is very new for readers in India, so a large part of our work is introducing people to this genre." Mumbai's Joshi-Thanks was a lawyer in an earlier life, but now, she runs the e-store Paper Planes, which sources magazines from all over the world. "We try and get our magazines directly from the publishers themselves. The idea behind Paper Planes is to become the bridge between publishers and readers," she says. They currently have monthly, half-yearly and annual subscription plans and their most popular titles are *The Happy Reader*, *Gather Journal* and *Cereal*. Covering niche interests across categories like food, travel, fashion and literature, these magazines originate in diverse locations, from Riga to Brooklyn, Beirut to Berlin.



**MANASI NENE, 20**

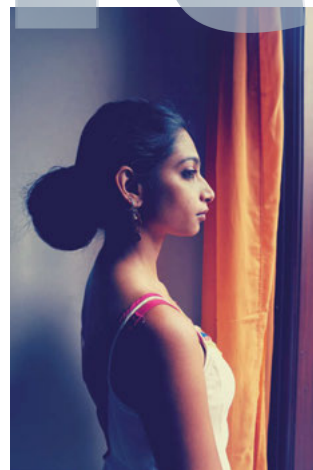
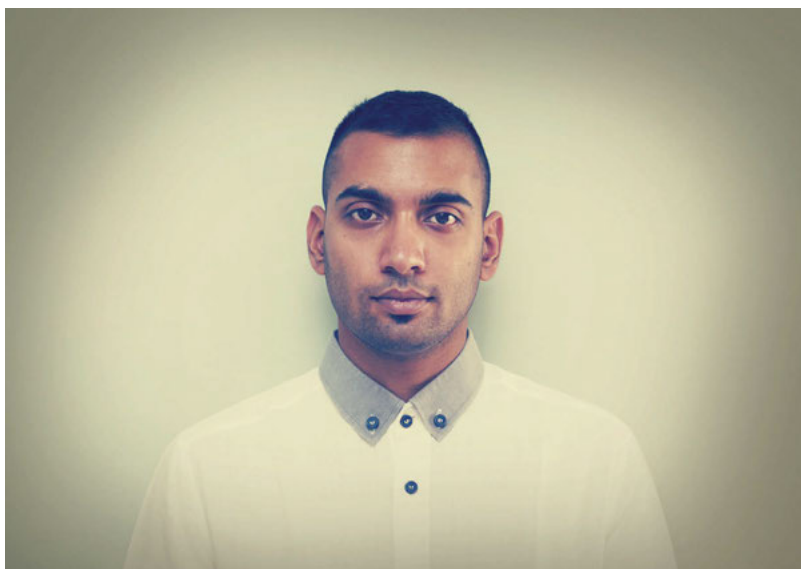
FOUNDER, PUNE POETRY SLAM

Nene performed her first-ever spoken word piece—a rant on the education system—for her best friend in the college parking lot. "I didn't fully understand poetry till I read 'Is/Not' by Margaret Atwood and 'Howl' by Allen Ginsberg. They showed me what poetry could achieve—the kind of stuff you wouldn't read in school." A journalism student in Pune, Nene started the city's first club dedicated to poetry and spoken-word performances. Today, she's a veteran, riffing on such themes as sexuality, anxiety and existentialism. Her act, *Half My Love Poems*, is especially poignant. "Anything that leaves you pondering for more than 20 minutes—there's some art waiting to be made."

**SANKET AVLANI, 29**

ART DIRECTOR AND DESIGNER

Avlani moved back to Mumbai from London to work full-time on his project that gets local designers to redesign the interiors of Mumbai's ubiquitous black-and-yellow cabs. The designer had been documenting the insides of taxis for a while on his blog and the idea for TaxiFabric, a kind of design movement, soon emerged. "Visual artists are used to expressing themselves to a limited set of people, whereas this lets you design something for a much wider audience. It's a contemporary interpretation of local stories and iconic symbols around us." TaxiFabric's vehicles (over 150 of them) are portable galleries, featuring a variety of styles and subjects including monochromatic graphics and tributes to historical and cultural events, not to mention the phenomenon that is Mumbai.



**MALLIKA TANEJA, 31**

THEATRE ARTISTE

*Thoda Dhyam Se* is one of the most powerful plays to be staged recently in India. Its creator, Delhi-based Taneja, exploded onto the scene with her reaction to the victim-blaming that followed the reporting of the Mumbai Shakti Mills gang rape case of 2013. She begins the performance in her lingerie, then piling on layers of clothes as she delivers a monologue questioning just how much women have to cover up to be safe—to not be "asking for it". The layers symbolise the constant pressure exerted by patriarchy as it expects women to conform, dress and behave in a certain way. Taneja also performs in people's homes as some venues, fearing violence, are reluctant to let her get on stage.

**SONALI ZOHRA**, 27  
ILLUSTRATOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Zohra's drawings on her Instagram (@dangercat) are dark, layered and moody. Her tools of choice are watercolours, the graphic tablet Wacom, ink, paints and charcoal. "I'm primarily influenced by nature," she says. "I find joy and inspiration in the small things, like watching my garden grow." The artist who's a prominent influence on her work is French painter Paul Gauguin ("Looking at his paintings is like teleporting"). Zohra's recent illustrations for Arshia Sattar's *Ramayana For Children* (Juggernaut, 2016) are spellbinding. She has sound advice for young artists: "Just keep doing. Don't stop, don't question yourself too much, just do what you feel like doing."



**NATASHA VAKIL**, 31  
YOUTUBE ENTERTAINER

Vakil manages a dance studio, has her own jewellery line and runs an Airbnb in Mumbai, but she's best known as Gangsta Gudiya. Her online avatar is equal parts sassy and spunky, spitting out funny rhymes that have won her a small but dedicated following. Her YouTube debut, 'Bhaji shop', was a rap song about buying vegetables. Not only is it catchy as hell, but in the expletive-studded world of Indian YouTube comedy, it stands out for another reason. Vakil says, "I'm not against cursing or using bad language, but I do feel that people will listen more willingly to what we have to say if they can't object to the manner in which it is said."

**PRIYANKA PAUL**, 18  
ILLUSTRATOR AND POET

A student in Mumbai, Paul creates art that's concerned with issues of gender and race. She has been drawing since childhood, but only took art seriously once she studied sociology and political science, which contributed to a wider understanding of the world. This perspective has given her work a political punch. Case in point: this year's popular *Goddesses* series on Instagram (@artwhoring), inspired by the poem 'Pantheon' by Harnidh Kaur (another cool person on this list). It depicts goddesses as liberated women in the contemporary world of social media. "Female sexuality is still seen as taboo around the world; oppression is universal, which is why the series connected with people," she says. "Art on platforms such as Tumblr and Instagram is helping artists talk about—and create work for—subjects they didn't before." ●

