

RATE OF KNOTS

Mrinalini Mukherjee took Macramé to a new level



Growing up in Bombay, India, Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949-2015) studied under KG Subramanyan, one of the leading artists of post-Independence India, and who was in turn a former student of her father. Subramanyan, a scholar and textile revivalist as well as an artist (he helped document India's textile heritage in his role as deputy director of the All India Handloom Board), who was influenced by indigenous Bengali artistic traditions including the textile patas and Kalighat-style paintings. Mukherjee was greatly inspired by Subramanyan and her decision to work with textiles was in part the result of his influence.

Born two years after Indian independence in 1947, Mukherjee forged her own path, drawing on a pool of references and traditions that included Hindu divinity, Indian and historic European sculpture, folk art, modern design, local crafts, and textiles. Mukherjee first worked with natural fibres at the craft fairs organised by Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda (an institution known for promoting a creative and individualist approach), where she had studied painting. Rejecting the traditional loom she favoured makeshift frames and armatures, on which she knotted her fibres. While independence brought huge political and social upheaval in India, at an individual level there were positives for Mukherjee who was able to win a British Council Scholarship for Sculpture in 1971. The scholarship allowed her to spend a number of years at West Surrey College of Art and Design pursuing her interest in tied fibre works.

In an essay entitled *The Knots are Many But the Thread is One*, art historian and curator Deepak Ananth writes of Mukherjee's work, describing it as, 'In harmony with the vegetable realm from which her medium is derived', and explaining that the leading metaphor of her work comes from the organic life of plants, 'the work's gradual unfolding itself becomes analogous to the stirring into maturation of a sapling.' Her work *Jauba* (2000) refers to the hibiscus flower and hangs on a metal frame like a garment - to the untrained eye - perhaps a long colourful cardigan to snuggle up in on those cold winter evenings. But on closer inspection it is a sculpture featuring hemp dyed in dark green, blue and red that has been manipulated to resemble flowers.

Ritu Raja (1977) is in one way less ambitious than *Jauba* as the fabric has not been dyed and so the hemp is exhibited in its natural colour form. However, this is a complex piece, whose title in Bengali means 'The King of Seasons', a reference to the fertile spring. It is an excellent example of her considerable knot making skills, great dexterity and, one assumes, tremendous patience.

Creatures as well as plant forms fired her imagination. In the sculpture *Nag Devta* (1979), a rippling serpent constructed from a green tangle of hemp bore an erection combined with female genitalia. Coiled against a wall it looks as if it were ready to spring. This piece, from relatively early on in her career, incorporates all the ingredients that she would regularly revisit. ▶