

mint

FEBRUARY 18, 2017  
SATURDAY

## Architecture's stalwarts come together

# Breaking craft out of its cast

The title of Rooshad Shroff's exhibition, '15,556', acknowledges the man-hours it entailed

BY KOMAL SHARMA

A long line of architects such as Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Eero Saarinen, Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid have chosen chairs as their favourite medium of expression. Perhaps it's the scale. It's compact but complete, covering form, function, material and all the values that a maker cares for.

Mumbai-based architect-designer Rooshad Shroff, 35, has taken that route too. He first shot to fame with his *C-Series* chairs; sculptural, cantilevered pieces in perfect wooden joinery. Over the course of five years, he has scaled new artistic heights. At an exhibition opening today in the Capital, Shroff is launching his latest collection, *15,556*, in collaboration with the Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai. The title, *15,556*, is indicative of the man-hours that went into the collection, acknowledgement of the time and skill used to create a hand-crafted object.

Shroff studied at the Cornell and Harvard universities and worked in architectural firms such as REX, New York, and Zaha Hadid Architects, London, before returning to Mumbai in 2011 to set up his own firm. "I worked in offices that were heavily invested in digital fabrication. I was fascinated with it then. But the script-driven aesthetic became so generic that it could not be identified. It had no authorship," he says. That's when Shroff found inspiration in Indian crafts. "Relooking the know-how we have in our coun-

try, I felt it was so untapped. It's reduced to a souvenir," he adds.

*15,556* consists of 26 chairs, tables, benches, screens, a day-bed, and lighting. It explores three distinct techniques. In the first set, holes have been drilled into wood before it's been embroidered with Zardozi and French knots, a technique that Shroff has patented. "Though the idea seems simple, it doesn't come easy. An artisan was drilling holes for the first six months just to get used to it," he explains.

The second is a colour-sanded set where layers of paint are applied on wood and then sanded down to reveal different contours. The third set consists of tables and light pendants created from hollowed-out marble and then carved.

All the woodwork is hand-done in traditional joinery techniques, without any screws, nails or glue. While some of the chairs are older prototypes, the embroidery, colour-sanding and marble work are recent innovations. In one of the pieces, the embroidery is double-sided and things like a change in thread colour and knots are navigated within the thickness of the wood.

The process of design—the conception of an idea, experimenting with a material—is what Shroff finds most challenging and fulfilling. "*15,556* is the culmination of my research so far. The process of making is more important to me than the end result," he says.

And the process is not a painless one. As much as it is about making anew, it is also about letting go of the old. Shroff recalls his early scap-

Rooshad Shroff with pieces from '15,556'.

ticism of embroidery. "A friend who worked with embroidery for fashion brands opened up his factory to me and that was my introduction to the craft. Before that, I considered it ornamentation."

Shroff used to consider embroidery to be limited to fabric. "But the architectural notion of skin and structure emerged, the idea that upholstery isn't something that you add on but something that exists within the structure," he explains. It was embroidery's latent possibilities that attracted Shroff.

In exploring the limits of material and maker, Shroff also presents his view of the blurred borders of art, craft and design. "Someone might criticize my

pieces saying that they are not the most comfortable or they may ask how to clean this embroidery. But I feel I'm pushing other boundaries. At some point, comfort is not the driving force of the piece." Perhaps that's where Shroff crosses over to a space of art. He suggests that embroidery is not just for a sari and a chair is not just for sitting.

Shroff maintains that while his architectural practice goes on, "furniture is the purest form of (his) research. It is not diluted by constraints put up by a client."

*15,556 opens today at Bikar House, New Delhi, and is on till 3 March. It will show at the Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai, in June. The limited-edition pieces will be available for sale, with an option for made-to-order.*

✉ [lounge@livemint.com](mailto:lounge@livemint.com)

