

A trip down memory lane with Elsie Nanji

Animesh Das



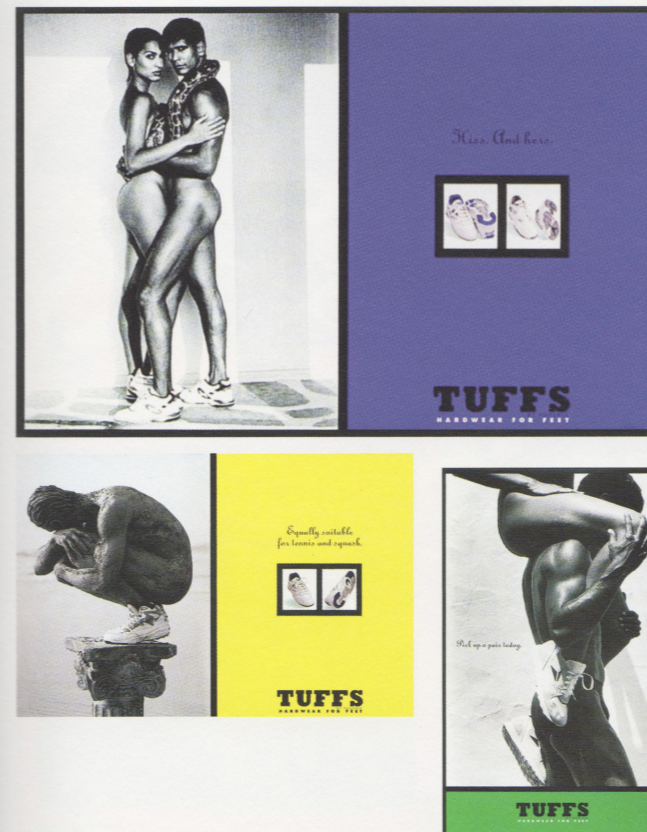
Four decades of exemplary work by one of the country's design and advertising mavericks, Elsie Nanji's just-concluded retrospective gave the audience a crash course in Indian advertising history, and then some.

Tuff Shoes. Garden Vareli. RPG Headquarters. Sanctuary Magazine. Lakme. Theobroma. Sil Jams. Planet M. Kamasutra. BPL Mobile. The Seagull Cafe. Citra. Zee TV. And a few more brands, packaging ideas, spatial design projects and works of art. All present together at the same time. The occasion isn't a marketing conclave, or another creative award. It does, however, celebrate creativity across advertising and design, offer lessons on commercial art and communication, and gives the audience a view of how things were, and how they came to be. The occasion? A retrospective of Elsie Nanji's career, held at the newly opened basement gallery at the Rachna Sansad art school in Mumbai.

The keywords in the last sentence are Elsie Nanji, and retrospective. And none of those keywords really need further description. But let's try anyway, and we'll begin with Elsie Nanji.

A graduate of Sophia Polytechnic in 1979, Elsie joined the world of advertising soon after finishing art school. Starting her career in advertising with Lintas, Elsie then enjoyed a stint at Ogilvy and then moved to Enterprise. At the age of 30, Elsie was offered a partnership at advertising agency Ambience by Ashok Kurien. She stayed with the agency till it was bought by Publicis Worldwide in 2004, and then accepted the network's offer to head Red Lion, a specialist shop. A multiple award winner, Elsie has judged the Cannes Lions, the D&AD, the Clio Awards, AdFest, Spikes Asia, GoaFest and the Kyoorius Awards. Somewhere along the way, advertising gave way to design and over the last decade or so, Elsie has created bespoke spaces, and various design works for corporate and retail applications. And she continues to work as a design consultant to Mahindra, the RPG Group, Marico, and others.

Tuffs Shoes:
"Hardware For Feet",
1995



Garden Vareli:
"Suminara Chiffon", 1990
& "Garden Creates The New Woman", 1988



A retrospective is an exhibition or compilation showing the development of an artist's work over a period of time. In Elsie's case, that period of time lasts over four decades. The idea for the retrospective came to her on the heels of being awarded the Hall Of Fame award by the Communications Art Guild in 2016 for her contribution to advertising and design. "The award led to a small one-panel exhibit at the JJ School Of Arts," explains Elsie. "To my surprise, the students crowded around the work, and the faculty asked if they could keep the work and exhibit it in some other colleges. That's how it really came about, and it led me to exhibit the work at an independent bungalow in Kemps Corner at my own expense for three days. A year and a half later, the Rachna Sansad College opened a new basement gallery, and asked me to start off the first exhibition."

Curating the exhibition was not an easy task. "But it was a lot of fun," says Elsie. "I got to take a trip down memory lane."

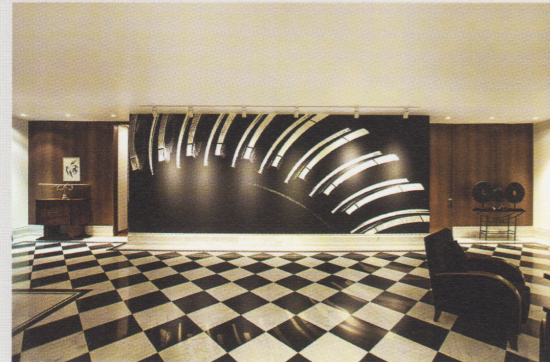
That memory lane leads you through some of her greatest hits, including the famously controversial print ads for Tuff Shoes in 1995. Starring models Milind Soman and Madhu Sapre, photographed bare naked with nothing else on except the shoes and a python. Deemed obscene and indecent, the ads were

mired in legal proceedings and lawsuits, and ended up being withdrawn for 14 years till a High Court ruling in 2009 vindicated them.

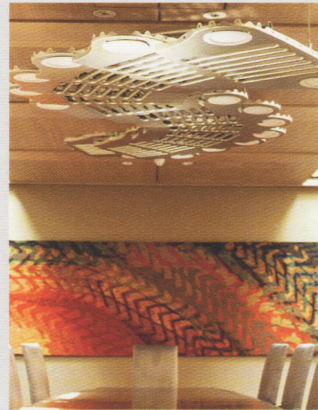
Then there are several artistic print ads for designer saree brand, Garden Vareli, where one can spot a young Aishwarya Rai or Rani Mukherjee. Elsie says the campaigns would be eagerly awaited, much like a fashion forecast for the year ahead. The campaigns also captured Elsie's simple, yet elegant aesthetic. "What do two women get out of a photograph of a saree shot in a beautiful manner? It's nothing great as an idea, but people got a lot out of it because it was so simple. We didn't solely focus on the material, or the texture or the fabric. You have to evoke some feeling in the people that see it. Evoke that feeling, and follow it up with clear communication."

Clear communication is an overarching theme that shines through Elsie's work. Be it the witty headlines married to detailed food photography that made ads for Vadilal ice-creams a success, the tongue-in-cheek visual interpretations for music store Planet M's "Obsessed With Music" campaign, the bold advertising for Kamasutra Condoms, the fashion photography driven work starring a young Arjun Rampal and Malaika Arora, or even the launch campaign for BPL Mobiles, where office setups are relocated to a beach or swimming pool to communicate the ability

Ceat Corporate Office, 2015



Mahindra Corporate Office



My Mykanos

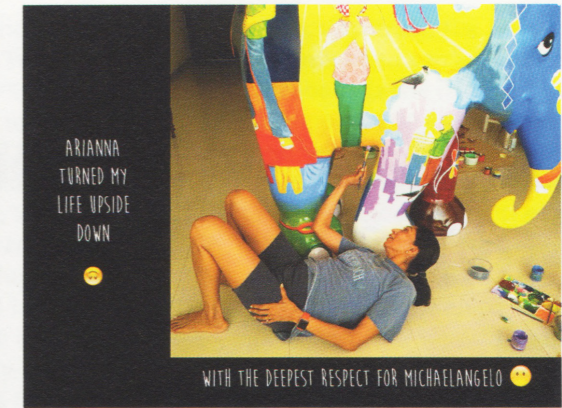
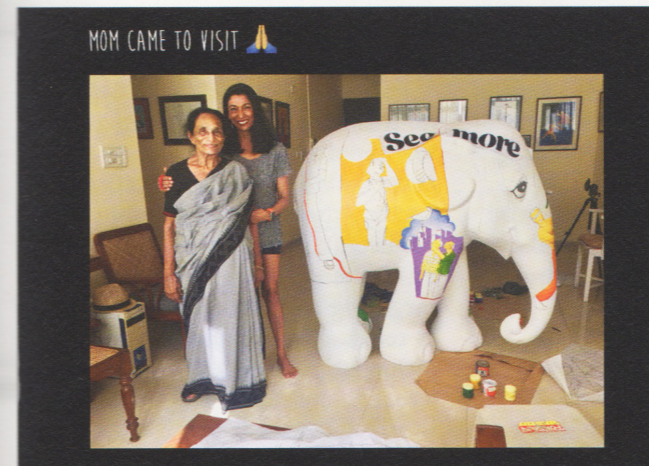
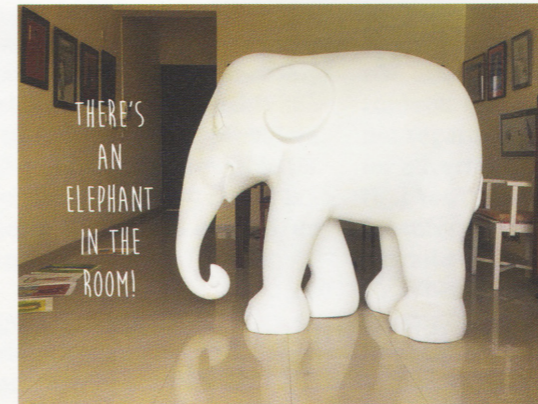


RPG Corporate Office



Theobroma Bakery & Patisserie, 2013

Elephant Parade India: "Arianna", 2017



print campaign were shot on sets since the actual resort wasn't ready. "At that time, all hotels would advertise big, large lobbies or swimming pools. Charles Correa, the architect, didn't have the hotel to shoot a big picture. He said he would make me a set," reminisces Elsie. "Building that set helped me create a story for a little hotel by the seaside where you would have a room service being delivered by waiters on a yellow bicycle. We made a whole story about that thing. I think telling stories has worked for me, and that was my first story, per se. Maybe that had something to do with my getting into spaces."

Talking about spaces, the retrospective also covers Elsie's foray into space design by showcasing a diverse range of projects. There are the home-spaces Elsie's done up, including her own home in Alibaug, "My Mykanos". There are the head-offices for Ceat Tyres, the RPG Group and Mahindra and retail spaces for Melt (a gelato brand from the Vadilal Group), Theobroma (a Bombay based bakery and patisserie) and the Lakme Salon. And then there's 'The Seagull Cafe', located with the Breach Candy Hospital, and the Currae Birthing Centre, a luxury birthing wing for a hospital exclusive to women. "I do a lot of this now," says Elsie.

"I find displacing concepts from one place to the other seems to work for me. In

the sense that if you take something that you usually see, say for in a Starbucks or a McDonalds, and you put it into a very severe corporate environment, then something happens. That mixture or contradiction is very enlightening. I try to create a space that celebrates my client, and can remain unique to them. Architects and interior designers don't really think that way. I view it as bringing a brand-driven thought into environments. I'd love these spaces to speak in a way my ads do."

This trip down memory lane however, does not put a full stop to Elsie's career. "I can't stop. I want to calm down, but somehow, that's difficult for me," exclaims Elsie. "There's just so much going on, such a variety of things to do. I can do a million things — the list is neverending. But I make it a point to wear blinkers of some sort because if I didn't, I wouldn't know where I would end. I don't want to get into too many areas. Where I am is great. And there's so much in where I am, that I don't think it'll

ever end. What I do is not just my work anymore. It's what I love to do."