

THE KATHMANDU POST

Without Fear or Favour



15.12°C Kathmandu
Air Quality in Kathmandu: **166**

ARTS

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Bringing art and science together

Neera Joshi Pradhan is perhaps Nepal's only botanical illustrator capturing the character, details, aesthetics and scientific accuracy of flora. Her journey has been solitary but priceless.



When she was a young school-going girl, one afternoon, when she had returned home after giving her science exam, Neera Joshi Pradhan was asked by her father what questions were there in the exam to check how she did. One of the questions she recalls

was to write the uses of flowers. Her father frowned and asked, “So, what did you write?” To which Joshi remembers naively replying, “I wrote we use it for puja to worship gods.” Joshi now laughs at her innocence at the Siddhartha Art Gallery, against the backdrop of her artwork. Ask her that same question today, Joshi will in turn ask you which flowers and what details do you want to know. Joshi today understands flowers in a much different way than most would, beyond their outward beauty to their intrinsic nature. For years, Joshi has trodden [a road less travelled](#) by artists, and it has made all the difference.

She is probably the only acclaimed botanical illustrator of the country, say the botanists and art critics the Post spoke to. “I have not met people who have an interest in making flowers the way I do. Artists do make flowers but their flowers are emblematic and of their own imagining. But my flora portraits are about capturing the character, detail and scientific nature of the plants—capturing their technicality for the scientific purpose with an artistic flair,” she says.

It’s spring, and flowers are blooming gracefully on paper at the gallery, as Joshi showcases her ninth solo exhibition ‘The Beauty of Nepal’s Flora’, where she brings together some exotic and indigenous flower portraits of Nepal through watercolour with gouache, and graphite, educating people about the flowers with their scientific names.

“My works can also be taken as visual communication and documentation of our flora. And I think they are significant for the conservation of our natural heritage,” she says.



Beeju Maharjan/TKP



Beeju Maharjan/TKP

Joshi is right to think that people have little idea about flora, even those that people come across every day. When flowers like jacaranda, orchids, bird’s foot trefoil, or *loonkali swan*, and pear blossom bloom, it’s their beauty that people notice first than their distinction. According to Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha, a senior botanist, many seasonal flowers have slowly disappeared in the Valley itself. “It could be because of climate change, urbanization or the haphazard flower picking—but many flowers no longer blossom and people are really not concerned about this change. We are still without that kind of awareness,” said Shrestha. “The greenery that we see in the

springtime has shrunk visibly,” he says. And that is one pertinent concern that has been driving Pradhan to make the kind of art she does through the years: The need to educate people about flora. It has been her dream to establish and document visuals that will stay with people and give them information beyond their allure.

“When you don’t know anything about something, how will you protect them? And so my efforts have been about trying to bridge that gap by bringing art and science together to the general people in the way they can understand the nature of flowers,” says Pradhan. Joshi’s journey as a botanical illustrator began in the ’90s, as she pursued her Masters of Science in Botany. As a botany student, Joshi had to make a number of pen and ink drawings of plants to study the nature of plants. It was part of their education programme. But for Joshi, this task was becoming more and more interesting and immersive. By the time she had completed her Master’s degree, Joshi had found her calling in the most unassuming way. Joshi, the daughter of the celebrated artist late Ramananda Joshi, was expected to take art as her subject but Joshi had plans for science. But Joshi perhaps was destined to be an artist all along. Soon after she discovered her aspiration as a botanical illustrator, she was working towards honing her skill. She trained herself in the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Florida, USA, in 2002 and then took Botanical Art Classes at the Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh, in the UK.

Today, there is a vast difference between her work from her initial days as an artist to now. Over the years, she has mastered more finesse and dexterity. Her portraits have more exact details of a plant’s structure and physiology and their aesthetic. And they have more life, as Joshi patiently takes time making the portraits, and oftentimes collects flowers as herbariums to imitate the strokes in its most natural form. She studies the floras through the microscope to inscribe each stroke carefully. That is also why Joshi’s work is invaluable: she doesn’t work on making copies of her work, rather she involves herself in a deep process that she has fallen in love with. Each of Joshi’s flora portraits is an effort to document the life of flowers in their natural environment without any alteration or adulteration. “You have to be disciplined so the strokes are focused and prudent. It’s a process of mindfulness,” says Joshi. “And it’s not easy; there are rules and regulations that you need to follow if the works are to be botanical illustrations.” Joshi today also makes subjective aesthetic and abstract art related to flowers. It was something she gradually opened up to as she pursued botanical illustrations. But the journey of becoming a botanical artist in Nepal has been mostly solitary for Joshi. It’s mostly students of botany who become her apprentice, not students of fine arts. And although she has become a bridge between science and art, the two fields have not converged and hence opportunities and scope for works like hers have not been explored. While in Europe and many other countries, artists and scientists work together in research studies of floras, here in Nepal, such expertise has not been taken into consideration seriously yet, says Joshi. “The collaboration between science and art has not happened and so, the scope of this art is still limited,” says Joshi. And it’s Joshi who has been pushing for this domain with her illustrations and her botanical art classes through her atelier cum school of botanical art, Studio Petals, which she started in 2004. Joshi has contributed to many studies and conservation of Nepali

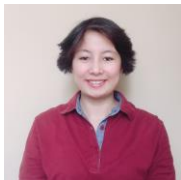
flora and her work is also included in the Flora of Nepal, Volume III, a comprehensive record of plants published by Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh.

In a world where the idea of art has been dominated by traditional and contemporary art, Joshi's work is unusual and offbeat. "It is something that does not necessarily fit into the conventional idea of art, and much of it is because we have not educated people about the diversity that art and history offers in this country," says Mukesh Malla, art critic and writer. "Neera has been making portraits of flowers capturing their characters carefully and exactly of nature. And in her own way, she has also broken the idea of art, the set norm of art and has drawn people's attention to an art form that is still overlooked and undermined," he said. "And the way I see it, she has made history in our Nepali art history already by taking a path so courageously that not many have," said Malla, over a phone conversation with the Post.

Even botanist Shrestha believes Joshi's work is significant to the study of Nepal's flora and in the education of the general people. "Her works are not just about expressing the beauty of the floras but in portraying the scientific identity of plants. And that is what makes her work special," says Shrestha. "Her work is lively and draws people's attention to flowers with a deeper understanding," he said. Joshi's work has both artistic and scientific purpose: to art lovers, her botanical portraits give them artistic pleasure and to scientists and botanists, information on the nature of plants. Her portraits have a clarity that even photographs cannot capture. Her exhibition includes watercolour and graphite works of floras like *Luculia gratissima*, *Rhododendron arboreum*, *Magnolia grandiflora*, Jacaranda and sunflowers. It's a bracing experience where onlookers are bound to think of nature. But it's a known fact to Joshi that her art does not have the kind of reception that artworks of other genres do in Nepal. It's difficult, she knows, but despite it, Joshi pursues it with much fervour. "I hope people will come to see the exhibition and enjoy it," she said. "I have always wanted to bring my collection to people. Piquing their interest in flowers will be everything to me," she said.

Joshi's current exhibition is definitely one to look forward to; it's refreshing and embraces the romantic idea of spring. Her journey in the context of Nepal is definitely one of a kind, hopefully, it will also open new opportunities and widen the scope for new forms of artistic pursuit.

The Beauty of Nepal's Flora will be on display until 26 April at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Babarmahal.



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