

Arpana Rayamajhi

What constitutes “making it” in New York City? Is it effusive magazine coverage, top-shelf clientele, 50,000-plus Instagram followers, or a spot on *The New York Times*’ “30 Under 30” list? For Nepal native Arpana Rayamajhi, accolades from the industry, while certainly welcome, can obscure the difficult realities of being an artist in a city full of artists. After nearly a decade as a New Yorker, however, Arpana has finally hit her stride as a designer and entrepreneur and is ready to admit how much real work she puts into it.

Why did you start making jewelry? When I was in school, shopping in New York was tough. Not only did I have very little money, but everything I could afford—even the most beautiful things—seemed mass-produced and anonymous. Making jewelry came out of my desire to have something unique to wear. My friends, and then their friends, started asking for my jewelry. Eventually, the media picked up on my work and it snowballed from there.

Has living in New York City changed your perspective on Nepal? Coming from a place that has very little and aspiring to live in New York—the capital of materialism and consumerism—I expected to discover something that I had been missing. But no matter where I travel, I find that people are just people—fundamentally the same everywhere. There’s no place on the planet, nor will there ever be, that provides the perfect human experience. That said, New York has been important for me. Living here has allowed me to see Nepal from a perspective that’s no longer

confined to my own experiences and frustrations. Nepal can be a tough place to live, but its beauty, rich history and people are somehow clearer to me at a distance.

And what is it like when you return, as you did recently? I noticed that I wanted to take pictures of things that I would never have before. My friends laughed and accused me of becoming a tourist. People at home in Nepal often believe that life is better abroad. So few of us return talking about the hardships we’ve faced; it’s embarrassing to have moved so far away and then admit that it’s a struggle. But living in the United States has been much more difficult than it might appear from the outside. I might be featured in magazines or have a lot of Instagram followers, but that doesn’t do justice to the tremendous effort that it takes to succeed in New York. I try to share the tougher realities with my friends back in Nepal, because a lot of people aren’t willing to do so.

You’ve traveled extensively. How do different cultures influence your work? What I’m trying to do by seeing different places and ways of living is examine sensibilities around construction and how people create. In Japan, there’s a culture of accepting the strange. Experiencing that part of Japanese culture gave way to more expressions of quirkiness and humor in my work. Mexico gave me an appreciation for color and more specifically, the way that colors can become symbols in themselves. I never appropriate symbols from other cultures but rather try to pick up on different sensibilities and translate them into my work.

Between Nepal and New York: A jewelry designer blends her heritage and home.

Do you have any objects that remind you of Nepal? What little I brought with me from Nepal has no monetary value but a lot of personal worth. I’ve lost both my parents, so I have my mom’s jewelry and my dad’s board games, pens and scissors. They’re things that I would never have imagined would mean so much, but they do. I’ve lived in the same house since moving to New York in 2009. In Nepal, it’s rare to move much unless you’re forced to for financial reasons. In that way, I feel very Nepali. I need a solid base, stability. I don’t like constant changes when it comes to my physical space.

Does New York feel like home? When I was young, I came to New York on holiday and immediately knew that it would eventually be my home city. Nepal wasn’t big enough for me, and a large city was always an environment that I felt I would thrive in. Growing into myself and determining how I wanted to live, who I wanted to be, was linked to living in a world completely foreign to me. In Nepal, I was constantly wanting. Having very little left me wanting for a lot. Weirdly, living in New York has helped me to pull back on my desire for consumption. When I suddenly had access to anything I could think of, material things and desires stopped equating with happiness. The process of elimination is very important for me, and living in these two very different places allowed me to come to terms with what I don’t want in life. Being in New York has been a huge part of my spiritual growth—I really do believe that home is something that you find within yourself.

“Creativity is central to my family,” says Arpana, who was born in Kathmandu, Nepal, to parents who were actors and painters. Though she focuses primarily on jewelry design, Arpana has also studied music, painting and sculpture.



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