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A Life built on courage, vulnerability and creative living.

CREATIVE LIVING

Photo Credit: *Paul Herb*

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Arts & Features

Mesma Belsaré

A Life in Art - Vulnerability. Courage. Creative Living.

*By **Anita Vallabh, Ph.D.***



Photo Credit: Paul Herb.

Dance and painting are like two limbs of the same body. When one gets tired, the other takes over.

There is no mistaking Mesma Belsaré's warmth and intelligence. I first met her in 2023 at the University of Hawai'i,where she was in residence on a Dance/USA Fellowship and I was serving as visiting faculty. Even in that brief encounter, her clarity of purpose and quiet radiance left a lasting impression. When we reconnected in early 2025, she invited me into her home. Stepping inside her home felt like entering a space alive with art — where every wall seemed to breathe color, memory, and meaning.

Belsaré's art, much like her dance, moves between devotion and daring — a dialogue between discipline and the freedom to feel. In this conversation for Global Indian Artist, she reflects on her early years, her dual practice of dance and painting, the transformative arc of her transition, and her groundbreaking museum work that has redefined Indian American representation in the arts.

Tell us about your early years, the moments and influences that first drew you toward dance and painting.

I come from a family of scientists. My parents were supportive, but art was unfamiliar territory for them. My elder sister attended Shri Shankar Hombal's Bharatanatyam classes at Kalapadma Dance Academy in Bhopal, and when I was seven, I insisted on joining her. I used to hide dance clothes in my school bag and make excuses to sneak away to class. Years later, when I left medical school to pursue art, I knew I was choosing a difficult path — one with no clear promise of stability. There was no arangetram, no family legacy, no influence or connections in the art world. But I still wanted to fly.

What kept me going was a mix of stubborn conviction and the generosity of my gurus. Geeta akka (Padmashri Geeta Chandran) never demanded fees when I couldn't pay — and that happened many times.

She gave freely, without in judgment. That kind of grace is rare. I've been lucky to have teachers like her, Shri Shankar Hombal and Dr. Maya Kulkarni, who shared their knowledge with immense generosity, care and faithmy ability to carry it forward.

Painting was a safe solace for a shy child escaping expectations. I painted in solitude during the long summer vacations. My mother, who worked full-time at the university, would leave simple line drawings of flowers to keep me occupied. I was four or five years old. I'd try to copy them, always frustrated that I couldn't capture her fluid, confident lines. Later, my father's travels brought home catalogues of paintings by Rembrandt and Raphael. I didn't know who they were — I just loved looking at them and trying to paint them in my own naïve way. Like many Indian artists, I was deeply influenced by the bhitti-chitra of Ajanta and Thanjavur, and later by modernists like A. Ramachandran, Anjolie Ela Menon, Gogi Saroj Pal and H.S. Raza, who showed me how our visual traditions can flow into the contemporary.



Photo Credit: Prachi Dalal.

I have seen your performance as well as your paintings. They are both intense. How do you sustain two emotionally demanding, visually intense art forms, and how does each one creatively inform or challenge the other?

I am not sure if intensity is something you manage or moderate. It's something you learn to ride, like learning to stay on a horse that's already galloping. Intensity will sustain you. We don't need to sustain it. When you ask how I sustain two emotionally demanding forms, you might be thinking that they're draining me. But they're not. They're drawing me toward each other, creating a circulation system.

Dance and Painting are like two limbs of the same body. When one gets tired, the other takes over. Painting teaches me patience that dance won't tolerate. I follow the old masters' techniques of working through studies, sketches, preparing the ground and the mediums, grinding earth pigments, layering thin, translucent paint. This teaches me to wait, to let time do its mysterious work.

When I'm staring at a canvas that refuses to cooperate, I go to the dance floor. Dance, the art of the instant, masks this waiting stretched over long decades of working. But in that moment of dance, your body either knows the answer or it doesn't. This back-and-forth between waiting and immediacy keeps me from calcifying in either direction.

From the point of view of directive literature/shastra– the Natyashastra, Chitrasutra, Shilpashastra – cross referencing across various artistic disciplines is required, not just recommended. The lesson on kakshā-vibhāg in the Chitrasutra, for instance, teaches how to create variations in spacetime on a flat surface. This is exactly what we do on stage in dance. We have to only look at the stage as a two-dimensional plane from a higher vantage! Varna (color), pramāna (proportion), sthāna (posture/-placement) etc. are interchangeable terms between so-called static and kinetic arts. The dancing and the painted body are both governed by māna (measure) and sthiti (stability). Thus we consider the kinetic (dance) and spatial arts (painting) in an elastic concert with one another. That is what lends each its vitality and the quality of "chaitanya" or "alive-ness".

Dance without painting would become too caught up in the moment's urgency. Painting without dance would become too static, strangled by its own deliberation. Together, they create a continuous flow like breathing—expansion and contraction, the rhythm of being alive.

People assume intensity burns you out. But I've found the opposite is true. Intensity, when it flows between forms, becomes renewable. Moments of despair in one are immediately metabolised by the other. The refusal to keep things neatly in categories is where the interesting discoveries happen.

How did your early experiences in the U.S.—both within the Indian American community and beyond—shape your sense of belonging and creative path as an artist?



Submission, oil on canvas.



Symphony of Dancers, oil on canvas.

Art had taught me that identity was creative work.



Photo Credit: Paul Herb.

When I migrated to the U.S., the Indian American community embraced me with extraordinary warmth. People drove me to grocery stores, opened their hearts and homes, and offered kindness with no expectation of return. These gestures may be commonly experienced by many students and immigrants, but that doesn't diminish their beauty or impact. My first public performance in Boston — at the India Independence Day celebration at the Hatch Shell — came through the invitation of Ranjani Saigal, whose belief in me was both grounding and joyous. Later, the curators of the Indo-American Arts Council's Erasing Borders festival — Prachi Dalal, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Aroon Shivdasani, and Rajika Puri — extended that same spirit of trust and generosity. No artist thrives alone; I am here because a community opened its arms.

And then there is Robert, my partner. We met before my transition, and his steadfastness through that journey has been one of the deepest acts of love I've known. Many lose their companions in such moments; I did not. His compassion and courage carried me through the darkest phases, and his love opened new worlds of music from the opera and European classical traditions–– music of resilience and passion that found echoes in my own art. All these streams–– the community that held me, the mentors who guided me, the love that endured —fused into an alchemy of desire: to create from a place of truth, tenderness, and wonder.

How has your experience of moving from one gender identity to another informed the direction and expression of your art?

I never thought my transition extraordinary, but a necessary alignment between inner truth and outer expression. It was neither political statement nor social assertion, but a quiet rearrangement that allowed me to move through the world with greater harmony.

Yet this apparent simplicity masked enormous complexity. As a dancer in my prime, I had to rebuild my instrument completely. The body I had trained for years changed, requiring me to rediscover how to inhabit and express through this new form. I had to reinvent not only my relationship to my art but my entire professional identity.

On the other side an enormous reward came with my transition: the internal discord resolved, freeing energy that could flow into creative work rather than being consumed by the exhaustion of pretense.

Perhaps more significantly, I learned to extend patience and grace toward others as they adjusted. We often overlook this in contemporary discourse about trans experience. We forget that our changes require emotional adjustment from people who care about us. Their lives, too, are touched by our transformations.

During my student years I worked as a nude model for life drawing classes at Mass College of Art and Design. It was a hard job for little money. But holding poses in the nude for hours taught me that my body could speak even when stripped of clothes. Martha Graham said "movement never lies." I discovered my body couldn't lie either. Then came the nightclub dancing gigs—sequined and feathered clothes, splintered floors, dark hours, trying to make rent. It was risky work. But it also made me fearless.

So transitioning, in fact, aligned with my artistic trajectory. It was perhaps the most complete artistic act I'd undertaken. Like in any creative process, much had to be discarded in the editing act of crafting a new identity—every program brochure, press review, public acknowledgment. Like Sisyphus at the bottom of the hill, I started to roll that rock up again.

Art had shown me that change was possible. Imagination let me envision a version of myself that aligned with my inner truth before the external world could accommodate it. Art had taught me that identity was creative work. Each day, we compose ourselves anew through countless small choices. Understanding this fluidity has deepened both my art and my spiritual practice, revealing the malleable nature of what we assume is fixed.



Shiva's Procession, oil on canvas.

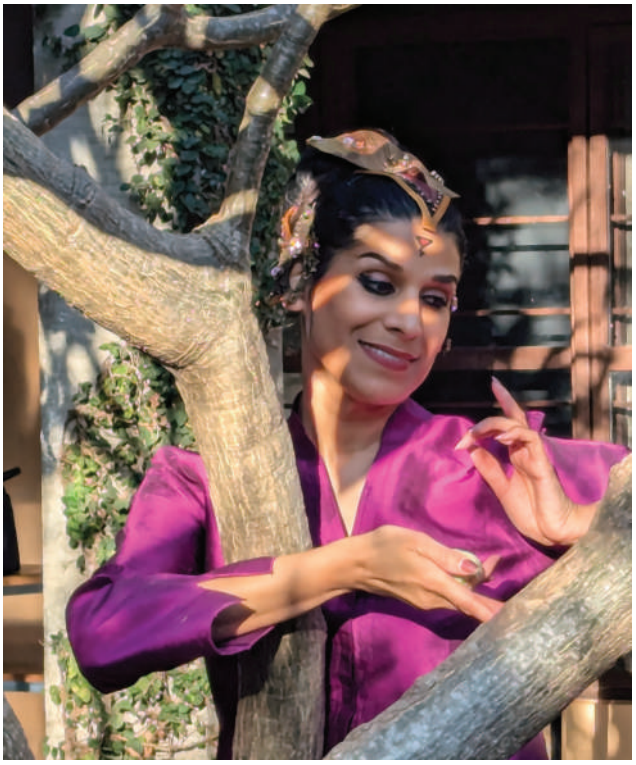

Photo Credit: Prachi Dalal.

The work that emerged afterward—SIREN, Plato, Medea, Carmine Bees, Vermin's Will, Jatayu—wasn't about transition. These pieces emerged from what becomes possible when an artist drops the veil of pretense and becomes truly vulnerable. There is freedom and beauty in that kind of surrender. And once I understood that, I was free to throw caution to the wind and embrace creativity in an authentic way.

You spent a decade at the Peabody Essex Museum before moving to MassArt Art Museum as Curator of Education. Help me understand that arc. What were you building? And what impact did your work have on establishing Indian American cultural presence in museums of national significance?

My museum work emerged from a conviction that art galleries are living, breathing spaces where cultural memory and contemporary imagination meet. After earning my Masters in Art Education from Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2004, I spent a decade at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, later moving to MassArt Art Museum as Curator of Education. I now see them as platforms from which I could amplify voices that were somewhat muted in America's cultural landscape.

At the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM), I encountered the extraordinary Chester and Davida Herwitz Collection—over 1,200 works by 70 of India's leading modern artists, includingM.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, Manjit Bawa, Tyeb Mehta, Ganesh Pyne, Nalini Malani, Bhupen Khakhar, Gieve Patel, and Arpita Singh. The museum had opened the first American gallery devoted to India's modern and contemporary art in

For the first time, the Indian diaspora had agency within a major art museum.



Photo Credit: Gajen Sunthara.

2003; I arrived soon after, working to activate that space and make it pulse with life beyond the gallery walls.

Over the next decade, my focus was on what I call "looking and learning" through objects—creating educational experiences as diverse as the visitors themselves. I developed programs for adults, families, and students; designed guides and interpretation tools; and mentored more than 400 young people through a federal internship initiative.

My most significant contribution came through co-creating Sensational India! with mentors Ray Williams and Vas Prabhu. Launched in 2005, the festival transformed PEM's relationship with the Indian American community and became a national model for presenting contemporary Indian art—drawing thousands each year and earning the full sponsorship of the diaspora itself.

That last point matters deeply. For the first time, the Indian diaspora had agency within a major art museum of historic and national significance. We partnered with MITHAS, Learn Quest Academy, New England Malayalee Association, New England Telugu Association of Greater Boston, universities, and numerous community groups. These were genuine collaborations, and not token gestures, that gave the diaspora

ownership over how their culture was presented and celebrated.

Our programming was intentionally sophisticated and varied, featuring luminaries such as Shashi Tharoor, Madhur Jaffrey, Mira Nair, and authors Bharati Mukherjee and Amitav Ghosh. Dance presentations included Raja and Radha Reddy's Natya Tarangini, Nrityagram, Anita Ratnam's Neo Bharatam, Lakshmi Vishwanathan, Geeta Chandran, Chitresh Das, Rama Vaidyanathan, and a Kudiyattam troupe from Kerala. U.S.-based companies such as Hema Rajagopalan's Natya Dance Theater, Dakshina, Parul Shah Dance Company, Sa Dance Company, and Chitresh Das Dance Company, along with sitar maestro Kartik Seshadri, drew packed audiences.

We screened Merchant Ivory classics (Shakespeare Wallah, Autobiography of a Princess) with Ty Burr in conversation with James Ivory, and premiered Shirish Korde's chamber opera on Phoolan Devi.We offered hands-on workshops: rangoli floor decorations, henna application, Madhubani folk painting workshops, kite-making, and storytelling sessions.

I also designed Art360, a learning series for adults that offered deeper, multi-perspective gallery experiences through three-part classes on photography exhibitions featuring Jerry Uelsmann, Barbara Bosworth, and Ansel Adams, as well as Hudson River School landscape paintings. Each series brought in art professors, artists, photographers, photojournalists—voices that could illuminate the work from unexpected angles. I coordinated PEM/PM: Unconventional Gatherings for Creative Minds, informal evening events featuring contemporary visual and performance artists, speakers, photographers, jugglers, street artists, musicians, chefs, plus art-making activities for adults. We were reaching young professionals, showing them the museum could be their space too.

My work extended beyond PEM's walls. I taught portfolio enrichment at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, symbolism in Indian art and architecture at Tufts University's Experimental College. During this period I was twice nominated for the Boston Foundation's Brother Thomas Fellowship award, and received an Artist Grant from the Cambridge Arts Council.

Throughout, my approach was interdisciplinary, multi-sensory, multidimensional. I worked across departments—curatorial, marketing, public relations, integrated media, creative services, development, membership, collections management. I conducted community outreach to cultural organizations, artists, and traditionally underrepresented communities.

When I moved to the MassArt Art Museum as Curator of Education, I carried forward this philosophy: that contemporary art spaces must be democratic, accessible, and alive. That education and curation are acts of care, of bridge-building, of honoring both the art and the people who encounter it.



Mesma Belsare and Ramya Shankaran.
Photo Credit: Nabil Kapasi.

Mesma Belsaré is a fascinating confluence of intellect and intuition, rigor and grace. Her art—whether danced or painted—reveals how living by what feels right is, in itself, the truest form of creative living.



Split, oil on canvas.