CHAPTER 5

FEMALE FORMS, MODERNITY & CREATIVITY IN HER PAINTINGS

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FEMALE FORMS, MODERNITY AND CREATIVITY IN HER PAINTINGS

The man lived is the Parisian world, but he was detached from it. He invites us with his pictures into his own awareness, his own realm of feeling and inner seeing. As his imagination, or fancy as some world call it, is limited, we can not go very far, very deep. The word modern art comprises a remarkable diversity of styles, movements, and techniques. The wide range of styles encompasses the sharply realistic painting of a Mid western farm couple by Grant Wood.

Arpana Caur is an artist who has tried to bring a feeling of freshness in her paintings and this trait distinguishes her from other artists. Creativity is well evident in her paintings. Since the time she started painting, this freshness became a unique trait of her paintings. Apart from creativity, modernity is also well-represented in her paintings. She has used traffic light in collaborative works and plugs in Buddha paintings. She has used them so beautifully that there gadgets looks a part of her paintings. She started her career in 1975. At that time people were not so enthusiastic about art and it was quite difficult for an artist to make her mark. But she undertook this challenge and proved her worth. She showed that she is
going to be one of the successful artists in future and result are for all to see.

In spite of being modern and creative, her paintings showcase Indian values. She has worked on Gouche, water, oil and collaborative medium. When asked to comment on the lack of understanding about modern art among most people, she elaborates “Contemporary visual art is individualistic, unlike Calender art which has popular images. Further, it uses subtle lay. In its narrative unlike journalism and photography. Art comes closest to poetry. It is the sum total of the artist’s experiences sensibility and thinking. The creative process can not be fully understood even by the artists. He knows the origin. He images in his mind but a part of it remains a mystery. Figurative work is not difficult to understand”.

Use of modern techniques make her paintings fresh and unique. She has used many symbols which have their own meanings. She has used scissors as a metaphor and says “The Greeks believe that scissors have the power to cut Man’s fate that is in a state of perpetual suspension. So I thought let me use the scissors”.

She has many creations to her credit which are never shown in the paintings by other artists like weaving of water and use of plug as a
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connection. Now, at the age of 51, Arpana has become a well known and much celebrated artist around the world. For the last three decades her exhibitions have been shown in Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, London, Cardiff, Amsterdam.

She has painted a series gouche medium in which she has shown the importance of time. She has given a message through this painting that time waits for none. If we don’t understand the importance of time in our life. We are bound to suffer in future.

Every series by Arpana Caur is self-created. She has got a lot of new ideas which she presents through her paintings. According to her "In my paintings my ideas, dreams and fantasies all emerge. I like to paint the dualities of India. A thermal power station with cow-dung cakes drying on its walls-the two sources of energy. We exist in several times, different ages in India take a bullock cart carrying the upper body of a truck".

She is Sikhpoint. Com’s featured Artist for the 2006 Calender. Arpana grew up in an environment that was rich in art and music. Arpana’s mother is an award winning novelist (Sahitya Academy and padashree Winner) whose influence resonates in Arpana’s very essence. Arpana attended Delhi University and graduated in 1961 with M.A. in literature.
As a self taught painter, Arpana’s influence came from her mother’s writings, Punjabi folk literature, and the pahari miniature tradition and Indian folk-art motifs. Her art is a direct reflection of her personal experiences, inspired by local and world events. Over the years, her main focus has centered on Indian women, and capturing the essence of their daily activities inspired by social, cultural and spiritual themes.

B.B.C. and Star T.V. have made documentary films on her in the 1980’s apart from a documentary by Sidharth Tagore.

For the past 5 years, three of her works including ‘Nanak’ and ‘1984’ have been on display at the Sikh Art Gallery in the Smithsonian, Washington D.C. She done murals from 1981 to 2005 in India and one in Hamburg.

Arpana Caur’s work symbolises the emerging trend of a growing consciousness among women-intellectuals and artists not only for the search of selfhood and the need to forge new linkage with society, but also for developing new sensibilities in art that are distinctly felt in the figuration, content and the use of visual symbols.

Arpana’s art deals with our time, our life in which boundaries and contexts are being changed to meet the constantly growing new realities. Nothing, excepts, perhaps, the human being is sacrosanct in art, for, the
whole of art imagery revolves around the crumbling layers of protection we wear around us, according to an eminent critic.

In her various series of painting, Arpana has candidly expressed situations of life, dealing particularly with women’s predicament and the increasing violence in our society, such as in her series of paintings entitled ‘Women’. She has made concerned statements on socio-political events. Since she is passionately aware of man and this predicament, her paintings are images of the pungent truth of life. Her more recent themes like ‘Body is just a Garment’ however, are more philosophical.

She structures her composition using some typical characteristics of Pahari miniatures, the rounded figures, the curved horizon the division of the background into sky, earth and water, and the creation of many centres of activity in the pictorial format for expressing, a multiplicity of ideas. Her works provide a scope for discovering the aesthetic as well as the philosophical the discerning.

Many years later, after migrating to Punjab, she was given another opportunity to broaden her knowledge about the Guru. This time not by her Sikh-in-Laws, but through a children’s book ‘Nanak: The Guru’. Written by Mola Dayal and illustrated by Arpana Caur, the book gives interesting insight into Guru Nanak’s life, from his birth in 1469 to his death in 1539.
through Mala’s simple words and Arpana’s symbolic illustrations, Guru Nanak comes across as a great social reformer and a poet, more than a religious Guru.

Arpana has done a good job portraying him as a common man, a refreshing change from artist Sohba Singh’s protraoyal of the Guru with the halo and titled head-the one representation we are so accustomed to.

For Arpana, "Guru Nanak is a poet who sings and dances and is a common man’s man." She has been painting Guru Nanak for the past two years. It was during one of her exhibitions, she met Mala and the idea for this book, germinated. It was published by Ruba & Co., earlier this year and proved to be one of the most sought after books in the recently held Roopa Book Fair in Chandigarh.

Nanak-the Guru, 48 pages (2005) book for children, the life and teaching of Guru Nanak are related simply and lucidly and accompanied by outstanding illustration. From his early days, Nanak marveled at the beauty of nature and answers to the many questions that trouble him: who made the sun and moon? Who made the earth and all the creatures in it? Where do we go when we die? Why are some considered high-born and others low-born? Why can’t Hindus and Muslim live like brothers.

Nanak’s teaching of love and brotherhood led to the founding of a
new faith where Hindus and Muslims, men and women, the rich and the poor, high-born and low-born are treated as equals.

In the painting ‘The Immersion’ from her series ‘Nanak’ she depicted that the Guru Nanak went under water for contemplation, when he emerged, he was a seer. One of his teachings referred to the equality of all beings. The net symbolises worldly desires, the fishes trapped in it – human beings. The two works are parts of diptych.

It was her grandmother who has initiated her into the teachings of Guru Nanak when she was still a child and lived with her in a small town Dibrugarh in Upper Assam. She often used to recite ‘Guru Nanak Shah Fakir’, Hindu Ka Guru, ‘Musalman ka Pir’ she says “I was too young to understand the significance of these lines”.

Since 1986 Arpana Caur had covered a variety of issues related to gender for nirvana and the predicament of the contemporary woman. Some of her recent work feature political indepicts the Banyan Buddha incident in Afghanistan in 2000. But however deep and philosophical the theme, wit is never ruled out, which makes her so enjoyable, she says, “I seek place in Buddha. It’s everyone’s journey. Moving on looking back, I must confess the going has been tough”.

Her art remarkable in the simplicity with which she present a radical
view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to in a new context. Over recent years her works have become more symbolic and certain symbols keep appearing, colour still dominates her work, but she has started to use more black in her works, which beautifully offsets the blues, browns and gold the links to use.

Caur’s strength is in her ability to deftly juxtapose the modern with the traditional, both in her themes as well as her medium. Duality is seen through all her works, as Caur combines figurative and abstract art, monochromatic and polychromatic, the single image and its multiple reproductions, men and women, day and nights, land and water. She also uses ancient and modern techniques as she has been influenced by a wide range of traditional art forms like for example Godna paintings, Gupta works of arts, Chola bronzes and provincial Mughal styles of the Deccan and the Himalayan foothills. She has collaboratively worked with folk artists, and ended up evolving a visual expression that draws on folk motifs but express concrete present day concerns as a sort of ‘magical reality’ of Folk art is essential, to re-establish contacts with a continuity of culture even colonial times could not suppress, not past-modernism obscure.

Shilja Vohora of India with art, who has organised the show says about Arpana: “She is one of the most important contemporary Indian
artists, what I like about her is that she is an artist with her own agenda. She is neither influenced early nor does she change her expression with what is fashionable on just to please the market forces. The monumentality of her theme and their visual representation, gives her the historicity of classical artist. Caur’s ability to always present as with a powerful humanism makes her an acute explorer of the paradoxes and passions of life. The entire exhibition will make you aware of the strength of her persona and how she sees her world”.

FEMALE FORMS IN HER PAINTINGS

Arpana Caur has employed woman in the category of nayika as classified by Bharata, as well as demonstrating an artistic and literary connections from Indian miniatures. Caur metaphorically releases woman from the clutches of her environs and is set free against a backdrop of congested concrete jungle. Ramananada postulates his Bengali tradition particularly the strength of his lyrical line.

Of the famed love-legends of Punjab, the story of Heer-Ranjha is the most celebrated but perhaps most poignant and picturesque is the Saga of Sohni-Mahiwal. This love legend has the Chenab river as the central motif and the water of the river plays the role of bringing together the lovers and then parting them forever.
Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in his famous ‘qawwali’ sung of Sohni as the one who lost her all for love. As the tale goes, Sohni, a potter’s daughter in Gujarat and an artist in her own right, baked the most beautiful pots ever. Mahiwal, the prince of Bukharo, came to Gujarat and saw the pots made by Sohni and led from the pots to Sohni, he fell in love with her Sohni too gave her heart away to the prince charming. The social order would not accept this love for a man from a far and so to be near her, he became a buffalo herd, thus the name, Mahiwal.

However, Sohni was married off to someone else but the lovers continued to meet. Sohni would swim post midnight with an earthen pitcher for support to meet her Mahiwal on the other side of the Chenab. He would await her arrival with a fire lit out-side his hut. However, her sister-in-law discovered this secret rendezvous and one ill-fated night replaced the earthen pitcher with a half-baked one. Sohni was drowned in the Chenab and her corpse reached her lover.

The saga of Sohni has attracted to painters of Punjab through the centuries. The first known painting on Sohni is that by an with century Pahari painter, Sen Nainsukh. In fifties, the painting of Sohni-Mahiwal was painted by Andretta-based painter Sobha Singh, slowing the two lovers in ecstasy in the waters of the Chenab.
Recently other Punjab painters like Satish Gujaral, Manjit Bawa and now Arpana Caur have re-painted the romance. In the late 19th century we have the painting by Pakistani painter Ustad Allah Bux. This painting shows an aghast Mahiwal receiving the corpse of the drowned Sohni. The painting enjoys a place of pride in the Lahore Museum.

The real blossing of this theme as far as the Indian canvas goes comes in the opening years of the 21 century with a woman artist wielding the brush. Arpana Caur in a series of paintings on the theme has re-painted the love legend as seen through a woman’s eyes.

Her paintings of Sohni are earthy, vigorous and there is an empathy with the subject. Arpana says, “Sohni was a very brave and strong woman and her story indeed inspiring, she defied social norms and swam across the river to be with the one she loved. She swam while others slept”.

Thus the connection between two lovers in her works is seen through a series of pitchers of which one is broken. Her Sohni has the plain looks of the girl next door but her spirit is spectacular as she battles against the waves barebodied. In one painting the image of the traffic lights intervenes and Shoni has no care be the light at red or green, she has to reach her love and then return before the sun series. In another she danced on the waves
and in yet another she sings the song of the water with the fish.

Arpana Caur has presented a creative interpretation of women’s empowerment through her painting “Women Hold up Half the Sky”. This painting formed the theme for the special cultural function held on the UN Lawns in New Delhi on October 23, 2000 to celebrate the UNITED NATIONS DAY. This was an occasion for several UN agencies in India to get together, share and showcase their work and achievements. This cultural programme related to one of the crosscutting theme of the United Nations in India-promoting gender equality. The special performance was conceived as a fusion of three art forms-painting poetry and dance-on the theme ‘Women Hold Up Half The Sky’. Apart from Arpana Caur, Mr. Ashok Vajpeyi, the poet, critic and essayist, and Bharatnatyam dancer, Ms. Geeta Chandran, also participated in it.

Arpana Caur’s painting titled ‘Women Hold Up Half the Sky’ was unveiled by Mrs. Usha Narayanan wife of the then-president Mr. K.R. Narayanan. Mrs. Narayanan and UNDP Distinguished Human Development Ambassador and the then-Chairperson of Inter-Parliamentary.

Council of IPU. Dr. Najma heptullah, also released a poster of the painting on the occasion.
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She is frequently paints in response to events in her life and in the world around her. Caur’s subject of choice is women, whom she depicts engaged in Delhi activities such as day dreaming, typing or sewing.

The artist has said “The women in my paintings are steady, women you see in your homes or your neighbourhood. There is no hint of sexuality. Women and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle. I believe women represent the talent force, which has not been explored property even today. They can counter the challenges of industrialization and extreme urbanization. Inherently, they have a power to renew and regenerate”.

HER CONTEMPORARIES

NILIMA SHEIKH

Nilima Sheikh was born in 1945 in New Delhi. She studied history at the Delhi University (1962-65) and painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda (MA fine, 1971). She has taught painting at the Faculty between 1977 and 1981. Nilima Sheikh held her first solo exhibition in New Delhi in 1983, and has shown her work widely. Since then, her practice has embraced various kinds of painting, from the hand-held miniature to the construct at an architectural scale, and from conventionally hung paintings to scrolls and screens for the theatre stage. Prominent exhibitions include

The work of Nilima Sheikh stands before us at a time when varying theories relating to modernism in Indian art being closely argued. Her working of an aesthetic that relates art to the artisanal has enriched our reading of the modern, and owes as much to her teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, Professor K.G. Subramanyan, as to the artists of the Bengal School. Subramanyan, himself tutored by the master Binode Behari Mukherjee in Shantiniketan, has encouraged the alignment of art and craft with great conviction, just as he has the study of western and Eastern art without prejudice or condescension, while expecting to see the imprint of personal comprehension and style in the final result.

It was the first modern miniaturists, therefore, who dealt with the problem of new form frontally, in the face of a threat to their very livelihoods, and without any intellectual or material defences, in contrast to
the ideology-based nationalism of the Bengal school. In effect, the modern experience in Indian art so closely connected with changing identity in changed circumstances that individuation became its most important factor, in direct contrast to the internationalism of European modernism. It is the work of the eighteenth-century artist that must form the groundwork of any appraisal of Indian modernism, most certainly its mutations in contemporary Indian art. We may therefore, with profit put aside the methodological red herrings of European modernism and post-modernism offered as having direct parallels in the Indian experience in the fine arts.

Nilima has contributed to the healing with assured ease. There is a coordinative sympathy between her style and her subjects, which refer to nature and incidents from everyday life, the drama of the home, the ambiguities of human relationships, animals, and children at play; Indian painting offers a rich bank of similar experiences contemporary to their own time, as popular legends and ballads, which have currency till today. Nilima refers, among other subjects, so this vital source, locating a timeless human theatre in the present and basing her creativity on experience.

Her special love for Far Eastern painting includes the Ukio-ye, or Pictures of the Floating World, Showing people in commonplace activities and locations with warmth and contour. One of the figures often repeated
in her work is that of a woman crouching, washing clothes, or scrubbing a metal dish, and other subjects include a child at a sweet shop, an old fashioned pharmacy, a courtyard where a small theatre of domestic human activity unfolds. Some of the quality of Japanese drawing is also seen in her rendering of figures as in the illustration showing the two women from the 1984 series, *When Champa Grew up*.

Nilima also uses the multi-planal perspective of the Indian painter as in *Wakeful Night*, where views of several rooftops alternate with a deep into a neat softly lit kitchen, the mother feeding her infant before two sleeping figures in the centre, the night with its prowler and tree brushing against the doorway. She has also fairly controlled the practice of dividing a single frame into panels which allow simultaneity in the description of events, transgressing singular space and scale relations.

Other stylistic features recognizable as her own are her treatment of foliage and fauna which she sources from Indian and Persian painting, but transforms compositionally as in *Samira in Dalhousie* where the landscape, treated like a painted textile, forms a lush background to the vulnerable face of the child before. Abstract notations such as dotted areas, or cues such as dash of colour, or an ambiguously conceptualized form which could be read as wings, a leaf, or a piece of paper are judiciously
placed in quite the same way as a word in a poem, which may often have more than one meaning and is necessary to the pattern of the verse. *About Seasons*, a work that stands midway between a painting and a drawing, shows there small aerial shapes between the open window and the chair before the table; the effect is one of a poem.

This style speaks effectively across the technical devices of the various media Nilima has chosen to work in, as oil on canvas, tempera both on paper and cloth, as well as drawings for a children's book, theatre design for proscenium and the outdoors including painting on banners and screens. This same style has come to be specially identified, however, with the tempera she has chosen to work with for more than a decade now, specially as certain compositional and textural effects in particular are possible only on the medieval Indian miniaturist's traditional 'wasli' or hand prepared paste-board she has perfected the use of. The method is laborious and involves careful laminating of several sheets of handmade paper which are coated and covered with whiting in several layers before being painted on with soft and brilliant cake colour with the use of a fixer; Nilima is particular to paint out such craftsmanly details as the use of white as an integral part of the composition. Colours are rendered opaque with the use of whiting or marked lightly across a coloured area to suggest
partial visibility, as skin under fine fabric, or the detail of distant mountain as in *Hillside Flock*. As the Indian white (Khari) takes time to dry to its correct dense value, its use requires special control and keen foresight.

It is interesting to remember that the Progressive Artists’ Group (Bombay, 1984) which allotted exclusive credit to itself as the champion of international modernism, haughtily dismissed in the process the Bengal school and, later, several Baroda artists as “illustrators” who did not know how “to paint”. Amrita Sher-Gil had used exactly the same terminology for the Bengal school Nilima’s response to Sher-Gil’s historicist reading of the modern has been to include Sher-Gil’s work along with. Abanindranath’s as per of her legacy, and this is done in a spirit of detached admiration without the political albatross of the progressive as a virtue. Sher-Gil did not extend the status of legacy to the Bengal artist. For her it was combat; for Nilima it is an aesthetic cornucopia.

Again, Nilima use of the tempura—usually associated with the jewel-like finish of the miniature, to speak both on social issues and poetic/personal subjects, is an audacious achievement which—certainly in the visual arts—proves the fallibility of conventional coordinations of “form” and “content”. Of this attitude the dramatic series when Champa Grew Up is a most unforgettable example, with its subject of the death of a
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young girl for dowry (or groom price) and the range of emotions shown in expressions ranging from innocence to evil. The artist uses restraint in the telling. In one of the paintings illustrated, the graceful figure of the bride seated in her meticulous kitchen is shown lit up gently, the outlines of her figure and dishes in a light ochre, while on both sides the darkened panels reveal the ghoulish figures that are her death.

The same vulnerability of human experience is seen in the series of large panels, ‘Song, Water, Air’. The series depicts combinations on several levels, as in the references in certain sections to the reasons, along with history, anecdote, and experience. All the panels together exemplify this range, from references to the legend of Sohni-Mahiwa and the story of the Ramayana to historical figures and to the non-heroic and anonymous human factor, whose voices rise and subside in song. Both the loveliness and terror of nature are seen as transient as the relationship of the human factor to this overwhelming landscape. In Edge of Wind, land and water collide in a series of Jagged chunks of colour wherein patches of fields, trees and house tops are seen in the haze. This painting is treated more conceptually than all others in the series and provokes a participant feeling of world breaking up, receiving the edge of the wind. In the lower right corner a small swept female figure raises her hands to her head, facing a
world dissembling.

The view that equates art and craft is neither recent nor fashionable, as proved by Nilima’s artistic antecedents. However, it is substantial enough to question the same internationalism that on the one hand espouses the causes of freedom of expression and on the other turns form into a fetish that is the ideological opposite of aberration. This fetishism can not logically exceed even the farthest limits of aesthetic hedonism and is as close to artistic annihilation as perfection can make it possible to be. In this context the rejuvenation of the human principle must remain paramount despite the most cynical readings of progress. If, therefore, ritualistic happenings and constructs address and display the symbols of ethnicity, radical power, and the purest formal excess that symbolize this progress, Nilima’s attitude to her work, by no means an isolated experience is India, may well answer many questions raised by these excesses.

GOGI SAROJ PAL

Born in 1945, much of her childhood was spent gaining impression that were to become the mainstay of her artistic vocabulary. In 1961, she graduated form the college of art in Vanasthali, Rahasthan, after which she went on to a diploma in painting at the College of Art, Lucknow (1962-67). Her first foray into the art world was as a graphic artist in 1955, when she
exhibited thirty odd works at the Lucknow Information Centre. During this period Gogi worked on woodcuts, linos, lithographs, and monoprints. Due to the scarcity of zinc after the Chinese war and the unavailability of zinc plate she concentrated on woodcut intaglio printing. The process of the deep embossed impressions fascinated her, for the intense effect that was produced. Along with its three-dimensional effect Gogi instroduced colour on to the wooden plates-the engraving was almost relief-like and it was here that engraving was almost relief-like and it was here that she learnt the nuances of colour pigment.

At this point of time Gogi was greatly influenced by the muralist Giotto’s work *St. Francies of Assisi*. The simplicity of form, concept of nature, and panoramic view of an almost Indian pastoral scene was what she related to. Other than that, Ben Shahn’s series of five lectures to students at Brooklyn University from the book *The Shape of the Content* went a long way in shaping the artist’s methodology. She did, however, go back in time to her own home and library where she would read the works of Tolstoy, Tagore, Steinbeck, and Hemingway, which fuelled her search for a personal philosophical purpose.

The years from 1965 to 1968 saw a series of exhibition at the Lalit Kala Academy in which Gogi made her debut with oil paints. As she
worked on figurative forms on canvas the composition value of the figures became more important. It was in 1988 at the Delhi Shilpi Chakra exhibition that her figuration verged on a more solid and lucid frame work. but she was still undecided: “I was closer to Dadaism”, say she, “I filled my senses with Camus, Sarte, and Dante but realized that in that mode I was unable to find a form that could justice to my vision of India. Here too I could see in the post independence era a very different India from the India I had known in my childhood”.

Of her own evolution in terms of images and colours some can be marked as major milestones. In 1970 she did a series called Reminiscents based on a set of experiences she had gathered in a slum in old Delhi. Living among the wretched and the needy, she developed her own sensibilities; understanding the need for independence and its value in a patriarchal society.

Within the somber shelter of her room in the Jama Masjid area she would paint into the small hours of the morning. Her immense patience to sit for hours on end in the ibaadat or praying posture, working vertically over her paintings, prepared Gogi for a novel kind of approach. Her perception too seemed to vary and unify within the images of recognition. Two memorable sojourns at this stage were her representations at the third
World Print Biennale in London and Baghdad in 1980 and fourteenth and Fifteenth Print Biennale in Lubjiyana and Yugoslavia in 1981-83. having attended there, it was in 1983 that she went back to her concern for the woman and began making a distinctive statement in her creative oeuvre.

A strong contender against history, Gogi recognized that it lacks the vitality of memory. It is from this focus that she picked up a metaphoric language that wiped away the burdens of the past and invented images-her works were crowned with wistful female faces which were quintessential portraits of sensitive people seen in introspective moments. The artist reconciled two ways of looking at women. A woman was both the subject and object of introspection and absorption, painted with an engaging directness.

In 1983, she painted a series entitled Being a Woman. There were dramatic social changes compelling her to look at the anonymous widows of Benares, the insecurity of women who face the responsibility or the denial of motherhood, and the lie of choice and self determination. The woman sometimes became Kunti (1966), at other times she was the caring, ennobling Mother earth, and in 1986 woman assumed another aspect as Hailay’s Comet. Gogi relentlessly explored and reviewed the
samskara (Hindu rites) of being a woman and in doing so was observer to the many paradoxes that exist in the social milieu.

**Once on a visit to Vishnupur, I came upon a medieval terracotta; it was the figure of Menka being steered by kartikya.** The image of the half horse half-woman with all its visual and sexual implications remained with me”, Gogi says, “Instead of portraying it as it was I decided to represent it is an image that spoke-so the eyes became suggestive, the mouth sensuous and expressive but the sum total revealed a half-conscious attitude.” From this born her Naika series—it was 1989 and she decided to question the ethos of tradition and mythology. The Naika (heroine) has been an intrinsic part of drama, dance, and any storyline in classical Indian art. She was at most times submissive, diminutive, and servile to the male presence which dominated and controlled aspects of her existence. The nayika was the obvious emblem of Indian womanhood, her moods always matching her lover’s advances and retreats. From her study of the Vedas, the Puranas, and other ancient texts. Gogi picked up the image and stood it on its head, working at a contemporary synthesis of both history and reality as it exist today. The maidens were women who were symbols of their own situation but they were no more closed to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, no
more unconscious of the defined calibrations in society, no more suscepti-ble to being dormant, but observers who were aware and responsive, Home Coming was what she called her series of hybrid mythic images. She worked on large canvases, a riot of luch green Tropicana gave sanctuary to her Eternal Bird figures. Small and petite, these bird-women looked diminutive and forlorn as they hovered suspended in a darkening sky or alighted tentatively on the periphery of a verdant forget. The forest recalled the painter’s home in the hills of Himachal Pradesh.

Another bird-woman figure that she called kinnari personified womanhood’s expansion in terms of vision and experience. She recalls her days at Shantiniketan in the year 1989. “I spent hours awaiting the migratory birds, hoping they would fly in soon, and when they did they would enjoy themselves on the surface of water, skinning its breath and sometimes dipping into feel its depth-to finally bring out a tiny fish. I felt they were the only creatures who were really free. Though they were light and delicate to the point of fragility their wings became a symbol of freedom-the forests were their philosophy”.

The proportions of her works too verged on the smaller format. No matter what the symbol, the women depicted in their moods and functions could be from any walk of life. What emerged was an attempt to transform
personal and universal experience into allegorical visual statements. Kamdhenu (1989), the mythic wish-fulfilling Cow, became a passive emblem of Indian womanhood who performed an internally supportive function. Gogi gave Kamdhenu a modernity grounded in the conservatism of her time. “I was overwhelmed when I thought of the service the cow renders to society - it’s amazing how after it all, she is degraded and ill treated”. The voice of dissent and dissatisfaction was apparent with the attendant strain of rebellion. To Kamdhenu, she added the burraq or dancing hourse as an equally obvious symbol of exploitation. Sometimes she would place on top of the horse-woman a

The artist also does away with ambiguity and complexity. She concentrates on lucidity and luciousness swathed in a sea-bed of colour. In her presentation of mythic women as nudes, she sometimes drapes them in transparent saris. The images become not merely fascinating, but on account of their structural complexity reveal a sculptural sensuality. Gogi treats curvatures too in a complex organic manner, owing to the progressive decrease in weight as the curves descend the degree of curvature increases constantly towards the lower part of the bodies. Thus the breasts and the rump often have a simplified roundness that has been accentuated to give a tactile feel of density.
Gigi’s forte lies in devising art forms and expression. In painting the Ayodhya incident in 1993 on the banks of the Saryu river, she played here with a philosophy of physical displacement, rendering her landscapes in bright blues, greens and a flaming the single eye at eye level. This eye was Sihanvlokan, the all-seeing eye (literary, the lion’s retrospective look). She then moved from landscapes to tapertry; wove into the glorious red and gold threads, tassels and long hair as embellishments. The motif of the all seeing eye recurred in her installation Red Saryu has eyes for the Indian Triennale in 1994 red saryu has eyes was a strong statement about the social milieu of contemporary India. This is why even in her mythic images the viewer was always drawn to the eyes of her figures. Arresting and attractive enough to hold your glance, Gogi’s eyes would look back endearingly, inquisitively, and sometimes with a desolate look of dejection.

In the midst of this phase, Gogi had to face the death of her only son, a promising young man on the threshold of his won debut into the art, world. The little bird woman came to a tumultuous that-the wings ceased to open up for flight, the eyes sank to the depths of darkness, Amidst her grief she worked to complete Red Saryu has Eyes-“The concept of the installation has grown from my conventional format paintings and sculptures".
"The installation is not a one-time experiment and is not outside the parameters of my visual imagery or my creative concerns. The imagery for this installation started taking shape after the fulfillment of my installation project “Swayambram” in 1992 and a recent painting “Red Saryu has eyes”.

Gogi’s recent work marks some noticeable changes. Gone are the rough, rustic textures and simplistic images that confronted the viewer. The impressionistic streak of imagery has been replaced by a polished, greatly smoothened textures that survives on appeal and beauty.

Gogi’s works do, after a point of time, become a notably militant statement against subtle forms of authority. As she exalts the abstract of her work with her colours, one realizes her pursuit of a creative life on her own terms has made her a feminist exemplar. Yet, she distances herself both from feminism and from politics.

NALLINI MALANI

Malani is an artist of deep convictions. Hers has been a some what radical left-learning political view ever since her student years in Paris, where in the early 1970s she rubbed shoulders and ideas with a stimulating cross-section of thinkers, writers and artists.
Born around the time of Indian’s independence to parents who had to flee Karachi and their considerable assets during Partition, and who settled in Calcutta to carve out a new life from scratch, Malini studied at Loreto Convent and later at the Sir. J.J School of Art, Bombay. While still a student at J.J. she was given a studio at the Bhulabhai Desai Institute, a unique cultural institution that hummed with vibrant creative interaction—music, dance, theatre, and art—where, among others, established painters like V.S. Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta, and M.F. Hussain also had studios.

Malani, who is married to psycho analyst Shailesh Kopadia, and has two school going daughters, seems to straddle the two very separate and presumably hermetic worlds of home and studio with apparent ease. One would like to think she also enjoys living in the gap between—a reflective space, a place for reverie, where life works its own ways—even as the simultaneous dichotomies between her two worlds hold each other in perpetual balance.

More and more, her works typify references that come from every type of urban reality—sociopolitical, psychological, and autobiographical, where the other or the self becomes the subject. The former explores relationships and situations such as those of dependence and exploitation, the victims and the aggressor, or the colonized and the colonizer; the latter,
layered from direct experience as well as from dream and memory, are Journeys towards self discovery.

In all these works by Malani, the human figure continues as always to assert its claims. Her probing analysis of the human body in movement and response has however never been mimetic or merely to pictorial needs. As such she often breaks with realistic figuration in order to break with the limitations of representation. And whenever she resorts to the representational syntax, it brims over with semantic ambiguities.

Malani’s understanding of bodily rhythms and tension which has resulted in a recodified vocabulary of forms over the years, has been served by a visual memory (she never draws from life) that stores both the image and its effects. Likewise, the context in which she situates the figure is frequently abstracted. These staged settings, which also owe their origin to recall, are often shuffled to suit the ever-changing circumstances of whichever aspect of the specious present needs to be painted. As she enlarges her cast of characters, distributing the action all over, the effect is sometimes like unrelated frames from films that intercut each other, allowing the boundaries to blur so that the montage resembles large Renaissance paintings with their tumult of activities.
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These works, often oil paints, may extend into space within which an overlay of forms, structures, and time are perceived, and where images appear and disappear like pale ghosts through luminous colour washes. Seldom a means of self-indulgence or more painterly gratification the fluctuations of sensuous colour and light in her work, and their confrontations with shadow and darkness, become a metaphor, as of some obsessive inner vision.

Often, cross-currents between mediums and techniques eddy to and fro as oil paint effects become indistinguishable from those of water colour, or when monoprint, xerox replication, and water colour overlap in shared picture space. Much the same happens with imagery and style, where she has quoted and cross-matched shades of Goya, Delacroix, Ravi Varma Degas, Binode Behari Mukherjee, Amrita Sher-Gil, Farida Kahlo, Sia kalam paintings, and persian miniatures.

Malani’s early works in the 1970s, executed in a realistic manner, and depicting family situations and feminist issues, gave way to make room for a more urgent questioning in the 1980s. Here, problems of globalization, were examined in works like old Arguments about Indigenism, of Msters and Angels, and Flux of Experience. In these, hunger, and homelessness became obsessive, much like in the crowded

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Hieroglyph water colour series dominated by monochrome repelition and juxtaposition. Essentially, variations of the anguished human motif studded these latter composition like push pins of ricocheting pattern, a pulse that irrevocably punctuated both the paper and one’s conscience.

With Malani, the pendulum of possibilities swings free of predictability. She could be described, perhaps, as a balanced post-modern artist who smudges the boundaries between past and present and between traditional art practice and the avant-garde.

An interesting case in point was the City of Desires project in 1992. Here she painted ceiling-high pictures of the walls of Gallery Chemould in Bombay, in protest against the neglect of the rapidly disintegrating nineteenth century frescos of Nathdvara in Rajasthan. A “sharing in the collective unconscious of the artists of the temples, palaces, and homes as in Bengal pat painting and the Jaipur frescos, encapsulated the viewer in a “wrap-around experience”. Malani’s site-specific paintings on the gallery walls were whitewashed two weeks later in an erasure that became a symbolic act of solidarity with the plight of the Nathdvara frescos.

Malani admits that her earlier attempts at installation, among them a transparent walk through reconstruction in Mylar embodying the experience of Lohar Chawl, did not work too well. She has since begun to
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seriously transform space. Objects are not simply hung or placed. They play off one another in terms of form, construction, and matter, as well as perception and imagination.

Just as in her paintings, the web of allusions in her installations are embedded in their time and cognizant of it. Sometimes the artist relates them to other times as well, as in her Medeamaterial project at the Max Muller Bhavan, Bombay, in 1993 which was based on Heiner Mueller’s version of the ancient Greek myth where sexual jealousy, domination, subservience, political power, gender issues, and environmental degradation cut across centuries. Consisting of an 11.4 x 2.4 metre composite of paintings, a theatrical performance (a collaboration by actress and director Alaknanda Samarth), installation, video projections and sculptures, Mediamaterial’s multiple references established a realism where shifting focuses abet the freedom of disparate connections even as they underscore the terrible tragedy of the myth.

In her most recent installation, the painted mylar robes of Medea-a late addition to Medeamaterial, which in 1995 was shown at the South African Biennale along with other Indian contributions under the collective title Dispossessed-three-metre-high robes hang ceremoniously from ceiling hooks roughly in the shape of a cross. Shored up by rocks clustered on the
floor which bear Mueller’s haunting quote from the play. “I, no man or 
woman, live in the empty middle” in the scattered letters, the robes seem 
suspended in memory and time.

Throughout, her sensuous chromatic insurgencies, fluency of paint 
handling and fascination. with visual staging and ordering, extended her 
enquiry to works which continued to hover between deeply felt emotional 
responses, ideological positions, and visual strategies. The blurred 
infusions allowed for interesting slippages between all three, the balance 
tipping some times in favour of one or another.

With these, her most recent works, Malani combines some of the 
classical painterly sensibilities of, say, a Tiepolo or a Titian with 
modernism’s insistence on the importance of material and idea. The images 
and their implications seem to dwell between dissolution and integration-
their resolution, it is implicit, can only be apprehended in the contradictions 
of fragmented form. At the same time, the setting becomes a map of the 
world or a stage-set of the mind as deliquescence solidifies into object and 
light glows from beneath layers of transparent washes. It is a world that has 
few resting, points and often no gravity as the artist mediates between a 
free landscape and an impulse for order.
Increasingly, she also mediates between an expanding range of mediums and artistic practices, a metaphoric current connects them all. What came next—a complex dance/theatre/installation/video film project in collaboration with the actress and kathakali dance Maya Rao staged at the National centre for the Reforming Arts in Mumbai at the end of 1995—has proved that Malani is moving on, trying to extend her horizons. Meanwhile, she is once again back to making accordion books, a welcome reversal in times when the accessible and pleasurable threaten to become an archaism.

MADHVI PAREKH

In an autobiographical piece entitled "How Green was My Valley", Madhavi has narrated the story of her birth (in 1942) in the village of San Jaya near Ahmedabad and her growing up as one of six brothers and sister & all children of a staunch Gandhian father who was a primary school teacher and a mother with no formal education who would not treat her male and female offspring differently. She remembered how as a quiet child she would give her boisterous playmates the slip and sit quietly in a field watching the cattle graze or stand by the village well, unobtrusively, gazing at the slow procession of village life. She has spoken of how fond she was of the spectacle of village festivities. A wedding or Holi or Diwali
celebration would make her joys.

All these facts are undoubtedly important, for they have entered Madhvi’s work as vital inputs. One is apt to find reverberations of the child’s wide-eyed visual recordings surfacing in the mature painter’s work. Parallels between the observed events and memory-images can be discovered. But as critic Mala Marwah, in her introduction to the catalogue of Madhvi’s exhibition in 1978. In New Delhi perceptively observed, “the strength of artistic memory lies in its power to transform the subject of inspiration….with fresh significance.” It is the manner in which she transforms her childhood memories, endowing significance to them in visual terms, that is of greater importance towards a general appreciation of her work as a painter. After all, the peaceful coexistence of diverse species of identifiable animals, birds, aquatic life, plants, and people of various ages, gender, and ethnic beliefs, so evident in Madhvi’s paintings, can not be taken as observed facts. Wishfulfilling imagination must have played its part in such depictions. More than that, an exclusive emphasis on the memory factor as causative of the imagery of her paintings is likely to desubstantiate the symbolic significance of the motifs, like small figures within larger enveloping figures, birds carrying the embryo of fish within their wombs, animals pregnant with birds and, of course, the
In continuation of the preceding discussion, a preliminary review of the notion that Parekh’s paintings are like children’s art should be made. Her lack of formal education at a modern urban institution for art education is cited as a reason for the resemblance of her paintings with those done by children; advocates of the unilinear development of art do find a parallel between the art of non-professional rural folk and children, whenever they are, albeit without much justification. No wonder, then, that some of them would find a concurrence of the falkish and “child art” elements in Madhvi’s work. A preponderance of imaginary creatures, conglomeration of multiple points viewing a single event in a composition, resulting in a multiplicity of representation of the three dimensional worldly space on the two-dimensional picture surface, rendering of motifs as compounds of simple geometric shapes and elements, and an inclination towards assembling of primary and secondary colours in colour complementaries, are pointed out as elements of child art in her work. What, however, the critics overlook is the fact that she employs elements of this kind of art internationally. Her creative goal is construction of an adult surrogate of the child’s world. The remembrance of things past—of her own childhood—in her painting can, therefore, be seen as strategy she actually adopts.
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Madhvi herself has contributed to the notion that her entry into the field of art has been without a passport of formal education from an art institution. When as the secondary school educated bride of child marriage (she was married when she was fifteen and her husband Manu was eighteen) she came of age and started living with her struggling artist husband in Bombay, the only pastime the cash-short couple developed was visiting museums, galleries, and exhibitions. During these visits, Manu would make every efforts to interest his wife in the world of painting and sculpture. The interest that he kindled led to her desire to learn to draw and paint during her pregnancy related confinement in 1963. It should be noted that her preference at the point included none of the useful traditional crafts which pregnant women take up in preparing themselves for maternity and childcare. Instead, she decided to learn to draw and paint.

Manu, then a down-and-out young painter and textile designer, enthusiastically started initiating his young wife into the intricacies of drawing and painting, following meticulously the programme of training drawn by Paul Klee\textsuperscript{101}, in his Pedagogical Notebooks. Manu would teach Madhvi the mode of composing pictures on a two-dimensional surface by conceiving motifs and images as compounds of simple geometric entities and shapes like lines, dots, dashes, crosses, circles, semi-circles, triangles,
squares and rectangles and realizing them in black and white or in primary colours. On each day of her confinement, Manu would provide her with a supply of paper and the wherewithal to do exercises along the lines chalked out by Klee. He would patiently explain things very simply and lucidly. A number of these exercises and drawings were exhibited by Navin Kishore in the retrospective exhibition of Madhvi’s work held by the Seagull Foundation in Calcutta, New Delhi, and in Mumbai in 1992.

What is noteworthy here is the fact that the art education Madhvi received from her painter husband was non-traditional and of a most advanced kind, being the one developed at the Bauhaus school. Her interest in the non-performing visual arts grew while in Mumbai and later through her association with a set of artist during the couple’s stay in Calcutta from 1965 to 1974. Thus, the myth of Madhvi’s being an untrained amateur can not be cited as reason for the childlike look of her paintings. In fact, the technical mastery with which she has been handling various media for well over two decades and the manner in which she has been constructing earth, sky, and water imagery through rich textural weaves are enough to demolish that belief. Madhvi learnt whatever she wanted to from the direct informal education she had and then steered clear of influence for the sake of self-objectification. In a similar way she has been seeing and learning
indirectly from the work of her contemporaries, including her husband, without getting influenced. The painter is untrained only in the sense of remaining unspoilt by training. Her strength to remain an individual, transcending training and influence, comes from her wish to objectify her vision. And it is in her vision that we have to look for the apparent childlike appearance and ambience of the visual folklore of Gujarat.

Madhvi’s invocation of affinity to folk art and her refusal to carry the mantle of any particular tradition of folk art and craft, like her invocation of the logic of child art, seems to have been a creative strategy. To create the aura of recollection of a childhood happily spent in rural areas, she possibly conceives of some kind of convergence of the child’s logic of visualization, the ambience of folk art, and the teachings of Paul Klee. However, an alchemy of this kind does not sufficiently account for the significance of her paintings.

The manner in which Madhvi deals with the mythic and the iconic in her work clearly underscores the stand she takes against the conservative nation of tradition as something sacrosanct. A myth, like a fable, is a constructed narration with phenomenally disparate elements and make believe events, to posit certain values and norms. But the myth, unlike the fable, makes the values and norms sacred. In her painting Madhvi not only
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depicts children, birds, reptiles, and animals at play, but creates an over all ambience of playfulness and adopts a playful mode of working out her visual fables. Even in those paintings where she has introduced Puranic and brahmanical divinities like Kali and Durga, she brings them down from their iconic pedestals and engages them in worldly play. It must, however, be added that she has never critiqued the divinities the way an iconoclast does, she has, however, refused to be subjected to the authority of the sacred. The fables the painter constructs with characters in absurd juxtapositions often tend towards fantasy. Happily, her fantasies are not of a macabre kind.

Madhvi Parekh’s refusal to let her conception and skill be subjected to the authority of particular techniques, forms, notions and ideas, irrespective of the stamp of tradition, modernity, and contemporary, and a supreme confidence in her own ability to perceive, conceptualize, and objectivity these even as she uses her own acquired skill, makes her an individualistic artist. Yet, she does not reject or negate any things confrontationally. We have seen that she appropriates, transforms, and integrates any element from any where that she finds appropriate for her self-expression. We see an aspect of her modernity in her rejection of the authority of tradition, in her playfulness with the mythical, and in the
desanctification of the iconic. Yet, she finds reference to all these important
to objectify her experience and desires. The problem, however, is whether
the doctrinaire kind of modernism would accept the forward and backward
linkages of Madhvi’s art with the phenomenal world, on the one hand, and
the traditions of the land on the other. Post-modernist understandings seem
to be more accommodative of such plurality.

Identifying labels, however, are neither relevant nor sufficient for
appreciating the significance of this artist’s very individual art. She orders
her signifiers in a such a playful manner as they appear under a seemingly
decorative veil, only to reveal the different stratum of significance, at an
extremely slow pace. The pace of revelations suits the almost time-defying
nature of some of Madhvi’s concerns. In this respect also, her mind beats in
rhythm with that of rural India. Her intuitive oneness with this rhythm
establishes her as an authentic modern artist who can transform the most
vulnerable aspect of womanhood into a source of strength and power.

REKHA RODWITTIYA

Rekha Rodwittiya was born in Bangalore in 1958. She studied
painting at the faculty of Fine Art, Baroda (BA Fine 1981), and at the
Royal College of Art, London (MA 1984, on the Inlaks scholarship). She
held her first solo show in 1982 in Baroda, and has subsequently held

She has travelled widely and lectured on contemporary Indian art of several fellowships and artist residencies in Sweden, France, the United State, and the U.K. She has also written on contemporary art and has curated two exhibition of young artist’s works.

Her early years at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda laid the foundations of what now stands as a politically alert feminist practice of painting. Belonging to a generation which starts operating on the ground prepared by the narrative artist of the previous generation, Rodwittiya’s generation sought to plough fresh fields across it. She found herself at odds with the male chauvinism of her contemporaries in the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, which did not allow for any gendered redefinition art practice. This was if anything, a confirmation for her of her resolve to seek a way of painting that functioned with early clearly
articulated feminist political intention.

The representation of the female figure has been a paramount concern for her, even as it has been significant for several feminist artists. Rodwittiya has been consistently working with the problem of representing the female form in a way that does not allow voyeuristic participation from the onlooker. Female figures in her works from the 1980s were often tortured and broken, strewn about in a hostile space, sometimes that of the convoluted, claustrophobic interior. Through the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, her paintings often had the appearance of the shadow play populated by their human and animal protagonist in compositions that aggressively pitched figured out of the picture plane, almost demanding participation from the audience. A narrative subtext with concealed references almost always underlies these works.

Recent years have seen Rodwittiya exploring archetypal figuration of the female form in a celebratory mode. The disappearance of the male figure form her work is not so much a measure of exclusion as it is a positive assertion monumentalised figure of the female protagonist. Very often, this monumental figure is presented within a domestic, intimate situation surrounded by objects that the artist uses for their metaphoric potential. Bathed in radiant red, their recent works at other times present
the protagonist as historical witness, as an entity that participates in observes and thus comments on situations in the contemporary environment.

Rekha Rodwittiya lives and works in Baroda.

VASONDHARA TEWARI

Born in Kolkatta in 1955, Vasundhara Tewari is one of the experimenting figurative women artists of the young generation. She graduated in literature from the university of Delhi, and studied art at the Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. During 1982-84, she worked on a Cultural Scholarship awarded by the department of culture, Government of India.

Vasundhara first drew attention for her sensitive mixed media work in which she interpreted the female nude as an image of the Indian womanhood suffering, searching and aspiring for independent individuality. Her treatment and use of the female nude soon diffused, what she creates are abstraction and are often emblematic of the inner life of contemporary women. Her paintings are characterised by tension arising out of the naturalistically modelled figures and the flat pictorial space which is enriched with small focuses of tonal recessions.

Between 1980 and 1994, Vasundhara has seven solo shows in New
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Plastic Arts, Algiers (1987) second and third time the Delhi state Award, Sahitya Kala Parishad (1987) (1992) and during 1988-90, Vasundhara worked on the Fellowship awarded by the department of Culture, Government of India. Between 1979 and 1993, she attended artist workshops held in different parts of India. Her works are in many public and private collections in India and abroad, including National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco Lalit Kala Akademy; New Delhi, Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal, Chandigarh Museum, Sahitya Kala Parishad, New Delhi, Chester and David Herwitz Collection, U.S.A., Masanori Fukuoka Collection, Tokyo and New York Art Scene, U.S.A.

Vasundhara lives and works in New Delhi.