ABSTRACT

Arpana Caur is one of the finest artists among the new generation of artists in India.

Arpana’s introduction to paintings came via sculpture after her tutelage under B.K. Gura. In the main, however, she is a self-taught artist. She had a scholarship for advanced course in painting in St. Martius College of Art London 1979 but chose to return after a month as she missed her home & India. Her earliest exhibited paintings of 1974, of heavy muscular androgynous women, are in a sombre palette. From the outset, she located her figures in the Punjabi milieu adopted by Amrita Sher Gil of women with their veils and thick khadi salwar-kameez texture on which the “Phulkaries” of Punjab could be embroidered. However Sher Gil’s havelis and open spaces become congestive city pavements darkened corners, and Sher-Girl’s melancholic figures of the “other” Indian appropriated by Arpana Caur as the tragic self. The relative isolation of the small urban family and the complexity of Arpana’s own situation, of a fraught childhood with separated parents is seen in early paintings of her mother, her grandfather, and herself of the family selectively severed and then rejoined. This biographical, even cathartic, strain proffered with little self-consciousness was to recur with engaging direction during the first decade. “Women in
Interiors” of the mid 1970’s was an early series of painting of women hemmed in by advancing claustrophobic city walls and the crowded city skyline. The body like the city was treated as susceptible to encroachment and physical pollution with the eventual threat of effacement. These paintings also plotted a personal graph.

On a superficial level one might be tempted to dub the exercise post modernist, but the reality is that her themes and their treatment are eminently modern. The post modernist illusion, in fact, is just a reflection of the necessity a third world artists has of negating the cultural fracture colonialism imposed on us by linking up with our pre-colonialism past once more to evolve a proper expression for an independent post colonial present and future. Such art, then, qualifies as un-compromisingly modern.

This assessment is further strengthened by the fact that over the period from 1975 to 1995, her work has evolved from a fairly close approximation to the structure of Pahari Miniatures, with its use of flat colours and the pictorial element to a definite restructuring of her canvases that are dyptichies and tripyches where, for example the water, earth and sky division are no longer placed in a vertical sequence but a horizontal one. Where figurative gives way to the abstract, or even as on “road and river” in which parts of the dyptich come together where the two meet outside
canvas, in our minds. The colours, too are worked upon the basis of techniques of preparing layered pigments that are temporary like the water in the “So what” series. Even the repetitive and decorative elements, rather like the folk ornamentation derived from the sculptural friezes in our temples play the role of the metronome in western music or the Tanpoore in ours, placing the work in a temporal or tonal context. All this is not nostalgic return to the past but its reconstruction to build a present that can pierce through the dark age of colonialism and tap its real cultural roots once more in a modern context.

This process of reconstruction has evolved its own laws of motion. Once of the most powerful ploys Arpana uses is that of graffiti, in one phase of her work where writing figures, all superimposed one on the other, create a canvas where discontinuities are physically wished away by a mere putting together of different elements, transferring the tension they create to associations connections being made in the mind of the viewer. She is an artist who thinks and is not afraid to take the consequences of her thought.

Basically a self taught artist, the young Caur was taken by surprise when three of her paintings were selected by M.F. Hussain in a group show of young artist in 12974 in Delhi. From then, on matters progressed rapidly. She held the first solo exhibition in 1975 at Shridharani Gallery, Triveni,
New Delhi. A London Art Gallery owner Maria Souza (also Souza' first wife) saw her work there and invited her for a show, which she went for four years later. Although the initial exhibitions did not even cover the cost of the shows, they helped young Arpana gain confidence. After this exhibition, she held exhibitions Nationally and Internationally. An attained fame in the field of art, she then never looked back and march forward to the heights of artistic world.

Her first successful’ exhibition came in 1980 at the Jahangir Art Gallery Mumbai where all her works were sold out. Today, her works be they oil on canvas, small works on paper with pencil, gouache, pastel or prints form part of the collections of such museums as the National Gallery of Modern art, the Indian Council for cultural Relations, the Victoria Albert Museum, London, Singapore Museum of Modern art, Hiroshima Museum of Museum art of Modern Art besides numerous private collection, including that of Hussian himself.

Unlike her contemporaries, Caur has never sought inspiration from European traditions. Instead oriental art from miniatures to Madhubani have found reflection is various phases of her work.

According to art critic Gatatri Sinha “The works of Arpana Caur gave a view of her mind, her marks depicted the present situation of India.
She choose to work on the critical problems of India and gave an artistic touch to it”.

Arpana is basically a featuring artist, her work mostly depict women lost in thoughts. She held the low grade women to be powerful. Her work always shows low working class women in their loose Kurta and Salwar, toiling day and height with a distant dream. Compared to the high class-working leading a fabulous and sexy life. Arpana in her paintings of “Vrindavan” showed old women whose head and brows shaved off.

Her painting of 1970 too depicted women sewing, which are the pride of galleries. Paintings of Arpana between 1970 to 1980 were according to that present society.

The 1979 “Maya Tyagi Rape Case” was depicted in her canvas showing the partiality and careless of the police on the title “Custodious of Law”. She then showed the pitiable conditions of the windows in Chasnala. She showed the army atrocities meet to the Sikhs as a result of death of Indira Gnadhi in 1984.

Arpana created a personal life under the series “World Goes On”. She spokes of the body expression between the individuals showing the relation. In 1986 she was awarded “Triennale Award” for this series.
Hiroshima Museum choose Arpana for the Rs. 7 lakh commission after on 5\textsuperscript{th} anniversary Bombay in 1995 having borrowed one of her works, titled "\textit{Resilient Green}" from the 3,000 strong private collection of Masanori Fukuoka, a Japanese patron of Indian art for its Asian Art Show during, the Asian Games. The work which also formed the center spread of Fukuoka's catalogue on Indian art, was covered in several Japanese papers. The Museum officials liked the work immensely and decided to commission Arpana for the project & wrote to her as "Miss Arpana Caur". She was invited to Hiroshima when the work was installed.

At present for instance, Arpana’s art is going through a period of transition. She has begun incorporating elements of Madhubani works in her paintings primarily because it helps create a witty juxtaposition of two worlds of women’s art from the village in the form of traditional patterns of trees and animals, set off against the off shoots of today’s worlds.

In one such canvas for an up coming exhibition. Arpana has pitted the Madhubani background against the modern duties of televisions sets cars traffic lights and other consumer durables and aptly titled it "\textit{Brand New God}". Today, looking back at her career, which she embarked on more than 25 years ago. Arpana makes a candid confident appraisal of her work, Caur had a some what modest initiation into art. She has never been inside an art
college, but today her works are the subject of Ph.D thesis in many art Colleges and Universities.

She has been adorned with awards from the Lalit Kala AKademy. The VI Trienniale India and the All India fine Art society. And her paintings are sought out for shows in London, Mumbai, Ottawa, Stockholm, Kolkatta, Tokyo, Athens and even Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war.

She is also paints on many different issue like –

1) Spiretualism and mysticism
   a Kabir series
   b Sufi seires
   c Where Many Streams Meat
   d Nanak series
   e Buddha

2) Love (Sohni-Mahiwal)

3) Environment

4) Embroiderer

5) Delhi history

Today their place has been taken by a volcanic eruption of primary colour assembled with which graffiti took over the images in her works of the last 5
years producing a multiplicity of meaning no longer centered on the central images that had been her hall-mark for so long.

This new imagery which draws deeply from the oriental tradition of a multicentered composition and at the same time partakes of the informality and spontaneity of the art of Kandinsky and the Bauhaus school gives us an originality, we do not easily find in art today that only an artist whose art has evolved in the background of an ancient cultural and the colonial past confronted with radical national movement can achieve.