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INTRODUCTION
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The terms contemporary and modern are synonymous, especially with reference to the present styles and trends in art. The concept contemporary or modern is not geographical, it does not mean mechanism, it is not fashion, it is not materialism nor a theory of social reconstruction. It can not even completely circumscribe what is existing in the present.

Contemporary art exist at many level in many media, and is very complex. The beginning of modern art can not be pin pointed to any single date. It is however, generally believed that it became a serious movement, shortly after the middle of the nineteenth century.

Contemporary art in India has begun to receive recognition for the innovative spirit of its inspired images. Over the last thirty years, recent works challenge the conventional perception that only the legacy of India’s deep into the earth, art today grows organically, astonished us with its vitality.

Contemporary Indian painting, as elsewhere, seeks an accord with the developing social situation; the new social awareness demands other aesthetic value which are continually underfire. The major currents of present-day painting are experimental and, for that reason, transitional, the aesthetic vision renews itself perpetually. It is a new “reality” that the artist
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strives to interpret Modern art is reflective of this universal heritage, of the international commerce of aesthetic value and processes of art. Contemporary Indian painting, emerging from the historical context of legend and literature, reaches our to become a part of the international expression.

The history of women artists of visual art is chequered and does not afford a continuous well documented record. From historical evidences such as the Kamasutra of Vatsayana and Kalidas’s Abhijinana Shakuntalam women had artistic accomplishment in painting, drawing, picture making, architecture, etc. The Mughal period paintings of a woman artist confirms that painting was one of the accomplishments of well born women. The generous support of women to early Buddhist art and the outstanding historical examples of the Sembiyan Mahadevi of the Chola period or the Mughal queens and princessess such as Noorjahan and Jahanare show women as patrons of art rather than practitioners. Although there were some women artists during Mughal period, very few names can be given historically before Amrita Sher-Gil who acquired fame as an artist in her own right in the 1920s. However, in the mid 19th Century, Indian women, specially Paris women, followed the lead of women artist who were wives and sisters of British Officers, and took initiative to become students of the
famous artist Raja Ravi Verma. The women artists of that period exhibited their paintings at Amateur Art Society Exhibitions held in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, Simla, Pune, etc. At the Calcutta Art exhibition of 1879, the presence of women artists could not be ignored. It is said that the most remarkable feature of the exhibition was the presence of 25 women artists, most of whom were from Bengal, Mangalabai Tampuratti, like her illustrious brother Ravi Verma followed the tradition of amateur painting. It is worth nothing that Ravi Verma commissioned the service of Mangalabai to fulfill the important Gaekwad Commission of 14 paintings of works based on Hindu Mythology. The Indian Society or Oriental Art, founded in 1907, held its first exhibition in 1908, but not until 1915 did it exhibit the work of women artists. In this exhibition, two women artist were prominent, including Sunaii Devi, a member of the Tagore family. In 1919, Rabindranath Tagore brought Nandalal Bose to Shantiniketan to organize Kala Bhava. Soon several women were involved in teaching at Kala Bhavan; Stella Kramrisch took Art history, Liza Van Pott taught Sculpture and Gouri Devi, the daughter of Nandalal Bose, taught design. Early women art students at Shantiniketan included Sucheta Kripalani and Jaya Appasamy. One of the first art groups to emerge that proposed a radical break with the Bengal School, was the Calcutta Group of 1940. Among its
circle was Kamala Das Gupta, (the wife of Prodosh Das Gupta) who was sculptor in her own right. Women artists began to participate in exhibitions, both solo and in terms and in instance Cumi Dallas and Roma Mukherjee, who painted Penitence of Krishna for the Calcutta exhibition of 1949.

Notwithstanding Amrita Sher-Gil’s privileged social status, women as artists were not conscious or accorded political or private patronage in the manner of Ravi Varma, Nandalal Bose or, later, M.F. Hussain the transition from painting for private pleasure as genteel pursuit to one of trained professionalism was not easy despite the output of artists like Reba Hore, Damayanti Chawla, Shanno Lahiri, and Amina Kar even met with hostility. When the Paris-trained Kamala Roy Chowdhry exhibited her nude drawings in Calcutta in the 1950s, a hostile press described her as a threat to public morals.

The early pioneers, struggled with establishing means, methodology, and use of materials. As of the earliest Indian printmakers, Devayani Krishna prepared her own plates and worked at the press especially designed by her husband kanwal Krishna; and when metal surfaces were short she used what was available even cardboard. Pilloo Pochkhanawala struggled to get the right kind of tensile aluminium alloy, which would express her aspiring forms. Meera Mukherjee lived and worked with tribal
communities, while charting out of veritable artistic and anthropological journey, in very trying conditions. As post-colonial artists & women their quest for a creativity was an emblem of change. The abstract my mystical symbolism of Devayani Krishna, the strong forms of labouring women depicted by Meera Mukherjee, embark on a discovery of the self the community, and nationhood.

Women became a visible presence in art colleges in the 1950s. The establishment of institutious Delhi College of Fine Arts in 1942, the Fine Arts Faculty at the M.S. University, Baroda in 1950, and schools like the Sarada Ukil School and later Triveni Kala Sangam, in Delhi, provided avenues for training. That decad saw important artists - Meera Mukherjee trained in Calcutta and Germany, Nasreen Mohamedi trained in St Martinis, London, Veena Bahrgava in Calcutta, Anjolie Ela Menon from J.J. School of Arts in Bombay and the Ecole des Beaux Arts Paris, and Arpita Singh in Delhi, to name a few.

In the 1960s, Kishori Kaul, Latika Katt, Anupam Sud, and Nalini Malani, who were almost contemporaneous with Ira Roy, Nilima Sheikh Mrinalini Mukherjee, Gogi Saroj Pal, and Arnavaz Vasudev emerged as famous artists. In the 1970s and 1980s the floodgates of participation by women artists had opened.
Arpana Caur and Gogi Saroj Pal used artistic and literary convention of the nayika, bhed and its sendition in Pahari miniatures. While Pal and Caur draw from the wellspring of Hindu mythology, Madhvi Parekh & Arpita Singh devise their own fables.

Navjot and Latika Katt interrogate contemporary Indian society: the city & the subject, particularly when pitted against convention. Again, Nalini Malani has in some of her earlier paintings such as “Of Monsters Angels a Fable” remodeled history to place figures from the miniature tradition in modern times. In every case here, there is the evolution of a methodology which in fact comprises one of the more interesting aspects of present day Indian art. Nilima Sheikh assimilates Persian, Japanese, and Chinese pointing techniques to paint her subjects with a warm, even protective, empathy.

Despite the socially reactive work of Arpana Caur and other female artists, it would not be wrong to define a “female space” in art which is the space of reverie, warmth, and resistance.

ARPANA Caur was born on 4th Sep. '1954 into a traditional Sikh family of medical practitioners who left Lahore during partition and settled in Delhi in 1947. She was brought up in a family of strong women, as her mother left stifling middle-class marriage to earn her living as a creative
writer with all the hardships it involved. And finally she faced the trauma of the Delhi riots in 1984. When Sikhs who regarded themselves as the sword-arm of India, and played a major role in its struggle for independence, were slaughtered by politically motivated rabble after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. All these events affected her life and art profoundly.

She was attracted to the artistic world since her childhood. At the age of 3, she had started to paint pictures on wall. Her mother Ajeet Caur, author of the novel ‘Homeless’. (khanabadosh), realized her daughter’s interest in art and encouraged her to go ahead in this field. With the help and efforts of her mother, Arpana Caur developed a new form in her art. Speaking of her mother she say “My mother has been my inspiration and support throughout not only as a single parent but also in many other ways, trying to this date, to shelter me from the bruises of the world”. That explains why even the humblest woman in Arpana’s figurative works manages to carry such authority and weight.

Infact Arpana can not discuss her art without mentioning and being grateful to her mother for what she is today “It is she who encouraged me to paint when I was young, who persuaded me to give up my teaching job to become a fulltime artist. Infact so great is my emotional
dependence on her that I do not like to go anywhere without her,” she says.

Being a writer herself, Ajeet Caur was able to make Arpana feel the angst an artist must feel before transmitting it into a work of art. Little wonder then that Ajeet Caur became the subject of number of her daughter’s paintings be it the series called “Mother” where she explores the maternal relationship or canvases depicting such mundane activities as her mother tweezing her eyebrows.

It is almost with child-like enthusiasm that Arpana takes you around the impressive newly build, four storied Academy of Fine Arts and Literature that her mother has set up after decades of struggle and toil.

The academy which started functioning in its new premises in the posh Sirifort Institutional area, has a huge art gallery and has a hall for literary gatherings, music concerts, symposiums, films, a vocational training centre for women and economically backward youngsters besides facilities for pottery, sculpture classes, an amphitheatre for staging plays and cafeteria.

Given her shy, sensitive persona, it is not difficult to look for the emotional props that are as crucial to the artist as her sensitivity, one is her husband Harinder, as a sitar player, designer and now a cartoonist, who
prefers to keep a low profile. She got married in 1988; her father-in-law Jaswant Singh was a painter.

The other is her mother who introduced her to various creative media so that she could decide what she wanted to take up, so dance, sitar and painting classes went on simultaneously for Young Arpana, whose father Dr. Rajendra Singh died when she was barely a teenager. And of course, there were stocks and stocks of books from her mother’s collection which she read alongside. The only extraneous agent in all this was radio she got to listen whenever her grandfather turned it on. A television set came in much later.

Arpana Caur was educated in Delhi and brought up with great love and affection. She completed M.A. (literature) from the Lady Shri Ram College. In 1979 she had a scholarship for advanced course in painting in St. Martins College of Art, London, but chose to return after a month as she missed her home and India. Between 1974-75, she began to participate in group shows. In early 70’s, only two private galleries were in Delhi. Dhoomimal and Kumar, and only three galleries were on here, Shridharnis, AIFACS and Rabindra Bhawan. During that time art was not in range in Delhi and just two buyers were in the city, so most of the artists moved to Mumbai to work, because Mumbai was the Mecca for the artists and there
were great lovers and patrons of art like Parsi, Jahangir and Godrej were chiefly interested in art. In early 70’s, only two newspapers were in Delhi, in which no artistic news or articles were released. When one of these newspapers released two three lines about Arpana Caur’s art by rotary then other artists and critics were excited to know about this new emerging lady artist Arpana Caur. They thought that she is really a good artist.

Arpana’s introduction to via sculpture came after her tutelage under B.K Gure. In the main, however she is a self taught artist. Her earliest exhibited paintings of 1974, of heavy muscular androgynous women, are in a sombre palette. From the outset, she located her figure in the Punjabi milieu adopted by Amrita Sher- Gil of women with their veils and thick Khaadi – salwar – Kameez textures on which the phulkaries of Punjab could be embroidered. However Sher- Gel’s melancholic figures of the other Indian are appropriated by Arpana 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 directness 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, infact, is just a reflection of the necessity a third world artist has of negating the cultural fracture colonialism imposed on us by linking up with our pre-colonial past once more to evolve a proper expression for an independent post-colonial present and future. Such art, then qualifies as uncompromisingly 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 pictorial element to a definite restructuring of her canvases that are diptyches and by triptyches, 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 the canvas in our minds. The colors, too are worked on the basis of techniques of preparing layered pigments that are temporary like the water in "So what" series. Even the repetitive and decorative element rather like the folk ornamentation derived from the sculptural friezes in our temples play the role of the metronome in western music or the tanpoora in ours, placing the work in a temporal or tonal context. All this is not a 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 content.

This process of reconstruction has evolved its own law of motion. One 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 association and 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 artists in 1974 in Delhi. From then on matters progressed
rapidly. She held the first solo exhibition in 1975 at Shridharni Gallery, Triveni, New Delhi. A London art gallery owner Maria Souza (Souza’s 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 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. According to Arpana Caur, visual art is not mais bared art but elitist in nature. Even now, 25-30 people come a day on an average to see the individual exhibition and if the show goes on for a month, only 1000 people come roughly. She used to get bothered by the issue of promotion of visual art when she was young but now, her energy has got dissipated and her whole concentration centres around her work. She feels it is the work of galleries, museums and media to spread art and her work is to paint and create good work.

Her first ‘Successful’ exhibition came in 1980 at 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, gouche, pastel or prints from part of the collections of such museums as the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Indian council for cultural Relations, the Victoria

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

According to Gayatri Sinha, "The work 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 depicts women lost in thoughts. She held the low grade women to be powerful. Her works always show low working class women in their loose Kurta and Salwar, toiling day and night with a distance dream as composed to the high class working women leading fabulous and sexy life. Arpana in her paintings of Vrindavan showed old women whose head and brows were shaved off.

Her paintings of 1970 depicted women sewing, which are the pride of art galleries. Paintings of 1970 to 1980 were on the present society.
The 1979 *Maya Tyagi Rape* case was depicted in her canvas showing the partiality and carelessness of the police on the title "*Custodies of Law*". She then showed the pitiable conditions of the widows in *Chasnala*. She showed the army atrocities met to the Sikhs as a result of the death of Indira Gandhi in 1984.

Arpana created a personal life under the series *world Goes On*. In 1986 she was awarded "*Triennale Award*" for this series.

In 1989, an exhibition organised by Sahmat, a cultural activist group in Mangolpuri, an outlying Delhi slum, proved her to draw in elements of the city’s free wheeling mechanichal and human detritus, cycles and autorickshaws, workers and the tools. They become a greygraffity scrawl that busily works itself into a corner of her canvas, even as they are too insignificant to attract close attention.

Indeed the city starts to mark its invasive presence. There is a progression from closed interiors to vertiginous landscapes, to approximate the crowded city of anonymous hard pressed labour.

Arpana invariably paints serially, the earliest paintings in the series have an abrupt, cathartic quality. The symbolism is heavy while, as the emotional tempo wears itself out, the tone becomes more and more contemplative. The sight one day, of an old Sikh tailor stitching women’s
As a child, there were many things that the silent, sensitive Arpana Caur had felt passionately about. And prominent among them was the atomic bomb-blast that destroyed two cities and brought Japan to its knees in World War II.

Even today, the nuclear destruction that the atom bomb wrought evokes the same fear, the same anguish, and the same compassion in the artist. So when the Hiroshima Museum wrote to her last year, asking if she would do a painting on the theme Hiroshima to mark the 50th year of the tragic event, Caur went to work a vengeance.

Now back from Japan, where her work triptych titled “where are all the flowers gone” formally installed at the sprawling Hiroshima Museum—along with the works of four other Asian artists, who had also been commissioned to work on the theme, Arpana Caur is both modest and full of child-like enthusiasm about her achievement.

“It was a nice feeling to see the work of not me as an ‘I’ but as an Indian artist living in the museum. What was heartening was that it
stood out, because of its typical Indian colours, blue and yellow, as against the blacks and browns of the other works," she says.

But what touched Caur most during her trip to Japan, which she describes a land of beauty and peace, was the gesture of a waiter in a restaurant she ate in. As she sat there having a meal with three of the young curators of the museum, a waiter, identifying her Nationally from her Salwar-Kameez, came and placed two tiny Japanese and Indian flags, stuck on a piece of thermacol, on her table to convey his welcome. "I was so overwhelmed by the gesture that I just started crying sitting there". says Arpana.

The three frames of the 12 x 6 feet triptych displayed at Hiroshima depict lotuses (symbolising life) blossoming under the blue sky and on deep blue water, guns and soldiers (signifying death) and a forlorn woman (the ultimate victim of all violence) draped in a black veil sitting despondently in the rain under black clouds of destruction. The images are a subtle yet evocative depiction of the twin themes of violence and peace.

And for once, Arpana is more than satisfied with her work. Not all works of art are successful, irrespective of whether or not they sell.” She explains, “I myself do about 12 works a year and am satisfied with less then half of them. But this triptych has given me immense
satisfaction. What is more gratifying,” she adds “is that Indian art has been represented, for the first time, in the museum’s permanent collection that houses some of the greatest works of art such as Henry Moore’s ‘Atom Peace’.

Hiroshima Museum chose Arpana for the 7 lakh commission after having borrowed one of her works, titled “Resilient Green” from the 3,000 strong private collection of Masanori Fukuoka, a Japanese patron of Indian art, for its Asian Games. The work which also formed the centrepiece 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.

The prestigious commissioning could not have come at a better time for the artist, who by her own confession, feels that she is going through the peak of her career. “I have been on a high each day for the past two-three years. Every day is a surprise. In the morning, when I sit down to work and then take a look at in the evening, I wonder whether I really created these new images and explored the new territories”.

The number of canvases that she produces may have increased. But its not quantity that matters to Caur, what she is most pleased about is that the quality of her works is improving and that her paintings are now
imbursed with a sense of adventure, in which new boundaries are constantly being explored.

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 woman’s art from the village in the traditional patterns of trees and animals, set off against the offshoots of today’s worlds.

In one such canvas for an upcoming exhibition, Arpana has pitted the Madhubani background against the modern deities of television sets, cars and other consumer durables and aptly titled it “Brand New God”.

For an artist who is forever unsure of her paintings and can not but look surprised when you praise her work is an unusual one. For the most part, Caur still remains a little hesitant about the quality of her paintings.

Recently, for instance, she was due to send two canvases for the CIMA exhibition of contemporary modern Indian art in London, recalls Caur, “I had sent three works for the show, but developed doubts about the third work. So I did another painting and sent it to the organizers so that they could chose whichever they liked more.”

For an artist whose bigger works sell for anything from Rs. 50,000 to over a lakh, Arpana comes across as a surprisingly simple, down to earth
person delights in the joys she gets from doing such mundane chores as speaking track of the daily ration needs buying vegetables and cooking simple meals for the family—her husband, mother and herself.

Basically a morning artist who has put her palette by the forenoon, Arpana makes no bones about the fact that she is a reclusive person who hates having guests over, or going out for function and gatherings, even if it is an exhibition where her own works are showing “Even our relatives and friends seldom come over.” She says.

The only outing that the entire family enjoy is to their ‘Guru Sahibji’s Ashram’ in Ghaziabad, twice a week. “It provides me with a very good escape” confesses Arpana. Besides meditation and recitation from the holy tracts, going to the ashram involves doing Sewa right from cooking meals for all, washing the utensils and sweeping the floors. “It is a place where every body is a nobody and the only purpose is to find spiritual peace,” she explains.

Today looking back at her career, which she embarked on more than 25 years ago, Arpana makes a candid confident appraisal of her work, “when I started, I was a young girl, in search of an identity and in search of a path that would help me escape from falling into the assigned roles,” she says, “Today that search is long over now it is
direct confrontation between me and my work and the important thing is to make it evolve into a better work.”

Caur had somewhat modest initiation into art. She has never been inside 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 Academy, The VI Triennale India and All India fine Art Society. Her paintings are sought for shows in London, Bombay, Ottawa, Stockholm, Calcutta, Tokyo, Athens, Japan and even Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war.

Using colours with the same informality with which graffitti took over the images in her works for the last 5 years, producing a multiplicity of meaning no longer centered on the central images that had been her Hallmark for so long.

This new imaginary which draws deeply from the oriental tradition of multicentred composition and at the same time partakes of the informality, and sensitivity 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 part confronted with radical national movement can achieve.