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BEGINNING OF HER CAREER AS AN ARTIST

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BEGINNING OF HER CAREER AS AN ARTIST

The identification of Arpana Caur both as a woman and as an artist developed especially in 1974 and when she had just begun to explore the world of canvases. Five or six years later, she began to feel that she was “restricting herself to just themes rather than aesthetic preoccupation such as composition and the visual tension within the painting.” So, she started looking at the architecture in Pahari miniatures and this gained an entry in her work to create strange, linear tensions vis-à-vis the roundness of the figure in tune with the Indian sculptural tradition. The Pahari miniatures drew her attention for their “Unusual composition and vibrant colour”. And vibrant colours, as is evident from her works, are her weakness. The artist is known for the use of bold colours that have a dynamic dimension, in keeping with the pulsating rhythm of life. “I love to use bold colours with an element of surprise everyone thinks women artists, paint only women. But I have done Buddhaas, Sohni Mahiwal, too” is her candid admission.

The artistic expression of Arpana Caur is the distillate of a long period of struggle. It is not only the struggle of a determined and talented
literary mother and her two daughters, one of whom met with a tragic end in Paris, but of the Indian people to free themselves from colonial rule. This history of dingdong battles, beginning as peasant and tribal revolt almost as soon as the East India Company spread its tentacles over the country in the late eighteenth country, carried on relentlessly till India became independent in 1947. And naturally, it left an indelible stamp on our cultural and expression.

The history of peasant revolts made the folk artist the natural ally of the national movement and of the post-colonial artist, reestablishing contacts with a continuity of culture which even colonial brutality could not suppress, nor post-modernism obscure. But while it seemed a natural enough alliance in hindsight, it was not an easy one to forge at the time. The British and the Indian colonial elite encouraged both an imitative Victorian imagery married to Indian epic literature as well as the revival of imperial miniatures, and stylized Ajanta'sfiguration after failing to attract the Indian aesthetic elite to follow the colonial programme.

Even after Independence, Nehru tried to revive Gupta art, which has had a lasting influence on a number of our leading contemporary artists. Recently, the revival of Ravi Varma's art bazaar kitsch by the neo-colonial elite in globalising India give us evidence of new threats. That
contemporary artists, including Arpana, have been able to avoid these diversions is to their credit.

Arpana Caur went through this entire journey herself, unlike other artists who were given readymade solution at art school. Having made a practical survey as it were, she chose definite options in her work from 1974 onwards. Her early figures remained one of the stocky, rounded treatment of Gupta aesthetics, which she later blended with influences from chola bronzes and provincial Mughal styles of the Deccan and the Himalayan foot-hills. She then went the whole hog into collaborative with folk artists and ended up evolving a visual expression that draws on folk motifs but expresses concrete present-day concerns as a sort of 'magical reality'.

At every stage, she had to make her own choice of visual language in relation to her own experiences. The unconventional nature of the life she has led has helped Arpana keep away from the conventional nature in art and strike out on the path of her own. That is why she remained firmly figurative while most of Delhi artists steeped in abstraction to one degree or another.

The incorporation of abstract and textured spaces in her composition was a much later development in keeping with her slow perception and
experience. This is the basis of the authenticity of her art and its continuity.

Her earliest works are those of an outsider looking at the colourful world of galleries behind plate glass, but then there are works of the mid 70s that envisage the breaking up of that window to ‘let the outsider in’. In fact, the inside-outside theme predominates in her work of this period. She contrasts the drabness of one sphere with brightness of the other. What is interesting is that the duality does not hold her down. Sometimes the inside is drab, sometimes the outside. She is her own master.

This comes out much more forcefully in the first of her original images. “The Child Goddess”. Here she portrays a nude gore lecturing to several nude figures who are immersed in their own concerns and not listening to her. They could well be statues. There images appear to contain the germ of a future series in them; the one of a performer without an audience. The recur again and again in different content and sensitivity over the years.

The blatantly disinterested crowd the Child-goddess is addressing becomes the audience whose absence is indicated in ‘The Missing Audience’ series of 1981, through empty chairs: and finally people are pictured as visibly immersed in petty day to day concerns, ignoring riot victims floating past or dead bodies lying on ground, in her series ‘World
Goes On\textsuperscript{14}. This series painted from 1984 onwards, reflects a growing sensitivity in her portrayal of reality.

The audience in the child goddess series is stone deaf, but present. In the performance series, it is absent. Both these, however, do not capture indifference in all its complexity as do the images of people living their daily lives doing mundane things, while riot victims float past them unobserved. This demands considerable artistic depiction and reflects the real flowering of this image. The fact that we are able to trace this image of the mid 70s, involving indifferent conditions and emerging as a hard reality in 80\textsuperscript{s}, not only of present day India, but of a world being continually desensitised by a flood of information and making a spectacle of everything, including appalling human tragedies, reflects how her art is genuinely a product of the progress of her life and times and not borrowed stuff. She is very modest when asked to rate herself as an artist, she elaborates “The artist is his or her own best critic. All the work that comes out is not of the same caliber. For every work that is of a quality there is bound to be one that is of B or C quality also. When I was younger and some gallery wanted my work, I used to think the opportunity had now come to off-lead my Bs and Cs and keep the As for a one person show,
"I find that some of my ‘Bs’ and ‘Cs’ have found their way to public or an auction. One such work was picked up by a Britisher, who gave it to Sotheby’s. From there it found its way to the Victoria Albert Museum. It is only once in a lifetime a museum can normally afford an artist’s work. So you should always ensure that the lesser work. When one is selling one should lesson one’s pace to keep up the quality. One should not give into the temptation of quickening the pace to make a fast buck. In Berlin, for my show, they wanted 10 canvases, I am sending only the five best. As a creative, person, I am striving to reach my best, but I am still striving”

Working in her spacious studio that look across New Delhi’s skyline, Caur steers herself to her own island of calm. One senses a cerebral artist who is directed by a lightness of being—because Caur is quite essentially the observer of human life—the great narrator of tales the artist who wants to constantly break the fame to things differently and came out with an unpredictable phase. As she unravels her works she ponders on the magic of happenings, of what they do to people, of identities, of tragedies, triumphs, and most of all the unassailable human spirit.

This phase them churns out like a glittering and hunting epic—it reflects great love, loss and the music by which our lives play out the coda. But her work is also about cities and people whose extraordinariness is
contextualized by the familiar frame works that we instantly recognize. The female figure then become the narrator-her voice is her expressionism. It is once expansive, intimate, soulful and sensuous. Whether she be at crossroads or at a stilted point in her life, she marks the course of divergent phase. Caur plays with images that go back in time to generations of bygone eras. She also weaves into that plot an image of the urban consumerist culture. What results is a consecration of the unique and the alien. Her harmony too reflects that singularity the image in question, whether it to a traffic light, the folk idiom of Warli or Godna or even the rustic old village belle-the image becomes the autonomous self sufficient symbol of struggle and strength.

The Neon Diety appears both in the canvas and the collaborative works-there are notions of an indelible nature which range from the earthly to the ethereal-while we distance ourselves from it, we are forced to strike parallels with Buddhist ideologies and actually traverse that orbit.

What occurs is a quaint emotion of a tireless tenor, which celebrates the abstracting quality of form. The material quality of viscosity is worked into giving an emotive assimilation. The discerning eye notes that this artist works on the abacus of a legacy, one that pays tribute to traditional art forms as well as folk idioms. Even if the female figure dominates and
determines the essence of her sensibility, this artist has rare understanding of early 16th – 18th century miniatures. The Pahari tradition specifically serves a comparison in terms of construct. However, she subverses the spatial distribution so that the resultant turmoil and strength both exude out naturally.

For instance, ‘The Embroiderer’ personifies the image of her own mother sitting absorbed in the process of her sewing while the ruined ramparts form the historical background of the portrayal. The terracotta tinge harks back to the Mughal ages, and the small numerous vehicles that became part of the cloth indicate the modern automated age of pollution. That centralized image recurs again in ‘Letters to the Past’ where the modern is reflected by the typewriter-while the black core reappears on top to be contrasted against the white letters that twirl up.

Around the 1980s, Arpana’s work showed a significant shift from subject to aesthetic concern. In 1984 came the communal riots, the Sikh massacre in Delhi and she felt the need to paint the gory face of death. This series titled ‘The world Gaes On’ highlights violence per se. Arpana’s first exposure to death at such close quarters while she worked with the riot victims in the relief camp. In this series water became a symbol of death.
for her. In one such painting, she used three areas-water, earth and sky-to show how life went on unaffected by death and destruction.

A painting from this series won for her the Triennale award in 1986. Arpana followed up this series with the paintings. “Windows of Vrindavan” a moving comment on the forgotten white-clad, head shaven widows who are destined to wait for an ever elusive Krishna, Deprived of their marks of feminine identification, they are compelled to play out a life in attitudes of prayer and waiting.

In the late Eighties, provoked by the changing face of Delhi, she began to paint “Environment” series. In one painting of this series titled “Prakriti,” she painted nature as the creator and destroyer simultaneously, and individuals are her temporary harvest. She says, “I am interested in representing the forces of nature and spirituality: both seem threatened in our present times”. The harvest motifs are from Worli paintings, with multiple images again and again emphasizing the cyclical flow of the process of creation and destruction. And the other painting from this series shows the Green Embroiderer is Nature, also carrying within herself the seeds of destruction in order to recreate or re-embroider again. She embroiders here the whole universe of birds and animals and flowers taken from the Godna (tattoo) folk art, Bihar. A pair of scissors represents time
Beginning of her career as an artist

Cutting the thread of life, so the work can be read on a dual level. When a pebble is thrown into a pond, it sets off ever-expanding, hence the multiple images in the painting represent ongoingness.

'The Body is just a Garment' an important series, which has her way of coming to terms with life and death and wherein she used the triptych 10 from a painting split into three canvases or sections in a progression of a chronological sequence. The motif was the saying of the weaver mystic poet Kabir and Lord Krishna in the 'Geeta' that the body is a mere garment which one changes from birth to birth.

She also painted 'Kabir' series in which Kabir is weaving water, she began to paint water since 1984. She depicted 'Buddha' in her paintings for the past 15 years. In one of her painting, The Great Departure' Buddha leaves his sleeping wife and child at night in search of truth. The abstract white sheets are a bold visual device against the black, their stark linearity creating surprising visual tension with rounded mountains and human forms. The use of white as a colour has been inspired from miniatures.

Arpana Caur was very much impressed by 'Sufism'. She produced different paintings on that issue in 2001 'Nanak' series is another important part of her work, she says, "I have been painting Nanak since
1980 as he did not belong to a particular religion. Though a Hindu by birth, he never believed in the external manifestations of faith. He refused to wear Janeou. I have come across people in Ladakh who call him Lama Nanak while in Baghdad he’s called Peer Nanak. The painting ‘the Immersion’, in which she painted Guru Nanak going under water for contemplation, when he emerged, he was seer. One of his teachings referred to the quality of all beings. The net symbolises worldly desires, the fishes trapped in it-human beings. The two works are parts of a diptych.

‘Love series came in 2001. In this series, she painted different paintings from the legend of Shoni-Mahiwal, a well known love story. The woman swims on a pot to meet her love and drowns as she has been given an unbaked earthen pot by scheming relatives. The landscape is inspired from miniatures, the abstract geometrical space separating her from her lover is linear to offset the rounded forms of hills and people. In sufi and Bhakti thought, earthly love becomes a passage to the divine, connecting with the above, hence, the plug which also lends contemporaneity to the old myth.

Pocket Art Series-the art of Arpana Caur by Suneet Chopra An offering in the pocket art series, this volume with an elaborate life sketch of
the painte and a short text on her work carries a selection 24 colour reproduction of her painting.

**MURAL**

There is art beyond the galleries. And if you want to savour it, it is on a wall of Lady Irwin school just past Andhra Bhawan on Canning Road. It is a large mural that is part of the Indo-German project that likes the cities of Hamburg and New Delhi, figuring a young girl and boy sitting together near a global jigsaw puzzle.

It is collaborative work by two very sensitive artists-India’s Arpana Caur and Germany’s Sonke Nissen Knaack. The mural form, of course is very much at home in India, where we have murals like those of Ajanta, Bagh, Chamba, Mattancherri with riveting paintings that vie with ease with the best in the world. So, one finds that school children going by on the street take it in their stride.

The message is that the world is one lost to them. The Indians have always had a fascination for roaming, perhaps that was why crossing ocean was forbidden at the coast of losing caste. It was hard to stop Indians from wandering. Indeed gypsies all over the world claim to be of Indian descent. So this collaborative work makes eminent sense to us.
Perhaps its real place should be in Hamburg. It is the people of the west with their criminal immigration laws, in human conditions of life for foreign workers and racist imperial histories that should be educated about the brotherhood of man. But imagine the second phase of the project that will involve. Arpana and Sonke in creating a similar wall somewhere in the middle of Hamburg.

The message of Arpana and Sonke is that the world is a global village and no man is an island into himself. But John Done told us that in the 17th century, so why was he not listened to?

The message needs to addressed to those who cry out loudest to globalise, the world’s bankers. They want a free flow of capital, but savage restrictions on people. And with globalisation, the restrictions continue to increase like the recent British to put a hefty 10,000 on entry visas for Indians. This art addressed to them would be much more useful than to us. But as with most things in the world today, the best lessons are preached where they are least needed.

Still, when such multi-national collaborations happen on the people level, they are welcome. For there who have paved the way for the globalisation of capital will soon really feel working along the avenues they created for commerce alone.
The first Indo-German mural was painted in Hamburg by Arpana Caur and Sonke Nissen Knaack. The Hamburg mural is about the Eastern view of time, which is linear. It is offsets a goddess on a lotus, a pot of water and spinning wheel against a scale, compass, and individual wheels. Overlaying those motifs is the spiral dance of life from Warli folk art, 40 x 40, mural on a five-story high wall, 2000.

This monumentality, both of her themes and their visual representations, gives her work the historicity of classical artists, like the muralists of Ajanta. This is why a number of museums, like the Victoria and Albert and the Bradford Museums in Britain, the Kunst Museum in Dusseldorf, Germany, the Hiroshima museum of modern art and the Glenbarra Museum in Japan, the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm (Sweden), the Singapore Museum, the National gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and other museums in India, have chosen to acquire her works. However this history is personalised with the artist as the centre of her world which has the stamp of contemporaneity on it.

Arpana was on a brief visit here to meet with a team of young artists who will collaborate with her for putting up five murals in the city.

"Bangalore will probably be the first city in the country to have five public murals," says a visibly excited Arpana. "I am particularly enthused
at the opportunity afforded by the large dimension and scale." Expectedly, she has done her homework and as she opens the sketch pad, one gets a glimpse of a tall, stately Bahubali rendered in gold with spiralling creepers, a meditating Buddha with flowers floating all around and a re-invented Roerich landscape. "I am interested in representing the forces of nature and spirituality; both seem threatened in our present times."

Her works have been featured in newspapers like 'The Guardian, The New York Times, Berlin Morning post and The Times of India. While documentaries on her have been made by the B.B.C., Star T.V. Doordarshan, Stockholm TV and CNN.

Minutes before leaving with the team on a location-hunting trip for the murals, Arpana spoke to Metro Plus. "I did murals even in the early '80s. I remember doing two murals for the Himachal Pradesh and Goa pavilions at the India International Trade Fair. The work was elaborate and got me Rs. 35,000, a princely sum those days. With that, I was able to help my mother pay an installment on the flat she was purchasing... I have been doing mural since then. About five years ago, I did a huge mural 35 ft. by 15 ft. for Lady Erwin School in Delhi, without taking a single rupee. That was to show my appreciation for the school, which to this day charges a fee of only Re. 1 per student, but provides quality education. Another easy
recall is a collaborative 50 ft. by 50 ft. mural with a German artist in Hamburg (2001) where we incorporated both the western concept of time (linear) with the Eastern notion of time being eternal. With meticulous planning, the entire project was executed in just six days.

HER ART AFFECTED BY FAKING

The art frat is justifiably celebrating there days, what with the industry growing like never before and going international. But mixed with this elation is apprehension. The issue that is causing all the heart burn are the allegations of fakes that have resurfaced.

The Indian art market is approximately pegged at Rs. 600 crore today, and conservative estimates say about 35 percent of it are fakes. This, when people are looking at art as an investment. Say Sunaina Anand, a gallery owner in the city, “As the art market is expanding, the issue of fakes is also getting more serious in a Rs. 600-700 crore market, they occupy a huge share. As the business is based completely on trust, this can prove to be suicidal.

The experts point out that establishing the provenance of an art work is a must. “Now a d says, artists sell to a particular gallery which gives a certificate saying that the painting is authentic. Buying from such a gallery
ensures everything is aboveboard. That is the reason why the galleries take almost one third of the painting’s worth,” reveals Anand.

Holograms and signatures are also being put by certain artist at the back of their paintings to make sure that fakes don’t abound in the market. In case such a certificate is not available, the buyer can also apply to the artist, in case it is a contemporary artist, “Artists themselves can not stop this menace..... it’s too widespread. Buyers, gallery-owners and auctioneers need to be more careful and check the provenance of the painting,” says artist Sanjay Bhattacharya. Say a gallery owner,” finally it is up to either the auctioneers and gallery owners to check and double check the provenance of the painting. With experts working at such places, this should not prove to be a big problem. Ultimately, the watch word in our business remains trust”.

Arpana Caur is one of those artists whose paintings have been rampantly forged. She says that the high prices art is fetching these days has a lot to do with imitations. “My first work of 6 x 8 feet sold for Rs. 800 in 1975. In 1980 it was re-sold for Rs. 3,000, two years later at Rs. 16000. and in 1985 the price tag was Rs. 16,000. Today it commands a price of around Rs. 200,000”.
“When I first detected a fake of my painting I thought it was an isolated case till I discovered that illegal copies of my original work were being sold-of all the places in New York. Now I have come to know that there is this person who reproduced my works on a large scale and exports it to New York where he has arrangements with dealers”.

With prices of paintings going through the roof, forgery has become a natural-and negative-progression of art. Some attribute the phenomenon to the increase in the number of galleries in major metros. Arpana Caur says that in 1975 when she held her first solo exhibition there were only two galleries in Delhi, Dhoomimal and Kumar Gallery. Today there are over 200.

Add Arpana Caur all set for a London exhibition, “The police must be serious about arresting culprits. But there attitude is callous. When I approached the crime branch I was told to arrange a decoy customer. How can an artist be a detective and conduct a raid? The ministry of culture must take some stringent laws.”

For all her achievements, the self-taught artist strikes with her absolute gentleness, simplicity, honesty and humility. Speak of the delicate
balance she achieve in her works, she says, “That is the magic of painting, isn’t it? You could call me a colourist, I thinks and dream of colours”.

Her eyes twinkle when you tell her that viewers in Bangalore are quite familiar with her works in group shows. But the city is yet to see a solo show of hers, “you se, I just do one painting a month. Even in Delhi, my soles are held one is five years,. But, yes. I should exhibit more often in Bangalore.”