

Learning in Transit

In her best work, Dhruvi Acharya aspires to blend the quotidian and the supernatural, the myth and the TV soap. **Karin Miller-Lewis** traces the artist's journeys of identity as she finds herself an operational space between her country of birth and her country of adoption.



Dharamsala. Oil, 72 x 72 inches. 1999.

Since leaving Bombay and completing her training in illustration for an MFA program in the US, 29-year old Dhruvi Acharya has charted her journey towards self-definition in richly coloured paintings packed with graphic imagery and decorative effects. Striving for and often achieving lyricism, her works can be sentimental. But as she surrenders a will to resolve her pictures prematurely, she makes ever more witty and touching comments about what can be learned in transit. And offers encouraging evidence of the imaginative resources she possesses and has still to plumb.

Acharya's first body of work, exhibited in 1999, merged formal principles shared by classical Indian art and commercial illustration to explore her cultural roots and make metaphors for her particular experience. The pizzicato memory images in *A Life Divided*, 1997, *Moist Earth*, *Paths from the Past*, 1998, and *In My Room*, 1998 suggest the time-dimmed forms of cave paintings, or more playfully, the dispersed props of a passionate child's sprawling game of make-believe. Invoking the artist's longing effort and her limited success at remaking a whole, a self, from these scattered experiences, the pictures also effectively register that familiar paradox of nostalgia. From a distance, home is more vivid, less tangible.

And increasingly uninhabitable. Craning birds in flight and upturned trees represent the urgency of the artist's homeward gaze, as well as the desire for greater personal freedom that impelled her departure. A blue pool sprouting hot pink lotuses, borrowed from Kangra miniatures of romantic longing, identifies India as the wellspring of her imagination. A moveable oasis, now; but shoreless, and thus disconcertingly less fathomable. In more recent works she has probed what makes return difficult. On the screaming red ground of *I-Screen*, 1999, a sharp-edged grater makes a shoddy filter and inadequate shield in a familiar war of words between two women.

As consolation for pain and



A Life Divided. Oil. 48 x 48 inches. 1997.

disorientation, Acharya's paintings offer order and beauty, classical culture and commercial art's common cause. But her works can falter over her pursuit of this very goal. Her symbols, aiming for communicative clarity, can be conventional. And when she does not develop a divergent context to propel them beyond given meanings, she blunts her exploration of emotional imbalance and ambivalent feeling. Her bifurcated or figurally hierarchicised compositions can be static. When combined with elegant linear rhythms and pretty colour harmonies, as in *Birth*, 2000 and *April 2000*, her figures suspended in a moment of emotional indecision seem merely passive, her theme solipsistic.

But Acharya is an artist who recognises the shortcomings of a chosen route and seeks new strategies to lead herself out of its dead ends. Since late 1999 she has tapped her own capacities for satire, the common thread amongst a varied group of artists who have attracted her attention. She's pointed out the impact

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Watching. Oil. 30 x 30 inches. 1999.

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of Lari Pittman's layered surfaces, the excess of imagination in Hieronymus Bosch, Jean-Michel Basquiat's spontaneity, Francis Bacon's "elegant way of painting the grotesque", Pieter Brueghel's precise observation of life around him, amongst others. She's acknowledged her affinity for the work of Nilima Sheikh and Nalini Malani. By re-engaging some of commercial arts' original gifts to high culture – celebration of unreason, superfluity, appetitive demand that is as insistent as it is fleeting – she has unburdened her symbols. Recently, she has taken more inspiration from cartooning's ironic use of clarity to defuse what's mystifying.

In *Dharamsala*, 1999, Acharya finds a way out of her ego's imprisoning self-obsessions through the humorous undertones of the painting. Reflecting her exploration of Buddhism, this painting is a lively zigzag composition rendered in warm hues. It creates a sense of frenetic energy set against reverence, as one of the two monks attending an ashen

woman stares at a young woman seated across the canvas. Wavering lines emanate from the young woman's head like unruly hairs or frazzled thoughts. Her form echoes that of a bulbous-bodied woman sitting in meditation, fixed or full of potential, to the right above. With the artist, we are left to wonder whether she has achieved the higher state of consciousness she aims for, or threatens to fly away – or pop – like an over-inflated balloon.

Watching, 1999, one of Acharya's best paintings, blends the quotidian and supernatural, high thought and common sense to reveal what may be learned when one submits to the contradictions a day will deliver (and life's disregard for our efforts to make sense of them). With deadpan, dead-on comic style, she pictures herself munching a snack, watching TV-modernity's own means of emptying the self. Four-armed Krishna at her side gesticulates as if commenting on the evening drama's latest development; his (un)remarkable presence offers reassurance that home is always with her.

But *Watching* also lightheadedly invokes the Bhagavad Gita. In this struggle to locate and identify oneself between possible homes and possible selves, Arjuna's chariot is a worn and cozy sofa and the battlefield of Kurukshetra is a wall-less living room that the world casually crashes. The seeming passivity of Acharya's figure is a sign of her receptive state. *Watching* ponders whether identity may be something more likely to be found than constructed, more received than researchable. With a knowing laugh, the image recommends that she accept the arbitrariness of identity, its necessity as well as her own absurdity.

Acharya's newest works, reflecting on her relationships with people at home, approach the idea of the externally determined self from another angle. Reusing a familiar layout, a large central figure sits amidst a swirl of choices, memories, and talking heads in *Saturday Night*, 2000 and *Uma*, 2000. But here the surfaces buzz with decoration, offering something more akin to

visual gossip than elaborating gloss. For, like gossip, whose compelling embellishments enable it to replace the original story, the varied, pleasing patterns of florals, dots and lozenges on party-pastel grounds contradict, indeed overwhelm the dramas of inner conflict. This is more than content giving way to pretty effects.

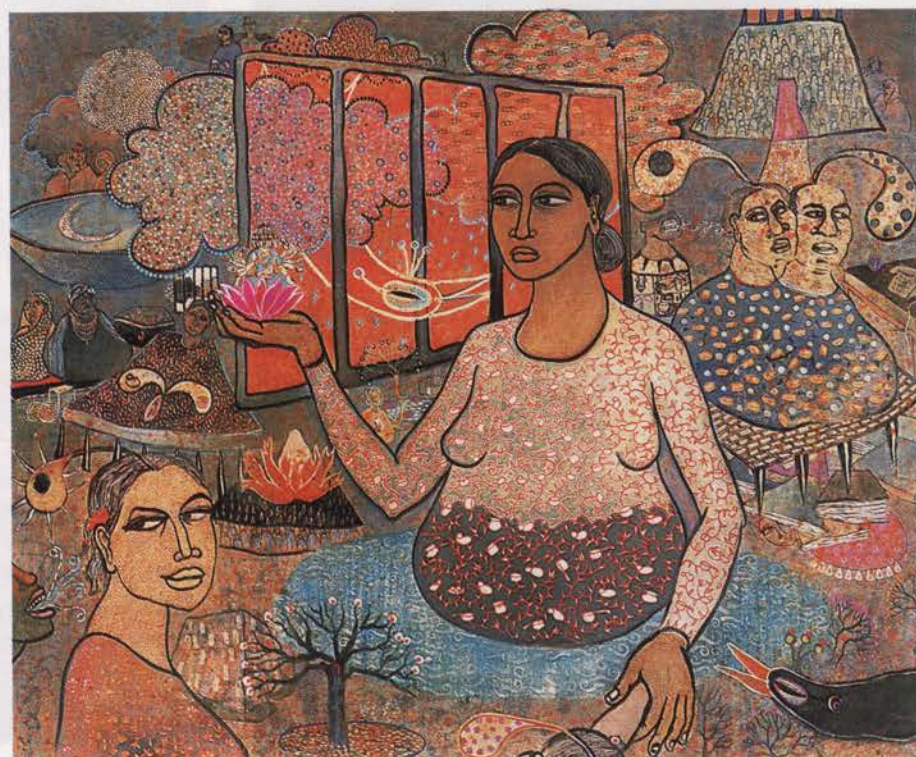
Her stilled, almost vacuous figures held captive by or reflecting the profuse surface activity invoke the dilemma of being a social creature, part of a social fabric, dependent on and attached to the conventions and demands of love that have shaped her despite her desire to shape herself. The gaps and coincidences between the figures and forms embody the pleasures and limits of having to approach and articulate herself through words and images – those social forms whose usage always precedes and exceeds us, that make communication possible but that also always place us at a remove from ourselves.

If her journey is familiar and her focus still narrowly – that is, personally – defined, Acharya demonstrates significant potential. Her sophisticated use of beauty as a counterpoint not only makes a strong suit of an earlier source of weakness. These paintings also suggest that she appreciates the under-acknowledged power of the decorative in art: a humble schematisation of reality, the transcendent ornament of beauty is also the imagination's brazen offer to replace or recreate what reality cannot resolve, or wholly reintegrate.

What might Acharya gain now by examining the works and ideas of K. G. Subramanyan, or Arpita Singh's use of the decorative in her intensely personal and historically engaged pictures? Brave enough to rethink the modern chestnut that equates self-definition with rebellious self-assertion, Acharya deserves the attention that will encourage her to continue to transform a once-sentimental longing for an irrecoverable past into a mature embrace of home, in the broadest sense, as the original and necessarily conflicted site of an enabling and engaged imagination.



Saturday Night. Oil. 36 x 34 inches. 2000.



Uma. Oil. 50 x 60 inches. 2000. All images courtesy the artist.