

Dhruvi Acharya's paintings give a visual insight into a woman's life. Georgina Maddox brushed with her consciousness

illusive reality

Dhruvi Acharya picked up her paintbrush out of her need to reconnect with familiarity. She had spent her childhood in Mumbai, but marriage took her to the US where she faced a bit of a culture shock. Her longing for homely surroundings and their comforting solidity could only be dealt with through the painted image.



"It was a sense of being alienated, without friends and family, that led me to paint seriously. Before that, I enjoyed painting as a hobby. But it was only when a serious dialogue developed between the canvas and myself that I realized how much I love to paint," says Dhruvi.

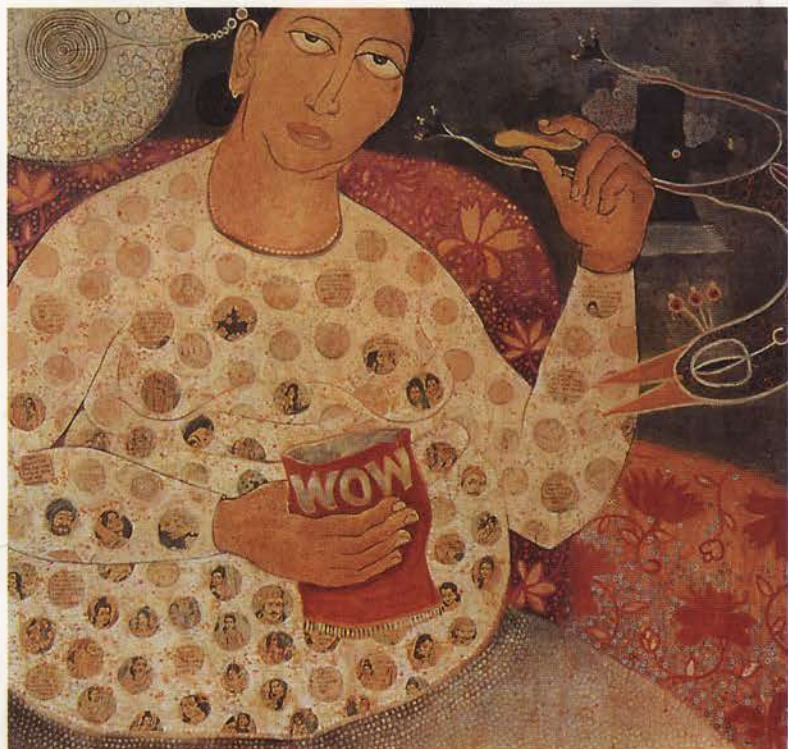
Getting serious about her work, Dhruvi considered a formal art education. The Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, accepted her application and she went there to study under the tutelage of Grace Hartigan. "As I explored new techniques in painting, I realized that although my paintings began with my personal experiences, they



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also embraced symbols and content that touched on many other broader issues. But looking at them now, I find that they are still anchored in the issues related to the initial experience that I was dealing with at that time," she says.

Dhruvi culls out motifs that become symbolic of recurring thoughts and emotions. For instance, her 'wingless' birds are trapped in the paradox of flight and are bereft of freedom. "Happiness is illusory. One can never be completely happy because it is inherent in human nature to long for something else," she says. Another symbol that recurs in her paintings is the lotus. Hindu mythology has connected this flower to the gods and it has thus become an accessory to wealth, purity and knowledge. Dhruvi reclaims it as a personal symbol



of female sexuality.

Though true to her idiom, Dhruvi is not closed to exploring new territory. Her recent works draws on popular imagery. Cuttings from *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, which are represented as tiny speech bubbles, float around the female protagonist. A plethora of images swirl around her; everyday women gossip and

perform chores around the ambit of her consciousness.

In a contemporary world where the temple and the market merge, Dhruvi has many sources for inspiration. "I refer to the Indian miniatures, to contemporary life and pop culture... the list is endless. To a large extent, women assume many roles; there is a day-to-day reference to this duality of

tradition and modernity. They may perform a *puja* in the morning and go dancing at night," she laughs. Although her work is essentially weaved around her feminism, Dhruvi does not position herself as a 'feminist artist'.

Her recent paintings also deal with her experience of motherhood and her ten-month-old son's birth. "Nothing make ones more

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aware of the physical contortions that the body undergoes than motherhood," says Dhruvi. This explains why many of her works that deal with this phenomenal change depict a headless body of a woman. Reminiscent of the ancient mother-goddess statues that were metaphors for fertility and birth, Dhruvi's women are both humorous and empowering.

The discovery of her narratives is quite spontaneous since she never starts out with a given agenda. "In a way, my work is like a visual diary where I record my dialogues and experiences with life. I never start out with a conscious decision to make a 'statement' about gender politics. It so happens that many of the incidents are unique to being a woman – like having to leave one's home or giving birth," she points out. From the languid women, full of longing, to the more confrontational fertility goddesses, Dhruvi's realm is, nonetheless, defined by her femininity. @

(Georgina Maddox is a feature writer with The Indian Express.)

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high lights
The lotus recurs as symbol in her paintings as a personal symbol of female sexuality.

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