

# in vogue

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art

## comics tripping

Artist Dhruvi Acharya battles with supervillains to make the world a better place, writes **Rituparna Som**. Photographs by **Manmeet Bhatti**

A large woman on a couch is munching WOW chips. Her clothes are neatly patterned in circles with sketches from the Indian comic book series *Amar Chitra Katha*. The series narrates stories from Indian mythology of nubile damsels in distress, macho gods coming to their rescue and family feuds solved by patriarchal heads. One of the circles contains a woman frowning prettily, contemplating an arranged marriage; one has a bed of nails, another make-up. It's a painting—a highly detailed one by artist Dhruvi Acharya. With a few brush strokes, Acharya makes a telling statement on the expectations heaped on a woman by society. It's a depressing sight to see this single woman eating her way through a bag of chips (WOW chips were a fat-free variety introduced in the mid-Nineties that proved controversial because one of its ingredients, olestra, led to stomach cramps and diarrhoea) while her miserable life is sketched out in detail on her clothes. Her efforts to improve herself are reflected in the bottles of make-up, the lack of a sex life mirrored in the bed of nails and the impulse to get

**State of art**  
Dhruvi Acharya surrounded by her portrayals of women

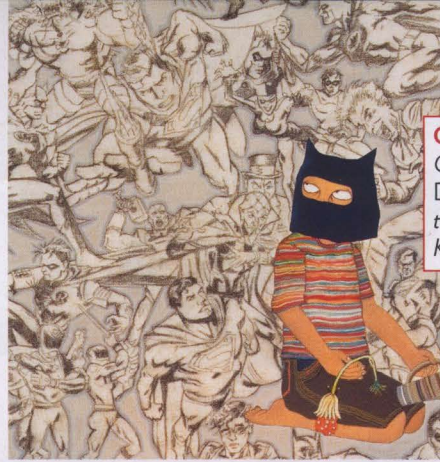


married through the frowning damsels. The colours and comic book illustrations, however, contradict the melancholy.

Acharya started painting while a student of fine art in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute. Missing home, she filled her drawing books with multi-layered sketches of India. "I applied to universities and suddenly everything fell into place," she says. She met her husband at a wedding; he proposed after nine days, they were married nine months later and then moved to Washington, DC, where she commuted two hours a day to college. "I was travelling 10 hours a week—that's almost a workday by itself," she grimaces. "So I moved closer to university and met my husband over the weekends."

The shift was more than a geographical one. Acharya came from a joint family and a house that was always full of relatives. She married into a nuclear family and found herself in America, sometimes snowed in for a week with just a television for company. "I've never been as prolific as I was that week," she laughs. Her first canvases were busy, spilling over with details. *Watching* (1999) has Lord Krishna sitting alongside Acharya watching TV. "I felt like God was with me no matter where I was," she explains simply. The background is littered with lotuses and peacock feathers, a rich canvas spilling over with everything that linked her to India. Her later canvases are different—there is usually just a single protagonist against a background that is more restrained. She moved back to India after the birth of her two sons, Malhar and Aman. It was a shift once again; she was not the person who had left India 10 years earlier. Her show in 2004, *Figment*, was based on internal quarrels and dualities, always a solitary female figure pondering her choices.

Not that the caricatured figure is Acharya; she's very clear about the difference. Her canvases emerge from sketchbooks that never leave her side and work as daily records of her life. "I went through a new experience when I was pregnant; it reflected in my work. The women got wider bellies, and I realised that my thoughts—the anxiety and the joy of having a child—were a shared experience. It became not only my pregnancy, but preg-



### Canvas alert

Clockwise from right: Dhruvi's sketches; On the fast track; Wham! Kerplon! Splat! Bam!



nancy in general. It led to the *Woman, Mother, Goddess* show in 2002."

After the birth of her children she rediscovered her childhood stories, which, together with her sons' Batmans and Supermans, led her to start referencing the graphics of a comic book in her work. "I knew those *Amar Chitra Kathas* so well. I had accepted them as the truth—all those perfect waists and little clothes. Oh, please! It was like the Barbie doll myth." Her initial interest lay in the portrayal of women through the ages. She subverted the images from the *Amar Chitra Kathas* to make her point. "There's so much to express but there are no words sometimes. So the thought bubble becomes very symbolic of what the character was thinking about."

Soon, her work reflected the anxieties of raising a child. The Acharyas still don't have cable TV, a move to protect the kids from on-screen violence. One of the first in the comic book-inspired series *Two Plus Two Equals* (September 2006) was a painting of a masked child watering an uprooted plant, looking over his shoulder at a gamut of superheroes and supervillains. "He expects the superheroes to protect him, but there are enough bad guys among them to make him doubt that. This is the reality a kid grows up in."

Technical reinvention is always on

Acharya's mind. She started off inspired by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's super-flat technique, using layers of solid colours. She then started to layer thematically, and eventually moved on to collage. For her upcoming show in 2008 at Nature Morte in Delhi, she uses charcoal and is contemplating adding sculpture.

It's this ability to continuously reinvent herself and render melancholic thought in a playful manner that makes Acharya's works so rich. *Mumbai 11/7* from *Two Plus Two Equals* looks like a beautiful starburst at first glance. A closer inspection reveals that it is in fact dismembered body parts lying among splatters of blood.

Acharya's works emerge from her acute response to the world she lives in. The average Indian woman's position in society intrigues her—doing pujas in the morning and going clubbing at night. "As a child I watched my mother cover her head in public. She would eventually wear whatever she wanted as I grew up. That change has happened in a short time—30 years. I'm aware of this life existing around me, even if I don't experience it firsthand." This aesthetic sense emerging from years of casual analysis makes most of Acharya's works statements of gender politics. Except that they're rendered in delightful, colourful and comic detail. ■