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A Moment of Requiem

Spending time at artist Dhruvi Acharya's studio in Mumbai as she readies herself for her first solo exhibition in six years is like walking through a world of memories, of lives lived, lost and then reclaimed

SUNIL MEHRA

Photographs by Anushree Fadnavis/Indus Images

As my cab cruised to a halt opposite the sea-facing Sagar Darshan building in posh, upmarket Breach Candy in South Mumbai, I found myself thinking that this seems like the most unlikely place for an artist's studio. But then, this was the address Dhruvi Acharya had given me. As the lift silently cruised to her fifth floor apartment, I was, to put it mildly, a tad intrigued.

Dhruvi – petite, slender, short-haired, gamine, all high cheek bones and sparkling intelligent eyes – opened the door, greeted me warmly and ushered me into her apartment. I walked through the L-shaped entrance corridor, the walls covered with assorted artworks, and slam-banged into a living room with a floor-to-ceiling window at its far end with a clear view of the sea and swaying palms beyond. Absolutely nothing

obstructed that view which made me, the Dilliwala from the dusty, diesel plains, gasp in sheer delight. It was like walking into a painting. Natural light flooded into the tastefully appointed room that probably glows luminous orange and russet at sunset. As Dhruvi busied herself organising a *chai* for me, I sauntered into the entrance corridor again with a large Atul Dodiya limited edition print, a Nalini Malini print with hand drawings, a cluster of Shreyas Kalre's works and a large striking grey and black canvas by American artist Greg Emory opposite the entrance door. The very lived-in living room, where I sat, was an art buff's delight. Very informal American setting: two large comfortable couches upholstered in muted grey with multiple, seemingly assorted but tastefully handpicked cushions;

a large centre table with a split-open papaya, meticulously sculpted in wood by Mayadhar Sahu and smaller side tables laden with interesting bric-a-brac; tiny white sculptures of heads by Vidha Saumya in a red lacquer tray; and the tidy row of tiny bottles filled with different coloured granules in the shelving below. On the wall opposite the couches was a giant explosion of colour on an 8-ft by 8-ft canvas by Os Gêmeos, the hugely talented Brazilian twin brothers, that Dhruvi and her late film director husband Manish discovered and bought from in New York. 'We fell in love with it! Of course, we had to take out the window of the living room, hoist it up five floors from the front of the building to get it into this living room. There was no other way to bring it in but I'm so glad we got it. I can never get tired



Dhruvi Acharya

looking at it,' Dhruvi smiles. At the far end was a large joint work by New York-based Chitra Ganesh and Dhruvi made as a fun project at her studio, a viewing of which led Girish Shahane to invite them for a 'joint painting performance' as part of the India Art Fair, Delhi, 2015. On the wall behind me were hung some exquisite works on rice paper by Kochi-based Siji Krishnan, apart from works by Arun KS, Anant Joshi, K K Raghavan and Dhruvi herself. 'You're only seeing works of artists I love and can afford, not of all the ones I'd love to live with,' she chuckles as she offers me tea. A remark that begs the question – so who exactly are her favourites? 'Oh, Julie Mehretu, for one,' she answers. 'I admire her skills, the scale of her works, the precision and finish... I'm not sure but she apparently has 25/30 assistants

but it takes something to have it all fall together so beautifully. The 23-ft by 80-ft mural she did for Goldman Sachs is incredible!

Our cuppa done, Dhruvi walks me to the adjacent bedroom now converted into her studio. Like the living room, the studio, too, is flooded with natural light and looks out to the sea – dream workspace for any artist. As soon as you enter, you see a long rectangular table atop which sits a huge computer monitor. This is where she composes her paintings after first scanning her final drawings – she discards, maybe, 30 drawings before selecting one to scan that is then converted into a painting. To the left are two large tables laden with assorted acrylic paints, water colours, glazes, primers, sepia, inks, and multiple brushes. Stacked along the walls are many

framed paintings and a large multi-panel work-in-progress for her first solo exhibition in six years that opens at Chemould Gallery on October 13. At the base of the monitor are a row of post-its with reminders, notes to herself and axioms: 'If something is not working get rid of it/NO exception/Be prepared to start all over if that's what's needed/Get critical'. Another post-it is a to-do list for the stunning installation she's devised for the forthcoming exhibition: 'Work on wood/Accordion books/Clothes/Hangers/Pen/Pencil/Doors/Windows/Art frames/Mirror/Floor/Ceiling/Lights.' I step into the attached wash-room and do a double take. Was Keith Haring just here? The white walls of the black tiled bathroom are chock-a-block with doodles, drawings and scribbles!

This studio, then, is the space where Dhruvi conjures her quirky, inventive, wry, often autobiographical dreamscapes peopled by often obese, square-jawed women that could be characters out of a Pedro Almodóvar film. Her fantastical characters with pods and plants sprouting from their heads or empty speech bubbles hovering overhead are figurative, yes; but not remotely in a mimetic, representational genre – they're flat, stylised. Humour, for her (like for people who she admits to being hugely inspired by *a la* Larry Pitman, Takashi Murakami) is an artistic device, an instrument for making lacerating sociopolitical comments. But it wasn't always so.

The brilliant Sophia College applied arts gold medallist trained for a career in advertising and commercial art, quite fancied a three-day advertising/three-day 'pure art' week as a career option. That is, until a whirlwind romance and marriage to film director Manish Acharya (then working in a software start-up concern in the United States) happened and she found herself one snowy January in remote Fairfax, Virginia, from where they were to move to Bethesda and then New York. The numbing isolation of American suburbia, the sudden withdrawal from a fruitful busy life in Mumbai to a country where she wasn't working or mobile (no American driver's license, yet) led her to seize upon the only skill she could keep herself occupied with: painting. 'And that's how it started!' she laughs. 'I became so homesick. I painted images of familiar stuff: my bedroom, the

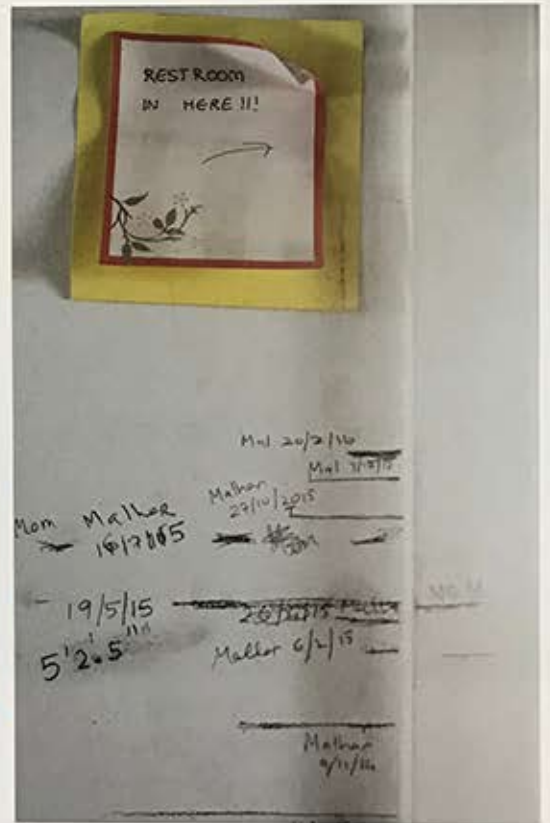
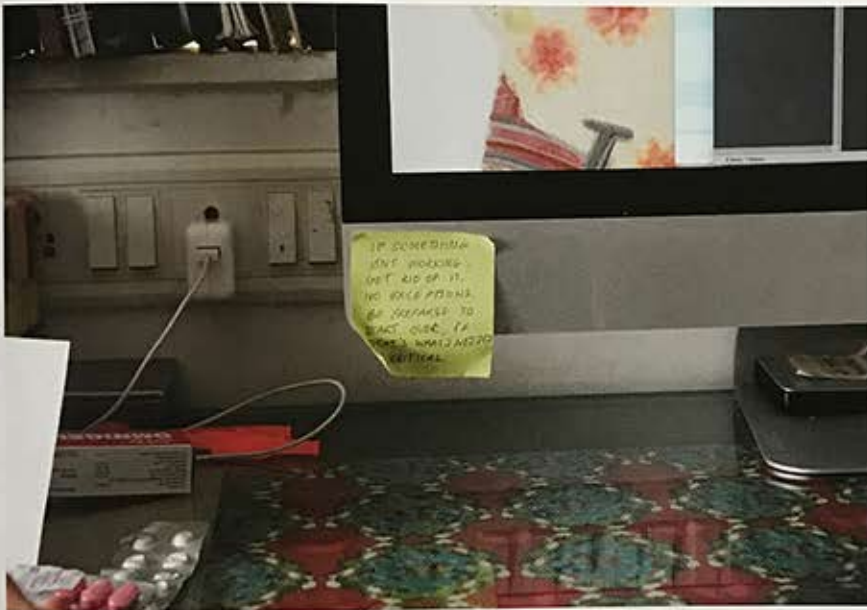
floor plan of my Mumbai home. I realised that's what I wanted to do. Looking back, I think it was sentimental, melodramatic work. But that's ok. It was real life for me: I did miss my family, friends, home. That was me. Then.' She seems to make light of the work that the faculty at the prestigious Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute, College of Art, found compelling enough to choose her for one of the six seats available. Grace Hartigan, who headed the programme, proved to be an incisive critic; thought-provoking critiques and questions about her work from visiting faculty like Raoul Middleman and Archie Rand helped enormously in distilling her practice. She graduated from small form works she had hitherto confined herself to, to a six-foot canvas that moved an overwhelmed Hartigan to remark tearfully, 'Now, you're a Master!'

It was a fecund time. Her thesis show was an unqualified success. It also became her first solo gallery show. It sold out! 'It was a huge surprise. A pleasant one!' she laughs.

The time at the Art School, the art she saw and absorbed, radically altered both her artistic precepts and practice. 'Seeing the Padshahnama at the Smithsonian was an incredible experience. The patterning, composition, detail, that flat rendition of perspective...' That influence resonates and is evidenced repeatedly in her meticulous detailing, patterning and decorative flair. In fact, at her

Chemould Mumbai show in 2008, critics like Girish Shahane remarked on how in some of her works 'patterns of fabric appear to lift off figures and take on a life of their own'.

But, while in America, it was her chance sighting of Larry Pitman's layered, whimsical, very contemporary work that combined elements of graphic design, textile design, even disjointed typography that triggered her eureka moment. 'I realised what was missing in my work was a lightness. Also, my work wasn't contemporary enough – there was nothing to mark the time/context of the work; nothing from the "present" seeping in.' It was time to change tracks. Californian graffiti artists Margaret L Kilgallen and Barry McGee, too, proved to be artistic triggers. Critic Nancy Adajania, writing in 2006, found kinship between their work and Acharya's 'use of a layered approach and the positioning of a central figure against backgrounds of drips, patterns and colour fields'. Takashi Murakami's psychedelic flowers and bright colours too influenced her greatly. Sentimentality was given a conscious go-by in favour of humour, caricature, graffiti art, her own absorption and new-found passion for miniatures and the decorative arts. It was a considered decision. 'What do you enjoy in a film? Drama, yes. Melodrama? No! It doesn't stay with you. But when it's subtle, when it's humourous, you connect with it more, think about it longer; you think back and reflect on the nuances,' she says.





Post her graduation, her time in New York was characterised by a certain driven-ness. Full-term pregnant with son Malhar she was still working when her waters broke. The New York show, and this was becoming quite the norm with her, was a sell-out. 'I did a painting which had this woman eating WOW chips. 'Fat free' they advertised it as, made with Olestra – the magic ingredient that meant zero calories as it bypassed your gut. What they didn't say was it leached your body of nutrients'. That fat woman eating chips was a biting social comment on women's body issues being looked at through a patriarchal lens. 'Take this Burkini business,' she exclaims. 'Why is a woman's body always a battlefield?' Other images were

self-referential: a woman on a couch, watching TV, eating junk food, with a crowned, blue-bodied Krishna seated alongside her: both providing comfort of a kind. 'Being brown in a sea of white, that sense of alienation crept into my work,' she recalls. The complexion of her works changed in tandem with her concerns and her altered inner landscape. Shahane observes how the artist 'by degrees eliminated culturally loaded colours from her palette. Hot pink, deep blue, vermilion and turmeric gave way to less saturated hues such as russet, olive, grey green and dark coral'.

In 2003, with eight-month-old Malhar in tow she arrived in Mumbai. 'It was a conscious decision. We wanted our children to spend time with family instead

of being isolated in the United States.' Which is when *Woman/Mother/Goddess*, her first solo in India happened. 'Sleep was not on my list! I was nursing Malhar day and night but I'd applied for a showing at Jehangir, Mumbai two-and-a-half years ago. They offered me a show. I decided I wasn't passing up my chance.' It marked a quantum shift in her work. Amar Chitra Katha blurbs as backdrops with her grotesque woman figure fore-grounded, it questioned sexist Indian patriarchal attitudes and social prejudices. For the Gujarati girl from a conservative business family it was a milestone moment. 'Anyone living away from home tends to look back, re-examine, question. Some things are good. Some are not. You reject those.' Her subsequent



shows (Chemould Gallery, Mumbai, snapped her up post this Indian sell-out show) like *Figment* in 2004 depicted the constant jugglery between her roles as Wife/Woman/Mother/Professional Painter. The 2006 show titled *2 Plus 2 Equals* critiqued the menacing social context, highlighted her growing concern for children like her own growing up in an atmosphere of atavistic violence. It was also a look at equitable, democratic parenting. It featured some light-hearted works any parent would immediately identify with – a woman in dialogue with an unseen other foregrounded against theme songs that echo across all households with growing kids: 'Brush your teeth/Your teeth will fall off/Eat your veggies....!' The 2008 *One Life on Earth* show with the environment as its theme had stark images: like that of the multiple-eyed woman foregrounded against a background of names of lethal chemicals. 'You react to the poverty, the toxicity in the air, the daily problems you encounter and we all talk about it. My evolving concerns as citizen, parent and mother also echo in the work'.

As did widowhood, in her recent work, after she tragically lost husband Manish in December 2010 in a freak accident. 'All the cruel things well meaning people say like "It all happens for the best"... I also got to thinking about the fate of urban, educated, metropolitan women like me and how different is my reality from that of that poor widow in Varanasi,' she says. Some powerful works emerged from that mind space as she extended the self examination and rumination: the arduous emotional and psychological processes of reconstructing one's self and to again live a purposeful life.

On the threshold of her solo in Chemould, Dhruvi is in a quieter, more assured space. The studio is quieter. The boys at 15 and 13 are discovering Other Rooms, Other Wonders. 'Mom is here. Now working, uninterrupted. They know they can pop by anytime'. The new works? Stunning. Canvases, water colours, a 16-foot panel, enough to fill the large gallery space. The highlight? In a room with the ceiling and floor covered in white cloth, mattresses on the floor – a poignant installation of soft sculptures depicting a bedroom with bed, duvet, with art frames for the walls, a dresser, mirror, 20 books (titles like Loss, Father, Bliss) on the book rack, study table with pencil, pen, doors, windows with painted fabric drops, other accoutrements. All stitched in white fabric. To float mid-air like a suspended dream. It's a document: A Chronicle of Loss, An Aching Void with a bed strewn with thorns, again made with cloth. 'The hardest thing was to wake up to that empty space beside you on the bed,' she says quietly. The wallpaper is 1,550 drawings made over the past 20 years; the bedspread, too, is imprinted with drawings. An installation that is at once record, tribute, evocation, summary, obituary, requiem and ode to a moment in time, a life together, now past.

Which you look at. To be renewed again.



● **Man and Women,**
Synthetic polymer paint
on unprimed canvas,
36" x 72", 2016. Image
Courtesy of
Dhruvi Acharya.

● **Thoughts & Words,**
Synthetic polymer paint
on unprimed linen,
42" x 42", 2016. Image
Courtesy of
Dhruvi Acharya.

● **Trunk,** Synthetic
polymer paint on
unprimed canvas,
36" x 36", 2007. Image
Courtesy of
Dhruvi Acharya.

● **Wham! Kerplonk!
Splat! Bam!,** Synthetic
polymer paint on
unprimed canvas,
24" x 24", 2006. Image
Courtesy of
Dhruvi Acharya.