



Men & Women



Awakening



Memories

Taming the memory machine

Dhruvi Acharya, who lost her father and husband in the same year, emerges with a remarkable exhibition about the resilience of the human spirit

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At artist Dhruvi Acharya's sea-facing home at Breach Candy, a large installation that is still in the making sits in the corner of the living room. The soft sculptural bedroom titled, "what once was, still is, but isn't", takes you into the intimate shared space. "The bed has been part of my work since ever I got married 21 years ago. It's where you rest and recuperate, where you read and even mope," she ponders.

The work that will occupy an 18 x 20 room, along with 27 paintings and 51 works on paper, is part of Acharya's exhibition, "after the fall", at the Chemould Prescott Road gallery in Fort, starting October 14. The show is a strong narrative on dealing with the mental processes in coming to terms with pain and loss. "After the fall comes winter, then spring, and then summer, and then back to the fall. Much like life really. Nothing is permanent," she philosophises. "You fall down, and you get up. The works are about that — how one confronts personal loss and tragedy. The works address the mental transfor-

mation that takes place when something happens that you can't understand, can't believe or can't fathom."

The year 2010 was much like that. Acharya met with two personal tragedies. In March that year, a day after the opening of her New York solo show, she was asked to cut short her trip and return home only to

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find that her father was no more. In December, she lost her husband and best friend of 16 years, filmmaker Manish Acharya, in an accident. "When you lose your life partner, the bed — once a haven becomes also a space of great discomfort. I wanted to create an ethereal space that explored that feeling and that's where the idea of making a bedroom sculpture came from," she shares. "It was a time when I could not understand reality. When people lose

someone very close to them, they still expect the person to show up. It is nothing unusual."

Working on the show has almost been a cathartic experience in order to come out of a tragedy and lead a more purposeful and meaningful life again. "The loss doesn't disappear, but you pick yourself up, attend to your duties and you move on," smiles the mother of two teenage boys, Malhar and Aman.

Her work, *Awakening* — you find a woman lying next to a pool of red on the right, trace her mental anguish on the left and then find her at the centre 'awakening' — is an illustration of this thought. "When I painted the work, I was thinking about this Hindi phrase, 'ghar ujad gaya'. Around the same time, the Syrian bombing was happening. You realise, it's not just you, but the whole world is dealing with loss" says the 44-year-old. "In 2011, when I was in Tokyo to get away from life, I was stuck in the aftermath of the Tsunami for five days. That experience made me understand how transient life is. Even people there would have lost their partners, but then also lost their homes,

maybe family and friends. My paintings may start with a personal experience, but the end result includes things I read, see or hear about that brings a deeper understanding of the initial emotion."

Another painting titled, *Men & Women*, also looks at the macro issue of what may seem as micro concern. Phrases such as 'your husband has died so may as well you die', 'wear a coarse white sari', 'you are bad luck' are inscribed on the painting. Inspired by the *India Matters: The Women of Vrindavan* documentary that traces the life of widows in Mathura, the work speaks about societal prejudices against women who have lost their husbands. "I wasn't blamed for my husband's passing away. I was earning. I had a supportive set of friends and family. My mother has been a strong role model. But not every woman finds the emotional and financial support, and I know this happens in every society," she says of the layered narrative.

Acharya's work has always been about tracing memories. As a Master of Fine Art student of Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore, "I was really homesick and I began painting my memories of home, growing up and even the floor plans of my school. I had not planned to become a professional artist, but my thesis show was also my first gallery show, and I have been lucky enough to be working since then" she says.

Memories includes floor plans of the 10 homes Acharya has lived in after she married Manish. "It is very much a personal journey, but half of it is erased because I keep putting layers of paint and scratching them off. You can't tell the whole story, but that's symbolic of how our memories are, they fade away," she explains.

