

Fall, rise, repeat

After eight years, Dhruvi Acharya presents an aching intimate solo show that explores her own loss and looks at women as independent individuals



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On one of the walls of Chemould Prescott Road, Dhruvi Acharya's diptych titled 'Woman and Men' (2016) unfolds a violent but familiar story. A woman, a new-age gun-slinger in wedge heels and a rifle strapped to her back, faces off three men, each holding flowers in one hand and a gun in the other. While this makes for an explicit story, one cannot ignore the almost Comic Sans style text that graffiti's both panels: On Her panel, it reads "Your husband died, but you're still living. You don't have to wear white..." On the other, "Your husband died so you may as well die... sati abolished? Then be a living sati. You are bad luck." And so it goes, outlining two diverse realities that women must contend with, from sections of family and society at large, upon the death of their husbands. This thought process continues to exist, and remains to negate the life, feeling and emotional work of women as individuals. Acharya would like us to take this away from *After the Fall*, her first solo in India after a gap of eight years. The show features paintings, drawings and Acharya's first foray into the sculptural with a large installation resembling a room.

Life in a decade

The premise to the show is encapsulated in a Japanese-inspired scroll in a vitrine by the door. Those paying attention will remember the scroll (and its placement) from the last of the five shows that Gayatri Sinha curated for the gallery's 50th anniversary, *Aesthetic Bind: Floating World*. Titled 1993-2013, the scroll is not only an autobio-

graphical visual diary of a decade in Acharya's life, it also tells us about the impetus to make the show. The now 40-something Acharya begins her art career, meets and marries filmmaker Manish Acharya, and the couple has two kids in the ten years she features. In 2010, the story goes dark when her husband passes away after falling off his horse. The next part of the scroll is eviscerating. How do you help your kids make sense of this tragedy, when they ask, 'How come Kasab's alive but dad died?'. Acharya's scroll is an exquisite portrayal of the best and worst moments of her life, one that will leave you untouched, and instead will reach in your mind for condolence that does not sound trite.

Women and work

Acharya fills the gallery with drawings — sketches co-mingle with watercolours which share space with larger canvases — that speak not only of pain and loss, but also healing and cobbling together strength in the face of bone-weary loneliness. She brings out not just stories (as in 'Woman and Men') but also the emotions she herself, and many other women, have to go through when they set out, through choice or circumstance, to live life on their own. Take 'Awakening', the largest work in the show. Acharya employs a comic-book style for this exhibit, with speech and thought bubbles, some familiar-looking characters, splitting painting into panels like comic books. The three-panel work shows a woman rising out of the mess of the city. The speech bubbles are used to scream a cloud of awful into the sky, to gather from that cloud of awful



EXPLORING EMOTIONS: Dhruvi Acharya's works on display show a maturity and strength in extending a personal tragedy to encompass those of women less fortunate in family and friends than her. — PHOTOS: PRAASHANT NAKWE AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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good things that it seemed to ignore, and finally to sit with wings in a pose that could be ethereal if not for the determination and strength on her face. Throughout the show, one notices an abrupt

(and understandable) departure in Acharya's style. Her style, and figures employed remain more or less the same. However, the addition of comics-style elements, and the maturity and strength displayed in extending a personal tragedy to encompass those of women less fortunate in family and friends than the artist, makes all the difference. Additionally, it makes the work more accessible. One doesn't need

to know of Acharya's personal tragedy to understand she is questioning the Indian woman's place in modern India. While seeming forward looking, women and their rights constantly hold on to the past. As someone who grew up in a single parent home devastated by a similar tragedy, it's appalling to think that the things expected of widows in the 1990s continues to echo in 2016. And in the '90s, it already

was an echo of the '50s.

Charting different waters

The emotional landscape charted by the show takes a surreal turn in the 'Room'. In what is Acharya's first foray into the sculptural, she transforms a part of the gallery into a padded room that brought back memories of reading Charlotte Perkin Gilman's 1892 short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. In the story, a well-meaning hus-

band brings his wife, who has recently given birth, to a Colonial mansion for 'rest'. The wife grows increasingly isolated from the world in this 'rest period' and slowly descends into madness. A repetitive description of the room marks it as yellow, with missing patches of wallpaper, and a feeling of confinement that eventually drives the protagonist insane. While the story was intended as a critique of the place

given to women in medical and professional spaces, it comes to mind because Acharya builds a padded room, where everything is 'made safe' through padding, and then covered in a standardised off-white.

The walls are papered with sketches and drawings on paper that varies between shades of 'old': off-white, yellowy-white, yellowed white paper, and so on. To enter the room, one must shed their footwear. It adds to the hushed, careful atmosphere. As you study the (literally) hundreds of drawings on the wall, you can't help but think about the thin line between caring, and being careful. The former comes from love, the latter from fear, of love, of loss, and everything in between.

The room becomes a physical, tangible illustration of this caring/careful life that women, whether married, with child, or not, have to live with, because these emotional burdens are strictly Women Only. It speaks to the weight of expectations, and the pause they bring to women's lives, ambitions and hopes, to a point where it becomes path-breaking simply to say something not rubber-stamped by patriarchal tradition.

After the Fall is exquisite, personal and unabashed in its grief and in its strength. It shows the way, like a successful person's autobiography is supposed to show you the way, to being successful yourself. If you've loved, lost and picked up the pieces, we recommend you visit this exhibition and give it a high-five in solidarity.

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After the Fall is on at Chemould Prescott Road till November 19.