



The Universality of the human experience

I wish for my paintings what I have wished from the first completed canvas. When they are viewed the specifics of the stories and the meaning of each image become unimportant, and all that is felt and remembered is the universality of the human experience says Dhruvi Acharya. In conversation with **Dhanishta Shah**

VISITING the home of an artist gives you a delightful sneak-peek into his or her mindscape. Dhruvi Acharya's signature speech bubbles make a prominent appearance on her main door, as if inviting the visitor into her world. The house of the famed artist is laden with her work interspersed with other art. Being an avid reader her prized book collection is also on display. But it is her in-house studio that truly captures the ethos of the artist. It is by viewing the works in progress that one gets a unique inner glimpse of the artist.

The soothing sounds of the sea waves envelop the room as we talk. We start off by discussing her childhood, which mirrored that lived by girls from traditional Gujarati families. Born and brought up in South Mumbai, Dhruvi studied at Walsingham School (an all girls school, she emphasises) and then pursued commercial art at Sophia College (again an all girls, she asserts).

She was always academically brilliant. Contrary to prevailing attitudes at that time, she went ahead and pursued art. As she puts it, "despite doing very well in school." I cannot but notice that her recollections are laced with a pinch of her trademark wry humour that very successfully finds a space on her canvasses as well.

Dhruvi dwelt in this predictable comfort zone till she went abroad. Her world suddenly opened up when she



opted to study art in the United States. Her decision was a bit of a surprise to her as well, because though she had always been good at painting, she never really thought of it in terms of a career. She had thought of becoming a designer. "I also did an internship that involved designing. However, while giving me feedback on my work, my boss told me that I should keep in mind that his place was a design studio and that I was not working on a painting! I guess this was an initial pointer that painting was my love," she recollects.

However, it took another overwhelming experience to seal her choice of painting as her official profession. She experienced an intense longing for home during her sojourn in the U.S. The emotions of homesickness and yearning found their way on canvas. This was when she knew she had truly found her calling.

She received her Master of Fine Arts Degree from the Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore and completed her post baccalaureate from the same college. Dhruvi began



exhibiting her work professionally in 1998 in the U.S. where she spent over a decade.

It was her thesis show that got her noticed, landing her with an opportunity to exhibit solo right after graduation. She then applied to display her work in all kinds of shows and became a regular on the art circuit. "You have to be everywhere every time!" she says.

The journey with the brush and canvas, developed into a full-fledged relationship and has become the core of her creative self. "Painting for me is actually the way I make sense of the world. It all starts with my drawing books," she asserts. Her work is a powerful expression of her thoughts. After two intensely traumatic experiences—losing her husband and her father within months of each other—she took a solo trip to Florence and visited the Medici Chapel. "As I entered the chapel, I just knew I would be fine. I feel art has the power of making you feel positive. That is the power of the medium," she states.

Everything that affected her right from the initial homesickness, to the experience of pregnancy, motherhood, environmental consciousness and the experience of being a woman, is captured in her work. And from the personal it moves to the universal. For example, her experience of wheezing because of pollution in the city led her to create a series of paintings, some of which depict people moving with backpacks carrying fresh air, or exclusive clubs that are oxygen bars!

Amar Chitra Katha was also a huge part of her culture when she grew up. "After I moved to the U.S. and reread my collection, I realised that so many of our values and thoughts are shaped by what we read as children. For instance, take the concept of women as damsels in distress. I started using my medium to talk about things I felt strongly about," she explains. This is why many of her characters resemble these much-loved caricatures and her paintings have a comic strip element to them.

Another conspicuous feature of her work is the dark humour that she uses very effectively as a tool, something that not many artists do. "There was no humour earlier in my work. When I started, I feel my work was more serious and sentimental. As you grow older life teaches you things. How can you live without joy and laughter even in the worst circumstances? I now have the ability to step back and look at the situation with perspective. I think humor is a result of living," she reminisces.

This brings us to the role that art should play in life, which in a wider context would point to the role of an artist in society. "A successful work of art will bring joy, or make you think or make you question,"

she says.

Her home is surrounded with art. She believes that art museums are the new temples, where people find beauty and meaning. This is something that is coming straight from her heart. Personal tragedy has impacted her deeply but she refuses to wallow in self pity. "I think life is never fair. There is a lot of sadness around. So, I am never going to question 'why me?' Loss makes you more empathetic," she says.

Her life is boldly on track and she is steering it with confidence. She is excited about her latest show where she has experimented with a different medium—installations. The new body of work explores the themes of reconstructing one's self and returning to a purposeful life. It portrays the numbness, the disbelief and the deafening screams in one's head, where battles have to be fought in order to understand and accept a new, altered reality. But on a positive note it also portrays the resurrection of the self.

Her life revolves around her work and her two sons. After a morning swim, she is in the studio till the boys are back from school.

She hangs around with them and then it is back to painting. "I don't sit with a topic in mind. I just draw. Right now, I'm experimenting with my new sewing machine for an installation in the upcoming show," she points out.

While the installation is a first for her, she is very positive about the use of mixed media. "There is sound and light art as well as installations. Right now there is no specific movement in art. Everyone is doing what they feel like. I think that is really great. Once you break down barriers there is so much creativity," she says.

Where does she see her art in the future? "In people's homes I hope!" comes the quick reply. That is definitely true, but one thing I can vouch for, after one short meeting with her, is that what she really wants to do is to paint forever! ☺

