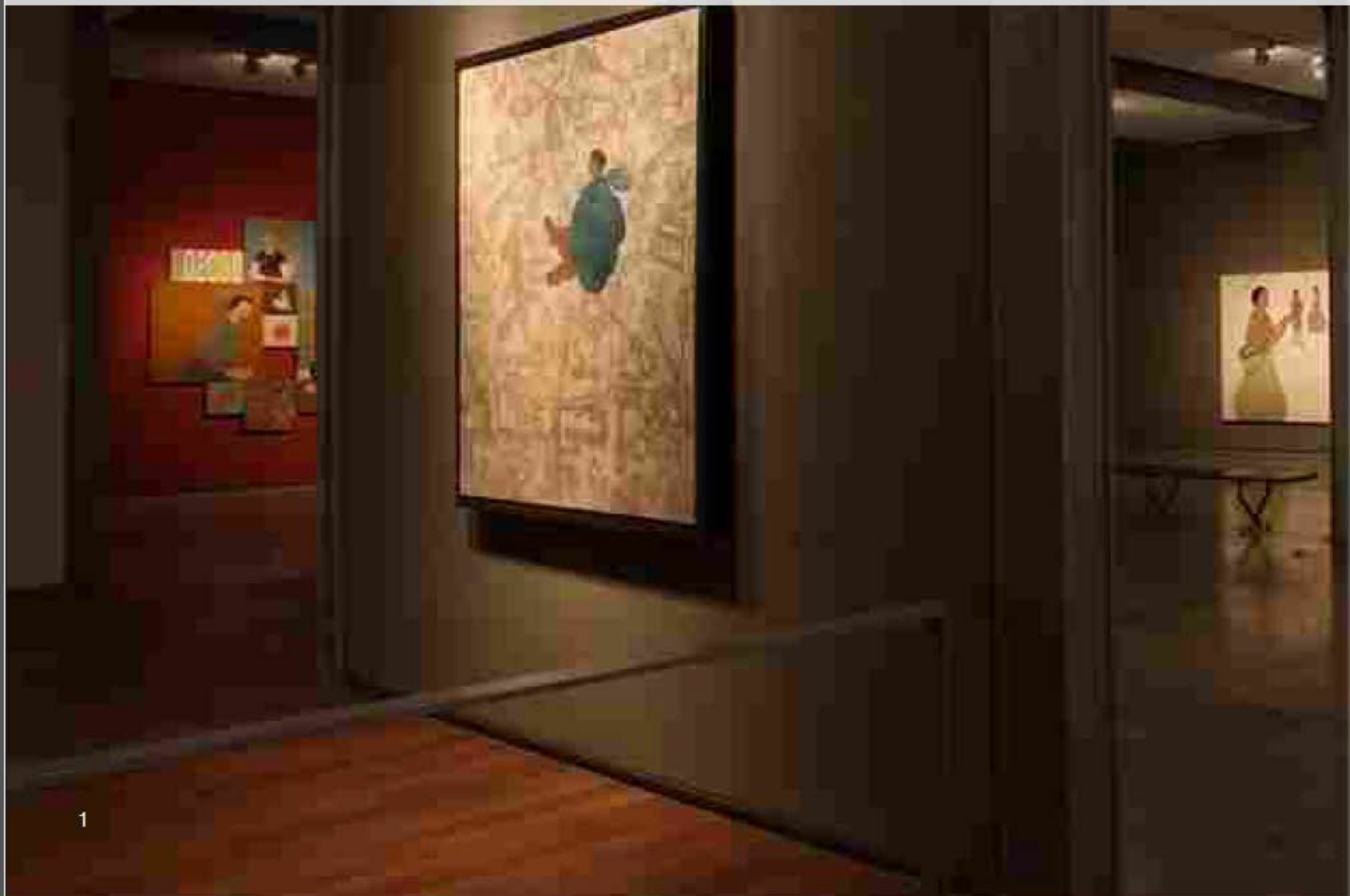


# FLOWER POWER IN DYSTOPIA

Any attempt to interpret Dhruvi Acharya's art is complicated by the fact that she seems to distrust words. The titles of a number of her paintings from previous exhibitions hint at this outlook: *Hot Air*, *Yap Yap*, *The Outburst*, *Words Like Water*, *The Poisoned Tongue*, the list goes on. Her alter ego sometimes features in these works with a speech bubble

emanating from her mouth, but it is invariably empty, as if she's at a loss for words in a world where the purpose of language has become to obscure rather than clarify. Perhaps she finds herself in Cordelia's position, unable to heave her heart into her mouth amid a plethora of glib avowals.



THAKUR, I AM TIRED OF PLAYING QUEEN! TAKE ALL MY MONEY AND PERMIT ME TO GO BACK TO MY PEOPLE.

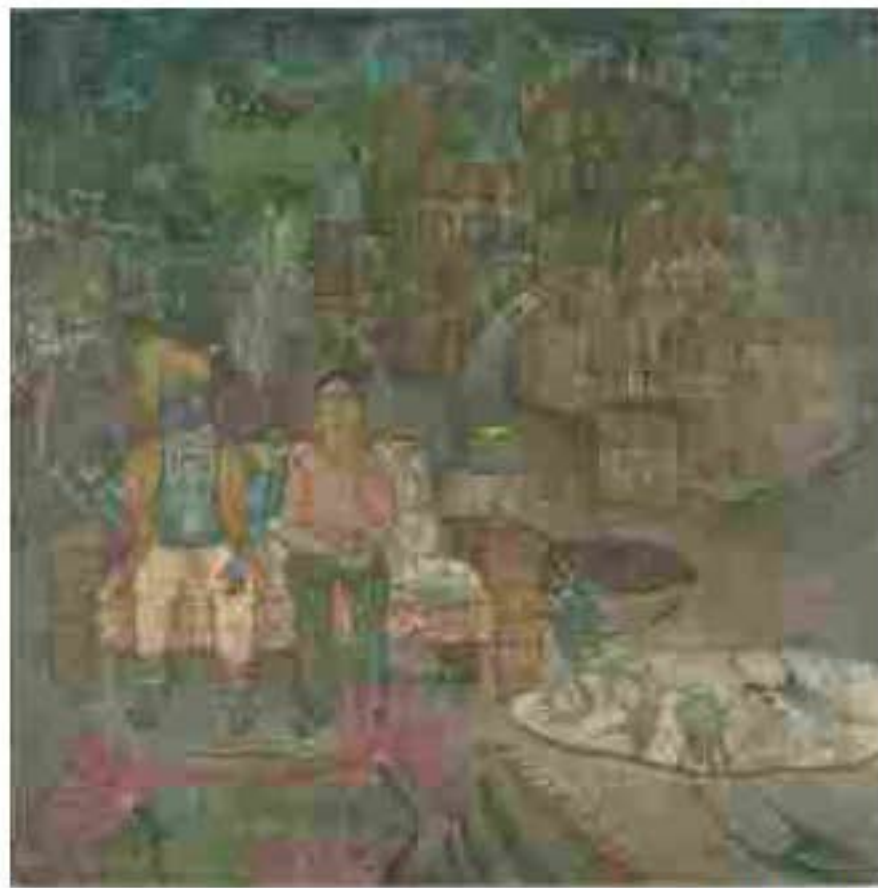
In three paintings from her latest show, *One Life On Earth*, Dhruvi intensifies her confrontation with language by reversing roles previously assigned to characters and speech. Appropriating the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics she loved reading as a child, she erases the protagonists while leaving much of the dialogue intact. Viewers confront a grid punctuated by words spoken by persons unknown. The first response is to treat each image as a puzzle, by trying to make narrative sense of it. Should it be read left-right or up-down? Are there names that can be identified, to assist in the decoding? The reading is frustrating because insufficient clues are provided for a clear story to emerge, and entertaining because many amusing non-sequiturs are engendered by the lacunae. The motive behind the selection of these particular bits of text soon

WHAT!... MY FATHER, AN INFORMER?





HOT AIR, 2002



WATCHING, 2000



APRIL 2000, 2000

becomes clear: as daughters, fathers, husbands and wives express love, anger, shame or joy, what comes through is the prejudiced social foundation on which their desires and expectations are built. Even the rebellion of the erudite and quick-witted Savitri

is grounded in a complete merging of her identity with that of her husband, so she feels her own life has ended with his death.

Dhruvi's perspective on cultural issues has undergone a significant shift in the course of the past decade. Her first mature paintings emerged while she was living in the United States. Yearning for the familiarity of Bombay, she crafted pictures tinged with nostalgia, in which references to India were generally affirmatory. Elegant birds and vivid lotuses enriched the home of her canvas counterpart, and Krishna sat reassuringly beside her as she watched television and ate junk food. Since returning to her birthplace, the artist has begun to question a civilisation which devalues women so greatly that the country now suffers one of the worst female to male population ratios in the world. *Words I, II and III* form her sharpest critique yet of traditional conservatism.

She has also, by degrees, eliminated culturally loaded colours from her palette. Hot pink, deep blue, vermillion and turmeric have given way to less saturated hues such as russet, olive, grey-green and dark coral. Instead of

filling every nook of canvas with flora, fauna or furniture, she has arrived at a sparer figuration, which is nevertheless far from the goals of minimalism. She remains committed to exploring decorative values through alluring images, but has now struck a different balance between immediate gratification and gradual revelation, as also between the influence of miniatures and classical murals on the one hand and of contemporary advertising and applied art, in which she received formal training, on the other.

One might summarise by stating that Dhruvi's paintings have moved in the direction of a more global, less ethnic look since her return to India. Paralleling this movement, *One Life on Earth* is concerned with a global crisis: that of environmental pollution and the dangerous warming of the earth through an excessive emission of greenhouse gases. The bulk of the show is composed of paintings set in an imagined future when the planet's air is no longer breathable and all vegetation has disappeared, presumably because of a climatic catastrophe. Within this dystopia, some humans adapt by growing botanical extensions which provide precious oxygen, while the rest, dependent on the mutants, become buyers, scavengers, hunters and harvesters. The origin of the series lies in a bout of breathlessness the artist suffered and respiratory ailments among people she knew, but all biographical references have been erased from the final images. Instead, the major points of departure appear to be Hollywood science fiction movies. One thinks of Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*, whose lead character has developed gills in response to an all-engulfing flood; Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, in which mutants are forced to stay inside a dome on the planet Mars by a ruler who controls the supply of air; and the Keanu Reeves hit *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowski brothers, where humans are harvested in factories even as their brains are plugged into an illusion of a rich and varied life.

*One Life On Earth*, however, looks and feels quite unlike these sci-fi flicks. For one thing, men have gone extinct along with birds, beasts and flowers. Viewers familiar with Dhruvi's output might not notice their absence because she has focused insistently on female figures, to a greater extent than even Anju Dodiya, the artist whose work comes



most readily to mind when thinking of precursors and peers. The annihilation of men significantly impacts the mood of *One Life On Earth*. Obviously, the patriarchal society with clearly assigned roles encountered in *Amar Chitra Kathas* no longer prevails. Neither does the adrenalin-pumping violence of action films. A reminder of the macho world is contained in two transitional paintings, *Sink* and *Float*, which consist of a central figure placed within a sea of fancy weapons and exaggerated sound effects. Those staples of superhero comics seem less like absurd caricatures than gruesome premonitions in the light of barbarous acts catalogued daily, hourly, minute by minute, in the mass media.

The post-apocalyptic world envisioned by Dhruvi may not display the same level of brutality, but is no haven of tranquility and cooperation. It consists of haves and have nots, women who have evolved and others who have to fill 'breath packs' with flowers to survive. The conflict between these two groups is the subject of the four-panel *Airfare*. At first glance, the large mutant on the left wielding a gun appears the prime aggressor, and the flower breather on the extreme right a



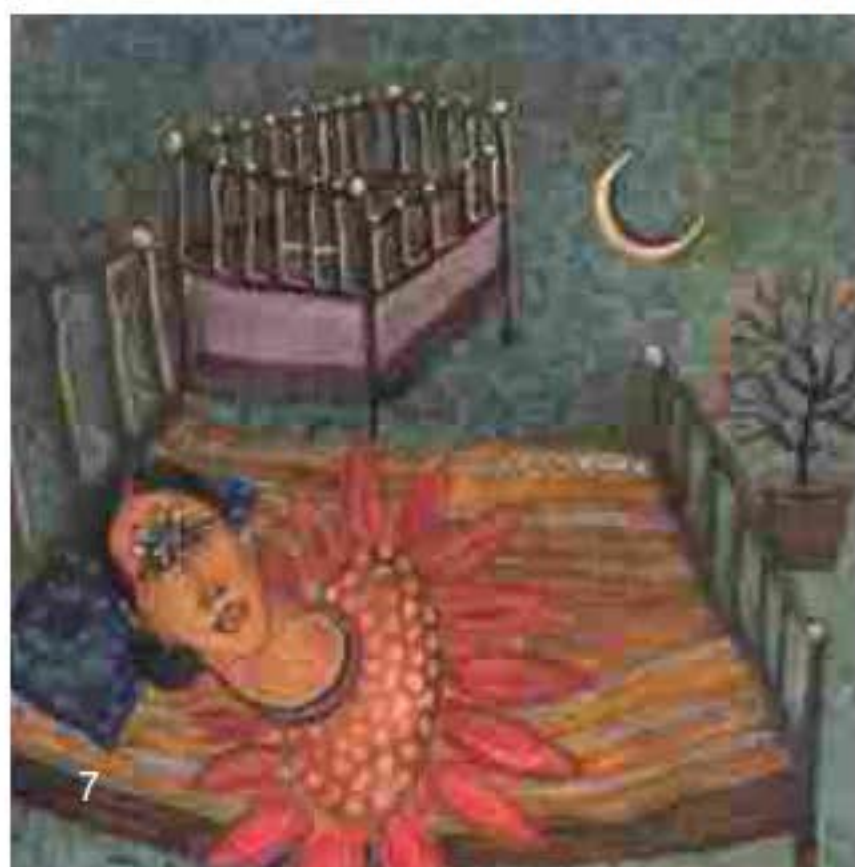
peacenik. The rest of the arrangement, however, manifests a contrary dynamic. A breath-pack carrier with red rimmed eyes has a band-aid wrapped around a finger where the long nail is missing: a battle wound of sorts. Another has spikes on her boots, dripping blood. A third looks up in mock innocence after having sliced the life-giving plant off the head of a half-buried prisoner.

There is little in the figuration differentiating oppressors from oppressed. Instead of identifying with one group we are encouraged to look dispassionately at the situation as a whole, a process which leads us to introspect about our complicity in the disasters threatening our existence. This is a refreshing contrast to the approach of many Indian artists who travel the easy route of hand-wringing in dealing with geopolitics, offering up images of wide-eyed innocents to extract pity in the way Hindi films in their heyday used to extract tears. It is also a signal development in the trajectory of an artist who was chided by Karin Miller Lewis, in a broadly sympathetic article published in *Art India* in 2000, for her attachment to "a sentimental longing for an irrecoverable past". *One Life On Earth* provides the very opposite: an unsentimental

vision of a calamitous future. There is nothing romantic about the protagonists any more. The pretty, perfectly oval faces of the early paintings have given way to squarish-jawed women with sinister, tired eyes. The line no longer traces a smooth arc from ear to chin, but ripples and quavers, creating asymmetries, unpleasant bulges and crevices. Many of the figures are grossly corpulent, reminding us of the addiction to consumption which feeds global warming. The obese women come across now and then as overloaded beasts of burden, again scrambling the categories of victimiser and victim.

Where characters bear resemblances to Dhruvi's early style, the changed context makes for a radical shift in meaning. Take the case of *Air Fair*, a 23 panel work that is certainly her most ambitious effort till date. It is a satirical piece, poking fun at the well-heeled community in which she was raised. Bombay's first oxygen bar was inaugurated barely a block from her home in posh Breach Candy, and is echoed in the Airdome whose breathable atmosphere is marketed in the breathless prose of contemporary copywriting. She knows the world of advertising well, having worked in an agency in the period between majoring in illustration from Bombay's Sophia Polytechnic and enrolling in the Maryland College of Art, where she went on to receive a post-Baccalaureate followed by a Master of Fine Arts degree. In *Air Fair*, she underlines the cold-bloodedness of an industry which is happy to put a gloss on the most exploitative practices; but she also acknowledges through emulation the profession's creative use of typography and design. One of *Air Fair's* components features a multi-eyed goddess

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, 2002



similar to a figure from a small canvas titled *In The Middle of the Night*, exhibited at Jehangir Art Gallery in 2002 as part of the show *Woman, Mother, Goddess*. In the earlier image, the many eyes of the woman signified nights spent awake taking care of her infant. Now she appears against a background filled with names of frightening-sounding chemicals, so her eyes seem less emblems of empowerment than consequences of unchecked pollution.

In a smaller composition from the current show, we see a woman with many breasts, which could have been interpreted as an allusion to the icon of the fertility goddess Artemis in the temple of Ephesus, had the body not come across as a monster rather than a deity. In these paintings, the archetypal identification of woman with nature has been turned on its head, as has the trans-continental motif of the part-human part-vegetal goddess.

In moving from personal to political subjects and from a sympathetic to a largely critical viewpoint, Dhruvi risked creating cold and distant pictures. She has averted the danger by employing wry humour to soften the nightmarishness of the subject, and by drawing viewers into a complex play of surface and depth through her characteristically meticulous application of pigment. The upper layer of the compositions is usually polished, evoking shellac, enamel or ceramic glaze, but panes of transparent gel offer a peek down onto bare canvas, matte understrata and contrapuntal hues. Patterns of fabric which sometimes appear to lift off the figures and take on a life of their own are evidence of her decorative flair, as is the most lyrical passage of the show, a delicate white-on-white band of flowers running across *Airfare*, ghost memory of a once-fecund world, now forever lost.



WOMAN WITH NAIL BAG, 12" X 9", 2008

A collection of watercolours serves as pendant to the group of acrylics. Included are preparatory studies as well as occasional portraits, digressions from and elaborations of the major themes holding the show together. When the canvases explore the grotesque, which falls somewhere between the comic and the freakish, the accent is usually on creating a degree of visceral discomfort. In the watercolours, amusement takes precedence over horror, something that is entirely appropriate because, in the one life we have on earth, there ought always to be room for laughter.