

Dhruvi Acharya's work unveils a world of femininity

■ After seven years in the USA, this Mumbaiite began painting out of a sense of longing for her familiar surroundings in India.

"It was only when I left home to live with my husband that I realised how much I loved to paint. I felt alienated without friends and family. I missed the old way of life," says Dhruvi Acharya. Having shown often in New York, she is having her first solo show in India, *Woman, Mother, Goddess*, showing at the Jehangir Art Gallery, from March 25-31.

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■ One painting led to many more. Acharya soon joined the Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, to study under the tutelage of Grace Hartigan.

"I discovered, that although my paintings stemmed from my personal experiences, they grew in symbols and content to encompass many other issues, that were inevitably related to my core experience," she says. Some recurring motifs are the 'wingless' birds, that gives an illusion of flight and freedom. "Happiness is illusory and human beings long for something else," she says. The lotus — though encoded with mythological significance of the gods — becomes a personal symbol of female sexuality for her.

■ In these works, she has included cuttings from the Amar Chitra Katha comics, which she has painted over.

Popular imagery — like the speech bubble and a constant reference to media — is weaved into her constant reference of religious iconography. "Although I am visually inspired by Indian miniatures, I take several

elements from contemporary life and pop culture. Women, especially, role-play in this constant duality. They may perform a *puja* in the morning and go clubbing at night," she explains. Addressing these parallel worlds, Dhruvi's women — who often take on vegetal, boneless shapes — float in a timeless narrative, that moves back and forth.

■ This particular show deals with her whole experience of motherhood.

"Motherhood led me to a new-found appreciation of the human body. I got in touch with the physical contortions that my

body underwent and discovered this well-spring of emotional and physical strength," says the artist, whose ten-month-old son's birth forms the focus of her recent body of work. Small format wood panels are painted with headless figures of women, whose bodies are metaphors for fertility and birth.

■ Yet, Acharya does not position herself as a feminist artist.

"I don't think gender defines my work. I never start out with the conscious decision to make a 'statement' about gender politics. Mine is more like a visual diary, where I record my dialogues and experiences with life. It so happens that many of the incidents are unique to being a woman — like leaving one's home or giving birth," she points out. From the languid women, full of longing, to the more confrontational fertility goddesses — Acharya's realm is, none-the-less, defined by her femininity.

— GEORGINA L MADDOX