



DHRUVI ACHARYA



AMANTA BATRA MEHTA



POOJA IRANNA



THE GERMINATION OF AN IDEA

And of a seed. Three young, women artists talk about fertility and motherhood, and how this life-altering process also changed their art and view of the world.

Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* may have just been a sensational, fast-paced thriller, but it did bring the notion of the sacred feminine to the foreground and introduced the world to a concept that has long been forgotten or considered esoteric.

The female form is akin to fertility and to life itself, and fertility goddesses, are associated with all civilisations, from the ancient Egyptian and Incan to that of the Indus Valley to present day cultures. The female was likened to a vessel that is the receptacle of life, but the significance was not merely of pregnancy and the propagation of the species or the genetic lineage. The powers of these goddesses extended to the land and the earth around, and they could bestow their blessings and fertility on their surrounds. Incidentally, nature was (and still is) always considered female—hence the term 'Mother Earth'.

Traditionally, in the depiction of fertility goddesses, it was the reproductive organs that were emphasised—the genitals, the *yoni*, the breasts, or even bulging torsos signifying pregnancy...something that is seen even today.

To be fertile and capable of producing and nurturing life is a magical thing. Artists have been depicting this for centuries...but to see art produced by a fertile or pregnant woman is quite another.

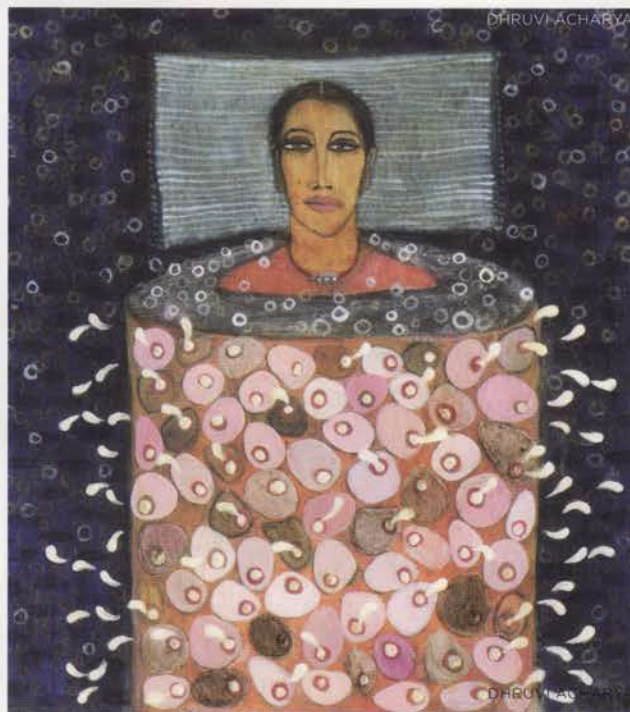
We talked to three young artists, all mothers, about their art, inspirations, fertility and motherhood. Dhruvi Acharya, Samanta Batra Mehta and Pooja Iranna may all have different styles and their work may be as different as chalk and cheese, but the bond of motherhood and the emotions they grappled with link them inexplicably.

What influences your work?

Dhruvi Acharya: My thoughts, emotions and observations, my experiences as well as those of others are all sources of my inspiration. I carry my drawing book almost everywhere—and I constantly draw about what I may think, read or see. These drawings are not autobiographical—for example, when I was pregnant I drew not only about my own pregnancy 'The Future is the Past is the Present,' 2000 and 'Hot Air,' 2004, but also about the birthing process in general as well as my growing appreciation for the process of creating a life—which led to creating works like 'Goddess of Birth', 'Goddess of Souls'. This then led to my show 'Woman, Mother, Goddess'.

Samanta Batra Mehta: The immediacy of my environment and my reaction to it has always been my inspiration. After I moved to New York in 2003, some of my work began to speak of identity, location, (dis)location and question the perpetuation of stereotypes through media. A lot of my work has been consistently informed by mystical writings, sacred geometry, creation myths; and the connectedness between the mind, body, the earth, creation and time. Much of my work explores the idea that empirical and intuitive disciplines share a united reality and are made up of the same constituent parts. I began to study traditional Byzantine Icon painting with Russian iconographers in New York, learning with it its 'inward looking' meditative practice. Icon writing also became point of departure from where I began to explore traditional materials such as earth pigments, minerals, egg, gold leaf and inks and the use of these materials to define the spiritual in art.

Pooja Iranna: I have always been inspired by architectural spaces around me. The old and the new spaces as they tell the story of man, the life they lead or have lead. I feel all spaces carry the vibes of people, and that I get very excited about. The spaces earlier were projected using different materials in my work. Later, I shifted to digital work to show architecture, and lately I have also been working in watercolours to depict my point of view. My images are devoid of human figures but talk about humans—their lives and their strength indirectly.



"A lot of my work has been consistently informed by mystical writings, sacred geometry, creation myths."
—Samanta Batra Mehta

Did you at some subtle level know that you were pregnant before tests confirmed it?

DA: Yes, but I can't explain it.

SBM: I knew right away from the moment I conceived that this was it. I actually felt it—for lack of a better way of describing it—I felt a seed being planted! For two nights in a row after that, I had vivid dreams about birthing which only reinforced what I already knew, and I told my husband about it. About 10 days later, I tested myself with an early result pregnancy test which yielded a positive result.

PI: I think I had my intuition telling me that I might be expecting and very much so especially with my second child.



POOJA IRANNA

The mother-child bond is very strong. Did you feel a deeper level of connection with your baby when he/she was so clearly a part of your work?

DA: I think my connection with my baby would have been there regardless of my work. But due to my work, I did get a chance to work through my dreams, hopes and emotions about the big change in my life before the babies came along, and about being a mother after he was born. Even today a lot of my thoughts and experiences about parenting inform my work—'L.O.C.', 'Wham! Kerplonk! Splat! Bam!', 'Riot', 'Barrel', 'Sword'...all 2006. Some of these were included in my show 'Two Plus Two Equals'.

S.B.M.: My work was borne of this connection not vice versa...but this connection, being deep as it is, I think has become a lifelong muse, which will continue to be manifested in my art-making

P.I.: The mother and child bond is really the strongest part of any relationship especially from the mother's side. Although my work as is devoid of human figures or any similar imagery, it has undergone a lot of transformation because of my children—but I find it difficult to pinpoint specifics. As I have understood my responsibilities, I have grown stronger from inside. I now realise and also relish the wholesome beauty of womanhood. It for me denotes strength, both inner and outer; it also shows confidence of self. It shows building of character. It shows outgrowing of all weaknesses and the ability to sustain pain and the building of energy. This entire feeling one can see and feel in the latest work that I am doing.

Once you had your baby did your work undergo another transition?

DA: In terms of content, I painted about the birthing process, about nursing and about my hopes dreams and thoughts of being a new mother. I was also inspired by my appreciation for all mothers. I finally understood and experienced 'unconditional love'.

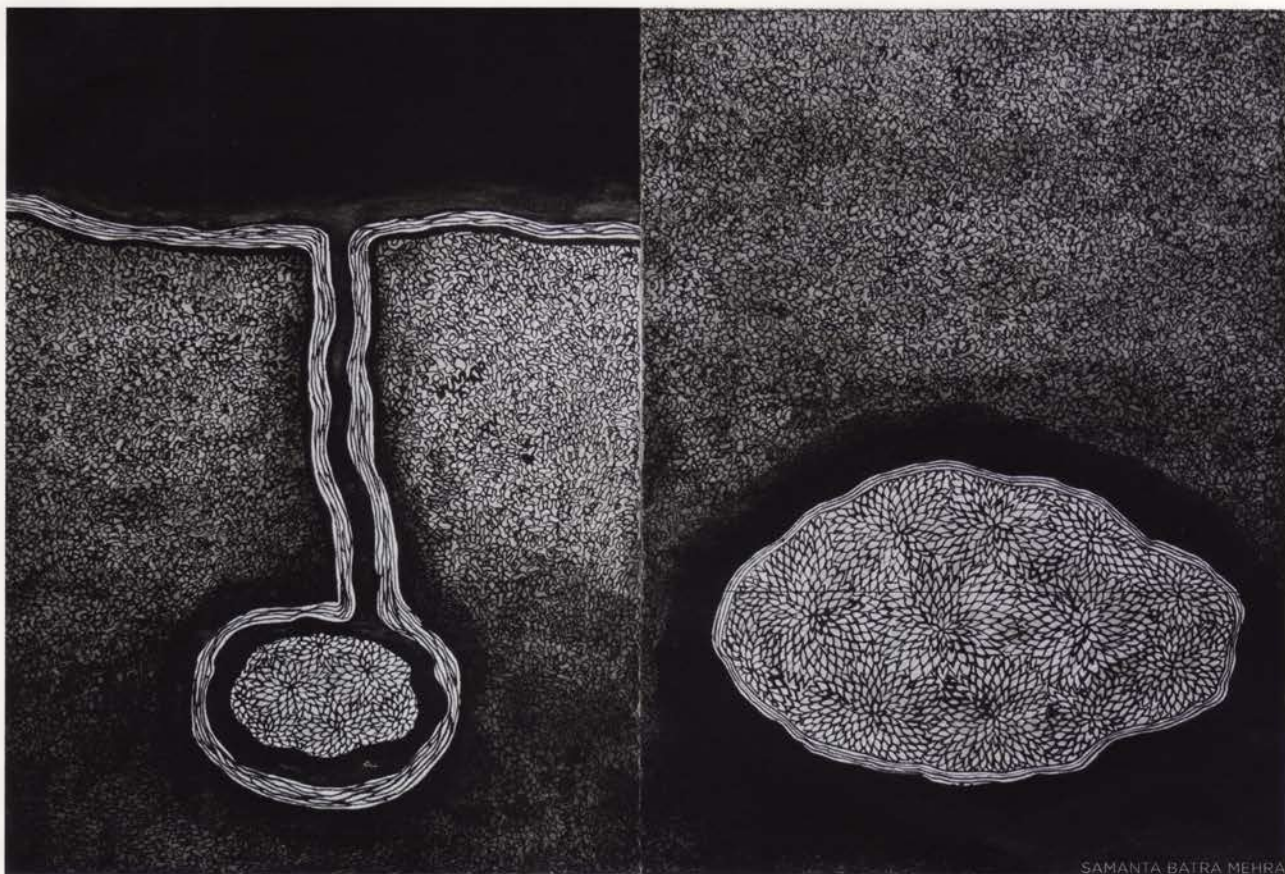
In terms of process, I had much less time to work than I did before I had the baby and that was hard. But somehow my work process got streamlined—I began using the computer to figure out ideas, work out the layout and colour schemes. Also, right from graduate school, I used to buy my own wood, cut it with my electric saw, make the stretcher frames, stretch the canvas and prime it for painting, but after I had children I almost completely outsourced that process, allowing myself more time to do what I really love—to paint!

S.B.M.: Having a baby is very, very physical. A woman's body is turned inside out. There is pain, blood, sweat, milk, tears and God knows what fluid coming out of every one of your orifices! There is wonder, joy,

"I now realise and also relish the wholesome beauty of womanhood. It for me denotes strength, both inner and outer."
-Pooja Iranna

crying (lots of it!), happiness, bewilderment...your body is tested to its limit; you are at your most vulnerable state and yet at your strongest state; you realise that you are wholly and totally responsible for a tiny, perfect, most trusting and a totally dependant human being (with the most gorgeous eyes, I might add!). Your life as you know has taken a 360 degree turn, and so yes, your work does undergo a transition too! At the very least, my drawings have taken on a more raw, primordial, in-your-face turn. I'm sure they will shock people...but shouldn't they? After all, isn't this experience of pregnancy and childbirth the most basic experience—one that ensures the continuation of our species? It's been wonderful and overwhelming and I'm still searching for ways to articulate these ideas and experiences in my work in order to facilitate reflection, question existing authoritarian structures and engender action.

P.I.: There is one work in particular I would like to talk about. It is called 'To My Kids with Love' and was done in 2006, as part of a show called 'Avatars of the Object'. It shows a wall made of boxes. On one side are digital images of my architectural spaces and the other side carries words of wisdom given to the world by famous people. The work is about what mothers would pass on to their children and in turn children would to the next generation. In a way, this is wisdom that is passed from one generation to another and finally helps in character building. The wall denotes the outer strength of a character or a person and the images on the wall denotes the inner strength. This work is a very different work but it strongly suggests a mother's contribution in the upbringing of her children.



SAMANTA BATRA MEHRA

Did you notice a change in your work when you were pregnant? Or did you use that phase of your life as inspiration in any way?

DA: My work has always been a reflection of experiences and emotions so of course my work was influenced by my pregnancy! The protagonists in my works developed a big waistline and later the pregnancy bump. I was apprehensive about how I would balance the roles of mother, wife, daughter, woman and artist, and this showed in some of my works like 'Seed', 2001, 'Bodybed', 2002, 'Expecting', 2002, 'Birth I, II and III', 2002.

Pregnancy inspired my goddess works—created when I truly understood how powerful and marvellous the female body was. The form of the female protagonists in my work also changed as my own body changed. After the birthing process, I did a series of work about it, and then when I was nursing my baby, I did a few works about that 'mother cow' experience.

SBM: Oh absolutely; before I got pregnant I was already making art dealing with the themes of the body, universe and creation, but pregnancy made my art much more personal and real. Being pregnant made me realise how we are all connected to the universe in an inextricable way; and how we (women) are part of a greater whole, this unbroken chain, to be able to conceive, nurture and give birth to another human being.

Two of my works, 'In the Beginning #1 and #2' are about the elemental seed (the bindu) from which stem creation and potential. 'You Became a Cloud' deals with an early pregnancy loss; it is a sensitive work which allowed me to mourn and heal. 'My Body the Seed' is a work that celebrates feminine fecundity—it was made at a time when we hoped to start a family. It speaks of potential and bounty and is a very positive

“Pregnancy inspired my goddess works. The form of the female protagonists in my work also changed as my own body changed.”
- Dhruvi Acharya

work. Sometime late in my pregnancy, I began working on the 'Germination' when my own body at the time was in full bloom—rounded like a ripened fruit waiting to burst open. The series is an ongoing one and I'm still adding to it even after I became a mother to my baby boy.

PI: I started doing very small works later in the term because of my physical condition. It is after my first child was born that my work started changing. For a group show on womanhood, I did a series of four works in which I showed four stages of pregnancy. Each stage depicted a trimester of my pregnancy and finally the fourth work had a digital portrait of my son. This work was a turning point, as I started my digital work from here on and went deeper into my architectural imagery using a technology and technique new to me.