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The Painter Talks

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Photo by Pradeep Kochereker

Once again kudos to [Masala Chai](#) for making my world bigger (smaller). Through it I found a marvellous painter, [Dhruvi Acharya](#). I know for a fact that art and expression are tricky fields and that itself makes a person love the exploration. When I skimmed through Dhruvi Acharya's work I saw a strange honesty that was soft and beautiful. I really wanted to talk to someone who takes a painting beyond the canvas, and so emailed her. Her work is striking, humorous, witty, and unique.

For one, I must say I really enjoyed reading her answers. Dhruvi Acharya, an artist and native of Mumbai, began painting only after she left land to USA in 1995. She finished her MFA in painting, with scholarship from the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore. Not leaving India forever, she studied Applied Arts at Sophia Polytechnic College.

Her art as won many accolades. In 2006 Dhruvi was awarded the Aditya Birla KalaKiran Puraskar (India) and nominated for the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award (USA), and in 2005 she was featured on the cover of India Today. I could call her famous, but will stop the introduction by simply introducing her as a *beautiful person*.



In My Room, 60 x 60 in, 137x 137cm, oil on canvas, 1998

Sam: A painting is a record, a memory, and a voice. Personally, I love my paint to jump out of the canvas whereas yours are smooth and flat. How do you react to violence or rather loudness in art?

DA: I like art that moves me emotionally, makes me think, as well as makes me wonder how it was done, technically. It doesn't matter if it is loud or subtle.



Watching 30 x 30 in, 76 x 76 cm, oil on canvas, 2000

Sam: About Watching: I feel a presence with me too, always. But, I after many things that have happened to that have indeed been difficult I understand that I do not know pain. And probably, this presence is needed somewhere else. If this presence is always with you, how do you understand solitude?

DA: Watching was made in 1999, we had just moved to NYC after three years in Baltimore where I attended Grad school. I spent my days working from my home studio and didn't know too many people in the city. This painting reflects my emotions then – alone but not lonely, content yet confused. It was made in a more innocent frame of mind.

Now, as a mother in this world environment, I'm more aware, concerned and afraid, and my relationship with this "presence" is not so clear or simple. I am now usually alone only when I am working, and this is my time to think and reflect, my time for solitude.

Sam: The small eyes in your paintings look saintly and in a way reaching a weird realization. But, in other painting they seem empty. Define vision here.

DA: The eyes reflect much of one's state of mind, and I would think it is the same for the protagonists of my paintings.



Wham! Kerplonk! Splat! Bam! 24 x 24in, 61 x 61 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2006

Sam: About Two Plus Two Equals – Wham! Kerplonk! Splat! Bam!: I once wrote a small story about how my blanket is my superhero. What do you think about superheroes?

DA: I wish superheroes existed! But I think in reality there are people in all walks of life doing truly heroic things – saving lives, saving the environment, fighting against the ills of our society, raising a conscientious next generation. It's just that the heroes of our times are unable to fight the evils or our society individually. A superhero today is a great leader that can motivate people to fight the ills of their society together – like Gandhi.

Sam: Technique or story – what is more important in a painting?

DA: Both, if it is a narrative painting.

Quoted from her website: When the works are viewed, I hope 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.

Sam: But, don't you think ultimately each image will tell a person a specific story? Won't that be the central aspect of a painting -it's story?

DA: Yes, the central aspect of a narrative painting is its story. And yes, each image will encourage an interested viewer to try to decipher a story. But the specifics or details of the story will be usually different for each person, and definitely different from the story I was painting about.



"Trunk", 36x 36 inches, synthtic polymer paint on canvas, 2007

Sam: What is your favourite colour?

DA: Brown

Sam: True. Brown seems to dominate your paintings. Pastel browns, ochre, red – it's refreshing to see a streak of purple or bright green once in a while. Brown and earth. Do you think humans have a deeper connection (in the level of the soul) to the environment?

DA: I am sure humans have a deep connection to the environment – we depend on it, and almost everyone feels at peace with themselves and with the world when they are in nature versus in a polluted city.

I use colour very intuitively, I feel rather than think colour, and the emotions I am painting about affects my choice of colour.

Sam: So, curves or lines?

DA: Curves

Sam: The woman and her body. The man and his body. The transgender and her body. Gender issues. I see your paintings and your life has travelled a lot through the exploration of the woman body. What about the other genders? What about the other bodies?

DA: I am interested in painting about emotions and internal conflicts, and how the external world influences them. Nature and human society treats different genders differently and so obviously my experiences as a woman will be different from that of any other gender or body in our society. I am not really interested taking up gender issues as an intellectual exercise, but choose to explore the emotional side of the issues organically, as they come up in my life or in the lives of people around me.



"The Birth", 12 x 12 inches, synthtic polymer paint on panel, 2007

Sam: Your Birth series is striking. Yes, I am moved. There is a subdued shout in those paintings. And there is a quite painting, like the Pond, which is serene and beautiful. The woman, talk more about her – as a body, as a soul, as a human, how do you relate to “the woman”? Who is she to you?

DA: Most of my work starts from my daily drawings that are based on a personal experience as well as on what I hear, read or think about. The woman is representative of my thoughts and emotions.

Sam: Dhruvi, when she is not painting... Who is she?

DA: She is a very lucky woman, mother, wife, daughter, sister and friend.

Sam: Mumbai and New York, both are cities of their own kind. Tell us bit your experiences in both cities.

DA: Mumbai is the city I was born in, the city my children call home and where most of my family lives. I had a great childhood here, and am happy to be back here after spending 10 years in the US. But Mumbai is a crazy place – it can be both – inspiring and very frustrating. Even after all these years, the disparity between the have and have-nots doesn't yet fail to astound or sadden me, nor does the lack of civic sense fail to anger me.

New York was home for 7 years – both my sons were born there. It is a very generous city and inspiring city. I spend a few months there every year, and spend much time in the museums and galleries.

Sam: Your sketchbooks must speak a million more stories than your paintings. Pollution, violence, gender politics, what else do you wish to address with the strength of your brush?

DA: I really never set out wanting to address an issue very consciously. I draw and paint about what moves me emotionally or makes me think. Hence when I first started painting, the subject matter was separation from home, then acclimatizing in the USA and dealing with issues of a woman straddling two cultures, then I painted about pregnancy, motherhood, internal conflicts, issues of women's role and position in society and most recently, the environment. The subject matter for the paintings in "One Life on Earth" were inspired by a wheezing attack I experienced, caused by the Mumbai smog. Then I found out a few friends' young children had begun or been suffering from asthma. This led to the drawings and paintings that expressed my thoughts, fears and emotions about our air pollution. So I really do not know what else I will address in my work – life will decide.



Fat 6 x 6 in, 15 x 15 cm, synthetic polymer paint on panel, 2007

Sam: There is always a balloon over every character. Why?

DA: It symbolizes the protagonist's thoughts and state of mind. It is inspired by the comic book speech bubble.

Sam: I simply loved Amar Chitra Kathas as a child. Airfare: pollution is getting more and more serious by the minute. What is your view on releasing Nano cars?

DA: The Nano is a big step towards the progress of our society as per its definition of progress today. So, now many more people can buy a car for Rs.1,00,000 – something unimagined a few years ago.

But as I said, the fault lies in our society and what it holds important. If we all held the larger vision of a clean environment more important than our short term personal comfort, our society would be rewarding effective public transportation and environment friendly cars. Laws would be set up to promote the vision of our society, based on long term thinking about the survival of the earth and the life it supports. At the moment the government and society rewards what seems to be the opposite of this larger vision of progress.



Plant Leg 6 x 6 in, 15 x 15 cm, synthetic polymer paint on panel, 2008

Sam: An image talks more than anything. Any form of expression creates an image, but when done visually it has a stronger power. I see that in your paintings. And there is so much earth in your paintings. What is your view on environmentalism? What do we need to do?

DA: I am an artist, not an environmentalist. My works addressing the environment started with a personal, physical reaction to Mumbai's smog (few

hours of breathless wheezing). Which led me to think and draw about air and its future.

I did not set out to make paintings to tell people what to do, nor can I claim to know what we need to do in practice to change the world. And obviously my views are influenced by the current discourses and discoveries regarding the environment. Actually my first serious study of the environment was when I was working on an undergraduate project on the "Save Bombay Committee". I had done much research then and had realized that on a personal level, there is so much each of us can do to help conserve our natural resources.

But now I think that is just not enough. Along with personal choices, we all really need to focus on the larger picture. On a societal level, we need to stop rewarding consumerism and consumption. On a policy level, governments need to penalize polluting practices and reward environment friendly ones. On an industrial and agricultural level, cheaper, greener, environmentally-sustainable options for products or services should be available – and they would be available were people able and willing to pay the price. Obviously, in the long run, we will pay a much bigger price for this desire for cheaper, faster, better at the cost of the environment.



Words I 48 x 48 in, 122 x 122 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 2007

Sam: I strongly believe that a large part of my purpose is to experience and express. But, talking about pollution, environment, etc does not solve the problem. Though it is a major part in change, have you done anything on field or in your lifestyle to address these issues?

DA: On a personal level, my own lifestyle and that of my family is not driven by consumerism. We are definitely environment conscious in terms of consumption of our natural resources and extremely diligent about recycling and reusing. We try using environment friendly and organic products. But I know this is nearly not enough. I still live in a big city and still obviously contribute to pollution in many unavoidable ways. This is where I think the role of the society and policymakers comes into play.



Growth 48 x 96 in, 122 x 244 cm, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 2007

Sam: Sometimes, so many things are happening to oneself – physically, emotionally, or even financially. There have been times when I have resorted to crying, because I cannot find the material I want to express in. What would you do if you ran out of paint or colour?

DA: Draw.

Sam: Any final remarks...?

DA: My hope always is that the viewers will enjoy the humour and images in my work, and be drawn to think about the issues that I address.



Dhruvi Acharya's Website

When the paint splashes, the painter talks.

Interview taken by Samyuktha PC