

Psychological portraiture

Dhruvi Acharya explores the realm of dual responsibilities, multiple commitments and ambivalences of location.

NANCY ADAJANIA

THE first thing that strikes you about Dhruvi Acharya's paintings is their tactile skin, which is sometimes soft and buttery enough to melt in your eyes, at other times as smooth and unbreakably uniform as glass. But the moment you try to catch your reflection among the women figures who occupy this surface, it turns opaque. The provocation to viewers, to touch and feel their way around the artist's world, is summarily retracted. I would contend that this play of invitation and withdrawal is characteristic of Acharya's art. Her women figures appear insular, lonely even amidst friends and family. They play a double game of wanting to share their experiences and yet foreclose that possibility: the speech bubbles, or thought balloons, that emanate from their heads are often vacant. The flatness of Acharya's painted surface is ruptured by a choreography of half-revelations and silences.

Dual responsibilities

Acharya's current suite of acrylics and watercolours, titled "Two Plus Two Equals" and exhibited at Gallery Chemould, Mumbai, explores the realm of dual responsibilities, multiple commitments and ambivalences of location. Commonsensical logic would suggest that an individual is simply the sum of these various self-investments, but psychology knows otherwise: each self-investment causes asymmetries and complications, which break down the simple logic of summation. The psychological logic of being various things and playing various roles can be as attritive as it can be additive.

Let us consider some of the dualities

that Acharya reflects upon, which remain vexed even when they seem to have been integrated seamlessly. At the personal level, we have the artist performing the dual roles of creative agent and mother, the citizen inhabiting the culturally diverse worlds of Bombay and New York. At the level of image-making practice, we have the maker of sophisticated, abstractive colour-field backgrounds that crave the viewer's attention and the creator of communicative devices that carry their signals only erratically.

In "On the Fast Track", a sky stretches out taut as a piece of laminated plastic; against it, a rather over-sized cowgirl looks back at the viewer, as if waiting for a cue to spring into a gallop. Her anxious eyes disappear like two black points on a white sheet. Like the cowgirl, Acharya's protagonists — rendered as semi-autobiographical variations — seem to be in an eternal dilemma, perpetually riddled with self-doubt but never lacking in humour.

Her protagonists think aloud, their feelings registered in thought balloons that inflate, at times leak or even deflate

in helplessness. In this world of dromomania, of jet-setting thoughts and flash actions, the cowgirl may not even jump a fence, at least not yet. A shrunken thought balloon trails off the cowgirl's head instead of a colourful plume, and her lumpy body could just as well have ridden a stationary exercise bike. The artist deploys the contrasting qualities of stillness and animation to orchestrate an unequal music of pause and rupture.

Acharya's work is quilted from various sources, blurring the line between high and low art, fine art and commercial art. Her visual arts education began in the field of applied arts: she has a degree in Visual Communication from Bombay's Sophia Polytechnic. With this, she was equipped with the virtues of draughtsmanship. Her hunger to express herself beyond the purview of 'skill' brought her to the Fine Arts course at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore, in the mid-90s. Here, she trained under the noted American abstract expressionist Grace Hartigan and imbibed lessons in colour field, a strong and resonant feature in her current

work. She was also exposed to the Indian miniature tradition. Acharya's early work was more drawing-based; as she obsessively recorded the comfort zones that she had left behind. Her works became increasingly layered with overlapping narratives and translucent and opaque surfaces.

Artistic influences

While the caricatural elements in Acharya's works are influenced by the Amar Chitra Katha comics that the artist devoured in childhood, they also owe allegiance to the work of the California Graffiti artists: Lari Pittman (b. 1952), Margaret L Kilgallen (1967-2001) and Barry McGee (b. 1966). From them, she has imbibed a worldview where the formal strategies of folk art, caricature, mural painting and votive art can be integrated into a contemporary position without hierarchy or value judgment. She has assimilated some of the common features that unite their variegated approaches, such as the use of a layered approach and the positioning of the central figure against backgrounds of drips, patterns and colour fields. Acharya demonstrates great discipline and rigour in integrating Hartigan's colour-field training with her own interest in caricature and graffiti art, along with her abiding interest in the miniatures and the decorative arts.

In her recent paintings, Acharya makes an effort to reveal an intimate relationship, through her anxiety for her son, who is embattled by peer pressure and by a pop culture that glorifies machismo. Her son is portrayed as an alien with a mask that spots antennae, feelers for a suspect world. Since



EXPRESSING EMOTIONS: Acharya's works blur the line between high and low art.

Acharya now resides in Bombay, the angst of betweenness has given way to the fears of the known. As for her son, he must feel like an alien in a growing body and an environment steeped in everyday acts of violence. In the paintings, he escapes into the world of comics, where Superman, Batman and Spiderman can conquer the world in masked glory.

The paintings revolving around her son may have liberated an impulse in the artist. She is able to go beyond the contradictions of the self. Acharya

seems to have released herself from the temptation of self-pity and struck up a communion with others. Until now, she tended to portray her emotions as a tight skin wrapped around her body; but now she is able to express emotions that other people can share and participate in. Consider "Long Hair", in which a weird-looking woman in party dress, her brain on edge, bunches her fingers to punch an unsuspecting guest. We look forward to more such acute psychological portraiture.

SHE HAS IMBIBED A WORLDVIEW WHERE THE FORMAL STRATEGIES OF FOLK ART, CARICATURE, MURAL PAINTING AND VOTIVE ART CAN BE INTEGRATED INTO A CONTEMPORARY POSITION WITHOUT HIERARCHY OR VALUE JUDGMENT.