

SPOTLIGHT | DHRUVI ACHARYA

Earth songs

An irreverent and humorous take on pollution, war and violence

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The women in Dhruvi Acharya's paintings aren't pretty. Shifty-eyed and flat-nosed, the most flattering thing that can be said about them is that they appear to be firmly in control of their own destiny. In *Air Fare*—a mock look at a world where air itself has become a scarce commodity that people battle over—taloned women brandish guns and knives, wearing silly flower hats (actually they're growing from their heads) in what can pass off as a scene from an eco Spaghetti Western. In *Float*, a corpulent woman lazes on a bed of comic-book style weapons and words, while in *Words*, her indolent sister types on her Macbook, squeezed into the corner by a blank comic strip.

Acharya, 36, insists that she

finds humour in all subjects, including "being a mother cow" while pregnant. Her works, currently on display at Chemould Prescott Road Gallery, Mumbai, in a solo show *One Life on Earth*, reflect her irreverent take on a variety of topics such as pollution, war and violence.

Acharya has had an impressively prolific start to her career, having had several solo and group shows since moving back to India from the US in 2004. Her panels, intricately built through several layers and finished with a glossy tile-like finish, have become progressively more stylized and less earnest in both subject and execution. "Earlier, they were emotionally melodramatic," she says, "in a bad way sometimes."

At the time, Acharya was living in the US, homesick and pregnant. Her longing for India worked its way into dense, heavily-hued works laden with ethnic associations. Amar Chitra Katha comics, and Indian miniatures, which she



A mock-up world: Acharya with *Air Fare*, a 22-panel painting.

saw at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, found their way into her patterning and detail.

With time, however, Acharya's works have morphed into clever and funny commentaries on current world discord; her style has grown less frantic, and, in the manner of Aubrey Beardsley, deliberately and darkly drawn. In *Words*, Acharya painted over real strips from Amar Chitra Katha comic books, erasing the images,

but leaving the blurbs intact. Read in isolation, they are wickedly dirty, silly, and not a little bit sexist. "You don't know who's saying what," Acharya says pointing to some of her favourite lines. "How strong and firm is his grip", 'I have worshipped the Gods but still have no child', 'Our queen is prettier than an Apsara. She will make our king happy'."

In another 22-panel painting, also called *Air Fare*, Acharya has

put together an intricate "wall from the future, a time when we are buying breath". As with all her work, the details are key in understanding the larger message: that as ridiculous as the idea may appear now, a time when we're battling over air and water may not, in fact, be terribly far off.

In one panel, a woman morphs out of an amoebic, tired body of excess ("You hear about frogs with four legs, so it's quite likely that humans may change shape," Acharya says); in another, red flowers with teeth swarm towards their victim ("She's running away from her own mind"). For all their light jabs, the panels are a little menacing. "Well, you only have one life on earth. And if you don't live it well, nobody knows if you're coming back," she says. "And even if you do, you might come back as a dog."

One Life on Earth is on at Chemould Prescott Road Gallery, Mumbai, from 6-30 August. Prices of the works range between Rs25,000 and Rs14 lakh.