

## One Life on Earth: from dyspnoea to Air-Fairs...

Thank God men cannot fly, and lay waste the sky as well as the earth.  
~Henry David Thoreau

When one enters *Nature Morte Gallery* in New Delhi to view Dhruvi Acharya's latest solo exhibition, 'One Life on Earth,' it seems as though we have chanced upon a bleak, futuristic galaxy where bloated figures float aimlessly, plants sprout from heads and arms, humans carry floral breath-packs on their backs.

A sense of unease lingers as we begin to converse with these mutant beings - constantly ruminating over our environment, gender relations and unsustainable lifestyles.

In this phantasmagoric world we meet a woman with lotus arms, leaking caricatures, headless bodies in saris and figures that have become amoebic with many arms and breasts. A lot of these visuals bring to mind, disasters like the Bhopal gas tragedy and nuclear accidents that disfigure victims for life and deform children of succeeding generations.

Dhruvi's ironic caricatures appear as inflections of high art mingling with kitsch, pop art and graphic illustration. She employs them to systematically disrupt social and artistic hierarchies.



AIRFARE, 5.5 x 16 feet, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 2008

Her witty and lyrical, female dominated canvases become a stage for battle between mutants and humans - the haves and have-nots; as the shortage of air turns inadequate humans into buyers, scavengers, hunters and harvesters. Though the drama appears borrowed from popular sci-fi flicks, it is underpinned with the tonality of psychological enquiry and larger discourses.

The absence of male protagonists could be seen as a satirical remark on sex ratio imbalances and the alarming rate of female foeticide in India.

Dhruvi goes on to challenge the conventional beauty aesthetic by posing female protagonists with wide faces, flat noses, piercing eyes and outlandish bodies.

The artist appears as a story-teller, giving life to these altered beings. In 'Sink', an inflated woman in bright orange sits upon a tableau of 'exclamations' and violent objects – she creates a canvas with a striking 'soundscape.'

Guns, *trishul*, sickle and missile lay splattered between sounds... crash, boom, arrgh, screeeeeeeeeeeeecchhh. The large, dysfunctional figure appears transfixed amidst these vitriolic surroundings.

With comics and graphic novels occupying a significant place in our visual culture, Dhruvi Acharya has used animated expressions to comment on serious issues plaguing our present. Though her 'fantasy creatures' differ from the '*Kawaii* characters' of Japanese manga artists; at times they share similarities in structure and technique.

The speech bubble is a metaphor that has persisted across her art series. It transcends from soliloquy into a shared discourse. In a sense, the empty bubble also functions as a void left for the viewer's thoughts to penetrate the painting. At times, the vacant blurbs seem to 'say' that there is too much being left unsaid.

Words I, II and III - are art works that convey the artist's continual dialogue with the *Amar Chitra Katha* stories. The comic strip appears like a vacant parking lot as the squares have been 'whitewashed'. The mythic characters are erased and only their dialogues dot the canvas.

The iconography of mythological figures has been so deeply entrenched in the mind that a reading of the narrative can bring them alive. It is also a way of contemporizing archaic gender disparities. The 'missing characters' could even be the men and women of today.

"Girls are like flowers; wherever they go they make the world beautiful",

"Do stars rule our fate?"

'I have worshipped the Gods but still have no child',

These lines across the canvas enable a modern discourse on the extent of gender bias and social exclusion that has entered popular literature through 'classical texts.'



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



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

At the end of the 'story' a fat woman lounges with her laptop, looking bored as an empty speech bubble creeps over her head.

In an interview with Vogue, the artist said, "I knew those Amar Chitra Kathas so well. I had accepted them as truth – all those perfect waistlines and little clothes. Oh please! It was like the Barbie doll myth." In a previous series, Dhruvi used these stories with the mythological actors present, leaving the speech bubbles empty.

The art-works of 'One Life on Earth' are delicately painted, yet they never fail to provoke and challenge the mind. As a trained illustrator, Dhruvi Acharya has used innovative costuming and rich imagery – thus, creating a buzzing canvas. Her backgrounds often resemble those of Henri Matisse's theatrical and highly exoticized odalisques.

With ornate textures and curvilinear forms layering her work, there also appears an affinity toward Gustav Klimt and other Art Nouveau artists.

While the canvas stands as a morbid projection of the future, and the state of 'other' worlds; the high life is parodied by the use of warhol-esque, glossy surfaces. The effect of synthetic polymer paint is heightened by her striking colour palette.

As part of this series, Dhruvi Acharya has created a range of farcical water colour works. Their softness and luminosity creates an ironic twist and an intentional discomfort for the viewer. They seem to draw upon the wit and modernist aesthetic of master artist-illustrator Saul Steinberg; who used popular design vocabulary and cultural signifiers as parody to unravel societal complexities and trace the journey of icons.

Dhruvi's characters often function as alter egos. When she moved to USA, her paintings began to recall daily rituals and the lively joint family she had left behind in Mumbai. An early work, *Watching* – portrays Lord Krishna sitting beside her as she watches TV, while another work – Mumbai, depicts a complex interaction between skyscrapers, uprooted trees and the peacock.

As she became part of the diaspora, she began documenting global changes from a self-consciously Desi identity and her position as 'woman-artist.'

Now she is back in Mumbai, dispassionately plotting the altering faces of the city and its connections with the world at large. As she moved from young art student to wife and further to mother; her work has been moulded by her changing life condition.

Air Fair could be seen as the seminal work of this show, as it encapsulates the essence of 'One Life on Earth.'

One literally gravitates toward this work, which occupies an entire wall. It appears as a quilt – as images of varying sizes are pieced together, into a grand 'advertisement.'



Aman at 14", 24 x 18 inches, watercolour on paper, 2007

The Air-dome and breath packs are being sold to the viewer as we enter a time when air has become a prized commodity. The words 'Gasp' and 'Buy Breath' stand at two ends of the painting - boldly addressing the dyspnoeic passer-by.

Dhruvi has mentioned in an interview with the Hindustan Times that the idea for the current exhibition came to her when she was running the Mumbai Marathon a year ago. "After three hours, I was breathless. That got me thinking - what if there was no air?"

With Oxygen bars becoming popular in Metropolises across the globe, the reality of the Air Fair is not far away.



AIR FAIR, 23 panel painting, 7.4 x 14 feet, synthetic polymer paint on canvas

At Nature Morte, art works speak for themselves - they freely mingle, flirt and converse. They do not carry 'dog tags.' With no pre-determined labyrinth - there is neither a beginning nor an end; each viewer explores a new path. The exhibition is treated as a spatial experience with each wanderer forming an individualized narrative. While certain works may appear to be infused with psychobabble, there is space to unravel the layers of complexity.

Most of the Indian contemporary art sector seems to be following the trends of the fashion industry. Like seasonal shows that aim to spectacular-ize; art is also becoming more about 'the flavour of the month' with the artist becoming a design label as work methods follow ware-housing techniques as much as assembly line production.

Dhruvi Acharya's work stands in contrast; as she constructs an introspective canvas by giving voice to environmental realities and gender debates. Erratic sketches from her notebooks - daily jottings and meditations, are translated into highly detailed paintings. Intricate motifs are sculpted into self-conceptualized protagonists as messages are woven into images.

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**Natasha Ginwala**

**One Life on Earth** is on view at:

**Nature Morte**

A-1, Neeti Bagh

New Delhi 110049

October 5 - November 1, 2008

**Chemould Prescott Road**

3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Queens Mansion

Fort, Mumbai 400001

August 6 - 30, 2008

For more information visit - [www.dhruvi.com](http://www.dhruvi.com)