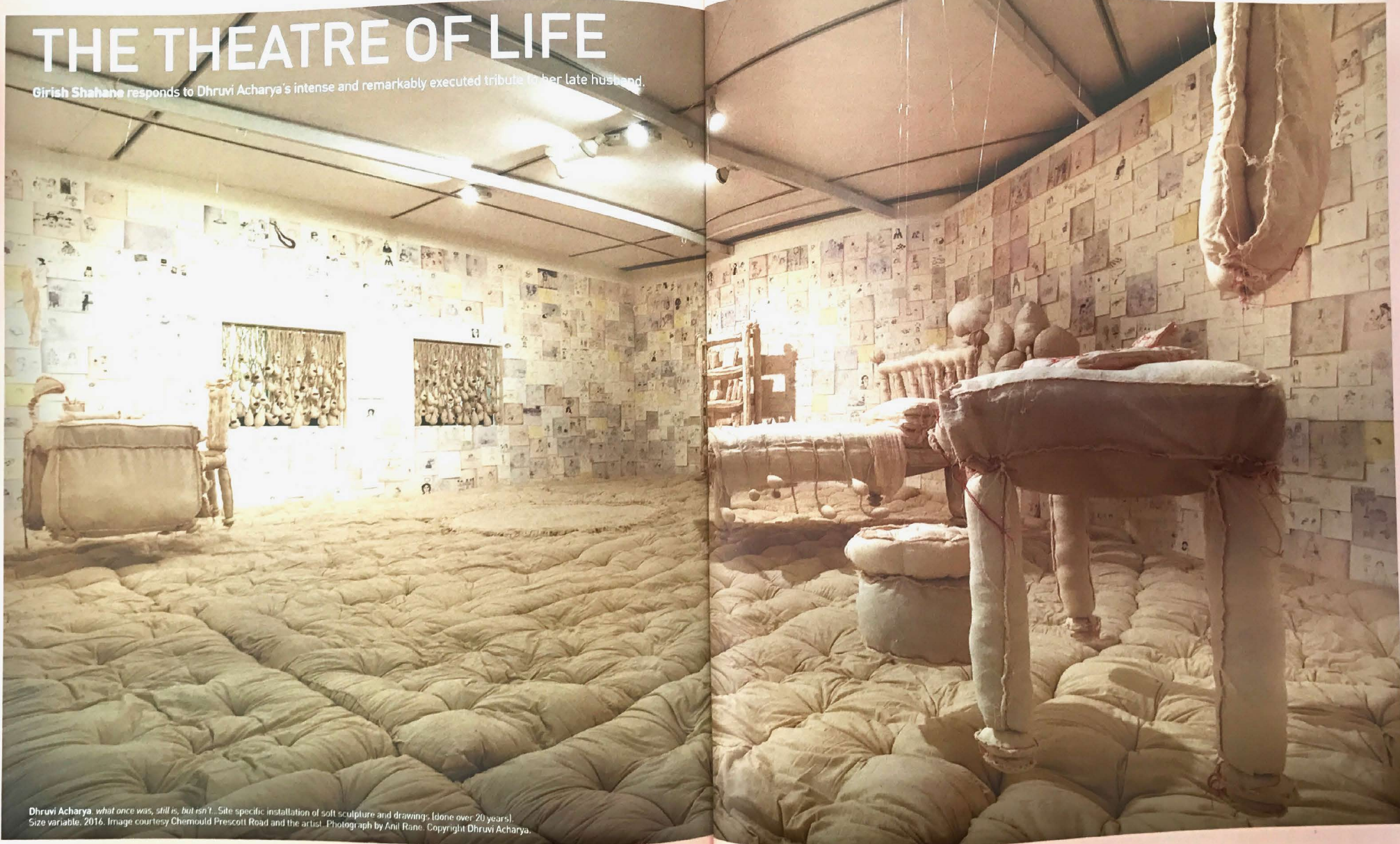


THE THEATRE OF LIFE

Girish Shahane responds to Dhruvi Acharya's intense and remarkably executed tribute to her late husband.



Dhruvi Acharya *what once was, still is, but isn't...* Site specific installation of soft sculpture and drawings; (done over 20 years). Size variable. 2016. Image courtesy Chemould Prescott Road and the artist. Photograph by Anil Rane. Copyright Dhruvi Acharya.

I recall a brief interaction with Manish Acharya at a dinner organised by a mutual friend. Dessert was an enormous chocolate cake, which had a tiny piece of cutlery placed next to it. Reaching for the implement, I muttered, "That's not a knife". Manish, standing next to me, instantly caught the allusion, repeated the line in a broad Aussie accent and proffered a bigger cutter with, "That's a knife". Those were the last words we exchanged aside from the goodbye at evening's end. Not long after, I heard he had died falling off a horse and hitting his head on a rock. Although I did not know him well, his warm smile, amiability and ability to put at ease everyone around him have stayed in my mind.

His wife, Dhruvi Acharya, took a long time to emerge from the shock and begin painting in earnest again. Her first solo show since the tragedy opened at Mumbai's Chemould Prescott Road in mid-October, and was a tribute to her partner in the form of an account of her life 'after the fall' to quote the exhibition's title. Those who follow Dhruvi's work will know it has consistently drawn upon her personal life, whether it was the feeling of cultural homesickness while a student in the United States, or the changing shape of her body during pregnancy or the experience of raising two boys. In dramatizing life events in this fashion, Dhruvi departs from Anju Dodiya, another virtuoso painter of the self. The two are also separated by the fact that Dodiya draws recognisable depictions of herself, while Dhruvi's personae resemble the artist only distantly.

Though biography is not an uncommon source of inspiration for artists, the death of a loved one, and the depression and loneliness that follow, present a uniquely high hurdle. Only a tiny range of combinations of emotional engagement and aesthetic distance can successfully transmute and transmit that kind of pain. It's easy to get maudlin and there exists also the opposite danger, of avoiding sentiment to such a degree that the material turns unfeeling and opaque. Dhruvi's *After The Fall* threaded the needle perfectly, forming a substantial, deeply felt and impeccably executed tribute.

The largest piece in the show was a room made from stuffed cotton fabric. A soft-sculpture bed, dressing table and bookshelf floated inches from the pillowy floor, hanging from the ceiling on thin cords. Prints of the artist's drawings completely covered the walls. At the floor's centre was a note addressed to Manish in which Dhruvi described in precise, moving words the accident that befell him, her thoughts during those terrifying moments and the questions that beset her in the months after. The cushioned room was both a reaction to the sharp, hard object that had caused a fatal injury, as well as a nostalgic rendition of their life together. It also evoked a padded cell whose walls

an unhinged individual might cover with incoherent scribbles. That was the road the artist had not taken, but one she might have sensed beckoning in her worst moments.

The prints, seen close up, were anything but incoherent. They testified to Dhruvi's exacting practice, which begins with drawing and develops into watercolours – mostly small-scale renditions of lone female figures captured in a particular mood or thought – and canvases, some of them monumental. *After The Fall* contained over eighty paintings, filling Chemould Prescott Road's capacious space optimally.

The paintings had straightforward titles: *Weighed Down*, *Insomnia*, *Ashes*, *Meditation*, *Life without my Love*, *Afloat*, *Extinct*, *Memories*, *Awakening*, *Departure* and so on. Recurrent motifs like screams and dark clouds underlined the literalism of the titles, which was countered by a combination of whimsy, self-deprecation and theatricality. Dhruvi represented herself through a painted alter-ego who, by the end of the exhibition, I felt I knew in a manner not far removed from the way one knows a real person. In one painting, titled *Remembering*, the artist's persona was split into seven: one looked like a monk, a second had the mask of a bandit, a third appeared to be swallowing fire. Between these personalities were buildings inscribed with the names of the many cities in which Dhruvi had resided over the decades, along with the dates of her domicile. The square composition was intriguing but rather noisy, a shortcoming for which she compensated by adding a panel on the right, turning it into an asymmetrical diptych. This second panel, containing a lone curling, flowering plant against a mauve background, provided much needed breathing space. It felt like an apt afterthought, a feeling substantiated by the artist in a conversation. *Remembering* demonstrated how critically the artist approached her own work, and also revealed the creative resources at her disposal that prevented the critical distance from becoming a paralysing force.

The entire exhibition could be said to have its starting point in rawness, literal and figurative. The cotton fabric used for the installation was not dyed. A number of paintings were created on unprimed linen or canvas, the brownish fabric providing the base colour for the entire composition. That base was never directly accessible, but covered in layers of the artist's characteristic gel, occasionally showing through the first clear coat, slightly changed by the second which might have glitter mixed in it, and entirely occluded by further layers delineating backgrounds, figures and objects. The process of accretion became a metaphor for the channelling of raw emotion through sophisticated reimagination, creating a meta-discourse about the relationship of life and art alongside the compelling narratives communicated by the paintings.