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Dhruvi Acharya's upcoming solo show in Delhi is a contemplation on death and the ageing body

Dhruvi Acharya's 'Permeated Absence' on show at Nature Morte is all about dealing with personal loss and her continued preoccupation with the female body



Shaikh Ayaz

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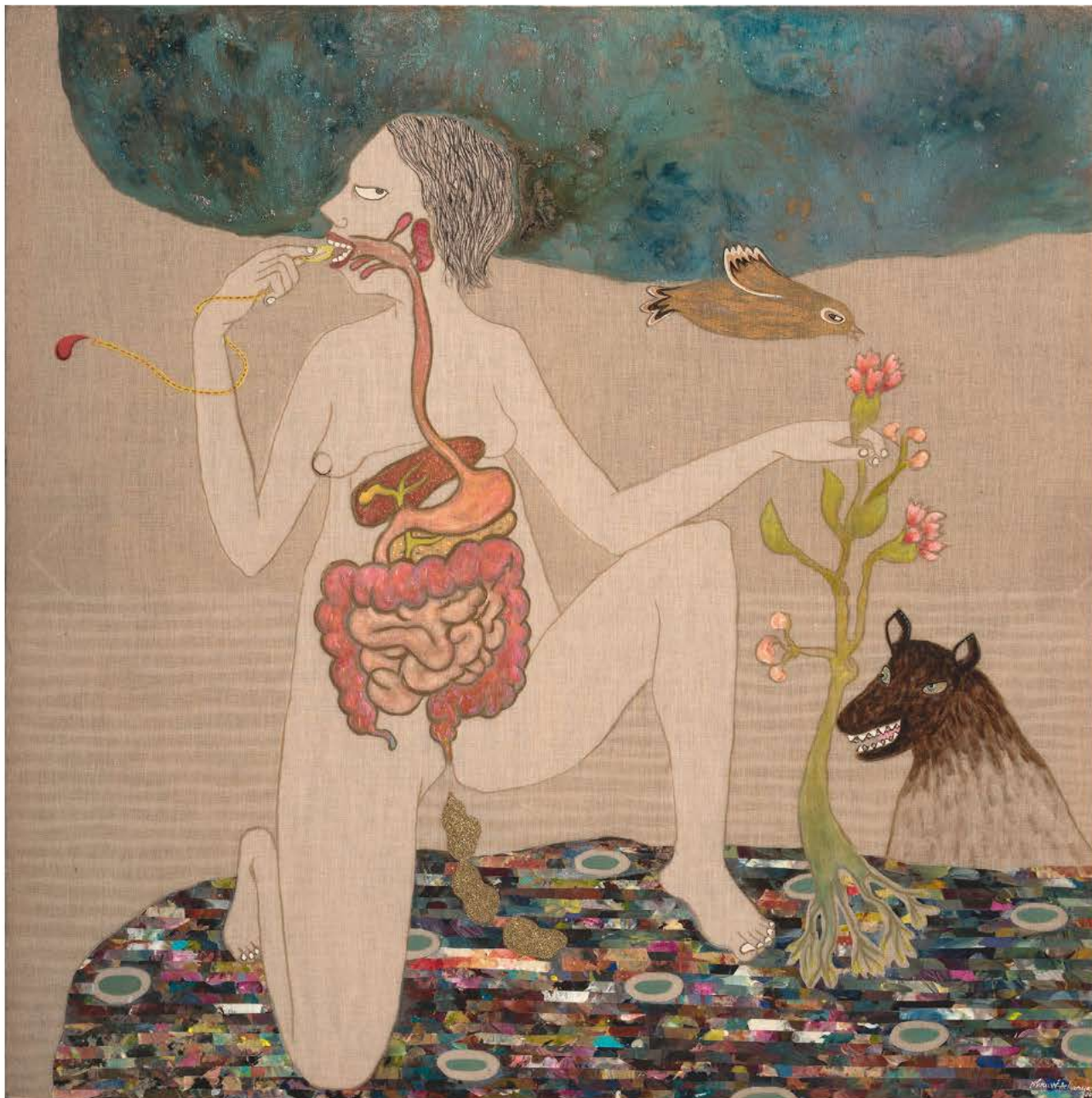
Dhruvi Acharya Bed Sculpture 2016

Artist Dhruvi Acharya's upcoming solo at Nature Morte in New Delhi has a rather grim theme—death and ageing. If not triggered by personal events, 'Permeated Absence,' as the show is called, could have easily been inspired by a Greek tragedy. But it isn't. The reality is that Acharya lost her father followed by her husband (filmmaker Manish Acharya) in quick succession in 2010, plunging her into a sudden state of grief. It may be yet too early for a 48-year-old to contemplate on the idea of mortality but Acharya insists she couldn't stop thinking about death in the last decade. "After Manish passed away, his absence was and is still not easy to live with," Acharya tells AD India, during a relaxed meeting at her South Mumbai sea-facing studio. "And when in 2016 my father-in-law passed away from age-related health problems, I saw first-hand how ageing can slowly ravage even a healthy body."

The Heart of Darkness

This led to an inevitable line of enquiry: 'Living with death is an odd experience.' Acharya built her idea around this credo. As it turns out, the works in 'Permeated Absence' raise more questions about mortality and ageing than they answer. The new series of paintings seem darker than the works exhibited in her last solo in 2016 at the Chemould Prescott Road gallery, both on the thematic level as well as in tone and texture. Consider 'Dust to Dust.' Painted in 2018, it is a loaded image that serves as a metaphor for the cycle of life, while the more recent 'Fog' features a typical Acharya woman, lost in a dense fog of memories, hopes and dreams. Though Acharya resists the idea of a more straightforward reading of her work, preferring instead to leave it to the viewer's imagination, she confesses, "I often hear myself say, 'Oh, if Manish was here....' Somewhere, I feel humans simultaneously live in the past, present and future. The emotions and the vagaries of the heart are never fully in your control." Watching the painting 'Light' strikes you as though it's designed as an exercise in irony. Ignore the title for a moment and you find yourself immersing in its heart of darkness, as it engulfs you in a psychological nightmare of an old lady staring out at an impossibly morbid future.

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Dhruvi Acharya Dust to Dust 2018 48x48



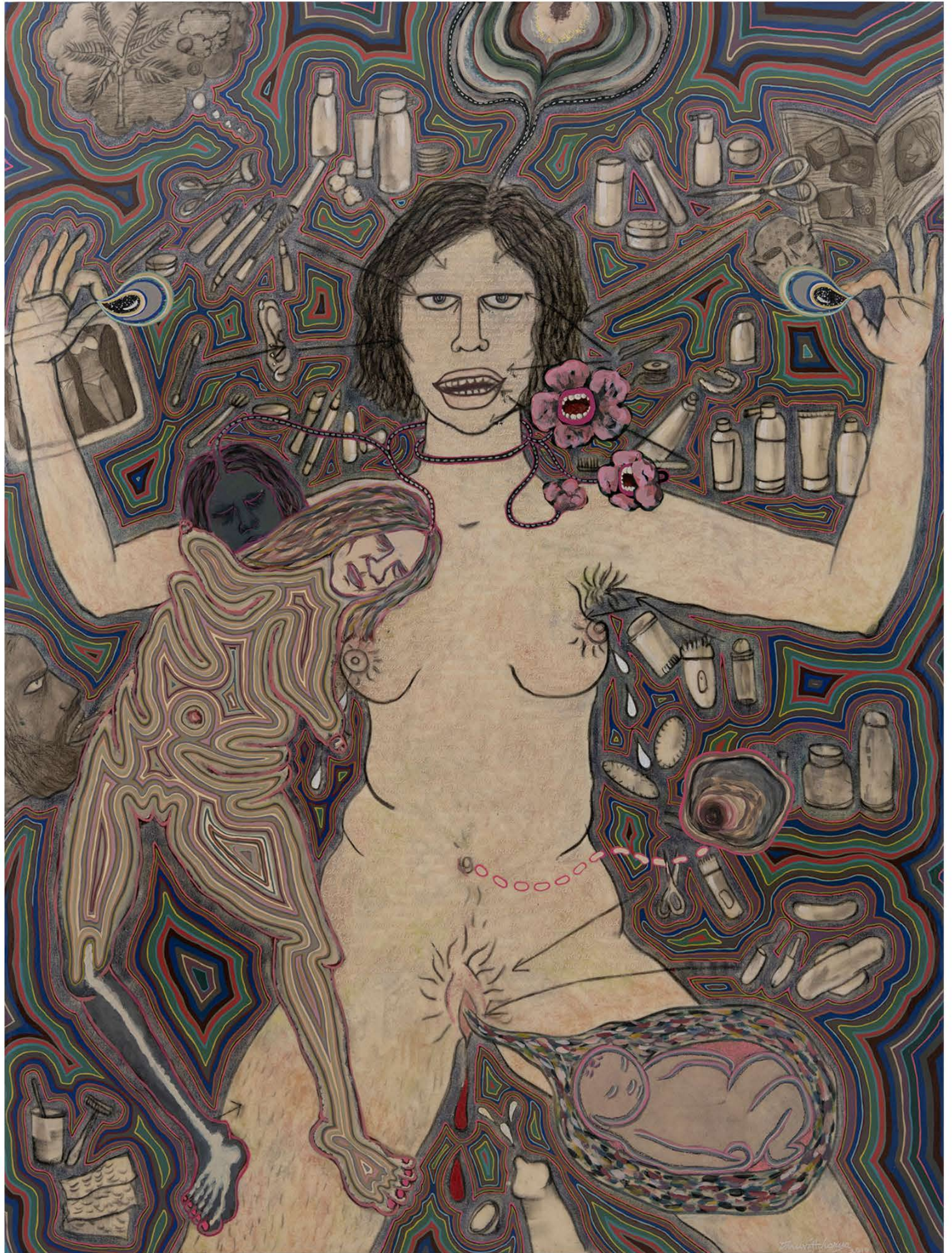
Dhruvi Acharya Fog 2019
60x72



Dhruvi Acharya
Conversations 2019 72x48

Woman as Protagonist

Keen observers will pick up on the hidden messages that Acharya tries to transmit through her exquisite art. For one, many urban women will find a personal connection with her protagonist. Distant and yet intimate and emotionally resonant, Acharya's women exist in a visual universe of her creator's distinct parallel reality. In one sense, the Mumbai-based Acharya is a part of the long history of Indian trailblazers (from Amrita Sher-Gil and Nalini Malini to Anju Dodiya and Bharti Kher) who have reclaimed the female body to draw attention to feminism, misogyny, sexuality, identity, gender gap, social expectations, unrealistic beauty ideals, body-shaming, sexual violence and rape. In Acharya's case, the experience of being a mother and a middle-aged urban woman also creeps into her work.



Dhruvi Acharya Femina 2019 72x54

Politics of the Female Body

Describing herself as an artist interested in the “female body and its politics,” she directs us to an artwork titled ‘Feud.’ It is singularly eye-catching at first glance but as you begin to explore it, you realise it does have a social subtext. It shows a woman with swirls of fumes growing out of her head—a solitary figure grappling with inner conflict as social pressures and forces of history bear down on her. Particularly, the powerful ‘Femina’ stands as a no-holds-barred indictment of all that’s wrong with our attitude towards women. Holding a mirror to society, Acharya even throws in all the names and sexist remarks that gets hurled at women. ‘Cougar,’ ‘cheap’ and ‘Chameli’ are only a few of the slurs. “In an unequal society like ours, women still have to go through a lot more than men,” Acharya says, adding, “What you read in the papers and on the internet will have you believe that there is a widespread hatred and hostility against women. It’s disturbing.”



Dhruvi Acharya Feud 2019 60x72

Private Space

In 'Permeated Absence,' Acharya is also showing a soft sculptural installation titled 'What was, still is, but isn't...', a bedroom with floating furniture and walls covered with a litany of drawings. The sculpture is based on what she calls "the experience of continuously living with the death of loved ones", especially invoking memories of her late husband, filmmaker Manish Acharya (of Loins of Punjab Presents fame) who died prematurely in 2010 in a freak accident at the age of 43. The use of a marital bed is an obvious visual metaphor for a mourning spouse. "A bed is symbolic of so many things," the artist says, explaining, "It is a place we sleep, rest, make love, recuperate and heal. It's also a place where the children come in the middle of the night to feel love, security and comfort. But for a while it became a place of extreme loneliness and brought about an acute awareness of Manish's absence."



Dhruvi Acharya Bed Sculpture 2016

An Indian in America

A mother of two boys, Acharya says that just like her late husband, her children are her biggest cheerleaders and critics. "If something is wrong with a painting, they do not hesitate in saying so and even point out the reason for it," she says. "From the time they were young, I have always treated their opinion with respect." The proud mother adds, "Both my sons seem to love art, but I am not sure if they will grow up to be artists." Incidentally, Acharya had herself never considered a full-time career in art. Her brush with painting began in the US after she was married and found herself homesick in a far-off American suburb. "I started painting memories of India. That's when I realised how much I enjoyed painting and so, it became my calling." Soon after, in 1998, she got a master's degree in painting from the Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore.

Autobiographical Shades

Today, Acharya has retained the habit of drawing. As she puts it, “My sketchbook is like a diary.” She explains that on a good day one out of 20 drawings has the potential to become a full-fledged painting. Does the artist see her work as autobiographical? “Earlier, yes,” she concedes. “But now, more than my own self, what I see, hear and read finds an expression in my creative process.” Still, she insists much of her art is strictly a figment of her fecund imagination. Well-known for casting women as central figures in her darkly comic world, the thought bubble emerging from her female protagonists’ head is the one thing that has remained constant in her work through the years. These days, the thought bubble transforming into chattering mouths reflecting all the noise back into the artist’s ear often results in quirky and humorous situations. She laughs, “I found thought bubble to be a really relevant vehicle of expressing myself but then, it’s good to know that it’s taking different forms now.”

Voices in Her Head

The comic book feel to her art can be traced back to her love for Amar Chitra Katha as a young girl and the influence of artists as varied as Lari Pittman, Takashi Murakami and Margaret Kilgallen. Today, she declares, “Good art always inspires but I won’t say influences.” As someone whose brain is a beehive of activity, Dhruvi says she prefers painting the “voices in my head.” For Acharya, what’s more important is rendering the “emotions” rather than achieving a likeness. “I like to draw what is going on in the mind.” She adds, laughing, “And let me tell you, my mind is never at rest.” Is she nervous about ‘Permeated Absence’? “I was a little nervous about a month ago,” she concurs. “But as the show draws closer, I think I am more or less comfortable now.”

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Dhruvi Acharya Off Springs
2018 48x42

‘Permeated Absence’ will be on show at Nature Morte, New Delhi from January 11 until February 8



Dhruvi Acharya hereafter
2018 60x54

'Permeated Absence' will be on show at Nature Morte, New Delhi from January 11 until February 8