

Living with Death

With her latest show, **Dhruvi Acharya** seeks catharsis



ART OF THE LIVING
'Hereafter' (left) by Dhruvi Acharya

What does it mean to experience the deaths of loved ones? How to cope with the resultant grief? *Permeated Absence*, a solo show by Dhruvi Acharya, 48, on at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery till February 8, explores these ever-complex questions. Haunted by husband Manish Acharya and her father's deaths in 2010, followed by her father-in-law's in 2016, an emotionally devastated Acharya has spent the last decade grappling with thoughts of mortality. The only way to overcome it, she felt, was through art. The Mumbai-based artist explains, "It's not just a broken heart. It's actually a different kind of loss where your loved one is permanently unavailable for any communication and you are forced to live a life you cannot make much sense of."

Tremendously "personal yet universal", as Acharya puts it, *Permeated Absence* offers a glimpse into the artist's closely-guarded world. Besides a soft sculptural bedroom installation that allows people to walk into a spectral world of memories, the exhibition also includes her recent paintings about the ageing body. One, in particular, recalls the cycle

of life while the rest of the works focus largely on an urban woman struggling to retain her identity against powerful historical and social forces. Most striking is the fact that Acharya's art is entirely about the female experience, challenging social perceptions of womanhood. Inevitably, then, every painting features a female protagonist, often accompanied by her trademark 'thought bubbles'.

Pairing the tensions and turbulence of her own mind with the recurring image of a woman lost-in-thought has become an intrinsic part of Acharya's artistic voice. Her joyful visual style blends the imprint of Amar Chitra Katha with Margaret Kilgallen's folksy delight, rendering otherwise morbid works oddly celebratory. Yet, don't let the comic book conceit of her art fool you. It raises important questions about patriarchy, misogyny, sexism, sexual violence and rape. For example, 'Femina' is Acharya's feisty take on the state of modern Indian woman. "You read about women being groped, attacked or raped all the time," she says. "Plus, we are fighting centuries of repression. It's scary." ■

—Shaikh Ayaz