

## ART

**A**rt is an emotion, a feeling, and a rather subjective one. A painting that can deeply move you may not incite the same love from another person. Yet, there are artists whose repertoire of work have us hooked, make us ponder and give us a deeper perspective of life around us. Dhruvi Acharya is one such name who continues to inspire, thought-provoke and engage with us through her visually layered work. An Indian artist who has made her mark globally, Acharya is best known for her portrayal of urban women and the myriad narratives surrounding this gender. She also delves into grimmer topics such as death, climate change and more, but not without her sense of dark humour and wit.

# Visual provocations

Whether it's women, death or climate change, **Dhruvi Acharya** is a gifted artist who has always provoked thought and made us think deeply through her visually layered work. In an intimate chat, **Kriti Saraswat-Satpathy** gets to know the person behind the art.

**How did your artistic journey begin? Was there a defining moment that led you on this path?**

I would draw even as a child and my family was always supportive of my love for drawing and painting. Despite doing well in studies, my core interest was always art, and it led me to do my undergraduate studies in Applied Arts at Sophia Polytechnic in Mumbai, with an illustration major. Soon after the course, I got married and moved to the US. Being the 1990s, phone calls back home were expensive and rare, and my homesickness led me to draw my memories of home. I think this is when I knew I wanted to paint throughout my life as it was not only cathartic but gave wings to my creativity. When I was in India, I had been secretly applying to colleges in the States without my family's knowledge, and my move to the US gave me a chance to study further and hone my skills. I built my fine arts portfolio in a Post Baccalaureate programme at the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore and then got a Master of Fine Arts Degree from the Hoffberger School



Dhruvi Acharya



of Painting in the same college. Soon after graduation, I was lucky that I got a chance to showcase my memory landscapes in one of the oldest art galleries in Baltimore...and since then, the journey has been ongoing.

**After spending 10 years living in the US, what made you move back to India?**

The atmosphere in New York where we were living drastically changed after the 9/11 attacks, and my late husband, filmmaker Manish Acharya and I realised we both could live and work from anywhere in the world. So, we packed up our home and travelled for a few years to live in different countries including India. The passing away of a few close family members, including my husband, made me put down my roots in my own city and raise my two children whilst living close to family.

**How did you find your footing in the Indian art scene?**

It wasn't a cakewalk as I did get rejected by 10 galleries that I had contacted soon after getting my MFA. But in 2002, I exhibited my work at Jehangir Art Gallery in Mumbai where Shireen Gandhi of the then Chemould Gallery saw my work

and offered me a solo show in her gallery. That's how my association began with this gallery and continues even today. My first solo exhibition at Chemould was in 2004. In 2008, I did a solo show at Chemould Prescott Road that travelled to Nature Morte in Delhi, with who I continue to work.

**Your work primarily depicts urban women and their psyche. Is this based on your own experiences? What made you make this an essential part of your work?**

I started painting as it helped me deal with emotions, clear my head and think better, much before it became my profession. Many times, my work reflects an experience that I've had, whether it is parenting or dealing with a bout of breathlessness while prepping for a marathon. It, however, also addresses bigger issues that affect us all, like gender inequality, air pollution, climate change and more. As women, we go through several big and small changes, both physically and mentally, and my art is reflective of these. So, I would say, my work is about different human experiences and emotions that are universal, not just mine.

But I have poured incidents of my life into my work. For instance, after losing my husband, I did a show about death.







I had made a soft sculptural bedroom installation that one could walk into, that tried to share with viewers the surreal space one exists in while grieving. One of the paintings was about my experience as a widow in urban India that had the support of a loving family, and the stark contrast of those who did not always find the same. We experience several biases solely based on our gender, and through my art I try to shed a spotlight on these notions.

**How do you infuse an innate sense of humour in your art that has become a characteristic of your work?**

My initial works probably didn't have this characteristic but artists like Takashi Murakami and Lari Pittman have deeply influenced me. Their works tackle some of the most grim subjects, like the atomic bombing or death, and yet, there's a playfulness that draws the viewer in. Their works are beautifully deceptive and pique your interest and make you ponder about the subject. Over time, their influence reflected in my work with my sense of humour allowing me to work with difficult subjects without being melodramatic or didactic.

**In today's Instagram age, do you think artists need to have a social media presence to survive in this industry?**

There is absolutely no guarantee that one will succeed as an artist so one doesn't join this profession to make money, but simply because we love making art. Expressing oneself through art not only requires innate talent, but also the ability to keep learning and improving one's craft. Like any other



creative field, a few see soaring heights of success, many even posthumously, while more, for various reasons, fail to receive the breaks and recognition they may deserve.

When it comes to the business part of it, it is the art galleries that represent artists and exhibit their work who are involved. And so, when an artist makes a sale, a high percentage of it goes to the gallery. While this has been the traditional route, there are budding artists who are using social media as a tool to showcase their work. For many, it is the lack of a gallery representation or the high commission percentage that has led to this platform. While having a social media presence isn't a requirement, it can surely help in many ways. It is interesting to see how other artists work, their process and studios. I also made use of it by posting a watercolour work a day during the lockdown. What started as a daily exercise for myself to paint and be accountable by putting it on my social feed, turned out to be a successful fundraiser. I sold most of my works through Instagram, and raised 15 lakh rupees for charity. While I continue to exhibit my works at galleries, having a virtual presence is nice as it puts me in touch with people who like my work.

**What are you working on next?**

Besides painting, I am currently working on the plans for an installation that will tie in all the mediums I work in, such as painting, drawing, fabric sculptures, watercolours and ceramic sculptures. I am very excited about it but it's too early to know how it will materialise. ◉