

after the fall

Dhruvi Acharya – Is it all just in my mind?

“You can’t always get what you hoped for. But you can still survive, and you can still keep trying” -- Charles Schulz

The allure of the recognizable is that it can lead you into the belief alleyways of the familiar, the easy, the child-like. Dhruvi Acharya’s work plays upon this aspect with a beguiling invitation. Her paintings that appear like a graphic novel in miniature, or in nearly life size format, are peopled with characters that look like your Sunday toons. Through a cascade of speech bubbles, against the rainbow colours of bubble gum, they appear, occasionally spouting existential enquiry in one-liners. But there is a lull as you pause and notice that a puddle of darkness seems to rise like a torrent of black bile. Elsewhere the smoke overhang over the city obscures and smudges the skyline, engulfing the surface. Any sense of certainty of how you read the work is belied, in an overwhelming sense of contradictions.

Presenting a major exhibition after a gap of six years, Dhruvi Acharya represents an artist’s compelling enquiry on some fundamental assumptions on art. Acharya stands alone and away from the large narratives of Indian art, its determined quests, its failures, its occasional posturing. Equally, her work does not easily ally with its family of resemblances – comic strips, sequential art, film toons. In that sense, it is a superbly crafted, but somewhat undisciplined interloper in the art world where she invites you to listen in, and perhaps linger.

In the life of an artist six years can mark a period of change. In the case of Dhruvi Acharya, the period has been a cataclysm of extreme emotional loss. Her work however has endured, with remarkable consistency. If anything it has expanded, gained an interrogative edge, altered formats and played remarkably with media and scale. On view is an explosion of energy that makes visible the racing mind; the rush of a tachycardia of emotions, tempered by Acharya’s quest for a language that is known and yet new.

The death of Manish Acharya, Dhruvi’s husband and the slow absorption of the event have preceded this exhibition, and echo through it, in unexpected corners and crevices. The centrepiece of the exhibition is a bedroom made of stitched cloth, reminiscent of the colour of canvas bearing faint drawings, like fading snapshots. It is framed by other ‘pieces’ of furniture, rendered floppy and yielding in cloth. The marital bed appears as an altarpiece to memory, its tactility suggestive to the experience of touch. In a work without figures or thought bubbles, it is the forms themselves that assume an emotional tenor.

What if we view this output and what went before as a sequential narrative?

Through the early years of her marriage to the present, Acharya has maintained a

fidelity of practice in which the characters appear engaged in an emotional play against a fantastical or even surreal landscapes. She speaks of how these forms appeared in her drawing after she trained as a graduate student in Baltimore, under the critically acclaimed artist Grace Hartigan. Hartigan, an influential figure in the New York school of abstraction who was in turn close to Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Frank Capra, and who counted leading artists Pollock, Kline, de Kooning, Rothko, and Guston among her friends, had moved from abstract expressionism to a more “tensely personal” style. In an interview she has spoken of how abstract expressionism – a genre that she engaged with – lent itself to create a flatter shallow surface. Speaking of her work, Hartigan said: “There is no recessional space, there’s no perspective that comes from out of the abstract expressionist idea of projecting surface. Of course, not everything is all on the surface, but it’s a very shallow, loose, moving, mobile surface space”.¹ Importantly, Hartigan believed that art must have “content and emotion” – and devoted much of her later work to the subject of women.

The experience of studying under Hartigan over two years bears repetition even two decades later, for the directions that it marked. Training in America and assailed with homesickness, Acharya developed a “memory landscape” of sites of familiarity, even nostalgia: floor plans of her family home in Bombay, Amar Chitra Katha narratives and their mix of the heroic and the fantastical. The throw back to the realms of the safe and familiar was not uneventful, however. A few stories like Sati Savitri now shocked her with their blatant sexism: in the present exhibition there is a work with just blurbs and quotes from such contexts, extolling the power of men and placing women in perpetual subservience.

The work that she produced after her art training created a rich and malleable template, from a pastiche of comics, homilies on ‘goodness’ from Amar Chitra Katha and the great reservoir of mythology. While in graduate school, Dhruvi attended an exhibition of the *Padshahnama*, which illuminates the splendour of life in the court of Shahjahan (1628 –1658). This encounter with the Indian miniature influenced her profoundly. While much of the *Padshahnama* celebrates Shahjahan’s military exploits, the aesthetic indulgences of the court are everywhere apparent – the richly caparisoned horses, the embroidered and woven brocades of the king and his courtiers, lush floral carpets. The structure of the miniature, and the flatness spoken of by Grace Hartigan here allowed Acharya to construct multiple planes – that allow the seamless flow from body to landscape to thought, to imaginary spaces even in small format paintings. In the intense patterning of the fore and background, and her use of clothing, it appears that Klimt, the *Padshahnama* and the loaded heavy efflorescence of the painting of Frieda Kahlo all seem to come together, to create rich textual surfaces.

To those familiar with Acharya’s work in the period prior to 2010, this exhibition will astound with its explosive energy. She has moved from the miniature format

to close to life size, single and multiple frames, from the immediate sensorium of Bombay and its invasive problems to narrative surreal conjunctions.

Like the late American artist Margaret Kilgallen whom she admires, Acharya has adapted her figures to expand into muralesque dimensions. At the core of her practice however, remains the female form, and the range of experience that she imbues it with. Through two decades of her work, Acharya has painted the menstruating and the pregnant body, mythological tropes of the domestic goddess and flying *gandharas* in close proximity with overweight bodies on the beach. Around 2004 the thought bubble appears like a presence, much like the chorus in Greek theatre, that never assumes a singular identity, but interrogates, provokes, and anticipates what is to come. Wrapping around the body like a vine, emerging peaceably like a peacock feather from the head, leaking out of her ear or blowing bubbles from her mouth, the fragments of thought expand when speech enters her work, around 2010. In every frame one reads the female figure as autobiographical, and it may well be. Equally, the painting may be about a more complex process of how to materially express thought, and in the process, create a unique language of communication.

The female body has served the artist as a site of enactment, becoming over time a highly protean form, that can grow and metamorphose at will. The Acharya family appeared gradually, their two sons with paper bags masks like a non-identity marker. And around these characters she develops what may be a thought landscape, of a consistent if charged visual field for thought. Thoughts may be articulated in speech bubbles that emit from the head – Acharya devises a number of ways of attaching and detaching the bubble which changes from signature comic book bubbles to head ornaments, to flowers, teardrops, or a proboscis. That thoughts can crowd and populate the space like disembodied organs is borne in the chattering, wincing and grinning mouths that travel and course across the surface of the painting. Sometimes they embed in flowers, clouds or bubbles, and float busily across the surface. Body parts – usually sexualised – like the tongue – can wiggle and wag with a manic energy.

Central to the exhibition is Acharya's own evolution, after the death of her husband, of marking a point of departure and arrival. "I began the work one and half years afterwards, and then what happens thereafter makes up this show. This is not the initial response. The installation of the bedroom came in because it was a surreal time, one doesn't understand reality." At the core of this body of work is a bold even audacious ambition to integrate the "memory landscape" – fragments of conversations, gestures, past drawings, images from the family album, into the present as it evolves, with its sites of discomfort. Like a line from Bertolt Brecht: "Forward, but forgetting nothing" this landscape unfolds like syncopated time. In the teeming zeitgeist of the present, exemplified for instance by the grey smoke overhang and outlines of Syria under a wave of bombings, the image of Manish

Acharya returns. The conflation of devastation among a people distant, without name or address – merges into the beloved, into a phenomenology of loss. Acharya uses elements of memory and memorialisation minimally, much like discontinuous past, in which fragments of memory linger.

How then do we view Dhruvi's work? For all its comic book / graphic form, it is closer to the artist book, where her intention is not social action or mass circulation. Rather it is the artistic intention at the core of her practice, that beneath the apparently skewed comic worldview, there is a sense, that things do not quite feel right.

In creating an emotive thought space, Dhruvi Acharya breaks with the metanarrative of Indian art enforced by many of her contemporaries. Or perhaps she arrives at it through a different route, that of the comic character, the figures outside high art, which nevertheless have license to speak out. For all its sociability, her chosen form marks unease, discomfort and sometimes outright rebellion. Acharya's protagonists are women trying to cope, with the everyday, with body issues, expressing some of the "defeat, cynicism, despair that seem to permeate the world of the adult comic character."² In creating an imaginative field of her own Acharya collapses history and disciplines to create a distinctive language. Just as Linus van Pelt of the series Peanuts is the only one who believes in the Great Pumpkin, Acharya has created a world where thought is nameless but potent and visible. Her paintings are to be read then, like a returning series, in the language of her own making.

- Gayatri Sinha

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¹Oral history interview with Grace Hartigan, 1979 May 10, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²Benjamin DeMott, Darkness in the Mail, Psychology Today 1984, February. Pg.84