

BLink

Celebrating small

Georgina Maddox



Big impact Trauma and loss are frequent themes in Arpana Caur's work Courtesy Arpana Caur

Arpana Caur's first solo in Delhi after 2003 commemorates three decades of work and her smaller masterpieces

Arpana Caur refuses to wear a watch, does not carry a mobile phone, avoids switching on her computer and does not believe in lavish exhibition openings, even if it is one that marks her turning 61. The renowned artist describes herself as “living in a timeless zone”, devoid of gadgets and gizmos.

She prefers to pour you a cup of brewed tea in limited-edition stoneware pottery as she gives you her undivided attention at the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature at Siri Fort, Delhi, where her first solo after a long break is currently on display.

We are surrounded by 104 drawings, set in modest grey frames against a white mount. ‘Crossing 60’ ranges from early works of graphite on paper, and pen and ink on paper to zinc plate etchings from the '90s, a set of gauche on paper made during her visit to Ladakh, and a collection of soft, dry-pastels that were made in the 2000s.

“Everyone knows me for my large canvases and I still like to work on a large scale. But I wanted to share my drawings and smaller works to commemorate my turning 60, because they do not get seen in their own right. I had planned this exhibition over a year ago. However, due to various personal reasons, I had to postpone it by a year, hence I have called it ‘Crossing 60’,” she says with a smile.

Caur says that what is remarkable about this show is that half the works are not for sale. Some have been borrowed from the Alkazi Foundation, while others are older and dear pieces that she does not wish to part with. The galleries which will show her work after the Delhi exhibition — Gallery Veda in Chennai and Emami Chisel Art in Kolkata — agreed to her conditions.

Caur’s works, while gentle in their execution, are filled with pain, loss and often speak of trauma. Whether it is her recent series, ‘Threatened Landscape’, that depict imaginary maps juxtaposed against a single flame, a sword or a deer in flight, or earlier ones that speak of the tragic 1980s Sikh riots and the widows of Vrindavan.

Caur has seen tragedy in her own life; her maternal grandparents were refugees from Lahore and she lost her younger sister in an accident when she was only 18. Her mother, Ajeet Cour, an award-winning novelist and Padmashri recipient, could never get over this. Caur grew up drawing beside her mother, who would often be lost in reading a book.

“These maps speak of the sites of upheaval, like India and Pakistan, India and Bangladesh... our history is one of conflict and constantly changing borders,” she says.

There are also works that glimmer with hope and spirituality, like ‘Pilgrim’, a pastel that depicts Guru Nanak walking into a green landscape, or the glowing blue face of Lord Buddha, which floats reassuringly above maps torn by conflict.

In another work the bleeding feet of Jesus Christ have given fruition to a dense, green banana grove in Kerala.

Caur’s ‘Widows of Vrindavan’ is another fascinating series, for not only does it depict a town of numerous lamenting widows but also includes an autobiographical piece that portrays the artist and her mother ‘in the same boat’. The work is intensely personal, and Caur restricts her comment to “We were both facing a similar loss at the time...”

The works that were made in 1989 were part of a larger exhibition hosted by the Alkazi Foundation in Delhi. “I remember that Alkazi bought most of the drawings, since at the time, they were priced only ₹100. Most people rushed in to see the large-scale paintings and these little drawings were often ignored in the corridor,” she recalls. Today, however, the smaller art works have found their place in the sun. Caur’s zinc plate etchings should also be admired. She lost many of the original zinc plates while shifting homes, but their craftsmanship is evident. She says, “I enjoyed my phase in printmaking at Garhi Studios, Delhi, because unlike drawing and painting you cannot entirely predict the outcome when you’re etching a zinc plate. There is that element of chance, since you cannot calculate exactly how the acid will bite into the lines, or how the ink-roller will ink them, and it is that element of surprise that I enjoy.”

Caur has always been interested in the lives of ‘marginal’ characters. And this becomes evident in a beautiful diptych where a construction worker carries bricks upon her head, which then transforms into an ‘Eid ka chand’ or a sickle-shaped moon, which is considered an omen of wish-fulfilment. Her famed ‘Night and Day’ series also celebrates the labour of

construction workers, while 'The Water Weaver' depicts a woman weaving a garment out of water.

There is also a series of pastels that laments the degradation of the environment, where hungry dogs devour wild peacocks and tall buildings take the place of trees. "Nature is in chaos and we can only blame ourselves for this," says Caur, with a sigh.

(The exhibition runs till October 5, at Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, Siri Fort Institutional Area, Delhi)

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