

MEMORY AS METAPHOR

For Arpana Caur, the act of painting is a soliloquy to herself—deeply personal and often cathartic. A peep into the world of one of India's most celebrated artists

By Bandeeep Singh

Arpana Caur, 62, sits on the floor of her studio facing the camera, curling into herself like a scared child. "I am extremely shy and can only face the camera standing behind my canvas," pleads the reclusive artist who does not own a cellphone "for the fear of being hounded".

The afternoon sunlight is streaming in like a wash of Indian yellow. As she glances out, her shadow falls in the middle of a red swathe of negative space on her unfinished painting. The visual unfolds like a metaphor of her work itself—a figurative shadow-play of her life influences on the canvas.

"Her art is a sincere rumination of her personal trials and experiences, incorporating local and worldly circumstances," writes Prarthana Tagore, the young curator of her forthcoming show—a retrospective of 40 years of her work at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru, in collaboration with Swaraj Art Archive. It opens on November 4. The month-long show features a huge body of 94 works from one of India's most celebrated—and reclusive—artists.

Arpana places personal memory like a prism before her canvas. Her life and circumstances refract through it. Being a woman with a sheltered upbringing, the activities in those confines—embroidery, weaving, storytelling replete with all the attendant body language—is the brush, the subconscious of her work. Her colour palette is her life-shaping experiences—people like her grandfather

and the overarching presence of her mother, the renowned Punjabi writer Ajeet Caur; encounters with inequality, urbanisation, rapes and violence. Also pertinent are cultural influences, miniature painting, folk art and literature and spiritual inspirations such as the Buddha, Nanak, Kabir and the Sikh and Sufi thought. Dipping the brush in these colours, she paints her characters and her stories.

For Arpana, the act of painting is a soliloquy to herself—deeply personal and often cathartic. "I painted to purge

wonder unscathed. Her recent work is more meditative and with a lightness of being as it explores ideas of body, space and time.

Central to much of her work is the woman figure. It is like her alter ego inhabiting a parallel world—the canvas. Art critic and curator Gayatri Sinha describes Arpana's typical woman: "Large and strong, she looms like an androgynous *bahubali*; Earth-like, her contours are akin to those of undulating land."

She is also earthy in spirit—dark, brown, desexualised and accepting of her fate with a calm resilience. As such, she is an archetype that takes on many lives and evolves through time. Be it the mother figure, the maid, the woman labourer, the mythical Sohni or Prakriti or Yogini standing on one leg. Yet Arpana keeps all these characterisations to the level of surface body language, like external garments, deliberately loose and unfinished, to reveal that underneath she is the same being—a metaphor.

"Through her realism, she weaves surrealism. Only she can do it," says art critic Uma Nair. The huge life-size human forms the artist is known for often become complex allegorical figures. From the lone woman doing Phulkari embroidery, a dark shadow emerges and she assumes a yin-yang duality. Her embroidery thread unspools and encircles her, becoming the thread of life. In other variations, this dual woman form in deeply contrasting colours represents day and night and the thread there becomes time itself.

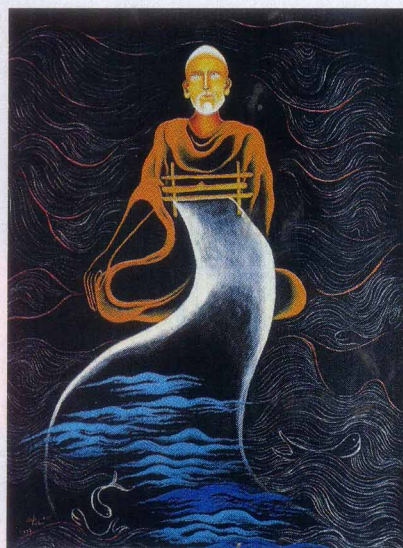


myself of the angst and pain," she explains, talking of her earlier painting series on women in confined spaces, the widows of Vrindavan, and on the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 which seared her memory. Like the parable of Shiva drinking the poison *halahala*, her canvases absorb all the angst and torment from her being, leaving her child-like

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH



ARPANA CAUR IN HER STUDIO;
(LEFT) EMBROIDERERS, 1999



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) *BODY IS JUST A GARMENT*, 2010; *KABIR*, 1993; *SOHNI*, 2005

In later works, the symbol of the same dual form is reversed to represent life and death. The dark figure this time leans and cuts the thread with a scissor. It embodies time as *Kaal*, Fate, which clips the cord of life. As Arpana's preoccupation with time and death grew—especially after her bypass surgery in 2008—the 'yamra-jaesque' scissor became larger and such a recurrent motif in her works that fellow artist Satish Gujral nicknamed Arpana *Kainchi*, scissors.

The lone woman figure embodies representations of the feminine principle, like *Dharti*, earth, and *Prakriti*, nature. The body garments interchange lives and bequeath the same metaphorical dimension to Sohni—the

female character from Sohni-Mahiwal, the Punjabi folk tale of star-crossed lovers—who forms one of the principal characters in her painting series called *Love Beyond Measure*. The figure of Sohni crossing the Chenab on an upturned earthen pot to meet her lover Mahiwal becomes an overriding image for Arpana.

"Sohni is anyone who takes a leap of faith," she explains. "She is a metaphor for human courage." Her feminism is beyond the limitations of just political ideology. "Sohni could be both man and woman," she says.

So the Sohni of her paintings swims in the middle of contemporary urban streets—our rivers of traffic, lust and contempt. In other depictions, she

floats on the canvas in a zero-gravity state. Symbols such as geometrical tools, "which allude to measurement", a wire with a plug "showing connectedness to *Ishq Haqiqi*, true love" and traffic lights that are "neon deities issuing diktats" hover about. The river she crosses is another metaphor—flowing throughout Arpana's body of work, representing time or death, or both. These symbols play out even in her paintings of religious figures, such as Guru Nanak, Buddha and Kabir, where they evoke glimpses of Indian spiritual thought. One of the most well-known paintings in the show is of Kabir weaving a fabric that unfurls from the loom in the form of a river. Kabir's iconic song *Jhini Chadariya*, diaphanous garment, gets a new dimension.

Structurally, Arpana's paintings borrow a lot from the miniature painting tradition—the absence of geometrical perspective, the lyrical winding spiral forms of natural elements such as trees, water, clouds, etc. Its device of creating animal shapes with multiple human forms is reflected in several of her paintings of bodies that contain numerous mythical figures within them. She paints faces bereft of any strong emotion. "Because passivity is in our ethos and the figures are archetypes," she reasons.

"She is a post-modernist artist defined by tradition," says Nair. Another language that Arpana consciously borrows from is that of traditional Indian art forms—the Madhubani, Warli, Gond and Shekhawati forms of painting—as an act of "paying homage" to them.

Such sentimental outpourings on canvas, coupled with the simplicity of her narratives, are what some critics point out as the limiting factor of her work. Others see it as rare honesty. "On the canvas she is not a liar and she is not trying to catch a trend," says contemporary painter Sidharth, who has a similar narrative style.

By now, the shaft of light in the studio crawls to the other end of the unfinished canvas, lighting up a figure of an ecstatic yogi with colour bursting from his limbs. Another metaphor. This one is for her. ■