

# A Tapestry of Guns and Targets

**Roobina Karode** catalogues a shift in the mood of Arpita Singh's paintings in the run-up to the artist's solo show in New York.

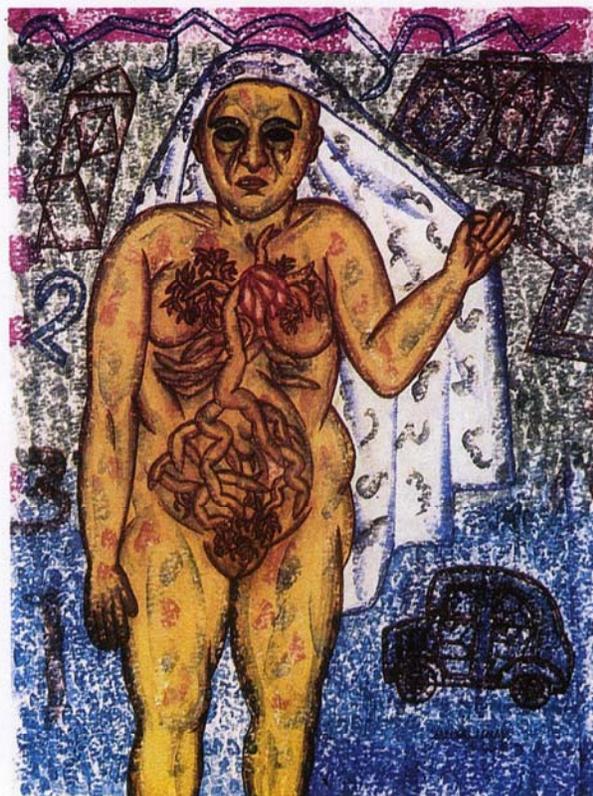


The naked woman of monumental form stands vulnerable, her insides opened up for the viewer to examine. We see her blood-soaked heart, frail as a flower, and the cloth over her head fails to veil her fragile inner condition. Arpita Singh, our well known "tapestry weaver", is this time weaving knives and bones, guns and targets in her work. Truncated heads and crouching human figures have replaced the flowers and cups that bordered her previous pictorial frames and the fragility of life is captured in the delicacy of a growing creeper.

Over the years, Arpita has familiarised us with her marvellous paintings, wherein the narrative is inscribed in her decorative style of floral patterns, luminous colours and rich textures. She has evolved a repertoire of images, of which the meanings and metaphors are at times literal, but more often layered beneath the formal beauty of her work. In her recent watercolours, Arpita seems more engaged with lamenting the distressing reality of our times. Signs of impending doom and death rendered into compelling details catch my eye as it shifts over the works – the hanging stark bones, the drawn heart of a woman resting on her hand, the skeletal armature of the body and innards floating in the fluid painterly space, all make more than an iconic appearance. The works are striking for the overwhelming presence of anatomical iconography in them.

The horror and scale of the communal riots in Gujarat exposed us all to the unbelievable celebration of brutality in the name of religion and love of God. Sitting in the protected space of one's home, we are confronted by the social and political happenings of our nation. Television and newspapers deliver the horrors of the world into our living rooms. No wonder an artist as sensitive and sincere as Arpita has been battling feelings of remorse, shame and fear. Whether we see it as massacres engendered by open political strategies, or as rioting mobs of inflamed religious workers, the ghastly killing of the innocent, images of their charred bodies, amputated parts and bleeding wounds stare us in the face to become a part of our daily consciousness.

Arpita's narrative is not only about personal predicament but also about the evils associated with games of power, authority, mindless rituals and gender bias. She reacts to how a propensity for violence has instilled a fear of an engineered death over natural death. Even the safest places for women, their homes, have been invaded. Arpita imbues *The Knife Rain* with a sense of insecurity and helplessness, showing knives showering down on the woman who lies precariously on the ground, her ageing, sagging, naked body twisted inwards. Her heart (scooped



Arpita Singh. *Unveiling*. Watercolour on paper. 36 x 48 cms. 2002.



Arpita Singh. Missing Target. Watercolour on paper. 20 x 24". 2003.

out) is floating in the air amidst the threatening objects... the only ordered element in the space is a row of hanging teacups. She seems unable to protect herself either from the sharp objects or from the man pointing a finger (no less powerful than a gun) at her. How can peace be made with war and death looming large?

Arpita's art is neither a hurried response to an event nor an instant revelation of a message for the viewer. Instead she seeks to play a quizzing game, giving hints but camouflaging clues and holding secrets within the painterly maze. Her work places the onus on the viewer to engage and enter the inner passages of two worlds – the lost and the remembered.

In her much admired works in the '80s, Arpita had arrived at an amazing interlacing of body and fabric/garment, with figures and spaces quilted by continuous flowing dense patterns. Her attitude towards decoration was reflected in her visual language – mark making, cross-stitching urban streets, capturing the intricacy of designed objects and worn garments. The beauty of her painted daubs, stitches and linear markings embellished, for instance, the surfaces of *Girl in a Floral Dress* (1985) or the *Kidwai Family* (1987). In her recent works, Arpita tells me, though she starts filling in the pictorial space around her figure with floral patterns, they metamorphose into something else. Indeed, creepers have transformed into magnified veins or innards. She makes visible what is by nature invisible – internal organs of a body, roots of a plant, the skeletons of things and inside veins flowing out. To me, even the flowers look like blobs of blood-soaked raw flesh. Often, in varying contexts, the same drawn shape connotes roots, creepers, veins and a bony spinal armature.

In the *Missing Target* (2003), she starts as usual by painting flowers that subconsciously turn into targets, in the presence of threat and proximity to death. The garlands of targets are symbolic of countless victims awaiting their fate, crouching and begging for mercy as goons point guns in all directions. The intrusive force of culture moves one as it imposes itself on nature. Perhaps hinting that if we have survived, it is simply because we are the missed targets. In this many-layered work, Arpita juxtaposes the ambivalent forces of life and death – the sensuality and regeneration of life manifested in the amplified seedy fruits and the ugliness of death revealed in truncated human bodies floating in space.

Arpita must also be seen in relation to other Indian women painters and much has been written about this. In paintings by women, closeness to/of the body suggests that bodily positions in space are signifiers of relations in the social sphere. Nilima Sheikh writes, "The woman of Arpita's watercolors has grown, to fill the paper sometimes. In some paintings she seems to grow larger than the daily life arena where she had juggled her size and place with other members of the repertory. ....Often she is large, caring, frontal, mythic, urban, stepping across history to belong to other times." The female protagonist, as she grows older, exudes a full-bodied presence – her ageing, sagging body with heavy fleshy folds becomes more engaging for Arpita, who dresses her in a fluorescent pink brassiere, holding her paperboat



Arpita Singh. Couple Waiting. Watercolour on paper. 36 x 48 cms. 2003.

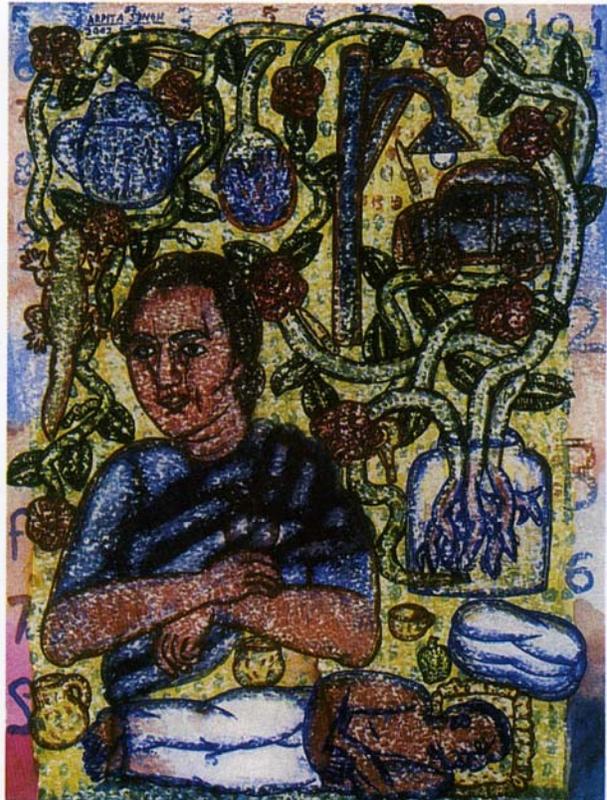
of fantasy/desire close to her body. In many of her solitary images, she is caught between overlapped spaces of dreams and reality, in moments of introspection and self-engagement.

Arpita's life experiences have enriched the woman as subject. For her, the personal history of growing up as a woman and an artist are intertwined. Pursuing art professionally was a zigzag journey, multi-tasking and shifting gears to fulfil responsibilities as a wife and a mother. Having lost her father at an early age, it was her mother's strength and resilience that was an inspiring force. Arpita's periods of hibernation, of divided attention and energies perhaps, strengthened her inner resolve.

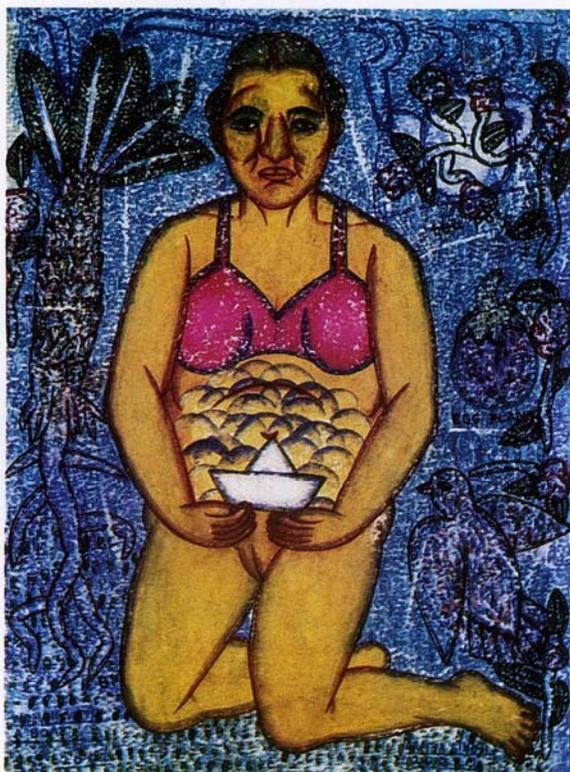
The ordinary rituals of the domestic life of women are Arpita's therapy. In a recent conversation with me, she indicated that the activity she enjoys the most in her kitchen is washing utensils, the act of moving her hand over smooth, grainy, earthy, or metallic surfaces and forms. This is perhaps why her art has always been process-oriented. It is through the process that she senses, feels, touches, resists, relishes and creates. She layers and effaces paint, taking it through acts of staining, smudging, sandpaper rubbing and scraping, a labour-intensive process. I realise that Arpita, the woman and the artist, are not two separate entities but a merged identity. Her loyalty to process is also grounded in the basic act of painting as communication. For Arpita, the surface is an immediate attraction, an irresistible encounter. The working surface is never blank or sterile even at its inception. "It evokes a response instantly, it speaks to me and I take the clues as I go on," says she. The painting process is not just a physical manifestation but, for Arpita, a revelation of the workings of the mind, with which she repeats and invents everyday.

Arpita, who paints both in oil and watercolour, enjoys the unique negotiation of the processes in both. She gave up oils in the '70s as she sensed in the medium a lack of freedom. The watercolours instead encouraged intimacy and so did paper (and its size) that can be worked with flexibility and ease by keeping it on the floor, table or even in one's lap. While less forgiving than oil, watercolour can be instantly playful and gratifying for the artist. If Arpita works on canvases now, it is for her love for thick impasto and broader swirling movements of the brush unique to the medium.

Arpita draws upon many kinds of sources and past styles that take on a new complexion in her work. History and memory provide evocative textures. Arpita reminisces that a non-religious upbringing liberated her to view even the established traditions of religious art from a purely aesthetic point of view. "Patterns of any kind capture my imagination – for instance, the beauty of the Bharhut and Sanchi medallions intricately carved in stone, saris with elaborately embroidered borders, *kantha* stitches, appliquéd quilts, all demand a visual attentiveness in both physiological and psychological terms. Decoration is never without function or meaning." Such an attitude helps Arpita dismiss the established hierarchy in arts (lower and higher, functional and fine), privileging her artistic gesture with the rhythm and repetition of weaving and stitching that add a distinct flavour to her works.



Arpita Singh. Tea Pot, eggplant and a house lizard. Watercolour on paper. 36 x 48 cms. 2002.



Arpita Singh. Woman with a Boat. Watercolour on paper. 36 x 48 cms. 2002. Slides courtesy Sunny Photography.

Inevitably in art, certain sensibilities of the artist transform into characteristic features of her work. Arpita loves to paint images simply outlined in their clear shapes with their titles, the ones we come across in a child's picture book or in an educational chart. She made a lot of drawings in the past on printed surfaces (newspapers and magazines) where she enjoyed the blank gaps between letters and columns. She used them to introduce drawn images that made visual connections with the text. This perhaps initiated her later into making numbers and texts a part of her painted world. And, of course, also the fact that she immensely enjoyed writing shapes of numbers and letters in paint, for they evoked varying tactility. For many years, she explored the potentiality of abstraction through drawings, making dots and lines, in black and white to gain a real understanding of space and surface. She was interested in exploring the economy of visual elements. The spontaneous doodlings of Rabindranath Tagore and the dark outlined figure drawings of Kalighat happily coexist in her work.

Informality and discord are possibly compositional strategies that do not restrict the spreading of the narrative. Arpita, by habit, pushes objects and people to the edges of the painting, suggesting its continuity beyond the frame. She, like many of her contemporaries, defies scientific perspective and the construction of a narrative from a single vantage point. Instead, the pictorial space is enriched by juxtapositions, even collision of the inside and outside world, making our vision mobile, to move equally to all places and corners of the canvas/paper without a sacralising centre. In seemingly naïve configurations, the immobility of Arpita's figures stand out in contrast with mobile objects (airplanes, cars, boats, birds) that surround them. She positions her figures, whether standing, seated or reclining, in very awkward postures that defy both objectivity and gravity. The intuitive growth of the narrative, the emotional scaling of figures and objects, and resonating layers and textures exude an untrained freshness.

Arpita captures the transience of life in its shifting moods. In one of the works, a couple is shown sharing an evening tea ritual seated under a tree; in another they are placed calmly in the foreground while they reappear in the distance, seemingly playing a game. Arpita compares the home to a playground, where the players/couple at times play for fun, at times to compete, win and assert superiority. She places an empty chair in the middle for the one who will win, rule and assert power. In her present mood, Arpita makes sharp incisive folds instead of soft and sinuous ones when drawing the body and the garment.

In these recent works, Arpita has, through her wit and grit, taken up the challenge of reconciling decorative elements with anti-decorative motifs. The impossibility of simultaneous visual engagement with the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic elements or the inside and outside of things has obsessed Arpita who, in a subversive mood, infuses the raw ugliness of life into her daily ritual of painting beautifully.

Note :

1. The term "tapestry weaver" was originally attributed to Arpita by Nilima Sheikh in the catalogue on Arpita's painting 1992-94 for Vadehra Art Gallery.