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Editor: ktpress@ktpress.co.uk
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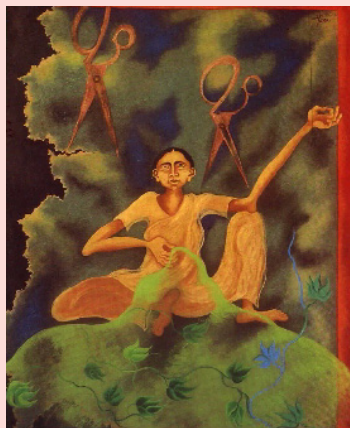
Arpana Caur: A Profile

Nima Poovaya-Smith

In 1991 Bradford Art Galleries and Museums were presented by a well wisher with two paintings from two Indian women artists. A small oil by, arguably, one of India's first great moderns - Amrita Sher-Gil - who died tragically young at the age of 28 in 1942, and another oil by Arpana Caur, a large glowing canvas entitled *Time Image - 2*.

Sher-Gil's painting was a portrait of a woman, obviously based on an Ajanta cave painting - moody, mysterious, and curiously implosive. Arpana Caur's work was much more gestural. Against an infinity of stormy, indigo sky and a white speckled red foreground the figure of an aged women, ghostly in her white shroud-like sari, faces a saucer-eyed child. Old age and youth mirror each other; the viewer was confronted by an allegory on the theme of immutability and mortality that was quite terrifying.

The gift of the two paintings coincided with the opening of an exhibition on Sikh culture, curated by Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, called *Warm and Rich and Fearless*. Since both Sher-Gil and Arpana are of Sikh descent, it seemed appropriate to incorporate their works in the exhibition. The display also included



Arpana Caur *Woman Embroidering* oil on canvas 1995 120cm x 152.5cm



Left : Arpana Caur *Night and Day* Godna drawing & gouache on paper 1996 57.5cm x 40cm
(Godna is a School of Indian folk art, Madhubani region, Bihar in India)

Centre: Arpana Caur *Prakriti-3* Godna drawing and gouache on paper 1996 57.5cm x 40cm

Right: Arpana Caur *Between Dualities* oil on canvas 1996 210cm x 152cm

miniature paintings of the Sikh school, woodcuts, rich damascene and gem-studded armour and weaponry, jewellery and phulkaris and baghs, embroidered textiles from the Punjab, in which Sikh women, in particular, excel.

All these objects were intricately worked, the gold koftgiri inlay on the steel armour, the bejewelled daggers, the laboriously embroidered phulkaris, the hierarchical troubled world presented within the miniatures and even Sher-Gil's sombre earth-coloured palettes showing a dreaming girl. In this exhibition, one was surrounded by minute detail. But dominating all this were the spacious, horizons of Arpana's painting, a perfect contrapuntal device. Although allegorical, it was also modern and it was confident. And in its modernism and confidence, it seemed to breathe a different glowing life into the surrounding works. It not only brought their richness even more to the fore, but it also further particularised them.

And strangely enough there were all manners of echoes, hints and allusions between this extraordinary painting and the other exhibits. The horizon seemed a non-formulaic re-working of the horizons contained in the miniatures, the flower-speckled foreground reminded the audience of embroidered phulkaris.

And this is how the whole body of Arpana's work has, rightly or wrongly, become fixed in my mind. They are not only lucid articulations of our contemporary state, through figures that resonate with quiet strength and anguish, they also act as mechanisms of release of earlier traditions. The works become agents of empowerment for the widows of Vrindavan, and the other dispossessed. But in the process Arpana compels one to look at her own sources differently. She takes the



Arpana Caur *Compassion* Godna drawing and gouache 1996 30cm x 40cm

Arpana Caur *So Many Horsepower* Godna drawing and gouache on paper 1996 50cm x 40cm

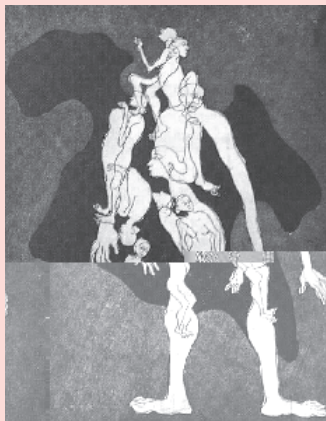
Arpana Caur *The Embroiderer* oil on canvas 1996 165cm x 137.5 cm

All images © courtesy of the artist.

landscape and female figures of the 17th and 18th century Basholi Hill School, and by setting them in a seemingly boundless universe, she frees them.

Caur expands and personalises Sher-Gil's seductive 'otherness' editing out any hint of romance or onlooker status in the process. One of my favourite theories is Arpana's conscious or unconscious witty homage to the compositional devices of the Pahari and Sikh miniatures. William Archer has pointed out that Pahari artists of the Himalayan foothills found the surfing rhythms of the hookah an extremely useful device in painting, creating as it did its own spatial divides. But Sikhs frowned upon smoking and the Pahari artists who had transferred to the Sikh courts nimbly responded to this by replacing the hookah with the Chatri or ceremonial umbrella. With its slanted shaft and curving brims it too became an important compositional device. In a number of Caur's paintings it is the woman's exaggeratedly extended hand, whether she is lifting, carrying or, particularly, embroidering that immediately strikes the onlooker. The compositional device of the hookah and the chatri have been humanised and given life. The extended hand symbolises the strength and the power of the women who appear in Arpana's paintings. As Gayatri Sinha comments 'An image challenged as one of moralising domesticity, is in a way liberated by Arpana as the women is placed outdoors. Instead of a feminine, income-producing function, it becomes a political comment on women's productivity'.

And, what you see in the work in Caur's recent exhibition *Between Dualities* is the physical act of directly interweaving or encompassing Arpana's own visual vocabulary with the ancient vocabulary of the women artists of Mithila. The direct



Left : Arpana Caur
Body is Just a Garment
etching 1995
24 cm x 34 cm
Right: *Yearning*
etching 1995
24cm x 34 cm

nature of the intervention is a risky endeavour, but one that Arpana pulls off with cool assurance. Sometimes the intervention is shadowy and flickering, as in *Kalpavriksha - 1* and *-2* and *Prakriti* - where her own images are insubstantial and cloud like, trailing a nebulous passage across an ancient canvas.

In others the intervention is much more dramatic and witty in the oppositional images they provide as in *So Many Horse Power* where vertical columns of gaily coloured cars are painted against ranks of traditional Madhubani stylised horses. In the larger works in this series, the intervention is skilfully woven in. In *The Embroiderer*, for instance, very much a creation myth painting, for the woman could be weaving as much as embroidering, the figure in verdant green is nimble, hallowed by circle upon circle of folkstyle bird images. A bird figure seems to emerge from the mouth like a conch shell being blown at some ritual ceremony. The softness of the diaphanous cloth and the woman's seemingly peaceful although admittedly mythic task is rendered threatening by yet another halo of marching scissors. Arpana introduced them in a playful vein but the menage of their sharp steel blades is inescapable.

Perhaps because Sher-Gil and Arpana arrived together, metaphorically speaking, to Bradford's collection, they have become symbiotically linked in my mind. Sher-Gil is now a legend in India. A major road is named after her in New Delhi. There is a ban on the export of her works out of India. Her glamour and her beauty have created its own mystique.

In a very different way (thank god) I can sense the bare bones of legend already forming around Arpana. Most people I meet in India seem to be familiar with the various flash points that were defining moments in Arpana's life. Her parent's separation, the move from a suffocating, congested area to the grimness of a working woman's hostel, and the fact that Arpana is a self-taught artist - all these are well

known facts. Arpana however, is a very modern protagonist. Her own experience of displacement has given her a kind of reckless subversive daring.

This has also informed the work of her writer mother - the redoubtable Ajit Caur, author of the novel *Khana Badesh (Homeless)*. Indeed, having had the privilege of seeing them together in a bond that is fiercely close, and I'm sure occasionally combative, one cannot fail to be moved. 'I didn't need a god father', Arpana once said to me, 'I had my mother!'. You can see now why even the humblest woman in Arpana's painting manages to carry such authority and weight.

Arpana Caur, artist b. 1954, Delhi. She lives in New Delhi. She has shown widely in India since the mid-1970's and also during the 1980s increasingly in Europe and Japan. Her works are in many public and private collections in India, Stockholm, England and Japan. In 1995 she was commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum to execute a large work for its permanent collection on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Holocaust.

Arpana Caur's work since the mid-1970s is discussed by Gayatri Sinha in *Expressions and Evocations: Contemporary Women Artists of India* (India: Marg, 1997). She will be showing in Kassel during *Documenta X*, June-September 1997.

Nima Poovaya-Smith is Senior International Curator, Bradford Museum, England.

This is the text of a speech delivered at the opening of *Between Dualities: Recent Works by Arpana Caur*, ARKS Gallery, London by Nima Poovaya-Smith.

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