

## Tara Sabharwal: Embracing the Lightness of Being

In Tara Sabharwal's work, watery forms reminiscent of coral and sea creatures float on top of each other and convey the exhilarating experience of being unrooted. Sabharwal grew up in India and has spent much of her adult life in London and in New York City since 1982. She accepts the idea that she is not tied to one place, and she says, "I embrace the experience of being unfixed. I have used water and rain as a metaphor in my work, but the wateriness of the work is something larger and represents something about my essence." This quality of diaphanous indeterminacy emerges even more strongly in her recent paintings and prints. It signifies more than transience or fluctuations in light, weather, or mood. It allows her to move between different worlds, resisting the oppressive tendency to confine people to exclusive class, racial, and geographic categories that occur in Indian, European, and American cultures. This buoyancy stands for the freedom with which she lives her life and the desire to dream and play.

In Sabharwal's recent work including *Float* (2016), *Sparkle* (2014), and *Ta Da* (2016), the sensation and movement of water dominates the surfaces. She populates these images with small circular and organic forms that drift like fish eggs, jelly fish, rocks, or sea cucumbers amidst an ocean like ocean. The paintings can be viewed from any direction, a testament to the painter's practice of rotating her works in process. Many of these compositions are organized with small shapes on the top and bottom, while larger forms float several inches above the bottom. The lack of traditional perspective can cause a feeling of dislocation. The warm atmosphere of yellows, oranges and reds suggest that the viewer is seeing these forms under

water as golden sunlight filters through it.. Other palettes are more monochromatic with mysterious veils of blue and purple. The transparent textures created by her thin layers of printing ink generate ripples and dots of wetness akin to tidal pools teeming with life. These spaces are primordial and fertile. They seem to be ahistorical or prehistorical, and they allow the viewer to dream of a world without oil spills, acid rain, and the bleaching of coral reefs. Alternatively, they could be cells or vessels inside the body. Their biomorphic abstraction allows for many interpretations.

Abstraction in Sabharwal's paintings and prints connects to the lineage of major modernists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Arshile Gorky, but her translucent use of the paint is more similar to color field painters such as Helen Frankenthaler. Wassily Kandinsky wrote of the synesthetic experience of color in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, "Color directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively, to cause vibrations in the soul." Sabharwal's sensibility of color and form is not about her physical reality, but the perception and expression of her emotions and experiences. She strives to represent the abundance of feeling and her sensory perception of these states of consciousness.

Sabharwal's images seem both contemporary and tied to a history of Western and Indian culture. Her handling of the paint and its sheer color also relates to textile dyes and perhaps the silk or cotton saris worn in India. She works with these influences unconsciously, and she strives for the vivid essence of experiencing everything for the first time, as when one is a child.

She observes, “When I’m working, I feel like I’m following a certain direction. I don’t start a composition with anything in mind, it is more about tapping into the unconscious mind.”

Having the freedom to create without getting stuck in one formulaic way of working is the main reason that her work has continued to blossom and change. She alternates between figuration and abstraction, perhaps as a way of breaking her own rules.

One of the most unique aspects of Sabharwal’s work is her multi-media process of painting.

Many of her works begin as monoprints on plexiglass, to establish the initial texture and markmaking. The black and white ones reveal her pleasure in moving the palette knife, adding some turpentine, and keeping the surface sensitive to the touch of each brushstroke. She works on paper with oil based ink to provide the richness of oil paint and the flexibility of working on paper. Like an earlier period of artists who worked between plein air painting and the studio, Sabharwal alternates between spontaneously sketching out an image with guttural strokes in a collaborative printmaking workshop, and the privacy of her studio, which allows a more contemplative approach. This technique of beginning on the plexiglass surface affords more transparency than working on canvas, and offers a liquid-like quality. She can also add elements of collage, also known as chine-collé, to the surface. In addition to the additive process, monoprint enables her to work subtractively and remove the marks from a dark ground, and the solvents also allow her to create reticulations and bleeding of the color. Her unique process easily lends itself to developing a theme and variations, and to carry over some of the same forms from one work to another. Painting in her studio, with a view of the Hudson

River and its changing cloudscape, also inspires her palette and the evolution of these water-inspired works.

Color in these works of express emotion, light, temperature, and vitality. She says, "I have always enjoyed color, like an embrace or pure energy... Sometimes, when I see color and light, I have a flash of my childhood memory, of seeing a space, the environment, and feeling the air." Her sense of color is reminiscent of Pierre Bonnard in its subtle transitions and mixing on the surface, but her use of incandescent color that seems to radiate its own light is more akin to late works by Odilon Redon. Her saturated hot and cool juxtapositions in works such as *Lush Lands* (2014) implements color in a similar way to works such as Francesco Clemente's "No Mud, No Lotus" (2013-14) series, but her images are more buoyant and mark-making far more vigorous. Her paintings convey the movement of forms that are evolving, dissolving, and developing rather than figures that are fully defined. In this way, she allows the viewer a privileged position of witnessing the painting's creation.

In addition to intensely colored paintings, Sabharwal has always worked on series of black and white images. For example, in *Night Nets* (2014), the energy springs from broad lines that sweep from the upper left of the painting and spill diagonally into loops and curlicues in the far lower right. Below are many groups of delicate lines, like tentacles or hairs, and shapes like the necks of anemones. This clandestine scene seems to flourish all by itself, without any human presence. This and other dark works invoke the glow of insects, jellyfish, deep sea creatures,

and phosphorescence at night. She uses reductive mark-making techniques of wiping and scraping off the paint from a black ground to reveal bright streaks, squiggles, and tendrils. Rather than using color to create form and space, she implements the movement of line and positive versus negative shapes to design the drama of the image. This process reveals mysterious groves, caves, and mountains.

Sabharwal works within the polarities of inside and outside space, above-ground and subterranean, physical and spiritual to express states of being that cannot be confined to one extreme or the other. Her recent paintings resist narrative and leave the viewer in a space of possibility and multiplicity. She constructs clear scenes and images, but without complete resolution or logic. As in the mysterious state of being half awake, the viewer can perceive a scene that is coming into being. Her most recent paintings explore an ambitious, environmental scale that enable the viewer to be enveloped by an alternate reality and that moves them, as if carried by a wave, to a space of fantasy and limitlessness.