

## **In other rooms, I find myself**

Roobina Karode

Art Historian/Curator

A growing mainstream interest in imagined worlds has drawn us in recent years to engage with stories of spirits, aliens, fairies or ghostly apparitions, where unusual occurrences of the psychic phenomena are allowed to reveal their mysterious presences/energies. For Tara Sabharwal, this could well be the world she creates by indulging in fantasy, visions, nostalgia and reverie. As one sifts through the fuzzy contours of her work, one meanders through the zigzagging paths amidst dense nature that often remind us of the fairytale world- the wizard's castle with bare masonry and its curiously haunted corners. For Tara, these encounters have been a preoccupation since adolescence, and continue to be a relentless pursuit in her art. She allows the psychic interior to flood out on the surface in imagery that is both real and fictitious. The title of the exhibition hints at this unexpected occurrence. *In other rooms, I find myself*, could easily extend to mean- I find myself in other worlds.

Tara is drawn to architecture quite like poets and dreamers who indulge open terraces to gaze at the moon and stars in the sky, windows, to reach out to distant hopes and faraway lands, lonely corridors that long human presence, canopies and verandahs as places ideal to wander, dream, desire and seek wish fulfillment. What we encounter in Tara's painted world is a certain precariousness, be it the bird land, solitary islands, dense forests or city-fragments. Figures are magically fused into the topsy-turvy dreamscape, easy to be missed amidst dense creepers, roots, vines or a sea of eyes. Visually deceptive, the paintings employ tropes of disguise and mutation that unfold the surprise rather slowly, demanding curiosity as well as attention from the viewer.

Everything Tara paints has the presence of intense imaginings, and seems to be caught in a state of slow awakening, breathing on the surface, unsettled as yet in its own body. The 'strangely familiar' and the 'familiarily strange' are all prompted by the everyday life but acquire composite dimensions so that the inadequacies of the self can be overcome. For instance the human body acquires wings to fly or turns into a tree blossom, or becomes a weightless shadow that effortlessly floats around, appearing and disappearing at will. Tara withdraws from the precincts of the external world, suspends reason for the undirected chain of thought to take over, allowing the

painting to emerge through bizarre juxtapositions that are both enchanting and unnerving. In the nocturnal landscape, the ambience of the twilight is amplified with fleeting shadows that signal the dark hour. It is time to step out of hiding places and enter those rooms where one can meet oneself, without any inhibitions or disguise.

This is perhaps the place where many identities, memories and paths collide, and the protagonist attempts accessing her true self. What comes together then in these works alludes to the notions of 'self' in a private hinterland. It is through this, that a gender thrust in her work is also revealed. More so, the imagery that Tara configures defies the conventional notions of perception, excavating and pushing forth the fertile realm of the underground, the hidden, and the invisible.

Early in life, Tara had watched a cat disappear in a drain on the street. She could not get over the incident for a long time, returning several times to the drain with the hope that the cat would surface. In her yearning for the cat to be alive, she convinced herself of a whole world thriving under there. Over the years, Tara's fascination for worlds that lie hidden below the ground hasn't diminished and she often transposes herself to places other than the visible and empirical. This is sometimes expressed in the act of splintering the earth surface to reveal stalks of plants/trees as they stand above and below the ground, connected and rooted. Tara invariably reads and responds to Rumi's poetry and I quote from the wisdom of Rumi –“everything you see has its roots in the unseen world. Forms may change but essence remains the same”.

After having lived in cities located in different continents– London, New York and New Delhi, for Tara, her travels are rich sources for new material that she engages with. Past themes gain new meanings, for instance, the idea of rootlessness that gets most pronounced with her recent personal loss and long spells of solitude. Homes, paths, journeys recurrently appear in her small intimate watercolours, amplifying the invisible roots that now seem to be growing and sprouting above the ground. She is the migrant bird, who deals with homes left, lost, revisited or reinvented. In the painted imagery, we encounter homes that now hang as loops, anchored as if in the sky as colonies of hanging nests woven out of leaves by the baya (weaver bird) - cosy and sheltered, but sometimes dark and deserted. The intricacies of experienced ambiguity pertaining to self and home are revealed through feelings of rootedness and displacement, shelter and fragility, confinement and freedom, interior and exterior, pleasure and pain.

On her last trip to India, from the terrace of her Neeti Bagh home in Delhi, Tara looked at the city that looked unreal/surreal in the moonlight. The concrete houses appeared like blocky airtight containers, akin to beehive-like structures and tall tight buildings claustrophobic against the breezy and free forms of nature.

Tara's formative years of art training at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda were the most influential in fostering her individual creativity. She was there at a time when the institution was at its finest, with an illustrious group of teachers KG Subramanyan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Jeram Patel, Nasreen Mohamedi and Jyoti Bhatt to name a few. Equally significant was the presence of Bhupen Khakhar who was very close to the artists of the Narrative school. Tara credits Bhupen's influence in her approach to painting the human form. She expresses, "Bhupen showed us through his work that form does not have to be anatomically perfect and can be sloppy, saggy and weightless for expressive purpose. His naively simple forms were fascinating." She further adds, "Gulammohammed Sheikh's great lessons in art history opened before us a range of pictorial possibilities, and immersed us in the depths of Indian miniature traditions, the nuanced treatment of figures, flora and fauna and imaginative compositional devices". She noticed in Sheikh's own work, elements from Mughal miniatures reinvented on his large canvases to weave personal narratives and the locale of the everyday, capturing seasonal and native ambiances through luminous colours. From K G Subramanian she learnt the importance of finding her own voice over norms of knowledge and from Jeram a lesson on controlled spontaneity. Tara fondly remembers Nasreen Mohamedi and her emphasis on artistic sincerity in her students and the need for conviction and commitment to their work.

When Tara left India in 1982 for London and the Royal College of Art, she had already started developing a language that indulged colour as its primary force, attempting its delicate layering that later on made her shift from the viscosity of oil to the airiness of watercolour and ink. Under the tutelage of Ken Kiff, her teacher at the Royal College of Arts in London, Tara's interest in colour and its structural and expressive abilities peaked and her radiantly coloured landscapes emerged out of a loose constellation of brushwork. Perhaps Kiff's approach to painting gave her the courage to bypass the thinking mind and the definite contours of forms. One can of course connect Tara via Kiff to Marc Chagall and his playful spirit, but more to Paul Klee's poetic economy and his belief in the intuitive process by which images arise out of gestural marks and the materials used.

The recent series of works carry the painted vocabulary further to touch upon the elusive aspects of experience through soft washes, light feathery touches of colour and sprinkling of radiant dots. Often one finds juxtaposed minutely sketched imagery against forms painted to faintly register. Transparent layers heighten the hide and seek between leaves, bodies and objects scaled minutely or magnified in detail for certain effects. Things start appearing and disappearing in the painterly maze of marks, strokes and linear forms, fading and emerging through the painterly treatment of atmospheric layers. The long years of working in sumei ink and watercolors displays a poetic sensibility that distinctly complements Tara's naïve yet sophisticated visuality, poised between delicacy and resilience. Colour exudes light as experienced underwater on forms or by forms in the lowly illuminated moonlight. The faint liquid tones interspersed with sharp details create the distance between things through emotive scaling. Even a matter of fact image gains an aura in its blurry presence.

One of the images that stays with us is of a haunting face that appears from nowhere through a transparent curtain. Its unsettling presence makes us think about both, fantasy and reality as slippery concepts. One is tempted to ask- Is there a split between them? Do strict boundaries exist between them? Even if they did, artists do dare to cross the line and inhabit worlds that are not so easy to dissect or untangle.

Tara Sabharwal is one who enjoys embodying this ambivalence in her art.