

By Salwat Ali

Late 19th century explorations of the irrational and the fantastic and a growing interest in naive and primitive modes of expression liberated artistic imagination enabling artists to make real and comprehensible the improbable and the illusory. When the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins proposed the term “inscape” he was referring to the way psychological states may be analogized to the forms and textures of the natural world. Anatomical and organic imagery is often used as a way to represent human physicality. The artwork references flesh-like masses of anatomy to depict a constantly evolving state of society and human existence. At the core of the work is the perception that society can be viewed as a living system.

An exhibition by visiting artist Tara Sabarwal currently on show at VM Gallery in Karachi centralizes on this palpable inner reality. The represented works use abstracted forms as metaphors. Imagery for the paintings is derived from botanical illustrations, drawings from observation, images from popular culture and fragments of the urban landscape. In the painting and drawing and printmaking process forms are disassembled, recombined, deconstructed, and reconstructed to create ‘hybrids’ of sorts. The work explores dreams and thoughts through organic abstraction. She constructs an artificial or manufactured natural world which addresses her evolving ideas.

Tara’s vibrant colour palette animates the shapes and forms; this adds to ‘the life’ of the organic images and makes the viewer confront the shapes directly. As you experience the fluidity and movement in the works you feel as if organic tree limbs are growing right on the canvas or that the orbs of colour are like amoebas moving across the painting in some random manner and that amidst this ‘life’ there is systematic chaos much* like cells dividing in a biology laboratory. No matter how disparate the works may appear for Tara there is a continuum as the collection is a chronicle of her life’s journeys. She says “Life has taken me from my birthplace in Delhi to many new places, homes and identities. The experience has been enriching, it resonates in my work and has enabled me to build bridges between boundaries.”

Describing her vocabulary she elucidates that the images of homes, ladders, windows, roots winding paths, rain and container, that she uses are open ended symbols that viewers can reflect upon and draw independent conclusions. Vacillating between “passages of extreme beauty” and “borders of terrifying darkness” she conjures a life of fears and hopes, anxieties and optimism so common to the nitty gritty of living but as her individual experiences they assume an independent character. Tara’s life is driven by a desire to explore, discover and understand the meaning of life in the light of developments in her private life as well as the global environment of which she is an integral part as a human being. Her narrative, thus, is a complex weave of personal feelings and their equally complicated relationship to the external world.

The works on paper that she is showing presently at VM are in her own words "remembered moments from a journey of outward and inner explorations." Born and raised in Delhi the artist left India after completing her Bachelors at MS University Baroda in 1980 to pursue an advanced degree at the Royal College of Art, London. While she has returned to India often and continues to spend a portion of every year in her family home in Delhi, she now resides in Manhattan. Her art is an interpretation of this varied, multiplex existence and her endeavour to locate herself in it. Unlike works that are direct and impact instantly, Tara's art requires extended engagement, it needs to be deciphered either in context of the artist's original perceptions or as per the onlookers' own willingness to probe.

Broadly speaking the visuals present viewers with vibrant or stark human or biomorphic images that create openness to the unknown but her narrative often needs to be decoded as it has considerable sub text or layered meanings. Eminent Indian artist and Tara's teacher at MS University, Baroda, K.G Subramanyan's art was an integration of subject and settings. In his portraits of contemporary India, the environment and its figures seem to constitute each other because they are made of the same kind of marks. This influence is noticeable in Tara's exploration of self and surroundings and the relationships she tries to build within them. Her paintings and etchings in ink, gouache, watercolour and fine line do not employ rules of dimension, proportion or linear strength. Their curving contours, scratched surfaces and blending colours mimic the forms of the nature and since she is constructing dreamscapes she indulges in free play of the imagination.

Titled, 'Life Journeys', her art revolves on the concept of 'homes and paths.' Examined from various aspects she sees the body as home to the soul, home as a concrete structure, captures the feeling of being homeless, an organ shaped drawing delineates home is where the heart is etc. A painting of a pathway connecting two distant homes captures the spirit of Life Journeys. Tara elaborates the bridge as a vessel that contains the journey from one place to another, this container then is seen as home away from home. Pathways leading to and from the home are also explored as liberating or confining passages, the home can be a prison for some and a cocoon or a refuge for others or a secure vantage from where you can anchor yourself. Similarly, windows and doors are projected as routes to freedom or spaces for introspection. Essentially a storyteller, Tara's narrative is a mix of hard core realities tempered with caricature, humour and fantasy. As dreamscapes they are not definitive statements but thought provoking visuals. They suggest and prod the viewers to think and draw their own conclusions.