

Thoughtful Explorations

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From a pink raft at the center of Tara Sabharwal's *Drifting Boat*, a girl looks out at us. A watchful sun's rays, like skinny limbs, embrace her. She seems safe in a sequestered circle of sky blue waters until we notice the foreboding objects around her. Leafless tree trunks writhe. A few of the peaks girding the shore, thrust their jagged edges inwards. Something about the anomalous islands sparkling in the margins recalls early maps of the unknown world. Those primitive charts similarly registered their makers' fear and wonder.

The desire for exploration may be the fundamental motivation of Tara's art. Born and raised in Delhi, the artist left India after completing her BA at MS University, Baroda in 1980 to pursue an advanced degree at the Royal College of Art, London. While she has returned to India for a year a few times and continues to spend a portion of every year in her family home in Delhi, she now resides in Manhattan. Tara's drawings, prints and paintings reflect upon the vicissitudes of her own life. But her imagery also strives to elucidate some of the complexities of the modern human condition. *Drifting Boat* is one of many works that dramatize the coincidence and conflict between our desires for the familiar and the new, release and refuge, change and continuity.

The Familiar and the New

Tara is an artist of sustained focus; like a scientist in search of new insights, she'll try many different approaches to persistent problems. Using the deliberative processes of etching and photogravure, she has furthered her investigation of the self's hidden worlds. *Animal Etching* convenes three shadowy female figures in a forest clearing where they seem to nurse a mysterious beast. This open-ended provocation to association exemplifies what Tara has long admired in the great explorer of the subconscious, Odilon Redon. Like him, she believes that awakening buried thought and feeling requires a delicate touch.

With a scratchier, more delineated style, the etching *Puppets* re-examines the subtle exchanges between men and women. A naked male and a prone female toy with the strings of two marionettes. Clothed in a suit and skirt, the dolls could be the public images of their manipulators. However, Tara's gray washes help conceal which their manipulators. However, Tara's gray washes help conceal which of the pairs is really in control.

Deploying yet another visual language, *New Beginning* conveys the exuberance and anxiety that attends new ventures. Its remarkable depiction of a garden in full bloom

– achieved without color through sinuous lines and short inky slashes – recalls the young Matisse’s scurrying brushwork. But the print also reveals the lasting artistic links Tara maintains with K.G. Subramanyan. The eminent Indian artist (and Tara’s teacher at M.S. University, Baroda) often interweaves the 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 kinds of marks.

Developing that compositional strategy has given Tara the means to explore the dynamic relationship between a place and oneself. She frequently embodies variable states of mind with natural imagery. Tree’s explosive and foliage agitates for attention. Growth’s moody blue portrait of two emergent saplings equivocally contemplates change. The landscapes Treespine and Body Path 1 and 2 take their metaphors further. The first fuses a thick, strong trunk and human backbone from which emanate lyrical memory images of kurtas on a clothesline. Gauzy brushstrokes in the second pair of paintings transform a forest trail into the mirror image of winding innards. While the Treespine may express Tara’s visceral longing to make memory real, the Body Path visualizes the desire to find oneself in the land one inhabits.

Both paintings also suggest that there’s a reciprocally creative relationship between one’s knowledge of one’s environment and one’s sense of self. The images of body parts as land forms acknowledge that we learn to know the world around us through ourselves. We thrust our bodies into the raw elements, depending on these organs like divining rods. And conversely, the surroundings teach us about ourselves the external world lets us know by our responses what and who we are. It brings us into being.

Release and Refuge

Tara’s sensitivity to the inseparability of what lies within and around us may derive from her having left familiar surroundings to explore new ones abroad. That personal history has also moved her to probe the relationship between the journey and home.

Home is a multidimensional concept in her pictures, as capable of consolation as it is full of paradox. Paintings such as Home and Path and Two Homes portray apartment buildings as containers; pock-marked, they are also fragile. They tip and lean as if straining to withhold the urge to leave, expand, like a blister near bursting. Many works consider our ideals and wishes. Home in the Clouds ambiguously renders a stable refuge ephemeral. More hopefully, Loop’s vision provides byways between structures of stability. But in other instances, her works project the fear that one has to make a difficult choice. The weave of connections between alternative shelters in the psychedelic Web Home is nearly overwhelming; in equal parts, booby trap and safety net. The sea-blue Home without Path envisions two different floating vessels cut off from each other. Yet more cruelly, both are severed from the cord that may have once joined them.

Tara indeed knows the melancholy and indecision aroused by the freedom of movement. In *Hair and Path*, a gray matron stands with her back to the viewer in front of a tipping apartment building. A skein of broad, gnarled brushstrokes winding around and away from this bleached and inedible figure seem to provide the means both for leaving and reluctant return. Elsewhere, an intense color scheme conveys the bucking tumult of change. The cherry reds of *Moving Roots* burn; its blues recall a storm-darkened sky. A starkly simple composition in *Life Journeys 2* invokes the stresses of travelling between worlds.

However, other recent paintings convey the lure and delights of passage. *Homebird's* sweet, unlikely harmonies of orange and green fantasize that the urges to leave and stay can be reconciled. The soft tonalities of *Late Evening Walk* utter a prayer of gratitude for the rare experience of finding one's sense of internal harmony mirrored in a city park, becalmed at dusk. Here, as often, the range and contrast of bright and saturated pastel tones from roses and soft violet, to pale oranges and plum blues – are full of vivid, shifting light. The palette reminds me of Pierre Bonnard's. His intensely colourful compositions (in person, never merely pretty) similarly carried his desire to make the canvas vibrate with life, not merely represent it.

Change and Continuity

Tara has begun to explore new imagery in current work. Etchings such as *Rain and Water* and the painting *Greenleaf Still Life* picture drops amid leaves with similar shapes, or rain falling into large bodies of water. Like the arrangement of forms on the surface of the works themselves, water is an element that breaks into separate units and reconvenes as a whole in the sea. It is shape-shifter, variable, changing its state with changes in its environmental conditions. But whether liquid, gas, or solid, it is always fundamentally the same. Could Tara be striving to visualize a kind of unity with such imagery; a kind of reconciliation that encompasses differences? (She herself looked wistfully at the paintings as we considered them together in her studio. "I think I will be doing something completely new, in a new way when I'm done," she said.)

Interestingly, she has come to these new works through reflection upon the world-splitting dangers we face. In a series of paintings entitled *Tears and Bombs*, executed after 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a helter-skelter of planes swarm around a circular target. Drops of blood fall from the sky.

Scattered figures shedding tears seem simultaneously to be suffering civilians as well as would-be guardian angels desirous, although helpless, to protect.

Although apparently opposed in theme, the rain/water and *Tears and Bombs* pictures share in all-over organizational scheme. From the center of the circular void, the images of the latter painting press outward even as the planes cut across the

surface horizontally and the drops spill downward. A similar weave of counter movements organize the former series.

Perhaps this unexpected commonality in two seemingly different projects reconfirms a deeper unity of purpose. Tara's body of diverse imagery aims not merely to analyze the oppositions we struggle with internally, but to embrace the multiple dimensions of experience. This thought returns me to the girl in the drifting boat who remains so alert and so vulnerable to her mysterious environs. The painting, while acknowledging uncertainty, also proposes a response to it: She urges herself and her viewers to face fearful change; to lodge fleeting joys; to make, and share, art.

Karin Miller-Lewis is a writer resident in New York, involved with contemporary Indian art for over twenty years. Upon graduating from Columbia University with a Masters of Philosophy in Critical Theory, Modernism and Indian art, she worked at The Museum of Modern Art, NY; the Sackler Museum of Asian Art, Washington, D.C. and later served as the founding curator of New York's IndoCenter of Art and Culture. Since 1998 she has regularly contributed articles about South Asian and South Asian-American art to journals such as Art India Magazine and ArtAsiaPacific. She is currently at work on her first novel.