
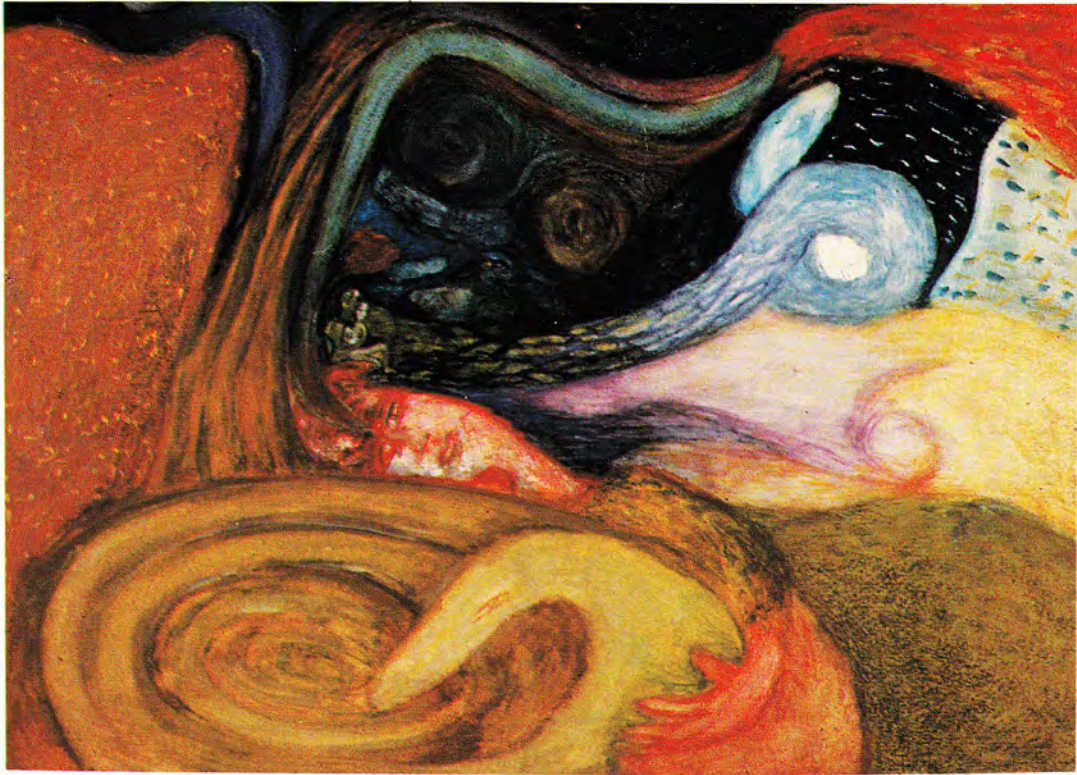




TARA SABHARWAL

 Art Heritage, New Delhi

Tara Sabharwal / 117



Snakes, 1992



Orange Curtain, 1993

TARA SABHARWAL

The Dream of Waking Consciousness

by E. Alkazi

In feeling and sensibility, Tara Sabharwal's works are intensely feminine, not in terms of a strident, militant ideology, but suggestive of an inward grace, a becoming reticence and modesty. Tara's approach is by no means placid or vegetative. It does not ruminate over the pains of womanhood; it unfolds layer upon layer of their mute suffering before our eyes. It has its tremors and its moments of nervous unease. It is moody

and changeable, but it is true, to the slightest flicker of a fleeting thought. And because it is true, it rivets one's attention, despite its occasional awkwardness, its stumbling forays. In fact, it is these very features that give the works their unignorable appeal. Firm, stolid architectural stability in pictorial structure belies the fluidity of human emotions. In art, as in the deepest human relationships, what one seeks is that moment of truth that

expresses itself in subdued tones, in a tremulous movement of the lips, the delicate touch of a hand—far more eloquent than visual or verbal rhetoric.

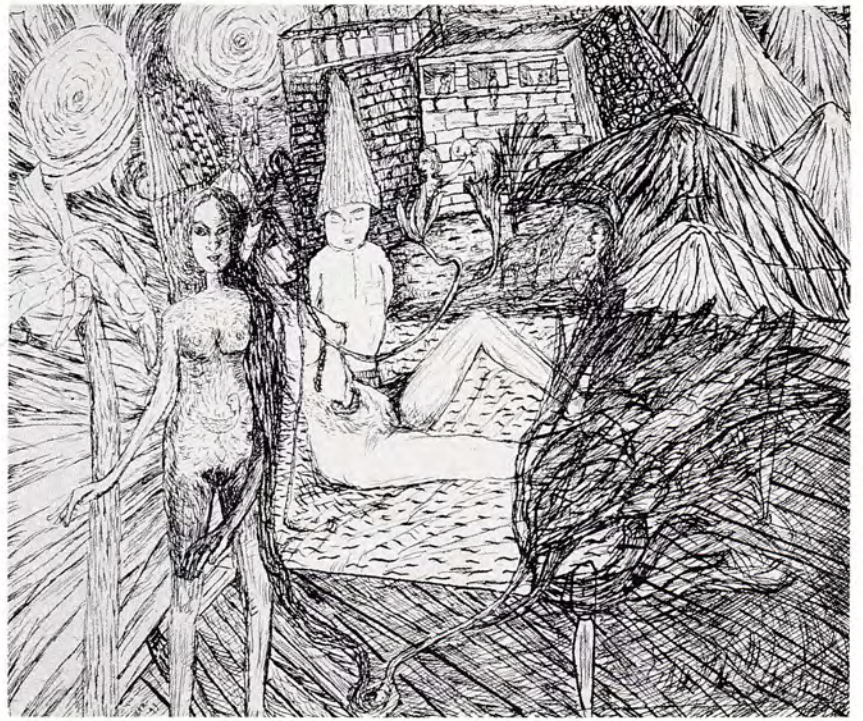
The whispered confidence creates that intimacy, offers that quiet exchange where heart speaks to heart, shapes that inner space where joy and pain are shared, as and how they come, and where dissimulation has no place. Such a barring of the soul earns a profound respect. It is this quality



New Lives, 1994



Under the Ground, 1991



Glowing Night, 1995



The Visit, 1994

of emotional intimacy and dignified restraint that gives Tara Sabharwal's works their charm; stark nakedness generates their evocative power.

How does one give substance to the intangible; form to the fleeting; visual meaning to ambivalence and doubt? The short answer is: through a pictorial language of one's own making, where form and colour are so true to the experience portrayed as to be inseparable from it. To be in the presence of some of these works can be as harrowing as witnessing child birth (all one's defences are down in such a situation), but, ultimately as uplifting. For one has been present at a process of generation, with all its agony and exhaustion, its troughs of despon-

dency and despair, in works woven so fine as to suggest an almost uncanny insect skill.

Intimist painters in the West, such as Vuillard and Bonnard, dealt with domestic interiors, the shaded 'tranquility' of family life behind curtained windows. Tara Sabharwal's intimism is of a different kind: it is that of a woman's mind beset with anxiety and unease. Her work is a way of revealing her mind, unburdening herself of her innermost thoughts. It is an intimate diary of the emotional life. It is small in format, it is secret, and it is hushed. It is a woman talking to herself in whispers.

The experience for the viewer is fascinating, and, at the same time, unsettling. It makes the blood tingle with the thrill of secrets shared; and it is unsettling

because, in the process of the artist dredging up the accumulated silt of drowned memories, betrayed hopes, unfulfilled expectations, and anxious motherhood, she has awakened in us a disturbing awareness of our own divided selves.

Childhood fears rise to the surface in later years to haunt the adult mind. Tara's world is a universe of unappeased spirits.

Inchoate feelings find their true expression in an appropriate awkwardness of style. The artist strives to capture the unfinished statement, words left hanging in the air, as the mind hurtles on, in its fumbling, panic-stricken way, leaving in its wake the floating wreckage of scattered thoughts and battered emotions.

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Sleepless, 1993

Towards a Maturing Intensity

To render complex and subtle human experiences, Tara does not require complex human situations. They emerge from the simple and often repeated 'images' of day to day life and come from the obvious scenic elements and apparent properties of nature. Thus a figure, a plant, an object and a certain interior of a house come handy to her. With these she explores the whole gamut of time—past, present and future, and explores the tensions and intimacies inherent in relationships and the subtleties of dreams, memories and fantasies.

In miniature format she creates a world which is easy to recognize yet requires de-coding, time and again. Her works have a certain charged atmosphere where tiny figures and forms come alive to speak of the flow of life, to speak of the passages of time, to speak of the various weathers and to speak of the withering and flowering of experiences, big and small.

At times there is a certain playfulness, even comicality, in Tara's work, yet not without a sense of irony and a tinge of sadness. Perhaps this is the only way an artist can come to terms with the ever changing ways of life and nature.

And why these tiny figures and forms in an age of large canvasses and huge installations? Will they be recognized, observed minutely and seriously? Will they satisfy the viewer who has been unwittingly trained in seeing only the bold and the big on the screen and on the walls of galleries and museums? Answers are not easy to find. One can only hope that with patience the viewer, initiated or uninitiated, will be able to read Tara's works like a book which is how they are meant to be read.

Tara lives in two worlds, two cultures, in her home country India and also in England and America. It goes to her credit that this has not caused a split in her personality. She is interested in cross-cultural dialogues yet takes human situations, problems and challenges in their own inner and outer revelations, as and when they come, and does not place them in any simplified cultural context for easy solutions.

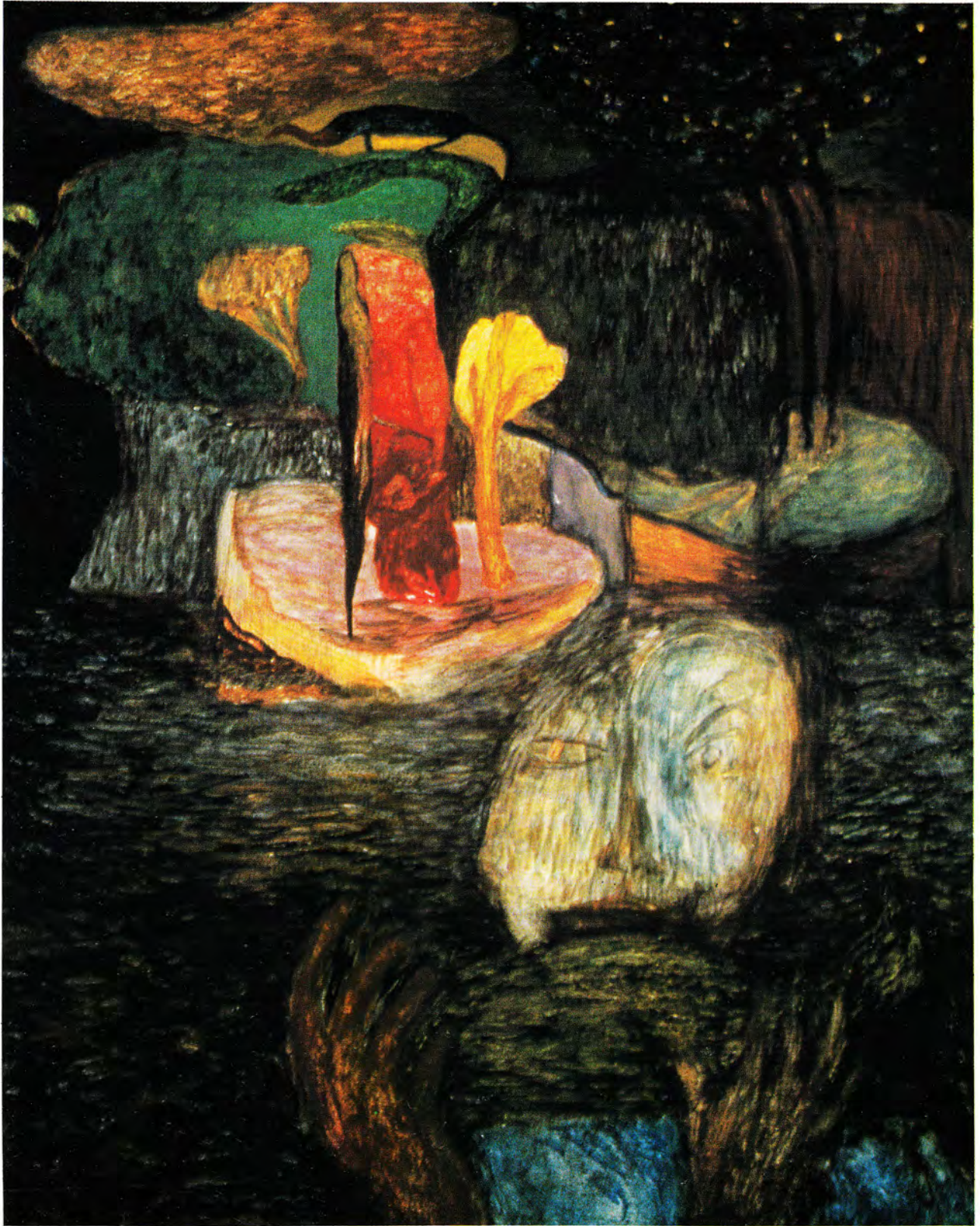
She weaves an intricate world of forms and images in a manner which is personalized, yet not so personalized. She creates this world not with a finality, but with a sense of wonder and curiosity.

In some of her works Tara has painted the mother-child theme. Now herself mother of a little son, she rejoices in this theme and in a most curious manner plays with it. Here she fantasizes and perhaps goes down memory lane to find herself as a child.

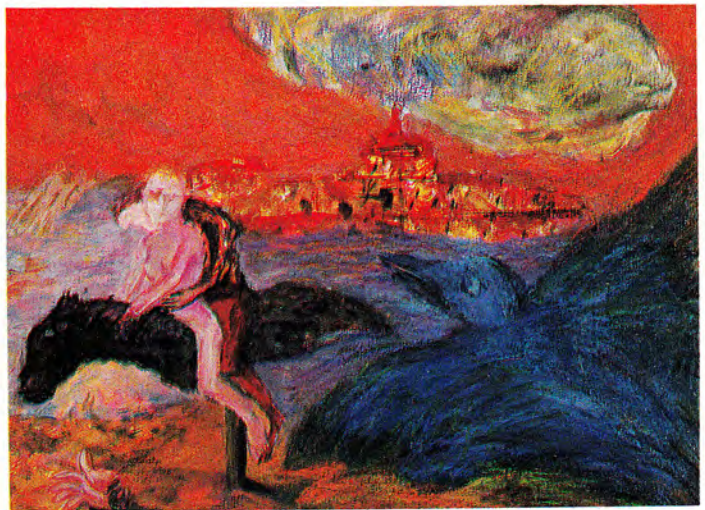
The flashback technique in Tara's work is not incidental. She uses it to place the present in different perspectives. Tara does it amusingly, curiously, sincerely and cautiously, only to get the close-ups of sentiments in all their shades and colours. In some of the works her style of building the structure or total image, dot by dot, line by line, stroke by stroke, colour by colour, reveals this facet of her personality as an artist.

In these works Tara seems to aspire for a pictorial language which would be by her side to sustain her through the tides and torrents that may come in her way as a person and as an artist. These may not be definitive works, but assertive they are. We can certainly feel happy at the assertion and look forward to their maturing intensity.

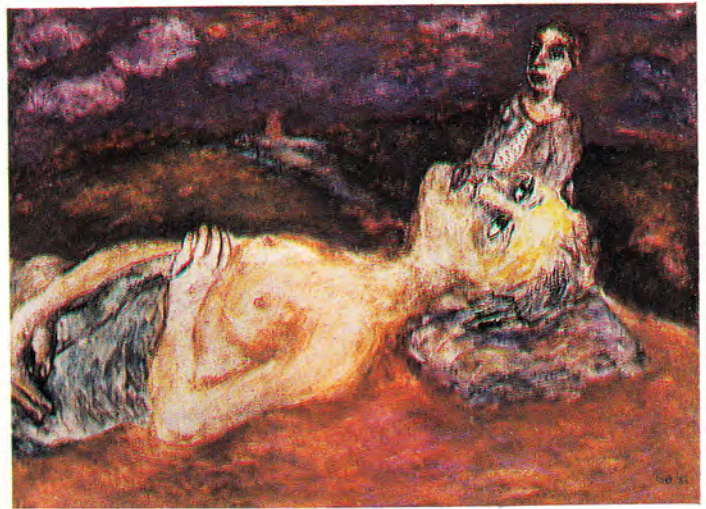
Prayag Shukla



Terrace, 1992



Horseback, 1987



Night Gaze, 1988



Islands I, 1983

Art is the crystallization of feeling into coherent form. Though every experience seeks a form unique to itself, there is an overall individuality of style into which disparate experiences tend to cohere. In Tara's hands, collage and assemblage are devices to capture thoughts on the wing, and mesh them into a disquieting relationship. They are a way of piecing together fragmented experiences, putting together the shattered pieces of a mirror, which once provided the complete reflection of an image. That image is now thrown back askew in a score of dismembered splinters. Each sliver offers a partial, dislocated picture. But the broken fragments, even when glued together, can never again provide a coherent whole.

We are past, present and future, all at once. Every moment as we speak is already the past, and, even as the instant ticks its way into the future, that future is the sum total of all that has gone before, but from an altered perspective. The human psyche is like the everchanging pattern in a kaleidoscope, forming new designs with the slightest turn of the wrist, the least twist of the mind.

We live in a multiplicity of cultures, traditions and time-frames. That is part of the excitement and challenge of contemporary experience. This does not suggest that the artist has cut his moorings from his native historical tradition of art, whether Asian or European, but that he can be, in fact has been forced by historical factors to

be, engaged with both, in a meaningful way. From the beginning of this century, with Picasso, Matisse and Klee, down to our own times, with Henry Moore, Anish Kapoor or Stephen Cox, we have witnessed the artist's need to reach out from depleted and exhausted cultures and seek replenishment from others still firmly rooted and vital. This has been one of the more significant phenomena of the last hundred years.

Tara Sabharwal's small, miniature format establishes a link with Rajput pictorial practice, not through affinities of colour, form or sentiment, but through the manner in which experiences are shared with the viewer at a much deeper level than appears on the surface. Such a work



Slow Time, 1993

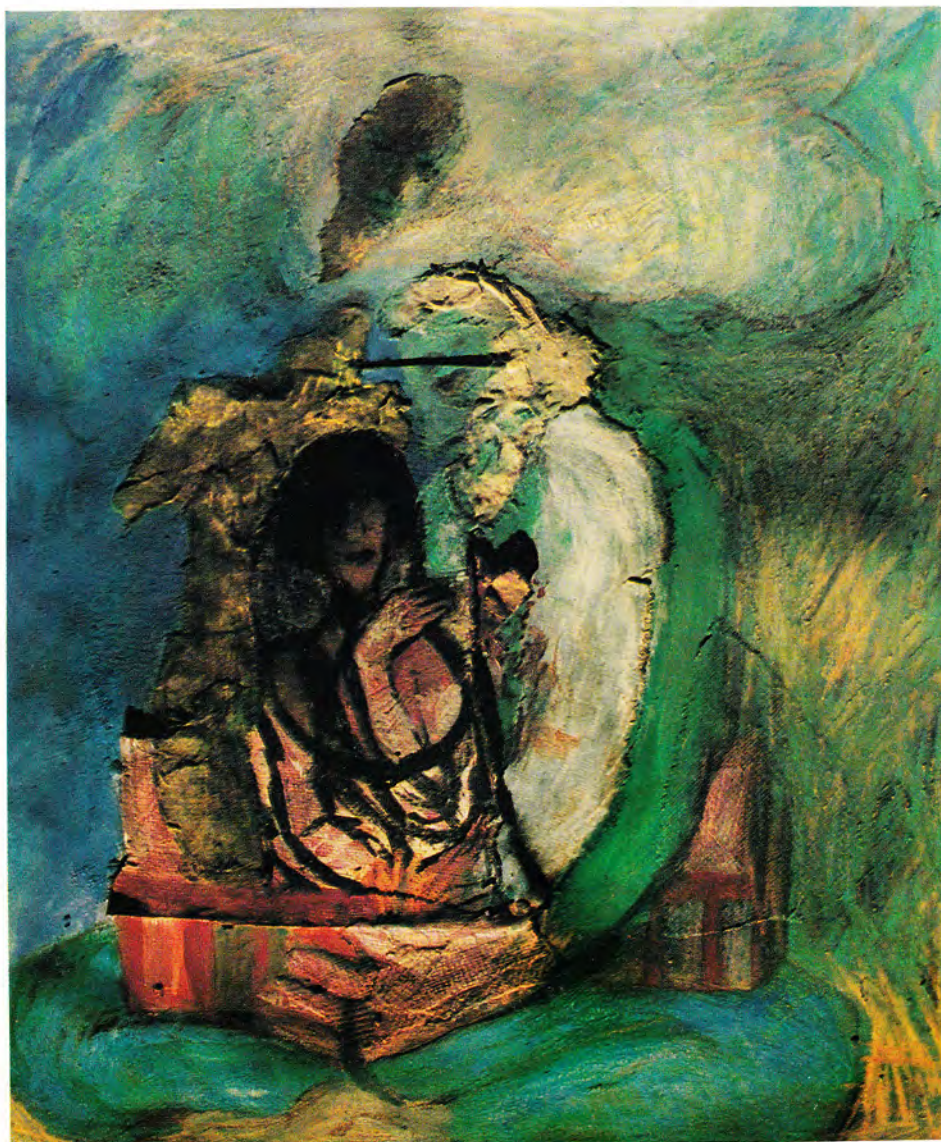
is not meant to be hung on a wall, as part of a large decorative scheme, loudly asserting its uniqueness and drawing attention to itself. The miniature is a way in which the artist takes one intimately by the hand, and asks one to slowly absorb and ponder over the work. The narrative of tales unravels itself, strand by strand, offering fresh insights with each re-telling. And since the myths and legends are well-known, the viewer's delectation is through the subtler nuances of the artist's interpretation. Tara's myths are deeply personal and individualistic, but not so obscure as to make it impossible for one to follow the trail of the artist's journey.

Occasionally, when dealing with the theme of motherhood, for instance, the

experience is so elemental and universal that, almost instinctively, Tara has recourse to terms which relate to both Hindu and Christian traditions. It is as though the individual experience reflects, or is reflected back in, tribal archetypes. The new-born as the Child Krishna or the Infant Jesus, and the passage through various stages of the mother's tribulations: the Annunciation; the Conception; the Nativity in the manger, among humble cattle and to the astonishment of awe-struck peasant-folk; the Flight from tyrannical forces, Joseph and Mary on the one hand, Nanda and Yashoda on the other. The link with such age-old icons, relating to the miracle of childbirth, and its attendant rites and mysteries, is clearly

established. But the symbols are no longer static, stratified into pictorial conventions emerging out of a pastoral society, simple and unquestioning in its faith.

The bleak passage through life of the Madonna of today has to discover its unique formal expression—the woman of our times, from a broken home, displaced, riven with anxiety and a sense of guilt, falling back on her instincts of procreation and survival, in a cold, inhospitable, incomprehensible world, comforted by no firm religious faith, or supportive social order. In such an alien environment, the lonely mother can do no more than weave her personal patterns of meaning. Work after work tells of the contemporary woman's predicament. The ghosts of the



Stealing His Heart, 1985

past are never exorcised, laid to rest once and for all. They rise again and again, when least expected, to haunt one all through life.

In *Womb Watch*, 1994, the mother's face is frozen into a pallid mask of tragic intensity, as she broods over her babe in its sac of amniotic fluid, floating on a sea of blood.

In *Night Gaze*, 1996, the supine, half-naked mother, her arms folded protectively over her belly, watches the child rise like an apparition out of a tumultuous sea.

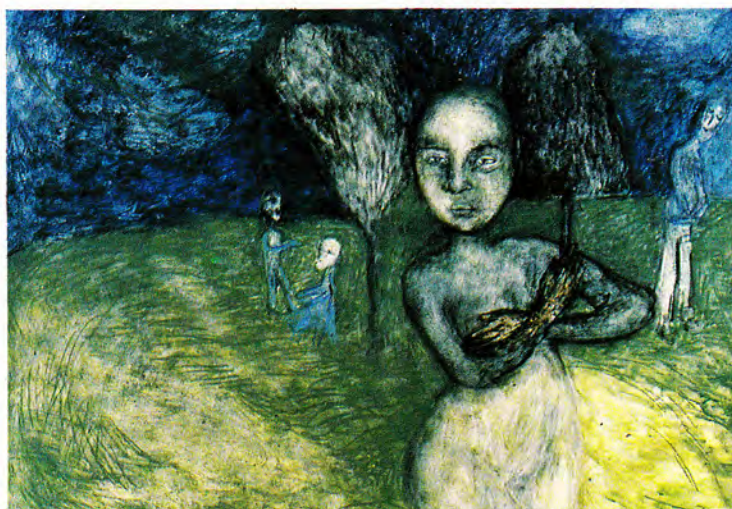
A seated Madonna-like woman suckles her new-born infant in *New Lives*, 1995, recollecting the stages of her pregnancy and parturition; she gazes gratefully at a saintly female form that surfaces from the water, her hand raised in benediction.

But soon the young mother is beset with fear and a sense of impending disaster, (*Afternoon Separation*, 1995). Bereft and insecure, she shrinks behind bars at the foot of a spiral staircase, clinging to her child, while callous figures turn towards, or away from her, in derision. The steps cavort in a frenzied dance, and potted plants writhe menacingly, struggling to escape.

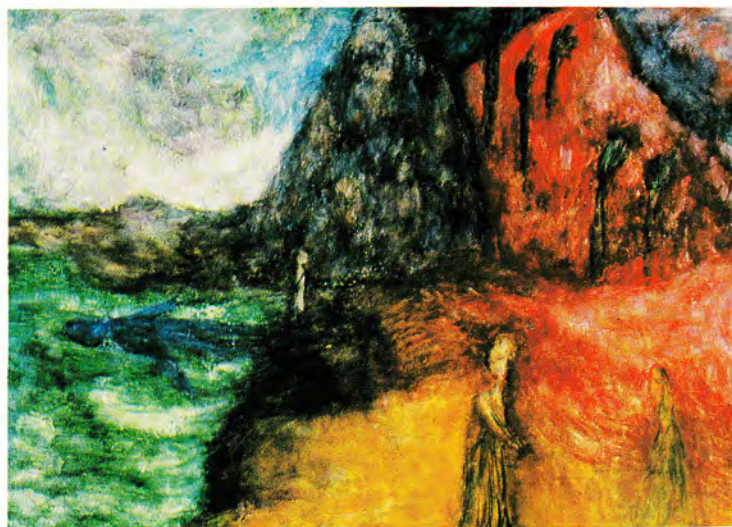
The increasing tension pervades a whole series of works, some of them congealed around time-worn mythic images: mountain, island, storm-tossed sea, stricken city, predatory bird, until the final denouement in *Sick Bed*, 1995. Here, an elderly woman, having gone through her cycle of life, now lies stretched out on her deathbed, surrounded by family members, her own many discarded selves, and vestiges of her earthly and imaginative existence. An elephant, both toy and meaningless deity (from the Buddhist belief in the dream of Maya?) raises its trunk in sad farewell. Significantly, both *New Lives* and *Sick Bed*, the beginning and the end of human existence, are in subdued grey tones, covered all over with a tracery of thin, nervous lines.

The concept of time is integral to the meaning of most of the works: the fluidity of time, its intangibility, its corrosive nature, the fact that it cannot be arrested or frozen, is charted out in a series of poignant visual images.

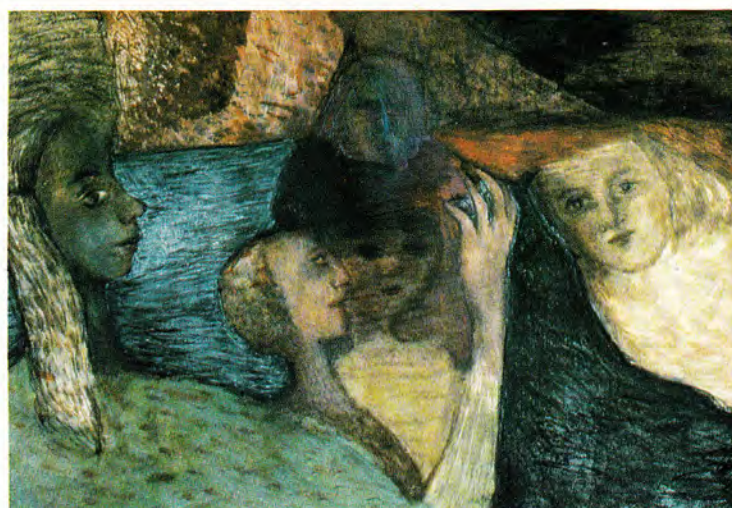
We sense the germination of an intense drama beneath the softly-brushed surfaces of these works. The paint caresses the forms, almost lovingly, with slow, sensual deliberation, but only to reveal the raw



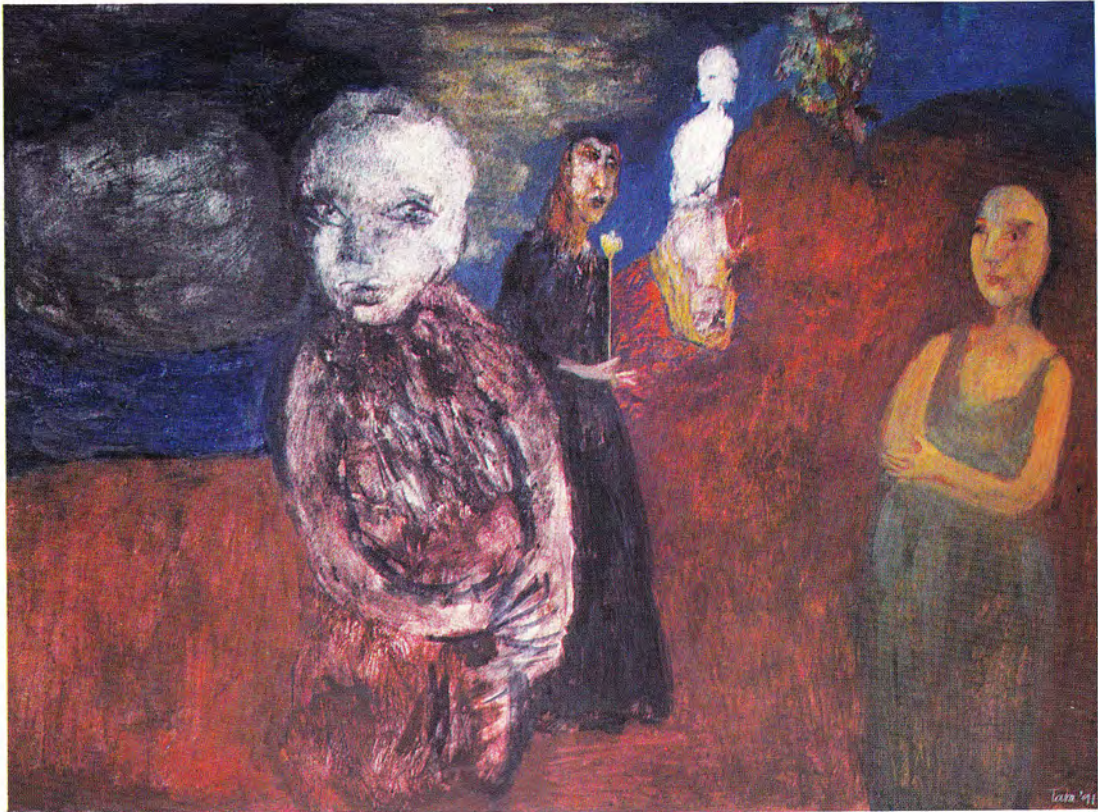
Stormy Day, 1993



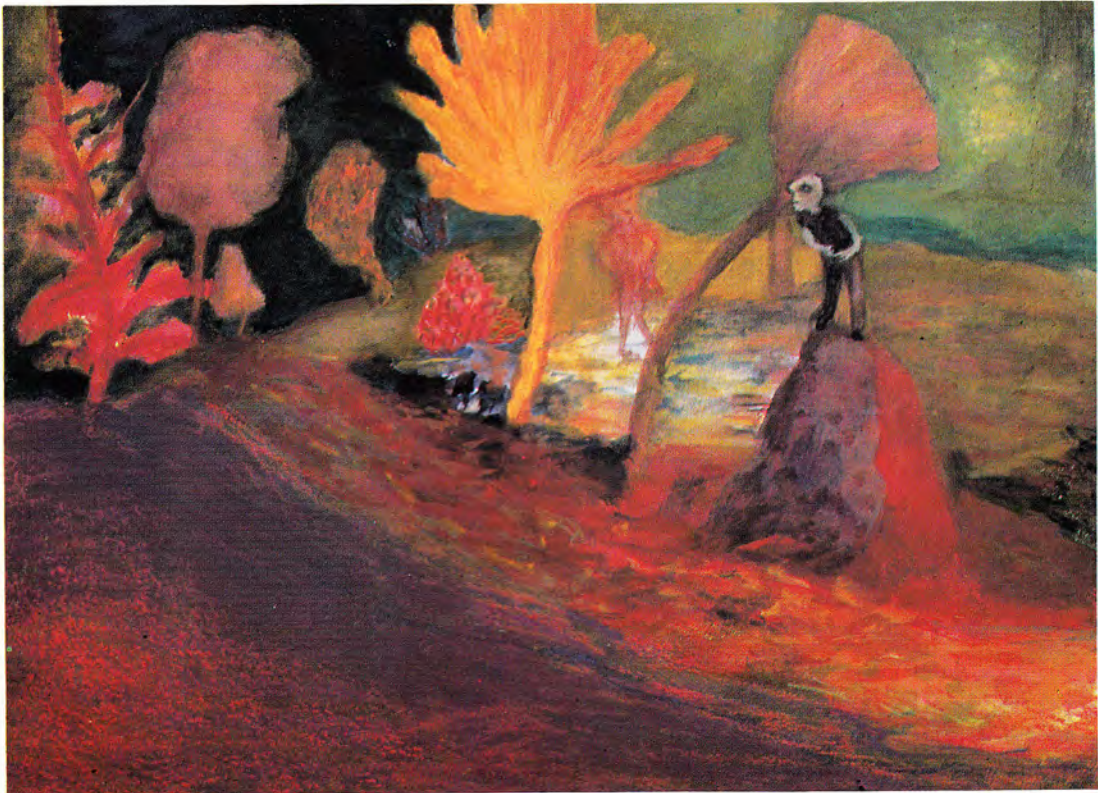
Storm, 1993



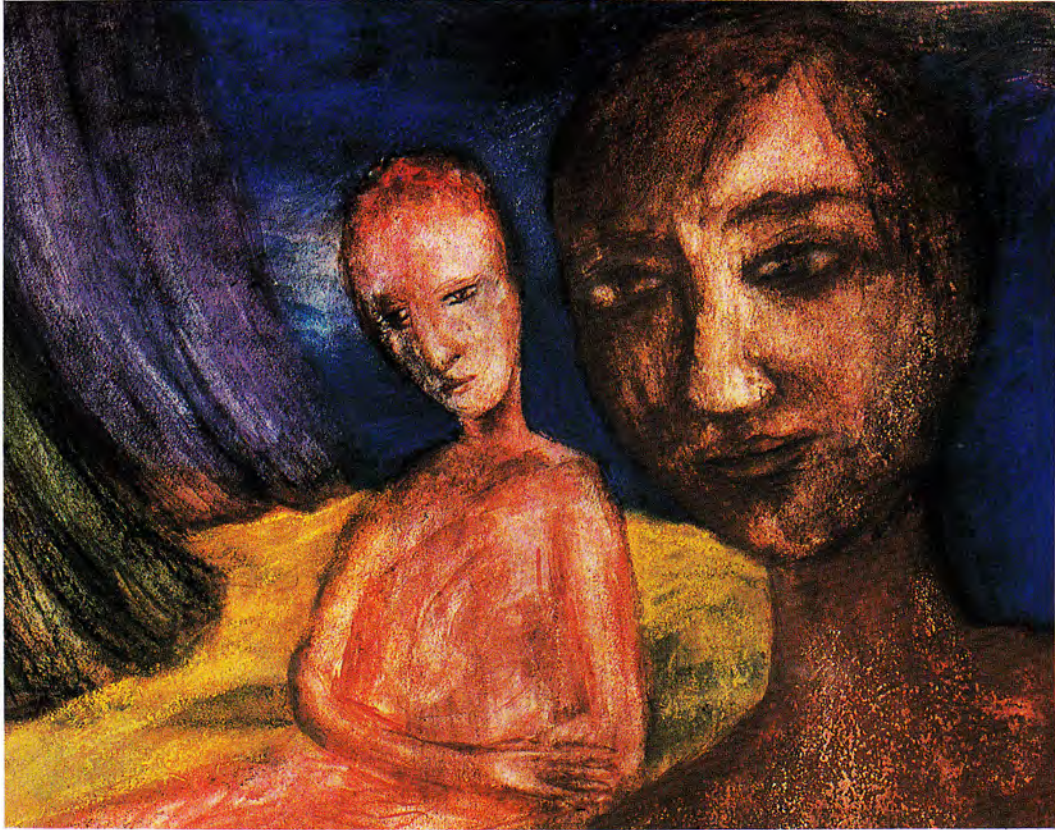
Night City, 1993



Night Walk, 1991



Greetings, 1993



Two Women in Thought, 1994



Womb Watch, 1994

wound beneath. There are no great dramatic climaxes; the pain oozes out, almost imperceptibly: through an anguished look, a half-finished gesture, in the contorted spaces between human beings. The surroundings and the elements become participants in the human drama; nature is coloured by the emotions of the characters; it mirrors their moods and feelings, and is drawn into their suffering.

In Indian art, the universe is looked upon as *lila*, the sport of life, which reconciles body and soul, heaven and earth, participation and renunciation. In Tara's works, the *lila* assumes a bitter, ironic significance. Human beings are victims of emotions and circumstances that they cannot come to grips with, cannot comprehend or control, except in terms of the pain they endure.

In these works, woman vis-a-vis society as a whole, in relation to her family as daughter, sister, bride, mother, is an individual unfulfilled at every level of these associations. The only being she can cling to, with frantic hope and desperate longing is the infant she has engendered, brought into the world through her loins. The first wail of the new-born is but an echo of the mother's anguished cry at that primal act of severance—the cutting of the umbilical cord. How swift is the division between mother and child; how quickly does the infant grow into the man-child, even before it has been weaned.

The absence of a sustaining faith; the breakdown of family ties; the collapse of moral values; the tearing apart of the social fabric, breed a sense of purposelessness, of the futility of human endeavour. They lead to the dismemberment of society, and the disfigurement of the individual psyche.

Tara Sabharwal's works compel attention because of the muted, but relentless, power with which they portray the plight of humankind today, particularly that of woman. Her art does not transcend the tragedy of the human condition. It does not liberate. But it is inexorable in its attachment to truth. In that, perhaps, lies the seed of a new beginning.

Education

- 1975–80 Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, India (BA (Fine Arts) First Class with distinction)
- 1982–84 Royal College of Art, London (MA, RCA in Painting)
- 1990–92 The Printmaking Workshop, New York (Printmaking Courses)

Solo Exhibitions

- 1986 Christopher Hull Gallery, London
- 1987 Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi, India
Cymroza Gallery, Bombay, India
- 1989 DLI Museum, Durham, UK
Darlington Art Center, Darlington, UK
- 1990 DLI Museum, Durham, UK
Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
- 1991 Harewood House, Leeds, UK
- 1993 Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi, India
Galerie Scherer, Miltenberg am Main, Frankfurt, Germany
- 1994 Galerie Schwerpunkt, Stuttgart, Germany
- 1995 Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London
- 1996 Art Heritage Gallery, New Delhi, India

Group Exhibitions

- 1983 '2 British Council Scholars' British Council, Bombay, India
'From Gonzales to Tara' Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London
- 1984 'Pick of New Graduate Art' Christie's, London
Church Gallery, London, (Summer Show)
- 1984, 85, 92 Contemporary Arts Society, London (Art Markets)
- 1984, 88, 89 Summer Shows, Christopher Hull Gallery, London
- 1986 Prints from Garhi Workshop, Max Mueller Bhawan, New Delhi, India
- 1987 '4 Indian Printmakers' Galerie Schwerpunkt, Stuttgart
- 1989 Annual Selected Exhibition, Royal Overseas League, London
4th International Drawing Biennale, Cleveland Art Center, UK



- 'Encounters, 3 British-Indian Artists' Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Touring, UK
- 'Drawing the Line: More Artists Against Apartheid' Merz Contemporary Art, London
- 'Printmakers from Charlotte Press' Bishopsgate Institute, London
- 'Red Mare, a UK Women Artists Group' Newcastle Art Center, UK
- 1990–94 Summer Shows, Mercury Gallery, London
- 1991 'Gallery Artists' Nese Art Gallery, Los Angeles
'The Printmaking Workshop' Hillwood Art Museum and Bronx River Center, New York
Summer Show, Cooper Seeman, New York
'Red Mare' Aire Art Center, Scotland
- 1992 'Red Mare' Oldham Museum and Art Galleries, UK
'Four Asian American Artists' Council for the Arts, Glen Cove, New York
- 1993 'Ferragosto' Gallery 128, New York
- 1992–93 Summer Shows, East West Gallery, London



Protected Space, 1995



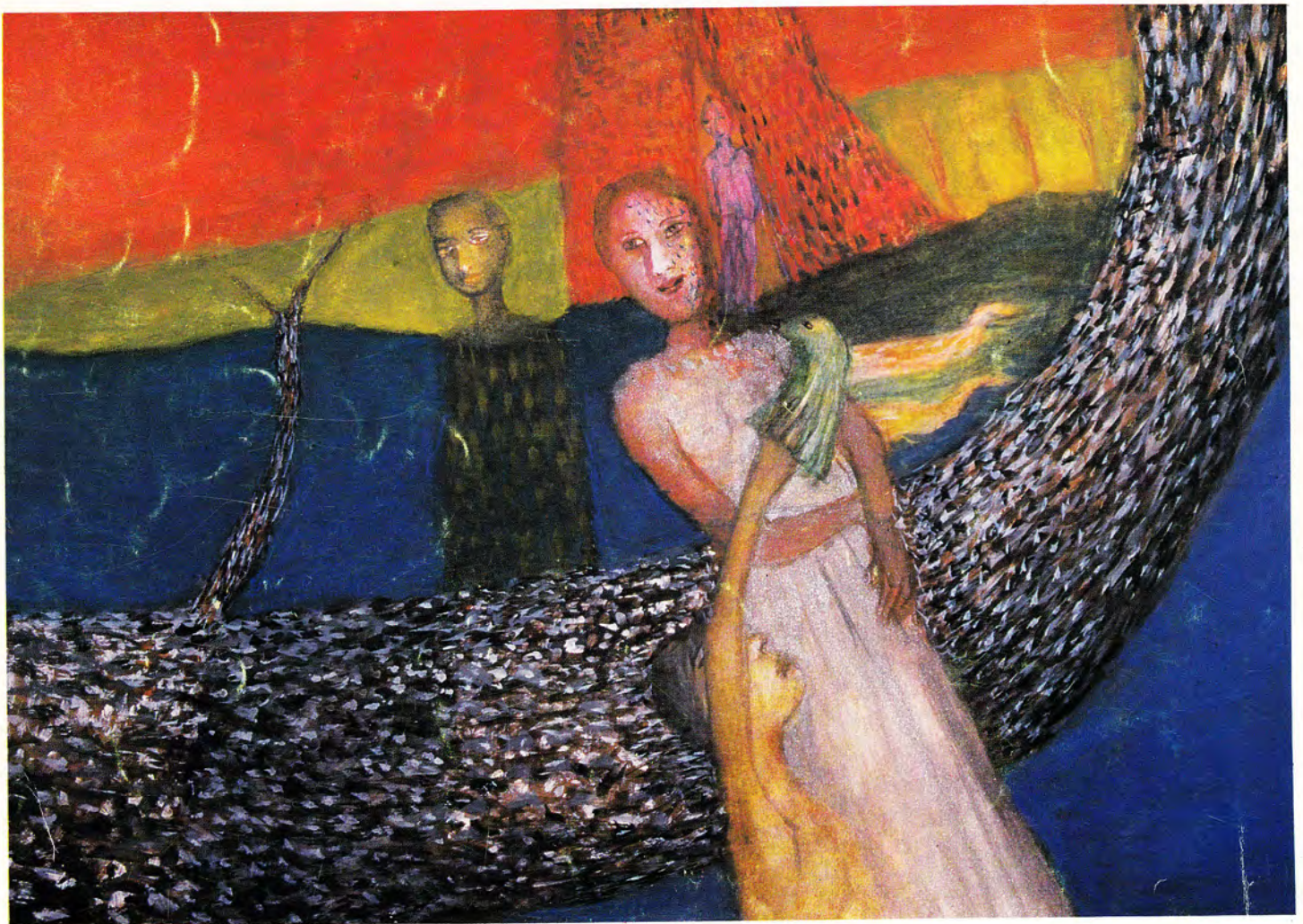
Afternoon Separation, 1995

- 1993 'Durham Cathedral: Artists and Images' Durham Art Gallery
 'Sweet and Bitter Images: Farrokh Fathi and Tara Sabharwal' La Monte Gallery, London
 'Indian Artists with a British Connection' Gallery Seven, Hong Kong
 '100 for 100' Gallery 128, New York
 'Indian Artists of New York' Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, New York
 'Christmas Greetings' Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York
 1994 'Indian Artists of New York'

- India Mission for UN, New York
 'Mosaic, Asian-American Artists' Pennsylvania University, Philadelphia
 'Arts Asia' Din Associates, London
 'Downtown Artists' Gallery 128, New York
 1995 'Unwanted Figures of the Imagination' Organization Independent Artists (OIA), New York
 'From the Dragon's Cloud, Asian American Artists' Arts Commission of the City of New York
 'Addressing Gandhi' SAHMAT India, Touring
 1996 DLI Museum, Durham, UK (Artist in Residence, 1983-96)

- Awards and Collections**
 1982 Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Collection)
 1982-84 British Council Scholarship, UK (Study Grant)
 1988-89 Myles Meehan Fellowship, UK (Artist in residence)
 1989 Royal Overseas League, London (Sir Earnest Castell Education Trust Prize)
 1989-90 Durham, Cathedral, UK (Artist in residence)
 1992-93 Henry Street Settlement, New York (Artist in residence)
 1995 The British Museum, London (Collection)
 1996 DLI Museum, Durham, UK (Collection)

p. 117 *Moon Tree*, 1994



Tree Trunk, 1995

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