



Tara Sabharwal

Open Dream Paths

recent works of
Tara Sabharwal

Art Alive Gallery
19 – 30 September, 2006

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GALLERY

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



Drifting Boat, 2005

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

Thoughtful Explorations

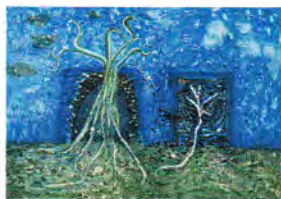
by

Karin Miller Lewis

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 red foliage agitates for attention. *Growth's* moody blue portrait of two emergent



Growth, 2004

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 our selves. 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



Loop, 2004

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 indelible 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 traveling 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 colorful 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



Rain & Water, 2006

is an element that breaks into separate units and reconvenes as a whole in the sea. It is a 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 an 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.

Memorable art must always exceed the domain of its means, the range of its terms. Its experience must open the way for thinking of new ways of encountering the world, but also new ways of understanding how to encounter the world. This experience is always subtle and a bit puzzling, and art that remains memorable is indeed art that makes the puzzling experience of its reception memorable.

Such is my sense of Tara Sabharwal's art and especially of this new series of etchings and paintings that follow her previous accomplishments in drawing and watercolor. Beyond the evident pleasure of seeing an artist using the material elements of her artwork to their fullest potential, one cannot help being struck, on the one hand, by a thematics that favor the landscape of dreams (hence an idiomatic artistic language) and, on the other hand, by a mode of representation that highlights a corporeal relation to the world. In these etchings, Tara's dreams are uniquely incorporated in a range of tangible and sentient paths, so that even in their most abstract and uniquely configured representations, beyond the standard depictions of body and mind, person and world, they never beguile the spectator into the comfort of pure aesthetics.

**The Open
Dream Paths of
Tara Sabharwal**

by
Stathis Gourgouris

One might say, paradoxically, that these images pulsate to a certain music: the visual landscape comes across indeed as a tightly woven harmonic pattern, and yet an amalgam of singular interventions, of sudden voices crying out, sighs emitted in secret, exclamations or whispers, questions raised about meaning, expressions of surprise at a puzzle solved, lullabies of conscience or interrogations of spirit. All

these layers of visual musings, uniquely poised on a specific image or notion in various instances of repetition – vessels, paths, branches – are consistently interiorized. Tara's world takes the risk of disclosing a tangible body – yet, not in the sense of exposing or fetishizing it (violating it through recognizable depiction), but expressing it in such a way as never to surrender its enclosure. This is a concrete body that seeks to exhale, and the unveiling of its inner elements invites us to suspend our own exteriority, to let ourselves become part of its breath. There is something astonishing in the experience of viewing this work, and this astonishment, a momentary drawing of one's breath, registers a sense of being breathed in, of flowing into the multifarious paths of a visual world that promises no common denominator.

Culturally speaking, Tara Sabharwal's work is indecipherable and uncategorizable. This lends an intransigent, self-confident, ambiguity to her evident concern with the multiple languages of home (which includes her peregrinations into the landscape of interior nature: blood, roots, paths of mind and body). One sees here a whole range of images of homelessness – or perhaps better said, of a concern with the instability of the category “home”, whether as experience or as prospect. But this work expresses neither nostalgia nor disaffection. It is dedicated, instead, to the visuality of disclosure. Home is manifested as an open dialectic of paths: organic, circuitous, enclosed, suspended.

For Tara, the contemplation of homelessness is a way of rendering a productive otherness – not otherness that presides supreme, unapproachable, or disembodied, like an exemplary or absolute limit.

This work plunges otherness into the body itself, disrupting a certain comfort and reliance on patterns of recognition, but forging instead an uncanny



Home with Path, 2003

intimacy between elements that otherwise make relations uneasy and unyielding. In Tara's work, homelessness has a path (or is a path), because even in the most abstract image the world is right there. This lithe interplay between the artist's personal language and a minimally processed presence of historical reality is one of the most striking elements of Tara's unique idiom. Even the grave legacy of 9/11 registers visually without surrendering its concrete experience to aesthetization, but also without yielding any resistance to being absorbed into an artistic language that existed before the event and continues to exist, mutable and unencumbered.

Perhaps, that's why, in surveying this dreamscape of etchings and paintings, one is left astonished, yes, but also filled with an enormous sense of intimacy with a world that, no matter what its enclosures, remains open, playful, unresolved and, yes, optimistic.

Stathis Gourgouris has taught Comparative Literature at Princeton, Columbia, Yale and the University of Los Angeles. He has published two books: 'Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece' and 'Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era'. In addition to literary writings, he has written articles on politics, psychoanalysis, music, art and film studies. He is a poet with three published books and work in various international anthologies.

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The lure for exploration guides me in life and in art.

In my art practice, I reach outwards, with hope, into new territories as I cross passages of extreme beauty and borders of terrifying darkness.

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.

These works on paper are remembered moments from a journey of outward and inner explorations. The images I use of homes, ladders, windows, roots, winding paths, rain and container are open-ended symbols. They invite you to make your own interpretations, and reflect.”

Tara Sabharwal



Blue Skies Ink, Gouache and Watercolor 24" x 36"



Body Organs Homes Ink, Watercolor and Gouache 18" x 27"



Rain River Loop Ink, Gouache and Cine-cole 24" x 36"



Tara Sabharwal

Tara Sabharwal was born in Delhi, studied painting in Baroda and completed her Masters from the Royal College of Art in London on a British Council scholarship. As a student in London, the Victoria and Albert Museum bought her work and she showed at Bernard Jacobson and Christopher Hull galleries.

On returning to India she had solo shows at Art Heritage and Cymroza galleries and after three years left for the UK on the Myles Meehan fellowship. This was followed by the Durham Cathedral fellowship, solo shows at the Laing Art gallery, DLI Museum, and the Darlington Art Center along with teaching in Newcastle and Sunderland Art colleges.

In 1990 Tara moved to New York and started to live between India, UK and NY, making paintings and prints and continuing to show in all three countries. During these years she had solo shows at Mercury, La Monte, East West and Rebecca Hossack gallery in London; Galerie Scherer, Michael Oess, Galerie Schwerpunkt and Martina Janzen in Germany; John Jay gallery, Henry Street Settlement, Gallery 678 and Stephen Harris in New York and Art Heritage, Cymroza, Nazar and Saakshi galleries in India.

She has taught art at the Guggenheim Museum, Cooper Union college of Art, Studio in a School, Art in general and the City University of New York. She has received the Henry Street fellowship, International cultural collaborations grant and Cooper Union residency and her work is in the collection of the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum (a second collection) in London, the Peabody Essex Museum in Boston and the Library of Congress in Washington DC.