

TARA SABHARWAL

*Mysteries of The Mundane*, Catalog Article by Karin Miller-Lewis for December 2002 solo exhibition at Art Heritage gallery, New Delhi.

The mysteries and mutability of our interior lives have always been Tara Sabharwal's focus. In earlier paintings and drawings, her naked and secretive figures often seemed locked inside themselves unable to express what haunted them or reveal themselves without disguise. In recent years, that isolating seal has been pried open. New watercolors, drawings and monotypes escape the closures of self-consciousness, and suggest that fragmenting experiences and ambivalent emotions may yet lead to a new kind of integrity and communicability.

Lost memories and pressing feelings manifest themselves like bubbles rising to the surface of still water in *Behind the Scenes*. In this and other watercolors, the viewer's guide to the world within is a young woman reclining amongst the figments of her thought with sensuous and casual self-possession. As if emanating from a child wrapped around its mother's bulbous belly, a tree trunk climbing the picture's center joins minute images quiet as morning: a lone pedestrian strolls a residential street, a tiny performer sprightly balances on a wheel observed by geese. In contrast to the barren plains and spare rooms of previous works, the plethora of images here, like a spring, is soothing. And the presentation, a kind of sharing of introspection's mysteries, recasts the muteness of those pictures as the intimate silence in which self-understanding, and human connections, deepen.

A group of monotypes begun last fall present the forms that might shelter - and symbolize the states of mind of - her ephemeral figures. Capped vessels, their contents bubbling, and lopsided, ballooning apartment towers pocked with windows as in a child's drawing invoke the monastic place the home can become to the mother of a young child. Constraining and cradling, ascetic and whimsical, these enclosures convey the insularity of home life, as well as the sublime surprises its disciplines can yield.

In other monotypes, Tara contraposes images of stasis and transit. A dangling cord connects two structures, suggesting her effort, the effort of every expatriate, to create continuity. Elsewhere, the sheltering forms link up to circuitous roadways. Leading off the page, these loopy tracks are goal-less and well traveled. Amiably they signal that self-discovery may require more good faith than conscious effort, more readiness to wander than to reach a goal.

Such open-endedness is the fundamental and common principle of her various working methods. Welcoming the unexpected and mistaken turn, she revises her monotypes, scratching forms into the first coat of color covering the plexiglass, splattering it then with vinegar and other abrasive fluids; later she might apply cin'cole paper and paint to the print. These sensuous, accumulative actions guided by intuition enhance the monoprints' simple binary arrangements. They enable them to invoke that world-brightening sensation, the "a-ha" that accompanies the moment of embracing two combative emotions, two

contradictory thoughts. She develops the organic compositions of her drawings and watercolors from a wide range of strokes, dabs, and washes. Her variable spaces, made accordion-like of shallow planes intersecting, abutted, or alternately opening to infinite through color; her figures, intimately linked by a gaze or shared contour and disjoined by their contrasting scale evince the elastic connections the mind makes and the discontinuities it suffers in the course of reverie. The never-ending construction work - and pleasure - of remembering and rethinking is, after all, her true subject.

Tara's pictures share the expressionist goals and idioms of artists she admires, like Louise Bourgeois and Odilon Redon. Her working methods exemplify Paul Klee's dictum that drawing should make visible rather than render the visible. But, dreamier than Bourgeois, more visibly grounded in everyday experiences than Redon, and less interested in theoretical issues than Klee, her recent work also exhibits none of the spooked fascination with which many expressionists have surveyed social estrangement and the subconscious. No cymbals crash at the perception of fused contradictions in her work.

There are many possible reasons for these distinctions, and they point to the artist's efforts to bring together multiple sources. The new and hard-won intimacy of her images may be the result of motherhood; for a generous nature, even its frustrations have the unexpected effect of overwhelming a sense of isolation with the throbbing certainty of our connection to another. Tara's equanimity in the face of contradictions may be a result of her belonging to the culture from which European Romantic and modernist thinkers borrowed concepts to transcend dualism. For Tara, no cultural otherness impedes or mystifies her contemplation of the way one thing implies and participates in its opposite. Indeed, she deals with that fundamental Indian concept as a commonplace, a truism. Tara would say her work manifests the same familiarity with the philosophical tenet that the telephone operator demonstrates when dispensing some advice unself-consciously based on Shankaracharya's principles.

So it may be a mistake, or unproductive to weigh Tara's multiple roots against each other, to calculate whether she is more Indian or western-influenced. Tara maintains a faith in the universal need for art, the capacity of lines and colors and shapes to articulate the complexities of what lies buried within and between individuals. Her work, now more than ever, aims to transcend the categories that isolate - feeling from thought, mundane from mysterious, banal from philosophical - in order to draw out the significant relationships between them, and us.