

A New Complexity

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Few Indian artists have been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and if one manages to get there before one is 30 years old, there is a strong case to have a close look at the artist. Tara Sabharwal currently on view at the Art Heritage gallery (till March 21) had her initial training in Baroda and later did her Master's from the Royal College of Art, London, where she now resides. It may be recalled that her husband, David Olivant, had an exhibition at the same venue a few weeks ago and the natural reaction would be to look for the cross-cultural pattern and the manner in which Sabharwal has grappled with these diverse influences.

On view are 52 exhibits including oils (just two) pastels, water-colours, acrylics, crayons – often used together and a strong section of drawings and graphics. It is small work on the whole, in terms of scale and the overall ambience is one of wistfulness of forgotten songs and tales – the woman figuring prominently. The influence of Munch is unmistakable and one may conjecture that Sabharwal empathises with the German expressionist to a certain extent. Despair, Brown and Blue. Lady by the Sea. Night Gaze may be thus classified amongst others, and it is Sabharwal's credit that she manages to convey this fleeting mood most convincingly in water-colours.

The strongest section to my mind were the drawings and graphics which are finely executed and here again. Sabharwal's gentle rendering heightens fragmented narrative. The drawings reflect this concern with the unarticulated fear and whether it is animals emerging from a distant background (shades of the Olivant influence?) or birds lurking in a corner, it is more by negation than by affirmation that mood is heightened. Scale within the individual work has been intelligently used and for instance very often Sabharwal's infants and children to their mothers and I daresay that by this one inversion the quality of her work attains a new complexity.

It may be recalled that one had in the past, discussed the work of a few young women artists and Sabharwal could also be included in this genre of what may be mood and nascent emotion is evoked-often maternal-visual sonnets using luminous colours. Is this alchemy of fantasy and harsh reality (which a woman's sensibility is more brutally exposed to) the beginning of a new genre in women painters? But in the same breath, one may well ask if those who are engaged in the creation of endearing little sonnets would like to grapple with epic verse?