

Home > Magazine

Home is a Concept We Travel With

A deep focus on artist Tara Sabharwal and her rich body of work featured at the Abu Dhabi Art Fair 2021.



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Artist Tara Sabharwal

By Georgina Maddox

The curated Art Alive booth at Abu Dhabi Art Fair conceptually looks at the idea of 'home' through different perspectives. Tara Sabharwal's work is showcased alongside Paresh Maity, and The Singh Twins in a presentation that negotiates the idea of home through different perspectives - memory, diaspora and identity.

When Sabharwal says "my relation with my own mind comes first", one gets the sense of an artist who is driven by her inner journey even if she spends a lot of time expressing it outwardly in a vigorously physical manner.

Sabharwal tells us she layers, splashes and rolls oil-based pigment, benzine, kerosene and a selection of bright colours onto her thick rag paper as the first layer of a long process of working.

The next step is to work on plexiglass where she rolls out her main composition which then gets transferred onto the same paper that she has worked on and then the final touches are applied with a brush.

The New York-based artist is a printmaker and painter, and she enjoys the process of creating 'hybrid', monoprints and then painting to allow the final work to come through, which she puts up and looks at for a while before she can move on to her next creation.

Ready with a new body of work for Abu Dhabi, Sabharwal tells us over a call from the Big Apple that she has been working for the past two decades with this technique that brings printmaking and painting together as a merger of liminal spaces, both personal and universal or as she says 'transcultural', where "Relationships and negotiations constantly define and redefine themselves, remaining unfixed, in a state of flux...however paint is very forgiving."

Art is her go-to space, given that she had a difficult life as a teen, when her parents separated and she had to move away to Baroda at a young age to follow her dream, which was painting.

At the Faculty of Fine Arts, MSU, she was mentored by her teachers: the enigmatic and essential Nasreen Mohamedi, the maestro KG Subramanyam and the affable revolutionary Bhupen Khakhar.

"While Nasreen was like a mother to me in a quiet nurturing way, Bhupen was a great friend, who always reassured me. 'Never give up on your painting in the end you will do it. Just be stubborn', he said," recalls Sabharwal.

Khakhar even helped her when she went to the Royal College of Art (RCA), by putting her in touch with British painter Timothy Hyman, under whom she interned for a while. As for Subramanyam, fondly known as 'Mani da', he was instrumental in creating a post-Independence identity for India through his art and he passed on his ideology to his students.

Sabharwal's colleague Veer Munshi recalls their student days fondly and says, "Tara's Boat Series says it all; she has been a traveller throughout her life shuttling between places particularly from homeland India to New York. It reflects majorly in her work references, which are not drawn from any fixed position, rather back and forth revisiting places makes her observations richer to express through various mediums in multiple ways," he says. "Her concerns of belonging, migration, displacement have been felt deeply in her recent curatorial project titled 'In-Between'," Munshi adds.

With so many of these larger-than-life influential artists around her, it was no small wonder that Sabharwal had many choices to make before deciding on a lexicon. Her long association with the 'narrative style' of painting that is peculiar to Baroda and even to some extent the RCA, she perhaps felt 'trapped' in the figurative style.

Therefore, there is a tension set up by her abstract works and the brief appearance of the figurative elements, and her narrative style of titles, as explained by critic and art historian Parul Dave. "Viewing Tara's hybrid paintings is like being transported to a strange ethereal world," writes Bansi Vasvani.

While writer Hemant Sareen is of the opinion: "Tara's abstraction retains the intensity of abstract expressionist displaying their self on a canvas, yet her turn to the meditative and self-hypnotic process replaces Ab-ex's ego-drive with automatism wherein the artist is a medium, channeling spiritual energies into the realm of art. Tara's spiritualism is informed by an interest in both eastern philosophy and modern neuroscience."

The new body of work that finds a platform at the Abu Dhabi Art Fair does give us many layers and moods to examine and experience in a refreshing manner.