

ARPANA CAUR

THE EPITOME OF FEMININE AND CREATIVITY

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INTRODUCTION

Arpana Caur's art is amazing in the simplicity with which she portrays a thorough insight of the everyday realities of life, by using images that we see around us but in a new context and light. In the past few years her art has become more symbolic and she keeps reusing certain symbols over and over again. In many of her paintings, we notice the use of distinctive metaphors such as the extended hand, feet, thread and scissors. She says she started using the scissors in her works because she needed a metaphor for time. According to the Greeks, a scissor has the power to cut a human's fate in a state of continuous suspension. Her works are still dominated by colour, but we see more of black in her paintings. Black provides a beautiful offset to the blues, browns and gold that she often uses.



Arpana Caur's main strength lies in her ability to cleverly juxtapose the traditional with the modern, both in terms of style and themes. One can see duality in almost all of her works as she combines abstract art with the figurative, the single image with its several reproductions, the monochromatic and polychromatic, water and land, day and night and men and women. She also used both modern and ancient techniques while painting her canvases. In the beginning, Arpana Caur's paintings had a lot to do with her own identity both as an artist and as a woman.

ARPANA CAUR-ABIOGRAPHY

Arpana Caur was born in Delhi in 1954, seven years after Partition. Her family had been uprooted from their home in what is now Pakistan, and made their way down to Delhi in India. She grew up in a world that was torn apart by communal disharmony.

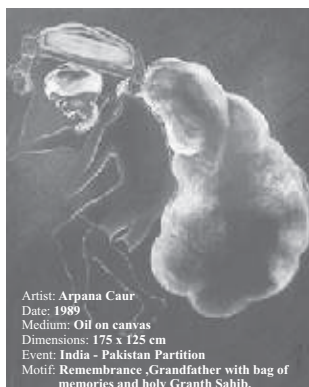
Brought up by her mother Ajeet Kaur, an award-winning novelist and artist herself, whose influence is evident in her daughter's creations. In 1961, she received an MA in literature from Delhi University. A self-taught painter, Arpana has drawn inspiration from her mother's writings, Punjabi literature, the Pahari miniature tradition, Punjab hill art and Indian folk-art motifs like Warli paintings and Godhna art of Bihar.

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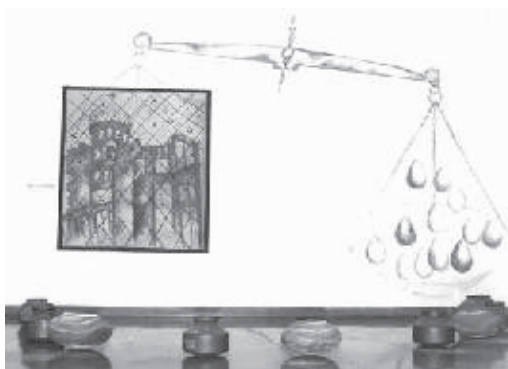
The stories of Guru Nanak, Sufi saints, Kabir, Buddha and Sohni-Mahiwal is seen in her works, as does the theme of contending opposition in her series of paintings entitled *Between Dualities*, in which the momentum that divides life and death, light and darkness, enlightenment and oblivion is the cosmic, and time is the metaphor for the universal soul.

Since the beginning of her career Arpana's main concern has been the girl child, condition of women and the growing violence in India. She has been consistently figurative and also does a fair bit of printmaking and installation.



Artist: Arpana Caur
Date: 1989
Medium: Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 175 x 125 cm
Event: India - Pakistan Partition
Motif: Remembrance, Grandfather with bag of memories and holy Granth Sahib.

Between 1975 and 1996, Arpana had 18 solo shows of her paintings, and participated in nine national and international exhibitions and art festivals. Received the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society Award in 1985, Commendation and Gold Medal at the Sixth Triennial-India (1986), was nominated by the Lalit Kala Akademi as the Eminent Artist (1990, '91, '92). Executed the first Indian mural on Environment, with German artist Sonke Nissen in Delhi 2000, and on Time in Hamburg Germany 2000. Her works are in many private and public collections in India and abroad including National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Bradford Museum, U.K. Kuntz Museum, Dusseldorf, Singapore Museum of Modern Art and the Ethnographic Museum, Stockholm.



Artist: Arpana Caur
Date: 1997
Medium: With canvas and pots
Dimensions: 10x20 ft. wall
Event: 'Tears for Hiroshima'
Place: In Kassel, Germany. Also executed in Mumbai (Cymroza Gallery) and Calcutta (CIMA Gallery)

Arpana Caur lives and works in New Delhi. Today her paintings support several projects for the under privileged, including free vocational training in the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi, of which she along with her mother, is the founder member, providing basic vocational training expertise such as stitching, computer typing and handicraft making for the women of Delhi who 'need' that extra income to support their family. She supports a leprosy home in Ghaziabad, and ration projects for poor and old widows.

Her works, mostly oil paintings, are a statement in contrast, her canvases are monumental and the subjects and colours minimal. They reflect the serenity that she exudes. Though her quiet demeanour and soft-spoken nature can prove difficult to assess the great artist, Arpana's paintings speak a thousand words.

ARTISTIC STYLE

PARTITION

Arpana Caur often works and reworks themes in her artworks, drawing from past events. Though the India-Pakistan Partition occurred before she was born, the artist grew up hearing stories from her family. The displacement and loss experienced by the artist and her family as a result of the Partition accounts for the recurring theme in her work of the loss of habitat. In a particular painting “Remembrance” she paints her grandfather, carrying the burden of memories on his back. On his head, he carries a Holy Book, which the artist states is "a necessity to hold on to the values of harmony and love this Book enshrines, any such Book" and “A Landscape With Knives”.

HIROSHIMA INSTALLATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

She has also taken to installation. In one of her installations 'Tears for Hiroshima' she drew a huge scale and tears on the wall and placed a painting of the bombed city on one side and a semi-circle of pots with water (tears) on the floor. Arpana executed this commission for the Hiroshima Museum's permanent collection, on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Nuclear Holocaust.

The 1984 communal riots in the capital city of India prompted her to paint the gory face of death. Also disturbed by the changing face of New Delhi, she started visually expressing her environmental concerns and has recently won a court case along with fellow green enthusiasts to replant 9,000 trees, which were felled during the Commonwealth Games construction activities. Her six-foot bronze structure titled Common Wealth at the first Art Summit held in Delhi 2011, gathered attention to the problem of uprooting the green cover of the city. She works towards the environmental issues, like the illegal constructions and posters on disappearance of precious wildlife like the endangered species and the little sparrows.



FEMININE SUBJECTS

Her work can be seen to continue the line begun by Amrita Sher-Gil. It is feminine and feminist in its perspective, with portraits of women placed in a contemporary urban context. The erotic is downplayed in favour of the sturdy. There is no hint of an expressive sexuality, woman and nature are both symbiotically tied in a circle of perceived thread and uncertain renewal. Her work responds to the surroundings and events of her life, from the crowded Patel Nagar of her childhood

to events such as the rape of Maya Tyagi and the widows of the Chasnala mining disaster.

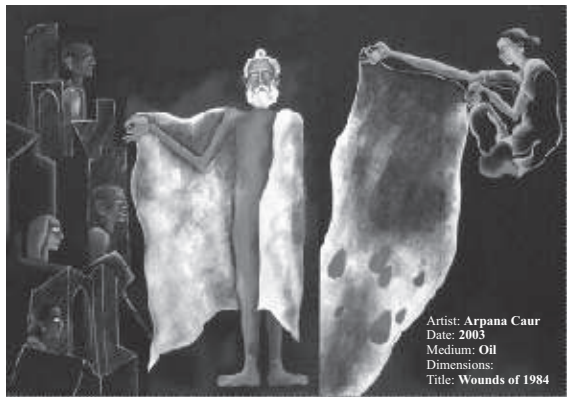
Brought up by a working mother, who was a pillar of strength probably led her to depict women with a more real-life approach, rather than just an object of beauty. The repeated motif of clothing in Caur's work both confirms and expresses the traditional picture of women.

The image of women sewing quietly, within the acceptable parameters of femininity is in a way liberated, as the woman is placed outdoors, embroidering larger destinies using scissors and thread as an icon. Instead of a feminine, income-producing function, it becomes a political comment on women's productivity like in the painting titled 'Harvest' where she uses Warli folk art motifs in her painting, the circle of Warli Folk Art indicates time. Thread ties everybody in one bond and sometimes it also breaks the bond. These creative elements of Folk art produce magic on canvas as a secret is created.

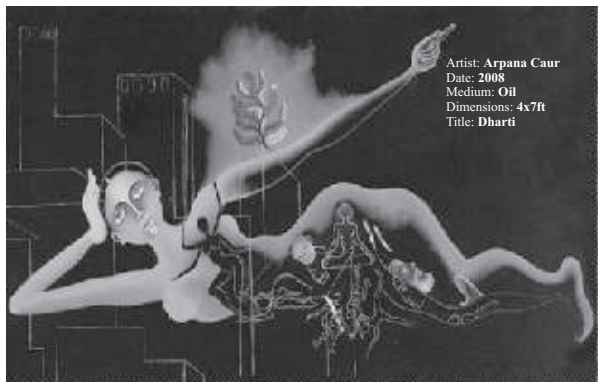
Similarly paintings of 'Umbrella' series are also based on social inequality. In this some fair women are shown under the 'umbrella' while labour class women are shown with wrinkled and dark faces burning in the sun. She has also projected the pain and miseries of Widows of Vrindavan through her canvas. She feels the pain when she sees such people in society and by projecting their miseries somehow gives her a little relief.

After that we get the 'Threat' series, of violent policemen aiming guns at innocent women, in which we get serial images influenced by Pahari miniatures. These develop an optical character in later works of the 'Body is Just a Garment' series, often evolving into graffiti in works with industrial and street imagery.

"I believe women represent the latent force, which has not been explored properly even today. The struggle of women is quite long as they have to walk on the sharp edges of two swords at a time. They can counter the challenges of industrialization and extreme urbanization. Inherently, they have a power to renew and regenerate. They are givers of life, which is beautifully expressed in her painting titled Dharti".



Artist: Arpana Caur
Date: 2003
Medium: Oil
Dimensions:
Title: Wounds of 1984



Artist: Arpana Caur
Date: 2008
Medium: Oil
Dimensions: 4x7ft
Title: Dharti

SIKH THEMES

Arpana Caur depicts spirituality, that is evident in her paintings that celebrate the life of Guru Nanak. Arpana is a devout member of the Sikh community, for her the religious and ritual activities of the Gurudwara are central to her life. Her faith is intact through tragedies and is revealed in her artistic endeavours.

In Arpana's painting Immersion/ Emergence the dual nature of past and present and of searching and finding from ignorance to knowledge. Here Nanak is submerged under water and reemerges to give the sermon of Ikk Oan Kar (the one Divine Being) which means the oneness of all beings. The watery depths are shown in intense blue, and the waves splash over him, with a passionate red background, the power of blood with Nanak enveloped in glow of golden joy and enlightenment.

Arpana uses water in many of her paintings in a similar way as a formal device to divide her compositions. In the painting of Dancing Nanak, the rhythmic lines of the blue river of life are echoed in the curves of Nanak's dancing body. Flames erupt from the curves of the river like a spirit, reminding us of the eternal force that exists between fire and water. The Dance juxtaposes with the dance of Natraj, in a Sufi context of ecstasy and hope.

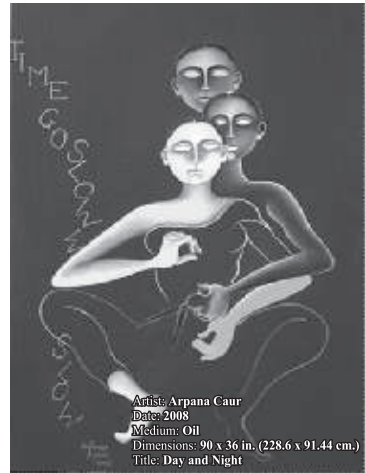
In Wounds of 1984, Guru Nanak stands half naked, half robed in a white cloth, again against a black background that casts the pall of endless night over the painting. He is watched by figures to the left who peer out of compartment like buildings. In the right panel, a seated woman, holds up a blood-stained cloth that flows across the canvas like a silver river”.

CREATIVE COLLABORATION

Arpana Caur reinforces links with the traditional base of India's artistic expression, the folk art of the peasantry. Her art has evolved as a blend of modern and folk art motifs . It is a collaboration between a folk artist, Lakshmi Narayan Pandey, and the modern painter, Arpana Caur, both of whose signatures appear on works they have jointly created using the repetitive and graffiti-like images of the traditional tattooists of Bihar, Godna art.

DAY AND NIGHT SERIES

The recent work by Arpana Caur is part of the artist's 'Day and Night ' series 2008 . Depicting the continuous and never-ending cycles of Day and Night, Creation and Destruction, Life and Death. She has also created many paintings under the series titled 'Samay' as Time is a favourite theme. Today life of people has become very hectic and unmanageable. They are running continuously from one pole to



another. The canvas shows a procession of three female figures set against a black background, their luminous colours contrasting vividly against the background. The dark female figure is seen using a scissors to cut the fine thread of life symbolizing death and the end of life. The progression of time is portrayed by the jumbling up of figures. The text on the left of the figures reads 'Time Go Slow Slow' and refers to the nature of time that it waits for no man. The artist is telling the viewer to live life to the full and enjoy himself completely before the thread of life is cut by the scissors of death.

ARPANA HER PRESENT DAY PERSONA

Arpana is the epitome of politeness and compassion. If she isn't painting at her huge studio in Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, she is busy collecting folk art and craft material from across the world. She has set up a folk art and miniature museum at her academy. I have been a woman of independent thought since my childhood. As a child I wanted to fly under the open sky and wanted know the secrets of nature. I always wanted to fathom the depth of water and height of the sky. I always use to be absorbed in contemplation.

An ardent collector of miniature paintings she has a varied collection of miniatures in her academy gallery, as well as a display of her own works and catalogues. The colours in her paintings are black and dark to make images look more luminous and create space which has its own language and breathing space.

There's a sensuous pleasure in the weight of the paint when you lay it on the brush, just as there's a pleasure in being splashed with colour, even if you know you'll never be able to wear the dress again," she says, looking down at her kurta ruefully, she sums up, smiling.

She has carved a niche for herself in the art world as an iconic female Indian artist, with collection and exhibition of her paintings all over the world.

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