

# The Contemporary Scene

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From the 1970s, the art scene in India started undergoing considerable changes, and in the 'free market' era of the 1980s artists became more conscious of market forces, as galleries willing to sell works of art mushroomed in the main cities. Narrative art with recognisable subject matter returned with renewed vigour, but it made very different statements. The human figure continued to be treated not in naturalistic detail, which is a characteristic of European art even today, but in a typical Indian fashion entirely as an expressive medium. Artists distilled elements from personal experience to create Platonic types that made universal statements. Another important feature is that, with some notable exceptions, artists preferred ambiguous, floating poetic spaces like those of Chagall to European single-point perspective. Such perspective was closer to the use of space in Indian miniatures.

Artists of considerable originality, for instance the self-taught artists Sudhir Patwardhan (b. 1949) and Gieve Patel (b. 1940) in Mumbai, made their debut in this period. Among a number of major figures, I have focused on several with individual visions that exemplify the variety and richness of this pictorial trend. The following four are characterized by their poetic, super-realist rendering of reality. Ganesh Pyne (b. 1937) started as a watercolourist in the Bengal School mode. His discovery of the pictorial world of Klee enabled him to inject a modern sense of fragmentation and ambiguity into his own work. In addition, *The Outsider* by the English existentialist writer Colin Wilson struck a chord in his own temperament, which has always been marked by an acute sense of alienation.<sup>1</sup> Pyne's work demonstrates a craftsmanship perfected through years of concentrated study of a few self-imposed themes [138].

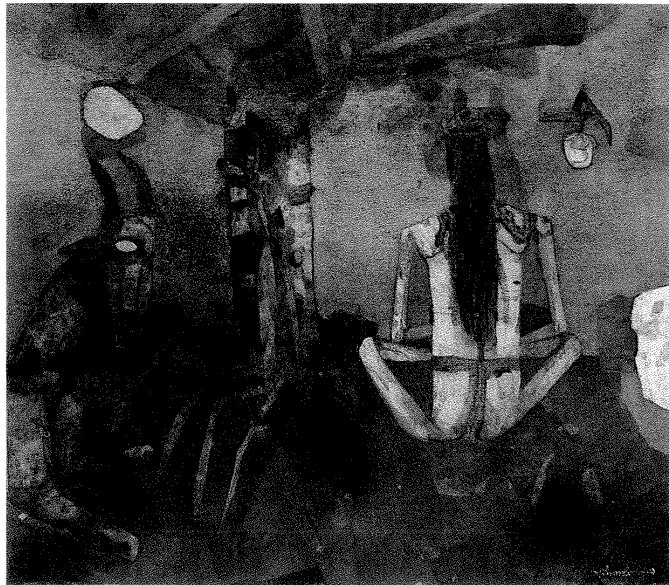
The hyper-realism of the Calcutta artist Bikash Bhattacharjee (b. 1940), with strong light and deep shadows like an art photograph, swims against the tide of fashion in India.<sup>2</sup> There is an undercurrent of violence in his work, as in his sinister Victorian dolls treated in the manner of Surrealist sculptor and painter Hans Bellmer, though their styles are quite dissimilar. Bhattacharjee's portraits of Bengali lower middle-class women are deceptively academic. On closer inspection, they reveal themselves to be the stuff of bad dreams. These scary aliens

Detail of 147

**138 Ganesh Pyne**

*The Sage, 1979.*

Pyne describes his picture settings as a twilight zone, the meeting point of day and night, of life and death, of love and agony—where everything is seen in a different light. His persistent motifs are anthropomorphic masks with gleaming eyes, Jurassic animals, bleached skeletons, and stunted humans, surrounded by dark pools of water. These subtly textured paintings with exquisite detail conjure up a mysterious world that exists outside the normal commerce of life.



that inhabit the twilight world seem to emanate from the slums of Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> Another poetic realist, Jogen Chowdhury (b. 1939), who spent some years in Paris, delights in combining the erotic with the grotesque in sagging, wrinkled flesh, the excrescences on the epidermis erupting like pustules and tumours [139].<sup>4</sup> The lyricism of Manjit Bawa (b. 1941) springs from his training in silk-screening. Bawa's boneless, amoebic humans and beasts float in fluorescent candy-coloured space: pink, violet, emerald green, sky blue, tangerine. Bawa,

**Postcolonial art criticism**

The developments in Baroda must be set against the rise of postcolonial art criticism, which treats art as a form of cultural discourse rather than as the embodiment of self-evident truth. As the sacrosanct western canon and its claims to universality began to be questioned, women's art and non-western art, until now judged condescendingly against classical taste, won a new recognition. This challenge to the dominant canon was radically different from the earlier modernist assaults on it, which never really questioned the western colonial, capitalist hegemony or the unilinear trajectory of western art history. The concept of colonial discourse laid bare the culturally constructed nature of many of the artistic 'truths'. This important development in the academic field coincided with the emergence of new art critics, notably Geeta Kapur. She challenged Europe's leading question: 'How can Indians appropriate western modernism without misunderstanding and reducing it?' These theoretical developments gave Indian artists an increasing self-assurance about their work. They also felt confident enough to mount protests against the international art market controlled by western art critics, gallery owners, and art dealers.



**139 Jogen Chowdhury**

*Man and Woman, 1987.*

In this work, Chowdhury makes his monochromatic grotesques stand out against the dark void behind them. The metaphor of over-ripeness is applied to humans and inanimate objects, which take on the qualities of an ageing organism, decaying and corrupt. An ordinary pillow in a Bengali bedroom with the word 'love' embroidered on it, slightly stained and crumpled with use, floats in a bare space. Another series, *Reminiscences of a Dream*, brings out his eccentric vision of the lotus, a cultural icon, alongside dead fish and stale vegetables.

who is inspired by the eighteenth-century Hill State painters of his home state of Punjab, seeks the iconic simplicity of Indian mythology. Since the themes are universally familiar, 'you can concentrate instead on the form, the colour, the space', he explains.<sup>5</sup>

**The new pictorialism**

The fine arts department of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (Madhya Pradesh) was a major force in the re-emergence of pictorialism of the 1970s, the paper *Vrischik* (scorpion), published from Baroda, becoming a powerful ideological weapon in the dissemination of radical ideas. In the 1960s, Baroda had established close links with the Royal College of Art in London, a link that has led to significant cross-fertilizations, in part because of a shared interest in figurative art. The English painter Howard Hodgkin has had close associations with Baroda artists, notably Bhupen Khakhar. Another British artist, Timothy Hyman, a passionate advocate of expressionist realism in painting, made a controversial visit to Baroda in 1980–1, contributing to the ongoing debate at the university. Geeta Kapur, writing for *Vrischik*, launched a frontal assault on post-Independence non-figurative art as being part of a conformist international formalism that claimed primacy of style over meaning.<sup>6</sup> These ideas came to a head at the 'Place for People' exhibition held in Bombay and Delhi in 1980–1, where the new pictorialists, Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar, Vivan Sundaram, and others, consciously repudiated non-figurative

modernism as playing hostage to western capitalism. They also sought in a postmodernist vein to end the distinction between fine and popular/folk arts.

The fine arts department of the University of Baroda was founded in 1949 on the novel idea of offering art as a vocation; art students took courses in art history and the humanities as part of their all-round training. This intellectual background provided the basis for a consciously thought-out artistic programme, which received a boost with the appointment of the artist and pedagogue K. G. Subramanyan. Subramanyan vigorously implemented the teaching principles of his mentors, Nandalal Bose and Binode Bihari Mukherjee, introducing the Santiniketan mural tradition in collaboration with a traditional painter from Rajasthan. Together they undertook public mural projects inspired by Bengali terracotta reliefs. Subramanyan himself acquired a first-hand knowledge of the traditional arts by working for the state-owned Handloom Board.<sup>7</sup>

Subramanyan's objective was to obliterate the gulf between the artisan and the modern artist, incorporating the 'living traditions' of rural and tribal art into the Baroda curriculum. Subramanyan, whose romantic primitivism equated the formalist universe of non-illusionist art with tribal art, 'found the structural mechanism of Cubism answering certain questions about the two-dimensionality of Indian folk art and vice versa'.<sup>8</sup> This formalism, he claimed, had fallen into disfavour during the post-Independence regime of semi-figurative art.

**140 Gulammohammed Sheikh**

*City for Sale, 1981-4.*

Sheikh discovered the wealth of Indian miniatures at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: 'it was in the landscape that I invested my new-found understanding and excitement, sensation and experiences'. Sheikh feels that Mughal aerial perspective, which opens up layers of shifting viewpoints, better expresses Indian landscapes than European single-point perspective. He applies the idea of fluid space in his paintings in conjunction with a 'spinning structure', like the ancient Indian literary device of containing a story within a story.



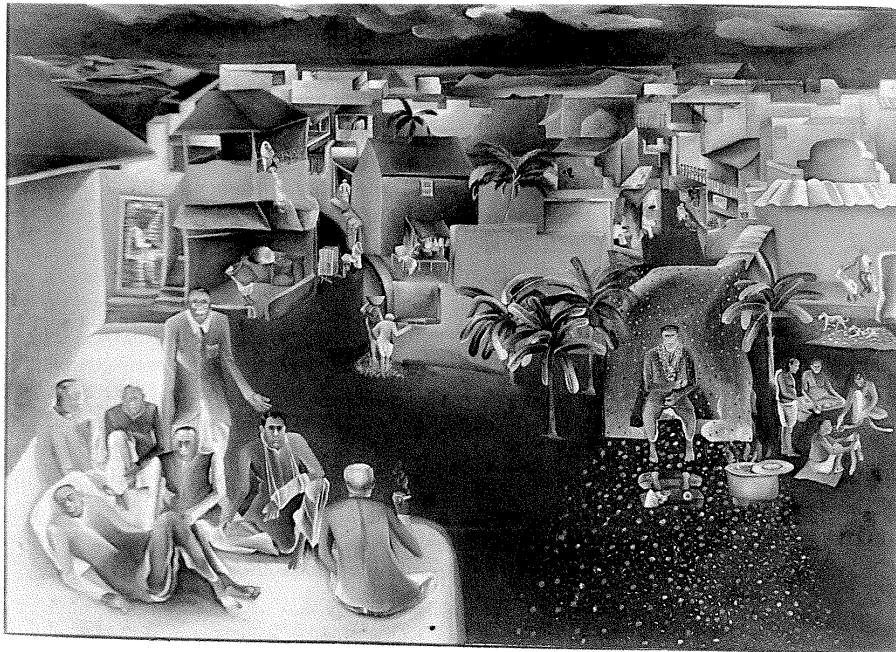
Subramanyan threw down his gauntlet at the 'modernists', reasserting the pioneering importance of the Bengal School, which had been dismissed by artists from Sher-Gil onwards. He sought to 'contextualize' creativity and reintegrate art with cultural, social, and environmental issues. Finding postcolonial theory congenial to his own enterprise, Subramanyan put forward 'language', by which he possibly meant artistic conventions, as the transformative element in art. The role of the artist, he asserted, needed to be merged with the function of the work of art.

Two of the most original talents to emerge from Baroda are Gulammohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar, both of whom use narrative art to express multiple levels of meaning. Sheikh (b. 1937), also a noted poet, was the first artist from Baroda to receive training at the Royal College of Art in London.<sup>9</sup> His 'polysemic' cityscapes are conceived as vast panoramas in the manner of the Shah Jahan *Padshah Nama* [140]. They express his personal and social concerns, and are made up of complex layers consisting of sexual symbolism, Koranic imagery, memories of childhood, and episodes from everyday life. Sheikh often uses the courtyard as an emblem of the frontier between the home and the world in an Indian household. He writes:

Living in India signifies living simultaneously in several times and cultures ... The past is a living entity which exists in parallel with the present, each illuminating and sustaining the other ... With the convergence of periods and cultures, the citadels of purism explode. Tradition and modernity, private and public, interior and exterior incessantly separate and reunite.<sup>10</sup>

Bhupen Khakhar (b. 1934), born in an artisan community, was trained as a chartered accountant, which still provides his main income. He came to Baroda to study art criticism but found painting more attractive. Khakhar collects 'kitschy' imagery to construct an elaborate narrative genre, employing playful irony in his portrayal of the banal lives of inconsequential people as they lead their daily lives, adroitly capturing their awkward gestures in stiff, frontally posed studio portrait-like figures.<sup>11</sup> He revels in mock chandeliers and leather furnishings and makes careful inventories of the objects in an interior. From miniature colours, Khakhar moved on to garish enamel and calendar paints, including the actual paint used for decorating the interiors of small establishments such as a barber's saloon or a watch repairer's shop.<sup>12</sup> His meticulous constructions are full of care and humility, his iconic figures are surrounded with all the attributes of their daily activity.<sup>13</sup>

Khakhar's 'Pop' art is more 'naive' than satirical, since the high-low distinction in art is less obvious in India. However, we would fail to appreciate the sense of alienation, irony, and personal vulnerability in Khakhar's work unless we take into account his homosexuality in a society which is yet to come to terms with it. His cityscapes often offer



**141 Bhupen Khakhar**  
*Celebration of Guru Jayanti,*  
1980.

One of his most ambitious works, it depicts a number of mini-worlds, each self-contained and deeply immersed in its own activities, as they float in the deep blue field of colour.

us a protagonist, his alter ego, a voyeur who gazes on the distant scene with ironic detachment, tinged with a touch of melancholy [141]. Khakhar's symbolic 'outing' is expressed in his panoramic work *You Cannot Please Everybody*, purchased by London's Tate Gallery in 1998.<sup>14</sup>

The most articulate, politically committed of Subramanyan's students is Vivan Sundaram, who works with a global perspective, seeking artistic equivalents of the Marxist ideological struggle. Although he has produced elegant paintings, it was logical that Sundaram would eventually turn to the political art of installations. In 1991, Sundaram chose to comment on the Gulf War, viewed by many in the Third World as a ruthless form of western colonialism. His installation is visualized as modern warfare in an ancient land, a war game that belies the grim reality. The game is about war, destruction, and death. As he points out, 'Operation Desert Storm, the battle between Iraq and the Allied Forces early this year, was projected in the mass media as bloodless high-tech warfare'.<sup>15</sup>

### Women artists of the subcontinent

#### India

The most significant development in the subcontinent since the 1970s has been the rise of female artists as a self-conscious group. The aims

and issues of women's art, especially in the wake of the women's movement of the 1970s, are quite distinct from those of men and transcend the political frontiers that separate the three nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Does gender override other considerations, even though some of these woman artists do not perceive themselves as feminists? It is problematic whether women's art can be defined by something inherently 'feminine', but women's experience in a male-dominated world is palpably different to men's. Woman artists of the subcontinent constitute a group in which certain concerns, anxieties, and aspirations are shared, given that they have not yet achieved anything like equality with men in social and cultural spheres.<sup>16</sup> It is no coincidence that many of the artists included here have been active from the 1970s, the period when feminism made its mark. Some of them, as part of that movement, seek to subvert with irony the common perception of woman's role as either nourishing or destructive and to engage in an examination of sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

Women's consciousness sharpened at the turn of the century under the impact of colonial education and nationalist concerns. The earliest evidence of woman artists in colonial India is the art exhibition held in Calcutta in 1879, in which 25 amateur woman artists took part. In the early twentieth century Tagore's niece Sunayani Debi, a housewife, won celebrity status as a naive artist, while Amrita Sher-Gil was the first professional woman artist in India. In the first decades after Independence, a few woman artists, namely Shanu Lahiri, sister of Nirode Mazumder, Kamala Roy Chowdhury, Kamala Das Gupta, wife of the sculptor Pradosh Das Gupta, and Amina Ahmad, wife of the sculptor Chintamani Kar, were seeking to establish their professional credentials. In the Nehruvian era, it is argued, women groped for individual expression within the dominant artistic framework, caught in the dialectic between the representation of women in art and their self-representation as women.<sup>18</sup>

#### MEERA MUKHERJEE (1923–98)

Meera Mukherjee, the most outstanding Indian sculptor to emerge in the post-Independence period, produced works of considerable power. A heroic individualist, she denied any feminist content in her work, considering herself to be a professional first and a woman second.<sup>19</sup> Mukherjee had her first lessons in sculpture from a traditional sculptor, gaining further technical training later in Munich. On returning to India, she renounced her western training in favour of traditional art, turning to the bronze-casting techniques of the Bastar tribe. She lived with the Bastars in order to gain an insight into their life and work, a participatory experience that included an anthropological study of the Bastar crafts: 'To my mind, every artist must also be an artisan, who brings to his work a devotion' [142].<sup>20</sup>

**142 Meera Mukherjee**

*Sitting Woman*, bronze,  
c.1990.

In contrast to Bastar bronzes, Mukherjee's explore irregular shapes and accidental growths. Her figures were often so massive that they had to be cast in pieces and welded together, but the actual weld was visible to reveal the transparency of the process. This is seen in *Ashoka at Kalinga*, one of her major works, a pacifist protest against political violence in contemporary India.



But she also came to the conclusion that, unlike the circumscribed world of the traditional artisan, the modern individualist artist was engaged in solving new problems and exploring new experiences. It is a token of her intellectual honesty that she was acutely aware of the fact that while the modern artist could profit from traditional art, the asymmetrical relationship between the underclass and the elite was a dilemma that could not be easily resolved. Despite sincere efforts, the tribal must remain the Other. Meera Mukherjee was impressive in her austerity, enjoying her isolation and self-imposed poverty, living solely for her work. She viewed her own life as a romantic struggle, lent intensity by the strength required for her monumental projects.<sup>21</sup>

**NASREEN MOHAMED (1937–89)**

Nasreen was rare among Indian artists in pursuing pure, minimalist lines, colours, shades, and textures. While at St Martin's School of Art in London in the 1960s, she wrote cryptically, 'It is a most important time in my life. The new image for pure rationalism. Pure intellect which had to be separated from emotion—which I first begin to see now. A state beyond pain and pleasure. Again a difficult state begins.'<sup>22</sup> From her early colourful abstract expressionist landscapes and organic forms, she went on to minimalist black and white ink and pencil drawings. Whole sheets were filled with landscapes of light grey wash punctuated with calligraphic marks as in Arabic script. Occasionally, she used black ink to add tone and texture. Gradually nature yielded to the grid and the geometry of straight lines, aided with precision instruments. Her black and white photographs of Arab lands reveal the same formalist play of pure geometric and architectural shapes.<sup>23</sup> In her final years of illness, Mohamedi wrote wistfully of Kandinsky as she faced a crisis of confidence: 'Again I am reassured by Kandinsky—the need to take from outer environment and bring it an inner necessity.'<sup>24</sup>

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PAINTING**

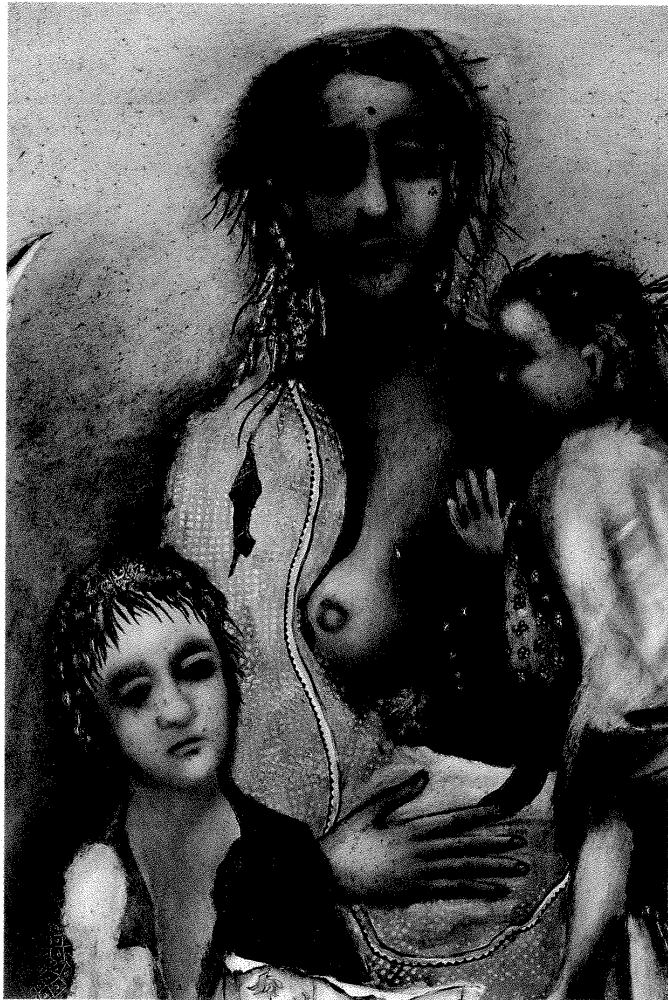
Feminism made women reassess their lives and aspirations. Women artists spoke with a different and concerted voice on modernity and social commitment, interweaving personal histories with collective memories. The following three artists confronted the new consciousness in an autobiographical mode. Anjolie Ela Menon (b. 1940) found her personal expression after her meeting with the Mexican painter Francesco Toledo in Paris, who introduced her to layered surfaces and textures on hardboard. She aims at distancing her subjects to add a touch of mystery, as in her window series, in which the subjects are confined within actual window frames. She also uses accidental factors like wiping the paint off a figure to lend a *nonfinito* quality to her work [143].<sup>25</sup>

Nalini Malani (b. 1946), who was an art student in the West during

**143 Anjolie Ela Menon**

*Midday, 1987.*

Her nostalgic madonnas and nudes are images of women—maternal, sexual, virginal—frozen in time and yearning for the unattainable, recalling Russian icons. Their erotic melancholy mirrors her own temperament. 'In the hinterland of this pandemonium [her busy, full family life] I live alone, finding secret space from which to touch the sources of creativity.'



the late 1960s, was politicized by the student revolts of the time. Her early narratives focus on women's role in the family in a consciously subversive juxtaposition of the mundane and the unexpected. They allude to urban life, the human figures in them recalled from memory (she does not draw from life) [144]. 'For me,' she says in celebration of hybridity, 'a single subject cannot possibly be contained in one frame, so I have to repeat the idea by cloning and recycling images.'<sup>26</sup> Her 'political' art almost inevitably led her to installations which make reference to global issues of postcolonialism and Third World poverty. Nearer home, in order to draw public attention to the decaying

**144 Nalini Malani**

*Balancing Act, 1983-4.*

Her busy compositions seem like unrelated film stills floating in an ambiguous space. Her sources and media are heterogeneous: oils, watercolours, photocopies, and monoprints jostle with borrowings across time and space: Goya, Delacroix, Ravi Varma, Degas, Binode Bihari Mukherjee, Sher-Gil, Frida Kahlo, and Persian miniatures.



traditional murals of Nathadvara in Rajasthan, she organized a session of performance art. The paintings she did at the Chemould Gallery in Bombay covered entire walls. At the end of the show, to insist on their contingent and non-commercial purpose, she had them whitewashed over to be ready for the next show.<sup>27</sup>

Arpana Caur (b. 1954) challenges the male-dominated art world from a feminist perspective, as the universal merges with the autobiographical in her paintings. A child of divorced parents, Caur was influenced by her mother's prize-winning novel *Homeless*, based on their experience. She dwells on the claustrophobia of living in cramped lodgings, their trials and tribulations. She uses a range of female types in her work, from the young child to the mother, the widow, and the emblematic Mother Earth. She also reinterprets the heroines of eighteenth-century Basohli painting in a feminist light. As women in her paintings grow to heroic proportions, men consequently diminish in stature. The image of women sewing in quiet domesticity serves in her work as a surrogate for women's productivity in general, the embroidered cloth becoming a signifier on different levels of meaning.<sup>28</sup> Caur has taken up Madhubani paintings done by women, transferring the motifs directly onto the canvas, preferring tensions and contradictions instead of harmonies, describing them as existing 'between

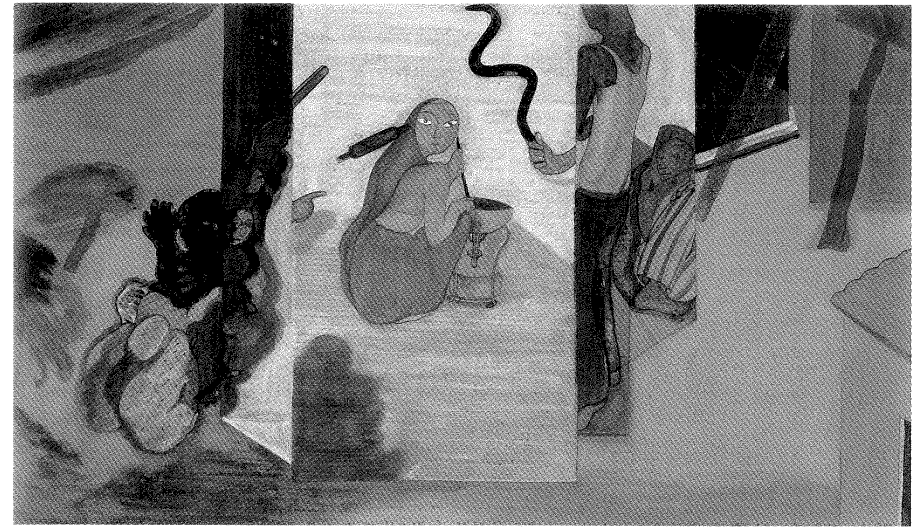
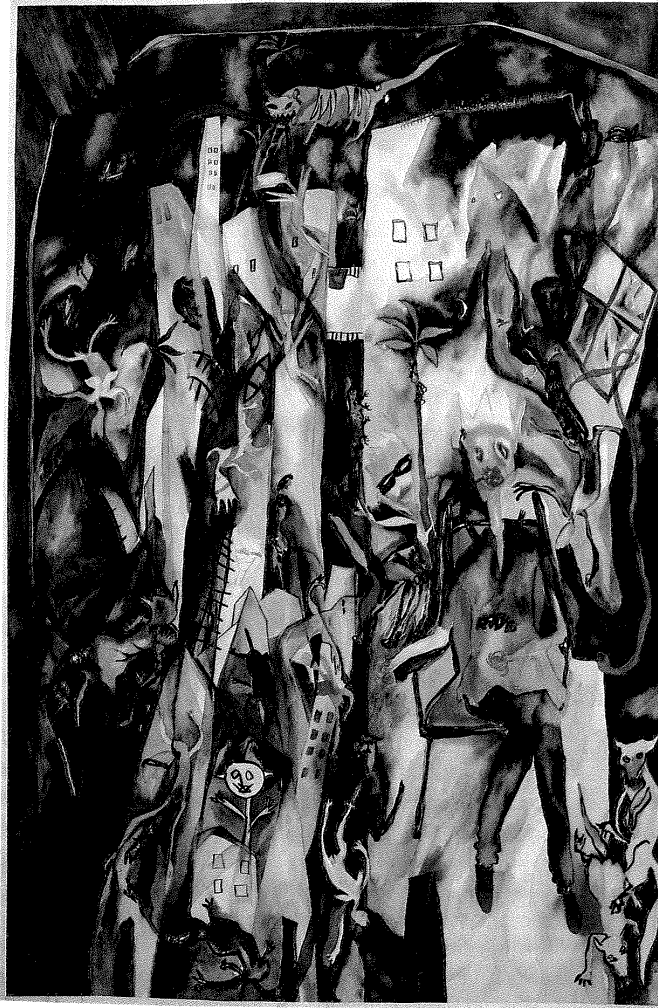
dualities'. In 1995, she was invited to commemorate the anniversary of Hiroshima's destruction by the city's memorial museum. Her painting, *Where Are All the Flowers Gone?*, alludes to the violence perpetrated on the city's inhabitants.

In the 1980s, a new group of woman artists was coming to the fore at Baroda, notably Nilima Sheikh (b. 1945), Madhavi Parekh (b. 1942), whose naive paintings drew upon village art, and Rekha Rodwittiya (b. 1958), who trained at Baroda and the Royal College of Art, London. Rodwittiya was briefly part of the younger group that

**145 Rekha Rodwittiya**

*Within Ivory Towers*, 1984.

Rodwittiya, a striking colourist, packs her figures into crowded spaces, making feminist statements through a combination of paintings and autobiographical writings.



**146 Nilima Sheikh**

*When Champa Grew Up (7)*, 1991.

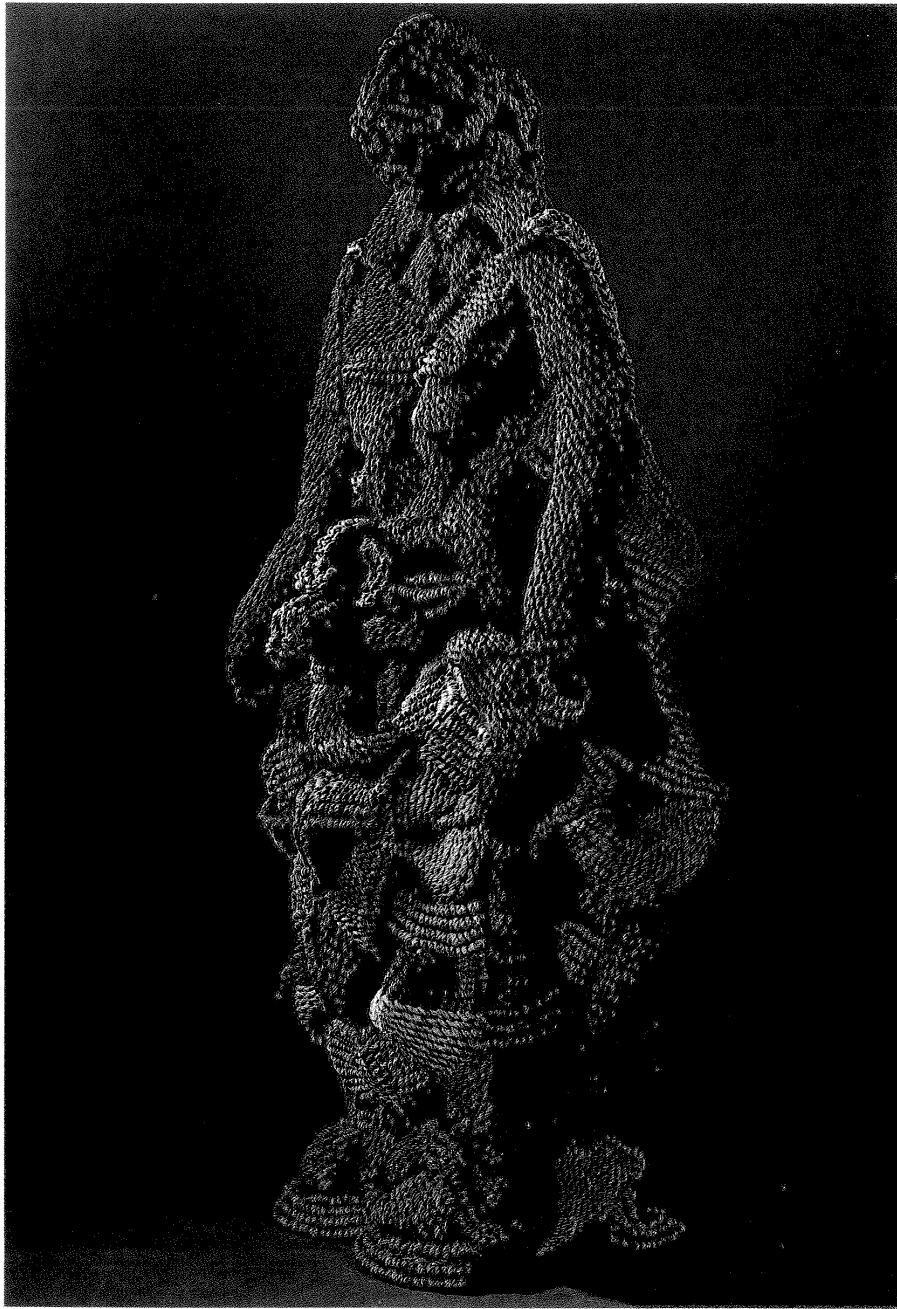
By means of this understated pictorial device inspired by Indian miniatures, Sheikh expresses the horror of the scene.

included the sculptors Ravindra Reddy and Rimzon.<sup>29</sup> She was invited to participate in the exhibition celebrating the declaration of human rights by the United Nations in Geneva in 1988 [145].

Nilima Sheikh discovered the radical imagination of Binode Bihari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij through her teacher, Subramanyan. She was also exposed to Gulam Sheikh's multilayered landscapes inspired by Indian miniatures. Of the different media she has experimented with, tempera, the medium of Indian miniatures, has become her favourite. She has also revived the Mughal technique of making hardboard out of layers of fine paper and combines Mughal compositions with the spirit of Japanese *Ukiyo-e* to narrate everyday events. Nilima considers her mother's influence in her life and art to be decisive. A recurrent figure in her work is a crouching woman washing clothes or dishes, a common sight in India.<sup>30</sup>

Nilima Sheikh's memorable work is the series *When Champa Grew Up*, an indictment of the 'bride burning' phenomenon in India. Her personal acquaintance with the young victim represented, who died from third degree burns, gives it an unusual intensity. The choice of a quiet lyrical style brings home all the more forcefully the horror of the incident, its evocative power resting on the mythic contrast between the innocent young bride, Champa, and the evil mother-in-law. The pictorial language makes use of incidental details, such as the kitchen where she cooks and the sinister objects lurking behind innocuous utensils which would bring about her destruction [146].<sup>31</sup>

A brilliant sculptor of the post-1980s generation, Mrinalini Mukherjee (b. 1949) is the daughter of Binode Bihari Mukherjee and a



**147 Mrinalini Mukherjee**

*Woman on Peacock, 1991.*

Her mysterious primeval figures, often marked with hollows and crags, have a ceremonial grandeur about them, 'constantly crossing boundaries between the domestically improvised and the ambitiously monumental, between cheap simple fabrics for the home and the rhetoric of sculpture for a public gallery'.

student of Subramanyan at Baroda. She offers a subtle but complex feminist message through the medium of an unconventional material, a species of vegetable fibre resembling hemp. Mrinalini fully exploits the dynamics of the material, its capacity to fold, twist, drape, and stretch. She begins by dyeing the material in deep colours, such as purple or carmine, and then knots and weaves it. She then slowly builds up her totemic figures, some of them menacing, many of them sexually ambiguous, occasionally a flower symbolizing the genitals [147].<sup>32</sup>

*Pakistan*

Political issues have a particular urgency in Pakistan, which has produced woman artists of originality and commitment. Since the Mughal period, there has been a tradition of Muslim women being accomplished in the arts, a tradition that continues today in Pakistan. Women have played an active role in Pakistani art, as professional artists and in pioneering art education. Anna Molka, an influential figure, opened art classes for women at the Punjab University in Lahore at a time when the first art institutions in the new capital at Karachi were also set up by women.

Acknowledged by many as the first modern artist in Pakistan, Zubeida Agha was introduced to Futurism by an Italian prisoner of war she met in the 1940s. Her first act of defiance was to paint a nude and a self-portrait, both subjects considered inappropriate for a woman artist in Pakistan.<sup>33</sup> Zubeida Agha's show in 1949, the very first modern

**148 Zubeida Agha**

*New York, 1970.*

Her early work is sombre, seeking to capture the essential forms or emotions, but lightened considerably after her visit to the West. She is known for her carefully designed, flat, diagrammatic cityscapes painted in primary colours evocative of stained glass, sometimes bounded by thick black outlines.





art exhibition held in Pakistan, unleashed a fierce controversy. However, Agha was defended by those who argued that a different kind of art was required for the times [148].<sup>34</sup>

As artists' work in Pakistan was often dictated by the demands of state patronage, women received few public commissions. To survive, they had to create an alternative scene that presented their work and struggle. The resulting works were characterized by irony and defiance, calling into question social and political injustices as much as women's marginalization. An exhibition held in 1995 in Britain in the city of Bradford brought together 25 woman artists, who were remarkable for revealing a new sensibility. Most of them were from the National College of Arts in Lahore and their works challenged the male-dominated tradition. However, the artists shown were widely varying in their approach and interests. There is, nonetheless, an understated quality and a concern with texture and subtle chromaticism that unite a few of them.

Salima Hashmi, daughter of the leading Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, uses an intimate scale and the 'off-centre' compositions of illuminated manuscripts in order to convey her political message. Her *Poem for Zainab*, on the abused wife of an imam, purposely uses delicate hyacinth paper for the tragic subject in order to underline the mixture of vulnerability and resilience in women's existence.<sup>35</sup> Another artist, Sabah Husain, learnt the art of paper and printmaking in Japan. This demanding traditional skill has brought her an inner richness. Husain enjoys the tactile pleasure of paper making and is trying to introduce its use among artists in Pakistan. She has applied her knowledge of Indian classical music, and the Ragamala genre, to evoke abstract images of different sounds in her work [149].<sup>36</sup>

Naazish Ata Ullah, an influential art teacher and printmaker, addresses gender issues in her politically charged *Chaddar and Shrouded Image* series, produced during a period of political oppression in Pakistan. For others, notably Nilofar Akmat and Sylvat Aziz, the trauma of Partition and displacement provides a potent creative source. Among the younger generation, Sumaya Durani has chosen the medium of conceptual art to scrutinize the institution of marriage. Finally, Durriya Kazi is a rare artist in Pakistan since there are few sculptors in the country, let alone woman sculptors. She makes syncretic use of South Asian traditions: Tantra, Sufism, Islamic decorations, and Hindu temple forms.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Bangladesh*

After 1947, Muslim women of Bangladesh began taking up art as a profession. The first major woman artist was the figurative sculptor Novera Ahmed (b. 1930), who now lives in Paris. She established herself with her relief mural for the Dhaka University library in 1957

#### 149 Sabah Husain

*Zard Paton Ka Ban (Forest of Yellowing Leaves)*, 1993.

Smudges, splodges, lines, and marks made with Japanese sumi ink on semi-transparent handmade paper highlight the translucence and the layered textures in her work.

Committed to the women's struggle, she creates work that is full of unexpected delights and optimism.



**150 Rokeya Sultana**

*Mother and Child (Madonna series), c.1995.*

The artist brings out the poignancy of the relationship through subtle, understated, and delicate use of watercolour tones and simplified, 'childlike' drawing of the figures.



and the first open-air sculpture there in 1959, inspired by village dolls. Ahmed has preferred to use unconventional materials such as cement for her sculptures. She was followed by the sculptor Shamim Sikder and the painter Farida Zaman, whose subtle, intricately textured series *Fishermen's Net* won wide recognition in the 1970s.

The 1980s and 1990s, which witnessed many changes in the Bangladeshi art scene, affected the careers of woman artists, who are now more visible and active. Nasreen Begum's unconventional experiments with watercolours and mixed media, Nazli Mansur's works combining satire and nostalgia that challenge patriarchy, and Naima Haq's illustrations for children's books have all won wide

acclaim. Some of the most moving images from Bangladesh are Rokeya Sultana's *Madonna* series, which include recurrent, haunting images of mother and daughter. The memory of her mother fleeing with her during the genocide attending the War of Liberation in 1971 becomes in her work a metaphor for women's struggle [150].<sup>38</sup>

**The future of art in the subcontinent**

Moving into the new millennium, the artistic scene in the South Asian subcontinent is changing rapidly as a new generation of artists begins to take over. Questions of national identity in the face of increasing globalization of art hold a special place in their minds. Partly because of the communication revolution (including easy and inexpensive travel and the internet), the legacy of colonialism, and the growing generation of children born of Indian parents spread across the world, the definition of an outsider or insider in India is becoming harder to sustain. In a global celebration of cultural hybridity, the concept of nationhood becomes problematic—are British artists born of South Asian parents British or Asian? To the younger generation this question seems meaningless, and an artist such as Anish Kapoor simply refuses to make a choice. The western canon has dominated the world for the last 100 years. The consequence of this has been to evaluate artists from the colonial world by western standards. Thus in the art markets of the 'international art capitals', London and New York, the western avant-garde has occupied a privileged position. In the 1990s, South Asian artists began to challenge this dominance. For their part, market forces as represented by western art galleries and notable auction houses, Sotheby's, Christie's, and Bonhams, have turned eastwards, setting up branches in Indian cities and holding auctions there. A number of recent sales in London and New York have centred on modern art in India and Pakistan. In South Asia art galleries are mushrooming as more and more young artists are taken up by them. But in all this, the most visible and critical presence has been that of woman artists and art critics, and perhaps in them lies the future development of Indian art.