

# ARPANA CAUR

*Paintings* RITES OF LIFE



Indian Council for Cultural Relations  
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ARPANA CAUR  
*Paintings* RITES OF LIFE  
CURATOR: UMA NAIR

ICCR Presents  
VISITING INDIAN MASTERS



Stepping out, 24x6 feet, in Supreme Court, 2019

## Between dualities and experience

One of India's greatest contemporary artists with works in museums all over the world, Arpana Caur creates a canvas that inhabits the world of a woman. To glimpse her canvasses with the perfection of the human figure brought forward from the miniature tradition is to be caressed by the neatly delineated contours of the brush of the finest figurative artist in India. No one can create a supine or yogic squatting human character on canvas the way Caur does and this is the structural firmament that greets your gaze at this celebration of more than 4 decades of work.

Dualities, social commentaries, transcendental trajectories, objects swirl and scatter like surreal leitmotifs laden on tales woven from antiquity to meet present day reality. Women have always dominated her works. Her women are strong and sturdy, they belong to yesterday and today, they belong to our homes, to our neighbourhood. Look at her works-*Water Weaver, Rites of Time, Threat* or even *Stepping Out* -there is no hint of sensuality, for her women and nature share a symbiotical connection. Women are the latent force, tale carriers as they go through their everyday chores. Through the challenges of development and urbanisation they have the power to renew and regenerate.

## Women at work

Her travels over the years have taken her from the temples of Thanjavur to the monasteries of Leh, from caves in Sri Lanka to holy sites in Jerusalem, and she draws inspiration from their ancient folk art and spiritual traditions. "There is so much richness and colour in tradition and myth; it's a well one can keep drawing from," she says.

The 1999 work *Embroiderers* is a rippled reflection of two women in consonance as they use their tools in intense quietude. The Godna folk motifs and the neon toned Prussian blue and verdant green both create connotations of the characterisation of roles in the purpose of existence. Caur constantly looks at metaphoric elements – the scissors a mythic symbol from Greek literature. The eyes of the women – wide and bold in sunken hollows form the narrative – they are always hinged on time. *Dharti* 2008 looks like a selfie in which Caur is the protagonist and within the canvas of her womanly curves and emerald green womb are juxtapositions of men and women, commoners and iconic symbols which speak at once of war and peace in the darkness of death's shadows. *The Thread* done in the same year has a seraphic looking Sikh holding onto a thread that seems to connect hope in the hour of destruction.



*Threat-26x6 feet, Oil on Canvas. Collection Supreme Court*

Her famous ‘thread of life’ series about the passage of time, with the scissor as a recurring metaphorical motif. Then you have the meditative abstract figuratives featuring Kabir, Buddha, Sikh mystics and yogis. Graceful figures — usually female — flow against vast oil canvases filled with bold yellows, reds, blacks and mystical blues. Powerful symbols of bones (a new motif used in this show) and swords talk of the violence and inequalities of our world, and broken-backed figures of labourers and starving children speak of the cruelty of poverty.

A graduate in literature, Arpana has, since the start of her art career in the 1970s, been speaking out on such themes through her paintings, whether it was the 1984 Sikh riots or the “atrocious condition’ of the widows of Vrindavan. It was only natural, then, that she was moved to create an installation depicting the horror of the recent gang rape in Delhi, which was shown in both Delhi and Kochi this year. “The first time I painted rape was 33 years ago, about the Maya Tyagi case,” she says. “It was exhibited at my first solo show and bought by M.F. Husain.”

### **Tragedy and Upliftment**

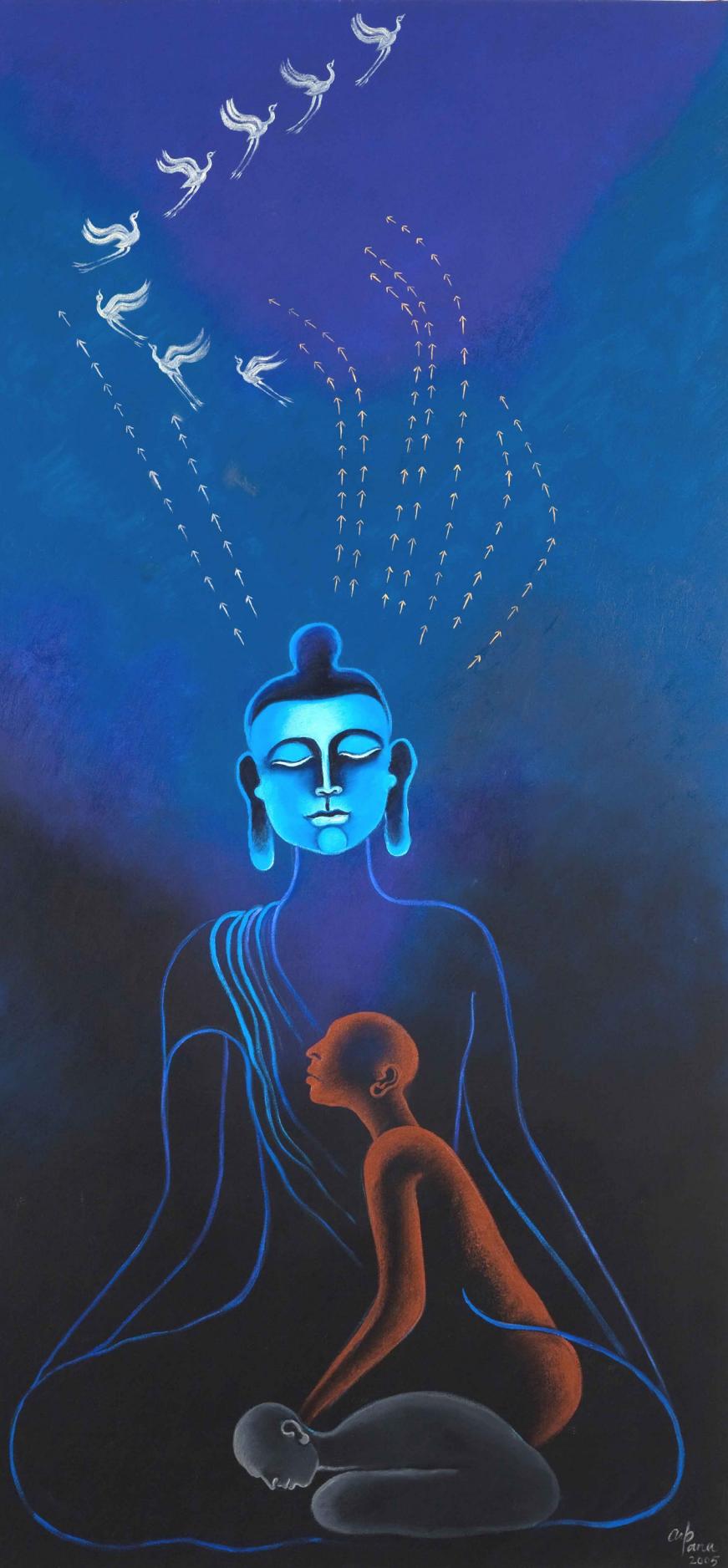
No matter how tragic the circumstance, a painting must uplift, Caur remembers Picasso’s Guernica, the screaming horse, but at the bottom, the child holding a flower. Even in the darkest of times there has to be

redemption. Stories of tragedy and spiritual quotients are recurring themes in Caur’s oeuvre, apart from Sohni Mahiwal, the widows of Vrindavan, the Nanak series, yogis and yoginis, and the environment. Her series are unending, she used to play with the idea of the eternal connect between day and night.

She wanted to paint time. So she did embroidery, weaving a thread and night, which is death, cuts it. History and literature run through her grammar. Deeply knitted to Indian miniature traditions she creates gouaches that stir you. When Caur started painting human tragedy she created them in the backdrop of nature. She took natural elements from miniatures, the curved horizon line of the Basohli School, the painted trees and waves of water that stood for melancholic lyricism and the lilting narrative.

More than 40 years of Caur gives us a masterclass in the art of figuration. As art lovers we are drawn into a miasma of reflections and ruminations woven into the canvas of the dualities of time. The greatest artist Pablo Picasso said: “To draw, one must close one’s eyes and sing.” That is what the contours of Caur’s canvasses and paper works do. They sing to us of the past and the present.

*UMA NAIR*



“ I have always loved miniatures. When I started selling my works, I wanted to have my own collection so I started buying miniatures. Over the years, I bartered some of my works for miniatures, while others, I bought. One collector gave me 25 Sikh school miniatures in return for five of my works; another exchanged 10 miniatures for three of my works. Over the years, the collection has grown; it is available for public viewing at our academy in Delhi. From 1980 to 1984, I brought in architectural elements from Basohli miniatures into my work — its linear architecture and vibrant colours fascinate me. It became a device for dividing the canvas. The miniatures have inspired me to include elements.

I borrowed the concept of narikuncher from Persian miniatures, where several figures came together to form one. I also turned to 18th century Pahari painter Nainsukh when I was painting Sohni (from the Punjabi folk tale on the star-crossed lovers, Sohni and Mahiwal). I referred to his painting of her created 200 years ago. Sohni is a metaphor for any human being who takes a plunge. She is a real person, a potter, an artist. I also visited her birthplace, Akhnoor (Jammu).”

*ARPANA CAUR*

*Ascension, 48 X 72 inches, oil on Canvas, 2005,  
Collection Reuben Museum, New York*



*Day and Night, 102 X 72 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2011. Collection-Bihar Museum*

“ I used a pair of scissors in my work around 25 years ago. I needed a metaphor for time and wanted to paint day and night. The Greeks believe that scissors have the power to cut man’s fate. I painted a woman embroidering the thread of life, and the other was cutting, depicting the endless cycle. It also represented the dualities within nature, of creation and destruction, life and death. It is said that when one dies, Yamraj comes and cuts the umbilical cord. As an element a pair of scissors goes back and forth in time.”

*ARPANA CAUR*



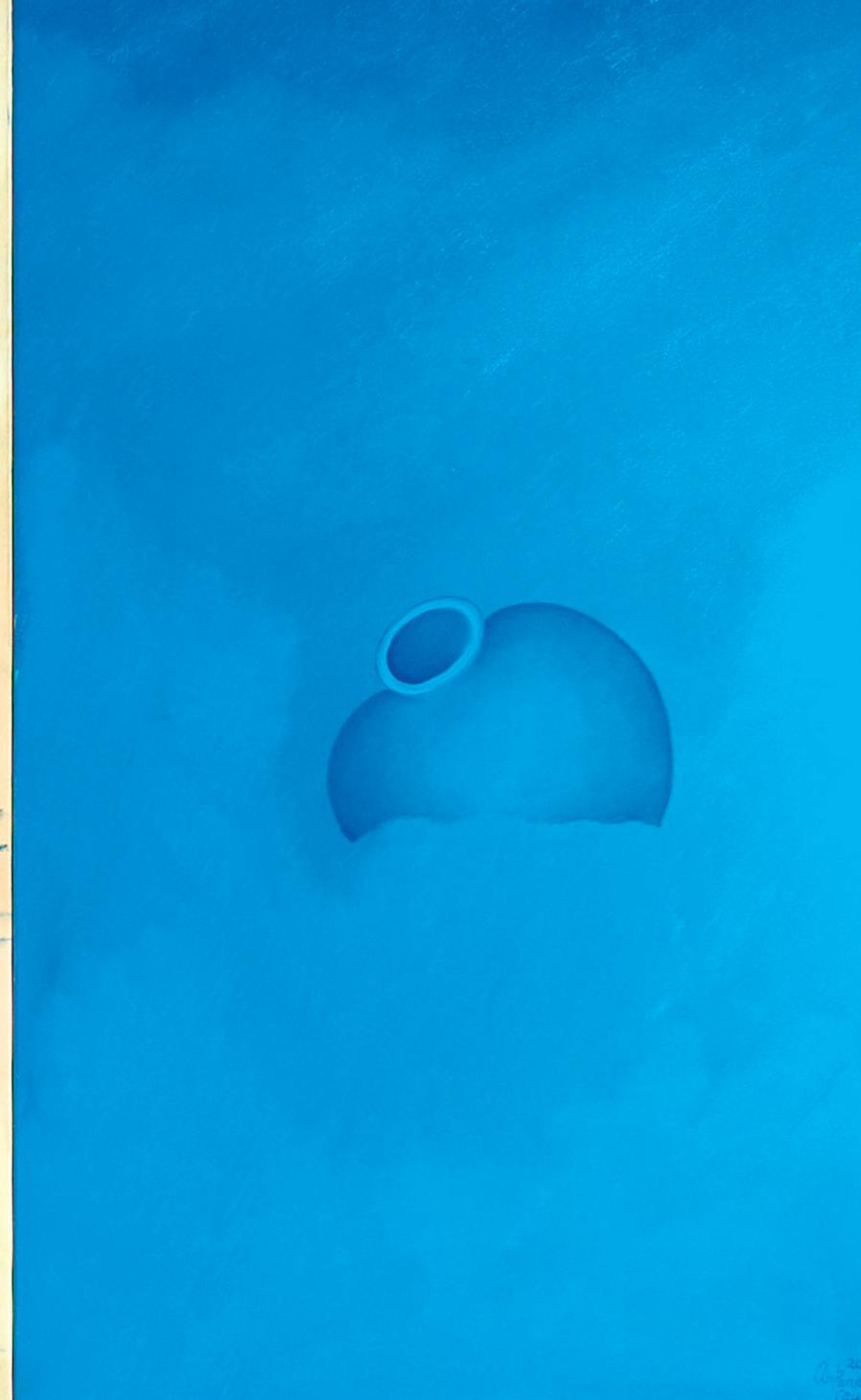
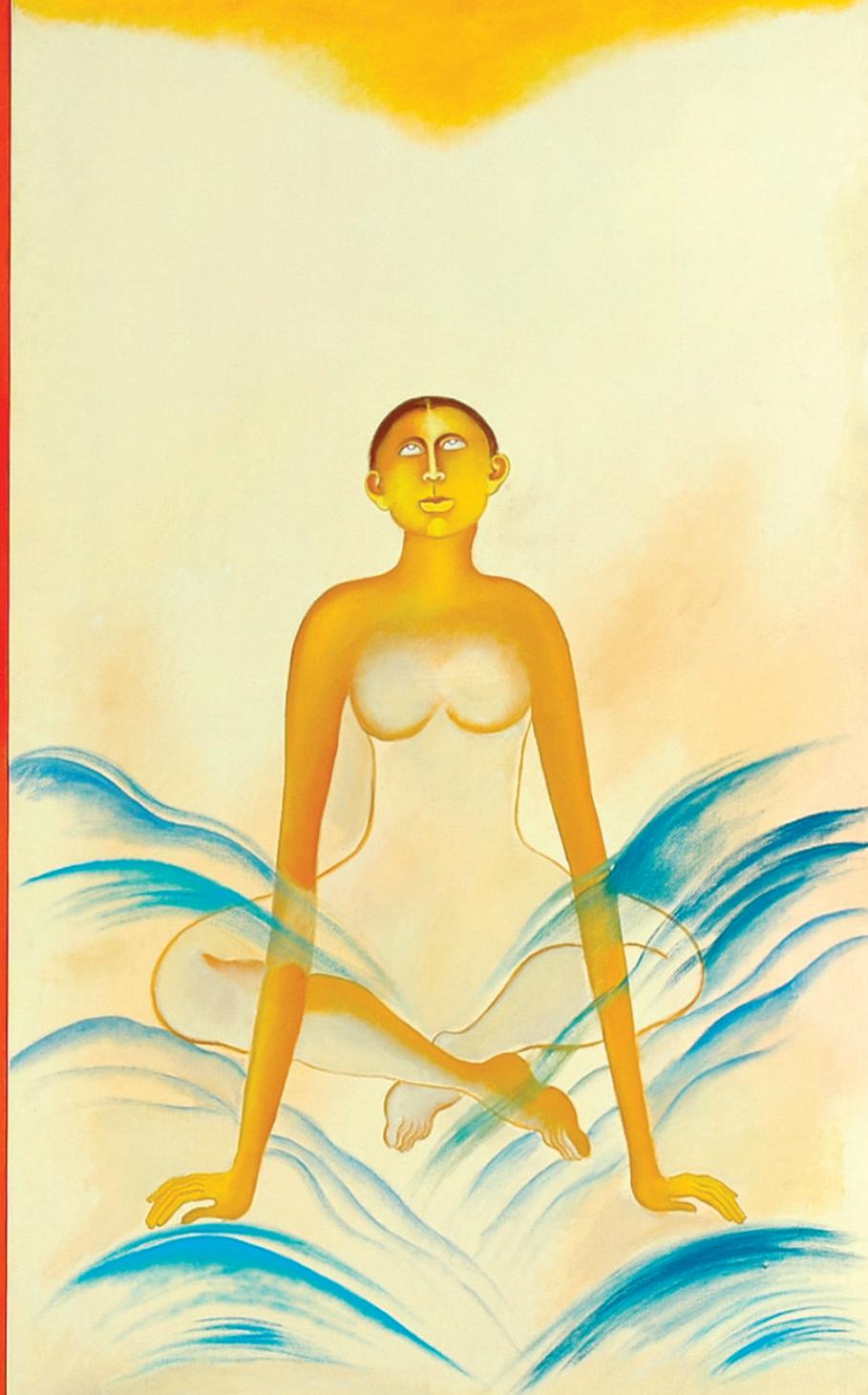
*Love Beyond Measure-Sohni Mahiwal-Diptych,  
156 X 72 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2001-2009*

## SOHINI MAHIWAL

Sohni of the famous story features in some of her works- the contemporary Sohini swims in the middle of urban streets-defined by the modern rivers of traffic, lust and contempt. In other depictions, she floats on the canvas in a zero-gravity state. Symbols such as geometrical tools, “which allude to measurement”, a wire with a plug “showing connectedness to Ishq Haqiqi, true love” and traffic lights that are “neon deities issuing diktats” hover about.

The river that Sohini crosses is another metaphor-flowing throughout Arpana’s body of work, representing time or death, or both.

Caur reminisces,” Sohni Mahiwal’ is a real love story. Born 500 years ago in Akhnoor near the Chenabs. I have been there. Sohni was a potter who swims on a pot to meet her love everyday, she drowns after a scheming relative gives her an unbaked pot. She is an emblem of courage, and is everyone who takes a plunge, man or woman. In the Bradford Museum my Sohni Mahiwal triptych hangs next to a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Roman and Juliet! ”



*Emergence (Sohni), 144 X 72 inches, Oil on Canvas, Collection- Bradford Museum, UK*



## KABIR AND BUDDHA

Iconic are her Nanak, Buddha and Kabir paintings. Kabir weaves a fabric that unfurls from the loom in the form of a river. Kabir's iconic song Jhini Chadariya, diaphanous garment, gets a new dimension and becomes a hymn of the living strains of life and death.

About her iconic work Kabir the Weaver she states:

“ I weave in the great Eternity, have no quarrel with anyone, have distanced myself from pandits and mullahs’. The spirit of secularism is embodied in him. His many verses are incorporated in the Guru Granth Sahib. In abject poverty he knew the ‘rasa’ of God to the full. I have shown him weaving water in some works because it douses the fire of religious divisiveness. In 1993 had a Kabir solo of 33 paintings and 6 terracotta installations titled ‘Body is Just a Garment’.

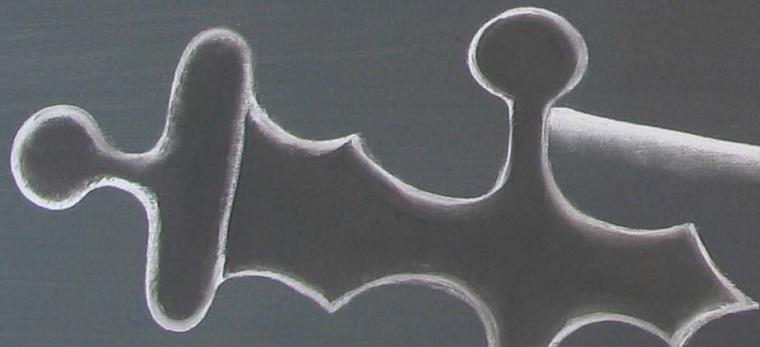
A number of Buddhas have become life giving symbols in her art. From a mural in Kathmandu to a number of Buddhas on canvas they are sentinels of spiritual silence.

She adds; “ For me Buddha, is the embodiment of compassion. From a prince to a mendicant after seeing old age, disease and death's inevitability.”

*Kabir, 48 X 72 inches, Oil on Canvas, 1993*



*Budha and Ashoka-6x3½ feet-Oil on Canvas-2014, collection Bihar Museum*



*Anjana Caur 2014*

What emerges in all these works is her passion for human figuration. Between the alchemy of space and contours Caur figures are abstracted, riveting beings floating or standing or sitting in the resonance she creates.

‘My art may be abstract figuration, it might talk about contemporary issues, but my form of expression, the imagery and style, is very Indian.’

“I can’t get away from the figure; it flows in the blood. But 10 to 15 years ago, I realised that unless you introduce an element of abstraction, your figuration will not have mystery. I have always felt the Chola bronzes are life giving they combine simplification and the abstraction of style and statement. You have to balance both.”

UMA NAIR



## SO MANY NANAKS

Caur celebrates and commemorates more than 550 years of Nanak in works that have organic and minimalist strokes done in tensile thread like contours. Her brilliance lies in her weaving of tensile and tactile tales with elements she takes from Nanak's life.

Caur says: "Nanak is a spiritual master who guides and defines our lives. The stories are unending and when you practice his teachings, it becomes like a tale that turns into a testimony. It becomes a part of who we are."

### Modern miniatures

Caur brings forward the miniature tradition and is the only contemporary artist, who has been creating modern imagery of characters with miniature formats entwined. "Ajanta, Ellora and Pahari miniaturists flow through my veins, just like many other stories that have always stayed in my mind. Whenever I think of Nanak, it's a journey that goes deep into the roots of my own existence. It's like finding a fragrance," she states.

One look at the many artworks of *Nanaks* that she has done over the years show that she always sought to achieve near perfection. Khushwant used to say that Caur's *Nanak* was like a reminder to invoke Lord's blessings for strength. Caur's images have graced many books. The finest being *Nanak: The Guru* in collaboration with author Khushwant's daughter Maya Dayal. Apart from that — *Hymns of the Sikh Gurus*, which unfortunately is now out of print.

### The journey with Nanak

*1-Nanak, Bala, Mardana, 70 X 70 inch, Oil on canvas, 2002, Collection Gallery Nvyaa, Delhi*

Caur explains her oeuvre over more than four decades. “It is very hard to capture ‘a being as elevated as Nanak’ on canvas with a painter’s limited skills. My solo on Him was almost 20 years ago. There were ‘Baba Nanak, Guru Nanak, Peer Nanak, Lama Nanak’. I have been to many of the innumerable places he went on foot, (Baghdad, Sri Lanka, Dhaka, Kashmir, South India, Leh and Sikkim). He, of course, went to many many more.”

It is clear that you cannot create so many Nanaks unless you have deep devotion for him. “I love him because of the life affirming things he did. He did away with the caste system. He said ‘Nako Hindu Na Musalman’. He considered women as equal to men and said so in his verses that too 550 years ago. He was an ecologist and has even praised nature in his verses. He was against feudal oppression. He shared and asked all to share their earnings with the needy. He was a great poet and was against rituals (sacred thread, pilgrimages etc) and believed only in humanity. Love, and service to everyone.”

### **Surreal and stark**

In most of her paintings, Caur’s depiction of Nanak in a minimal, organic form, is what excels. Her backgrounds are surreal and stark she flits and floats in fragments and fragility in between. She plays with different backgrounds but it is the darker ones that have a deeper resonance. The stark black backgrounds draw attention to the contemplative expression on his face and the prayer beads in his hands even as she lines the silhouette with grace. Surrounding him are lined details in blue and white and these trace abstractions and reflect perhaps his many journeys as well as his thoughts. She creates a metaphor of the many journeys that he undertook during his lifetime not only around the India but also to Afghanistan, Iraq, China and Tibet.

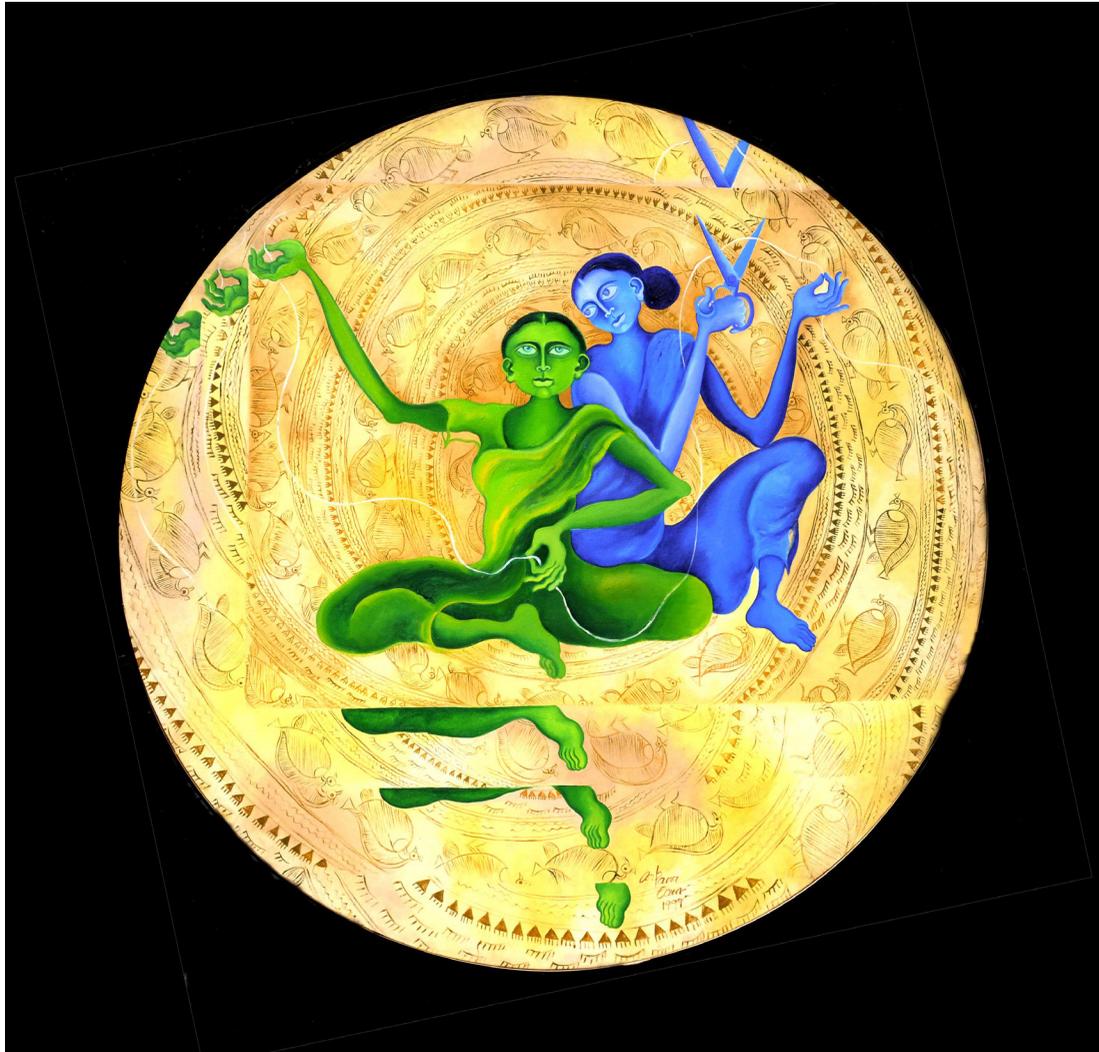
According to Caur, she added shards of colour and light, in white, grey and blue to create a transient feel of spirituality. Each Nanak in Caur’s hands is unique and deeply contemplative.



*Mardana-Oil on Canvas, 2019 - (1)*



*Sultanpur Lodhi-3x6 feet, Oil on Canvas, 2019*



*Threat, 70x84 inches, Oil on Canvas-1998,  
Collection-National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi*



*Executing Tile Mural for Nepal, in her Studio, Delhi*



*Rites of Time, 72x72, Oil on Canvas, 2005, Collection-  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles*



*Threat, 70x84 inches, Oil on Canvas-1998,  
Collection-National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi*



Water Weaver, 60 X 66 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2000



Yogi oil on canvas 2008 68x58 inches





*Where are all flowers gone, Triptych, 70x140 inches,  
Oil on Canvas, 1995, Collection-Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art*

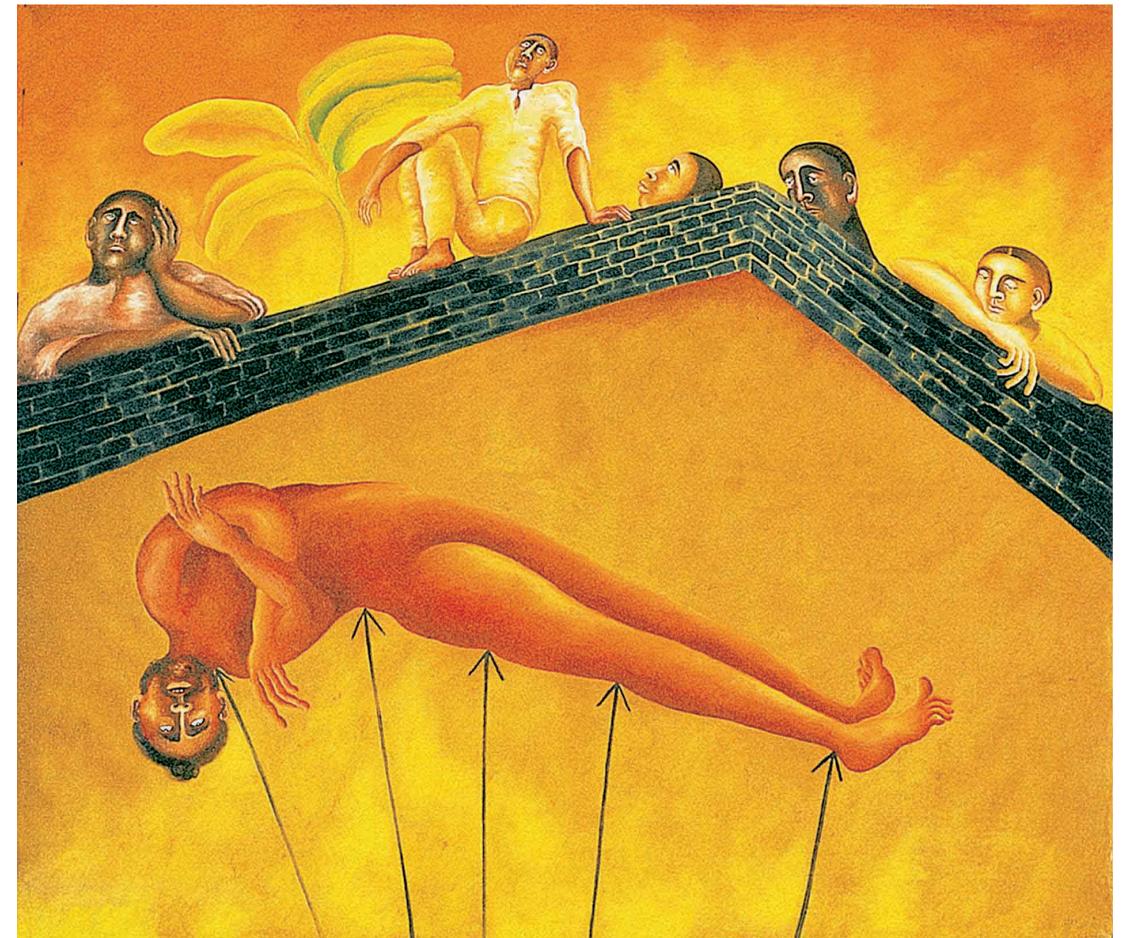
I have always believed that museums are carriers and keepers of tradition. Art lives through the archives of museums all over the world. I have always wanted to take my work to the people and that can only happen through museums, that have permanent collections. Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art had commissioned me in 1994 to paint the 50th anniversary of the Holocaust; that work is still with them. If a museum approaches me

with a limited budget, I am willing to give my work even at one-tenth of the cost. My work is now in over 20 museums across the world, including London's Victoria & Albert Museum and Singapore Art Museum in Singapore. It ensures that the work outlives you.

*ARPANA CAUR*



*Tree of Life, 72 inches, 150 Kg, Cast Brass, 2009*



*World Goes On, 60 X 72 inches, Oil on Canvas, 1985,  
Collection -Kevin Koche*



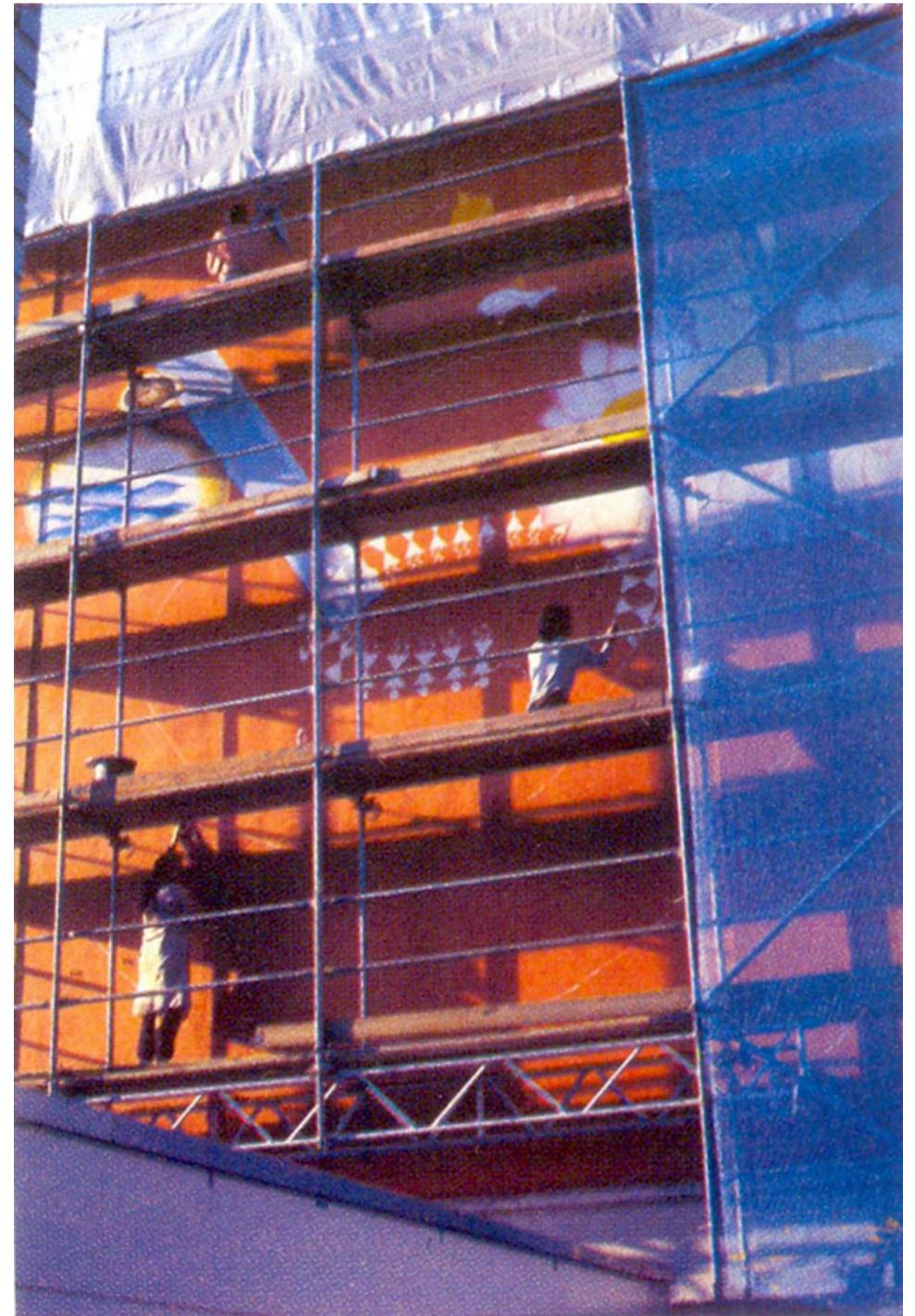
*Mural on Tiles, Outer wall of SAARC Secretariat,  
120 X 192 Inches, Kathmandu, 2009*



*Time, 50 X 50 ft, Mural in Hamburg, Germany, 2000,  
Wall by Arpana Caur and Sonke Nissen*



*Body is Just a Garment, 78 X 42 inches,  
Oil on Canvas, 2010, Collection-  
Nayantara Dhillon, Chandigarh*



*Executing Hamburg Mural*



## ARPANA CAUR

Born 1954. Exhibited since 1974 in Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Bangalore, Chennai, London, Glasgow, Berlin, Amsterdam, Singapore, Munich, New York, in Stockholm and Copenhagen National Museum, Osaka Print Triennale and Delhi Print Triennale. Her work is in Museums of Modern Art in Delhi, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Dusseldorf, Singapore, Bradford, Stockholm, Hiroshima, Peabody Essex Boston, MOCA L.A, Brooklyn, Bharat Bhawan Bhopal, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Swaraj Archive & Victoria and Albert Museum London. Gold medal for painting in VIth International Triennale 1986, AIFACS Award, Commissioned by Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art for its 50th anniversary 1995. Since 1981 she did large non-commercial murals in Delhi, Bangalore, Hamburg and Kathmandu in public spaces. 40 year Retrospective in National Gallery of Modern Art Bangalore 2016 with Swaraj Archive. Received Lalit Kala Grant, AIFACS Award and filmed by BBC, Stockholm TV and many Indian TV channels.

website: [www.arpanacaur.com](http://www.arpanacaur.com)

## UMA NAIR

### Curator

Uma Nair has been curating art shows since 2005 in the capital city of Delhi. Her first show Terra Natura, was a show of five seminal ceramic artists that sold out in Delhi.

Her curatorial ventures have spanned painting, photography, ceramics and sculpture.

Moderns, Earth Songs and Gandhi @150 years

History happened when she was invited to curate an archival show at the Lalit Kala Akademi in a show called *Moderns* that was sent to Jordan, Berlin and Vienna in the years 2008-2016.

In researching the archives of the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi her next historic culling was *Earth Songs* a show of 86 works from the Lalit Kala Archives, a study on India's tribal art.

She also curated Gandhi@150 Years an epic show of sculptures paintings and graphic prints and photographs at Lalit Kala Akademi on October 2nd 2019 with 86 artists.

### iSculpt I and II

In terms of public exhibitions her most important curatorial exercises have been *iSculpt I (2016)* and *iSculpt II (2018)* at the India International Centre, Gandhi King Plaza. *iSculpt* was a revolution in the making of public exhibitions and public art that expresses fidelity to the idea of a "sculpture of one's own"—in this case, a series of literal and metaphorical works dedicated to material experimentation



and innovation, and in doing so provides a plethora of works for the history of ingenuity among sculptors to take root. The Gandhi King Plaza morphs into a sculptural court for 10 days creating dynamics of a rare aesthetic order.

### Photography

Coupling photography and paintings happened with a show in 2007 with Gallerie Nvya called *Darpan*. It looked at how artists and photographers dealt with the concept and idea of a mirror in art. 2011 became an important year when a small show of photographs and paintings and sculptures was held at the India Art Fair entitled *Womb to Tomb* with works by Raghu Rai, Pablo Partholomew and Pankaj Mistry.

Two important solo exhibitions in photography were Pankaj Mistry's *Reverie* in 2009 and Prabir Purkayastha's *Borokhun* in 2011.

The greatest exhibition of photographs happened at Kolkata Centre for creativity in 2019 when she curated Kolkata International Photo Festival with the masters Jyoti Bhatt and S Paul other than many other Indian photographers.

### Painting

Nair goes by the discipline that solo shows as curatorial exercises hold greater weight when you curate a show of an artist with great talent specifically for artists who have worked for more than a decade and are still relatively unknown.

Among artists who revel in painting Nair's most

important exhibition was Sanjay Bhattacharyya's *Emerging Krishna* at the Religare Art Gallery in 2012. Iconic oils and a series of photographs became the focus of an exhibition that celebrated form as much as the spiritual aura of the flute player as an incandescent symbol cast against different prisms of light by the master disciple of Bikash Bhattacharjee.

Nair's next curation is Prabhakar Kolte's 50 years of work at Treasure Art Gallery in Delhi.

#### **Printmaking -intaglios and serigraphs**

Nair's group shows like Vriksha, (2019) Gandhi @150 years (2019) and Yatra Naryasthu (Women's show at NGMA-2021 ) have included leading printmakers like Jyoti Bhatt, Zarina Hashmi and Soghra Khurasani.

Her most historic solo exhibition to date has been 84 intaglio prints by the mentor and leading printmaker Jyoti Bhatt. This solo show was a collection of prints and serigraphs from Collectors all over India and held at the prestigious Bihar Museum ,Patna.

#### **Sculpture/ Installations**

In the year 2010 Nair was invited to write about the Lalit Kala Akademi National Exhibition that was held in Kolkata. At the exhibition she discovered the work of the brilliant bronze sculptor Arun Pandit. She came back and connected with Pandit who was working at Garhi Studios and curated his first solo show in 2012. Later in 2016 his epic show of sculptures Power and Pathos was well received with the Alkazi Foundation picking him up as their lead sculptor and buying 4 works for the foundation.

In January 2020 Nair curated Prodosh Dasgupta: A journey of 60 years at Akar Prakar Delhi for the India Art Fair. This exhibition became one of the most highly proclaimed exhibitions because it became an educator's paradigm of modernist moorings.

#### **Ceramics**

Nair is both a collector and a great patron of contemporary ceramics. Her first show Terra Natura 2005, became a lesson in history and techniques and the alchemy of textural terrain in ceramics.

The next show she curated was in April 2017 by Architecture Professor Manjari Sharma who had been dabbling in sculptural ceramics more than 10 years. *Sculptour* became an exhibition that spoke of the power and passion for explorations and experiments with clay.

Nair's next solo unveiling was the enigmatic and brilliant ceramic artist G.Reghu's ceramic show at Jehangir Art Gallery Mumbai on January 15, 2018. As a voice in contemporary art criticism it is Nair's in depth analogies and critiques that pitch her amongst the best in the nation.

#### **International**

On the international front it is the Lalit Kala Akademi exhibition *Moderns* that has garnered great recognition and appreciation for Nair's curatorial and historical annotations. *Moderns* has travelled to Jordan and Berlin for epic unveilings and rave reviews.

#### **Author**

**Nair has been writing as an art critic for 31 years.**

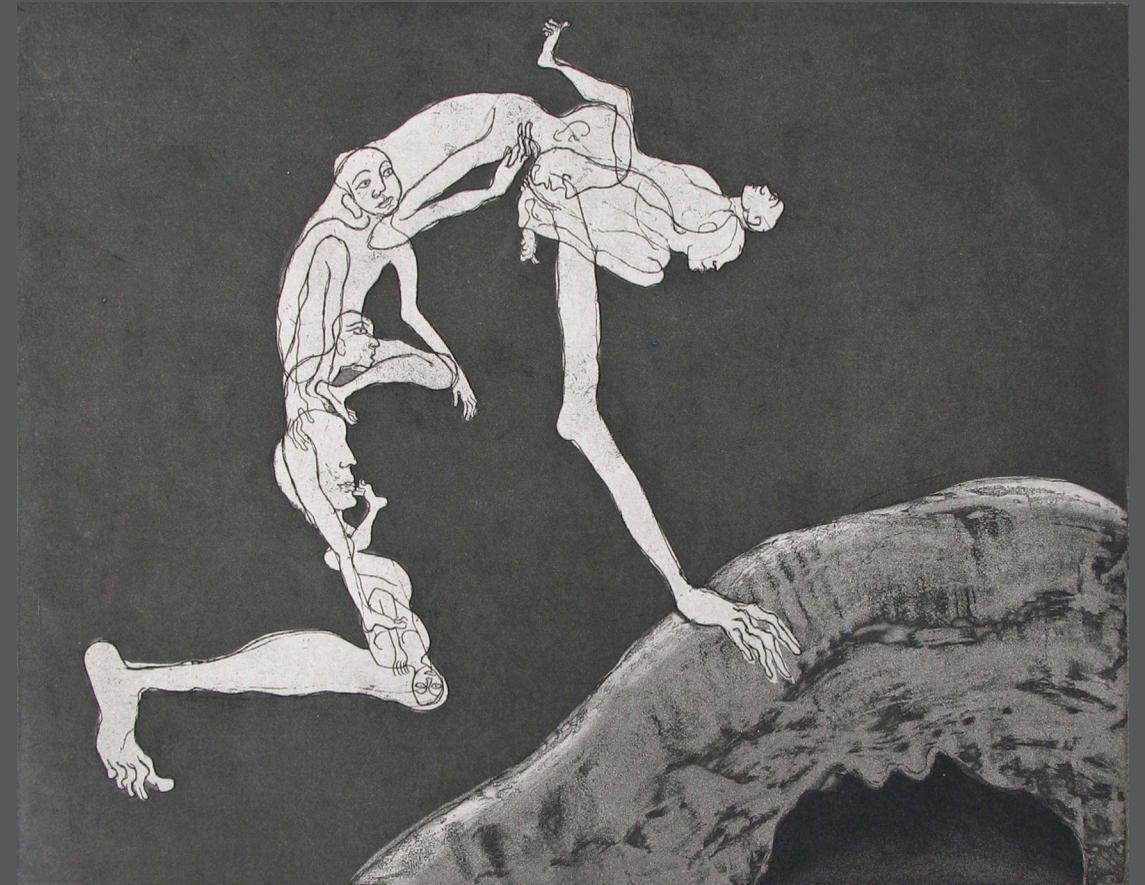
Nair's first monograph was published in 2005 -25 years of Paresh Maity.

Nair's monograph on Arpita Singh's *Wishdream* was an essay that was penned as far back as 2005 but published by Saffronart in 2010.

Nair's last book was *Reverie with Raza* for Akar Prakar and Mapin Publications published in 2016. It became the last book to be published on Sayed Haider Raza during his living years just before his passing away.

Nair has also penned more than 100 catalogues in 31 years of work. Her most important ones are ITIHAAS, Dhanraj Bhagat at 100 , Dhvani-Shabd our Chinh and Upendra Maharathi for NGMA Delhi.

She currently writes as critic for: *Architectural Digest India*, *The Hindu*, *The Pioneer*, *EXOTICA Magazine*, and writes a blog called **PIUMAge** on *Times of India*.



*Time*, 10x14 inches, Etching, 1933

*Back cover: Traveller*, 66x60 inches, Oil on Canvas, 2007,  
Collection-Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh



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Indian Council for Cultural Relations  
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