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Artist Shambhavi Singh: Stories from a forgotten time

Artist Shambhavi Singh's new work is inspired by the rural landscape of Bihar

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Amit Sengupta

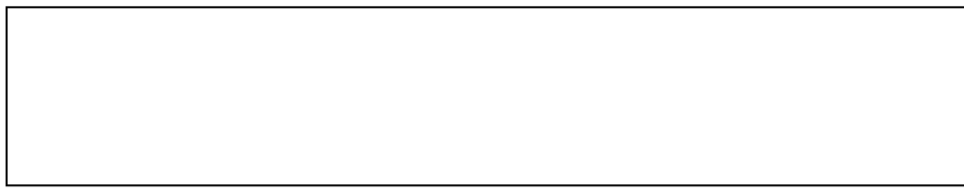
Shambhavi Singh has finally got the recognition she deserves. After travelling, for years, on a painstaking, difficult and archival journey of recording invisible narratives of rural India, especially Bihar of her grandmother's oral traditions and the life and times of ordinary, hardworking toilers of the land, men and women, with their dark skins in the sun becoming both metal and substance, feeling and sensitivity, memory, loss and exile...

It's about mud, agriculture, mustard flowers, paddy fields, the open-to-sky courtyard, the long and unwinding byways between home, hearth and earth, the stories entering the night sky, like a tree full of stars. Between hard metal, paper pulp, acrylic and cotton, and a multimedia of imagined substances and local familiarities of daily life, she has woven the hard and beautiful life of a village, and its manual labour, into the realism of abstract art.

It's like a grandmother's story, truly, told again and again, but forgotten only to be remembered with eyes, dreams, memories and fragrances of the past. It's history, invisible and reimagined, in art, sculpture and craft. It is not always that an artist and sculptor, who also does paintings and installations, gets to exhibit her shows in two prestigious galleries in Delhi simultaneously. Shambhavi's shows in Gallery Space and Shrine Empire, happily curated by her friend and artist Anita Dube, therefore, mark both a beginning and a departure. Indeed, her contemporary shows have taken her almost one decade of aesthetic work and imagination.

Her work with metal, especially depicting rural life, has been shaped by the great solidity and thoughtful, hard labour of blacksmiths, sometimes in their own work domains, sometimes in her studio. The sickle, for instance, an endearing symbol in the Indian mind, especially in communist folklore, comes back again and again and you suddenly remember the Mother India poster with Nargis where the logo of the legendary Mehboob Studios is the hammer and sickle, the eternal symbol of the toiling peasant in India. You also remember Bimal Roy and Balraj Sahni in Do Bigha Zameen, the tragic and stoic migration of the landless peasant from his rural home and hearth, in stark poverty, to the cruel and inhuman alienation and anonymity of the metropolis, in this case, the Calcutta of the past. The door, or 'dwar', is a gigantic multi-entrance structure made with metal, and you know that human hands and fingers have made this cosmic enterprise. It is the entrance to the home as much as to the world, 'ghore-baire', as Rabindranath Tagore would have written. It is also a corridor of reverie, you enter one door of perception, and many doors of perceptions open up, like trees with stars and a twinkling moon, all made in metal, with sickles flying like birds in the sky.

The Gallery Espace show in Delhi, very close to Shaheen Bagh, remembers this moment of revelation: the door to heaven is basically the door to earth, also the innermost spaces of the home, where all the stories of childhood have gathered in celebration of collective unity, love and resistance, overcoming the daily grind of daily tragedies and ritualistic obstacles, like in a B&W Charlie Chaplin movie.



The Shrine Empire exhibit is not metallic. It is wood, cotton, paper pulp, lost substances and textures, again burnt like a chulha in the house, smelling of food and mother, where the steam and the aroma of burning wood combines with the warmth of the mother and the mud walls. It's a continuous celebration of mud and muddy substances, alive and burnt, as if waiting for the first monsoon rain. Ashaar, the season of rain, like the four paintings at the Gallery Espace, in acrylic, in soft, subdued colours, in anticipation of rain, and the smell of mud just after the first rain.

"I remember my childhood and my village and my grandmother's stories. I also remember the people and the farmers. My work is all about remembering and resurrecting the eternity of the daily life of farmers and rural society. My work is about 'chhupe kisse', hidden stories," says Shambhavi.

Rich oeuvre

The artist's practice includes a wide range of processes and media, but her work is largely non-figurative and focuses on the relationship between man and nature as well as the social and metaphysical condition of the agricultural worker. Shambhavi studied in the College of Fine Arts and Crafts, Patna, in the 1980s. She travelled to the Netherlands as the youngest artist of the Foundation for Indian Artists to participate in a project at the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam. It was here that she began to take interest in issues of migration and migrant labour. In 2000-2001, she was an artist-in-residence at the Greatmore Studios in Cape Town, which led not only to a deepened engagement with the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, but also to an invitation to participate in Holland South Africa Line, an international exchange project with Dutch artists held in the William Fehr Collection, in the Castle of Good Hope. In 2010, she was an artist-in-residence at STPI — Creative Workshop & Gallery, in Singapore. Her work was recently added to the collection of The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Her most recent showcase was at the Kochi Muziris Biennale.

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