



GALLERY TIME AND SPACE

A MOMENT IN MODERNITY

A Show of Sharmila and Haren Thakur

Curated by Dr. Alka Pande

Jehangir Art Gallery

5th – 11th August, 2025

161B, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Kala Ghoda,
Fort, Mumbai, Maharashtra – 400001





presents

A MOMENT IN MODERNITY

A Solo Show of Haren Thakur

Curated by Dr. Alka Pande

Research & Documentary by Dr. Mandakini Devi

15th - 25th April, 2025

Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Dehli - 110003

The show continues at **Art Magnum**

4th May 2025 - 30th June, 2025

60/2C, 3rd Floor, Yusuf Sarai, Aurobindo Marg, Indian Oil Complex, New Dehli - 110016

and

at **Jehangir Art Gallery**

5th - 11th August, 2025

161B, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Kala Ghoda, Fort, Mumbai, Maharashtra - 400001







Dr. Alka Pande
Art Historian, Author, Curator

“Today’s artist lives in an era of dissolution without guidance. He stands alone. The old forms are in ruins, the benumbed world is shaken up, the old human spirit is invalidated and in flux towards a new form. We float in space and cannot perceive the new order”

– Walter Gropius in 1919

A slightly built, light-footed man, a gentle smile on his patrician features with a mop of silver hair and matching frames defines this hidden gem of Santiniketan. Living between Ranchi and Howrah, the Santiniketan trained artist Haren Thakur lives in a world infused with nature/prakriti in full measure. Meeting him in his studio in Ranchi was an incredible experience of calm and quietude away from the hustle and bustle of the urban modernity of India.

Tagore, Santiniketan, Modernity:

Meeting Haren and entering into his landscape of arts and ideas, I felt I was transported into the world of Tagore's Bengal, a period of Indian renaissance. Whenever I think of modernity in Bengal, there are some pivotal figures at the top of the pyramid such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, founder of the Brahma Samaj, and later in the 19th Century, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. They were followed in quick succession in the 20th Century by pioneering film-makers Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, also artists in their own right.

Some of the key artists associated with the Bengal School of Art were the three Tagores—brothers Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, and their uncle Rabindranath Tagore. Later, there were other men of great stature, like Kshitindranath Mukherjee, Asit Kumar Haldar, A.R. Chughtai, and K. Venkatappa. Artists like Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee evolved the ideas of modernity further by blending traditional forms with abstraction and modernist influences. Nandalal Bose, in particular, played an important role in shaping Indian modern art. In fact, his influence even extended to the aesthetics of India's nationalist movement as he designed some of the fine artistic elements in the manuscript of the Indian Constitution.

In many ways, the Partition of Bengal (1905) acted as a catalyst for a cultural and artistic awakening, pushing Indian art beyond colonial influences toward a unique modernism rooted in revival, resistance, and redefinition. The movement not only reinforced a national identity but also shaped the trajectory of Indian modernism for decades to come.

A Larger Canvas:

Modernity in India is not limited to one single facet of it. The movement of modernity is characterized by scientific growth, rational thought, discussions, and debate. But the modernities in India that we focus on at this point was a blend of Bombay in the West, Madras in the South, Indore and other royal states in central India as each had its own unique flavour. Each one of them had their own singular regional variations, reactions and embodiments of the modern, particularly in terms of the history and tradition of the culturally diverse subcontinent of India.

Each geographical region's approach to modernism was shaped by its own cultural, social, and intellectual contexts. Bombay's modernism was cosmopolitan and internationally driven, while Calcutta's was political and intellectual. Madras artists integrated traditional Tamil aesthetics into their work, whereas Baroda artists explored narrative figuration and interdisciplinary methods; and Santiniketan fostered an organic, folk-infused modernism.

“Twentieth-century Indian modernism reflects a complex interplay between the legacies of British colonialism, the nationalist movement for Independence, and the evolving realities of a transitional nation. Artistic motives during this period were inherently political, navigating between inherited traditions and the demands of a global, modern aesthetic. At a certain point in history, a key aspect to this evolution was Cubism, a European movement rooted in colonial appropriations, which Indian artists transformed into a tool for asserting creative autonomy and reinterpreting cultural identity. Far from being derivative, Indian modernists fused indigenous philosophies with Cubist principles, blending fragmented forms with cyclical concepts of time and space”

(Gaganendranath Tagore, DAG Catalogue)

The Bengal School:

The Bengal School of Art was one of India's first modern art movements, emerging in the early 20th century as a response to British colonial rule. The first Partition of Bengal under Lord Curzon in 1905 had a significant impact on modern Indian art, particularly in shaping the Bengal School of Art. This division, orchestrated by the British, was seen as a deliberate attempt to weaken nationalist unity, and thereby sparking widespread resistance. In response, Indian artists rejected Western academic realism and turned to indigenous artistic traditions as a way of asserting cultural identity. The movement was rooted in a rejection of European artistic influence, especially the kind seen in Company paintings (commissioned by British officials to document India) and the Westernized naturalism of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings.



Artist Working at his studio in Ranchi



Dokra work from the artist's village in Jharkhand

Led by Abanindranath Tagore and E.B. Havell, this movement sought to revive classical Indian art forms such as miniature painting, tempera painting, Rajput paintings, Ajanta frescoes, and folk traditions, positioning them as a counterpoint to colonial aesthetics that often misrepresented Indian culture. This first Partition of Bengal also led to a broader Pan-Asian artistic movement, as artists sought solidarity with Japanese and Chinese traditions to develop an alternative expression. Abanindranath Tagore worked closely with Japanese artists like Yokoyama Taikan to develop an Indo-Japanese aesthetic that stood distinctly apart from European realism. The movement had strong institutional backing too. The British art historian E.B. Havell played a big role in promoting it, particularly at the Government College of Art in Kolkata.

The Bengal School emphasized spirituality and symbolism, moving away from the Western fixation on realism. One of the most iconic artworks from this period, Abanindranath Tagore's 'Bharat Mata' (1905), depicted India as a divine mother-figure, reinforcing nationalist sentiment through visual culture. Alongside this, institutions such as the Indian Society of Oriental Art (1907) and Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan (1919) provided crucial platforms for this emerging artistic ideology, offering Indian artists an alternative to British-dominated academies.

A major shift in patronage also took place. Previously, Indian artists had relied on British patrons and official commissions, but the Swadeshi movement encouraged Indian intellectuals, aristocrats, and nationalists to support indigenous art. This newfound independence allowed artists to explore themes of heritage, mythology, and contemporary struggles on their own terms. While the Bengal School initially focused on revivalism, it laid the foundation for modernist expressions in Indian art.

Emergence of a New Visual Language:

The central figure, Rabindranath Tagore through his 2000 songs, 50 volumes of poetry, short stories, novels, plays, essays and philosophical writings, evoked a deep feeling of sensibility. Through his literary works and later his paintings, Tagore mapped a modern Bengal which he tried to free from the mental shackles of a colonial mind-set. Within the ecosystem of the arts, he accomplished setting up of an art campus based on the Indian traditional system of learning; i.e. the 'guru-shishya parampara.' It was the verdant landscape of more than 1129 acres, 100 miles away from the hustle and bustle of the erstwhile second capital of the British Empire, Kolkata. This abode of peace was Santiniketan.

Santiniketan was not just a revivalist nationalist University campus; it was virtually a sacred geographical landscape in which the 1000-petalled lotus bloomed. Each petal became a gem of knowledge, inspiration, creation, and incredible beauty. The many facets of modernism shone brightly in the list of names that followed-- Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij, later K G Subramanyan to mention just a few.

A Gem called Haren:

All these gems found an extraordinary space which produced nurtured and polished hidden jewels in the artwork. One such gem is Haren Thakur, an alumnus of Santiniketan. Haren Thakur was educated at Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. His tutelage came from some of the most influential figures in modern Indian art. He was indirectly influenced by the presence of Ramkinkar Baij, Benode Behari Mukherjee, Somnath Hore, and Dinkar Kowshik. Deeply rooted in the humanist and indigenous traditions of Indian modernism, the environment encouraged the young Haren to engage directly with nature, rural life, and vernacular artistic practices. These values became central to Thakur's artistic philosophy which continues to inform his work today.

At Santiniketan, he absorbed the ideals of contextual reinterpretation and Eastern modernism which further emphasized an organic relationship between art and its surroundings. The teachings of his mentors instilled in him a deep appreciation for the rhythms of nature and the lived experiences of tribal communities—an approach reminiscent of Ramkinkar Baij's sculptural depictions of Santhal tribal people, and Benode Behari Mukherjee's mural compositions. Somnath Hore's socially charged and highly textured works also left a lasting impact, shaping Haren Thakur's sensitivity towards themes of labour, resilience, and cultural memory.



A totem pole in the village, around where sometimes grain is dried

Life was a delicious mix of tradition and modernity for Haren. Until his third year at Kala Bhavan, he was steeped in the traditional art of Bengal—from 'alpana,' dry and wet fresco to batik. In the fourth year at college, Haren took a quick step forward. He entered the ecosystem of a certain modernity inspired by Dinkar Kowshik, Somnath Hore and Sarbari Roy Choudhury. These works, particularly the dry paint of Somnath Hore, inspired him. The sensitivity of line, fascination, and spirited awareness that he had drawn from his masters engulfed me when I saw his art work too. The figurative lines of Ajanta and the etchings of Hore were significantly different. A line could start from one place and move to another, but the thickness of that line should not be the same. Haren started finding movement in all these lines before him. He began to understand how the rigid stagnant lines of Indian traditional 'alpana' patterns of Bengal, the Ajanta frescoes and murals were so different to Hore. At Santiniketan, Haren was exposed to Western cubism via the Bengal modernists. He said, "As elsewhere, experimental artists embraced Cubism to challenge established hierarchies of naturalistic representation and academic sensibilities. At the same time, it inspired Indian modernists to engage with their cultural heritage, exploring the ancient through a new Cubist visual language."

Haren set up his studio in Jharkhand in 1976 where he continues to live and work today. His engagement with the region's tribal communities and landscape has reinforced his commitment to preserving indigenous narratives while adapting them to contemporary artistic discourse. His work bridges historical memory with modern concerns, urging audiences to recognize the richness of local traditions before they are lost to rapid development and urbanization. Throughout his career, Haren Thakur has remained deeply connected to the legacy of Santiniketan's humanist art tradition while forging his own path forward as a modernist.

His presentation of modernities was varied as he placed them against this backdrop of newer experiences. Haren decided to stick with the eastern forms of the modernist style from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. He started looking at the Renaissance views again, especially those set up by Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan. And from all these he created his own unique language. Therefore, Haren Thakur is recognized as a modernist artist whose work intricately weaves together traditional tribal art forms with contemporary aesthetics. His art reflects a deep engagement with nature, life, and spirituality, often depicting themes of harmony and simplicity through a fusion of tribal and modern elements.

A Peep into Haren's World:

In the exhibition, the art works have been loosely classified, as works on paper or canvas works showing different themes. The works on paper vary from 10x6.5 inches to half imperial size of 20x13 inches; the works on canvas vary from 14x18 to 72x60 inches.

One work which is particularly appealing is Hanuman in his 'virat roopa.' Hanuman is wearing a 'shirshsthan,' i.e. 'crown' a symbol of kinetic energy. He has Lanka behind him and the Gandhamadan Parvat in the foreground on a square canvas 24x24 inches, a mixed-media work.

Haren used rice paper for the first time in 1974. He stated, "Earlier I used to mount the rice paper on board where it felt like cloth. I started one work in an experimental way, painting directly from my love affair with the rice paper which I continue till today." Often he uses rice paper as a collage particularly in his animal series. Needless to say, not only are these animal collages deftly handled, but they are also sensitively torn and pasted with a rare lightness and delicacy of touch. In Haren's rice paper works, I sense an influence of Cubism which was also evident in the work of the earlier Bengal modernists. He agrees that "Cubism, as an ideology, is deeply intertwined with the colonialist framework and their biased perceptions of non-Western cultures."

Another work which in a way does encapsulate his artistic oeuvre, is a large canvas 5x6 feet in dimension, and is as usual untitled. The painting captures the essence of tribal life, with a cow in the foreground; it is standing in front of a tree and people. The men, women, flora and fauna of Haren's imagined landscapes are etched sharply in his memory.

A closer examination of Haren Thakur's watercolour artwork, '*Cat and the Fish*' reveals a profound connection to Bengal's cultural landscape. The image of a cat holding a fish in its mouth beside a fish pond is more than a simple representation—it reflects the cultural imprint of his time in Santiniketan. It also carries the lasting influence of Bengali traditions on his artistic sensibilities.

Since 1947, an integral part of Thakur's practice is his choice of Nepalese rice paper also known as 'Nepali kagaj.' This hand-made artisanal paper is indigenous to Nepal. Made from the bark of Daphne shrubs, this paper has a long history of use in religious scriptures and government documents in that country. Its textural richness, durability, and organic quality align seamlessly. Thakur's artistic philosophy emphasizes the fusion of traditional materials with modern expressions.

Thakur also favours Nepalese rice paper as his primary medium for his acrylic and water-colour works, a material he has been using since 1974. His brushwork is fluid, capturing motion and musicality. It is something he associates with tribal speech and movement. His figures often blend into their surroundings, emphasizing a seamless relationship between humans and nature.

Style, Approach and Themes:

Thakur's approach to modernism is deeply rooted in Eastern aesthetics and Indigenous materials, echoing the ideals of Santiniketan artists who sought alternatives to Western artistic conventions. By incorporating Nepalese rice paper into his works, he not only preserves artisanal heritage, but also reinforces his commitment to a distinctly Indian modernist visual language that remains grounded in cultural authenticity. Haren Thakur's studies of Egyptian wall paintings, particularly from the Thutmose IV era, inspired him to integrate their geometric sophistication into his visual language. This influence is evident in his stylized human figures and structured compositions, where the formal precision of ancient Egyptian art is reinterpreted within a modernist framework.

His work embodies a fusion of traditional and modern where he reshapes the living artistic heritage into an evolving visual language. Rather than merely preserving folk art, he transforms it, merging diverse influences in a continuous process of reinterpretation. Folk art forms like the vibrancy of Madhubani art, the abstraction of Warli, and the colourful Patachitra of Bengal have inspired a number of Indian modern artists including Haren Thakur. Even though the influence is not direct, it is subtle and nuanced in Haren's artworks. These influences have been a part of his artistic language that has evolved through time. His practice transcends conventional boundaries, resulting in a visual philosophy that embraces abstraction and reinvention while maintaining a reverence for cultural heritage.

His visual language is deeply influenced by the lifestyle of the tribal communities of Jharkhand. Their philosophy of life communicates their love for nature, their personal interconnectedness emphasize love for their natural surroundings. Haren explains, "What fascinated me was the way they interacted with their animals. They actually talk to their animals. I derive inspiration from their body without sophistication. This is a constant in my work." He reworks and experiments with what he perceives, rather than simply replicating what he observes. Over time, his artistic practice has moved beyond a strict adherence to Jharkhand's folk art, evolving into a more versatile and contemporary form. This has led to the development of a geometric visual language, incorporating elements of Warli art and Cubism, while



Haren Thakur's sculpture at DAV Jawahar Vidya Mandir, Ranchi

demonstrating his ability to synthesize traditional motifs with modernist abstraction.

Haren draws significant inspiration from his environment, particularly the intricate details of rural life. His works often reflect the harmony and rhythm of village existence, where life remains untouched by external disruptions. His flat-surfaced compositions enriched with bold earthy tones highlight his connection to fundamental artistic elements. Being of Bengali descent, his art also engages with Eastern Indian visual traditions. Through techniques of cutting, moulding, pasting, and painting, he transforms this fragile yet resilient material, exploring themes of earth, agrarian life, and ecological concerns.

His paintings depict themes from tribal life, but are not merely documentary in nature. Works like 'The Musical Meet' portray couples in an intimate yet timeless way, inviting comparisons to mythological figures such as Shiva-Parvati or Rama-Sita. The 'Open Parlour' highlights intergenerational care, a practice he feels is disappearing in urban society. Meanwhile, 'The Reckless Recluse' presents a man at ease after drinking which challenges the notion that guilt and excess are exclusive to urban life.

Haren Thakur's deep immersion in the tribal communities of Jharkhand profoundly shaped his artistic vision, allowing him to experience first-hand their harmonious relationship with nature. This exposure led him to incorporate tribal symbols and imagery into his work, bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary art forms. His art does not merely depict tribal life, but engages with its deeper cultural and philosophical essence, presenting it as an enduring source of wisdom and aesthetic richness.

Like his teacher Ramkinkar Baij, a strong theme in Thakur's work is often projected through a tribal lens. While his art incorporates religious and mythological imagery, it does not function as a direct representation of these narratives. It is an exploration of their cultural ethos. His approach to simplify the abstract religious iconography allows him to infuse his own spiritual perspective, thus moving beyond traditional depictions to craft a more personal and introspective visual language. Thakur views tribal life not as primitive or out-dated, but as a source of deep wisdom and aesthetic richness. He believes that contemporary society has lost touch with its roots, and that the so-called "civilized" world is often less connected, emotionally and socially than tribal communities. His works emphasize both the distinctiveness and universality of indigenous cultures, highlighting how their traditions resonate with broader human experiences.

Nature, in Haren's artistic philosophy, is not a passive backdrop but a living entity, imbued with emotions and symbolic meaning. He attributes qualities such as love, empathy, and camaraderie to trees, seeing them as silent witnesses to human existence. This perspective aligns with his broader artistic goal: to capture the spontaneity and rhythm of life, rejecting polished artificial refinement in favour of organic movement and energy. His work reflects a deep commitment to preserving authenticity, ensuring that art remains a medium for genuine expression rather than mere aesthetic sophistication.

Well ensconced in his home in Ranchi, Haren Thakur follows the phrase which he read in Nandalal Bose's book 50 years ago. Any place you make your home, make it a Santiniketan. That is the philosophy he follows: "Work every day, and make your own oasis of peace and creativity."

- Dr. Alka Pande
Art Historian, Curator and Author
April 2025





"A slightly built, light-footed man, a gentle smile on his patrician features with a mop of silver hair and matching frames defines this hidden gem of Santiniketan. Living between Ranchi and Howrah, the Santiniketan trained artist Haren Thakur lives in a world infused with nature/prakriti in full measure. Meeting him in his studio in Ranchi was an incredible experience of calm and quietude away from the hustle and bustle of the urban modernity of India."

- Dr. Alka Pande



Erotic Emergence
Mixed media on canvas
23.5 x 23.5 Inches
2006



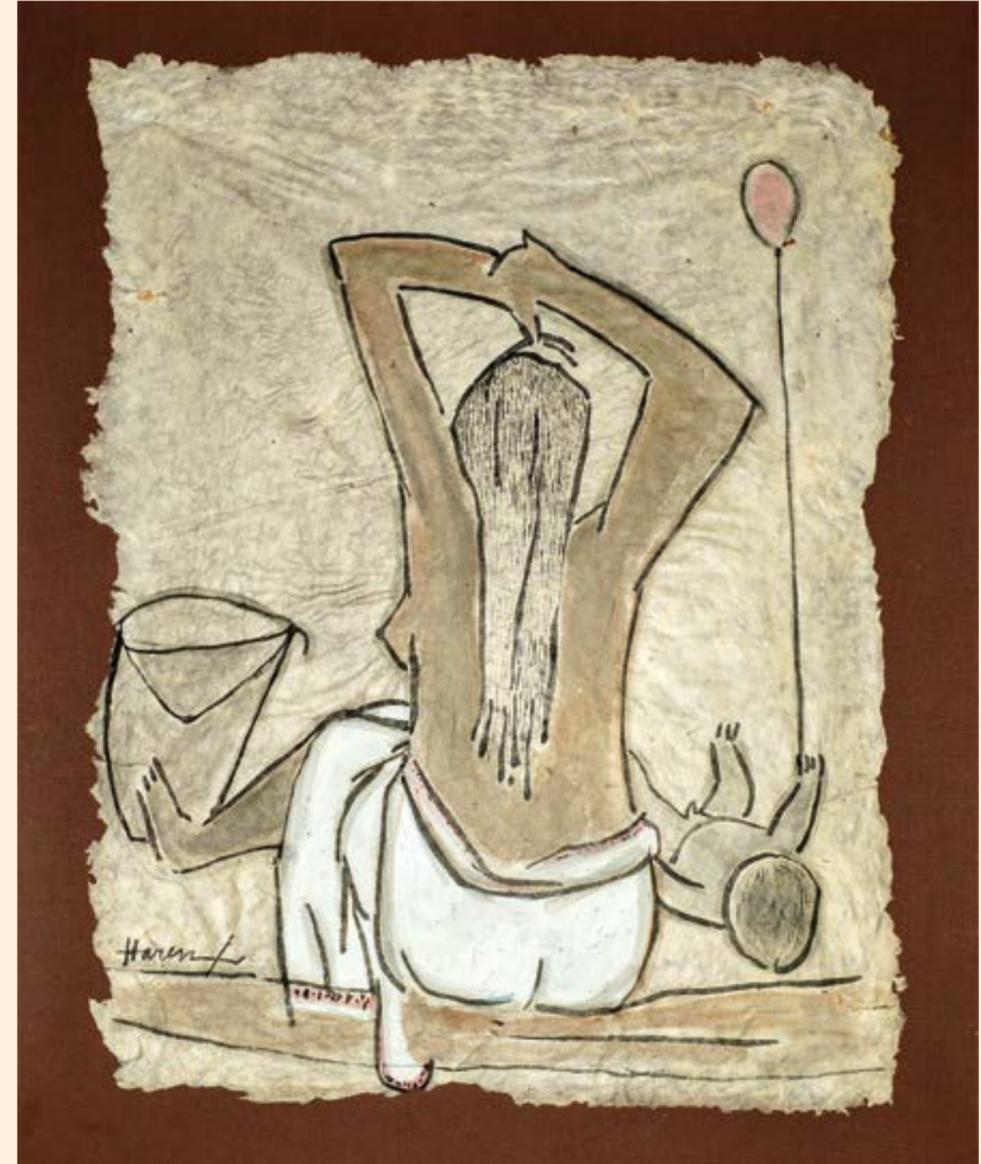
Musician
Mixed media on massonite board
26 x 30 Inches
1980



Silence
Mixed media on paper board
21.5 x 30 Inches
1974



Three Bathers
Mixed media on paper
20 x 26 Inches
2000



Natural Bathers
Watercolour on rice paper
26 x 20.5 Inches
2010



Godhuli (Cows returning home in the evening)
Mixed media on canvas
35 x 45 Inches
2020



Rhythm of Nature
Mixed media on canvas
50 x 70 Inches





Rhythm of Nature
Mixed media on canvas
50 x 66 Inches
2025



Nature Balanced Each Other
Mixed media on canvas
60 x 58 Inches
2025



Untitled
Mixed media on canvas
60 x 60 Inches
2025



Cosmic Tree
Mixed media on canvas
65.5 x 50 Inches
2024



Natural Shelter
Mixed media on canvas
17.5 x 17.5 Inches
2023



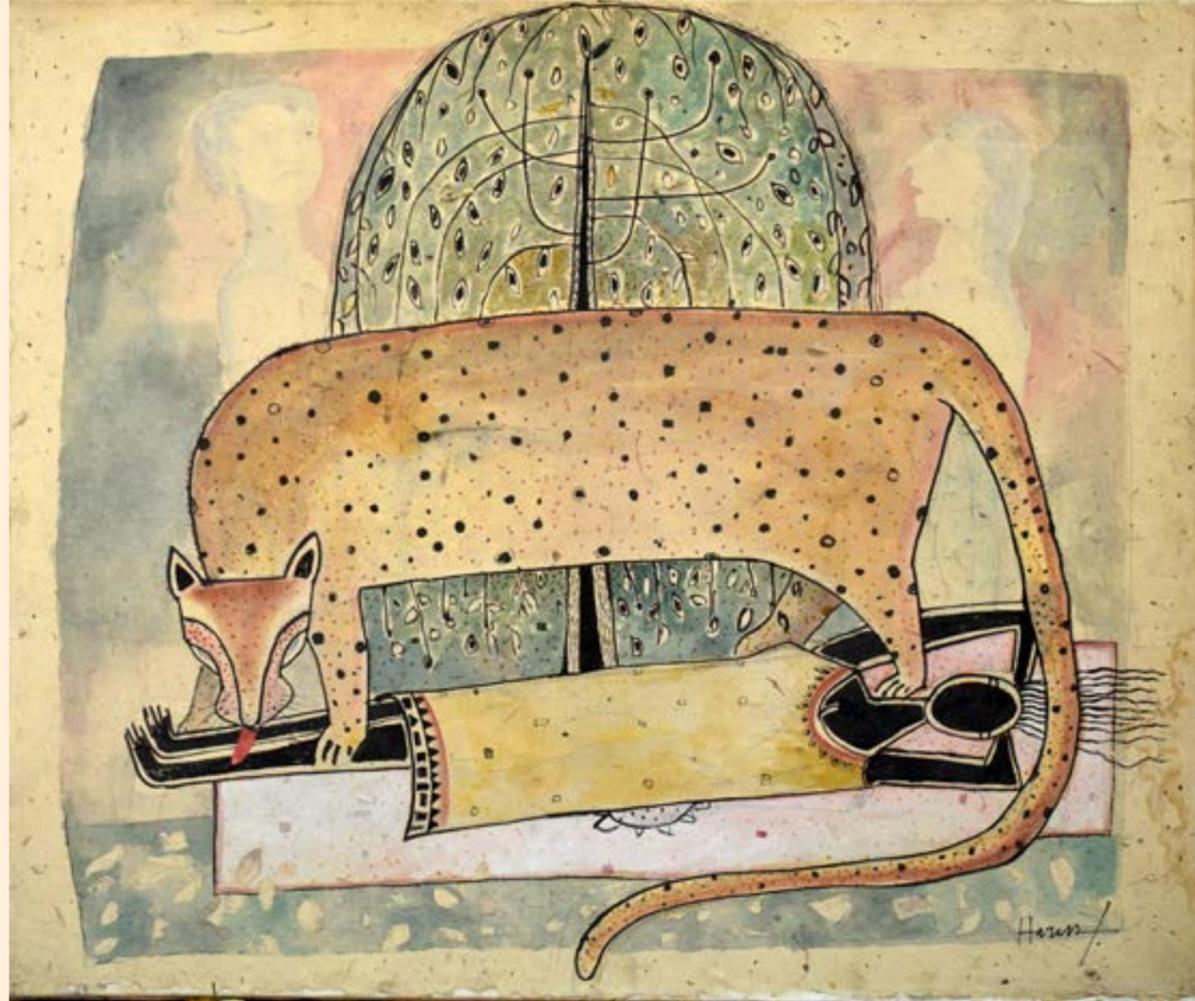
Untitled
Mixed media on canvas
13 x 70 Inches
2024



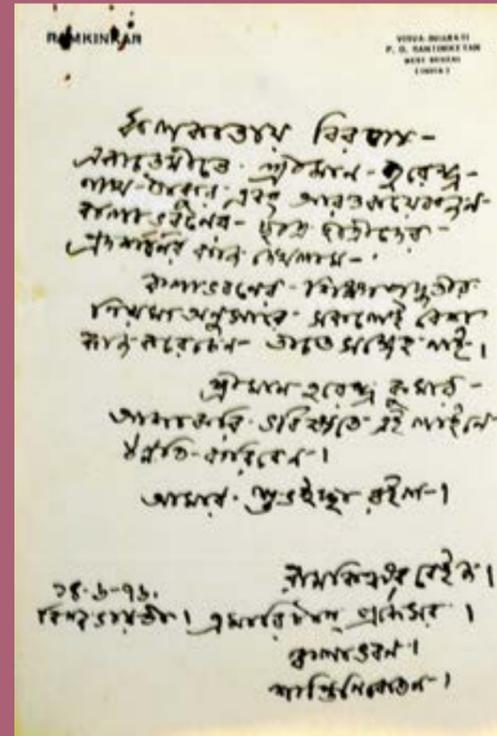
Structure within Nature
Mixed media on canvas
60 x 48 Inches
2024



Untitled
Mixed media on canvas
70.5 x 50 Inches
2024



Wild Dream
Watercolour and ink on rice paper on canvas
24 x 20 Inches
2005



“

Seen the creative works of Shri. Harendranath Thakur and some of his compatriots, students of Kala Bhavan displayed in the exhibition held at Birla Academy, Kolkata.

There is no doubt that their creative outpourings are in conformity with the set rules and adhering to the traditions of Kala Bhavan.

I am sure that Harendra Kumar Thakur will gain prominence in this profession in future.

With good wishes,
Ramkinkar Baij
14/06/76
Visva Bharati

”



Migrating Labourers During Pandemic
Scroll drawing on paper
5.5 x 81.5 Inches
2020



Mother Fish
Mixed media on canvas
36 x 36 Inches
2011



Safe Zone
Mixed media on canvas
16 x 12 Inches
2018



The Moon and Rocks
Mixed media on canvas
70 x 50 Inches
2025





Rocks Concerned
Mixed media on canvas
70 x 62.5 Inches
2025



Cosmic Rocks.
Mixed media on canvas
66.5 x 50 Inches
2025





Aging Alignment
Black ink and dust colour on canvas
8 x 10 Inches
2020



The Pig
Black ink & dust colour on canvas
12 x 16 Inches
2020



Fashion Feathers
Mixed media on canvas
24 x 24 Inches
2010



Competitor
Mixed media on canvas
36 x 45 Inches
2011



Proud Mother
Mixed media on canvas
20 x 14 Inches



Vegetable Sellers
Mixed media on canvas
37 x 46 Inches
2024



The Humble Hanuman
Mixed media on canvas
29.5 x 29.5 Inches
2011



Structural Integrity
Mixed media on canvas
66 x 49.5 Inches
2025



Eternal Connectivity
Mixed media on canvas
65.5 x 50 Inches
2025

Conversation (Vartalap)

with Haren Thakur

Introduction:

Haren Thakur is a graduate from Santiniketan College of Art in West Bengal. He has been living and working from Ranchi for over two decades. His primary interest lies in using rice paper without manipulating its original nature and materiality. He combines rice paper with his personal style of drawing. When placed together on a single surface--the canvas--these different mediums are balanced to represent the inter dependence that is the essence of any society. In the case of Haren Thakur's practice, his expressiveness emerges from his interest and respect for the way tribal communities from Jharkhand have adapted to their changing landscape, and yet been able to preserve significant parts of their culture. His personal concerns are ways in which contemporary and modern India can learn aspects of harmony and adaptability on the path to further development.

Haren is a deeply thoughtful artist who is equally adept with oil and acrylic on canvas. Along with his drawings, paintings and sculptures, the creative oeuvre of the artist has an unending continuum with traditional folk art and tribal language which he expresses by using the brush with modern elements of the region and geographical landscape that he inhabits.

M.D: You had mentioned that children interact and engage with sculpture better than with a painting, so why did you choose to paint instead of engaging in sculpture?

HT: The question as to why I paint is quite simple. I believe that I don't paint, but the paint or painting directs and guides me to create a piece of work. The idea first reacts in my mind, and then it gets transferred to my hands along with my thoughts and feelings. The material seems immaterial as it could be a canvas, a piece of cloth or paper.

I believe that when some pain or any kind of churning of emotions or intense feelings gets mixed with paint, it takes the form of a painting. My belief is when the letters P.A.I.N become mixed with 'paint,' I achieve my understanding of the word 'painting.' This pain is not only a physical pain as it could be the pain of creation itself. There are things going on in my mind like my reaction to my surroundings or how to develop some imagery I need to communicate. That is expressed in my final work. I don't paint because I am legally bound to create. My paintings are the reactions in my mind to my immediate and personal surroundings.

M.D: How has your childhood in Purulia with your family and friends influenced your journey as an artist?

H.T: With regards to my family, I come from a middle-class background. My father was a service man and worked several years for the government as the district post master. My mother took care of the house and the children. I remember my mother as a very disciplined lady. On my father's side, his family was from Bankura and they were quite religious. They had a deep appreciation for Hindustani Classical music too. Recordings from the Vishnupura Gharana would play in his and his brothers' houses all the time.

You can consider me a 'breakthrough' because in visual art and culture as I was the first one from my family to consciously choose this field of the visual arts as a profession. During my childhood, even though my family enjoyed classical music, they were not aware about my interest for the world of fine arts. The area around Bankura and Vishnupura is known for its beautiful Hindu terracotta temples. I cannot ignore that reference in my upbringing and it is one of the major influences for my art.

As I belonged to a middle-class family, the idea of art as a profession was not economically possible. During my school days and after completing my homework, I would visit the local crafts people constructing idols of the Goddess for Durga Puja. As you know, Durga Puja is a not only an auspicious time, but it is also considered the beginning of a New Year for the Bengali Hindu community there. Surprisingly, I found myself keenly observing the process of a potter (in Purulia)



Haren Thakur's sculpture at DAV Jawahar Vidya Mandir, Ranchi

making the Durga Pratima. He would spend a few months in the nearby temple making the idol.

Afternoon sleep is common in the region where I am from. When the senior members of family, especially my mother was asleep, I had the opportunity to visit the potter. I would sit with him for a few hours until evening came, watching the craftsman minutely constructing each part of the idol. He would start with the skeleton (maquette) and then apply layers of other material or skin to the the straw and clay mixture. He would later add further layers including the garments in order to create the divine idol.

While the potter was busy on his feet all day long, I would come and observe him working on his craft. I used to imagine how lucky I would be if he asked me to assist him. When he began observing my interest in what he was doing, there were days when he would let me play with some spare materials. On such occasions, I would feel that the day was indeed my luckiest.

At home, I would copy art works from weekly magazines. Some also had Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij's artworks featured in them. I would often get scolded by my mother for not focusing on my school work. When my father passed away quite early in my life and my elder brother became a sort of guardian to all of us, he took on the responsibilities of the household. He was one of the first to observe my interest in drawing and painting as a child.

After my matriculation, it was my brother's idea to enroll me in an art institution so that I could develop my interests further. It was again my elder brother who filled in my application form for Santiniketan, after visiting other art colleges nearby. Most importantly, he convinced my mother that I should pursue fine arts as she could not imagine how a person belonging to a middle-class background could become an artist.

When I visited Santiniketan for the first time on the day of my entrance examination, I felt as if a dream had come true.

M.D: You have been taught by pioneering artists such as Ramkinkar Baij, Sarbari Roy Chowdhury, Somnath Hore, Dinkar Kowshik to name a few. How did their ideas inspire you?

H.T: I took admission in 1970 and it was a very unique period in my life. I was not directly taught by Ramkinkar Baij or Benod Behari Mukherjee because when I joined, Kinkar-da had retired. As a fresh student at Santiniketan, I could not understand yet the work of Ramkinkar Baij, but through my seniors I became aware of him as an artist and a personality.

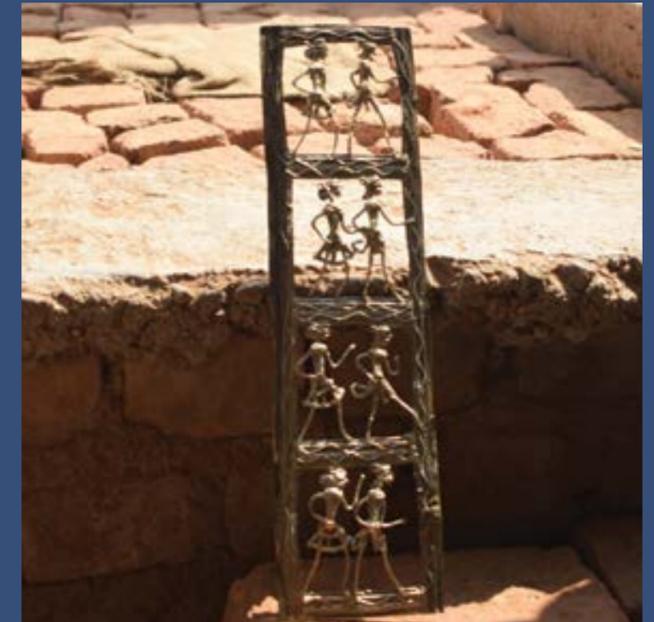
Baij was Emeritus Professor by the time I joined, but he would often be in the college premises, talking with the more senior students and chatting with other teachers. Even after his retirement, his connection with the college never ended. He had spent his every breath in building the atmosphere at Santiniketan, in the company of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose.

The college campus was full of his sculptures and so his presence could not be missed even when he was not actually present. As a first-year student, my interaction with Kinkar-da, as everyone called him, remained limited to when we were in our foundation classes during the clay workshop. However, his interaction with us will remain etched in my mind forever.

At this time, I was in direct contact with other artists who also taught us like Gauri di and Vishwaroop Bose (children of Nandalal Bose), and Shaileen Munshi. Being a first-year student I was more focused on my academic training in Oriental Art including tempera, traditional Indian painting in the tradition of Santiniketan or alpana. Munshi ji took some of my outdoor classes, and they were very interesting.

My transformation period to understand contemporary art contexts came from our two pillars--Ramkinkar Baij and Nandalal Bose, on either side of our institution. There I was studying academic and traditional ways of creating art, but simultaneously I was looking at the great works of contemporary Indian artists in Santiniketan. The print-making department under Somnath Hore was producing works that influenced me as well.

I have to say there is one unique quality I experienced in my art college. No one held your hand or taught you how to create. For example, Sukhomoy Mitra and Pranab Roy were our teachers but they never interfered in our techniques. They only asked us what we were doing in a way which encouraged us to further develop our practice. Instead of correcting our work, they guided us by encouraging us to create more work and learn by doing so. The way they spoke to us was as equals. They shared their own methods and even the difficulties they faced in completing an idea.



Dokra work from the artist's village in Jharkhand

Through them I learnt about Nandalal Bose. For him nature was a teacher, a book was a tree and the branch was a chapter. I learned that if you see a tree, draw it like you experience it--by sitting under it or touching it, instead of drawing it exactly like a photograph. The tree is not asking you to draw it, and neither is it waiting like a model. The artist has to observe the various elements of the tree as a part of nature and feel the dialogue that takes place which is essential for creativity. This lesson was so profound in those early days, and it is relevant even more today.

M.D: You say that your artistic expression is inspired by the lifestyles of the tribal people. For instance, you observe the way they sit and stand and also the way they dress and their activities every day. How have you infused these elements in your practice?

H.T: My interest in the lives of tribal people did begin in Santiniketan. Every Wednesday, we would explore the nearby villages of the Santhal people and observe their lifestyles. Developing tribal motifs or representing their essence through my work was a gradual process, and I cannot say exactly how and when I began working in such a way.

After I left Santiniketan, I came to Ranchi in Jharkhand and took up a job. It was important to have one if I were to sustain and support my art practice. I was a senior art teacher in a school which has now become very eminent; but at the time when I joined, it had a smaller number of students. At that time, Jharkhand was still a part of Bihar. In the present landscape of what is now Jharkhand, I found many similarities with the tribal lifestyles I saw in Santiniketan.

Visiting the interior villages and forests in Jharkhand, especially the homes of the tribal people, I felt inspired by their simple life. They existed in such harmony with the modern times. I believe an artist does not create something new because everything has already been created by God. The role of the artist is to research and find what he can re-create or re-visualize from something that already exists.



Haren Thakur's mural at DAV Jawahar Vidya Mandir, Ranchi

I was searching for that simplification as an answer to simplify my art. I did not find it important to complicate my practice or waste my time in creating complex forms. Even in our daily lives, we are looking for simple things and there is so much joy in simplicity. How can life be simple? We have to consciously search for it and often we don't.

Since my college days, I was heavily influenced by early Egyptian forms--the elongated gestures of the body. I also found similarities between African tribal art and that made by the tribal people from Jharkhand--Sohrai and Kohvar. I made this connection after leaving Santiniketan.

The various motifs, colours or ornamentation of Sohrai and Kohvar did not inspire me as much as their lifestyle and approach to the everyday activities did. Their dialogues with nature --the way they can sense if it will rain, the way their cattle follow them, the way they can identify trees or flowers--impressed me a lot. When I saw their connectivity to their surroundings, I found it very modern. In our present time where global warming has become a real threat, such a connection can teach us so many important things. Contemporary society is going back to the grassroots level in finding solutions to our modern-day problems. We are searching for a kind of simplicity that we have lost. And that is precisely what the tribal community is trying to preserve.

M.D: We have spoken about global warming as a contemporary global concern. Technology has also connected people in unique ways. What are your views on the impact of technology, not only in art but in our lives as well?

H.T: I treat technology as tools for information and communication. Global warming is a very bold term that is being used widely. But what is it an indicator of? Is it telling us about the changing weather and climate patterns? I can say that when it is about to rain, dark clouds will appear and the sky will become red in colour. The cattle grazing in the forests will begin returning to their shed. The fact that insects and birds take shelter is an indicator that something is about to happen. With this kind of awareness already present, technology in such cases does not provide the tribal community with any new information. Their connection with nature is stronger than information provided by technology.

As part of modern development, we believe in information technology. But even today, technology has not been able to replace the connection that the tribal communities share with nature.

A child playing in the courtyard will be alerted by the mother to return indoors without much of visible signs really. When the storm passes, everyone returns to their activities. This ability to recognize change is also another form of technology. There are so many international seminars on climate change with discussion on how to conserve forests, land and water. In tribal villages such seminars are not required. Instead of international seminars, we can go to a tribal community and try to see have they have developed their concepts regarding weather.

M.D: Through your craft as an artist, what or how do you communicate with your audience?

H.T: I don't paint to send a message or to communicate with a person as if I were illustrating a particular thought, feeling or moment in my life. I am communicating concepts like my relationship with nature, my approach of simplifying visual representation. In my work, I am sharing a feeling of satisfaction created in the tribal community through their simplicity. As I have experienced such kinds of emotion and connectedness, I found this to be a space where I was able to further explore my ideas. So I asked myself, then why don't you portray this in your work if it brings you joy and satisfaction?

And to answer the question about why I have chosen painting and drawing and not some other medium, I think it just happened. If the general audience, the critics and curators are able to communicate and relate to themselves through my paintings, then I should continue in this manner.

Using the tree as a metaphor, a distance is maintained, but not enforced Nature has its own rules of distance and space that is spontaneous as opposed to being an imposition. The roots of the tree balance the branches, and the tree is able to balance itself independently. It may be constructed in a disciplined way, but within those constrictions, the individuality of the tree is still maintained.

The tree is meant for more things than shade. In the villages, it is beneath a large tree that the herdsman awaits his cattle, or takes shelter from the heat, cold and rain. It also becomes a space for the public to gather, to discuss politics and even celebrate some festive moment. My attempt is to bring to the forefront this relationship that we have in a modern society, even in urban surroundings. But we have lost sight of it. What I think my work represents (or if it is about some message), is sharing my experiences of how the tribal communities have preserved the balance created by nature with their people.

M.D: You have used the phrase "food for thought and food for survival" as a process where an artist has to find ways to survive as well make art. How have you navigated this path and do you have any advice for younger artists? What compromises did you have to make, if any?

H.T: During college, when I read the writings of Nandalal Bose, I found that he described a very significant instance in the life of an artist. If an artist keeps on making art and storing it away without showing it to anyone, then that work is unsuccessful.

The concept here is to produce an artwork and show it perhaps to only 10 people. The idea of exhibiting your work also emerges from this for it is important to interact with the public in whatever capacity possible, through your art. To show the public how you create reveals your dedication to your practice and justifies why you are an artist.

For younger artists, I would encourage them to strike the balance between food for thought and food for survival. After all, to work with paper and pencil, and then to add colour to your brush, you need to arrange for both kinds of food. To survive and create, you will need some employment even if it is not directly related to art.

Food for thought is another aspect where you have to continuously make new artwork to refine your craft. Many of the young artists I have mentored complain about not having the time to create art. I find that is just an excuse and do not agree with it at all as one has to make the time. Even if it is for an hour at any time of the day, and even if you are unable to produce anything new, just sit and have a dialogue with your art work. Working daily is the essence of being an artist. If I leave a painting mid-way, I find that when I return to my work, most certainly there is a sense of disconnectedness.

As I begin a new piece work, I develop an emotional attachment to my painting. It is this daily communication with my work, through the process of making it and looking at it, that the dialogue with my work grows. This is very important.

Nandalal Bose would also say, that you must visit your studio every day and the day you unable to produce anything, meditate, sit and have a conversation with your inner self.

Indeed, the compromise an artist makes is to maintain the balance between food for thought and food for survival.



Artist's studio in Ranchi

M.D: Today there is an interest in contemporary Indian art globally and the Indian art market is also investing in art. In such an atmosphere, what are your concerns about the future of contemporary Indian art and our artists?

H.T: I feel in the global contemporary art arena, the interest in contemporary Indian art by international galleries, critics and curators alike is not about a trend or a theme; it is an interest in the idea of 'Indianness.' The idea behind 'Indianness' is the cultural and the spiritual ethos of India – the idea of sanatana dharma that I regard as highly modern and contemporary. For example, we have great intricacies in our symbolism such as the meaning behind the form of the Shivalinga, the dance of Nataraja, and the gestures or mudras in our various dance practices.

I don't want to discuss global contemporary trends in art. But I will emphasize that the attraction or interest in Indian art will always remain because it is based on our legacy of original Indian crafts—some of which we can still find in our villages. The original handicrafts and tribal paintings have informed contemporary Indian artists as well. In the spirit of contemporary art, artists should merge or imbibe the already existing cultural legacy of India in their works in order to make something new within the old.

By copying or following trends from Western art and aesthetics, we will not be appreciated the way an artist might expect. In my mind I always feel that copying trends will ultimately be rejected by the global art world.

Contemporary Indian artists must reflect upon the history and traditions from India. We must build on and represent what is unique and special to Indian arts and aesthetics. For example, Ravan Dahan, in postmodern terms may be seen as merely performance art. However, it has a compelling narrative, costume and all elements that fit the criterion of Western terminologies for fine arts as well. It has a large paper effigy that narrates a story, and then the performance ends with the idol being burnt as part of a celebration. There is music, dance, story-telling and spectacle, all in one frame, in one event. In our religious rituals, there is singing and chanting that has been passed down over centuries, Generations of people have listened to such oral texts narrated by a specialist.

Indian culture and its various philosophies have much to offer. We must learn from them and explore those concepts and sentiments in artworks. Artists should focus on these extensive resources of traditional knowledge before looking for inspiration in Western art, history and aesthetics. Art works that are connected with an artist's own experiences create an authentic experience for the viewer and can last for generations in public memory.

M.D: Please describe your recent exhibition. Is it a retrospective? Have you approached your practice in a different style?



Haren Thakur's mural at DAV Jawahar Vidya Mandir, Ranchi

H.T: I would not consider this exhibition as a retrospective in the formal sense because that suggests a final moment, as though it is the end of something. I feel an artist or let us say his art can never die. For centuries artists have been creating, I consider this exhibition as a story about my practice and of my ongoing journey as an artist. The idea of a retrospective is like a milestone of a journey, as simple as moving from point A to point B. This exhibition is also about the fact that I am still on my journey. I have enough ideas I would like to share before I reach my destination which is still at a distance.

I feel as though I have just discovered a form, yet to be explored. It needs to be molded into a personal philosophy in order to create a strong and enduring concept. I consider that I have miles more to go. There will be more works on the way, so I can't consider this exhibition to be a retrospective. If anything, this exhibition is about various stages in my artistic journey-- the agony and ecstasy. I don't foresee this exhibition as an exclamation, as there are many things yet to be explored, many questions that remain to be asked and answered.

This exhibition is my experience of significant amount of time marking my life. If the audience or viewer is able to communicate with my works according to their preferences, then that is the fulfillment of my idea for holding this exhibition.

M.D: Santiniketan was established to bring together a new way of thinking under British Colonial academia. Have you developed your own practice as a blend of Eastern and Western thought? What is the legacy of Santiniketan in contemporary India? After all, people are more aware of art today and want to pursue fine arts as a discipline and profession.

H.T: The vision of Sri Rabindranath Tagore was such that he supported art, along with music and literature as significant elements to refine education in the fine arts. Gurudev Tagore began painting at a later stage in his life, and at that time there were two schools of thought in fine arts. One belonged to the West and their views on Orientalism; the other was the cave paintings and sculptures around Ajanta-Ellora which provided another source of inspiration, and created a highly cosmopolitan atmosphere in Santiniketan.

I feel that Gurudev began painting only because he was not satisfied with the theories and style of art prevalent during his lifetime. He belonged to a highly cultured family with an elite standing in Bengal. He became a poet, philosopher, novelist, musician and an artist too. However, his vision for Santiniketan was not to follow either schools of thought-- the colonial style, or the decorative and antiquarian styles of Ajanta and Ellora. For him the idea of modern and contemporary art lay in researching and exploring a purely Indian ethnicity and heritage. This could be considered as the Santiniketan style of art, I experienced this fact as my practice began finding a voice.

Santiniketan was envisaged as hermitage where the artist was not isolated, but he/she was completely immersed in a culturally rich atmosphere. The student would be mentored so that learning came by doing. The practical experience was relevant in the freedom our teachers gave us, especially as they encouraged us to make artworks which reflected our personal belief system.

Creative ideas can be translated in more than one medium, device or technique; but the content should be authentic to be qualified as contemporary art. We have to pay attention because we represent what is contemporary to India today. People come from all over the world to visit India for its cultural heritage and artists bear part of this responsibility in guiding our visitors through our traditions.

Even today, I try to strengthen my connection with the ethos of Santiniketan where art, nature and society interact with each other harmoniously. They are never forced to co-exist. I try to represent this balance acquired through my experiences from Santiniketan, in my paintings. I try to showcase an art form where all the elements which are different from each other still create a rhythm when stitched together.

For example, if you see Benode Behari Mukherjee's work, it is not overly decorative and ornamented like the paintings of Ajanta and Ellora. Similarly, Ramkinker Baij's work is not like the sculptural works found in Indian temple architecture. Their works reflect modernity that is not modified using complicated techniques. Their works are genuinely expressive, and the level of simplification is to further develop or break away from academic styles of representation.

In this spirit I strive to connect my work with ideas that are inspired by or spirituality found in nature. I believe in the universal laws of cause and effect. My work represents the harmony I experienced in Santiniketan. My success lies in my ability to reflect my personal feelings and emotions in my artworks.

- Dr. Mandakini Devi
Artist, Independent Researcher & Filmmaker



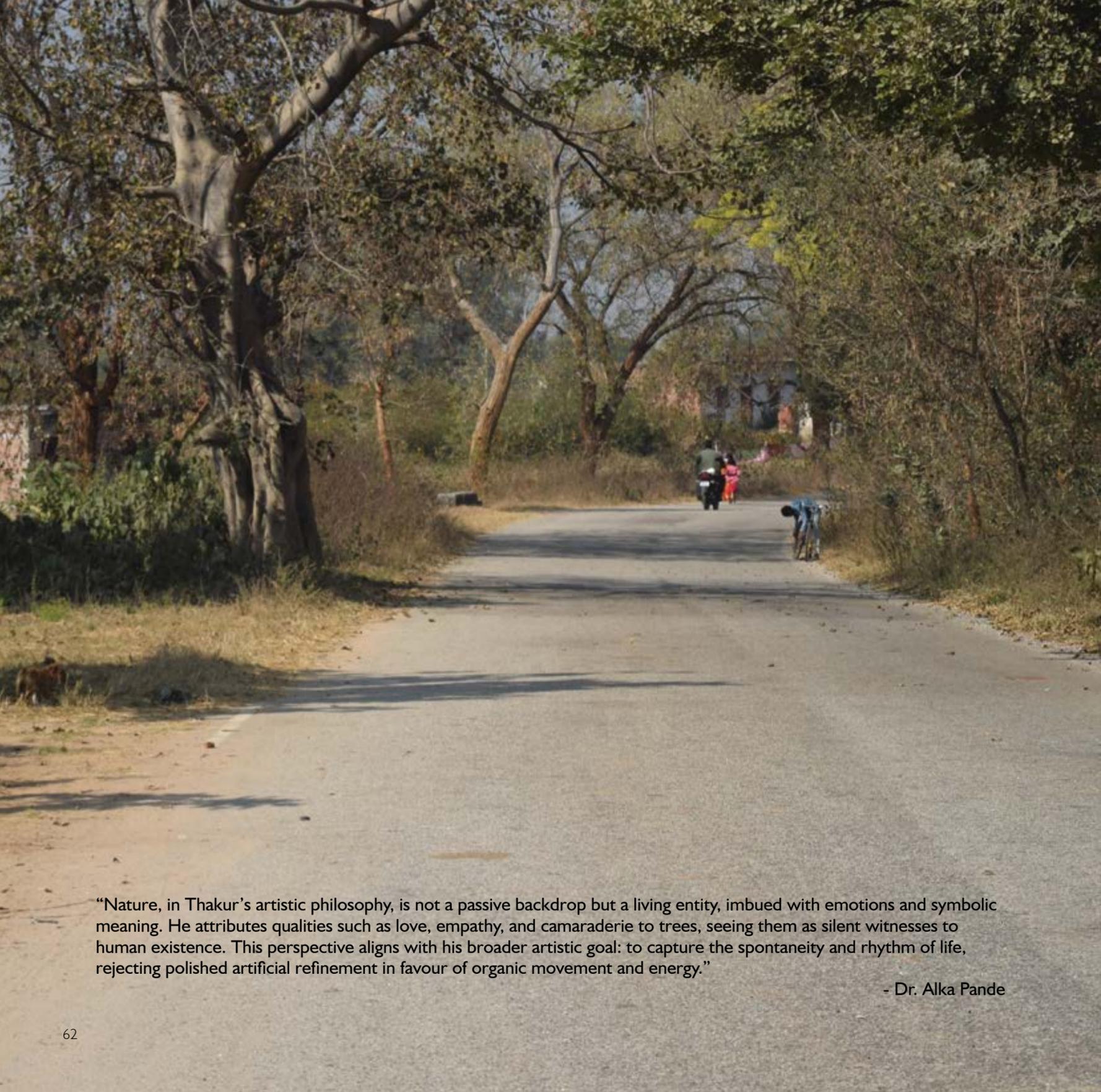
Sitting Nude
Watercolour on paper
20 x 30 Inches
1975



2 Bathers
Ink drawing and watercolour on paper
12 x 11 Inches
2007



Hills and River
Ink drawing on paper
7.5 x 5 Inches
2010



“Nature, in Thakur’s artistic philosophy, is not a passive backdrop but a living entity, imbued with emotions and symbolic meaning. He attributes qualities such as love, empathy, and camaraderie to trees, seeing them as silent witnesses to human existence. This perspective aligns with his broader artistic goal: to capture the spontaneity and rhythm of life, rejecting polished artificial refinement in favour of organic movement and energy.”

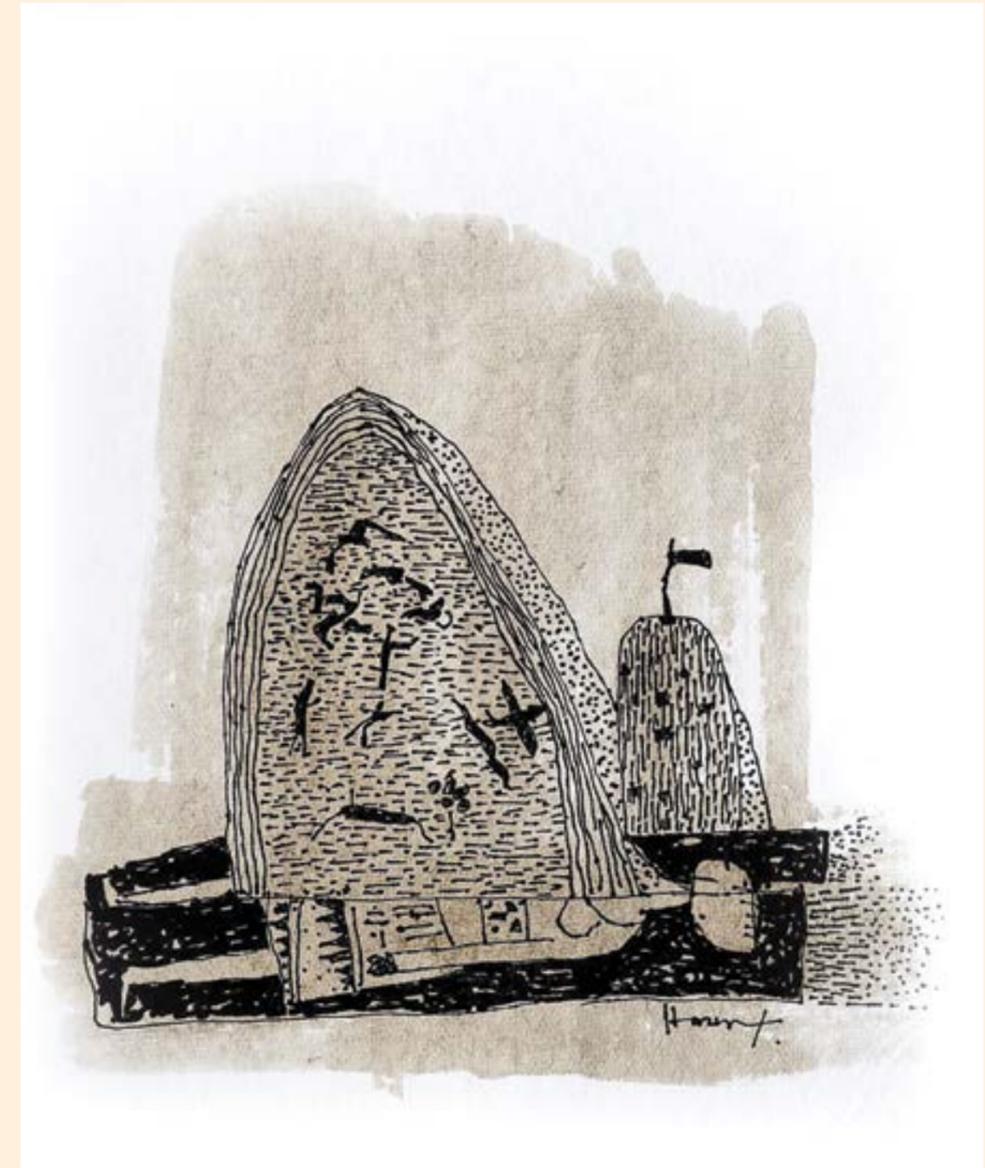
- Dr. Alka Pande



Two Ducks
Drawing on paper
9 x 6 Inches
2018



Untitled
Coffee tint on paper
10 x 8 Inches
2014



Mother Earth
Ink and coffee tint on paper
10 x 8 Inches
2014



Mother's Affection
Charcoal drawing on paper
14 x 11 Inches
2018



Mother and Child
Ink on paper
14 x 11 Inches
2019



House Door
Drawing on Paper
4 x 4 Inches
1999

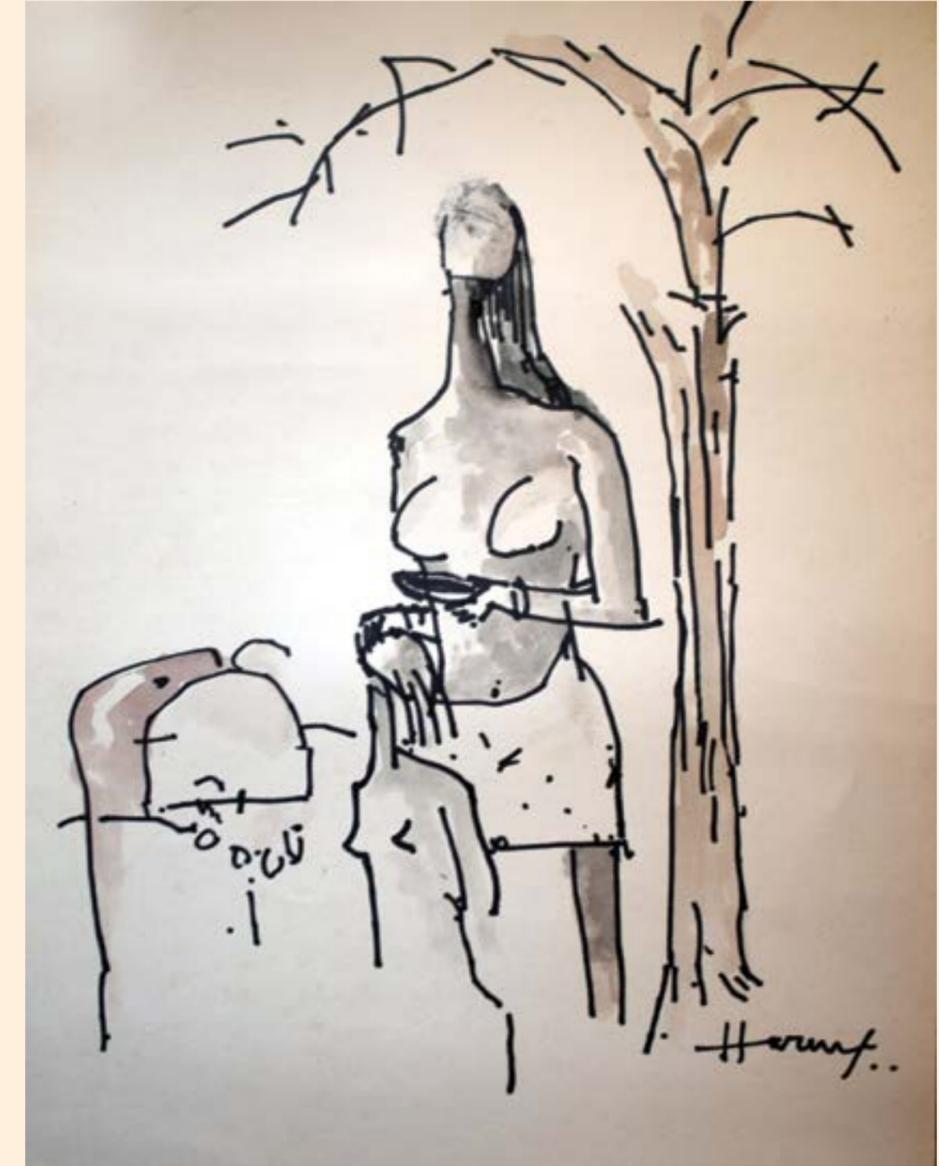


Fearful Mouse
Black ink on handmade paper
12 x 18 Inches
2009





Panicked Labour
Drawing on paper
9 x 6 Inches
2021



Karuna
Drawing on paper
14 x 11 Inches
2018

HAREN THAKUR (Harendra Nath Thakur)

BORN :-

1953, Pathardhi, Jharkhand

EDUCATION :-

- o Diploma in Fine Art, Kalabhavan, Shantiniketan Visvabharati University - 1975
- o Short Course with Creative Theatre Designing, National School of Drama - 1980

EXHIBITION (Group and Solo) :-

- o Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata - 1974
- o Birla Academy of Art and Culture - 1975-96
- o Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, Ranchi - 1982
- o British Council Library, Ranchi - 1986
- o B K College of Arts, Bhubaneswar, Odisha- 1986
- o L T G Art Gallery, New Delhi - 1995
- o "Young Faces of Indian Contemporary Art," Birla Academy - 1996
- o AIFCS, New Delhi - 1997
- o Hotel Ashoka, Ranchi - 1997-2000
- o Krishna Art Gallery, New Delhi - 2002
- o Eastern Regional Art Exhibition : CIMA Art Gallery - 2002
- o Lalit Kala Kendra, Odisha
- o Gallery K-2, Samanavya Art Gallery, Jaipur
- o Yapanchitra Art Gallery, Kolkata
- o Indian Museum Hall, Kolkata
- o Kolkata Information Centre
- o Chemold Art Gallery, Kolkata
- o Emami Art Gallery, Kolkata
- o India Habitat Centre, New Delhi
- o Bajaj Art Gallery, Mumbai
- o India Art Gallery, Pune
- o College of Art and Craft, Patna
- o Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai
- o Nandan Art Gallery, Shantiniketan, West Bengal
- o Artist Circle, Kolkata
- o Gallery Space, Hyderabad
- o India International Centre, New Delhi - 2012
- o Jehagir Art Gallery, Mumbai - 2016
- o Yugantar Bharati, Ranchi - 2012-2018
- o Audrey House, Ranchi - Inaugated by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Former President of India
- o Group show spondord by Gallery Time and Space.Bangaluru.
- o Retrospective show Curated by National Gallery of Modern Art.Bangaluru.2019.
- o Group show at Bikanir house New Delhi 2023.
- o Invited Artist show by Times Group at Indian Habitat Centre. Delhi. Curated by Alka Pande. 2024.

AWARDS:-

- o Visva Bharati Merit Scholarship - 1974-75
- o Kolkata Information Centre - 1987-88
- o Shilpi Samman, Ranchi - 1992-98
- o Academy of Fine Art Award - 1997
- o Sukumar Das Award - 1997-98
- o Recognition of State Personality in Pratiyogita Darpan - 1999
- o AIFCS Award - 2004
- o Sanskar Bharati Samman - 2004
- o Camlin Art Foundation Award - 2005 o Jharkhand Ratna Award - 2006
- o Chintamoni Kar Award, Bangiya Sangit Parishad
- o Angar award by Coal India Limited
- o Recognition and award by Doordarshan, Ranchi
- o Prabhat Khabar Gaurab Samman
- o Dainik Bhaskar Samman

COUNTRIES VISITED:-

Widely travelled including United States, Canada and European Countries

CAMP :-

- o "PALASH" - Organised by Chotanagpur Art Research and Development Society, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o MECON ISPAT Club, Ranchi, Jharkhand - 1985
- o Rastriya Lalit Kala, Odisha
- o Rastriya Lalit Kala, Patna, Bihar
- o Samskar Bharati, New Delhi
- o AIFACS Camp, New Delhi
- o Kolkata Milanium, Victoria Memorial, Kolkata, West Bengal - 2000
- o Art and Industry, Tata Centre for Excellence, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand
- o International Art Caravan, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Lalit Kala Academy Camp, Shilong, Meghalaya
- o Lalit Kala Academy Camp, Kerala
- o Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh
- o Jaipur Art Festival, Jaipur, Rajasthan - 2014
- o Lalitkala Art Camp Contemporary and Tribal Art, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
- o "KARA" Art Festival, Anjey Reddy Foundation, Hyderabad
- o OFF The Wall Gallery, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand
- o Emami Chisal Art Gallery, Kolkata
- o National Camp of Ayodhya Sodh Sansthan, Ayodhya
- o National Camp, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh
- o National Art camp.yugantar Bharati.Jharkhand.
- o Hina Bhatt art foundation. Pune.
- o Art workshop.by NGMA.Bangaluru.

OTHER INFORMATION :-

- o Founder of Chotanagpur Art Research and Development Society, Ranchi Jharkhand
- o Organised many Art Camp and other activities in Jharkhand
- o Trained and mentored several young artist and talents in Jharkhand
- o Served as a Art Faculty for over 40 years at a reputed school - J V M Shyamali, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Established and Fabricated many parks, beauty spots by making murals, sculptures and public art in Jharkhand
- o Designed and fabricated the symbolic monument of Tura at Shillong
- o Designed and fabricated the symbolic still sculpture at SAIL, RDCIS, Ranchi
- o Founder and organiser of Rose Rock Garden, MECON Ltd., Ranchi
- o Ex-visiting faculty of BIT MESRA, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Former Art Consultant for MECON Ltd., Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Sculpted Sculpture at Heavy Engineering Corporation, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Founder State Representative of Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre (EZCE)
- o Founder Committee Member of Lalit Kala Kendra, Bhubneshwar, Odisha
- o Founder Member of YUVA Rang Manch, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Life Member of Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata o Former Jury Member of Camlin Art Foundation
- o Member of Tagore Hill Trust, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Founder Member, Yugantar Art Craft and Cultural Foundation, Ranchi, Jharkhand
- o Former Jury Member of State Lalitkala Academy, Patna, Bihar

COLLECTION :-

- o TAO Art Gallery, Mumbai
- o Gallery Time and Space.Bangaluru.
- o Pradip Fertiliser, Mumbai
- o Studio '3', Mumbai
- o E Art Gallery, Mumbai
- o Samanvai Art Gallery, Jaipur
- o Gallery Space, Hyderabad
- o Cara Art Foundation, Hyderabad
- o Emami Art Gallery, Kolkata
- o Mecon India Ltd., Ranchi
- o Yugantar Bharati, Ranchi
- o India Art Gallery
- o Audrey House, Ranchi
- o Krishna Art Collection, New Delhi







Dr. Alka Pande
Art Historian, Author, Curator

“A woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture, and transform.”

– Diane Mariechild

The Artist and her Family:

There is a certain *je ne sais quoi* about Sharmila Thakur’s intimate art works. It is difficult to capture in words, but easier to feel, sense and experience. Unlike her petite self, the diminutive and medium scale hand-painted paper pulp sculptures are intense, complex, compelling and meticulously finished. Ultimately, they are almost a replica of her personal self.

Born in Asansol in 1955 into a family of letters, she grew up in a cultured and progressive environment. From her early years, she was deeply embedded in education and the traditional culture of Bengal, and also modern day Jharkhand.

Sharmila Thakur’s father, Rabindranath Basu, served in the Indian Railways for many years, while her mother, Asalata Basu, was a highly educated woman who held the position of headmistress at a reputed railway school in the Asansol Railway Colony. Sharmila grew up in a large family of five sisters and three brothers, most of whom have subsequently settled in Canada and the United States. For over five decades, they have been engaged in professions related to science, engineering and diplomacy. Sharmila, however, chose to remain in India, and is deeply connected to its cultural ethos and emotional heritage.

Belonging to a Brahmo family, Sharmila carries a rich intellectual and cultural legacy. Her grandmother, Sarashibala Basu, was a noted writer and novelist during the Bengal Renaissance (1814 -1919). She was part of the literary circle that included luminaries such as Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. On Tagore’s advice, Sarashibala relocated from Santiniketan to Giridih (then in Bihar, now in Jharkhand) for health reasons and to pursue her literary work. Sharmila was indeed deeply inspired by the wealth of her grandmother, Sarashibala’s experiences.

After retirement, her parents eventually moved to Canada to be with their other children. Her father remained an active and intellectually curious individual, widely travelled, and deeply engaged in Indian philosophy and culture. Rabindranath Basu even authored a book based on his global travels.

Artistic Journey:

Sharmila completed her early education at her mother’s school in Asansol. In 1972, she entered the portals of the prestigious Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, to pursue a formal training in Fine Arts. Much of Sharmila’s visual vocabulary was informed by her extended time spent in the tribal regions of Jharkhand. She continued her artistic journey with traditional mediums such as watercolour, oil, and acrylic. Over time, she also experimented with natural pigments derived from organic materials like turmeric (haldi), haritaki, leaves, seeds, clay, cow-dung, and even milk-based mediums. Her art reflects a deeply personal, emotive, and grounded aesthetics which she considers is her “own living document of experience.”

From her childhood, Sharmila was a quiet and introspective child, extremely alive to her immediate environment and her inner self. Her curiosity and responsiveness to her surroundings led her to incorporate discarded materials—plastic bags, stitched boldly onto canvas with expressive use of colour—into her practice. She later transitioned to creating abstract fluid forms using enamel paint on board and paper, and eventually explored relief painting on board and canvas with striking, raw and indigenous textures.

Sharmila has been working quietly and consistently, creating exquisite sculptures for her personal joy. She has expanded her repertoire by working with small-format sculptural forms using iron net, plaster of Paris, paper-pulp, and discarded newspapers. Sharmila’s present body of work reflects her deeply personal journey of art and life. These three-dimensional forms in her art are finished with intricate motifs and drawings using acrylics. Sharmila’s approach to materials has always been intuitive and rooted in immediacy. She often uses what is available nearby, turning everyday objects into powerful mediums of expression.

Methods, Materials & Mediums:

Choosing the more unconventional material of paper-pulp, Sharmila makes her own using old newspapers, unused eggs, packing boxes, glue and other such materials. She keeps them aside for two to three days and allows them to soak so that they are easy mould. Papers or boxes are kept in water too. Later they are smashed—sometimes in a grinder or mashed by hand. Then she mixes in glue made of arrowroot, and sometimes uses Fevicol.

Meanwhile, Sharmila draws her composition on canvas or board, and on paper-pulp which is kept out in the sun for drying. Once the pulp is dry, Sharmila applies direct colours and creates textures on her paper-pulp sheet. Initially, she used to work on colour applications with enamel paint. But due to her breathing problems, she switched from synthetic enamel paint to acrylic paint.

When she works with plaster of Paris, it is often artwork in smaller sizes to ensure ease of handling. For her, size was never a limitation as she believes creative impulse can be expressed in any scale, medium or setting. Discarded materials and everyday objects such as waste boxes, household containers, agarbatti boxes, and used paper rolls frequently became sites for her artistic expression. Sharmila mostly draws directly onto objects, allowing her mood to guide the exploration and creative impulse. She does not follow the conventional idea of a studio. Her work-space shifts fluidly from the kitchen, drawing room, veranda to anywhere she finds herself engaged in activities of daily life. Her art follows her, whether she is cooking, relaxing, or just chatting. The entire house becomes her studio.

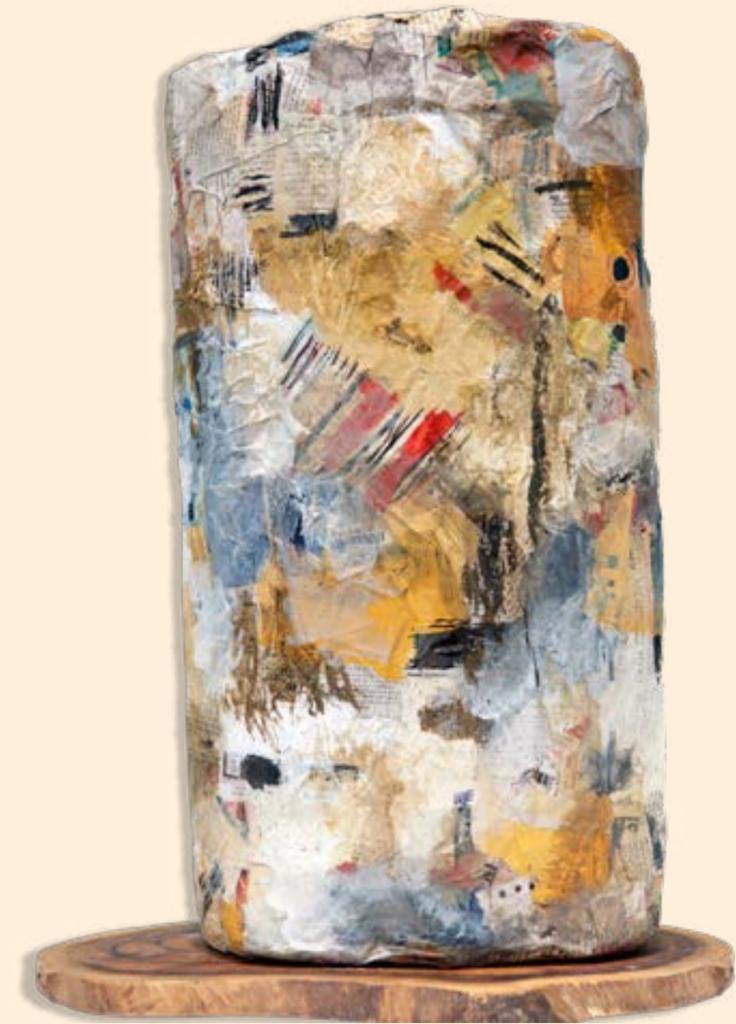
Sharmila also enjoys working on relief painting when creating three-dimensional works. This provides a refreshing break for her. Her works have carried considerable influence as revealed from the many insightful conversations she has had with her friend and classmate, Ratnabali Kant from Kala Bhavan. Ratnabali primarily works on a large scale model, mostly using fibreglass. Influenced by their ongoing exchanges about methods and materials, Sharmila began to explore the possibility of translating some of her paintings into three-dimensional relief forms. However, she chose paper pulp which is non-toxic and easy to handle as her primary material. This reflects her inclination toward accessible and environmentally friendly practices.

With a background rooted in Santiniketan, her love for music includes a casual engagement with musical instruments. She plays the sitar and perhaps her music makes her constantly aware of the changing environment around her which nurtures her creativity. She has never worked against her inner rhythm or mood, and her practice flows naturally from the sensitivity that lies within her to her work in exterior zones.

Philosophy and Practice:

Sharmila’s creative philosophy emerges from her formative years at Kala Bhavan, where the teachings of Nandalal Bose emphasized a holistic approach to art. As a student, she was encouraged to explore all disciplines—handicrafts, painting, sculpture, printmaking, pottery, and even stagecraft. This guides her in her multi-disciplinary outlook and the multiple mediums she employs while creating her works of art.

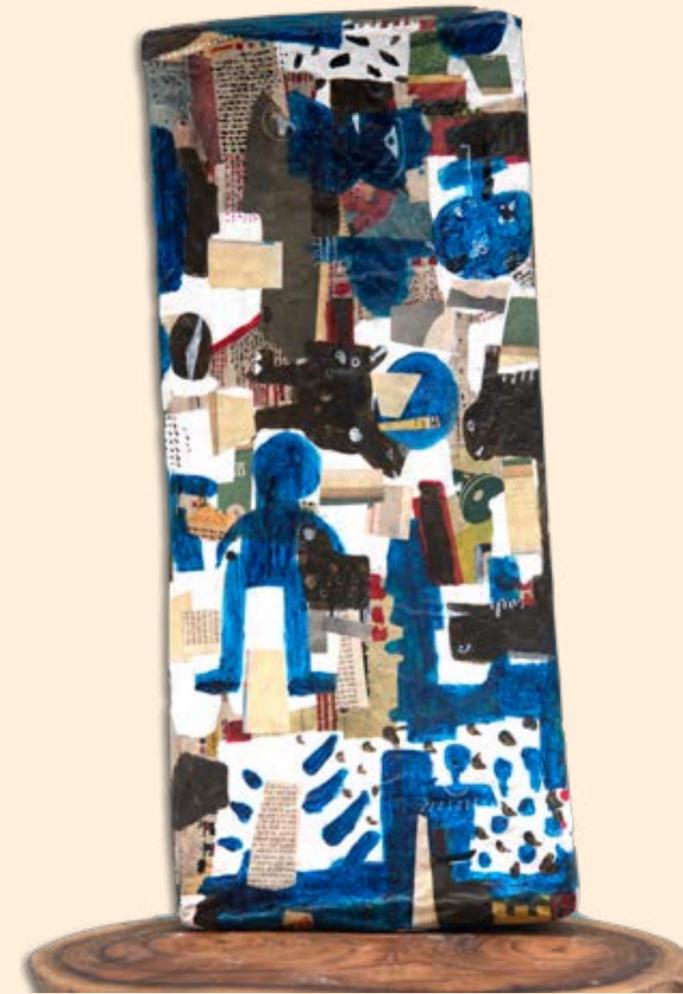
Unaffected by commercial considerations, public exhibitions or critical reception, Sharmila continues her artistic practice with quiet intensity. Her work flows seamlessly alongside her daily life, including household responsibilities and spiritual practice. A devoted follower of Mataji sri Nirmala Devi, founder of Sahaja Yoga, Sharmila’s life and art are imbued with a quiet spirituality, authenticity, and a deep connection to nature and tradition.



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
22 x 11 x 8 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
15 x 9 x 7 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
24 x 10 x 3 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
12 x 2 x 2 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
15 x 1.5 x 1.5 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
12 x 2 x 2 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
28 x 3 x 5 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
27 x 5 x 5 Inches





Untitled (Series: Whisper in Plaster)
Chroma plasterwork
8 x 2 x 2 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
26 x 9 x 4 Inches



The Cow Boy (Series: Whisper in Plaster)
Chroma plasterwork
26 x 18 x 8 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper in Plaster)
Chroma plasterwork
16 x 10 x 6 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper in Plaster)
Chroma plasterwork
17 x 13 x 5 Inches



Durga (Series: Whisper of Paper)
Recycled media sculpture
15 x 12 x 4 Inches



Untitled (Series: Whisper in Plaster)
Chroma plasterwork
17 x 7 x 5 Inches



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Alka Pande, Art Historian, Author, Curator
Saurabh Singhvi, Director, Art Magnum, New Delhi
Renu George, Director, Gallery Time and Space, Bengaluru
Dr. Mandakini Devi, Artist, Independent Researcher & Filmmaker

Team Art Magnum

Bhumika Sharma
Nazia
Robin Mohan
Soumya Garg
Shipra Kushwaha
Deepak

Team IHC

Aditi Tandon
Rashmi Kapoor
Ravinder Rawal
Saurabh Rai
Suprabha Nayak
Tezal Dahiya
Khushal Bhandari

Team Time and Space

Mahima Varma
Neera Gopakumar
Yana Makar

SELECTED READINGS

- Brown, Rebecca M. *Art for a Modern India, 1947–1980*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Dalmia, Yashodhara. *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Delhi Art Gallery. *Deconstructed Realms: India's Tryst with Cubism Catalogue*. New Delhi: DAG, 2025.
- Ghosh, Swati. *Design Movement in Tagore's Santiniketan*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018.
- Ghosh, Ujjal. *Folk, Traditional Art and Crafts of Jharkhand*. New Delhi: IBP Books, 2022.
- Guha-Thakurta, Tapati. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Imam, Bulu. *Tribal Art and Culture of Jharkhand*. New Delhi: Sanskriti Publications, 2011.
- Kapur, Geeta. *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000.
- Mitter, Partha. *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922-1947*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007.
- Mitter, Partha, Parul Dave Mukherji & Rakhee Balaram. *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2022.
- Pande, Alka. *108 Portraits of Indian Modern and Contemporary Art*. New Delhi: Arthshila, .
- Pande, Alka & Mitchell Shelby Crites, et al. *Bhumijan : Artists of the Earth*. New Delhi: Naveen Printers, 2022
- Pande, Alka & Mitchell Shelby Crites, et al. *Roots: Art from the Tribal Heartland of India*. New Delhi: Naveen Printers, 2024.
- Pande, Alka. *108 Portraits of Indian Vernacular and Indigenous Art*. New Delhi: Arthshila, 2024.
- Singh, Kishore, Ed. *The Art of Santiniketan*. New Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2015.



Art Magnum's vision and mission is to showcase South Asian art in its austere authenticity and magnificence on a global platform. Since its inception in 1986, it has been nurturing both the emerging and noted artists to further the cause of championing and patronizing South Asian art.

Its founder Lt Shri Prakash Chand Singhvi was a visionary whose passion and enthusiasm was the driving force behind the gallery. Presently, Art Magnum's enterprising director, Saurabh Singhvi, is skilfully taking his legacy forward. The gallery has been proudly presenting different mediums of artistic expression ranging from the traditional to the modern, and the contemporary and the experimental. Housed at a contemporary space with ultramodern infrastructure located in the heart of South Delhi, the gallery attempts to give voice to the novel and noteworthy talents through a roster of shows that present the news makers of contemporary genre and also the old masters and marvels of Indian art from the pre and post-independence era.

Art Magnum has innovatively kept striving towards new paradigms reroute to its journey, and has achieved multiple milestones and mammoth goals. The firm has successfully organised elite art events at art capitals across the globe including at New Delhi, Dubai, Singapore, etc and has received critical and popular acclaim for the same. The collection of the gallery includes works of M F Husain, S H Raza, F N Souza, Somnath Hore, Suhas Roy, K G Subramanyan, Paresh Maity, T Vaikuntam amongst the others. Going forward, Art Magnum shall act as a catalyst for the talented young artists striving for creative excellence and shall keep inspiring the art aficionado by showcasing the contemporary and the classic path breakers of South Asian art.

-Saurabh Singhvi
Director, Art Magnum





60/2C, 3rd Floor, Indian Oil Complex, Yusuf Sarai, Aurobindo Marg, New Dehli - 110016
Tel # 011-40111991 | studioartmagnum@gmail.com | www.artmagnum.in



2nd Floor, The Guild, 55, Lavelle Road, Shanthala Nagar, Ashok Nagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka 560001
Tel # 07760394808 | team@timeandspace.gallery | www.timeandspace.gallery