

The Buddha as her muse

ART & SOUL Soumya M Nair meets Arpana Caur, one of India's most successful female artists, only to be humbled by her earnest and child-like vigour

Since 1975, she has had 18 solo shows of her paintings. Her works are found in private galleries including the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, Ethnographic Museum, Stockholm, Kunst Museum Dusseldorf, Victoria and Albert Museum London, Glenberra Museum Japan, Singapore Museum of Modern Art. She is also a recipient of the AIFACS award.

I walk in to meet Arpana Caur at a restaurant near Lavelle Road, where she is busy cleaning her brushes to restore a non-commercial mural piece that she created for Bangalore 10 years ago.

Born in 1954 in Delhi, Arpana Caur was brought up by her mother, an award-winning novelist and artist herself, whose influence is evident in her daughter's creations. A self-taught painter, Arpana has drawn inspiration from her mother's writings, Punjabi folk literature, the Pahari miniature tradition and Indian folk-art motifs.

A recipient of the AIFACS award in 1985, today Arpana Caur is one of India's most celebrated women artists. "India is an exciting mixture of the old and new. Rural and urban India coexist in the strangest of ways."

Though her quiet demeanour and soft-spoken nature can prove difficult to assess the great artist, Arpana's paintings speak a thousand words. Her works largely portray issues of social concern such as the environment, the girl child, the condition of women and the growing violence in India. She has been consistently figurative with her work over the years too, with inspiration sources ranging from Kabir to spirituality.

"Punjabi literature has greatly influenced my artistic perspective," says Arpana. "Writers such as Shiv Batahvi, Amrita Pritam, and Krishna Sobti were regular guests at home. I have to admit that I am who I am today, thanks to my roots."

The literature and philosophy of Punjab contributed to the strains of melancholy, mysticism and devotion in her work, while the Pahari miniature tradition provided inspiration for Arpana's manipulation of pictorial space. Despite her diverse influences, however, her subjects remain firmly rooted in the world of women, showing them engaged in commonplace acts such as daydreaming or combing hair.

Arpana is also the only Indian artist to have a public exhibit in Japan. This, she says, came to her completely by shock and has never failed to keep her grounded. "I was invited by the Hiroshima Museum curators to paint a mural on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the nuclear holocaust. When I received the invite by mail, my name had the prefix, Mr. The look of surprise when I introduced myself,



at a later gathering in Japan, to the mayor of Hiroshima brought out a few embarrassed giggles."

Could that have been difficult?

Arpana sashayed into the field of arts around the time Amrita Shergil, Mrinalini Mukherjee and Anupam Sud were breaking into the scene. But the year was '74.

"Fondness for painting or art was, and still is, only a passion. I would like to believe that my contemporaries and I have made the path easier for younger artists to break in but that's sadly not the case. It takes courage and unfaltering dedication to keep at it. India is a long way off from accepting and acknowledging any art form as a serious profession."

Today her paintings support several projects for the underprivileged, including free vocational training in the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature of which she along with her mother, the renowned writer Ajeet Caur, is the founder member.

"While this was started by my mother, my niece, nephew and I try to provide basic vocational training expertise such as stitching, computer typing and handicraft making for the women of Delhi who need that extra income to support their family."

There's very little that Arpana is willing to share about the social causes she supports and remains quiet on a few occasions, allowing me to gush about her achievements. Her real spirit as a quiet, strait-laced artist comes out when she says to me, "I thrive on the sheer ecstasy of painting. I am most happy etching, sculpting or painting about what goes around. The Buddha is my muse."