

Life, death, and the immortal artist within

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Talking to artist Arpana Caur is like opening a book of literature, history, art, religion and environment in one go. Largely self-taught, the artist has constantly painted issues that affect her most. Whether it is Hiroshima, Sikh riots, women, death or environment, they are placed 'in a contemporary urban context for full effect. "I love contemporizing abstract themes," she says. Caur admits to being largely influenced by the legendary Amrita Sher Gil's poetry. "I have been fortunate to get my mother's support throughout my life. She was very liberal for her time as she gave me no name or religion and I was free to choose both!" So didn't she think of the name 'Amrita' as her own? "That would be outrageous! So I decided on Arpana instead," she admits. Needless to say the influence is so strong that noted galleryist Kekoo Gandhi has been calling her 'Amrita' ever since they met!

One of her best paintings, she says, is of *Death* where she has depicted a sinking figure along side a dreamy kite flier. Also, the NGMA Bengaluru has a work that is very close to her heart. "It was painted in 1984 as a reaction to the massacre of the Sikhs. It is titled 'The world goes on' as I depict people going about their daily life in one section while Sikhs were being murdered in the other sections."

Little known to the public are the five large non-commercial murals she has painted in Bengaluru, free of cost. Caur was most elated when she could re-touch the paintings she had made several years ago. "We put tables one on top of the other at Kanteerava Stadium, Venkatappa Gallery and the other places. Ironically the environment mural (Buddha surrounded by whirls of traffic) is especially threatened by traffic congestion." Murals are a way of bringing the gallery to the public, she adds. But isn't the concept of 'public art' missing in this country?



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miniature paintings and even folk art find a place in her expressive paintings. In 'Love beyond measure' Caur has painted the story of the legendary Punjabi lovers Sohni-Mahiwal. "I actually stood-in the river Chenab to experience what Sohni must have felt when she was dragged through it!" she reveals.

The artist has even set up the country's first folk art museum in New Delhi.

Her favourite theme though is painting 'time'.

"The concept of day and night is intriguing. I have never seen artists painting this. I am very conscious of time passing as I have seen people I love, dying."

Caur's paintings support several projects for the underprivileged, including free vocational training, a leprosy home in Ghaziabad, and ration projects for poor

and old widows. "I would also like to bring art to the people as much as possible and maybe that's why I deal with issue-based subjects," she adds.

Caur loves visiting Hampi, Shravanabelagola and Tungabhadra. A mural of Shravanabelagola adorns the Koramangala stadium in Bengaluru.

While it is easy to slot women artists as being feminist, Caur wants to stay clear of tags. "I would like people to see me as an artist — not a woman artist because then it is easy to get slotted," she says.

The new breed of artists are "very brave" according to her. "They are also lucky to be born into an atmosphere conducive to art."

And what was the best part of revisiting Bengaluru? "The high point of my visit here has been to touch up my paintings. I'm going back so fulfilled," she concludes. Arpana Caur was in Bengaluru for the Art Bengaluru festival where she gave a talk on the 36 years of her painting career.



"One per cent should be set aside for public art and we have been fighting for this for ages," she reveals. "But on the other side you have the art summit in Delhi which is very encouraging. Every city needs this."

Punjabi literature, Indian