

A REVOLUTION ON CANVAS

By

Mamta Chitnis Sen

Artist & Writer, Mumbai, India

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INTRODUCTION

What objective is a piece of art? Is it created to suffice one's soul—to inform the inner conscience and praise oneself or sympathize oneself for the accolades which have failed to come by? What is the objective of creating these art pieces? Is it to quench ones thirst in having achieved something wholeheartedly noble, chaste or prized? Or is it simply to show the whole damn world what a clever and talented soul you are? The reasons can be many—or eventually none at all.

For me, the process of creating my works on canvas began between 2010 and 2012, when I was confronted by the death of a close confidant, someone who I deeply loved and respected and the events that unfolded after drove me to immense pain and confusion. Out of this, began my unique journey of self-realization, freedom and direction as an artist of discovery.

THE BEGINNING

Although I had been observing and writing on Indian art since the mid 90s, it wasn't until 2012 that to escape the mourning of my beloved one and on the advice of a friend I officially enrolled in classes at the vast leafy campuses of Sir J J School of Fine Art in Mumbai to understand and learn the process of creating artwork of my own.

Founded in 1857 by a rich Parsee Baron who, under British rule, was keen on expanding art education in India, the J J School of Fine Art continues to be one of the oldest and finest art Institutions in India. Even today, it continues to uphold its legacy of teaching and promoting its unique academic art styles introduced by the British in colonial India.

Inside the vast halls and studios of the Institute, I would think a thousand ideas of how to express the pain and conflicts present in life on canvas. The most prominent of them being that of women and the various ways they tend to get scorned. I discovered I was best at conveying that idea on canvas when left alone to my thoughts.

I enjoyed working long nights the most.

The vast landscapes of Sawantwadi were the easiest to come to mind and soon I was lost in dipping my palette knives into various shades of colour and mixing them on the broad canvas.

The women and their faces unconsciously began taking shape.

Interestingly a majority of my art was brought alive on the dining table placed in my small kitchen. The table where my family dined and I used to chop vegetables was converted into my workplace every night. While the whole family slept, and as the clock chimed midnight my tools—knife, paints and me - would toil away on the canvas trying to bring alive the many stories I had witnessed and experienced of the women in my travels. I loved getting lost in the process of making these creations.

MIGRATION ON CANVAS

I have been touring the vast landscape of western and eastern India for a few years now and it was during one of these journeys that I came across several instances of migration. Farmers facing severe drought or famines in their homes were migrating to cities in search of employment, handing their lands in temporary care of their mothers/daughters/wives.

Although the women were either sole or joint beneficiaries of these lands, they were devoid of any powers to control or execute their ideas—eventually being delegated to the role of caretakers only.

THE WAIT

Sawantwadi, a former princely state and part of the Konkan belt on the western coast of Maharashtra has the highest number of farmers who have almost abandoned their lands and have been working as migrants in neighbouring cities for many years. The women and children left behind by their husbands eventually end up as mere ‘protectors’ of the lands they once toiled in.

These lands end up either being sold off under pressure to the local land mafia or abandoned, empty or left deserted.

The women have no skills or techniques, or are not empowered to make use of their own fertile lands. My paintings, mostly acrylics of canvas, highlight the plight of these women and their circumstances.

This is how 'The Wait' the first of the Sawantwadi series came into existence. While it took me nearly three years to explore the subject, I actually began including the research into my paintings in 2013.

I first noticed the subject of women merely becoming caretakers of their own lands during my travels to the interiors of Maharashtra (while reporting for The Sunday Guardian) specially the Konkan belt. I came across second generation farmers who were opting out of farming in many key areas. In Sawantwadi, large numbers of horticulture farmers preferred desk jobs in 'large companies' than compared to taking up their family profession which they believed was a tedious affair.

Unseasonal rains, too, were another reason for their growing disinterest. Most traditional farming families included newly married sons in their late twenties looking for alternate revenues of income. The escalating price of land in the region was another reason for this switch. Many second generation families in hope of easy money were either selling off their ancestral property or keeping them on hold hoping to get more money for it.

Hence while the men travel to cities, the women were left behind with their kids to either toil on some part of the land to avail government benefits or merely wait on as caretakers. Most women in rural areas, despite being educated up to primary level, were devoid of any other skills or education to convert use the empty land to their benefit. Furthermore local builders would often swindle them of their share while the men were away.

My paintings attempted to highlight all of the above and showcased vast landscapes of the region. The women mostly devoid of features dominate the foreground of the work, either with lunch baskets on their head or with toddlers in tow.

In India, the tradition continues where loyalty of a woman to the man of the house (father, brother or spouse) is expected to be unquestioned until her death. This unexplained rule applies to women irrespective of the class order she may belong to. It has only been a decade since educated women from middle and upper class have knocked on the doors of the courts to seek their rights (whether marital or otherwise) when denied by their own families.

I came across several cases of women farmers from Sawantwadi (incidentally my native land) whose loyalty and respect to the men they loved and adored and vowed to live with forever was often questioned vehemently when they asked for their share in family property or their right to earn a living doing something other than farming through occupation of these lands. Many are not successful in realizing their dreams especially those hailing from the underprivileged sections of the society.

THE RESPONSE

The first of my five works of these women were showcased in a group show at an art gallery at The Prince of Wales Museum in Mumbai. The response was overwhelming. Interestingly three of my five works—Housewife, Sisters, and Off to Fields were bought by a South African family— husband, wife and two kids—who connected with them immediately. Housewife, the painting of a married Indian woman in acrylic devoid of any features highlighted a woman who was still searching for her identity, while Sisters dealt with the loving bond between two sisters who hold on to their love for each other despite leading their own separate married lives. Off to Fields, dealt with two faceless women carrying lunch for their husbands on the fields. The fact that all of the above could be any of the women not only in India but anywhere across the globe was what I realized when the South Africans claimed why they loved it and wanted to put it up in their homes.

The narrative of woman and her plight remained the same across the world. Her hard work towards her family and her aching need to create her own identity appeared to connect a chord with many people wherever I showcased these works, whether it was in India, or in countries like France or Denmark.

In France, the French women found my works to be quite strong and positive and with a political message. My works *In Conversation* and *New Bride* were immediately picked up and continue to find an audience.

SILENT BRIDES

Am I creating a revolution through my canvases? I don't know. But my works are an attempt to highlight the disconnect that continues to exist for women especially the disconnect between them and their dreams. Ironically my dreams of creating my works took shape within the confines of a kitchen. I believe I have in my own way managed to get them out into the world hoping to start a conversation on what actually works for empowerment of any woman who is hoping to achieve her dreams.

Is it education, a good family, a supportive spouse or a flowering marriage? The latter too quite continues to remain a complex issue to be discussed. Which was why, I took it upon myself to create my next series of works on expanding the issue of marriage and the role of the woman in it.

The works 'Silent Brides' were mostly concentrated on rural women especially from tribal communities in India where women irrespective of age have no say in the choice of their partner— the decision is merely taken as a means to survive just another day without poverty. The first phase of my work was displayed at Kolkata's Indian Council for Cultural Relations. I hope to exhibit the entire show at the end of 2016.

CONCLUSION

My paintings of women are devoid of any facial features and are juxtaposed with the landscapes they work in. They too have been appreciated for their unique style by many and the feedback has been overwhelming wherever they have been showcased.

I am often reminded of the famous artist Frida Kahlo and her words "I don't paint dreams or nightmares, I paint my own reality."

Although the key subject may be women and their empowerment, I hope my paintings highlight a reality strong enough to bring a silent revolution to the lives of both men and women and help them to find their own voice and stand up for their dreams.