

ART MUSINGS



SMRITI DIXIT

Back

Images to be embossed
Smriti to be gold foiled.

Cover

SMRITI DIXIT

EXILE FROM SYMMETRY

1st August - 5th September 2007

ART MUSINGS

1, Admiralty Building, Colaba Cross Lane, Mumbai -400 005.
Tel : (91 22) 2216 3339/2218 6071 Website : www.artmusings.net

EXILE FROM SYMMETRY

As I stand among Smriti Dixit's recent mixed-media works, Siddheshwari Devi's sonorous cadences reverberate in my ears: 'Naynan ki pichkari chali re'. In this hori, traditionally sung in northern India during the spring festivities, the heroine is drenched in the jets of colour that emanate from the impish Krishna's eyes. Smriti's works, too, seem to have erupted from the divine lover's eyes: they are characterised by a callisthenics of spurt and stain, tension and release; they breathe sound into half-remembered notes, and make a claim on our visual as well as our tactile attention. As though reading my thoughts, the artist says, "We can touch with our eyes, see with our ears."

Smriti's palette squirts her surfaces with desire, longing, anger and that necessary element with which to build the house of the imagination: despair. Reds and blacks, dialects of gold and white: Why do I insist that Smriti's work is not only about the celebration of life, but also about the hum of lack, the tangle of uncertainty? The artist repeatedly emphasises that, for her, "the process is the art-work". I would describe her compositions, fittingly, as smriti-chitra, memory traces: they encode the ripping-up of paper, the plucking of yarn from cloth, the chain-stitching of braids, the crossing of threads and the maintenance of knots.

Intriguingly, the artist prepares her palette, not by neatly laying out tubes of Winsor & Newton, but by shopping for cloth in a variety of colours and textures; by stitching triangular silk and cotton sacs, and gauze pouches, and filling them with sponge. Some materials are heavy, others light; some absorb light, others reflect it; some are stubbornly stiff, others hang loose and can be shaped at will. Are we talking about the features of cloth or the temperaments of human beings? Smriti, ever the besotted devotee of intuitive significance, remarks without a trace of self-consciousness, "Cloth uses me, I don't use it. I am looking for the soul of the material."

Every stone, leaf and ant is invested with the presence of the divine, for Smriti: in her art, she affirms the pantheistic Bhakti vision of the sacredness of all life, and is preoccupied with the knitting together of a wide diversity of elements. In Kabir-like vein, she recites: "I must stitch everything together, the cow with the grass, grass with hunger, and hunger with grass again." Smriti's process takes her through cycles of excess and agitation to gradual refinement and serenity: through tandava to lasya. Her palette of cloth and thread transits across a spectrum of high-keyed colours, their loudness gagged by variations on white, which acts both as background and as potential.

The artist sticks or stitches her arrangements on a canvas surface, setting it in patterns that both mimic and rupture the grid. For instance, she may organise an array of triangular sacs in horizontal rows – but they follow a straight line only up to a point, toppling unexpectedly and continuing upside-down in their exile from symmetry. The gesture of toppling subverts the symbolism of the triangle, which privileges ascension and fertility. Or then one of the translucent pouches may be clouded by a sudden stain, a harbinger of darkness to come. There is no coy tucking or trimming to this fabric of rapture: Smriti does not conceal the scars of creation; the stitches on her cloth pieces are proudly displayed. The rogue red thread is allowed to hang untamed in a white work, the knots remain undissolved. Each work is an emotional reserve cataloguing the vagaries of fate. It is like a dress turned inside out, holding the crushed and crumpled contours of the body that inhabits it.

Revelling in the messiness and chaos of life, Smriti's works draw upon the moist and dry, the live and decayed residues of ritual spaces within the hubbub of the home and the temple. As a child, she must have thought of the elements of the puja as a set of toys. During festivals, she remembers her mother marking patterns of red and black dots with sindoor and kajal on a layer of cow-dung: the first instruction on grid and dot, traced in vermilion and kohl for a child who would one day turn to abstraction. Imagine the smoke from a dying diya or the smell of sweat mixed with incense and freshly plucked flowers. This synaesthetic experience is doubly amplified in a shrine in a public space. The runnels formed by the daily flow of milk and water on the lingam or the head of an icon smeared with a blast of sindoor, a throwback to ancient sacrificial blood. However, Smriti is intrigued less by the icon and more by the trail of anxious faith that marks the walls and doors of temples. In her album of notations, I find photographs of soot and vermilion marks that devotees have left while wiping their hands on the first available surface as they come back into the everyday world after their encounter with the Divine: vestigial

signs of transient individuals in the house of the Infinite. A master of the upadesa, the teaching story, Smriti says, "From the droppings of the banyan tree, you can tell what kinds of birds live in its massive shade."

Smriti's practice emerges from a full-bodied and sensuous abstraction that extends itself into a variety of media and genres: paintings, ceramics, sculptures, assemblages and installations. To my mind, hers is neither a sunshine abstraction where mandalas are celebrated by rote, nor is it a self-obsessed abstraction that expects its every drip and smear to be treated as a mystical revelation. Smriti experiments constantly with her materials and her vocabulary, and has the courage to confront a grand failure rather than producing works that shelter behind the safety cordon of mediocrity.

"Guru ke vachan rangu tan kapda
Man mudra pehnungi."

Yaa dehiyan ko karu kinjari
Rasna naam ratungi."

"My master's words will colour the cloth
of my body, I'll robe my mind in his sign.

I'll make this body an instrument
and resound with my Lord's name." [1]

The mystic-poet Meera sings of how her limbs become the frets and strings for a melody of ecstatic love for the Divine; this is not far removed from Smriti's conception of the physicality of image-making. The performative gestures that make up Smriti's process owe as much to the lila of unrestrained improvisation as to the tough romanticism of action painting. The M S University, Baroda, from where the artist graduated with a Fine Arts degree, exposed her to a plenitude of languages and styles – certainly those of Kandinsky, Klee, Pollock and Rothko – that she could assimilate into her instinctive articulation of ritual symbols and environments.

Smriti's education in art began even before she left for Baroda – in Bhopal. Her father played the tabla, and they spent many evenings listening to Hindustani classical music as the sun set at Bharat Bhavan. Curiosity led her to the art exhibitions conceived by J. Swaminathan, where contemporary and folk and tribal art were shown side by side as part of the same historical continuum rather than practices separated by the hierarchy of taste. Swaminathan's visionary interventions at Bharat Bhavan were instrumental in breaking down this hierarchy, which privileged art and dismissed craft, for an entire generation of artists and critics. In Bhopal, Smriti was also encouraged by artists like Akhilesh, who, along with Yusuf, Anwar and Seema Ghurayya, practised an abstraction that deployed layering as an important technique, working with the principle of an interplay between opacity and transparency. Above all, the pioneering Indian modernist S. H. Raza acted as a mentor and major influence on all these artists.

Even as an apprentice, Smriti retained her independence of spirit. She would argue with her contemporaries that 'silence' was not the only state in which art could be made. While masters like Raza believe in the isolation of the artist as a prerequisite to reach a state of enlightened focus, Smriti affirms the importance of conversation and the give-and-take of shared domestic spaces. She reminds us that, while in Bhopal, she lived in a house with eight people, two dogs and many friends dropping by. Her art was made in an armature of voices and laughter.

It does not come as a surprise that, unlike many other abstract works, Smriti's are talkative rather than solemn; sometimes they make music and sometimes noise. You could hear Siddheshwari's thumri while standing in front of them, but equally you could hear the ringing of a lota falling accidentally on the kitchen steps. Smriti's art practice is akin to conducting a japa, a form of meditation that involves the repetitive chanting of the lord's name, often while going about one's daily routines. But as she says cryptically, "After a point, when people are chanting,

if you listen closely you can't hear the words clearly." Is this an insight on the blur of variations produced by the process of repetition? The purity of repetition can become formulaic and its own worst enemy. It can be redeemed only by the innovation of blurring – which must be incorporated into the vocabulary of the seeker. A lesson that cannot be ignored by any abstractionist. In Baroda, Smriti's teacher Jyoti Bhatt taught her another vital lesson. Playing devil's advocate, this generous mentor figure early on identified Smriti's greatest strength as a potential weakness: her need to play with an overloaded palette. Bhatt gently set the maximalist in Smriti right by recounting the story of the feast where all the dishes were so rich and appetising that the guests arose from the table afflicted by indigestion.



On her journey from Baroda to Bhopal during her vacations, Smriti would find the landscape of her hometown swishing past her in a blur of colours and textures. Echoing the forms of the 'memory pillars' erected by local people, she decided to make her own five columns, 'Bhopal 400 km', in 1994. Her memory pillars, displayed at the Rabindra Bhavan, Delhi, were non-representational. She took old benches scarred by the travails of time and planted them in the soil like the feathers of a gigantic bird. Painted in primary colours, these benches were covered with ritual elements like husked rice, betel-nut and turmeric. A hollow coconut kernel with a stick decorated with kalava, a ritual thread, appeared as a talisman of the pillar. She wanted viewers to experience these shamanic sculptures in the round: one side of each column was 'live', covered with cow-dung, and the other side was 'dead', roughly painted in white.

After passing out from Baroda in 1994, Smriti used found materials – fruit boxes and the lid of a harmonium – to make customised shrines using cow-kernels, stone and paper. Layers of auspiciousness formed the backdrop arrived at a surface of her choice: the which gave them a rich yellow tone rawness pervades these works, sometimes become illustrative. But rolling-board on which chapatis were transformed into the artist's 'Black recycled in Smriti's art: everyday avatar. Even the objects in the boxes are arranged like 'materials from the same family', like interdependent souls.



dung, rice, vermilion powder, hay, coconut green, red and blue paint implying fertility and to these objects. By trial and error, she fruit boxes were treated with nitric acid which was retained by wax polish. A certain although the ritualistic symbols can they are never lacking in ingenuity. A broken made for a generation of relatives is Moon with an Umbrella'. Everything is objects are given a new lease of life, a fresh

During 1995-1996, Smriti worked in ceramics, making quirky kettles whose only 'function' was to provide joy, humour and mystery. Himmat Shahesque in mood, some were dome-shaped and recalled the Sanchi stupa; in some the lid shot up to become a chhatra to give shade to the gods; and in others the lid was sliced off and a stone was placed inside, like an unsolved secret. The ceramics workshop was a training in patience and refinement. A mercurial personality, Smriti had no choice while working in this medium but to wait for the process to take its own course, intervening only when required. Her ceramic sculptures were accompanied by experimentation in painting. She created a base of ball-clay mixed with acrylic colour and scratched out a wavelike pattern with her finger nails. On this undulating composition, she wiped her fingers, dusted with sindoor, simulating the wipings of devotees on temple walls.



In 1997, Smriti came to Bombay to work with an interior designer and stayed on. Over the next two years, she created a series of eight-inch boxes within boxes, where you could put your hand into a hidden niche and be blessed with a flower or an icon. Ever the choreographer of improvisation, she found herself questioning ideas related to reality and simulacrum, positive and negative space, flatness and projection. From miniature shrines,

she moved to an assemblage made from cloth pieces stitched together. This alluring object, which resembles the red cloth envelope of a musical instrument, is seemingly held in place by the humble brass spoons borrowed from a paanwallah's shop, to keep the cloth edifice from sagging. Smriti also wrapped stones in cloth and used these as elements in larger ensembles. Gradually, she began to evolve a palette of stuffed cloth pieces, which remains her current formal preoccupation.



In 1998, Smriti surprised us once again with another detour: she glued layers of white and black paper together, tearing the surface in some places to reveal the layers underneath. After much meditation on the act of tearing, and some splendid landscapes that grew from unforeseen side-effects of her palimpsest process, the artist thought she had exhausted the possibilities of this project. Not content to be a one-trick horse, Smriti began to make godhri-like quilts from 2000 onwards, stitching layers of cloth together: some diaphanous patches contained votive garlands made of cotton, while in others, pieces of sponge wriggled like sperms. A few of these quilt works morphed into fraying scrolls, some were garlanded with pennants, others were literally configured from shreds and tatters. Her works over a decade display an incredible transitional energy. With the quilts, she had already entered a post-painterly space. And yet, in her 2004 catalogue, she describes these works as 'paintings'. Perhaps she had to make a nominal bow to conventional wisdom, in an art world obsessed with paintings as commodities. Or, to put it another way, she may have tactically deployed her unquestionable position as an academy-trained painter to retrieve forms like the quilt, tapestry and scroll from the dismissed worlds of women's work and the crafts, and privilege them in a contemporary arts context.



In Smriti's 2006 exhibition and the present show, the canvas returns in this nominal avatar. The artist has used it as a base for ensembles of cloth pieces of diverse shape, triangles, pods and circles. In her work, the canvas has already become a superseded pretext, a painted backdrop that could be dispensed with. Perhaps her palette could find another base or frame now; the canvas is a Wittgensteinian ladder that can be thrown away, since she has already climbed it to the next stage of evolution. Similarly, her art has substantially outgrown the abstraction that served as one of its early reference points: this, too, is a ladder that she can drop behind her as she moves onward.

Smriti's recent works are soaked in a Vaishnavite sensibility: the saffron, russet, red and black palette could imply the winter and spring shringaras of Shrinathji, the form of Krishna who presides over the temple-town of Nathdvara, and who is dressed in different costumes that change with the seasons and the times of day. I am thinking, in particular, of a work that has a profusion of orange sacs scattered like flowers on a temple floor, and the one with black sacs that breaks into an overcast sky; also, the white, chain-stitched cascades that are knotted over a canvas, the unopened braids lying like flowers that are about to blossom.

Nancy Adajania

Nancy Adajania is a cultural theorist, art critic and independent curator. She has written and lectured extensively on contemporary Indian art, especially new-media art and its political and cultural contexts, at international venues such as Documenta 11, Kassel; the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM), Karlsruhe; the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein and the Transmediale, Berlin. As Editor-in-Chief of Art India, Adajania developed a discursive space for emergent new-media and global public art practices. She was co-curator for the exhibition 'Zoom! Art in Contemporary India' (Lisbon, April 2004), curated 'Avatars of the Object: Sculptural Projections' (Bombay, August 2006) and is contributing curator to 'Thermocline of Art: New Asian Waves' (Karlsruhe, June 2007). Her essay, 'The Sand of the Coliseum, the Glare of Television, and the Hope of Emancipation' has been recently published in the Documenta 12 book, *Life* (Taschen, 2007). Her archive-installation, 'In Aladdin's Cave,' has been exhibited at 'On difference 2/Grenzwertig' (Wuerttembergische Kunstverein, Stuttgart, February 2006) and 'Building Sight' (Waterman's Gallery, London, 2007).

Notes

1. From a private recital by Siddheshwari Devi, c. 1960 ('Siddheshwari Devi: Poorab Thumri', CD published in their 'Live: 20th Century Baithak Series' by Sangeet Kendra, Ahmedabad, n. D.)



'Krishna Krishna' - 7, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 10, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



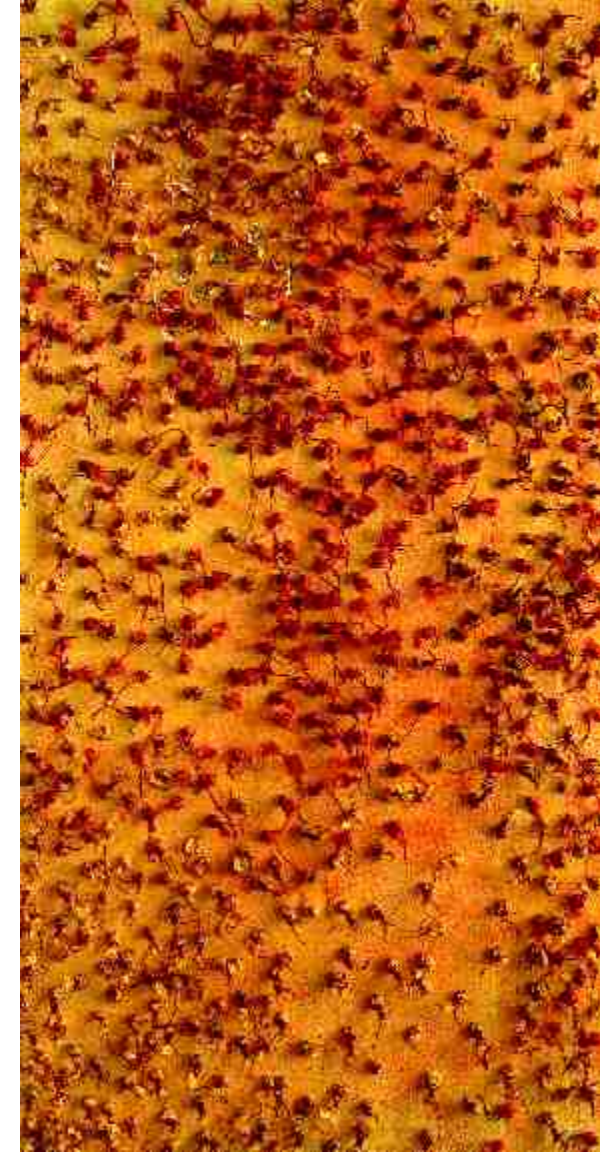
'Krishna Krishna' - 6, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 11, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 8, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 14, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2006



'Krishna Krishna' - 5, Diptych, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 66", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 4, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" X 48", 2007



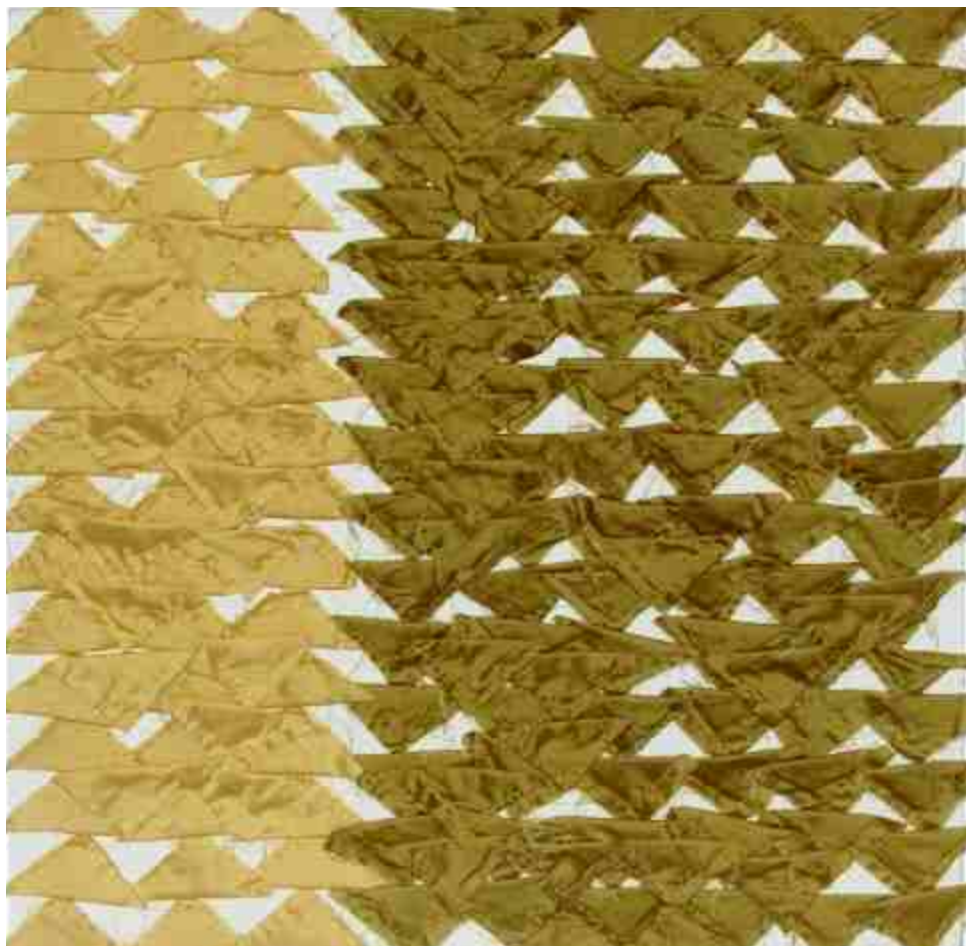
'Krishna Krishna' - 12, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 9, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66" X 33", 2007



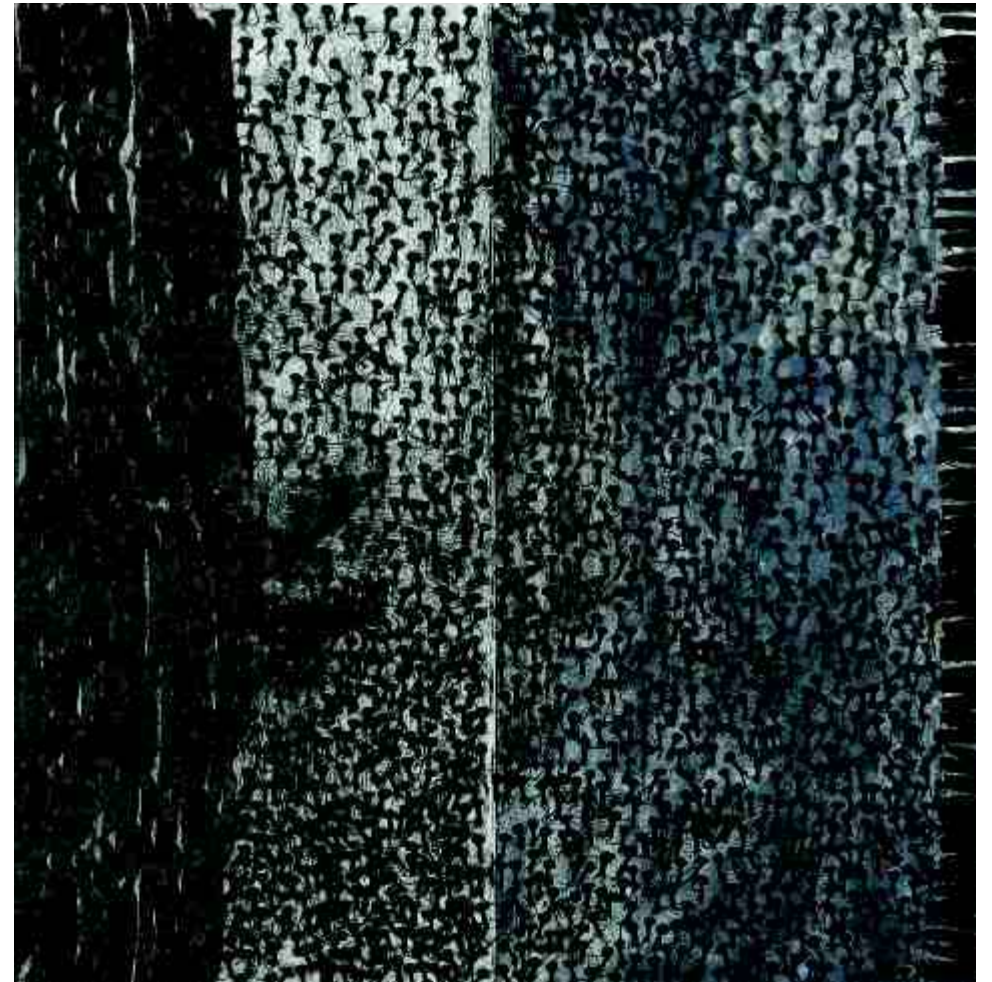
'Krishna Krishna' - 2, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" X 48", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - 13, Mixed Media on Canvas, 33" X 33", 2006



'Krishna Krishna' - 3, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48" X 48", 2007



'Krishna Krishna' - I, Diptych, Mix Media on Canvas, 66" X 66", 2007



SMRITI DIXIT

1971 - Born in Bhopal
1993 - 94-B.F.A in Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda

Solo Exhibitions:

2006 - 'Stitching Together', Aicon Gallery Palo Alto, USA
2006 - 'RealWorld', Apparao Gallery, Delhi
2004 - Art Musings, Mumbai, India
2004 - Apparao Gallery, Delhi, India
2002 - Apparao Gallery, Mumbai, India
2002 - Apparao Gallery, Chennai, India
2000 - Apparao Gallery, Delhi, India
1999 - Apparao Gallery, Mumbai, India
1998 - Apparao Gallery, Chennai, India
1992 - MP Kala Parishad, Bhopal, India

Group Exhibitions:

2007 - Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
2007 - Roop Adhyatma - Delhi, India
2007 - Ayya Gallery - Mumbai, India
2007 - Miami Art Fair, USA

2006 - 'Absolute Abstract Exhibition' Ati Art Gallery, New Delhi, India
2006 - 'Roop Adhyatma', Bodhi Art, Delhi, India
2006 - 'Basant Show', Bodhi Art, Delhi, India
2006 - 'Abstract Expressions', Bodhi Art, Delhi, India
2006 - 'Confluence 2006' Gallery AersIndia, New York, USA
2005 - 'Abstract Visions', Galerie Muller & Plate, Munich, Germany
2004 - 'Exhibition of Paintings', Art Musings, Mumbai, India
2003 - 'Performative Textures' Indian Habitat Centre Visual Arts Gallery, New Delhi, India
2003 - 'Solitude', Visual Arts Gallery, New Delhi, India
2002 - 'Tomorrow's Blue-Chip', The Park Hotel, Chennai, India
2002 - 'Tribute to Picasso' The Guild, Mumbai, India
1997 - Cymroza Art Gallery, Mumbai, India
1997 - Lalit Kala Academy, Delhi, India
1997 - 'Directors', The Air Gallery, London, UK
1997 - Young Artist Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, India
1996 - Vadhera Gallery, Delhi, India
1996 - Ravindra Bhavan, Delhi, India
1996 - Biennale, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, India
1994 - 'Tattooed Space' Ravindra Bhavan, Delhi, India
1994 - Dhoomimal Art Gallery, Delhi, India
1993 - 'Sadbhawna', Bhopal, India
1992 - I.F.A.C.S., Delhi, India
1991 - Do Pe Do Exhibition, M. P. Kala Parishad, Bhopal, India

Option-1



Design : Art Musings Layout : Pavan Java Text : Nancy Adajania Photography : Prakash Rao Framing : Chennaram Printing : Imperial Fine Art Offset Works

www.artmusings.net



SMRITI DIXIT

ART MUSINGS

invites you to
preview & cocktails

EXILE FROM SYMMETRY

recent works by

SMRITI DIXIT

1st August, 2007
7 - 9 pm

1, Admiralty Building, Colaba Cross Lane, Mumbai -400 005.
Tel : (91 22) 2216 3339/ 2218 6071

Exhibition continues upto 5th September, 2007
The show can be viewed online www.artmusings.net

Option-2