

ART MUSINGS

2011
RESONANCE
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SHRAZA • ANJOLIE ELA MENON • SAKTI BURMAN

S H RAZA

ANJOLIE ELA MENON

SAKTI BURMAN

4 - 28 February 2011

ART MUSINGS



THE TRINITY OF ELEGANCE
- Ashok Vajpeyi

Resonance is a show which features recent works by three senior artists Sayed Haider Raza, Sakti Burman and Anjolie Ela Menon. They are being shown together as a group perhaps for the first time. They come to us with works which are fresh, full of resonances of their own individual journeys as well as the times we live in. In an ethos where fast changes have become the ruling aesthetics, they can be seen to be rehabilitating the more patient painterly element. Also, perhaps asserting that change could be easily incorporated within the continuum each one has as an individual painter. For continuum does not inevitably suppress or bypass innovativeness.

There must have been incredible energy, vitality and dynamism, besides remarkable courage and complex imagination, that our moderns remain alive, not only metaphorically but also physically most of them, and creatively active and engaged. Picasso is reputed to have said to Françoise Gilot: "As soon as we saw that collective adventure was a lost cause, each one of us had to find an individual adventure. And the individual adventure always goes back to the one which is the archetype of our times: that is, Van Gogh's — an essentially solitary and tragic adventure". The moderns in India, who came together briefly in the Progressive Artists Group in 1940s, did, each one of them, carve out an individual path, 'an essentially solitary adventure', though it would perhaps not be correct to call it tragic as well.

Sayed Haider Raza, one of such moderns, has just returned to spend his remaining period in India after living and working in France for sixty years. This is a rare example of a painter remaining abroad for six decades and yet remaining a very 'Indian' painter combining in his work an essentially eclectic Indian vision and a French sans plastique. Like his childhood river Narmada of Madhya Pradesh he has been ubhayattirtha, a river with holy places on both the banks. In his case the two banks have been of France and India, of modernism and Indian metaphysics, of fury of colours and meditative tranquility of forms, of essence and celebration, of bursting forth of life and concentrated energy of bindu. These are not, however, dichotomies nor binaries. Raza's art is a site of consonance, a painted and discovered location of intensity and joy of exploration. It is an art which, in rich abundance but with remarkable reticence, celebrates what it formally discovers or unveils. It is, happily, also an art which has not only matured over the years but also one which has deepened itself by exploring new possibilities, new resonances and memories. They, in turn, bring a certain nobility, an unmistakable magnificence to the adventure which began amongst such uncertainties and hardship several decades ago.

For Raza modernity is part of a continuum. It is an element, inevitable and necessary, in tradition by which tradition renews itself, turns Punarnava, new again. While in France he carried a lot of India inside him and in his art. The two new works entitled Bharat and Navbharat painted in 2010, in a manner of speaking, anthologize his earlier forms and show them embodying what he feels is India in its rich and complex plurality. They also assert the continuing relevance of many age old concepts such Om, Shanti and Moksha. While Bharat is a little somber and subdued, significantly, Navbharat is assertive, brighter and playful. The earlier Raza geometry, the gesturals, the inscapes and the outscapes etc. are all assigned in these two works to India. It is an India which has given these wonderfully enduring and amazing gifts to the master. The two works together can be seen to be two cases containing gifts, that is India, to a modern master.

Nature has always been for Raza almost a complete metaphor for life. Perhaps even for art. The other three works are of the self – same repertoire. In two of them the bindu, the irrepressible and iconic image appears once counterpoised with tension as in *Shanti aur Tanav* and in *Heartbeat* as coming on top almost triumphantly after being sub-merged in some kind of an emotional or passionate turmoil. The masterly skill of balancing colours, locating them in spaces where their location yields new meanings and combining the geometric with the gestural are once again in evidence. The work *Winter Breeze* harps back to the pre-bindu phase of Raza's art. In all these three works the placement of white, the location of the unpainted, untouched parts of the canvas indicate a sort of visual relief. Not only a contrasting background but also the ever-present void amidst all the chaotic fury and confusion of reality which surrounds us and indeed gets expressed and explored in the paintings. The white void also points out to a possibility beyond and ahead. The white assumes a positive function: a pointer also to the fact that white contains all colours ultimately. In brief, the five works are works of a modern master which, once again, let us delight in a unique vision of life and art and instruct us to see more intently, more carefully and more imaginatively. The magic of the modern remains and returns in pleasurable and indeed surprising ways.

Anjolie Ela Menon draws in art from diverse cultures including Indian, Greco-Roman and Byzantine traditions. She has been placing the utterly ordinary and the popular in contexts which are recognizably classical thereby creating rich and creative frictions. A bird in a cage, two goats with a woman and a boy, an item girl, a face of an ordinary woman etc. are images which come from the ordinary daily life in India. But they are embellished, (she terms embellishment as “the essentially feminine need”), in such a manner that they seem to reveal both elegance and intensity of the ordinary without in any way romanticising the pain, suffering and drudgery of everyday life. They look like icons – one way recall her iconic works of the earlier period around the Christian themes – but these icons are not devoted to the divine or the royal: they iconise the utterly, simply human. It is as if Anjolie Ela Menon is paying a visual homage to those, who are likely to go in our glittering and overcrowded times unnoticed. Art, in any case, at its most intense moments brings to notice sensuously the act of living surrounded as it is by a number of objects, big and small, which constitute the fabric of everyday life. Anjolie in these works goes on to rediscover the enduring beauty as distinct from either prettiness or glamour of the ordinary human beings and their equally ordinary surroundings. This then is a deeply humanizing art: it makes us face and see the conventional limits of our perception both in life and in art. These are not loud eloquent works: they seem to be rooted in some sort of a melancholy, a beautiful sadness. They are beautifully sad and movingly gentle.

To move to Sakti Burman's works is to enter world of enchantment, a dream-world, a world whose lost charm is being rehabilitated through fantasy. The fantasy is narrative. More than showing it is telling us something we might have forgotten of our own world. It is a world, in a way, renarrated. Indeed, rearranged with bits of legends and myths, of fragments of racial memories, parts of earlier art and art-practices. It is, in a sense, putting together, selecting elements from various and varied sources and weaving them into new narratives. The narratives resonate with the past but they also reflect the present. They fabricate a simultaneity. They give the appearance and feel of frescos but are indeed paintings. The boldly romantic and the apparently classical come together in the painted narrative, each illuminating the other.

Sakti Burman would perhaps not like to be described as a story-telling painter, though homo sapiens as a species are marked by the unique trait of story-telling. We are all, in some sense or the other, stories being told to each other. But Sakti Burman is not trying to tell you a tale with a moral or a fable of some wisdom. He is playing with forms, characters, evocations and memories, images and symbols, icons and legends, to create and hold forth visual narratives. They are there to delight you with their formal ingenuity and inter alia to remind you that we all exist not merely in the real world but also in the imaginary world. More than any other living beings it is humans who live both in reality and imagination and more often than not, simultaneously.

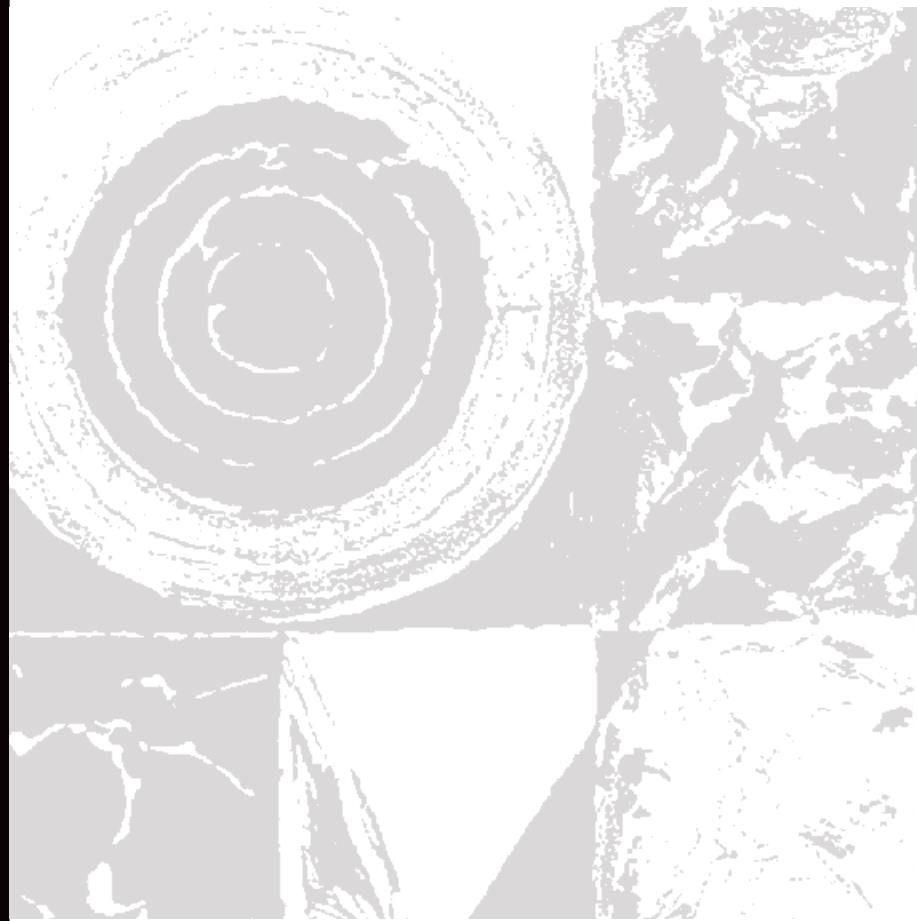
Sakti Burman apart from narrating also plays somewhat gleefully with the characters that he puts together on a canvas. It is a kind of Leela- a sort of a theatrical spectacle which cuts across time and space. The spectacle is woven through something like a circus in which both kinds the human and the divine, in fact also the animal spheres are brought in close proximity with each other. While Krishna dances in the work *Dancing Krishna* he is shown to be doing so on a peacock holding a serpent with a human head in one hand and his famous flute in the other. Two modern looking characters are also around. In another work the peacock reappears with a character, a boy with a flute-like instrument in his hands and three characters picked up from three unrelated backgrounds, again, are around. In the work *Devi and the Looking Glass* the goddess sits on the back of a goat with a human and bearded head while she holds three looking glasses in three of her four hands. Again, there are characters around in inexplicable movements having both modern and medieval features. The backgrounds in all the works are meticulously painted giving the impression as if these works are frescoes on walls rather than paintings on canvases. The well-known 'marbling' effect of Sakti Burman is much in evidence which also contributes towards making these works deliberately weathered and old rather than fresh and contemporary. Reality here is dreamt rather than reproduced or reflected. In other words, here is art picking up fragments of reality from across time and space and forging them into a new reality.

All the three artists have one common element. Raza has returned to settle in India after spending 60 years in Paris and Gorbio. Sakti Burman has been living in Paris for a long time now. Anjolie Ela Menon studied art in Paris early in her career. The influence of France on all the three has taken different directions except that they do share a certain sophistication, unmistakable refinement in their artistic approaches and styles. They are, in a way, a trinity of elegance. They are also some of our most senior artists: Raza nearing 90 years of age, Sakti Burman turning 75 and Anjolie crossing 70 recently. But they have taken three different paths. The richness of this plurality is overlaid by a ceaseless flow of energy. The three are painters of vision, substance and power. They have gained maturity which is relevant and still full of vibrancy.

Ashok Vajpeyi, an eminent Hindi Poet and critic, has held various important positions including Vice-Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi International Hindu University and Chairman of Bharat Bhavan Trust. He was also the Trustee of Indira Gandhi National Centre of the Arts, Member of Indian Council of Cultural Relations and Executive Board Member of Sangeet Natak Akademi.

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Having a number of publications to his credit, he has also won Dayavati Modi Kavi Shekhar Samman in 1994, Sahitya Akademi Award in 1994 and Kabir Samman in 2006. He is currently Chairman of The Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of Art).



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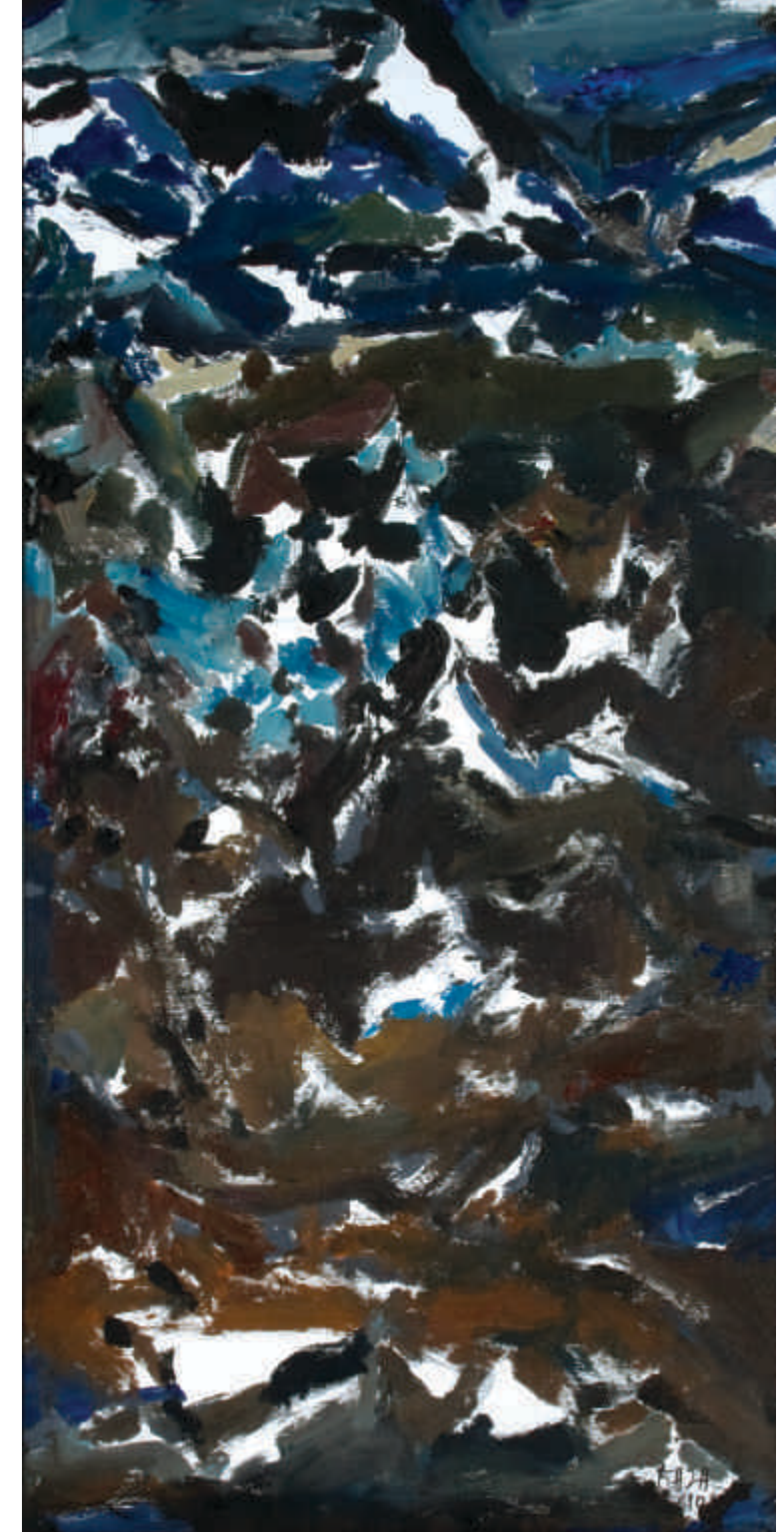
Navbharat
39" x 39" • acrylic on canvas • 2010



Heart Beat
31" x 16" • acrylic on canvas • 2005



Winter Breeze
32" x 16" • acrylic on canvas • 2010



Tree

16" x 16" • acrylic on canvas • 2008



Shanti aur Tanav
47" x 24" • acrylic on canvas • 2007



Bharat
39" x 39" • acrylic on canvas • 2010





S H RAZA

(1922, Babaria, India)

Raza studied painting at the Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai from 1946 - 48. Founder member of the Progressive Artists' Group, he went on a scholarship in 1950 to the Ecole National des Beaux-Arts in Paris till 1953.

Raza's work has the mystic aspects of Hindu philosophy. His images are improvisations on an essential theme: that of the mapping out of a metaphorical space in the mind. The 'Bindu' is now more of an icon, sacred in its symbolism, and placing his work in an Indian context.

Raza has participated in various landmark exhibitions including the Venice Biennale, 1956; Sao Paulo Biennale, 1958; John Moore's Exhibition, Liverpool, 1958; First Triennale, New Delhi, 1968; Salon De Mai, Grand Palais, Paris, 1989, International Biennale e Dakar, Senegal, 1992, and Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan, 2000.

His works are in several important collections all over the world including the Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris; Musee de Grenoble; Musee de Menton; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; Baroda Museum, India; Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, India; National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan; and the Peabody Essex Museum, Massachusetts. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1981 and the Padma Vibhushan in 2007 by the Government of India.

The artist lives and works in Paris and New Delhi.

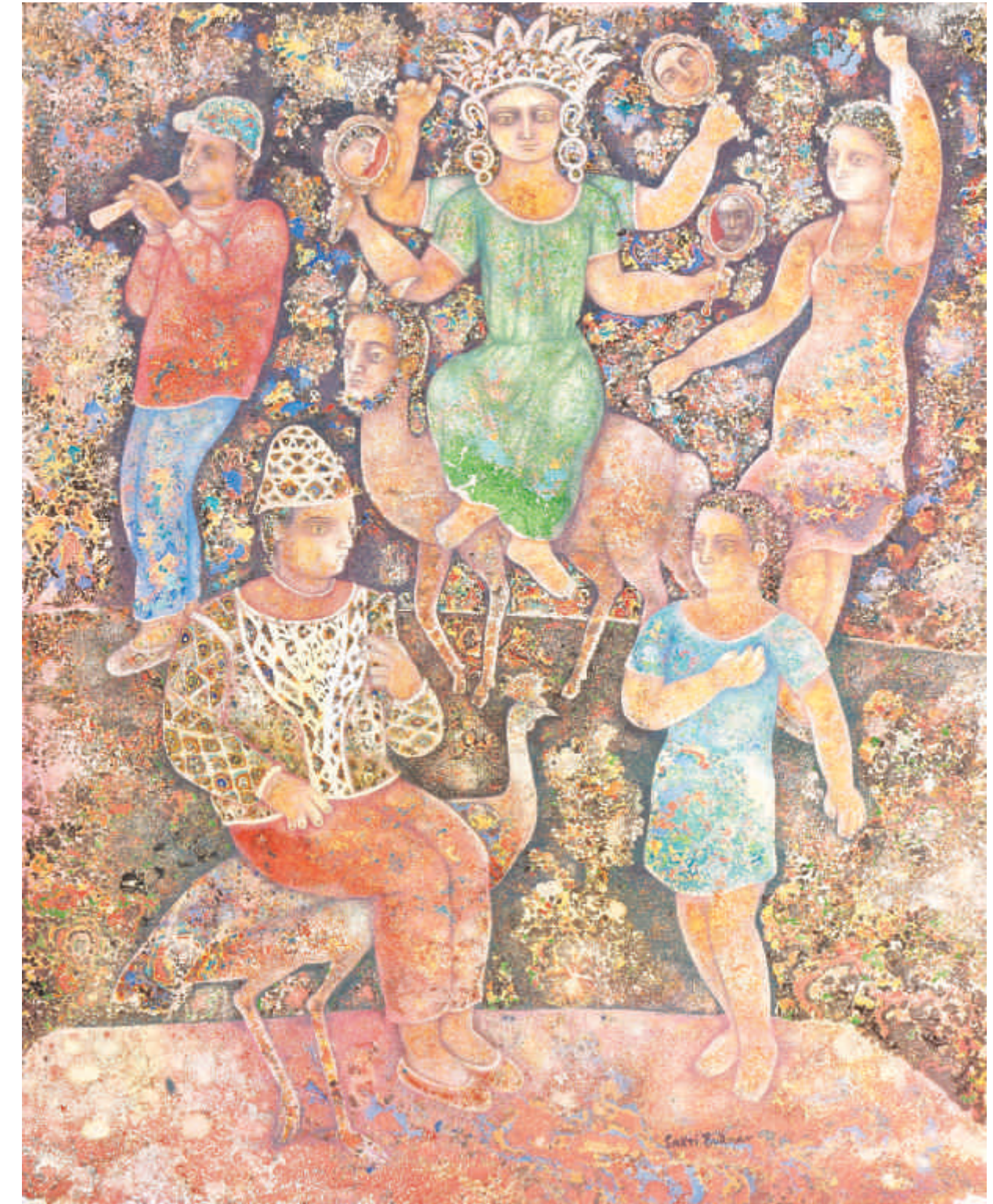


SAKTI BURMAN

Blossoming Jasmine Leading to a Dreamland
51"x 64" • oil on canvas • 2010



Devi and the Looking Glass
36" x 29" • oil on canvas • 2010



Dancing Krishna
25" x 21" • oil on canvas • 2009



Durga and Nature Abundance
51" x 38" • oil on canvas • 2010





SAKTI BURMAN
(1935, Kolkata, India)

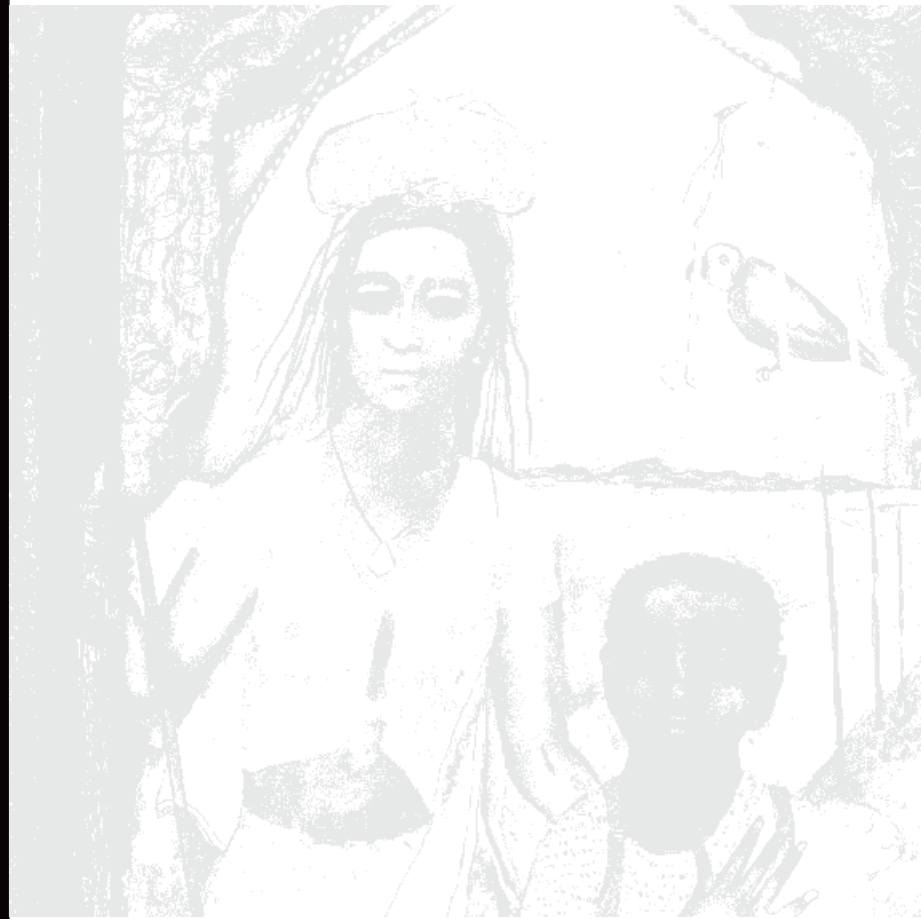
Burman studied at the Government College of Arts & Crafts, Calcutta in 1956, and thereafter at the Ecole National Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Paris.

Burman's travels to Italy and exposure to its Renaissance fresco paintings have influenced his evolution. Sakti skillfully blends the Italian and classical Ajanta cave murals in India to create a world where fantasy, fable and poetry coalesce and flowers, trees birds and imaginary anthropomorphic creatures co-exist in perfect harmony.

Sakti Burman has exhibited extensively all over the world, including landmark exhibitions Pouchkine Museum, Moscow, 1975; Freud's Interpretation of Dreams, with Marc Chagall and Salvador Dali, Vienna, 1999. He has also held several solo exhibitions all over India and abroad.

His works are in several important collections including National Gallery, New Zealand, Musée de la Ville, Paris; National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, New Delhi; Lord & Taylor, New York, Ministry of Culture, Paris; Musée Denon; Musée Rapin; and Bibliothèque Nationale Ville d'Eaubonne. Burman has received several awards including the Médaille d'Argent de Montmorency, Prix des Etrangers, Cole des Beaux Arts, Paris, Prix de la Ville de l'Isle-Adam, and Médaille D'Or, Salon des Artistes Française, Grand Palais, Paris.

The artist lives and works in Paris, France.



ANJOLIE ELA MENON

The Conjurer
65" x 31" • oil on canvas • 2009

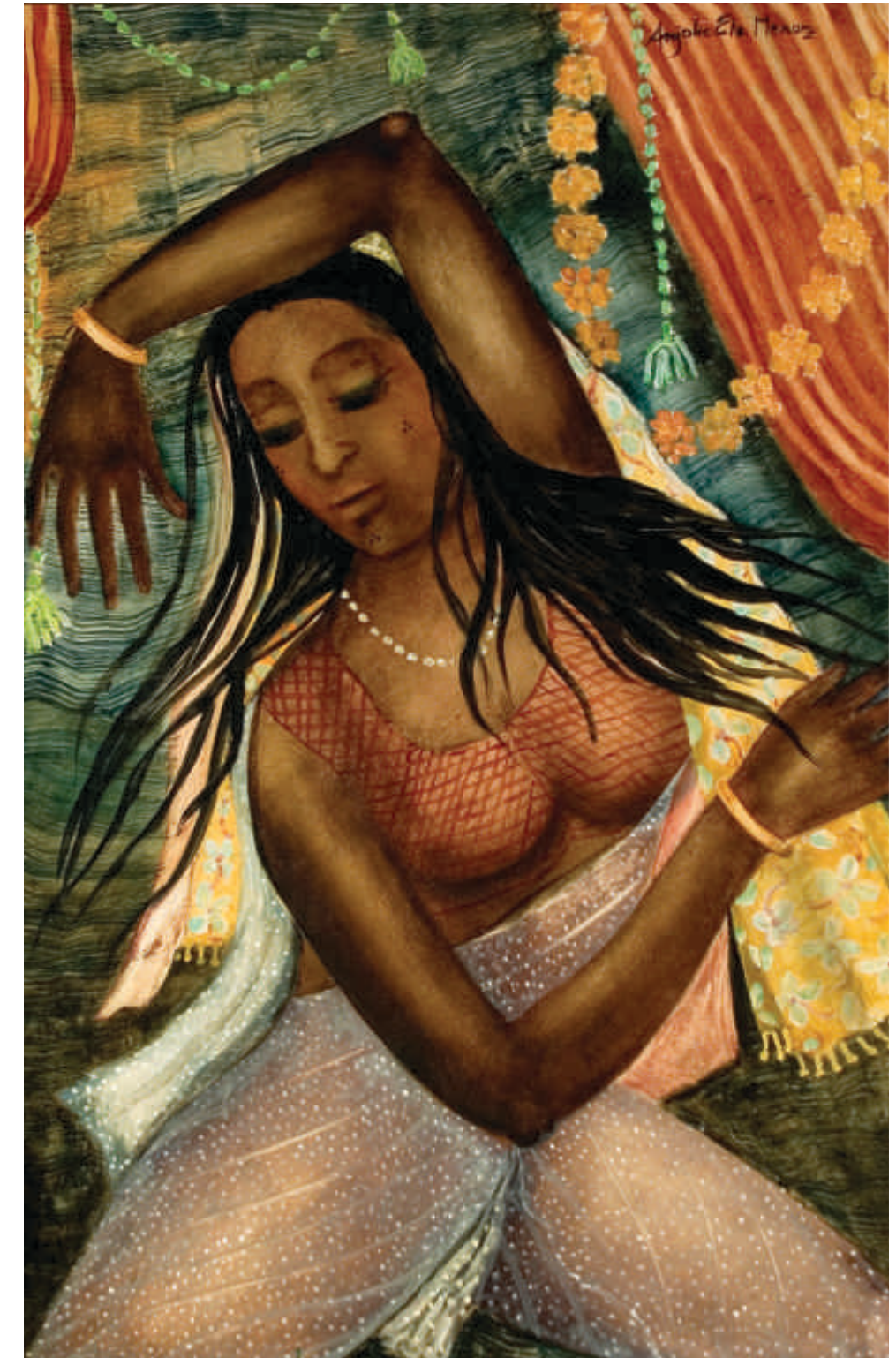


Parsonale
56" x 31" • oil on masonite board • 2010



Item Girl

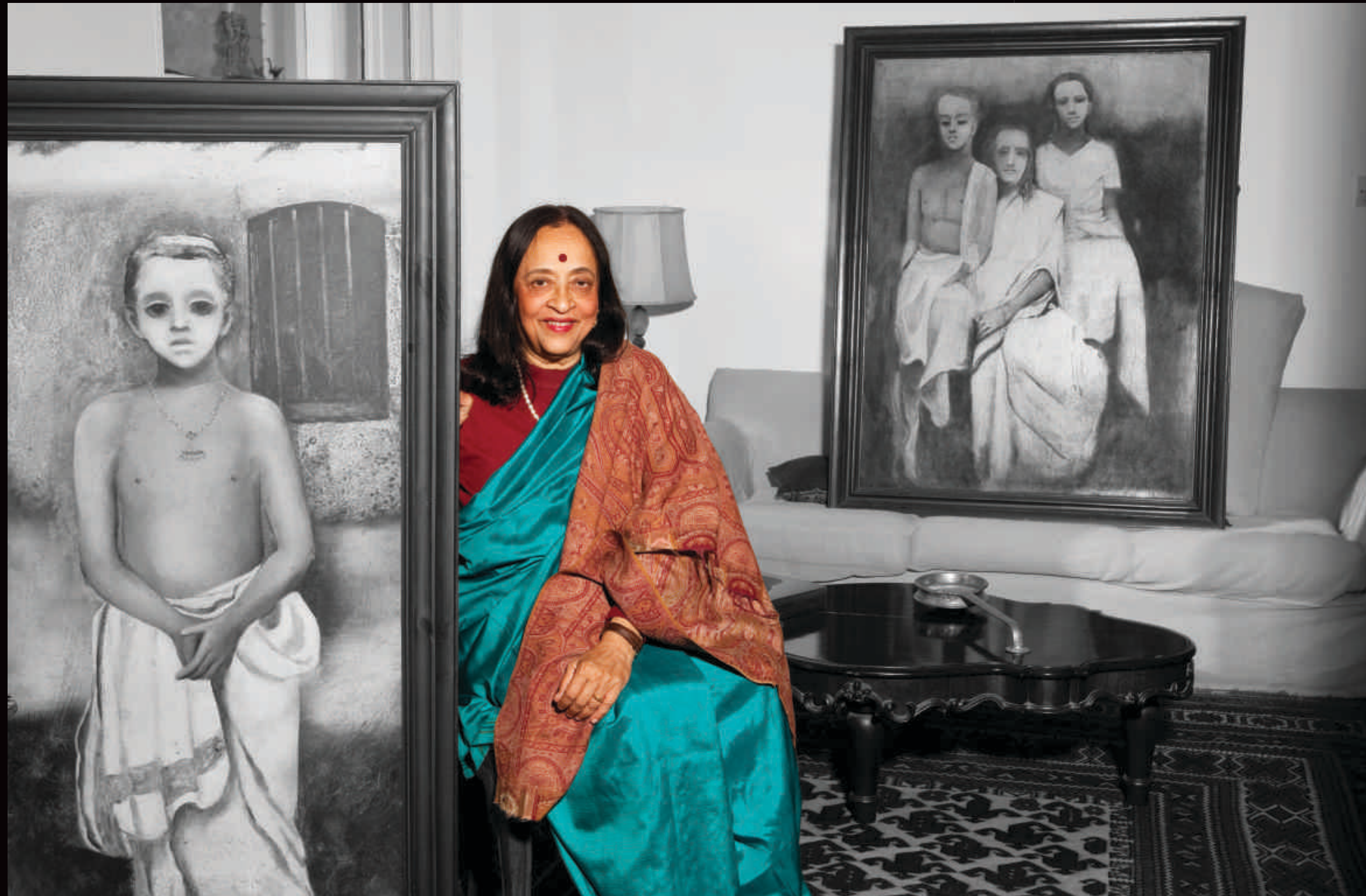
36" x 23" • oil on masonite board • 2007



Freefall

58" x 39" • oil on canvas • 2011





ANJOLIE ELA MENON

(1940, Asansol, India)

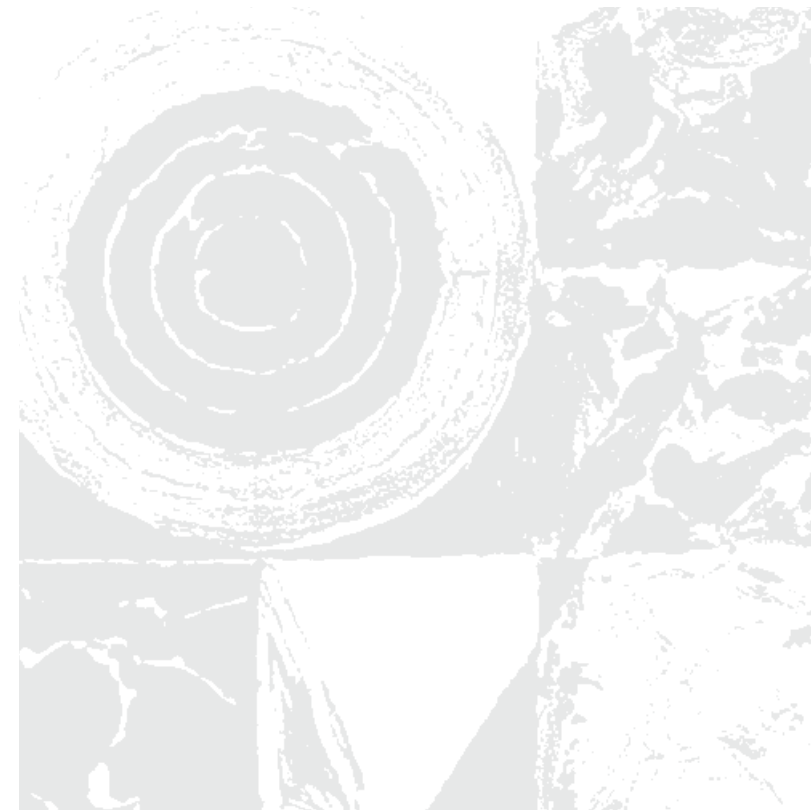
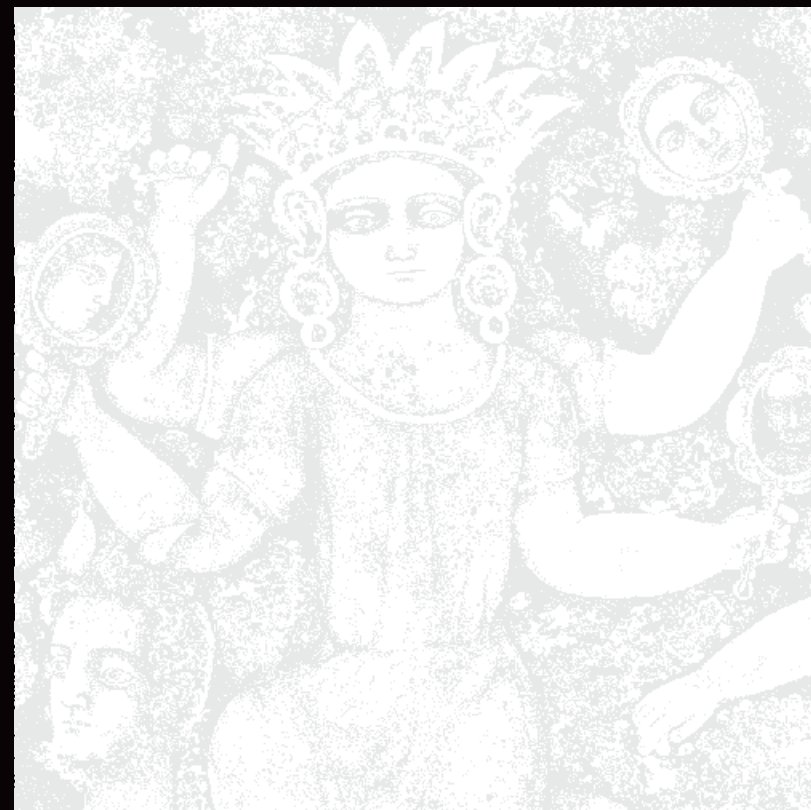
After a brief spell at the JJ school of Art in Bombay, Menon worked and studied in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1961-62 on a French Government scholarship.

Menon is well known for experimentation and innovation, and in an exhibition held in New York, in 1996, Menon effected a major change in medium being the first Indian painter to create computer-aided images resulting in a permutation of visuals from her own earlier paintings. Menon's innovations, particularly her engagement with kitsch have invariably influenced younger artists, leading to several new trends in the practice of contemporary Indian art.

She has had over thirty-five solo shows in India and abroad. She has represented India at the Algiers Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennale, and three Triennales in New Delhi. In 2002, a retrospective of her work was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India.

Her works have been acquired by several museums as well as public and private collections all over the world including the National Gallery of Modern Art, and Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi; Benjamin Gray Museum; Peabody Essex Museum; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; Fukuoka Museum, Japan.

The artist lives and works in New Delhi, India.



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