



Reena Saini Kallat, *Cleft*. Photo courtesy: Chemould Prescott Road.

That same seamless melding of lives comes to the fore esoterically in *Cleft* (2017), a panoply of animals great and small, familiar and unknown, weird and ordinary. These are strange hybrids that cross the horizons of species and the expected, purportedly aiming to unite by merging forms. A kind of Noah's ark of strange creatures great and small—a panda-tiger, stag-lion, snake-crocodile, evoking Indian myths describing the origin of the universe. Can things be reset? Will humankind be able to create a new and better tomorrow? Relook at the world as it is now, throw everything into a blender and let it spit out whatever results ... who knows! This one reflects a long-term concern for the world as it is becoming that Kallat has shown in so many of her works. The colours are light and happy, the mood that ensues after a little thought is anything but, especially in today's context of climate degradation, violence and the human condition.

There is more to humanity and community than sharing blood—or indeed, shedding blood. There is also change that comes with division ... or doesn't. *Shifting Ecotone-2 (The Teesta River)* (2019) harks back to the concept of borders that move with time and the local socio-political dynamic, with landscapes that change as peoples do. The water bodies that often form convenient borders between nations also shift course, almost like a jigsaw puzzle. And while human residents may perforce have to obey the rules made by man, the flora and fauna of the region have different plans, varying routes that they travel to find food, a home or a family. Biodiversity is the focus here, with a lesson for communities that stay alienated or perhaps learn to co-exist.

And tying the whole thought behind the collection together is the eponymous piece that is seemingly a set of eye charts, the Snellen tests used to measure vision. These are usually used to check for near-sightedness, myopic views of the world, which is entirely appropriate in the current context. Kallat used the preambles of the constitutions of seven pairs of nations that are in conflict with each other to depict the lack of sight of those who would wage war rather than live in harmony. The promises made to the people of the nation's form pyramids with disjointed letters and series of dots that resemble Braille notations but really signify nothing except blindness to values such as democracy, freedom, justice, equality, truth, and ethics. These are true-to-life 'Blind Spots' (2018–19) that blare loud

and clear in today's obscurantism and blurred reality of uncertain futures and messy political leadership.

In view of the world as it is now, Kallat's show makes perfect sense. It could become just a commentary on life's downs as contrasted to a more idealistic possibility, or it could act as a wake-up call that joins so many others ringing clarion across the world. Whatever it may be for whoever sees it, it has an important message to convey, a message that everyone needs to listen to ...

Reena Saini Kallat: *Blind Spots/Scotoma*, 30 November–28 December 2019, Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai.

04 / D E L H I

'The Listening Eye: Retrospective Show of Gopi Gajwani'

Rahul Kumar

Can a painting be 'heard'? When one encounters the works of artist Gopi Gajwani, it is not difficult to experience the whispering strokes of charcoal and paint. The confident vibrancy conveys the assuredness of their being, yet there is a sense of contradicting fragility, a layer of calm and subtle seduction. While there was an interest in the arts, to make it a lifelong vocation was not the preferred choice for Gajwani.

'The reason I got into art was that I was a complete failure in studies,' admits Gajwani with a smile as we sip our tea at the



Gopi Gajwani, *Untitled*, Charcoal on paper, 13.25 x 12.5 inches, 2015. Photo courtesy: Gallery Exhibit 320.



Gopi Gajwani, Canvas, 37.25 x 35.25 x 2 inches, 2007. Photo courtesy: Gallery Exhibit 320.

India International Centre, New Delhi. His brothers, he says, were exceptionally brilliant and that further became cause for worry of his parents. They got him admitted to Delhi College of Arts, then at Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, with the hope that he would be able to earn a living, even if it was through a teaching job at a primary school, or by designing cinema posters.

Gajwani passed out in 1959 after a five-year comprehensive program where in the final two years he specialised in Applied Arts. And then began his long struggle to earn the daily bread. 'To sell a painting was out of the question in those days. I, along with all my friends, stood in long queues at the Employment Exchange; we were willing to take up any job at that time,' he says. For several years, the only source of income for him was through ad-hoc assignments to design exhibitions at the Trade Fair. It is here that he stumbled upon a role with the American Pavilion of the fair, that although offered a handsome salary but was a temporary role. Gajwani worked here for several years and quit his fulltime job in 1995. He never looked back.

By now, he had concluded 15 one-man shows. His interest in non-representational depiction that dates back to his first exhibit in 1966. 'I do not know the origin of my interest in minimalistic abstract works. I do remember distinctly seeing a traveling show of art from the USA, where for the first time I saw in-person a work by Rothko. I almost froze in front of that work. It was a black-on-black canvas and the different tones revealed only on close engagement with the work,' he reminisces. This experience probably became a turning point for Gajwani at an impressionable age. It opened a whole new world of possibilities in context of his own art.

He recalls that he aced realistic paintings in college, but never desired to make figurative works or landscape studies. He developed his unique language to express deep emotions, especially during the hardships of unemployment and not

able to make ends meet. 'Abstraction became my language of comfort, though, for the viewer to appreciate the work, they have the burden to understand the language,' he adds. Gajwani fondly remembers an incident when two women entered the gallery at his ongoing show and walked through briskly, talking loud enough to be audible. They mocked the works for its simplicity, till suddenly one of them held back the other in front of one canvas. 'Seeing them 'arrested', I felt I had succeeded in my work,' he says.

Gallery Exhibit 320 presented Gajwani's retrospective of works from over five decades, in the recently concluded show titled 'The Listening Eye'. When Rasika Kajaria, the director of the gallery, called Gajwani, he was surprised at the possibility of a retrospective. 'Rasika was determined and sure. When she visited my studio, she herself went into the storage area to see my old works. Some of them even I had forgotten about,' adds Gajwani. 76 canvas and paper works were installed in various sections, creating exhibitions-within-the-exhibition to allow viewers to experience the depth of Gajwani's practice. Each decade had an underlying character and juxtaposing the works from each time-period created a sequential flow. This marked Gajwani's 25th solo exhibition. 'I was most amazed to see the show come together, and my ultimate delight was to see a 1978 painting titled *Rising Illusion* on the invitation and catalogue for the show', he says.

When he is asked to 'explain' his work, Gajwani says that it is meant to be enjoyed (or not). The clash of colours and stretch of a stroke is akin to an *alaap* of a classical singer. There is nothing to explain.

'The Listening Eye: Retrospective show of Gopi Gajwani', 23 January-15 March 2019. Exhibit 320, New Delhi.

05 / DELHI

Seema Kohli's 'A Circle of Our Own'

Shaista Anwar

'I, Lalla, entered the gate of the mind's garden and saw Siva united with Sakti. I was immersed in the lake of undying bliss. Here, in this lifetime, I've been chained from the wheel of birth and death. What can the world do to me?'

— Lal Ded, 1300s

Cutting across faith and caste people have been flocking the Nizamuddin Basti in Delhi. They have associated the place with a spiritual quest, including seeking respite from their misfortune. Some come for relief from physical ailments and some others for just blessings from the Sufi saint. The whole area is filled with graves of respected people like Muhammad Shah Rangila, Jahanara (daughter of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan), Amir Khusro, Rahim Khan-e-Khana, Mirza Ghalib,