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Navigating nation, signifying Sikhism: The work of Arpana Caur

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ABSTRACT

This article situates the artwork of Arpana Caur within national and global contexts through such topics as the nature of the aesthetic process for Caur, the relations among affect, activism, and politics in her life and work, and the ways in which Indian art can be supported and made more visible on the Indian and global scales. The article presents the artist's views – the longest and most in-depth she has given to date – on topics central to her work, including Sikhism, Buddhism, Kabir, feminism, human rights, environmentalism, and the nature of time. This piece explores in particular how art can represent the timelessness of spirituality alongside the exigencies of contemporary issues and tragedies, such as communal violence. Central throughout this article is the concept of nation, exploring how an artist can represent nation both aesthetically and politically, and the ways in which nation can be both attractive and challenging.

1. Introduction

Born in 1954, self-taught, and among the most distinguished and acclaimed artists in India, Arpana Caur has a distinctive style that addresses diverse subjects and issues, including religion, the environment, communal violence, social injustice, and the nature of time. She is the daughter of the renowned writer Ajeet Cour, author of the autobiography *Khanabadosh*, published in English as *Pebbles in a Tin Drum*. Caur and her mother founded the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, a multi-story building in southern New Delhi which houses a non-profit gallery, a museum of their collection of tribal and folk art, and a vocational school. The top floors of the building house Caur's studio and residence.

Caur's works are displayed by leading galleries in India and around the world. Within India, her work is at the Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh, the Jawahar Kala Kendar in Jaipur, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, and the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai. Outside of India, Caur's work can be found at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the Brooklyn Museum in New York, Cartwright Hall in

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Bradford, the Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm, the Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art, the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museum of Modern Art in Singapore, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Boston.

In addition to her paintings, Caur has produced several non-commercial murals (Figure 1). She painted the first two in 1981 at Pragati Madan, New Delhi, for the Goa and Himachal Pavilions. She completed another mural on the theme of the environment, in New Delhi in 2000 near India Gate, in collaboration with the German artist Sönke Nissen-Knaack. Caur and Nissen-Knaack also collaborated in 2000 to produce a mural covering a 50 × 50-foot wall in Hamburg (Figure 2). Caur also produced five non-commercial murals in Bengaluru for the Roerich Centenary in 2004 (Figure 3).

Outside of painting, in 2009 Caur produced four large sculptures within eight months of the destruction of an ancient forest near her home, the only forest in south Delhi, with 30 acres cut to make way for a six-acre stadium. The four sculptures include the six-foot brass piece *Tree of Life*, a large tree with a scissor in the trunk (Figure 4). The other three pieces – *Cosmic Dance*, *Threatened*, and *Crack* – all explore divinity. Not only has Caur produced artwork reflecting the destroyed forest – which includes paintings, such as *Prayer for Trees* – but she and her mother also took the case to court, and won. Nine thousand trees are now being planted in the area. In one of her recent works, she stitched thick red thread into a painted 'wound'. She has also used spray in two recent works, to symbolize the effulgence of day and light. In March 2013, she held a solo exhibition at Gallery Veda in Chennai. Entitled 'Painting is Not Dead', the show affirms the power of painting in the wake of the rise of new media, such as digital art (Figure 5). The show includes an eponymous, interactive installation featuring a hospital bed surrounded by drips and large paint-filled syringes. The bed lies in front of a chalkboard that invites

Figure 1. Arpana Caur, mural on outer wall of SARRC Secretariat Building, 2009, 16 ft × 16 ft, Kathmandu, Nepal. Photo courtesy Arpana Caur.

Figure 2. Arpana Caur and Sönke Nissen-Knaack, mural, 2000, 50 ft × 50 ft, Hamburg, Germany.

visitors to contribute text and images. Apropos of the vitality and endurance of painting in her life, Caur's latest series is *Day and Night*, in which she concentrates on her favourite theme: the ephemerality of things and how to capture and defeat time (Figures 6–8).

My conversations with Arpana Caur included meeting in her top-floor studio, with sunlight suffusing the high-ceilinged, airy room which opens onto an expansive terrace giving unobstructed panoramas of south Delhi. Large canvases – some works completed, others in progress – lay slanted against the walls, their angles complemented by the circularity of work stools fashioned from tree trunks and the cans of paint and brushes dotting the pastel green-grey polished stone floor. Her studio is an inner sanctum, a haven for an artist who prefers the joy of silence over the circuit of receptions and parties. I was privileged as well to accompany Caur on a visit to her guru, just outside New Delhi, where I noticed delicate decorations she had painted on the temple walls, small peacocks and deer which echo those that appear in her paintings. Visiting this temple, attending her Saturday reading group at the gallery for discussions of the late philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi's *I and Thou*, and observing the gracefulness with which

Figure 3. Arpana Caur, mural on outer wall of Hebbar-Roerich Museum, 2004, Bengaluru, India.

she comports herself, all showed me Caur's moral rectitude and commitment to social justice. Her work transforms affect into activism by fearlessly representing some of the most socially and politically charged issues and tragedies of contemporary India, such as the massacre of Sikhs in 1984, the violence of rape, and the oppression of widows. Perhaps the word 'activism' cannot translate the lifeworld of Sikhism that informs Caur's spiritual, social, and political consciousness. It is the Sikhism that inspires her to dedicate 90% of her earnings to her immediate community, blurring the distinction between self and other, between self and community. It blurs too the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent, translating timeless spirituality into the exigencies of the present. In the piece that follows, Caur and I pursue the many dimensions of nation, affect, and activism that so deeply animate her life and art. This is the longest and most in-depth interview Arpana Caur has given to date.

2. Representing India

Manav Ratti: For many years your work has captured some of the most striking facets of life in India: its politics, its religions, its social transformations. Why don't we begin by discussing your relationship with India? In what ways, however general or however specific, do you see yourself connected to the country?

Arpana Caur: I have a love for India that can't be put into words, it's beyond words. Each time I had a chance to study abroad, whether in the form of a scholarship or a teaching job offer, or even a marriage proposal, I said 'no', because I thought I would be completely cut off from my roots. It's my love for India that kept bringing me back. My roots are here, although there was nothing for artists here in the seventies. It was a miserable scene with no returns. There were just two galleries in Delhi. Though at that time of course, in 1979, I had a scholarship at Saint Martins in London, one which I never took up because I felt that I would just shrivel up and die inside. There

Figure 4. Arpana Caur, *Tree of Life*, brass, 2009, 150 kg, 6 ft.

are also a few personal things that I don't want to talk about, but I could have had a very good life abroad. So although I did have offers of all kinds, I thought that my soul would just cease to be if I were there. And it was utterly unexplained – these things, these passions, are very unexplained.

MR: Could you discuss how specifically you see your art in relation to your Indianness?

AC: [pause] I am very proud of our thousands of years-old culture. I feel it flows in my blood. And I connect myself with a *long* tradition of painters and sculptors, including for instance the miniature painters that flourished in the Punjab area. I feel a great oneness with them. So I see myself in a *long* line of tradition, though I'm very much a person of the present. I try to put *that* lineage in a contemporary perspective, like with my Buddha series, *Tree of Suffering, Tree of Enlightenment* (Figures 9 and 10). I have a plug coming out of the tree of Enlightenment, for 'connection' with the above, and I have appropriated the form of a palm tree, which is centuries old, from our folk art tradition. I'm therefore trying to build this bridge from yesterday to today because India is in every

Figure 5. Arpana Caur, *Painting Is Not Dead*, installation, 2013, Gallery Veda, Chennai.

moment its past and its present. Any person with eyes can see that – they can see, for example, a bullock cart carrying the upper body of a truck on any road. And if you go to a village you might see all kinds of tv antennae, yet there is still a lot of worshipping going on. They are worshipping trees, and tying threads around them, while at the same there are tv antennae and discs. So in every moment in India, we exist as a heterogeneous society which lives simultaneously in the past and present. This is unlike a more homogenous world, which in fact would be quite an insipid society, with all its perfections, its garden-like precision of every name and place one could mention. I find that very insipid.

Contrast that with the kind of visual incongruities that you see here. Siri Fort, which is my address, is the oldest wall in Delhi, from the fourteenth century. And next to this fourteenth-century Siri Fort wall is a thermal power station. On its steel walls, every day, the women of the Shahpur Jat village dry hundreds of dung cakes. So you have the fourteenth-century, you have the thermal power station, and you have the dung cakes. It's like many, many times in one moment. Eliot writes in one of his poems that time past becomes time present and time future. In India, all of the times are flowing; we are not just living in one time. We are living simultaneously in many times. Within my heart, I'm

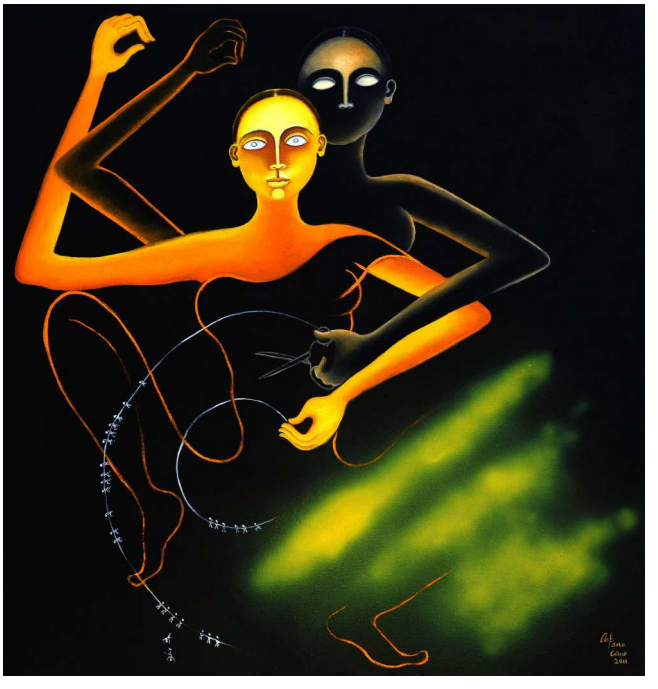

Figure 6. Arpana Caur, *Day and Night*, oil on canvas, 2011, 4.5 ft × 4 ft.

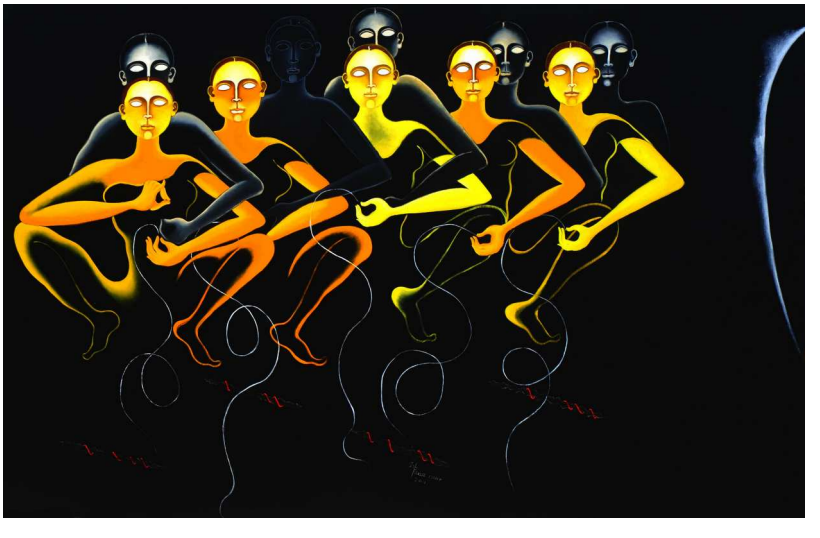

Figure 7. Arpana Caur, *Day and Night*, oil on canvas, 2011, 6 ft × 9 ft, Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.

> carrying many villages with me. I say to folk artists that although I'm living in the nation's capital, within me I'm just one of you, I'm carrying within me *all* of the villages that you come from. I feel an immense empathy with them. So this is what it means to be Indian.

Figure 8. Arpana Caur, *Day and Night*, oil on canvas, 2012, 7 ft × 6 ft.

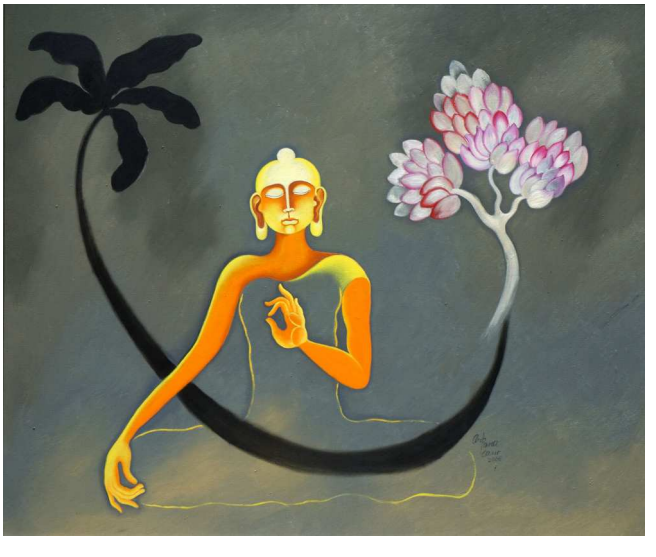

Figure 9. Arpana Caur, *Tree of Suffering, Tree of Enlightenment*, oil on canvas, 2007, 5 ft × 5 ft, Collection Jawahar Kala Kendra Museum, Jaipur.

Figure 10. Arpana Caur, *Tree of Suffering, Tree of Enlightenment*, oil on canvas, 2003, 5 ft × 7 ft. Collection Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Image courtesy of Arpana Caur.

And how to represent and capture all of that in a painting is very challenging and interesting, because then you can draw from the past and present, from folk art motifs, and your own tradition. And *this* is culture, along with contemporary images and contemporary influences. It all makes for a very interesting process. I of course find it's particularly challenging and interesting, because you have to put your ideas through in a way that is surprising for you.

MR: To yourself?

AC: To yourself. Because you are taking from tradition but at the same time you are playing, you are innovating, and you are creating anew. So that's where the challenge arises. It has to be of the time also, yet of the time not in a way like McDonaldization of culture, in that it should look like American art or French art or whatever. It has to be very contemporary and very Indian. That's the challenge.

MR: You speak eloquently of the painting process. It sounds to me as if it's almost a sacred process for you, a very personal process in which you are struggling with something, perhaps seeking something. Could you describe that process?

AC: You put it perceptively. As you know, all creative people have that yearning. They're never satisfied with what they have done. And they want to stretch themselves like a rubber band. It's a journey where you never reach a point, it can go on endlessly. And because it's an undefined thirst, this experience, there is no question of reaching. Apart from the Nanak series, I've worked with Buddhas and Sufis, and the Sohni Mahiwal love stories. Before that, there was Kabir, and in between there was *Between Dualities* (Figure 11). I never plan things. I let them happen as they come. The person I am in that phase of life will come out in my paintings. But my intent is always that the work should never be literal, it should be visual. For instance, some artists have this habit of saying their work is not narrative, as if narrative were a bad thing. On the contrary, I feel that the narrative tradition flows in our veins, in India. And I've inherited that narrative tradition.

MR: I'm fascinated by this distinction that you draw between the narrative tradition and the domain of the visual. What are some of the challenges for you, as an artist, in your negotiation between these two rich forms of representation?

Figure 11. Arpana Caur, *Kabir*, oil on canvas, 1993, 6 ft × 4 ft.

AC: How to make a piece of work aesthetically valid *within* a narrative tradition is a very big challenge, the biggest challenge, because you're working with a subject like Nanak or Kabir, which have been rendered conventionally hundreds of times. And I think in terms of colour. I dream in colour, I think in colour. When the image comes on the screen of my mind, it's with one predominant colour. And I take the images from life, but there are a lot of things that come unexplained. That's the mystery of the creative process. When working on Nanak, I of course drew upon his teachings and his verses (Figure 12). But then *how* did certain images emerge? The origin of those remains a mystery, like Kabir weaving water, and women weaving water (Figure 13). How did that weaving of water come to mind? It came because he is weaving harmony and love and coolness in an atmosphere which is polluted by hatred. Secularism, and all the people who represent it, is a big force in my mind, beyond the given bounds of religion. Nanak rebelled against the orthodoxy of the Hindu tradition in which he was born, and against that of the Muslim tradition. He simply followed his love for God, through verse. That's a very Sufi sort of approach, to rebel against institutional religious traditions, because they can be very suffocating and binding at times. And you choose your own individual path.

MR: Guru Nanak has been an inspiration for you. Have there been others?

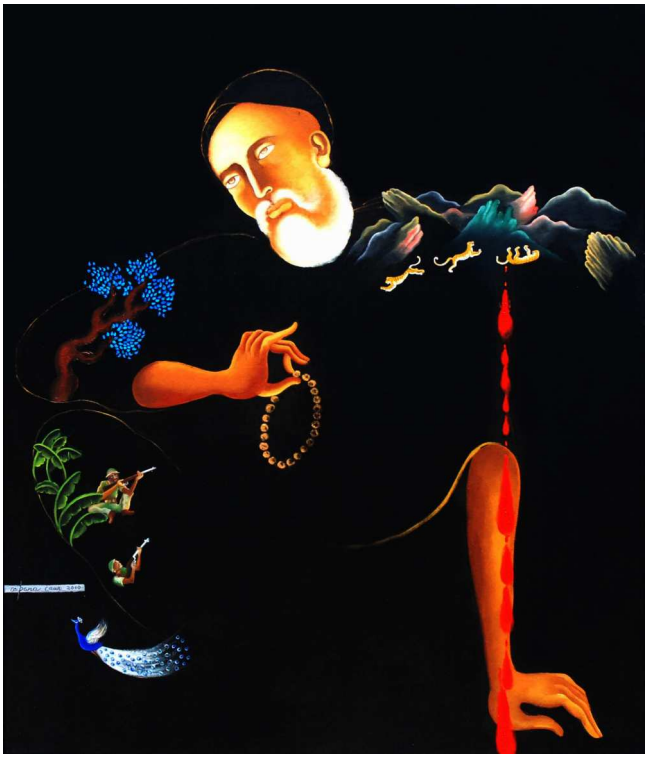

Figure 12. Arpana Caur, *Nanak in Bleeding Times*, oil on canvas, 2010, 70 inches × 70 inches.

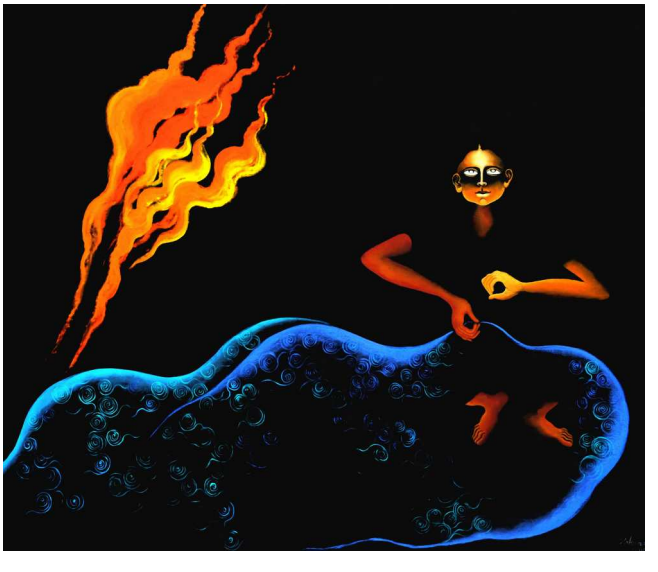

Figure 13. Arpana Caur, *Water Weaver*, oil on canvas, 2000, 60 inches × 66 inches.

AC: He is one of my inspirations. Another is this changing city, which led to my environment series. The third is the way the past and present co-exist in this very strange fashion in our country. They make for a strong visual richness. Those have been my inspirations.

MR: When you look at the body of work you have produced, does that process of reflection reveal for you certain things about yourself, perhaps even certain truths about yourself?

AC: No. Because it is not me who is making the work. I always believe that. It's the work that makes *me*. It's not me who is creating. I am being created. As I work, I am being created. I'm being chiselled from day to day. I'm being painted from day to day. It's not me who is making that painting. It's *that* which is making me, as well. It's a two-way process. You cannot claim to make a painting, you are being *made*, much more than you realize. It continues from day to day.

MR: In which ways have you been made, or seen yourself transformed?

AC: It's such genuine self-discovery. [pauses] The painting kind of – it's a flat thought, the canvas – and then you go to it and you give it your energy, and it gives you back its energy. It's a kind of …

MR: Dialogue?

AC: Yes, a dialogue, a two-way process. At this point in time, what I am, I was not ten years back, and I will not be ten years from now. So it's hard to say, but I know that I change from day-to-day in this process because it's not routine, it's not like going to an office from nine to five. It is bound to change you on an individual level.

MR: Is this what spoke to you from the beginning, when you began painting? Is this the process that captured you and drove you?

AC: Yes, you understand it well. It was the pull and the joy of colour. And the joy of silence of being in my studio with my canvas, always. And feeling very ecstatic, in a state like the Sufis, who say they feel ecstasy when they are singing and dancing – and for me it was that. It was sheer ecstasy, being with the intent, having the weight of the paint on the tip of your brush and with the colours that I use. It's the pleasure of that.

MR: You talked earlier about 'aesthetic validity'.

AC: Yes. I am thinking of when things are drawn from known sources or texts, when they are rendered into paintings. In one or two series when I have followed texts, in the Nanak series or Kabir series, I *heard* their poetry, read their poetry. And I wanted to have visual images inspired by that, not *of* that, but inspired by that, *charged* with the same spirit of the verses. It's all the more difficult then, because you want to represent that, and yet transcend the mere word.

MR: Yes.

AC: It's very difficult to do so in the space of a canvas. One can do it better in film and theatre and things like that, which are very all-encompassing, with the aid of music and sets and visuals. Here you can do it in painting, which is the form that I have chosen, which is different from a film-maker or a writer. I feel painting, better than making a film, gives me the maximum pleasure, and gives me the silence, the silence of being with the canvas and the painting.

MR: You have spoken a lot about traditional Indian artistic influences on you, the Pahari miniature paintings for instance.

AC: Absolutely, yes.

MR: It's like it flows through you, or it creates you …

AC: Yes.

MR: Have you had any Western art influences?

AC: I am fond of quite a lot of Western artists, like Francis Bacon. I like for instance the saturated oranges of his triptych in the Tate, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. I like the way the distorted figures and the bandaged eyes are placed against a very cool and flat orange. Some of the miniatures have this flat orange or flat Indian red or flat yellow. Bacon has all his distorted figures against this very Indian miniature-like flat orange and pink and blue. And that elevates the suffering of that figure. Bacon's figures are all suffering, and the colour elevates the suffering. Stanley Spencer, who has been dead a long time, is also one of my favourites. He was deeply spiritual, and was ahead of his time. Only after his death did he become famous. I like his mural *Lives of Soldiers*, especially the depiction of the everyday life of the soldiers. It's done with such reverence. I would say there are great artists all over the world, but I see myself as very rooted in India, and with a very contemporary mind. I've seen the world, and I've read all I'm exposed to, with so many influences through television and travel, but I see myself as very Indian, very rooted in the sense of tradition.

3. Art, affect, and the political

MR: I'd like to continue our discussion on your sense of rootedness in India, and focus now on the more social and political aspects of your work. As you know, India faces many socioeconomic challenges. What is your relation with those aspects of the nation? For instance, what do you see as your role in addressing poverty?

AC: My heart does bleed for the many problems that we have in India. I've addressed them in my own way. For instance, with respect to the socioeconomic disparities that are here, I've addressed them by giving away ninety-percent of my earnings from my paintings. I do it day-to-day, ever since my good period started, when I started selling abroad in 1988. So from all my earnings since then, my mother [the writer Ajeet Cour] and I started, in our own little way, a vocational school for girls from the slums in 1975, in addition to one or two other things we support, such as initiatives for the handicapped and lepers. There are about 150 girls who come to our school each day. We have nine teachers who teach stitching, embroidery, knitting, computing skills, toys, bag and jewellery making, block printing and tie-dye, manicure and pedicure, waxing and threading, henna and bridal makeup, and even classical dance. All this is run from the earnings of both of us. Safety is a big factor for girls, so we hire two buses to transport them to and from our gallery. Our contribution is a small step, and in that respect we have felt a little useful.

MR: What connection might then exist for you between the individual process of painting and that of helping the community?

AC: If you paint for yourself, and if it can also serve as a little education or food for others and the community, you feel even your very private act of painting has been of some use, far from giving yourself the pleasure of painting. That's how I solved that problem, because it used to tear me apart, and still does. You can't change the whole of society, but you can definitely make a little difference in your immediate environment. So I feel useful in India even for that reason. Knowing that my earnings will go back to support others motivates me to produce more art, giving me both the pleasure of art and that of making a tangible difference.

MR: How could your engagement with the political serve as an example for others?

AC: My engagement with the 'political' is a very small contribution, while the problems in India are immense. You can't do anything about corruption. It's on such a large scale. But at least you can be aware of it, and you can also lead your life in a way so that you feel it's happy and comparatively free, and that one is not the end-product. When I look at other people, and I read about all these politicians, I keep my distance from them, and vow never to act like them. So in a way even the negative elements that you see in society teach you how not to act. It's a learning process, and in turn can be a learning process for others. The state can and should learn more closely from the everyday acts of support and compassion that citizens extend to one another.

MR: What then, for you, becomes the relation between the affective and the political?

AC: I do not think artists can directly change socioeconomic realities, but the affective dimension of art is powerful in raising awareness about injustices and inequalities. The rich are getting richer here, the poor poorer. Is this the 'India shining' or 'Incredible India' of marketing slogans and national discourses? One finds here slums next to five star hotels and swanky apartment blocks – the contrast is appalling. I am pained by the injustices around me, and I strive to express and communicate that pain and emotion through my work, inviting viewers to empathize with the subject of my work, perhaps even sympathize with it. Simply put, when you share, it makes you feel better, and for me that sharing is an intimate conjoining of the affective and the political.

MR: Could you speak more about this conjoining of the affective and the political?

AC: My work certainly depicts political and politicized topics – socioeconomic disparity, genocide, violence, religion, rape – but on the other hand affect, humour, and spiritualism also run through my work (Figure 14). I'm identified with all of these. Some people who like to see me as one person, see me as a very social activist kind of person. And there's another school of thought which sees me as a very spiritual person. But I think I'm *both*. For me, the political can 'simply' emerge from compassion for others, and express itself through a commitment to social justice. It's like – I don't *dare* to say, and I'm simply giving an example – Nanak himself. He was immersed in immense spiritual ecstasy, but at the same time had immense compassion

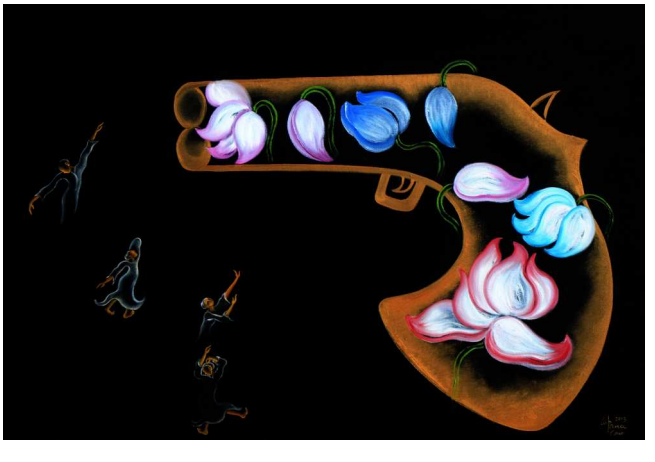

Figure 14. Arpana Caur, *Love Shot*, oil on canvas, 2013, 3 ft × 4 ft.

for others. He used to believe in donating his earnings, while making his earning by tilling his fields, and not simply running away to the Himalayas. His verses were brilliant. He always says in verse that women are equal to men. There are various verses about a ruler's duty to all his kingdom: don't levy taxes on them. And then verses about the rich person's duties toward the poor. You can be many things in one, not just one thing. You can be the social reformer or the spiritual person. You can be both.

MR: Is that how you see yourself?

AC: [laughs] Well, I wouldn't say so! But I try to do everything that my heart tells me is right for the moment.

MR: What role, if any, do you see the arts, and the visual arts in specific, playing in the transformation of Indian society, in activism, in the future of the nation?

AC: I see the future of the nation as being very, very healthy. I can certainly talk of the visual arts. We've been going through the best period from say 1988 onwards without any support centered from the outside. As for the day-to-day life in India, there are, as we know, immense disparities. There's no health care system, no social security system. So there the individual has to decide. If they are doing well, do they give their earnings back to society, or do they store them in a bank? I have told you already what my decision has been in this regard. I take a lot of satisfaction from the fact that ninety-percent of my earnings goes back to society. My mother started this practice. This work is still continuing.

And now she is also working with SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. Because India is the biggest country, it has a lot of tensions with its SAARC neighbours: Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, and Nepal. Any problem that happens, we are seen as the big brother, sometimes the big *bad* brother. My mother thus had an idea. She organized the first Pakistani writers' conference held in India, in 1987, using her own resources, without a penny's help from anybody. It was a three-day conference, and writers had come from all over. She put them up in the Jawaharlal Nehru University guest house. Then she held the first Indian writers' conference in Pakistan, in October 2003. She took a delegation and they were happily met with an overwhelming reception. She has organized numerous conferences since then. That's her way of contributing. What the government hasn't done, she has done. These SAARC activities that the government should have undertaken are on her shoulders, and she is over seventy-five years old.

She has taken up the responsibility of maintaining relationships, of building bonds with other writers. She asked me to get involved with the visual arts side of SAARC, but I declined. I'm so committed to my painting that I feel any organizational work would take away from my painting. I prefer to stick to my painting, and I'm very passionate about that. What my mother is doing with writers, I could have done with visual artists. But I would rather leave that to somebody else. I largely don't meet too many people, although I once had a Pakistani woman artist stay in my studio for ten days. I'm increasingly committed to my painting. The older I become, the more strongly I feel about, and feel madly about, my painting. People from other countries, and even the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, have suggested that I should organize some artists together, but that's another kind of work. I'm content very much on my own, in my studio. That's my space.

MR: Your gallery does regularly exhibit the work of contemporary Indian artists. Could such support have political or activist dimensions?

AC: Our gallery is a nonprofit space available for young artists before they find a commercial gallery to represent them. It has in fact always run at a loss, but we don't mind. Subodh Gupta's first show here free of cost from over twenty years ago is an important example of our support for emerging artists. It's important for me to give visibility to young, emerging artists, as well as to causes. For example, our gallery has hosted many exhibitions of work by differently abled Indian artists. This allowed us both to showcase the artwork and also to draw attention to differently abled peoples and the daily discrimination they face. My work can thus function as part of a wider institutional structure – such as a gallery space, with media attention – for raising awareness about issues and conditions, in addition to the work's individual depiction and thematization of those issues and conditions.

MR: Your work continues to speak to many people in many ways. For instance, it is recognized for having strong themes relating to the experience of women. Could you speak about you and your work's relation to feminism?

AC: While my work does of course represent the experience of women, I want to emphasize that I have never considered myself a feminist, and that my work is not related to women alone. I feel it's very easy to slot women artists as 'feminists'. I feel a lot of people have committed this fallacy because it's very easy just to *slot* somebody, whereas in fact a woman artist today can also be a citizen of the world, not only in herself as a person, but in her painting. Anybody writing about me finds it very easy to slot me in a certain way, but actually my themes have a wide range, including communal tensions and issues.

For example, I addressed the 1984 Sikh genocide in a series I did which was shown in 1985. It was called *World Goes On* (Figure 15). It had male figures, because these kinds of violence are perpetrated by men, and men of course suffer as well, although it's predominantly women who lose male family and relatives. I have also addressed urbanization, looking at what a big city does to an individual, which was my theme in the 70s. So that's

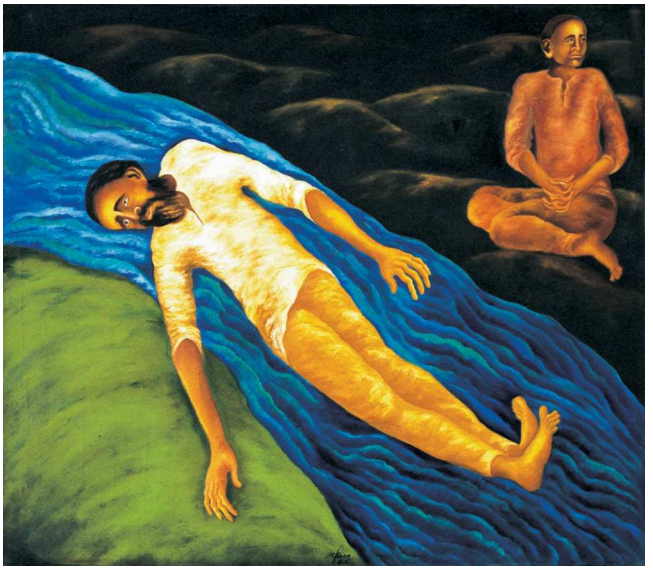

Figure 15. Arpana Caur, *World Goes On*, oil on canvas, 1984, 5 ft × 6 ft.

not a women's issue. Nor is communal violence a women's issue. And the work I did based on Hiroshima – for which I created a large twelve- by six-foot triptych, commissioned in 1995 by the Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art – is not a women's issue, it's a nuclear issue. Similarly, my Sufi series in 1990, which I later did as Kabir and Nanak, is not a women's issue, it's a spiritual search. There was also an exhibition called *Between Dualities*, exhibited here, in London, and in Mumbai, which was about the past and present times that we simultaneously inhabit in India, and in that I used the marriage of folk and contemporary images. That's certainly not a women's issue. These kinds of views of the Buddha are human issues.

I think also of my paintings on life and death and time, in which I use scissors in specific ways. In fact, I've used the motif of a scissor cutting thread for twenty years, and have become nicknamed 'Scissor' by senior artists, such as Satish Gujral (Figures 16 and 17). So these are not feminist issues. I have occasionally addressed issues of women, but I would say that fifty percent of the time they are issues concerning the environment. I started creating

Figure 16. Arpana Caur, *Body is Just a Garment*, oil on canvas, 2013, 6 ft × 4 ft.

Figure 17. Arpana Caur, *Threads of Destiny*, oil on canvas, 2011, 6 ft × 9 ft.

Figure 18. Arpana Caur, *Yogi*, oil on canvas, 2011, 6.6 ft × 4.4 ft.

work on the environment when I saw Delhi undergoing drastic changes, through a series I started from 1988 onward. This includes *Earth and Sky* and *Road and River*, diptychs that juxtapose the urban city against the freedom of nature. This kind of witty juxtaposition of the urban and the rural makes for a visual surprise.

I have therefore dealt with the environment, urbanization, communal violence (in the 1980s), nuclear violence (in the 1990s, the Hiroshima works, including pollution), and the mystic search through the Sufi series and Kabir and Nanak. Other major issues that have interested me are time, yogis and yoginis, day and night, and life and death. All of these issues go far beyond the feminist (Figures 18–20).

MR: It seems to me that representing Indian women's experiences is of course important to you, but it does not define the totality of your work, just as the label 'feminist' can be a limiting label on those committed to social justice for women. Could you offer any thoughts on how your work might contribute to a wider 'feminist' project within both art and scholarship? (Figure 21).

AC: Across art, across scholarship, those of us who represent women's experience want to restore respect and dignity for women and their experience. We can restore that respect and dignity by giving positive attention to women's experiences. My work shows the suffering and the strength of women, and it strives to humanize them where violence and patriarchy

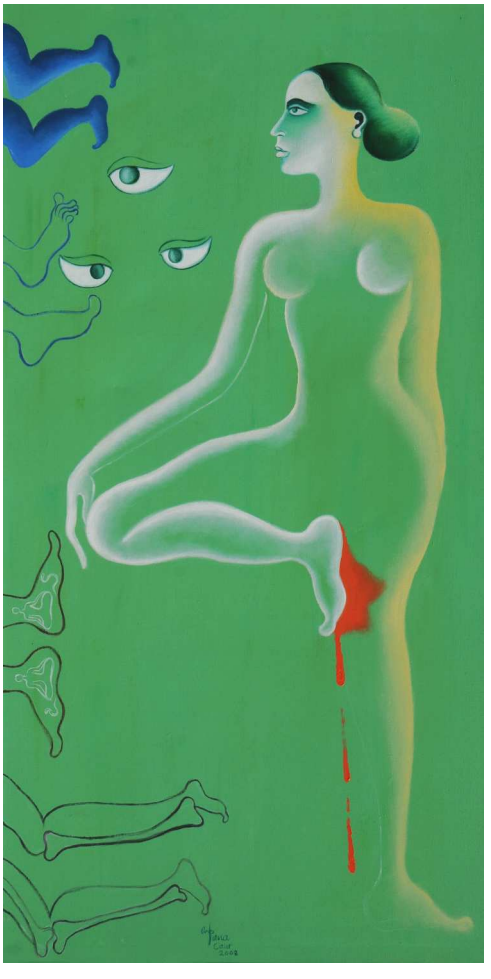

Figure 19. Arpana Caur, *Yogini*, oil on canvas, 2008, 6 ft × 3 ft.

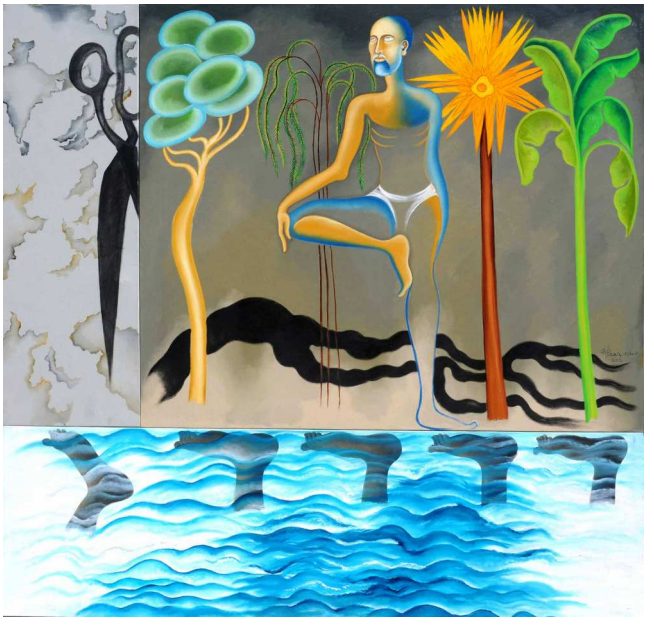

Figure 20. Arpana Caur, *Yogi and the River of Time*, oil on canvas, 2012, 96 inches × 100 inches.

Figure 21. Arpana Caur, *Embroiderers*, oil on canvas, 1999, 5 ft diameter. Collection Vijay Aggarwal.

continue to dehumanize them (Figure 22). Women feature in some of my series, such as the one about the widows of Vrindaban (1987), which shows their atrocious living conditions.

Other artists and scholars have acquired or used my work. M.F. Husain acquired a piece in 1980, from a series I did in 1979 called *Custodians of*

Figure 22. Arpana Caur, *Dharti*, oil on canvas, 2011, 3 ft × 6 ft.

the Law, about Maya Tyagi. She was passing through the street, the police found her pretty, and so they raped her. If India were a police state, I would have not been able to show that series. But it was shown and it was published, and we're talking 1979. Also, Faiz Ahmed Faiz used eight of my works about women in his magazine *Lotus*. These came from a series I did in the 1970s on socioeconomic disparity, called *The Sheltered Women*. One woman is sheltered by an umbrella, and there are many who are not sheltered. One of those paintings is hanging in the Chandigarh Museum. I have also done a series called *Maid Servant*, about the mistress-servant relationship, where one has everything and the other nothing. Also, I was delighted to have my artwork appear on the cover of Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's monograph *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. If my work can contribute to a wider commitment to showing – with sensitivity and dignity – the specificity of women's experiences and the work for justice, then that is satisfying to me, and that is a form of activism (Figure 23).

MR: On one hand you are dealing with a very personal process, themes that are significant to you and your journey, and yet those themes also have a wider social significance, even political ramifications. What is the movement like for you between a very personal process, and with themes that are significant in a larger political domain, especially in the context of India? For example, has your work been met with any negative reactions?

AC: I had painted Nanak inside a large image of a foot, because he travelled constantly (Figure 24). I then received two e-mails from a Sikh Indian woman living in America, asking why I painted Nanak in a foot – no, it was actually the dancing to which she had objected. Some people here also objected to a joyous dancing Nanak! I replied by saying that there's a lot of song and dance in his verses, so for me Nanak dances. He may not dance for you, but for me his verses are full of ecstasy and song and dance. If you read the text of Guru Nanak, there's a lot of joy in the verses. There's also a critique of society, of the external symbolisms, the sacred thread, the feet pointed this way or that way. And also there's a lot of love of nature. Therefore there has only been this one reaction. So far. That signalled to me that religion is an issue in the mind of some Indians living in America, who may consider themselves as very forward-looking, but who are in fact quite backward. I have never in the past had any reaction to my Kabir series, which I showed in 1993 (I had three paintings and terracottas), or to my Nanak

Figure 23. Arpana Caur, *Love Beyond Measure*, oil on canvas, 2008, 6 ft × 12 ft.

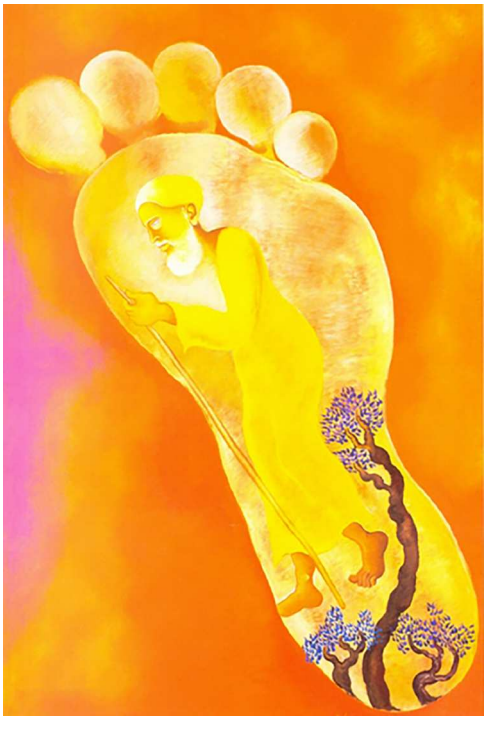

Figure 24. Arpana Caur, *Journeys*, oil on canvas, 2001, 72 inches × 48 inches.

series, or to my Sufi series, which I showed in 1990 with the Bauls of Bengal, who are Sufi singers and dancers. I haven't had a single averse reaction in India, except for these two e-mails from this woman in America. Otherwise it's not been controversial. In fact, I have gotten away with painting what I have *wanted* to paint, always. I haven't encountered any censorship so far, even for my 1984 massacre series, when there was a Congress government

at the time. There was a lot of coverage for that show. But nobody clamped down on the show. I enjoyed complete freedom, and I still do. I paint what I want, I show what I want, and I live as I want. On my own terms.

MR: You have certainly been very determined to carve out this independence for yourself.

AC: I have. I made choices. You see, this kind of life of an artist is like walking on a razor's edge. And I chose to walk on it. I never imagined that I would be so acclaimed. Even with my 'Nanak' show, I never expected the kind of response it got in the first four or five days. I was quite overwhelmed, because the Sikhs are a very small percentage, less than one-percent in India. So I thought it was a very subjective kind of show. But two Germans acquired two large works, two went to Washington, one to San Francisco, and two to Munich. All are large works, so I have met with a better response than expected.

4. Indian art in a global context

MR: I wondered if we could move now to a consideration of Indian art in a global context? Discussions about globalization regularly focus on the global flows of culture, economics, and politics, yet the role of the visual arts in global interactions does not feature as prominently, and that of Indian art even less so. How do you see your work influencing, for example, the image of India on a global scale?

AC: I would not have any illusions about that at all. I may have met with a little success: I've had six shows in London, from 1979 onwards, and I've been reviewed in newspapers like *The Guardian* (*The Sunday Guardian*) by the best critic, back in 1982, without even meeting him – Vladimir Janousek. However, I felt that the review and the recognition were for Indian art, not for Arpana. Similarly, the International Herald Tribune and the BBC once made a half-hour film, which was shown here also.

So whatever little achievement there has been, I feel has been for Indian art. I never generalize from that in my mind. While at least they know *some* Indian artists, we know all the foreign artists, such as Richard Serra. Yet what do they know of our work? Zero. For instance, I had a work in the Victoria and Albert Museum, through a Sotheby's auction in the 90s. And Neema Smith has picked up four works for the Bradford museum, from 1993 onward. She has always been very receptive to my work, and very generous. I feel fortunate with these two museums, especially because of Neema. Two or three other museums in the world have also acquired my work, such as the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf. I had received an international award in 1986, following which the Director of the Kunstmuseum, Hans Albert Peters – who is a very scholarly person, now retired after having written several books on painting – acquired two Indian works, actually *my* works. I always say 'Indian' unconsciously. He acquired the first Indian works in the Museum, probably the only Indian ones exhibited there. Similarly, fifteen years ago the Singapore Museum of Modern Art acquired two of my very large works, and another later. They barely acquire and exhibit work of an Indian artist living in India. Mine is probably the only work at most.

I've therefore been a little fortunate with museums, but I know that it's too little for Indian art, which is a vast scene. I have no illusions. So far we are still, with a few exceptions, 'Third World art'. I have no illusions about that either. I may have individual achievements, but I know that's all they are – individual

achievements. I was very fortunate with the mainstream press in the 1980s when I showed my work: 1979, 1982, 1987. With the latest show in London [at the October Gallery in June 2003], there was no mainstream press, but instead wealthy NRIs [Non-Resident Indians], that came to the gallery. It was simply in a few Indian newspapers and radio channels. That was disappointing, although it wasn't there for the duration of my show. But I noticed that there was mainstream press in the 1979 and 1982 shows.

On the contrary, in other countries, such as when I had a solo show in Berlin, there were two major newspapers, without my having met a critic. I was just there for two days, for the opening, and I had the fortune of having both the painting and the review in both the major newspapers in Berlin. This was similarly the case in other cities and countries in which I've exhibited, such as Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Canada (in Ottawa, 1981). All the major papers carried big reviews of the work, with an image. But those are few and far between. It surprises you because India pampers you a lot: you've done so many shows, and so the critics and media are very aware, and they want to do the preview, and they're very excited when you show. So it's different for us here, we've made a niche. Indian artists have made a niche for themselves in India.

MR: Why do you think Indian art is so invisible within a Western-centric art world? How can that invisibility be changed?

AC: That invisibility can be changed by Western museums acquiring contemporary works. Until they do so, Indian art will remain in relative oblivion. I think as India's economy continues to gain global prominence, there will be increasing attention to the nation's cultural productions, and greater interest in India in general. Indian literature and film have become increasingly visible through major festivals such as in Cannes, Jaipur, and Hyderabad, and through foreign honours such as the Booker and Commonwealth prizes and the Oscars. Indian art will also follow as attitudes in both India and the West continue to become more broad and open.

From the artist's perspective, while living in India, it's difficult to make a niche for oneself abroad. And I think it's not the artist's job anyway. Our government doesn't have the intelligence or the resources to do so here. When a British artist comes here, such as for an international show every three or four years, he's accompanied by the major British art establishment people, like the Tate Gallery, and somebody from the Arts Council. But when any Indian artist goes there, which of our people are supporting that artist? He's fending for himself. I would say this: for the visual arts there's been zero government support. Nil. But the only reason Indian art is still being seen a little is through the private galleries. There are two or three in New York, and one or two in London, showing Indian artists' work. I was lucky to show in two museums in Scandinavia, in Stockholm and Copenhagen. I showed in the National Museum in 1983, but that happens on a very individual level. At the government level, things aren't happening in the visual arts. There is no promotion except for the performing arts. We don't even have half a dozen contemporary museums for such a large country.

MR: You mention the problem of the Indian government's reticence with regard to the promotion of contemporary art. What do you think are the potential reasons behind this lack of support? For example, could you compare fine arts to more 'marketable' forms of culture, such as museums and heritage?

AC: We hardly ever participate in important biennales due to the government's 'lack of funds'. Certainly museums and heritage, and also ancient

art forms, are more 'marketable' forms of culture, in part because some of the work they promote fits easily into orientalist – and in turn, orientalising – images of India. But I think greater attention to the visual arts can make them *part* of the national cultural discourse, so that they are *seen* as marketable, and easily so. At the moment, art fair participation is through private galleries. Even the very important Indian Art Fair began only in 2008, and it was the brainchild of a young woman, Neha Kirpal. Neha observed the extensive support for the arts in the UK, across museums, galleries, and fairs, and it inspired her to work toward building similar support in India. And now five years later in 2013, the Indian Art Fair recently hosted over a thousand artists and 105 galleries from twenty-four countries. Throughout its first four editions, the fair has attracted over 260,000 visitors and has become an important art forum in Asia. The Indian Art Fair features talks, seminars, and book launches, and that to me shows the power of education. We need to educate both the state and the public about the value of art. The Indian art market is rapidly growing, but we still have a long way to go. The success of the Indian Art Fair is encouraging to me. It shows that public, national, and global engagement with the Indian artworld can happen through the right support, commitment, and vision.

MR: I'd like to ask you to look, if you will, a hundred years into the future. How would you like people to talk about and remember the work of Arpana Caur?

AC: [laughs] I haven't thought that much into the future! Every artist wants to outlive his life and art, through his work, the work surviving the artist. I too want my work to survive. The work that's in the museums will survive time, because work in the museums does survive the limited life of the artist. Unfortunately there are only three governmental National Galleries for Modern Art for such a big country, only three.

MR: Following on your point about wanting your work to live on, how do see your work communicating something about contemporary life in India to a global audience?

Figure 25. Arpana Caur, *Harvest*, oil on canvas, 2004, 5 ft × 6 ft, Collection Reshma Kapoor.

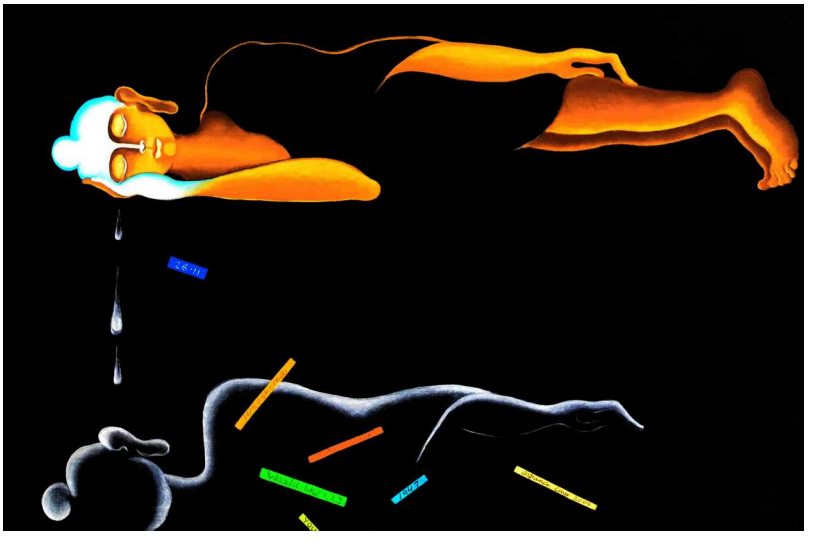

Figure 26. Arpana Caur, *Compassion*, oil on canvas, 2009, 5 ft × 6 ft.

AC: I am greatly inspired by ancient Indian art forms like sculptures and paintings, and our folk art forms. My subjects are always contemporary but the form and colour are deeply inspired by ancient and historical influences. I want my work to showcase the paradoxes and contrasts of India. I want to show that there is tremendous ability and potential for social change in India, but also that it must emerge through and engage with some of the most intractable and resistant forces. This is a deeply spiritual land, and in a sense that spiritual wisdom is timeless, similar to the persistence and simultaneity of multiple worlds in India, such as the worlds of tradition and those of modernity. My work can show that insights into contemporary conditions, such as the inequality of women and the destruction of the environment, are contained within timeless spiritual teachings (Figure 25). By juxtaposing the 'present' of injustice with the 'timeliness' of spirituality, I hope my work can communicate to a global audience some of the richness of life in India, and to invite people to consider that these are challenges and potentials which we all embody, across gender, across religions, across east and west, across nations (Figure 26).

MR: Thank you, Arpana. This has been a great pleasure.

AC: Thank you, Manav. For me as well.

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