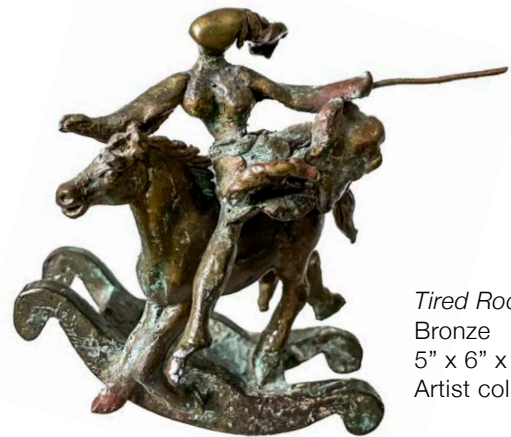


ela
BREAKING
BOUNDARIES



ela: Breaking Boundaries



Tired Rocking, 1982
Bronze
5" x 6" x 3"
Artist collection



"Buddha", Circa, 1950, Opaque watercolor on paper, 11"x 9"



My Mother *Sarla*

This book is dedicated to my parents who gave me wings to fly and my teachers who gave me the will to fly. Most especially, to my family and friends who accompanied me on this long journey.



My Father *Narbheram*

ela: Breaking Boundaries
Selected works from private and public collections.

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This book is done in conjunction with the documentary *ela: Breaking Boundaries* produced by Rohan Sukhdeo and directed by Swapna Kurup and featuring Victor Davson, Donna Gustafson, Kal Penn, Gail Stavitsky and Ela Shah.

Tired of Routine, 1986
Mixed Media
19" x 16" x 14"
Artist Collection



This is a visual autobiography. It depicts my life's inner journey and how I kept my faith in this confused and often contradictory world. I want to share my journey with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. S. M.", is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

To the Reader:

In what she describes as a “visual autobiography”, the Indian-born artist Ela Shah presents a survey of over five decades of artistic production. While the visual cavalcade that sweeps before the viewer in these pages is certainly impressive, the artist’s writing is a key element in the appreciation of this diverse oeuvre, adding a compelling journey of a life encompassing many facets and laid out before us with honesty and sensitivity. The narrative is intensely personal, touching on instances of difficulty and transcendence, hesitation and determination; all are described in a manner alternately searching and forthright, rich with experience, emotion, and spirituality.

The artist has stated: “I am a proud housewife and mature artist”. By placing her maternal role first, Shah offers a perhaps against-the-grain version of the contemporary self-definition of a successful woman artist. Yet as the contents of this book reveals, Shah’s art is derived to a very great degree from the events of her life, her reactions to them, and her devotion to her family – and her art -- as well as her perceptions and comments upon the wider society. Taking an accepting and inclusive view of the two very different Indian and American cultures that have shaped her life, Shah has created a hybrid universe of the imagination, where comic book superheroes may mix with the gods of Hinduism, where transport may be offered by either an elephant or a yellow school bus. Her approach to artistic media is also far-reaching and exploratory, including painting, sculpture in wood, bronze and ceramic, installations, and video. Thus, this book’s words and images offer an entry into an original artistic vision, complex and deeply humanistic.

Jeffrey Wechsler, Senior Curator (retired)
Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum,
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey



Ela Shah with sculpture Survival, 1993
Gold leaf, Paint on Burnt Wood,
Bronze and Chain
109"x 21"x 13", Artist Collection



Dedication, 1994
Mixed Media on wood
16" x 17" x ½", Artist Collection

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	12
Preface by Kal Penn.....	13
My Story	14
Chapter One "Home Sweet Home"	16
Chapter Two "Songs Of Healing"	32
Chapter Three "Power Of Flowers"	44
Chapter Four "But Where Is Your Easel?"	56
Chapter Five "Celebrating Power Within"	72
Chapter Six "Sanctuaries".....	84
Chapter Seven "A Ribbon Around A Bomb"	92
Chapter Eight "Structures Of Faith"	96
Chapter Nine "Let It Roll".....	106
My Story Continues	110
About Ela	112

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Without the generosity of those below, and all those whose names I may have unintentionally forgotten, this project would have never reached its successful conclusion.

Many thanks to Rohan Sukhdeo and Vikram Divecha for suggesting that I write this book. They guided me through the process and inspired me to finish.

This book would not have been possible without the patience and perseverance of my good friend Harish Shah. He insisted on perfection and devoted many hours editing my pictures and designing the book.

My first language is my mother tongue Gujarati. My second language is my art. My friend Sandy Levine helped me merge the two into the English text that introduces each chapter in this book.

I would like to gratefully acknowledge my sisters: Bhanu for being a role model and her input in religious topics and Tabu, who is an art therapist and who has accompanied me all over the world on my artistic journeys. My sisters Bakul, Kumi and Shilpa have always been a source of love and encouragement. A special thank you to my daughter-in-law Dr. Amy Mehta Shah for her loving support. I want to thank my nieces, the poet Radha Khambati, Renu and the computer savvy Krishna Kanabar for their assistance.

My good friend and fellow artist, Mary Angelino Murray, encouraged and inspired me through many years and my friends Aruna Patel, Nayana Bhopatkar and Jean Anne Rose provided valuable insight into the world of book production. A very special thank you to Dr. Bhupen Kapadia, Dr. Thakor Rana, and Ziku Valmik and her family for making our stay in Cambay meaningful and joyful so I could create!

Sonal Modi and Bhanu generously provided the book's Sanskrit translations. Paresh and Raj Kapadia's expertise and patience has been a big help in creating and maintaining my website. Marianne Ficara has always been a patient advisor on topics with which I was unfamiliar.

My grandchildren, Deven and Kaya, gave precious moments of their childhood to give me computer advice when I needed it. They prompted me to become more independent and tech savvy! Maanav and Mia have always given me their love, laughter and cheered me up.

Most of all I must thank my husband Bipin and my kids Bindi and Dhvani. They have fueled my inspiration and their ongoing unconditional generosity, are a wonder to me as well as the principal reason I've been free to pursue my heart's desire.

Preface

When my Aunt asked me to write a preface, I was honored, but stumped. I've written things for artists with whom I have professional relationships. Those are pretty easy; you write about the work, maybe a bit about how you met, and hope your words resonate with an audience. But what do you say when you've known the artist your whole life? When she's seen you in diapers, and given you advice over the years when it's become clear that your own career aspirations also include the arts?

My first memory of one of Ela Auntie's pieces was a five-year-old-me standing on my tip-toes. I was looking at a thin ladder sticking up from a bronze piece resting atop a table in her home. I was too short to see the whole sculpture, and remained fixated on the top. "Where does it go," I asked, "if you climb it?"

"The ladder can go wherever you want, beta."

There are of course multiple interpretations of various ladders, windows, roots, and Sesame Street characters throughout Ela Auntie's work. Multiple references to boundless possibility. I was too young to understand more fully the subtexts of pain, struggle, and triumph as a child, though I do I remember smiling as I thought, "In all of her work, the women are superheroes."

As an adult, I'd learn more and more every time I'd have the chance to see one of her exhibits or hear her talk with younger artists. While filming *The Namesake* in New York in 2005, I took the subway out to the Queens Museum of Art to attend a reception for the exhibit, "Fatal Love: South Asian American Art Now". Ela Auntie's work was put in its rightful context that evening – among history pieces by Vijay Prashad and contexts of socio-political movements by Jaishri Abichandani. Her powerful voice is unique, necessary, and bold. It's simultaneously of many backgrounds and worlds, and completely hers. The pieces are so quintessentially human, so relatable, they can bring out empathy in even the most narcissistic soul.

I'm lucky to have a mentor and family member in Ela Shah. But we're all lucky that she's willing to share so much of herself so humbly through her words and her art.

Kal Penn, Actor and Producer
New York, August 2021

My Story

I have learned to dance with my fate. Wherever I am, no matter what happens, I have tried to make things meaningful and beautiful for me and those around me.

When I was growing up in India and something bad happened, I would hide in a corner or go to the temple and find a quiet place. I would sketch or paint and create my utopia and that would make me happy. Even though I was young, I realized that I was doing something beyond painting. Whenever I was confused or sad, I turned to my art. When I had questions, art was my path to find answers. This has always been my way.

My dream was to do something meaningful with my life and make my family proud. I wanted to become a doctor. I never thought about becoming an artist. That wasn't considered a proper path for a woman.

Since my father had arranged the marriages of my two older sisters, I assumed that would be my path, too. But when I was a teenager I met a neighbor boy, Bipin. He was capable and smart, and we shared the same dreams. I thought "if I marry Bipin, I will be able to fulfill all my dreams, too." He was a member of the Jain community, and I was Hindu. It was not the way things happened then. It was not an easy marriage.

Bipin stayed in Bombay, to become a physician. I left with his parents to live in Ahmedabad. That was the way. It was an all-night train journey from Bipin and my home in Bombay, where I had lived all my life. While living with my in-laws, I studied at home and received my bachelor's degree in Sociology and Psychology with distinction from SNDT Women's University. They offered at home studies for women and their motto was "An enlightened woman is a source of infinite strength."

After three years, we moved to Cambay, a small rural town in India. Bipin was the only doctor with a postgraduate degree in internal medicine among many surrounding villages and so people waited in long lines for many hours to see him and get help. For those seven years we lived above the hospital, and I was humbled to see the suffering around me.

We got a lot of love from the people of Cambay. We made lifelong friends with young physicians who came for internships. People who had so little gave others so much. They were patient, worked hard and kept their faith. They counted their blessings and helped anyone in need. They welcomed strangers, and cared for others, and gave food to those who were hungry. There is no phrase in Gujarati like "there is no free lunch." In India we say, "Guests are like God."

मातृ देवो भव। पितृ देवो भव।
आचार्य देवो भव। अतिथि देवो भव॥

Honour thy Mother as God. Honour thy Father as God.

Honour thy Teacher as God. Honour thy Guest as God.

We suffered a tragedy when our first daughter, Tikdi, died when she was only one year old. When our second daughter nearly died after she was bitten by a snake, Bipin began to think seriously about leaving India. It was a difficult decision, but together we decided to move, and so in 1973 we came to the United States. We arrived with our daughter Bindi, infant son Dhvani, and my widowed mother-in-law who came with us so we could take care of her.

My family and friends remained in India, and I was very lonely. Bipin worked long hours, finished his training, and began to practice in New Jersey. I was in charge of our home and managing our family and finances.



As the years passed my dream of being a doctor faded. But I never lost the part of my dream that was to make things meaningful and beautiful. I needed my art. Since I had a bachelor's degree as well as a diploma in Fine Arts, I enrolled in nearby Montclair State University to continue my studies. With my husband's encouragement and full support, I went to university, took care of my family, my home and the many relatives and friends who came from all over to visit. Life wasn't easy. It was a roller coaster ride, but whose life is always easy?

I never had my work in commercial art galleries, but over the years, I had a lot of encouragement and success in nonprofit galleries and museums. There were lots of other artists and friends who admired and followed my work and they'd always come to openings and exhibits. Their support boosted my spirits and made me feel respected and acknowledged for my art. Eventually, I received awards and scholarships: and two generous grants from the State of NJ Council on the Arts, one for painting and another for sculpture. I purchased things I needed like welding equipment and a kiln.

Throughout it all I have believed what I was taught by my mother: taking care of family is like taking care of society and taking care of society contributes good to the world. I have always had my art and my faith and through them I have found meaning and beauty. I am a proud housewife and mature artist. That has been my path.

Dreamer, 1999,
Mixed Media on print
20" x 14", Courtesy of
Darshana and Tejas Sonpal



Sketch of Mural for Jain Centre for Europe, 1969
 Watercolor on Paper
 18" x 20", Artist Collection

Chapter One

HOME SWEET HOME

Art was always my favorite subject. I learned by sketching what I saw around me. I sketched sacred temples, beautiful mosques and gorgeous churches and the many different sculptures I saw. I studied and copied Indian masters' miniature paintings. I painted my own compositions of subjects from Indian mythology and festivals, seasons, and other things related to my life. These paintings were done in India in the 1960's. Most of them are opaque watercolors on paper.



Detail from the Mural, 1970
 Acrylic on Canvas
 24" x 30", Courtesy of Jain
 Centre for Europe



Desi (meaning one away from his or her town), 2000
Mixed Media on Resin Cow
20" x 36" x 9", Private Collection



Krishna Lila (story of Krishna), 1969-2013
Tempera and Mixed Media on Canvas
36" x 48", Courtesy of Drs. Dhvani and Amy Shah

The story of Krishna, one of the most widely revered Indian divinities, is depicted in this painting.



Warrior, Circa 1969
Opaque Watercolor on Paper
18" x 24", Artist Collection

A warrior taking blessings.





Swayamvara (from Vedic literature, choosing a marriage partner), 1969 Tempera, Gouache, and Mixed Media on Board
20" x 24", Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Avanti Shroff

A princess with a garland in her hands chooses her groom in a ceremony.

Page 20

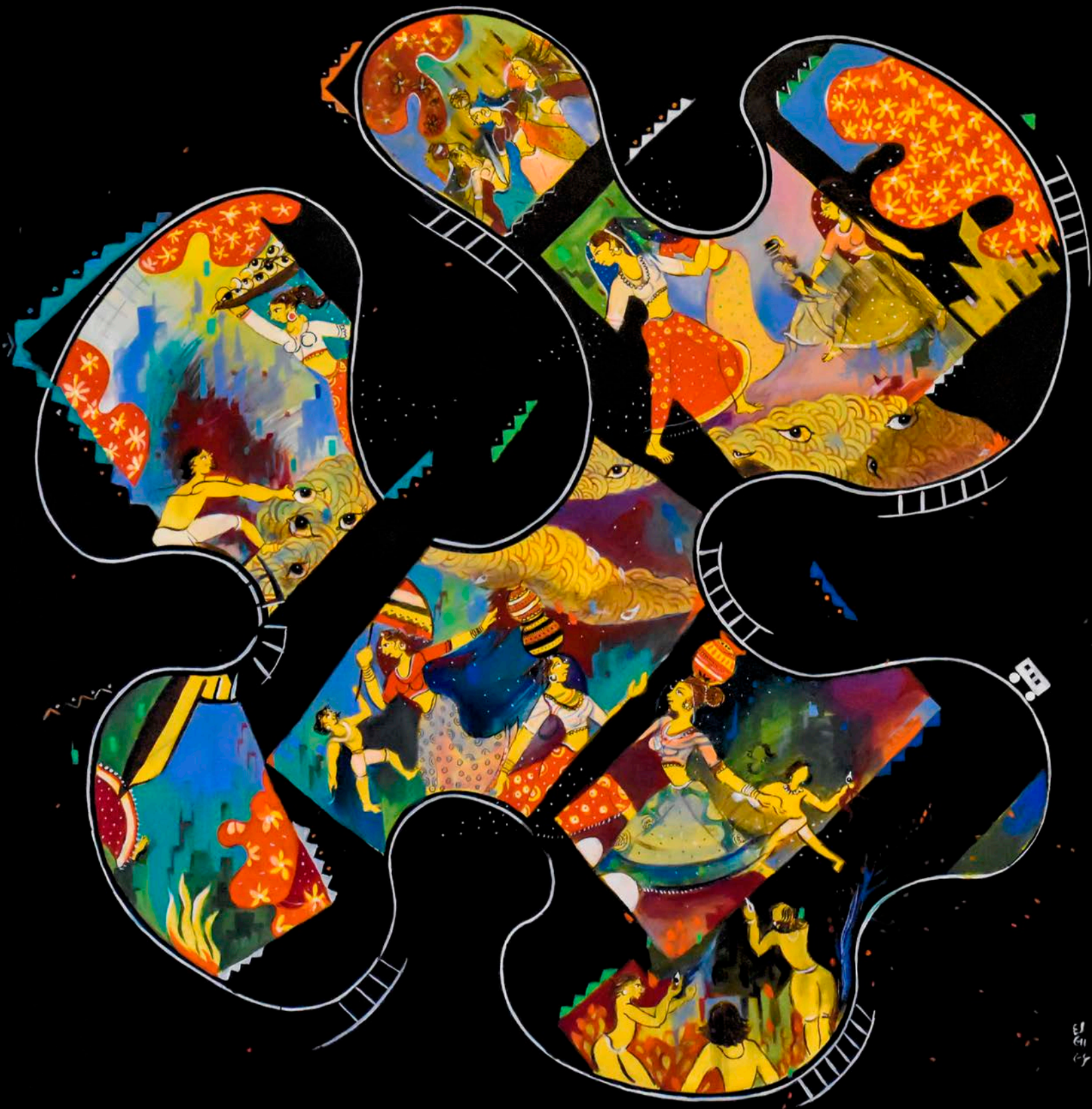
Holi (colorful ancient festival of India), 1969

Opaque Watercolor on Paper
18" x 24", Artist Collection



Ideal Village, 1969
Oil Color on Canvas Paper
18" x 24", Artist Collection

Page 23
Lost Puzzle Piece, 1996
Acrylic and Mixed Media on Canvas
36" x 36", Artist Collection





Coffee Break, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Courtesy of Jenny and Dwane Fletcher



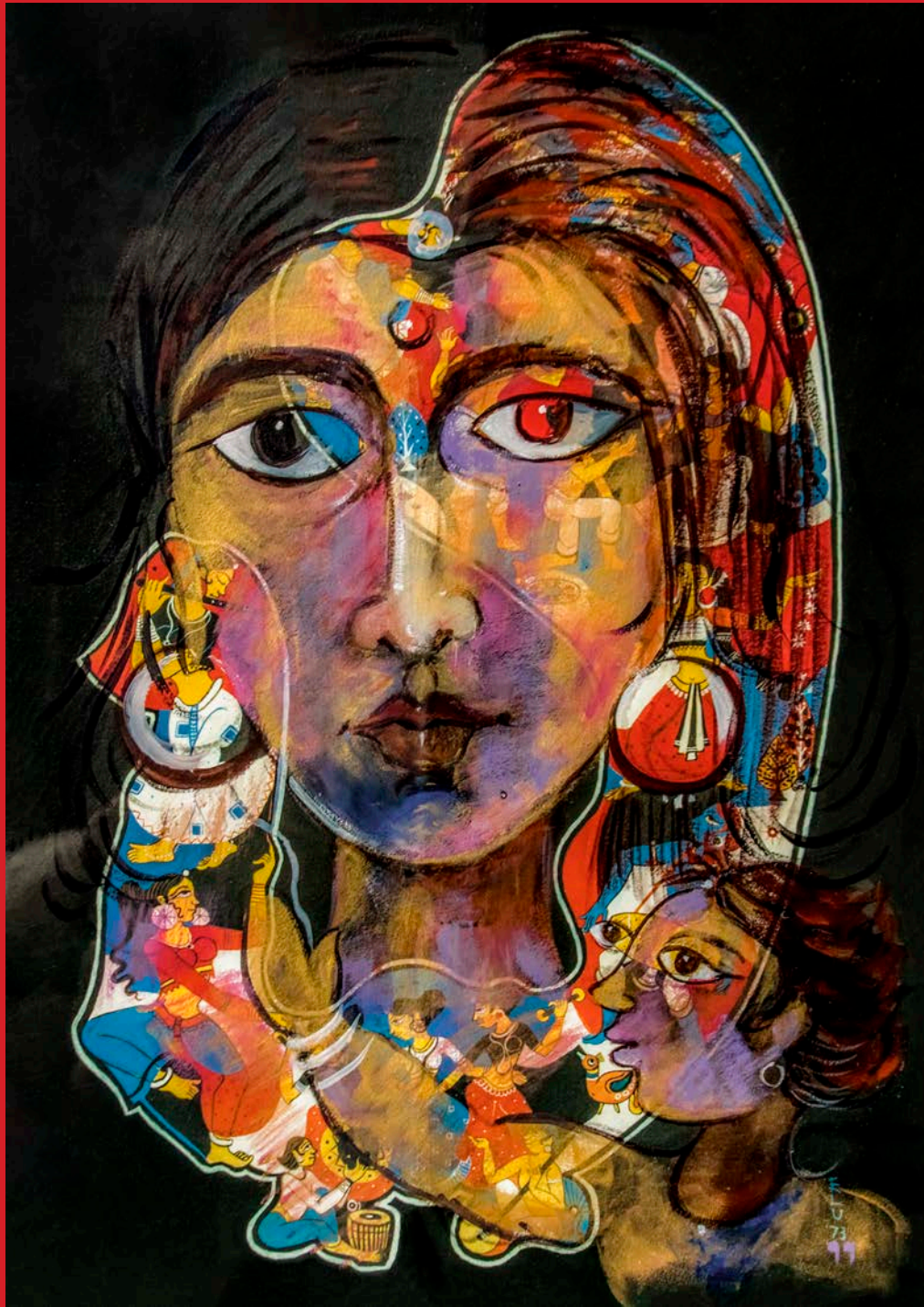
Pride, 2005
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Courtesy of Paresh and
Deepa Kapadia

JUNGLE ME MOR NACHA (PEACOCK DANCING in JUNGLE)

When visiting Paris, I was impressed with the wide range of materials being used in modern art, especially in the collages and compositions of Jean DuBuffet. When I returned home, I painted a dancing peacock and made limited edition prints of it. I continued to work on print, making each one unique. Years later I painted a 24-foot mural of a dancing peacock on the outside wall of my New Jersey studio. You may ask "Why the peacock?" It is because the peacock dances in the jungle without any music, stage, or audience. Like the peacock, I believe we must dance with our fate. We have no choice!



Dancing Peacock, 1987
Outdoor Paint on Wall
Approximately 19' x 20', Riker Hill Art Park, NJ



Colors of Ma, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Artist Collection



Blue Ma, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Private Collection



Ma on Wheels, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Artist Collection



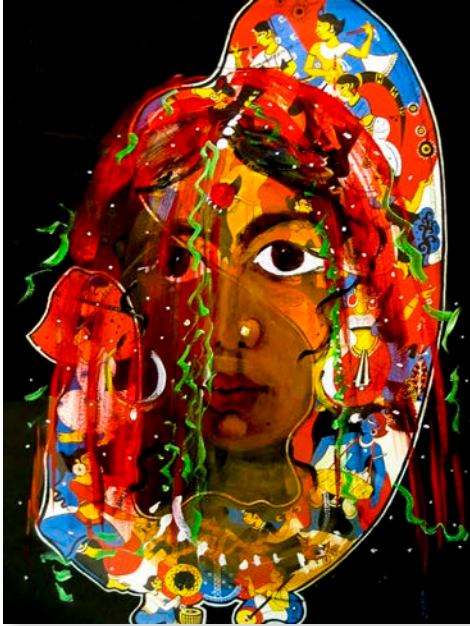
Mother and Child, 2002
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Private Collection



Mother and Child 1, 2002
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Private Collection



Pani, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Courtesy of Drs. Dhvani and Amy Shah



Bride 1, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Private Collection



Bride 2, 1999
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Private Collection

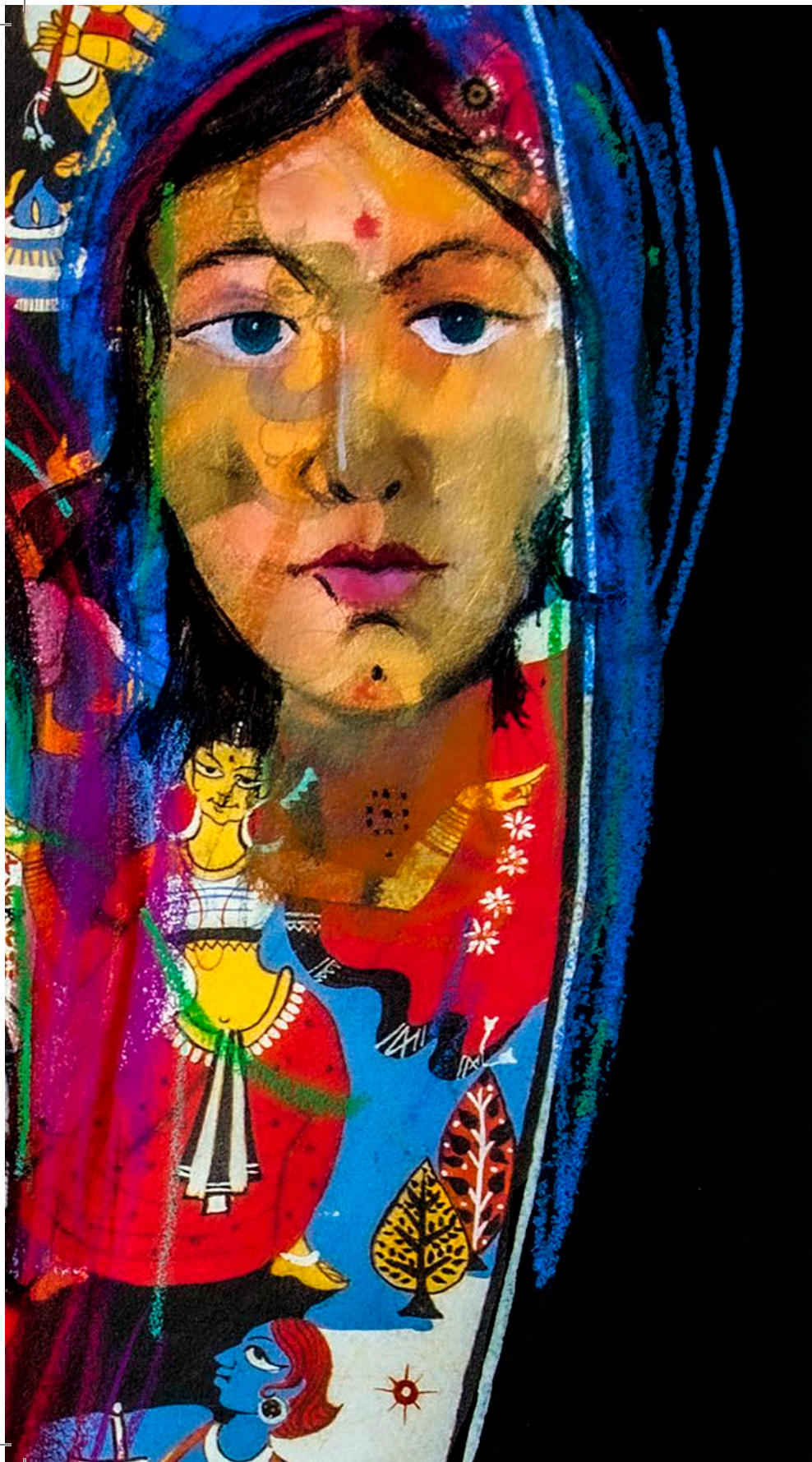


East meets West, 2002
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Courtesy of Dr. Patricia Rosinsky

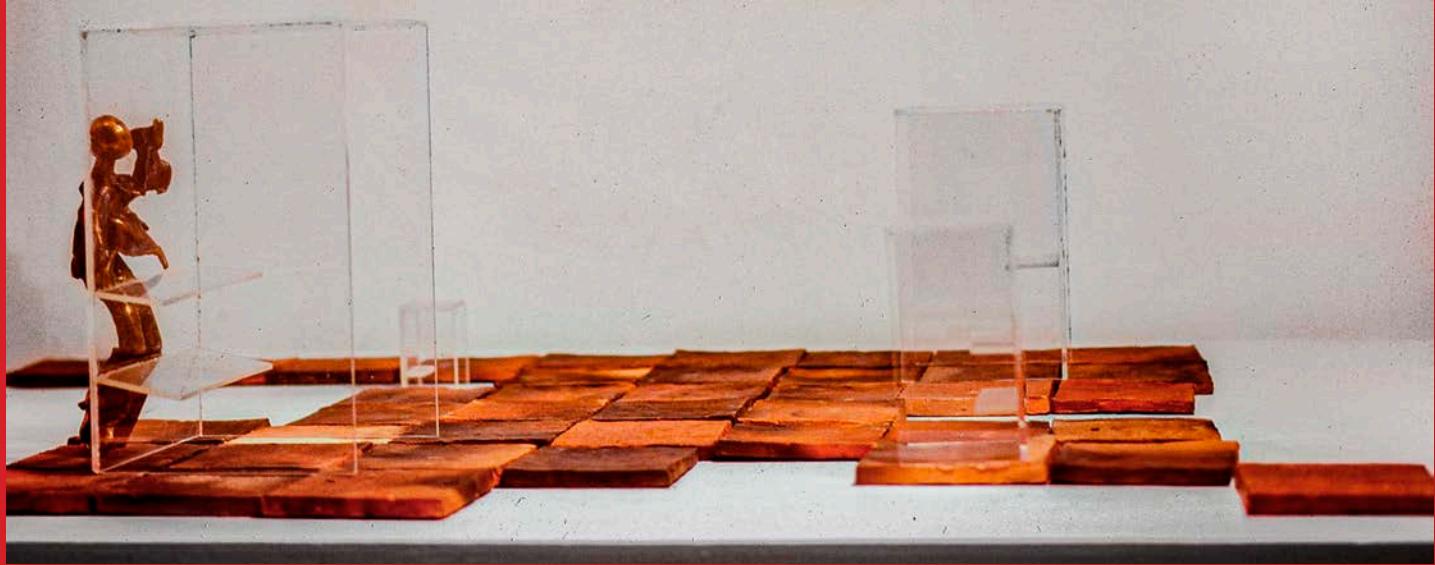


Soldier, 2002
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 14", Artist Collection





Power of Women, 2002
Mixed Media on Print
20" x 16", Artist Collection



Chapter Two

SONGS ON HEALING

After arriving in America, I was overwhelmed with physical and emotional burdens. I felt the sting of culture shock deeply. Every day there was something to remind me that I was different; the way I wore my hair, what I packed in my children's lunch box, the clothes I wore. "You are a doctor's wife, why don't you act like one?" I think those people meant well, but their advice did not help me. Beyond the pain of culture shock, I had to navigate my lonely life with two little kids, a sick mother-in-law, and a busy, ambitious husband. It was one of the darkest times of my life. I could not paint. The colors left me!

My way of moving forward was to bring art back into my life and I began studying at Montclair State University. Each of my teachers taught their own style. They were impressionists, surrealists, and abstract painters, but none of the "isms" they taught to me felt authentic. Painting was no longer working for me. I wanted to learn new ways to express myself and expand my artistic world beyond the boundaries of paint.

With my teacher Walter Swales' encouragement and guidance, I turned to sculpture. I began creating pieces that were dark and sad. My work helped me cope with my feelings of being dislocated in a new culture.

I had never hammered a nail in India. But here I started

working in heavy materials like bronze and iron. I casted in bronze and learned to weld. New materials brought forth my feelings.

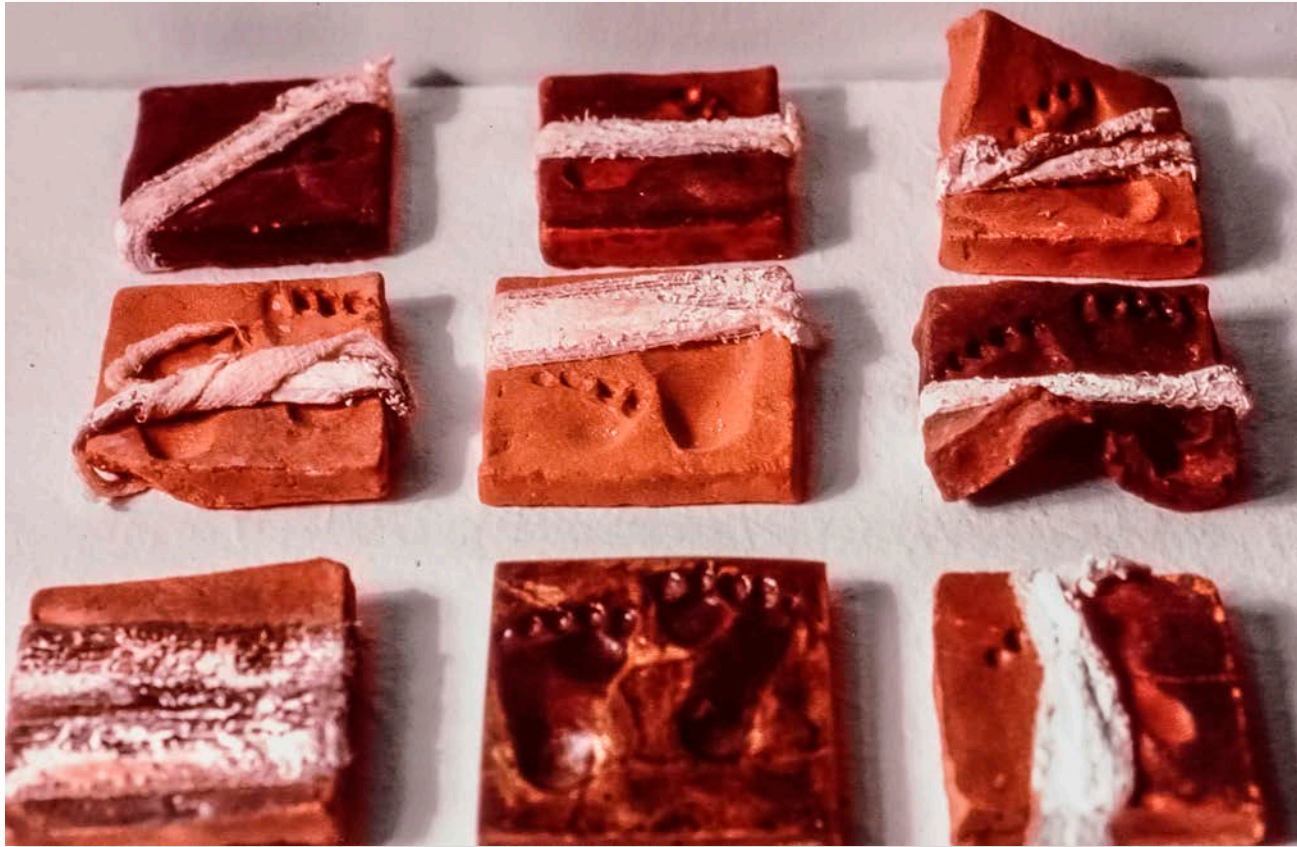
Without realizing what I was doing, I started to think about my mom's sayings and stories and everything she passed to me about the Bhagavad Gita.

I created many works that were meaningful for me with the combination of clay and bronze during this time. When I worked in clay, I was thinking that "this material is like our bodies and our bodies can perish." When I worked with bronze, I thought of it as something within us, our soul that can never be destroyed, a philosophy I had learned from Gita, the Indian epic of Mahabharata.

नैनं छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि नैनं दहति पावकः ।
न चैनं क्लेदयन्त्यापो न शोषयति मारुतः । ।

Weapons cannot shred the soul, nor can fire burn it. Water cannot wet it, nor can the wind dry it.

Sometimes I would have the urge to burn my work as a way of resurrecting fragments of my past. These burnt images are symbolic of purification and transformation and remind me of Shiva, the Hindu God who is both creator and destroyer.



Top

Unborn Sculptures, 1978

Burnt Clay, Cotton Gauze and Bronze

24" x 30" (Dimensions Vary), Artist Collection

This work was done in the memory of my first child who was 1 year old and passed away.

Bottom

Pagla, 1978

Bronze

4" x 4", Artist Collection

Page 32

Even in the Land of Plenty, 1978

Bronze, Burnt clay, Acrylic Plate

12" x 48" x 36" size varies, Artist's Collection

In India a child is gazing into an empty food pantry. Here, kids are looking for love and care in empty homes.



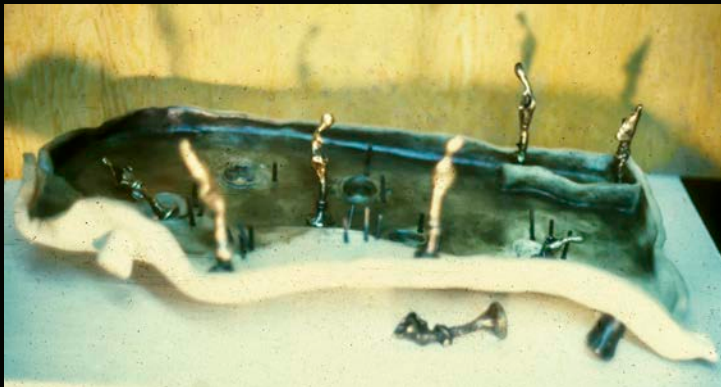


Freedom From the Known, 1978
Bronze, Wood, Clay
9" x 20" x 14", Artist Collection



And Nobody Came, 1979
Bronze and Wood
12" x 9" x 24", Artist Collection

A man was painting a high-rise building and fell down from the scaffolding and nobody came to help him. They were afraid of getting involved. This haunted me. I was lonely, hurt, and depressed in those days and could relate to it. This work is my attempt to share this experience and my feelings in visual form.



No Choice but to Play, 1979
Bronze, Burnt Clay and Wood
11" x 20" x 9", Artist Collection

Life is compared to a game of fate.



At Well, 1978
Bronze and Burnt Clay
18" x 13" x 8", Artist Collection

Women gossiping at the well while fetching water. Sometimes in India a desperate woman would jump in the well.



Stop the World and Let me Get Off, 1978
Bronze, Burnt Clay and Wood
9" x 22" x 13", Artist Collection

A woman sitting on a highway in the city.



Stop the World and Let me Get Off (Detail), 1979
Bronze, Burnt Clay and Wood
9" x 22" x 13", Artist Collection



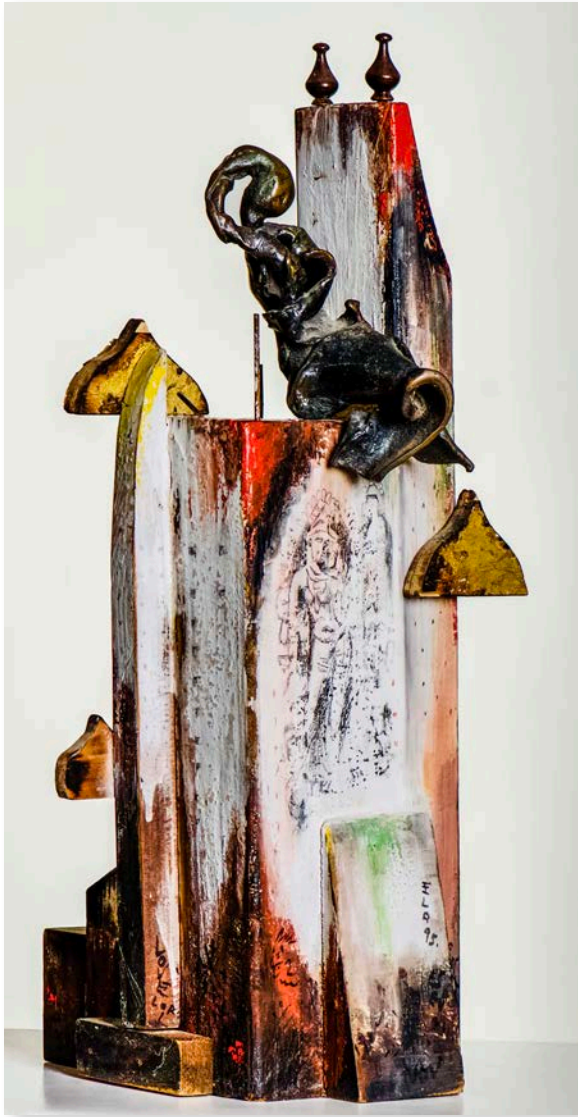
Love Sandwich, 1980
Bronze, Burnt Clay and Wood
9" x 12" x 9", Artist Collection

This work was done after visiting Auschwitz on an art history tour.



Dancing as Fast as We Can, 1978
Bronze, Burnt Clay and Wood
15" x 19" x 13", Artist Collection

Rescue, 1976
 Burnt Clay and a Toy
 6" x 9" x 3"
 Artist Collection



On the Top of the World, 1995
 Wood and Bronze
 20" x 9" x 9", Artist Collection

I WANTED TO BE LIKE PICASSO, BUT...

कार्येषु मन्त्री करणेषु दासी, भोज्येषु माता शयनेषु रम्भा ।
 धर्मानुकूला क्षमया धरित्री, भार्या च षाड्गुण्यवतीह दुर्लभा ॥

An ideal wife will have these virtues – she will be like a counselor in dealing with various situations, like a maid servant in serving her husband, like the earth in forgiveness, like a mother in giving care and like a Celestial dancer in the bedroom.

I wanted to be a good wife and mother. I was raised to believe that this was my primary role and responsibility. I also wanted to be an artist like Picasso. His art was respected around the world and was in the finest museums and private collections. In America people were telling me that if I could not make money with my art, I should not waste my time. They told me "Art is a business. too."

About 30 years ago I thought, "If I want to be a real artist, I need to have my work in galleries." I met with a few commercial gallery owners in the New York area. One was very blunt and told me proudly that he only showed American artists. Another boasted that he had the power to make or break an artist. None of them wanted to represent me and they scared me away. I wasted a lot of time until I finally decided not to be part of that rat race!

These works titled *Statue of Liberty*, *On Top of the World*, *Search and Survival*, *Prisoner of Freedom* and the series *Burnt Mothers with Kids* were created during this period.



Anxious Mother, 1978
Metalized Bronze and Iron
4" x 5" x 4", Artist Collection



Spinning Top, 1978
Burnt Wood, a Top, Chain and Sprayed
Bronze on Clay
10" x 6" x 3", Artist Collection



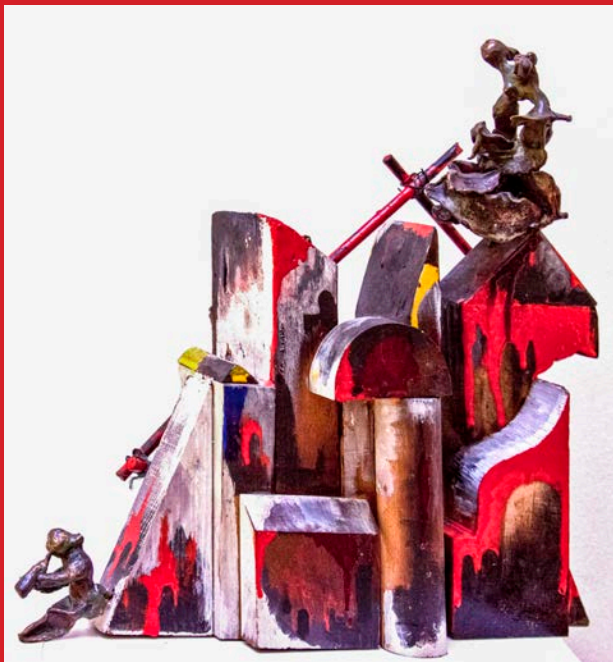
Burnt by Burden, 1980
Metalized Bronze and Iron
6" x 6" x 3", Artist Collection



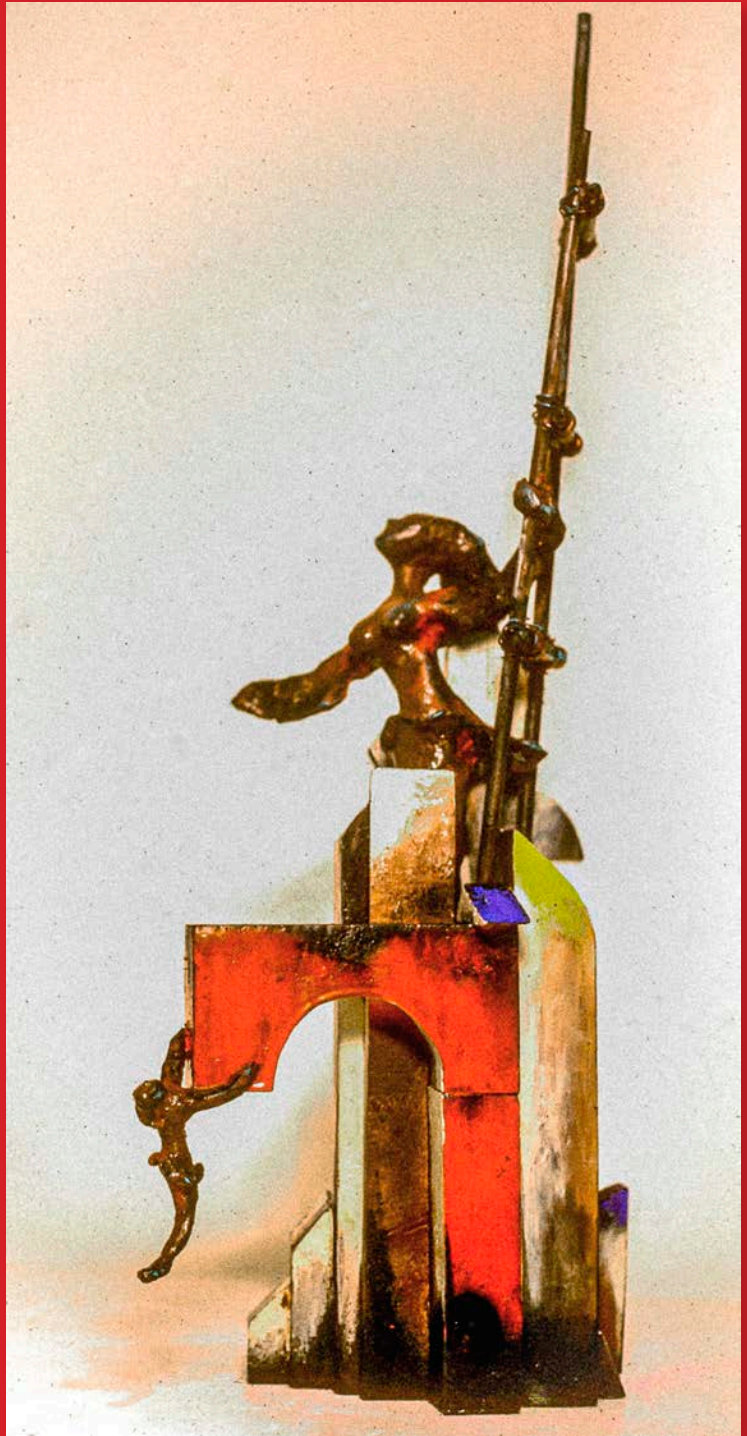
Thirsty Cloud, 1975
Bronze and Wood
8" x 6" x 3", Artist Collection



Search and Survive, Circa 1970
Bronze, Burnt Clay and Wood with Paint
18" x 14" x 9", Private Collection



Search and Survive 1, 1975
Burnt Clay and Wood with Paint, Bronze
19" x 14" x 9" Artist Collection



Statue of Liberty, 1976
Burnt Clay and Wood with Paint
22" x 9" x 9", Private Collection



Spinning Top, 1975
Burnt Clay and Wood with Paint
8" x 4" x 2", Artist Collection



Dilemma, 1975
Burnt Clay and Wood with Paint
9" x 5" x 2", Artist Collection





Top
Working Mom, 1979,
Sprayed Bronze Powder on Clay
16" x 6" x 8", Artist Collection

Bottom
Working Mom 1, 1981
Bronze and Iron Rod
26" x 10" x 9", Artist Collection

Page 41
Human Bondage, 1983
Bronze, Steel Rod
22" x 10" x 10", Artist Collection





Prisoner of Freedom, 1985
Bronze and Burnt Clay Cage
20" x 6" x 6", Artist Collection



Tired Rocking, 1990
Bronze
5" x 4"x 3", Artist Collection



Hari No Marg (Way to God), 2005
Mixed Media on Wood
21"x 13"x 1", Artist Collection

Chapter Three

POWER OF FLOWERS

My children were thriving in school, making new friends, and learning to speak English. Bipin was establishing himself in our community. With the help of my teachers and the support of my family, I slowly began to find my way in this new culture. I was beginning to find my path.

One spring day, I suddenly saw the beautiful and colorful flowers. I was compelled to paint. I began my rainbow series of flowers and abstract works. The colors had returned to me!

When I became disillusioned with the world, temple images rekindled my faith.

I tried not to give up on myself and found ways to deal with it. I realized that faith sees better in the dark.

These flower paintings adorned with symbolic figures are sacrificial offerings to the unknown. They reflect my sense of hope in the cycle of birth and death and remind me not to mourn over fallen leaves or any loss. I have no choice but to search within and survive. Despite the inner chaos of my life, I chose to live.

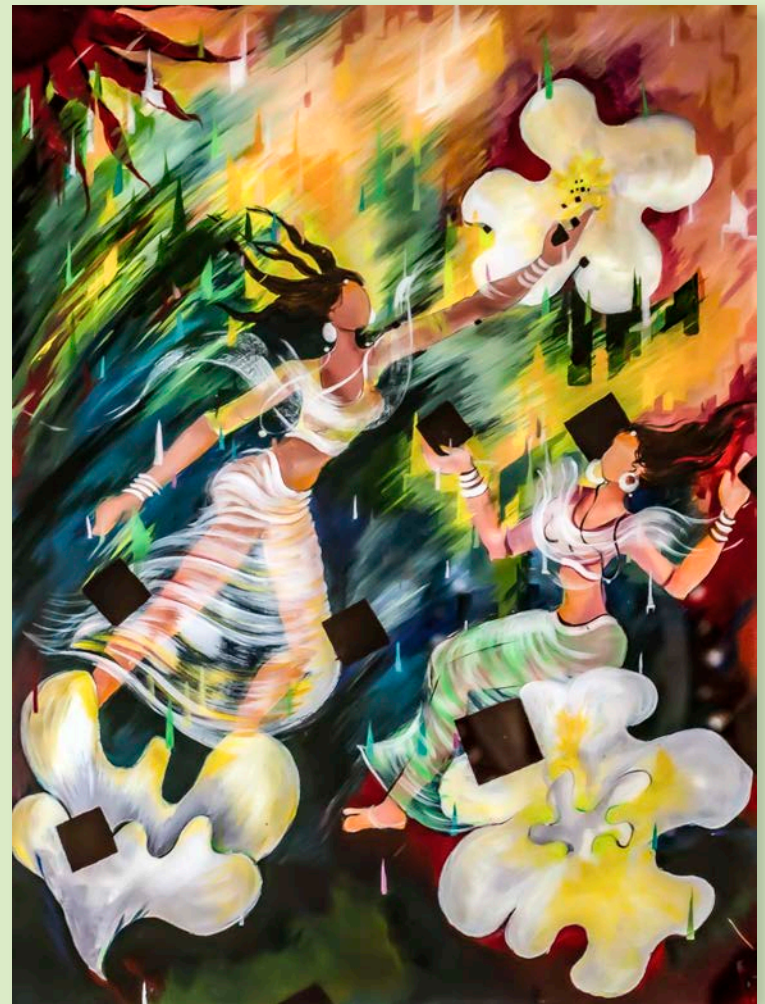
मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।

आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥ 14 ॥

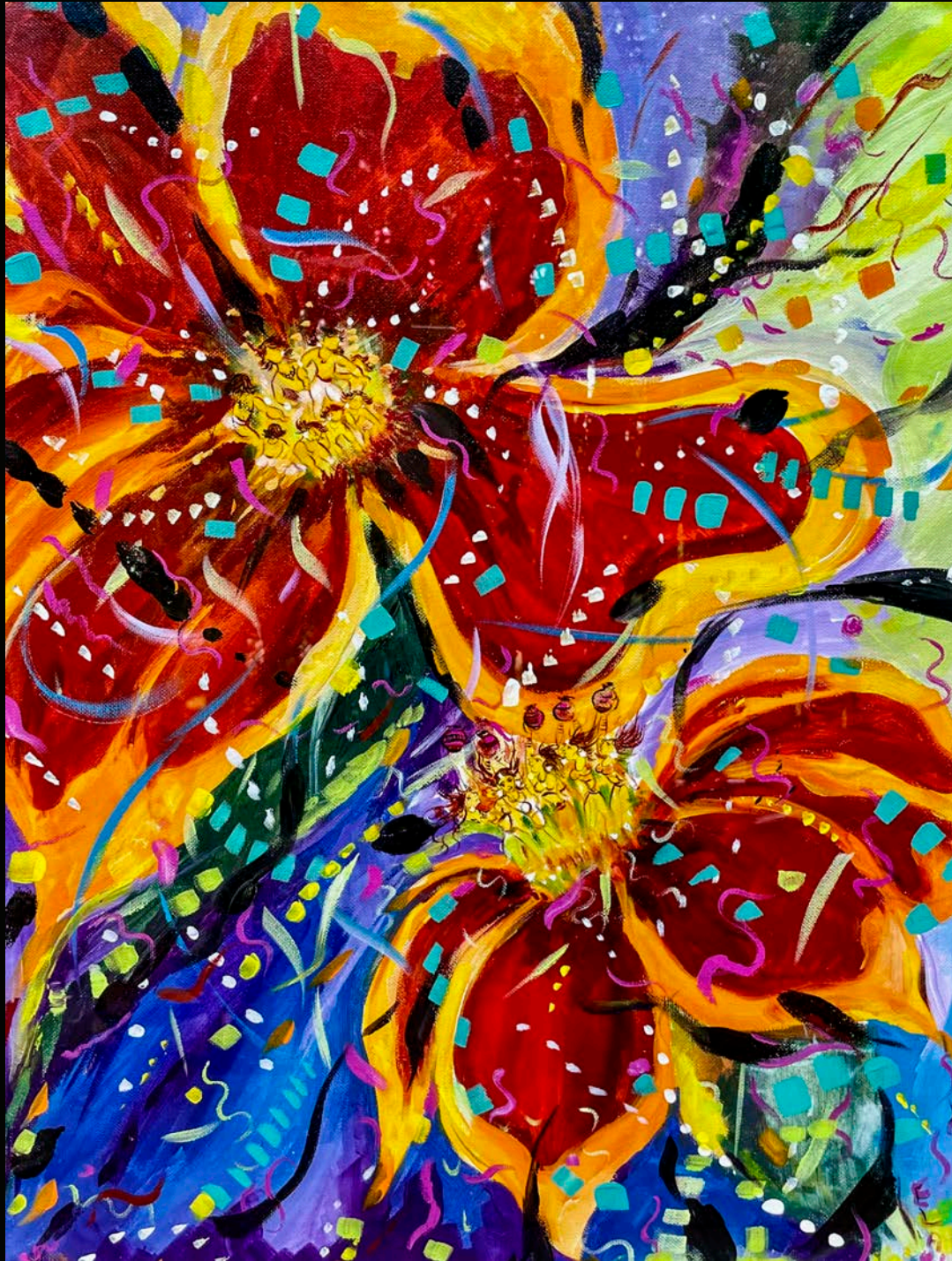
Winters and summers are temporary in nature. Similarly, pain and pleasure are impermanent. They will come and go away. Learn to tolerate them without being affected by them. Nothing is permanent in this world.



Sisters, 1990
Acrylic on Canvas
48" x 36", Courtesy of Dr. Bhupendra and Veena Kapadia



Flower Myth, 2001
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
30" x 24", Courtesy of Rohan Sukhdeo and Dr. Bindi Shah



Power of Faith, 2001
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
24" x 18", Courtesy of Drs. Dhvani and Amy Shah



Power of Flower, 2001
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
24"x 18", Artist Collection



Hope and Faith, 2001
Acrylic on Canvas
30' x 60", Courtesy of Cardiac Care Center, Cambay, India



Power of Pansy, 2001
Acrylic on Canvas
24"x 24", Courtesy of Cardiac Care Center, Cambay, India.



Hope and Faith, Detail



Cradle of Faith, 1995
Paper Pulp Print with Natural Dye
60" x 18", Courtesy of
Montclair Museum of Arts Collection

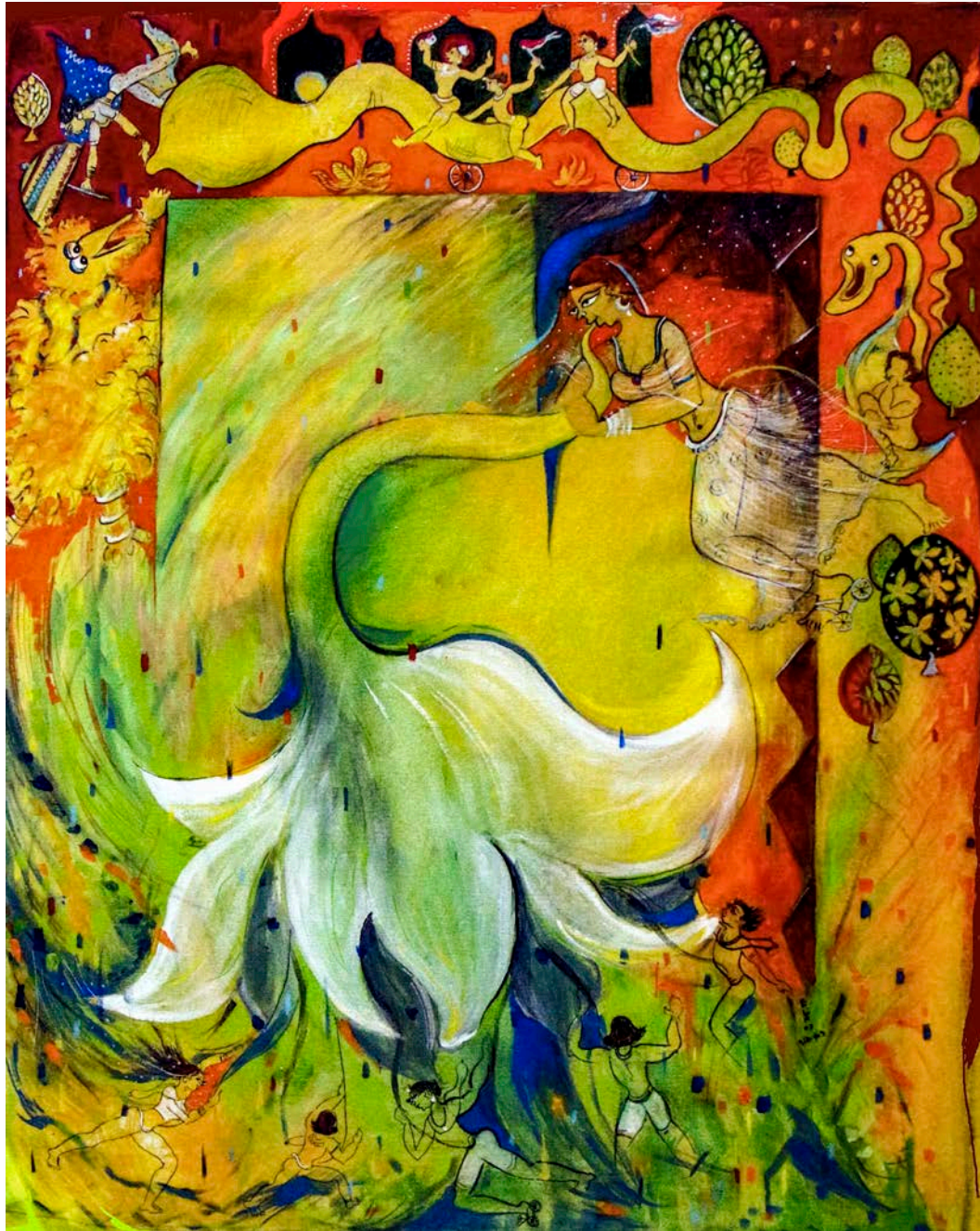


Cradle of Faith, 1995
Paper Pulp Print with Natural Dye
60" x 18", Private Collection



Bandhan, 2007
Mixed Media on Canvas
40"x 30", Artist Collection

This work is a celebration of birth. A mother is nourishing her child as they enjoy life in the city. They are connected by the umbilical cord.

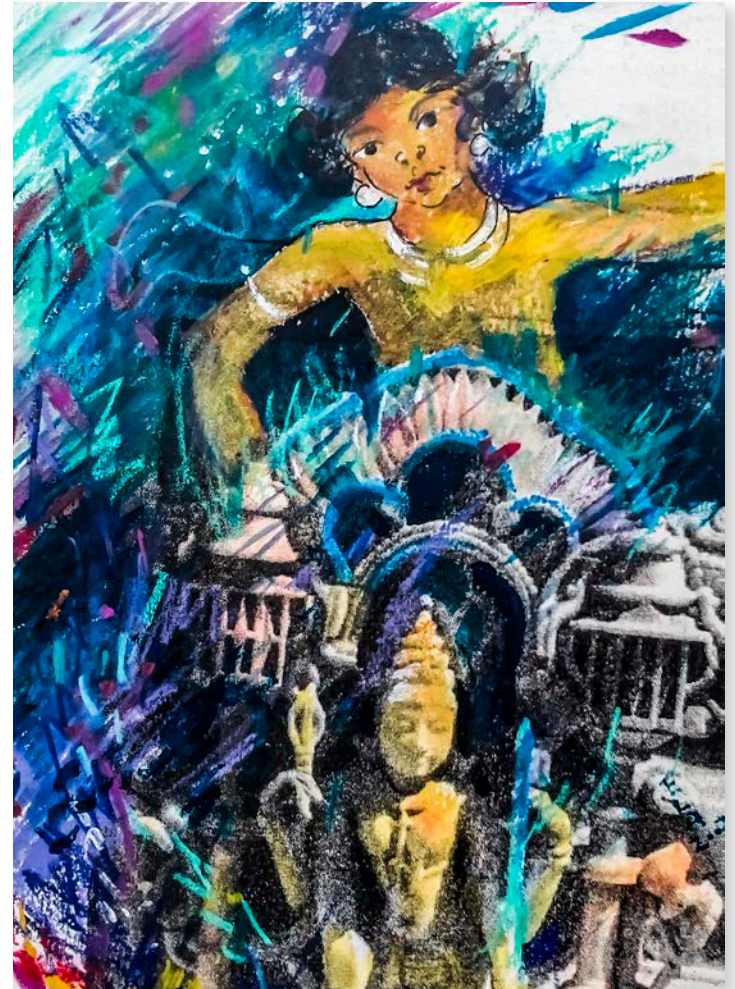


Dialogue, 2007
Mixed Media on Canvas
40"x 30", Artist Collection

A woman is passing secret messages from one generation to the next generation. India's temperate spring weather, beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and the colorful costumes of women, inspired me to create these works and have hope.



Puja, 2002
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Artist Collection



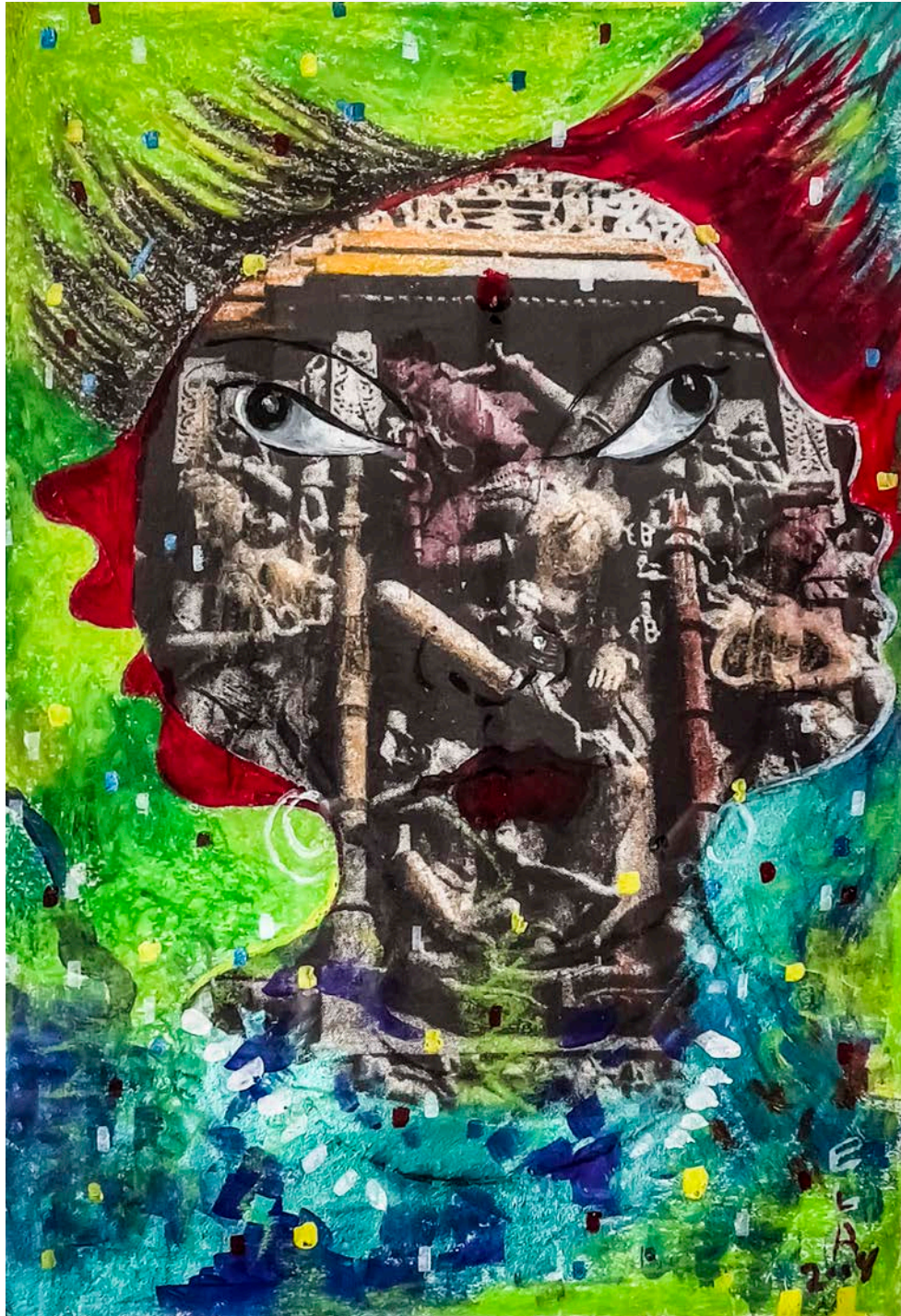
To Manaav, 2002
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Courtesy of Manaav Shah

POWER OF POWERLESS

When I came to America, I saw how people enjoyed big houses with plenty of rooms while in India some families lived in empty sewer pipes left on the ground. Here they wasted food while in third-world countries there was famine. When I came to America I was overwhelmed by how many pairs of shoes people had in their homes. Even though I grew up in a middle-class family, I had only one!

I remembered how I had found solace in temples. The mythological images of the divine idols, the fragrance of the flowers, the sound of music, and the bells ringing, had helped me to deal with whatever was going on in my life.

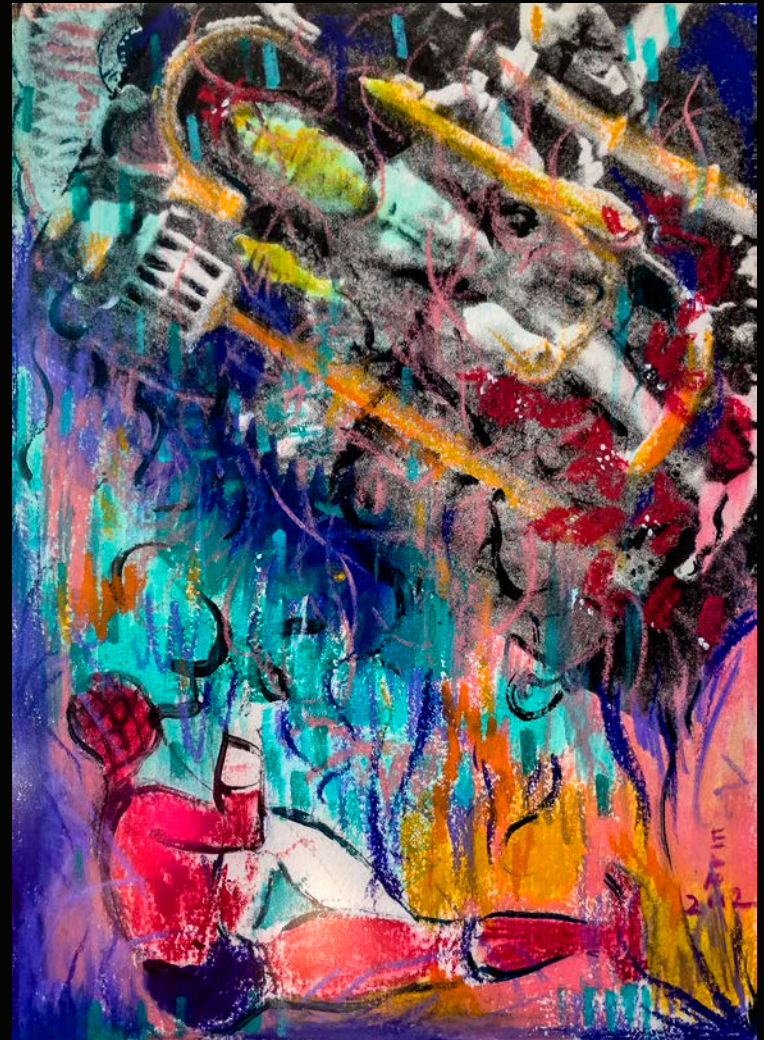
I was thinking about the paradoxes of life and the role of faith when I created these monoprints with silk screened temple images on the silhouette of the starving Somalian child's face. Can faith and their will to survive sustain them?



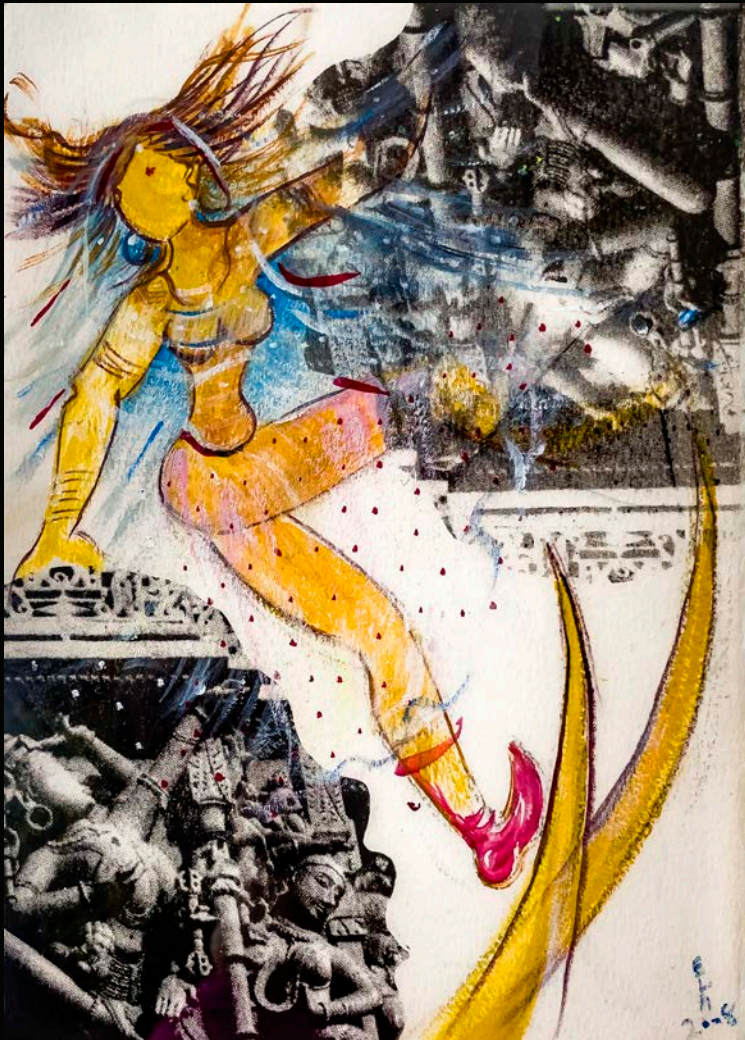
Duality, 2008
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Courtesy of Harish and Hema Shah



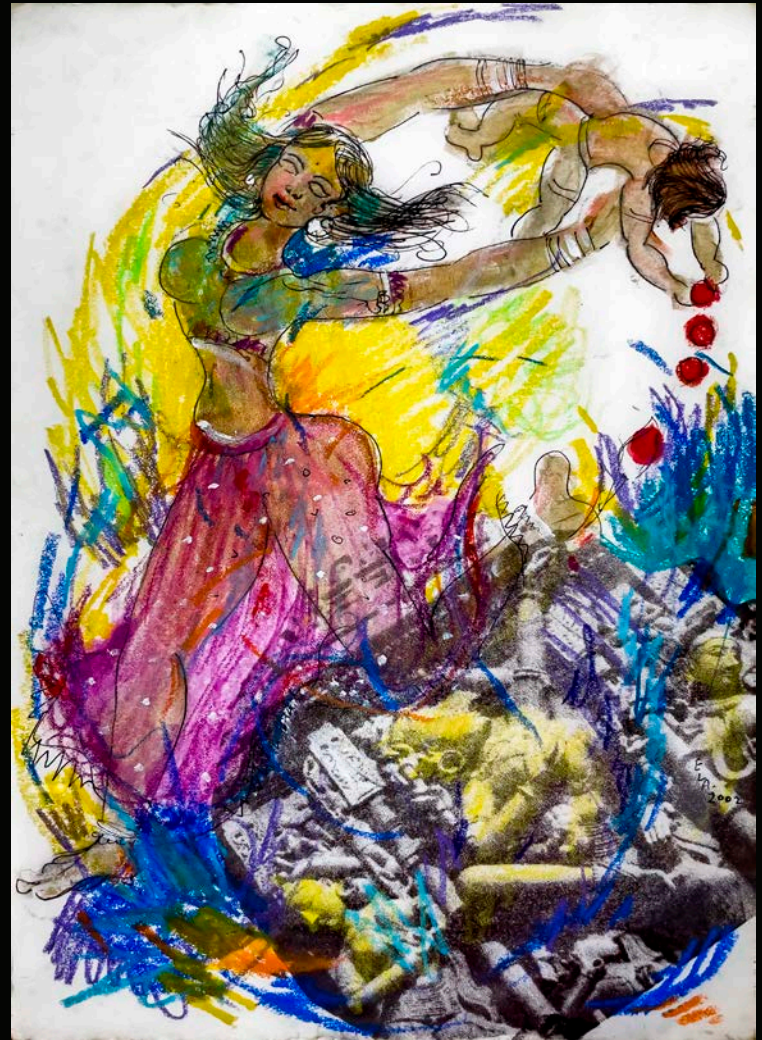
Divine Dance, 2008
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Artist Collection



Silent Prayer, 2002
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Artist Collection

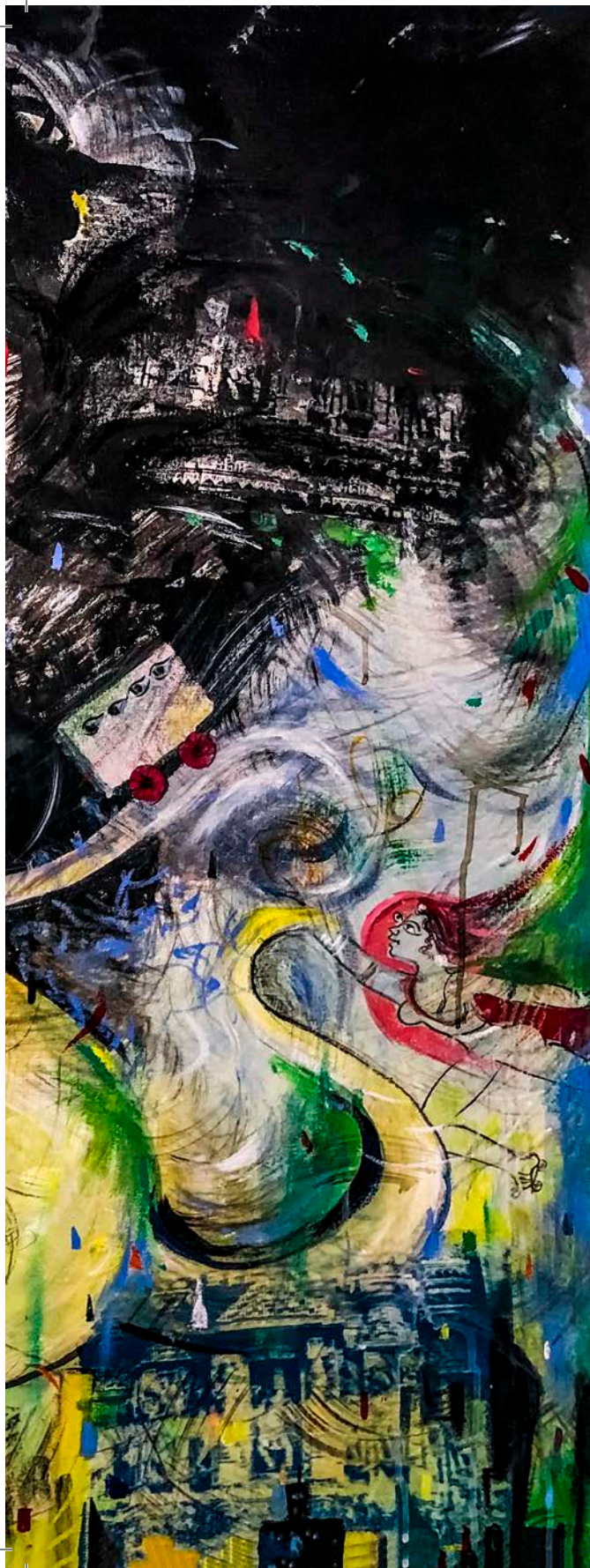


Balancing, 2008
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Artist Collection



Juggling, 2008
Silk Screen and Mixed Media on Paper
24" x 18", Artist Collection





Chapter Four

BUT WHERE IS YOUR EASEL?

A famous wealthy couple who admired my work came once to my home to buy art. They were looking for an easel in every room and finally said “But Ela, where is your easel?” I simply replied, “I don’t have one” and they left disappointed and empty handed.

Each year we travelled with our children to India and to places around the world. Wherever I was, I worked. When we were home, I worked on the dining tables, sat on the floors, or went down to the basement. When we travelled, I worked in hotels on canvas papers or on canvases I taped on the walls. For a few years I rented a very tiny studio in Riker Hill Art Park in New Jersey. I would go very early in the morning as soon as the kids went to school. That is where I did a lot of this work. I painted multiple canvases to create a 29-foot by 10-foot mural for the Jain Center of Europe in the United Kingdom.

Sometimes at home I watched Sesame Street with my children. They were becoming fluent in English and watching television with them helped me, too. I saw Big Bird and superheroes on TV, and they made a big impression on me.

On my mother’s 75th birthday she came from India to visit us. My four-year-old son gave her tiny figurines of superheroes. She kept them with her other gods of India in her little shrine, thinking they must be gods for American children. I was inspired to put these figures in my work since they symbolize hope and justice for all.

God is in whatever you believe in.

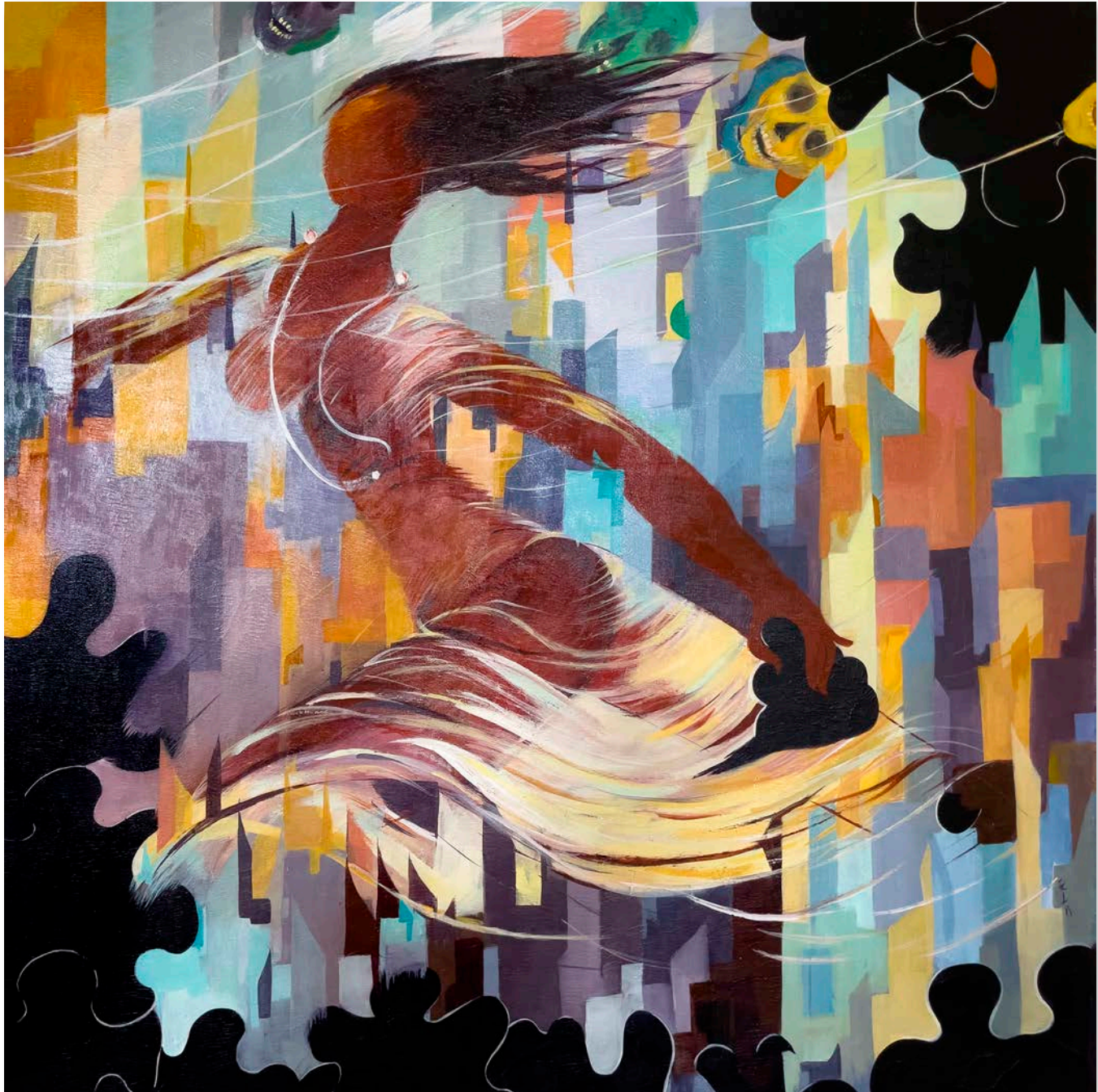
Ram Rakhe Ane Kon Chakhe?
(Who can Touch You if God is Taking Care of You?), 2018
Acrylic on Canvas
36”x 48”, Artist Collection



Puzzle of a Mother, 1990
Acrylic on Canvas
60" x 20", Artist Collection



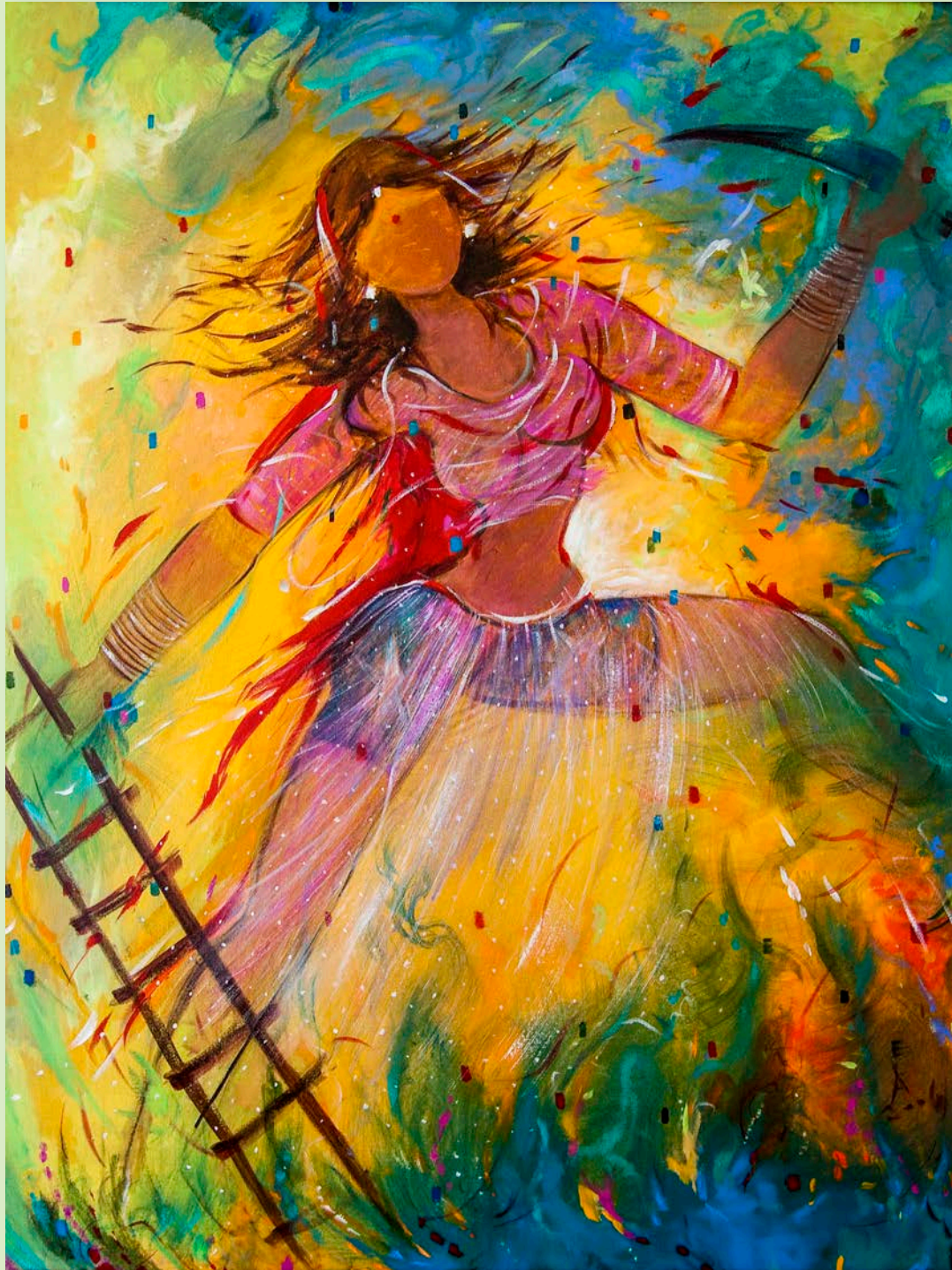
Puzzle of a Puzzle, 1992
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
30" x 24", Courtesy of Drs. Dhvani and Amy Shah



Freedom From The Unknown, 1985
Mixed Media on Canvas
48" x 48", Artist Collection



Gods Must be Playing Marionettes, 1985
Acrylic on Canvas
24"x 60", Courtesy of Drs. Dhvani and Amy Shah



Katar, 2006
Acrylic on Canvas
40" x 30", Artist Collection

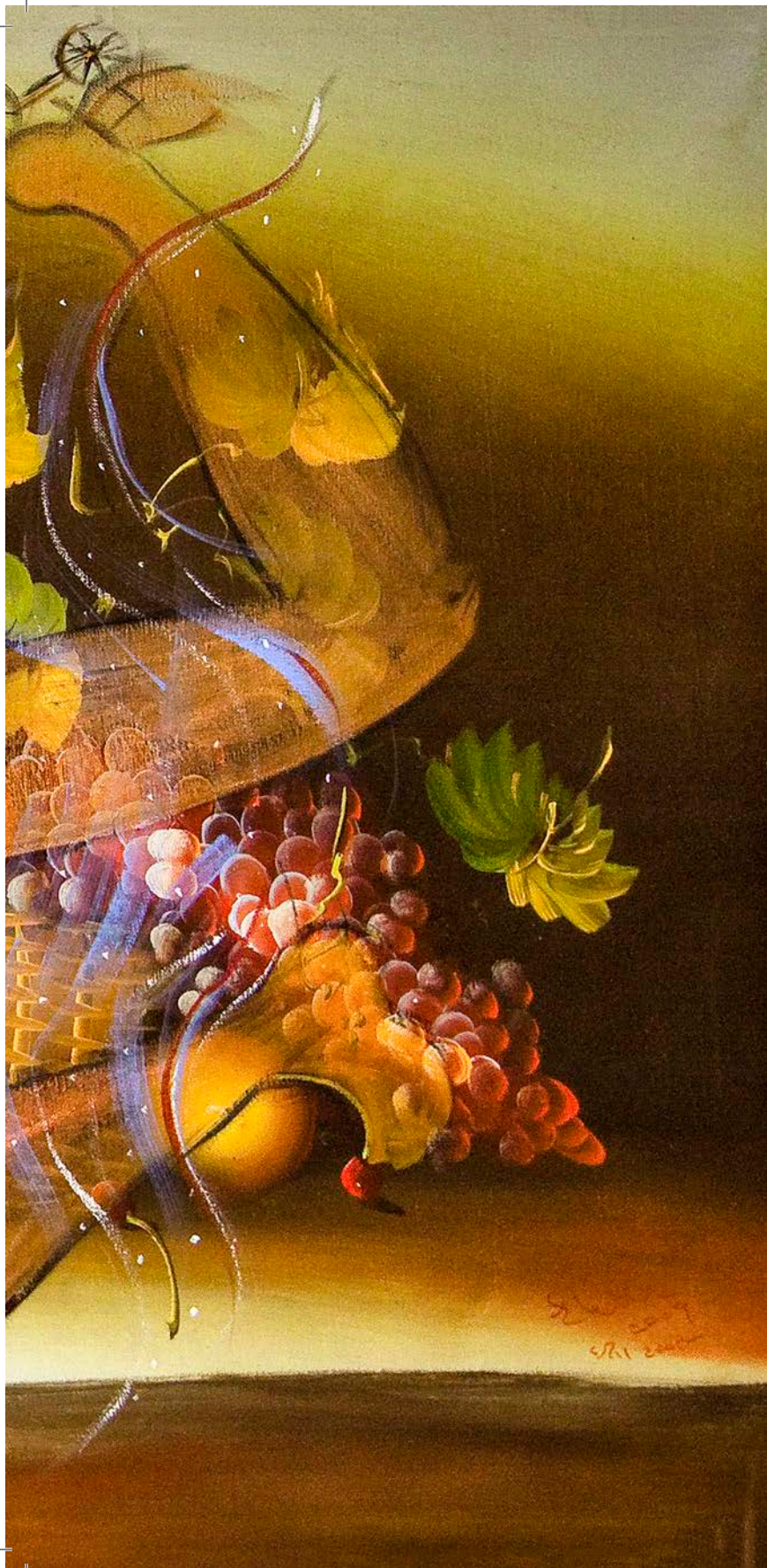




Discovery, 1986
Acrylic on Canvas
36" x 48", Courtesy of Drs. Ramesh and Kant Ubriyani

Page 62
Puzzle of the Past, 1985
Acrylic on Canvas
48" x 36", Courtesy of Drs. Dhvani and Amy Shah

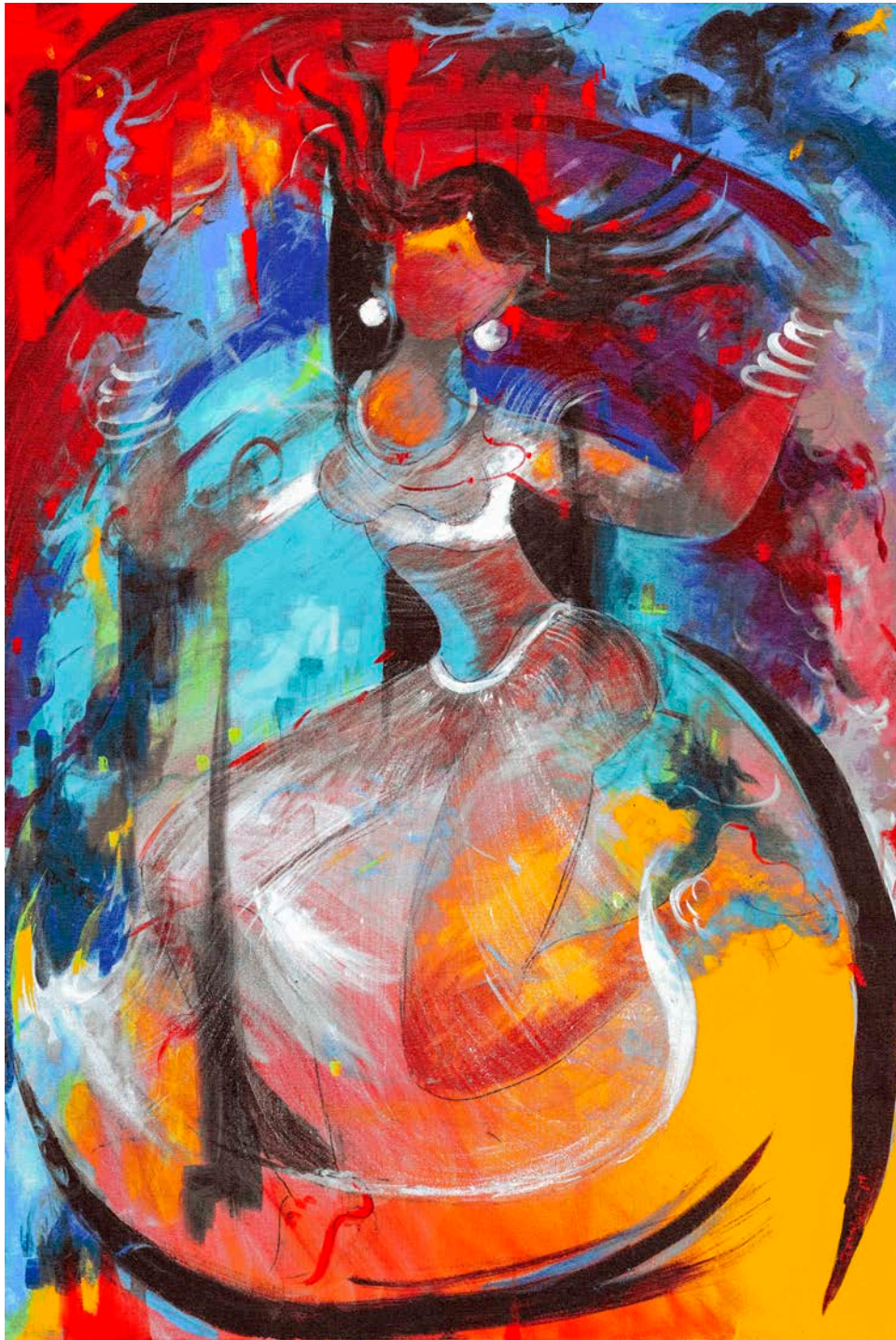




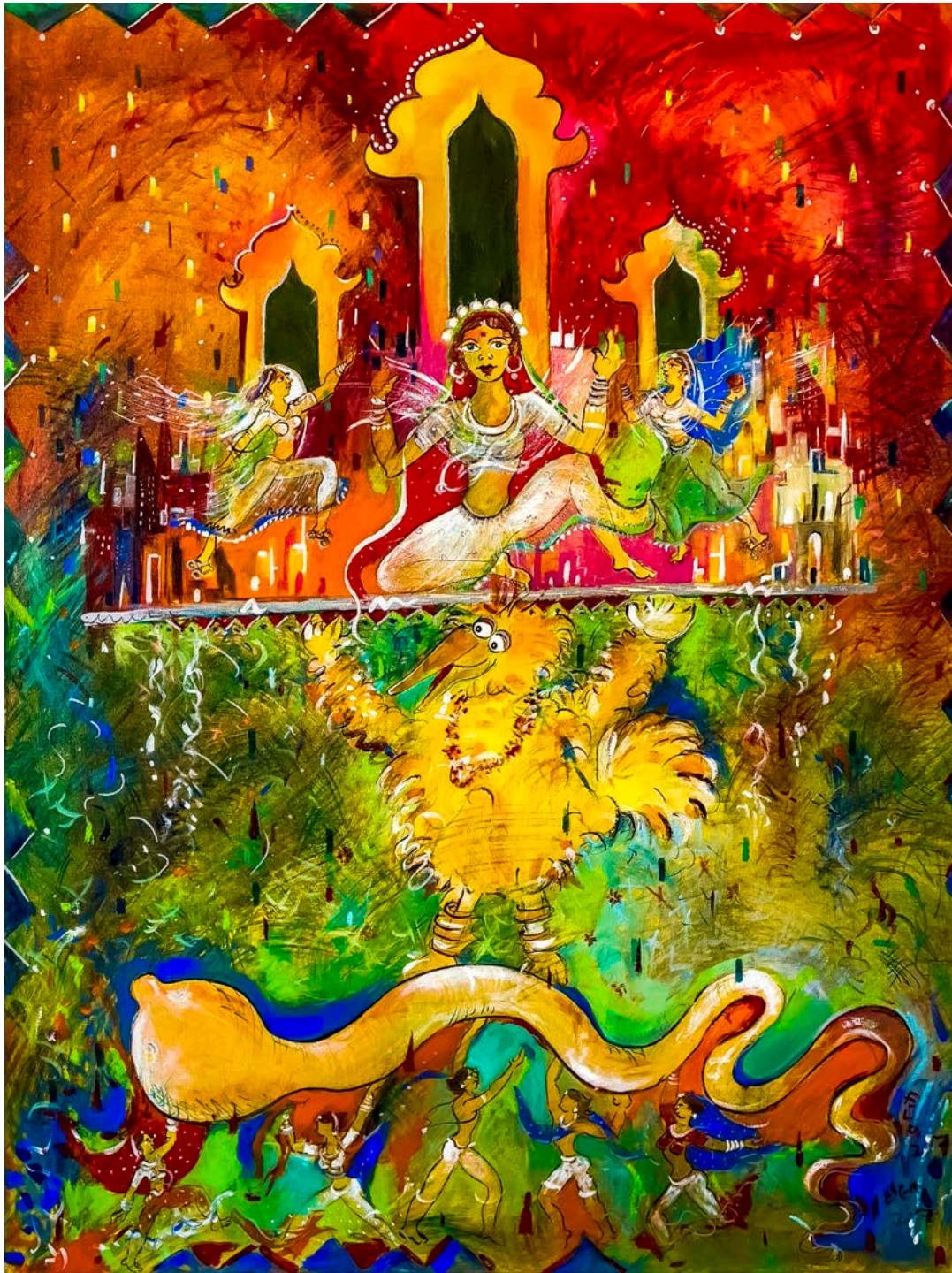
Ma, 2009
Acrylic on Found Canvas
24" x 36", Artist Collection



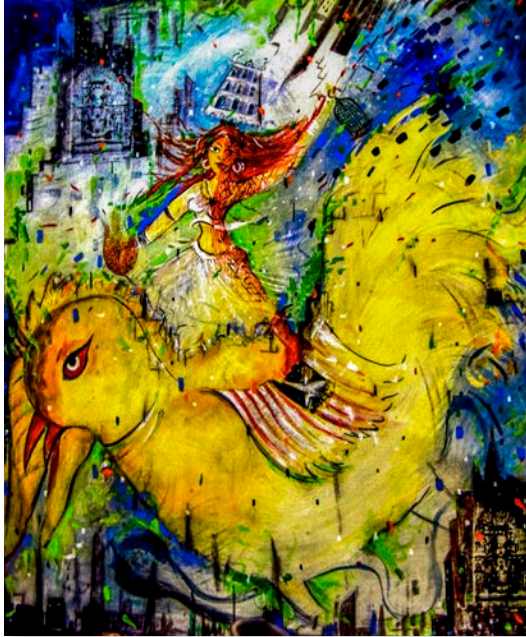
Lady Patanga, 1990
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
24" x 18", Artist Collection



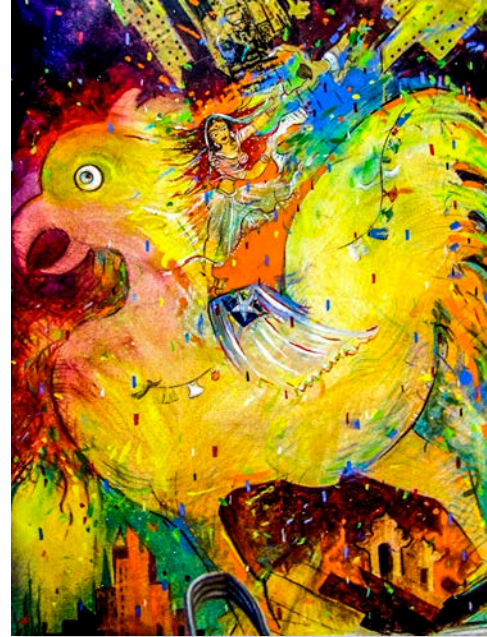
Rejuvenation, 2000
Acrylic on Canvas
36" x 24", Courtesy of Neil and Lauren Shroff



Yatra, 2006,
Acrylic and Silkscreen on Canvas
48"x 36", Artist Collection



Transformed, 2007
Acrylic and Silkscreen on Canvas
36" x 30", Artist Collection



Good Morning America, 2007
Acrylic and Silkscreen on Canvas
36" x 30", Artist Collection



Ma on Yatra, 2007
Acrylic and Silkscreen on Canvas
48" x 36", Artist Collection



Pilgrim, 2007
Acrylic on Canvas
36" x 24", Artist Collection



Divine Helpers, 1996
Mixed Media on Canvas Paper
30"x 24", Artist Collection



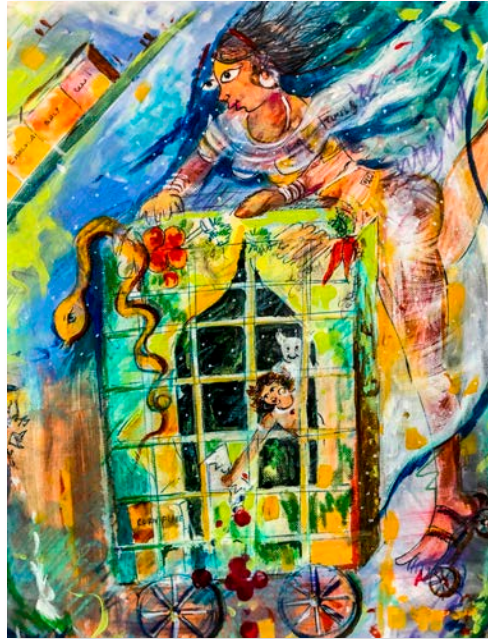
Passage, 1996
Mixed Media on Canvas Paper
30" x 24", Artist Collection



Paiso Parmeshwar (Money is God), 1996
Mixed Media on Canvas Paper
30"x 24", Artist Collection



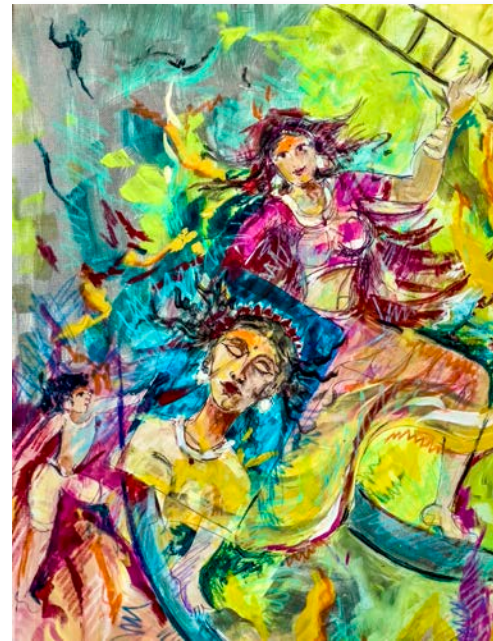
In a Pan, 1995
Acrylic on Canvas
48" x 36", Artist Collection



Busy Mom 1, 2002
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
24" x 18", Courtesy of Deven Sukhdeo



Memory lane, 2002
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
24" x 18", Courtesy of Rohan Sukhdeo
and Dr. Bindi Shah



Portrait, 2002
Acrylic on Canvas Paper
24" x 18", Courtesy of Rohan Sukhdeo
and Dr. Bindi Shah



Cradle of Faith 1, 2002
Gold Leaf, Paint on Burnt Wood
72" x 20" x 1", Artist Collection

The Indian mythological god Hanuman from the epic Ramayana was so strong in his faith that he was able to carry a mountain. Like Hanuman, an immigrant woman with one bare foot and a shoe on the other is carrying a structure of faith and is passing on her faith and culture to her child.

Chapter Five

CELEBRATING POWER WITHIN

Gradually I was getting accustomed to the ways of American society. I began to experience the freedom of making my own choices. As a doctor's wife, I didn't have to wear expensive clothes or jewelry or curl my hair or cut it short. As an Indian woman, I didn't have to put a bindi (dot) on my forehead or wear a sari or fill my kids' lunch boxes with chapati. I began bringing into my life those aspects of each culture that were beautiful and good. And I wanted that same freedom to be reflected in my artwork. I was finding my path to becoming a modern, authentic, Indian American woman and artist. I was finding myself and my way to be happy.

These works were made during this period. They are multilayered and address religious, political, or cultural issues that are created as byproducts of multiculturalism and globalization. They depict my hopes, fears, confusion and struggles to balance the demands of family life and my career.

Some of the woodcuts on the walls show how women raise their children while supporting temple-like structures of faith. At times women are paired with Indian goddesses who can perform impossible tasks with many hands. If one is afraid of losing something precious like one's culture and tradition, they try to hold on to it as tight as they can. The snakes that appear in my work symbolize the power of healing.



Welcome, 2001
Gold Leaf, Paint on Burnt Wood
48"x 38"x Artist Collection

An immigrant woman is looking in a mirror hoping to transform herself into Superwoman. A goddess-like image of the Statue of Liberty with a demon holding a sword below her. This symbolizes a paradox of their American Dream: their hope for a better life and fear of violence.





Top
Super Kid, 2003
Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
12" x 20" x 1/2", Artist Collection



Bottom
Cradle of Faith, 2003
Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
20" x 19" x 1/2", Artist Collection

Page 74
Letter to Ma, 1995
Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
22" x 12" x 1", Artist Collection



Watch Out Umrica, 2003
Silver Leaf and Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
48"x 20"x 1", Artist Collection

A postal van brings good news and sometimes bad news. I think of this as being like immigration which can lead to both positive and negative impressions of immigrants as well as of their home country.



Dream On, 1999
Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
18"x 9"x 1", Artist Collection

Page 77

Jab Tak Hai Card (As Long as I Have the Card), 2013
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood
60" x 55" x 1.5", Artist Collection

A "Desi" girl, clothed in a hybrid of Indian and American garments, emerges from a puzzle with a computer and an H1 B visa card. The work addresses the uncertainty, enthusiasm, pleasures, and pains of getting a temporary visa. The puzzled woman is trying to fit in the frame and confidently assert her presence.

In 2013, this work was done as a winner of the Smithsonian Museum's Asian American Heritage program.





Mermaids Meditation, 2004
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood
24" x 26"x 1", Artist Collection



Best of Both, 2000
Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
50" x 32" x 1", Artist Collection

A woman, emerging out of an envelope, is struggling to enjoy the best of both worlds by clinging to a kite with the Indian goddess Kali on it while balancing on the top of the Statue of Liberty.



At the Click of a Mouse to the Silk Route, 2003
Gold and Silver Leaf and Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
48" x 24" x 1", Artist Collection

Many immigrants use technology to hold on to their faith and traditions from their home countries. With a computer, pilgrimage can be done anywhere in the world!



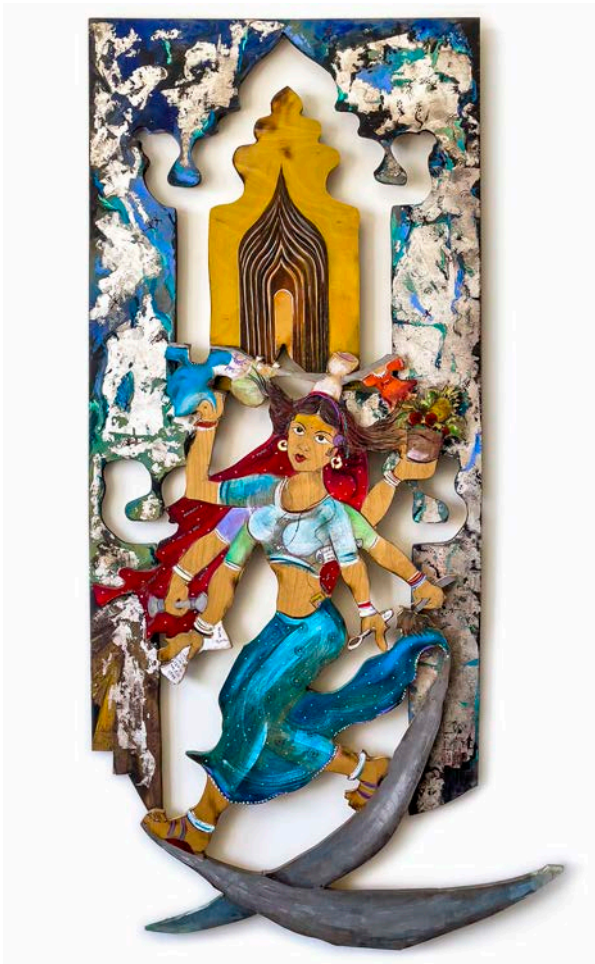
Tired: Rocking in a Pink Room, 2005
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood
25" x 24" x 2", Artist Collection

A woman's progress is like riding on a rocking horse. She thinks she is galloping on a horse and going forward but she always stays right where she is, rocking on a horse in her pink room.

Page 81
At the Click of a Mouse, 2003
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
48" x 25" x 1", Artist Collection

A structure of faith emerges from the laptop computer. With technology, pilgrimages are done on a laptop computer with a mouse. Ironically, the mouse is a vehicle of good luck god Ganesh. This work addresses how technology has changed our reality. For many immigrants seeing images from home on screen can be very comforting.





On Go, 2002
Silver Leaf and Mixed Media
on Burnt Wood
62" x 19" x 1", Artist Collection



Did you Hug your Mom Today?, 2000
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
22" x 23" x 1/2", Artist Collection

Kids are waiting in a queue to hug their busy mom on Valentine's Day.

Page 83
Hang in There, 2005
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
50" x 18" x 1/2", Artist Collection





World Within (in a kettle front), 2004
Gold leaf, Mixed Media, Wood
16" x 18" x 6" (dimensions vary)
Courtesy of Sanjiv Nathwani and Surya Shah



World Within (back)



Safety in a Safety Pin, 2004
Gold leaf, Mixed Media, Wood
36" x 18" x 6" (dimensions vary)
Artist Collection

Chapter Six

SANCTUARIES

"कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन। मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि॥"

Thy human right is for activity only, never for the resultant fruit of actions. Do not consider thyself the creator of the fruit of thy activities; neither allow thyself attachment to inactivity.

My mother raised me to have faith that "whatever happens, happens for good." Gita, part of the Indian epic Mahabharata, teaches us that we must do our best in life without expecting rewards.

Embracing one's fate is a philosophy that is found throughout Indian mythology and my work. I believe that fate determines our future and the best hope for happiness is to accept it. I think happiness comes from within and heaven is what you believe in. This philosophy sustains me, and I try to do my best in life, wherever I go and whatever role I play!

In these mobiles there are goddess-like mothers on one side. On the other side are empowered spider women. They both achieve miraculous tasks. Those times in my life when I have been consumed with family and home, I have created my sanctuary in domestic things like a kettle, an iron, a safety pin, or hanger. I wanted to be aloof from the outside world, and wanted to create heaven for me on the earth. Happiness comes from within I believe!

Sometimes I look at the icons of home in these mobiles and wonder if they are sanctuaries or cells.

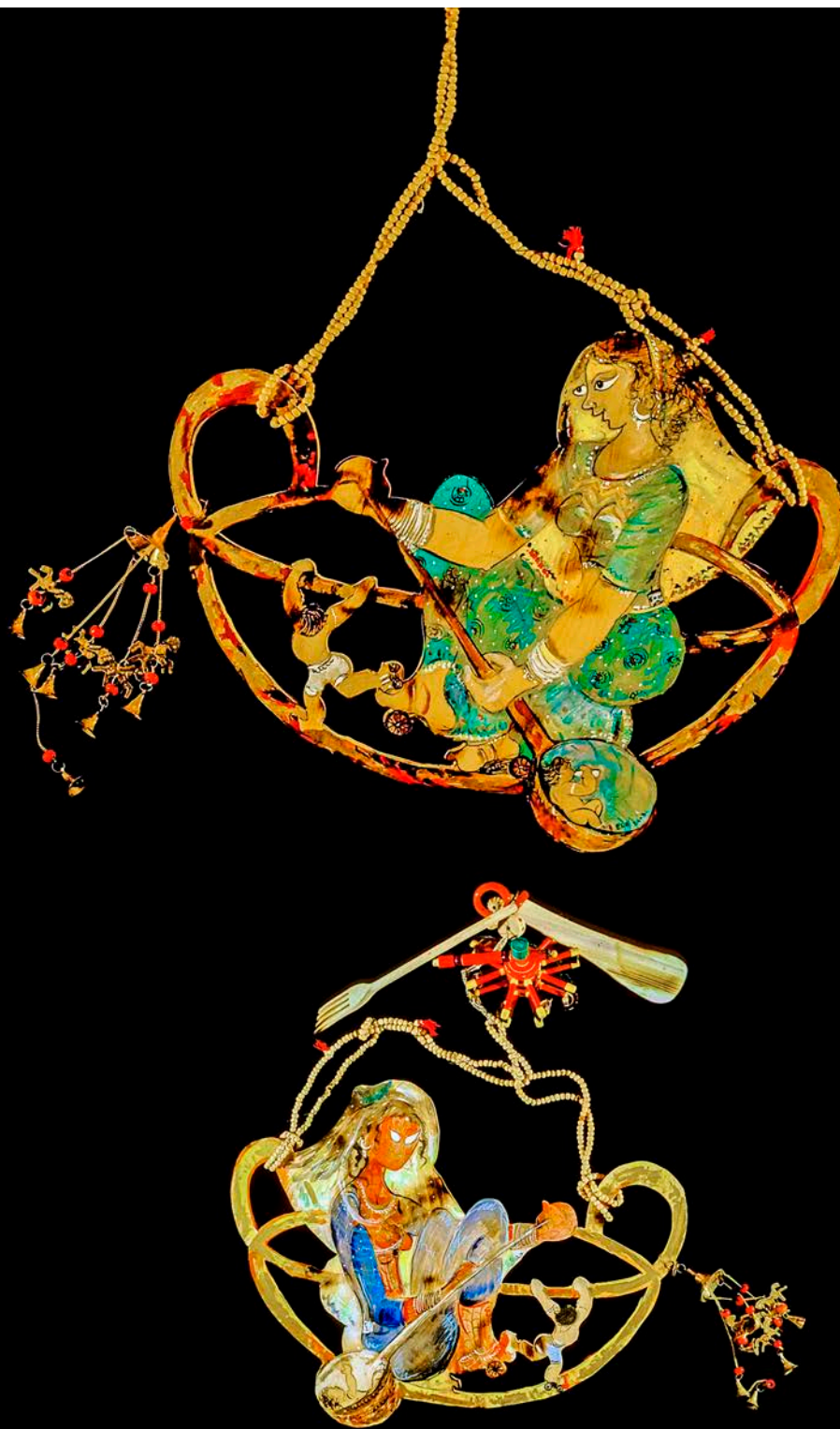


Gardner (front and back view), 2004
Silver Leaf on Burnt Wood and Mixed Media
30" x 16" x 8" (dimensions vary), Artist Collection



Mirror, Mirror in my Purse, 2004, (front and back)
Gold Leaf, Mixed Media on Burnt Wood
36" x 18" x 8" (dimensions vary), Artist Collection

A woman in a purse with a hidden gun is looking into a mirror. She sees herself transformed into a spider woman and she is empowered.



Row, Row the Pan..., 2004, (front and back)
Gold Leaf, Mixed Media and Burnt Wood
30" x 16" x 8", Collection Unknown



Bliss in an Iron (front and back), 2003
Gold Leaf, Paint, Wood, Mixed Media
22" x 18" x 8" (dimensions vary)
Artist Collection



Sanctuary (front), 2005
Gold Leaf, Mixed Media and Wood
20" x 14" x 4", Artist Collection



Sanctuary, 2005
Mixed Media on Canvas
36" x 48"
Courtesy of Rajan and Dipika Desai



Walking on an Edge (front and back), 2005
Silver Leaf and Paint on Wood, Mixed Media
20" x 11"x 8" (dimensions vary), Artist Collection

In the mobile "Walking on an Edge" a woman is climbing a dagger and the birds are entangled in wires which address environmental issues.



Rain or Shine (front and back), 2005
Silver Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood
32" x 8" x 4" (dimensions vary), Artist Collection



Chapter Seven

A RIBBON AROUND A BOMB

I really don't know what this gun series means to me. I want viewers to have their own personal and emotional reactions to it.

I've used paints and shining gold or silver leaf on these works. At first glance they look beautiful, but they can be like a ribbon around a bomb.

Bottled, 1990
Mixed Media on Wood
8" x 13" x ½", Artist Collection

Page 93 Top
Born with a Golden Gun, Circa
1990s
Mixed Media and Gold Leaf on
Wood
9" x 15" x ½", Artist Collection

Page 93 Bottom
Sandy Hook, 2013
Mixed Media and Gold Leaf on
Wood
9" x 13" x ½", Artist Collection





Bottled Up 1, 2004
Mixed Media on Wood
9" x 11" x 1/2", Artist Collection

Page 95 Top
Horsey Horsey, 1990
Gold Leaf and Paint on Wood
9" x 12" x 1/2", Artist Collection

Page 95 Bottom
Faith in Fate, 1990
Silver Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood
11" x 10" x 1/2", Private Collection





Chapter Eight

STRUCTURES OF FAITH

It fascinates me how millions of people around the world have deep faith in the unknown and celebrate their faith by building big monuments in public places and little shrines in their homes or on the streets.

These works are my monuments to a multicultural, postmodern world. They demonstrate how skyscrapers and corporate offices have replaced temples and churches. They exhibit the tension between the spiritual and material worlds. Leaning towers reflect the chaos, anxiety, and disorientation in a world where money has become religion. The painted arches and patterns echo both Islamic architecture and Indian temples.

These structures are also my structures of faith: faith in oneself, humankind, and divine power.



Top
Curious Cow, 2000
 Wood, Clay and Rope
 20" x 18" x 8", Artist Collection

Bottom
Power of Faith, 1998
 Wood and Paper Mache Idols
 19" x 20" x 8", Artist Collection

Page 96
Hungry Stones 1, Circa 1990
 Gold Leaf, Paint on Wood, Clay
 9" x 13" x 4", Artist Collection





Power of Myth 1, 2002
Mixed Media and Paint on Burnt Wood
84" x 32" x 10", Artist Collection



Desi's Delight, 2001
Wood and Found Objects
18" x 8" x 9", Artist Collection



Passage, 2002
Mixed Media and Paint on Burnt Wood
84" x 32" x 10", Artist Collection



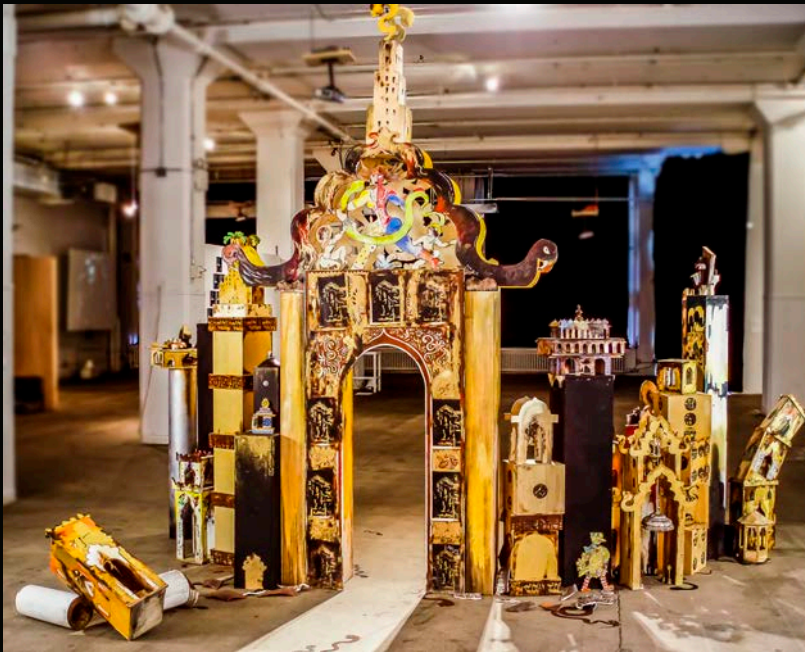
Destination, 1992
Brass Idol, Gold Leaf and Paint on Burnt Wood
90" x 18" x 13", Artist Collection



Survival, 1993
Paint on Burnt Wood, Bronze, Chain
109" x 21" x 13", Artist Collection



Pilgrimage
 (installation: front view, collaboration with Asha Ganpat), Exit Art Gallery, NY
 Mixed Media on Wood, Found Objects
 120" x 150" x 200", (dimensions vary), Artist Collection



Pilgrimage
 (installation: back view, collaboration with Asha Ganpat), Exit Art Gallery, NY
 Mixed Media on Wood, Found Objects
 120" x 180" x 240", (dimensions vary), Artist Collection





World Within, 2004
Mixed Media, (installation view)
Dimensions vary, Hunterdon Museum, Clinton, NJ



Fatal Desire, 2005
Mixed Media, (installation view)
Dimensions vary, Queens Museum of Arts, Queens, NY



Power of Myth, 1995
Red Beans, Paint on Wood, (installation view)
75"x 48"x 48", Noyes Museum, NJ



Altars, 2002
(installation view)
Noyes Museum, NJ



Journey, 2002
Mixed Media on Woodcuts and Tiny Sandals
(installation view), New Jersey Center for Visual Art, NJ



Leaning Tower of Faith, 1998
Mixed Media, (Installation view)
12' x 12' x 18', Montclair Museum, NJ



The Chair, 2012
Aluminum, (installation view)
(collaboration with Michico Rupnow, NJ)
20' x 8' x 6', Clifton Art Center, NJ



Untitled, 2000
Aluminum, (installation view)
65" x 20" x 20", Clifton Art Center, NJ



"Kamdhenu" 2011,
Acrylic on Burnt Wood and Found Object, Video Player
30" x 34" x 6"

This image from the Indian epic Mahabharata is called Kam Dhenu, a mythical cow who fulfills all human desires. She is looking at a video which shows how she has been transformed.

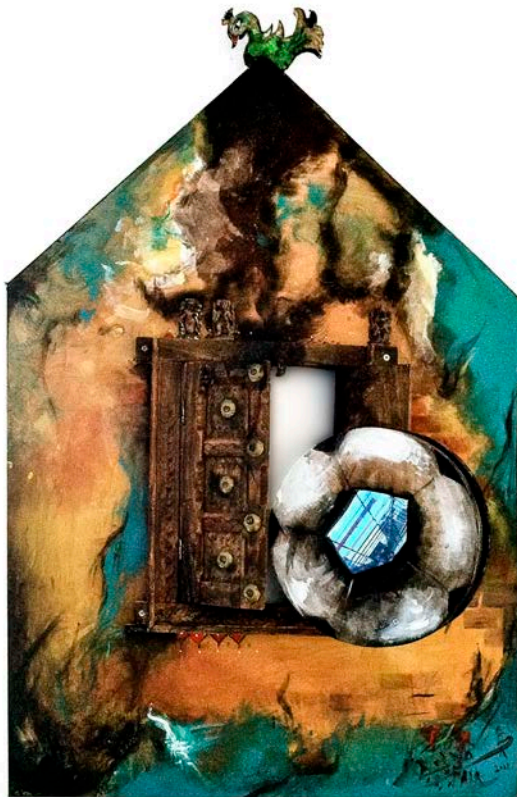
Chapter Nine

LET IT ROLL

These burnt wooden sculptures include brief videos. Each is about one-minute long and plays in a continuous loop on equipment hidden in the design. The videos are scenes that I have shot on my travels abroad including India. Most of the animations are done from my own paintings and sculptures.

Video is a new language for me and brings a new dimension to my work. It has become an integral part of my sculpture. It contributes to my exploration of the issues I have struggled with throughout my life: home, emotional turmoil, cultural identity, and globalization.

I love learning new techniques that let me express myself in contemporary ways that reflect how people communicate. I am also learning to work in age-old techniques like quilting. If I could weave a quilt of all my unsung songs I could wrap it around me, comfort my soul and go into a deep and eternal sleep.



Coming to America, 2009,
Wall Sculpture with Video Player,
Mixed Media,
48" x 20" x 1", Artist Collection

The action of the soccer ball represents the back and forth between two cultures. Juggling between two worlds expanded my dreams and gave me freedom and hopes.



If Fireman Ignites the Fire, 2011
Silver Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood,
Video Player
20" x 22" x 3", Artist Collection.



Winner Takes it All, 2011
Gold Leaf and Mixed Media on Wood,
Video Player
22" x 19" x 3", Artist Collection

A warrior must fight even if his head is cut off!



My First Quilt, 2018
Digital Print on Quilt
18" x 12" x 1/2", Artist Collection



Everything for U, 2019
Digital Print Quilt
18" x 18" x ½", Artist Collection

My Story Continues

I often think, "What will viewers say when they first see my work?" Perhaps the viewer will sum me and my work up in a single sentence. "The artist is Indian, she's old fashioned, the symbols say she's female, and the structures of faith mean she is very religious." Viewers can be quick to judge and move on!

I would respond this way: I am a contemporary artist, a proud woman, wife, and a mother. I am Indian and I am American. Please do not characterize me as being either one or the other. I want to take the best from both worlds. In my life and in my art, I am a struggling human being. I am asking the same questions asked throughout the ages by people everywhere. Questions you may be asking, too. Who am I? What is my purpose? Where is God? What is truth? Where do I find answers? These are the spiritual questions that define the journey I have been on for as long as I've been able to make marks on paper. The search for answers is, and has always been, the motivation for my life and my work.

My work in this book is contemporary to the moment in time when it was created. It reveals my emotions and thought processes at that time. I do not know what shape my art will take tomorrow or ten years from now, but whatever it is, no matter its color, size or medium, I will follow where it takes me, and it will speak to me. It will reveal. That is my fate and I have learned to dance with it.

I offer my prayers and salutations to the billions of people living with physical or mental disability or any human condition over which they have no control; those who flow with their fate and find inner peace and who live in harmony with all living creatures and our world.





About Ela Shah

Who is Ela Shah? She responds. “I am a contemporary artist, a proud woman, wife, and a mother. I am Indian and I am American.”

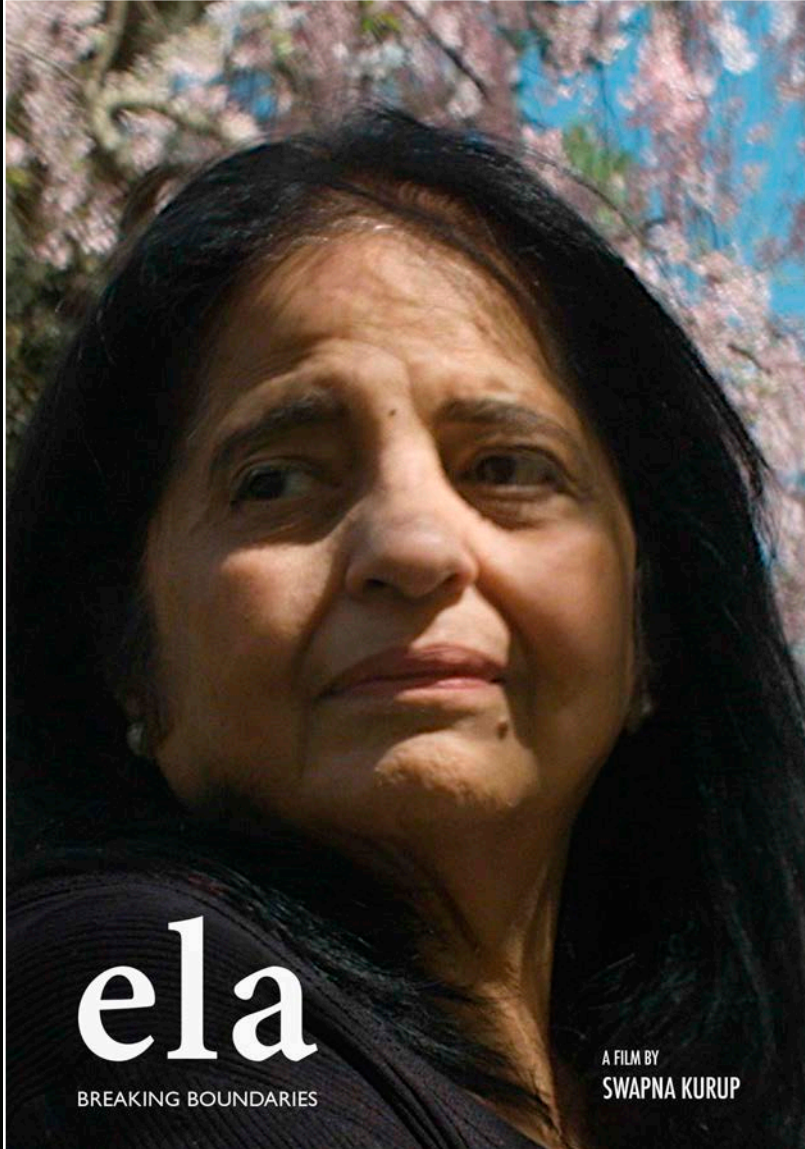
Born in Bombay, India, Ela emigrated to the United States in 1973 and holds a Bachelor’s degree from SNDT Women’s University, Bombay (India), Diploma in Fine Arts from C. N. Vidyalyaya Ahmedabad, (India) and a Masters degree in Fine Arts from Montclair State University (New Jersey.) Her extensive oeuvre created over more than fifty years reflects her mastery of a wide array of artistic genres.

This book, developed in conjunction with the documentary film “ela: Breaking Boundaries”, is her visual autobiography. It is a deeply revealing self-portrait of an award-winning artist as she searches for identity and meaning while navigating the cross currents of social and cultural transition. Shah’s artwork communicates a unique integration of her Indian heritage while incorporating powerful visual elements of Western culture.

Ela Shah has been highlighted in numerous one-person shows and countless group exhibitions in galleries and museums throughout the United States and abroad. Her work is in the permanent collections of well-known museums, public places and private collections in the U.S., India, and the U.K.. She has received numerous awards and fellowships including: The Amelia Peabody Memorial Award and Elizabeth Morse Genius Foundation Award (the National Association of Women Artists in New York): the Dodge Foundation Residency Award and the New Jersey Innovative Printmaking Fellowship at Rutgers University. She was awarded fellowships for both painting and sculpture by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

The documentary “ela: Breaking Boundaries”, produced in 2021, is being shown in film festivals including Flickers’ Rhode Island International Film Festival, New Jersey Film Festival, Chicago South Asian Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and Ontario International Film Festival (complete list in formation.)

For more information about Ela Shah please visit www.elashah.com



ela

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

A FILM BY
SWAPNA KURUP



PRODUCER
ROHAN SUKHDEO

SOUND DESIGN BY
GANESH MARAR

COLORIST
DAN MITRE

ORIGINAL SCORE BY
ROHAN SUKHDEO

POST-PRODUCER
FAHAD SHAIKH



Ela Shah

"Ela Shah's work is distinctively original and has a disquieting vision of the world."

John Russel, art critic, The Sunday Times of London, The New York Times

"Her powerful voice is unique, necessary, and bold. It's simultaneously of many backgrounds and worlds, and completely hers. The pieces are so quintessentially human, so relatable, they can bring out empathy in even the most narcissistic soul."

Kal Penn, Actor and Producer, New York

"Shah offers a perhaps against-the-grain version of the contemporary self-definition of a successful woman artist. Her approach to artistic media is also far-reaching and exploratory, including painting, sculpture in wood, bronze and ceramic, installations, and video."

Jeffrey Wechsler, Senior Curator (retired), Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

Ela Shah is truly "breaking boundaries". Her art form is an expression of emotions, desires, passion and her multi-cultural experiences. Ela is on a divine and spiritual journey through her art form which is simply awakening. Her voice is compassionate yet fierce. Her quest for cultural identity is reflected in her work and we witnessed an incredible documentary on her life at the film festival.

Jigar Shah, Festival Director, Chicago South Asian Film Festival

"Fine art in New Jersey cannot help but be about diversity. Cultural exploration is the lot of thousands of Jersey hyphenated artists, and one of the stars of this sort of thing is Indian-American Upper Montclair painter-assemblage artist Ela Shah."

Dan Bischoff, Star-Ledger of New Jersey

