

## 'Beneath the Surface'

Much can be said about the nature of the improvisational structure of Nobina Gupta's work and its close relationship with emotional and lyrical construction. What also becomes clear, however, in looking at her recent body of work is its relationship, not just to the abstract composition of emotion, but to contemporary visual culture. This body of works demonstrates a complex layering of forms and meanings, some of which connect her to classical modes of abstract painting, and some of which connect her to the contemporary visual world and other types of expression. There is the quality of the simple, the straightforward, the whimsical, and even the surprising aspects of contemporary visual culture that have begun to invade her imagery and this balance provides a dynamic energy to her work.

Gupta is an artist whose imagery has been developed over time by working out ideas through creating a series connected to a single theme or image. She has a profound understanding of principles of abstraction, the possibilities that minutely worked and bled colours provide as well as the richness of a well organized, complexly designed composition. Each work represents a series of related compositions and all the works share a kind of organizational resonance, an implied musicality of structure. In this way, Gupta's internalization of a lyrical structure emerges, bringing together seemingly unrelated works. Another important aspect of Gupta's art is crucial to understanding her work: craftsmanship. This term can be problematic in a world of Duchampian found objects, but there are many contemporary artists who continue to be interested in the vocabulary and syntax of form, image and colour quality and Gupta can be included among them. Her attention to compositional unity, application of colour and its harmony demonstrates her commitment to the physical and intellectual elements of art making and places her within a venerable pedigree of artists who share this fascination with the formal devices of painting. Her paper relief works exemplify her commitment to the fundamental elements of three-dimensional design. She balances negative and positive space, large elements and small elements, and broad but separate areas of the pictorial surface.

What is most fascinating about Gupta's work is the congress of the elegant craftsmanship of modernist abstraction and the bold language of contemporary visual culture. This close relationship appears to have evolved over time and emerged out of a natural and organic development. Her style is neither forced nor contrived, nor a self-aware cynical act. It is also important to address the lyricism of Gupta's forms which plays a dominant role in many of her works. Her lines become whimsical characters in themselves, providing a sort of narrative element within the composition, bridging the two seemingly disparate approaches of form and formlessness. The lines seem alive, a sensibility that reinforces the organic nature of the larger images. It is in this kind of balancing of the whole where we see again the musicality of her structure, a complex organization of classical abstraction, contemporary visual culture and organic form. It is, however, important to spend time with this body of work. The densely-worked images only reveal their richness and subtlety after prolonged scrutiny. To hear the music of these images and explore their subliminal depths, one must gaze into their essence, into their distances away at their horizons.

The work is at once agoraphobic and space-loving: incidents of colour hug the sides of the

pictorial surface, as if fearful of trespass on the wide openness beyond, yet the expansive field of subtly-modulated colour contained within these edges is filled with a radiant evocation of space and light. Initially the works may seem sparse but on closer inspection one finds them filled with incident in which energies flow in every direction without, somehow, creating a tumult. These are extremely elegant works and, yet, demanding of the viewer. They are cartographic without being, in the least, map-like. The colours edge at the viewer, bleeding into, flooding and renewing each other, effecting unexpected conjunctions of rare lyricism. In what is a dance but also a duel, there resides a discovery of self and meaning which transcends the actual process, while at the same time being totally reliant upon it. These images are about emotions but also about landscape; about the placing of pictorial elements; yet ultimately about the locating of self within the wider context of the world.

Gupta pursues a constant cross-referencing of colours. Black may be applied over light green, for instance, but instead of dominating, it is somehow absorbed into the light. They are akin to the footlights to the real drama of nature; something also of the cinder path; areas of shade and shadow like smoke or the precipitate in a chemical reaction. The texture is assertive, it draws attention to itself, to some extent it becomes the action of the work. These works are constructed, built up to the light. Or perhaps they have grown: there is certainly a sense of the organic here. Like many good works of art, these draw its strength from the apparent contradictions within it.

Gupta does not finish a work – be it a drawing, painting, an installation or a video – so much as she discovers that it has reached its most perfect point: the moment at which to touch the work once more would be to risk ruining it, and when the optical and intellectual sensations she strives for are at their most intense. Her work is activated by the observed world, but filtered through a sensibility naturally attuned to the language of abstraction. She is careful not to offer us certainties, but to concentrate instead on transitional states. By subtle variation and through a profound gift for interval and rhythm, Nobina Gupta reminds us that our lives depend upon the fundamental interconnectedness of all things. It is just a matter of seeking beneath the surface.

**Anirudh Chari**