

S. C. Sumran ..



Mithila Cosmos : New Narratives

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In 2007, S.C. Suman held a very successful exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery. Entitled “Mithila Cosmos”, this exhibition brought attention to the enduring iconographies of the Mithila Kingdom in its traditional and post modernist context. S.C. Suman’s paintings have been exhibited and appreciated both nationally and internationally.

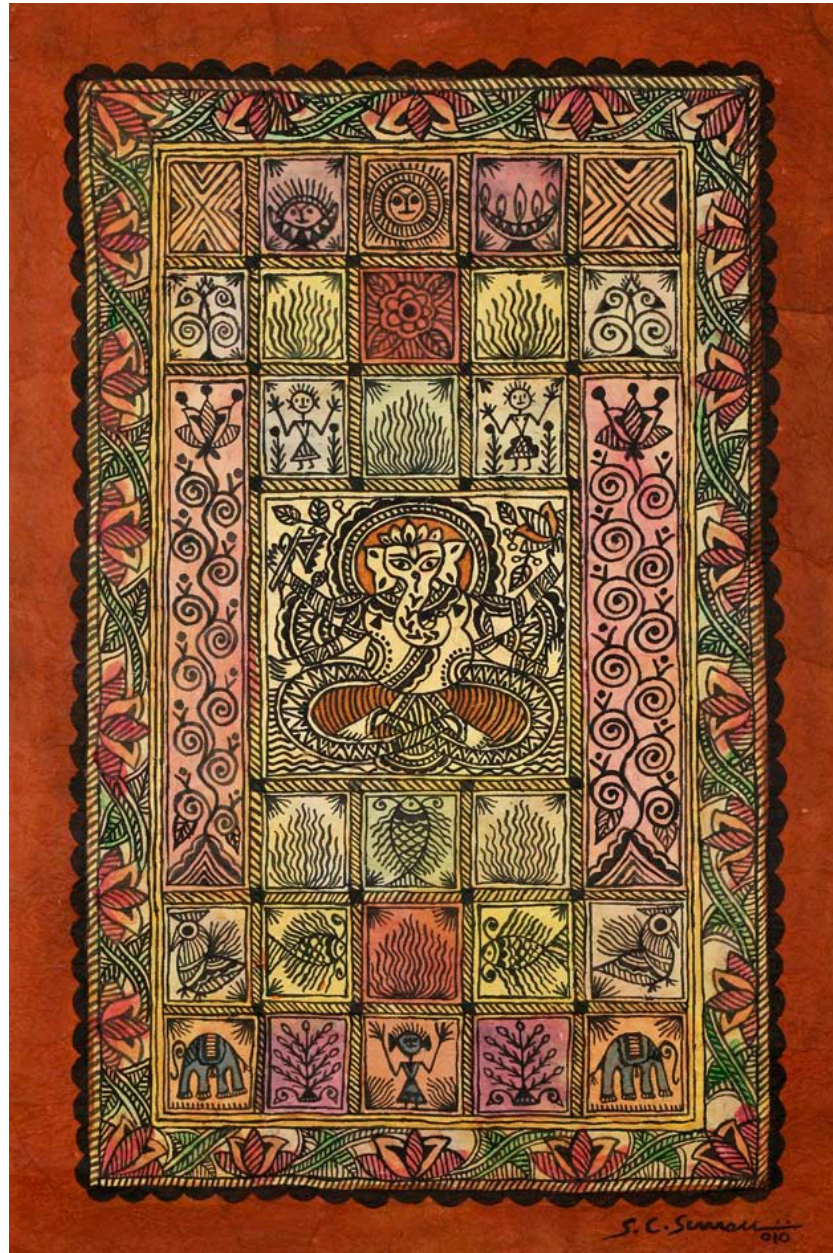
The present exhibition titled “Mithila Cosmos-New Narratives”, is again, a celebration of the Mithila culture. The area surrounded by the Ganges River to the South, the Himalayas to the North, and the now gone Koshi and Gandaki Rivers to the East and West, has been known as the home of the ancient Mithila Kingdom, Janakpur in Nepal was once the capital of this great and ancient Kingdom called Mithila, whose territory extended into present day Bihar, India covering the areas Darbhanga, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Sitamadhi, and the areas of Betiya and Sarlahi, Saptari, Mohatari, Siraha, Morang, Dhanusa, and Rautahat in Nepal. Even today Janakpur is the epicenter of Maithili culture in Nepal. The epic Ramayana makes mention of this area as King Janak and his daughter Sita the consort of Lord Rama, hailed from this great kingdom.

For over three thousand years, the genre of Mithila painting has remained within the bastion

of its womenfolk, who inherited their traditions, skills, technical knowledge and expertise from their mothers or grandmothers. Though Mithila art forms vary from caste to caste, the art forms that emanate from this region are associated with religious ceremony and are an integral part of local rituals.

The Mithila cosmos is imbued in the artist S.C. Suman’s psyche and his earliest memories are of his grandmother, making ritual paintings for the various festivals and pujas in their family home in Siraha. In this cosmos the ‘aripana’ or specially drawn patterns for the threshold, is made everyday. To make an ‘aripana’, Suman’s grandmother would grind rice with some water into a paste called ‘pithar’ and use this mixture to make the delicate ‘lace like’ patterns on the mudfloor and in the ‘goshai ghar or prayer room’ each day. These intricate ornamental but profoundly symbolic patterns, would be incomplete without adding the final touches with abir, sindoor and kesari powder. Claire Burkert, founder of Janakpur Women’s Development Center writes that Mithila women ‘have a repertoire of such designs that may be drawn for worship of the house deity or for rituals related to marriage or a particular full moon day.’ Bishwo Raj Parajuli in his article, ‘An

introduction to Mithila Folk Arts’, adds that the aripan motifs were ‘integrated with tantric and mystical elements where each line and form carry meanings, each performance is a moment of spiritual vow. An artist has to work as if she is coaxing the cosmic energy and interacting with divine power. The aripana represents a magic circle, representing a magically purified space for rituals and domestic ceremonies, the equivalent of the Tibetan Mandala.’ Suman remembers helping his grandmother make aripanas, wall paintings or ‘Bhitti Chitras’ and waiting for the right season to gather flowers, creepers, herbs and leaves that would be ground and distilled to make the natural pigments for the paintings. The stem of the parijat flower, bougainvillea, the pulp of the bel fruit, oil, milk and turmeric would be used to make organic pigments. Mud, cow dung and certain grasses were used to concoct earth tones for the paintings. Kajol and soot would be coated on to fine hand hewn bamboo sticks with which his grandmother would draw the fine images



Bhitti Chitra (Tharu) Natural Pigment on Nepali Paper 30"x20"

of their spiritual and natural cosmos. No other art form in Nepal shares such a close affinity to nature and celebrates the holistic involvement of all the senses: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

The severe Terai weather: scorching sun, prolonged monsoon, flood, drought, earthquakes, and chilling Himalayan winds created its impact on the agrarian and deeply spiritual Mithila cosmos. Over the centuries, the women of Mithila have drawn on the walls of their humble abodes and on their mud floors to avert these natural disasters, protect their crop, and pray for the well being of their husband and children. Housewives fashioned images out of clay, mud and cow dung of Hindu Gods for worship on diverse occasions, when they observed fasts for the prosperity and longevity of their family members. Since Mithila art is inseparable from religion, it is understandable that the Mithila artist still 'dedicates her talent and skill to God, and would mediate long before transforming a spiritual aesthetic vision on to a mud wall'. However these wall paintings have always been impermanent, as the annual monsoon torpor destroys the painted images and fresh mixture of mud and cow dung is applied over the old images to provide a fresh surface for new paintings, which are in keeping with the festivities.

Though some may consider Mithila art to be archaic, disproportionate and 'untutored', it is important to note that 'like the court artists of their time, Mithila women were equally conversant with the religious lore: Puranic literature, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the legends revolving around Shiva, Durga, Vishnu and their manifestations and with the iconography and iconology of the religious scriptures. In the days when writing for the masses was yet unknown, these art forms, apart from their utilitarian value also served to educate the masses in their region's religious literary texts'. The origin

of the 'Kobhar' or 'kobhar ghar' (nuptial or bridal chamber) paintings, harks back to a time when child marriages flourished and the sex education was non-existent. During the wedding ceremony, special suggestive love songs would be sung to celebrate the marriage. In addition, Mithila women would prepare a separate nuptial house or 'kobhar ghar' for the newlyweds replete with instructive paintings - the intimate love stories of Shiva and Parvati, Krishna and Radhika, Ram and Sita, which were consecrated to celebrate the spiritual and physical union between the newly weds. Similarly the paintings of the "gosain ghar" (puja room), "bhandar ghar" (store room) and "bhanchha ghar" (kitchen) clearly reveal that the home and the hearth of Mithila home are well defined sacred spaces. Apart from these sacrosanct visual narratives, the cycle of the seasons, fairs and dances, fertility rites, folk and tribal lore, marriage, other ritual ceremonies and cultural activities associated with the annual festivals based on the cycles of the moon and sun: Navabarsha, Nag Panchami, Janai Purnima, Rishi Tarpani, Krishna Ashtami, Teej, Chaurchan, Dasain, Deepawali and Lakshmi Puja Chhath Parwa, Sita Vivaha Panchami, Maghe Sankranti or Tila Sankranti, Basanta Panchami or Saraswoti Puja, Maha Shivaratri, Holi and Ramnavami, became the themes that Mithila women immortalized in their paintings. Some of the enduring images of Mithila art include agrarian village scenes and village activities. Attention is also given to recurring motifs used by (godana) artists to adorn the bodies of Mithila women, the silver jewellery and ornaments that they wear, and even to the motifs of their embroidered garments. In some instances the needlework itself is celebrated and the quilting stitches used to make blankets, becomes an integral decorative motif in the painting.



Kobhar Ghar *Natural Pigment on Art Paper 30"x22"*

These pictorial expressions are marked by: unbelievable spontaneity, imaginative use of space, lucid lines, a flat naive sense of proportion vis anatomy, dynamism and the intuitive use of color. It is this 'untutored' aspect of Mithila painting that gives it a distinctive edge and indescribable charm.

Today the winds of change have brought about transformation in the lifestyle of rural and tribal

folk. This change has challenged the artistic and cultural moorings of the Mithila cosmos. However, it is interesting to note that the mud walls, courtyards, textiles, household objects, paintings and handicrafts, still rest upon the age-old repertoire for ornamental patterns and designs, motifs, symbols and themes. For most Mithila women, the practice of painting on paper is a recent phenomenon, which introduced by Claire Burkert of the Janakpur Women's Development

Center in 1990. From this historic moment, the artistic motifs used by Mithila women were transferred on to paper. The Janakpur Women's Development Center was established to promote the inherent skills of these women, uplift their lives through the sales of their beautiful artworks and to introduce Mithila expression to the rest of the world. Today Maithili art in Nepal has taken a direction of its own and is a source of inspiration for national and international artists. Inspired by the artworks created at the Janakpur

Women's Development Center, the fine Madhubani paintings of Bihar, the Worli paintings of Madhya Pradesh along with the local Tharu and Rajbanshi imagery, S.C Suman is a Mithila artist who has gone against the tide and established his name as one of the finest painters in this genre. Though he trained as a textile designer in Bombay, he returned to his roots and began to paint in the Mithila tradition, stating that he did not believe that the issue of gender should restrict the innate creativity of an artist.



Beti Bidai Mixed Media on Art Paper 30"x22"

Rural art forms are an indelible link between the artistic output and the countryside- from his home Morang, Suman began his solitary journey as a male Mithila artist whose paintings reflect images of a myriad plants and life forms of the Terai which encapsulate a host of meanings : lotus (seat of the unblemished and pure feminine form), bamboo (lineage, roots, male form) fishes (fertility), turtles (good luck stability), parrots (teacher, intelligence) , peacocks (beauty), elephants (wealth and prosperity), tigers (power associated with the Goddess), snakes (associated with Shiva for protection and the ultimate union), sun, moon and the nine planets(power of nature). His painting document his intimate encounter with the rituals, myths and value systems of the Mithila cosmos. In this exhibition S.C. Suman incorporates the images from Mushahar, Jhaangar, Dhimal, Sataar and Tharu communities into his paintings. The “Bhitti Chitra” or “Mokha” (mul-dwaar or main gate) paintings that embellish the facade of a Tharu home with decorative



Salhesh Lok Katha (Musahar Sailee) *Mixed Media on Nepali Paper 29.5”x19.5”*



No Divisions *Mixed Media on Nepali Paper 30"×19.5"*

elements around the main gate and windows also find expression in this series."Salhesh Lok-katha" is another example of how the artist has deftly used Mushahar elements in his recent work.

S.C. Suman, is a contemporary man, he crafts his own painting tools and prepares his own colours. Though the artist prefers to use Nepali paper, his training as a textile designer, may have contributed to the experimental works with tie and dye technique and to the exquisite works on linen and silk. He also uses poster paints, watercolours, acrylic and oils with equipoise. His painting "Chir Harran" has been rendered on traditionally prepared Thangka canvas. It is interesting to note that the artist's pictorial narratives also relate to the present. In an unprecedented move his painting 'Kobhar ghar', embraces the erotic images from Khujrao and Konarak in India. Though the southern plains of Nepal are the locus of both Hinduism and Buddhism, traditional Mithila paintings did not include Buddhist iconography- this legacy

may be attributed to the rise of the Shankharacharyas of India and the sacking of the great Buddhist libraries and vihars in the 8th century. However S.C. Suman, like many Mithila painters of today, see the Buddha as an icon of peace and inspiration. Global and national politics, the decade long conflict in Nepal, the psychological trauma that Nepalis are facing, the desire for peace and the recent specter of ethnic violence are documented in his paintings with the sincerity of an artist who is cognizant of a world beyond the Mithila cosmos. His painting “No Divisions”, dwells on the need for unity in a country that faces impending political and ethnic fragmentation. For the viewer, it is interesting to note how the Mithila gaze continues reads the world. ■

Sangeeta Thapa
Art Curator / Director
Siddhartha Art Gallery



Bibaha (Jhangar Style) *Mixed Media on Nepali Paper 30"x20"*



S.C.Suman

September 25, 1961

Bachelors in Science

L.N. Mithila University,
Darbhanga, India

Trainings

- Textile Designer - Mumbai.
- Lab Training - M/S Sandoz (India) Ltd. Worli, Mumbai .
- Lab Training - Technical Service Division, Seren Dyestuff Industries Ltd., Mumbai .

Solo Exhibition

- 2011 : “Mithila Cosmos - New Narratives” Organized by Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal
- 2007 : “The Mithila Cosmos” Organized by Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu , Nepal.
- 2007 : “Mithila Art Exhibition” Organized by Everest Souvenir Adelaide, Australia .
- 2006 : “Mithila Paintings - A View” Organized by Mithila Mahotsav Janakpur, Nepal .
- 2004 : “Images of Tarai” Organized by Indigo Gallery , Naxal, Kathmandu , Nepal .
- 2002 : “Synthesis of Tarai” Organized by Indigo Gallery, Naxal, Kathmandu, Nepal .
- 2002 : “Tradition and Expression of Mithila Painting” Organized by Mithila Mahotsav Janakpur .
- 1998 : “Maithili Art” Organized by Indigo Gallery, Naxal , Kathmandu , Nepal.
- 1997 : “Mithila Art : A Living Tradition” Organized by Koshi Mahotsav, Biratnagar, Nepal.
- 1991 : “Mithila Art Exhibition” Organized by All Nepal Medical Conference of Nepal Medical Association in Biratnagar, Nepal.

Group Exhibition

- 2009 : “Separating Myth from Reality : Status of Women” International Art Festival, organized by Siddhartha Art Gallery , Kathmandu, Nepal.
- 2008 : “AMALAGAM- 2008” Organized by Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu , Nepal.
“Mithila Group Art Exhibition” Organized by Mithila Artist Society, Kathmandu, Nepal .
“Stop Violence Against Women – An Art Exhibition” Organized by OHCHR- Nepal (Eastern Regional Office, Biratnagar and Lalitkala Sangam, Biratnagar, Nepal)

- 2005 : Art Exhibition in Nagoya, Japan, Organized by Artist Association (wind) Japan .
- 1998-2004 : 29th-35th “National Art & Craft Exhibition” Organized by Nepal Association of Fine Art, (NAFA, Kathmandu, Nepal)
- 2000 : “Art Exhibition in France” Organized by Asian Artist Agromax- French Cultural Association, Kathmandu, Nepal.
- 1998 : “Mithila Art Exhibition” Organized by Netherlands Leprosy Relief Association, Netherland.
- 1998 : “Group Art Exhibition” Organized by All Nepal Commercial Artist Association, Biratnagar, Nepal.
- 1996 : “Mithila Art Exhibition” Organized by Birgunj Jaycees, Nepal.

Awards & Certificates

- 2008 : Rastriya Pratibha (National Talent) Puraskar By Nepal Government.
- 2004 : Special National Award in the 35th National Art & Craft Exhibition, Organized by Nepal Association of Fine Art (NAFA), Kathmandu , Nepal.
- 1999 : National Award - Second Prize in 30th National Art & Craft Exhibition organized by Nepal Association of Fine Art (NAFA) , Kathmandu, Nepal.
- 1998 : “National Award in the 29th National Art & Craft Exhibition Organized by Nepal Association of Fine Art (NAFA) , Kathmandu , Nepal.
- 1997 : “Special Consolation Prize” in Koshi Mahotsav, Biratnagar, Nepal.
- 1994 : “Consolation Prize” in Greetings Card Design Contest, Bhaktapur , Nepal.

Travel : France, Dubai, Germany, India .

Membership : Lalit Kala Sangam, Maithili Sewa Samiti, Chitrang Sewa Parishad, Chetan Pratibha Unnayan Tatha Sanrakshyan Pratisthan Nepal, Biratnagar, Rita Memorial Trust, Rajbiraj

Hobby : Textile Designing & Radio Jockey (Gadhimai FM. 91.4 Birgunj)

Collection : Nepal, India, USA, UK, Japan, Denmark, Canada, Netherlands, France, Kenya, Switzerland, Italy, Russia, Egypt, Korea, Mexico, Australia.

Media Coverage : Article, Interviews, Published and aired through various mainstream print and electronic media on the issue of Mithila Art & Paintings.

Contact Adress

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Cover Painting : **Mokha (Tharu)** *Acrylic on Nepali Art Paper 30"x20"*



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