

In Memory of Manida
2017





Produced by ARK
on the occasion of the exhibition
In Memory of Manida
K. G. Subramanyan
at ARK, Vadodara
3 June 2017 - 29 June 2017

Designed by Meena Megha Malhotra

ON BEAUTY, AESTHETICS AND THE ARTIST

K. G. Subramanyan

[. . .]Aesthetics is generally referred to as the philosophy of beauty. For that reason, it is rather suspect in this not-so-beautiful world which has put man and Nature at cross-purposes. (To whether the world is really unbeautiful or what makes us think so, we shall come later.) Whatever that may be, a number of artists and critics these days do take an anti-aesthetic stand and say that it is not the world's beauty that is the main concern of art but its reality, in the light of which even those things that were considered traditionally beautiful seem faded, worn out or distorted. On another side, some learned traditionalists, like Ananda Coomaraswamy, are prejudiced against the word for a different reason; they feel that it lays greater stress on the sensory experience, or enjoyment, than the extra-sensory vision a work provides, or is meant to provide. This, in their opinion, diminishes the gravity of the whole process and moves it out of its sacred precincts . . .

[. . .]An understanding of the visual art process will involve the working out of a relationship between Nature, the artist, the art object and the viewer. Our observation of Nature yields those perceptions and sensibilities that come into use when we create, or appreciate, works of art; art is inconceivable without these. By special disposition, an artist is stimulated by these to create a work that carries various leads derived from them, which have the power to awaken or animate the perceptions and sensibilities of the viewer.

[. . .] we have to go down to the grassroots of art and take a second look at that quality called beauty. An attraction for things around us is one of the inherent impulses in all human beings if only because it is a necessary step in our apprehending and understanding the world—a basic need. But in some, this attraction continues even after this need is fulfilled. You may call this the result of ‘the creative surplus’ of the human being that Rabindranath has mentioned. The world is attractive to most of us—to some all the time, to others at special moments. To some, this attraction embraces all they see—flower and leaf, rock and water, skies and landscape, sunrise and sunset, storms and gales, city and country, dogs and cows and, certainly, men and women, and these include wrecks and ruins, slums and garbage, even scenes of disease and death. To their own embarrassment, they find even these latter beautiful. One of them goes to the burning ghat to cremate a friend’s father and sees, with a shock of pleasure, the mounting flames. Monet, the well-known French artist, went to commiserate with an ailing friend and was embarrassed to find his eyes admiring the light playing on his beard. But some others may be choosy and find only fresh-blown flowers beautiful, withered ones ugly; find only glowing youth

beautiful, wrinkled age ugly. Their choosiness is tied up with the normal acceptance—the rejection mechanism as governs their day-to-day practical life, isolating the pleasant from the unpleasant, the dreaded from the wished-for. But when the attraction goes beyond its confines, it becomes all inclusive; all things are beautiful in their own way—green leaf, dried leaf, fresh flower, wilted flower, bright new shoe, old worn-out shoe. Here, when we watch things from our non-practical eyrie, all truth is beautiful enough.

But does everyone see everything the same way? Or the same person see everything the same way, under any circumstance? Is our retinal register the same every time we look at things, like that of the lens of a camera? Even a camera registers facts differently with changes in light and variations in exposure. Compared to it, our instruments of perception are more complicated; controlled by the head and the heart, their perceptions fall somewhere in the twilight ground between a seen image and its interpretation.

Accepting that we can see the beauty of ordinary things and see, in reverse, the truth of contrived objects or art, why do people still take an anti-aesthetic stand? We can only speculate. In a purpose-ridden world, being engrossed with things outside of it seems a sorry weakness to some; they cannot ‘stand and stare’ without a sense of guilt. Though beautiful things exist and catch us unawares even in a world riven with conflicts of many kinds—between man and man and man and Nature—the vision of beauty gets overlaid with the shadows of these conflicts. Who can admire the dahlias in the park when famished children shiver on the pavement close by? Who can enjoy the morning sun when the morning paper reels out a whole line of disasters? Such sharp contrasts reverse customary associations; the sunrise is no more festive but carries a flicker of tragedy, a flower seems a wound, a lean hand a fossil of anguish.

Pumelled around by these contrary facts, artists' horizons have gone awry. This is particularly so in urban environments. And most contemporary artists, we know, are urbanites, even if for their own comfort some choose to live in country cottages. Most of them concur with Tristan Tzara, the arch Dadaist, that, 'The work of art is not beauty in itself because beauty is dead.' In their thinking, the sense of object or life or reality or rhythm has replaced beauty, and emotion has gained a new emphasis. 'The artist is a receptacle of emotion, whether they spring from heaven, from earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing face, from a spider's web,' says Picasso. Even abstract painters like Rothko, Newman and Gottlieb (all American) say, 'There is no good painting about nothing . . . only that subject matter is valid that is tragic and timeless.' But is beauty really dead? Perhaps—of the old, ideal kind. To many modern artists not unduly upset by the conflicts in human life, the image of any common object is compelling in itself. 'I am for an art that takes form from the lines of life, that twists and extends impossibly and accumulates and splits and rips and is sweet and stupid as life itself,' says Claes Oldenburg.

They are all ambivalent; they love the world; they hate the world; they are sentimental Hamlets in a guilt-ridden world. And they mouth this sentiment with all kinds of verbal artifice. All the same, we cannot deny that our air is thick with mists of conflict and insecurity and so, our image of beauty is heavily tinged with irony and pessimism. Even if these mists were not there, we would still be beset with the various contradictions, or call them absurdities, of our existence and our final visions would be swathed by a kind of benign sadness or compassion. Our epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—the epics of a society deeply sensitive to the beauty and sacredness of life—are celebrated examples of these. No artist with a vision of his own can escape this. Only unquestioning professionals or unthinking artisans, gilding the

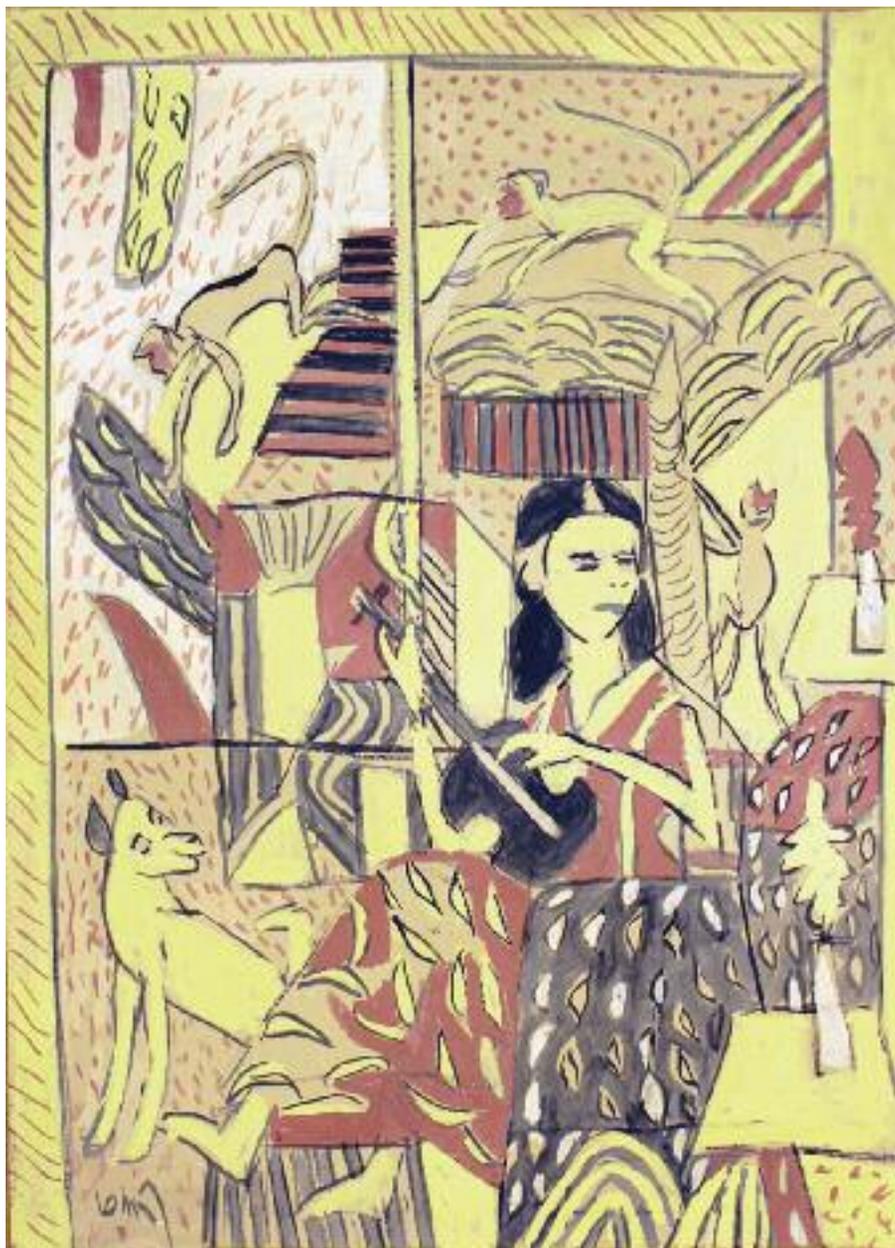
arcades of their hedonist patrons, can tinker out images of unblemished beauty or elegance.

In fact, such lack of blemish even renders art objects effete. Every sensitive artist or craftsman knows this; he knows that Nature itself covers its order with disorder and that unless he stains his beauty with a touch of oddness or mars his elegance with a touch of crudity nothing comes to life.

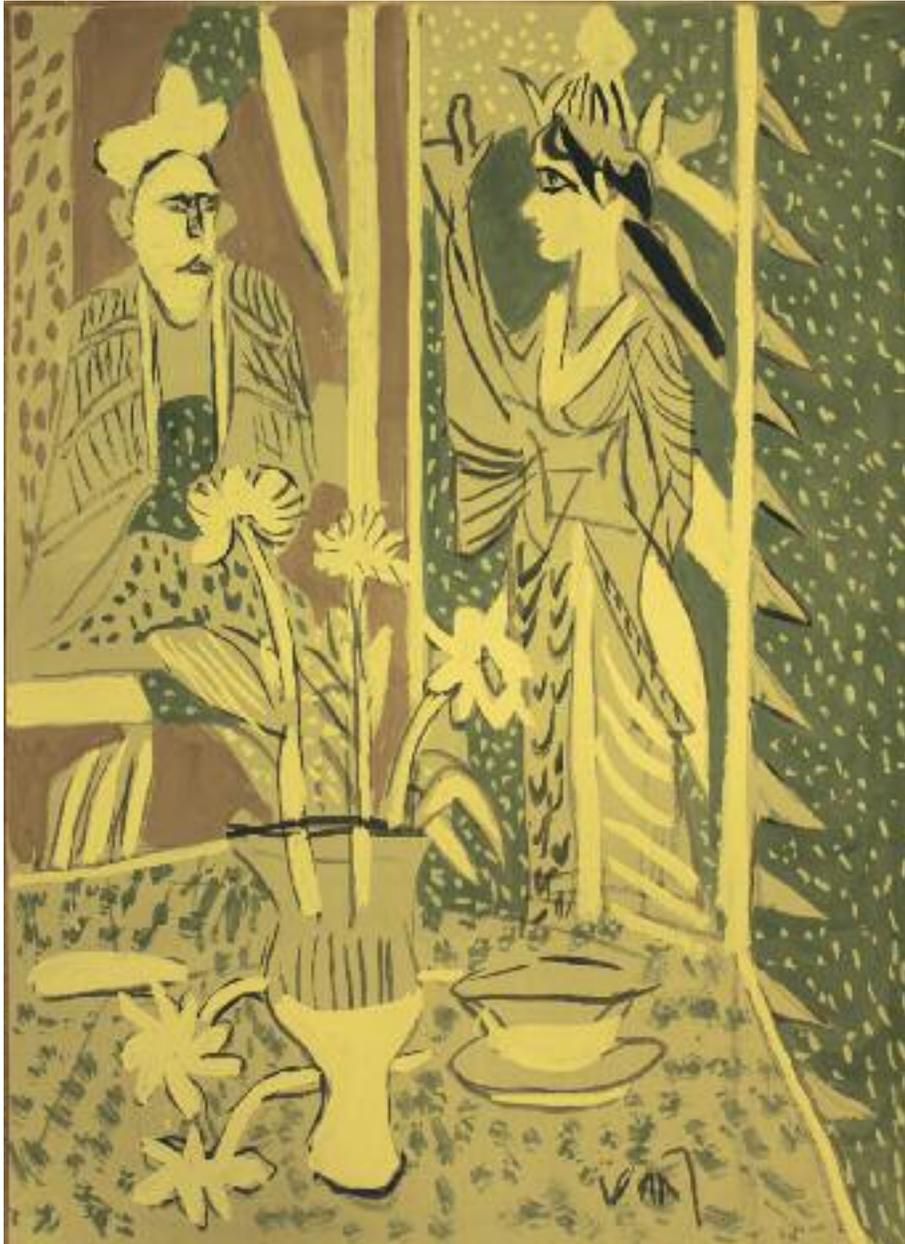
No wonder that beauty is no more talked about. The artist's coveted goal is the evocation of an emotion shaded with its opposite. But if he tries to effect this with too private a gesture, his art object does not have that power to awaken a viewer's field of experience, particularly a distant viewer from another cultural context. This is where Jasper John's targets, Frank Stella's shaped designs or Oldenburg's soft and hard trivia (for all their innate object attractions) are found wanting. In spite of their grandiose intentions, as spelt out in their own statements and the promotional writings of their supporters, they are prisoners of their own limited contexts.

The *rasa* theory makes no secret of the fact that a work of art or literature has to mediate between two contexts—the creator's and the receiver's. It provides an aesthetics that expects the art object to free itself from its generic connections and stand by itself, to be discovered (or taken advantage of) by viewers from various contexts.

extracts from 'Visual Arts and the Concept of Rasa',
The Magic of Making, Seagull Books 2007



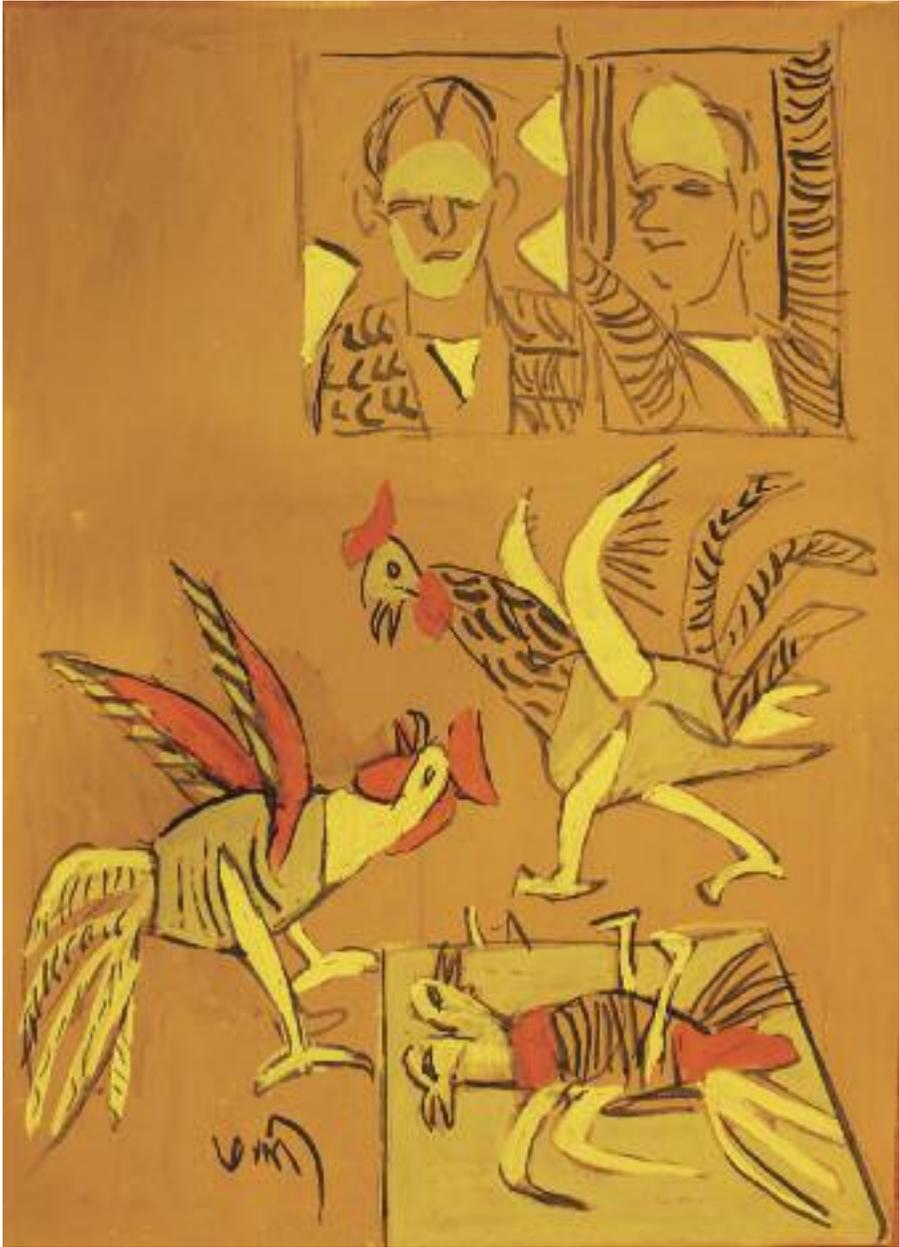
Gouache on handmade paper, 22.75 x 30.75 inches, 2015

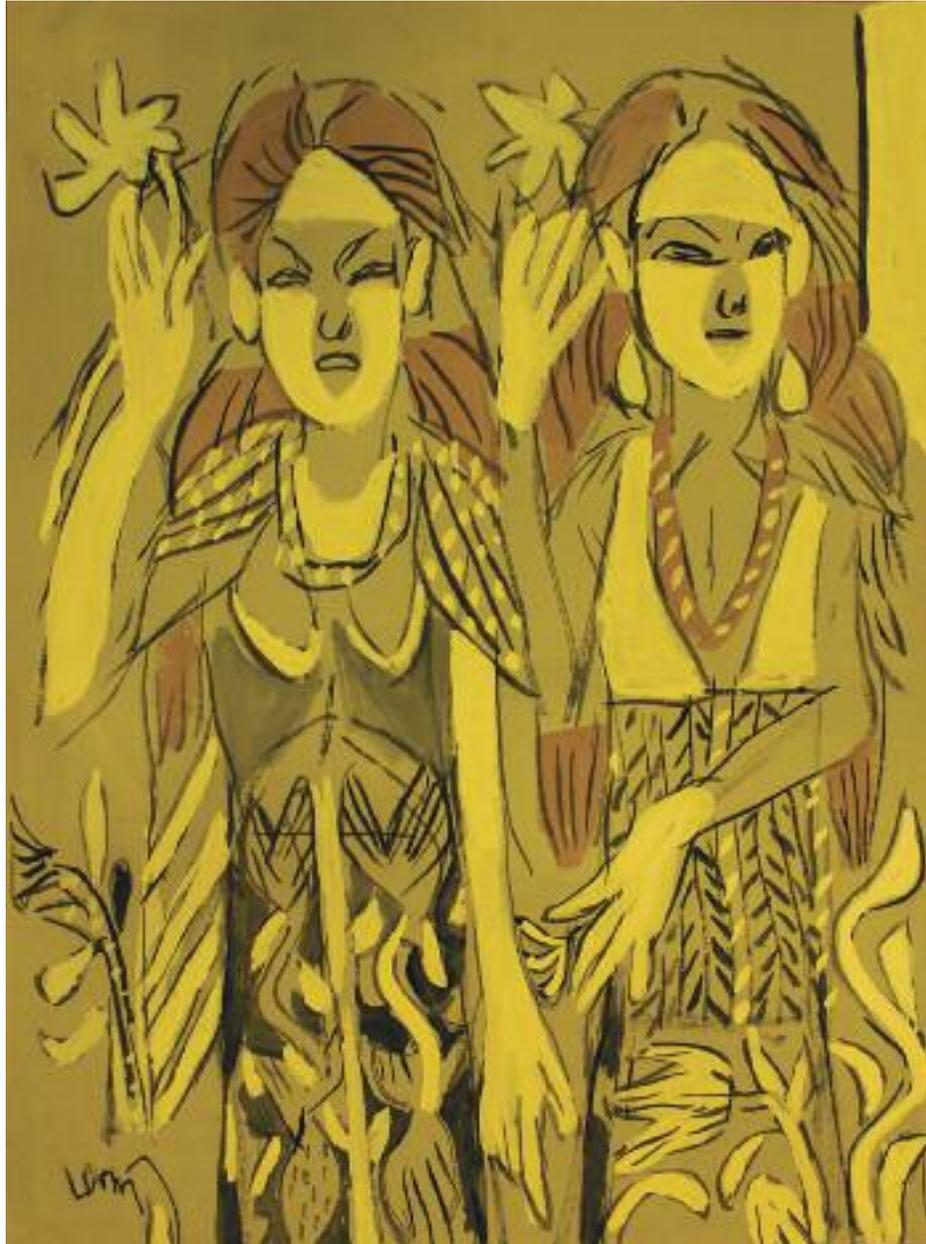








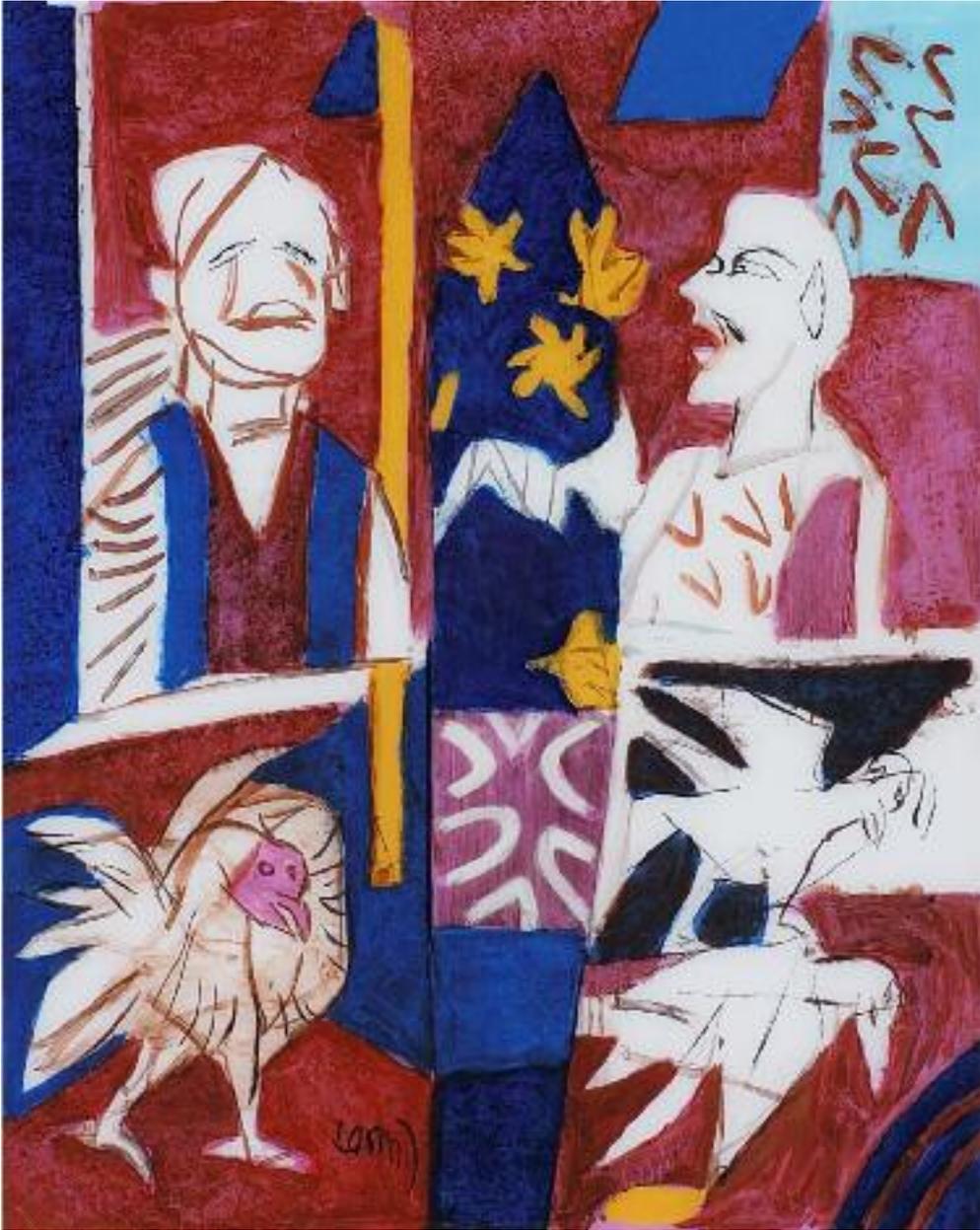








Reverse painting on acrylic sheet, 24 x 30 inches, 2015



























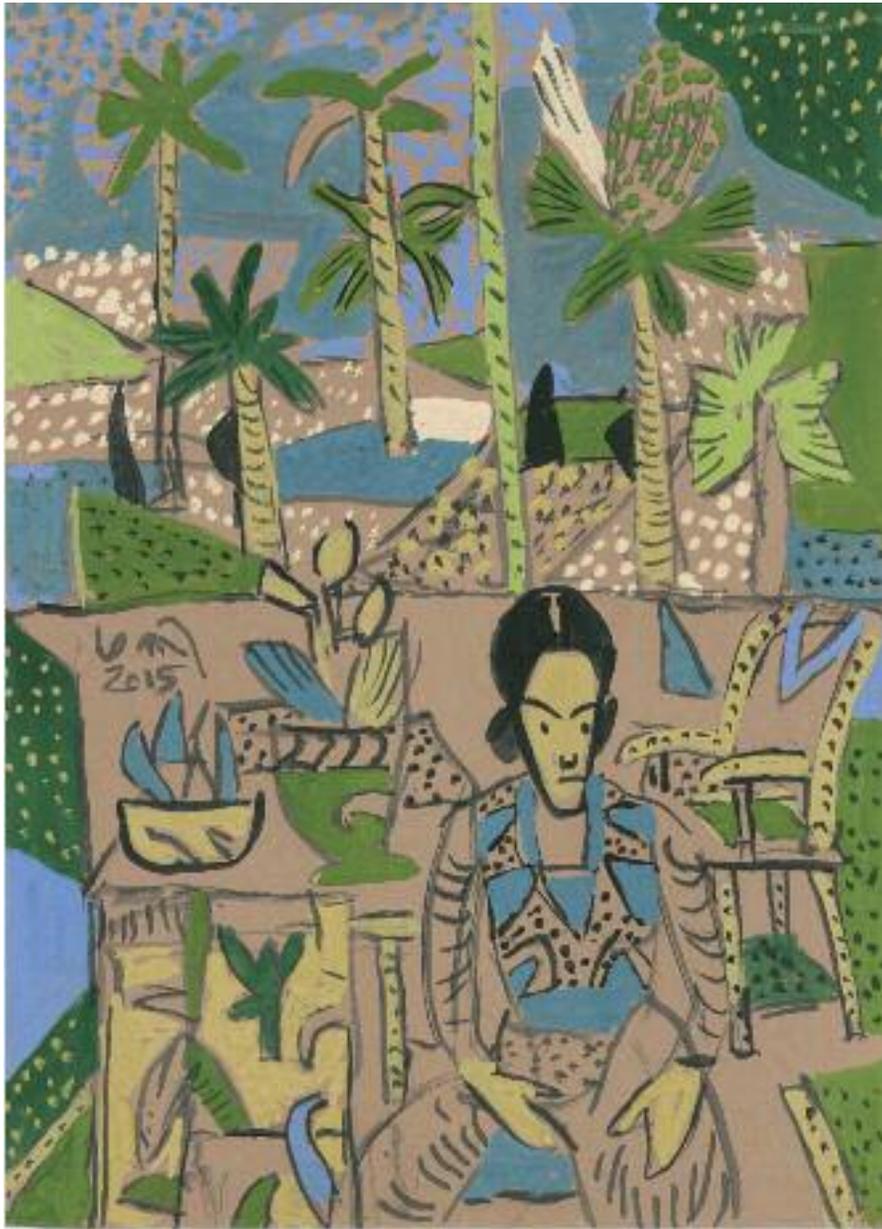


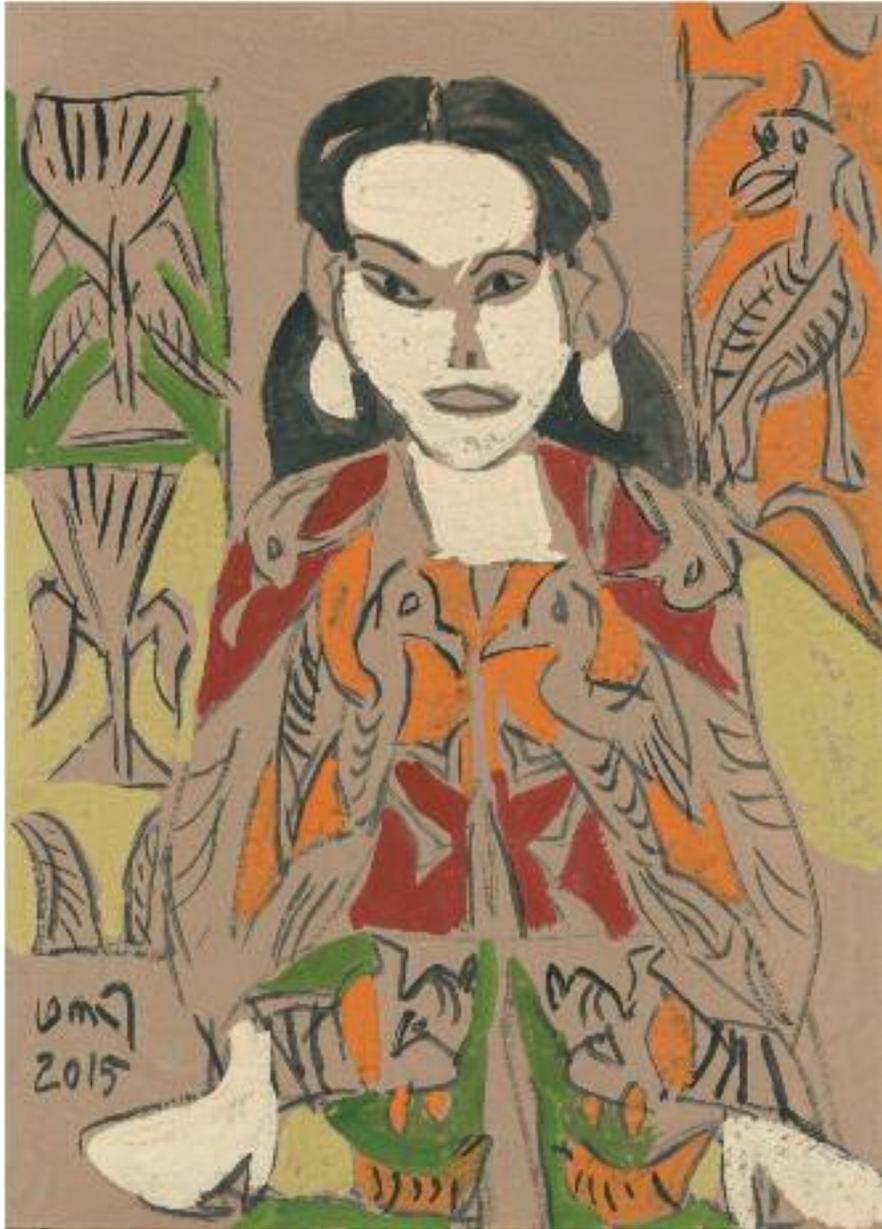


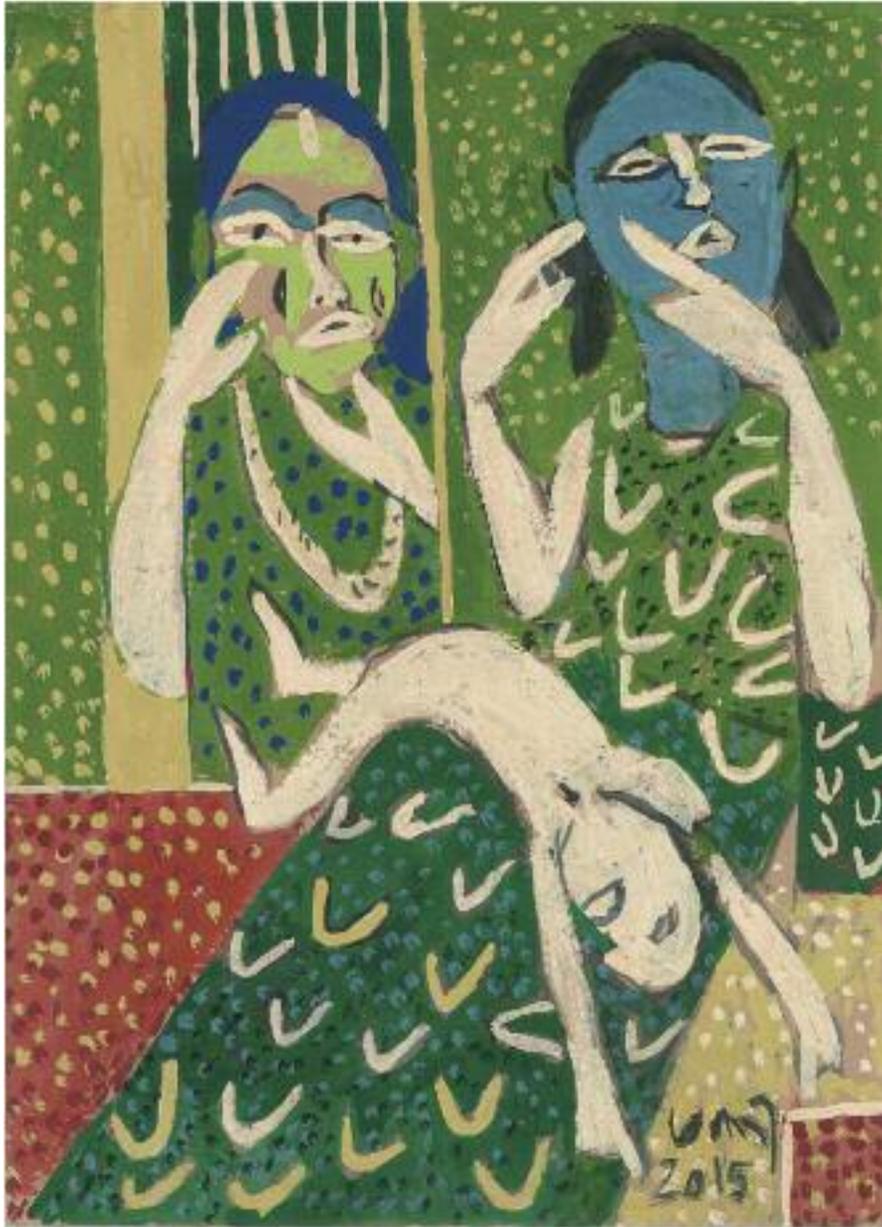


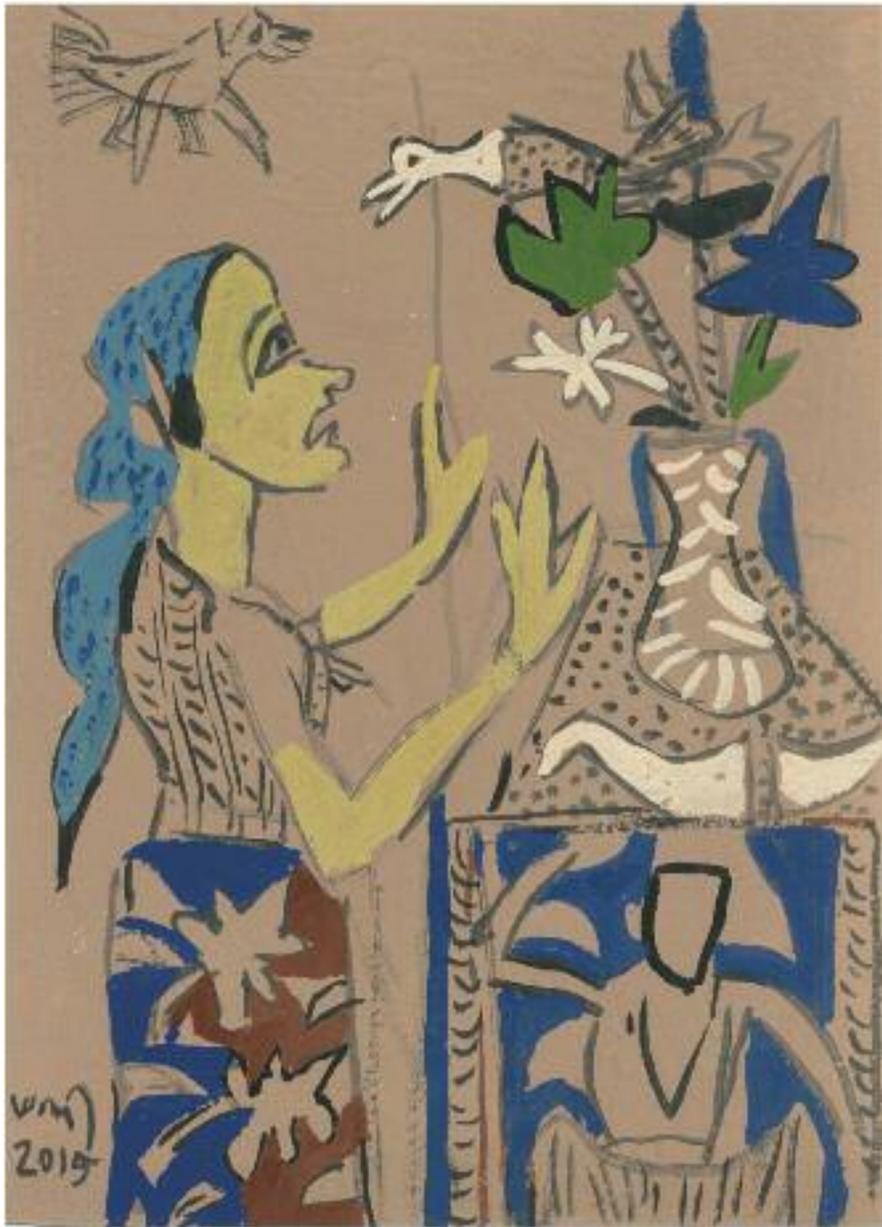
Gouache on handmade paper, 11.5 x 15.5 inches, 2015

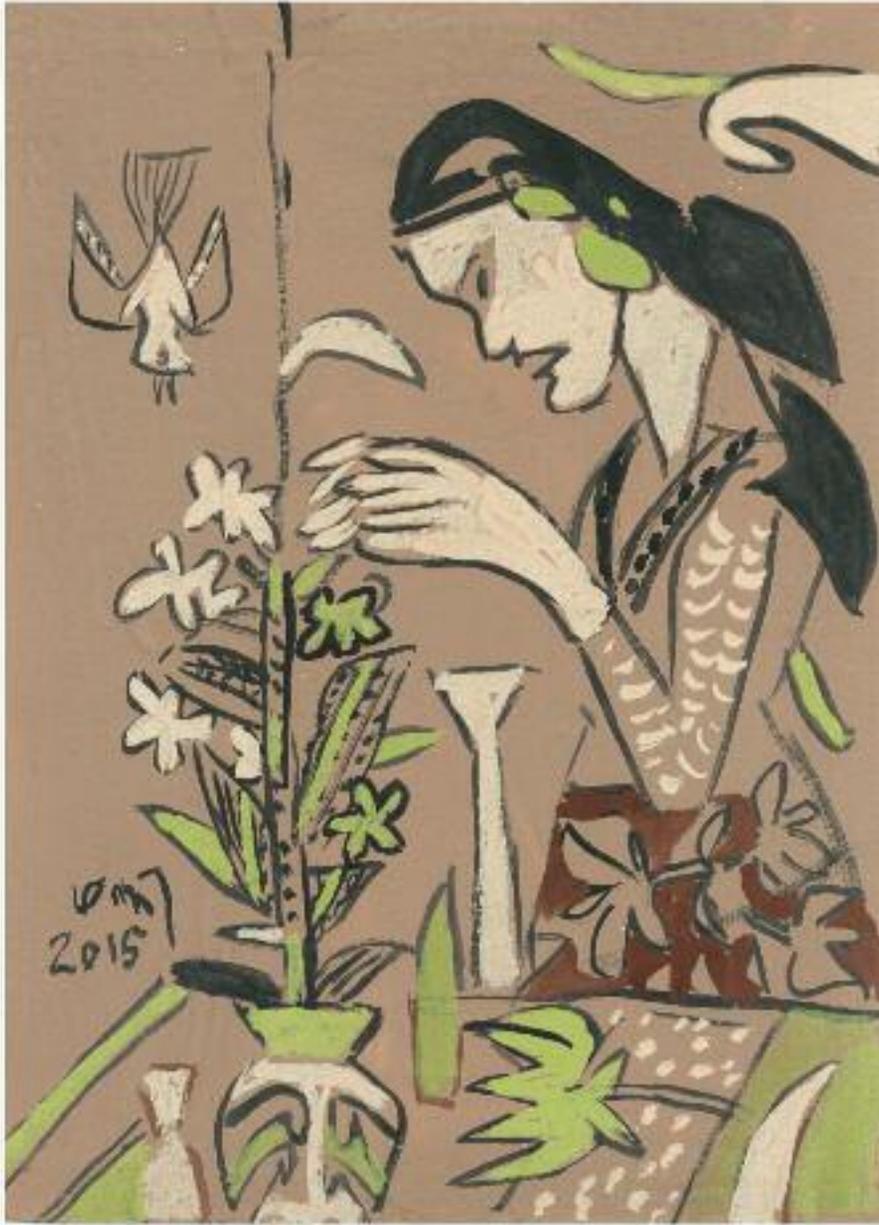


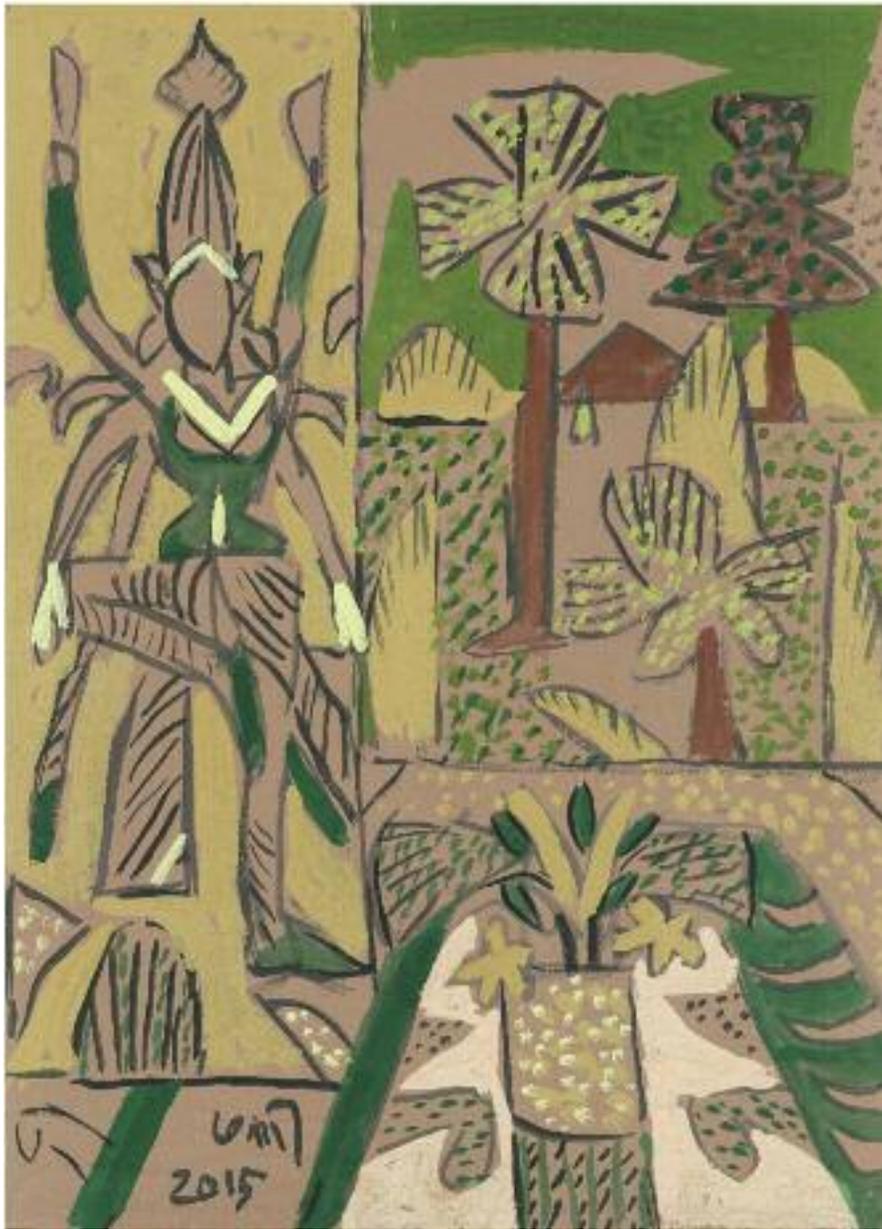


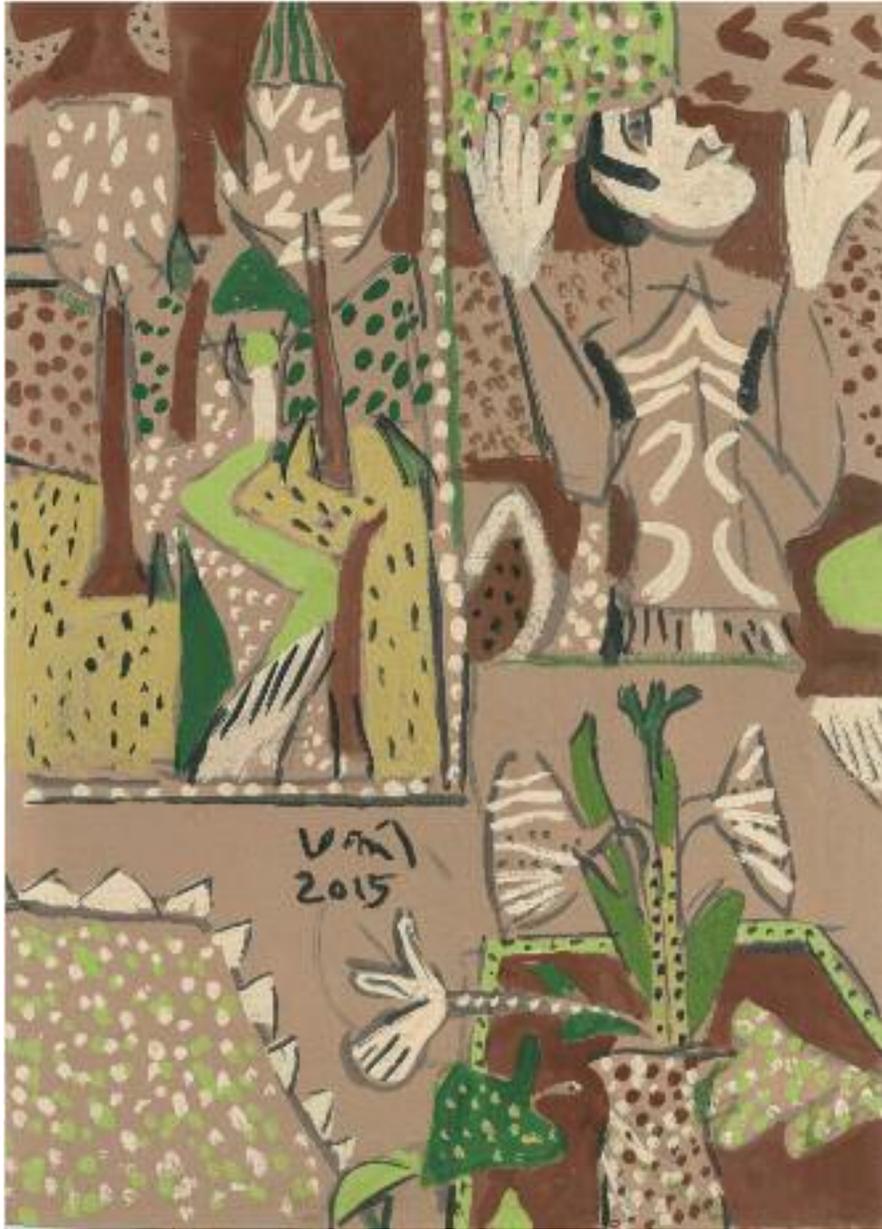




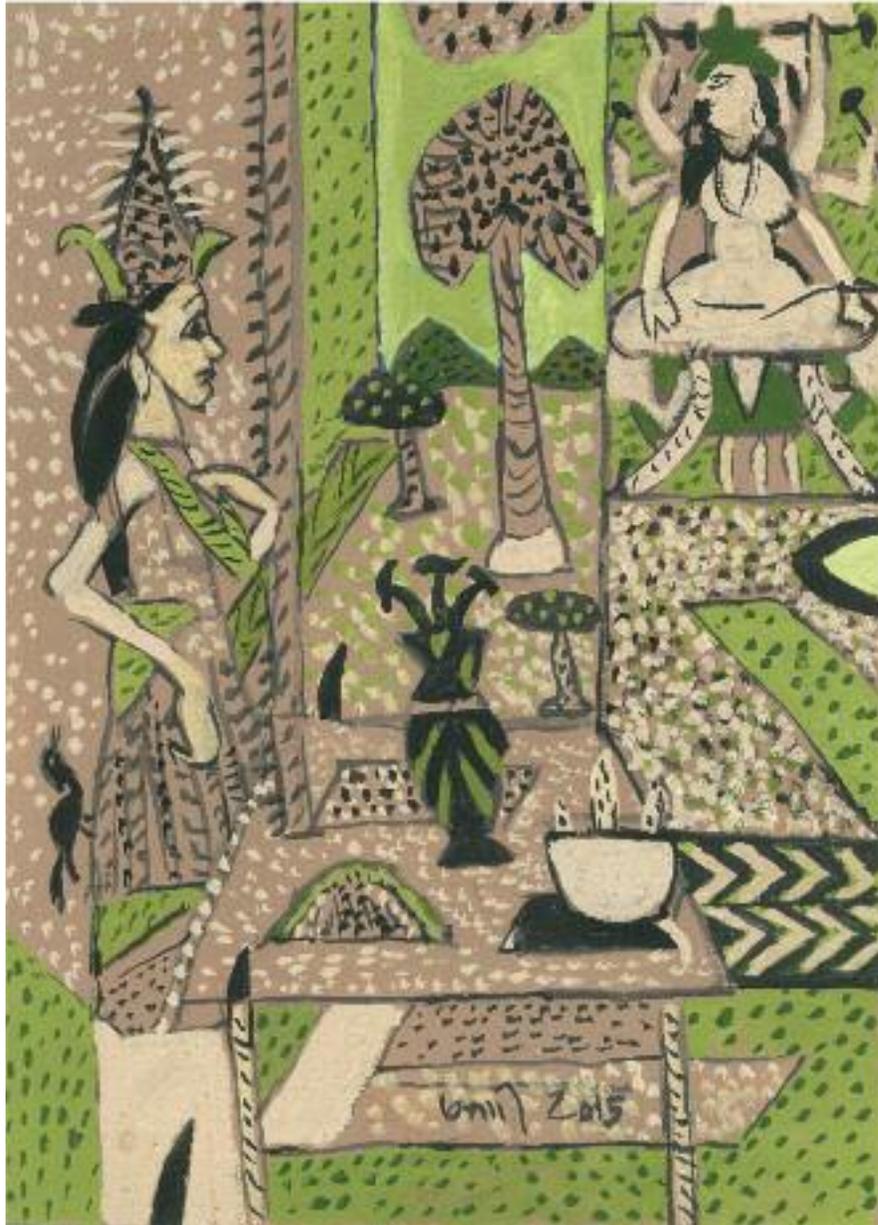






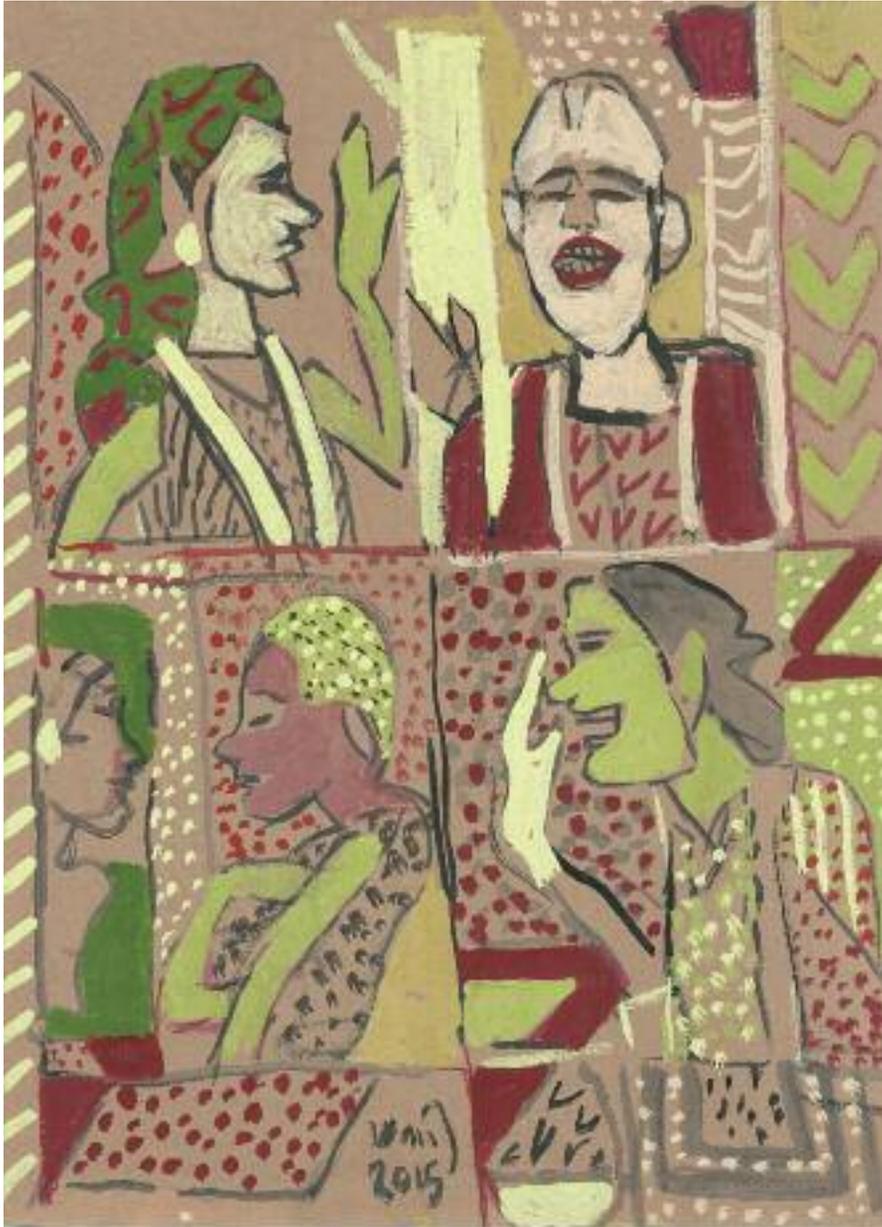


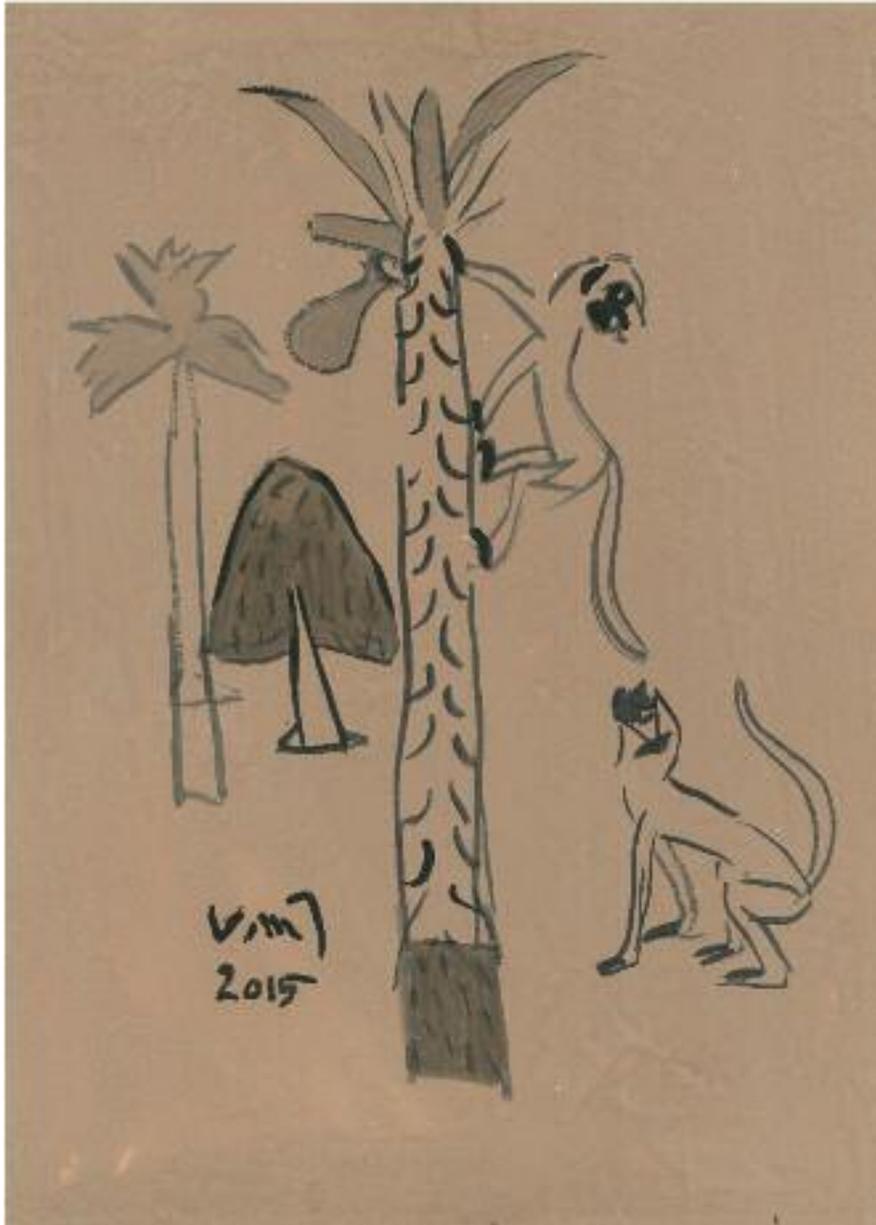


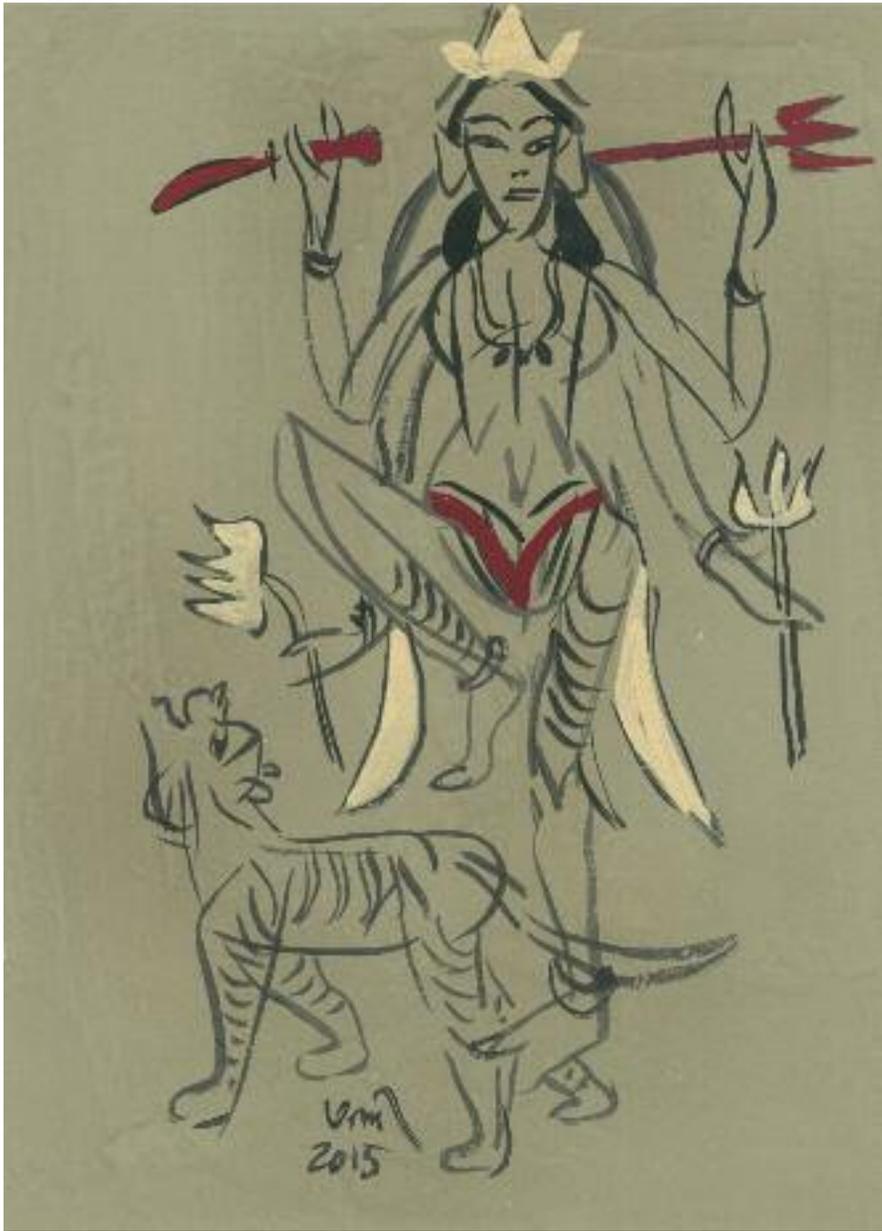


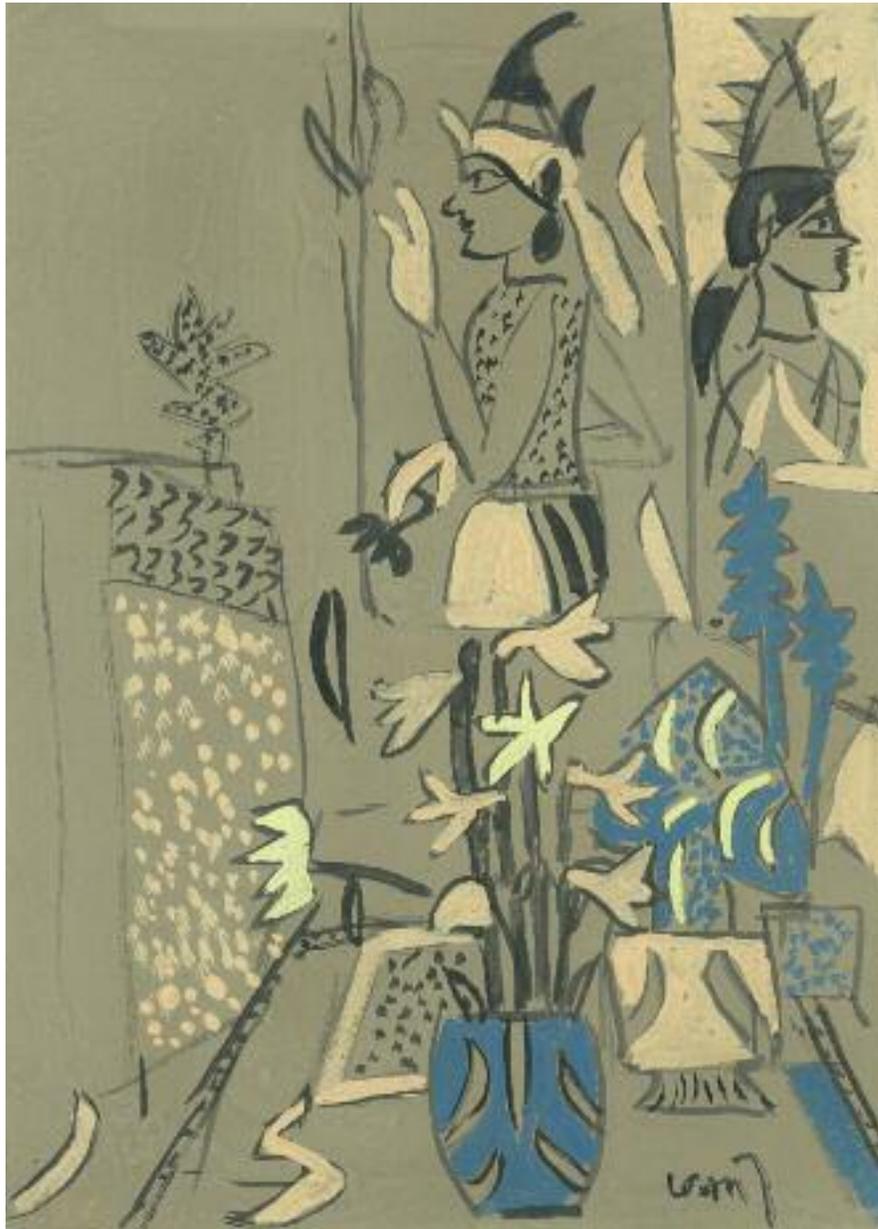








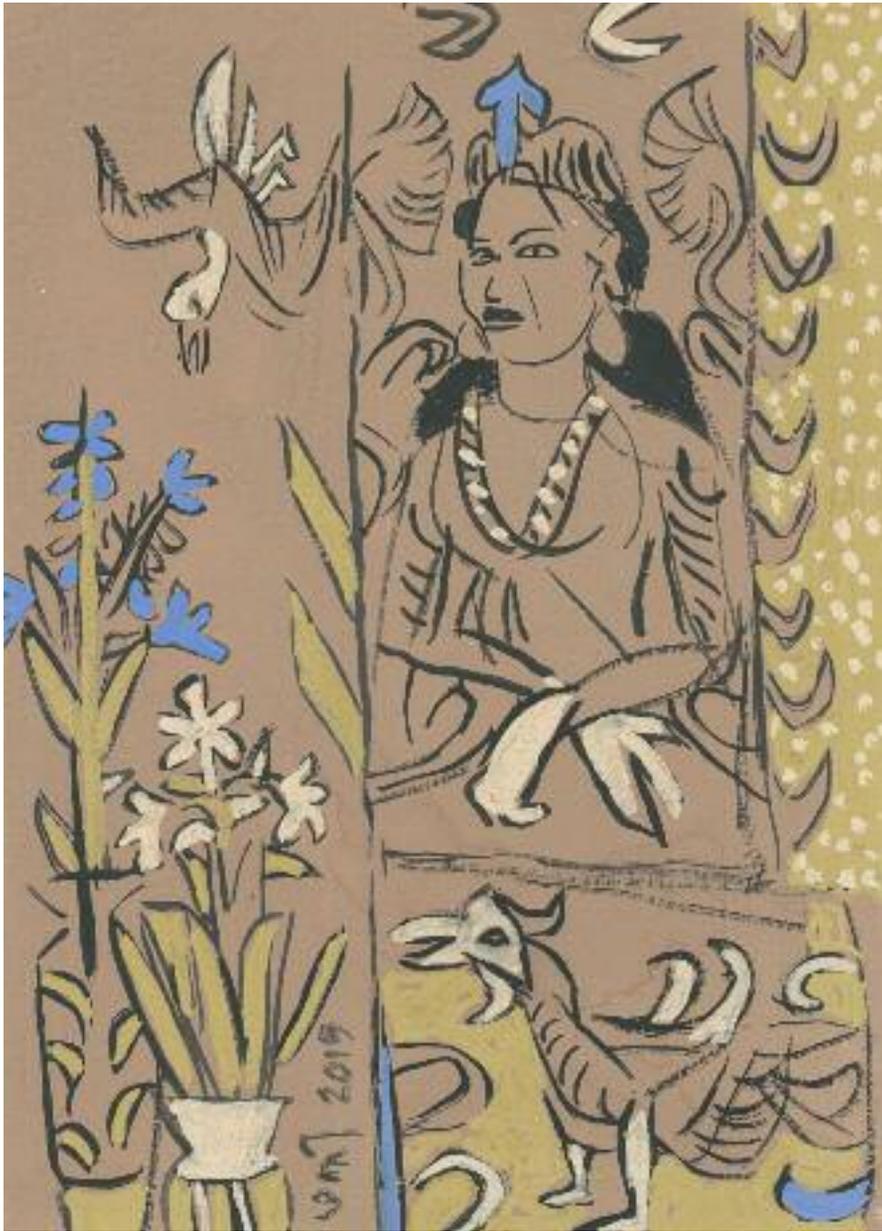










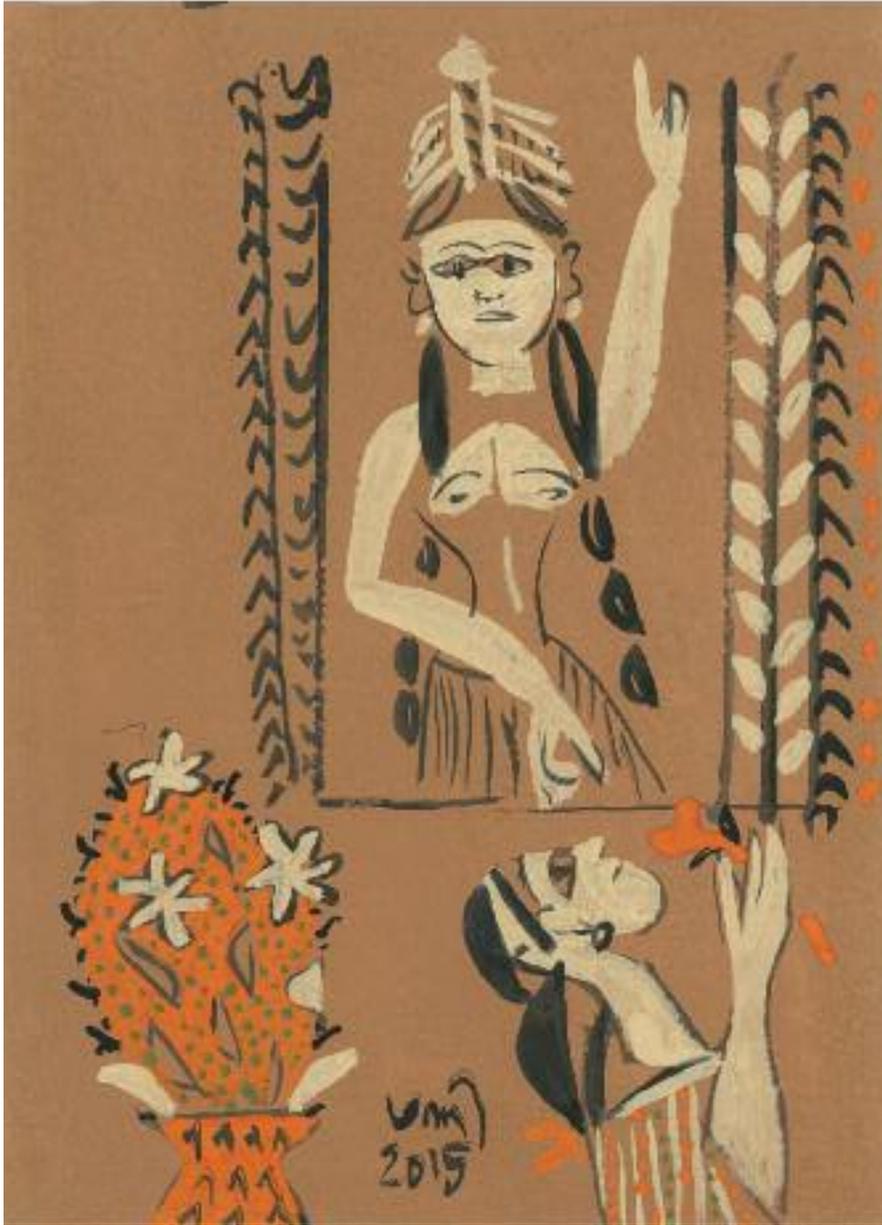


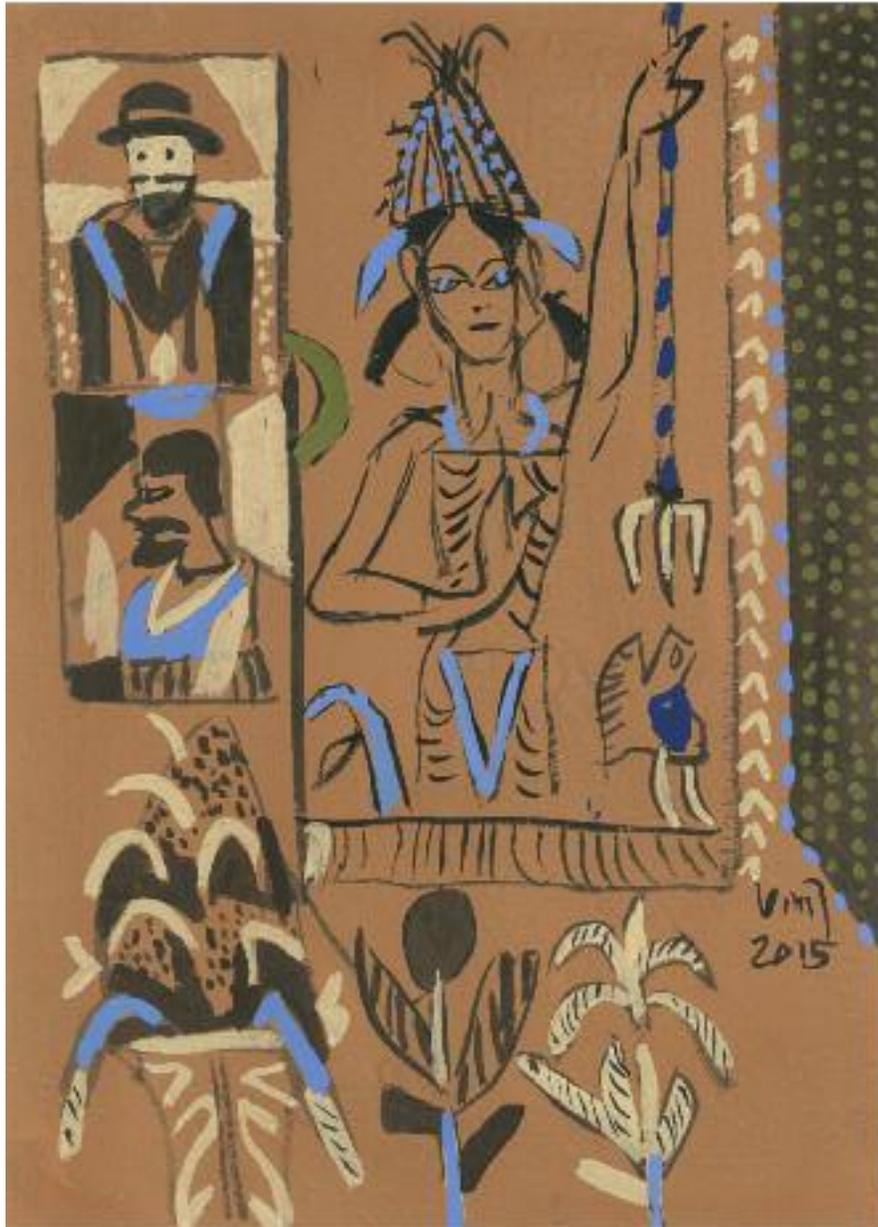


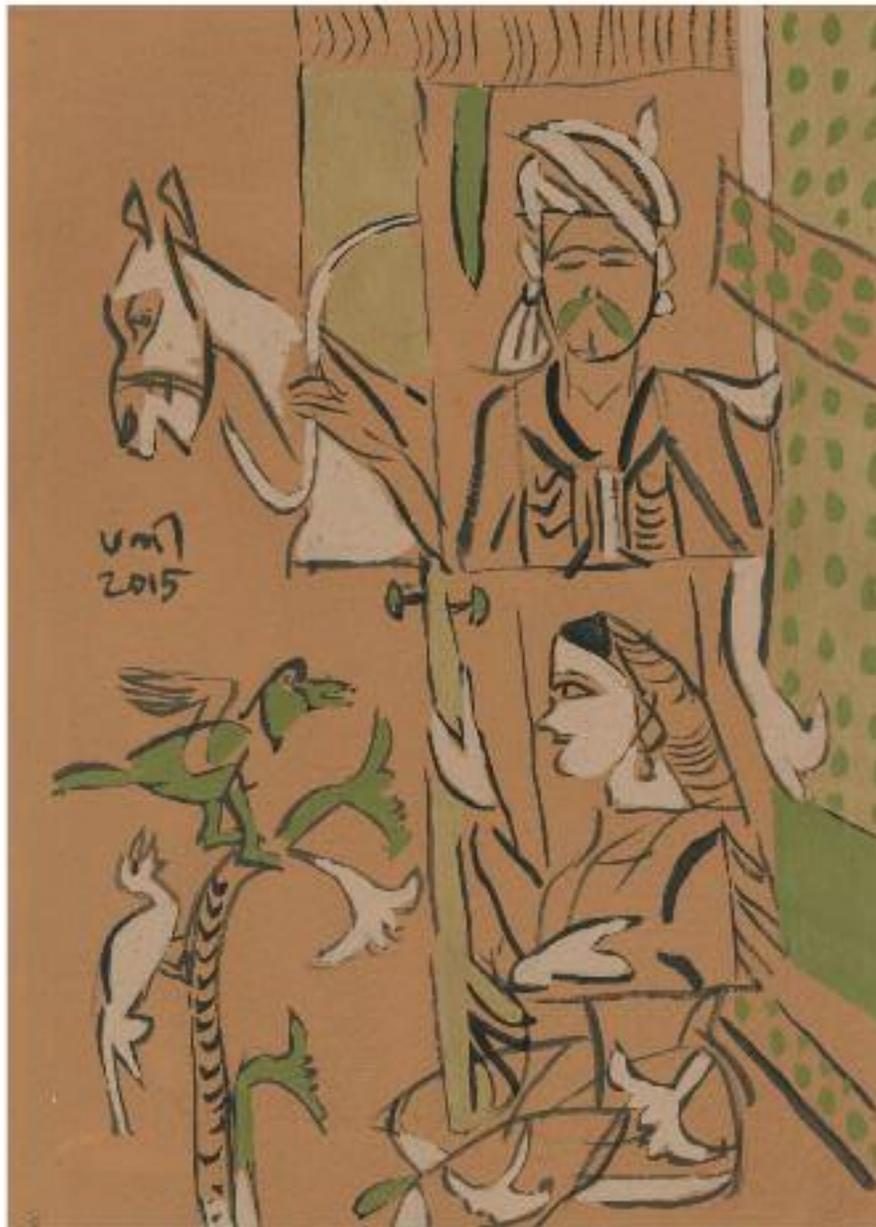


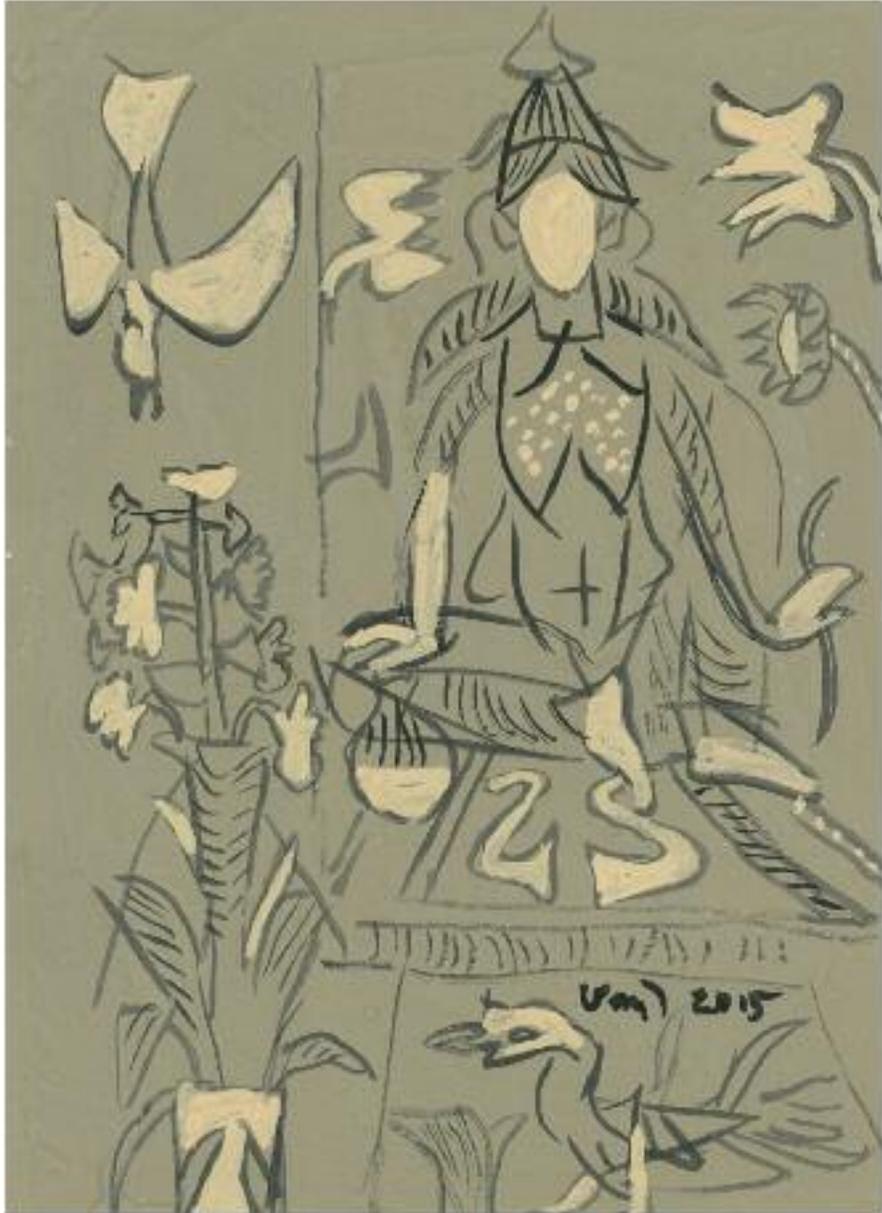






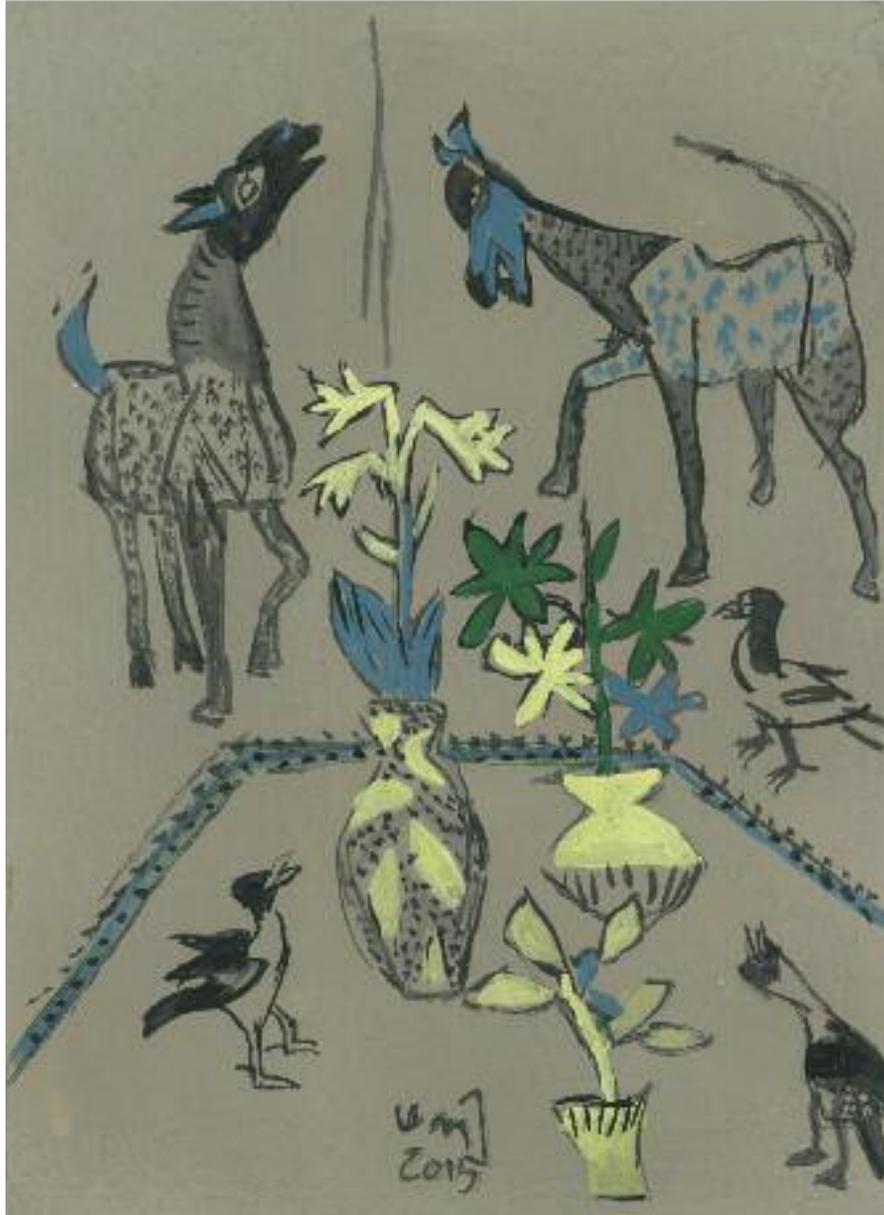


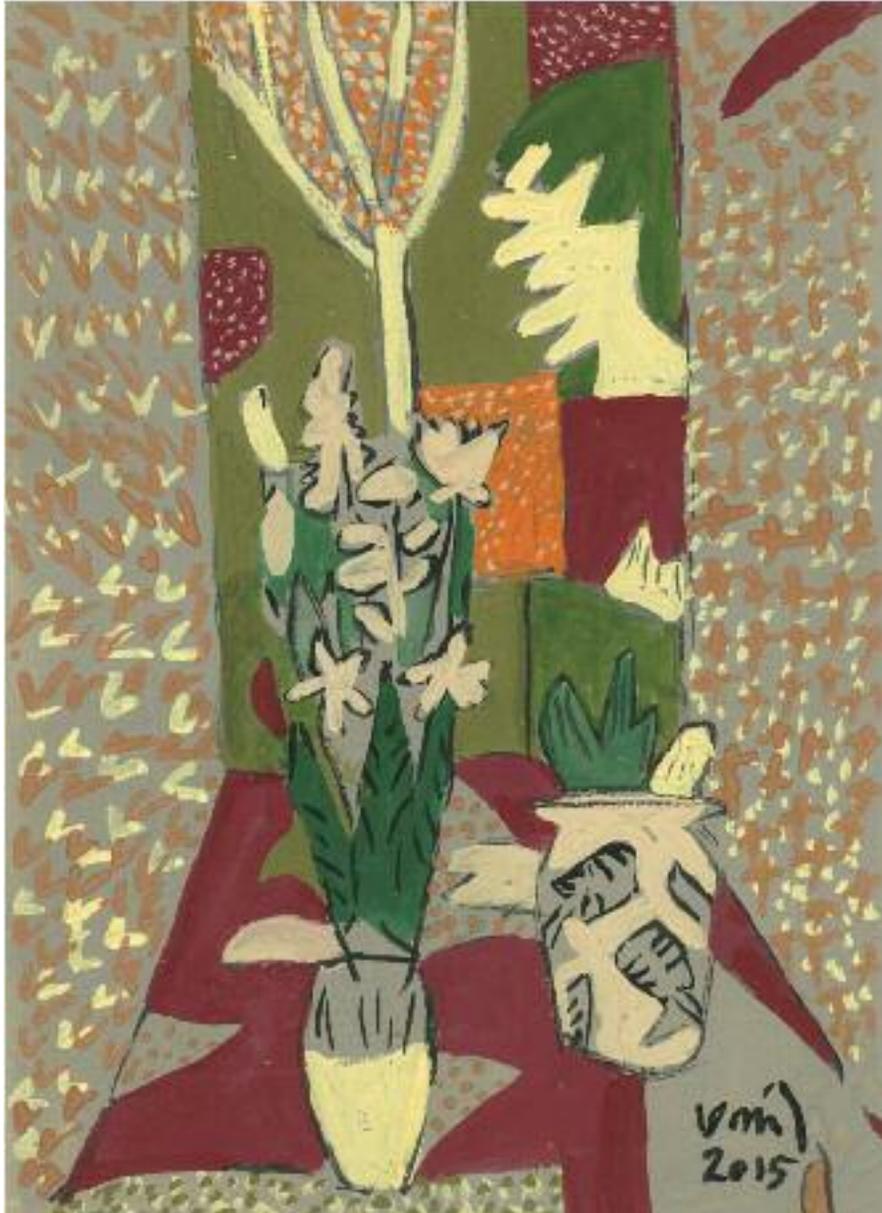


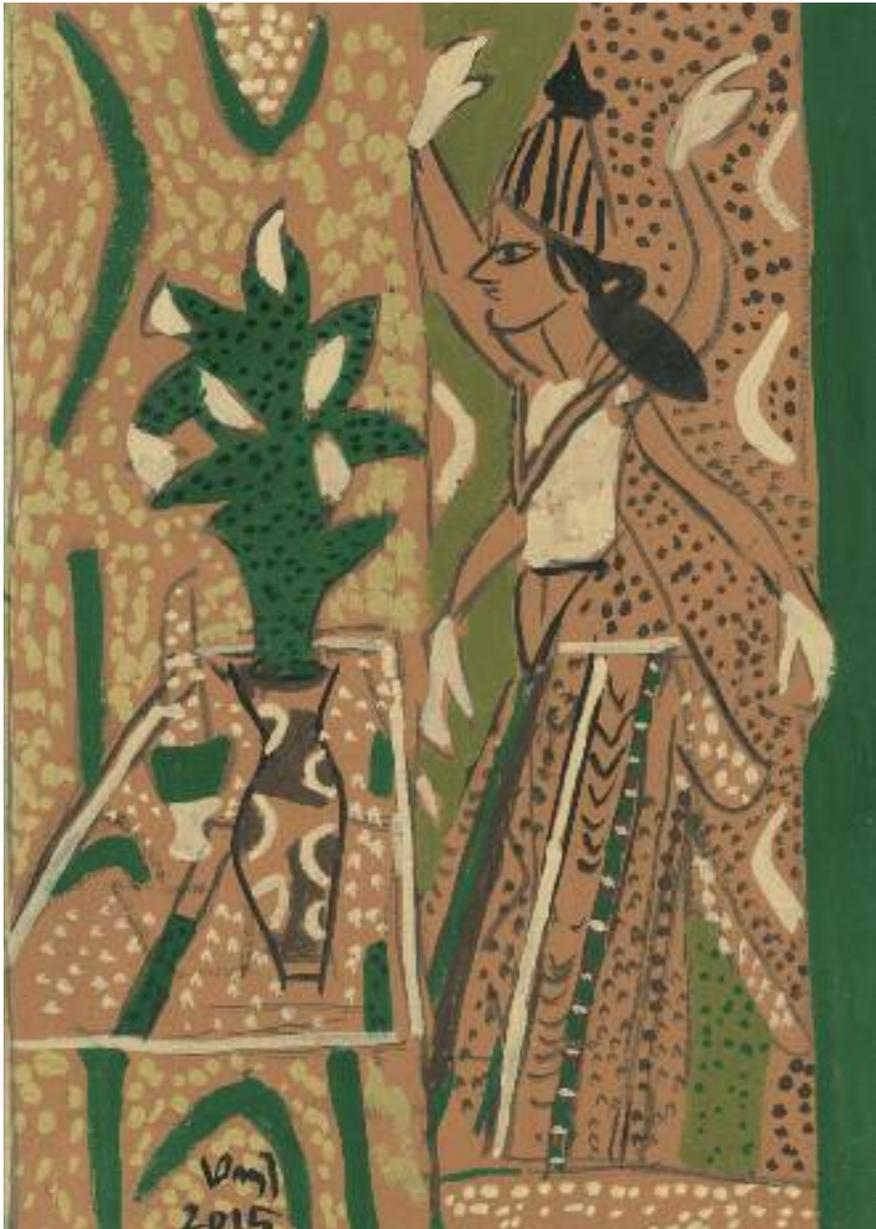


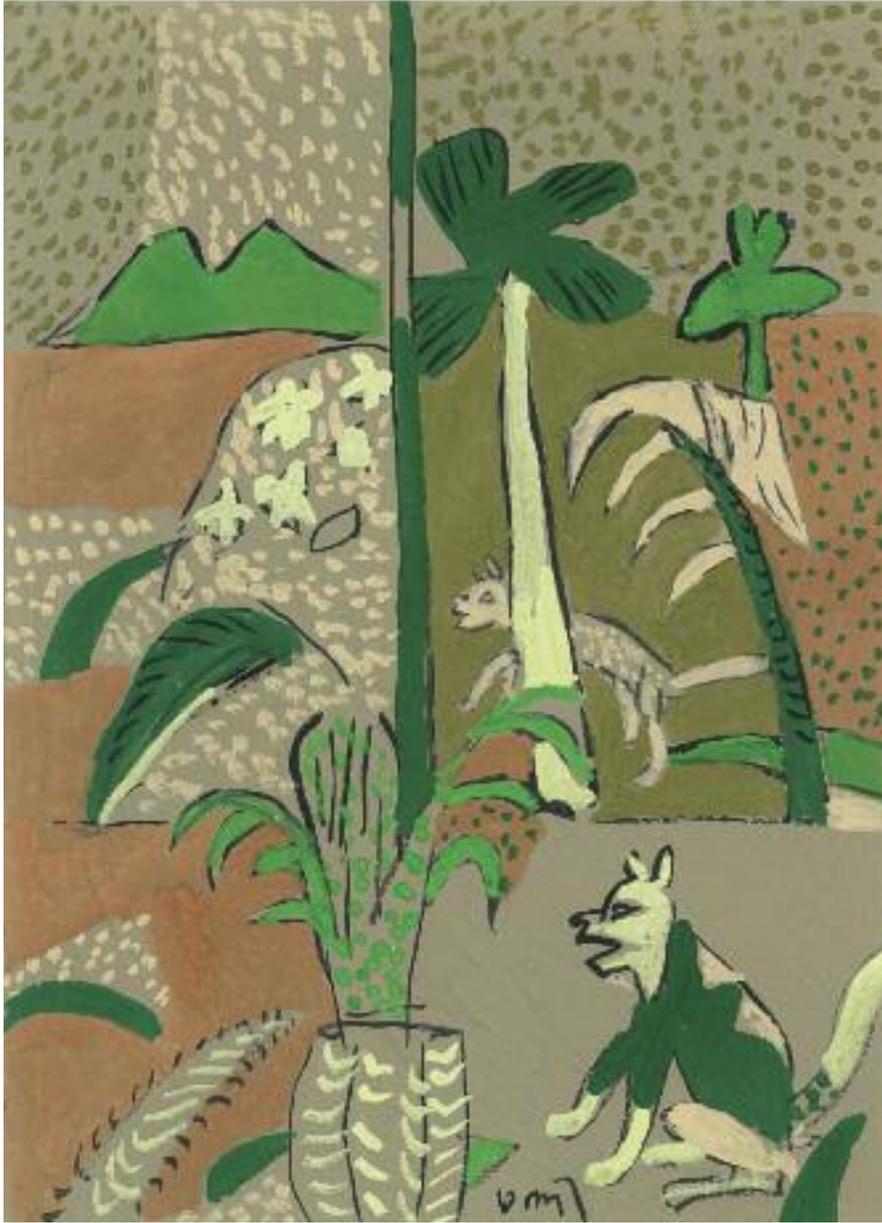


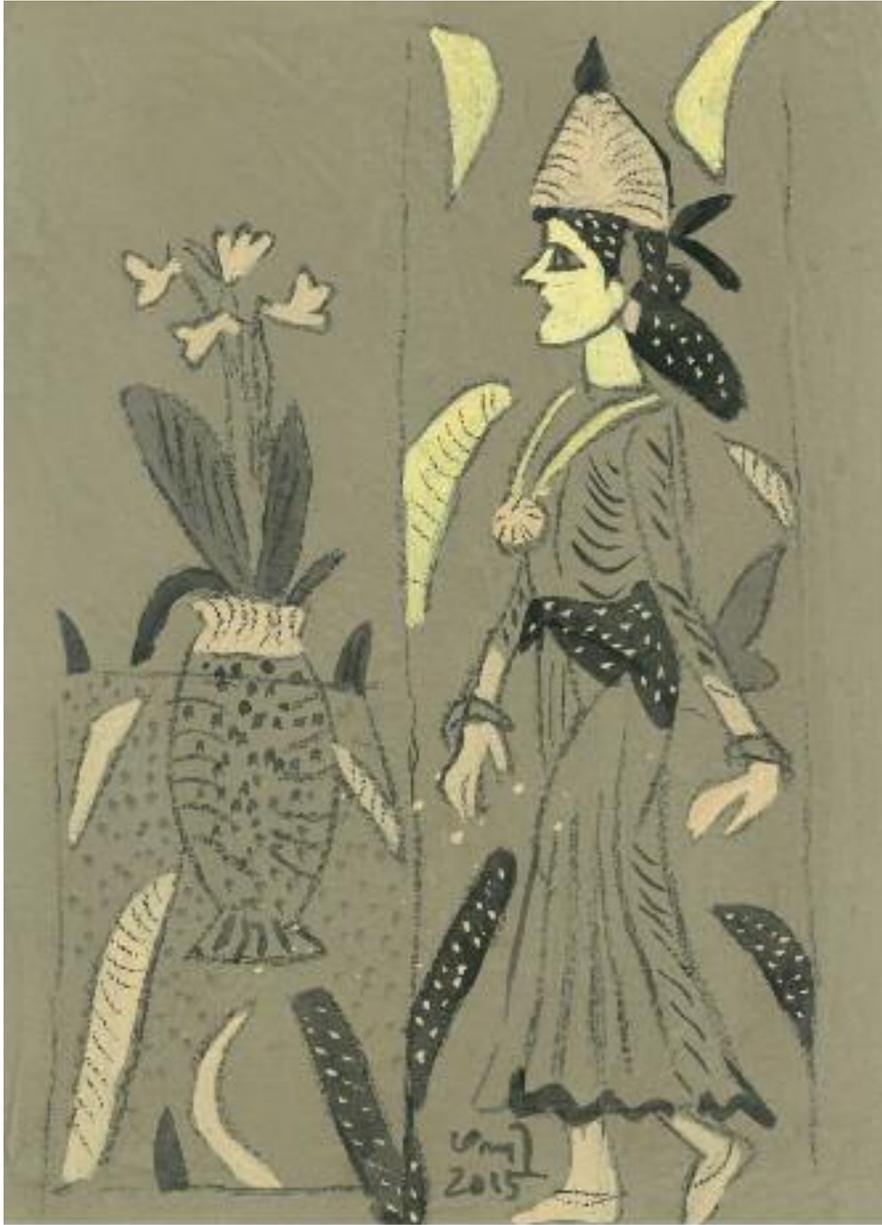


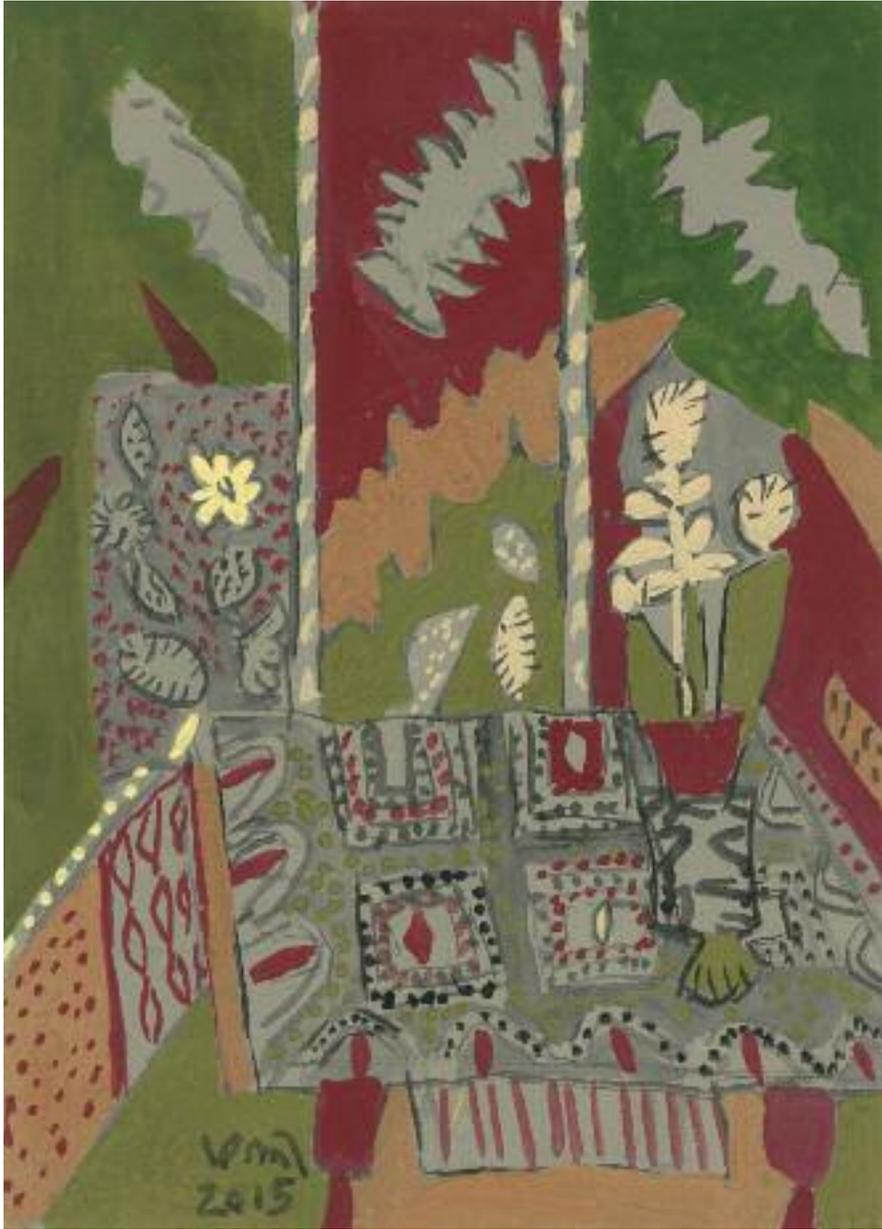


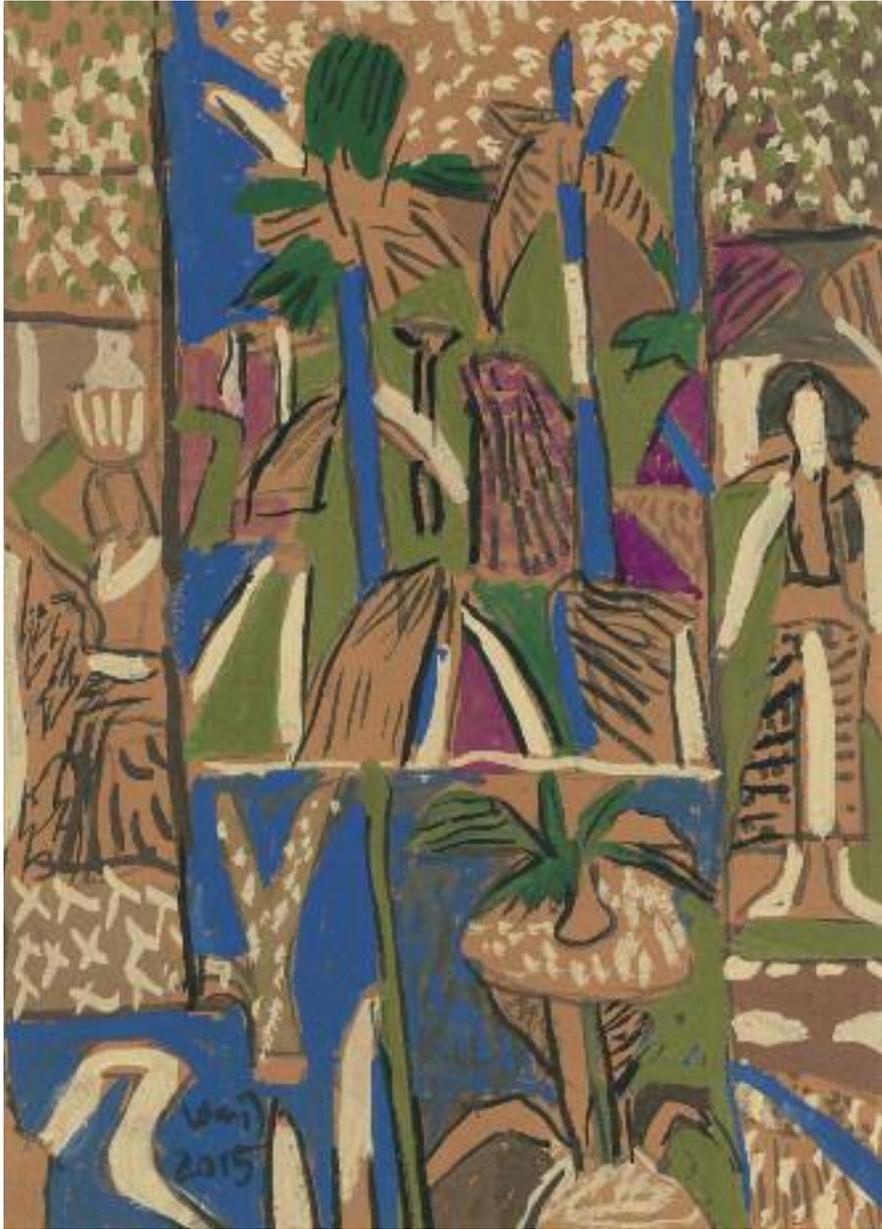




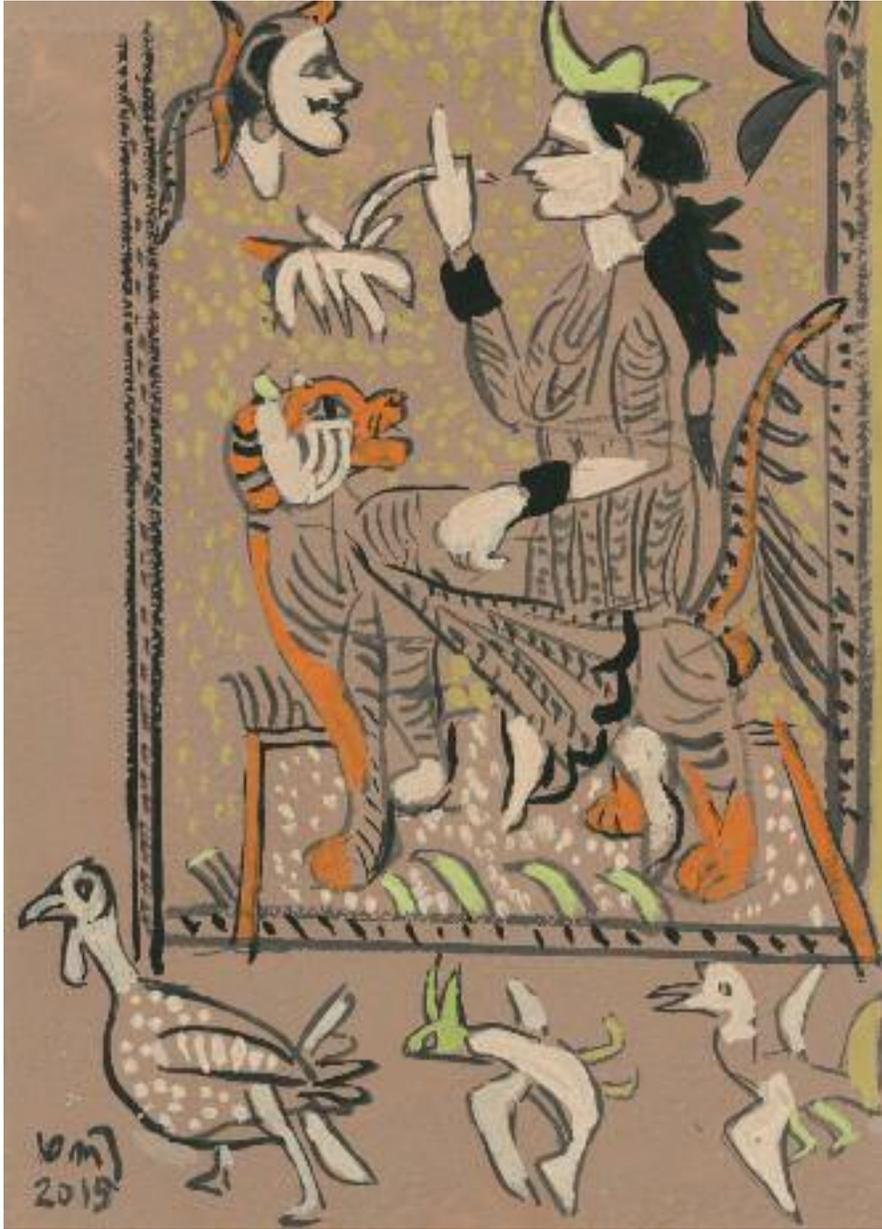












In the Night's Deep Furrow

In the night's deep furrow
Between two lidded leaves of sleep
Like a night-lily opening on the waters.

It is as if all one's likes had joined in one person
The bracing breaths of air
The coloured orbs of vision
The trees and landscape wrapped in
The sky's blue foil
The throbbing of the inner row of senses
And drawn one in
Between two coagulated shadows
Two lobes of intermeshing mystery

There is no movement
Just the thrill of pleasure
No action
Just the muted hide and seek
Of an image and its shadow
In indecisive lineament
Between two lidded leaves of sleep

The day's light then cuts dead open
All life's mystery
Sharpens the contours and shrinks the inner core
Cuts each limb adrift in autonomous action
The eye sees without knowing
The ear hears without feeling
The body acts without the inner push
And the wish-bud sears within its slender stem.
The lazy acts roll out
Like listless coins
From a mechanical mint.



The New Encounter

When you get on in years
And the body's fire runs cold
And in the heart's hammock lies
An aching emptiness

The sunbeams tip with gold
The sockets of your eyes
And the garden flowers' laughter
Goes tinkling in your ears

And in the vision of the world
Crowded with bird and beast
You see your wishes' flag unfurled
As in a holy feast

It is like the mind has moulted
Cast off its crackled skin
And a bodiless body stepped out
From the wizened bones within
And hurtled through the wall of flesh

Into the heart of things
The grass's green, the rose's red
The earth's warm brown, the eyeless winds
The open blues of the endless skies
And those little dramas
Of birds and beasts
Or the nameless humans in the streets



Nissim Revisited

It is not too bad
But it is not too good either
This poetry where you string words
 of daily
In loose locution.

You do get something out of them
Like a peek into the past
Or a tickle in the folds of memory
Bringing the common things that lie
 Close to your skin
Closer to your skin.

But you feel you are in a familiar
bed slept many times over
Wrapt in the same sweat and stains
The same blue drools of dreams
With the smell of amber and salt.

It does not amount to much
Just turns you side to side

In the same old common sleep.
What you need is a change of bed
That will jolt you into waking
Run a rake in your sodden chest
And tear its soil up.

And bring to green ignition
The heart's ceramic seed.



When you close your eyes

When you close your eyes and want to purge them
clean

Of every speck of light and paint them black

It is not easy.

Phantom streaks of ghostly red and green

Tear across its back.

For the scripts you cook in the green room of your
mind.

Trot out its figures in noisy fancy dress

On its empty stage

Even sleep does not bring peace; it is thick with
dreams.

Spinning and dancing dreams with dragon masks

And bodies of ballet girls with lathe-turned limbs.

Even the colour of blindness changes from man to
man,

The experts say.

It is black to Benode da

To Borges it is yellow.

To some others it may be violet.

Full blackness comes when you can kill your
thoughts,

Say the grew wise men.

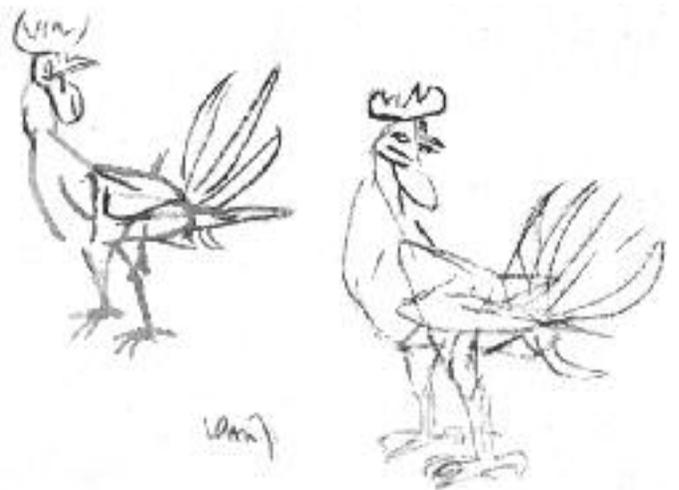
But why will you kill them, pray?

Did not someone say

You think therefore you are?

Why will you cease to be

To wipe clean a messed up slate



The Mirror

See that face in the mirror
Half of it is beast.
Barbed and ravenous, eyes red-veined
With rage.
White fangs of hunger. Black horns of hate.
Mouth warped with rank unreason.

It looks on exerything
As an object of desire,
To be chased and overpowered,
Struck down and preyed upon.

But the other half is angel,
Shining and silver soft,
Made up as if it were
Moonbeam and morning air.
Whom no sin can sully
Or shadow overspread.

For it goes to woo
The thing it wants to win.

Trying its best to please,
Not bring it to its knees.

But they are these together,
Both, tailored edge to edge.
So the angel is not all angel, Or the beast a
complete beast.



From *Poems* by K. G. Subramanyan, Seagull Books 2006

