

## FINE ART



# PAINTED TALES

As British artist ANJ SMITH prepares for her visit to India in September to showcase her works at Galerie Isa in Mumbai, she speaks to *Time to Style* about inspirations, trends, and contemporary artists

By SIVETA VEPA

## CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE COLLECTION THAT WILL BE ON DISPLAY IN MUMBAI?

I will be showing a series of seven paintings, which slip through the categories of still-life, portrait and landscape. What might appear to be a landscape might primarily be a portrait of psychology, or a portrait alluding to a presence that is physically absent. All the works are oil on linen and some of the marks are very minute, for which I source specific tiny brushes from Italy. Other zones in the same painting can be thick impasto, thrown on more casually with a palette knife. There are bursts of colour in jewel tones, and dark carvings into the paint; there are passive areas where the eye can rest, and intense parts of frenetic activity.

## WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS COLLECTION?

I have been thinking a great deal about a kind of existential fragility. There is no literal or singular narrative. I think of that as operating in fragments, different zones of meaning, inhabiting the same fictive plane.

## HOW HAS THE RESPONSE BEEN TO IT SO FAR?

Each work has taken months and months to complete, so I feel greatly relieved at the response that I have received. It's thrilling, actually!

## WHAT DOES ART MEAN TO YOU?

Painting is my life. I can never switch off from thinking about it, even if I wanted to, which I don't, usually! It's a cyclical process, sometimes, thinking things through can feel like a battle, but most of the time, it's an overwhelmingly fulfilling experience. It's obsessive—I visit several exhibitions and museum shows where I never look at the work (of any medium) without finally thinking, "What can this add to my work, how does it relate?"

## WHERE DO YOU DRAW INSPIRATION FROM?

It's hard to predict where and how ideas suggest themselves and evolve into paintings. I read a great deal and keep a journal of ideas with me at all times, to write down any fleeting thoughts as and when they occur to me. Research always generates ideas. I have certain preoccupations and as my brain is finely tuned to pick up on anything that relates to these things, I'm not sure if I really understand the nature of inspiration fully, but I rarely feel at a loss. Usually, I feel frustrated that I cannot work on more paintings at any given time!

## YOUR WORK SHOWCASES HISTORICAL STYLES, WITH A CONTEMPORARY FEEL. HOW DO YOU STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW?

I don't believe that history needs to be seen as linear. With the deaths of Modernism and Postmodernism, it seems fine to quote and reference whatever fits in to the conceptual intentions of any contemporary piece. Painters like Lucas Cranach and William Blake continue to fascinate me, as do Victorian artists Richard Dadd and Louis Wain, but I also find it important to relate directly to what is happening in painting now. I look at Polish conceptual paintings that emerged in the '90s, with painters like Rafal Bucznowski, all the time, and also the work that has followed them with artists like Piotr Janas. I'm also influenced by contemporary art that isn't a painting.

## DO YOU SEE ANY EMERGING TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ART?

There are always little trends that come and go—I'm not so interested in such superficial things. The real great thing



about working now is that there is great diversity. With globalisation, there is a cross-fertilisation of ideas.

## TELL US ABOUT THE ABSTRACT ELEMENTS IN YOUR WORK.

I often think of a single painting as comprising abstract paintings and representational paintings layered on top of each other. There are abstract fields of colour behind a lot of the action and there are also abstract geometrical shapes in much of my recent work. This geometry always features as broken, or irregular, or as morphed into something else. In a previous painting, 'Attempts At Conversation', 2011, a circle had become an apple and then a CND sign. Much of this relates to the inability of any kind of language system, to quantify or aptly express experience. It's a painting about alienation.

## WHO AMONG YOUR CONTEMPORARIES DO YOU ADMIRE?

I have always admired the work of Nigel Cooke and the eccentric intelligence of younger artists like Jakub Julian Ziolkowski and Matthew Day Jackson. I think Rashid Johnson is a breath of fresh air, and I have always liked the dry wit of Pablo Brumstein.

## FROM AMONGST ALL YOUR WORKS, WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE? AND WHY?

My favourite work is always the next one! I feel as though I've barely started. 🍌

