

Layers of Meaning

British artist Anj Smith brings a collection of her latest paintings to India



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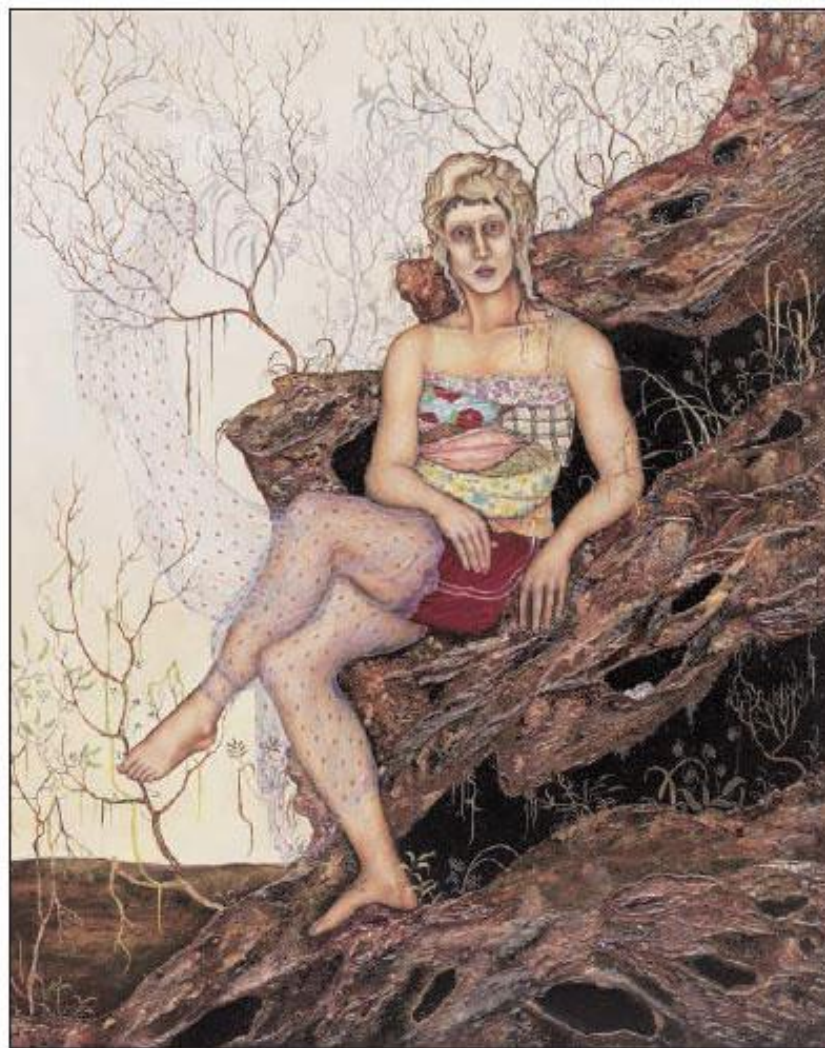
THE first aspect likely to strike a visitor about Anj Smith's paintings is how dark they appear to be. From the colours of oil paint that dominate some of the paintings, to the manner in which she layers her work using these and the faces of the characters in the portraits — some small aspect in all seems to suggest darkness. The British artist confirms this impression. "They are dark because they come from a dark place," she says of her latest collection currently on display at Galerie Isa, Fort. Titled "Woods Without Pathways", this is her first show in India.

Recently, a very dear friend of Smith's underwent a sex-change operation. The entire period of the preparation, to the operation itself took many years and left a

lasting impression on the artist and her work. Her current style of painting — very detailed with that element of darkness — she says, stems partly from this experience.

A 2012 work, *Sylva* perhaps best reflects the impression this experience made on the artist. A portrait of sorts, the painting shows a figure she calls androgynous, sitting in a rather lady-like posture. While the face seems like an equal combination of masculine and feminine, the legs and arms are more masculine, but the neck suggests femininity. Although Smith believes the painting is "tragic", there's an eerie sense of calm about the figure's face. The other factor that contributes in giving Smith's work this character of darkness is the influence she draws from the current turbulent times.

In *Portrait of Landscapes II*, for instance, there is a badge-like object with the most widely recognised symbol for peace on it on the lady's shoulder. In *Threshold*, one half of the ghost-like face in the centre of the painting is an inverted acid house icon — a yellow smiley face. While this smiley was initially associated with the genre



Sylva, a 2012 work, shows a figure Anj Smith says is androgynous (above); Smith

of music that is acid house, today it's looked at as just a smiley face.

Starting out her art career while still in art school at Goldsmiths College in London, the artist experimented with other forms of art, before settling with painting. "I did large metal sculptures in college because most professors were male and I had to do the most macho thing," she says. After that she did some text-based works that she describes as "dry", and also dabbled in performance art. Painting, however, was there all along and now she only paints, close to 12 hours a day.

Although her style has evolved over the years, she believes her work retains an element that makes it recognisable as hers. All, for instance, have that same character of being dark and almost eerie. But none should be dismissed as being only dark. Smith believes there's some element of hope in each of the works, all of which she says are "a combination of portraits, landscapes and still life". "They're dark paintings but there's a sense of celebrating life in them," she says.

Smith's solo show at Galerie Isa will continue till mid-November.