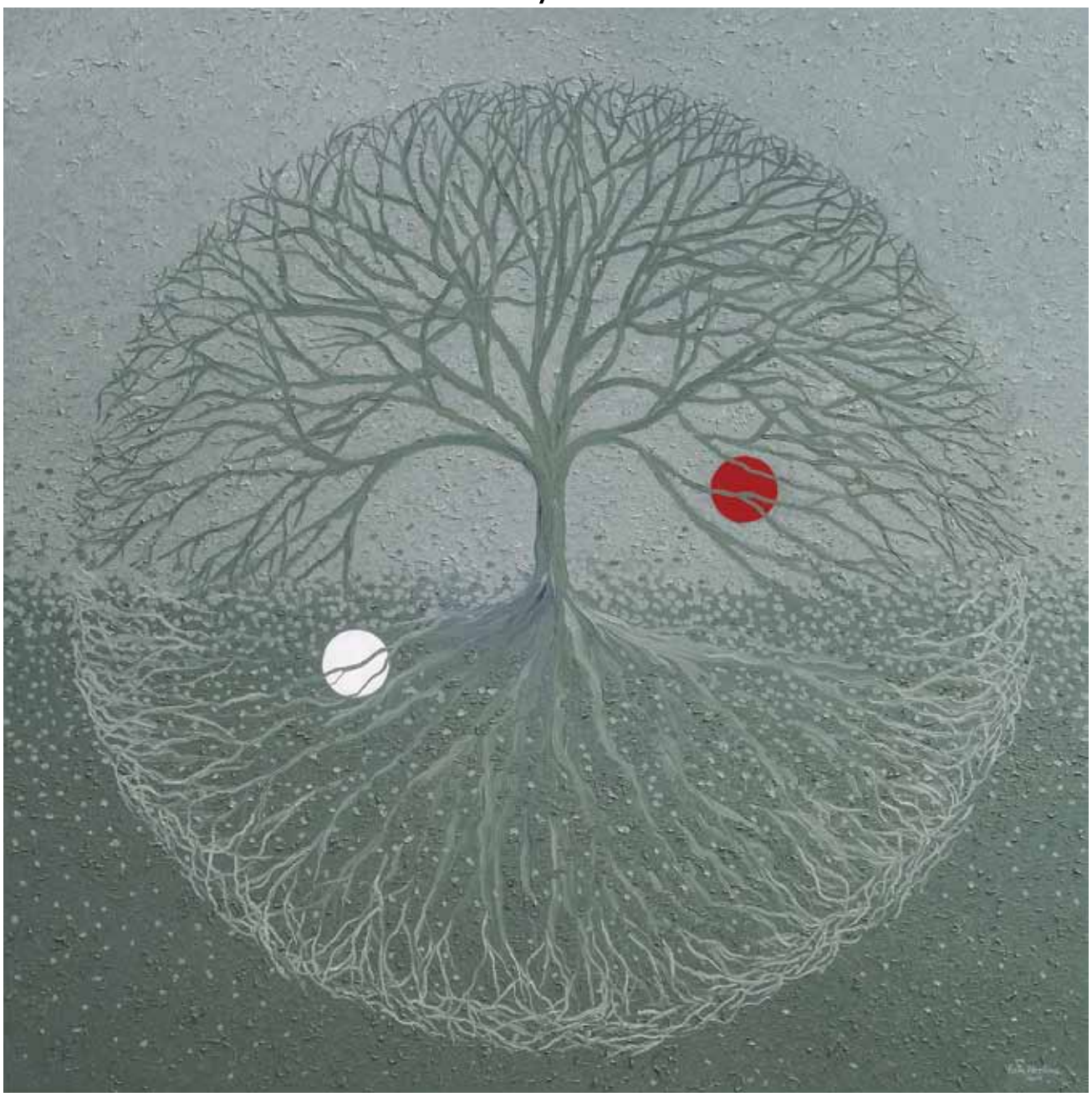
What The Eyes Can See



Paintings by Kota Neelima

Front Cover: What The Eyes Can See, 48" x 48", Oil on Canvas, 2015

Back Cover: The Search, 48" x 48", Oil on Canvas, 2014

What The Eyes Can See

An exhibition of paintings

by

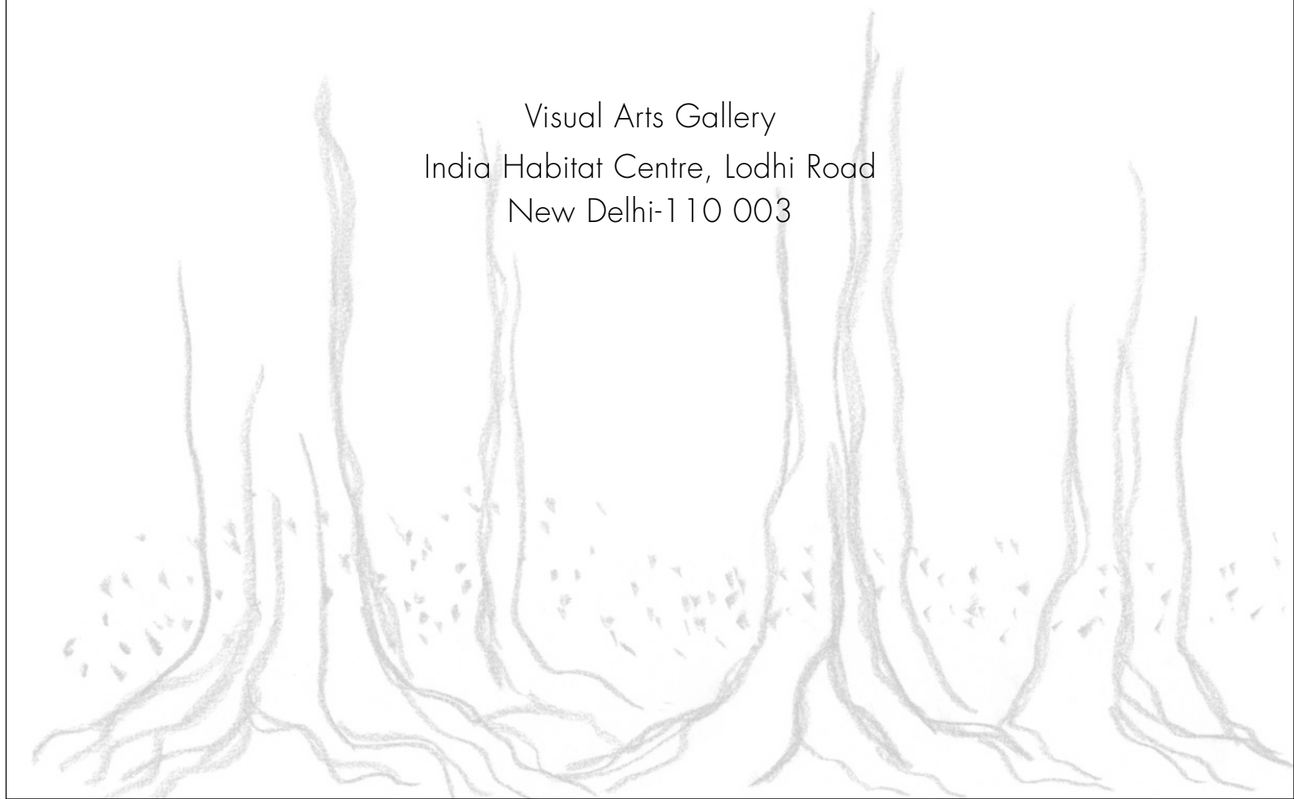
Kota Neelima

September 2015

Visual Arts Gallery

India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road

New Delhi-110 003



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September 2015
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Essay by Prof. (Dr.) SEEMA BAWA
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Foreword

by Sushma K. Bahl

There the eye goes not,
speech goes not, nor the mind.
We know not, we understand not,
how one would teach it?
—Kena Upanishad 1.3a, Translated by Woodburn

Artist Kota Neelima delves deep in this perennial search through a series of 28, oil on canvas paintings 'What the Eyes Can See' as it attempts to see what lies beyond the obvious. Inspired by her readings of Vedic treatise Kena Upanishad (*Keno* a Sanskrit word literally means what whom whence how why or from what cause), a dissolution of the seen image, informed by the lived experience and intuitive knowing, appears to be at the heart of what is re-presented and re-created in her art as memory, perception and forecast.

Causation and its deconstruction has been a recurring theme in Neelima's work over the years. In 'Neutral Witnesses' (2009) series of paintings she addressed agents of causation and in 'First Cause' (2012) her work focused on karma. In the present 'What the Eyes Can See' series, her art takes a further leap as it turns to the medium of causation through sensory structures and its vulnerability to simplified explanation. The experimentation begins with an intense journey that Neelima undertakes via her paintings to distinguish between looking and seeing or the internal self and the external world and its effect, tangled at every level of existence and awareness. This leads to the demarcation of the seen from the unseen and the one seeing as distinct from the other looking or looking through.

Questions about what makes the eyes see, what makes the mind think, how the transcendental forces facilitate the sensory or spiritual experience reverberate through her semi abstract impressionistic opaque imagery. The dichotomy between sight and vision, seeing and imagining, experiencing and analyzing, sensory and spiritual as well as manifest and non-manifest, that engage the artist also draw her viewers in, to look beyond what the bare eye can see. With its focus on

prana (life force) – speech, sight, hearing and other senses, the work incorporates ideation around the finite and the infinite, the external and the internal, the ephermal and the perennial.

The paintings translate into colour and form, as a multiplicity of visuals that the eyes can see while they also reflect what lies beyond the visual and in one's mindscape. Working with semi-abstract technique, the artist begins with pencil and charcoal sketches on paper, which are then worked upon to finish as oil on canvas paintings. Vibrant trees that flower in brilliant colours of life, roots that seek the depths, the sun, the moon, the sky and the waters that sustain the universe and birds that find the heights, all figure in her work as she discovers the conventional and the unconventional, the bound and the unbound. Though it defies tangibility, her art evokes multi-layered possibilities of - past present and future.

Kota Neelima, a multitalented and accomplished persona- author, journalist, scholar and painter - wears many hats with equal élan. I wish her success in her varied endeavors including the admirable work in this series that unravels the mystery of 'ways of seeing'.

Ms Sushma K Bahl is an independent arts adviser, writer and curator of cultural projects

Essay

by Prof (Dr.) Seema Bawa

Transcending the Visible

The show *What the Eye Can See* is a continuation of the ideational process that began with First Cause,[1] where the artist was exploring the impact of the act of Creation on the Creator herself, whether action, karma, doing something itself leaves an impression on the soul. Kota Neelima once again initiates an interrogation of presumptions and assumptions in inherited ideas predicated against the primordial dichotomy between being and imaginative consciousness that underlies attempts to grapple with the un-manifest. An inexpressible "opaque in objects" that remains untouched by any act of predication artistic or otherwise.

The artist's world cannot exist without the grammar of her art. It is an interpreted mediated world where the trio of the artist, her painterly grammar and the world she seeks to depict appear as co-primoridialities. However, if this world is constituted by the tyranny of sight and not the vision of the "seer" that guides or lies beneath the sight, then the world depicted is contextual and thus insubstantial. Instead if this language or grammar is denuded and the perceived banishes the perceiver that is the object or being usurps the consciousness, the predication is no longer done by the artist/seer instead they are done for her. The inadequacy of inherited grammar or language becomes apparent and she awaits a new "revelation"; she is led to the untouched creative abyss within. As Rainer von Maria Rilke says "The only journey is the one within". The mystic would plunge into this abyss and the artists steal the living fire therefrom to incarnadine the familiar objects or inherited painterly images with this fire.

[1] The artist's last series of paintings was called First Cause and constituted her fourth solo exhibition held in 2012, New Delhi.

ॐ केनेषितं पतति प्रेषितं मनः ॐ केन प्राणः प्रथमः प्रैति युक्तः।
केनेषितां वाचमिमां वदन्ति चक्षुः श्रोत्रं क उ देवो युनक्ति।।1।।

Aum! By whom driven does the mind set forth fall? At whose decree does the first breath go forth out on its way? Stirred by whom is the word they utter? And who is the Deva that guides the eye and the ear?

The first verse from *Kena Upanishad* above hints towards the logos, origin or the First Cause. Clearly the subjective human self is not what impels the first breath or that which underlies the eye and ear. The knower has no being or self except in relation to, as the constitutive other, of the known. It knows all, but paradoxically, does not know it knows. If every Cause has an effect then what was the Effect of the First Cause on the Creator and Creation both. Such questions constantly arise in the artist's mind. We are saying that Creation is an Absolute. If we debate anything about Creation itself the only way of doing is through the process, the act, the phenomenon of Seeing as a seer (and not 'eye' dealising it) not just through the sensory alone which reveal the interpreted world; but through submitting to the phenomena here, as Heidegger would say, the new predication would peel through the layers. The first Gateway to knowing, according to Neelima, is sensation of the world, the eye and ear reveal these as the interpreted world. The word and the specular/ sound merge to form the precept which is sought to be transcended for the un-manifest, its absolute complete diversity, and the wholeness of Creation. The artist had halted her quest in the last series at this point,[2] but seeks, in the current works, to go beyond this gateway, beyond the visible, to discover that which is invisible.

For her at what point we stop searching for meanings, messages, images is our choice, because the search is endless, one has to transcend the limitations of form, of visual language of colour to transcend each layer of knowing and push towards the un-manifest.

The artist is aware of the inherent contradiction in trying to express what lies beyond the visible through the recognisable and familiar visual grammar, but still she invites the viewer to embark on a journey in which 'the eye is not the limiting factor'. Because for her Reality cannot be known by the eye but by thought (not inherited thinking but the mood *Befindlichkeit*). Impelled by this cognitive but passive mind the eye can see much more, register more and that is why the series is called *What the Eyes Can See*.

The seeing is limited, not just ways of seeing based on the language games or forms of life one belongs to which would include as many ways of seeing as one could, living through our own frame of reference; but seeing instead as the mystic or seer did the unpredicted otherness in the object,

[2] *Maybe this is the first karma,*
Of the Absolute, the Light,
First fate, first cut, first part
Of the last act, the Night.
(From the theme of First Cause, Kota Neelima, 2012).

the un-manifest. These paintings are the spatialization of temporality and seek to depict the un-manifest as if in pre-temporal or eternal simultaneousness.

In the painting, *Nights of Tomorrow,* she has tried to retrieve the pre-experience and knowledge of what happened to us in other times, at those times when the moon was in its different phases. We have a memory of these, a deeply felt knowledge of these, the experience of it, which we can penetrate if only we allow ourselves to enter these nights of possibilities.

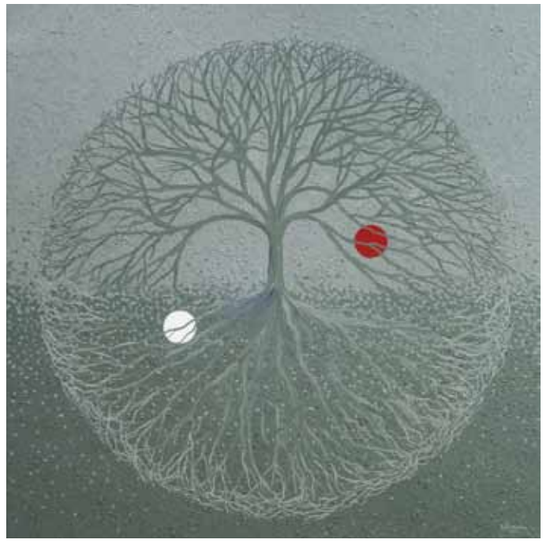
In another work, *The Separation of Self*, the artist strives to separate herself as someone who is going to make the image from the choice of the image itself. The fundamental question of whether the Creator can be distinguished from the Creation, can there be a self-willed indifference' towards the image being created.

She tries to move beyond not just the tyranny of form but also the tyranny of sight and thought. While our whole body of knowledge encourages us to look beyond the known, yet we are limited by our lives, our body-selves and this distance between the knowledge of the potential of the unknown leads to the inherent dissatisfaction, more we know, more the universe moves its epistemological boundaries. To **see** the world in its entirety, unmediated, is a gift or boon that Krishna vouchsafes Arjuna in the eighth adhyaya of *Gita* when he appears in his Vishvarupa form, and says that he would give Arjuna eyes so he could perceive the entirety of the universe embodied in the World Encompassing form of Vishnu. This Vishvarupa, according Neelima, is always around us, with all its processes constantly unfolding, but it is we who are not able to see it as a Whole because of the limitations of what the eye can see.

The fundamental question articulated in the Kena Upnishad as to 'What makes the eyes see? What makes the mind' think is revisited? This beautiful doubt, this curiosity is both Sensory and Spiritual. This wondrous feeling of looking for the world beyond has been explored through her paintings that impel us to look at the world around by constantly invoking our past and future journeys, our relationships, the sources of knowledge. Like the moon our mind also journeys, it starts from the roots, it moves to the sky and yet remains still.

Hypothetically the colour blue represents freedom, of the sky, of the waters, of transparency. But for freedom to exist there must be an antithetical state of unfreedom, and different degrees of liberty, at various point of time, which have been represented through mottled blue while red is Unfreedom. In the work *Freedom Sky* the vast limitless skies are constantly searching for the elusive moments of complete freedom where one can experience the golden ecstasy of true happiness, but the search is always as fragmented as the tree in the painting. The flowers are individuals, coming out of an undefined whole of community like the tree, that can think and produce infinite searches.

The cyclical structure of the painting *What the Eyes Can See* emphasises the idea that the root will eventually be



a flower and then return to being a seed and then a plant with root. And yet in each returning it will be a different being; there is a constant churning of forms that can be seen in the branches. The circular nature of existence is being challenged though the incompleteness of the circle; the broken twigs, branches, roots, all point towards inconsistencies that are part of the whole, *purna vidam*. The two moons, the two circles, also have a circular path in a circular movement, where the rising moon embodied human agency that through work, curiosity, alters the being itself and it is in this doing that the possibility of immortality is born, when doing can become one with the creation, and can turn green. By the time the moon sets, it turns red, and changes, becomes mortal. The elemental colours as well its tonalities play an important role in paintings as they represent thoughts and ideas, where green and red stand for creation, while black signifies ends and returns.

Nachiketa, (he who does not know anything) says of this cyclical vision that "Like corn will become ripe the mortal man, and like corn he is born again". Thus the human agent will never come to be, never accomplish the grade of being even after his perishing. For like corn, man is reborn to be

food or to be consumed, that is, being for others, live for others. Modernity and post-modernity posit instead a world view as one where contextuality and ambiguity rather than the human subject form the ground, basis or "first cause". The Nachiketas, and the rooted artists like Neelima can find no solace in the free play of signs celebrated by the followers of Derrida.

Thus *Leaves of White* suggest the complicity of leaves in the death of those leaves that did not survive and live on. The painting questions the notion of innocence of nature, and our knowledge that in nature survival is at the cost to other's death, a knowledge that is embodied in the white, textured leaves. The sense of past knowledge, memory, traces in what we see/know/feel today is a refrain that runs through many of the works, the circle dissolving and reforming behind sense phenomenon, like constant journeys. In these journeys one searches for happiness, personal and collective, for an elusive moment of freedom as can be seen in *Personal Blue*. These memories may not be as personal as we could like to believe but the created world contains the recollections of all around us, those who have been witnesses to the creative processes, all of which contribute to our becoming from being.

The idea of witness or *sakshi* is very important to the Indian tradition, where every act to be acknowledged as having taken place needs a witness. In the absence of human

agency, Agni and Bhumi, Fire and Earth, become witness of *karma* and enlightenment as they are considered to be immortal and therefore agents of the ages or *yugas*. In a series of four of vertical paintings Neelima, inspired by Vedic-Upanishadic philosophic tradition, explores different experiences, thoughts, journeys, stages in life, morality and immorality, karma that may be actualized by the *sakshis* of time and space.

A motif that recurs in her work is that of birds, a motif which she contests as a symbol of freedom. She asserts the bird is limited by the horizon, gravity, by its need to return to earth for food, to build its nests, to rest…it cannot fly forever. So a bird flying indeed reinforces in every flight the notion that it is indeed not free, and is bound within the terrains of affection, karma and knowing, all of which are conditional and conditioned.

Kota Neelima has taken recourse to familiar forms from nature, be it trees, stars, moon, or birds to express very complex and abstract ideas, perhaps because these are complex ideas that need to have a vocabulary of known forms that suggest but do not impose. All through her work she questions the sensory, the knowledge derived from the senses and tries to move beyond; for example though as humans when we see a neem tree we do not see the roots but we know they are there, they are implicit in the image of the tree. The show is an intensely introspective experience not only for the artist but also the viewer.

Prof (Dr.) Seema Bawa

Prof. Seema Bawa is Professor of Department of History, Delhi University, specializing in the History of Art and Culture. She has lectured extensively in India and abroad on Indian art, architecture and iconography including Institute of Archaeology, the National Museum, India Habitat Centre, Seminar für Orientalische Kunstgeschichte. She writes on contemporary Indian art and culture for national newspapers, specialized journals and magazines. She was the recipient of DAAD Fellowship to read at the University of Bonn. She has published two books *Religion and Art of the Chamba* and *Gods, Men and Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Indian Art*. She has edited *AR Times* and has curated shows including the *Decorated Cow: Sidharth* and *Shatadru: Feminine Sensibilities in Indian art for* Lalit Kala Akademi.

kenesitam patati presitam manah kena pranah prathamah praiti yuktah
kenasitam vacamimam vadanti caksuh srotram ka u devo yunakti

srotrasya srotram manaso mano yad vacho ha vacham sa u pranasya pranah
chaksusas chaksur atimuchya dhirah, prety asmal lokat amrta bhavanti

On whose wish does the mind go on its errand? On whose command does the first breath go forth? On whose wish do we speak this speech? What god directs the eye, or the ear?

It is Ear of the ear, Mind of the mind, Speech of the speech, Breath of the breath, and Eye of the eye; and so the wise give up wrong notions when they depart from the world and find immortality.

(Kena Upanishad)

---

anyatra dharmad anyatradharmad anyatrasmat krtakrtat.
anyatra bhutachcha bhavyachcha yat tat pasyasi tad vada.

Tell me that which you see as different from right and wrong, different from cause and effect, and different from past and future.

(Katha Upanishad)

What The Eyes Can See

Kota Neelima

Is Red not gathered from battlefields,
The colour of tribute, the last rose?
The eyes see beneath wounds healed,
the lingering scars, the settled score.

Was Blue not colour of lonely journeys?
Of those left behind or lost in transit?
The eyes see the cost of destiny
Paths that don't cross, roads that don't exist.

Where did Green come from,
If not desire for power, the will?
The eyes see fallen walls of history,
Lines in sand to live by, to kill.

And what of nature, of trees?
Free of human wrong and right?
In the changing colours of complicity,
The eyes see no leaves of White.

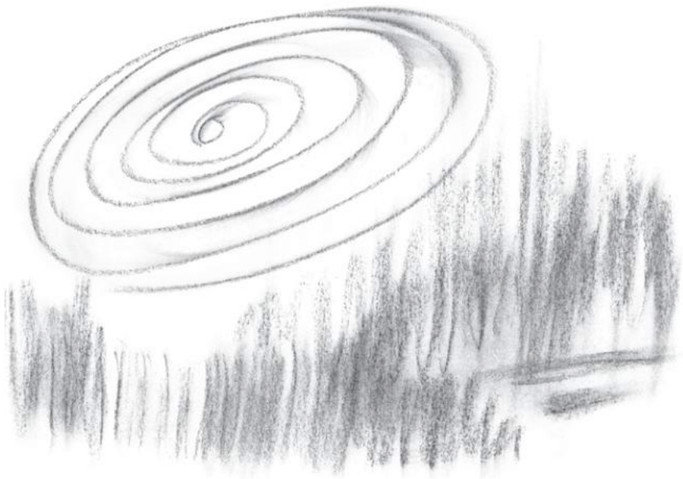
Is the Moon never constant
To promises made in its name?
Why does it change when it's absent?
The eyes see no Moon the same.

What colour the birds?
Dreams of impossible things?
Eternal thoughts, mortal words,
Prisoners of limited wings?

What colour the common sky?
Before nation, religion, books of rules?
What colour freedom?
The eyes can see the personal Blues.

These mountains of flight, these roots of rest;
Mind of the mind knows them to be free
They wait their turn to exist
To be what the eyes can see.

Perhaps it can be remade,
The Other's truth, the One's fancy
Recall any sky of memory
Reclaim what the eye can see.

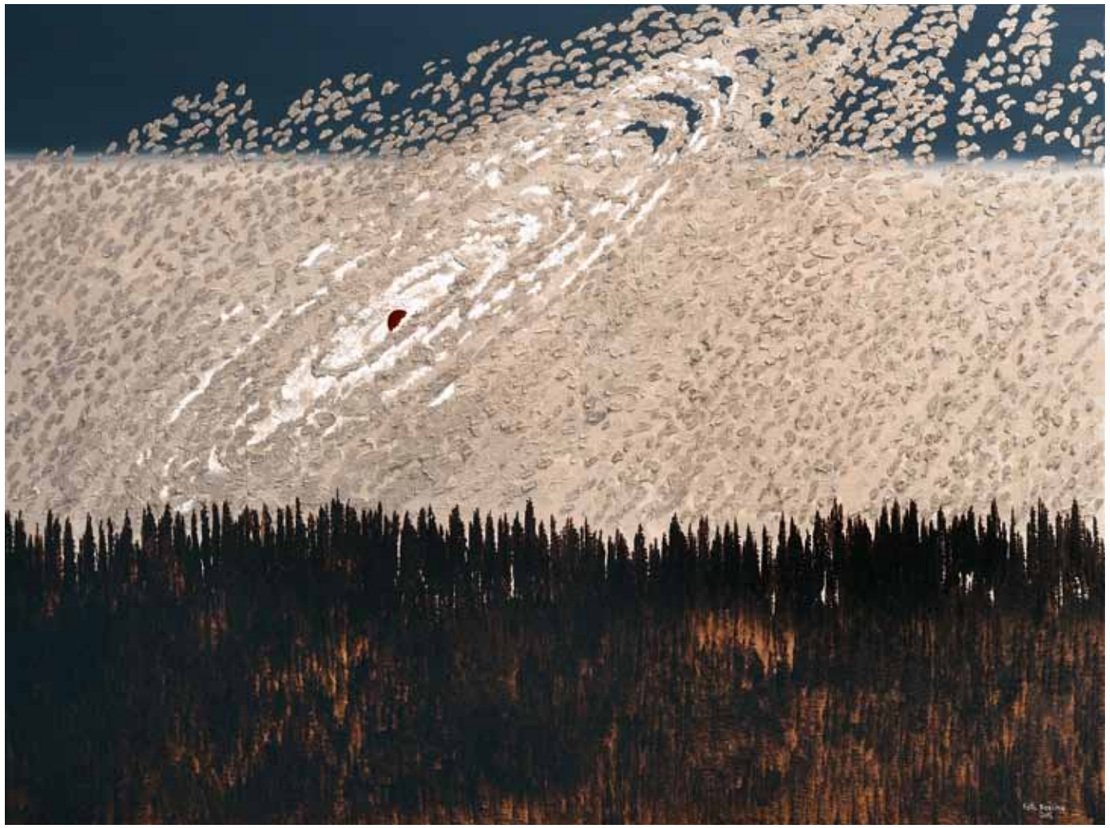


Under a million stars,

Where a billion rebellions start.

A childhood home calls,

To play again in its yard.



Childhood Home | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

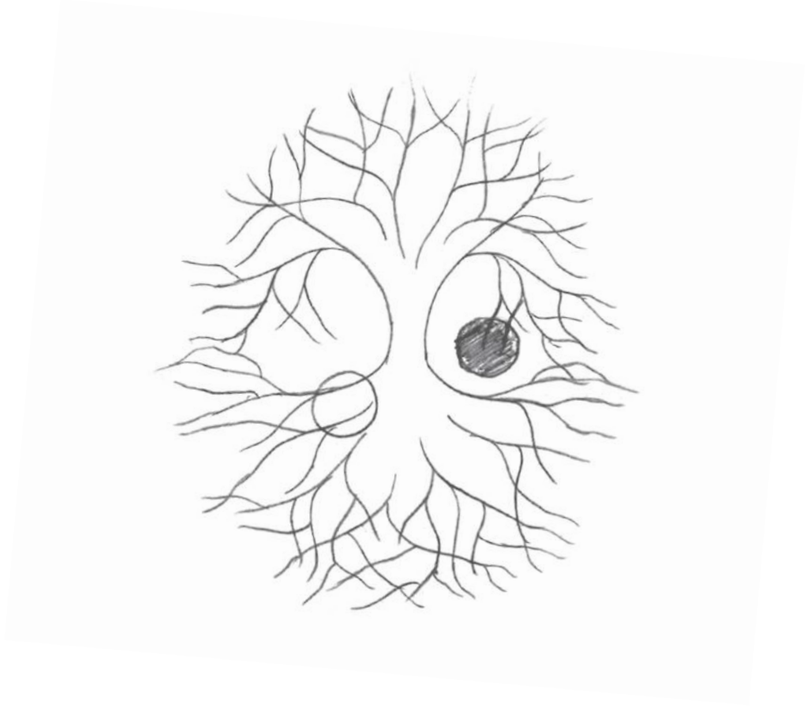
Flowers of late spring

Feathers of early dusk

Add words immortal

Make colours from dust.

Measure of Roots | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

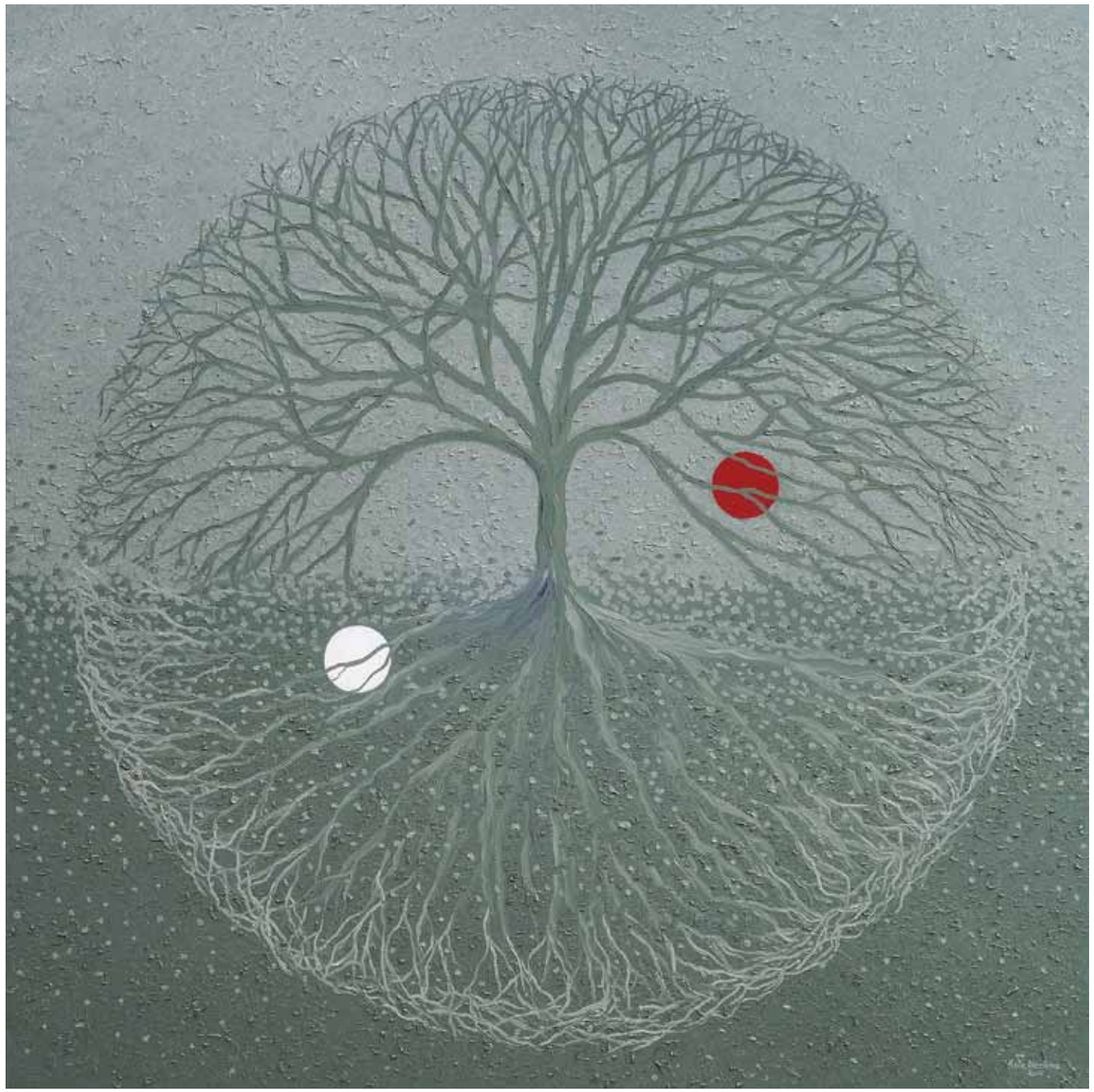


What the eyes can see

In the wisdom of trees

I must free the 'I',

Let the circle complete.



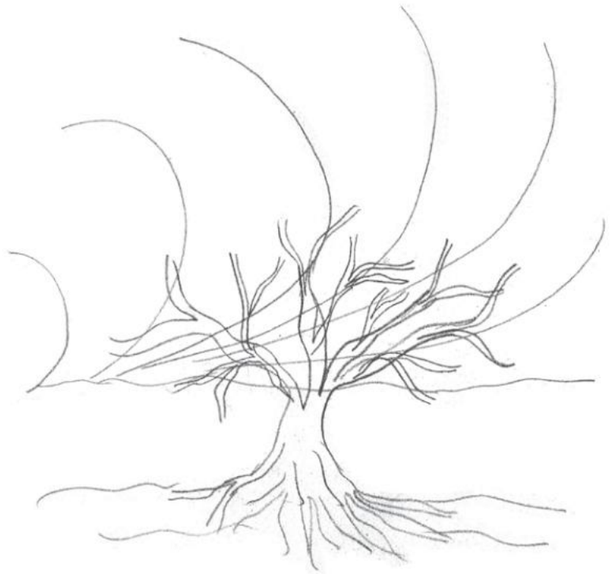
What The Eyes Can See | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Caprice of survival, wrongs

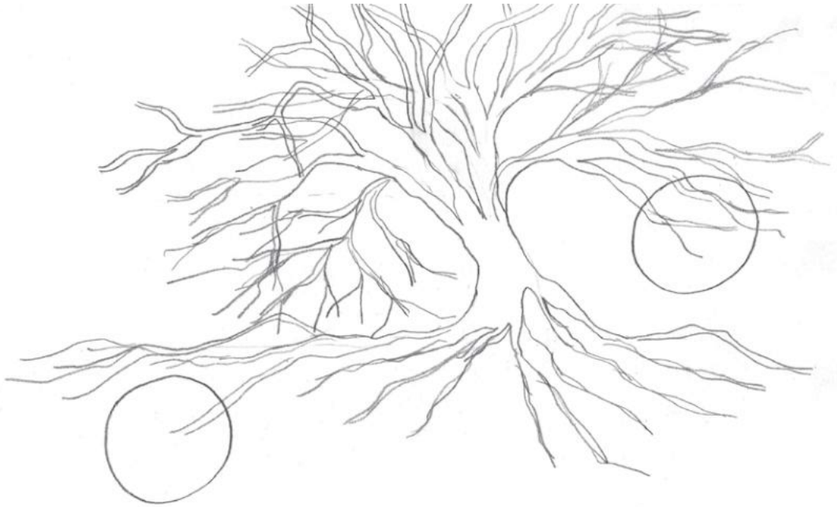
that make the right.

No cause for seasons,

If leaves had stayed white.



Leaves of White | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



Separate the Other,

From all things Destiny,

Find them together,

The Self and the Seen.

Separation of Self | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Arrows of time turn the corner,

Vanishing moons redrawn.

Newly born, newly found,

Newly forgotten, reformed.

Reform Moon | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

It's neither for settling down

Nor for taking root.

It's compass of a wanderer

Follow the Personal Blue.

Personal Blue | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

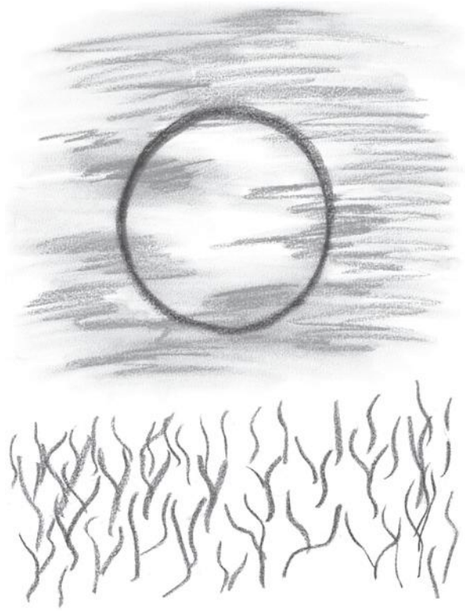
Early springs to come,

Mellow suns to set;

Borrow light of dawn,

Wake up leaves at rest.

Foliage of Future | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas



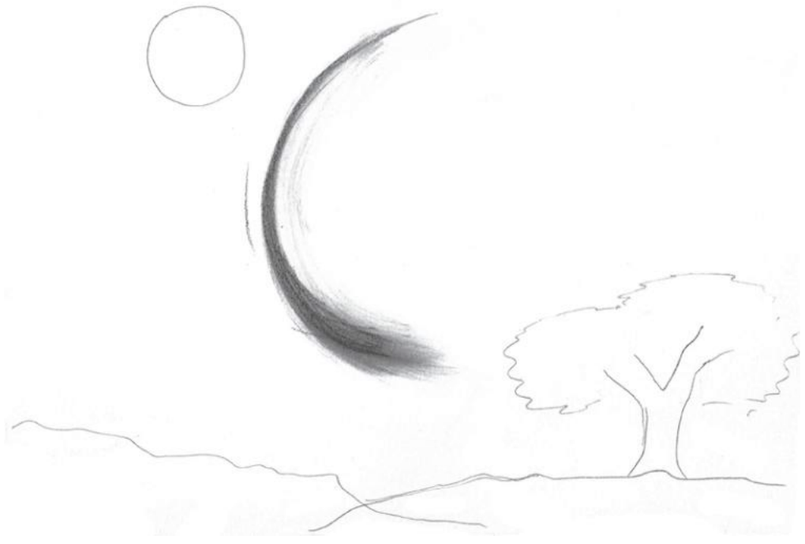
Why does the Self

Seek new beginnings?

Search for Itself

In changed becomings?

Unchanged Self | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



There's no place home,

No place heaven.

Nothing to acquire, to own,

No division of the Unseen.

Division | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

What the eyes can see,

In the sky of memory.

The undoing of change

The remaking of destiny.

Sky of Memory | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

To the roots that keep the secrets

Through the branches, the doors;

To know if it was a cause or effect

The Moon returns to the Source.

The Search | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

To forget, yet to remember

Times to come, times gone by,

Footprints of travelers forever

Left under the Freedom Sky.

Freedom Sky | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

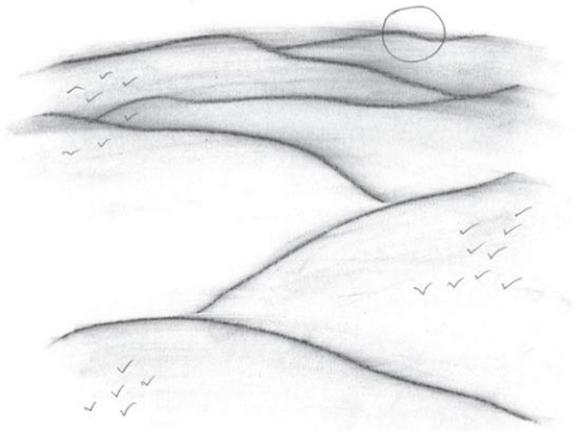
Nights to come

Moons to rise,

Yesterday alive

In tomorrow's eyes.

Nights of Tomorrow | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



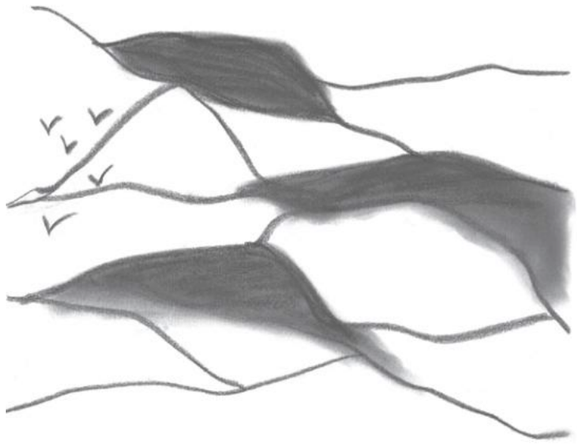
It is every reason and no reason at all;

Surrender to Causation, find the final call.

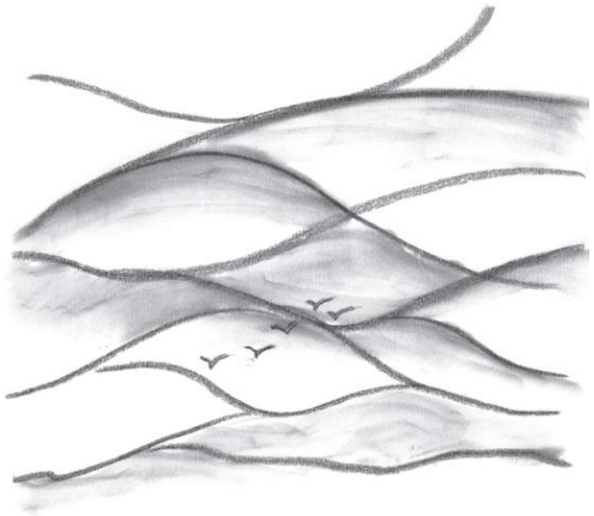
Terrains of Affection | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Not from darkness, not from light;

Terrains of Knowing behind closed eyes.



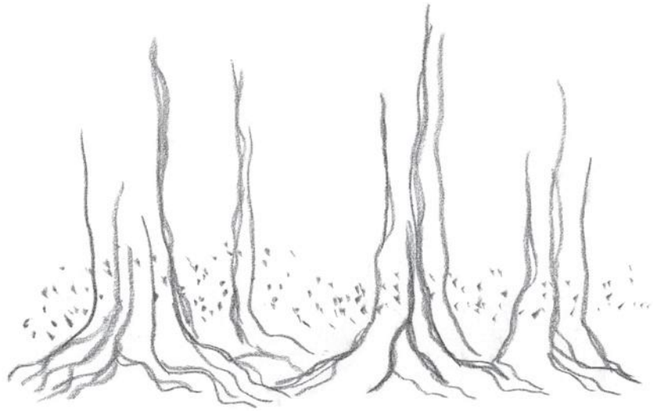
Terrains of Knowing | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas



Life to life, death to death,

Return to Terrains of Karma

Terrains of Karma | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

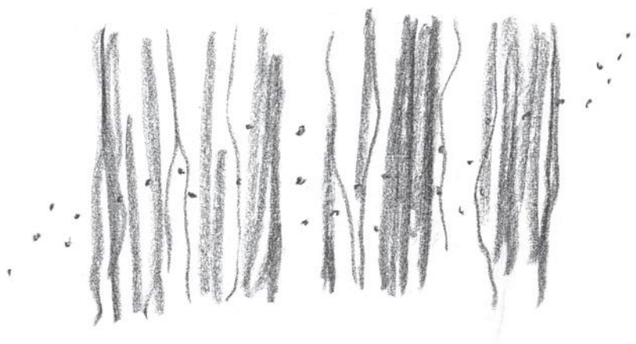


Written in an eternal ink

Personal messages of the wind,

Never returned unopened

Never left unanswered.



Wind Messages 1 | 18" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

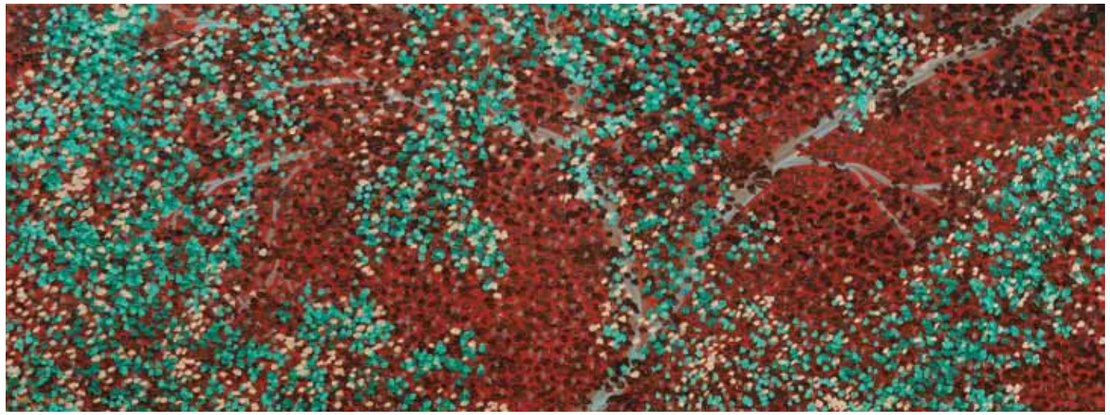
Wind Messages 2 | 18" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Part of us that was once a star

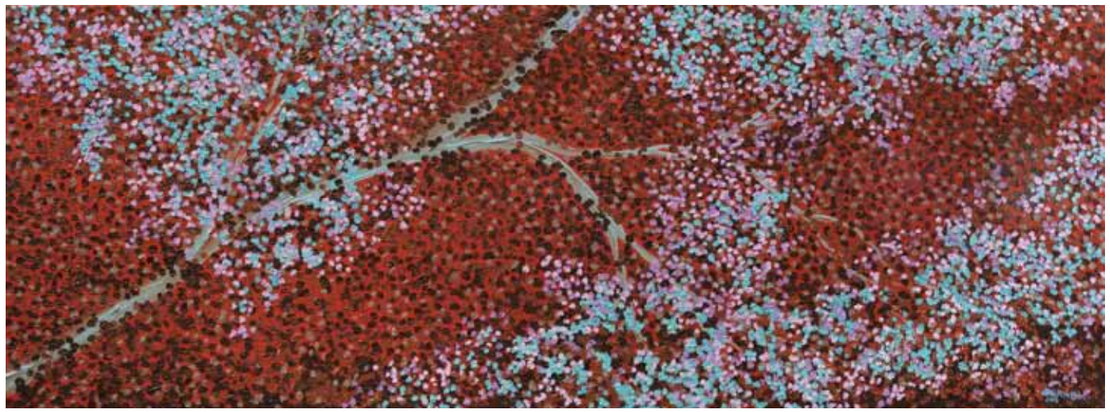
Points the way to return,

Find the signs within the heart

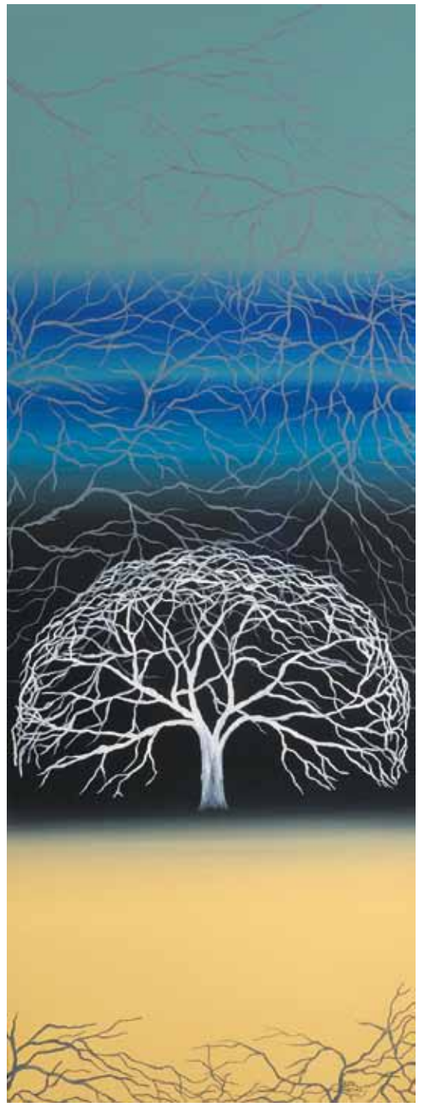
Follow the turns of the sun.



Answers in Stars 1 | 18" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



Answers in Stars 2 | 18" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



Witness of Thought | 48" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Source of the search;

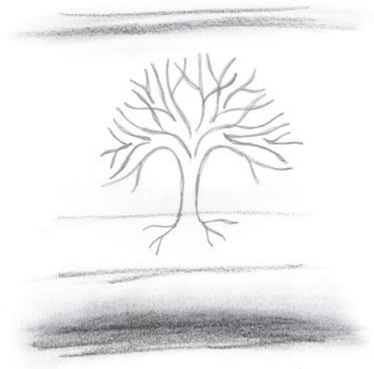
Witness of the Thinker.

Source of the arrival;

Witness of the Seeker.

Witness of Journey | 48" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Witness of Mind | 48" x 18" | Oil on Canvas



Source of becoming;
Witness of its Being.

Source of all cause;
Witness of every Circle.

Witness of Karma | 48" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Home of Clouds | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Of a home in the turn of rivers,

Of clouds that return to rest.

Million images,

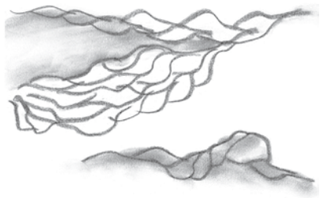
formed, fade,

made, unmade.

The dust of names.

Secrets of Soil | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Source of Fire | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas



A constant revolt, a fire,

A greater goal, to aspire.

Kota Neelima has studied painting techniques at the Arpana Caur's Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi. She holds a Master's degree in International Relations from the Jawaharlal Nehru University and is Visiting Scholar for South Asia at School for Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC.

As an artist and author, Neelima explores spirituality in modern times by re-examining ancient Indian philosophy. Her book on devotion, 'Tirupati, a guide to life' was published in 2012 and has been translated into several languages. The book drew from the Skanda Mahapurana to retell legends of God surrounding the temple of Tirupati in southern India.

Neelima's paintings are impressionist-abstract and the medium is oil on canvas. She has held four solo exhibitions in Delhi, which have all been part of the process to deconstruct contemporary reality through spirituality. The fourth solo exhibition of her paintings, held in August 2012 and titled `First Cause,' was based on questions from the Upanishads that seek to know the cause of all Creation, the cause of all causes. Three works from this series are displayed at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. Besides the solo exhibitions, her paintings have been featured in art shows in Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata and Pondicherry. Her work is also part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Sacred Art, Belgium.

Neelima has been a journalist for 20 years and, apart from her research into religion, she has authored three novels about farmer suicides in Vidarbha and politics of Delhi. Her last book titled, `Shoes of the Dead' and published in April 2013, had stayed on the national bestseller charts for 20 weeks and is soon to be adapted for the screen as a movie. Neelima's next book, `The Honest Season', is scheduled for publication towards the end of the year in 2015.

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