First Cause

Paintings by Kota Neelima

First Cause

An exhibition of paintings

by

Kota Neelima

August 2012

Visual Arts Gallery

India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003

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August 2012
Foreword by Ms. SUSHMA K. BAHL
Essay by Dr. SEEMA BAWA
Photography by Anuj Parti F&GL
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Foreword

by Sushma K. Bahl

The Hindu philosophy of Karma and the first cause of creation as a series of acts, or Karma is the concept that artist Kota Neelima attempts to explore through her current series of art works. The new collection in finely textured and diligently worked layers of oils, evokes ideas through images reflective of time, space, and nature. Her impressionist-abstract renderings in a soft subtle palette, seem to replay the concept of *panchtatva* or the revered five elements of nature- *Prithvi* or earth, *Jal* or water, *Agni* or fire, *Vayu* or air, *Akash* or space/ ether - that brought the universe to life and keep it going in cycling movement of birth-life, death and rebirth.

Taking us back to the beginning with titles such as First Cause, First Day, First Cut, and First Drop; her current art–scape features, the moon and the sun and the lush green trees, as well as images of nature's benevolence and fury. The *bindu* of *Tantra* cosmology, from which emanates all else – this creation and the structure of the universe and humanity, as per the ancient scriptures, is a significant element in her philosophy and art. Tracing the origin of life, she studies through the Vedas and the Upanishads, in a spirit of inquiry to reflect her findings in her semi abstract expressions. The notion of *tri-murti* seems omnipresent in the flora and fauna re-figured in her compositions, may be as some distant hill, or tree, birds, river, land or a horizon far away.

Notable is the artist's play of light and shade and her juxtaposition of colours in a magical mix that turns the static imagery into dynamic illusionistic re-creation. Another feature that characterizes Neelima's work is her underpinned and deep rooted concepts and poetics. In a fine assimilation of basic scientific principles, with philosophical layering and Vedic wisdom, she searches not only for her inspiration but also the ideation for her art. Usually sketching before painting, she works diligently to prepare her canvas and gradually adds forms to create her art in colours of her choice as appropriate for the theme under study. The expanse of minimalist expressions is marked for its stillness and vibrancy, ethereal and surreal, perceived and intuitive-transcendent all the same. The work is a pointer to the artist's preoccupation with concepts of time or timelessness and the origins of human life and the universe.

Author of `5000 years of Indian Art' and former head, Art and Culture, British Council, India, Sushma K. Bahl, MBE, is an independent arts advisor and curator based in Delhi.

Essay

by Dr. Seema Bawa

Is Ghat Antar Baagh Bagiche
Isi Main Sirjanhaara

Within this realm are gardens and orchards
(the Created World)
And within this is the One who created them.
- Kabir

As an artist and a writer Kota Neelima questions all presumptions and assumptions in inherited ideas including metaphysics. The basic relationship between being and imaginative consciousness, the relationship between the creations and creator is the inspiration behind the series: an attempt to reveal or peal the inexpressible un-manifest opaque, as she sees it, as the Manifest aesthetic creation. The microcosmic artist thus repeats each time the macrocosmic Creator.

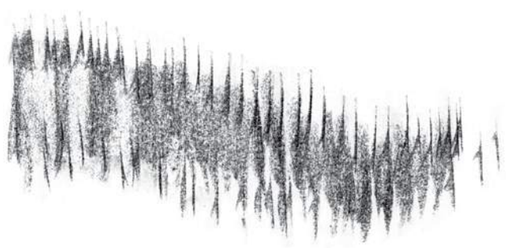
She avers that Indian civilization is based on questioning. But since the demands of development turned our minds to scientific and technological issues, we have lost this ability and indeed the courage to ask fundamental questions, metaphysical, religious, soteriological questions, and limit ourselves to social concerns.

Science and the theoretical practical paradigm of enlightenment & modernity has already limited the space in which real enquiry can take place, as has westernization of the Indian way of thinking. Her paintings are an expression of these concerns. Her questions are thus not mere theoretical yearning but deeply felt intuitive and aesthetic concerns. Her show is thus aptly titled *First Cause*.

Through her paintings, Neelima addresses fundamental issues such as if karma is the original cause, then how can it be free from the consequences and effects of *Karma*? All that exists as names (human attribution of meaning) and forms must have a beginning, an origin. All that man perceives and experiences is an effect with a cause preceding it. Thus all human endeavors are tainted with *Karma*.[1] One cannot take oneself as a presence as a *Causa Sai* and thus finds one disinherited from oneself. A sense of being disowned, an absence, a lack constitute what 'I' call myself. *"If I seek to know the cause in me I may intuitively know the First Cause".*

Her painterly consciousness then asks whether Creation changed the nature of the Creator Him/Herself. For any action, the act of doing changes the doer also. How is the creator immune?

What is the consequence of the act of Creation on the Creator? If god is nirupadhi, that is emotionless[2], does he partake of the imperfections of creation, the pain the suffering and inequities?. The Creator is *Pratham* and *Pratham* is his creation. From *Pradhana* (Uncreate), God be it Shiva or Brahma depending on the sectarian leanings of the believer, caused the Cosmos to be created. Through the interaction of the



non-characterized *Pradhana* that is devoid of smell, colour, taste, sound, touch and attributes with the characterized *Prakriti* that is endowed with all these senses. This is the source of the universe; it is elemental both in subtle and gross forms. It is the physical body of the worlds; it originated from the non-characterized of its own accord[3]. Neelima's painterly world explores the beginnings of the senses, of the attributes and the resonances and dialogues that start with these beginnings.

Any intense experience, *anubhava*, opens up a part of life, especially death and tragedy. Does the creator participate in this *anubahva*? Is the *Nirupadhi Brahma* then tainted by these imperfections of world and history? Vedantins and the Gaudapada see the Creator as what may be called consciousness[4].

For mortals this is a grim tainted existence but to the creator losing himself in ignorance is his glory his *Lila* . His *Lila*, his play is to be the perpetual sacrifice. For the creator all is self: S/he dies with the killed and kills with the killer, every pain is an ecstasy all sins a holy act. The Creator always "is" while mortals have to become. Mortals too need to partake with what "is" and then alone does *maya* come to an end. Kota Neelima's works play out this *lila* of creation where ancient secrets and seedings reveal themselves through colour and form.

The last question that she raises is What then is desire? Indian religio-philosophical tradition suggests that extinction of desire leads one to partake the divine, leading to the achieving divinity. However in history, desire or eros leads to progress, to amelioration. This contradiction and dialectic operates in the work of Kota Neelima.

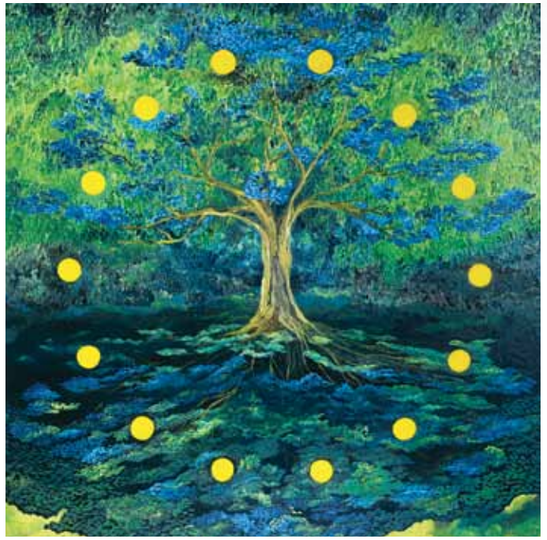
Such contradictions of Creation are therefore part of the Creator's *Lila*; the concept of *Sahkarma* states that you cannot have an effect of cause which is not related to the nature of the cause itself. Thus if the First Cause is vulnerable, the entire edifice of infallibility and godhead becomes vulnerable to emotions and desires. This is demonstrated in the painting *First Cause* which is a subtle work, dominated by gray with upwardly turning white feathers signifying the first *karma* floating on the sea of Uncreate. The contrast between the created world with its concentric strokes and the relatively undisturbed sea before time and space is marked by horizontal strokes. The first creation has to be imperfect as it rises from the perfect.

The other paradigmatic work is the *First Cut*. If the world is defined by mortality with blood, flesh the *nashvara* elements and the created world is part of

the Creator himself, by the act of creation, god himself endured the first cut. On pristine shades of white, a slash of blood, brown red as it dries, exemplifies this. It is the white, of Creative flux, that bleeds but not with blood. From the absolute emerges the world of pain, nature and anguish. There are no shadows, only a shine of zinc white juxtaposed with titanium white. It is the *First Drop* of blood that is circular dot which explains the concept of *pralaya* and *kalpa*, the cycle of destruction and creation, of eternal continuity, where there is no eternal tragedy, as old forms dissolve (*prakrita pralaya*) into new emergent forms.

Kota Neelima, then imagines the moments that came after the creative act, as the cosmos emerged from the Uncreate. The *First Light* as it tentatively came into being in form of energy drenched photons. But in the *kalpas* and cylical *yugas*, the realms have to end so there has to be the *Last Light*, or the fading into the night. Through light one can perceive distance, have perspective; the light and the distance to the horizon is in relation to where a person is. With light come the first colours, the pure white, a little imperfect but in conflict with its dual self, with black that has some white, some goodness mixed with it. Alterity defines the created world.

Then comes the *First Secret* shared between the trees and the clouds, between the material and the metaphysical, between the inclusive and the exclusive. The composition shows a dialogue with the forest, the trees, which have secrets that are shared only with those who have renounced the world of creation, the *vanaprastha* and the *sanyasis*. The sages of the *aryanka*, who can excavate the memory and the knowledge embodied in the forest. The entire process of Creation



is encompassed by the *First Day*, the first day of Brahma that equals a *kalpa* of the gods, hundreds of *yugas* of humanity- a day symbolized by a tree with upward reaching branches and downward descending roots but without an end on either side, rather like the *Jyotiralinga* that embodies perfect knowledge, light, support and shelter.

Neelima's works play with form and formlessness, using these to express the material elements and those that predate time, space and matter. Abstraction in her work is referential and resonates with intuitive feel of presence and not mere form as it seeks to partake of this presence in phenomenon. To a modernist everything must have a cause & effect. *Brahman* as presence cannot fit into this chain. The presence is a *truth itself* as it does not need the percipient or the viewer. This translates into Kota's work which while celebrating presence eschews the tyranny of mere forms; and is predicated on the Indian philosophical / aesthetic tradition.

The artist works directly on the canvas, without a pencil or charcoal line, unwilling as she is to mar the canvas with anything except the painterly process, or have lines chaining the painting. Then the paint, the form, and the thought become the agency and the artist herself is only the medium through which the process takes place. The basic structure of the painting is often evolved through sketches, but it is the oil colours and the canvas that are the real vocabulary through which the artist builds a dialogue between the past and the present in her paintings.

The artist palette is subtle with white dominating. However, it is a very pregnant white, with tonalities and shades and most importantly mass. Neelima creates sculpted forms through thick application of paint that give her canvases a body and a three dimensional feel. In this particular series one is also struck by the use of green, the verdant colour of created world, which is fecund and fertile, filled with potential, cumulative knowledge and the promise of regenerative beginnings.

ENDNOTES

[1] Modernity is predicated on uncovering the cause of everything and without satisfying this need one does not consider herself a "knower" of anything; thus a darkness of unknowing broods on all created phenomenon. This primordial yearning cannot be satisfied.

[2] The human mind needs the security of assumptions, the certitude of inherited shared concepts and meanings to make sense of the world and for happiness and serenity and endow the same to the Creator. The mind seeks causes of things because things always allude to something other than itself. Within the world, effects can be traced to causes material or instrumental and in this chain people seek teleology or eschatology and attribute God with the assumptions that underlie this telos.

[3] *Linga Purana*, AITM, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, reprint 2007, pp.xx .

[4] Modernity asserts that the senses perceive and the mind imagines and conceives. However to the Vedantin neither perception nor thinking is possible without non-temporal consciousness. If the creator is consciousness and creation is as some say, done by the creator to know himself; was the creator ignorant "in the beginning". It is true that self knowledge comes through the harshness of the world or *Anubhava*. To the Vedantin the Creator willingly becomes ignorant in order to be to be enlightened ignorance is the arche and *anubhava* the telos as he moves from fault to fault death to death to finally die into self-knowledge

[5] The presence as intuited is based on the traditions of Vedanta philosophy. Our theoretical-practical character towards anything never allows it to become a presence. Only if this disposition is shed can we feel the presence of an object. When an object becomes a presence only then it turns into a *Brahman*.

Dr. Seema Bawa, an Associate Professor at Sri Aurobindo College, University of Delhi, has written extensively on contemporary Indian art and artists. She has authored the book Religion and Art of the Chamba Valley. Her next book, Gods, Men and Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Indian Art, is under publication. Ms Bawa studied at the Institute of Oriental Art History, University of Bonn, on the Indo-German Cultural Exchange Fellowship. She contributes a weekly column on art to the Asian Age and Deccan Herald, and was the editor of ARTimes.

kim karanam brahma, kutah sma jata,
jivama kena, kva ca sampratisthah
– Upanishads

(What is the cause? Is it Brahman? Whence are we born?
By what do we live? And on what are we established?)

kim nv asti sarvasya jagad bhedasyaika-karanam yad ekasmin
vijnate sarvam vijnatam bhavati
– Adi Shankaracharya

(Is there one cause of all the varieties in the world, which cause being known, all will be well known?)

---

purnam adah, purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate
purnasya purnam adaya purnam evavasisyate
— Upanishads

(That is complete; this is complete. The complete comes from that completeness. Taking the complete from that completeness still leaves it complete.)

First Cause

Kota Neelima

It stayed back as effect
In canopies of hope
Over a world of chance,
The first cause till the last.

What will change if that cause is known?
What will we become then?
Will the cause remain uncaused?
Will the world remain its effect?

It must have rained before it rained here,
It must have burnt before these ashes,
It must have bled before it flowed here,
The cause of all causes.

It is part of the reborn,
One part sadness, one part joy,
One part good, one part evil,
Briefly together till all parts die.

The cause equalizes all,
One part belief, one part lie,
One part god, one part man,
Briefly together till all parts die.

Substance of this cause is known,
It is the substance of its effects,
Their success, their suffering,
Their perfection, their defects.

That which moved the unmoved
That which caused the first cause,
Only to make forms, give names?
Only to break and form again?

Maybe this is the first karma,
Of the Absolute, the Light,
First fate, first cut, first part
Of the last light, the Night.

The direction within

the needle of truth

the marker of action

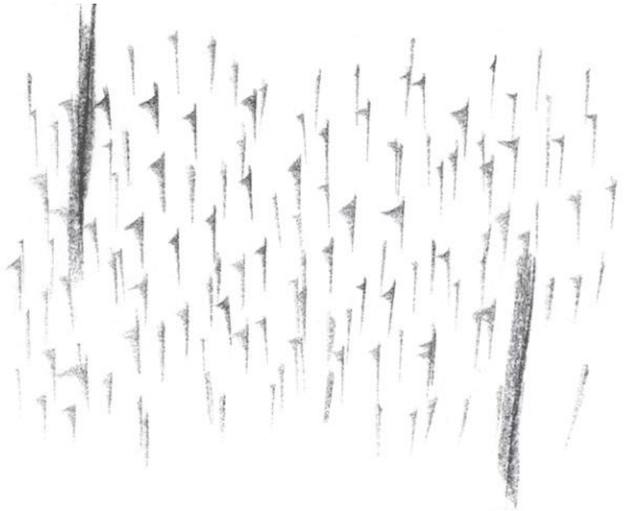
the compass of soul

Ninth Direction | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Separating man from God,

in the green valleys of destiny.

Valleys of Karma | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



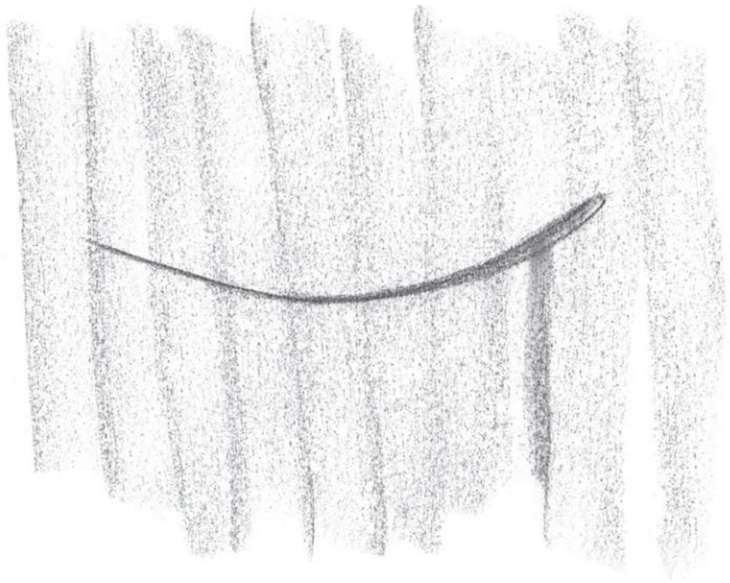
Before it flowed green in the forest,

before it flowed red in the veins,

before it was the blue of the ocean,

before it was the white of the rain.

First Rain | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



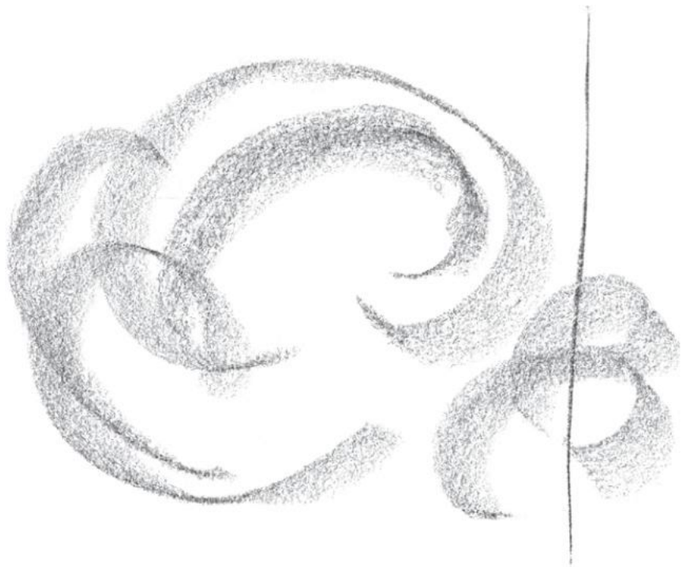
The first mortality,

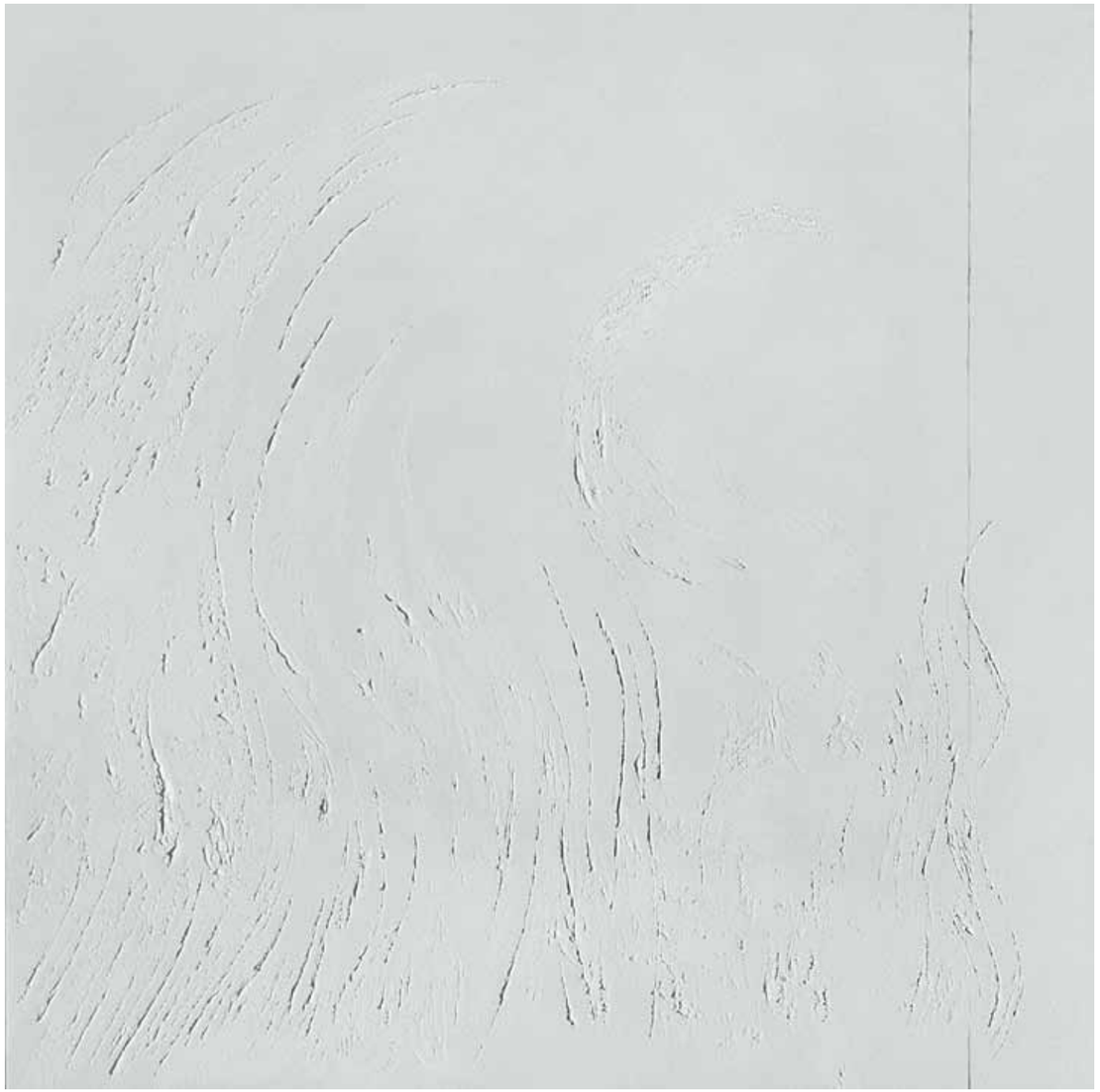
the flesh and blood,

the pain and joy of God.

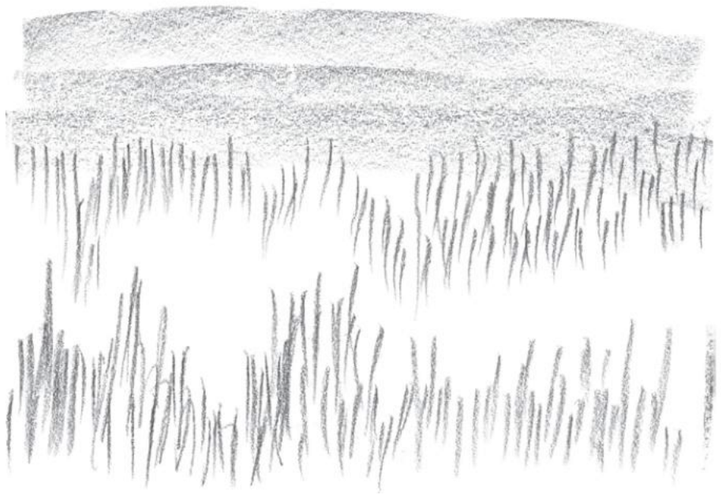
First Cut | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Who decided the first crime,
the first lie, the first long rope?
Who decided the first wrong,
the first black, the first white?





First Black | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas



Turning corners in the mind

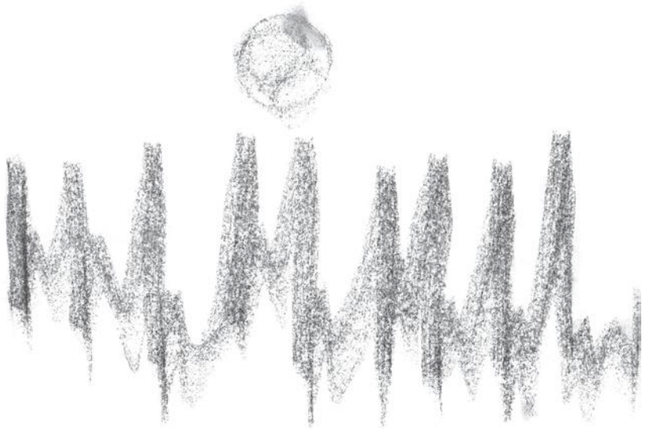
chasing time, losing time.

First Change | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Manifest as both wrong and right,

because of it or despite the night?

First Cause | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



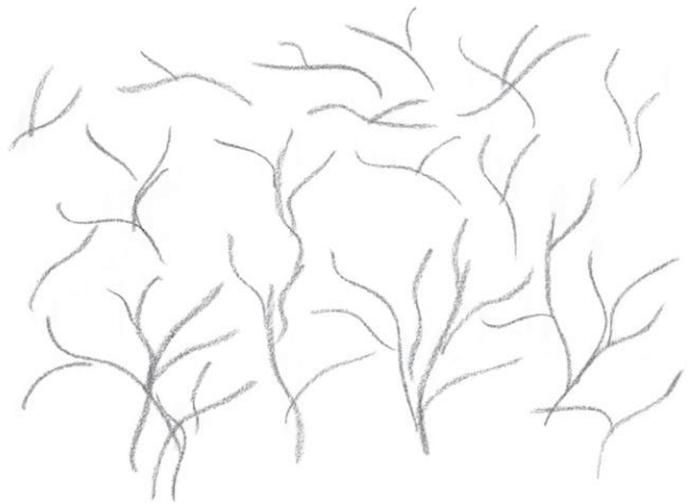
Light slowing down for the day,

making way for mortal pursuits.

First Light | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

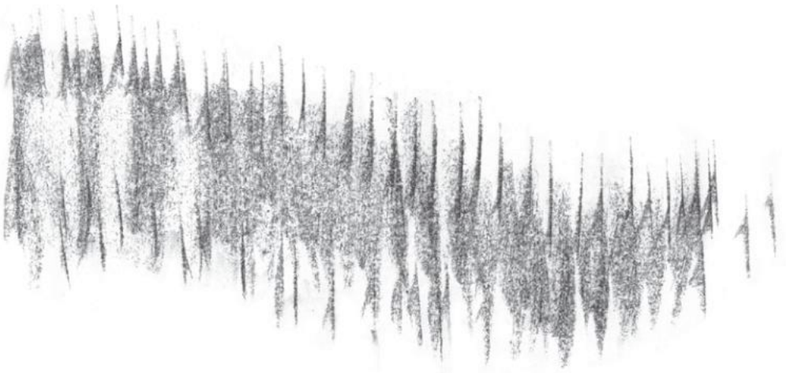
Waiting to be the effect
of the turning face of time.
Giving in to the future
with the alibi of hope.

Foliage of Hope | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



A poet's notion of the end
as the beginning, an emotional
response of those left behind.
Who has seen them return?
What has come back the same?

Forecasts | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

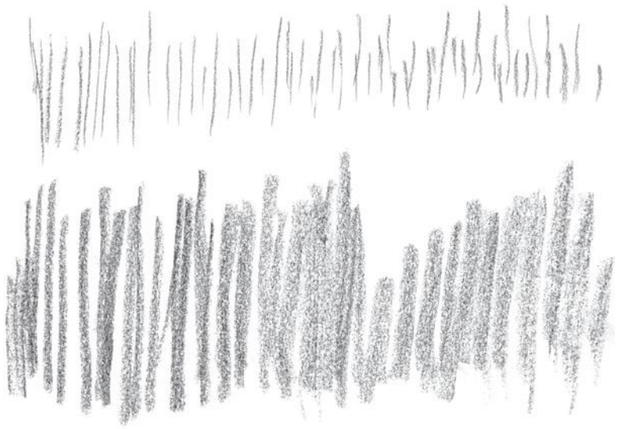


Changing with company,
living next door to evil.
The good less good than before,
the bad less bad than ever.

Counter Cause | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

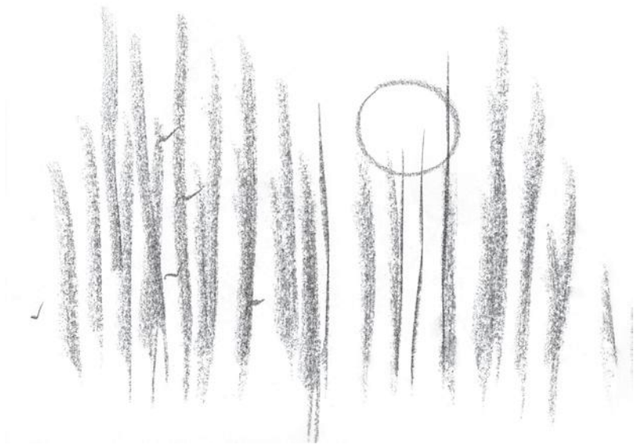
A portable destiny, travelling
from clouds, falling on leaves,
ticking as time in the living,
flowing as rain through veins.

Cycles of Water | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

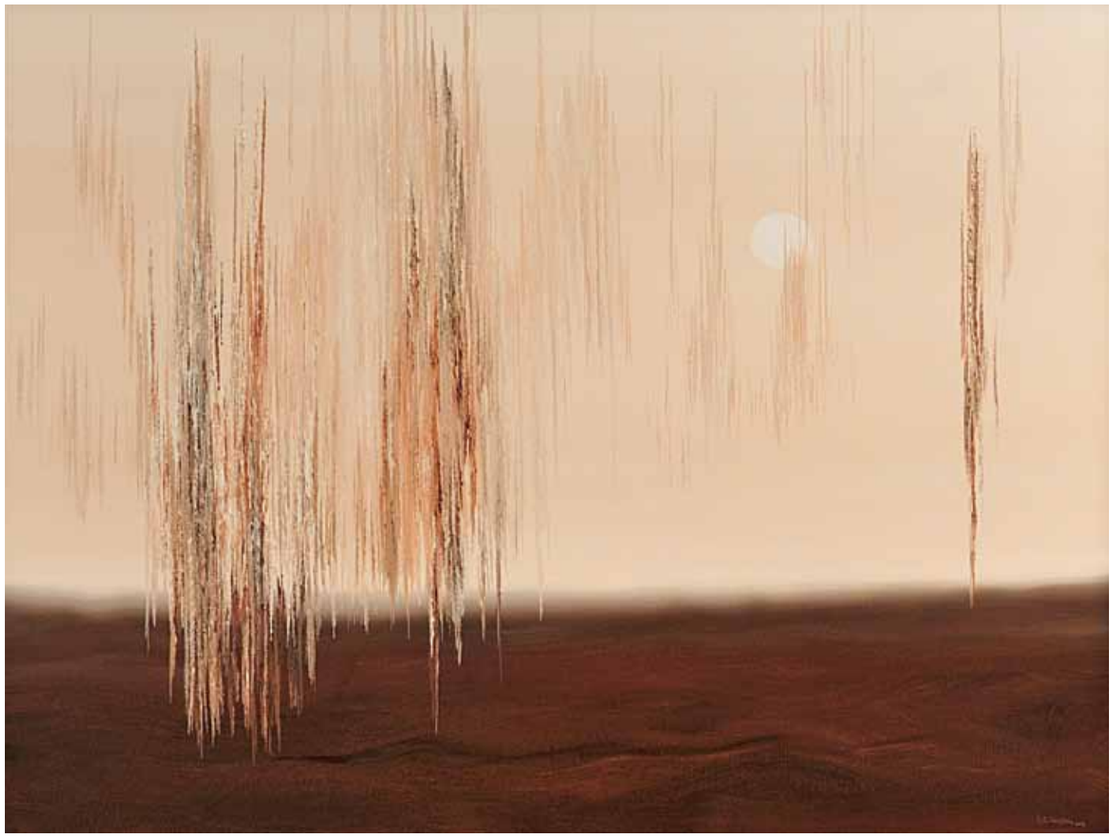


Through the secret door
at the centre of the soul,
times of past and future
exchange notes with present.

Ancient Watchers | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

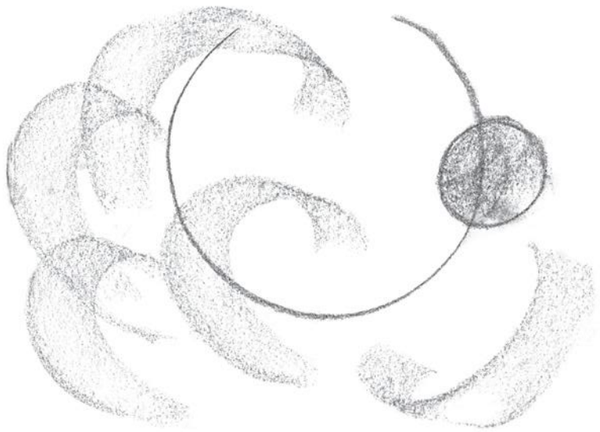


Choices running parallel to time,
arrows shot from different hands.
Some falling short, some landing far,
some not reaching at all.



Parallel Pasts | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Where did it live before it lived here,
where did it bleed before it flowed here,
the first drop, the first blood of life.



First Drop | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Even the soul must now be flesh,

the effect changing the cause,

the God within the man

becoming the God without.

Soul Sinews | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

The future reclaims the past,

branches lost to storms,

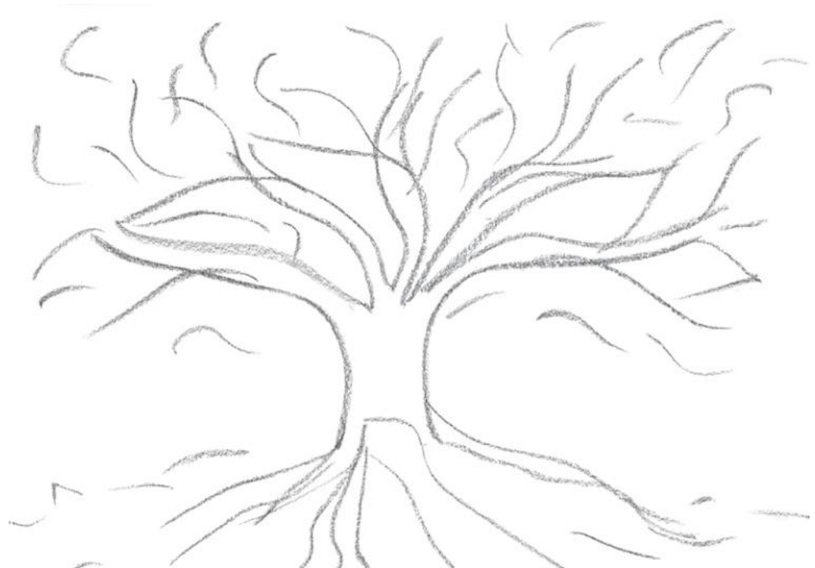
leaves lost to seasons.

If the eyes could see,

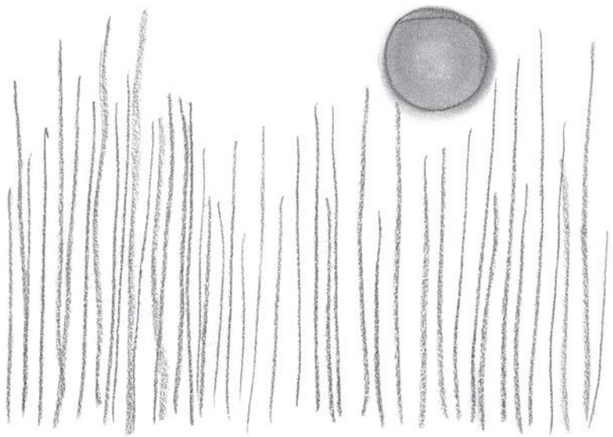
all that is returned to us,

all those gone,

all those to come.



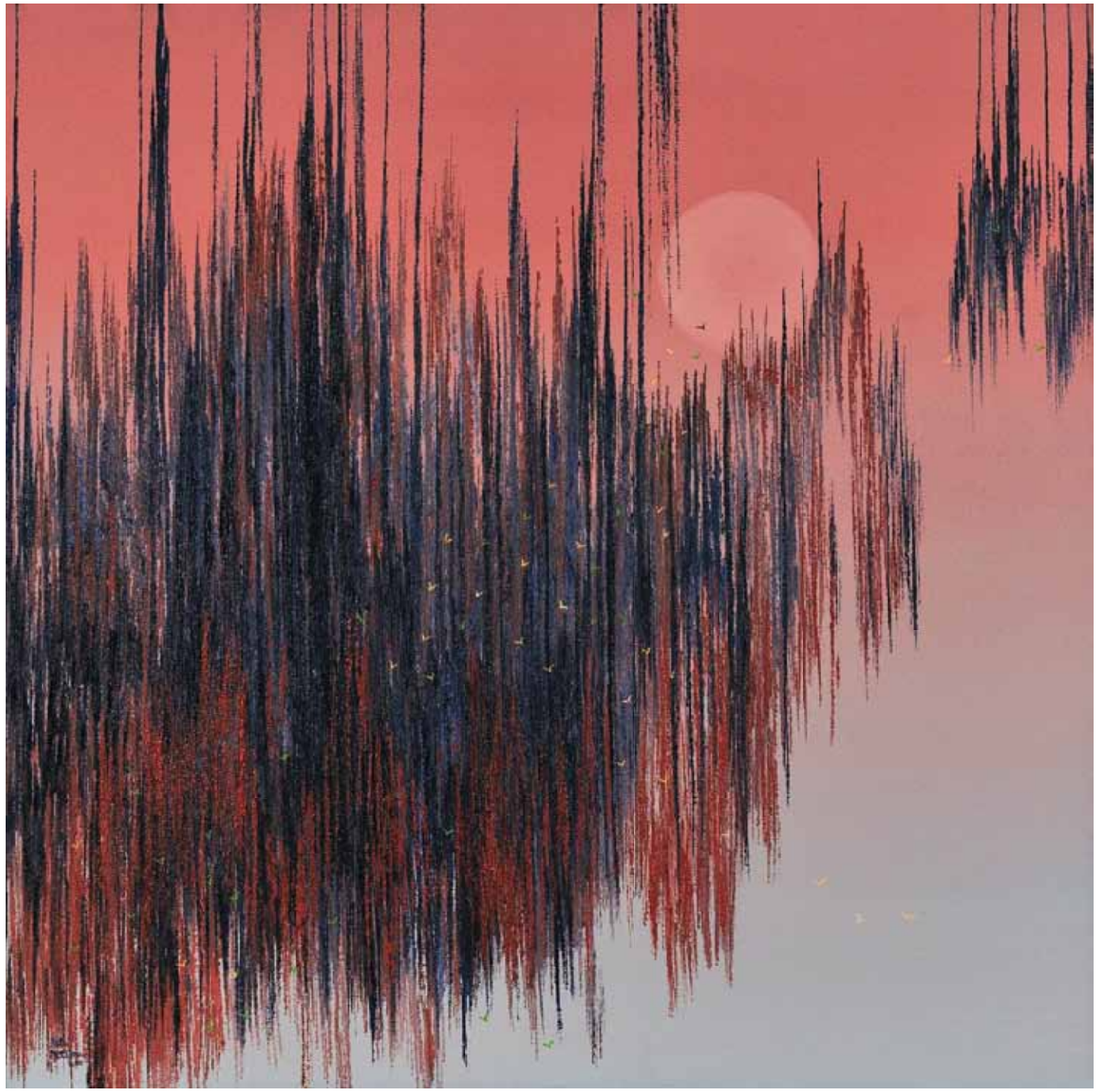
Constant Future | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas



Perhaps the wrong one was right,

it was the moon that changed things.

The black bird was once white.



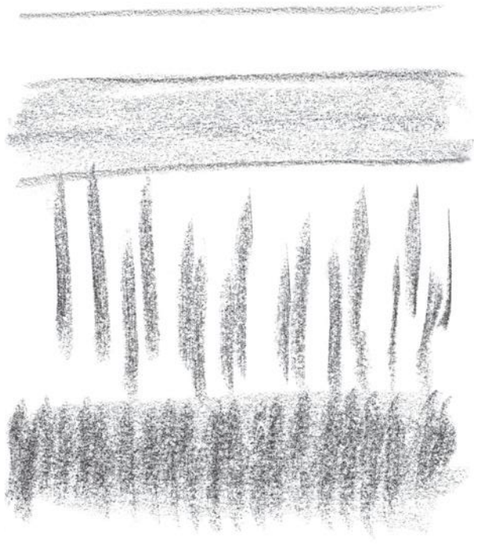
First on Moon | 30" x 30" | Oil on Canvas

To break the balance to cause the beginning,

to break the balance to cause the end,

only to make forms, give names?

only to break and form again?

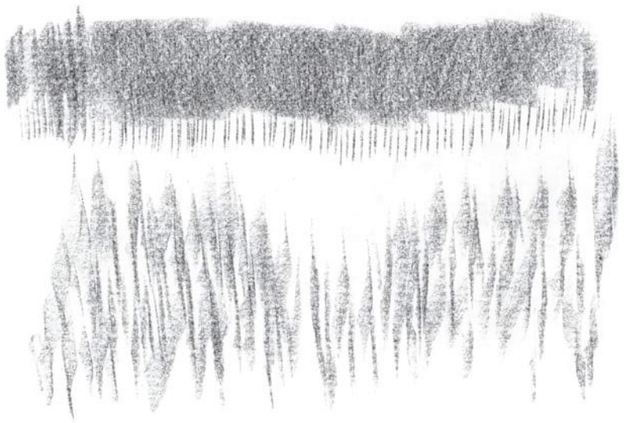


Gunas (3 Qualities) | 36" x 24" | Oil on Canvas

Signposts for same place

different directions, different faiths.

Faiths | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas



Beyond the fire lines of desire,
are the lines of wisdom.
Just above the fate lines of life,
just before the fence lines of freedom.

Fire Lines | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

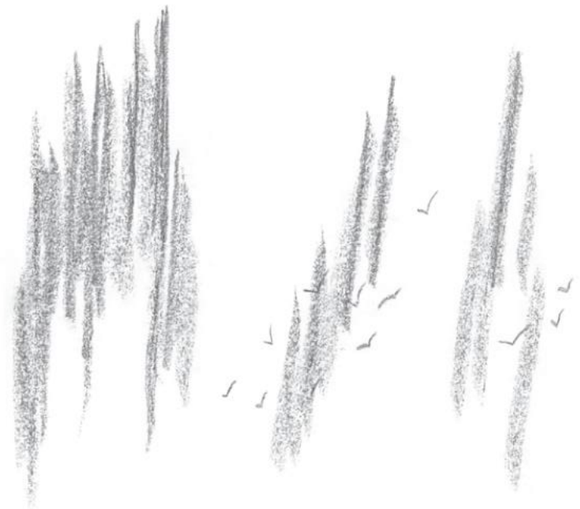
The same and new sun,

acquiring new causes,

new forms, new faces,

with new names, in new places.

Last Light | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



These heights can't be scaled
flying on the wings of desire,
riding the waves of success,
living by the crests of glory.

Heights | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Resting places for causes,

to cool their heels

cut their losses.

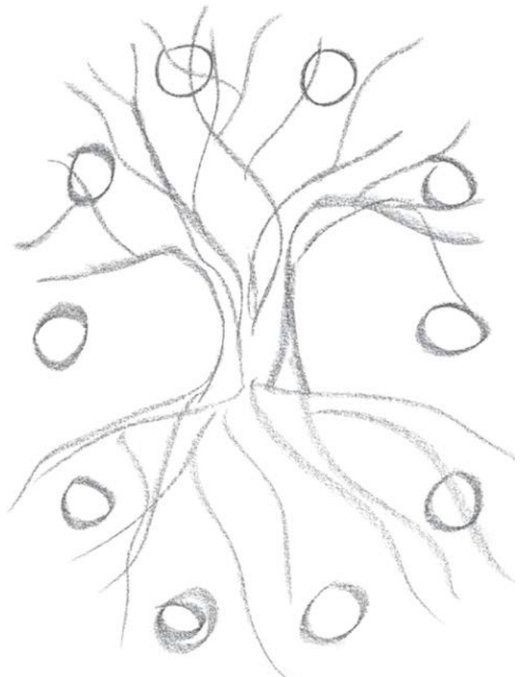
First Resort | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

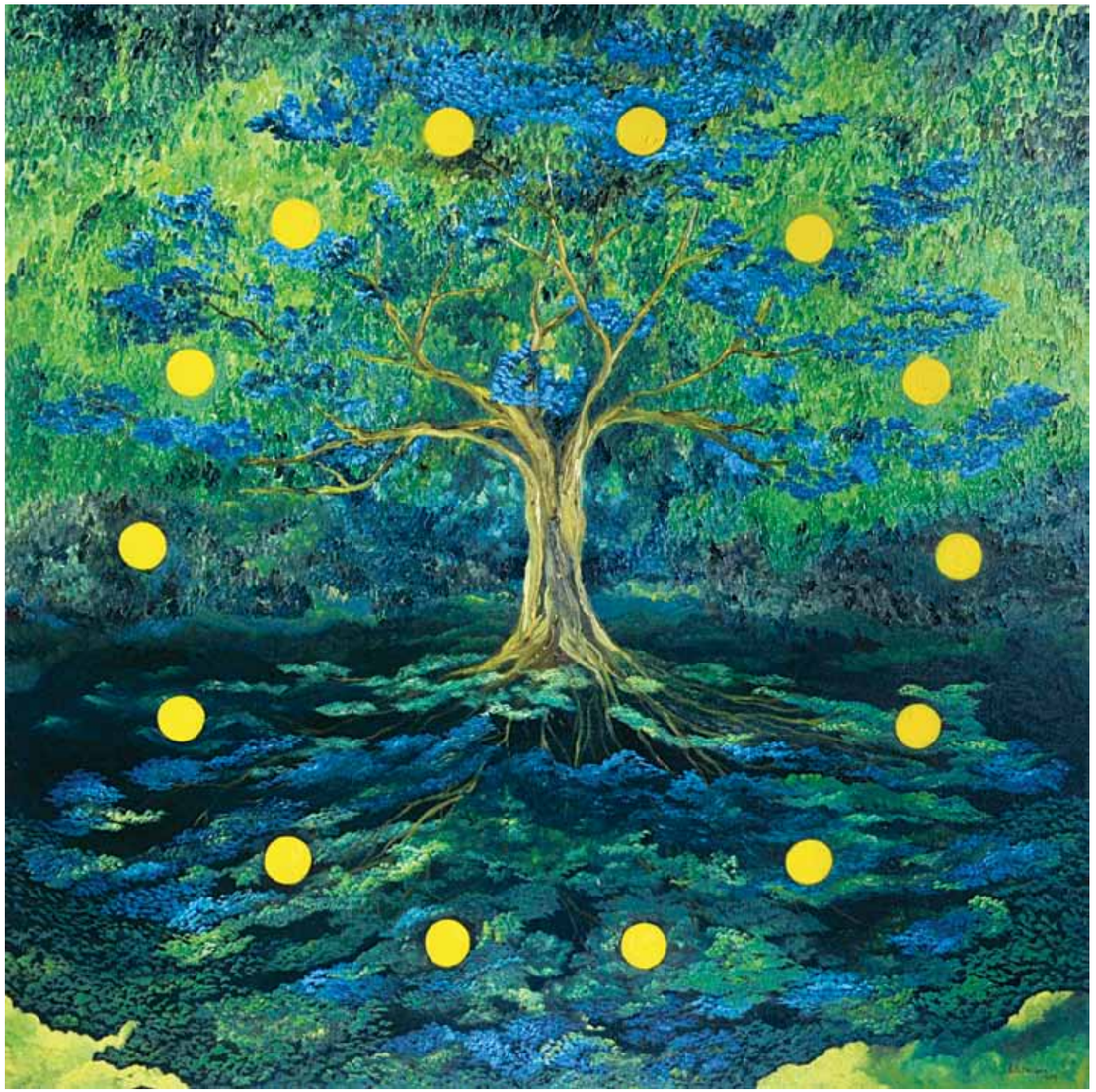
The immortal witness,

the ancient day.

What makes it change

What keeps it same?





First Day | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Keep out the sun and moon,

don't let even the birds see.

How the cause turns to effect,

how the One begins to breathe.

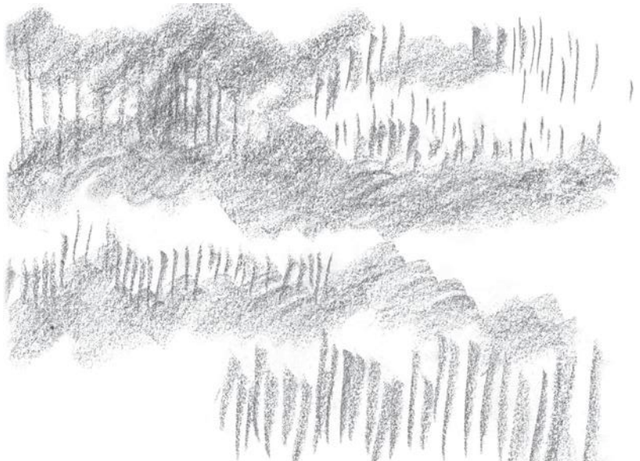
First Secret | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Messages from trees,

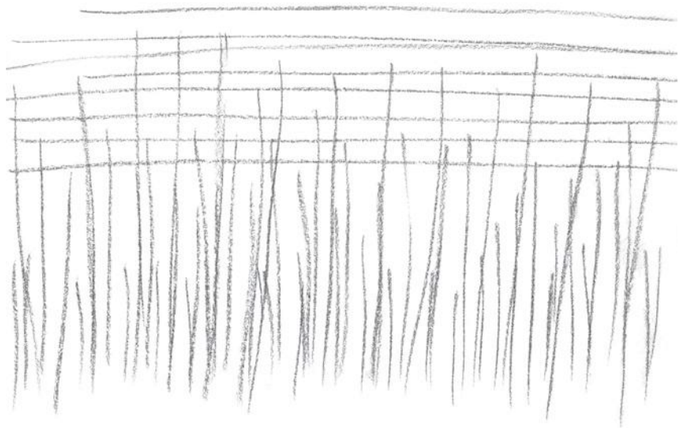
on clouds bound for the edge.

On how to make parts whole,

on how to make all compete.



First Exchange | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

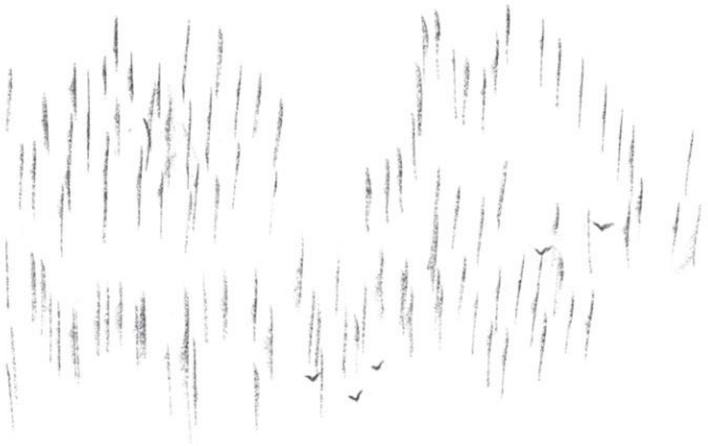


Making the effects

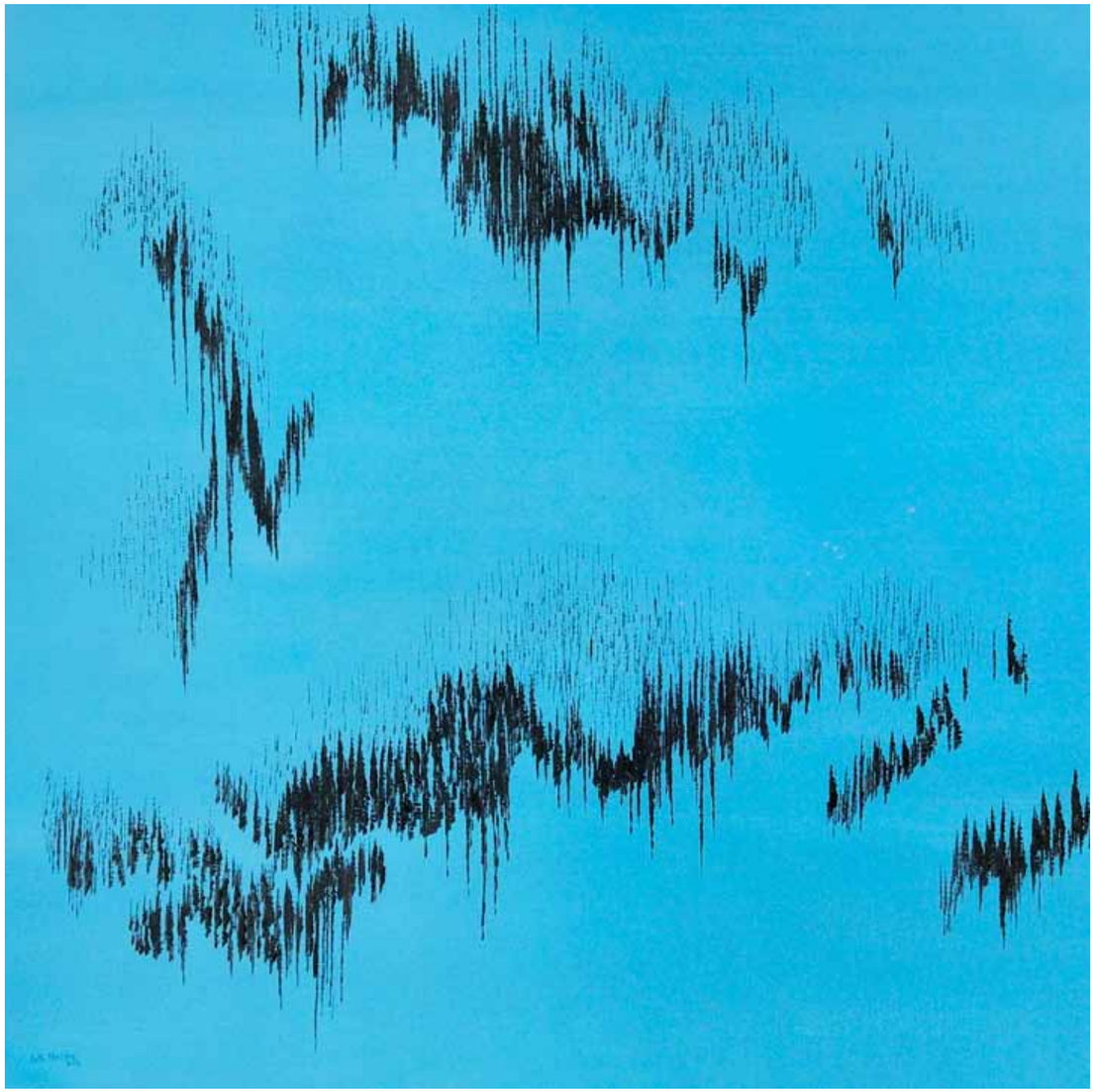
look for a cause once more,

once more begin the end again.

Finding Entropy | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

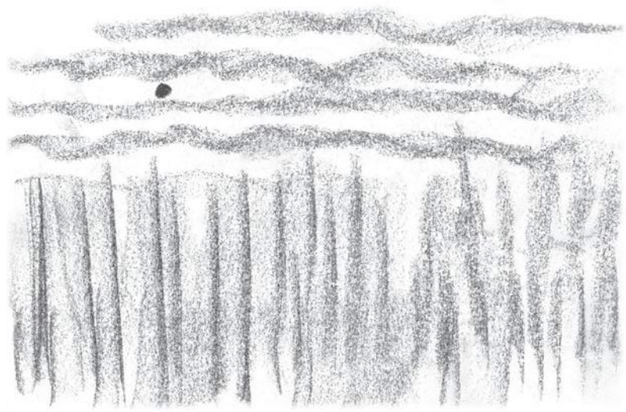


It was not this difficult
finding peace in the past.
It used to play under the trees,
it used to sleep under the stars.



First Peace | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

The catalyst frozen in time,
waiting for chance to change.
Hidden in the folds of time,
the cause for the end of time.



Inhibitor | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Subjects of God,

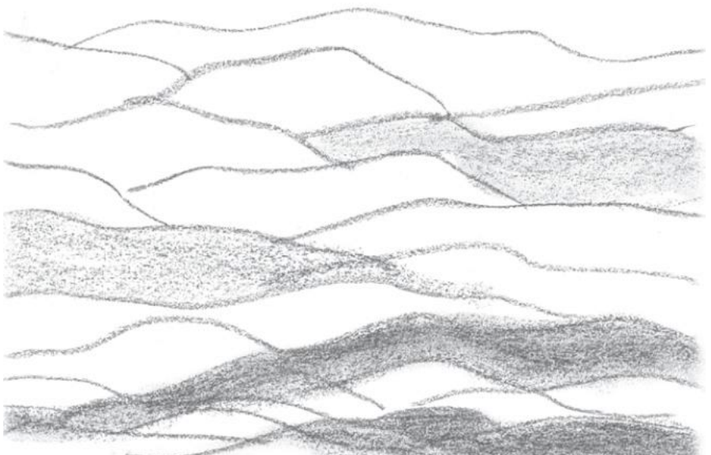
forces of nature.

Too tangible for worship?

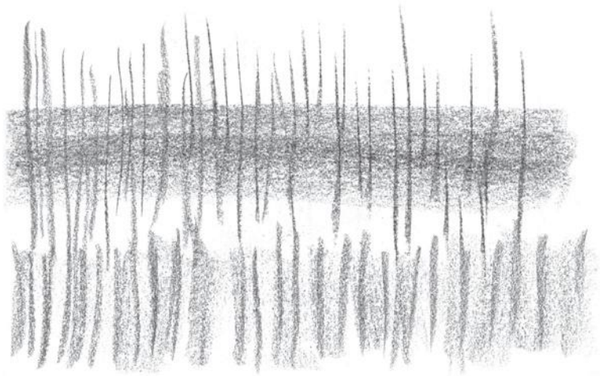
Too evident for prayer?

Greater Force | 36" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Ambition proves the boundaries
are not for containing,
they are for chasing, reaching
and chasing again.



Moving Boundaries | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

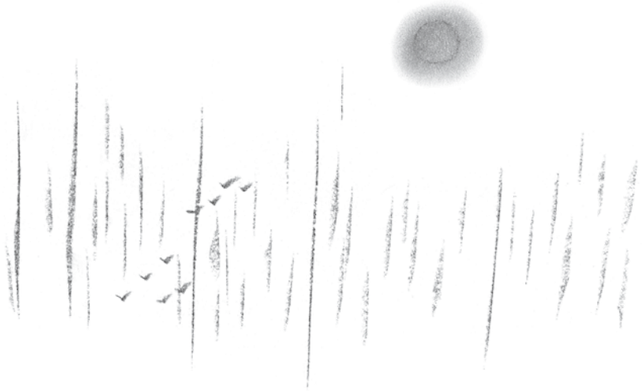


Leaving behind our lives
in the hands of a world
crowded with memory,
distracted with action.

Presence | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Trapped in the forest of mind,
wings that have been free before,
inciting thoughts of rebellion
so they can be free again.

Blue Wings | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

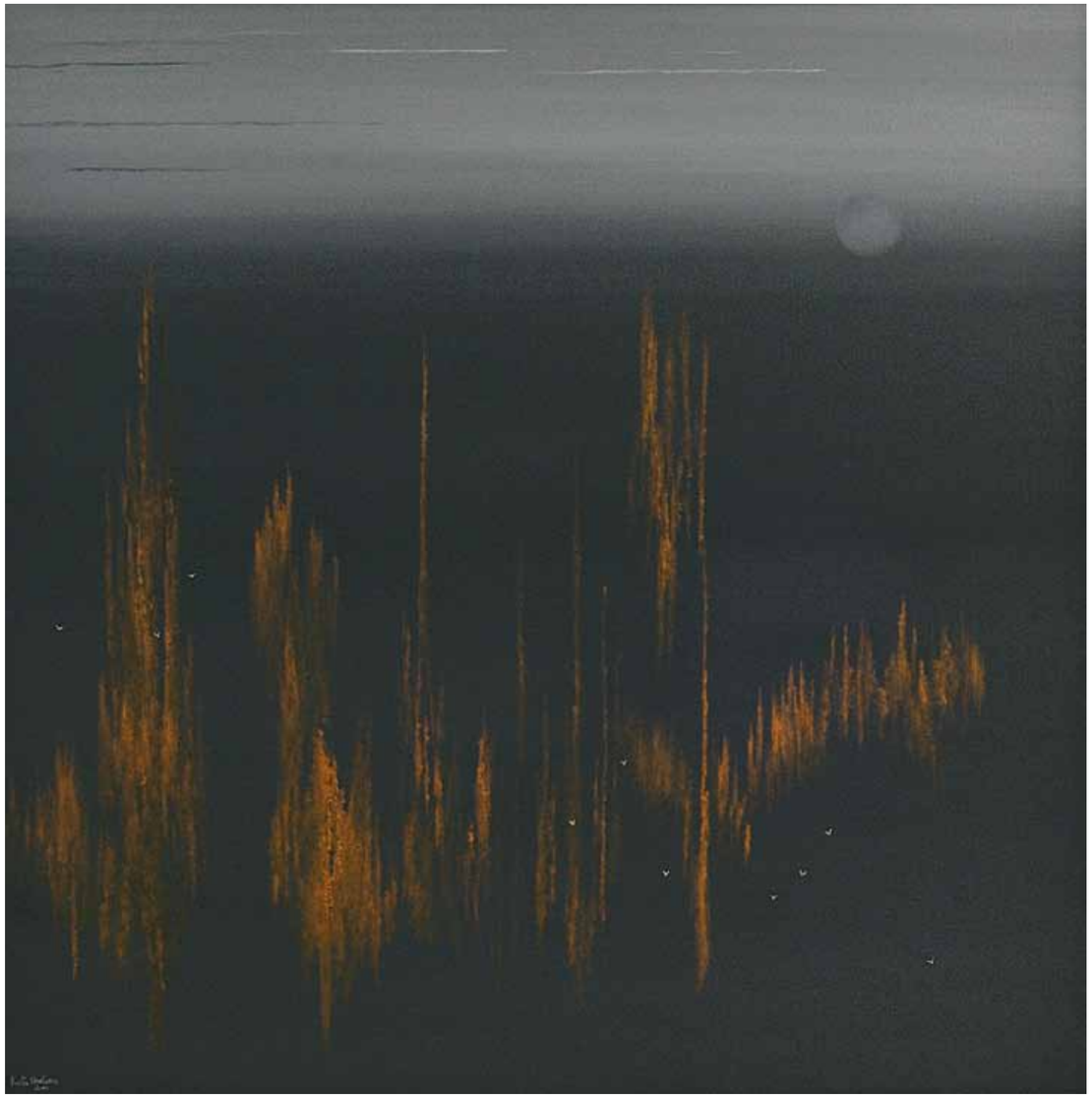


Where was virtue from?

Was it born in twilight of dilemma?

Did it exist before sin,

or was it created afterwards?

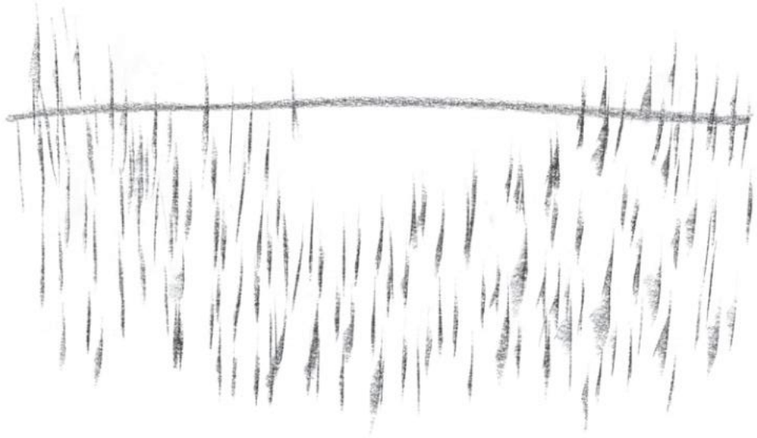


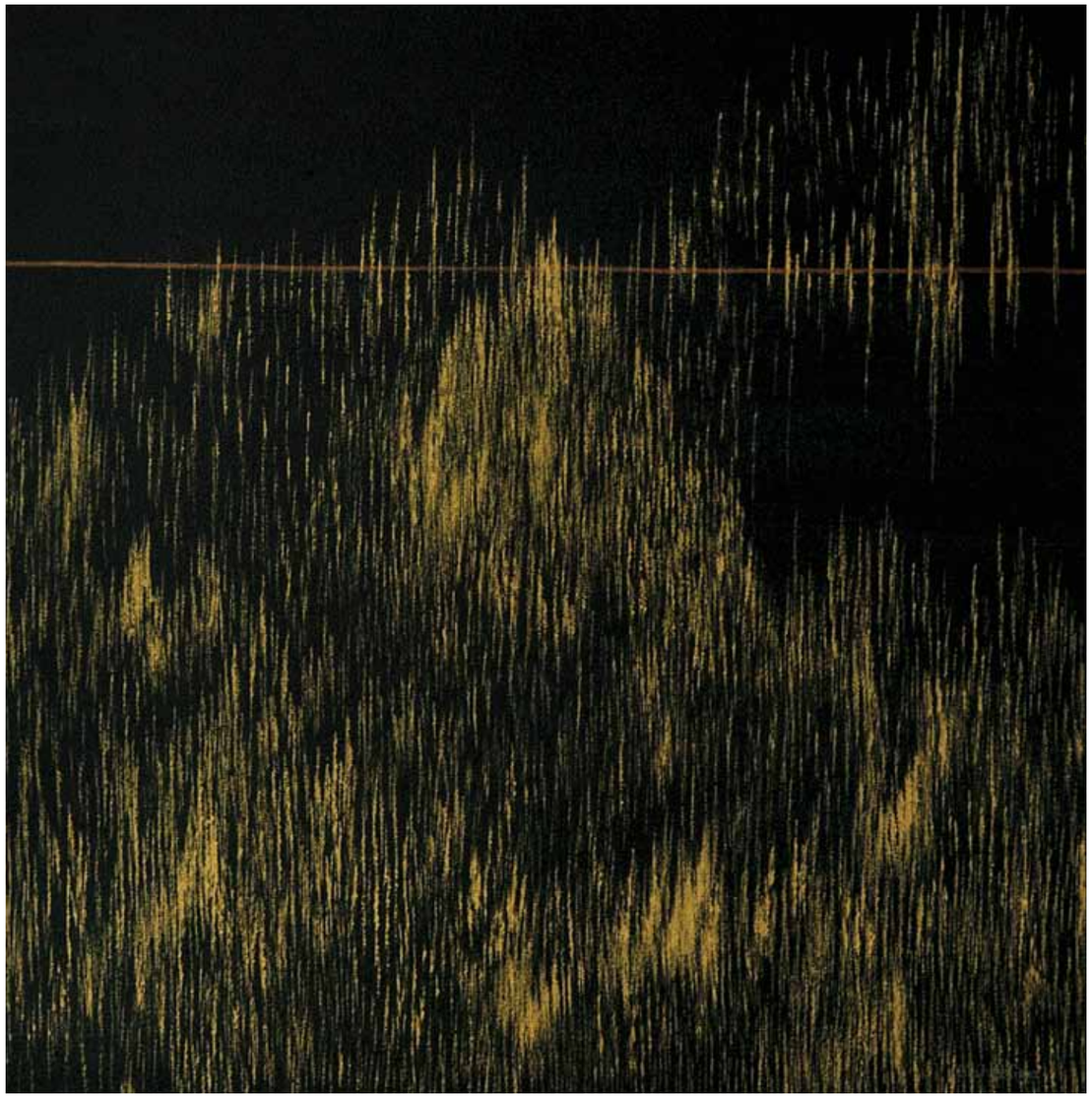
First White | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Folded flags of fate,

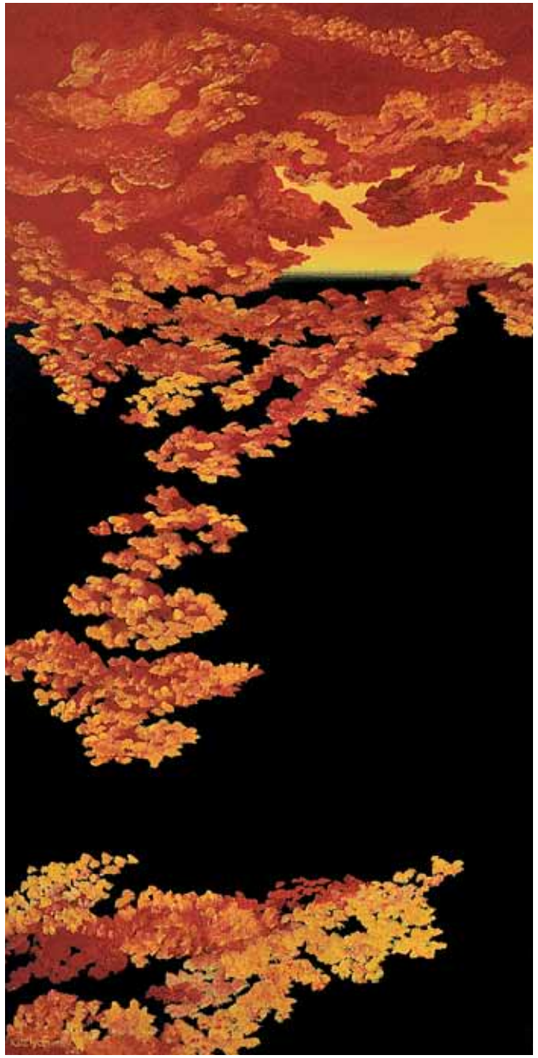
beginning of choice,

beginning of chance.

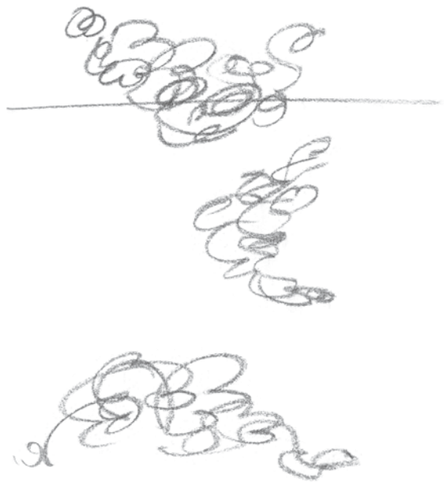




Dawn | 30" x 30" | Oil on Canvas



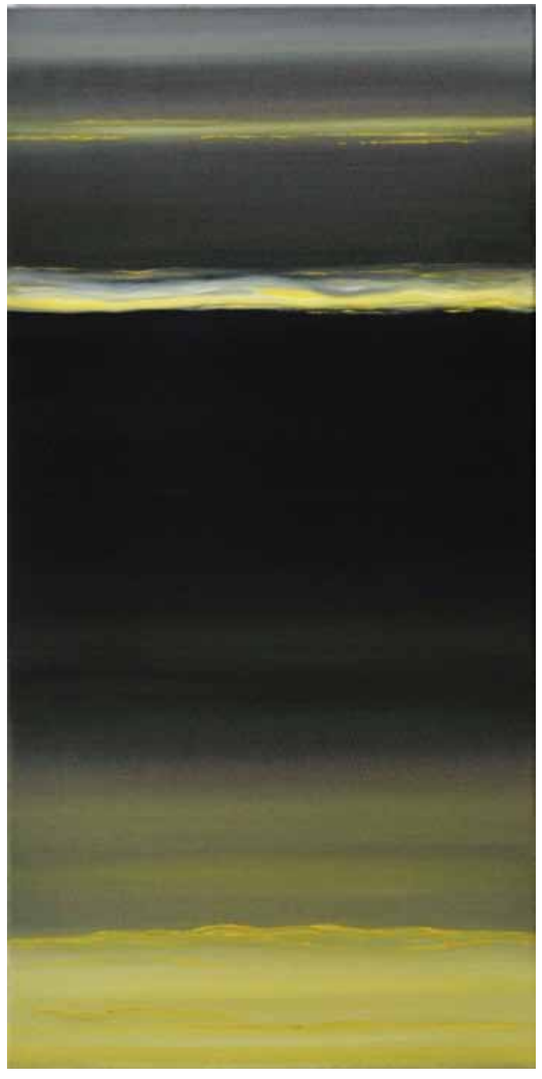
Samskara | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas



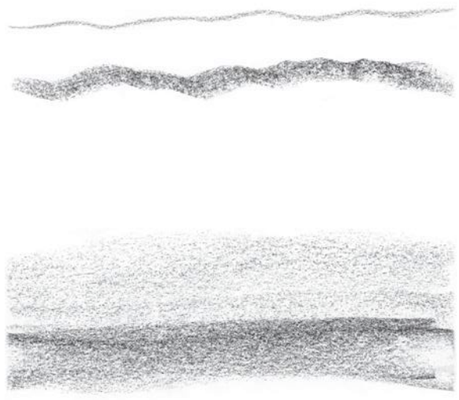
Samskara: An ancient memory, a recent life.

Niyati: A winding road, an easy destiny

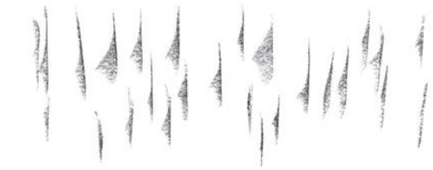
Niyati | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas



Kaala | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas



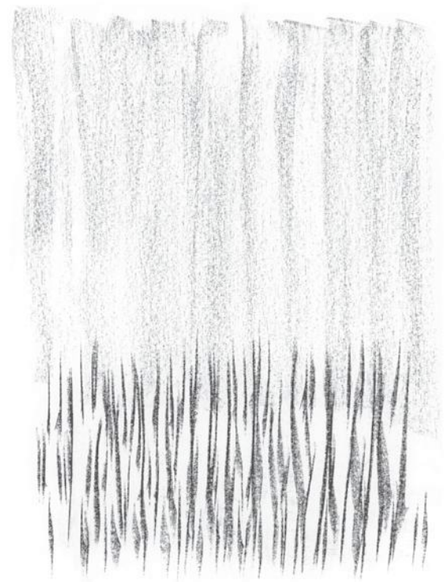
Kaala: Time, the constant conquest, the constant defeat.



Samgati: Finders keepers, the unseen chance.

Samgati | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Lakshana | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas



Lakshana: To conquer, to surpass

Svabhava: An inherent template, the hidden nature.

Svabhava | 36" x 18" | Oil on Canvas

Kota Neelima is a Research Fellow, South Asia Studies, at School for Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C. She is a Post-Graduate from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

She studied painting techniques at the Arpana Caur's Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi. Her works are impressionist-abstract and medium is oil on canvas.

Neelima held her first solo exhibition of paintings in 2006, second in 2007 and third in 2009 in Delhi. The 2009 solo show titled Neutral Witnesses was held at the Open Palm Court, India Habitat Centre in New Delhi.

Among the major exhibitions in which her works were featured are:
2007, Sanjha Safar, as part of the Government of India's International Federalism conference, New Delhi;
2008, the Harmony Art Show, Mumbai;
2008, Khushii Foundation's show in Bangalore;
2008, Legends of India-ICCR exhibition in Kolkata;
2009, the Christie's Khushii auction India on Canvas, in New Delhi;
2010, the Ati Art Gallery's India Rising show in New Delhi;
2010, ICCR-Seher art camp Puducherry Blue, in Pondicherry;
2010, Indian Art Circle's 10th anniversary show at Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi,
2011, Art Positive's show Imaging Sai in New Delhi.

Her works are part of personal art collections in India, US and Europe.

She has been a journalist for 18 years and has been the Political Editor with The Sunday Guardian newspaper, New Delhi. Neelima has also authored two novels on rural India, `Riverstones' which was published in 2007 and `Death of a Moneylender', published in 2009. Her third novel, 'Shoes of the Dead,' is scheduled for publication in February 2013.

KOTA NEELIMA

M: +91 9810395996 (India) / +1 202 280 4930 (US)
E: kotaneelima@hotmail.com
W: www.kotaneelima.com