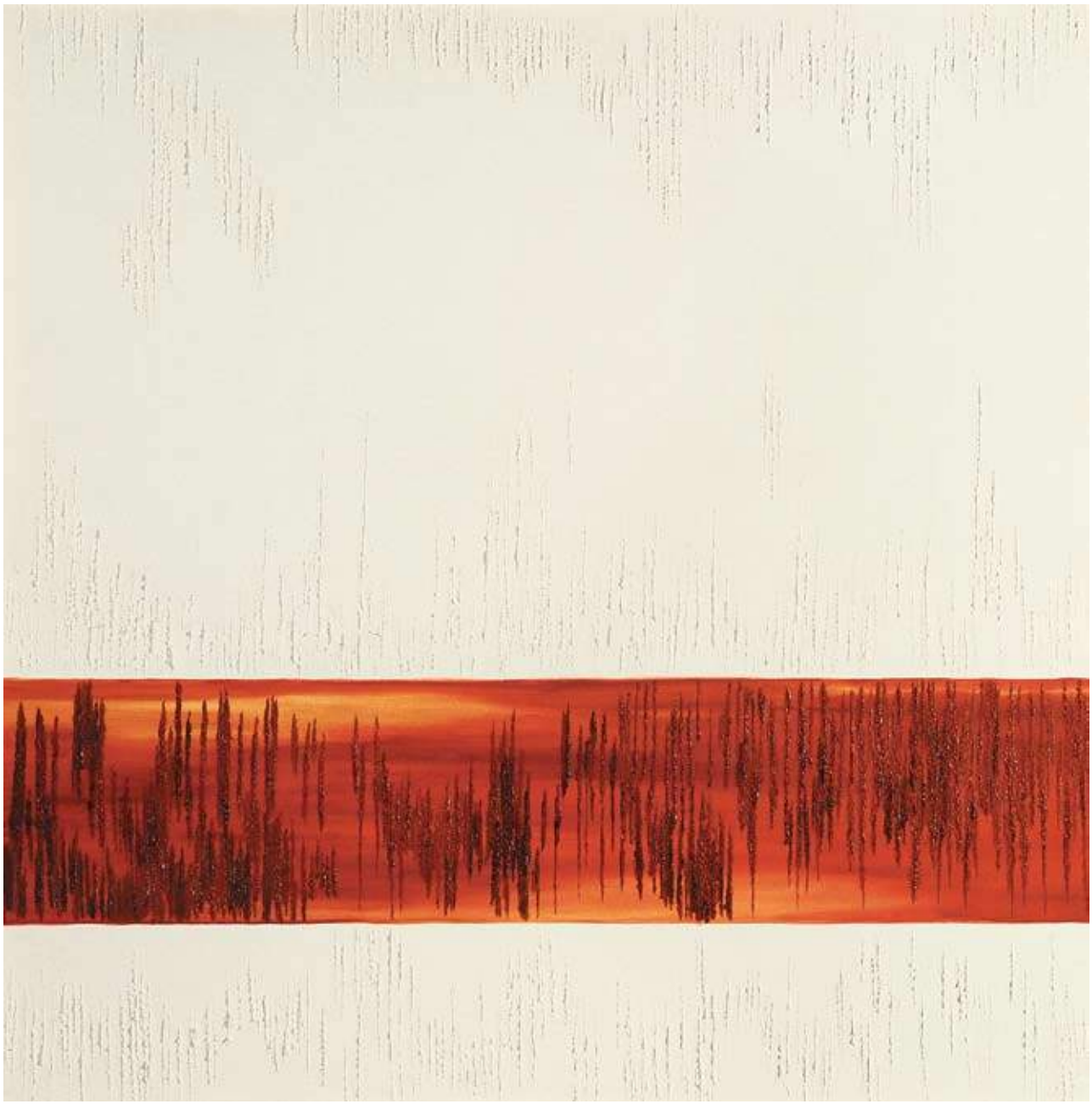
Neutral Witnesses



Paintings by Kota Neelima

Neutral Witnesses

An exhibition of paintings

by

Kota Neelima

November 2009

Open Palm Court

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

Cover : Possibility, Oil on Canvas, 36" x 36"

Back Cover : Arbiters, Oil on Canvas, 30" x 30

© Kota Neelima

November 2009

Essay by Sushma Bahl

Photography by Anuj Parti

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Impressionist Abstractions:
The Art of Kota Neelima

Sushma Bahl

A minimalist imagery in a soft subtle palette, finely textured and diligently worked in layer over layer of oils, evokes ideas and images of time, space, nature and dream scapes, as one confronts Kota Neelima's current creative outpouring. The 'Neutral Witnesses' no longer remain so, as the spectator turns into an aligned player on taking in some of the impressionist-abstract colourful paintings in the current exhibition featuring forms that bear a soft resemblance to hills, trees, birds, rivers, land or a distant horizon. In line with one of Paul Cezanne's famous quotes, Kota Neelima's creative focus, it appears, is not just to paint the nature but to feel and 'realize its sensation'.

The Persona

The artist born at Vijayawada, a major cultural centre in coastal Andhra known for its Kuchipuddi tradition, grew up in Delhi, where she continues to live with her husband Pawan Khera, a government official whom she first met at a press conference some ten years ago, while on an assignment for the Indian express. The accomplished artist primarily self taught, is also a journalist comes to one as a surprise, which is compounded further as one gets to learn of her variable creative streaks that encompasses commendable track studying, investigating and reporting as a political journalist and author of two published books besides her art trail. She seems to have inherited the journalist streak from her father who retired as editor-in-chief with one of the leading newspapers while her artistic appetite has been wetted by her mother, an amateur painter and Veena player herself.

Sketching and painting regularly since childhood, she has continued to pursue her artistic interests alongside her academic quest leading to a degree in science followed by a master's in international relations and a diploma in journalism besides acquiring multilingual abilities in one north Indian and a couple of south Indian languages besides English. These multifarious approaches seem to have helped in her investigative journalistic work that high lights concerns around growing agrarian distress and poor state of governance in the country pushing large numbers of farmers to commit suicides. The subject has continued to feature in a different garb in her fictional writing too, the debut novel 'Riverstones' which focused on the dismal state of agricultural sector, as well as her more recent book 'Death of a Moneylender' that engages itself deeper into issues around agricultural debt and journalistic ethics.

For a person whose writing work speaks eloquently for the marginalized and exploited and is so deeply socially entrenched, her art comes in an entirely different mode with its cool, quiet, meditative and philosophical demure. When questioned on this, Kota explains,

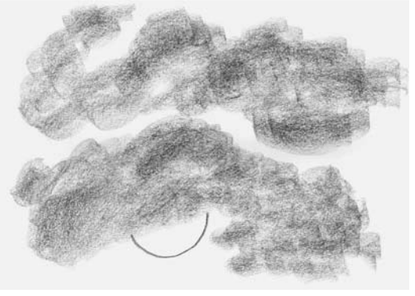
"my entire effort is to paint what can't be written about or talked about or expressed in words" as through art she seeks to portray solace, "ananda and peace- nothing more nothing less". Taking inspiration from western scientific thinkers such as Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton and our own scholars Adi Shankaracharya and others as well as classical Indian scriptures, this multilayered personality searches for balance in her writing, art and life. And on science and art she sees no dichotomy as her work rotates around concepts of space and time, fundamentally significant in both domains.

The Oeuvre

On view in the current suite of paintings are canvases created over the last couple of years, in a range of colours and abstractions hidden beneath ephemeral views of landscapes that coax the viewer to search within for the invisible. Negotiating through layers of colours, in meditated brush strokes the artist, who finds 19th century French master Claude Monet inspiring, works to excavate sound from silence and essence from void. The artist's play with space, palette and textures brings forth the omnipresence of elements that run as undercurrents in her compositions and thoughts. The titles of the works that connect the imagery with certain universal experiences and phenomena also disclose her interest in the domain as beguiled coloured patches begin to assume shapes linked to nature and elements.

Characterized by the prominence of light and shade in her compositions, she turns familiar matter, into unusual impressionist experiences. The juxtaposition of colours creates a magical mix in reflected light on the imagery that looks static from one angle and dynamic from another. Unlike the English landscapes painted by Turner and Constable, Kota Neelima's art is not about re-creation of realistic natural scenario but some ideas and impressions triggered by not just the visual panorama that confronts the eye but also thoughts and feelings independent of any visual reference that emerge from within. The perspective is important in her work but more crucial than the actual visible reality is the illusion it encompasses.

There is a fine assimilation of basic scientific principles, philosophical thoughts and Vedic wisdom from which she draws not just the inspiration but also the ideation for her non-objective and non-representational art. Equating "soul with both the atom and the universe, the micro and macro" and focusing her mind on concepts of time and space she incorporates colours in her work that are consciously altered vis-a-vis reality to provoke the viewer to search within. Her abstractions as a continuum bear hardly any trace of a recognizable object or scene though they are endowed with indirect symbolic references to naturalistic entities. One is attracted to the charged beauty of her expressions laden with colourful intensity without having to fathom or picture it as a certain narrative. Focusing on the portrayal of psychological and philosophical underpinnings, Kota's art appears in a poetic and fluid trance through heightened emphasis on composition, palette and texture rather than the form. Using a range of practices including smearing or spattering spontaneously on the canvas, her art makes unbiased and nonaligned renditions that a viewer can par-take as befits his/her own sensitivity and aesthetics.



The process

The artist usually sketches before starting to paint, using the drawing primarily for reference. The canvas often in a square format and medium size, is first prepared with an undercoat of transparent paint or a layer of the main colour of the work. The subsequent layers of colour require precision as with oils the brushwork cannot be undone. Hence "this phase is planned methodically and is usually completed in a sequence". The choice and play of colour in Kota's work is crucial as she sees the palette as "the catalyst of change" that helps to "decide the nature of my dialogue with the canvas" e.g. in her painting entitled `Possibility', to quote the artist, "nothing other than red was acceptable" whilst in, `Rain Banks,' "it had to be white".

Another factor that constitutes an important step in Kota's artistic rendezvous is the need for awareness that she terms as "chaitanya" to justify the reasoning or philosophy behind each creative endeavor. Though proficient in her handling of palette, form, texture and composition; that she learnt during her study for an advanced course in painting techniques at an art institute in Delhi, the technique has never been her prime concern. She appreciates the importance of rules, but it is the freedom from such rules and the idea behind a work of art that facilitates originality and experimentation which are of prime significance in her practice.

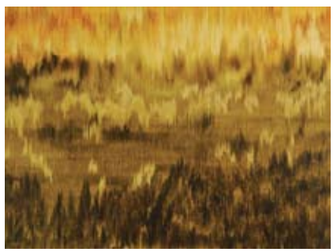
Even when the works are all of a given series, each one comes in a distinct appearance "because monotony is not the order of nature, science or philosophy". Her canvases though may look similar on a first glance, start to assume different character and appearance on further study as the artist lets "… each canvas speak about its tryst with change - from order, to chaos, to order again".

Initially sketching and working in pencil and charcoal, the artist started painting in oils around 2004 and has continued her infatuation with the medium since then. Particularly remarkable is the delicacy of her white paintings that permit no mid-course alteration. They demand clarity of thought and process that the artist finds "particularly special for the challenge they pose". Using medium grained, primed and stretched white canvas for her base, Kota paints with a range of brushes- flat, bright, round, Filbert and besides oil colours she mixes linseed oil and distilled turpentine to work on the texture.

Suite of Neutral Witnesses

On taking a closer look at the collection of 29 oil-on-canvas paintings in the current show, one begins to see through some of the images emerging from within the abstract impressions. The artist like all others of her ilk has a natural urge to follow a certain path that for her turns out to be a mutation of thoughts through colours. Though earlier she painted more of clear landscapes with trees, flowers and hills etc she has turned increasingly towards a more abstract track. Her art takes a stand contrary to a photorealistic strand as is reflected also in her choice of colours that are often different, stemming as they do from her dream world in which the palette is directed by her dialogue with the white canvas rather than what is dictated by the reality. The current suite appears mostly in square format though there are also some landscapes or vertical works, in the repertoire. Golds, browns, blues and whites are predominant in her palette in a diligently worked texture, layer over layer of oil after waiting for each one to dry before the next one is applied.

The titles of the artist's works suggest or point to the thoughts that meander through her mind as she draws and paints. The painting titled includes '60 Birds' in gold yellow and rustic browns suggests scorching sun, dusty land and sky scapes while her 'Acquaintance' reminds one of water laden clouds or deep sea water waves. 'Allies' in a mix of clay shades with grays and whites depicts fields with birds flying over and 'Ambitions' incorporates a remarkable perspective of reflections of green trees in blue waters and some hills in the distant horizon. Water and wild growth in 'Arbiters' seem to act as go-betweens while the palette turns from dark red to brown, to beige to gray and white and then red again. In 'Arrival' one encounters the morning sun and its light that awakens the world as 'Colour' appears untouched and pristine. 'Crowd' offers a different perspective where brown peeping through shades of white appears strangely quiet while her 'Dance of Memory' liberates her colour play. 'Embers of Fall' and 'Gold and Dusk' as



the titles suggest bring forth images of the day as the sun light turns one way or the other. 'History' perhaps reminds us of the journeys that the rocks, waters and *vayu mandal* has traversed. Her 'Hosts of time' comes in a surprising mauve, while 'Introduction' attempts to absorb the mauve within shades of gold and browns as her 'Layers' introduces pink and 'Monosyllables' present a range of bushes in peaceful whites and bluish greens.

And there are 'Neutral Witnesses' that bring the five elements together in a balanced and meticulous composition and 'Parallel time' that stands tall amongst a few of her vertical imageries in a mix and match of colours. 'Possibility' shows a rotated rendering of a similar play in a horizontal frame and 'Prisons of Night' could be interpreted metaphorically as man's desire to break free his hidden urges under the cover of a night. 'Prolific' comes in a green expanse of growth and prosperity, while 'Rain Banks' come with water laden clouds to quench the thirsty land. 'Remains of Dawn' shows light peeping through dark night clouds with the knocking of day and 'Time Distension' enlarges the frame in an assimilation of river, mountains, fields and skyline. 'Turning Gold' represents mid day time, while 'Uprising' comes in fuchsias and blues and 'Voices' in yellows and browns.

The expanse of minimalist expressions is a pointer to the artist's preoccupation with human mind, concepts of time or timelessness and space or other natural elements and scientific as well as philosophical thoughts as she opines "The clock is a symbol of human imagination, much like any other work of art". Stillness and vibrancy, ethereal and surreal, perceived and intuitive- her transcendent art can be seen to meander through it all in tonal hues- blues, reds, browns, greens, grays, whites, ochre, creams and earthy shades of turmeric and yellow, pinks and purples. The expansive lyrical, colorful and minimalist imagery unravels sediments of human psyche pulling in and out of the mind in compositions that glean through the ephemeral as well as atomistic lexicon as neutral witnesses or metaphors of *panchtatva*.

(Note: The quotes in the text are from the writer's conversations with the artist.)

Sushma K Bahl MBE is an independent arts consultant, writer and curator of cultural projects based in Delhi. A trustee and advisory panel member of select few cultural and educational institutions in India and abroad, she headed the Arts and Culture Department for British Council India until 2003, was Guest Director for XI Triennale-India 2005 and has curated several exhibitions on contemporary Indian art and authored/edited a selection of art books and catalogues.

Neutral Witnesses

Kota Neelima

`upadrasta anumanta chah
bharta bhokta maheswarah'- Bhagavad Gita
(a witness that gives permission, the one that supports, experiences and is the lord of all.)

`sakshi cheta kevalo nirgunas chah' - Upanishads
(the witness, the only one that knows, the one without attributes)

They have seen it being broken and built a thousand times,
The neutral witnesses of life, living and death

They are mind within mind, thought within thought,
Cause for trickle of plasma, cause for shift of ocean
Reason for falling eyelash, reason for falling star

They are at the first step, they are the first step,
They are in need of rescue, they are the rescue

They are the muscle torn by knife, they are the knife,
They are the thought before words, they are the thought after

They are neither friends, nor foe
They look like us, like them.
Like no one we know

The immortal cells that have made a million brains think
The immortal bones that have caged a million hearts
They keep the secret of time, they keep time

They carry no baggage of memory, no colour of emotion
No poetry of existence
They are free of mediocrity, free of excellence

Should fire burn them, the bones smell of wood,
The skin smells of promises,
The ashes feel like dew, the dust feels like wind

Should we look for them outside in the forest,
Or in the forest within
Should we search for them between breaths or after

It is easy to miss them, they look like trees among trees,
Paths among paths,
And, waters among waters

They look like gods among gods,
Saints among saints,
And, sinners among sinners

Indifferent to all that they are part of,
Untouched by all that they witness
They know the truth of all truths

The truth about why rain tastes like forgiveness
Or why blood tastes of predestination
The truth that memory does not end with death
And that time is not our creation

Ask for those who keep time for eternity,
Lets find where their loyalties lie
For whom they turn the fresh leaves of history
These neutral witnesses of time

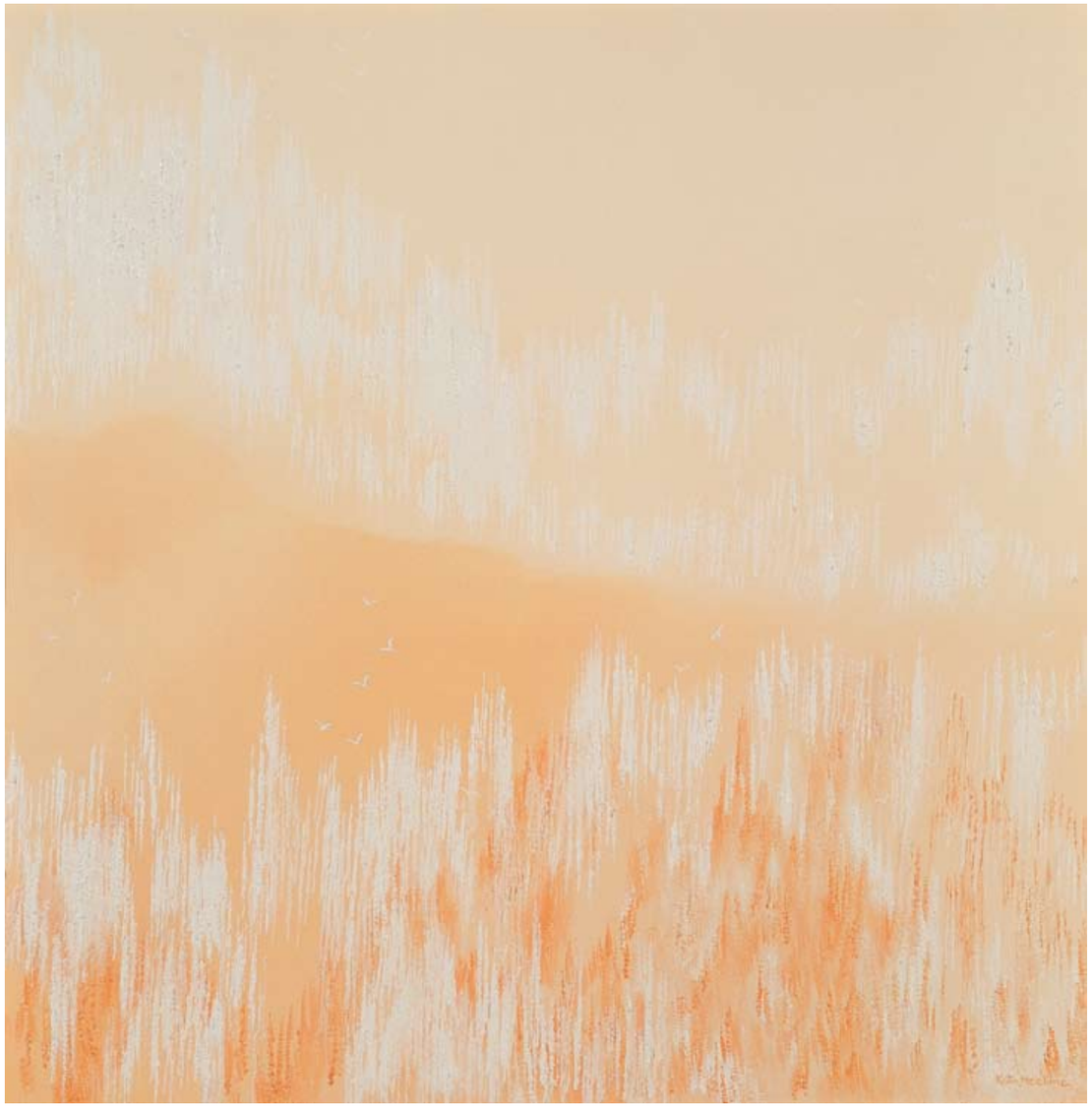
`na tvevaham jatu nasam
na tvam neme janadhipaha
na chaiva na bhavisyamaha
sarve vayamataha param' - Bhagavad Gita
(Never was there a time when I was not, nor you,
nor these lords of men,
nor will there be a time hereafter
when we all shall cease to be)

the great singularity

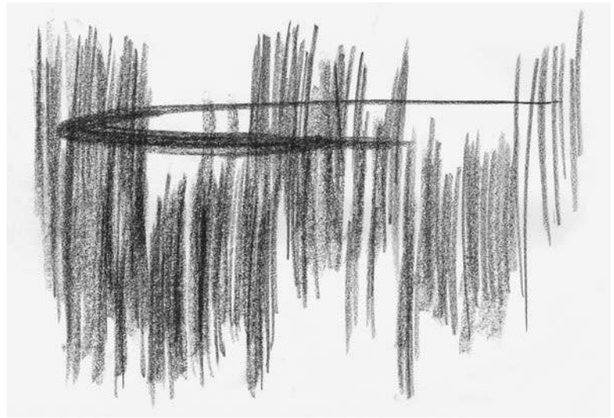
the knowing silence

Monosyllables • 30" x 30" • 2009

they come to us, perhaps,
because once we too were
birds
river
colour
truth



Allies • 30" x 30" • 2009



thoughts of future

awaiting carrier pigeons.

Crowd • 36" x 24" • 2009

colour of time

the elusive colour that was

here

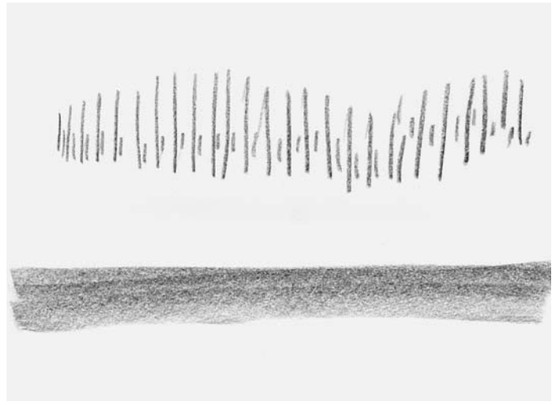
there

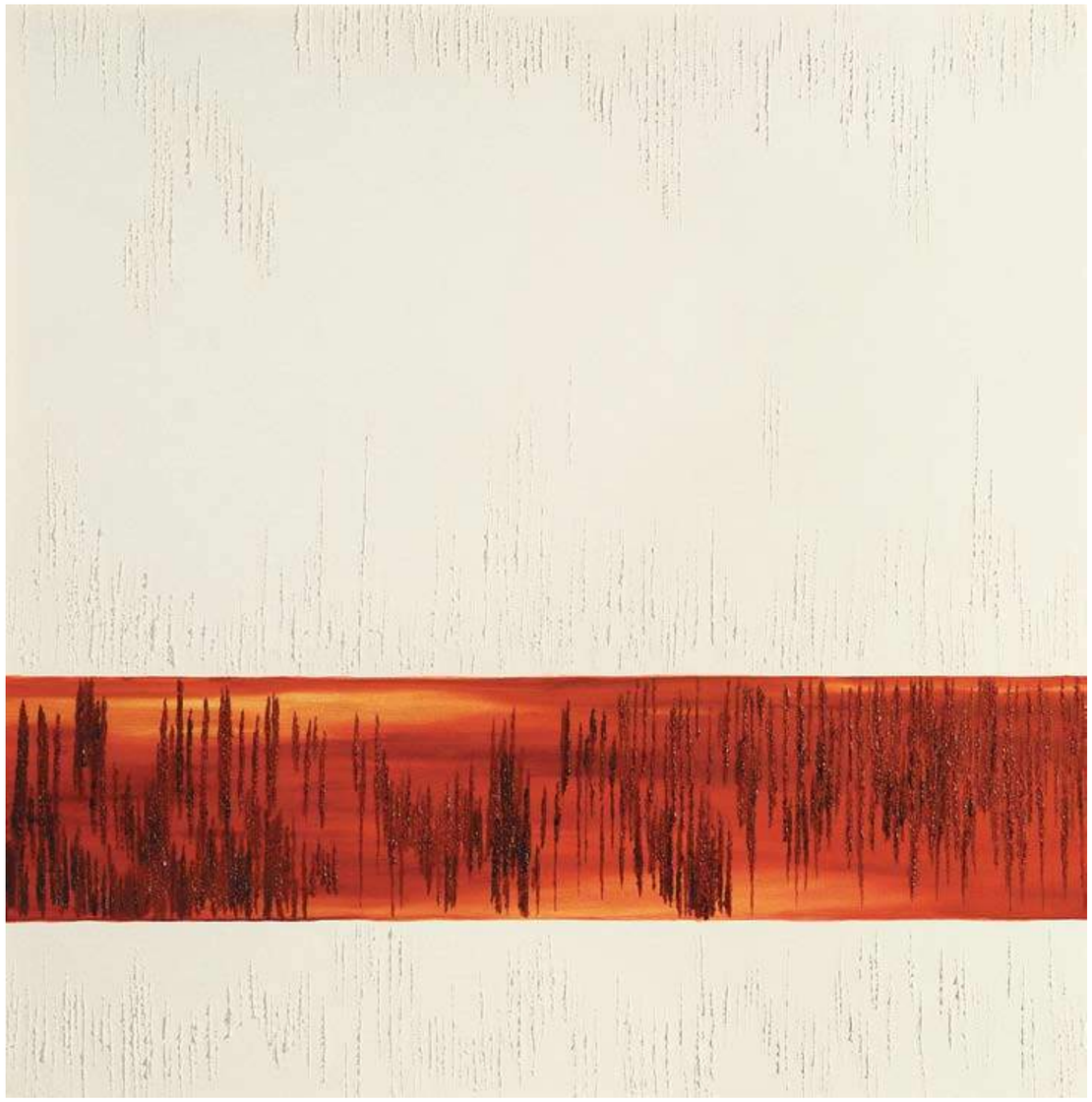
everywhere

no where

Colour • 36" x 36" • 2009

that which is lost will return
that which is found
will be lost again



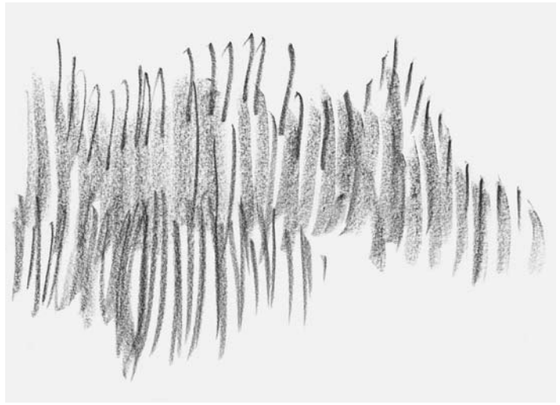


Possibility • 36" x 36" • 2009

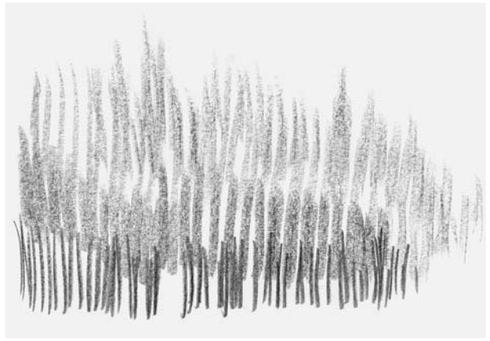
voices of those gone

of those going and

of those yet to come



Voices • 36" x 24" • 2009

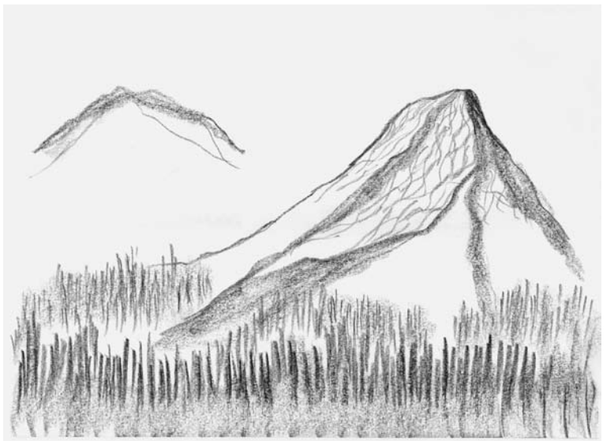


who gets to see colour ?

who gets to know colours ?

decisions

Arbiters • 30" x 30" • 2009



shoulders of mountains
those shelters of time

Hosts of Time • 36" x 36" • 2009

submersible soul

uncharted horizons

Layers • 36" x 36" • 2009

a timid conjurer's trick

an explanation of a universe

an arguement for salvation.

Time Distension • 36" x 36" • 2009

made and unmade again

masters and servants of time

Neutral Witnesses • 36" x 48" • 2009

implicit in each departure

beginning in each end

Arrival • 36" x 36" • 2009

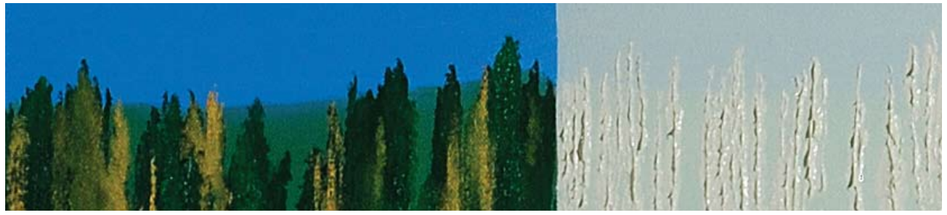
flying to escape should be possible
why else do we not have wings ?

Uprising • 36" x 36" • 2009

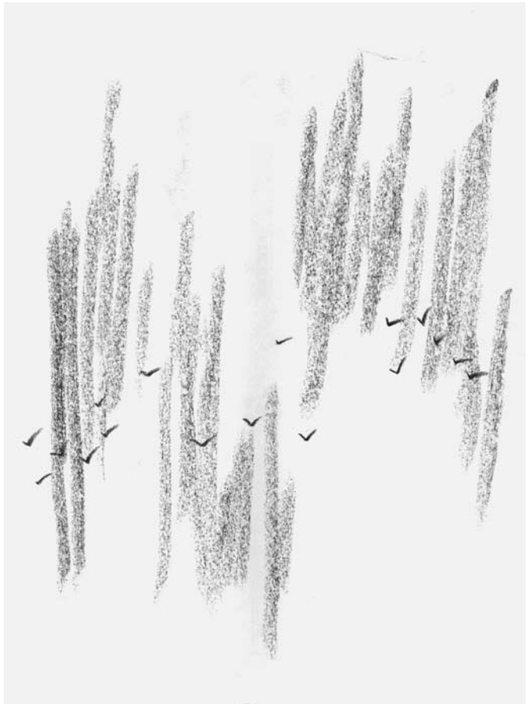
thin viels of time

sheepishly separating

life and death of everything.



Parallel Time • 36" x 36" • 2009

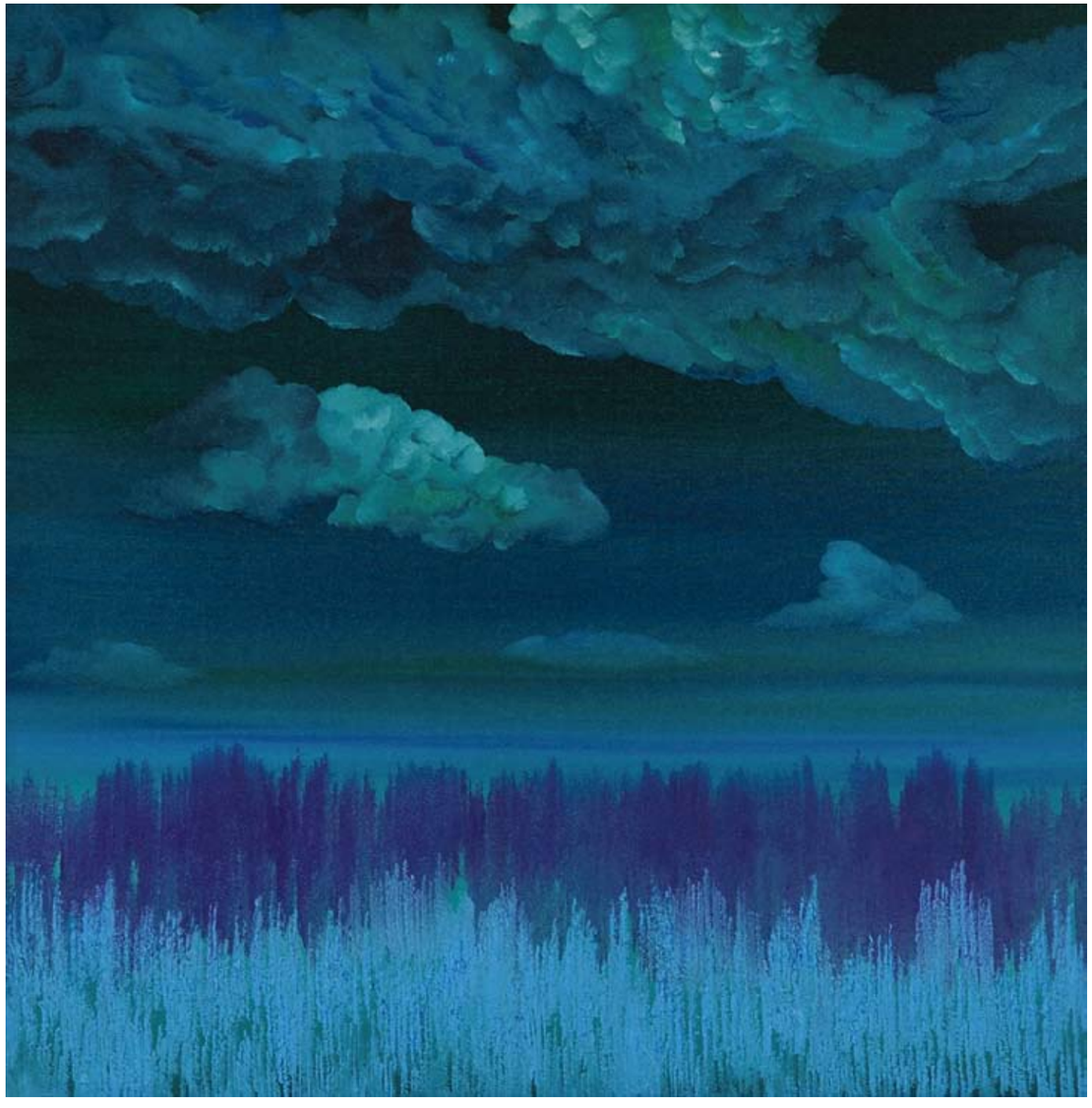


barriers visible
only when challenged

Ambitions • 36" x 24" • 2009

till the first cause is known

deal with the routine.



Causation • 30" x 30" • 2009

liquid time
crystalline
sharp and clear
honest time

Rain Banks • 36" x 36" • 2009

dawn of the question how, when, what
dawn of the question, why

Introduction • 36" x 36" • 2009

how many variations of trees and sky ?

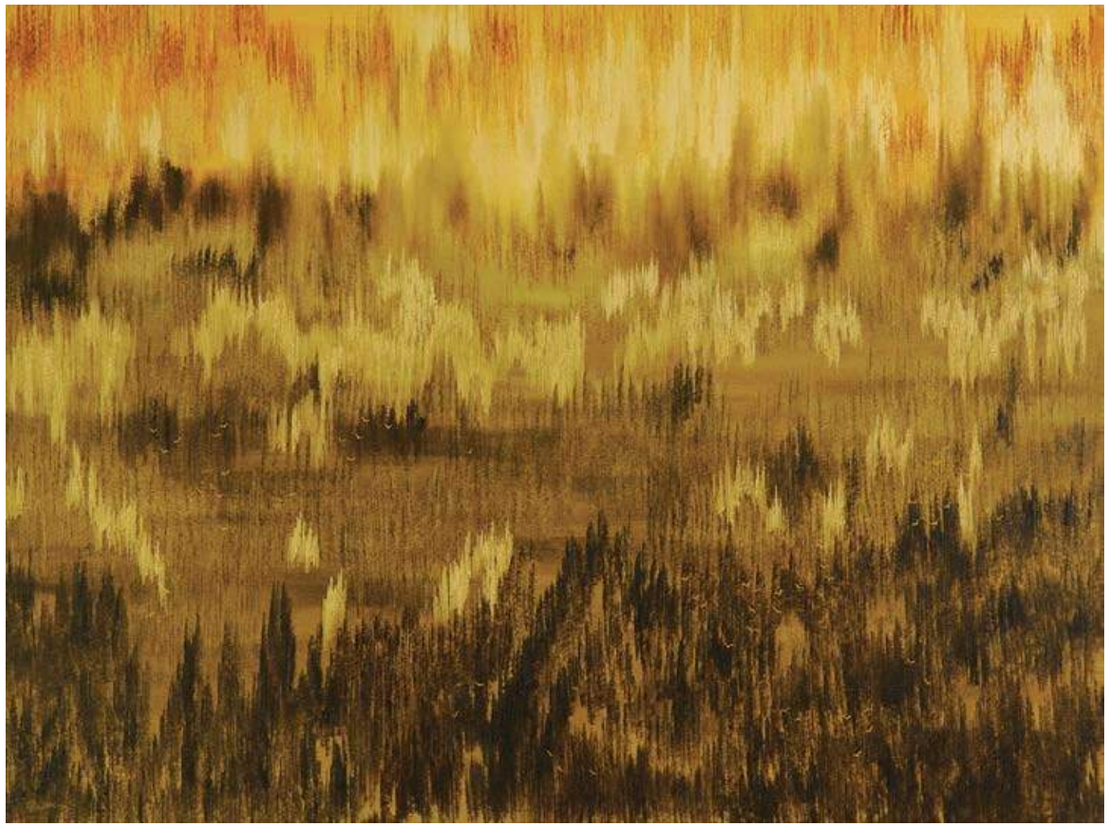
how many variations of a smile ?

Prolific • 30" x 30" • 2009

the minute,

the hour

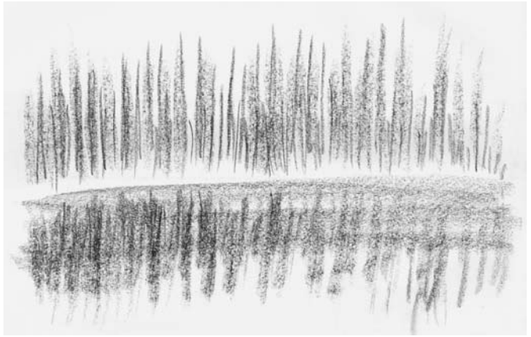
the bird cage of a clock



60 Birds • 36" x 48" • 2009

addresses of stones
left unturned

History • 36" x 48" • 2009



mosaic of time

matrix of memory

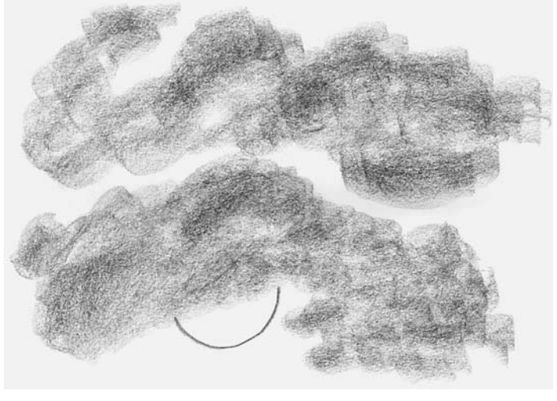
Dance of Memory • 26" x 36" • 2009

burnt and buried a million times
born again
to die again

Turning Gold • 36" x 24" • 2009

constant witness

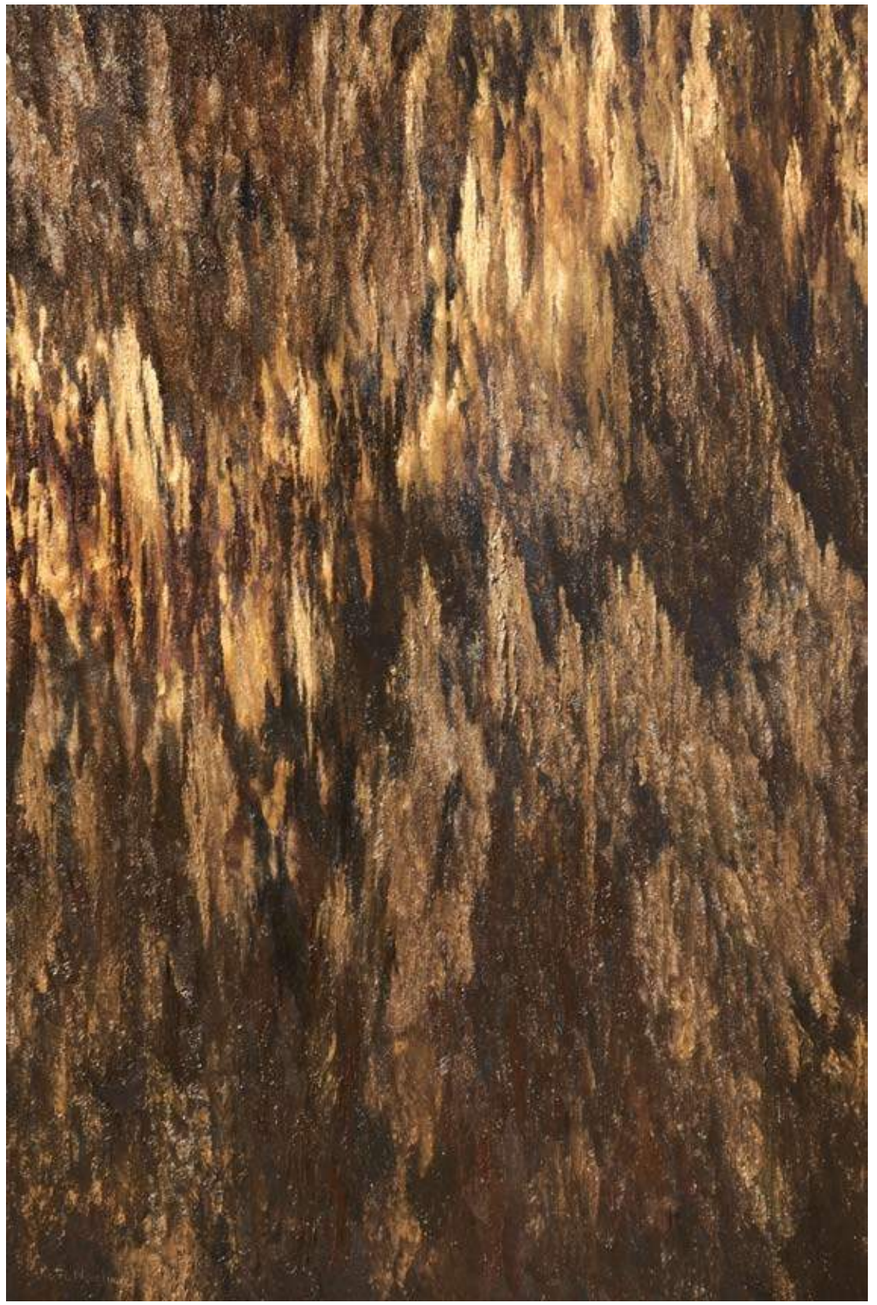
indifferent confidante



Acquaintance • 36" x 36" • 2009

lingering nostalgia of the end

time running out of time



Gold and Dusk • 36" x 24" • 2009

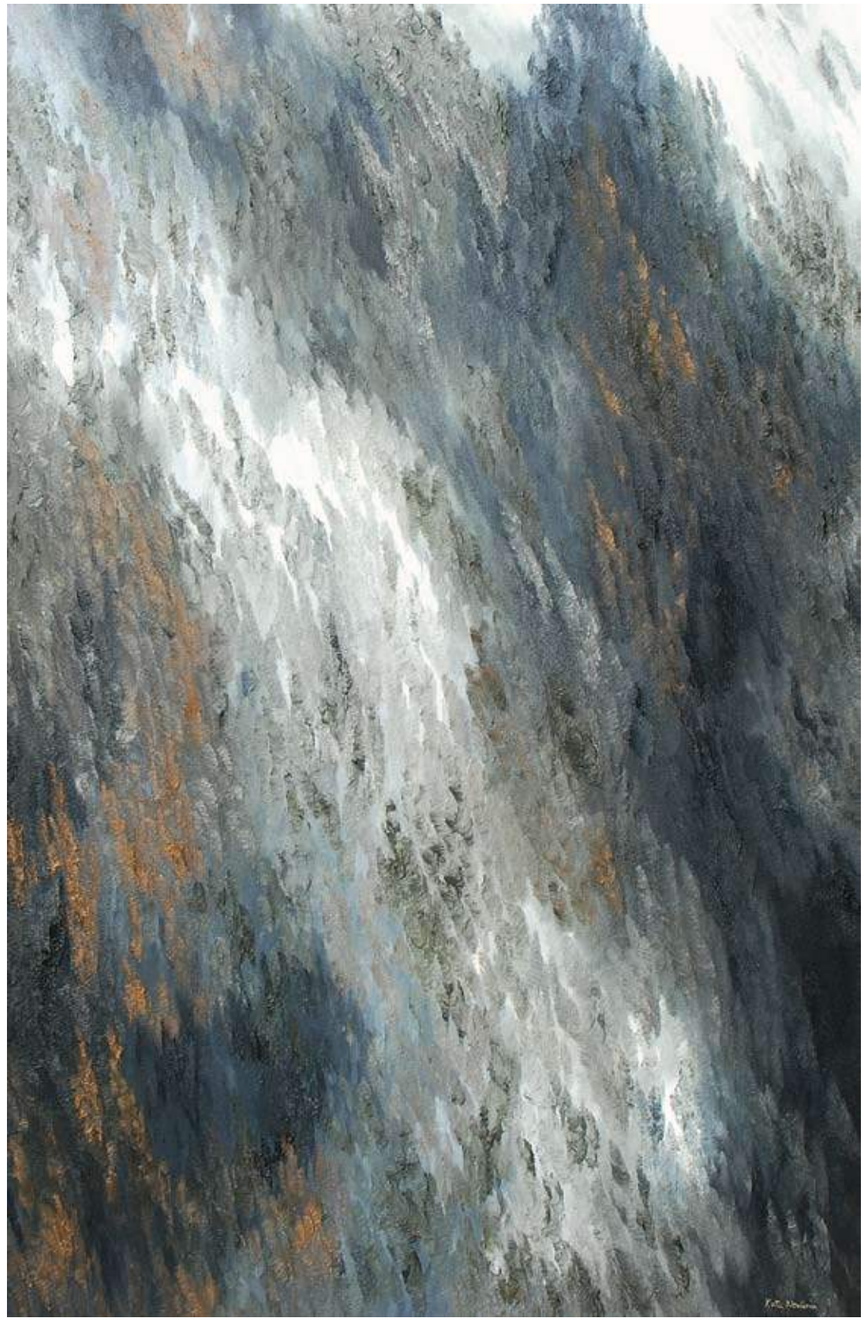
rejection

reconciliation

Prisons of Night • 36" x 24" • 2009

day caught in forest

time caught in memories



Remains of Dawn • 36" x 24" • 2009

anger of leaves
a protest of colours

Embers of Fall • 36" x 24" • 2009

Kota Neelima is a Post-Graduate from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has a Diploma in Journalism from Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan and has done an advanced course (painting techniques) from Arpana Caur's Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi.

Neelima was a newspaper journalist for 12-years. Her debut novel, Riverstones, published in 2007, was about agricultural distress leading to farmer suicides in the poorer parts of the country. Her second book, Death of a Moneylender, published in 2009, is about rural indebtedness and also comments on ethics in contemporary journalism.

Her paintings are impressionist-abstract and medium is oil on canvas.

MAJOR SHOWS

The artist held her first solo exhibition of paintings in 2006 at the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature in Delhi. In 2007 November, Neelima participated in art show for Sanjha Safar, organised by Shri Rajiv Sethi as an outreach event of the International Federalism conference held by Governemnt of India at Raj Path in New Delhi.

Also in 2007, she held the second solo exhibition of her paintings at the Travancore Palace in Delhi. The theme of the collection was `Sliver of Time' in which through symbols of rain, clouds, lakes and lotuses the paintings charted human understanding of Time's great and epic turning.

Paintings of the 2008 collection called `Memory of Trees', were displayed in the four major metros of the country. The theme of the collection was to capture the passage of time in a forest. Forest was metaphorically used to depict the natural state of mind with each thought living its cycle, along with other thoughts, despite conflict and disappointment.

In March-April 2008, Neelima participated in the Harmony Art Show, Mumbai.
In May 2008, Neelima participated in the Khushii-Round Table India in Bangalore.
In June 2008, Neelima participated in the Legends of India-ICCR exhibition in Kolkata.
In October 2008, Neelima participated in a joint show of Indian and Bristish artists in India that was held in New Delhi.
In February 2009, she participated in the Christie's Khushii – India on Canvas auction, held in New Delhi.

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