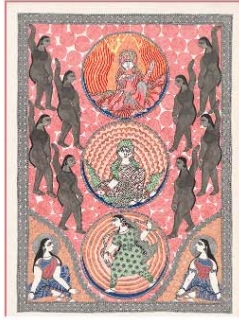


## Shalinee Kumari: American Debut

by Anuradha Vikram

FREY NORRIS GALLERY

Mithila painting is a tradition of folk art created by and for women from the rural state of Bihar in northeastern India. Historically, they painted directly onto the walls of houses. These days, the paintings are done on portable materials such as paper and canvas, and represent an important source of income for the artists, who usually depict traditional Hindu religious stories and scenes of village life. In the recent past, a movement to professionalize their efforts has resulted in establishment of the Mithila Art Institute. Shalinee Kumari, whose first US exhibition is currently on view at Frey Norris, is among the school's youngest and most promising graduates.



*Too Often a Woman's Fate*, 2009; acrylic and ink on handmade paper; 30 x 22 in.

Kumari combines the strong graphic sensibility and whimsical figures of classical Mithila painting with a contemporary sensibility. Drawing her subjects from current events, she is particularly interested in issues that impact women. Among her most affecting paintings is *Too Often a Woman's Fate*, in which a joyful young girl transitions to a shy bride, and then to a widow subjected to the brutal act of sati, or widow-burning. Women with ashen grey skin surround the central figures. They may be the elders of the family, who are often the ones to perpetuate such cruelty against their younger in-laws. Or, they may be the ghosts of burned widows, whose reputations have remained untainted at the cost of their lives. It is fitting--yet still unusual--for an artist working within the female-dominated Mithila tradition to confront the harsh treatment of women in Indian society.



*26/11 Mumbai's Taj Hotel Engulfed in Flames*, 2009; acrylic and ink on handmade paper; 30 x 22 in.

Another moving image is *26/11 Mumbai's Taj Hotel Engulfed in Flames*, a depiction of last November's terrorist attack. In this work, Kumari's mastery of line is used to great effect. Throngs of withered snakes surround the burning hotel, as a cobra engulfs the earth in its slithering coils. This is one of a few works taking terrorism as its subject, a response to recent tragedies that have once again divided Hindu and Muslim Indians along sectarian lines. However, Kumari's political message is not confined to her homeland. Other paintings address Barack Obama's many challenges, as well as a uniquely regional take on global warming.

In general, Indian contemporary artists fall into two camps. One--very much aware of and connected to the international contemporary art market and biennial circuit--adapts 20th-century tropes such as readymades and conceptual practices to an urban Indian context. The other is rooted in local traditions, and is usually concerned with long-established folkloric subjects. While many graduates of neighboring Pakistan's National College of Art in Lahore have adapted Mughal Miniature techniques to contemporary topics, only a small number of Indian artists have bridged the gap between ancient traditions and modern ideas. In doing so, Shalinee Kumari brings Mithila painting into an international art dialogue, and establishes herself as a young artist to watch.

*Shalinee Kumari: American Debut* is on view at Frey Norris through July 19, 2009.

Anuradha Vikram is an independent curator and writer based in the East Bay. More information about her projects can be found at:

<http://www.ourativeprojects.net/>

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