

Anatomy of a Crisis

As people cope with a raging pandemic, N. S. Harsha maps changing collective behaviour and altering community life with empathy and irony, finds **Kamayani Sharma**.

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, many artists addressed the upheaval of the past two years through both allusion and direct representation. On view from the 2nd of March to the 2nd of May at Vadehra Art Gallery in New Delhi, N.S. Harsha's solo *Stomach Studio* responded to COVID-19 through a series of large acrylic paintings that take a somewhat frontal approach to the crisis.

The pandemic is most obviously addressed in paintings featuring hands, highly regulated transmitters of the virus. In *May 2020* (2020) the blue-gloved hand seems to breach an indigo layer, haloed by an effervescent white curve, as though it were immersed in water. *Void Gate* (2021) depicts another gloved hand holding a rotten apple, part of its exterior hollowed out as a jagged black hole. Straightforward representations of caution and decay during a time of death, these works combine the illusionism of creased latex with abstract shapes signalling the artifice of the image; the danger is real, the way out will depend on our imagination.

In another explicit acknowledgement of 'the plague', as the contemporary pandemic came to be referred to facetiously, rats feature prominently in Harsha's canvases. In *Secular Bites* (2021), the rodents appear to be gnawing at pieces of cloth divided by a triangle of patchwork fabric (a face covering, perhaps?) that transects the surface, while *The Light Brought by the Rats* (2020) features hundreds of them scurrying around a seemingly equal number of diyas. In an interview, Harsha explained the symbolism of the 'lab rat', a species used for experimentation in order to advance human knowledge. Their scampers among diyas imply a leavening of darkness by the illumination of science, a major point of concern in the early part of the pandemic as researchers raced to understand the disease and devise treatments. The diyas are also part of other works like *Arrived from Elsewhere*, *Whose Light on Whom*, *Periodical Visit of God Particles* and *Back Home* (all 2021), the latter three of which show patches of the night sky with stars and planets interspersed with the diyas and a

motley cast of characters, including lockdown-affected migrants, astronauts, clowns, skeletons and monkeys. The stories embodied by these figures across the apparent expanse of the cosmos hint at the interconnectedness of the local and the universal.

Drawing on the wonder of scientific enquiry and endeavour is not new to Harsha's oeuvre – as works like *Show Stoppers At Cosmic Data Processing Centre* (2015) and *At the landing site of Voyager One* (2018) indicate. In the case of these latest pandemic-era works, science is salvation: PPE-clad individuals, syringes, microscopes, gloved hands and RT-PCR tests are among the imagery on display, either as minutiae or as single subjects. In some of the paintings, the tabular arrangement of figures suggests the routine of managing the crisis. In *Emission Test* (2021), for example, PPE-wearing medical professionals administer diagnostic tests to infected people of visibly diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, as well as animals. A similar typological array recurs in *God's Own Work* (2021) in which workers of various backgrounds, in orange safety vests, sit before banana leaf meals. A sense of community is evoked, each person a part of a whole, a process. This theme of discrete multiples adding up to a unified image is a trope in Harsha's oeuvre (an older work like *Sky Gazers* (2010) is a fine example). The linear organisation of elements in space is almost a graphic summary of the management of the contagion through systems and queues both physical and virtual.

In *Stomach Studio* and *Matriarchal Maps of Matrix* (both 2020), the flatness of the works combined with the plethora of miniature renderings of people handling food and mothers tending to children respectively, bring a range of narratives into the same spatio-temporal or historical frame. Harsha's practice in general and these works made over the course of the contagion in particular, have a similar quality, recalling wimmelbooks: complex full-spread illustrations that viewers must observe closely to notice specific details and sub-narratives. In



N. S. Harsha. *Emission Test*. Acrylic on canvas. 75" x 59". 2021. Image courtesy of the artist and Vadehra Art Gallery.

the aftermath of Europe's bubonic plague, depictions of death were subjects of its art for centuries afterwards. The Northern Renaissance artists rendered scenes of mortal agony and danse macabre as individual details in large-format paintings — Hieronymus Bosch's triptychs and Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* (1562) come

to mind. While associated with children's media in the modern period, the wimmelbook as a form that lends itself to capturing multiscale disorder on a single visual plane has antecedents in the work of these Dutch artists. During a time of havoc, the works constituting *Stomach Studio* are a reminder to look closely in order to see the big picture. /