

World teeming with life

VISUAL ARTS

SRIMOYEE BAGCHI

Madhvi Parekh: *A Life in Line, Memory and Myth*, presented by DAG at the Alipore Museum, brought nearly six decades of work into a setting weighted with histories of confinement and release. It was a setting where Parekh's creatures appeared peculiarly free. Birds perched upon bodies, fish swam through human forms, faces inhabited moons and animals shared space with gods, acrobats and villagers. No hierarchy governs the population of Parekh's works. Her world is built through affinity, as though memory has dissolved the borders among species, places and times.

The early works retain the mark of tutelage of Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook*: circles become heads, rectangles turn into torsos, and lines discover that they can walk. Yet Parekh soon loosens Klee's formal grammar from its Bauhaus moorings. She fills it with the visual life of Sanjaya, her village in Gujarat: *rangoli*, embroidered cloth, painted walls, travelling circuses, ponds, shrines and remembered animals. The result belongs firmly within Indian modernism but defies its customary genealogies. Like Jamini Roy, she draws strength from vernacular forms but unlike Roy, she does not refine them into austere, repeatable icons. Her surfaces remain restless, crowded and intensely private.

Colours act less as descriptions and more as emotional weather vanes. Vermilion, leaf green, mustard yellow, cobalt and chalky white meet in flat fields and are often held together by emphatic black contours. Dots, scratches, cross-hatching and embroidery-like dashes roughen these expanses, recalling the tactile intelligence of domestic



and village crafts. In the largely monochrome *Two Scarecrow in my Rice Field* (picture), the restricted palette sharpens the strangeness: reptiles, birds and flying forms accumulate around the sentinels until the field resembles an animated cosmology. *Travelling Circus in my Village* is more exuberant. Across its triptych, horned figures, acrobats and animals tumble through saturated colour, a Ferris wheel sprouts faces and limbs, while the moon becomes another teeming body.

Such density never settles into simple illustration. In *Goddess of my Village*, figures contain smaller forms, plants and aquatic life, creating what art historians might call a nested narrative. Pichhwai and Kalamkari offer useful comparisons, particularly in the centring of sacred presences and the distribution of subsidiary episodes. Parekh, however, makes the structure porous, prioritising feelings over scale and recollection and retelling over historical perspectives. Her benign serpents and childlike Krishna similarly drain mythology of terror, replacing dramatic conquest with coexistence.

The sketchbooks from 1978 to 2018 form the exhibition's quiet centre. Grocery lists, tables, ladders, birds

and doodled bodies occupy the same pages. They portray drawing as a daily discipline and self-schooling, closer to a visual diary than preparatory labour. A repeated motif is tested, forgotten and reborn decades later on canvas. The exhibition's achievement lies in making that continuity visible. Line remains the supple armature holding this abundance together. Parekh does not retrieve an untouched rural past. She repeatedly remakes it, allowing domestic experience, travel, faith and fantasy to coexist in a visual language whose apparent innocence rests upon formidable control.

That control was acquired beyond the academy. Parekh encountered image-making through the *rangoli* and wall decorations of domestic life. She married the artist, Manu Parekh, as a teenager and began drawing only in 1964, while pregnant with their first child. Her late, largely self-directed entry into art helps explain a practice in which learning and remembering remain inseparable. Over six decades, Parekh turned the circumstances of her life into a language capacious enough to hold village memory, motherhood, mythology and encounters with the wider world.