



Arts

INDIAN MYTHOLOGICAL HYBRID FORMS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTWORKS

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Abstract

In this paper I have highlighted those art works which have hybrid/composite imagery. These images are not only appealing visually but also have strong connections with Indian Mythology. In Indian Myths these are considered as heavenly being and are mentioned in mythological stories in many forms such as aerial or atmospheric mythical animals, terrestrial mythical animal, and aquatic mythical animals etc. I have provided analysis of these types of images which are a part of Indian contemporary paintings with a new interpretation of meaning. I have included variety of these images and distributed them according to their physical appearance. For this paper I have chosen those contemporary Indian artists who have maintained a relation with their philosophy, mythology as well as with present scenario. They have reinvented the meaning of Indian mythology by giving a new appearance of its idioms and metaphors. In contemporary art I have surveyed hybrids or composite images personified into a new expression.

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Hybrid Images; Indian Mythology.

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1. Introduction

Indian mythological stories speak about so many strange entities; those are unique in their physical appearance such as composite images. These mysterious creatures are the combination of various animals and sometimes also include parts of the human forms. Apart 'Thimrga' and 'Vyala'¹ there are various names also described for composite creatures in Indian mythological stories such as 'Yatu'² in the *Rigveda*, 'minavaji or Gajavakrajashi'³ in the Mahabharata. The Puranic writers give a long list viz., "Gajnam, hayanam, simhanana, Vyaghranana, rgendravadana, Kharamukha, Makaranana, thamrgamukha, Kakamukha, Gridamukha etc."⁴ K. Krishnamurthy mentions that "the term *ihamrga* was generally used from olden times for fabulous animals but from Gupta period onwards, the term *vyala* came into frequent used."⁵ The

composite characters are found in Indian contemporary paintings in the form of winged horse, winged elephant, bird human image, winged human etc.

Due to all important aspect of mythological elements I made this study and form this paper focusing on contemporary art works with reference to the hybrid images. The main structure of this paper is composed of the contemporary artists who have used these elements in their works. The main part (section 2) of the paper so divided accordingly which contains *Winged horses, Winged Elephant, Male & Female body with Body of Bird, Human with Wings, Human-animal Images and Marine Mythical Animal. Section 3 deals with the short conclusion. Section 4 is Appendix, containing the plates of paintings that I have used in the development of this paper. Finally the list references are given.*

2. Main Structure

Winged horses

Examples of winged horse are abundant in Indian mythology. According to Hindu Mythology the celestial horse named 'uccaisravas'⁶ is the forerunner of the winged animal. 'The Valahassa Jataka'⁷ is also talk about the winged horses flying in the sky. K. G. Subramanyan is one of those Indian artists who have depicted winged horses excellently along with other characters from ancient myths and traditional stories. In one of his painting 'Inayat Khan Looks at Oxford' (fig-1) from the Oxford painting series, the horses flying metaphorical presentation of the past. In this painting an old man who is close to his death watching these animals. In the painting '*Figure Group and Flying horse*' these unique creatures can be seen flying and wandering along with women figures.

Winged Elephant

The popular winged elephant in Hindu mythology identified as 'Airavata of Indra'⁸ and the same 'Airavata of the Buddhists is supposed to move high in heaven...' ⁹ in Buddhism it is the "...elephant Ratna that is associated with a chakravartin is of the uposatana class as well as described in "the Kalinga Bodhi *Jataka*, the prince travels in the sky riding on an elephant. The Vessantor Jataka describes the rain-giving elephant as born to a celestial elephant that could fly."¹⁰ All these have given the idea to the Indian artists of the elephant flying with wings .The contemporary Indian artist, Seema Kohli's depiction of these flying elephants as a metaphor of her free imaginative and bold fantasy. These elephants are the part of numerous tiny forms of animals, human and natural beauty. Such winged elephants flying are used as vehicle of the goddess also. (fig-2)

Male & Female body with Body of Bird

The representation of such images in art comprise the torso of a human and the rest body of a bird including wings and tail popular as Kinnar, Kinnari and Gandharwasin Indian mythology. A Kinnaras, heavenly musicians who is 'part-bird and part-human'.¹¹ They are mentioned in all ancient texts of India, like ' Pali, Prakrit, Epic, Puranas, Classical Sanskrit, and Dravidian texts'¹² where these divine beings are found as 'the retinue of various gods.',¹³ 'a race of handsome creates

and heavenly musician."¹⁴ Kinnara is also 'princely name (Vishnu).'¹⁵ "In the Chanda-Jataka, Bodhisatva was born as a kinnara prince named Chandaka, also called Chanda and Chanda Kumara....More Importantly, the Mahabharata myth of their birth from the mouth of Vasistha's cow as soldiers (Sorensen) to fight with Visvamitra's troops indicates that they were ancient soldiers."¹⁶ Similar figure are Gandharvas also known as semi-divine beings in the Indian mythology and has a close association with music and songs. As popular in Indian mythology about the Gandharvas that the "King Bharata defeated them and forced them to give up their arms and rest satisfied with the lute."¹⁷

A. Ramachandran is a major figure in the contemporary Indian art, has included several aspects of Indian mythology into his art including composite images. The establishment of himself as a narrator in his paintings is an important characteristic of Ramachandran's work and combined mythological creatures along with his self-portraits. In his famous sandhya-panel of 'Yayati' mural, Ramachandran has painted a *kinnara* playing a pear-shaped mandolin, is a composite form of a bird contain artist's own face identity. This creature has legs, feet, wings and tail of a bird, blue colored torso and hands are of a man, face and head resemble with artists own visual rendering (fig-3). In many of his paintings same hybrid/composite figure is appeared as a companion of a celestial nymph, who brought down to earth because of a curse, known as *Urvashi*, she is the celebration of the female form in the artist Ramachandran's work. Gogi Saroj Pal, who followed the Feminist idea, has created an innovative series which was focused on hybrid images divine bird-woman known as '*Kinnari Mantra*'¹⁸(fig-4). Gogi Saroj Pal's bird women creatures are the symbol of a new liberty painted against a lush landscape enjoying freedom. Late Ganesh Pyne's creation of bird-human synthesis figure represented mysterious images of a bird, which has human head with wings. In the paintings entitled '*The Creature*',(fig-5) a birdman in golden umber color. Seema Kohli's rendering of bird-woman is an auspicious being of Indian mythology such as *Gandharva* images. The Gandharvas are described in Indian mythology as heavenly musicians, dancers and worked as assistance of god. Seema kohli painted this composite being with a golden womb (fig-6). Another form of flying women is '*Soham Hamsa Saraswati*' (fig-7) is a half human-half swan spreading its large gilded wings covered almost whole canvas. In Indian mythology the swan or *hamsa* is close to the goddess Saraswati, in the painting it is shown immersed by the meditative powers. "The ethnic lists of the Puranas contain names such as Hamsa, or compounded with such as well as by its synonym Vaka, or Baka (Markandeya). The sanskrit for *hamsa* translates to mean swan but in Desi and Dravidian tradition particularly in Telugu, hamsa, is also a fabulous bird. The mythical *hamsa* has all the qualities of the Vedic Krauncha. It is also a symbol of wisdom as indicated by the saintly title of Parama-hamsa."¹⁹ A synthesis of myth and realism creates the pictorial world of Delhi-based artists Rini Dhumal, who taught both in Baroda and Shantiniketan. Her work identified as a combination of feminine and composite figures. The world of mystic creatures in Rini Dhumal's paintings are not similar with Seema Kohli's passive images. Rini embarked with a strong presentation of feminist dream the 'hybrid identity'²⁰ which are the combination of human element with mighty wings, muscular feet with. These winged women are beyond from the identity of soft feathery domestic doves.

Human with Wings

Apart from the Kinnara and Kinnari figures Indian artists have depicted human and animal with wings these hybrid figures are also popular in India as mythological beings. Late K. G. Subramanyan's paintings often feature winged human figures. In one of his paintings '*Fairy Fairy Tales Of Purvapalli*' (fig-8) a flying woman is appeared in the upper right corner of the painting. Wings are prominent in this work. In another painting '*Fleeing Angels*',(fig-9) there are two flying figure are shown, as the most dominating figure is of a woman resembles with Subramanyan's others ordinary homely Indian woman character wearing sari as well as having extraordinary wings attached with her back. In the same scene additional two composite figures are also mentioned their noteworthy presence, one is a winged male also trying to fly and the second figure having the animal body including tail, ears and horns but face and hand of a human, pointing out the winged male figure. Gulam Mohammed Sheikh is the next name who manifest the aspect of mythology, adjoined the basic attempts of narrative and fantasy in Indian art. "A reality beyond reality has always been attached to the Indian mythology and religion".²¹ As a result Gulam Mohammed Sheikh also inspired with the mutability of mythological beings and represents it under the shade of surrealist context and childhood memories with autobiographical concerned. Winged figures are showed many times flying upon the city houses like angles in the Gulam Mohammed's paintings such as '*Meghdoot*' and '*Passing Angel*'. In the painting '*Home And Beyond Home*', a flying figure crossing an electric pole. Artist painted this figure red with white wings against blue sky. The painting entitled '*In And out of Home*' artist follows the same sequence and painted winged human figures flying upon the city, children are running to follow them. '*Returning Home after a Long Absence*', (Fig-10) artist added flying figures are with big wings, their attire inspired by Persian paintings.

Bhupen Khakhar, belongs to the next phase of the Indian contemporary art, who is responsible for the depiction of both mythical and personal intimacy between middle-aged men in his paintings. He fantasized myth sequence of '*yayati*', (Fig-11) most definitely is based upon a popular story from the epic Mahabharata, where a son gives up his life to his ageing father so that he could enjoy sensual pleasures. "The work is showing the depiction of a man with wings...The subject matter here is love between gay. The man which is above the other person has shown with wings. Here wings suggest extra natural or celestial powers and creates a super natural atmosphere."²² Badri Narayan's painting '*Man and Woman with Still Life*' 2002 published in the catalogue of 'Asta Guru online Auction, Modern Indian Art, January 21-22,2014 depicted a female character with wings. Nalini Malani, another of India's leading contemporary artists, draws her inspiration from literature, mythology and history to create art and characters that have relevance across cultures. In the paintings of Nalini Malini human figure often depicted with wings.

Human-animal Images

Gogi Saroj pal's use of the mythic icon appeared naïve and pure. She subverts the mythic image of '*Kamadhenu*',(fig-12) the wish-fulfilling cow a symbol ironically suitable for the woman gifted with the half cow, this gorgeous white milky creature has her feet decorated with red cosmetic which is also known as '*alta*' (red color). This appearance enhances the sense of her sexuality of form that indicated the passionate nature of feminine. These new animal-human composite

beings form a bridge between the fantastic and the ordinary, the traditional and the progressive, the divine and the earthly. Pal's half-animal composites from shows another unclothed composite female figure whose top half is human and half morph into an animal. The works 'Dancing horses' (fig-13) and Couple (Swaymbaram)(fig-14) impart a fascinating impression, upon the audience through a new form of Kinnari image. This new development of Pal's is half-horse and half-female form, showing a woman whose head, arms are human but whose torso, and tail of a horse, displays a variety of poses, facial expressions and emotional responses. Actually Kinnaras also mysteriously associated with horse-human form which were mention in Puranas as 'horse-headed being'.²² An *Asura* (demon) with a horse headed, described in Puranas as 'Hayagreeva'.²³ "The epic Mahabharata mentions Kinnaras not a horse-headed beings but as beings who were half-man and half-horse i.e. like a Centaur."²⁴ Gogi Saroj Pal created female version of Centaurs, which is popular in Greek literature and art as 'Kentaurides'²⁵ Her female centaur image often wandered on lonely path, white colored figure appeared against a plain background, framed with striking colored borders such as red much like Pahari Indian miniature paintings.

Rini's works also shown 'pagan goddesses in yogik postures' who are 'half-women and half beast'.²⁶ Her somber tones gave a sense of silent spirituality in her work. Rini is one of those artists who have initiated an element of 'duality' in her paintings. She used divine elements with the deeply rooted earthly motifs. Composite imagery or hybrid characters appear frequently in her ceramics and smaller paintings, shown with wings and tail like wild. Her composite form of mythological Goddesses such a 'Mythical Goddess'²⁷ recalls the *purushmiriga* sculptures found as the architectural motives of many Indian temples. This painting is a combination of female and lion with wings. Another creation of Rini Dhumal 'Kamdhenu' (fig-15) followed the sequence of composite imagery. The subject is consistently women as in creature form. It's composite animal and human image showing a cow consists head and breast of a female with wings. Wings are mostly attached with the Rini's images such as human and animal with wings, human and bird with wings as well as winged female figure etc. Another important Indian artists in this list is Seema Kohli who's painterly world followed the tradition of Gogi Saroj Pal and Rini Dhumal and cast the woman as protagonist in her art work. She had depicted woman body with other forms like a makara (crocodile), boar and fish etc. in her paintings. A. Ramachandran is a major figure in the contemporary Indian art, who has included several aspects of Indian mythology into his art including hybrid images, and launched himself as a human-lion, human-bird, and human-fish etc in his art. In his painting 'Myth of Palash Tree' Ramachandran introduce himself as a man-lion. The painting 'Hannah and Her Goat" Ramachandran represented a two-legged goat with one stomach that is attached to both woman and animal merging up to muscular breasts with feminine shoulders. Apart from hybrid motives of bird and animals with human Ramachandran has painted himself as 'Kurmavatar',²⁸ the tortoise incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu. The painting entitled 'Incarnation' (fig-16) painted a hybrid figure of tortoise body with his own portrait, on which the tribal woman standing in a 'Tribhanga pose'²⁹ the tortoise incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu. The painting entitled 'Incarnation' painted a hybrid figure of tortoise body with his own portrait, on which the tribal woman standing in a 'Tribhanga pose'²⁹ mentioned in Indian aesthetics philosophy.

Another form of these composites and hybrids is known as "Theriocephaly, (from Greek therion 'beast' and kefali head) is the condition and quality of having the head of an

animal-commonly used to refer the depiction in art of humans (or deities) with animal heads.”³⁰Earliest examples of such type images in Indian art is 'the Pashupati figure' supposed to be the form of 'Lord Shiva as Lord of animals' belongs to the Indus Valley.³¹The form of Lord Ganesha who conjoining the head of an elephant with the body of a human being gives it the foremost position among all the hybrid representations, not only in Indian art but in the art of the whole world. In Indian art, this composite figure is designated as Ganesha. Jogen Chowdhay, a contemporary artist of India painted Ganesha in a sequence of important Hindu deity. His Gnesha image is unclothed, soft skin and chubby figure of the deity human elephant merged image along with trunk and huge breasts.”(fig-17) In Jayasiri Burman’s paintings the image of Ganesha is presented as the metaphor of a child, who is often positioned on the protective lap of Durga.

Marine Mythical Animal

In this category the human body combined with the aquatic creatures like crocodile, fish, duck, and swan etc. Jayasri Burman’s painterly world is full of marine composite images such as snake with many hoods, swan with many faces, mermaids, half swan-half female floating on the water she skillfully merged all these mutation in her art. Such creatures are closely associated with water because for Jayasri River is female character and gives birth to the life of worldly beings. Her depiction of 'Shyama goddess' (fig-18)is like mermaid half female-half fish who is standing on the chest of Shiva. At some places the swan legged goddess positioned on the crocodile, with fish tail and elephant tusk mouth. While Seema Kohli’s painting featured an image of a river goddess as the body of goddess rises out from a makara (crocodile) creature.

3. Conclusion

All characters of Indian mythology are unique in appearance and marked an important position. But the hybrid images emerged out with new possibility of interpretation for Indian artists. These hybrid characters refashioned Indian mythological characters into new aesthetic parameters that resulted we noticed a range of composite being found with new look and new meaning in the art works.

4. Appendix



Figure 1: Inayat Khan Looks At Oxford 1987, 81×61 cm, watercolor and oil on acrylic sheet
Source: Source: K.G.Subramanyan, R. Siva Kumar, 2003, A Retrospective, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, ISBN 81-87902-13-2,p-70 .



Figure 2:

Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/article-2271604/Top-pics-India-Art-Fair-Mail-Today-chooses-artists.html>

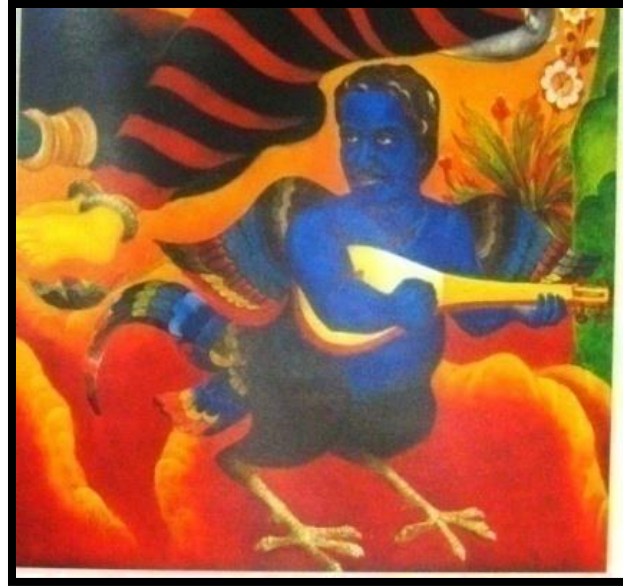


Figure 3: Yayati, (Sandhiya), 8'x20' oil on canvas, 1982-86

Source: 'Ramachandran Icons of The Raw Earth, Rupika Chawla, pub: Kala Yatra Publication New Delhi, 1999, p-74-75.



Figure 4: Gogi Saroj Pal Kinnari (Swayambram), Gouache on paper, 1991.

Source: Artists Series Gogi Saroj Pal Being Woman, Kishore Singh, 2011, Delhi Art Gallery PVT. LTD. New Delhi, ISBN: 978-93-81217-11-5, p-11



Figure 5: The Creature, 20×22 inches, Tempra on canvas, 2006
Source: Catalogue of Asta Guru, 'Online Auction, Modern Contemporary Indian Art', March 28-29, 2011.



Figure 6: Gandharva' Mix Media 60x70 in.
Source: Swyamsiddha, Myth Mind Movement, pub: Nvya Art Gallery, New Delhi, p-30



Figure 7: Soham Hamsa Saraswati, 48×72, 2013, mix media
Source: www.modernandcontemporaryartauction.com/pdf/auction-catalogue.pdf



Figure 8: Fairy Tales of Purvapalli 1986, watercolor and oil on acrylic sheet, 61x84 cm
Source: Source: K.G.Subramanyan, R. Siva Kumar, 2003, A Retrospective, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, ISBN 81-87902-13-2,p-65.

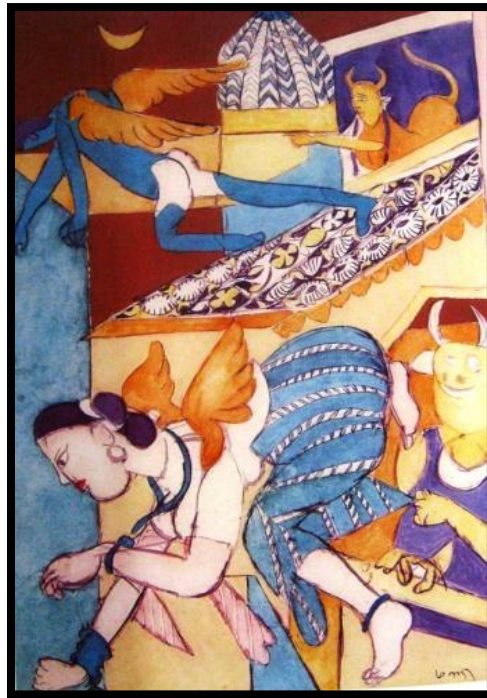


Figure 9: Fleeing Angels, 58.5x43.5cm, 1981, watercolour and oil on acrylic sheet
Source: K.G.Subramanyan, R. Siva Kumar, 2003, A Retrospective, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, ISBN 81-87902-13-2, p-146.

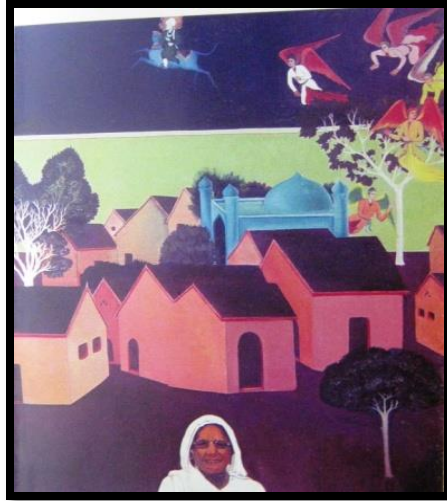


Figure 10: Returning Home after a Long Absence, 107x107c.m. 1969-73, oil on canvas
Source: Pocket Art Series the art of Gulammohammed Sheikh, Gayatri Sinha, pub: Roli Books, 2002, ISBN:81-7436-181-2.



Figure11: Yayati, 1987, oil, 171.5x171.5, Private London
Source: 'the flamed-mosaic Indian Contemporary Painting, Neville Tuli, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd. 1997, ISBN: 8-185822-45-X (Mapin) P-40.



Figure 12: Gogi Saroj Pal, Kamdhenu, Gouache on paper, 1995.
Source: Artists Series Gogi Saroj Pal Being Woman, Kishore Singh, 2011, Delhi Art Gallery PVT. LTD. New Delhi, ISBN:978-93-81217-11-5, p-9.

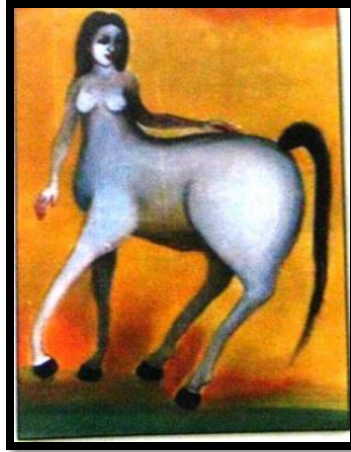


Figure 13: Gogi Saroj Pal, Dancing horse 1988, Gouache on paper 22 x 30 cm.
Source: <http://www.angelfire.com/in/Vedgogiartiststudio/>;
<http://www.angelfire.com/in/Vedgogiartiststudio/wogindex.html>



Figure 14: Couple, 22.2×25.4 inch. offset on paper
Source: <http://www.artintaglio.in/ViewProdDetails.jsp?cateId=15&ProdId=884>



Figure 15: Kamadhenu, 2006, oil on canvas 48 x 48 in.
Source: <http://www.taoartgallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Rini-Dhumal-The-sphinx-at-delphi-Greece-18.75-x-10.5-Mixed-media-on-Chinese-gold-board-11932.jpg>

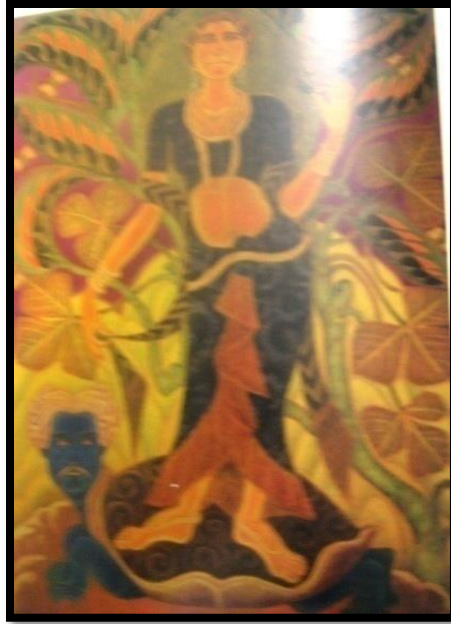


Figure 16: Incarnation, 142× 204cm. Acrylic on canvas

Source: '...in the seeds of time From the Collection of National Gallery of Modern Art tracing the history and evolution of modern Indian art, pub: National Galleryof Modern Art, p-66.

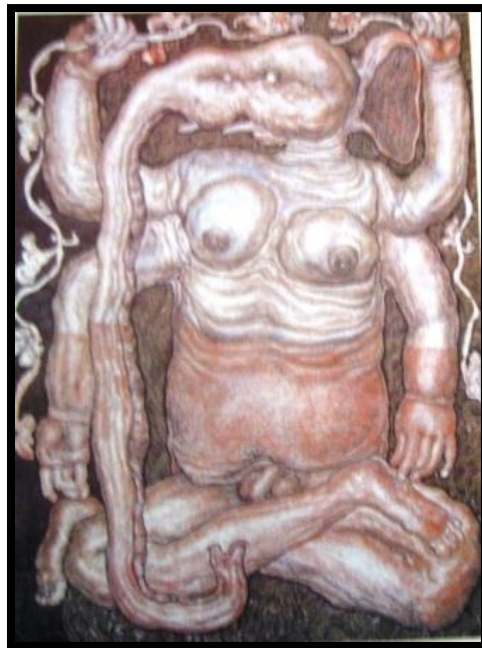


Figure 17: Ganpati, Ink & Pastel, 155×110, 1973

Source: 'the flamed-mosaic Indian Contemporary Painting, Neville Tuli, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd. 1997, ISBN: 8-185822-45-X (Mapin) P-290.

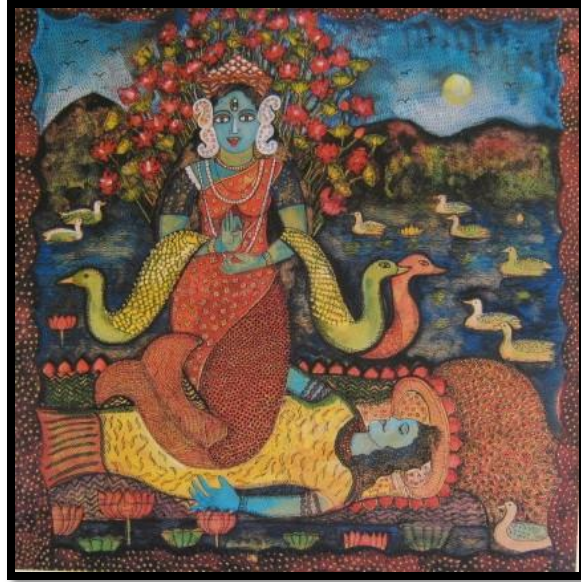


Figure 18: Shyama, watercolor, Pen& ink on board, 20×20c.m., 2009

Source: 'A Mythical Universe', Jai Sri Burman, Art Aliva Gallery, New Delhi, India, 2010, ISBN: 978-81-906463-0-7.

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