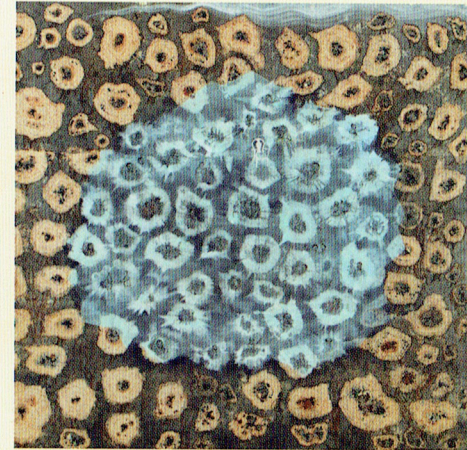


## THE HISTORY PAINTER

VARUNIKA SARAF IS ONE OF MANY SUB-CONTINENTAL ARTISTS KEEN ON EXPLORING the miniature in mixed media art. What sets her apart from other practitioners are her experiments with found objects, the use of variegated miniature protocols and the use of expansive rice paper as base material.

Highly detailed figures of people populated the compositional spaces of her works in the show *The Chair in the Cloud* mounted at Galerie Mirchandani+Steinruecke, Mumbai, from the 21<sup>st</sup> of October to the 27<sup>th</sup> of November. In *Cloudburst*, Saraf created a new model of layered viewership with dark, round, Bosch-like mythical creatures spewing tiny eyeballs, staring at stumbling figures of prince and servant, running towards each other under bejewelled rain clouds. In *Nayika*, Saraf inserted her image in a honeycombed space, contorting her body with five writhing female figures, hemmed in by a thousand colourful knots in the tie and dye style. In *The Tree*, a gold-stippled landscape was watched over by historical figures like the ghostly Inayat Khan. A multidirectional exchange of gazes occurred in the gallery when women from the *Island* looked on at a ship full of people being tossed around by waves in *Each Day You Drown a Little*. *The Chair in the Cloud* was a metaphor for the inflated sense of self that many political leaders have. Measured against the scale of earthly activities, these figures were reduced to minor presences. Saraf's material – cloth glued to rice paper, paint and fabric décor – appeared fragile yet elastic, precarious yet definite, as it ensconced the carefully balanced flora and figurines on its undulating surfaces.

Saraf's training as an art historian was evident in her appropriations from the masters including Basawan's skeletal horse groom in *Cloudburst* and Miskin's Prince of Baghdad and Princess of Tigris in *Each Day You Drown a Little*. They traversed the painted surface contemplating femininity, politics and violence, revealing the cyclical patterns of human existence. In *In My Father's House*, women shared domestic engagements with the viewer/voyeur, while gesticulating politicians circled the silver throne in *The Chair in the Cloud*. These engaging intricacies raise the hope that Saraf's voice would stand out in the growing chorus of miniature-inspired paintings. **Suryanandini Narain**



VARUNIKA SARAF. *THE CHAIR IN THE CLOUD*.  
WATERCOLOUR ON TIE-DYED RICE PAPER.  
182.8 CMS X 185.5 CMS. 2010.