

LIFESTYLE

Olivia fraser's spiritual universe in Singapore

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Uma Nair

Critic and Curator Uma Nair has been writing for the past 34 years on art and culture She has written as critic for Times of India and Economic Times.

For the first time in Singapore, a solo show of paintings by acclaimed Delhi-based artist Olivia Fraser , delves into spirituality, belonging and transcendence at the Singapore Sundaram Tagore Gallery. Melding formal traditions of Indian miniature painting with repetitive meditative motifs, Olivia has created a distinct visual language that brings to life intangible spiritual concepts. A Journey Within is an evolution of her love for yoga, India and its puranic epoch.



Between the Amaltas, the mango and Fraser's prismatic flower and bee series, the suite of works pan out like an Indian Summer . Nature is her muse. Whether it is among the blossoms of the Amaltas trees or the bounty of sweet Indian mangoes, the spiritual connections associated with nature provide a boon to the soul and a pleasure to the senses signalling a hope for the future. Indian Summer II, 2020, made of pigments and Arabic gum on handmade paper, is a masterpiece in metaphors of the sun and its riveting resonance in the realms of the mango tree. While she uses imagery of leaves and yellow Amaltas flowers and the rays of the sun along with a golden orb it is the emotive essence of ascendance that captures the human gaze.

The Amaltas trees and mangoes depicted are a reminder of the summer season in India and the joy the season can bring. "I watched the Amaltas tree outside my studio window come into its sunshine bloom over the course of the weeks that I was painting this." Olivia's continued interest in yoga, the different visualisations used in meditation and nature itself (an inner and outer vision) have also influenced these new works.

"I painted these works during the first lockdown in India, just as the summer heat was notching up into the early forties (degrees). As a Northern Scot, even after all these years in Delhi, I find extreme heat challenging, but when the Amaltas trees (the Indian laburnum) burst into bloom in May, their golden boughs light up and lift the streets of Delhi out of their hot torpor," said Olivia few years ago when she had a show in London.

Darshan (Kama)



Olivia has been fascinated by the idea of harnessing the senses during meditation. Her work Darshan (Kama), consisting of a pair of eyes with bees within the eyeballs draws on the idea of both sight and sound. Look closely and the work is more like an insignia of surreal splendour. The human eyes and the wings of the bees have about them a fulsome lushness. Anatomical perfection and precision is as important as botanical meticulousness. At once you know that Olivia has a deepened sense of both the garden of earthly delights as well as yogic symbolisms and evocations.

The word darshan means to see and be seen by the deity. She works on the active engagement between image and viewer. What John Berger calls “the reciprocal nature of vision“ is here literally translated to the physical attributes of human eyes. In sacred Indian art , the eyes are always the final element added to the icons. It is said to transform itself into the deity and devotees come, lock eyes with this image and perform darshan in devotion.

Olivia quotes: Tamil poet, Nammalvar:

Lotus-eyed

He is in my eyes,

I see him now,

For his eyes cleanse my sight,

And all 5 senses are his bodies

Over the years I keep returning to eyes as I am fascinated by the idea within yoga of a vision within, a whole landscape within, the lotus within.“



Breath III

In **Flux & Flow** and **Breath III**, the Lotus flowers are created in bloom , its ancient sacred associations within the art of India come alive. As a flower that blooms out of the mud, it is associated with purity, perfection, resurrection and spiritual growth.

Olivia reminisces : “ Using almost all the things I could see – the macrocosm of the world around me, has become my inspiration, to use44 in my studio and likewise in my yoga. Creating visualizations using a sacred landscape, flowers, chakras, snakes, or any motifs that one may harness in one’s yogic meditation. I feel that it has been very special and has totally influenced what I paint.”



Temple II and Doorways of Perception

A pair of works *Temple II* and *Doorways of Perception*, reflect her ability to use ancient techniques, jewel-like colours, and decorative, burnished surfaces to create paintings with a modern cross-cultural twist. Both works have an ecological echo, they depict trees laden with ripe mangoes—as well as the leaves, the mango tree being associated with the sacred and wish-fulfilment in India. What fascinates is the frame that she creates which seeks in depth intonations.



It is an intricate, jewel-toned pair that explore this inward journey. It reminds us of architectural nuances with a spiritual ethos. Olivia's works are inspired by Indian holy texts. The precious untranslated circa 18th century Sanskrit manual of yoga called the *Gheranda*

Samhita has been her catalyst. One extract describes a sacred landscape: “In every direction are kadamba trees with abundant flowers and it is ringed with a kadamba forest like a stockade, where the scents...of flowers perfume every quarter.” The text from the Gherandha Samhita then continues, mentioning all the senses: the scent of flowers (smell), the fruit trees (taste), bees buzzing and cuckoos calling (sound), all visualized (sight) by the yogi “steadying himself” (touch).



The text has guided Olivia’s journey, both visually and artistically, echoing her meditation practice. All of the paintings in this exhibition relate in some way to this text.

When asked about her love for nature and flowers and trees she said: “ I could never paint trees back in the past. I just looked at trees and I was baffled by them! When I asked my Indian guru, “How can I learn to draw a banana tree? Shall I go outside and do it? “ He said, “No, it’s got to be something you look for within.

There's only one way of painting a banana leaf." I loved that idea; of actually just calming down, to reflect, look inside and reach for the absolute essence! And within that essence, there will be something that's almost dance-like. I was able to sense everything as always full of flow. It's about following the breath, which is the same as it is with dance; it's the same with singing, and it is the same combination of all these things when you're trying to create an image."