

MEDITATIONS ON TREES

OMPAL SANSANWAL



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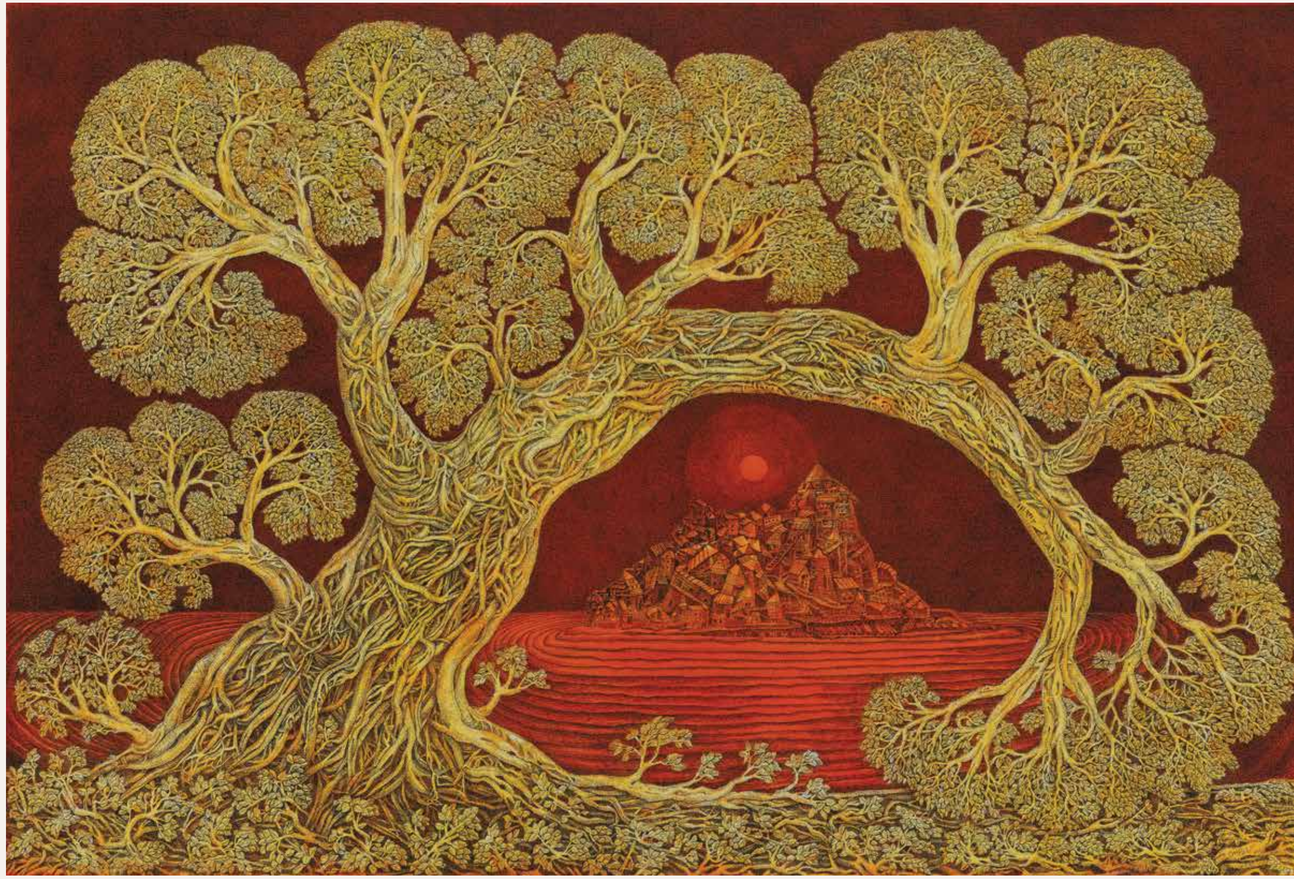
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FOREWORD

Om's delicate presence is unremarkably silent and yet very well settled, like that of nature. When we gaze at his paintings they allow us to see the world in them—gentle and vast, detailed and simple. Just like the subtle presence of nature, Om's paintings contribute a sense of calm and a feeling of ease to our living spaces.

Our relationship with him started with an early etching of an unembellished banyan tree in the wilderness. It has been an enjoyable journey to see his work develop over the years and we too have grown in our appreciation of his work alongside. This publication, *Meditations on Trees*, contains a collection of Om's work produced over the last decade.

Tanuj Berry & Saman Malik
October 2023
New Delhi

60 x 60" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



24 x 34" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

JIVA: REVERIES OF THE SOLITARY WALKER

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Effort and grace are both necessary in order to follow the quest successfully, but without vichara (thought) there is no grace, and without grace there is no vichara.
The whole lives of these trees are spent in service. With their leaves, fruits, flowers, branches, roots, fragrance, sap, bark, wood, and finally even their ashes as coal, they exist purely for others.
—*Bhagavad Gita*

Diaphanous trees and silhouettes coalesced in a palette of warm and dusty shades, between sunset oranges and springtime greens, his trees nestle into your inner recesses as if to say trees are beings of eternal stories.

To look at a painting by Ompal Sansanwal is to be invited into an oasis of contemplation in which the harbinger of tranquillity resides in the life of the elements, flowing from the tree, through the leaves, through the soil and elements of landscape coming to rest in the diaphanous roots and branches that become the threads of living.

Verdant green and untitled, the first panoramic work I was shown was an exquisite masterpiece that seemed like a flashback in botanical and geological history. It perfectly embodied Ompal's vision of an Indian landscape that the artist has mused throughout his artistic career over thirty years. With the central tree amongst three as his focal point and a set of eleven sentient creatures that look like a hybrid with sheep's coats and a cross between cow and horse faces, this landscape is not merely a depiction of localized/imaginary subjects.

The animals embellished in the threads of botanics look adoringly at the tree almost as if it has within their Godhead. The power of their collective gaze, the beauty of their form, and the impact of both sentient and transient energies create a spiritual signature rarely seen. In some ways, we are reminded of the Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael who was amongst the greatest at studying the impact of light on forests and trees so many moons ago.

This is a work that evinces the urban dweller's tranquil spirit through a sophisticated display of details, forms, and techniques, all rooted in the botanical brilliance of knowing the scientific phenomenon of trees.

Ompal uses classical Asian painting methods and Western modernist techniques with a succinct grammar. His landscape is populated with lithe lines and botanical patterns of flowers, little nodules, berries, as he recalls everyday inspirations from his time in a forest in Mehrauli, which he inhabits dawn to dusk. He experiments with acrylic, pen, and ink, and even uses sandpaper to create a satin smooth perfect landscape as his paintings invoke his urge to seek combinations of alternatively rich textures. The bold treatment of the surface on his canvas demonstrates the artist's keen eye for the splendid myriad of trees, flora, minerals, and materials that he meticulously examines and sketches during his walks to the forest.

These landscapes either in singular study or as a threaded group are profoundly significant to India's art, spiritual, and historical canon of Purusha Prakriti. An incredibly strong spirit surges as you think of the interconnectedness between man and nature. Ompal's colours on his canvas range from earthy to harmonious to inspirational intent of a solitary walker who is happy to contemplate on setting and rising shades of twilight.

'The tree in the centre is Lord Krishna,' says Ompal. 'The animals around are his devoted cows, which I create from my own imagination as beings who belong to the accents of the earth. I spent my childhood listening to stories of the Mahabharata and Lord Krishna. My love for trees grew as did my love for mythic tales of devotion and Bhakti,' he adds.

Amidst the canvas' ochre-like palette or burnt sienna smoky embers or cool hints of green and tangerine, his accentuations of the intertwining forms of trees and branches are depicted with diverse patterns of thread-like filaments that have a stupendous surreal signature. The trees for Ompal are both man and woman, either blooming in seductive aura or strongly tall and angular as they

bend, rendered in silent repose with elongated limbs and highly stylized floret shaped features. Ompal's trees appear to enter an almost meditative state, in harmony with the corresponding verdant environment that surrounds them.
As attested by these paintings, Prakriti or nature is a powerful stimulus underpinning Ompal's art. Through creating works of the single forest, the artist expresses many subjects and colours that define his mature and evolved stages of years of artistic practice. Humans are suggested in the little huts or the cityscapes he creates.

SURREAL LANDSCAPES

Ompal's landscapes are distinctly surreal, laced with quasi-realism. Like his Surrealist forebears, he enjoys, above all, playing with the multiple possibilities of perception. He infuses his canvases with an almost sculptonic imagination and deepened reflections of both poetic prose as well as rhythms of rustic resonance.



'Nothing prepares you for the impact of nature's material presence,' he says at our first meeting. For him the trees of the forests he inhabits stand like 'hopeful stars of flickering magnitude'. Ompal thinks in the broadest, most holistic terms possible about space, about trees in space and about the manifestations of forms in those spaces.

The tree that stands in the centre is an enchanting spectacle which features mesmerizing, infinite patterns. Set against the crisp green backdrop, a maze of intricately undulating vibrant contours threading their way within and without electrifies the canvas, intensifying the viewer's visual perception of depth.

Ompal plays on the depth of creating a repetitive quality, an arrangement that is perceived of a profound detachment from the world of materiality. His obsession is with the repetitive nature of the rhythms he finds consonance with, he combines his own fantasia with his distinct composition, holding a certain allure, creating a sense of intrigue within the contemporary practices of the art world.

The branches in their dense network form intricate winding shapes and demand close observation, inviting viewers to gaze enraptured at each vitality filled brushstroke. Ompal's use of repetition, often deployed as a way to find inner peace, is nothing short of sublime.

'I fill many hours listening to the silence that surrounds me in the forest,' says Ompal. 'When you spend so much time in this solitary exercise, everything else fades, and you are lost in the realms of a transporting, otherworldly experience. For me, the branches that intertwine are the materials I embody. They are living forms that invade my universe of consciousness.'

As an artist, Ompal also has a very different way of evoking woodlands in an Indian forest in North India, through a surreal colour palette, the gesture of a silent coda, he articulates his landscapes as if born of a raw and visceral palette of the numinous presence of an otherworldly realm. His trees are both handsome and stimulating. In his hands trees speak to the coveted, timeless aesthetic of knowledge and wisdom.

OMPAL AND THE BANYAN

'My childhood was spent at my home that was near a temple and a big banyan tree. The banyan tree had its own chapters of discovery for me. The branches, the roots, the leaves and the little forms hidden within its canopy all had their own little stories. In later years I always hunted down banyan trees because they became my metaphor for life and for the human,' says Ompal.

'My closeness and love for the banyan grew through seasons. Sunlight has a very important role in the life of a banyan, not only does it give it the beauty of prana but also jiva.

Life-giving energy thus becomes a very important ingredient in the journey of the banyan tree. Surrealism came into my works because of my close study of light effects which led me to understanding the many shades of atmospherics. In college we learned about Renaissance masters who studied atmospherics closely before doing landscapes. For us in India, the atmospherics are the most important ally of our meditative patterns. The moon is such an important part of rituals, puranmasi (full moon) has such an integrity about its very physicality. The moon for me is the harbinger of light and its many facets. I have always loved its silvery shades that disperse in the darkness of the night.

My landscapes are born of my own meditative experience, the surreal qualities take over because of my inner responses to nature's many manifestations. For an artist, intuition, when developed, takes over from impulse. Impulse drives the frequency but it is intuition that fashions the composition.

When I make a composition of the tree in totality with its handsome canopy, my goal is to capture what the ancient holy texts called Brahman. Yes, in a way, I am creating a summary of many associations and in this the most important is the cosmic reality of the world around me, which we in India call samsara.'

When Ompal speaks of the association between trees and cosmic reality, we go beyond geographical boundaries and note that the tree is a site of weighty meaning, both as a symbolic element of the ultimate metaphysical ground of being, and as a symbolic element in the perennial story of human suffering and spiritual bondage. The tree for Ompal is both testimony and testament of time and tide.

THE CRUCIBLE OF A CANOPY

'I like to define biology as the history of the earth and all its life—past, present, and future. To understand biology is to understand that all life is linked to the earth from which it came; it is to understand that the stream of life, flowing out of the dim past into the uncertain future is, in reality, a unified force, though composed of an infinite number and variety of separate lives.'
—Rachel Carson



Epic in scale and ambition, the singular tree with a lush canopy of moss green leaves reveals an intensely dynamic love for the subject of the tree of life. This image recalls many parallels in ancient practices as well as ancient literature.

Ompal injects a classic as well as cosmic energy into this decidedly distinctive tree that fuses established subjects and traditional art historical references with a modern-day mooring. Emanating from whirling, tightly knit branches, we glimpse a plethora of life that is enveloped in the tiny minuscule leaves like an explosion of knowledge.

The backdrop in tangerine is a surreal signature of sandhya (sunset). With both economy of line, as well as day-glow, the canopy of green leaves painted as if to bring forward miniature practices of yesteryear appear to hum in a carnival of rhythmic patterns. 'You see, when I paint, I am lost in the experience that, at its best, is one that transcends time and reality. I believe that for me as an artist the dimensions that I work upon are reflected in my state of mind while I am working. When I am working, in my studio, I am tapping into things that are both personal as well as universal, yes, you could call it total consciousness, but it is a journey that is both within and without, I am deep within my own consciousness and also beyond boundaries.'

HORSES WITH HOLLOW EYES

Ompal's horses are a fascinating flux of branched beauties who range from hoary to eerie to humble, they are comprised of a series of small and long brushstrokes, declared within the formative nuances of space accomplished by the artist's deft hand. Sometimes larger sometimes humbler in scale, Ompal engages his compositional clarity with the limitless space through infinite repetition. The branches in their classic connotations of botanical details become his aesthetic language through the development of the motif that becomes his insignia. Horses then reference the genesis of timeless infinities created during this defining period of his past two decades.

These horses cut across history and time. They bring back poets, scholars, and philosophers, and remind us of the beauty of their inheritance in supple bodies and strength and speed and royal mane. Atmospheric aura, captivating description, and a rich narrative in all the horse drawings and paintings keep them in their own class.

Indeed, we are reminded of the great poem titled 'The Highwayman' by Alfred Noyes (1906) which he opened with the verse and refrain:

The wind was a torrent of darkness
Among the gusty trees
The moon was a ghostly galleon
Tossed upon cloudy seas.
The road was a ribbon of moonlight
Oe'er the purple moor

The Highway man came riding, riding riding,
The Highwayman came riding
Upto the old inn door.

Pulsating with chromatic brilliance and mesmerizing optical rhythm, Ompal's Untitled horses and animals are a reverberating encapsulation of his incisive intellectual rigour. Bridging the gap between the grandiosity of realism and the quiet ethos of minimalism, the present works envelop the viewer through their scale, uniformity of strokes of colour and the power of composition.

Ompal reflects upon world practices and ancient civilizations that contemplated the quasi-spiritual atmosphere afforded by forests and trees, in many parts of the world, leading to worship and spiritual retreat in woods and groves. However, history states that the specific association of varieties of trees and plants with deities may be particularly associated with Proto-Indo-European traditions.

The conformation of the 'Horse' series represents the culmination of his effort to shift the focus of painting from actual tree representation to the bodily experience of horses, drawing the human eye to the form of the composition, and creating a dual sense of contraction and expansion in the head of the horses. The sunset and the silhouette of the horse with verdant leaves from top to bottom have about it a fascinating enigma.

Simultaneously, he also invents his own arrangement exemplified by the many threaded branches that from a distance seem almost like xylem vessels, coupled with a unique modulation of tonal values, so as to converge both space and form together into a single planar surface of the animal head. The curves of the shaped hollows for the eyes are hollows of the tree trunks that allow the form of the horse to radiate outwards, extending the already alerting composition even further into the viewer's space and hinting as well as questioning the distinction between painting and animals in form of trees in all their rooted splendour.

Within each of Ompal's horse studies we see an expansion and refinement of a skilful colourist, always mindful that his paintings remain both referential as well as realistic within his own oasis of celebrating nature's inherent rhythms through night and day.

NATURE'S ESSENCE IN A HORSE

The horse heads and the full-bodied horse forms created in the universe of trees with leaves and beaches tell us that Ompal is concerned with rhythm, the interval of life, with the beauty of repetition, and recurring motifs throughout his oeuvre.

The full horse images arise out of his love for animals and forms. When you see the landscape of the horse with the little moon in the distance you know that his love for horses is something that is born of transcendental intensities. He says, 'I used to go to the Race Course in Delhi to sketch horses when I was studying at College of Art. My love for horses goes back to stories I read, as well as the enchanting views of speed and their seductive movements in motion. For me the horse can be man as well as God. They are divine creatures in my album of memories.'

In contrast, Ompal pursues the infinite essence of nature's elements through an intuitive practice of grounding himself in the surface plane of nature's repetitive ethos, as he seeks to capture the infinite nature of eternal time and the absolute vastness of space in the forest of his own imagination.

'When I create horses, I'm going back to mythology, to the stories of warriors of good verses evil, of loyalty and of the love between man and his horse. In one work you will see horse-like creatures in another you will see the horse, each work for me speaks at different levels.'

For him, animals must be understood as highly personalized expressions of an artist's persona. However, it is evident that the 'Horse' series stands as the quintessential embodiment of Ompal's body of work bringing alive the beauty of the horse as a zoological wonder of speed, stamina, beauty, and eternal grace. In the few horse paintings we recognize the development of the infinite within the monochromatic, all-over aesthetic, of single toned branches and foliage that Ompal creates, telling us of his love for the uniqueness as well as the imaginary manifestations that resonate within the inner fibre of his own being.

MYSTICAL TREES ON PAPER

In colours as tranquil as turquoise or as sanded down as beige-brown embers with smoky sienna, Ompal's watercolours and pen and ink paper convey a mystical mooring of an iconographic representation of both artistic as well as landscape traditions of gardens.





The depiction of trees has always been closely related to and possibly influenced by the works of great poets as well as stories from ancient history and mythology, but for Ompal it takes its import from his personal experience that takes on the fragments of a memoir.

Within Indian literature, mysticism, and art, gardens have served as a means to access profound levels of thought and the imagination of spiritual interpretations of a worldview. In this worldview, nature is viewed as an important link in the great chain of being. In the tradition of Indian miniatures everything is set in a garden filled with lush tropicana, with an implicit message that trees, flowers, animals, and all creatures are part of the mapping of manifestations of divine grace.

When you study the different hues of colour tones and the miniature detailing of leaves and flowers and branches and tree trunks you know that Ompal stresses the biological significance of trees and forests in modern culture and modern economies. These works on paper have an ecological echo as it addresses contemporary deforestation across the world and its strategic importance for the whole of humanity. The turquoise toned work recalls the Bhagavad Gita, which creatively adapted the metaphor of the ashvattha (banyan) tree from the *Kaṯha Upanishad* in order to respond to the new context of a significant phase of history.

Ompal gives us a contemporary relevance in the symbology of the Ashvattha tree and in its parallels in other ancient literatures and practices. It is almost like a bookmark of Vedic traditions that 'inspire our minds' in addressing the global challenge of deforestation and loss of forest cover.

SINUOUS STROKES AND SUNLIGHT

Each study in the series on paper unveils like a fragment of a scene, a close-up of the way in which sunlight filters through the leaves of a tree and illuminates its trunk or its canopy. Ompal paints leaves with a bleached yellow or brown or leaves it on the shade of the paper that reflects the brilliance of the sun. His tree trunks alternate between smooth and sinuous strokes that blend into one another and suggest the shades of the bark of the tree. The compositions are deliberately oblique and the spectator's eye is led into its inner intensities.

According to Ompal the real form of this tree cannot be perceived in this world. 'No one can understand where it ends, where it begins, or where its foundation is.'

Ompal says: 'Older banyan trees are characterized by their aerial prop roots that grow into thick woody trunks which, with age, can become indistinguishable from the main trunk. Old trees can spread out laterally, using these prop roots to cover a wide area. In some species the effect is for the props to develop into a sort of forest covering a considerable area, every trunk connected directly or indirectly to the central trunk. But my banyans are from my own roots of imagination. It could be the banyan in the Himalayas, it could be in Kedarnath, or in Uttarakhand—it's a consolidation of all my travels and fervent love for trees.

The banyan tree for me is an analogy of the workings of the material world. Because the banyan tree spreads out laterally and 'drops' roots that form into trunks, it is very hard to determine the original trunk of the tree. In my banyan trees the leaves are not original they are different created according to my own fancy.'

SMALL CITYSCAPES

A few cityscapes by Ompal show his understanding of Cubism and the use of the vertical study in format and form as the imagery is in absence of any human figures; but his cityscapes are just buildings touched with softened hues that gently go about the day, both on the gently flowing times of light effects and along the tints he considers imperative to add to his lithe views.

The cityscape with three cows in the centre and a crimson tide of colour is

a portrait in the plight of cows in the country. In terms of division the canvas is divided into three horizontal planes.

Cityscapes he uses in two ways, sometimes he keeps the cityscape as a backdrop flanking the frame or in the far central core of a frame, sometimes he uses it to bisect the composition. But his cityscape is always wrapped in the warm glow of light, he uses many versions of design dynamics, but has subtle differences from other treatments of the same view by including different dimensions either on the right or the left of the frames. Whether created in light or dark shades of atmospheric conditions, his cityscapes are bathed in either a chromatic brilliance or a softened luminosity.





The triptych of three cityscapes rendered in different colour tones has its own individuality. When asked, he says: 'The cityscapes I made belong to my travels in the Himalayas and in the Spiti valley. The colour of sunlight, the colour of the sky, and the sight of the houses on the mountains in vertical frames look like an astounding architectural design from a distance. My travels taught me to look at landscapes from long distance views and my landscapes with small houses all became like vistas of these places. They range from small huts to small houses, always simple in traditional building practices. 'The light in different shades in these works depends on the climatic conditions. I'm also deeply connected to both reflection as well as refraction. The angularity of the sun's rays becomes the moment that I capture. Between the sun and the moon my landscapes are born in twilight hours or midnight in moonlight. I love the sounds and sights of the night time. I have walked miles to sketch, miles to find trees I love and miles to find the scene that is enchanting.'

SURREAL SIGNATURE

An important cityscape comes as a backdrop against the sinuous branches of a tree. The painting really works as a surreal composition, and the blending of soft and strong contours balance each other to create a harmony, the use of light and softened hues of colour convey the impression of the atmosphere of the place. This is an example of a landscape within which is imbued a cityscape. You can imagine that the artist must have worked with both speed and energy and loved what he was doing to produce a painting that was reflective of the season. We also see Ompal's love for the Impressionists, but this view seems to have taken on a bolder approach to colours and forms. We also think of schools of art that were categorized as the use of painterly qualities and strong colour over the representational values of the Impressionists. Then in this case it is a work that has a duality in form and fervour.

He says: 'This landscape was Kedarnath after the landslide and floods. Everything was washed away but the tree remained. How small we humans are, how insignificant in front of these magnificent trees. They remain for years and we vanish in the blink of an eye. The little houses are the only visage of human habitation. The moonlight is the symbol of the one who is stable.'

When you look at the moon in different works by Ompal and the manner in which the light is graded in shades of watercolours, you recall the great poet Walter de la Mare who wrote:

Slowly silently now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon
This way and that she peers and sees
Silver fruit upon silver trees.

PHANTOMS OF ANOTHER REALM

Combining the process of the drawn line and the clarity of composition is an expressionist mood of gravitas in the few works that mirror fragmented images of human faces amongst the trees. These are like phantoms of another realm, Ompal fuels our graphic imagination and also expands the vocabulary of the possibilities of pen and ink drawings as an expressive art form in these few works. Within the foliage and the darkness of density he creates a symbolist dreamlike

epoch, he also reminds us of the beauty of experimentation of old masters who wanted to create a dramatic choreography of a single story captured in the frame.

The beauty of these pen and ink on paper works is that we see a wide variety of compositions, and the grace of allegorical intimations. Ompal reminds us of engraved, surrealist, inspired meditations that have been moored along solitary moments as well as the power of contour both as single images as well as multi-compositional manifestations. Ompal says he works on handmade paper which he sometimes washes to create dramatic effects. It is his eye for detail and his constant, combined passion for experimentation throughout his career that has left us with some of the most memorable images of trees in Indian art history.



HUMAN FIGURES AND MYTHOLOGY

The human figures in his works belong to the pages of mythology and history. Lord Shiva's marriage is a monochromatic medley while Shiva and Nandi are a timeline of loyal divinity. Shiva's locks being the tangled coils of nature's bounty is a spiritual signature of devotion and reverence. Each facet is woven into intertwined branches of trees to recreate his stories.



The first scene of the Mahabharata with Arjuna and lord Krishna is a blue and white symbolism that brings home the first verse of the Gita when Arjuna listens to Lord Krishna's upadesha. The horses look happy to be part of this long chapter. The tresses of the trees become the natural embellishment for this genesis.

The gopis in a puissant pink landscape is yet another watercolour that goes back to tales of Lord Krishna. 'The tree is Lord Krishna,' says Ompal. The falling tresses with leaves remind us of peacock feathers. 'Leaves for me are always born of different reference points in my vocabulary of the anatomical artistry of trees.'

The panoramic Lord Krishna with his flute, the lotus leafed hillock in the distance on top and the gopis, cows, and little elephant heads all make for a divine pastoral as we gaze at the Muralidhara who will make divine music with his flute.

'I recreated the story of "Govardhan Parvat" in my way. In the story, Krishna says duty or karma is more important than puja. When Vrindavan was lashed with torrents of rain and thunderstorms, Lord Krishna lifted up the entire Govardhan Hill with his left hand, and held it up like an umbrella. My painting done in blue signifies moonlight, because Lord Krishna was as cool as the moon. In this the inhabitants of Vrindavan, along with their cows and possessions took shelter under Govardhan Hill and they pay obeisance to Lord Krishna who balanced Govardhan Hill on his little finger. I have drawn the men and women and animals all in the trance of the adoration of their Lord. If you notice the cows, the elephants, the people—all belong to a certain mood. The power of Bhakti is such that it envelops us into its many shades. I believe that great artists had this devotional quality of Bhakti that is why they did works that speak to us long after they were created.'

NATARAJA AND THE TREE

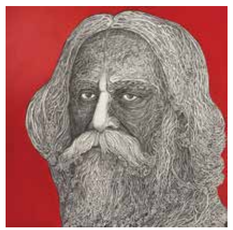
The Nataraja created with branches of the banyan is like a lattice of divinity bathed in the light of bhakti. Laced in the orchestration of ochre intertwining branches, it has the complexity and grace of Lord Shiva's figure, along with the mystery of frozen ether and a level of master craftsmanship that the world often associates within his classic Tandava posture. This seldom seen portrait is created by Ompal in its full form, and it transcends time even as it echoes of the beauty of divine light.

Elevating the branches of a tree to the realm of classical imagery against a vermillion backdrop, Ompal conjures a spectrum of a classic Chola sculpture symbolism, relating to immortality as well as fertility. Its title holds a particular Vedic resonance: the branches become a leitmotif adopted as a symbol for the sacred tree. In its proliferation of images, the circular frame of verdant leaves reveals a rich visual imagery and employs traditional art historical metaphors to

draw together the diverse worlds of art, nature, and philosophy.

Grounded in his lifelong artistic quest, the painting becomes a conduit for Ompal to address global themes of war and peace and chaos. Nataraja thus becomes a rhetorical figure, a symbol of spiritual transformation, of birth and death, a portrait where objects, lines, colours, and forms when through a creative sojourn are transmuted in order to experience a tempest of personal and social, earthly, and mystical impulses. This alchemy produces labyrinthine images filled with flashes of nature's rhythms that absorb the flow of figures and representations.

In a subtle way, Ompal echoes the importance of trees over centuries. Indeed, it can be no coincidence that the crucifixion of Jesus involved a cross which was fashioned from a tree, reminding us of the Genesis story from the Bible, as well as the symbolic appearance of trees across ancient world literature.



STUDYING TREES AND FOLIAGE IN MONOCHROMES

A set of monochromes in pen and ink on paper tell us that Ompal has a deep understanding of the mapping of the anatomy of trees and recreates them as artistic commentaries on man and nature.

In a conversation in his studio at Vasant Kunj in Delhi he states: 'The time I spent in the forest studying trees taught me that the extreme margins of holes in tree trunks, in roots, and in foliage through which we see the sky is sometimes diffused and sometimes colourless. When I studied them closely they are not sharp, they are not dark, not even bright coloured. In the centre of each foliage-clump we find the colour of the leaves, but everything is influenced by the skylight. When you study the trees at length you see that we find the strongest colour in the centre because the surrounding leaves form a concentration.'

In many ways when we look closely at these monochromatic pen and ink works we realize that Ompal studies small sky gaps, and these appear like circular or oval or elliptical apertures, giving the illusion of the light hanging among the leaves. Sometimes the aperture looks like a hoary human eye, sometimes like a fish eye, sometimes like a botanical being.

Everything then points towards the brilliance of the composition or the darkness, both where the sun shines through the leaves, or when the greyness of the surrounding foliage is tested by lesser light. His understanding for light intonations and intensities is nonpareil. It seems as if he has an inner radar that works on intuition when it comes to capturing light tones and tenors.

A scrutiny of all these tree trunks and branches shows us that the extreme edges are made up of definite forms, sometimes as clusters, sometimes as larger groups, and sometimes as less coloured. Ompal plays between portraiture of different strengths and studies in vertical as well horizontal moods. The gaps and the matted twigs become the surreal signatures that he translates into reality. The architectural anatomy of trees seems to have become an inward odyssey of depth and graceful rhythms of the earth.

PURUSH AUR PRAKRITI (MAN AND NATURE)

A singular portrait done by Ompal is that of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Created with the branches of a tree, this portrait is a monochromatic study done in an emotive essence of deep intensity.

Ompal says: 'For me Rabindranath Tagore is a tree. His fragrance belongs to yesterday, today, and tomorrow. I have grown up reading Tagore, studying his art, his poetry, his literature, his stories made into films. We understand Tagore better as we grow older. I have been fascinated to see how his words flowed into his poems, his stories, his songs, his novels, filling it gradually. 'For me Tagore is a tall tree, and all of us are enriched to learn from the pages of his life. I created this work one morning as a tribute to one of India's greatest legends. For me Tagore is India's symbol of niswarth bhava (selfless emotions) and service to man and the country and to the arts. I believe that when we admire and understand Tagore's personality as well his iconic approach to art and literature we become more learned. His contributions are still relevant today and are worth studying, for every Indian.'

Ompal's Tagore is a veritable ode to India's poet, Nobel laureate, and nationalist with devotion in every heartbeat. This image takes us far beyond the mere act of painting, Ompal gives us a glimpse of the poet's inner psyche. Looking at the pen and ink and acrylic strokes of the visage reveals the strength of the admiration and the relationship between the painter's hand, mind, and the surface of the canvas. Many emotions seem to emerge from the surface. Ompal uses a medley of strokes, some single, some soft; elsewhere, he uses darker tones. Ompal's choice of contours is what casts a spell on the viewer. And then, there are many moments when we can look into the eyes of Tagore and imagine how he composed '*Gitabitan*' (a compilation of Tagore songs), like water flowing through a wondrous valley.

This portrait brings back Tagore's love for nature, and his words from one of his notebooks: 'A transparent flow of sand dune and grey horizon, Banyan tree and Peepul tree, Way to Bhubaneshwar, Broken temple at top of mountain, Evening walk, A long clear shady road and a few covered carts, Blue ocean.'

This suite of works from beginning to end are like a morning or evening raaga pealing out its flats and sharps and extolling the beauty and eternal truths of nature. In Ompal's works we sense the music of the realms of nature and the truth that great photographers and environmental activists like Sebastiao Salgado proclaim—to protect the earth for future generations and plant trees that aid the building of forests that sustain like the Amazon.

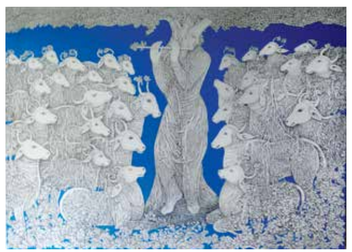
Ompal travels the upper and higher reaches of the Himalayas and says he has an insatiable hunger for gazing at and studying trees. He carries a little sketch book and pens and paint tubes. His dedication and devotion are seen in his ability to evoke the sense of timelessness associated with his art.

'For me art is about originality and the integrity of knowing that my work must stand on its own, defined and balanced by the harmonies of colour and contour. I learned the art of visual transition by studying the French artist Georges Seurat and other Old Masters. Along the way I invented my own techniques and processes. You could say my works are the resultant of a silent artist who has meditated on trees all his life, through numberless seasons with an inner peace.' Ompal swings into vision the great German writer and novelist Hermann Hesse who gave us a reverential assessment of trees, but this 'reverence was not for just the tree itself; instead, it was based on nature's ability to lead humanity to the spirit behind and emanating through the natural world'.

In his *Ode to Trees*, the great Hermann Hesse wrote:
'For me, trees have always been the most penetrating preachers. I revere them when they live in tribes and families, in forests and groves. And even more I revere them when they stand alone.... In their highest boughs the world rustles, their roots rest in infinity; but they do not lose themselves there, they struggle with all the force of their lives for one thing only: to fulfil themselves according to their own laws, to build up their own form, to represent themselves. Nothing is holier, nothing is more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. When a tree is cut down and reveals its naked death-wound to the sun, one can read its whole history in the luminous, inscribed disk of its trunk: in the rings of its years, its scars, all the struggle, all the suffering, all the sickness, all the happiness and prosperity stand truly written, the narrow years and the luxurious years, the attacks withstood, the storms endured.'

And so be it.

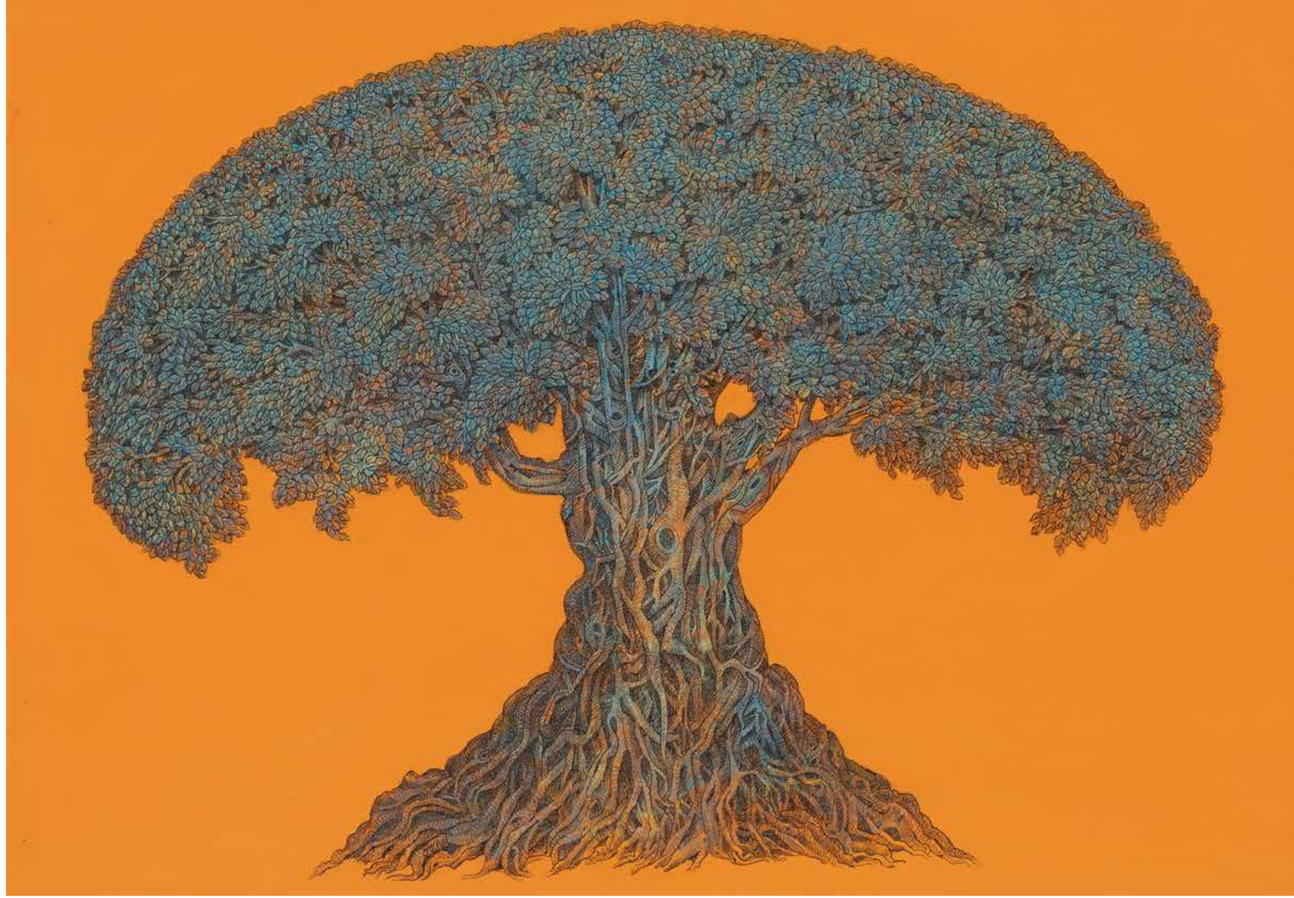
UMA NAIR
CRITIC & CURATOR



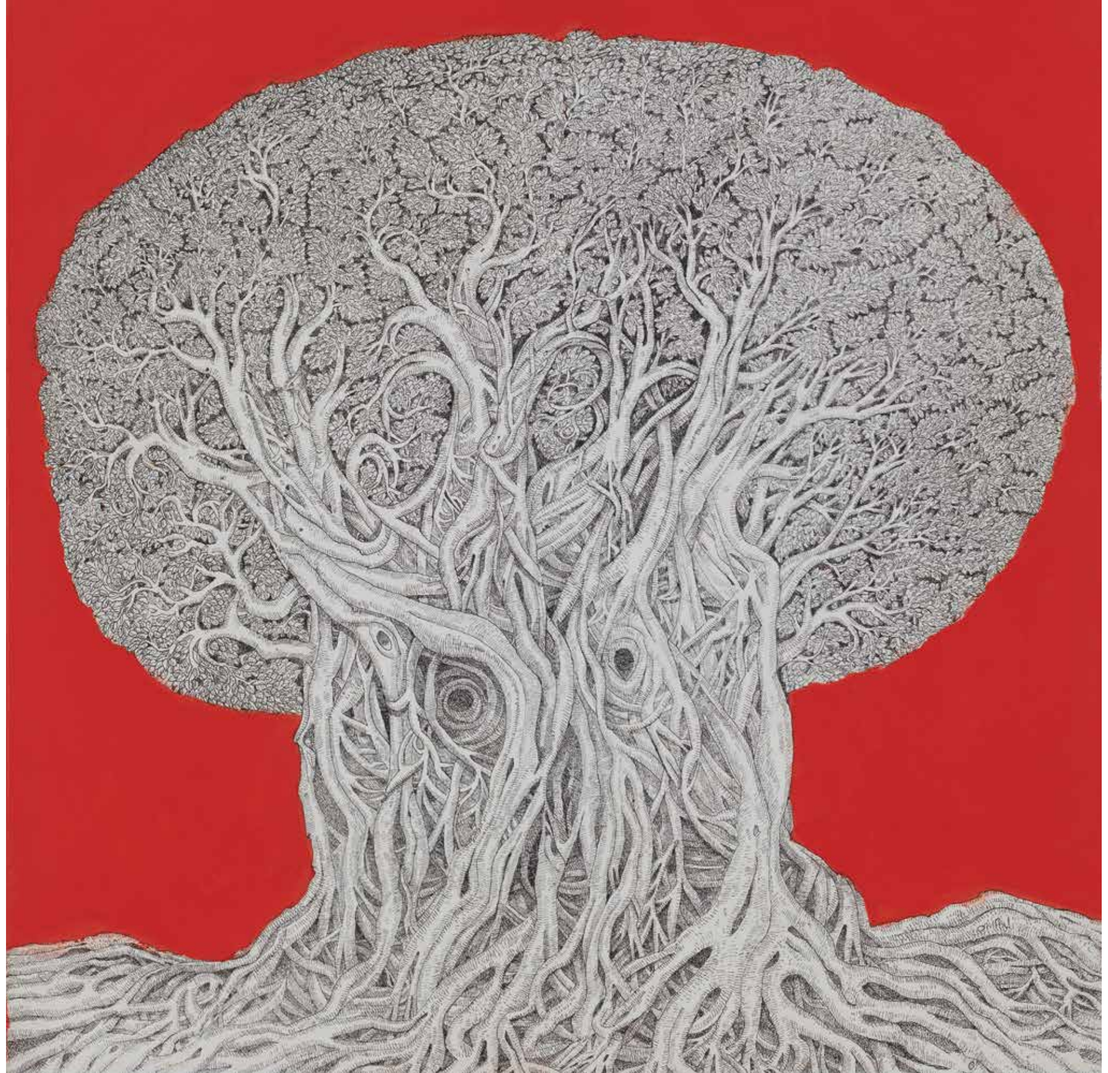
72 X 108" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

In the banyan trees of Delhi that I grew to love, I saw a quiet solemnity, a profound air of mystery and spirituality, so many surreal forms, deep almond-shaped eyes, sometimes a subtle smile, sometimes an imposing frontality and decorative elements in branches and leaves that reminded me of human hair and the forehead. Over the years my imagination and my physical sense of sight for trees became one vision. In trees I saw facial features and characteristics, in trees I saw solitary people and lovers, and the gods and goddesses.'

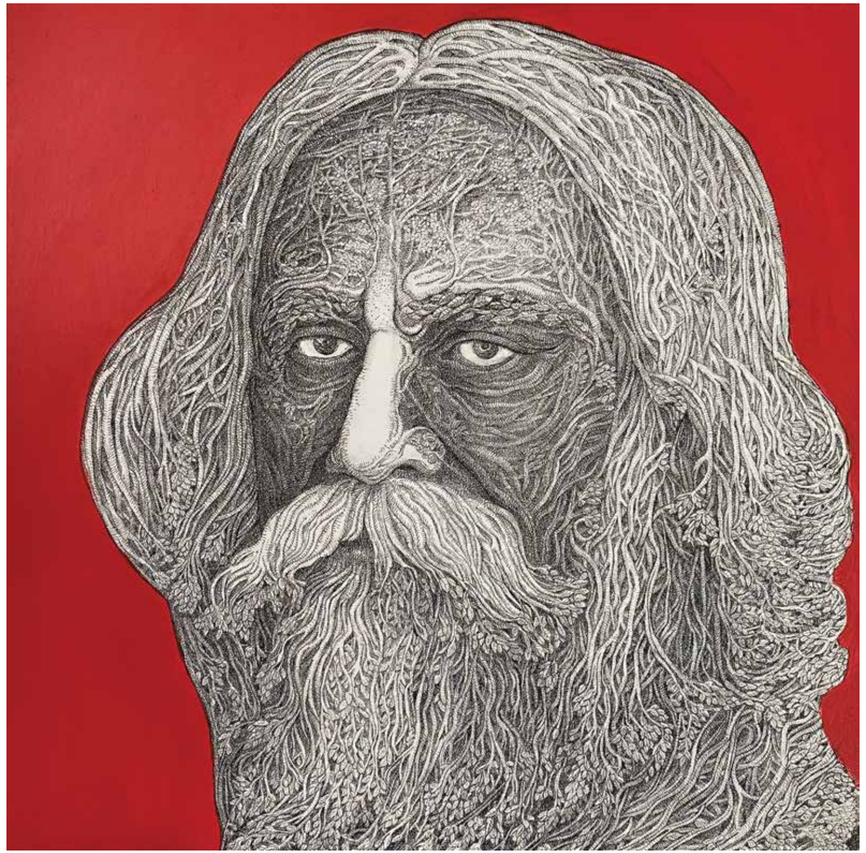
18 x 30" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



24 x 24" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



16 x 16" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



16 x 16" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

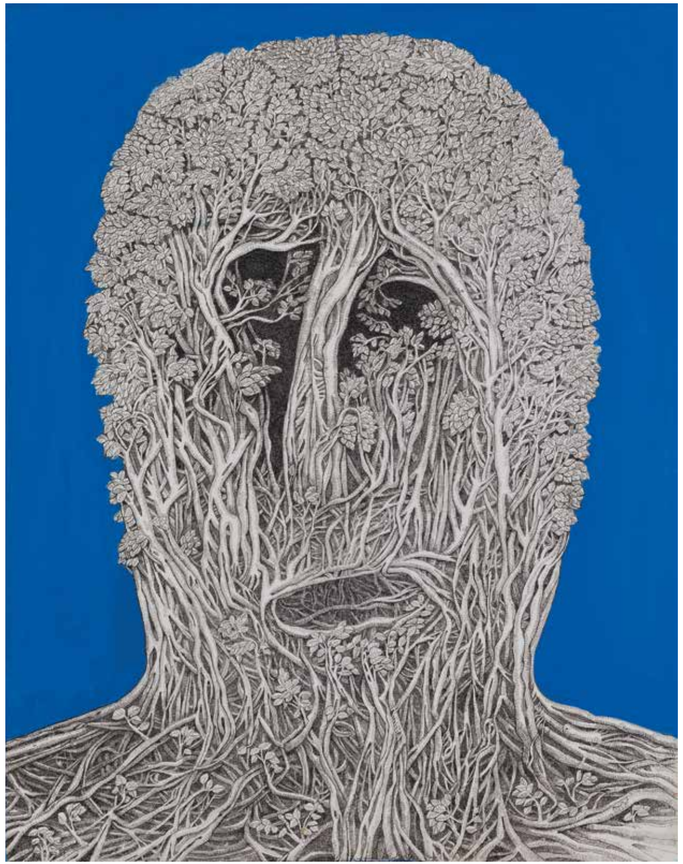


18 x 18" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



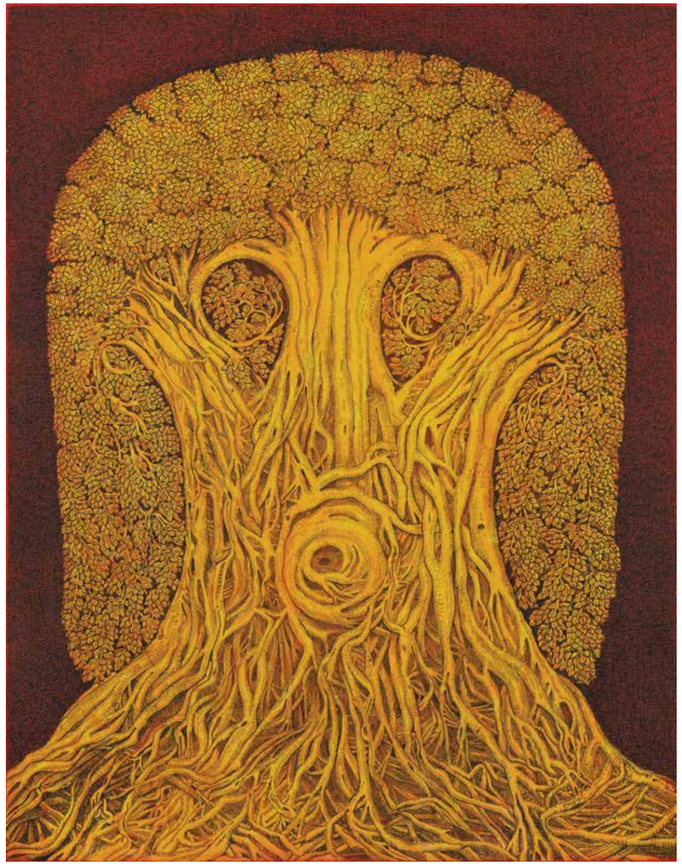
24 x 24" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

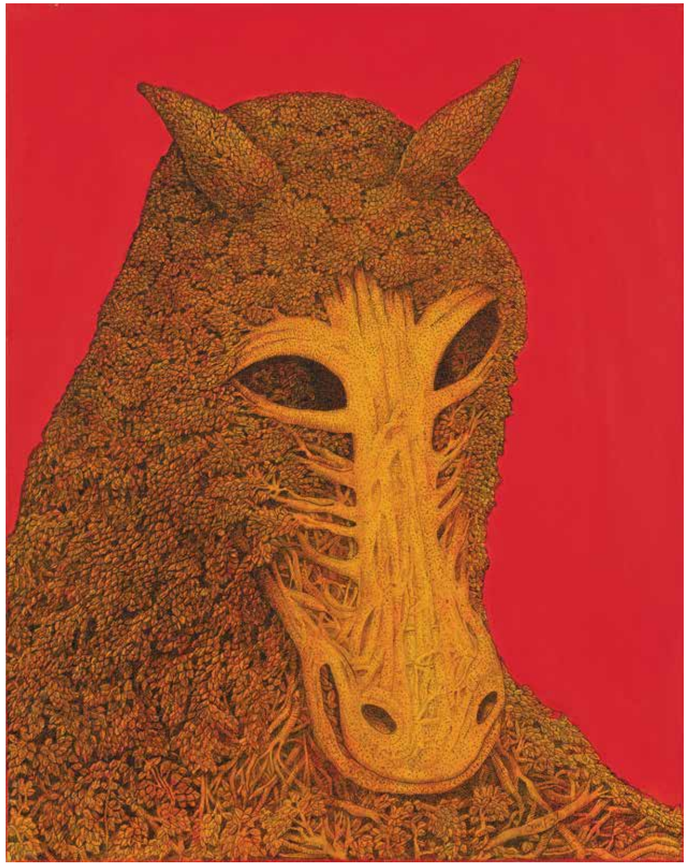




28 x 22” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

28 x 22” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

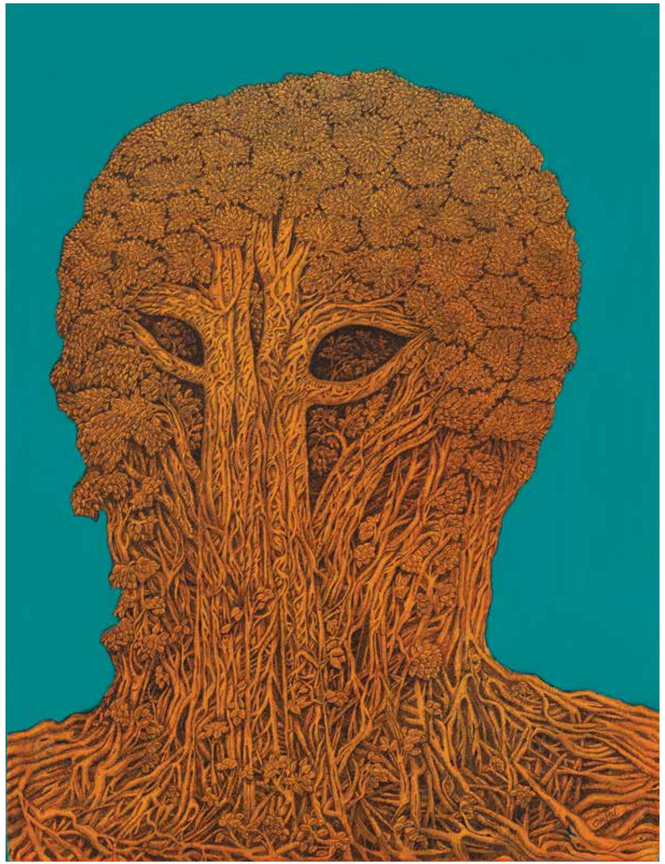




28 x 22” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



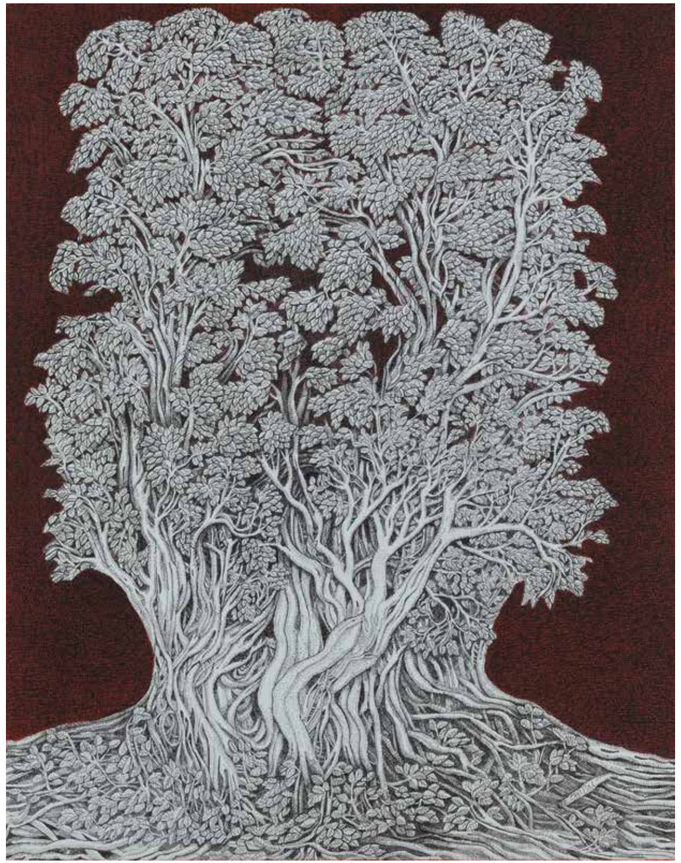
28 x 22” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



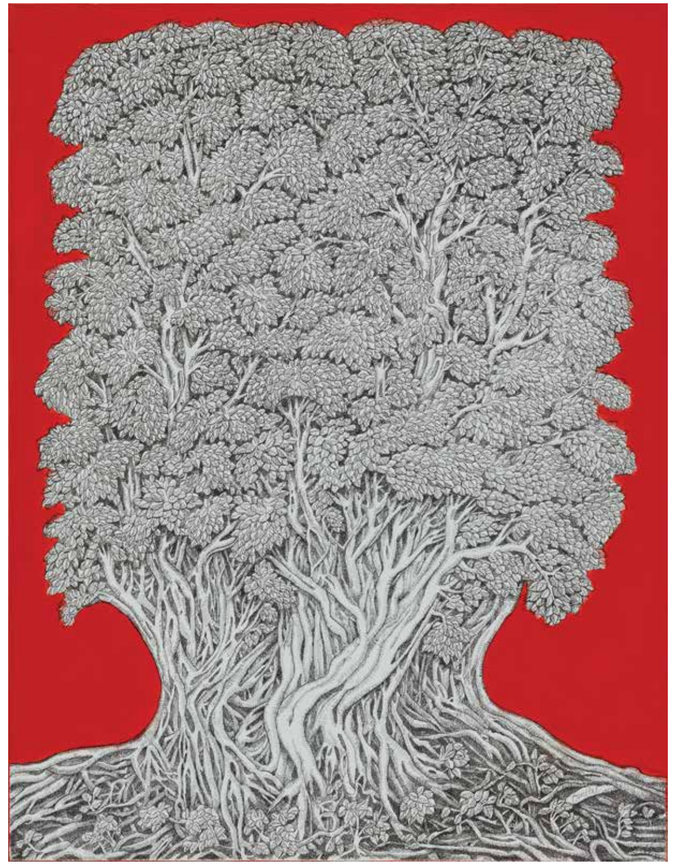
28 x 22”
ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



28 x 22”
ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



28 x 22" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



28 x 22" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

'My childhood was spent at my home that was near a temple and a big banyan tree. The banyan tree had its own chapters of discovery for me. The branches, the roots, the leaves and the little forms hidden within its canopy all had their own little stories. In later years I always hunted down banyan trees because they became my metaphor for life and for the human.'

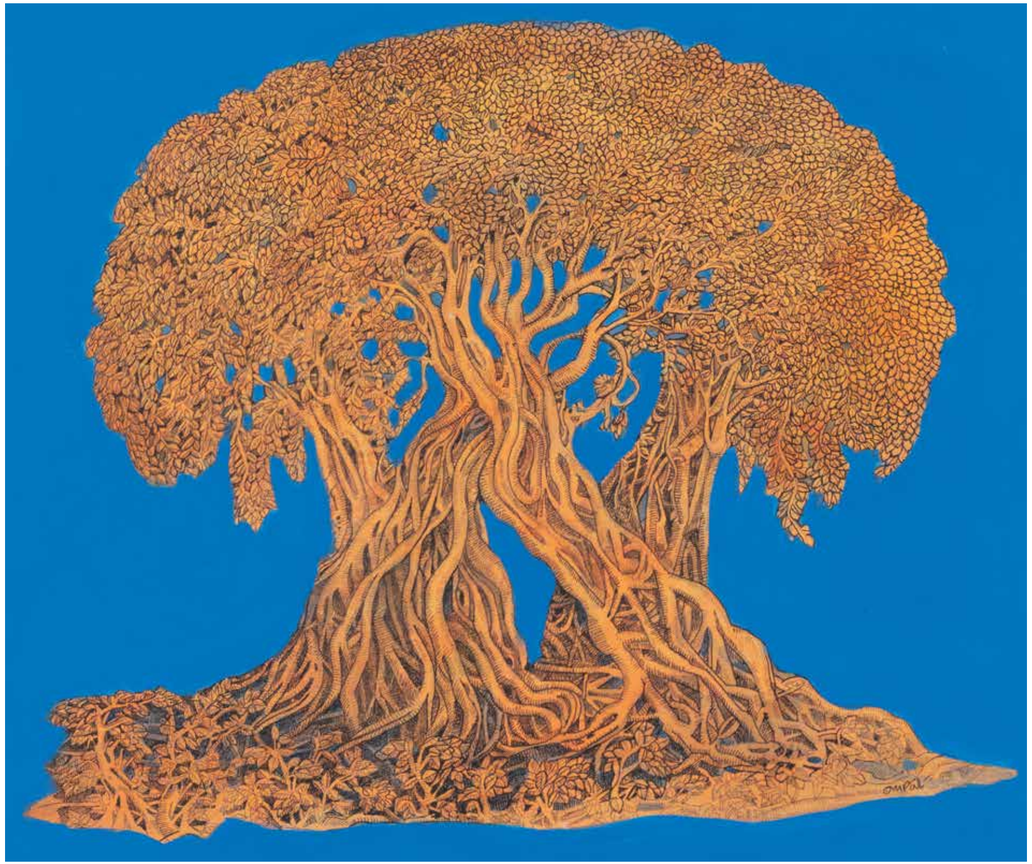
60 x 48" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS





34 x 20" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

(right) 12 x 15" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



60 x 60" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

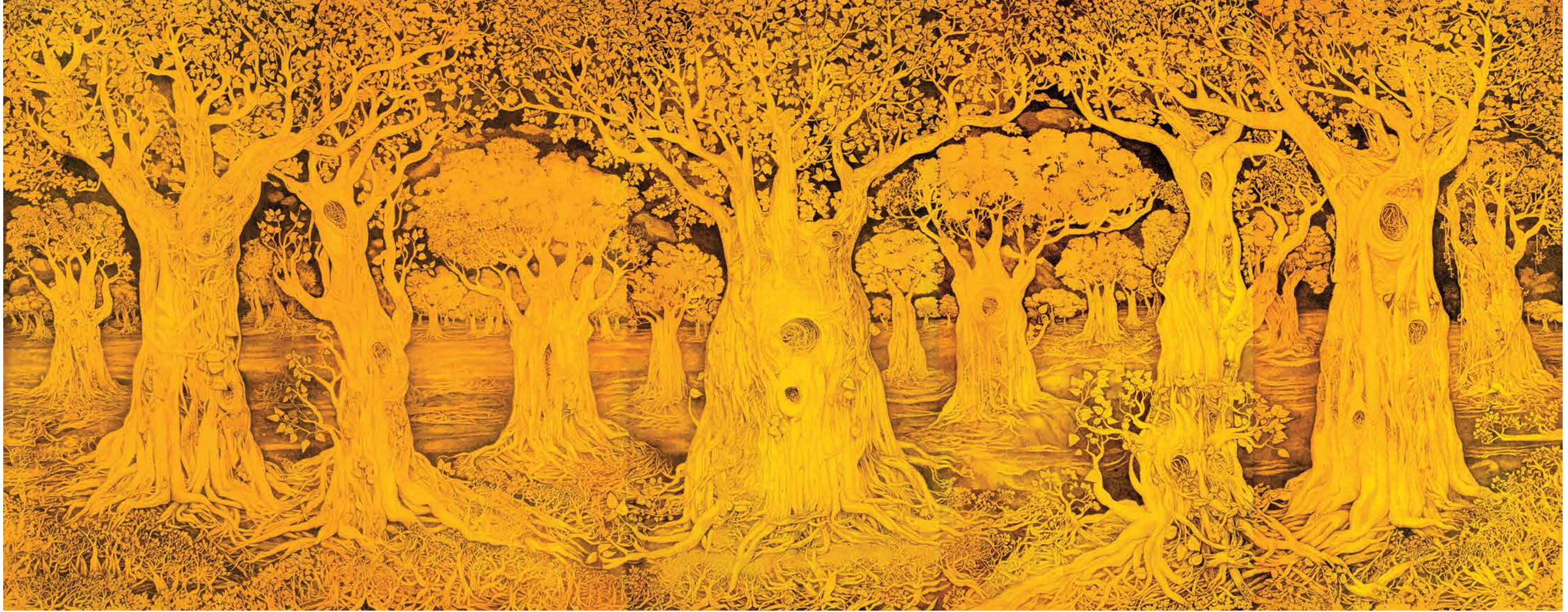




48 x 48” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



48 x 48” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

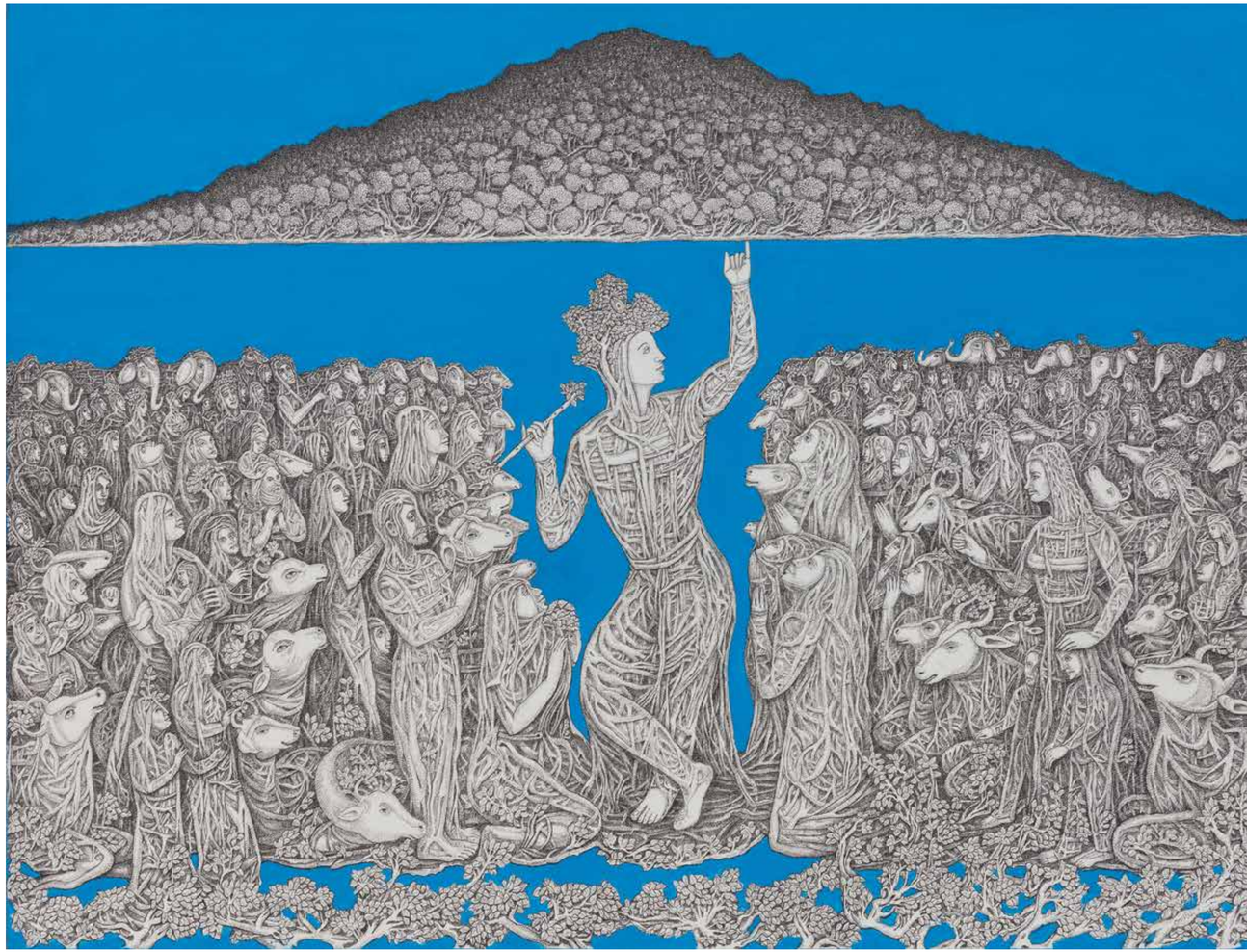


96 x 240" five panels, each 96 x 48" acrylic and pen on canvas



24 x 84” acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

24 x 36" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



The Nataraja created with branches of the banyan is like a lattice of divinity bathed in the light of Bhakti.

Grounded in his lifelong artistic quest, the painting becomes a conduit for Ompal to address global themes of war and peace and chaos. Nataraja thus becomes a rhetorical figure, a symbol of spiritual transformation, of birth and death, a portrait where objects, lines, colours, and forms when through a creative sojourn is transmuted in order to experience a tempest of personal and social, earthly, and mystical impulses.

–Uma Nair

72 x 72" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



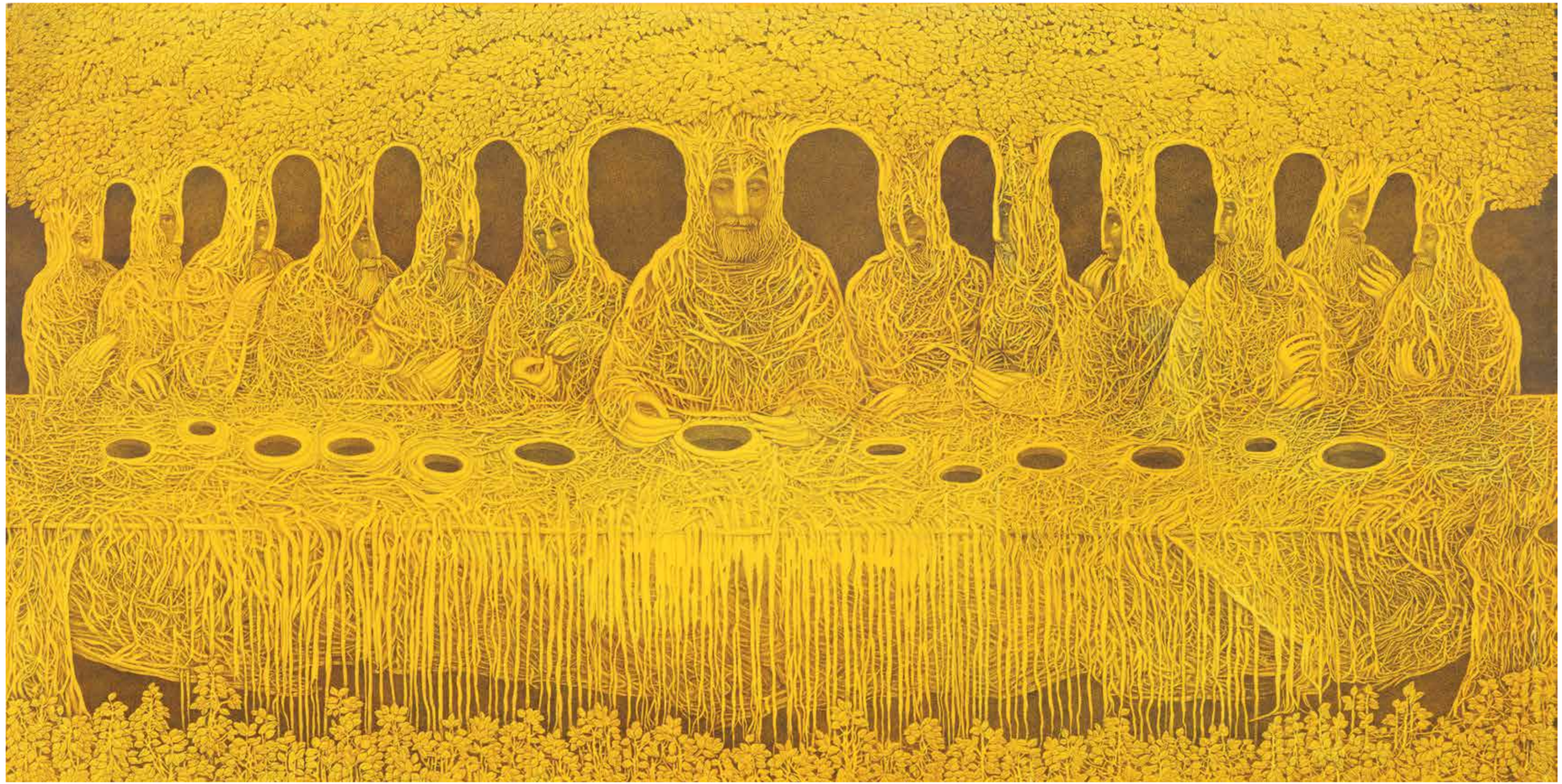
48 x 60" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



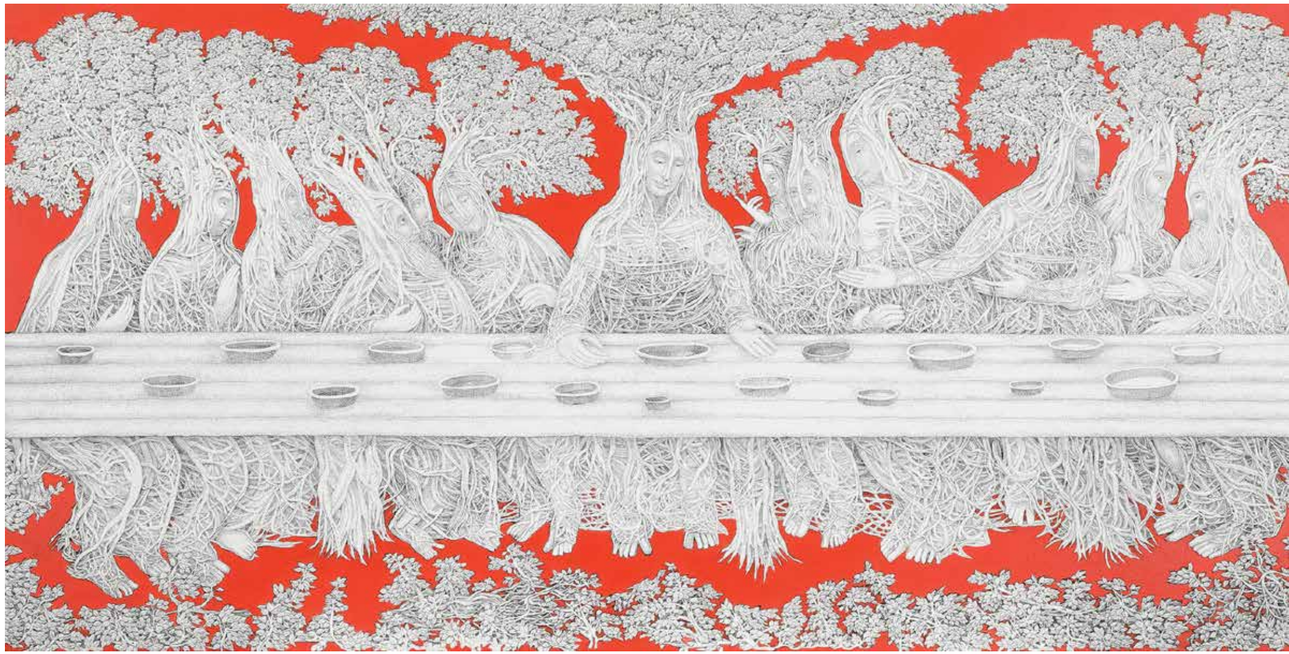


60 x 180" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

54 x 108" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



36 x 72" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



24 x 24" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



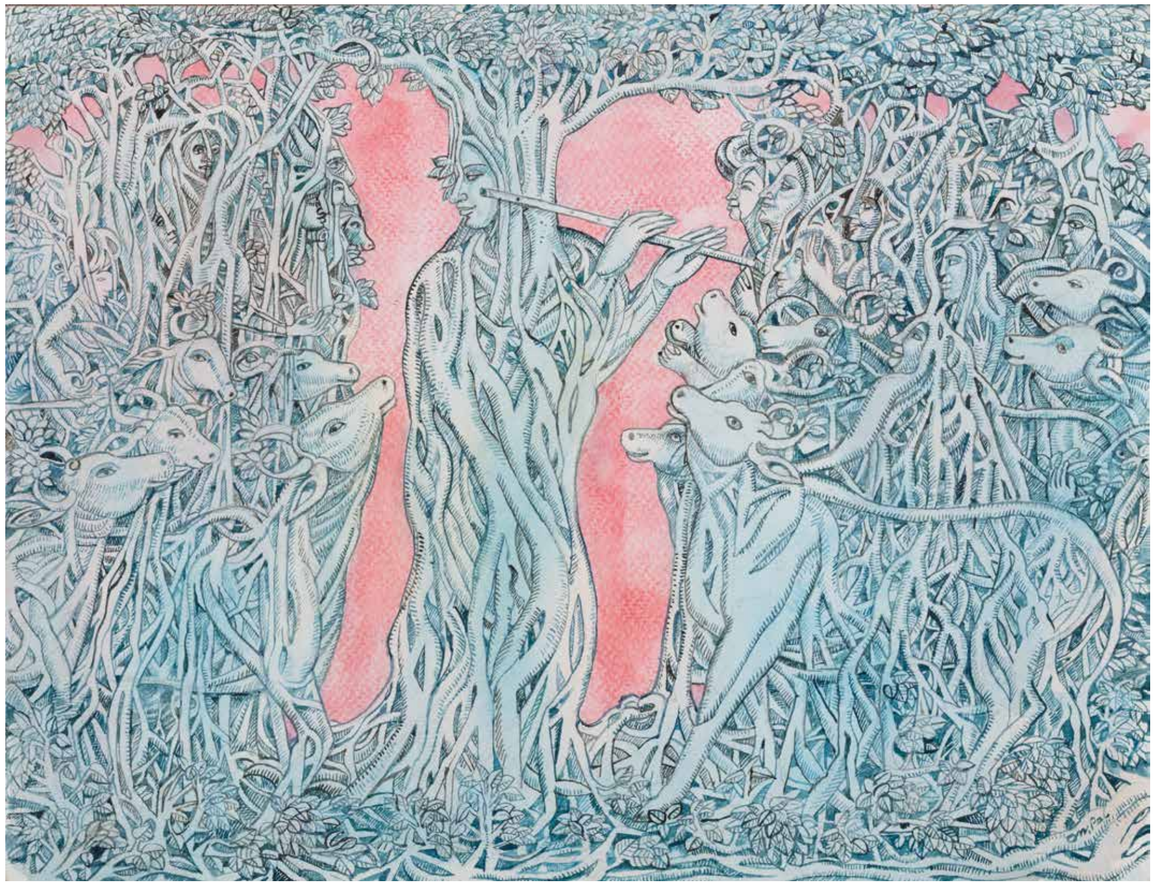
30 x 24" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



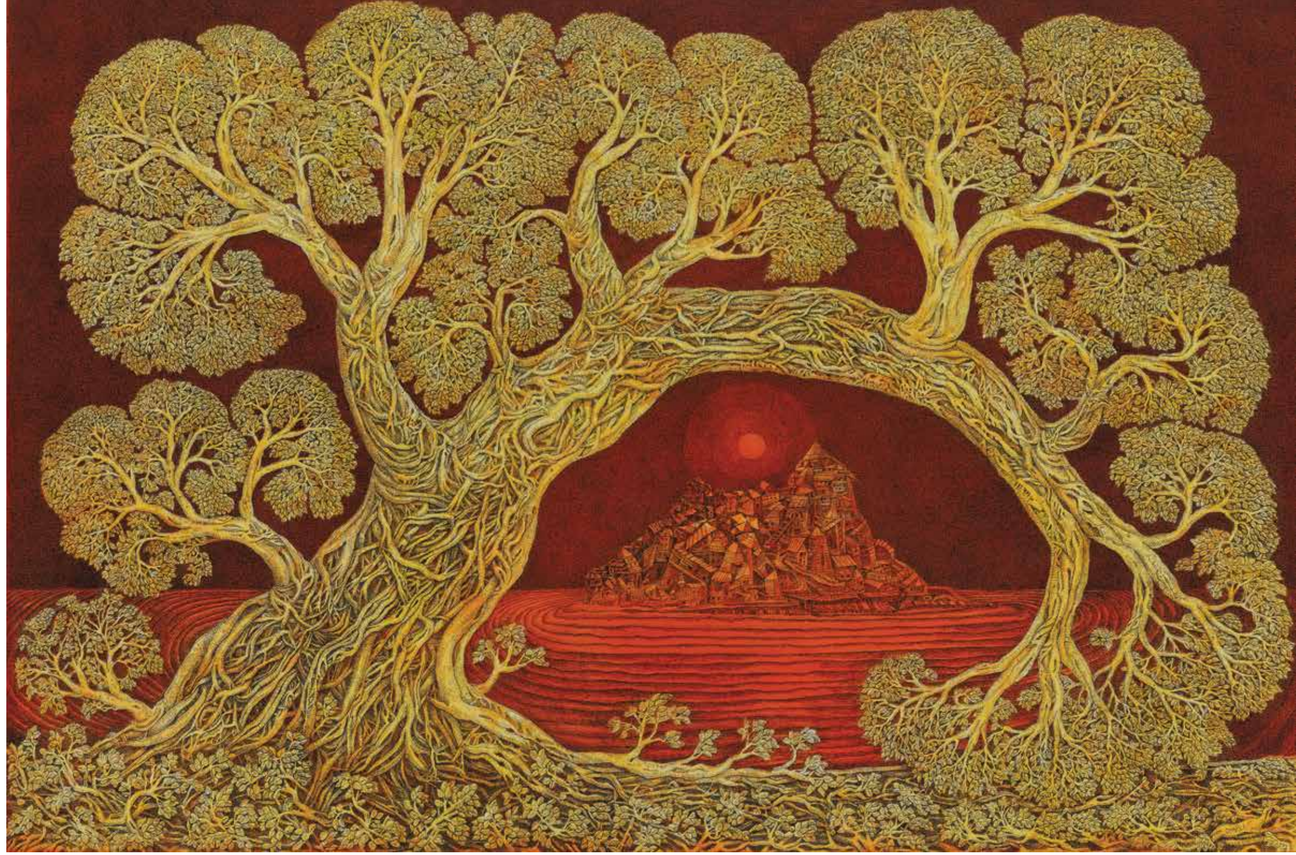
11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER





18 x 30" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

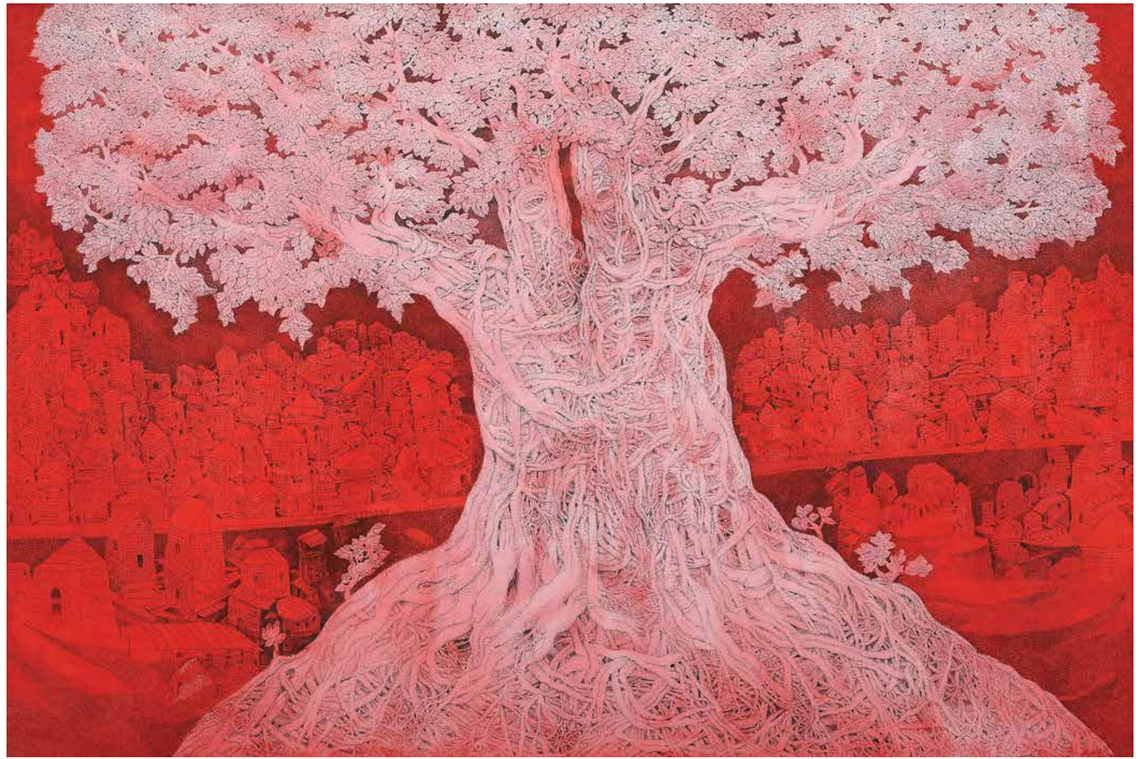
40 x 60" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



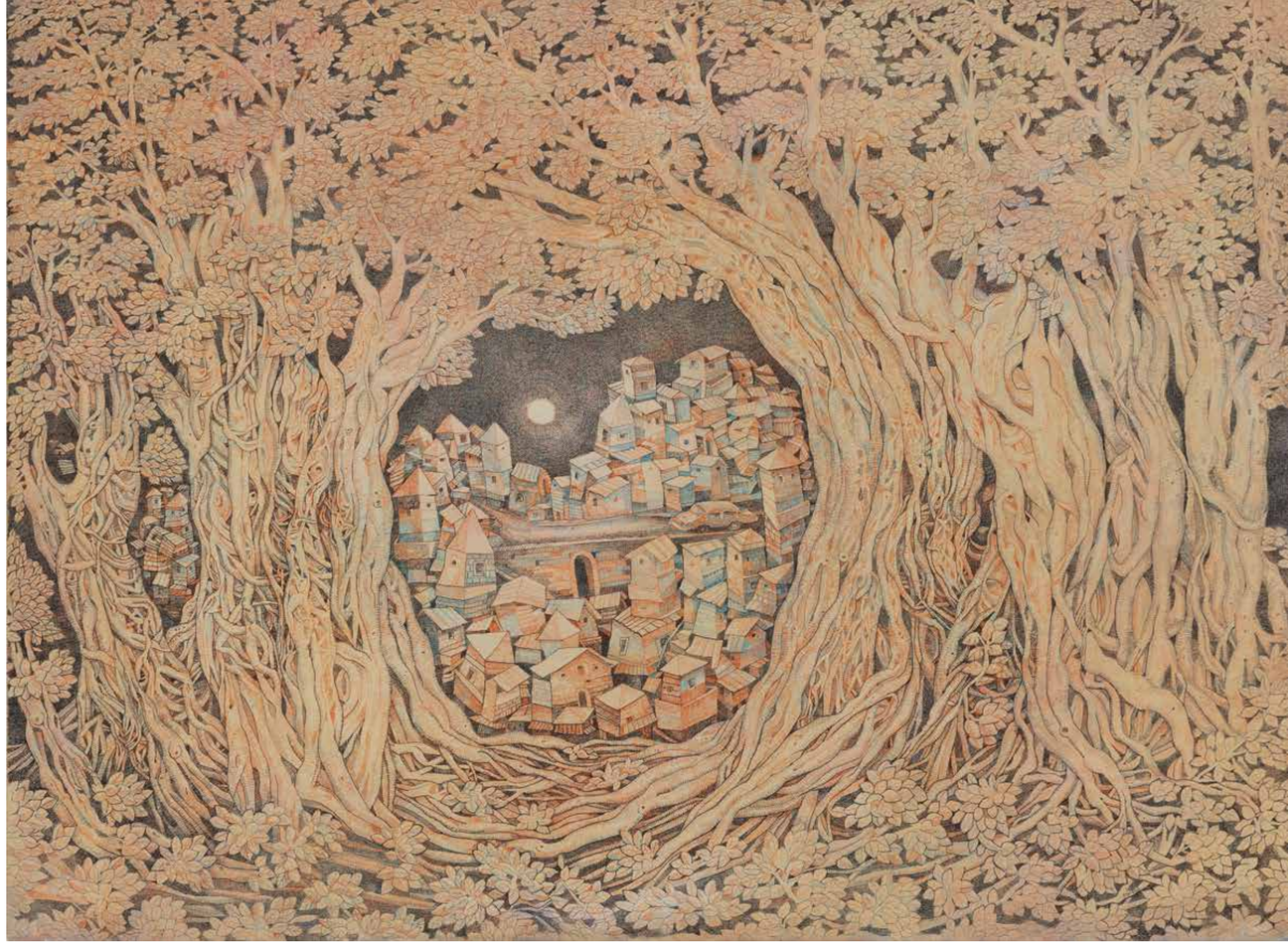
30 x 24" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



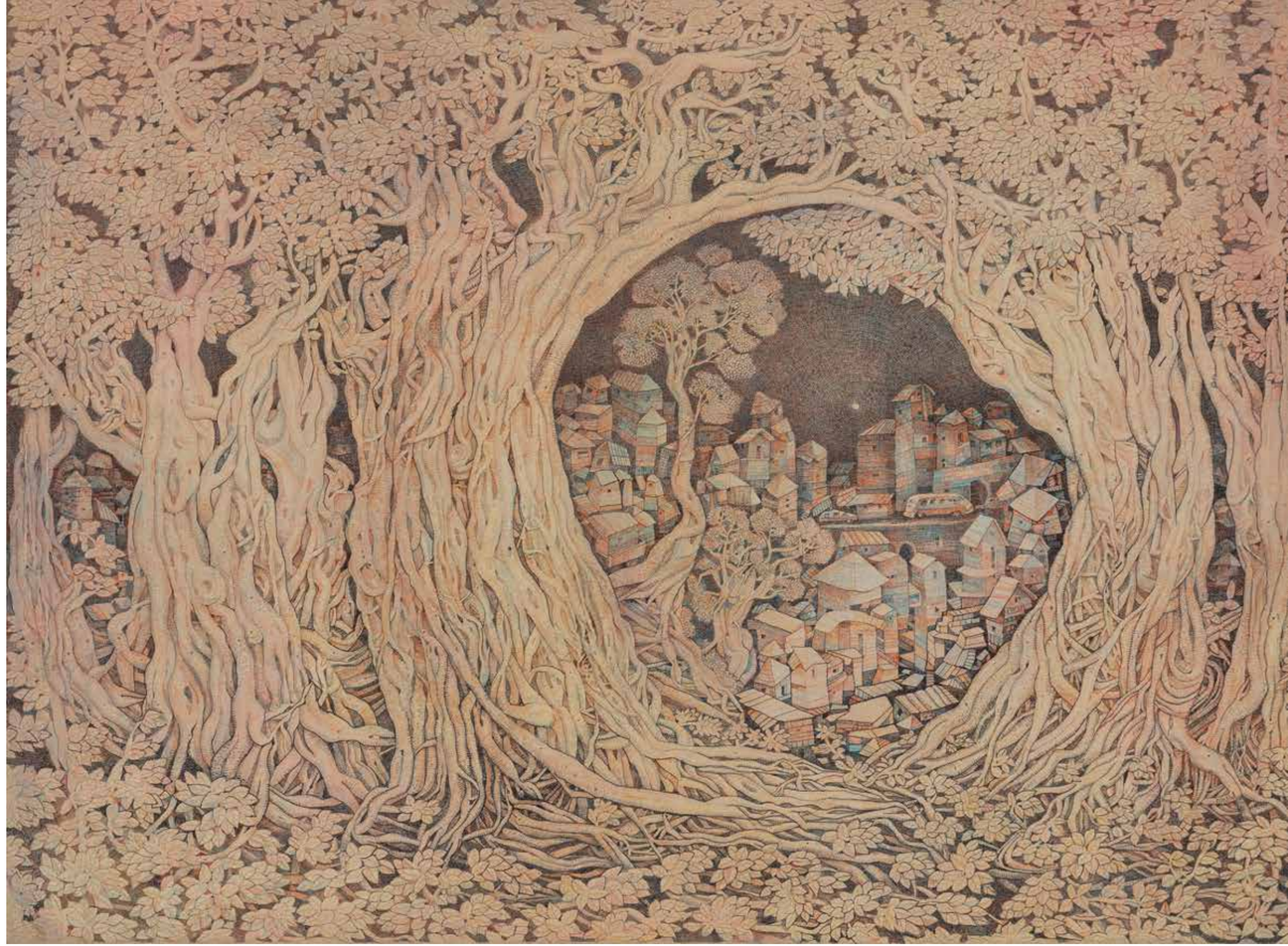
48 x 72” ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



36 x 48” ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



36 x 48" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas





24 x 34" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

24 x 24" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



40 x 60" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



20 x 30" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



I'm also deeply connected to both reflection as well as refraction. The angularity of the sun's rays becomes the moment that I capture. Between the sun and the moon my landscapes are born in twilight hours or midnight in moonlight. I love the sounds and sights of the night time. I have walked miles to sketch, miles to find trees I love, and miles to find the scene that is enchanting."

48 x 24" EACH, ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS





60 x 180" ACRYLIC INK ON CANVAS



48 x 60”
ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

48 x 60" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



100

12 x 17" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



"This landscape was Kedarnath after the landslide and floods. Everything was washed away but the tree remained. How small we humans are, how insignificant in front of these magnificent trees. They remain for years and we vanish in the blink of an eye. The little houses are the only visage of human habitation. The moonlight is the symbol of the one who is stable."

23 x 30" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



40 x 80" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



40 x 80" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



60 x 72" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

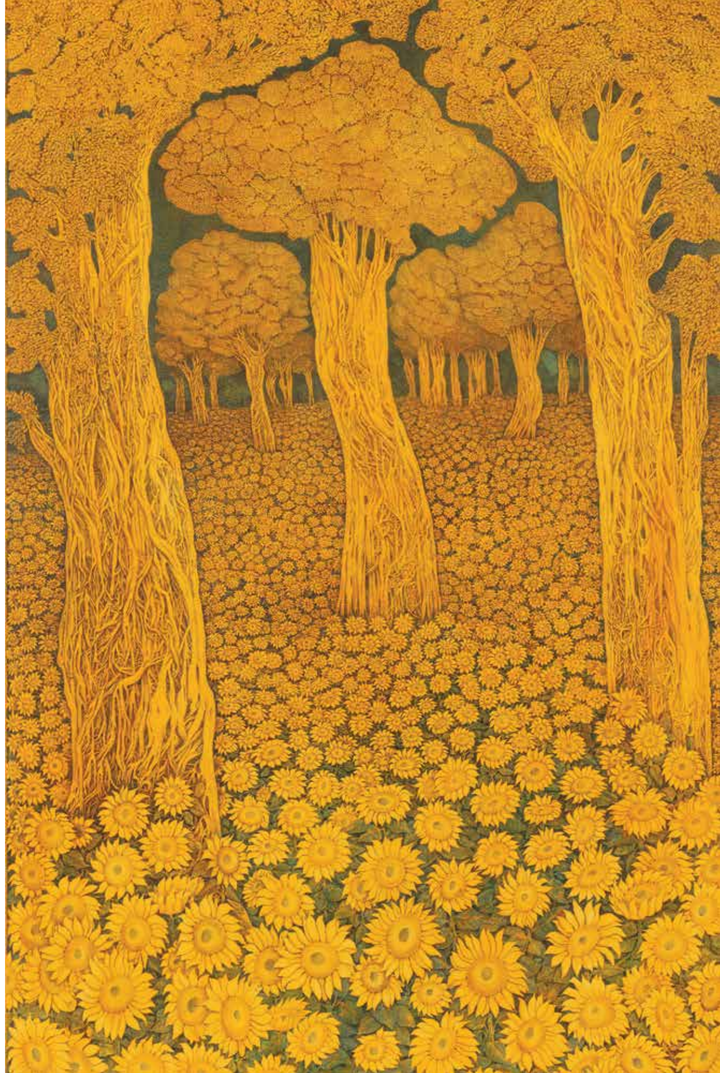


48 x 96" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS





13 x 22" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



48 x 72" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

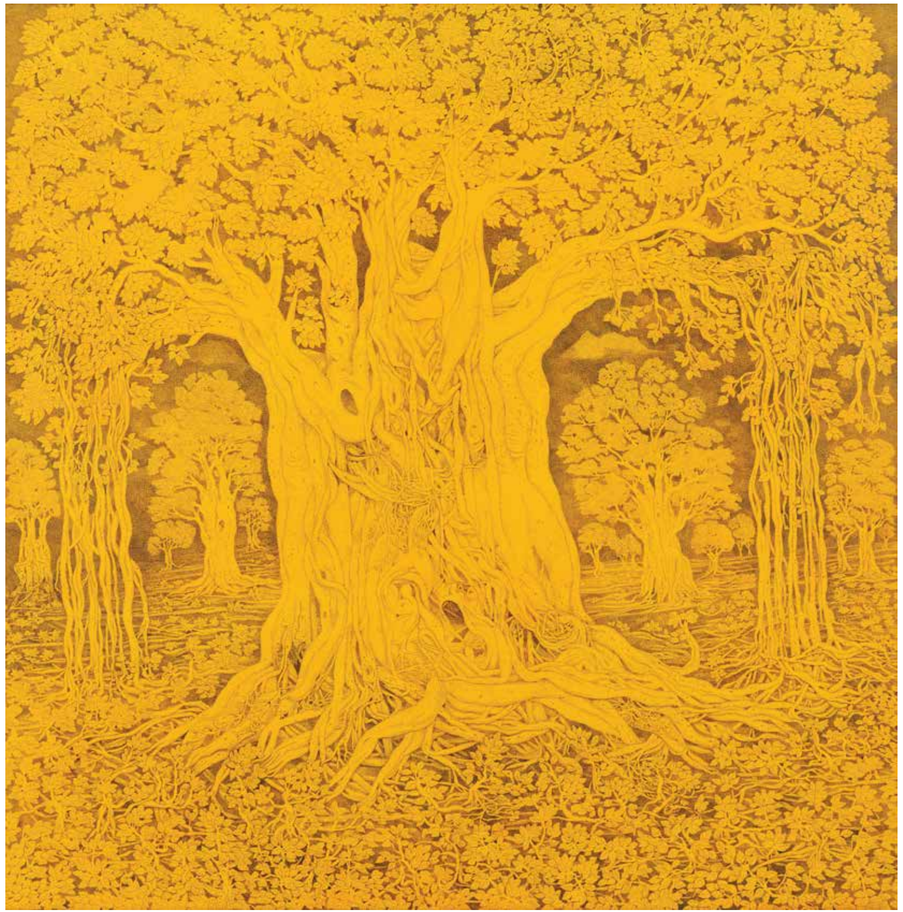
40 x 60" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



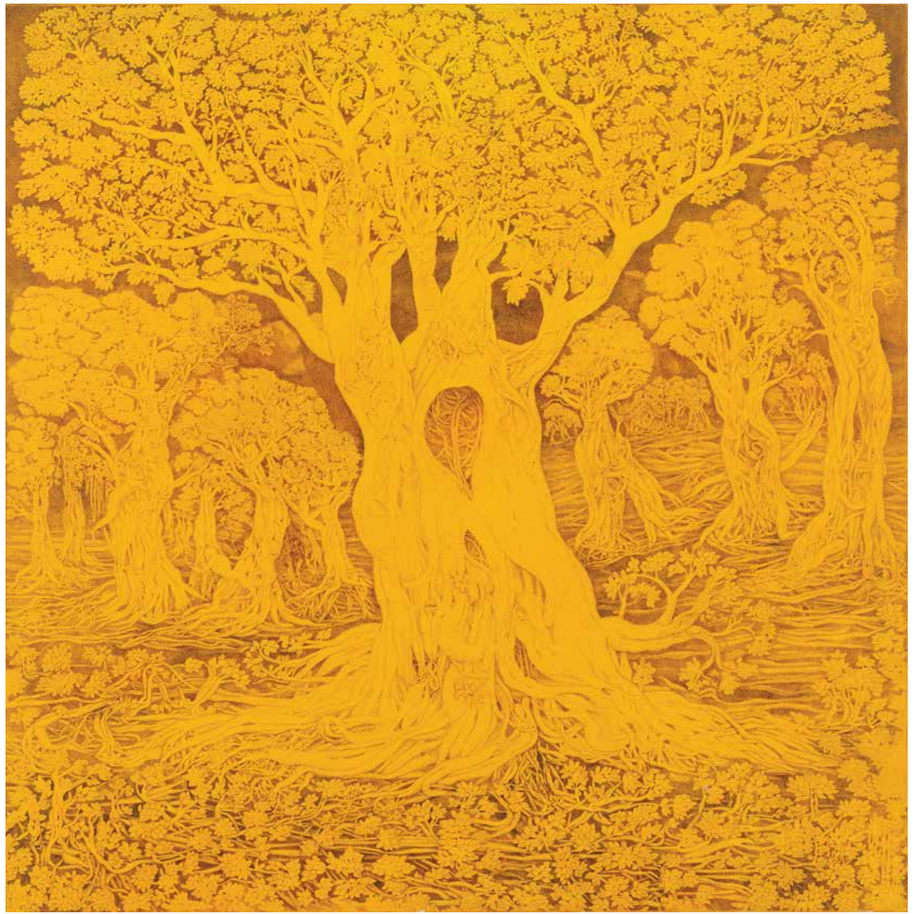


48 x 48" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

48 x 72" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



60 x 60" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



60 x 60" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



42 x 84”
ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

"You see, when I paint, I am lost in the experience that, at its best, is one that transcends time and reality...I believe that for me as an artist the dimensions that I work upon are reflected in my state of mind while I am working. When I am working, in my studio, I am tapping into things that are both personal as well as universal, yes, you could call it total consciousness, but it is a journey that is both within and without...I am deep within my own consciousness and also beyond boundaries."

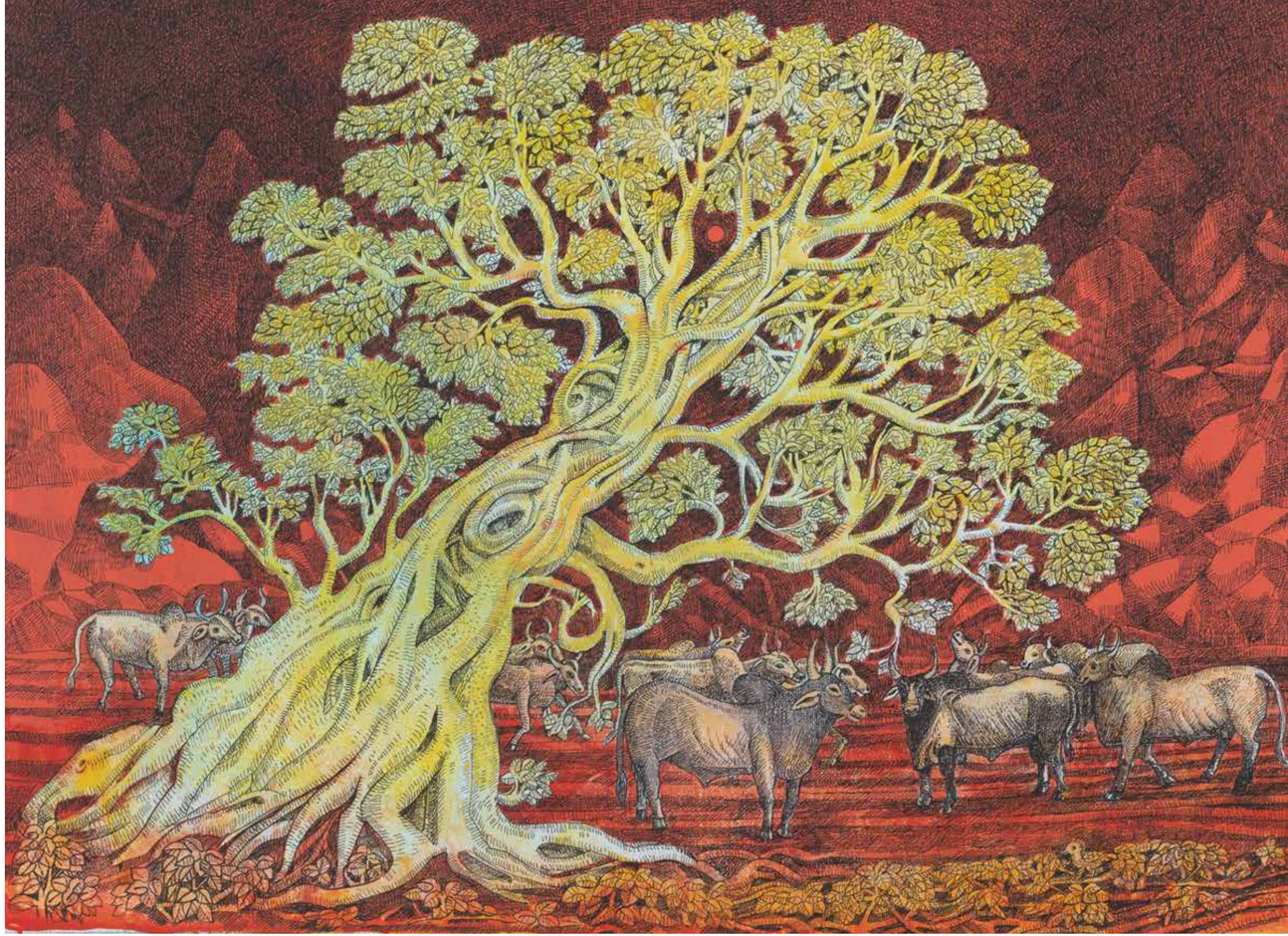
12 x 16" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



48 x 60" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



13 x 18" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas



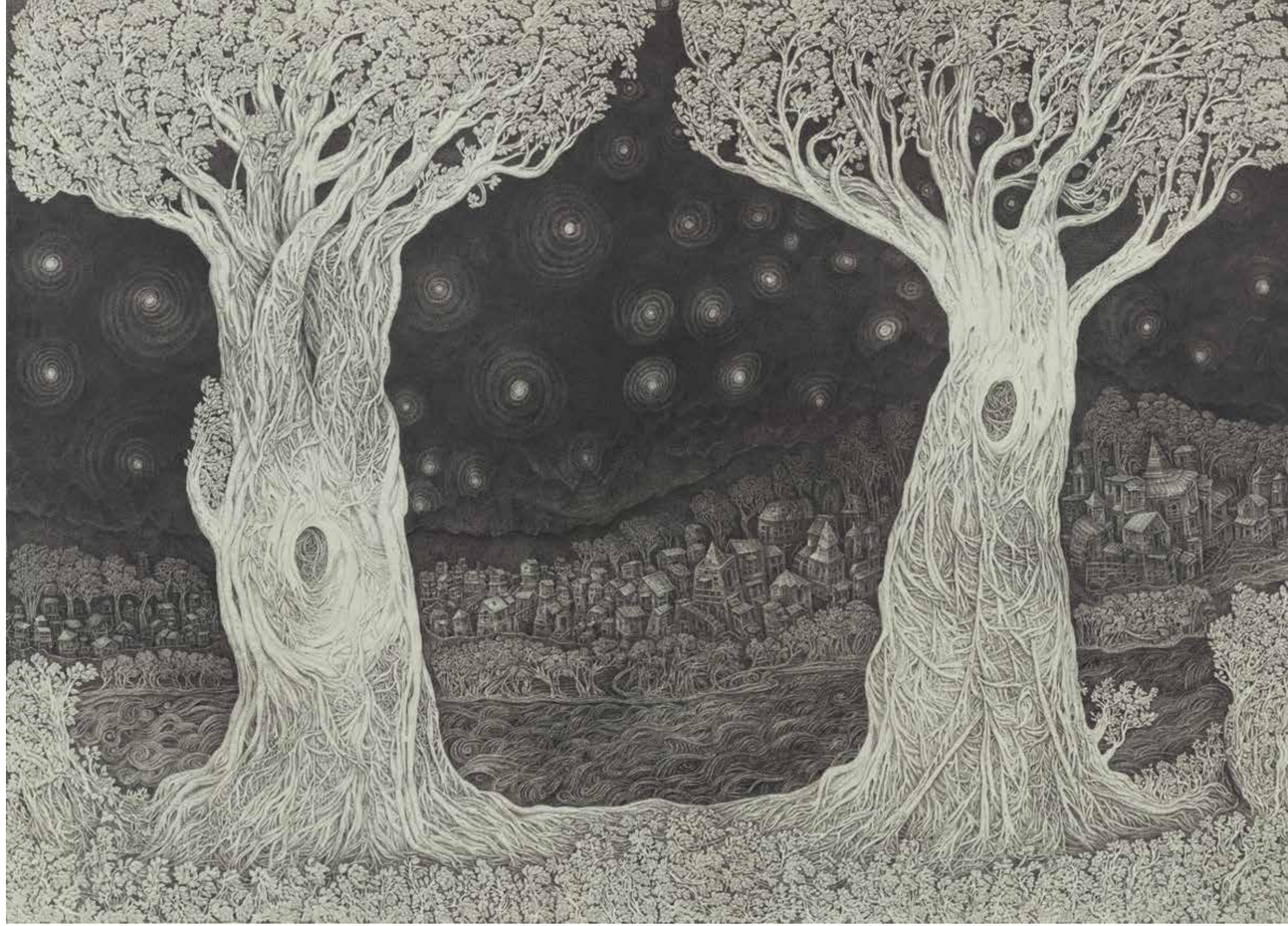
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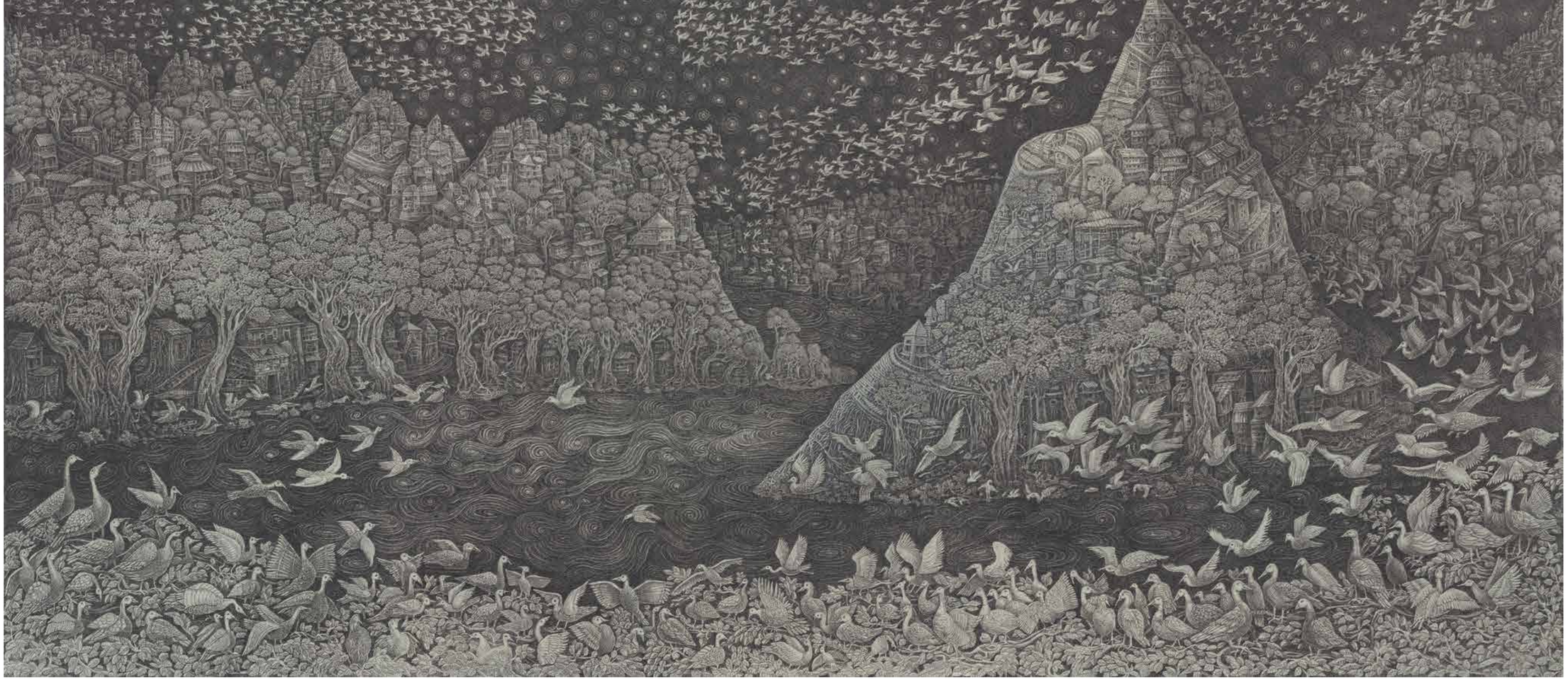
72 x 102" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



79 x 108" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

78 x 108" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



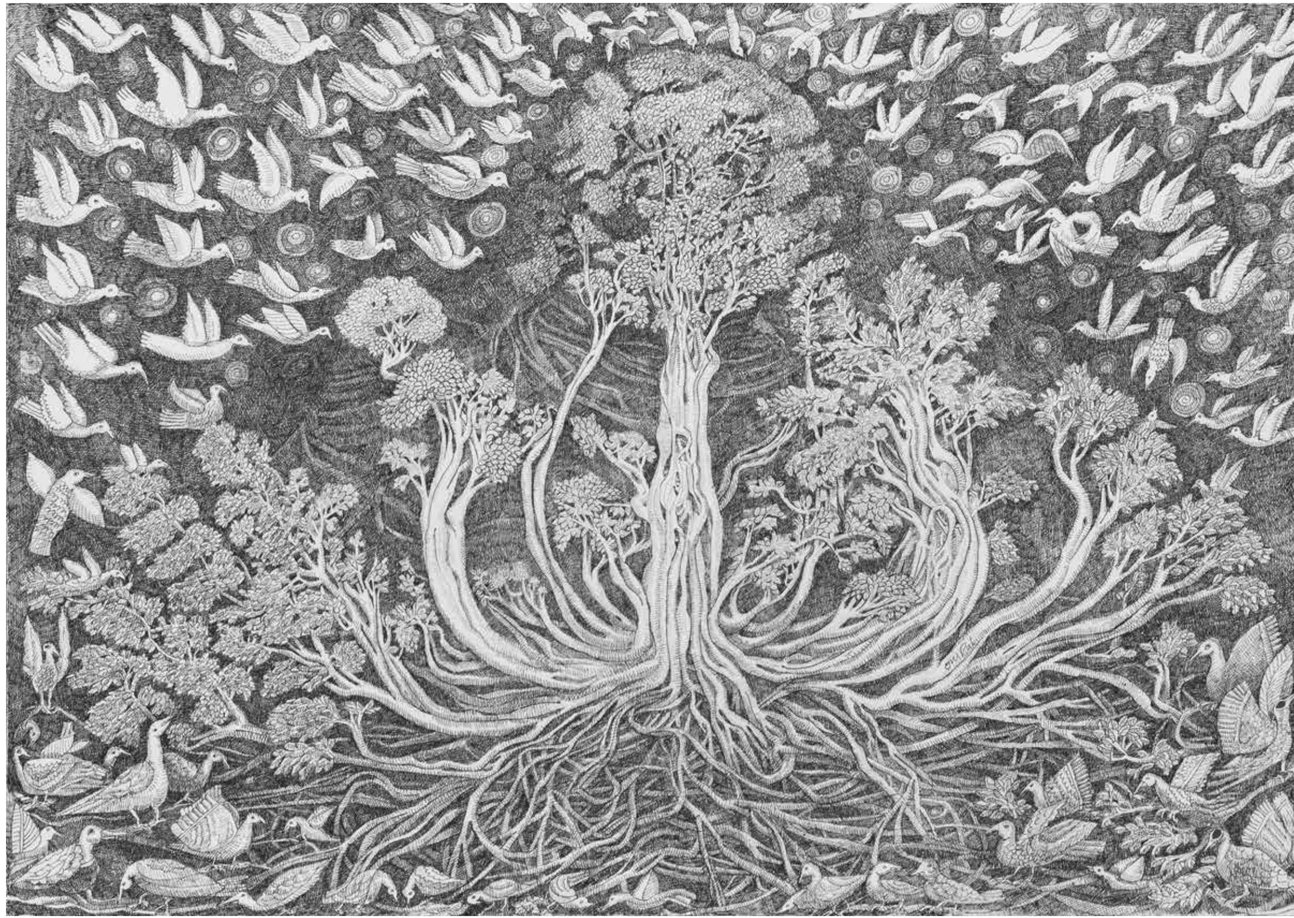


42 x 96" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

20 x 28" acrylic, pen and ink on canvas

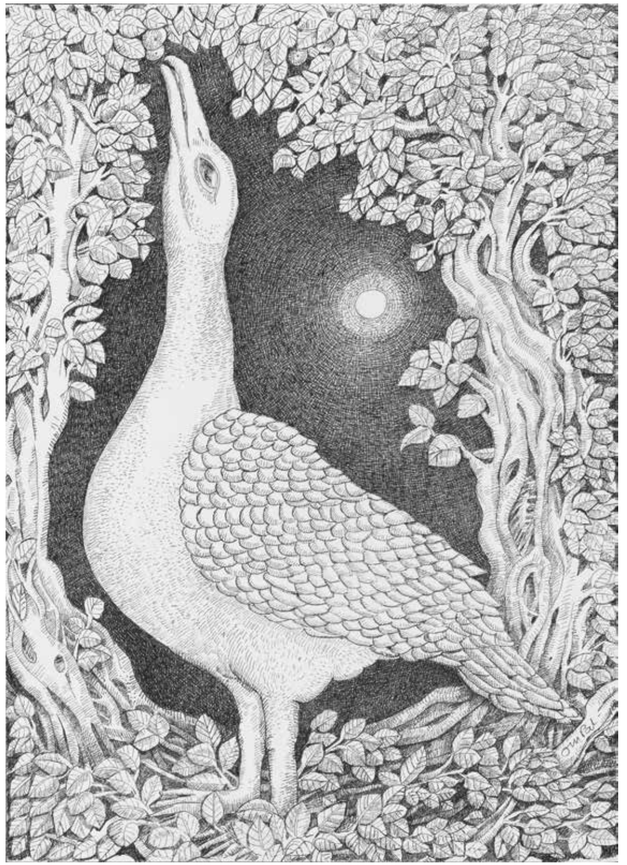


16 x 24" PEN AND INK ON PAPER

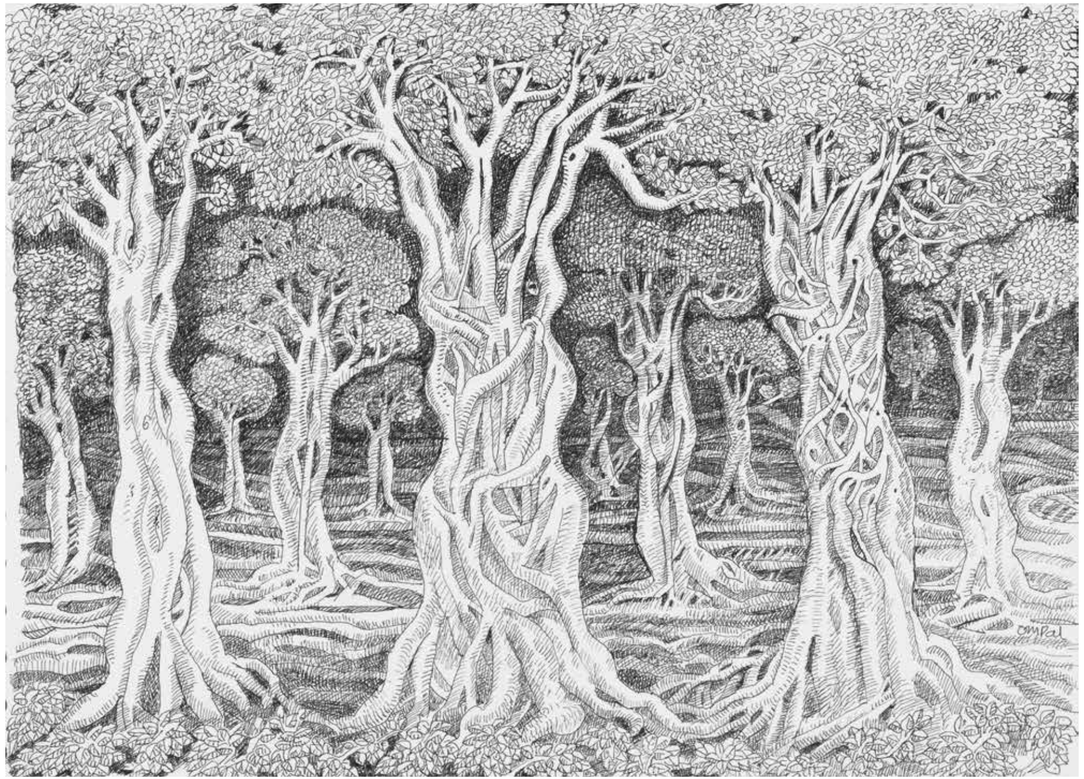




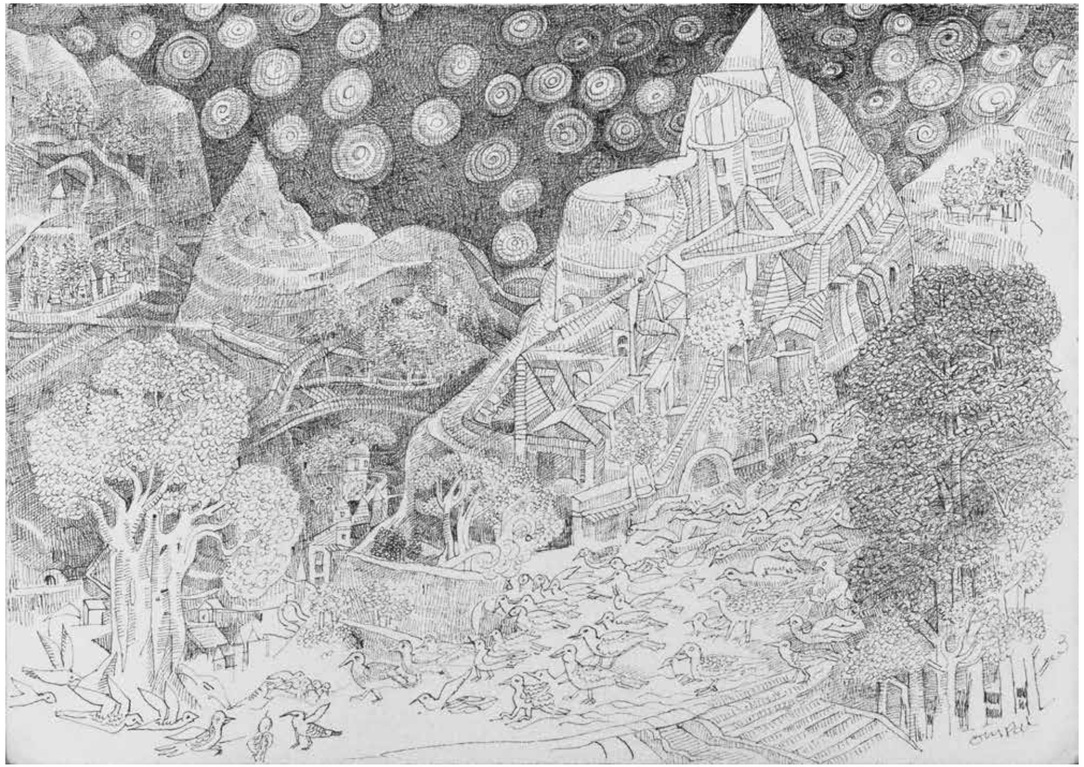
11 x 9" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



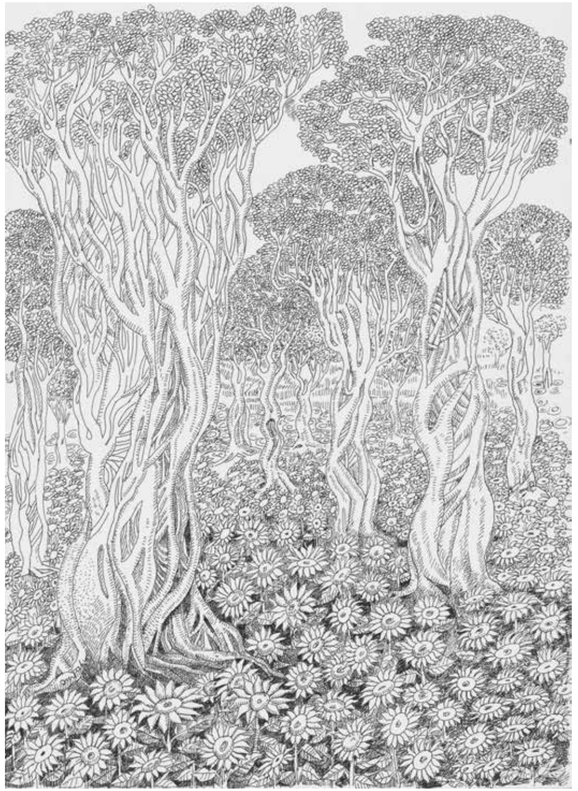
12 x 17" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



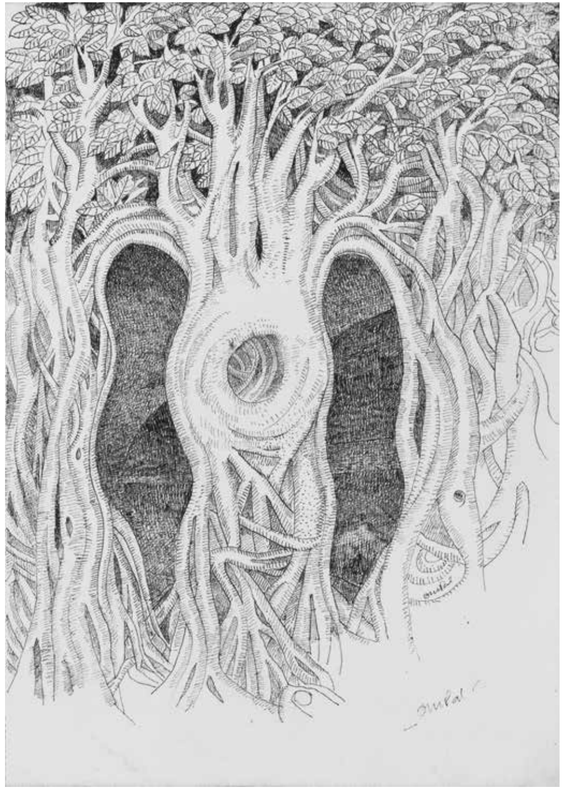
6 x 12" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



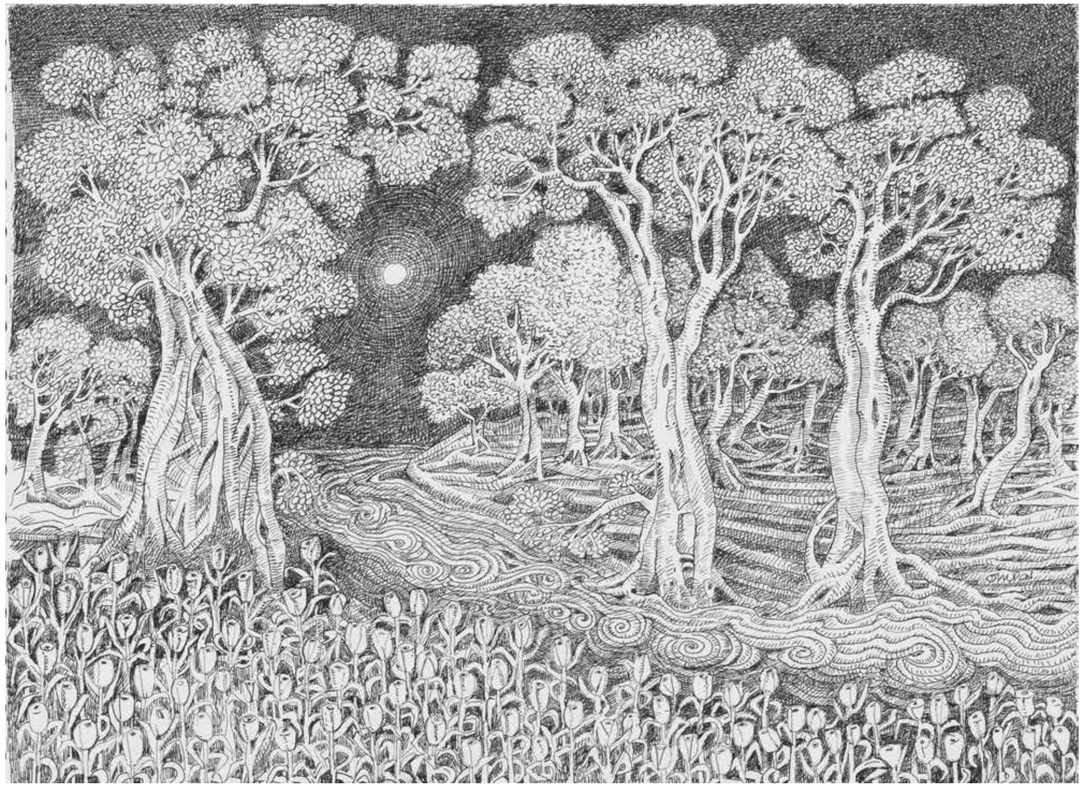
6 x 12" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



9 x 12" pen and ink on paper



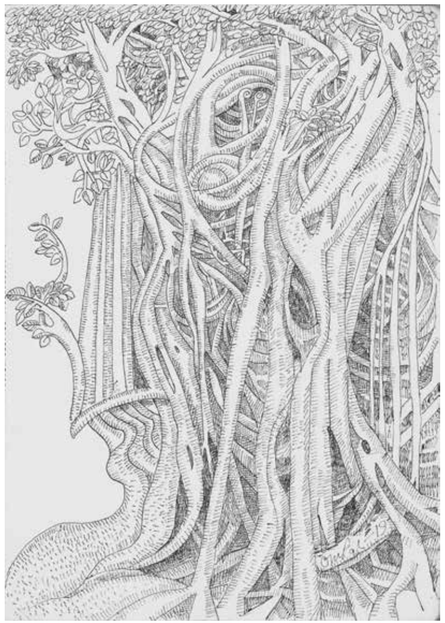
9 x 12" pen and ink on paper



9 x 12" pen and ink on paper



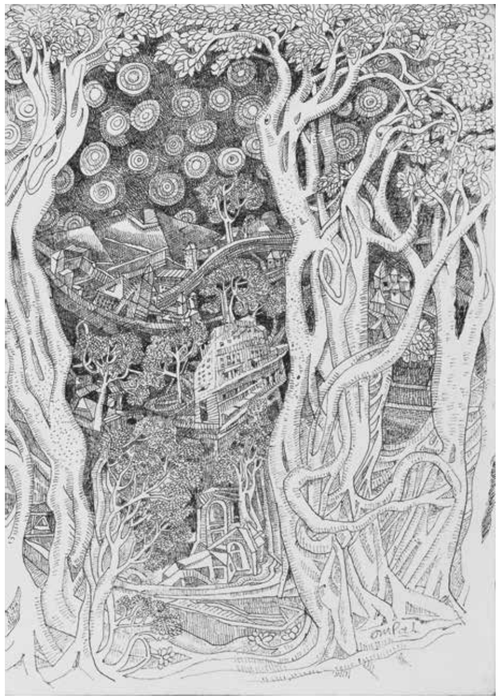
9 x 12" pen and ink on paper



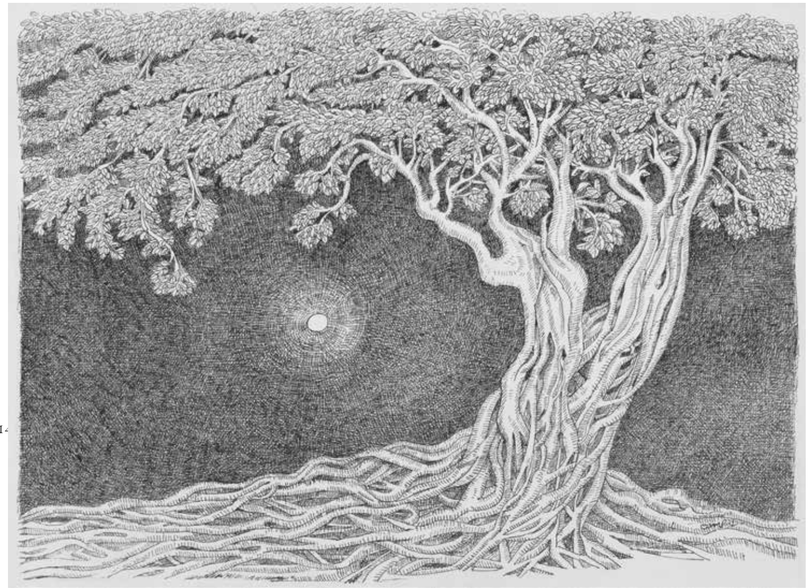
9 x 12" pen and ink on paper



11 x 14" pen and ink on paper



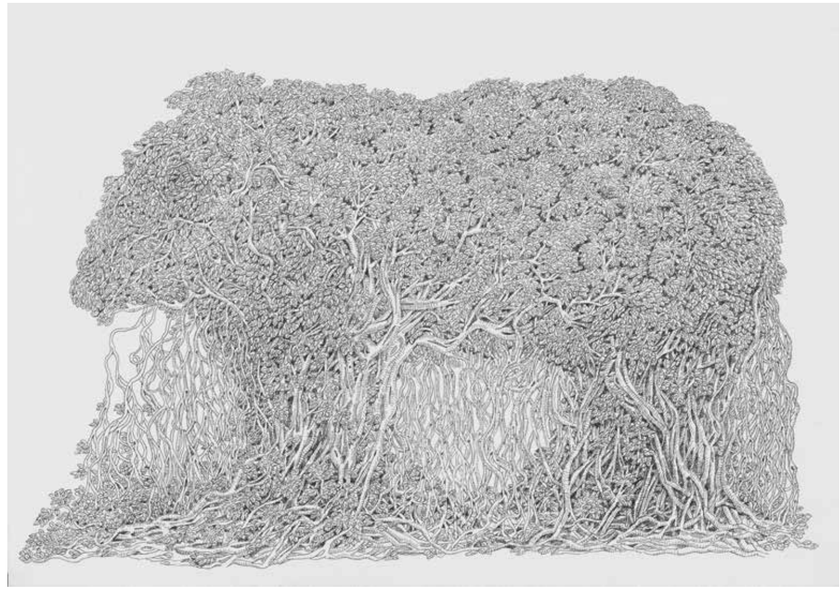
9 x 12" pen and ink on paper



10 x 14" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



12 x 17" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



12 x 17" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



10 x 10" ETCHING



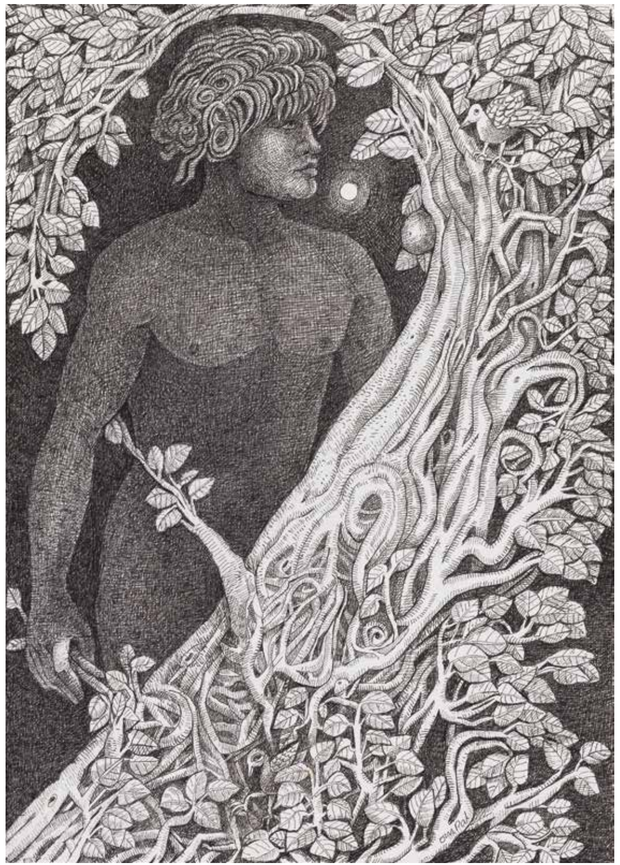
19 x 19" ETCHING

12 x 16" WATERCOLOUR, PEN, AND ACRYLIC INK ON PAPER





14 x 11"
WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



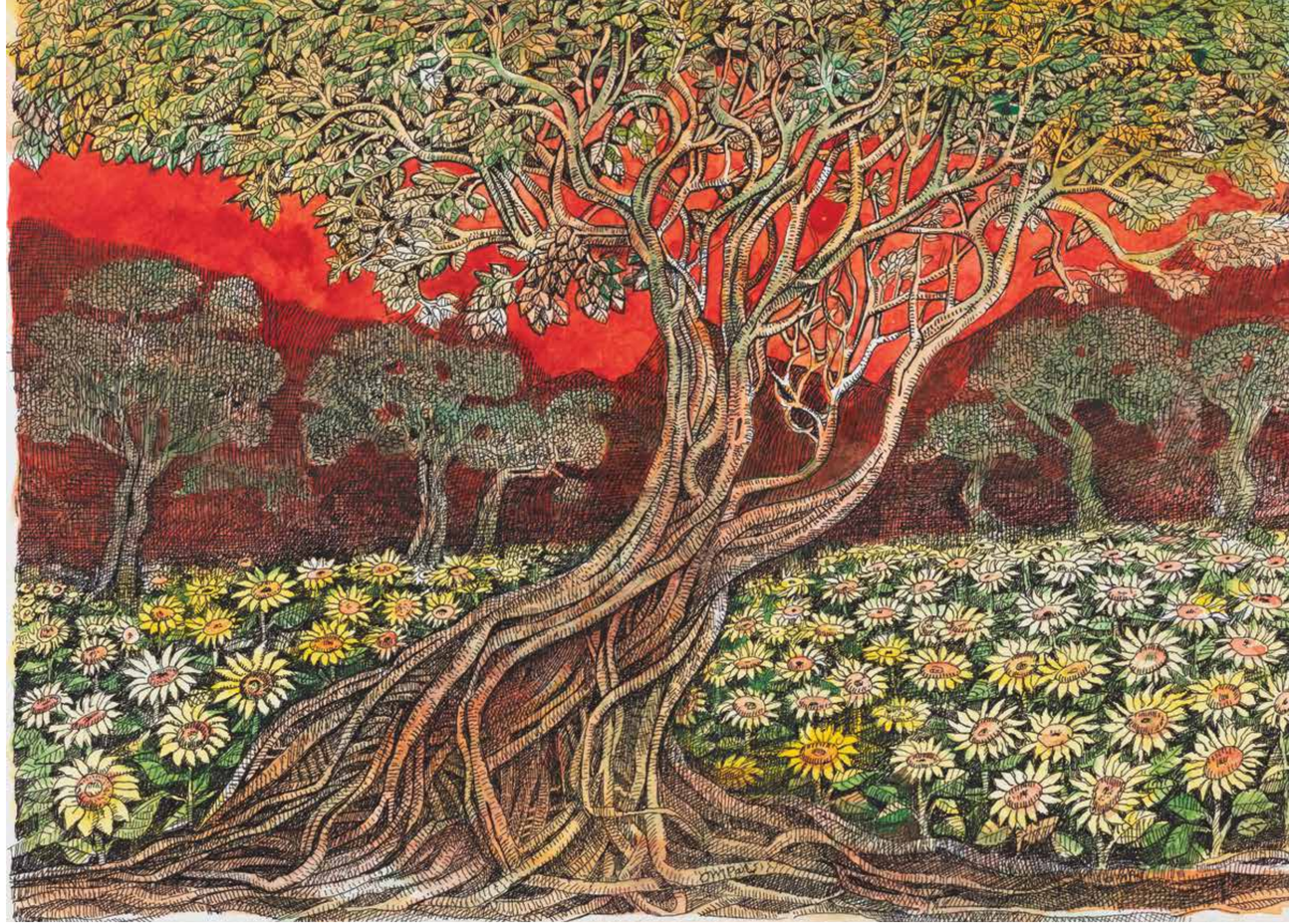
17 x 12" PEN AND INK ON PAPER

11 x 13" WATERCOLOUR, ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



158

9 x 12" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



11 x 18" WATERCOLOUR, ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON PAPER





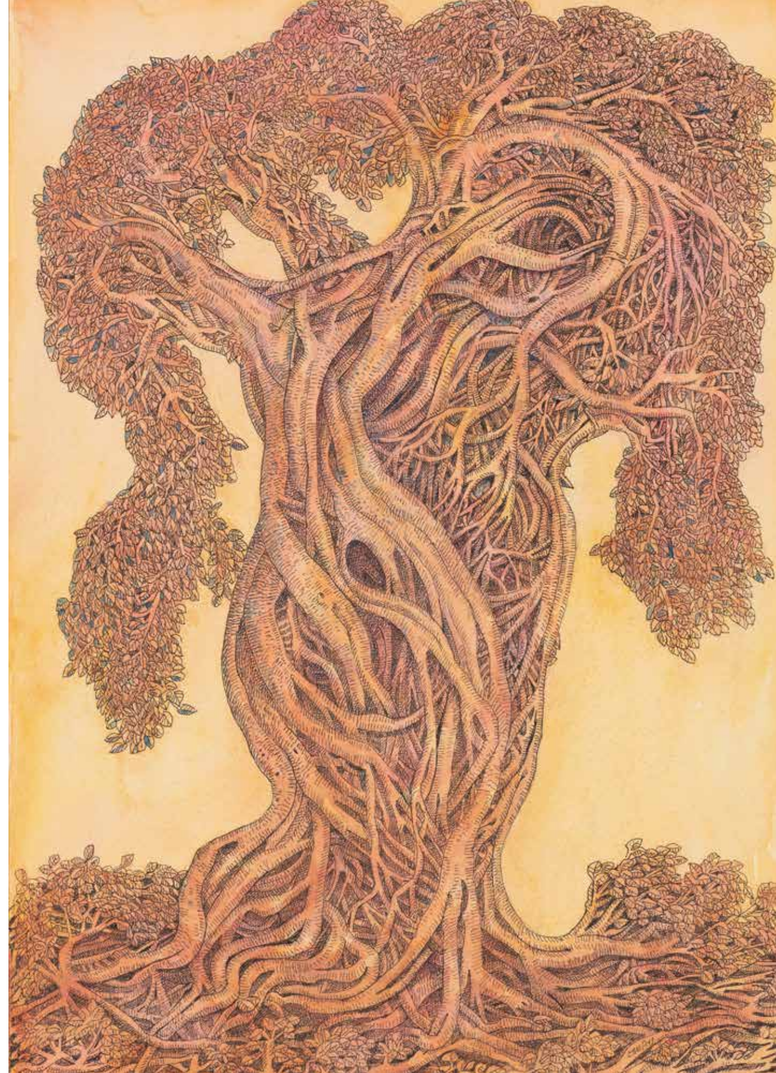
16 x 13" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



12 x 17" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



16 x 13" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



17 x 12"
WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



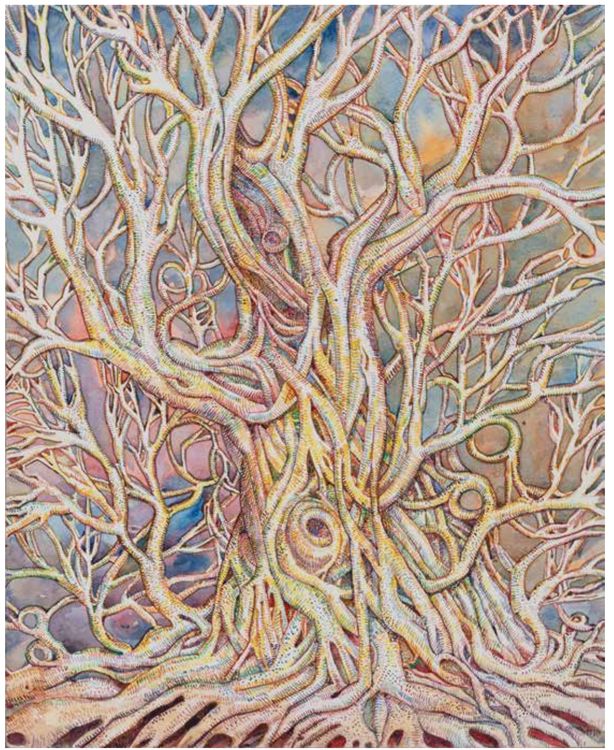
13 x 16" watercolour, pen and ink on paper

(right) 13 x 16" watercolour, pen and ink on paper

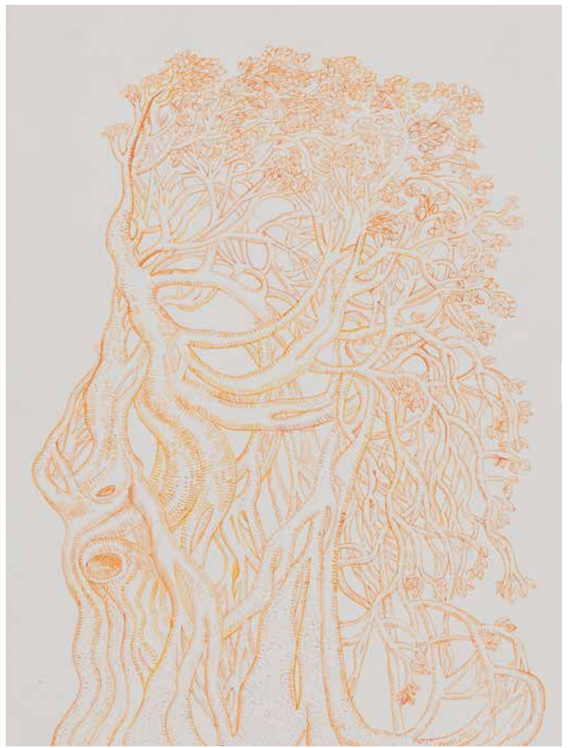




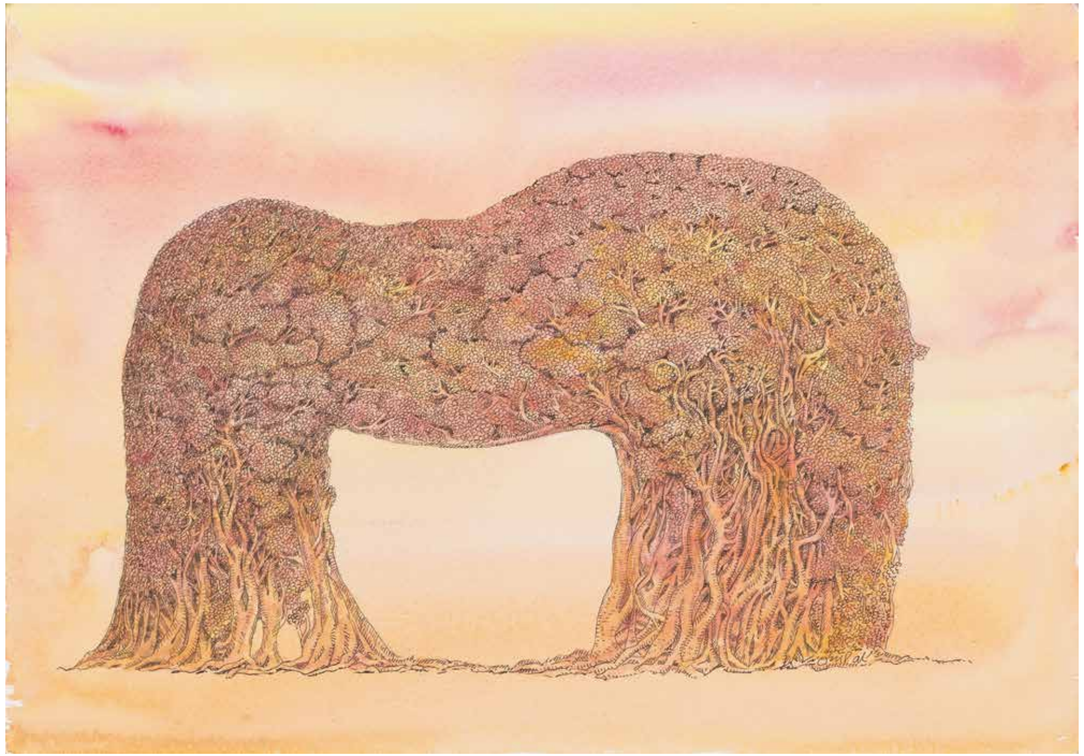
16 x 13" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



16 x 13" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



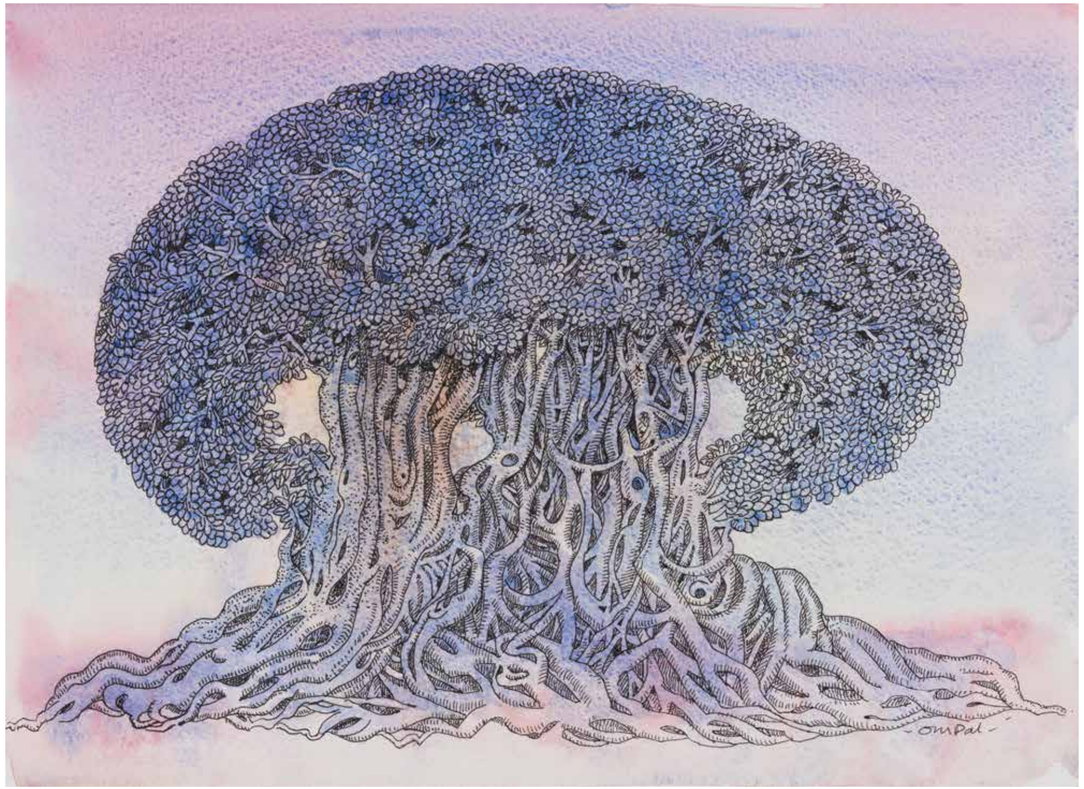
14 x 11" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



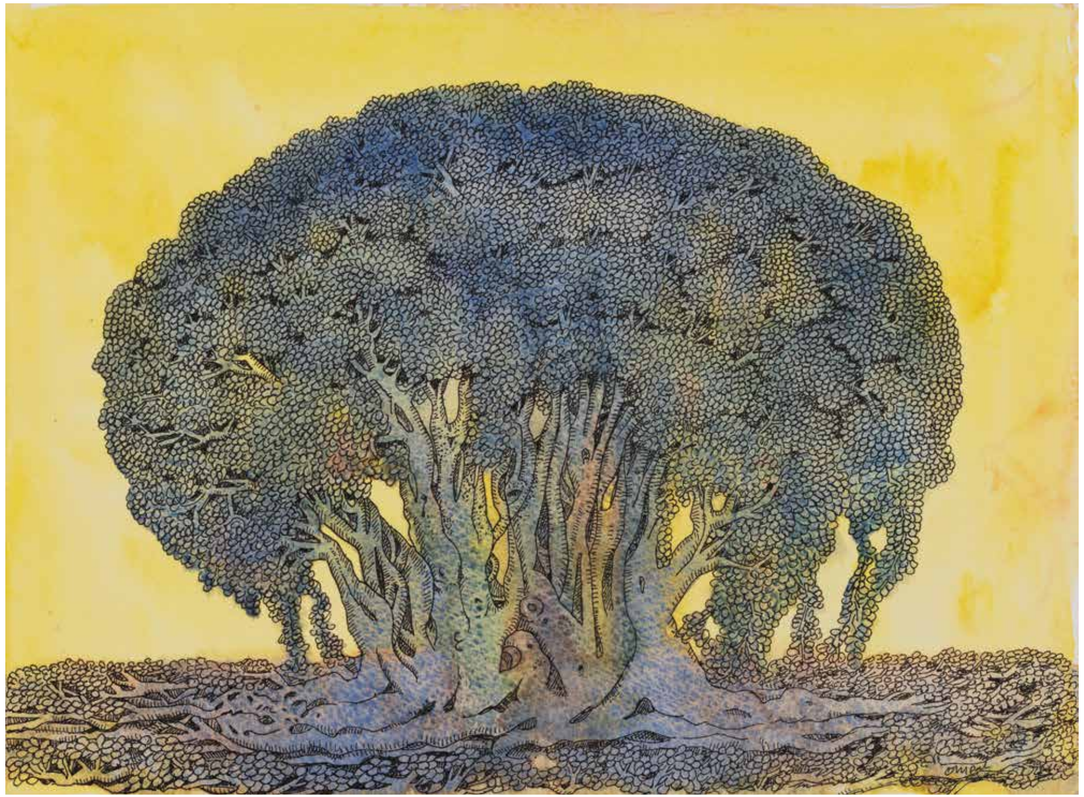
12 x 17" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



13 x 16" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



9 x 11" watercolour, pen and ink on paper



9 x 11" watercolour, pen and ink on paper



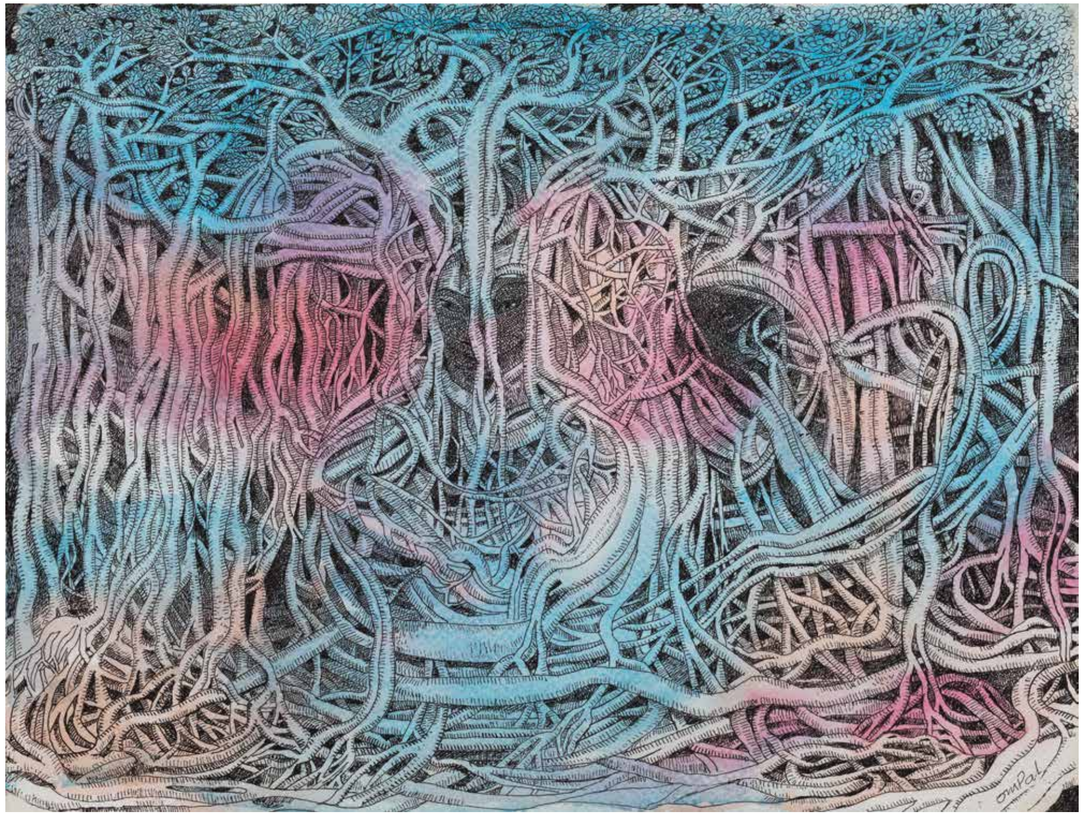
10 x 12”
WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



7 x 9”
WATRECOLOR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



8 x 9" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



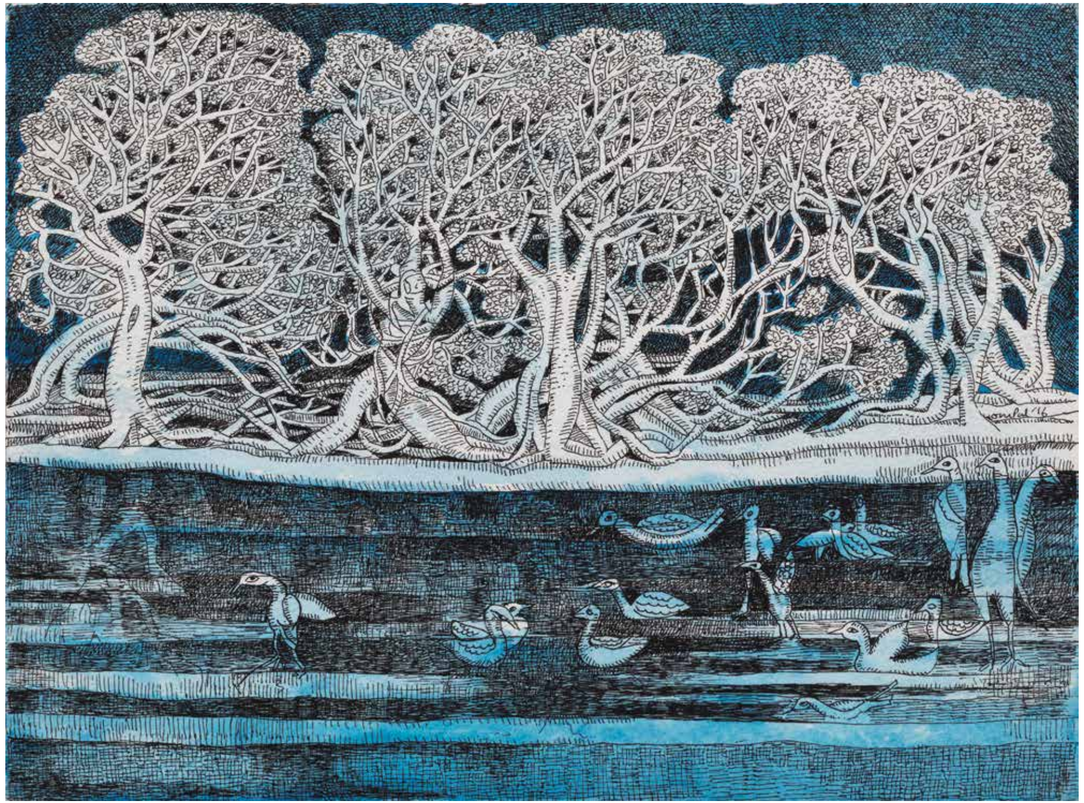
10 x 13" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



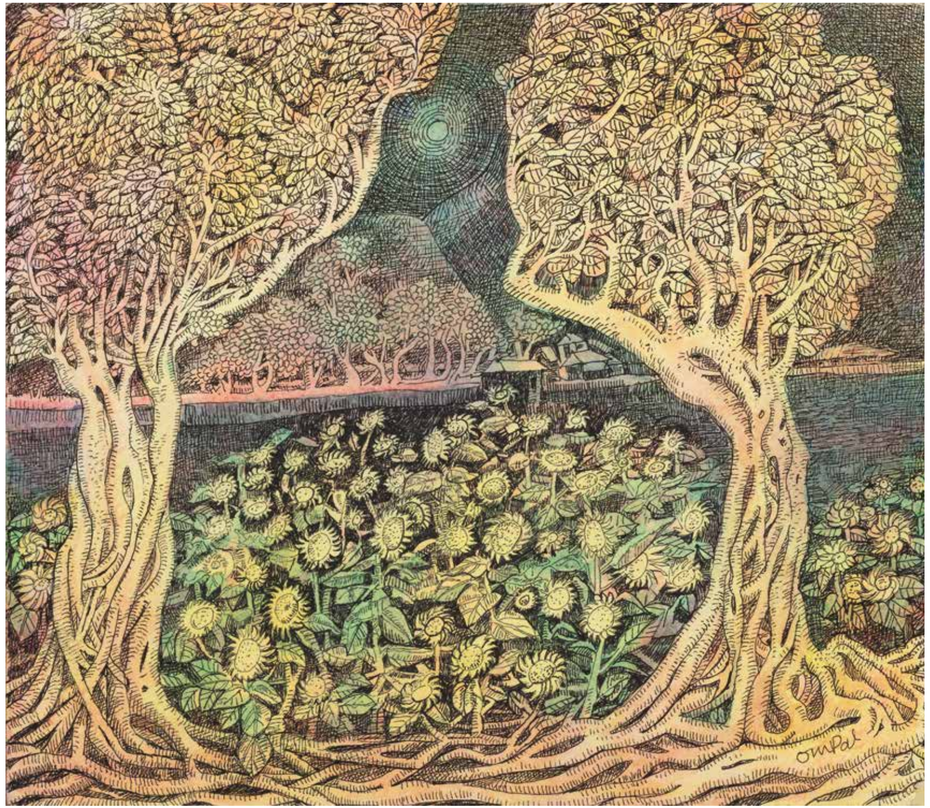
9 x 11" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



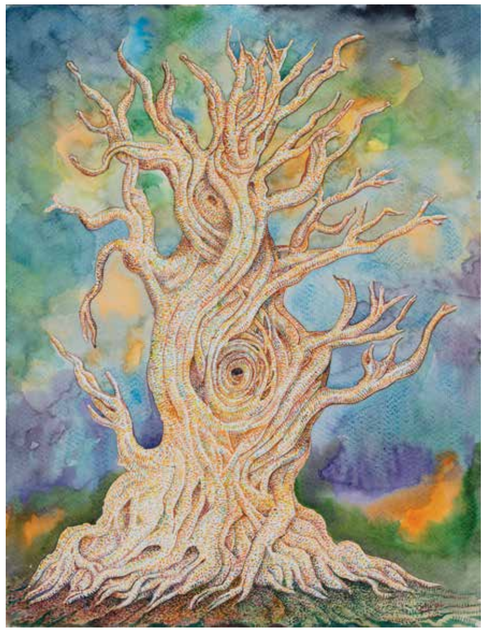
10 x 12" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



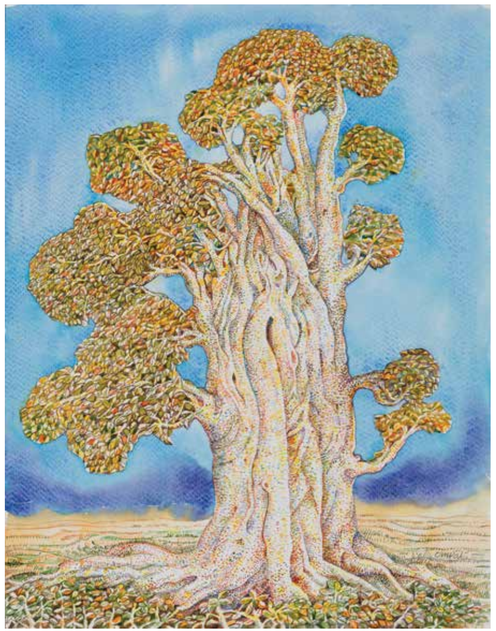
7 x 9" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



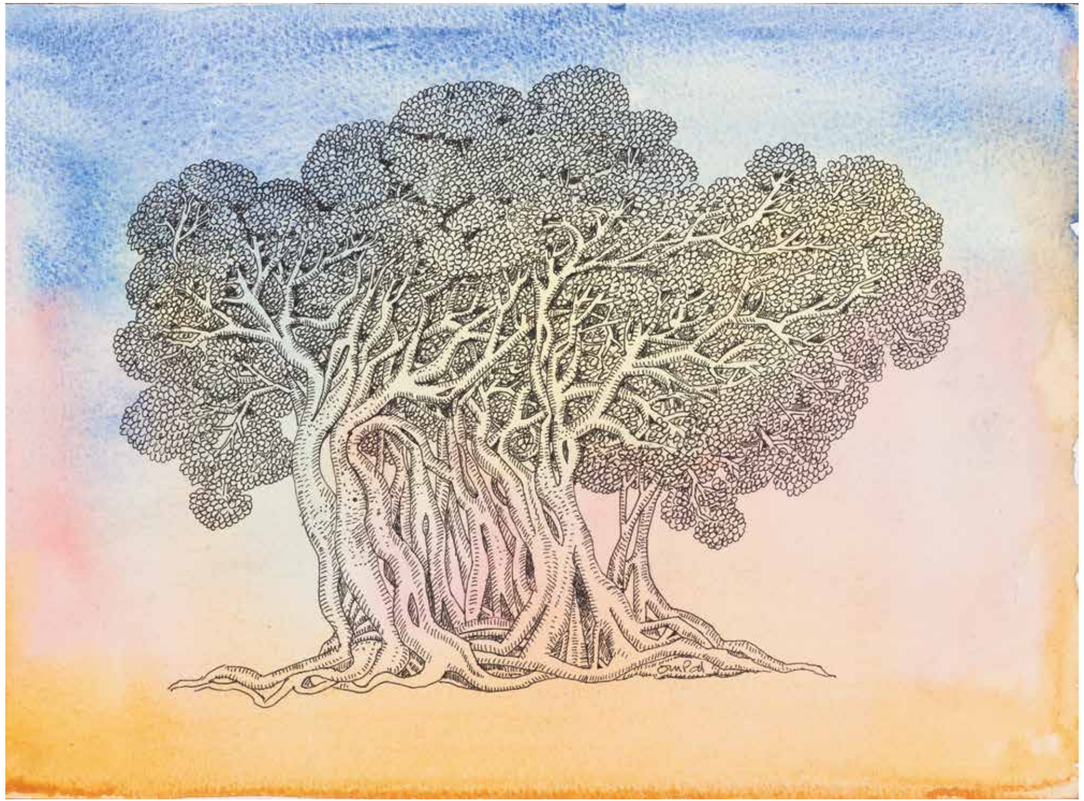
8 x 9" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



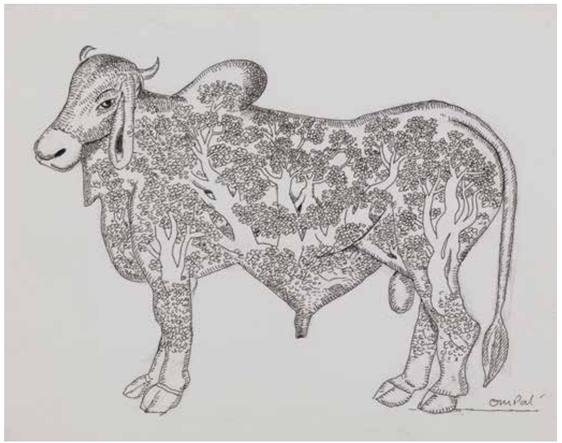
11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



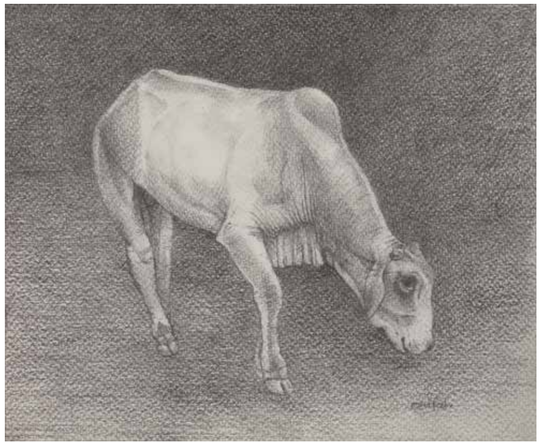
14 x 11" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



9 x 11" WATERCOLOUR, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



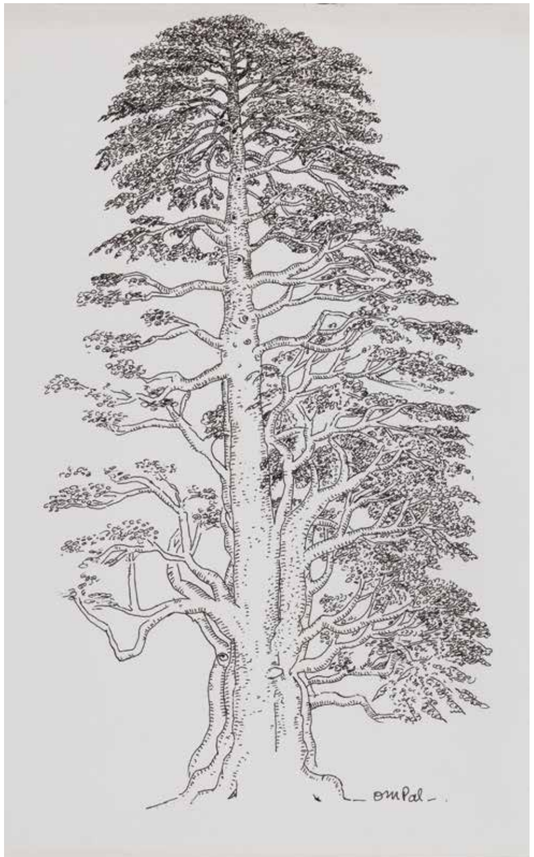
10 x 7" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



9 x10" PENCIL ON PAPER



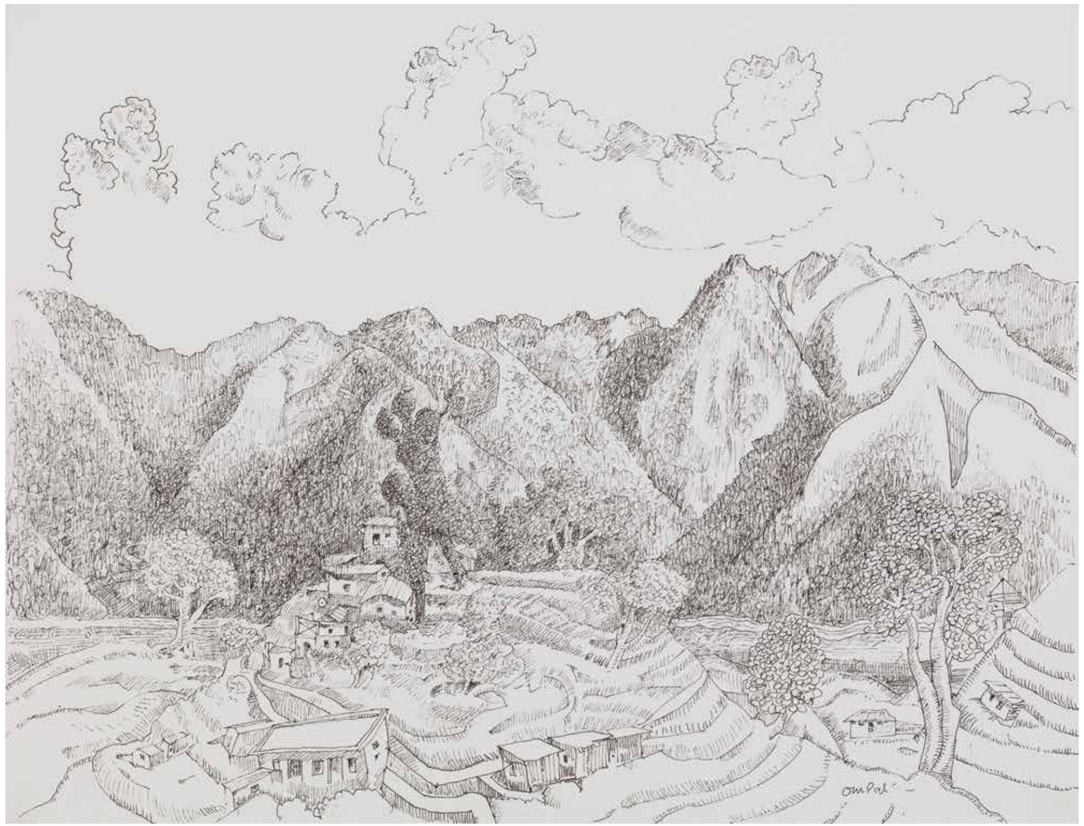
12 x 17" WATERCOLOUR, ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON PAPER



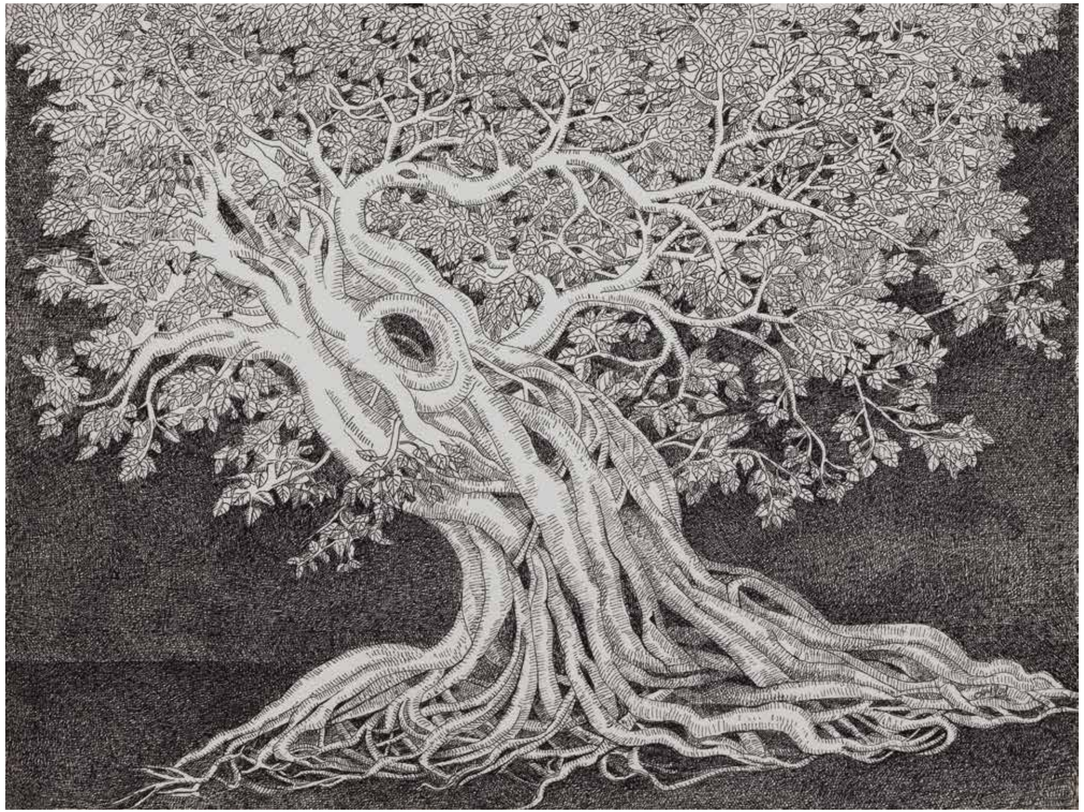
10 x 7" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



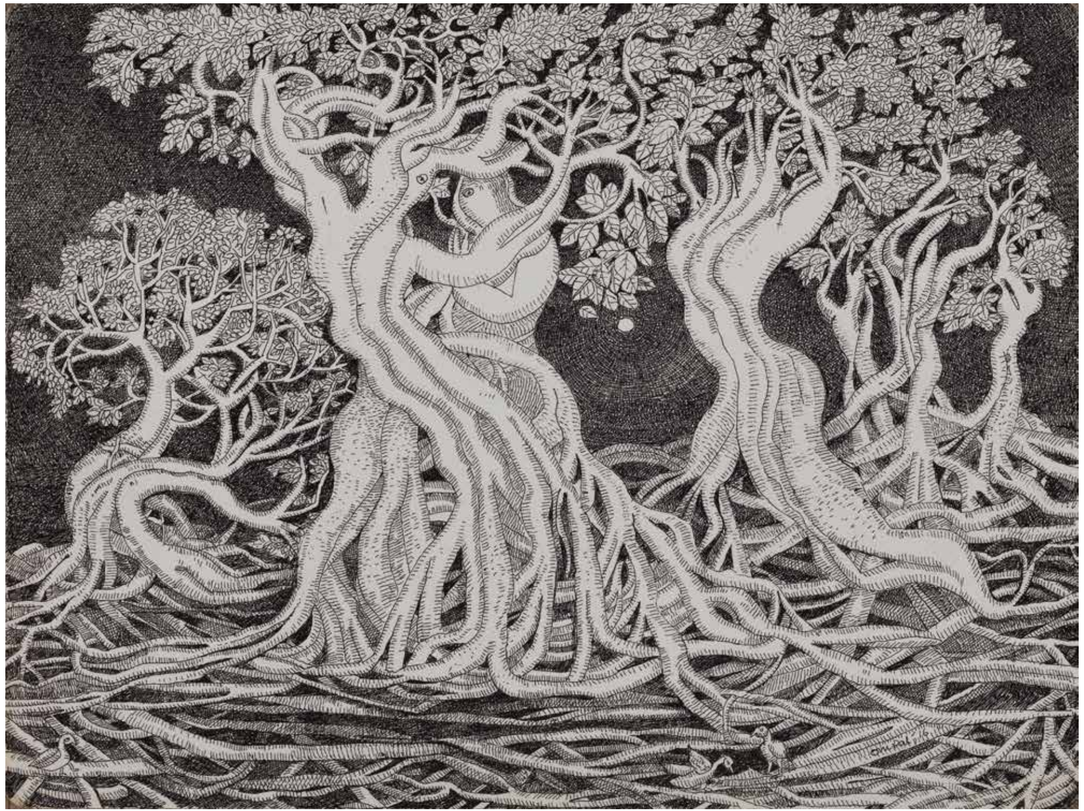
10 x 13" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



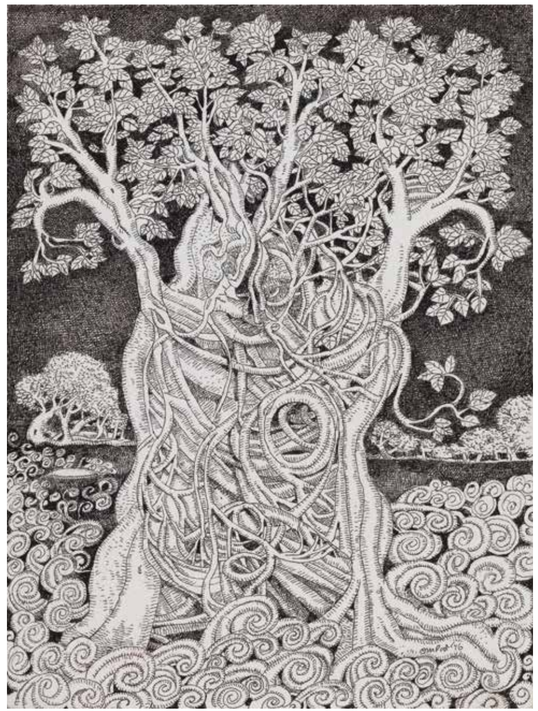
11 x 14" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



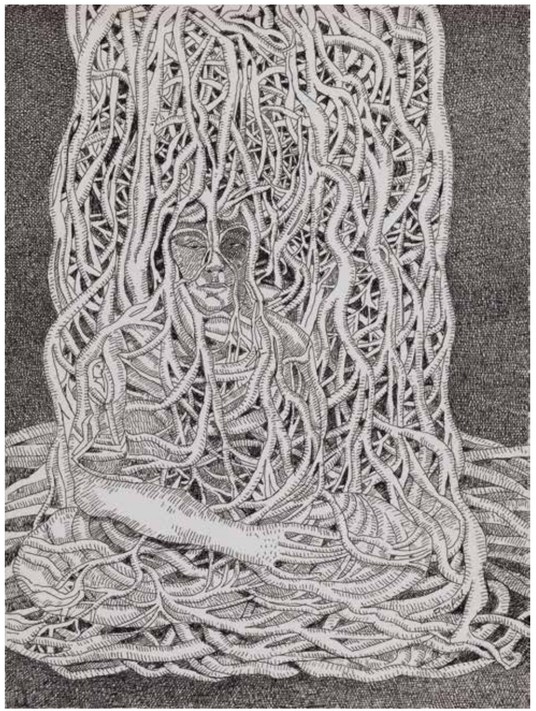
10 x 13" pen and ink on paper



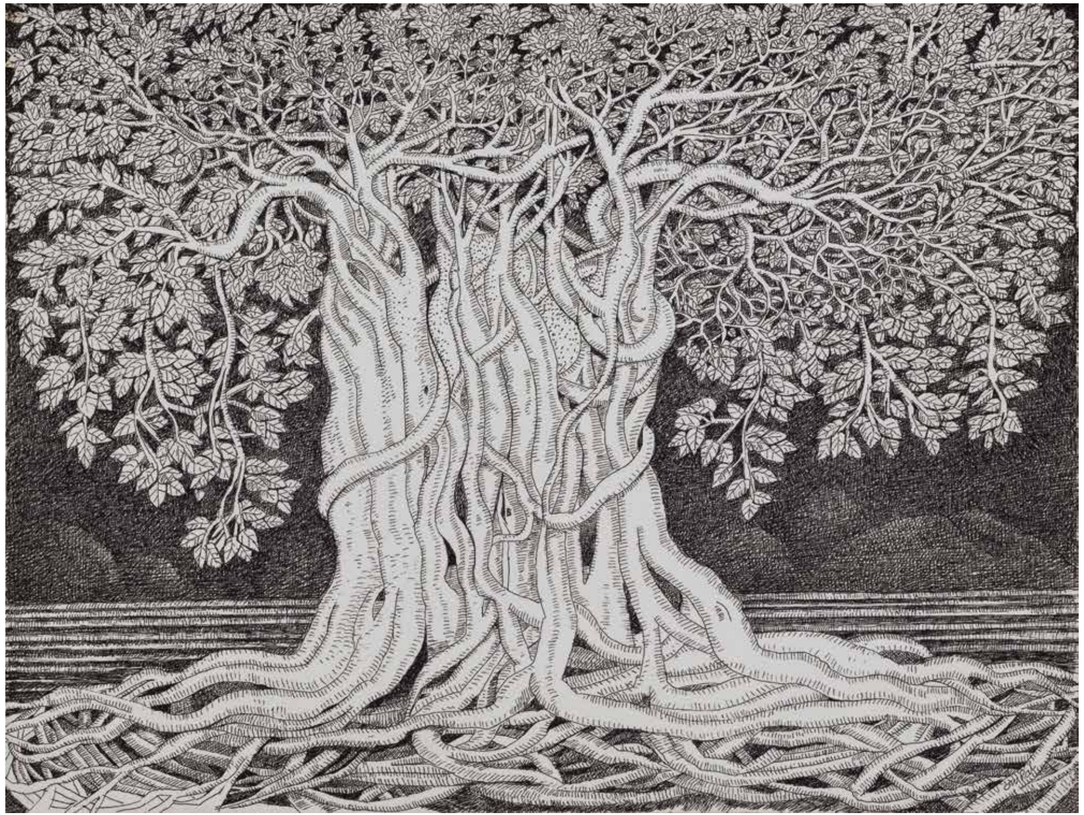
14 x 11" pen and ink on paper



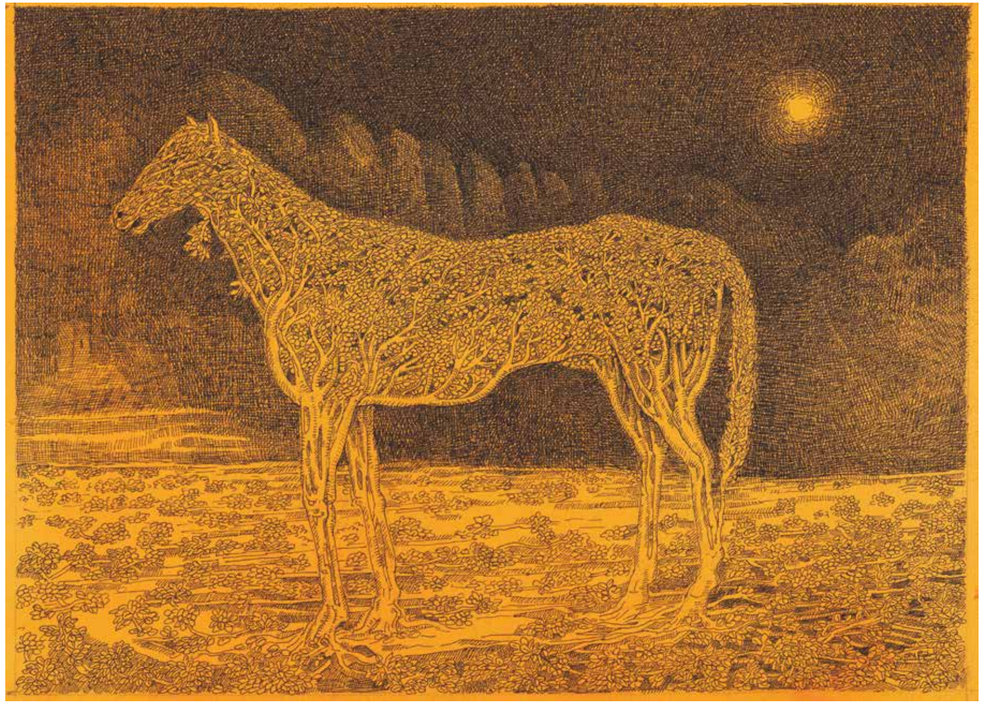
9 x 7" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



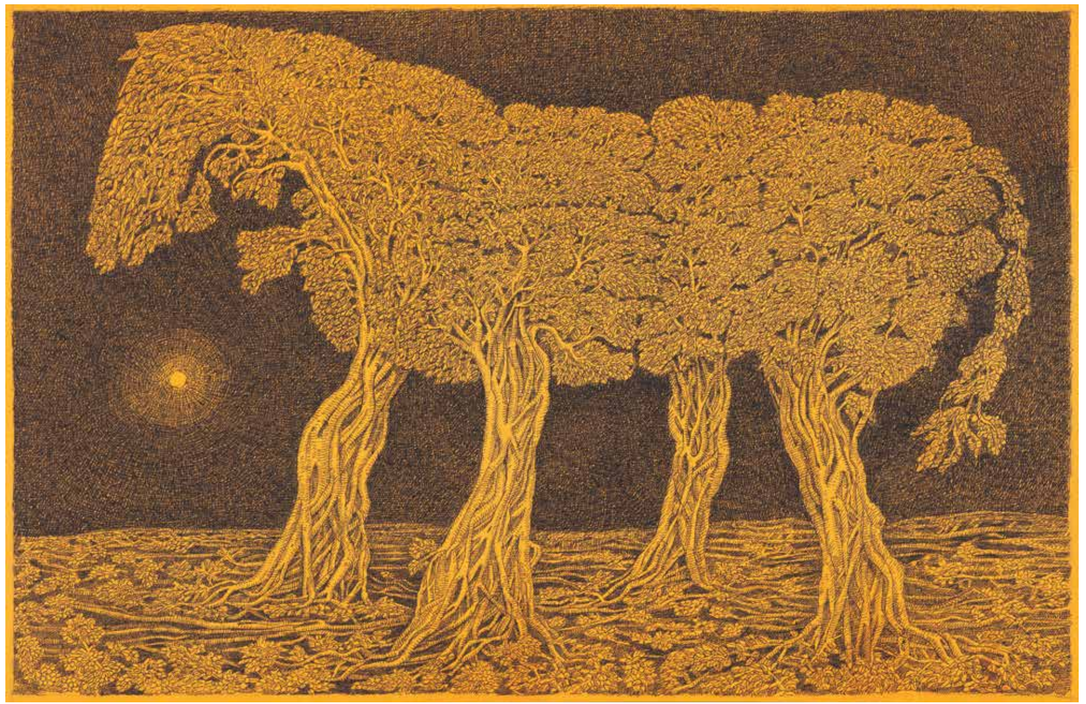
9 x 7" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



13 x 10" PEN AND INK ON PAPER



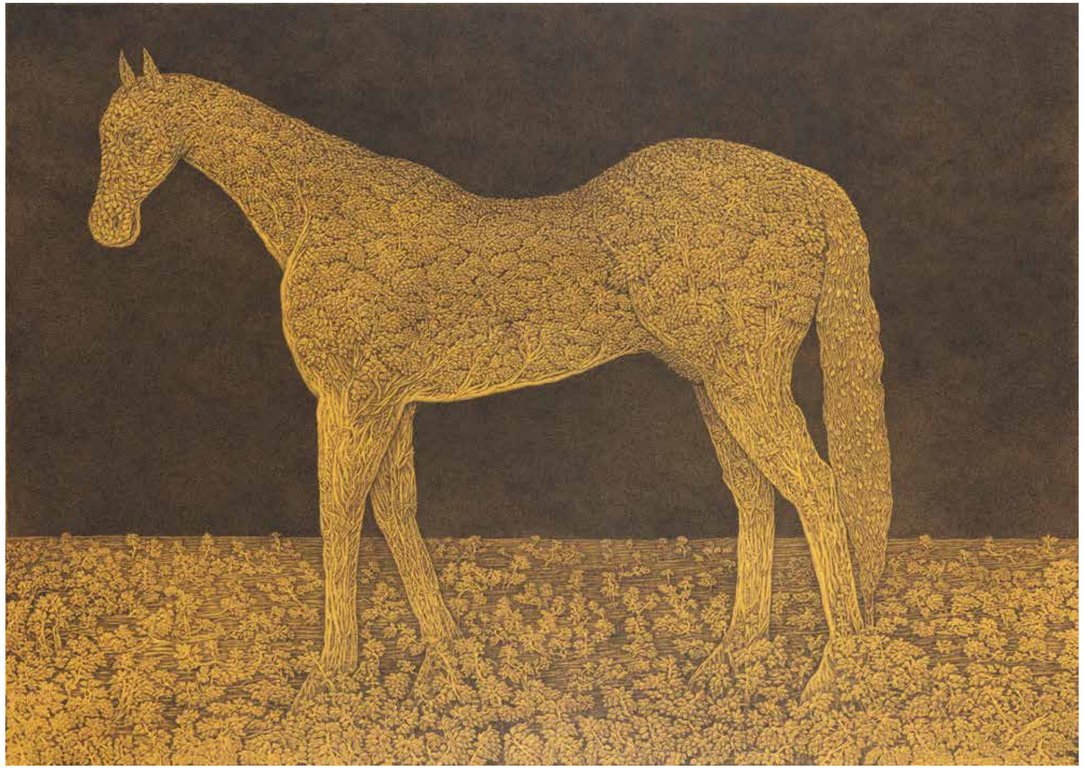
10 x 14" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



13 x 20" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



36 x 48" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS



60 x 84" ACRYLIC, PEN AND INK ON CANVAS

23 x 30" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER





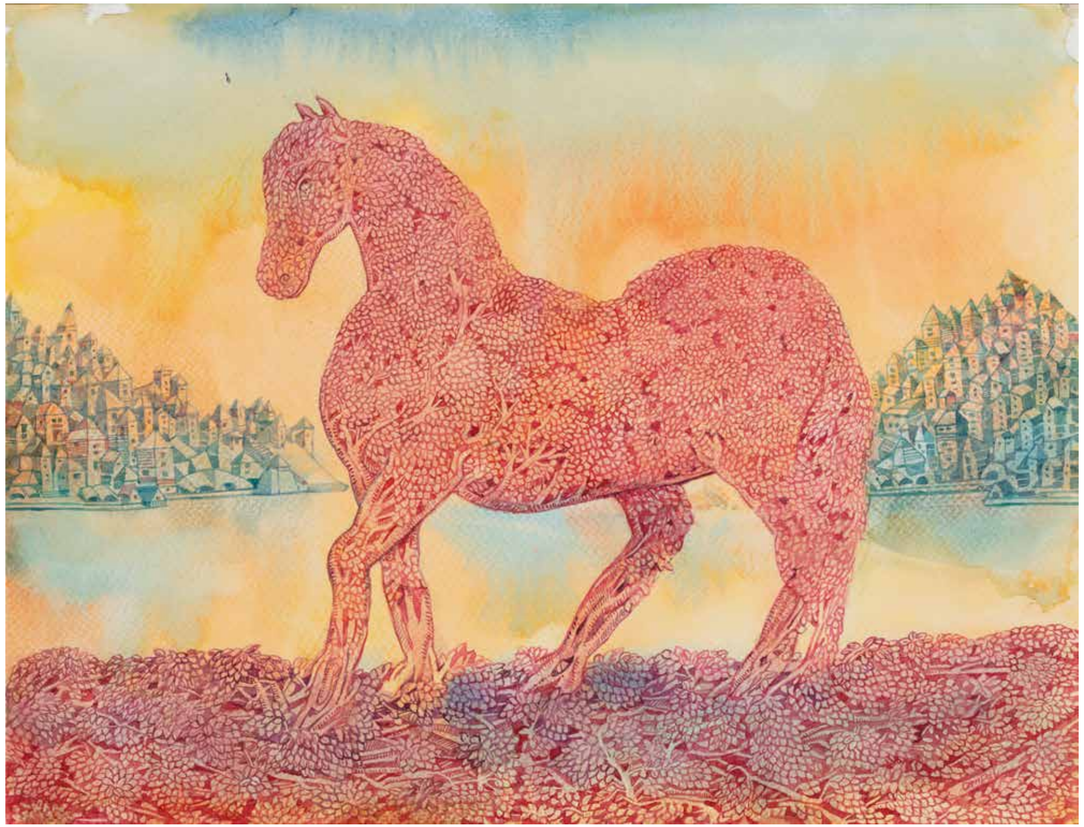
23 x 30”
WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER

16 x 13”
WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER





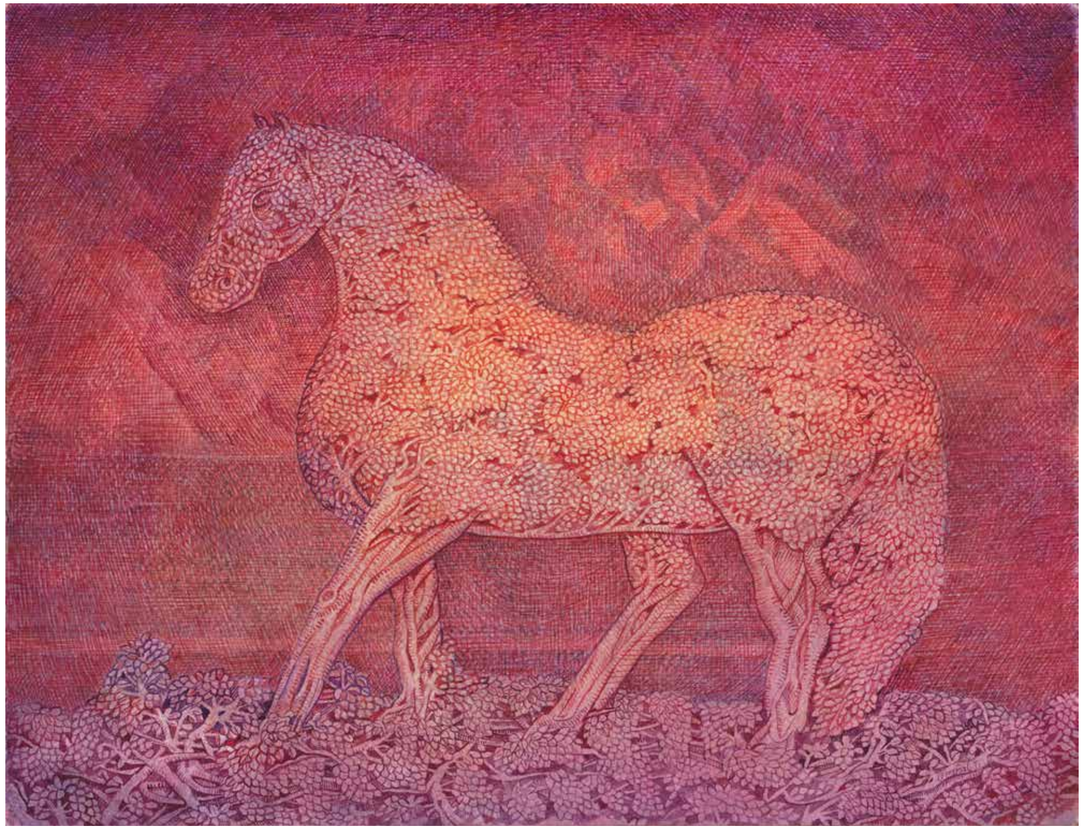
11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER



11 x 14" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER

17 x 23" WATERCOLOUR ON PAPER

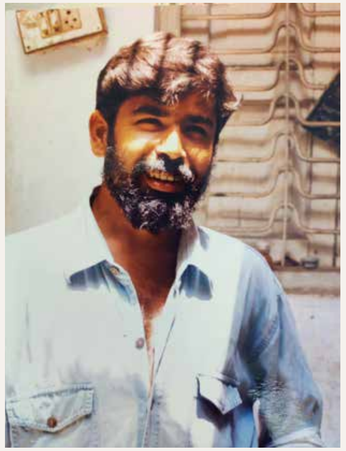




62 x 35 x 2”
ACRYLIC, PEN AND ACRYLIC INK ON WOOD







Early work of a tree trunk (1984), and the painter in younger days.

Black Cube is an alternative art gallery that focuses on working closely with artists and showcasing their work in the right contextual settings. Devoid of a physical white cube space, the model aims to exhibit artists' practices in interesting and unconventional spaces, which does justice to the artist's vision and increases accessibility to audiences. Founded by Sanya Malik, Black Cube is dedicated to the exploration and redefinition of artistic practices in our contemporary era. Adopting a global perspective, Black Cube deftly navigates the intricate terrain of art, transcending traditional boundaries, and bridging the divide between various materials, mediums, and iconic narratives. An advocate for the extraordinary, Black Cube shatters simplistic stereotypes to present remarkable works of art from both emerging talents and well-established artists within the Indian subcontinent. Black Cube works only in the primary art market, and procures and consigns artworks directly from the artists.

~

Sanya Malik

