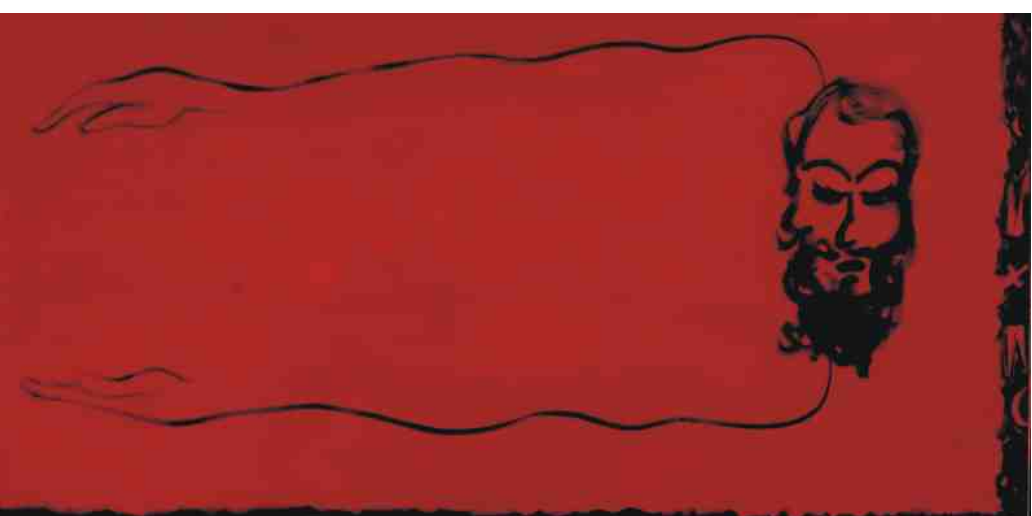


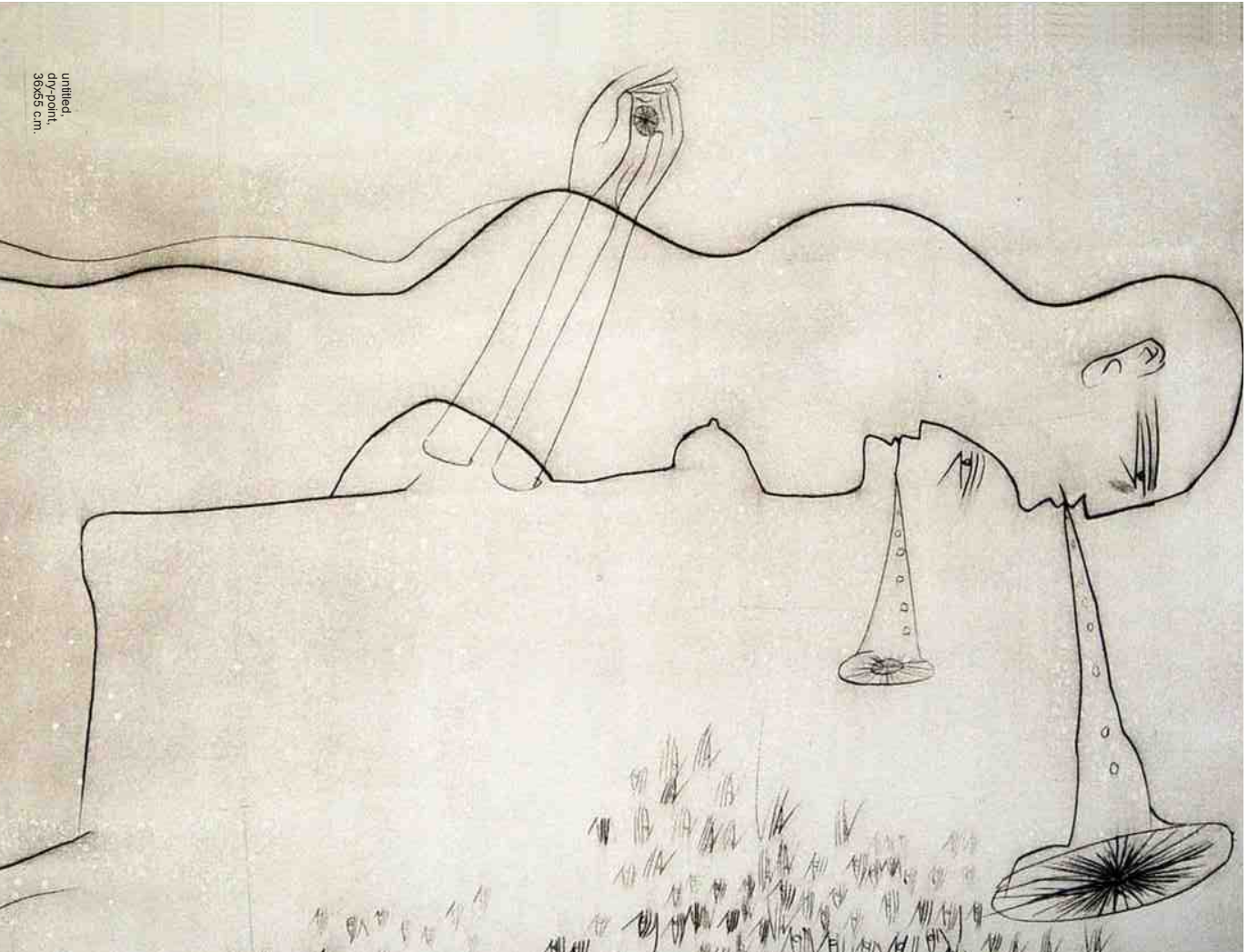


EYESRE-CAST

← S a v i S a w a r k a r →



untitled
oil on canvas
18x82 cm



untitled,
dry-point,
36x55 cm.

Recent Works of Savi Sawarkar

EYES RE-CAST

Parul Dave Mukherji

17th April-29th April 2008
Rabindra Bhavan,
Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi 110001



When there is no longer a “human minimum”, there is no culture.

Frantz Fanon

Acknowledgment

When approached by Savi Sawarkar to curate this exhibition, I responded to him with mixed feelings. Flattered that I was entrusted with the task of representing the artist's last ten years of work to the Delhi public, I was equally overwhelmed with the task of curating the exhibition itself, which exceeds a mere selection of works to fit on to the walls of the Rabindra Bhavan Gallery. It implied confronting my own limitations in understanding the complex relationship between identity politics and cultural practices. So far, gender had been my prime concern in dealing with the politics of representation and Savi's works compelled me to consider how intricately the categories of caste and gender are interwoven.

Not wanting to impose the curator's perspective on Savi's works, which have circulated within the public sphere for over a decade, I was keen to invite friends of Savi to contribute to the catalogue. I am grateful to Kancha Ilaiah for accepting the invitation to reflect on Savi's works and respond to the questionnaire that I had prepared. s santosh and Y S Alone rose up to the occasion admirably and offered insightful and incisive perspective on Savi's works and their position within the wider debates about contemporary Indian art.

I am indebted to Shivaprakash for not only agreeing to write on Savi at a short notice but suggesting nomenclature for some of the categories that I had framed. Prof Jyotindra Jain and Naman Ahuja's tips about the intricacies of curating a show have been valuable. I wish to thank my friend Deepth Achar for urging me on and Ranjani Mazumdar for her help in editing the text.

Most of all, I thank Savi for considering me an equal for the task !



zen master
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm

Some Curatorial Notes

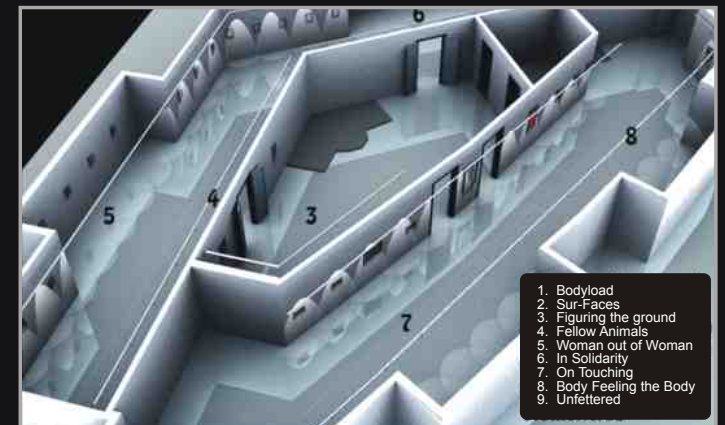
In the early 1980s, Savi and I were classmates at the art school in Baroda but I never recalled having met him then. This makes me very curious about what hindered our interaction, having been part of the same art school at the same time ! What politics of friendship underwrote modes of social interaction within an institution? When I left India for my PhD in 1986, Faculty of Fine Arts was soon to become a site for a kind of protest art which unfolded on two fronts: the Kerala Radicals led by Krishna Kumar and another group with Savi, Prabhakaran and Madhu. While much has been written about the former, the latter never acquired a group identity and visibility as one of the trends in contemporary Indian art. In retrospect, one can recognize a loose alliance amongst these three artists who shared a thrust towards a figurative style which was drawing based.

While the Kerala Radicals had formulated a manifesto that attacked artists, the art market and art institutions along the class lines, Savi Sawarkar had quietly and almost singlehandedly embarked on another battle that brought into the forefront the caste question. In the past, there was neither the absence of Dalit artists nor the non-Dalit artists painting on Dalit themes. K H Ara of the Bombay Progressives belonged to the depressed castes but at that historical juncture, the modernist style, subject matter and genres (still life, reclining nude etc.) left no room for the political exploration of identity. Just as some upper caste artists like B C Sanyal painted themes such as the "Harijan girl" or "Harijan woman", such works conformed to the paternalistic agenda of many modernists in India. What makes Savi's intervention within contemporary cultural politics different is the manner in which the personal becomes the political via the cultural. Clearly his works are firmly grounded within the politics of representation where caste, which had been erased as a coordinate of power in artistic practice, demands recognition.

For a curator, works such as Savi's that center on caste, one of the most political themes of our times, pose a number of problems. While selecting works for this exhibition, I have been drawn towards works that have walked a tight rope between the political and aesthetic concerns. For me, when a work tilts more towards the former, a poster-like quality sets in that is when the political instrumentalizes the aesthetic. In Savi's works, the balance has rarely tipped only towards the aesthetic which saved me the trouble of avoiding paintings that were only beautiful. However, being a skillful draughtsman, he makes aesthetics even out of anti-aesthetics; but again, the acutely disturbing content of his works redresses the imbalance.

Oils, drawings and prints on display are selected from the last ten years of works produced by Savi and they are grouped under nine conceptual clusters.

The foyer space accommodates Bodyload and Sur-Faces - two of the most recurring thematic in Savi's oeuvre. They set up two poles of representation of the body as a whole and body as a fragment.



Bodyload

Body as a whole, which is also a source of labour, brings to the foreground the instrumentality of the body. Bordering on sketchy caricatures, scenes from daily life of coolies laboring under heavy burden get depicted as a visual description. The laboring body has different connotations when it comes to women's bodies. Via the image of a stark torso of a woman reduced to her body parts, her subjugation as a sexual being is underlined. Running through the dehumanized state that laboring bodies get reduced to, is the figure of a crouching body in which the head is brought unnaturally in line with the limbs. The huddled up body is presented as a body under duress as it gesticulates its own state of constraint by a bodily enactment of impossible contortions and unnatural postures.



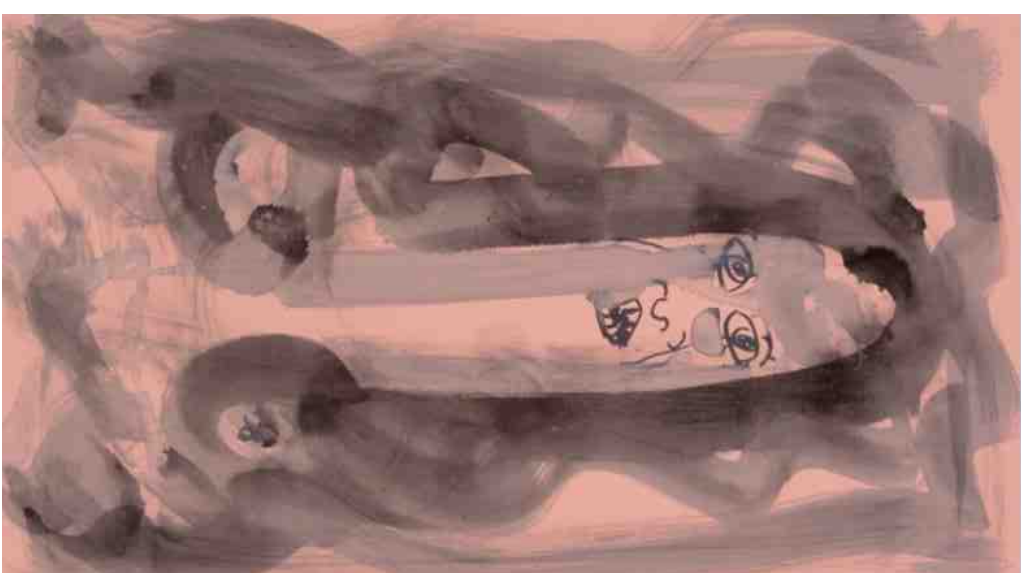
new delhi railway station
mix media
39x26 cm



struggle for bread
mix media
39x26 cm



untitled 01
mix media
39x23 cm



after bombay
mix media
39x23 cm



indigenous mother
oil on canvas
153x150 cm



head on leg
oil on canvas
144x117 cm



untitled 03
ink drawing on paper
12x18 cm



untitled 02
ink drawing on paper
17x15 cm

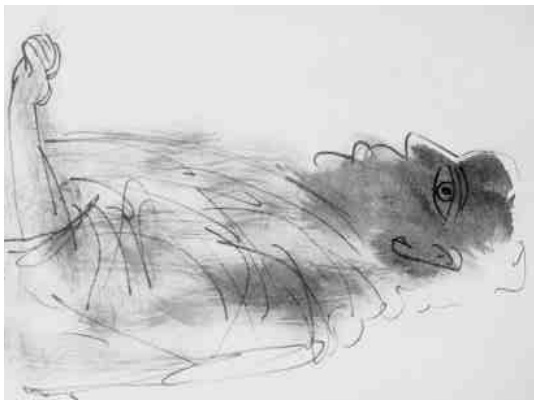
Sur-Faces

Portraits are normally assumed to be the sites of subjectivity which reflect a mental state. Losing any specificity or referentially, the faces take on allegorical function that is more about coming face to face with the state of one's existence than with the desire to stand in for a historical entity. Brooding faces that only occasionally give vent to anguish can also transform into an expression of serenity. To mark this transformation, I have juxtaposed an expressionist portrait that synchronically encapsulates centuries of oppression along with the tranquil portrait of a Buddhist that does not belong to any fixed historical time but signifies a state of self composure and serenity.

As one finds one's way by the winding staircase to the upper floor, the circular foyer-like space seems to be an appropriate place for an equally circular theme of *Figuring the Ground*.



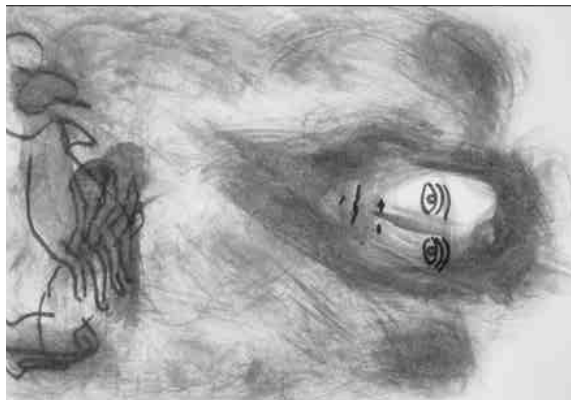
face of chiapas
mix media
39x58 cm



drawing
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



devdasi
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



jokla
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



devdasi
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



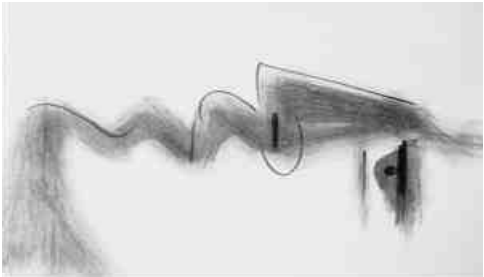
gaston bonnat
oil on canvas
122x92 cm



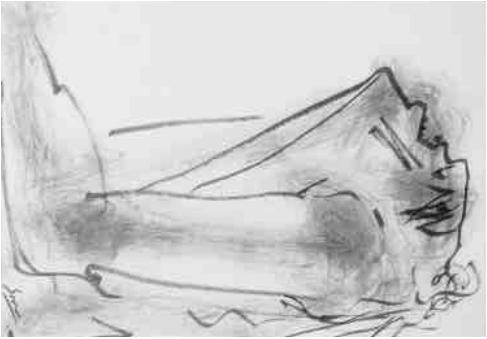
gaston bonnat
oil on canvas
79x59 cm



unknown face
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



profile
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



drawing
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



buddhist monk in nature
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



buddhist monk
oil on canvas
89x70 cm



zen master
oil on canvas
50x60 cm

Figuring the Ground

Figures that interlock, gesture towards a body politics predicated upon reciprocal relations that bind the aggressor and the victim - the inequity of the caste system is performed by the bodies as ads frozen in time. The viewer is now led to the gallery on one's right to the theme of intimacy between animal and human figures.

brahmin and devdasi
oil on canvas
187x121 cm





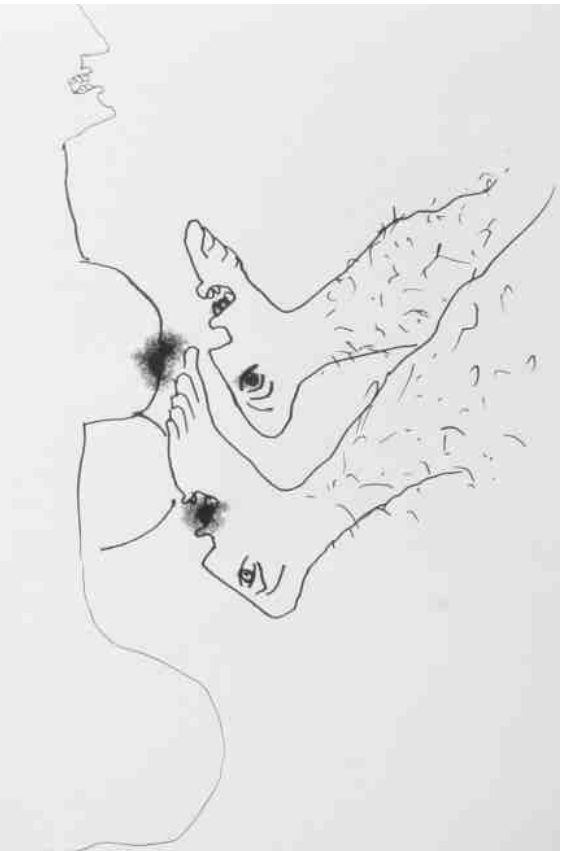
Gulraj
oil on canvas
178x153 cm



untitled
oil on canvas
147x106 cm



blue
oil on canvas
162x178 cm



caste of women
pen drawing
26x33 cm



women and caste
egg tempera on canvas
98x77 cm

Fellow Animals

The discourse of purity and pollution as institutionalized in Brahmanism aligns the Dait body with that of the animals. Figures as if in dialogue with birds and animals are not just about turning to crows, fishes and horses as indicative of alienation from other human beings, but they also reflect upon themselves. Condemned traditionally as scavengers of society, a reclining man mocks his self alienation through a kinship with a crow. What confers the status of untouchability is to some extent, a socially sanctioned function of disposing the dead animals but at the same time it is this close proximity to the animal that marks the laboring body as polluted! Brahmanism's belief in the sacred cow in itself indicates that the hierarchy instituted in the social world extends to and is reinforced by transferring it on to the animal world.



sound of bird
Ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



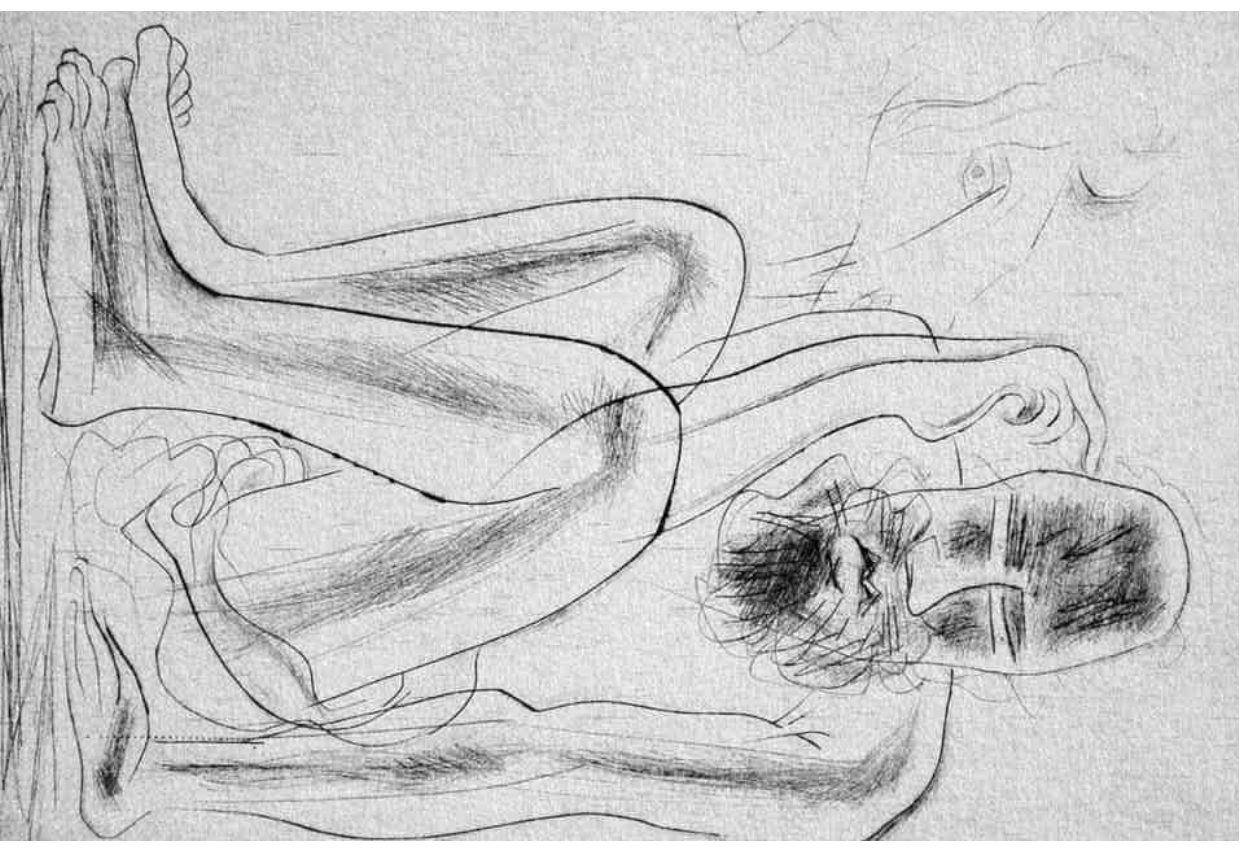
bird, mix media, 62x48 cm



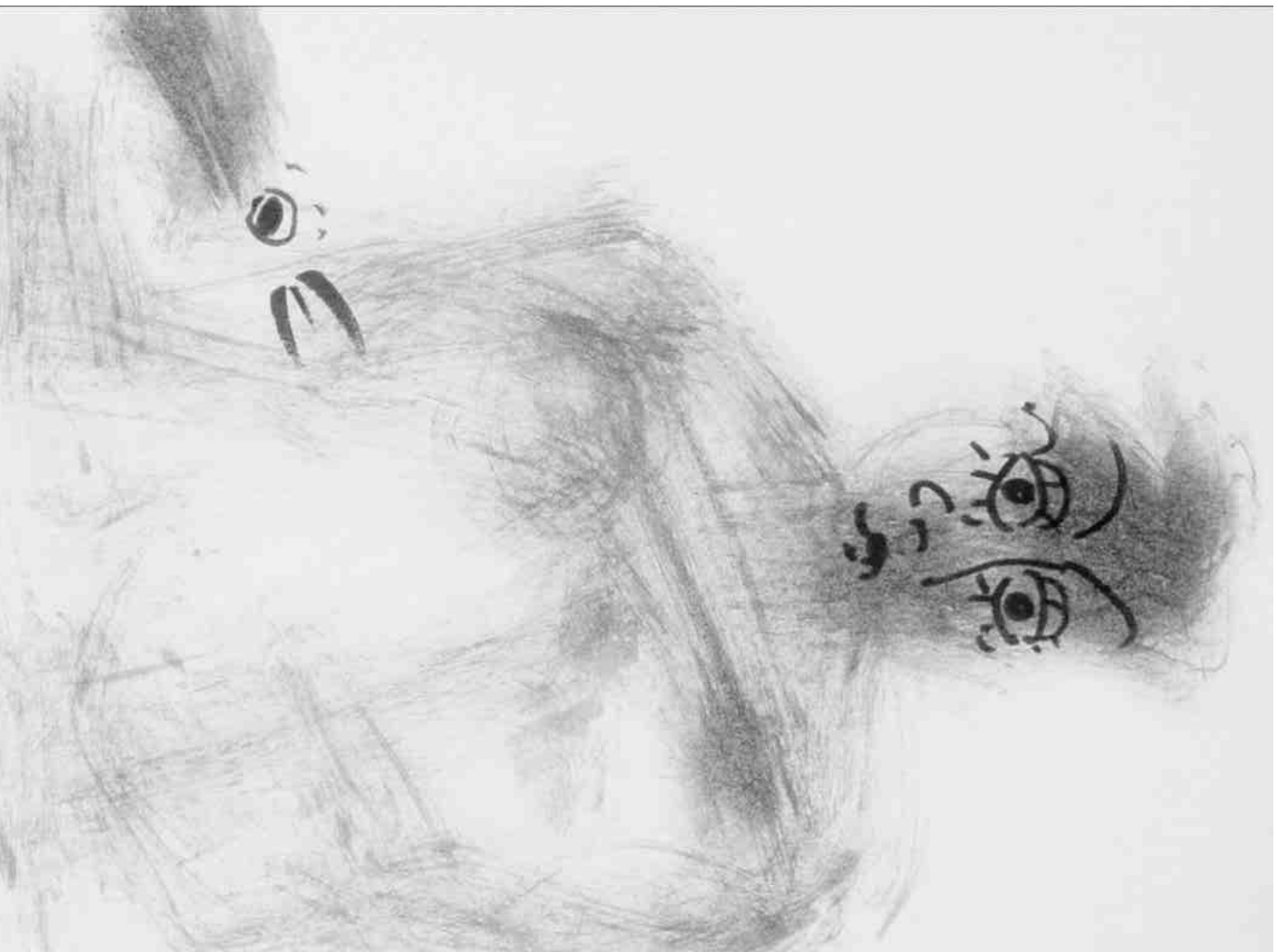
cat and woman, ink drawing on paper, 27x19 cm



devdasi with cat, etching, 15x17 cm



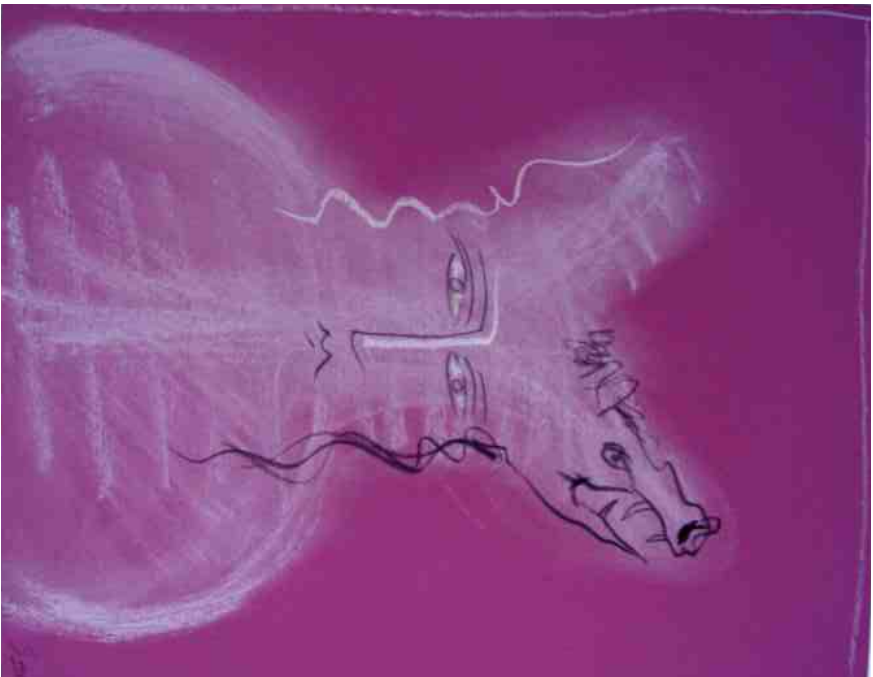
thinker 02, dry-point, 39x24 cm



sound of vision
ink drawing on paper
27x19 cm



fish and blue face
oil on canvas
99x79 cm



sound of pig
mix media
27x22 cm



searching, ink drawing on paper, 27x19 cm



tribe on street, mix media, 33x55 cm

Woman out of Woman

At first, I wanted to avoid creating an exclusive category for the representation of women or segregating the devdasi as a separate category. In response to my question to Savi about his abiding interest in the theme of a devdasi, Savi recounted numerous journeys he had made to different villages in Maharashtra, where the cult of devdasi still prevails. Almost sounding like an ethnographer, Savi narrated the rites and rituals that are performed outside the pale of legality when young adolescent girls from a depressed caste are dedicated to the temple. Contrary to an anthropologist's interest in the cult of devdasi, it was as if Savi was seeking his own history through the devdasi. It was perfectly possible for a male artist to identify with the plight of a devdasi in a manner of viewing sexual, economic and ritualistic exploitation as intersecting. Drawings of women ranging from the most brutalised to the tenderest, feature in this section. In the former portrayals, the graffiti style of overlaying the surface with lines scribbled and scattered angrily, reaches a shrill pitch and when the patchwork of lines and textures give way to linear contour lines, they result in tender portrayals of women's bodies that leave space for the expression of female desire.



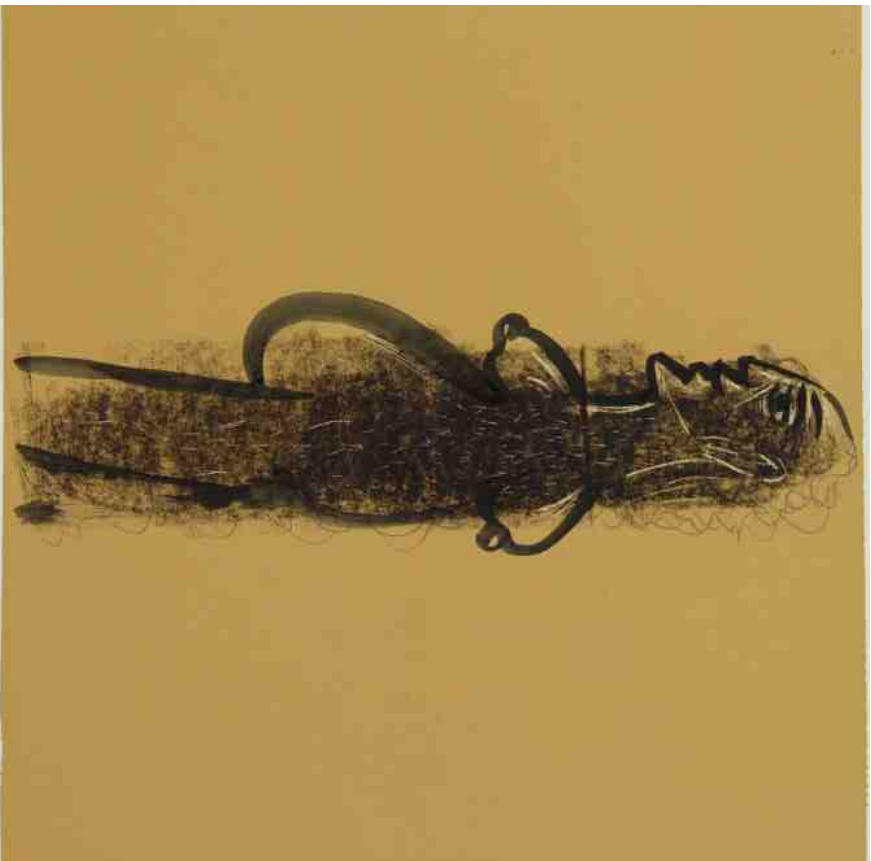
Castle of Castle, mix media, 23x23 cm



waiting for tomorrow, mix media on paper, 38x28 cm



woman
mix media
23x23 cm



woman in forest, mix media 23x23 cm



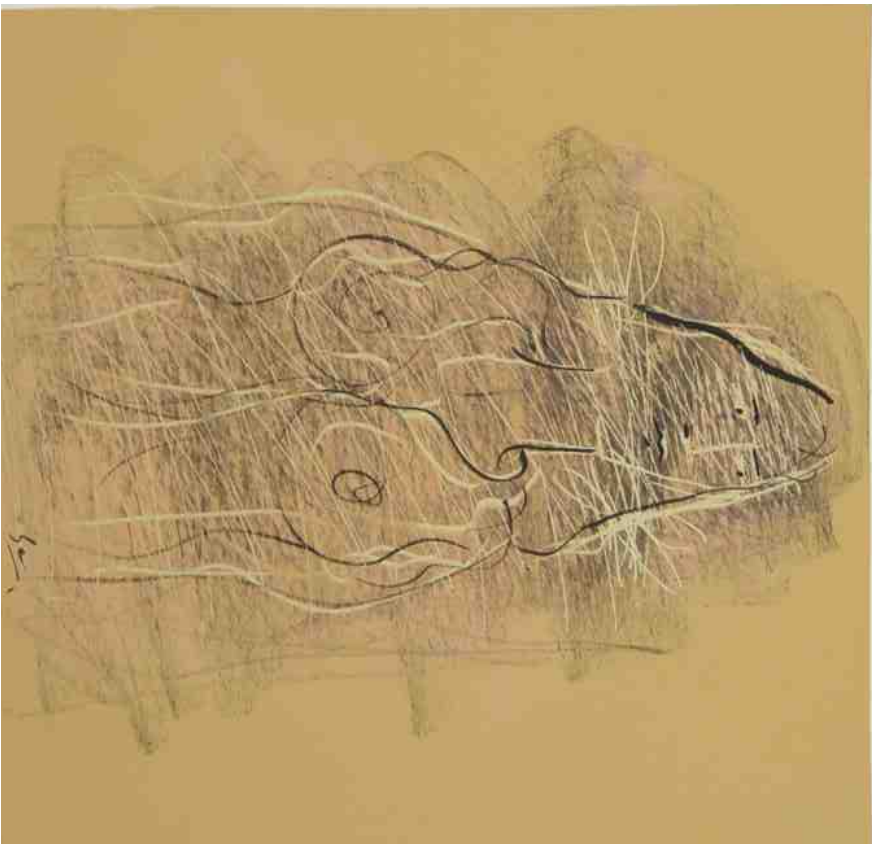
black mother, mix media, 23x23 cm



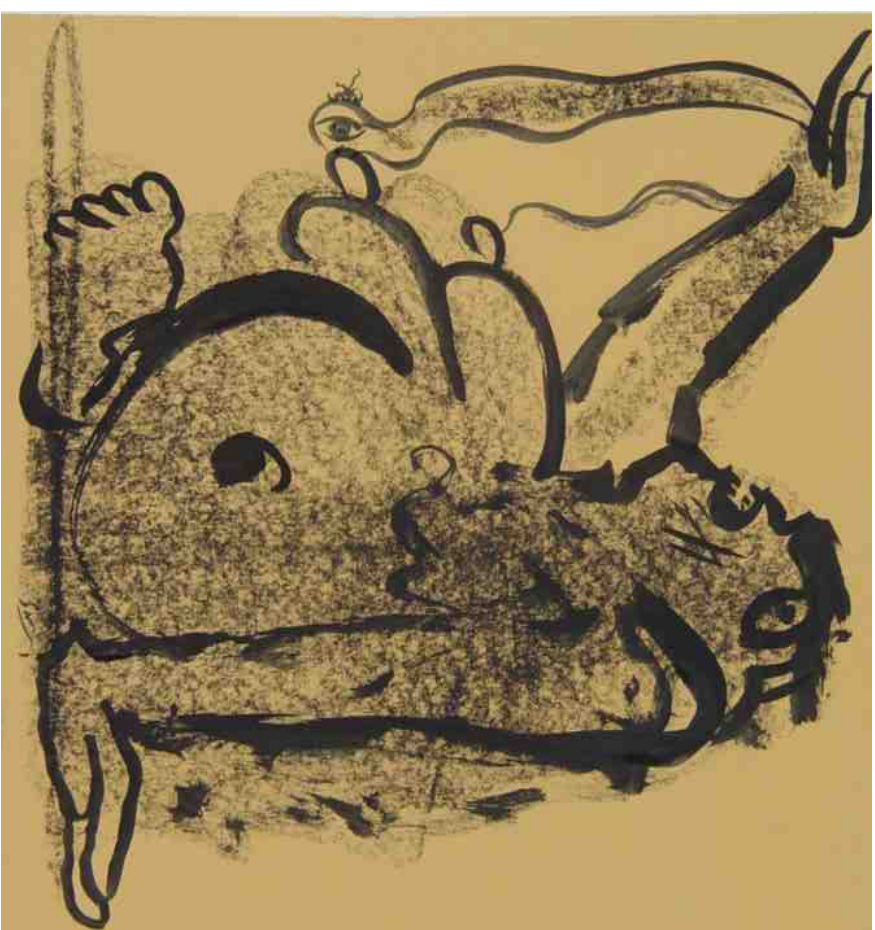
tomorrow, mix media, 17x15 cm

devidasi
mix media
23x23 cm





bombay, mix media, 23x23 cm



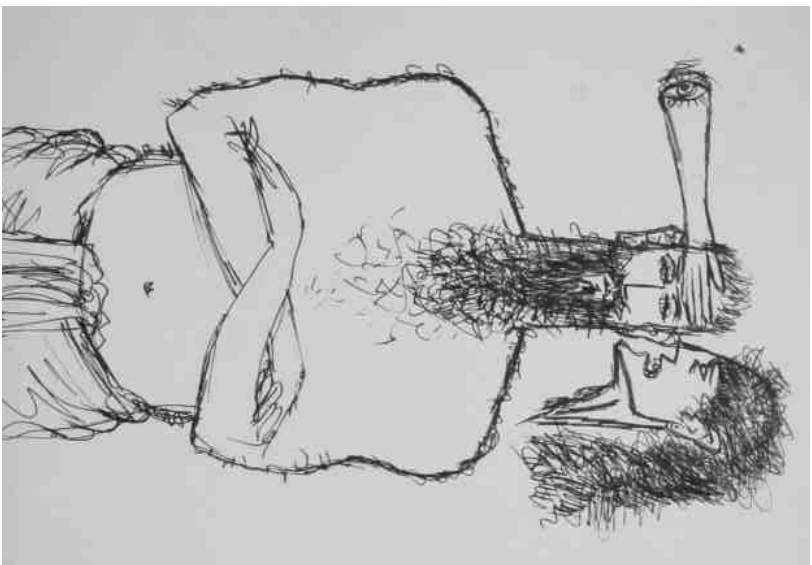
woman in forest, mix media, 23x23 cm

In Solidarity

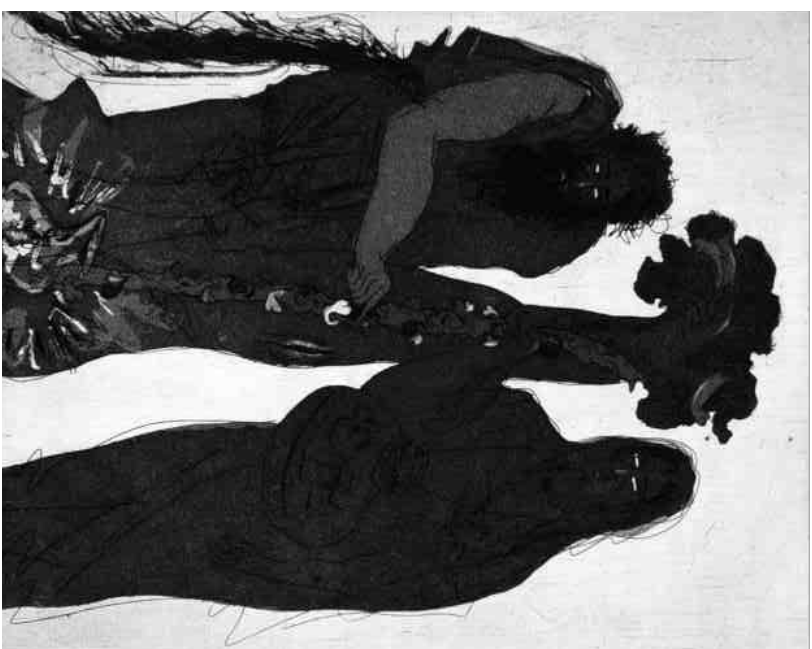
Savi's oeuvre is dominated by singular images of men and women in monumental proportion. Striking a different note are the images of couples, sharing the situation, scenes of tenderness and bonding. Social exclusion and marginalization is largely visualized by Savi as experienced by an individual but seldom does it translate into a community oriented representation. Some touching drawings of a couple or a group of figures convey a reaching out to others who share the structure of feeling. It is only when one breaks out of individual experience and reaches out to another that political beings emerge.



waiting for peacock. pen drawing on paper, 28x21 cm



drawing, pen drawing on paper, 28x21 cm



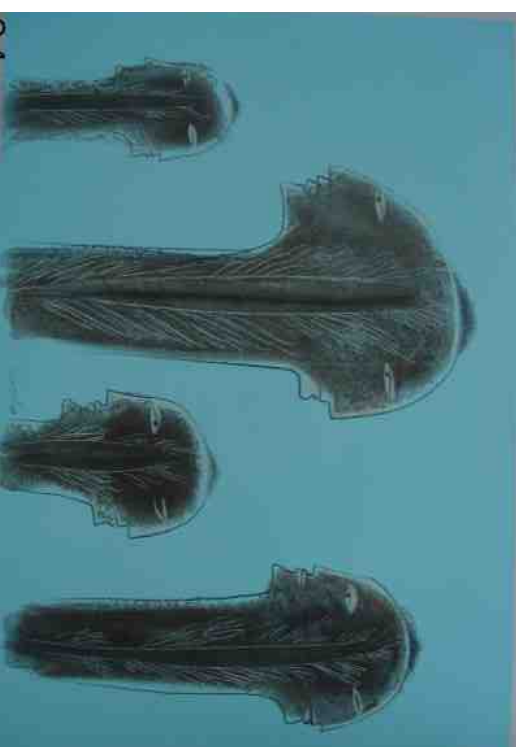
untouchable couple in pure, etching, 37x27 cm



three sisters
oil on canvas
86x106 cm



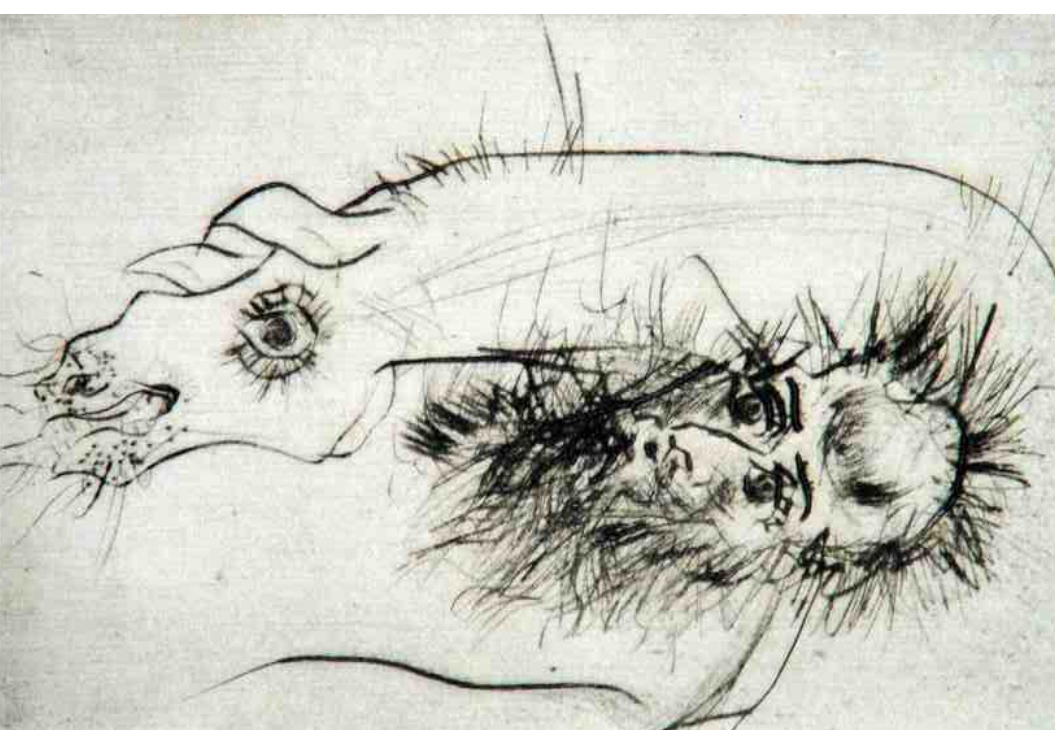
communication, mix media, 26x39 cm



family, mix media, 26x39 cm

On Touching

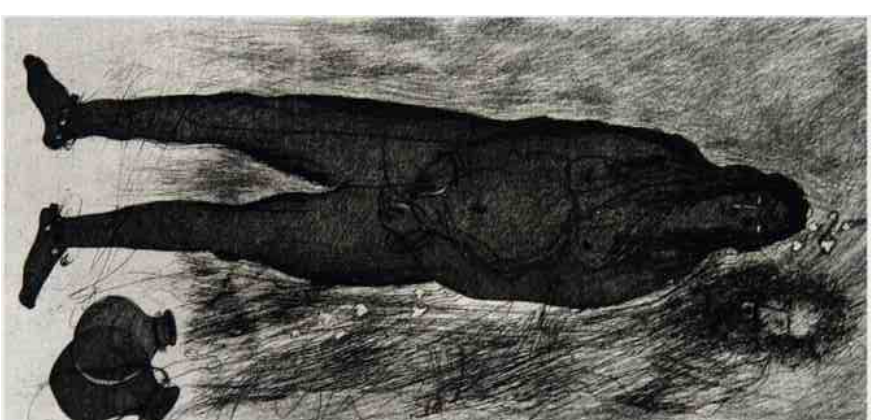
How does Savi create an iconography of the untouchable for which there is no ready stock of images that he can draw upon? From textual narratives of the past, he constructs a body type which bears fully all the markers of a caste identity that made public the humiliation suffered. While a brahmin flaunts the sacred thread and the *tilak* on the forehead as marks of self-professed purity, a Dalit body also has a thread but tied to a spittoon and a broom tied at the back to erase the footsteps left behind. Untouchability cannot be addressed outside the dynamics of the pollution/purity binary. It is the brahmin who creates the figure of the Dalit for his own self-recognition and hence the images of the untouchables are interspersed with that of the brahmin even if he becomes the object of ridicule.



untouchable with dead cow, dry-point, 26x19 cm



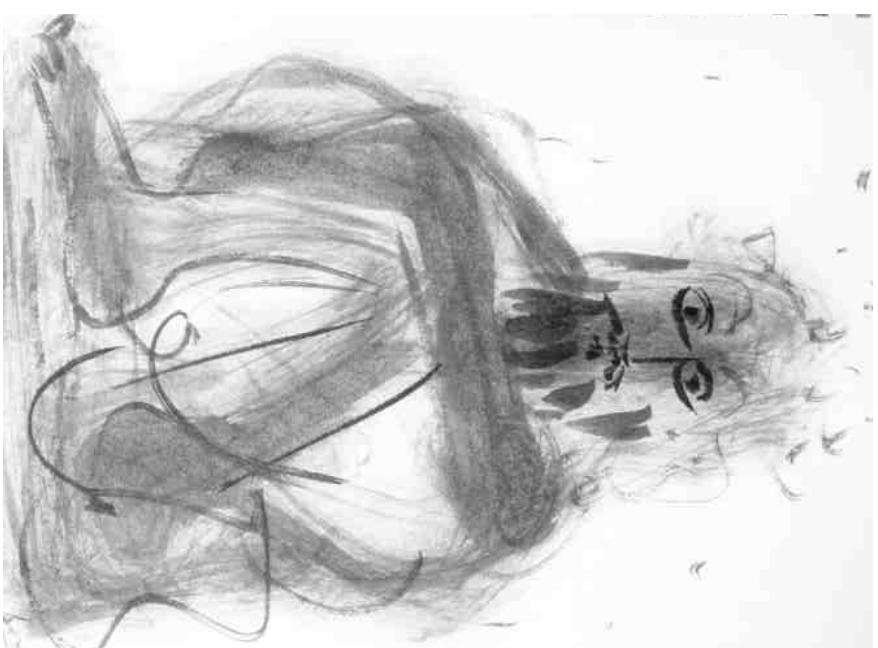
gorakhpanti, ink on paper, 27x19 cm



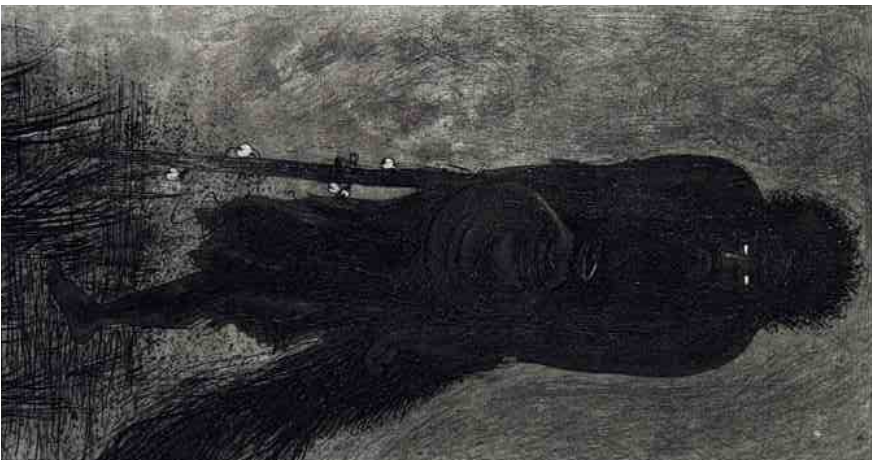
untouchable lady with pot, etching, 27x19 cm



god on cloud, ink drawing on paper, 27x19 cm



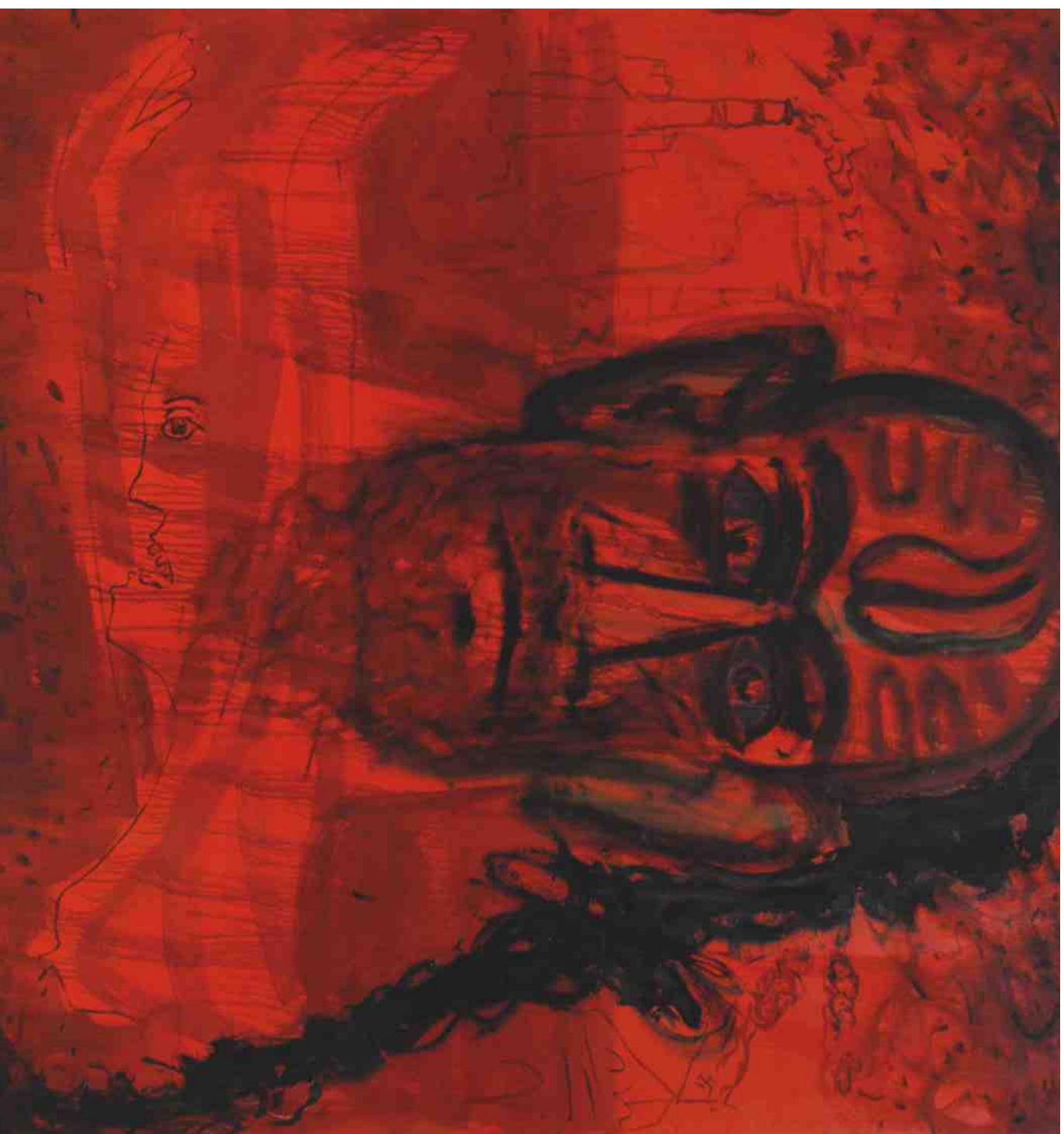
drawing, ink drawing on paper, 27x19 cm



broom, etching, 39x27 cm



untouchable and religion, mix media, 17x11 cm



brahmin and ganga
oil on canvas
176x176 cm



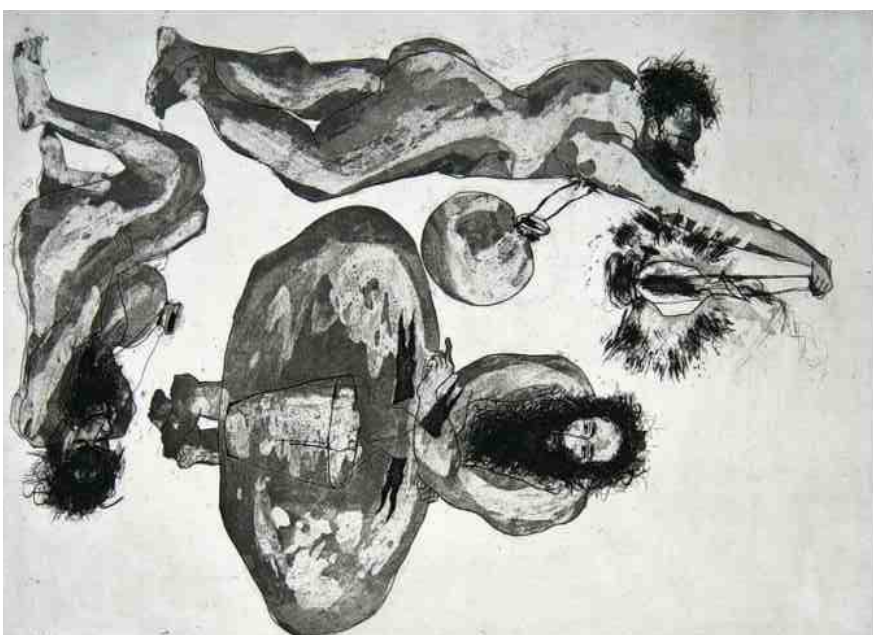
unhitchability, etching, 35x29 cm



going away, color ink drawing, 47x28 cm



untouchable with devdasi 03, etching, 42x31 cm



searching 01, etching, 55x36 cm



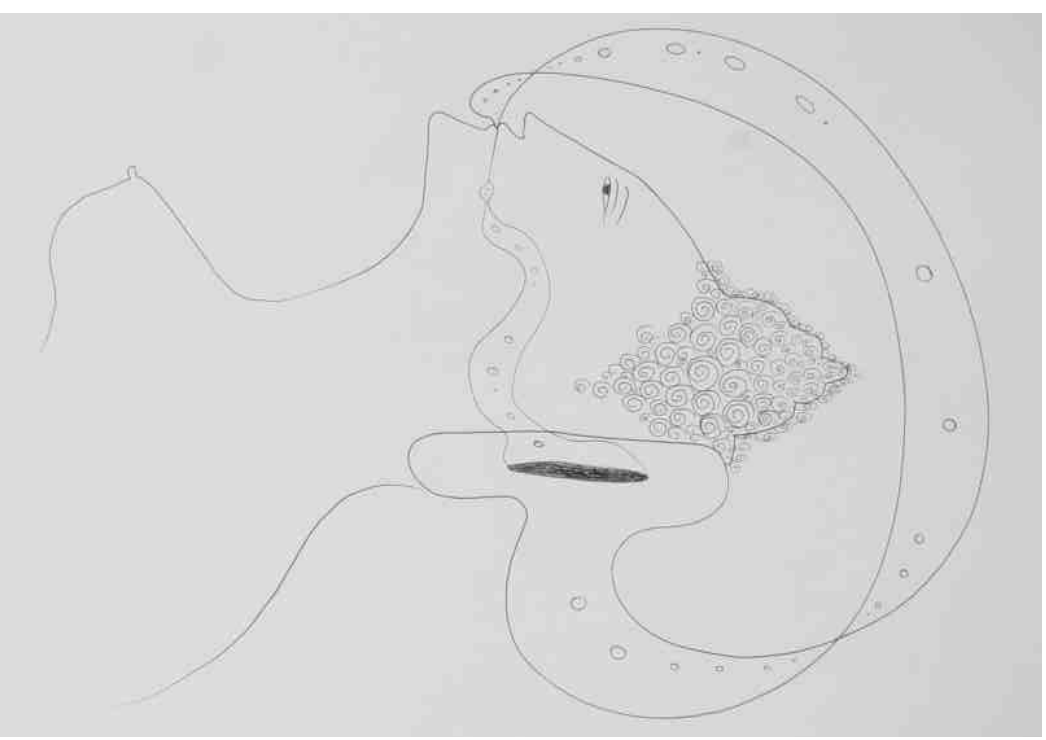
dark day,
oil on canvas
188x174 cm



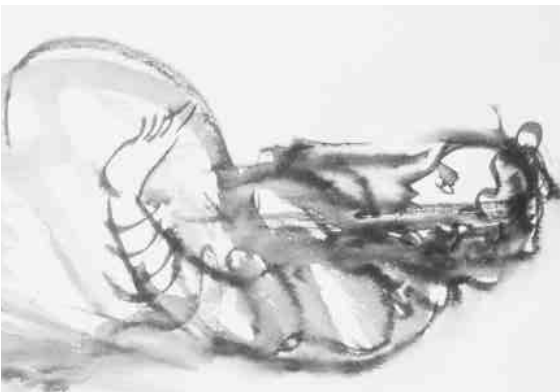
drawing, mix media, 38x65 cm

Body Feeling the Body

In contrast to the state of untouchability, where even the shadow cast by the Dalit is polluting, what happens when the body folds upon itself? After all, no law can forbid the body from touching itself ! As if in conversation with itself, almost as in a monologue, the body wants to hear its own voice, touch its own parts, and watch itself see itself. Why does the act of feeling one's body become a political act ? In the brahmin centered world, the untouchables were indispensable in maintaining cleanliness in civic spaces and yet as bodily presence, they had to be banished. For the ghostly presence of the untouchable whose shadow was considered 'polluting', figuring the materiality of the body as a sensuous entity becomes an act of protest. For the ritualists on the other hand with their obsession with purity, self consciousness takes a ludicrous form! In the case of the latter, each sense organ asserts itself as autonomous so that there appears to be a disjunction between what we see, hear, feel, touch and taste! An extreme state of self alienation occurs where the self recognizes no other and seeks to resort in solipsism embodied by Brahminism that finds a most suitable metaphor in organs without a body ! Savi sets up an alternative Buddhist concept of *samyag dṛishti* or Right Vision imagined around a wheel in which all the sensory perceptions converge to symbolically evoke seeing without a hierarchy.



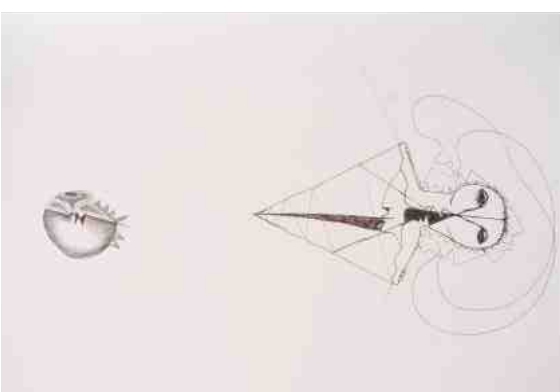
Introspection Pen drawing, 33x25 cm



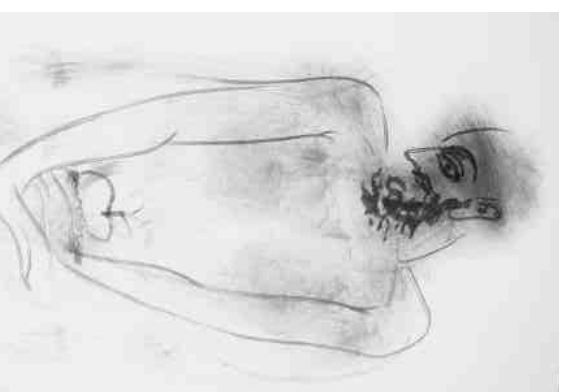
who is the father?, ink on paper, 27x19 cm



full of emptiness, ink drawing, 27x19 cm



within, pen on paper, 27x19 cm



apple, ink drawing, 27x19 cm



homeless, ink on paper, 27x19 cm



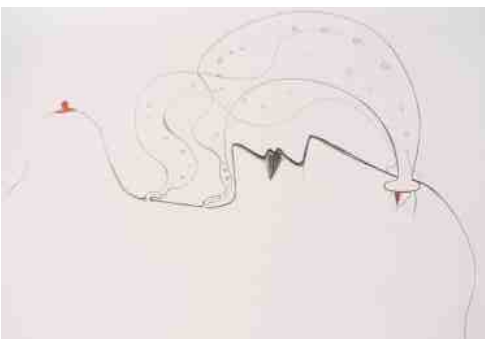
homeless Q2, ink on paper, 62x94 cm



samyak, ink on paper, 27x19 cm



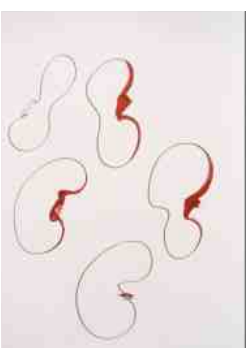
conversation, pen drawing, 33x25 cm



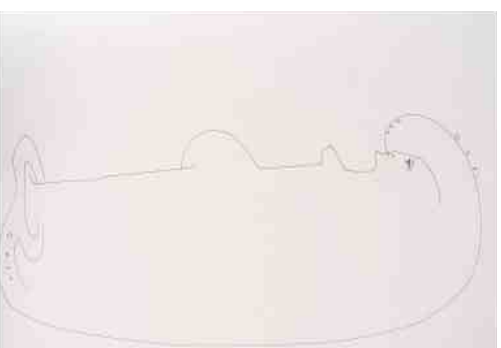
Introspection 02, pen drawing, 33x25 cm



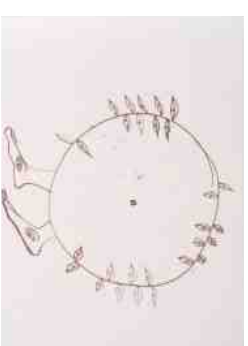
Introspection 03, pen drawing, 25x33 cm



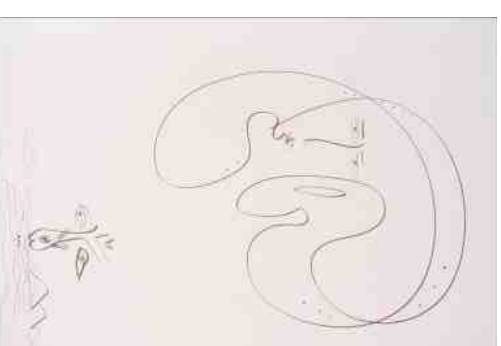
seed 01, pen drawing, 25x33 cm



seed 03, pen drawing, 33x25 cm



seed 02, pen drawing, 25x33 cm



seed 04, pen drawing, 33x25 cm

Unfettered

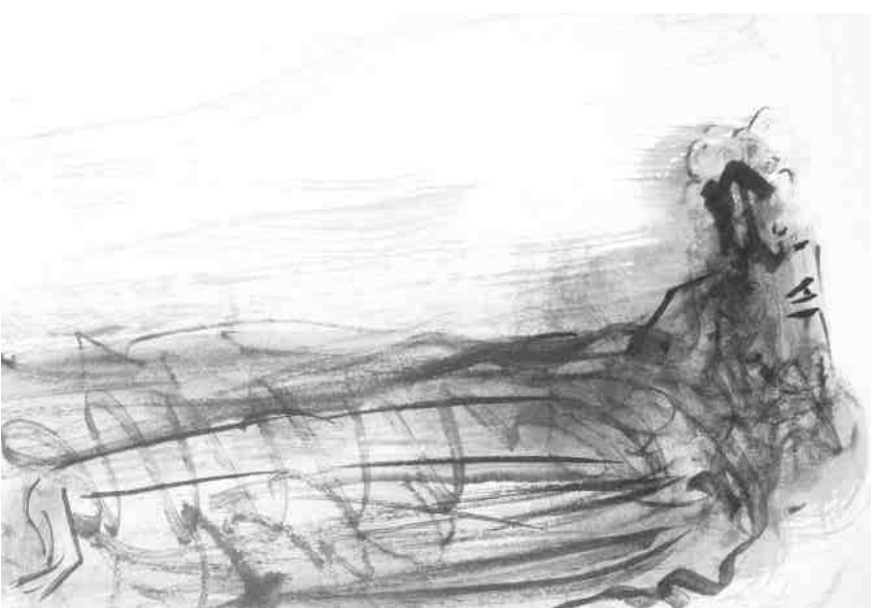
This takes us to the last section of the exhibition that may seem steeped in a Buddhist ethos but is not about any mystic transcendentalism. It is about immanence and the figure of the monk becomes emblematic of the body on the move, the peripatetic body that cuts across temporal and cultural boundaries. Such a figure, the perpetual traveler celebrated also by most *Bhakti* and *Sufi* saints, is set up as a counterpoint to the situatedness of *Kaliyuga*. It is here that the Buddhist conception of the wheel which stands for the ever moving phenomena of reality that informs a kind of nomadic aesthetics is proposed by Savi. From Sangharakshita, Vajrasuchi to Ashvaghosha, traveling has been a metaphor for self knowledge- nature is a stage within us and the more we travel outwards, the closer we get to ourselves. Where attachment to land and or any given preordained structure is itself seen as leading to decadence, not only does the *chaturvarna* caste system lose its ethical foundation but any new structures that reinvent the relationship between the outsider and the insider are also rendered problematic.



zen master, oil on canvas, 73x48 cm



bird on tree, mix media, 26x20 cm



philosopher, ink drawing 27x19 cm



free land, encaustic, 152x117 cm

" Positively, my social Philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French-Revolution. I have not. My Philosophy has roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teaching of my Master, the Buddha. In his philosophy, liberty and equality had a place but unlimited liberty destroyed equality, and absolute equality left no room for liberty. In His Philosophy, law had a place only as a safeguard against the breaches of liberty and equality; but he did not believe that law can be a guarantee for breaches of liberty or equality. He gave the highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty or equality or fraternity which was another name for brotherhood or humanity, which was again another name for religion."

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Questions by Parul and Answers by Kancha Ilaiah

P. How would you place Savi's works vis a vis other contemporary Indian artists who have also dealt with other modes of marginality?

K. I am not an art critic and a regular follower of modern art. With the limited knowledge that I have, I can say that Savi Sawarkar is the only artist who saw marginality through the prism of caste and untouchability. There have been painters who saw marginality through the prism of class, gender and liberalism but no painter in India used his/her brush to show us the pains of untouchability and 'unseeability' in the realm of art.

P. Is the question of untouchability "representable" through artistic practice?

K. Savi has shown that it could be brought to the artistic practice with a great facility. He has shown that both crude forms of untouchability and sophisticated and modernist forms of untouchability could be brought to the artistic practice.

P. What significance do you attach to aesthetics in political representation?

K. Aesthetics always remained a very fine form of political representation. If we glance through the Renaissance and Reformation art of Europe, each piece of painting represented a particular mode of politics. In our own country, the nationalist artists and communist / socialist artists painted the Indian society from their own political point of view. If Ravi Varma represented the Hindu political history, Chittaprosad of Bengal represented the communist political ideology through art. In that sense, Savi represents the Ambedkarite ideology in art form and he is a pioneer in that field. The Dalit political movement did not produce a powerful modern artist before Savi attempted his hand and did that with his mastery stroke.

P. Given the fact that caste has never entered into traditional and modern art practice, how can an artist like Savi create a language of protest and invoke public memory?

K. He did that by carefully selecting his Dalit objects and transformed them into artistic subjectivity. Any artists not only need to study the life of his/her subjects in his life time but he/she needs to read a whole range of literature about his subject people. By the time Savi came to the painting field, Dalits not only existed as fighting people against caste and untouchability, but there was a whole range of literature available. Since he too came from Maharashtra, he had access to both English and Marathi literature on caste and untouchability. Savi successfully used his Dalit sensibilities to bring the Dalit life into artistic practice.

P. Do you agree with my reading of Savi's works that the figure of devdasi becomes a central trope to gesture towards the history of caste oppression against the Dalitbahujans?

K. Though I could not view that painting of devdasi, normally devdasi invokes upper caste sympathy and acceptance of the need for debate on caste. There are many other paintings of Savi that represent caste and untouchability in their complex form. We need to look at his work in entirety.

P. Is caricature the most preferred mode of representation that can address social, cultural and political marginalization? I also have in mind the book cover design on your book 'Why I Am Not a Hindu?' and Savi's predilection for caricatures?

K. Caricature is one of the most popular forms of representation. The cover design of my book 'Why I am Not A Hindu' has become very popular as it caricatured the Brahmanic life in modern, traditional and oppressive mode, the brahmin figure on the book ridicules the productive work of Dalit. Savi has used many such caricature forms in his paintings. But he also used other forms for artistic communication.

-Prof Kancha Ilaiah teaches Political Science at Osmania University, Hyderabad and the author of 'Why I am not a Hindu' and 'Buffalo Nationalism'.

Untouchability



(No spelling suggestions)

Ignore
Ignore All
Add to Dictionary
Language
Spelling
Look Up...
Cut
Copy
Paste

Eyes Re-Cast

Hot sun beats down
the squatting bodies of laborers
as they eat their frugal meals
in haste in open fields:

A fat brahmin with an obese middle
voraciously gobbles down richly cooked dishes
served by a servile woman
who offers him food as if he were God;

The fat brahmin again,
linguishes under a date tree
lazily opens his mouth
to relish the drops of toddy
that trickle down from a pot,
as the toddy maker, tied to a tree
precariously looks down, bewildered *

Most political critiques of the dominant order rely heavily on caricatures. This was my first reaction to Savi Sawarkar's works which I saw as images projected on the walls at a conference on Art and Activism held in the department of Art History in Baroda in 2002. The question that I had asked the paper presenter, Y S Alone, was why did the artist need to confront one set of stereotypes with another- the ones of the archetypal portraited Brahmin with another set of them which portrays the Dalit as equally typecast into as a brutalized entity. Now in retrospect, standing in front of Savi's works, the question raised by me seemed naïve. It is premised on an assumption that caricatures deliberately distort the real to dramatize the social injustice, to make visible the diabolical workings of power and to pluck out the mask of folly to reveal the truth underneath. Savi portrays the victim as stereotypically as the oppressor. One is the figure while the other becomes the ground and their interchangeability as interlocking shapes spell out centuries of mutual dependency of the exploiter and the exploited. He derives his language of protest from a poetics of a critique of conventional language. At times he wields his brush like a weapon and at times caresses the surface with a delicacy of a sensual touch. His style of painting unfolds between these two extremes of draughtsman ship. From almost treating the canvas as a wall where paint marks seem scribbled, scratched and scattered in a graffiti mode to touching the surface delicately to evoke sensuality of the body, Savi defies being categorized as a political painter whose central agenda deals with caste alone. His paintings traverse ambivalently between politics and poetics- the politics of exposure of caste dynamics in contemporary India and poetics of line, of form and of color.

*These are not poems but verbal description of caricatures on the back cover of Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu ?*

Most politically driven art resorts to realism that, in its intensity of going against the grain gravitates towards caricature. Honoré Daumier, Chittaproasad and Somnath Hore loom as frames of reference. Does one see caricature as impoverishment of language that fleshes out itself around stereotypes or as a symptom of representational crisis when common frames of reference are not available as the terrain explored by the artist itself was not navigated before ?

Envisaging the write up on Savi's works as exceeding the format of a catalogue, I have invited Kancha Ilaiah, Y S Alone, s santosh and H S Shivaparakash to reflect on Savi's works by placing them in a contemporary moment. Each of them has engaged with Savi's works from different locations within and outside academic and institutional boundaries. Ironically my engagement with Savi's works have been quite recent and when I first saw them in 2002 as images, I was disturbed by what seemed then to be a crude affront on conventions of image making and dominant ideology of caste.

As an upper caste, woman curator, how does it prepare me to respond to Savi's works? How do I relate to the condition of untouchability that is central to Savi's works? The closest I have come to experience untouchability was being kept away from my mother for four days every month in my grandmother's household and a deep sense of resentment building up within me for being kept away. Amensuinating brahmin woman is reduced to an untouchable in her own house! My caste identity also came to the fore when the space of kitchen in my grandmother's house was declared out of bounds for my non-brahmin friends. Of course, an upper caste experience is similar but not same as the untouchability of a Dalit woman ! But marginality is not some monolithic condition that affects all social groups in any uniform way. It is only when we view marginally as fragmented and shifting relationship to complex coordinates of power, of race, gender, class and caste that possibility for speaking for the other as for one self emerges and ground lays open for political solidarity across borderlines.

Raising the question of representation as a key framework, s santosh underlines challenge faced by Savi of going against the grain of the normative discourse and offers a powerful critique of canonical art history and cultural nationalism.

Alone has viewed Savi's works, as deploying a gestural expressionist style and a range of synoptic signifiers, as a conscious strategy to shock the viewer, out of a political complacency. He argues that Savi Sawarkar deconstructed Brahmanism and the hegemony of Manu in contemporary Indian art paralleling what Ambedkar achieved in his political and intellectual project. Alone strongly and categorically upholds caste as the central concern on Savi's agenda. It is when Alone pays attention to the material dimension of Savi's paintings, that he lets his experience as a painter inform his readings of the images. On the other hand, Shivaparakash offers an evocative and poetic reading of Savi's paintings and contextualizes his works through the lens of a Buddhism that has a political and cultural resonance today.

Most of the contributors to the catalogue have addressed the gender question in Savi's works. The theme of devdasi has been my point of entry into Savi's paintings. Critics have long noticed that as modernism unfolded, the notion of art making as a male domain found expression in representation. Women as the subject matter assumed the foil of alterity as masculinity came to be identified as a generative force in artistic creation. Within modernism in India, Souza best fits in with such a figure and the list that can be drawn stretches endlessly.

When the subject matter of the devdasi was posed to Savi, he responded like an ethnographer and narrated to me his anthropological quest for the figure of a devdasi. Reading books about the rituals and mystification that surround the life of the devdasi, Savi set out to confront this figure in actuality. Savi's desperation to seek out this figure did not quite fit in with the usual feminist interpretation of reading the semi nude figures as assertion of the artist's male mystique. Can the devdasi take on the artist's alter ego, a metaphor for the ambivalent state of being a Dalit, a figure that inhabits paradoxically sites of untouchability and sexual availability?

Not given to abstraction, Savi's works dramatize the relationship between the figure and the ground. And the only rare times when abstraction enters his works are when both the figure and the ground invite the same intensity of attention. While the figure of the devdasi keeps appearing in different apparitions from the most abused to the most tender, its singularity has been striking as if it is a figure to be iconized. As if to compensate for centuries of existence on the fringes of society, she has to be brought right within the arena of high art and offered an iconic status.

The devdasi emerges as a paradigmatic figure of marginality upon whose body the entire debate around untouchability could be staged. As pointed out by Kanocha Ilaiah in his interview, it is the figure of the devdasi who has recently attracted upper caste sympathy and around whom contemporary debates about caste and representation have been articulated. Is this on the account of her proximity to the temple, the realm of religion and ritual? Just as earlier the figure of the widow had been at the centre stage in the nationalist imaginary as pointed out by Susie Tharu, the figure of the devdasi also accords with the humanist/ liberal discourse. They are both without a husband and consequently in need of public protection along with governmentality and citizenship.

For me, the figure of the devdasi along with the castrated figure of the jogta enables Savi to pose the questions of caste necessarily mediated through cultural practices associated with the normative labeling of the feminine and the masculine. Between the devdasi and the jogta, an interstitial space opens up within which Savi can relate with multiple forms of marginality. Religion then in not some mythical space of self regeneration and nativism but a set of performative rituals through which forms of social hierarchies enter into the everyday life and constitute the commonplace of society.

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Tense – Past Continuous

In the Indian context, our experiences of modernity tend to be theorized under the rubric of the elite practitioners' angst in relation to hegemony of Western dominance. Due to this, the fight of the subalterns in India to register their presence in mainstream cultural practices faces multiple hazards. Even after attaining a political identity such as Dalit and their recent assertion of a presence in the realm of political power, their struggles to participate in cultural practices have not even been addressed adequately and still their cultures more or less remain as something that has been accused of 'contamination' and regulated by the upper-caste intelligentsia. Most of the attempts made by the subaltern art practitioners to engage with the larger cultural field are accused of as pop cultural betrayal through the regulation/contribution of their practices as authentic folk/traditional culture. The subalterns in India have a double challenge: the hegemonic and overarching discourse of upper caste national bourgeois intelligentsia on one hand and the global imperialism on the other, even though their identities are often interchanged.

To recognize the historical nature of Savi Sawarkar's intervention we have to locate his artistic practices within this context. As a cultural practitioner he locates himself in the interstices of culture and politics, or in other words, art and activism. He is not professing of any alternative nor claiming to be the avant-garde. Instead, his works subvert the existing discourses on aesthetics by raising questions about the casteist nature of the alphabets and the grammar which constitute these discourses. While the so called mainstream avant-garde favors the modernist puritanical concepts like 'truth', 'goodness', 'harmony' etc, Savi Sawarkar favors an aesthetics of mistakes, what Rabelais called the gramatica iocosa ('laughing grammar') in which artistic language is liberated from the stifling norms of correctness. In this sense his works are anti-canonical; it deconstructs not only the canon, but also the generating matrix that makes canons and grammatically. Savi Sawarkar's quest for a new linguistic idiom is an outcome of the recognition that most of the existing linguistic options are inadequate to communicate with the expressive needs of an oppressed but multivocal/multicentered (or 'polyphonic' in the Bakhtinian sense) community and culture.

In the case of India, the entry of subalterns into mainstream art practices through hybrid, transcultural engagement has been prevented till now by upper caste institutions primarily through the attribution of an authenticity (such as living folk tradition) that locates them in an ahistorical world. On the one hand, these cultural elites act as the gatekeepers who prevent any contamination to the 'authentic subaltern' through interaction with other traditions including modernity. On the other hand these elites appropriate the attributed qualities – the cultural forms devoid of practice and context – as supplements in their practices in order to claim themselves as authentically modern in the postcolonial Indian condition. The 'speaking subaltern' who, expelled from the paradise of subalternity, is accused of (moral and ethical) contamination and systematically marginalized as the one seduced by 'outside' sins. One should consider the simplistic yet not innocent, understanding between subaltern identity and non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal as an outcome of this discourse.

Oppression as a subject matter was always part of the representative politics of visual art in general. Early instances of this representation can easily be traced back to the works of left-progressive artists such as Chittaprosad, Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore etc. But what makes Savi Sawarkar's intervention a 'discomfort' is his political positioning against caste oppressions that are completely overlooked by the progressive narratives. With a vigorous critical energy he has engaged with the lived reality of the world of subaltern communities; a world that is much more oppressive and suppressive, a world in which resistances and contestations have multiple layers and take on multiple forms.

Through this cultural intervention he also proposes that by not depicting this reality and acknowledging this fact, most of the progressive cultural practitioners had displayed their subservience to dominant discourses. His refusal to translate the caste oppression within the parameters of the grand narratives of economic oppression was a declaration of becoming part of newer knowledge and community formations which identify themselves as Dalits. This newer community formation is not merely the unification of oppressed castes against the oppressive castes. Dalit formation is not the traditional liberal view of interaction of different preconstituted communities. But Dalit as a newer knowledge and community formation resists this traditional liberal view because Dalit is something other than the sum or the relation among castes. This is similar to individuals and their relations with communities because both individuals and communities are not pre-constituted entities.

Savi Sawarkar's interventions in the sphere of mainstream art practices have to be located within the new cultural politics which identifies its first goal as a struggle for equality. The larger revolutionary impulses it carries can only accompany this struggle. This new cultural politics is not simply oppositional; it does not contest the mainstream for inclusion. It recognizes the politics of inclusion as a politics of subjugation; becoming of a group is no longer open but is conceived as the becoming of some specific essence. This new cultural politics is also not transgressive in an avant-garde sense of shocking the bourgeois culture. Rather it attempts through distinctive practices and by collective insurgency to target the decentring of the very premise of logocentric thought itself. Oppressed people worldwide now are skeptical about the dialectical oppositional modes such as avant-garde because these discourses hardly consider the subaltern as a discursive agency. The potency of 'avant-garde' claims of 'higher' cultural practitioners lies in the construction of the idea that they have the resource, ingenuity and (self-assigned) right to make value-judgments above and beyond all social and historical values and realities. However, the emergence of new subject groups (definitely Savi Sawarkar exemplifies this emergence in visual arts) and newer popular discourses indicates that the doubts raised by the people are valid, especially those who are depicted in all social theories as apathetic, about the appellations such as 'opposite', 'alternative', 'queer', 'secular', 'parallel' etc. Simultaneously, it confirms that the untouchability/absteeism constituted by the native elite is getting destabilized in the manner that the Othering constituted by Eurocentric systems of knowledge had.

The recent interest shown by the mainstream/conventional cultural institutions in Dalit literature and art is not a product of a desire that allows Dalit discourses to take part in the knowledge formation and cultural production. Instead, it was/is an attempt to preserve the conservative institutions from destruction and decentring. It is not coincidental that the people who engaged in the kind of arguments that bracket off and define Dalit literature/art as "this" or "that" appear to be interested only in alienating the life condition of the Dalit from its contemporary location and constructing it as something that is of the *Chaturvarnya* time. In other words, the historical memories of Dalits are often sedimented in their cultural forms and social practices that are not amenable to investigation under the auspices of discursive reason. In order to address the significance of Dalit society and culture, it is therefore necessary to reorient one's hermeneutic interest away from models of linguistically, discursively and textually toward the "phatic and the ineffable". Therefore a discourse that decentres the object and re-invents the subject, not as another homogenous center but as a presence of plural discursivity, can only hold the subalterns' 'double consciousnesses'.²

1. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993.
2. Ibid., This concept derives from the work of WEB Du Bois, who began *The Soul of Black Folk* with the observation that "one ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone kept it from being torn asunder" (quoted in Black Atlantic, p. 126). Du Bois's purpose in mobilizing the concept of "double consciousness" was "to convey the special difficulties arising from black internationalism of an American identity" (p. 126); but Gilroy wishes to generalize its applicability, according to its authoritative status with respect to black Western subjectivity.

Savi Sawarkar's usage of the human body seeks a special attention in this context. The manner in which these bodies have been rendered displays an uncanny sense of resistance against all kinds of standardization or canonization of human bodies. The bold lines which produce the contours of the bodies are not used as the limit that marks the 'natural' resemblance to the universal human body. These bodies are local in their specificity and at the same time they imagine a possibility of becoming which produces the prospect of political alliances through the recognition of multiple layers of sufferings and struggles. Or in other words, the unfinished, elastic bodies in many of his paintings transgress their own limits and keep open the possibilities of conceiving newer bodies. These paintings counter-pose the mutable body, the passing of one form into another, reflecting the ever incomplete character of being. As in carnivalesque aesthetics by calling attention to the paradoxical attractiveness of the grotesque body these paintings also attempt to reject what might be called the 'fascism of beauty'.

Many of the human bodies in Savi Sawarkar's works are fragmented and some of them are mutilated and amputated. Most of the figures display the agonies of their complex social existence. Many bodies bear the traces of the histories of casteist humiliation and torture. The surfaces and visual atmosphere of almost all the works clearly displays the way in which their lives are fragmented through the histories of exclusion and discriminations. Savi Sawarkar's painting surfaces are not mere backdrops to the figures; on the contrary they are very much part of the figures and represent the battle grounds of human sufferings. In most of the instances, the violence unleashed on the human bodies are not represented through any graphic representation of the acts of violence. The lethal combination of direct colors, bold brush strokes and rough textures make the surface vibrate with the agonies of violence. In many instances like in the case of *Dark Day I*, the figures are etched into this surface, indicating the fact that their bodies are the physical bearers of this casteist violence. In some other instances like *Benaras* and *Ganga* the propagators of heinous casteist violence, the muscular face which represents Brahminic ideologies, comes out of the surface and stares at the spectator with arrogance.

The presence of the structures which represents industrial outlets suggests the contemporaneity of this violence. The screaming female figure, crushed under these muscular forces also suggests the gendered nature of this violence. The violated and dejected female figures like in the cases of devdas also talk about the histories of sexual oppression. These representations also pose the question of the role of caste in gendering the bodies and the way in which this gendering reestablishes the rationale of caste itself. The miserable plights of the devdas are a recurring thematic in Savi Sawarkar's works. This thematic explores the way in which the anatomies of Brahminic religious practices are structured around casteist and sexist oppressions. His other works like *Untouchable with Dead Cow* also seek attention to the incidents of recent caste violence where numbers of Dalits were brutally lynched by the upper caste militia by accusing them of cow slaughtering. These representations expose the nature of the brutal violence unleashed towards Dalit communities and the casteist arrogance that treats the social status of the members of the 'lower' castes lower than animals.

Savi Sawarkar's inclination towards Buddhist philosophy as well neo-Buddhist politics works as the basis for his series of paintings on Zen masters and Buddhist monks. These paintings bear the historical memory of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legendary challenge to the Hindu *varna-jati* system through the massive conversion to Buddhism. The manner in which he represents these figures exemplifies the extent to which this massive conversion brought dignity to the lives of the 'untouchables'. These works pay tribute to the political philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar and neo-Buddhist movements and register how these historical initiatives have transformed the lives of millions of people forever. Savi Sawarkar's representation of the thinker also deserves a special mention here by the reason that his Thinker declares the arrival of the new subject and knowledge formation. To imagine these formations he hasn't followed the canonical *Thinker* of Rodin. This thinker is not the idealized thinker of the Western White male subjectivity. Unlike Rodin's sculpture Savi Sawarkar's *Thinker* is not positioned on any pedestal or in isolation. He is very much a part of the community he belongs to and refutes all the logics of an idealized thinker. He can be anyone in the street; he is not an armchair intellectual; the aesthetic standards which regulate the notion of intelligentsia as the upper caste male alone are countered by these representative tactics.

One of the other factors that is easily recognizable in Savi Sawarkar's artistic practice is the aspect of repetition in terms of thematic choice. There are multiple representations of *Devdasis*, *Untouchable with Dead Cow*, *Brahmin Priests*, *Manu* etc at different points of time in his career. With a renewed energy, each time he has questioned caste oppressions of various sorts through multiple tongues. Some times with a vengeance like in the case of the representation of the brahmin priests and Manu and many other times with the gesture of solidarity to the struggles of the systematically 'marginalized' communities. This act of repetition has to be read not in the conventional sense of repeating the same-old-thing but as a politico-linguistic strategy. In short, Savi Sawarkar's act of repetition is not the recurrence of the same old thing over and over again. For him, to repeat something is to begin again, to renew, to question, and to refuse remaining the same. Gilles Deleuze has observed, repeating the past does not mean parroting its effects, but repeating the force and difference of time, producing art today that is as disruptive of the present as the art of past. These works 'repeat' not in order to express what had gone before, but to express an untimely power, a power of language to disrupt the flow of dominant notions of identity and coherence.

One of the semantic components that are central to his critical artistic positioning is the usage of the language of excess which problematizes the dominant notions of beauty, harmony, aesthetic and skill in art. His unconventional usage of colors and mode of figuration raises concrete skepticism about binaries such as high art and popular art, figuration and abstraction, drawing and caricature by blending their boundaries. This move also postulates that in the context of India the concept of caste and the casteist notion of purity has played a significant role in the construction of normative aesthetics similar to the way in which binaries such as white/black has played in the western cultural imagination. The coming back of 'caste' as an analytical category does not envisage it as an agency that transplants itself as a new centre; on the contrary, it foresees the possibilities of decentring, differentiation, relationality, liminality, sharing and linkage. Savi Sawarkar's aesthetic and artistic initiatives have to be located as a counter-institutional mode of cultural production which rediscovers the possibilities of a newer cultural politics.

s. santosh

Department of Art History and Aesthetics,
Faculty of Fine Arts,
M. S. University, Baroda.

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Excavating the History of the Present

Human figure has been the most consistent form of expression for centuries of artistic practices across diverse cultures. It has been centre of experimentation particularly since modernism when traditional ways of articulations have been questioned and new ways of unifying figure in the picture space have become a norm. How does modernism that enters India under the aegis of colonial modernity inform pictorial formulations that were acceptable and entered into public spaces? The very training process in the art school, inherited from the colonial times disallows questions raised about the social identity of the model in a life study.

The artistic endeavors are located in the midst of modernism in the realm of liberty that chose to become a silent spectator towards evolving such pictorial signifiers that defy conventional set of standards of judgments in their thematic context. Aesthetic formulations in the country function at twin plane: a) Conventional ways of articulated meaning as well as its understanding based on the conventional notion of beauty, b) the shaping of perception in the backdrop of caste considerations. Thus visual language gets so much bounded that the notion of modernity which, though it consists of notion of democratic equality, functions well within hierarchy and therefore traditional bondage attached with society and its functioning operate within the well orchestrated power of dominance.

To get legitimacy from the social high caste, visual language functions like bonded labor to articulate the voice of power of domination rather than to represent the possibilities of no social boundaries and a narrowly self imposed code of rules to define the aesthetic values that have been in circulation for a considerable period of time. The most pertinent question raised in this regard is- what are the possibilities of figure expressions engaged in multiple reflections; representing figure engaged in pain, sorrow and abject poverty. 'Sensualism' of the physical body has always been the centre of attention of many artists. However, there are some who deliberately avoided the sensualism of the unclothed female bodies to focus outward into the stark encounters in which the situational condition of variedness in the topography of the expression of hidden realities come out into the open. Sensuous body has been avoided as a part of one's own self-conscious project to establish legitimacy in the gravity of existence. But such attempts never considered the central issue of caste-based realities. Conventional acceptability to appease one's own optical vision as well as that of beholders, have been in practice to arouse sensualism represented through the female body, the body may be sculpted and may not be very sculpted in its curves and protrusions but has a definite leaning to create element of pleasure.

Savi Sawarkar not only challenges such conventional notions of figure representations of the female body but also brings-in 'caste' in the pictorial language as self-introspecting individual, who belongs to a social group that witnessed the pain of discrimination in the form of 'untouchability' and numerous inhuman practices that have been inflicted on the depressed classes of society. The way, in which the prevailing pedagogic practices in art schools and the gallery conventions operate within the framework of industrial capitalism, conventional visual signifiers based on the Brahmanic mythology carry on this mindset extending to the practice and taste of art collection and forming a conjunction with the art school and the art gallery, duplicates dominant in the society.

The notion of individual has been constantly argued as the most liberating ideology of modernism in the way it opens up ways to question traditional practices. However, unless one addresses the question of one's own location in terms of class and caste, of the artist, art critic or the art historian, the interrogative potential of modernism cannot be realized

Savi has been making sincere attempts to break from social hierarchy by exploring conditionality of pathetic living, allowing his medium to build images that are extremely hard-hitting. The body of work he has produced involved multiple layers of thought process which no other painter yet dared to venture. His forms have definite time-space delineating the contemporary as well as distant past loaded through certain symbolism that have been constructed in the process of ongoing historical time. Image representation is part of time reference rooted in past and present. Female body has always been subject of depictions in which the focus has been its sensuality. However, Savi goes beyond such accepted conventions. For him, the body is no less sensual but by bestowing on the female body marks of her caste identity. Savi makes visible the historical dimension of how a particular female body acquires sensuality becoming an object of sexual and social exploitation. While feminist interventions have also raised similar concerns via the male gaze, they have been steeped in the class inequalities. However, Savi, despite being a male painter, articulates a rethink on the female nude by foregrounding the caste based inequalities. Translating caste based sexuality into pictorial codes to convey the abject condition of the Dalit woman and how this condition is given a 'divine' sanction is part of Savi's pictorial agenda.

But is it a simple narrative to address the issues of poverty and tradition of devdasi via the cult of the sacred prostitution? Perhaps a person who has no reference to the existence of such a tradition in the Indian society may find it difficult to accept and may consider as 'imaginative'. Imagination is part of innovative productive process to articulate pictorial narrative. Savi's imagination is grounded in history to articulate complex interplay between caste and caste based hierarchies to understand and expose the barbaric practices of exploitation.

Deploying frontality, Savi methodically compels the viewer to face the protagonist. The idea is not to create subjective metaphors that make sense only to the artist but to draw from common symbols and shared public memory to critique the hegemonic order. "After their use of body by the so called *templewallas*, they are sold for a few thousands in the Mumbai red-light area", observes Savi. Driven by the experience of being part of the society that faced exploitations and social exclusion, Savi absorbs the pain and hence there is no attempt on his part to aestheticise the female body, as for the fact that social exclusion and stigma of untouchability in the pictorial conventions cannot be compromised in the name of beauty. 'Caste' as aesthetic signification plays an important role on the pictorial surface of Savi's paintings and graphics.

Depicting faces from front and side views embedded in certain symbolism indeed requires us to understand their literary forms of references which Savi has evolved by sheer observations and usages in the actual practices well embedded in their historical context. Heaviness in the face, torso, lower limbs schemed in the manner of generic compositions against colored areas has distinctness of commendable draughtsmanship that has been involved through series of life sketches. His involvement with drawing has been so intense that it becomes like an industrial production but such stage was achieved after making his own iconography. The body of symbols is created by the very process by which the enunciation ceremonies are performed and the way then devdasi has to live a secluded life.

All that cultural nationalism has led to is vandalism of some works of art in the name of morality but it has never ever initiated any process to sensitize the lower-castes about their condition and their exclusion from cultural practices. Emulating Prule's notion of knowledge and power and Ambedkar's ideas of *alternative* cultural practices, Savi deconstructs the very premises of the Brahmanical philosophy. As for instance, the use of red/vermillion as *kunkum* which among the upper caste symbolized chastity of married women acquires contrary meaning when used by the devdasis. The practice of applying such *kunkum* on the face never departs even after coming to the urban prostitution zone. Thus despite change of location of operation, the conditionality of practices becomes integral part of the life of devdasi. Despite urban living and influences, Savi argues that the urbanized environment does not torment the age-old traditional conventions and practices of subjugation to an extent that caste functions as a suppressed reality. Highly stylized simplistic images with forceful lines either in the singular or in a group of twos or threes are articulated to denote systemic oppressions in the educated as well as uneducated urban as well as rural societies.

As paradigmatic of marginalized bodies, the jogtas assume centrally as castrated bodies. The process by which they are created show the poverty of an intellectual class that can not even raise a voice against a voiceless. His jogtas imprint on our sense perception make their own self-existence as naked social realities.

As castrated being, the jogtas and the devdasis share common condition and hence are shown together. When shown singly, the jogtas are loaded with the same passivity as that of devdasis. It is interesting to observe that jogtas dressed like devdasis and put large *kunkum* on their forehead which Savi transform into a dense color bloc articulating human situation. His drawings, despite being synoptic in presentation cover a range of their situational location, merge into surroundings of their own.

Why is Savi obsessed with the single figures? Because Savi himself is alone in his attempts to paint what others think as 'other' or an out-caste despite being part of the modernity. Savi challenges such single-minded assumptions and fights for his own space in the art-world which too has been successfully following the Brahmanical cultural nationalism. Savi prefers to draw instantly, soon after his observations or having met the real protagonist. It is these set of rules which made him to travel through troubled areas of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat for keen observations and to make record of such people in his own iconographic conventions. Drawings of a women whose life was tormented during the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat is highly distinctive in its own right bearing weight of her own conditionality and living with some positive hopes because her relatives were murdered during riots. Emphasizing the nature of humanness in the topography of hierarchical caste-structure, no fictive thinking is invested to create the images of daily life.

What makes Savi to break narrative into synoptic symbolism is to shatter certain assumption of celebrating the idea of visual pleasure. In a vertical and horizontal social space 'celebration' of joy gets imprecise as no other elements in his syntactical structure interlude to create any misnomer for suppressing the identity of image.

Manu and images of brahmins, for example, are among his most volatile works. Despite being historical categories, they are referred to as contemporary and still deeply informing society today. Depicting Manu and a *pundit* in the pictorial space with heavy black brush strokes against the foreground of either red, yellow or any other color, are projected as systemic opposites to the non-vedic cultural practices and philosophy that is deeply rooted in Ambedkar's writings.

While Ambedkar was the first one to make extensive critique of Manu and deconstructed his writing as part of his intellectual project, on the other hand, Savi chooses to demystify the aura around Manu by aligning him with Nazi like characters. Stark contrasts are used to make image a grotesque reality, greed and cruelty. It may be recalled that image of Manu was installed in front of the Rajasthan High Court, thus symbolizing how the process of modernist project of Gandhi-Nehruvian nationalism can percolate to establish and legitimize the celebration of Manu in the contemporary India. Savi's Manus are identical with the ideas of Manu controlling the governing polity and economy. By de-mythifying the image of Manu and a brahmin, Savi shifts the focus on the nature of conditionality controlled by series of impositions and systemic injection of ritualistic ideas by devising the relation between the ground and the actual figure.

While redefining the iconography of Manu, Savi intrudes into the foray of the symbolic order of the dominant since ages. Through the forceful entry he makes into this hereto forth guarded territory, his interventions into the symbolic order challenges the age-old hegemony rooted in graded inequality. In short, he redefines monumentality by giving visibility to those who were considered outside the pale of pictorial representation.

How does Savi address the symbolic order of the *chaturvarna* system or the four fold caste system? Drawing upon the personal and collective consciousness and relating with experiences grounded in the shadows of oppression where survival with dignity becomes fundamental issue, he probes into the genesis of the *varna* and caste. Although the idea is just not merely to project of the existing order, but to urge us through formal distortions, to re-imagine an alternative order. In such cases, it is the dynamism of line combined with energy released through formal juxtaposition that expressed his cynicism as well as a utopian vision about a better future.

Ever since his training at the art school in Baroda, Savi has been constantly engaged in searching a language of potentialities to devise his pictorial strategies to address the issue of 'caste' on the pictorial surface. His unperturbed involvement enabled him to go into the past to depict the symbols of broom hanging at the back and a sputum-pot hanging around neck, dead animal on the shoulders etc. Such signs became his immediate tools to make human figure more powerful to express his own inner-self. Though he paints such images rarely, nevertheless it has opened up many other possibilities to think differently, aiming to hit at the theoretical formulations that have gone into making of the very structure of Indian society, thus he arrived at 'Foundation of India'. Many figures bear identical look. Their specificity is conveyed through surrounding symbolic forms like masjid, books, temple, crow, begging bowl, bells etc.

Communalism has been a very burning issue in the contemporary society and yet Savi has refused to paint images of communal riots. He views communalism as the underside of Brahmanical hegemony and to view riots as based on religious divide alone is to get duped by misrecognition propagated by the mainstream discourse.

The pictorial form of the figurative deployed minimally through gestural strokes and that can stand in for different types of marginally cutting across gender divide has lent a structural simplicity to his works and allow him to capture the spectator instantly. The impression we gather out of Savi's work is that of an excavated history of our own time. Token distinctions between figures, ground and its surrounding are significantly shared by their involvement in the picture space itself. By pictorial quality achieved through the minimalist set of conventions, Savi tries to minimize the narrative as much as possible to capture the phenomenological condition of untouchability.

The fundamental point of departure is to present 'caste' in a declarative sense so as to denounce all claims of the so called self-modernist claims of equality and democracy. In a spirit true to the ideology built by Ambedkar, Savi questions the very claims of a modernist avant garde that aspires to speak in the name of the marginalized while turning its back to the most political category of our time- the caste system. Many modernists ventured in painting events based on mythological historical events to show adherence to the tradition. It has been done with the tendency of sheer romanticization of past without questioning its graded-inequalities. Such visuals are directed to project the sacredness of tradition in the present hierarchical structures to legitimize the well molded self-centric political positioning located in caste-dominant society. Savi preferred to denounce such conventions and opted to strengthen his position with series of visuals in a true Ambedkarite tradition.

Dr. Y. S. Alone

Assistant Professor,

Visual Studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics,

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

OUT OF THE LABYRINTH

Deceptively indifferent, inchoate and off-putting at first sight, Savi Sawarkar's works start taking on deeper dimensions and connotations only after our eyes learn to dwell awhile on his works and feel their way in, out and through them. This is not because he is a formalist in the sense of experimenting with forms as an end in itself. Neither are his works tendentious in the sense of being mere illustrations of any ideology, aesthetic or socio-political. They seek to re-educate our eyes to see as he sees differently from the commonsensical ways of seeing. This change consists in seeing, sensing and showing the world as it is in the light of Buddhist principles of *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (no-soul) and *dukkha* (misery). However, they are not just metaphysical statements, which would have made them tendentious in another sense. They take on an authentic and concrete aspect as they are deeply informed by the feel of being Dalit in a society desecrated by caste system, untouchability and patriarchy. They weave their changing patterns of bodies and figures through this labyrinthine maze, whose very immateriality points to ways out of the maze.

Savi Sawarkar's is the art of sur-faces and trans-formations in the Buddhist sense. Most often his figures are not fully formed but are trans-forming into something that they not yet are: bodies twisting out of themselves, figures dis-figuring themselves, limbs sprouting out of limbs, men, women, animals and objects flowing into each other erasing their *nama-rupa* (names and forms) into the instability and mutability of the sensory world. This changing world of senses without essences is often sketched in minimalist drawings on white emptiness that makes figures and forms somewhat like ripples and waves of a flux. When they petrify into three-dimensional, dehumanized and distorted faces, figures and forms in the darkest of colours, they remind us of African masks, the visual translations of a traumatized scream, staring into the godless present.

When we look at Savi Sawarkar's fragmented and twisted figures, what are they looking at? Better, what are they looking into? Certainly not at or into us. They are as indifferent to us as caste system is to them. Like traumatized people, they are staring into nothing at all. Their way out of this Manuvian hell is through the hell. These figures, becoming aware of the instability of their situation begin to move out of their own body limits, men, women, animals and beasts slowly open themselves to each other in unselfconscious acts of compassion, transfiguring themselves into serene expressions of unfettered *airantas*, prefiguring the enlightened state of Buddhahood. For those were the happy tidings *Compassionate One* brought to the anguished: 'Had there been no realm without birth, aging and death, O Bhikkhus, there would be no freedom from the realm of birth, aging and death'.

Savi Sawarkar's profound and creative engagement with Buddhism in experiential terms is the hallmark of his works. But there is more to it than just the philosophy of practice. It is the practice of Buddhist philosophy in visual art in the profoundly lived context of contemporary Dalits casting off Manuvian shackles and rising into moral and spiritual heights of liberated Dalits, a process Baba Sahab inaugurated in his *dikshabhumi*. Thus a subtle depiction of details of Dalit *samsara* merges into the emancipating artscape of *dharma*. Put together, Savi Sawarkar's works seem to be working their way towards an integrated art, Dalit and Buddhist at once through the epic dimension of casteist subjugation and Buddhist liberation.

Savi Sawarkar :

EDUCATION:

- 1981: Diploma in Photography, Pune.
- 1982: B.F.A. in Drawing and Painting, Nagpur University, Nagpur.
- 1984: M.F.A., Graphic (Print-Making) M.S. University, Baroda.
- 1999-2000: Spanish Language Course from C.E.P.E., Taxco, Mexico.
- 2001-2002: Mural Painting Course under Mr. Armando Lopez Carmona U.N.A.M. Mexico D.F.
- 2001: Under Mr. Jaime Quezadas Botanos, Pintura Encaustica, Academia de San Carlos, Mexico D.F.
- 2002: "Mural Painting" under Mr. Armando Lopez Carmona from Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas U.N.A.M. Mexico D.F.
- 2002: "Mural Painting" under Mr. Armando Lopez Carmona from Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas.
- 2003: "Mural Painting" under Mr. Victor M Caballero Ortiz from Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas U.N.A.M. Mexico D.F.
- 2001: Doing research on Neo-Buddhist Imagery from U.N.A.M. Mexico D.F.
- 2004: Fresco Training Programme from Banasthali Vidyapeeth, Rajasthan.

WORK EXPERIENCE:

- 1982-92: Indian Peoples Theatre Association (I.P.T.A.) New Delhi.
- 1984: Mr. Paul Lingren, (U.S.A), Garhi Studio, New Delhi.
- 1984: Mr. Krishna Reddy (New York), Garhi Studio, New Delhi.
- 1989: Prof. Pointacke (West Germany), Garhi Artist Studio, New Delhi.
- 1990-96: Amateur Astronomers Association of Delhi, New Delhi.
- 1999-2000: Programme of Visiting Artist, La Es Miralida, Mexico D.F.
- 2000-2002: Prof. Arturo Miranda, U.N.A.M, Mexico D.F.

AWARDS:

- 1986-87: Research Scholarship, Lalit Kala Akademi, Garhi Studio, New Delhi.
- 1990: Sahitya Kala Parishad, New Delhi.
- 1993: All India Exhibition, Jaipur.
- 1995-1996: A.I.F.A.C.S., New Delhi.
- 1996-97: Junior Fellowship, H.R.D., New Delhi.
- 1999-2002: Mexican Government Scholarship, Mexico U.N.A.M. Mexico.
- 2005-06: A.I.F.A.C.S., New Delhi.

H.S Shivaprakash

Professor in Theatre and Performance Studies,
School of Arts and Aesthetics,
Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi

Group Shows

- 1982: National Exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 1984: Graphic International, Bhopal.
- 1985: Sahitya Kala Parishad, New Delhi
- 1987: Graphic Exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 1990: "Art Yatra," U.S.I.S., New Delhi.
- 1991: 8th Triennale, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 1994: "Hundred Years of Indian Art" N.G.M.A., New Delhi.
- 1995: Bharat Bhawan Biennale, Bhopal.
- 2000: Casa Borda, Taxco, Mexico.
- 2000: Mittal Steel, Mexico.
- 2001: Academia De San Carlos, Mexico D.F.
- 2001: AAS Annual Meeting, Chicago, U.S.A.
- 2003: Asian Social Forum, Hyderabad, A.P. India.
- 2004: World Social Forum, Mumbai, India.
- 2004: National Exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 2004: World Social Forum, Mumbai, India.
- 2006: "Safdar Hasmi Samaroh," J.N.U. City Center, New Delhi.
- 2006: "Art Fair," Garhi Artist Studio, New Delhi.

SOLO SHOWS:

- 1993: Pandole Art Gallery, Bombay.
- 1993: Nehru Center, Bombay.
- 1996: Lalit Kala Akademy Gallery, Ravindra Bhawan, New Delhi.
- 1999: Chandrabai Hall, Nagpur University, Nagpur.
- 2001: 'Galeria Del Sur' University Autonomia Metropolitana, Xochimilco, Mexico D.F.
- 2005-06: 'Traveling Show in Germany sponsored by 'Bread for World', (German Human Rights N.G.O.).
- 2006: "Savi Sawarkar and the Annihilation of Caste" in Gallery '181, IOWA State University, U.S.A.

TRAVELS:

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- Widely traveled in India and abroad.

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Savi Sawarkar

Parul Dave Mukherji

Prof Parul Dave Mukherji has joined the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi as Professor and Dean. Earlier, she taught at the Department of Art History and Aesthetics, Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University in Baroda. From 2002, she became the co-convenor of the Forum on Contemporary Theory and co-editor of the Journal of Contemporary Thought.

She has lectured in India, Europe, Australia and Japan. Her recent publications include *Towards A New Art History: Studies in Indian Art* (co-edited), New Delhi, 2003 and guest-edited special issue on Visual Culture of the *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 17 (Summer 2003); *Rethinking Modernity*, (co-edited) New Delhi, 2005.

Her current research focuses on Indian art historiography, the politics of visual representation and the question of caste and gender in the study of early treatises of Indian art and aesthetics. It also involves working out a theoretical framework for comparative aesthetics to set up a conversation across disciplinary boundaries of critical theory and traditional theories of visual representation.

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Savi Sawarkar

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Eyes Re-Cast

Photography

Vikas

Navneet

Production

Ramdev

Asst. Production

Arjun Priya Gautam

Prashant Karan

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Ganesh Tayde

Viren Kardam

Exhibition Design

Lokesh Jain

Himanshu B. Joshi

Tony Gao Chuan

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Rajiv Pal

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