

OJAS  
ART

The Art of  
BHAJJU SHYAM  
Master Gond Artist





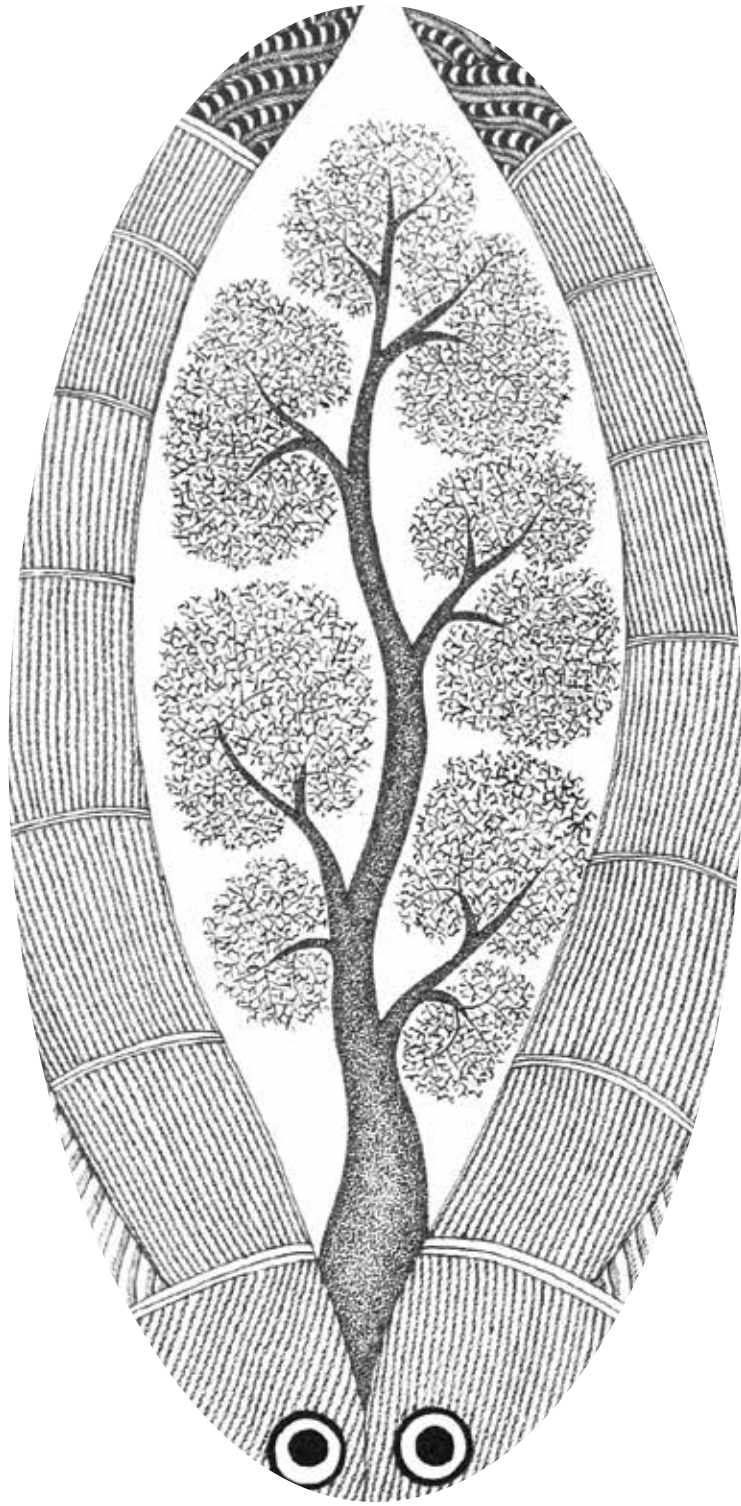
Maa Matre  
माँ मात्रे

Bhajju Shyam



*My first solo show in India is dedicated to my mother – Matre.  
My teacher and inspiration.*

**Bhajju Shyam**



**A few years back,** I met some accomplished Gond artists in Delhi. Subsequent reading and visits to Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal revealed a lot. Gond Art has thousands of years of recorded history and is probably the oldest surviving art form along with the Australian Aboriginal art.

There was a lot of pedagogical material available but not much on the current scenario. Other institutions in the vicinity showed contemporary Gond artworks but not much was available in terms of books and publications.

‘Ojas Art Award’ was initiated in 2015 in collaboration with Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) and Teamwork Arts with the aim of honouring the best tribal and traditional artists. In its inaugural year, Gond Art was the chosen genre and Bhajju Shyam the winner. At the award ceremony in Jaipur, it was heart-warming to see Bhajju a bit nervous to receive the award in front of an audience of more than 4,000 people! He told me later, “As an artist I have never gotten so much attention and respect.” His words assured me that we had done something right by initiating this award. His works were also exhibited at JLF, Boulder, Colorado in the same year.

In early 2015, we started the conversation on Bhajju’s solo show. He had had solo shows overseas, but this was to be his first solo show in India. He immediately decided to dedicate it to his mother.

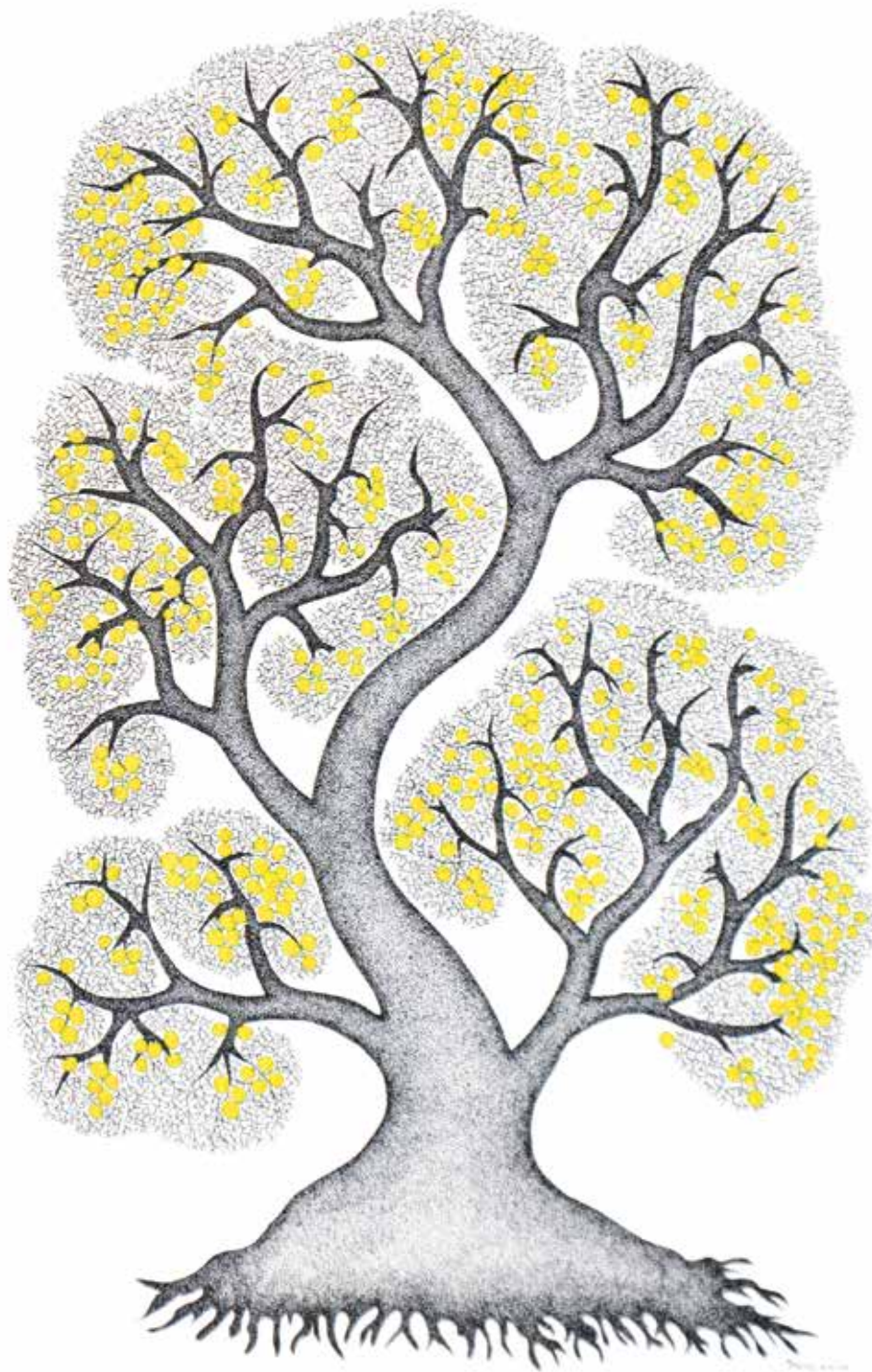
As the conversation on the solo show went ahead, I wanted to work on something special with Bhajju. Something that was his but he had not experimented with artistically. Gond art is well known for its vibrant color palette and detailed filling. Bhajju had experimented with monochromatic works in black ink, which are very detailed and elaborate.

To progress with his monochromatic works we started experimenting and started the process at the other end of the spectrum with white-on-white, meaning white ink on white paper. The thematic and visual imagery remained the same but the works now looked completely different. The work was hardly visible and Bhajju did not like the result. The next experiment was to retain the monochromatic character but change the color. Bhajju suggested adding a yellow. The result was not satisfactory. Each one of these experiments took two-three weeks between him making it and bringing the artwork to Delhi.

Through these experiments, we stumbled upon grey. Bhajju created a work in a single color tone of grey. We were discussing the work and he came up with an idea of introducing some lighter shades of grey as well and the result exceeded our expectations. Bhajju has developed a series of works in grey. These artworks have a certain fluidity which gives them a delicacy that is not seen in the colored or black ink works.

This exhibition has been a complete labor of love for all of us at the gallery, and we look forward to hosting more such meaningful exhibitions and presenting the best indigenous artists.

**Anubhav R Nath**  
Curatorial Director, Ojas Art  
November 2016





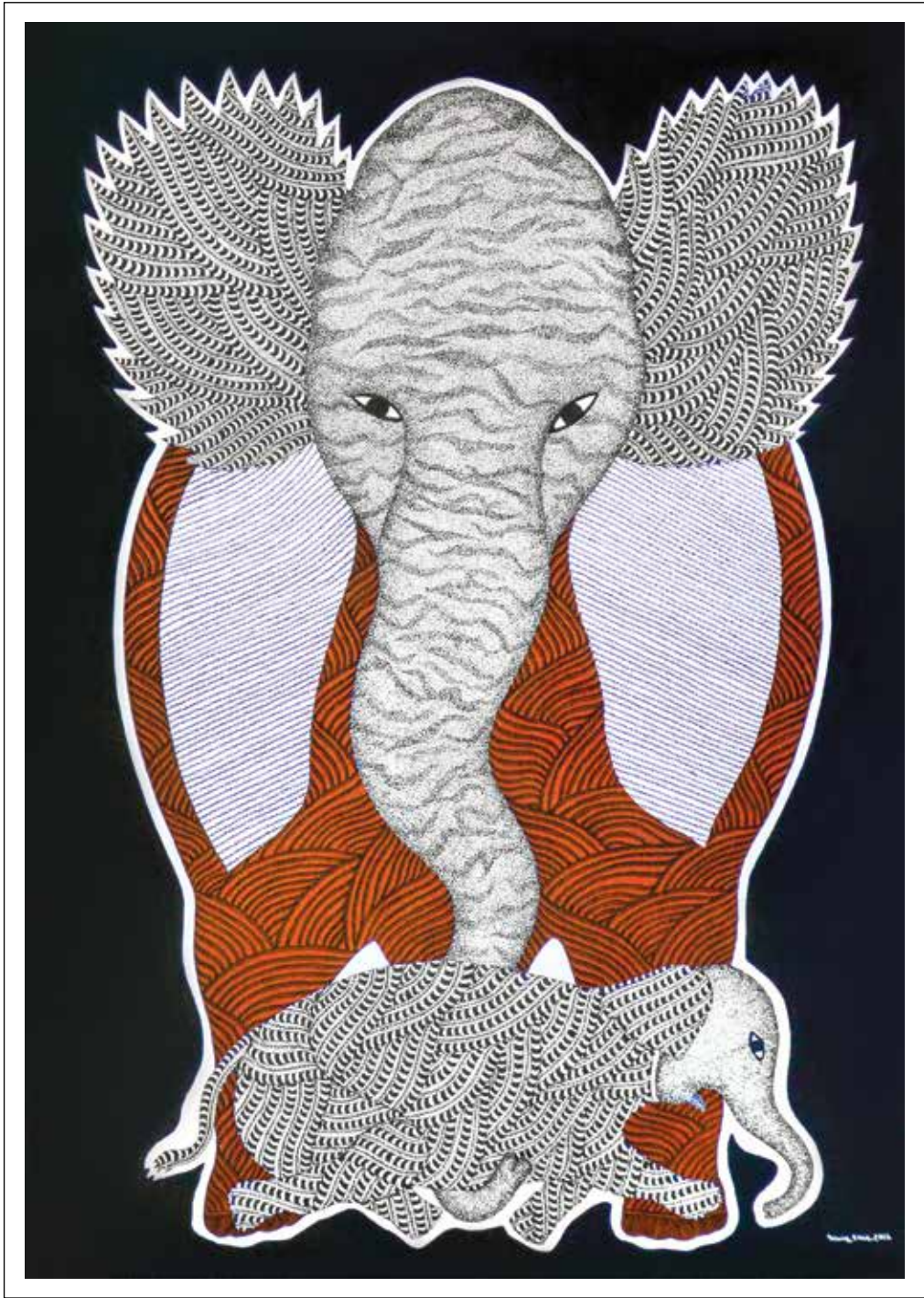
**Bhajju Shyam** comes from the tribal community of Pardhan Gonds of Central India. Pardhan Gonds did not have any significant tradition of painting, except for the rudimentary clay relief work done on the walls of their huts by the women of the family. The entire explosion of the so-called “Gond School of Painting” originated from the artist, late Jangarh Singh Shyam. It was Jangarh, who came to Bhopal while still a teenager, on the invitation of the artist J. Swaminathan to work in the environment of Bharat Bhawan, then being set up there in the 1970s. It was here that Jangarh began to paint on paper, using lustrous poster colours and created a range of astonishingly imaginative works derived from the memory of his community’s myths and legends. The idiom of painting that he established became the fountainhead of what is today known as the “Gond School of Painting”. As such, it would be more appropriate to label the genre not as “Gond”, but “Jangarh idiom”.

One of the most important and innovative artists to emerge from the explosion caused by this idiom created by Jangarh, is Bhajju Shyam. Exploring this new pictorial language, Bhajju charted his own path and created a series of works mythologizing the urban. His most remarkable works, now known as the *London Jungle Book*, in which he created a delightful visual narrative focalizing the city of London in terms of metaphors of Gond life and culture. While painting in this twilight space in the *London Jungle Book*, Bhajju returns, after a century, Kipling’s gaze, with an equal sense of wonder, adventure, humour and directness of expression.

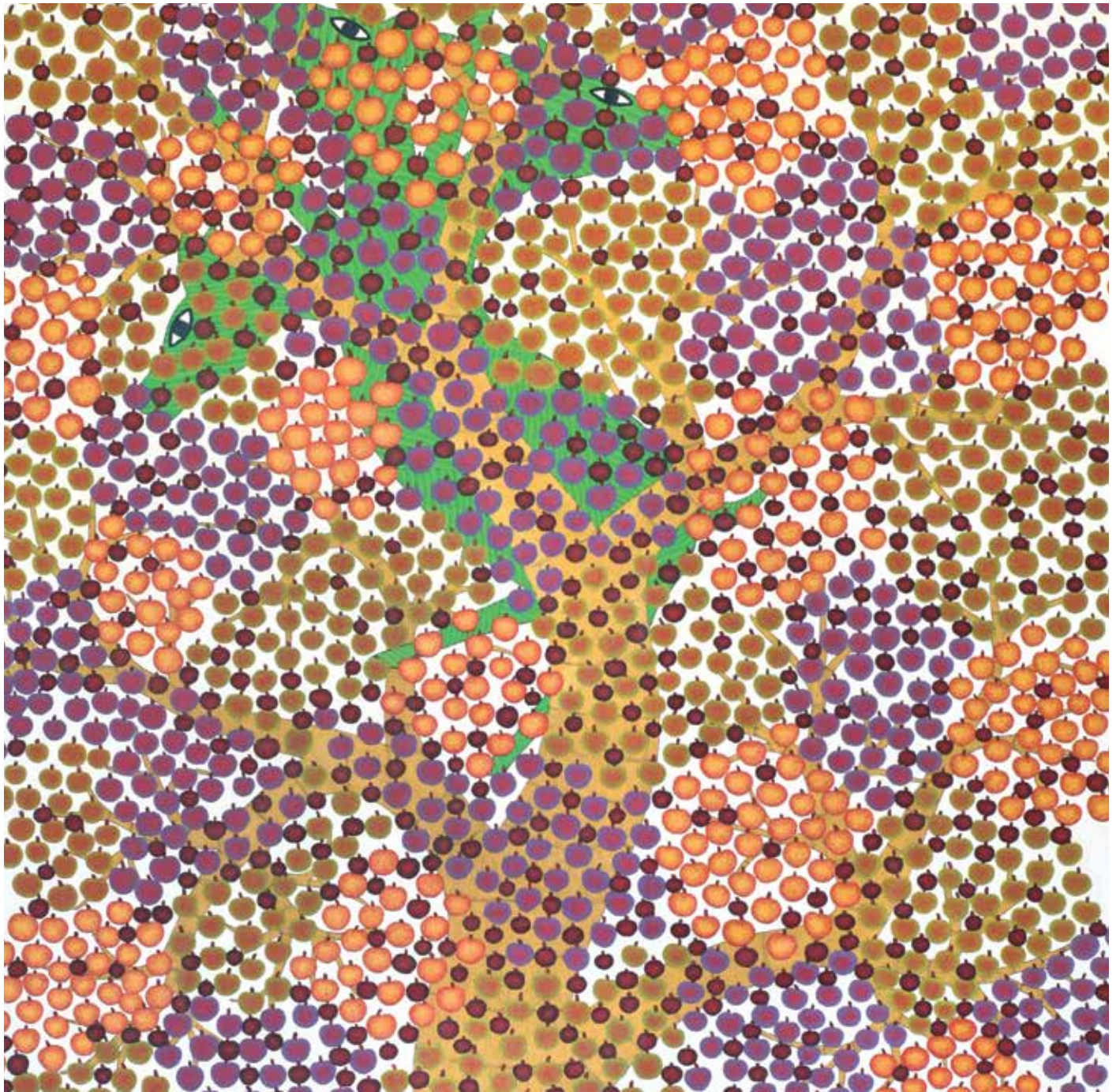
From this iconic phase of his work, Bhajju has moved on to explore nuances of the idiom with finer sense of colour, line and tonality while moving towards more abstract conceptualization of myths – both the inherited tribal ones and those emerging from his urban experiences.

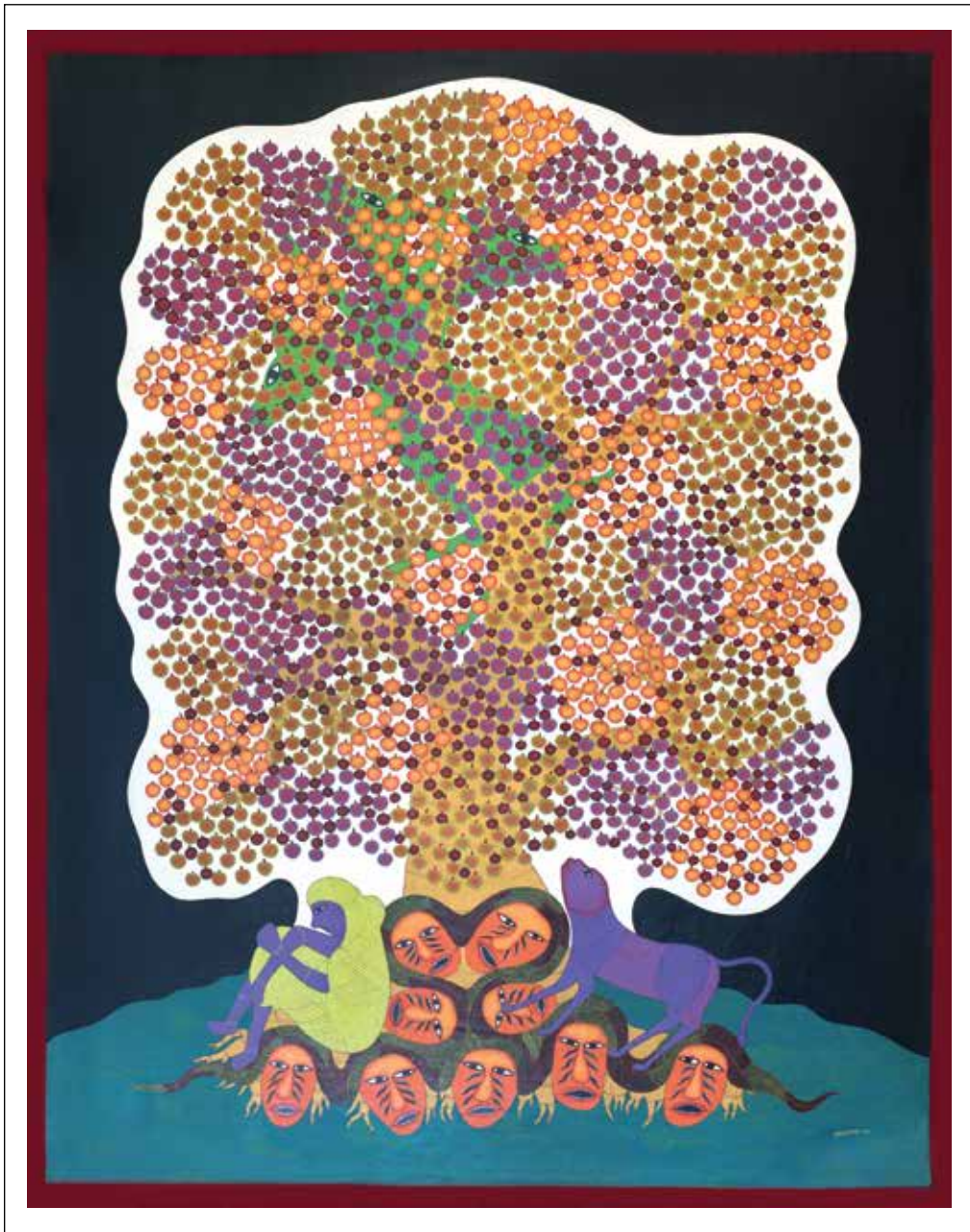
**Jyotindra Jain**

Curator & Art Historian



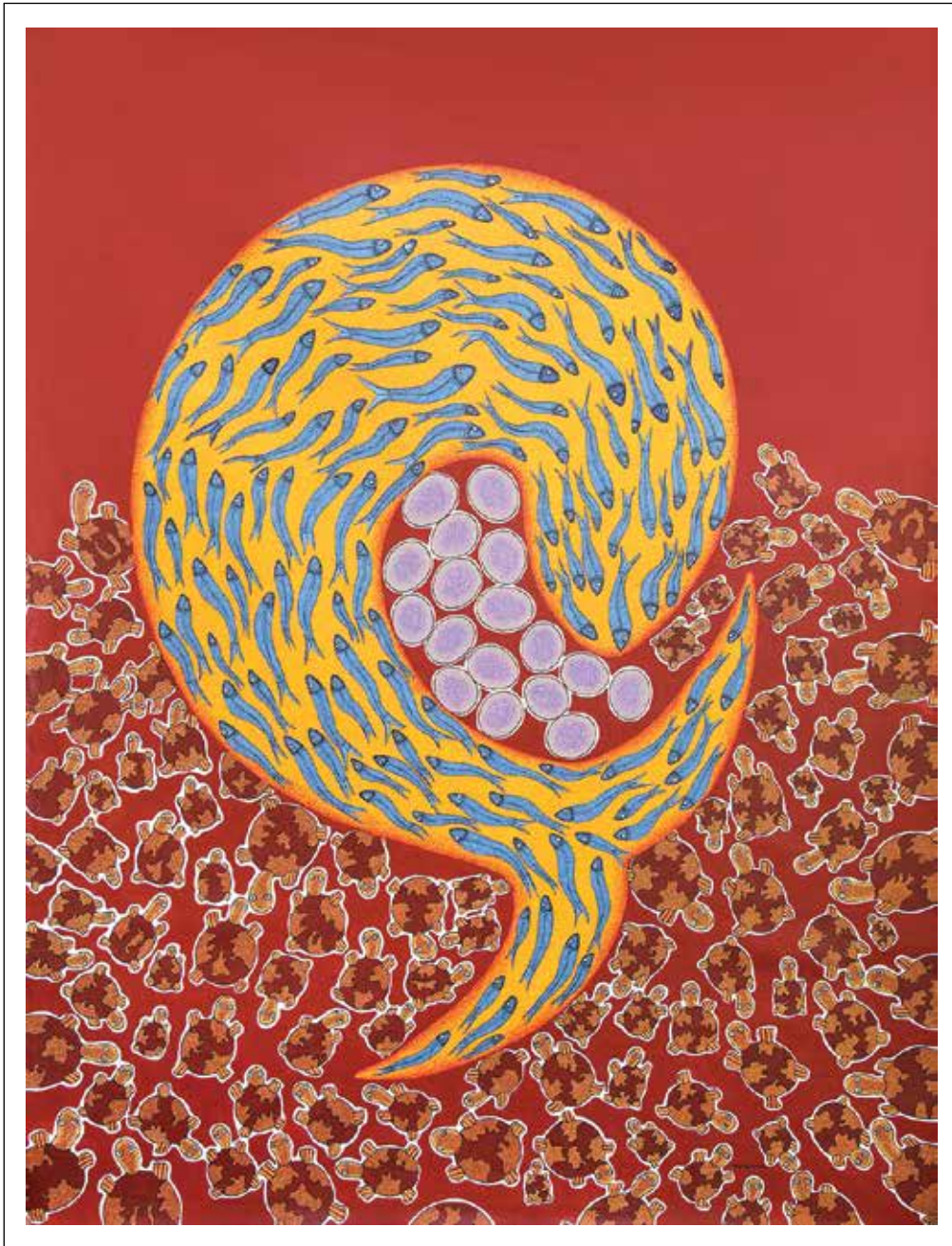




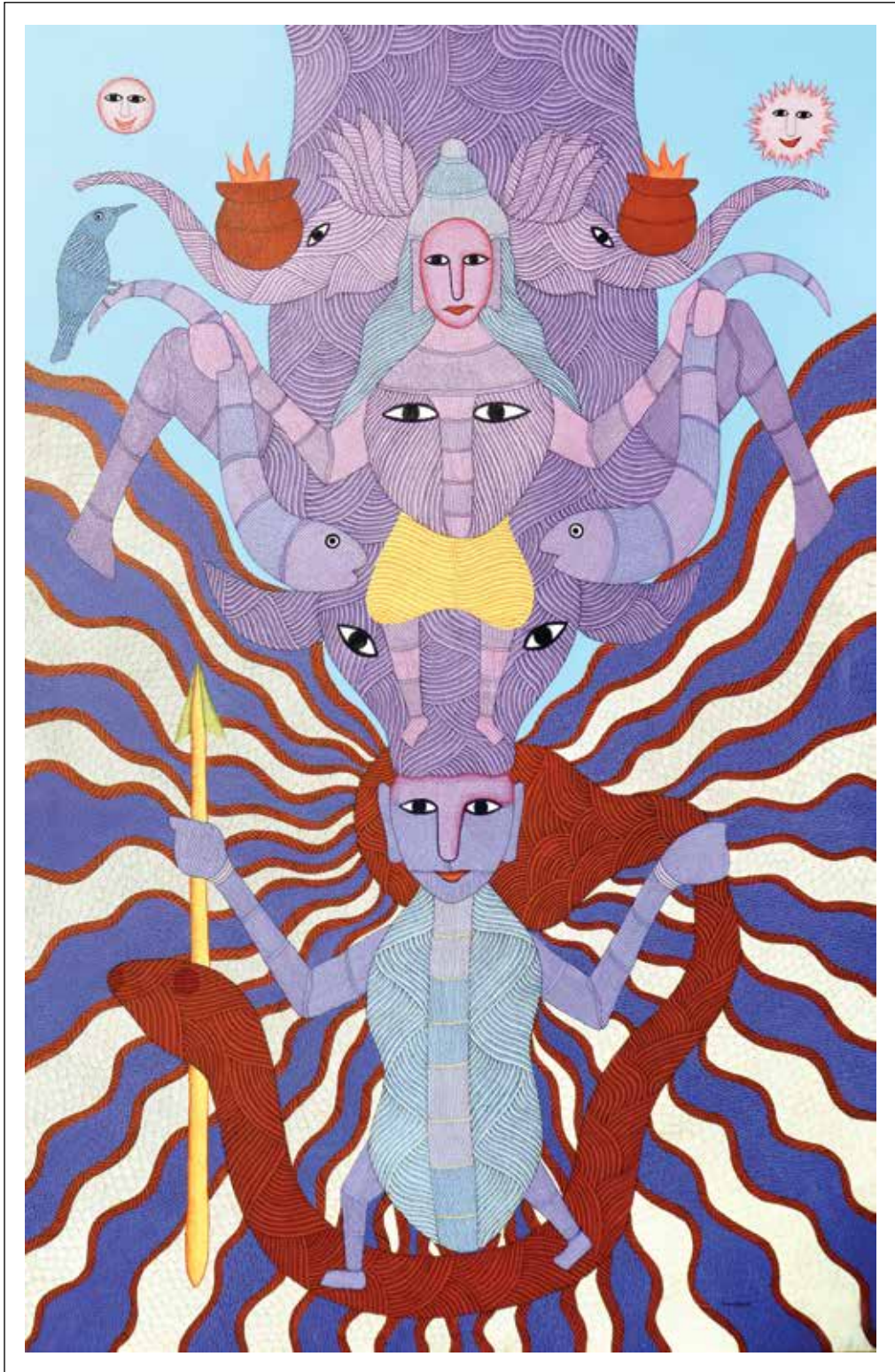








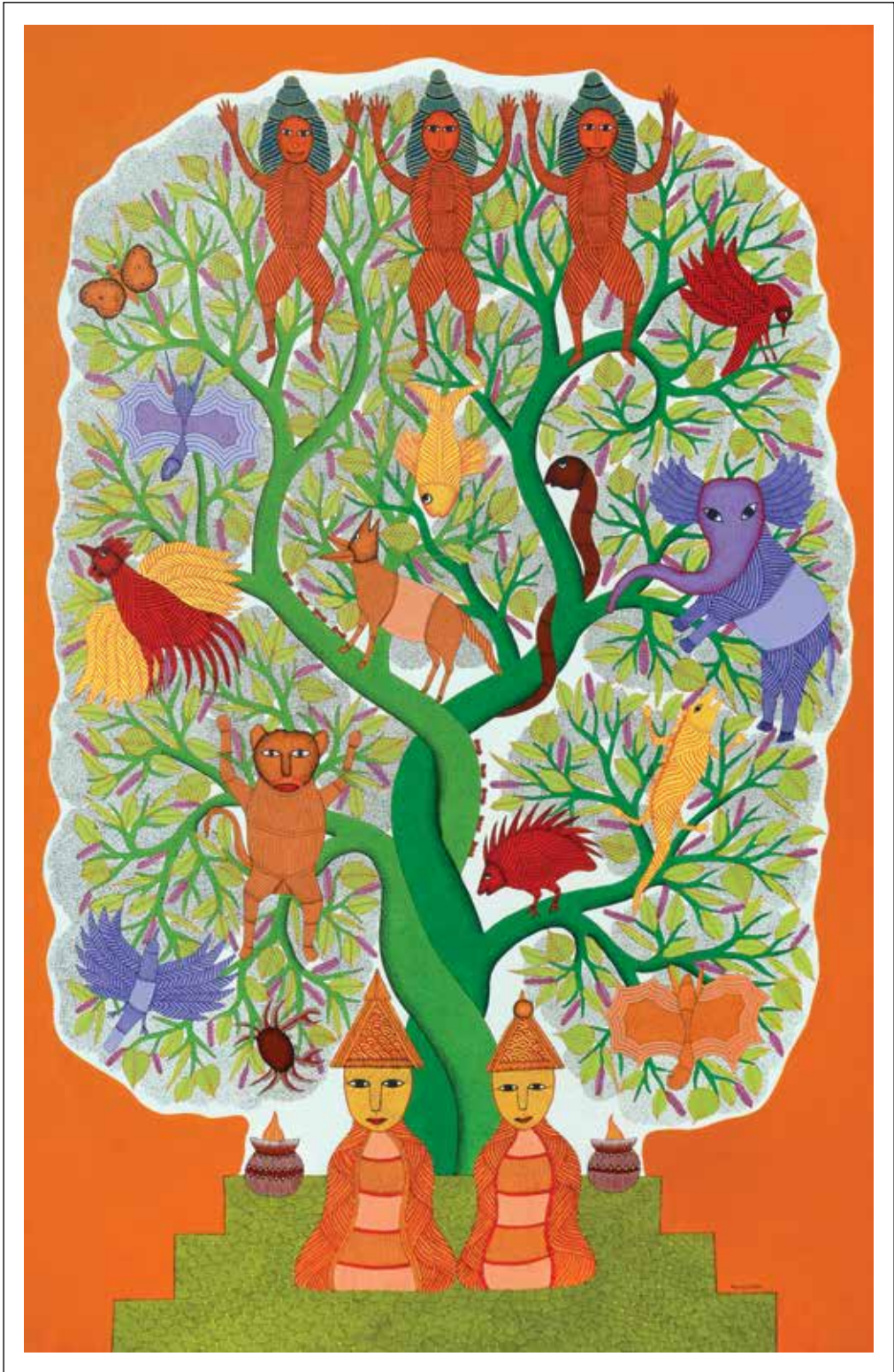
















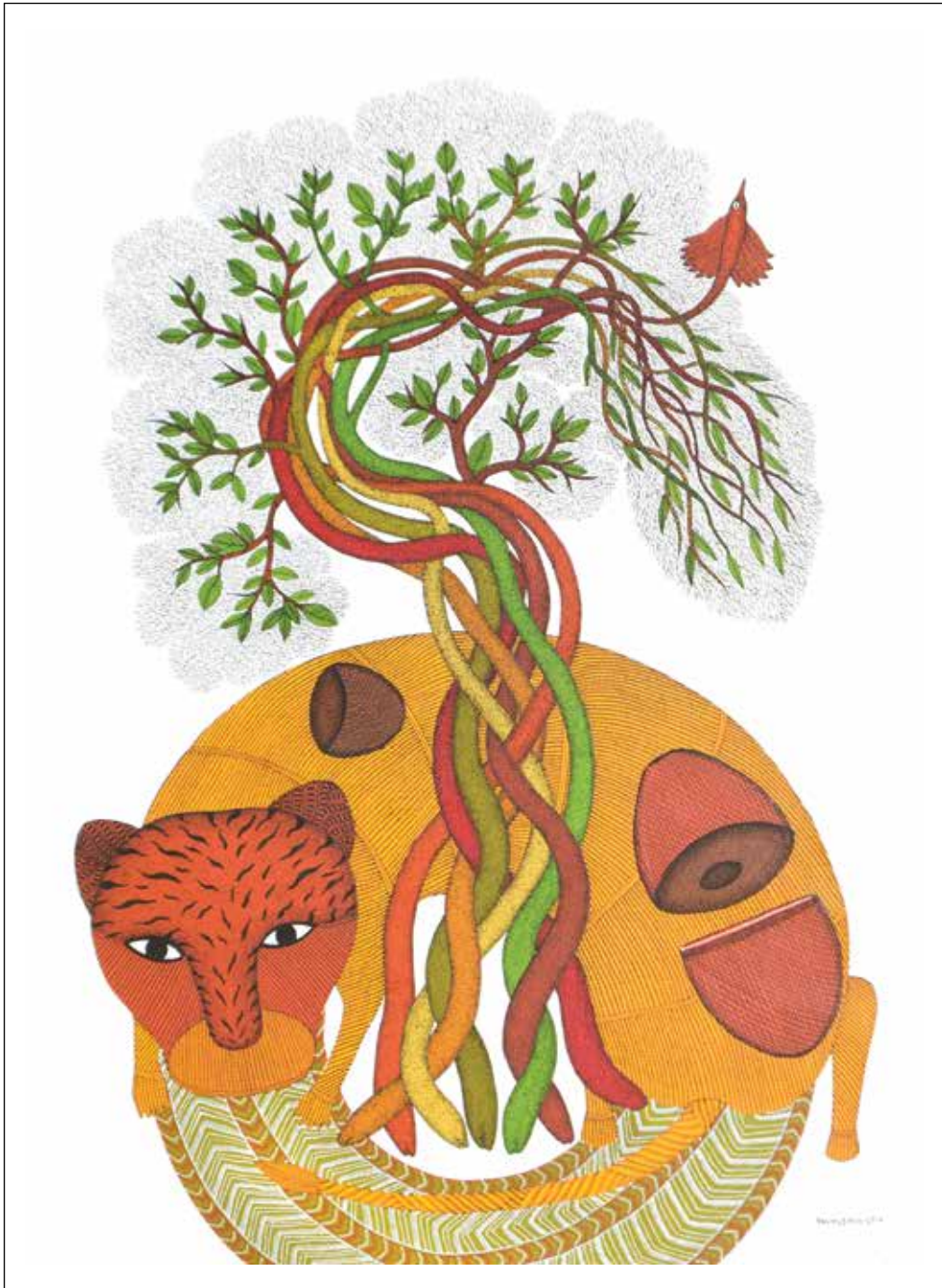


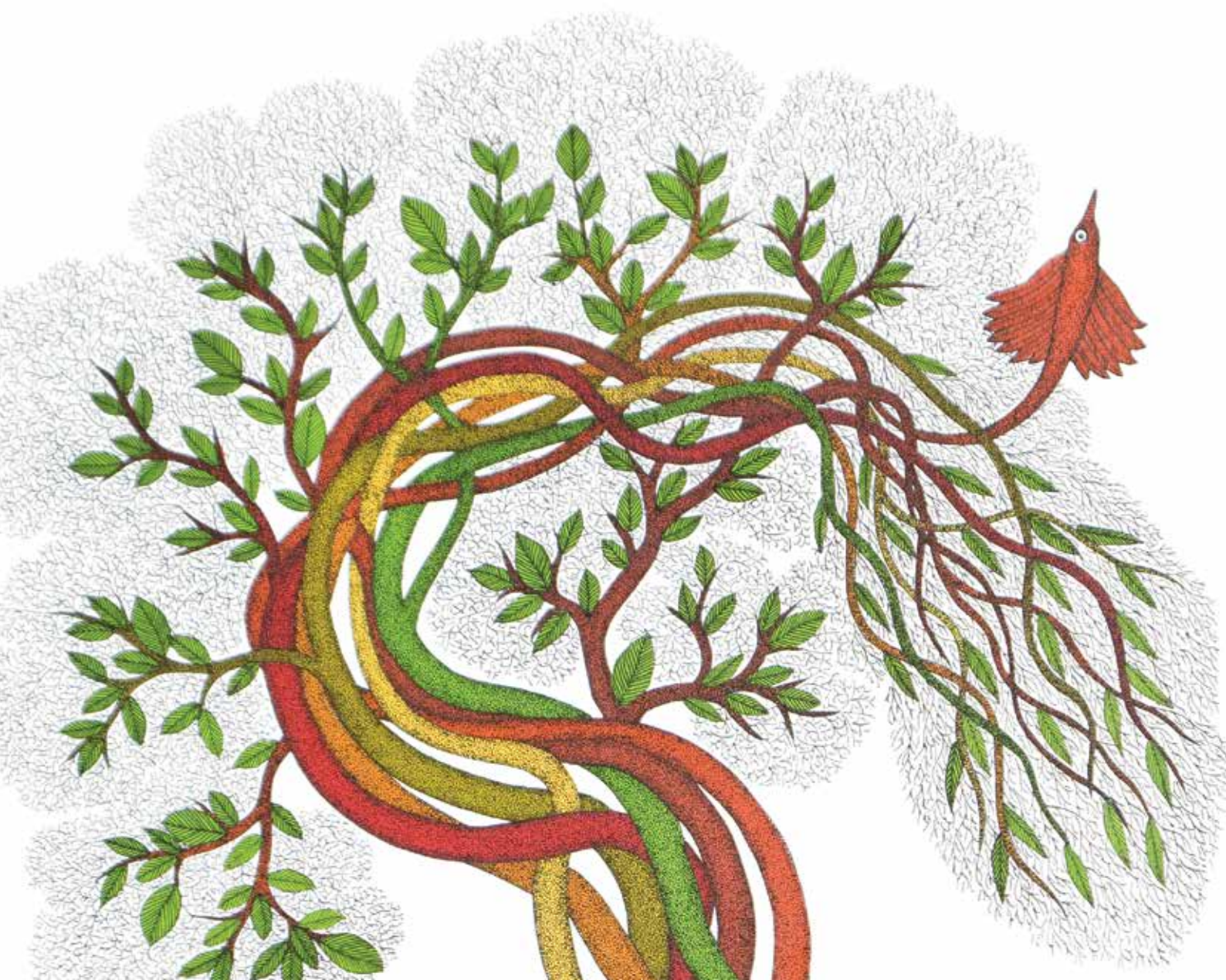












**In a world with flying machines** and subterranean carriages worming their way from location to location, magic and wonder have somehow become ever more elusive and slippery. Where does one travel to in the current times to encounter the witches upon the heath? Where have all the rabbit holes to wonderland disappeared? What are the contemporary conditions for wonder?

These are some questions which a practice like Bhajju Shyam's brings to mind, in its versatile alloying of contemporary subject matter and Gond sensibility. As an artist hailing from the Gond tribe dotting the Central Indian forests and negotiating a metropolitan life in Bhopal, Bhajju embodies a crossroads where two very different temporalities and worlds intersect. He is a quintessential example of someone who was never meant to be an artist and whom art claimed for itself. More accurately, the conceptions of art in the tribe where he comes from are somewhat different and his initial artistic training comprised helping his mother decorate their house by covering it in symbolic patterns.

In many ways Bhajju's story charts a conceptual course of shifting understandings of art – from a symbolic communal activity to a professional one. It is also a journey of evolution of a visual language originally keyed towards expressing shared communal meaning, into one that could articulate his own personal experience and unique vantage. Unlike many Gond artists who stuck to depicting traditional themes and subject matter Bhajju's was a special case where he moulded his inherited idiom to accommodate the contemporary imagery and thematics that now formed part of his lived experience as well as that of his community poised at the verge of change.

“Some artists I met in Delhi got at me for it, saying ‘You’re a tribal. Why are you drawing modern things? There’s no steel in your village – how can you draw a bicycle? You are getting spoilt by the city..’ They forget that we have bicycles in the village now. And how come they have the right to paint anything they like, but I must stick to wild animals because I’m a tribal? Times have changed, I live in a city now, and I have been on a plane to London.” – BhajjuShyam, *The London Junglebook*

For the Gonds art is a medium for prayer and viewing good art is connected with begetting good luck. The Gond visual system is a complex one with specialised ways of signifying different objects and subjects for instance water is depicted by painting aquatic animals against a decorative background whereas the earth is symbolised by earthworms among other things. As expected of any forest dwelling people, the tree is quite a central figure in the Gond lexicon as the giver of life.

Bhavna Kakar: How do you give titles to your work? A lot of these seem to be symbolic/allegorical with a pronounced aspect of metamorphosis.

Bhajju Shyam: Some of my works are titled while others are not. It's not of central concern to me. If someone asks for a title I explain it as well as the reference that the work draws upon. While at other time I just let the work speak for itself. For instance, [pointing to one of his paintings] there is no title to this work as such... it depicts a form of control... the theme touches upon the aspect of transformation through the magical art of *tantras* and *mantras* where a girl becomes a mare-lion when she enters a jungle, a fish when she enters the water, a bird as she enters the sky. This work [pointing to another one] shows a *mahua* and a *ganjha* tree. *Ganjha* is associated with God Shiva

whereas *mahua* with the worship of goddess Kali. At another level, the work is allegorical of a love story between a boy and a girl from different tribes who committed suicide in these hills in the face of opposition to their match from the members of their tribes. It is an old tale we are all familiar with. The work portrays these characters as lovers reborn as *mahua* and *ganja* trees finally able to unite and live as one.

In this way, his visual language is understandably animistic with metaphorical and mnemonic linkages to the flora and fauna that surrounds his community. That said, while some conventions are shared within the community each Gond artist has his own evolved signature, a distinctive decorative pattern for filling the figures in the painting that has roots in the ancient art of tattooing. Gonds believe that the motifs used for tattoos transcend the death of the body which explains their persistence into Gond art. Moreover decorative motifs are also drawn from everyday observations as well as from a pool of collective memory, revived and furthered through the oral accounts of *Bhujrukhs*, the traditional Gond bards who gather and retell myths and songs. Bhajju's own unique signature is reminiscent of a linked chain of dancers, seen from above.

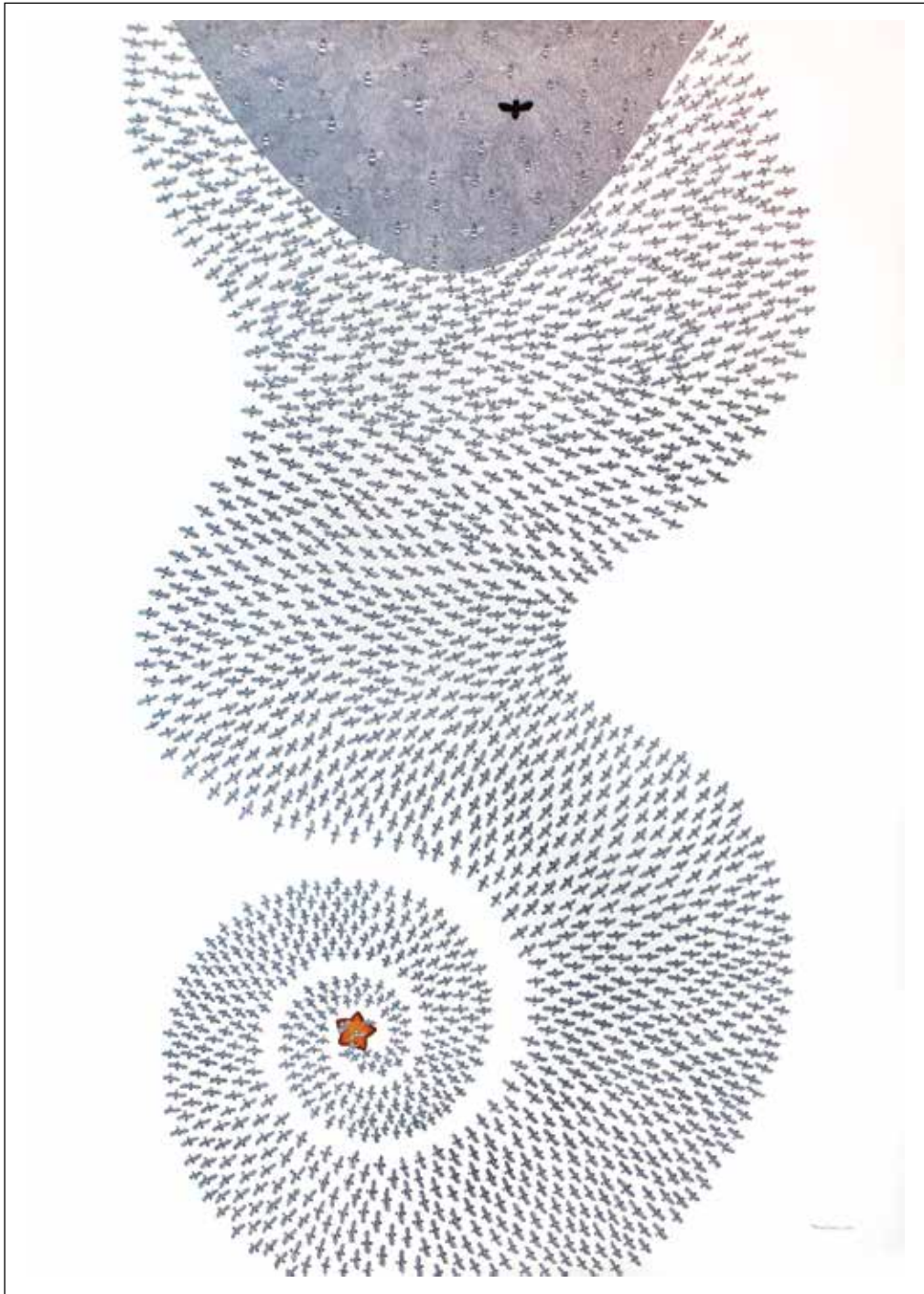
Bhajju Shyam: This one [points to another work] shows Radha Krishna as symbolised by the two fish.

Bhavna Kakar: But do you have Radha Krishna as a part of your pantheon? What are the principle gods worshipped in your tribe?

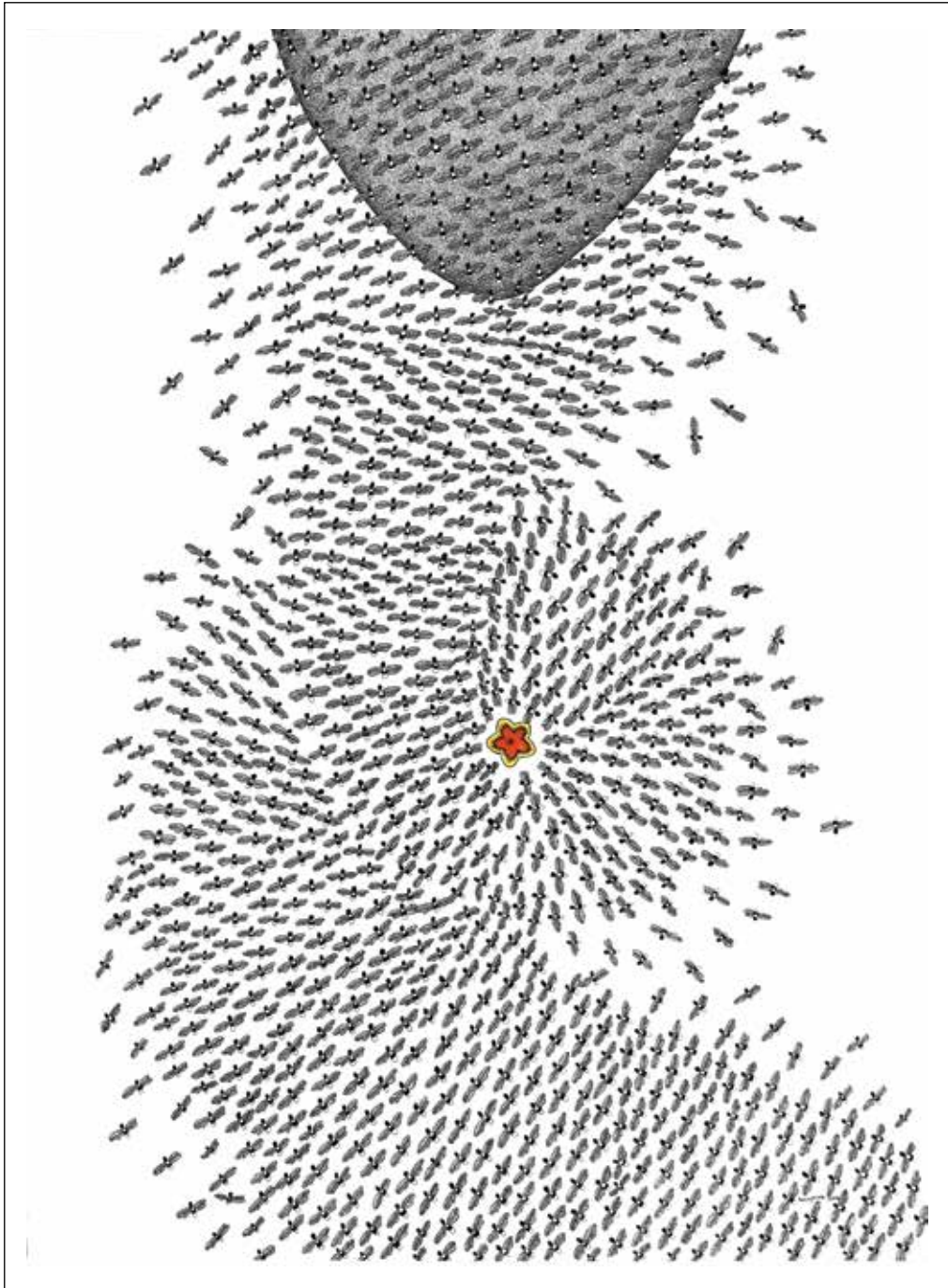
Bhajju Shyam: Some traditions like Madhubani has a history of claiming and depicting these characters... I, in my own way, try to adopt these semi-divine figures of Radha and Krishna to my style to see how they can be rendered in a Gond idiom. Though Badadev is the primary God but I usually paint flora and fauna as revered subjects. At any rate, the figures of Radha and Krishna are familiar to our people and prevalent in our imaginary through the tales of origin of the species and the universe sung by the *Bhujrukhs*. Unfortunately few of the *Bhujrukhs* (tinkering in the two districts of Mandala and Dhandori) remain. I am trying to revive the tradition by starting a new project where the young generations can learn the craft from the dozen or so remaining bards.

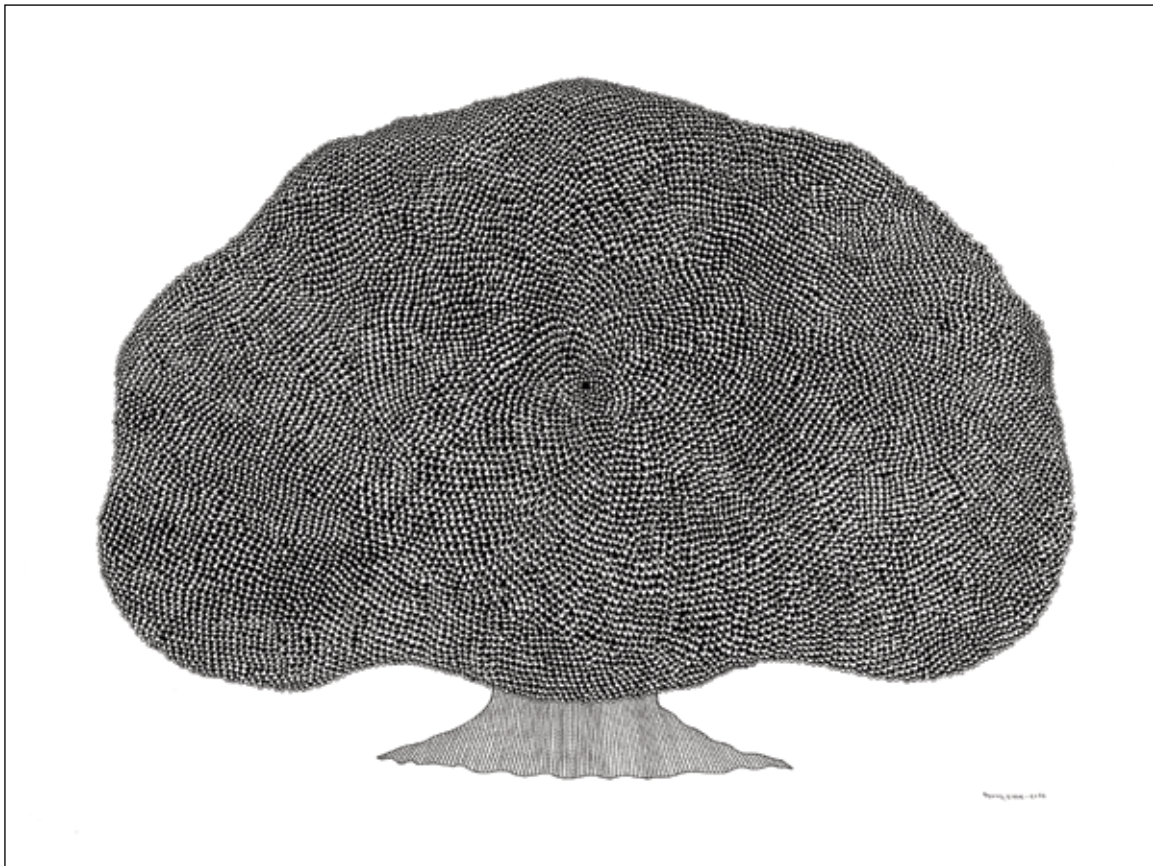
Bhajju's works combine a complex world view with an elegantly simple expression. The versatility of his oeuvre bespeaks itself not only in the adept cross-pollination of subjects indigenous and modern and in the devising of a language capable of rendering such hybridity but also in Bhajju's extension of his practice from murals and canvasses to other forms such as the artist's book and other collaborative projects. Bhajju has now inspired, published, illustrated, and co-edited a number of volumes with publication houses like Tara Books such as *The London Jungle Book* (2004), *Creation* (2014), *Signature: Patterns in Gond Art* (2010), *Between Memory and Museum* (2015) and *The Night Life of Trees* (2006) and the list keeps growing.

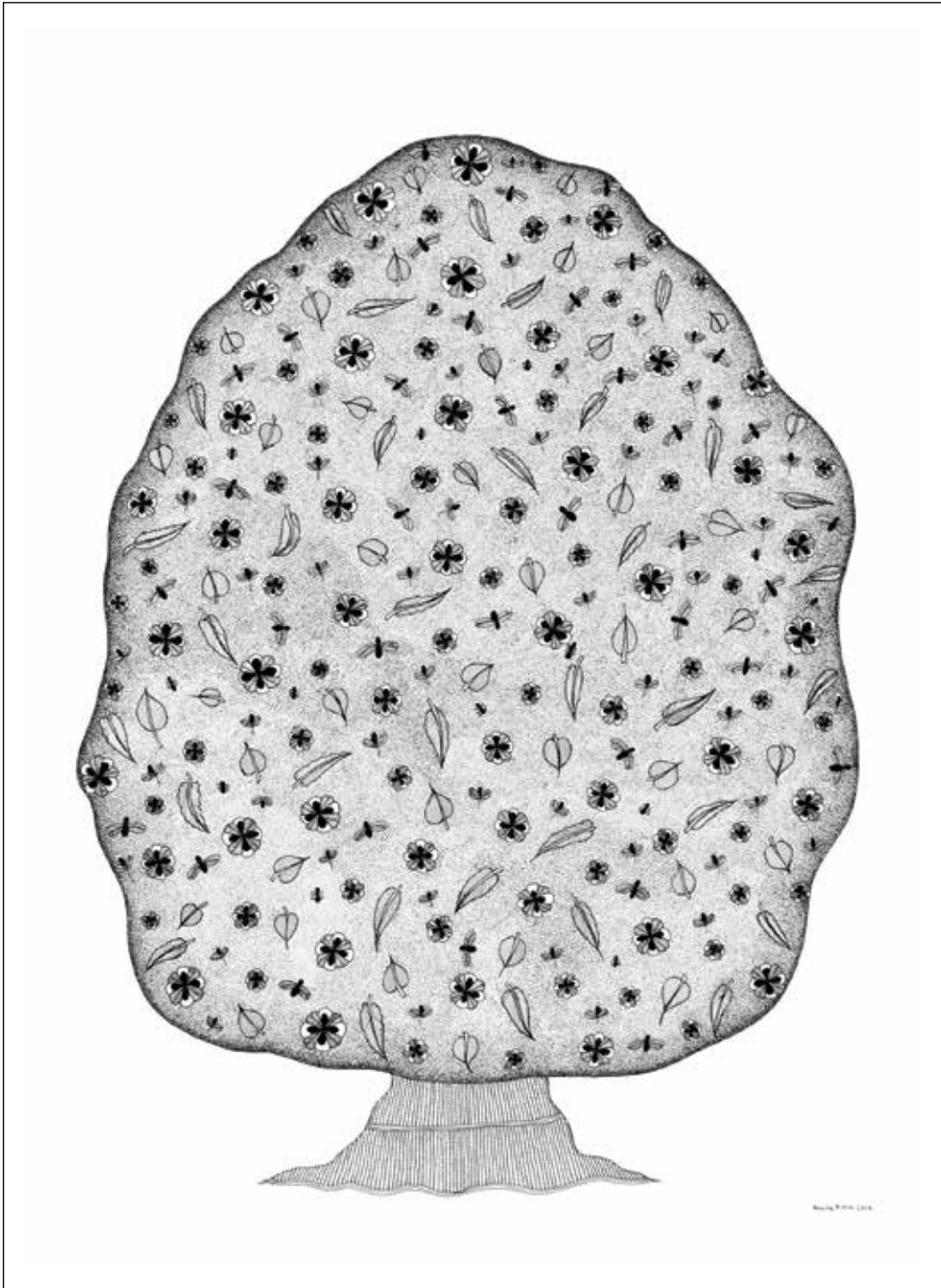
**Bhavna Kakar**  
Editor-in-Chief  
TAKE on art Magazine

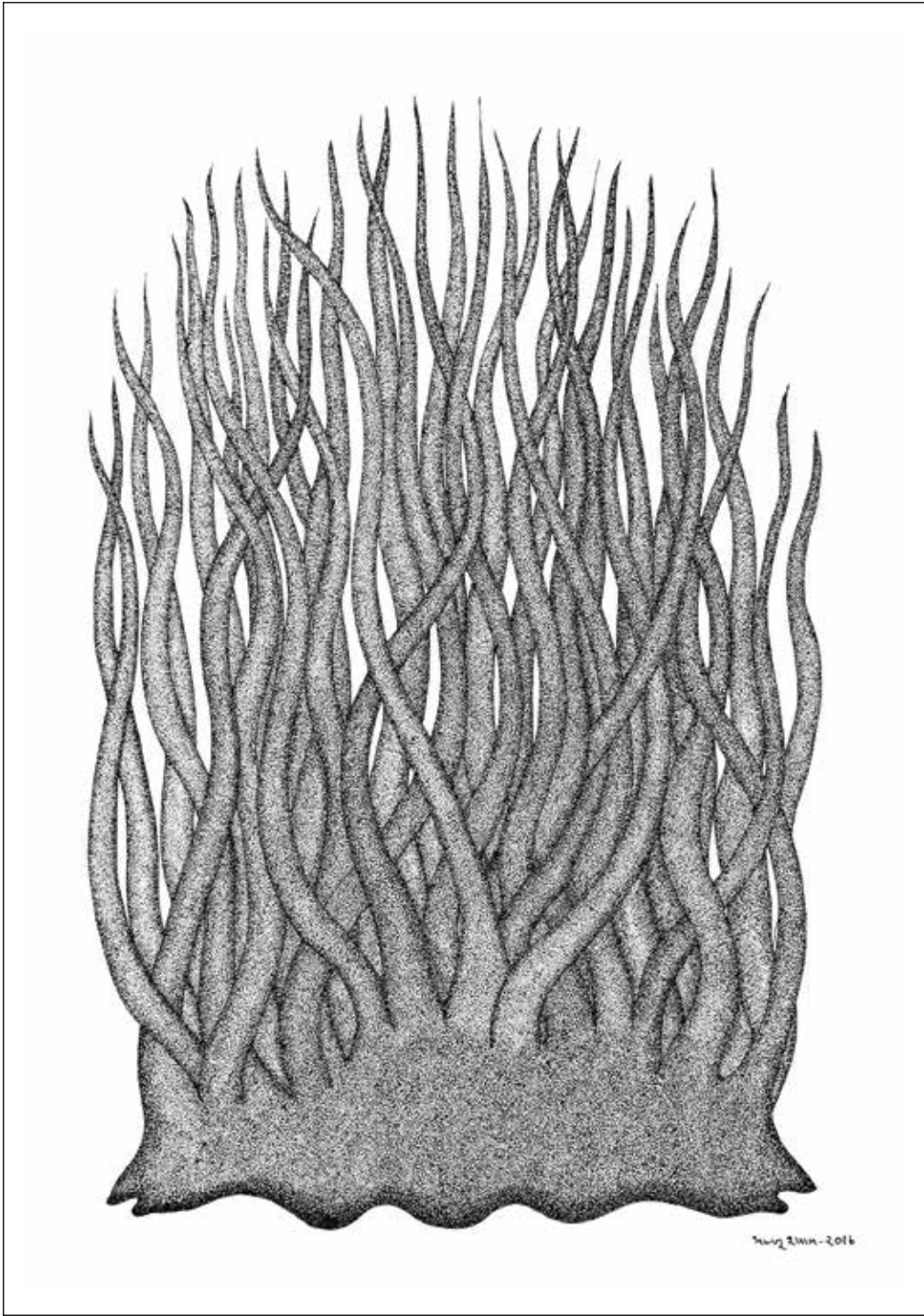


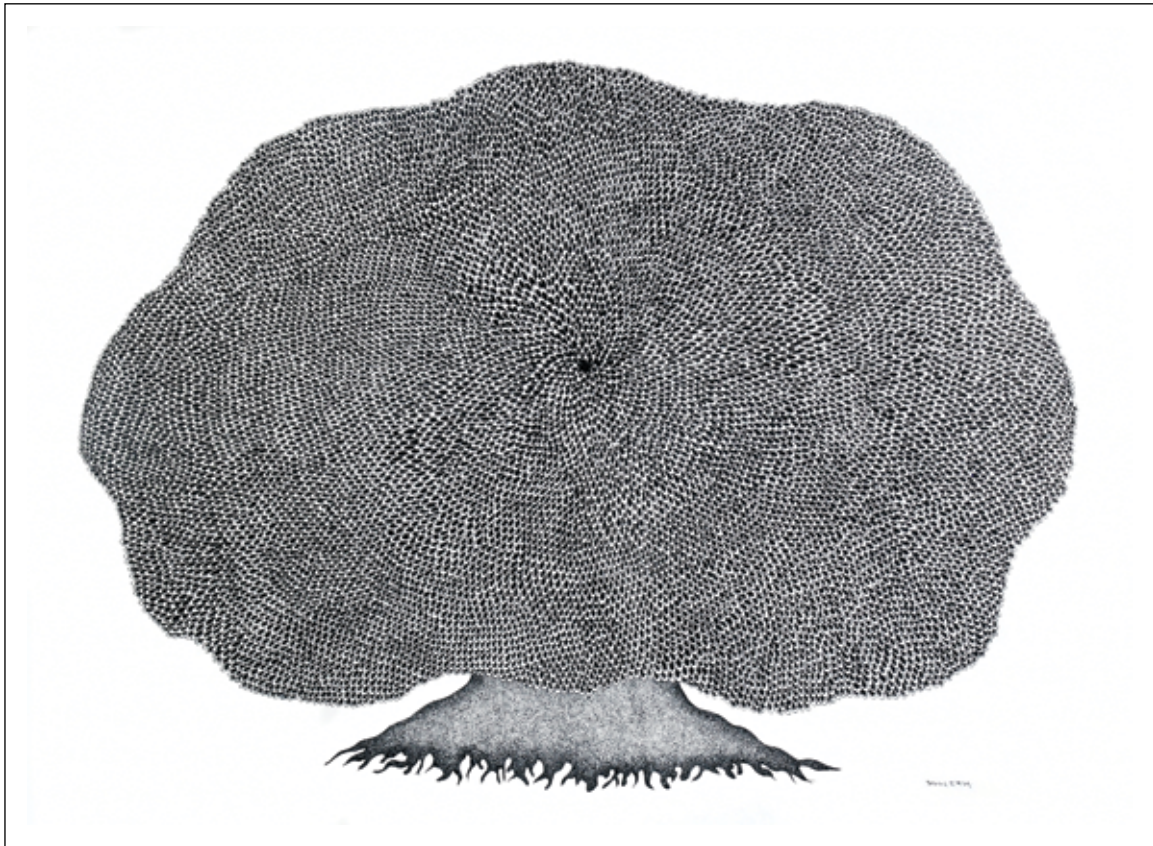




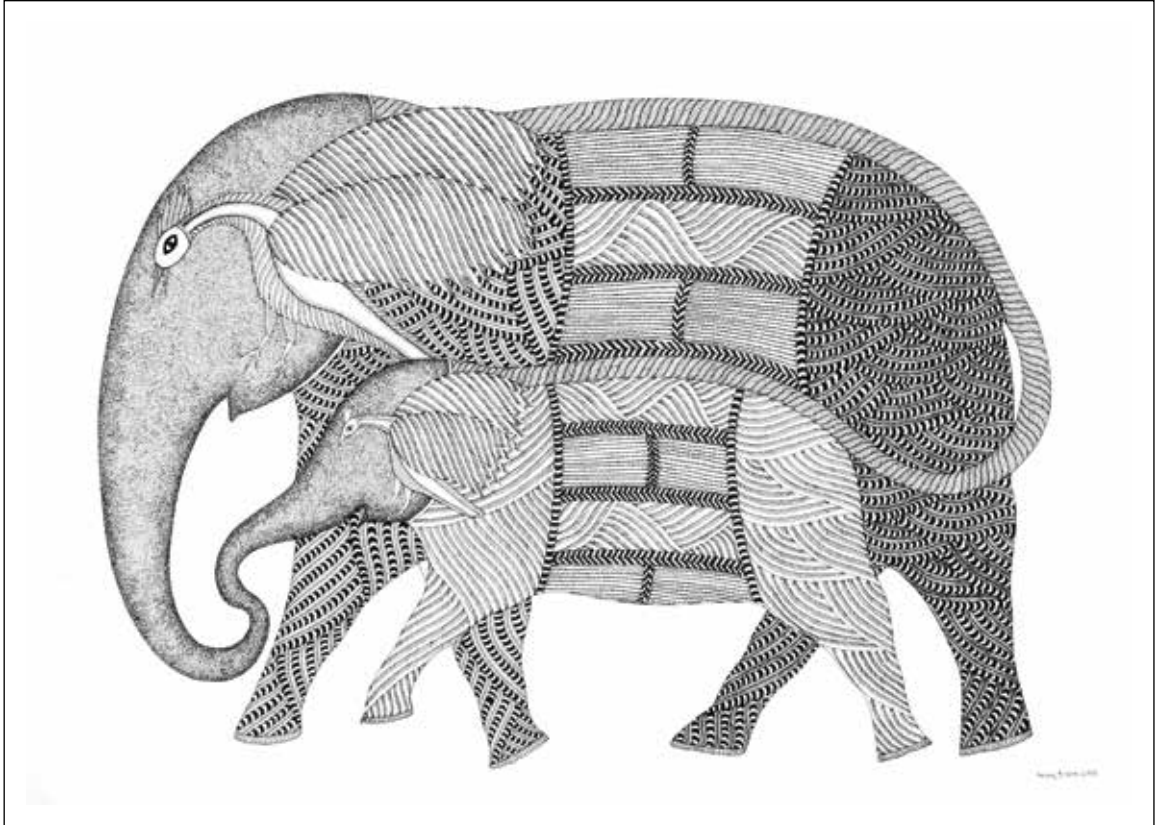


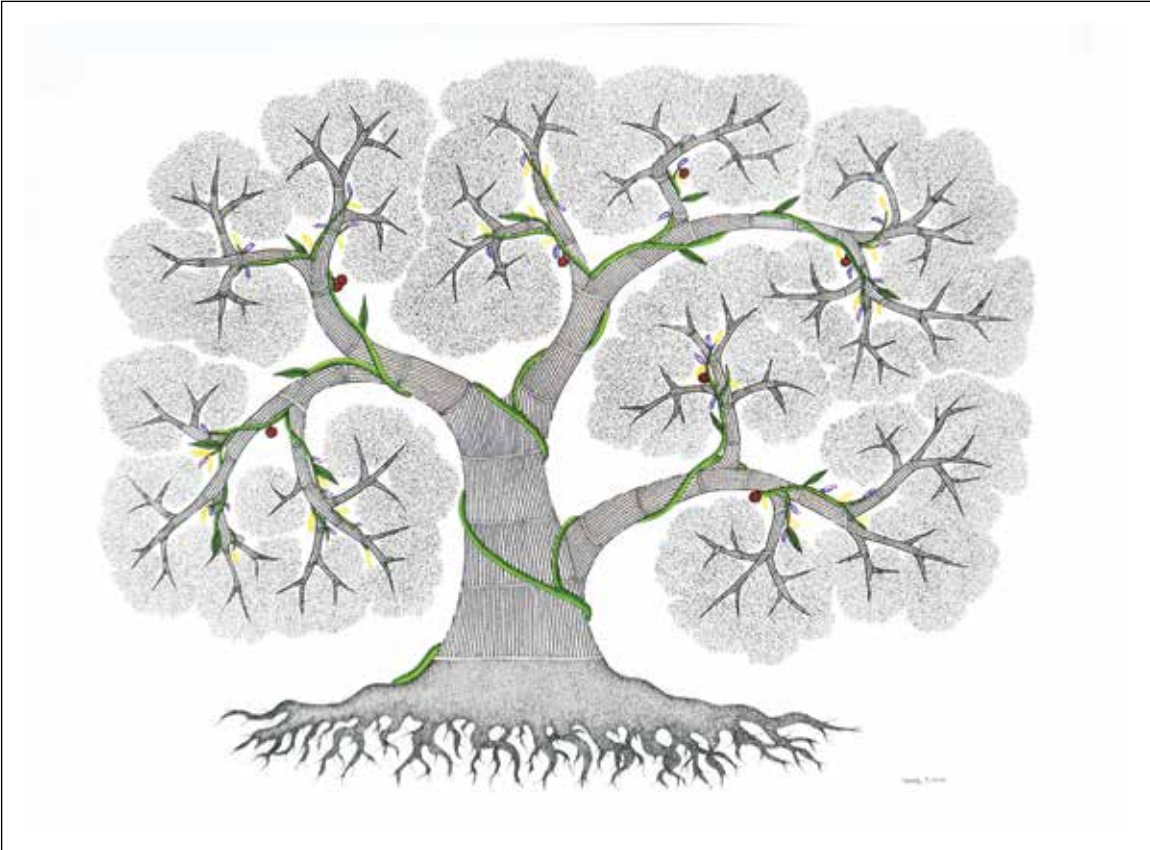




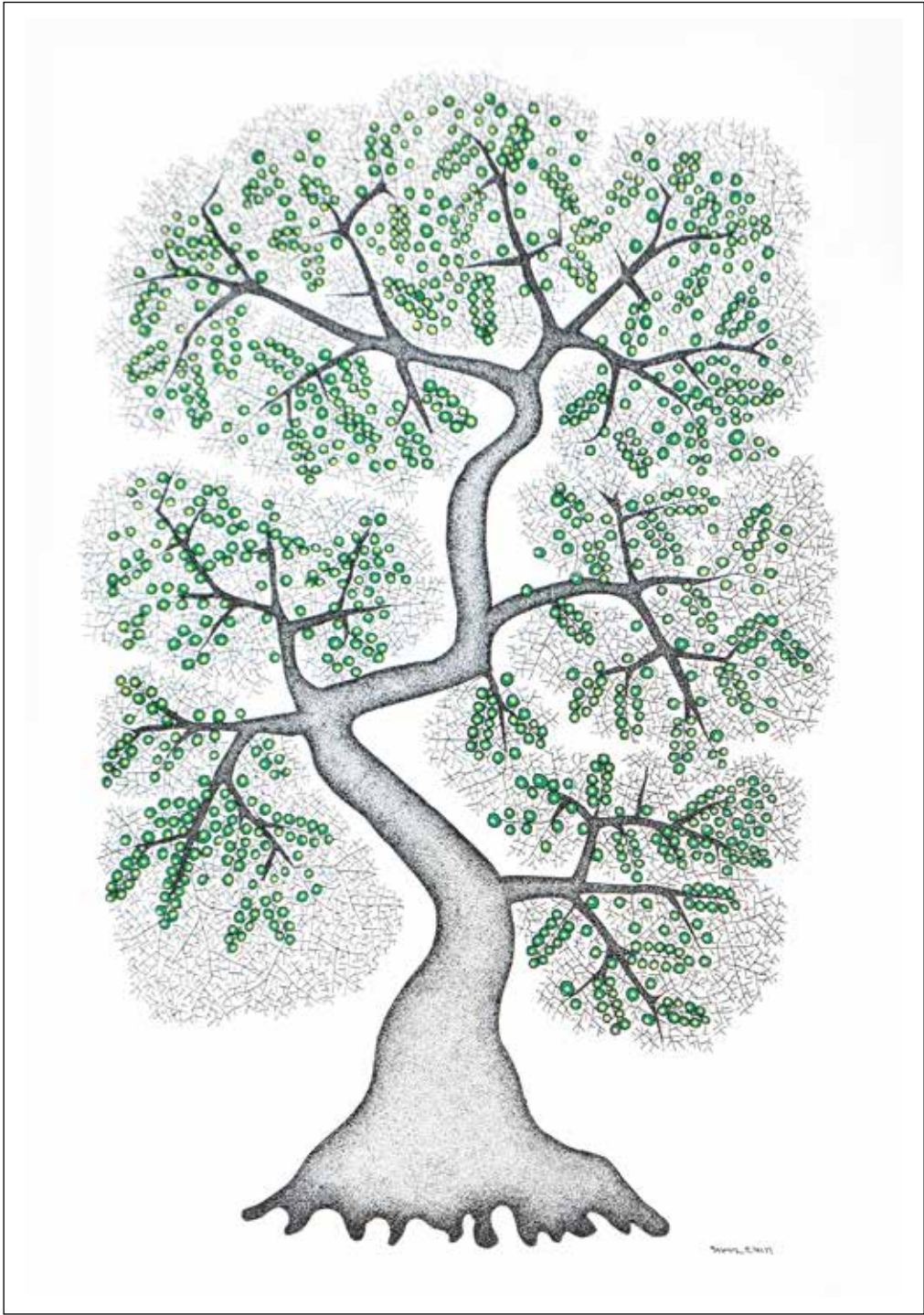


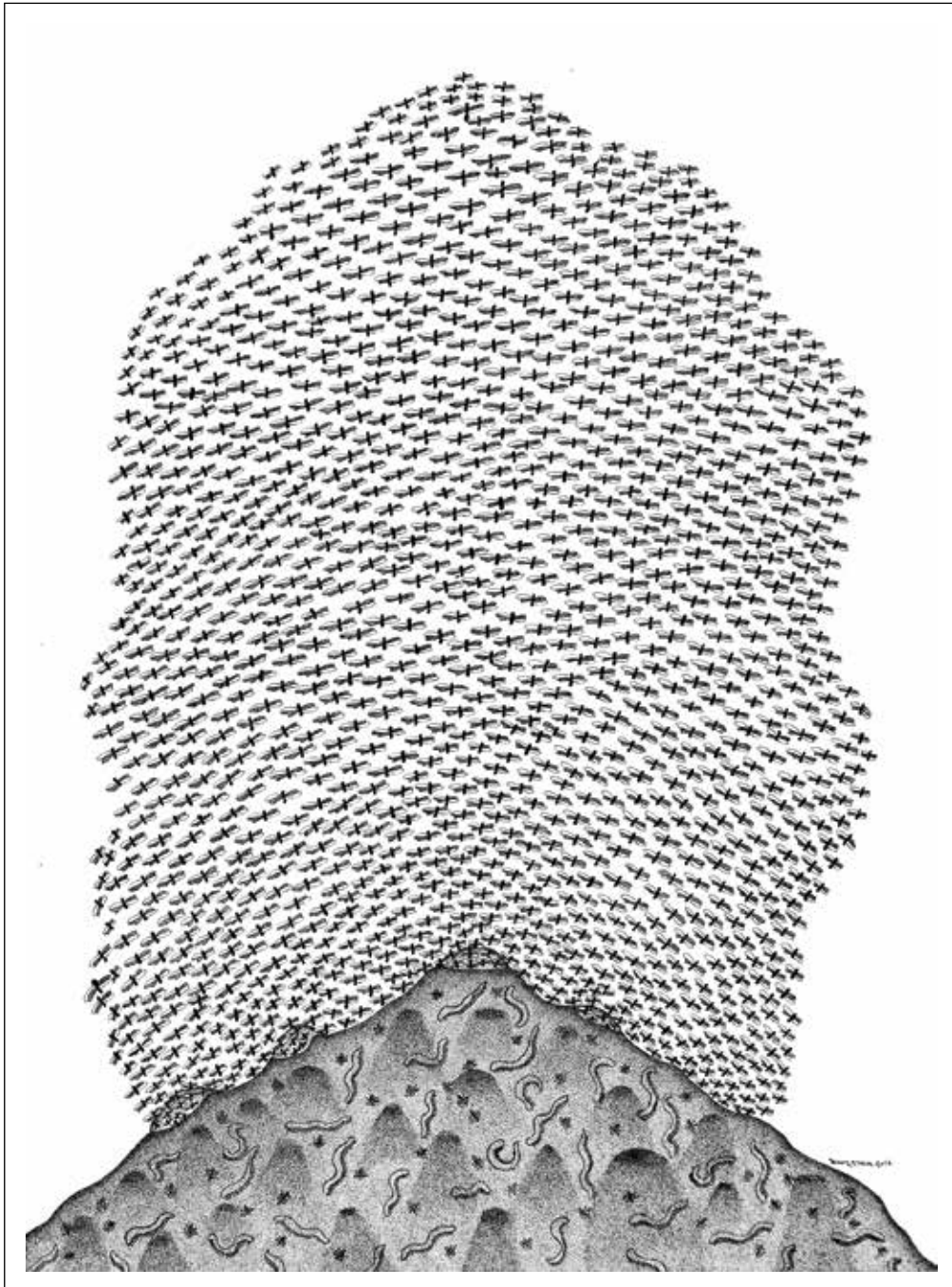


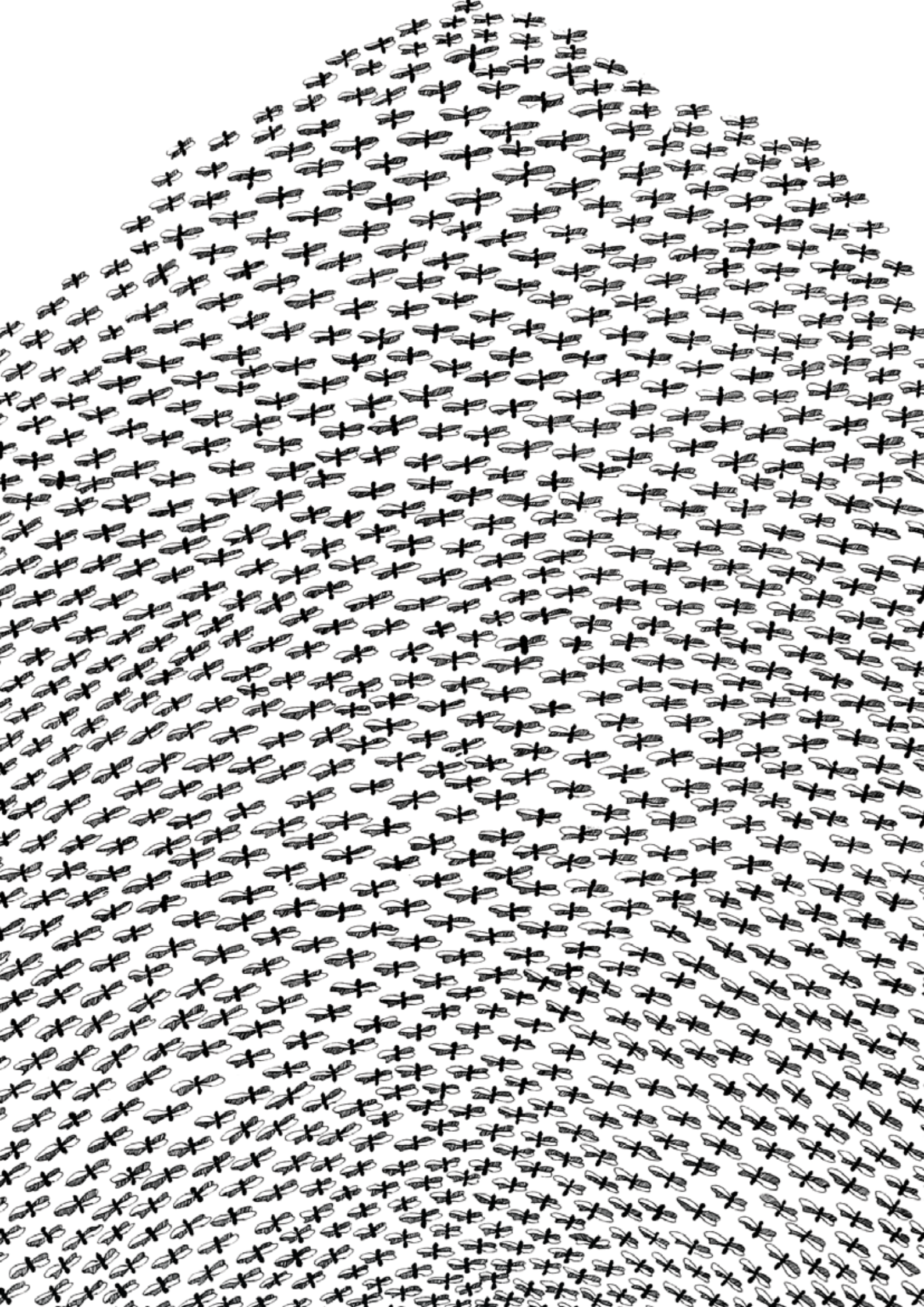




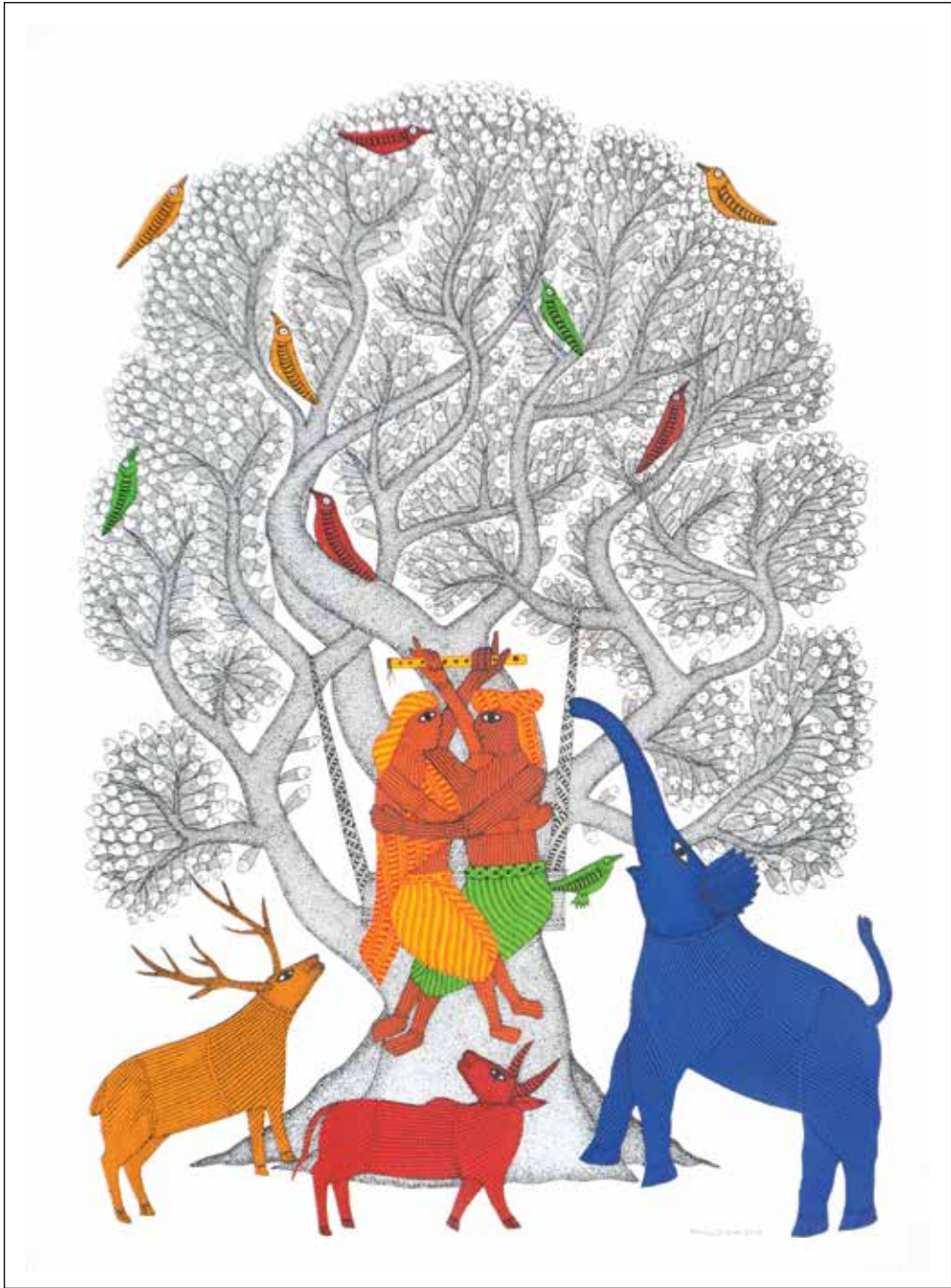


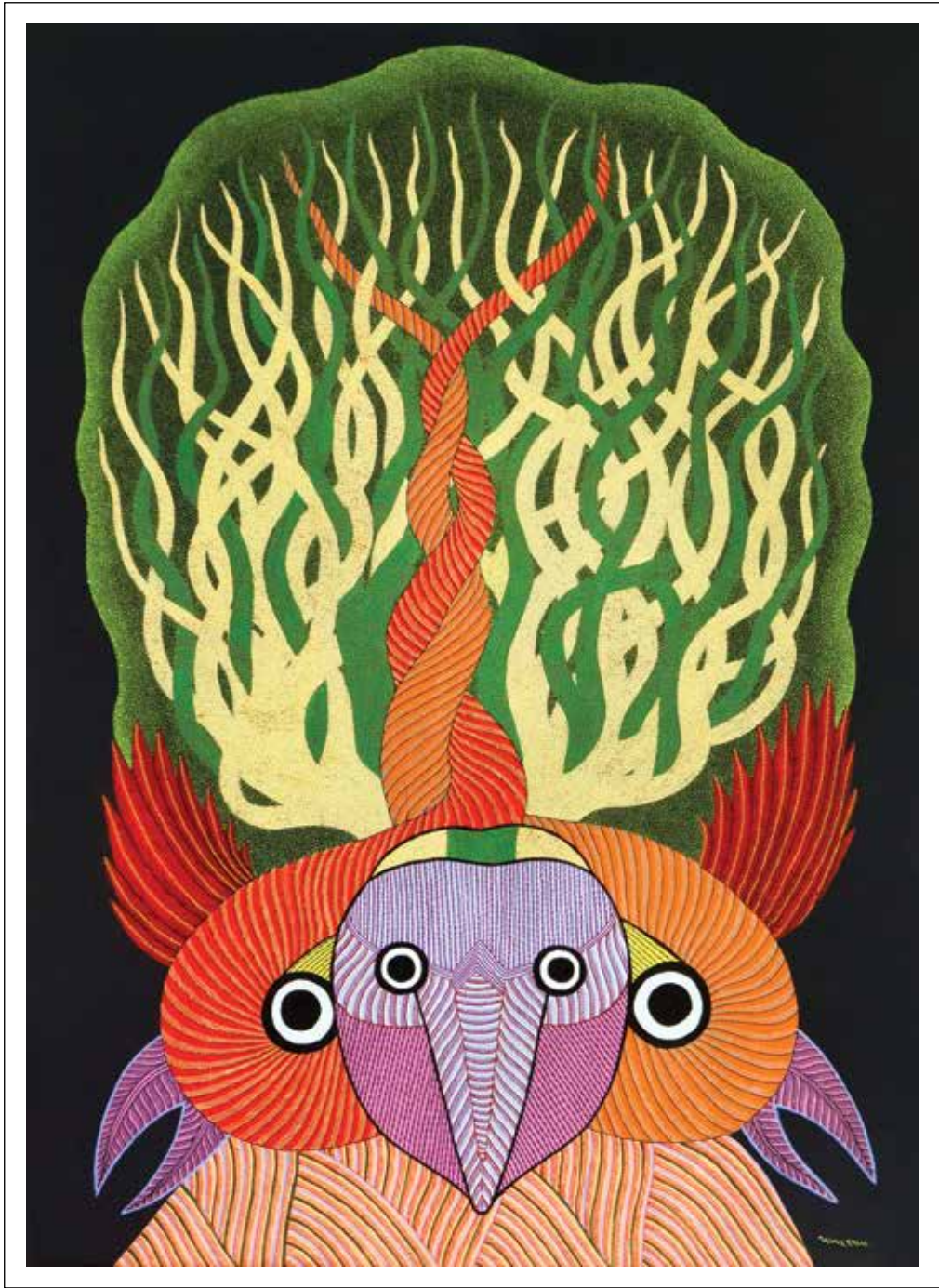


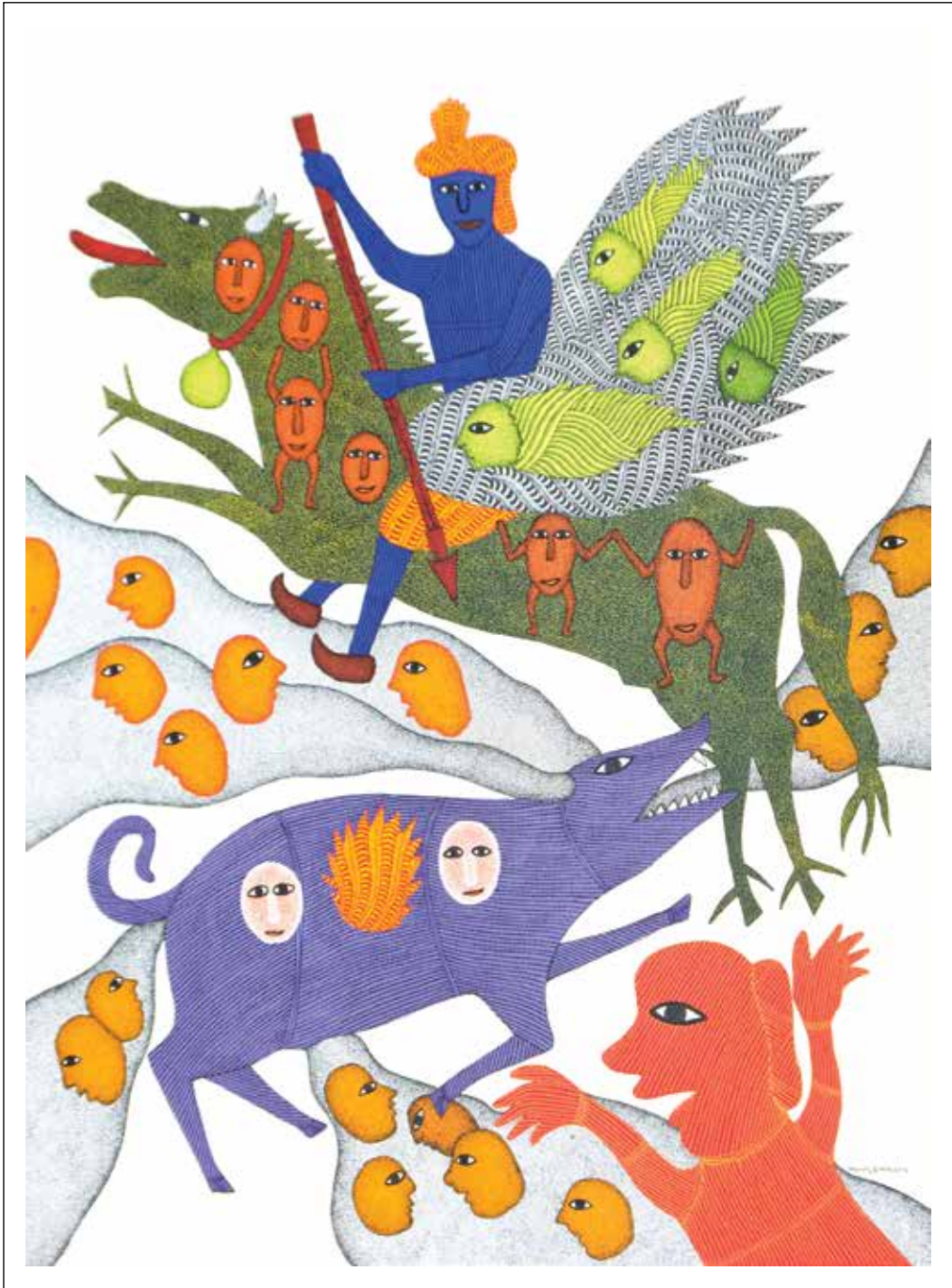


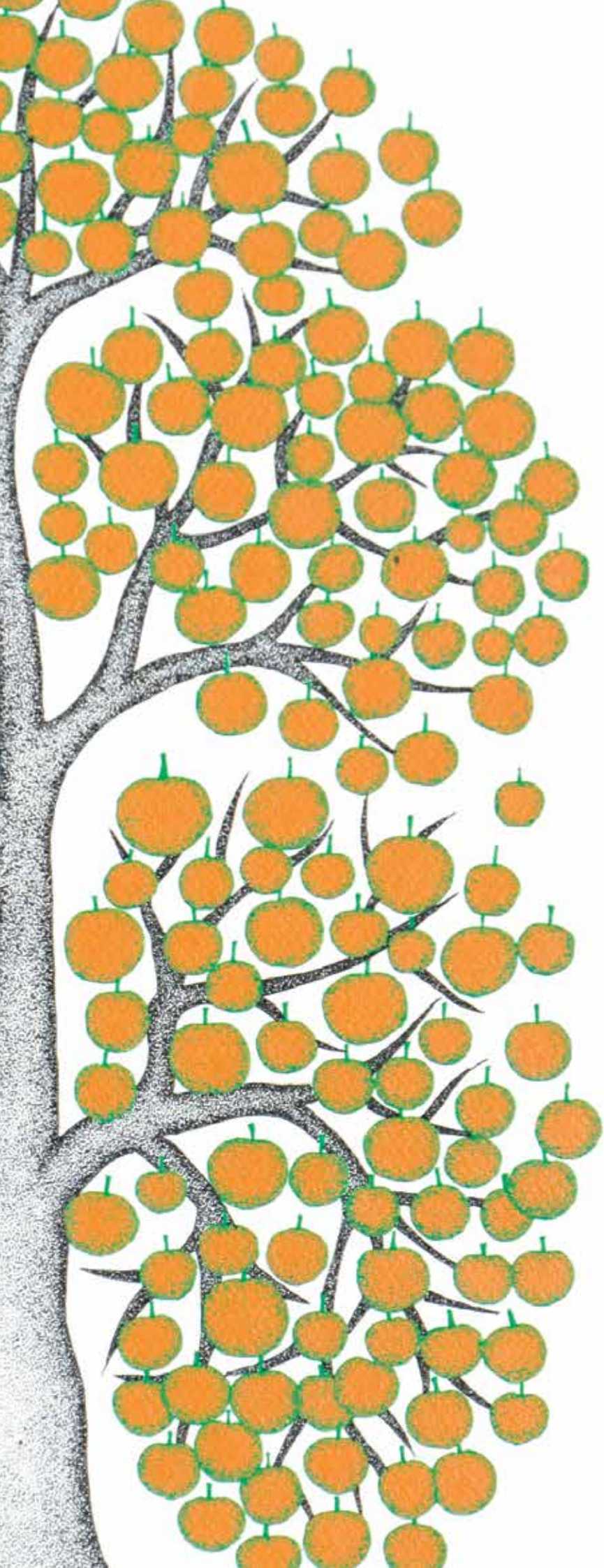




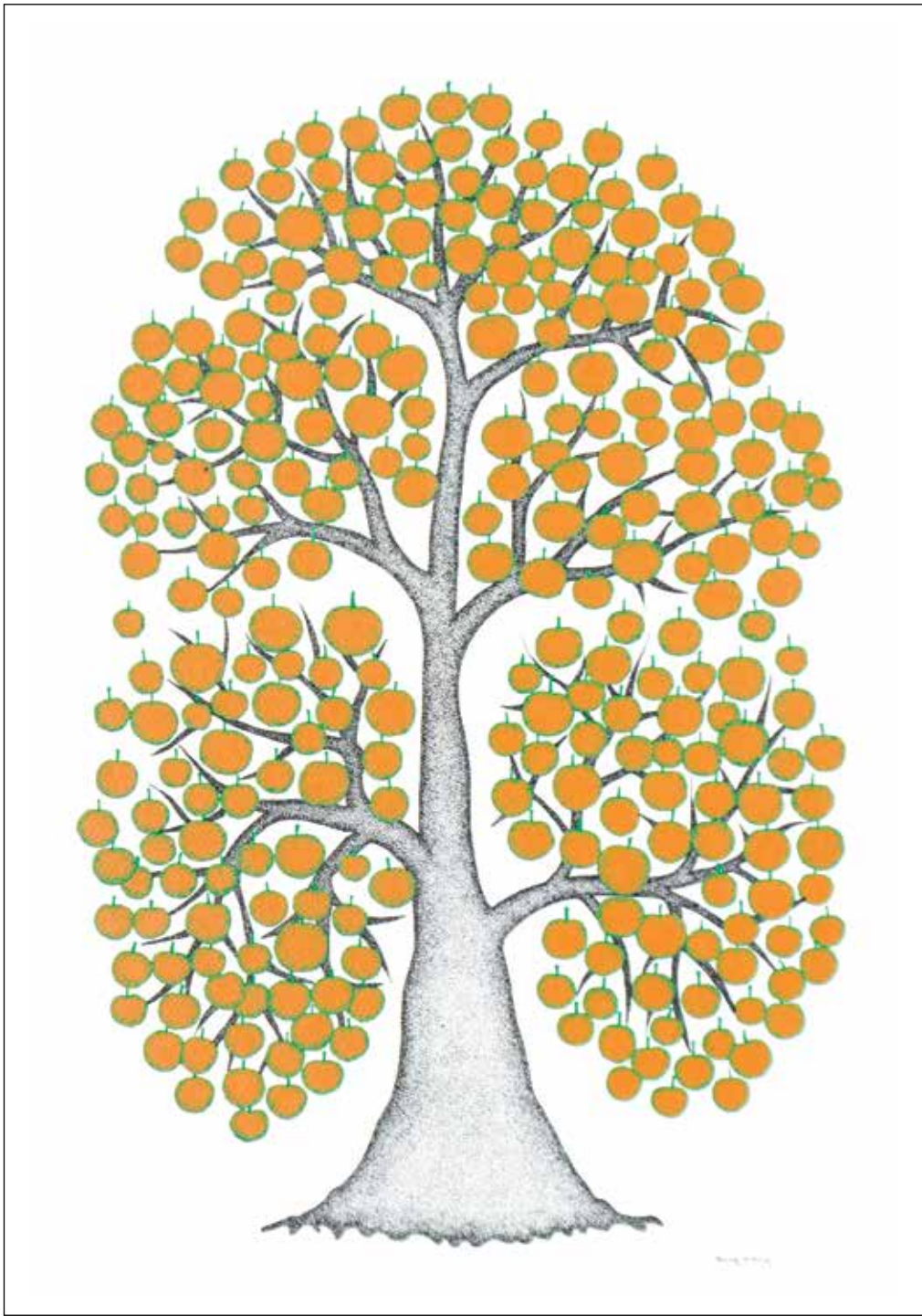


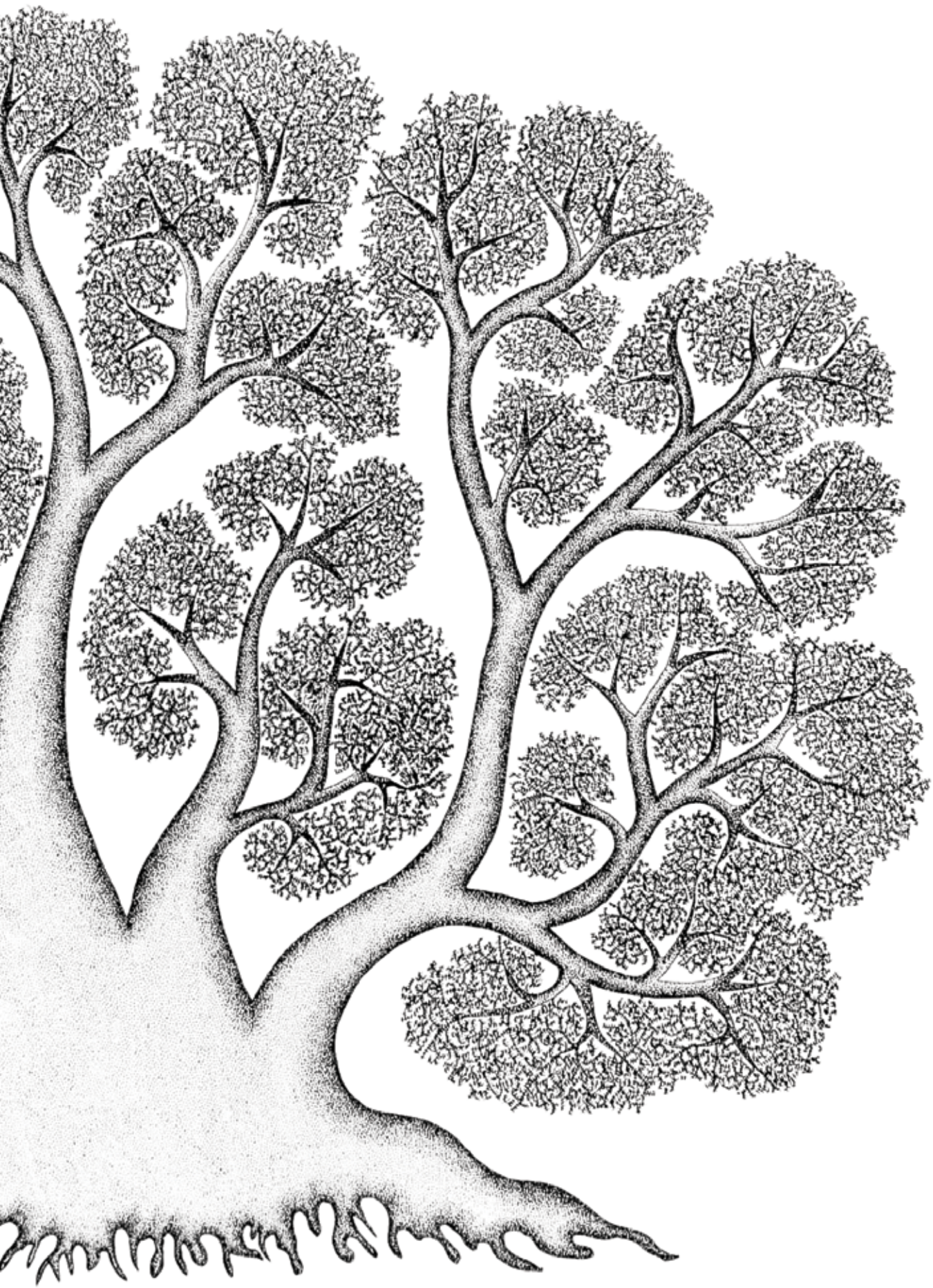












# Delivering us into the world of imagination and freedom

Bhajju Shyam is an exceptional painter in the tradition of Jangarh Kamal, which means in the tradition of Pardhan painting. Pardhans are the sub caste of Gonds and that is why quiet often the Pardhan painters are also called Gond painters. It is a unique tradition of painting which began in later half of twentieth century and yet is age old. It might look as a contradiction in terms but it, in fact, is not. Let me clarify. Pardhans are traditionally musicians, story-tellers and keepers of collective memory of Gonds from times immemorial. Gond society used to patronize them so that they could practice and fine tune their skills of storytelling and music. They were not supposed to do any other work except performing their art.

In course of time Gonds were no more capable of supporting Pardhans and the Pardhans had to take up farming for their livelihood. Music and storytelling went into the background of their lives and their living conditions deteriorated to that those of other small farmers. But the music and stories engraved in it went on flowing in their blood waiting for just a little occasion to surface.

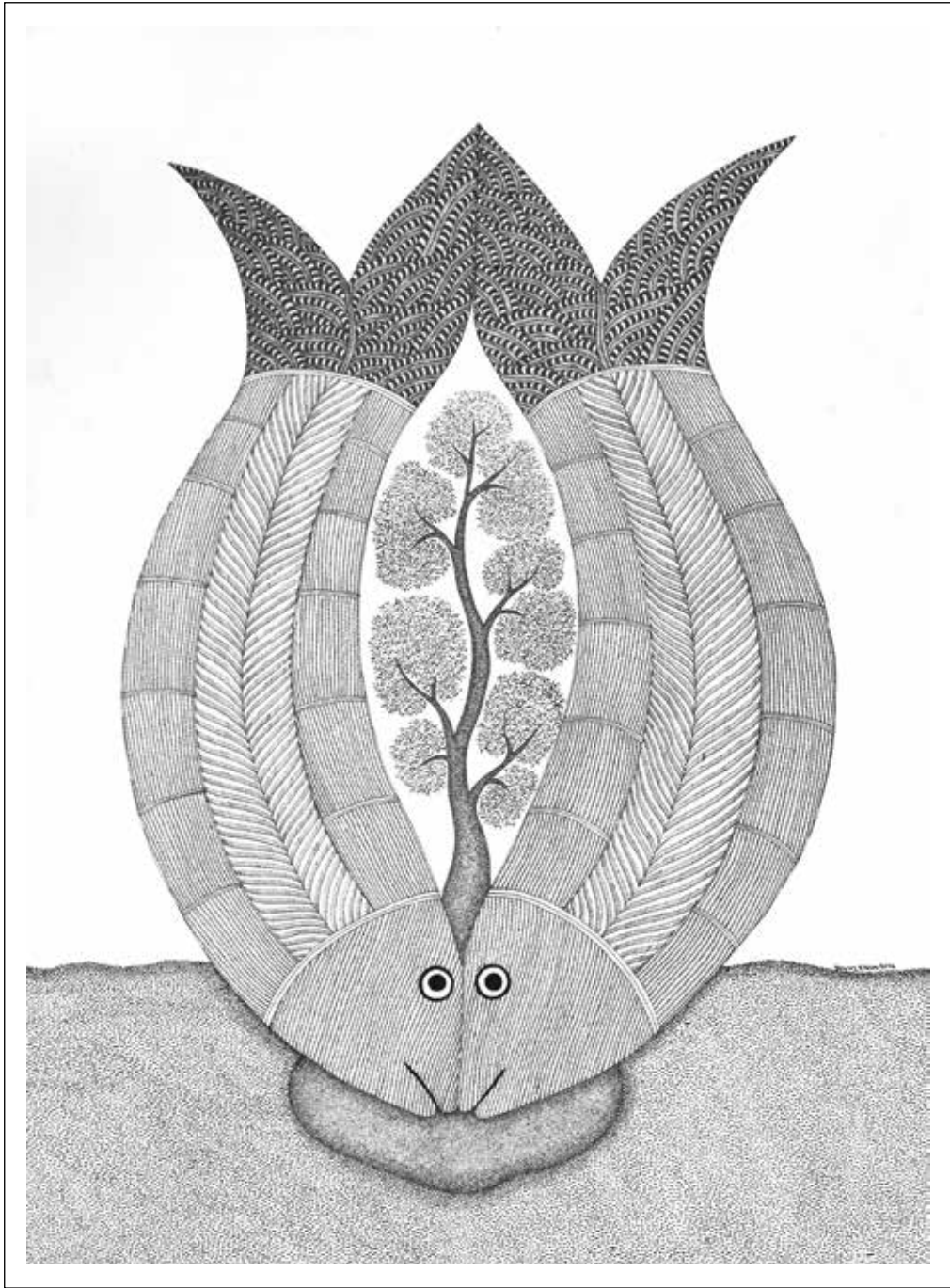
Jangarh Singh Shyam of Pardhan community came to Bhopal in early eighties. He has started painting in his village on the mud walls of the houses there. But it was acquire a certain style only when he was removed from his native village, Patangarh.

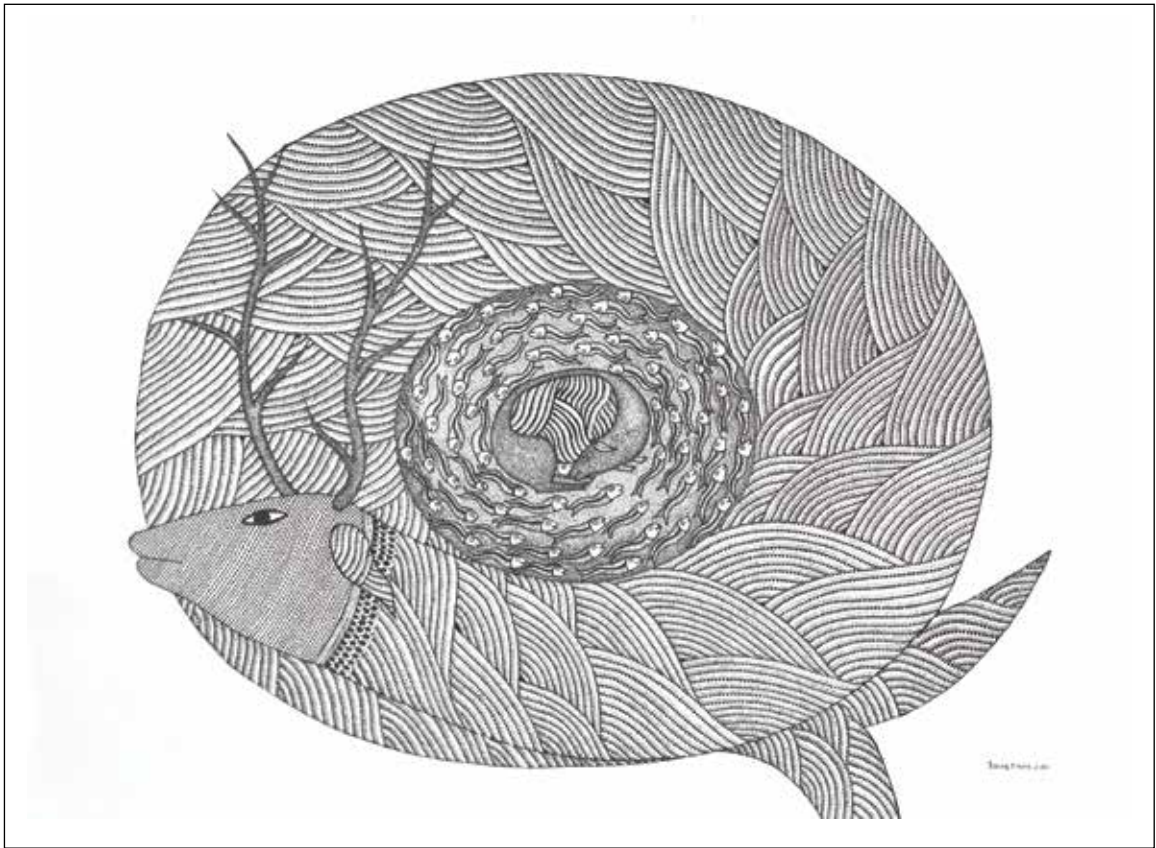
Bhajju Singh soon followed the path laid down by Jangarh and came to Bhopal and started assisting the energetic master. Soon he too became the medium of transformation of musical story telling of Pardhans into painting of a very unique style which was new as far as because it was invented in eighties but was, at the same time, age old because it carried an ethos of the Pradhans which was as old as any cultural artifact.

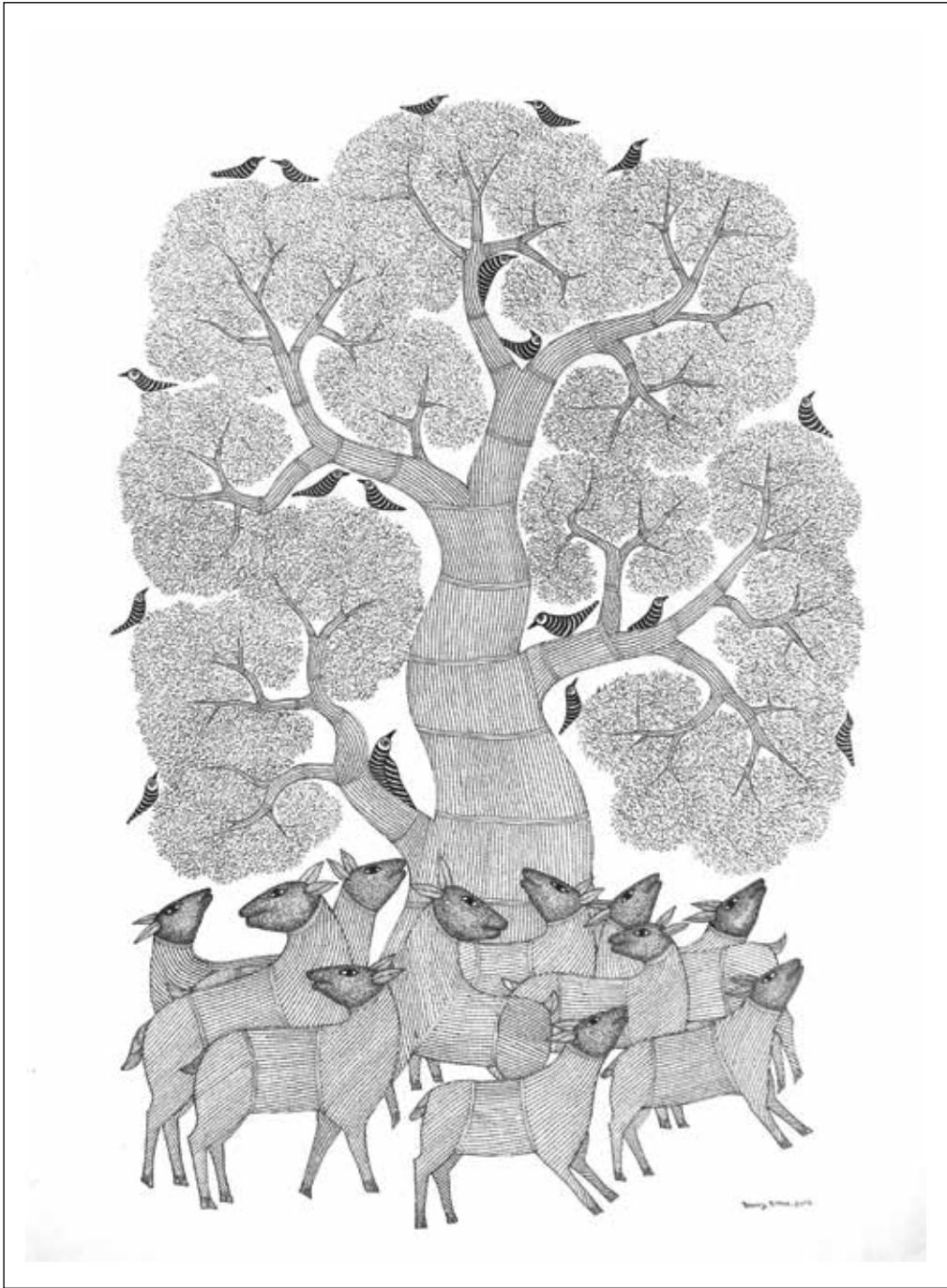
Bhajju after having assisted and learned from Jangarh developed his own unique idiom within the Jangarh Kamal (or school). He brought much more playfulness to the form. His figures are to a great extent musical in the sense they seem to be almost dancing on some rhythm. The use of the colours is also quite different from any other Indian painter working today. With the subtle use of a dark tone he can illuminate the entire canvas, covered mostly with lighter tones. In his paintings forms are engaged in dialogue with other forms, colours are talking to other colours and in the process transforming them into something almost unbelievable.

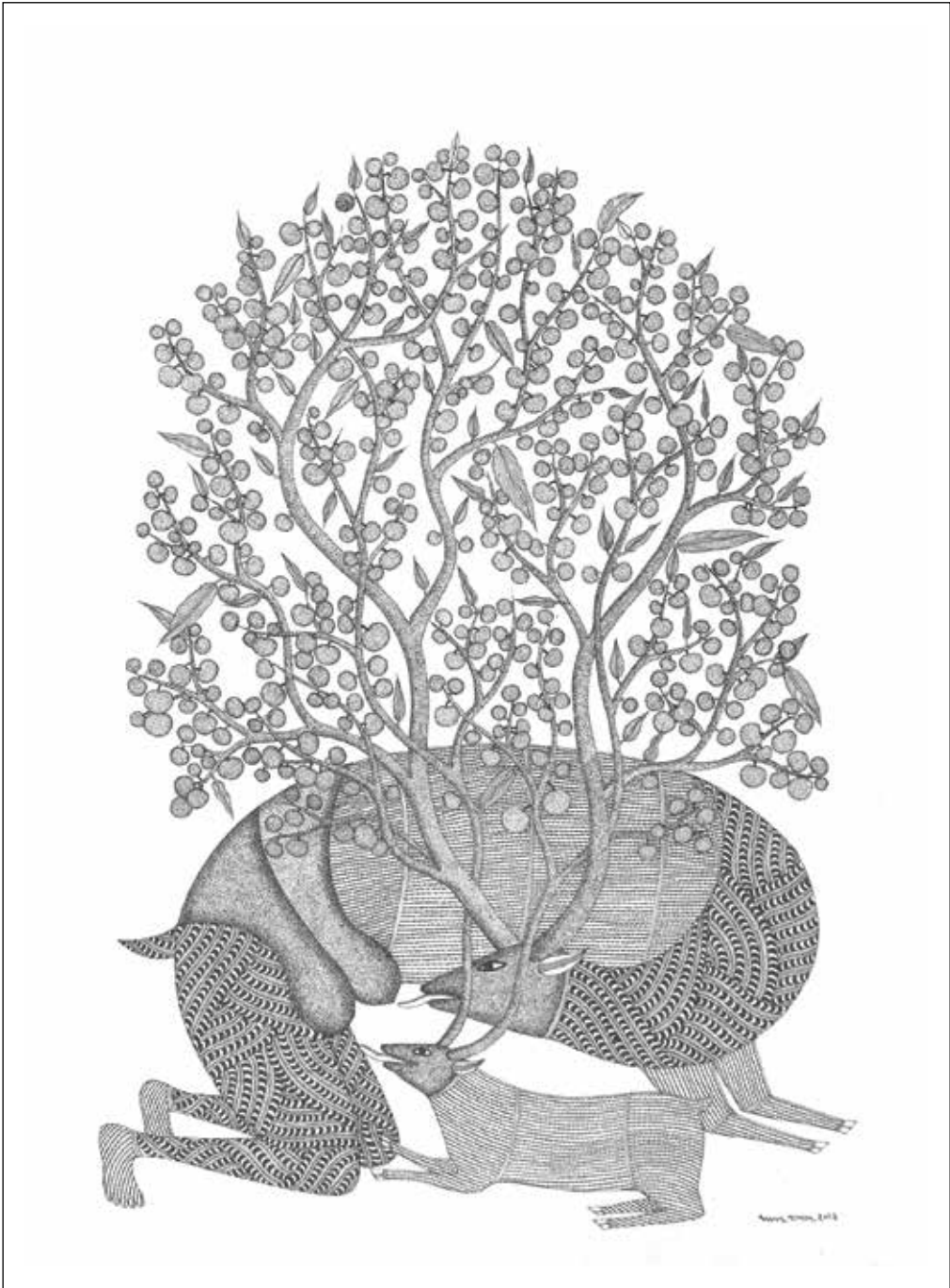
Bhajju paints mythology but does this in a way that the mythology enacts itself on the canvas as if it is happening before our own eyes. In other words he removes the pastiness from the mythology (in any case mythology has to be always in present) and makes it a part of our everyday life. He thus pulls us out of historical existence and puts us back into the world of imagination and music, colours and poetry; where we are left free to meditate on our roots and branches and the sky under which our existence is unfolding.

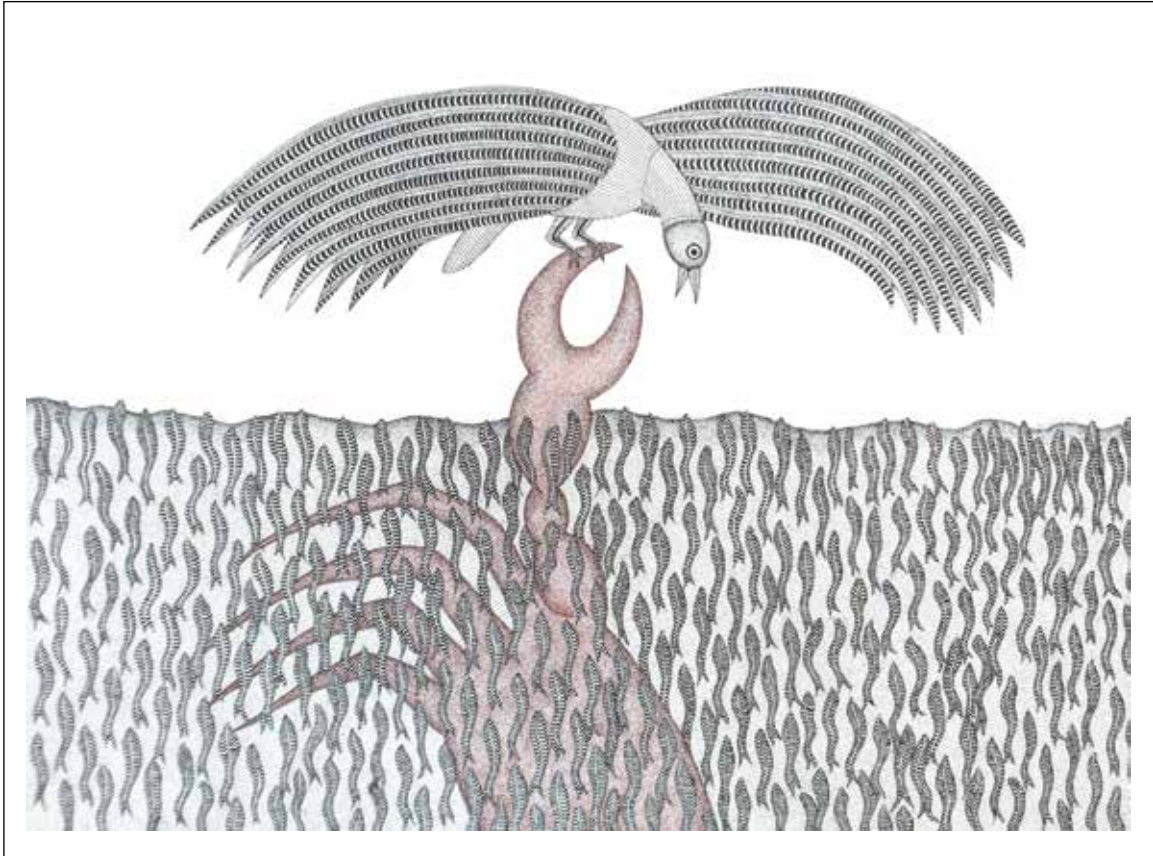
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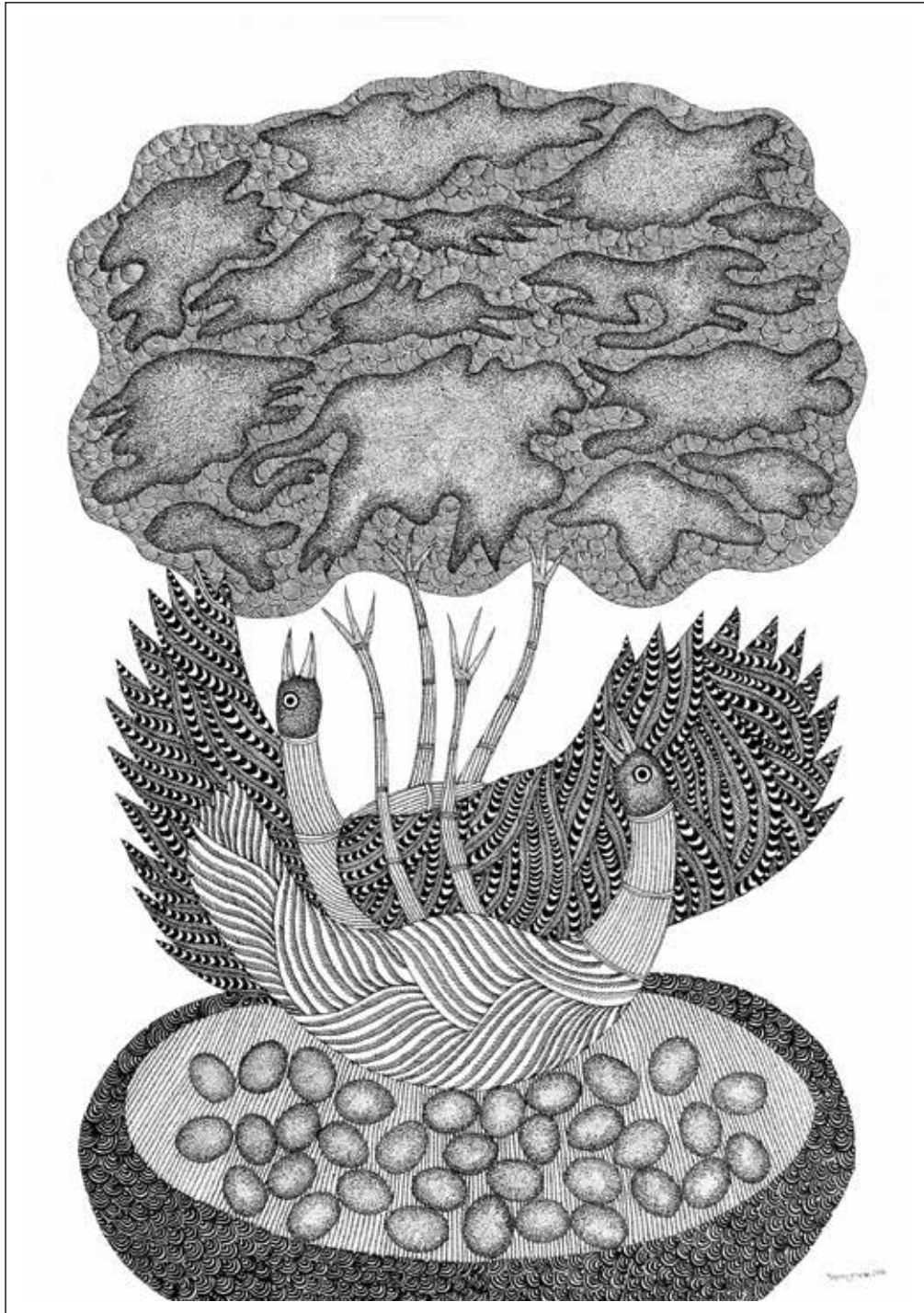


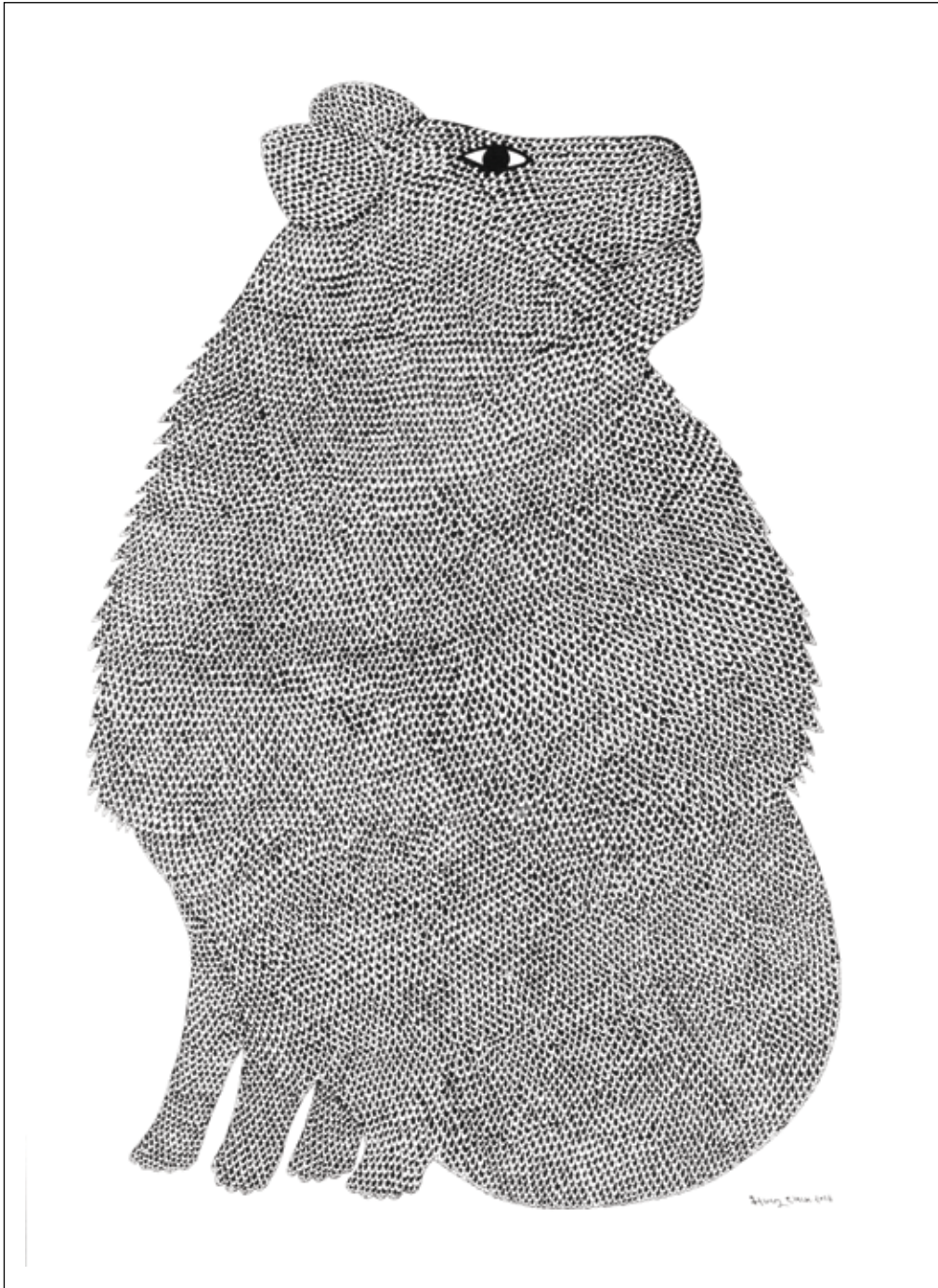




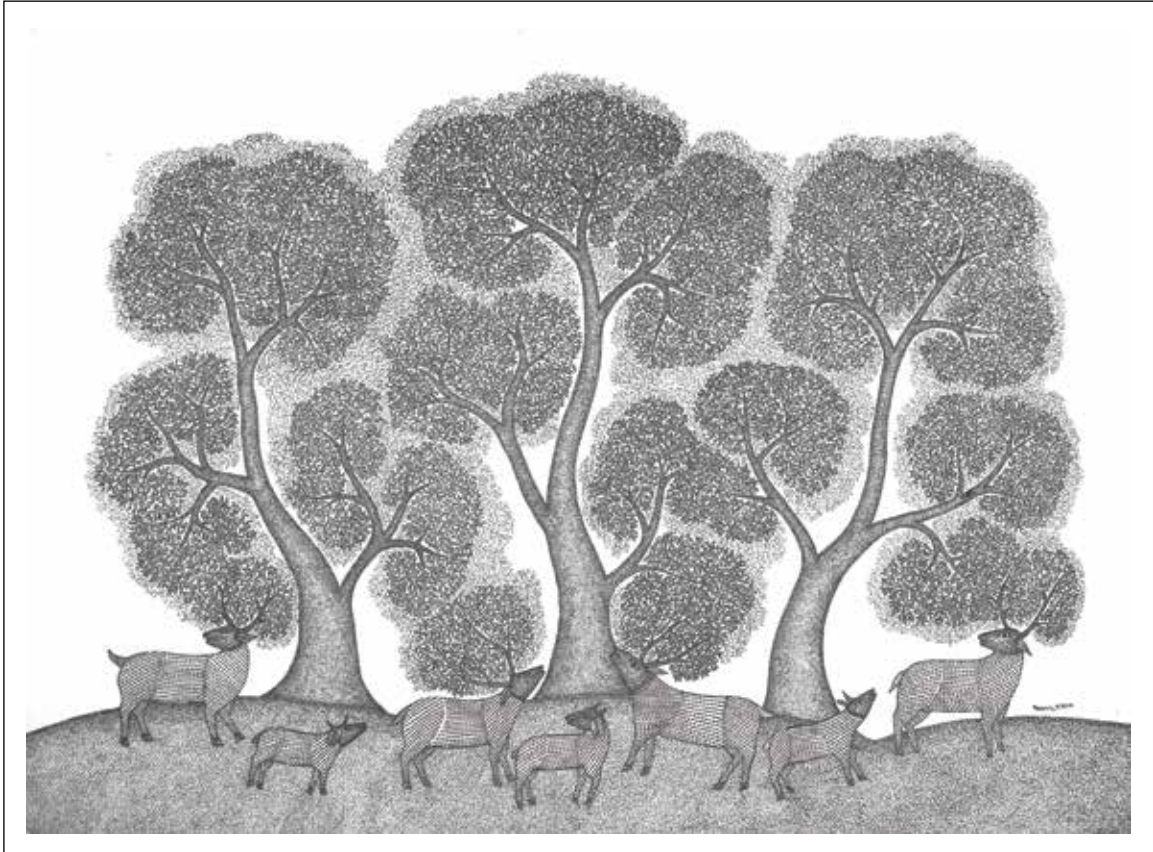


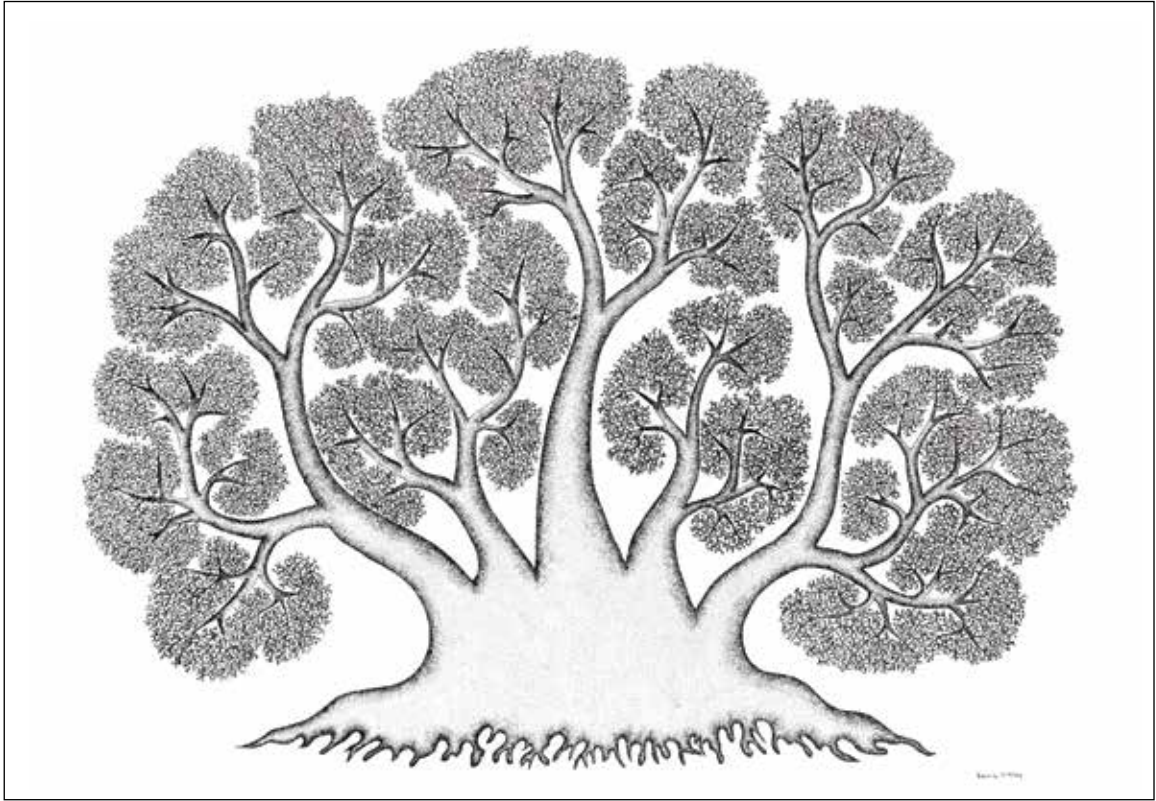


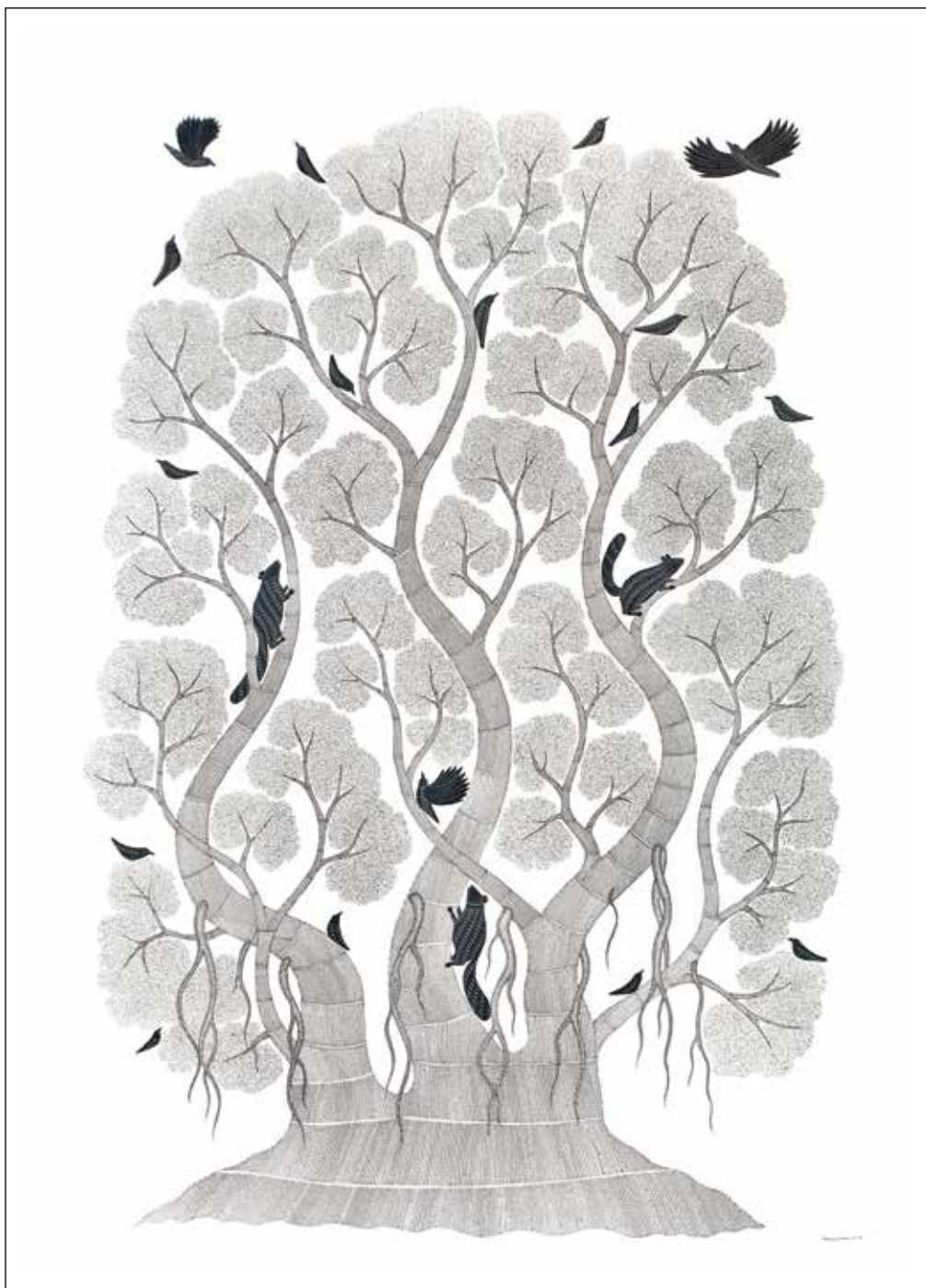


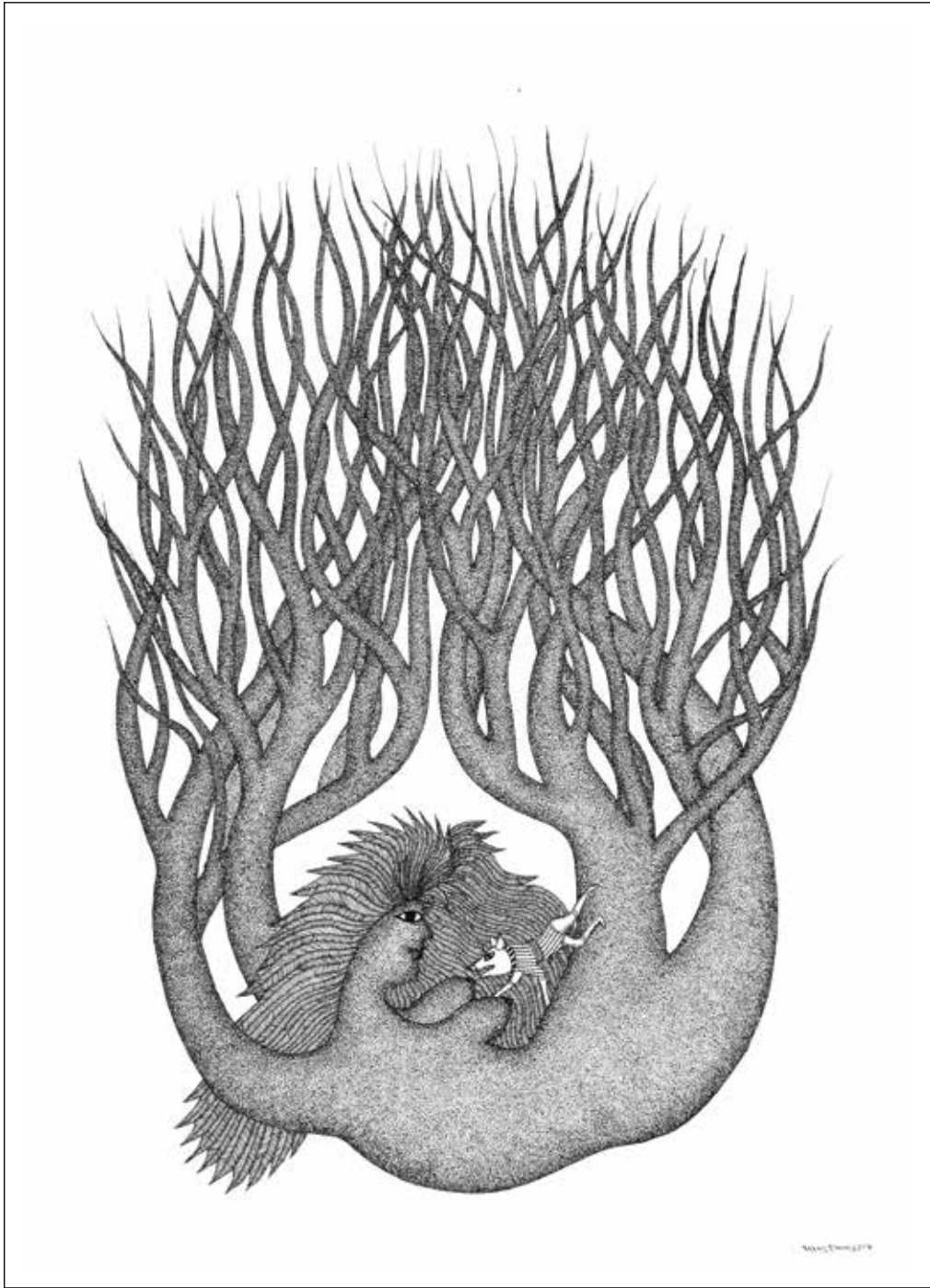






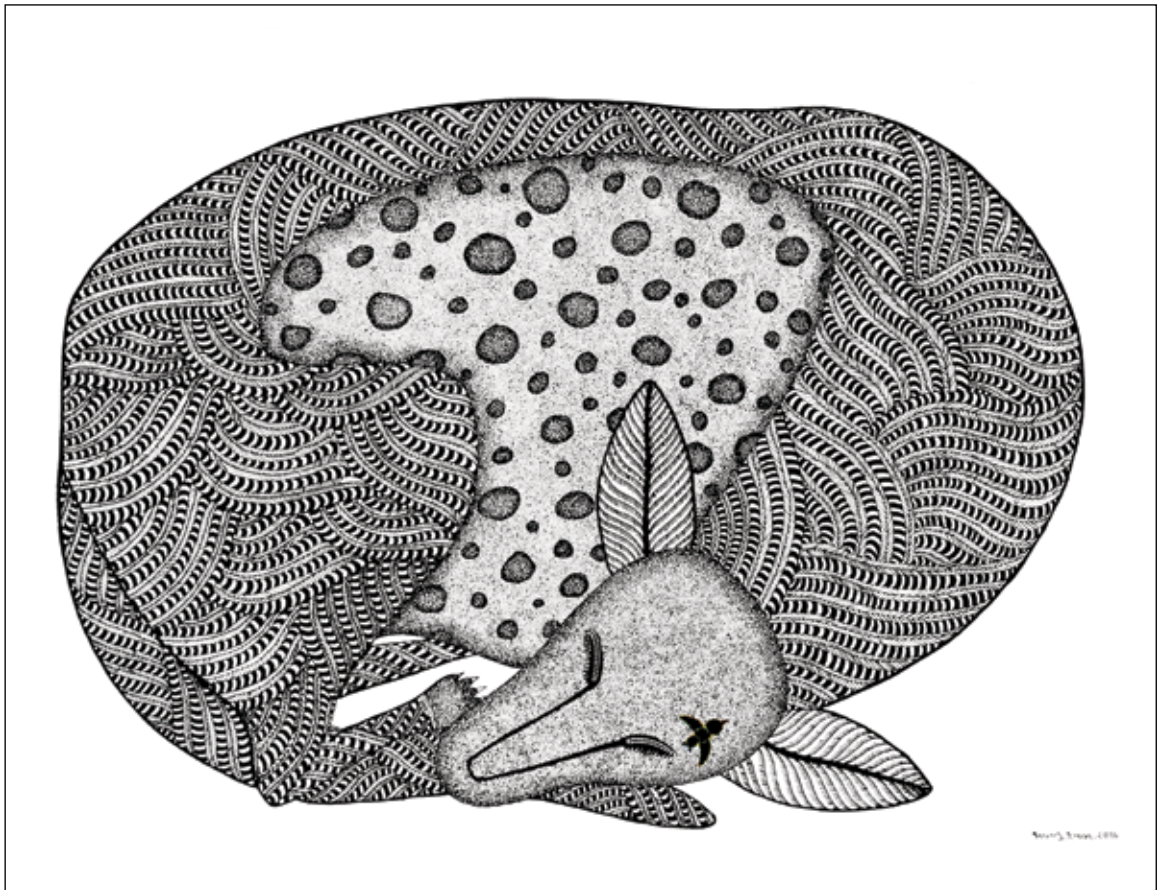


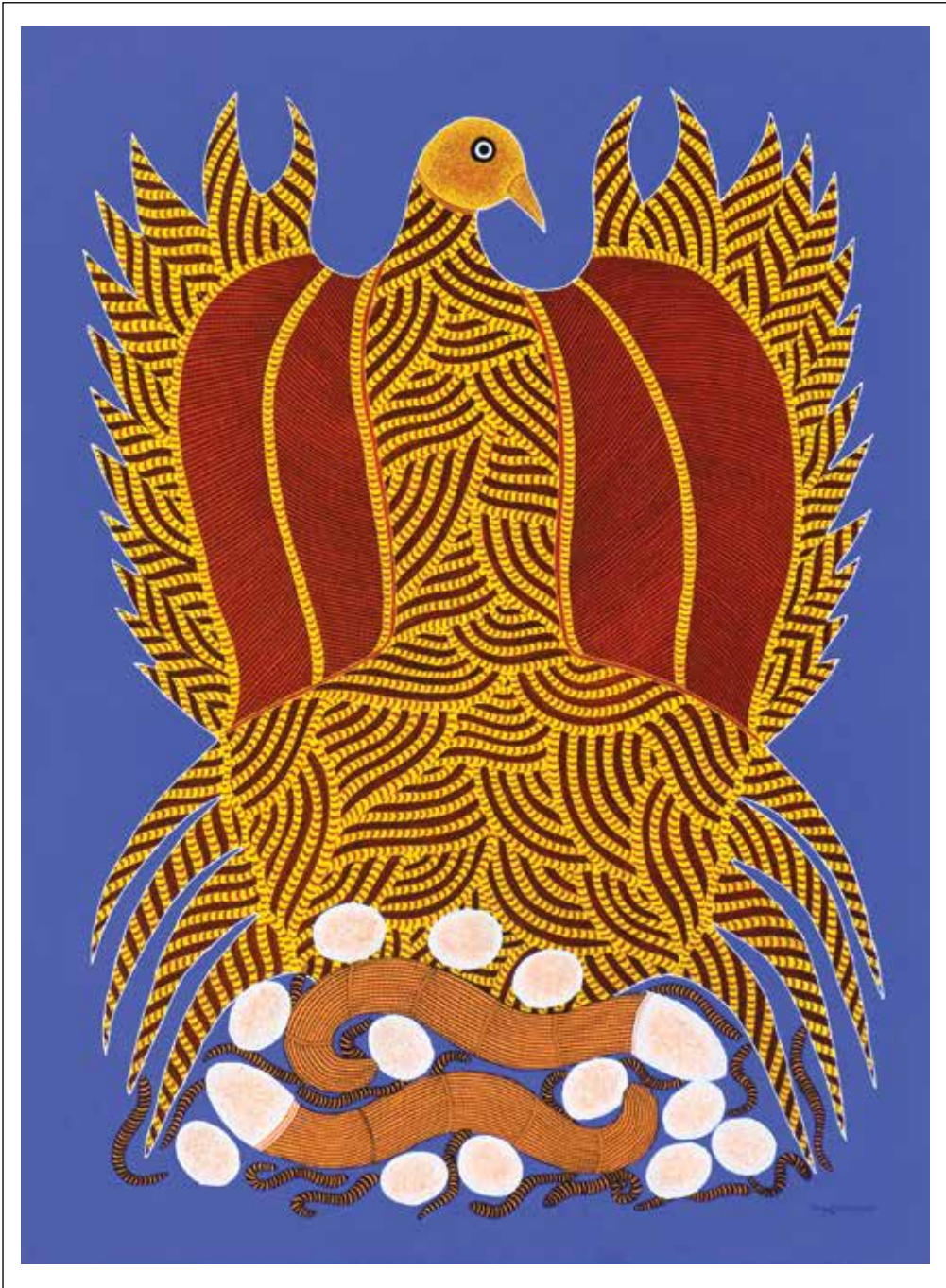


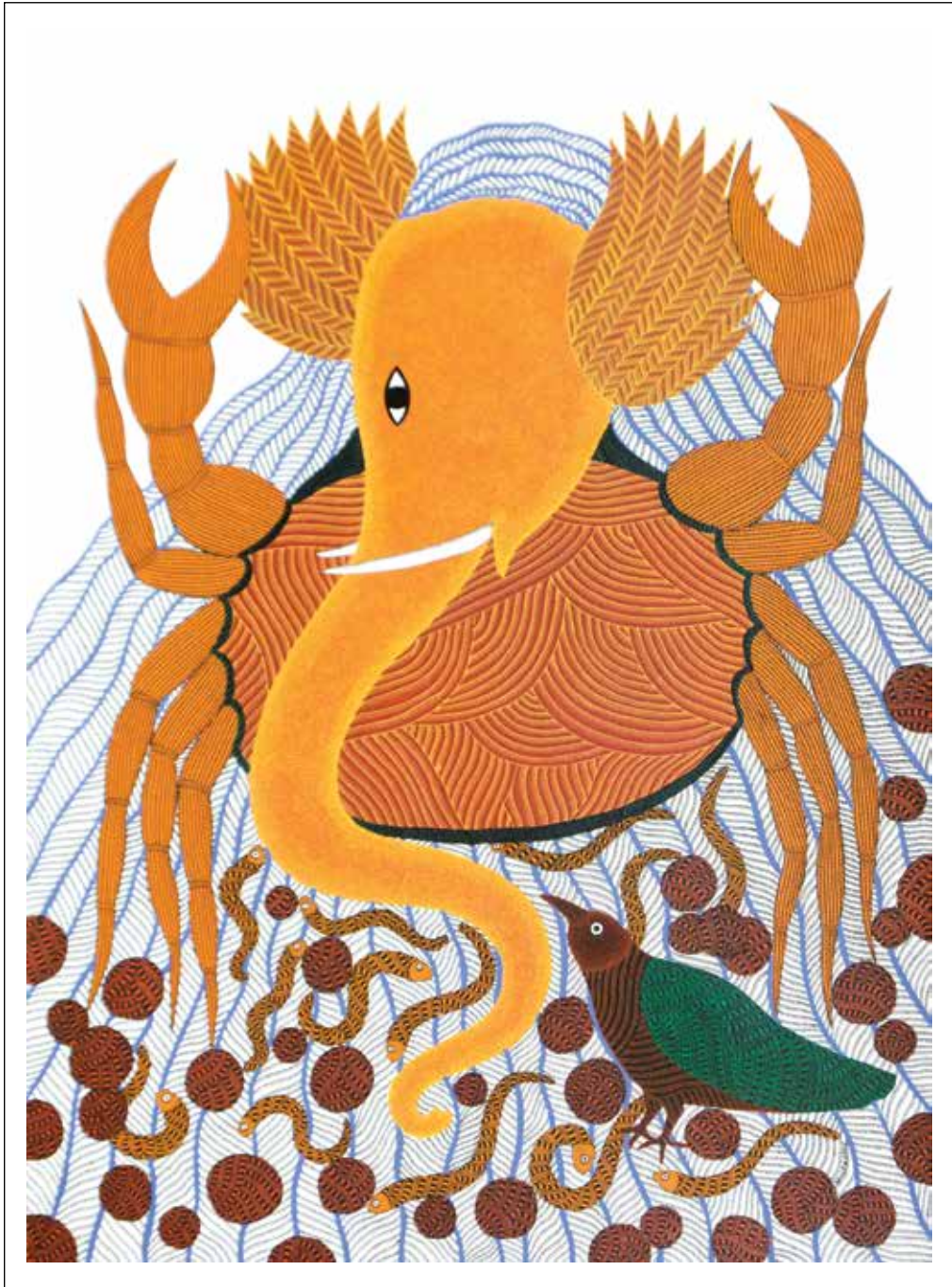


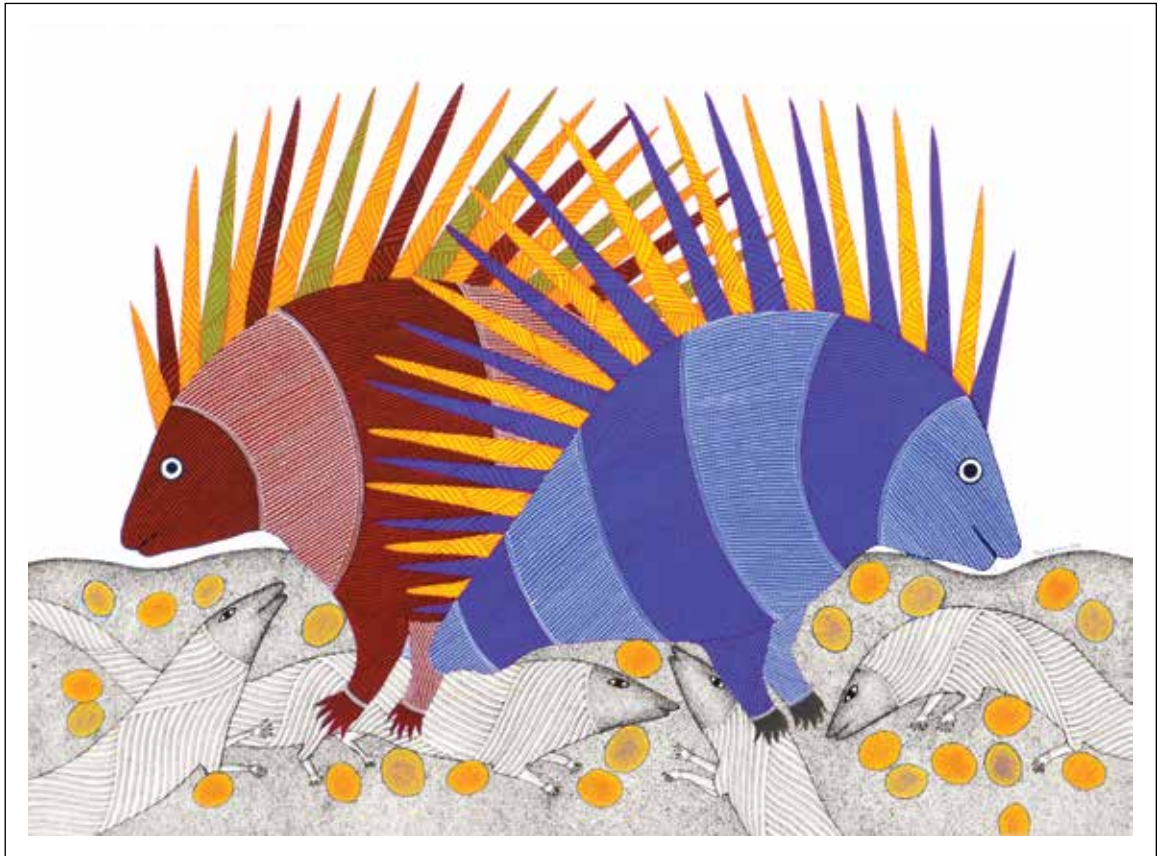


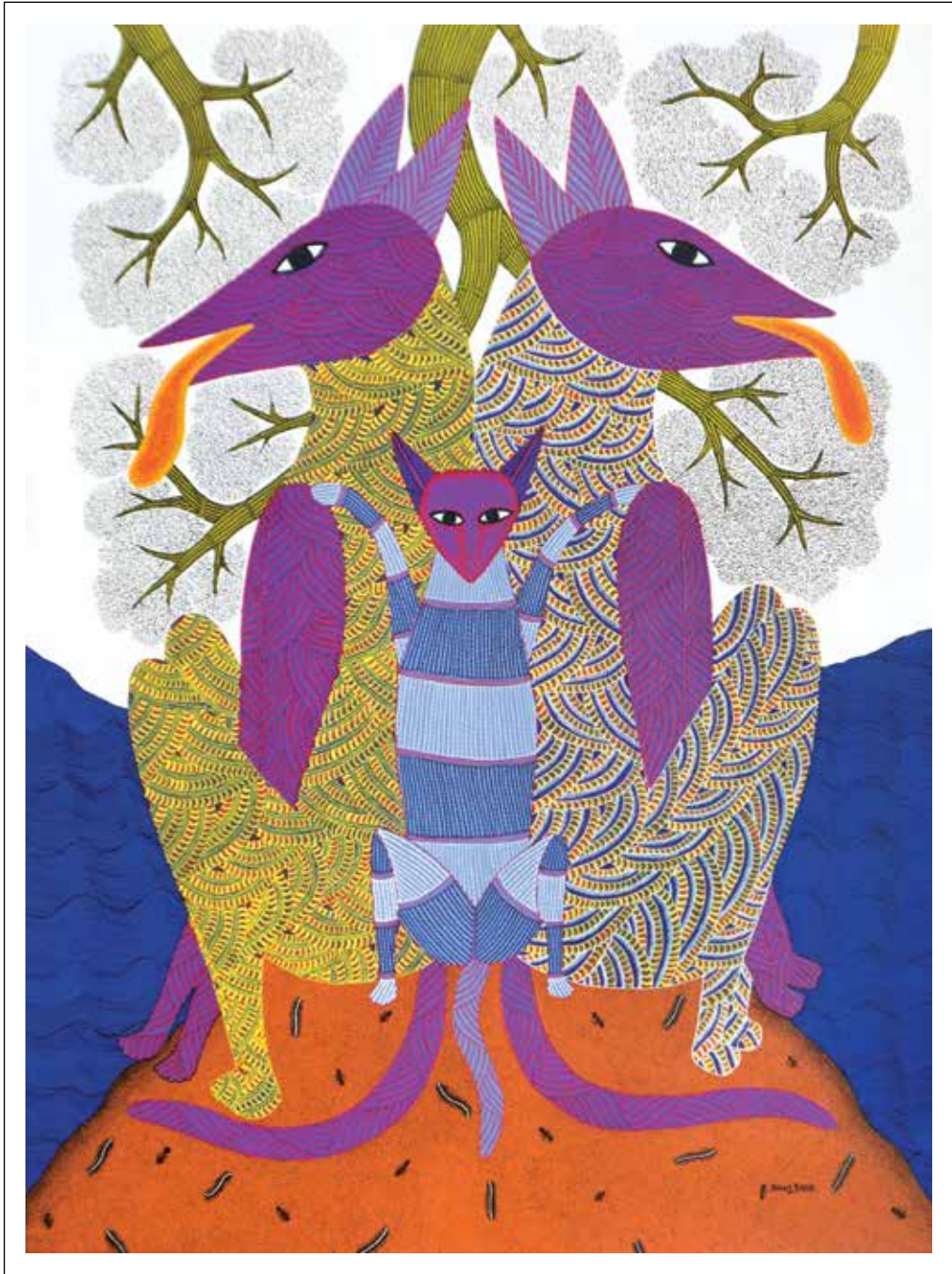


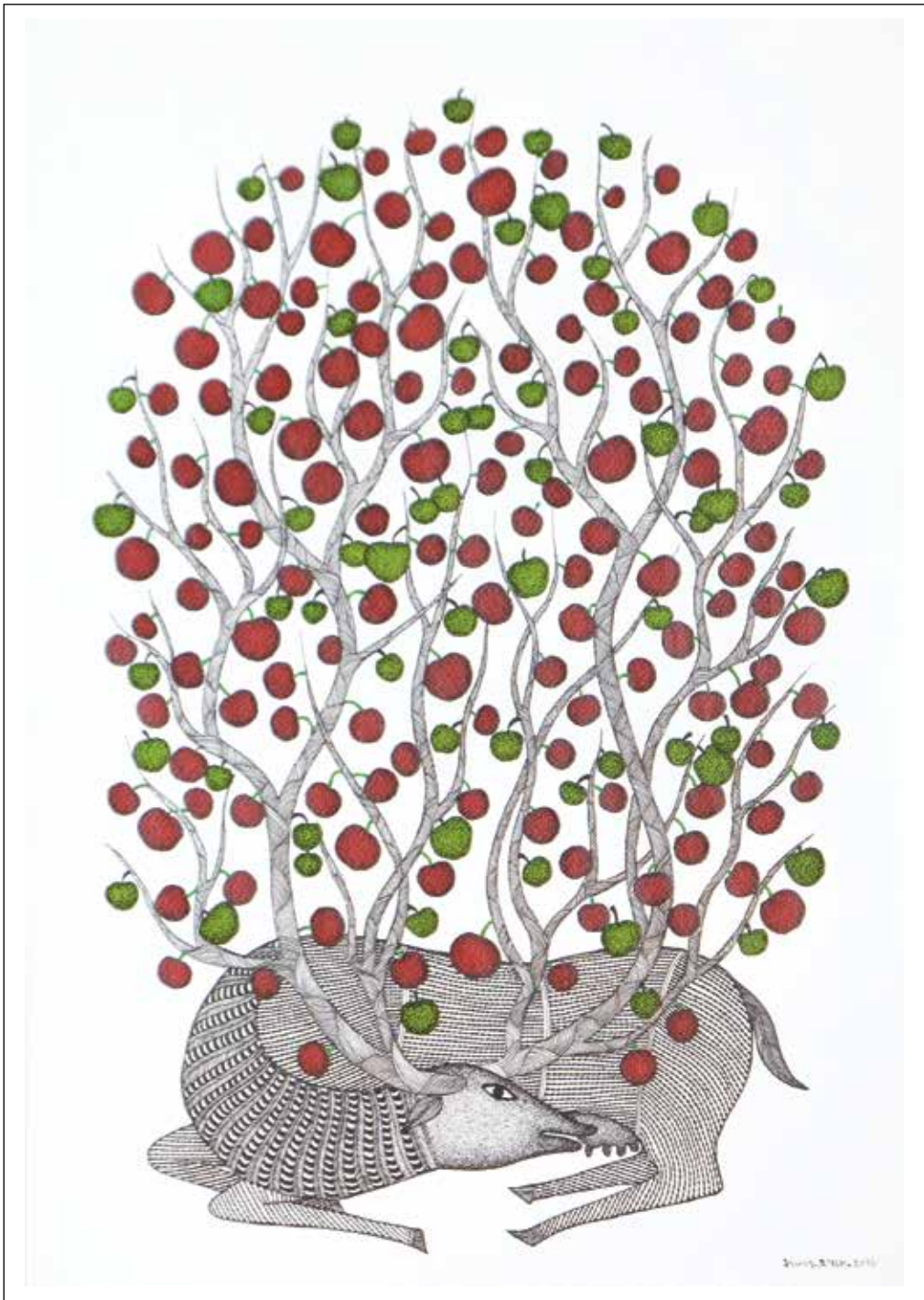








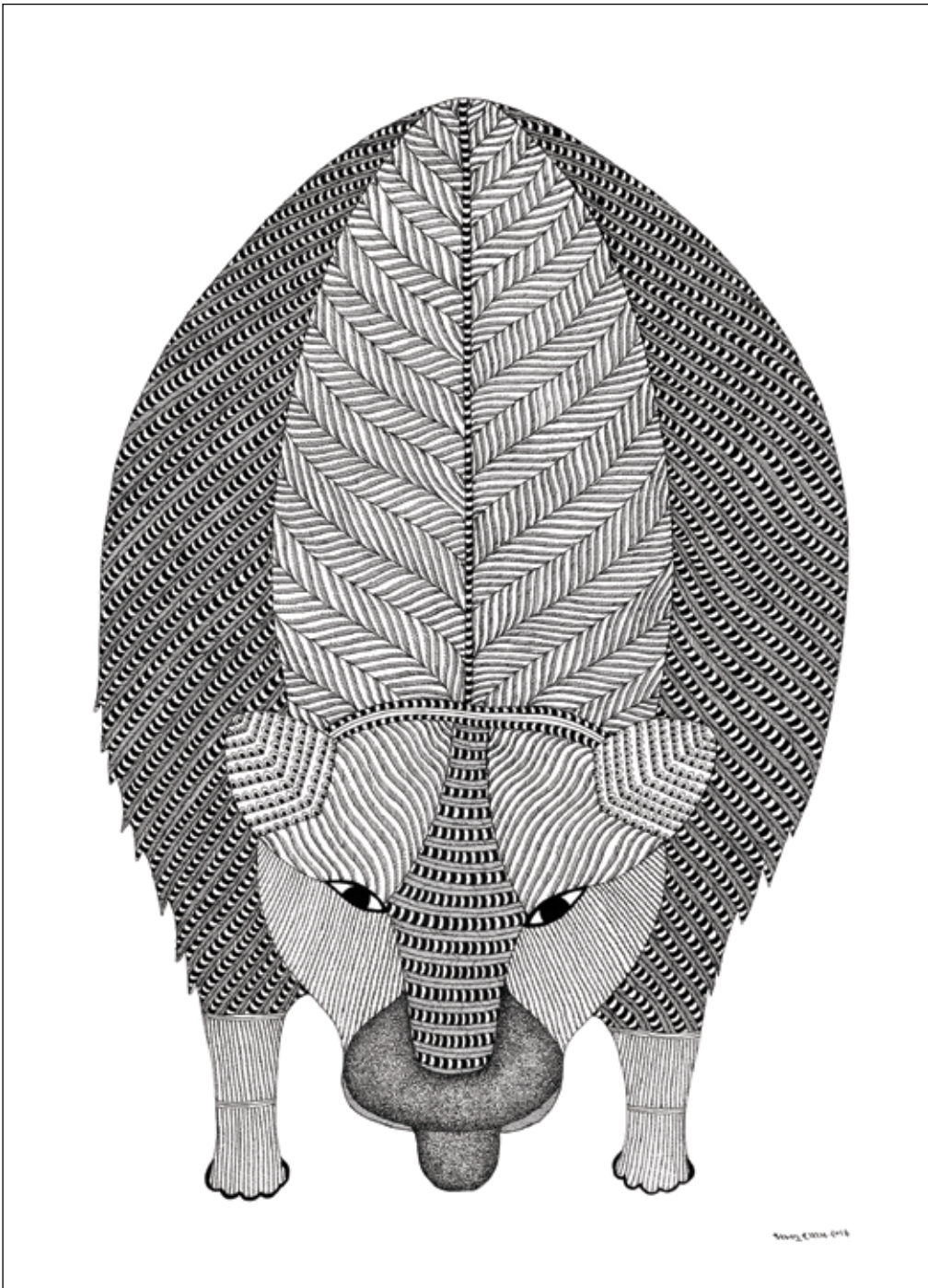












## You've Come a Long Way, Bhajju

“Write something short, but write it well!” Bhajju said, when he asked me to contribute to this catalogue. I’ll try. I need to go back a bit in time, because we’ve known each other for upwards of 15 years. I first met him at an illustrators’ workshop we had organized with a group of Gond artists – Bhajju had been invited because we’d been particularly struck by his work. What we had seen was a small drawing on paper – but hints of his quirky brilliance were already there in this image of twinned deer with a single head, sporting antlers that turned into tree branches. It had many of the characteristics I’ve since come to associate with Bhajju – a head for ideas, an ability to condense complex thoughts into a single taut image, a great sense of humour, and an openness to the unknown. These qualities are matched with his sensitive instincts as an artist – which include an unerring sense of colour and composition, paired with sure lines and fine rendering. But I’ve got a little ahead of myself here... for if truth be told, going from the early promise of his work to where he is now has been a journey of growth and hard work. We’ve been part of this process – with all the books we’ve created together – and nothing illustrates the point better than the time we spent together coming up with the now iconic *The London Jungle Book*. Bhajju had regaled us with stories about the time he spent in London painting murals on the walls of an Indian restaurant – and we decided to turn the experience into a visual travelogue. From the beginning, Bhajju was clear about what he could and couldn’t do: we were not to expect ‘realistic’ images. At the same time, though he wanted to stay with the Gond tradition he had inherited, he was aware that to convey his individual experience, he would have to push the boundaries of his community style. We spent long hours struggling with how he was to do this. It was an unbelievably great learning experience for both of us, and the result was more than we could have hoped for. *The London Jungle Book* remains the most significant book we have done with an indigenous artist, with its deceptively simple, yet completely radical reversal of the anthropological gaze. For Bhajju, this successful straddling of individual vision and inherited tradition was a defining moment in his journey as an artist. The rest, as they say, is history. We remain close friends and collaborators, and have since created many more books together. Meanwhile, Bhajju has gone on to become a contemporary artist of some significance, and what can I say – I’m both very proud and hugely delighted.

Gita Wolf  
Tara Books



BHAJJU SHYAM was born in 1971 in the Gond tribal village of Patangarh, in the forests of central India. As a child he helped his mother paint on the walls to mark special festivals. At the age of sixteen Bhajju left his village and came to the city of Bhopal in search of work. There, he worked as a night watchman, until getting a chance to become an apprentice of his uncle Jangarh Singh Shyam, the most brilliant Gond artist of the time, and the one who brought Gond Art from the walls of the village into the public eye. Bhajju started by filling in the fine patterns on Jangarh's large canvases, but when his talent became apparent, Jangarh encouraged him to strike out on his own.

Bhajju's work soon became known throughout India, and his first international exposure came in 1998 when he was part of a group exhibition at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris. Since then his work has been shown in the UK, Germany, Holland and Russia.

Bhajju has ten books to his credit and his best-known work, *The London Jungle Book*, is a visual travelogue of his 2002 visit to London, where he went to paint the interior of an up-market Indian restaurant. The book, published by Tara Books and the Museum of London, was released in November 2004, along with a three-month exhibition at the Museum. It has now been published in Italian, Dutch and French, Korean & Portuguese, and the exhibition has since toured the UK, Germany, Holland, Italy and Russia.

Other notable exhibitions include his individual showings at Arteutopia Gallery, Provincia di Milano, Milan (2005), the Crossing Borders Festival, The Hague, Netherlands (2005), The Museum in the Docklands, London (2005), the Natural Science History Museum, Bhopal.

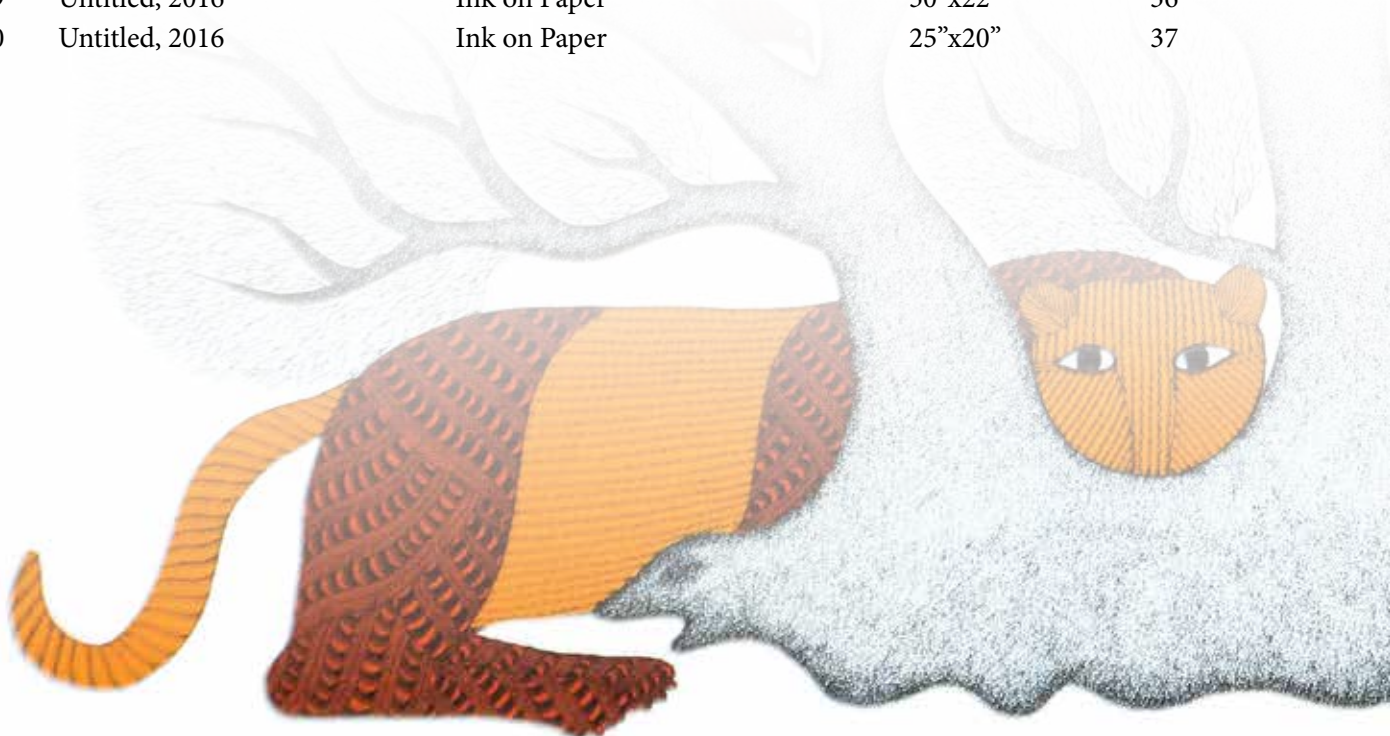
Bhajju has received many awards. In 2015, he received the Ojas Art Award at the Jaipur Literature Festival; CRESCER Magazine's 30 Best Children's Book Award Brazil in 2011 and Madhya Pradesh Government's State Award for Best Indigenous Artist in 2001.

Bhajju's works are a part of many private and institutional collections in both India and overseas.

Cumulatively, his books have sold nearly a 100,000 copies, worldwide and have been made available in multiple languages. *Maa Matre* at Ojas Art is his first solo exhibition in India.

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by  
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OJAS ART  
1 AQ, Qutub Minar Roundabout  
New Delhi 110 030  
art@ojasart.com | +91 11 2664 4145

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Ojas is a Sanskrit word which is best transliterated as “the nectar of the third eye and an embodiment of the creative energy of the universe”.

Ojas endeavors to bring forth the newest ideas in contemporary art.

OJAS  
ART

Cover:  
*Shadow 1*, 2016  
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42 x 60 in

## OJAS ART

1AQ, Qutab Minar Roundabout  
Mehrauli, Delhi 110 030  
Tel: 011 2664 4145, 85100 44145  
art@ojasart.com www.ojasart.com



@/#ojasart