

OJAS
ART

satranji

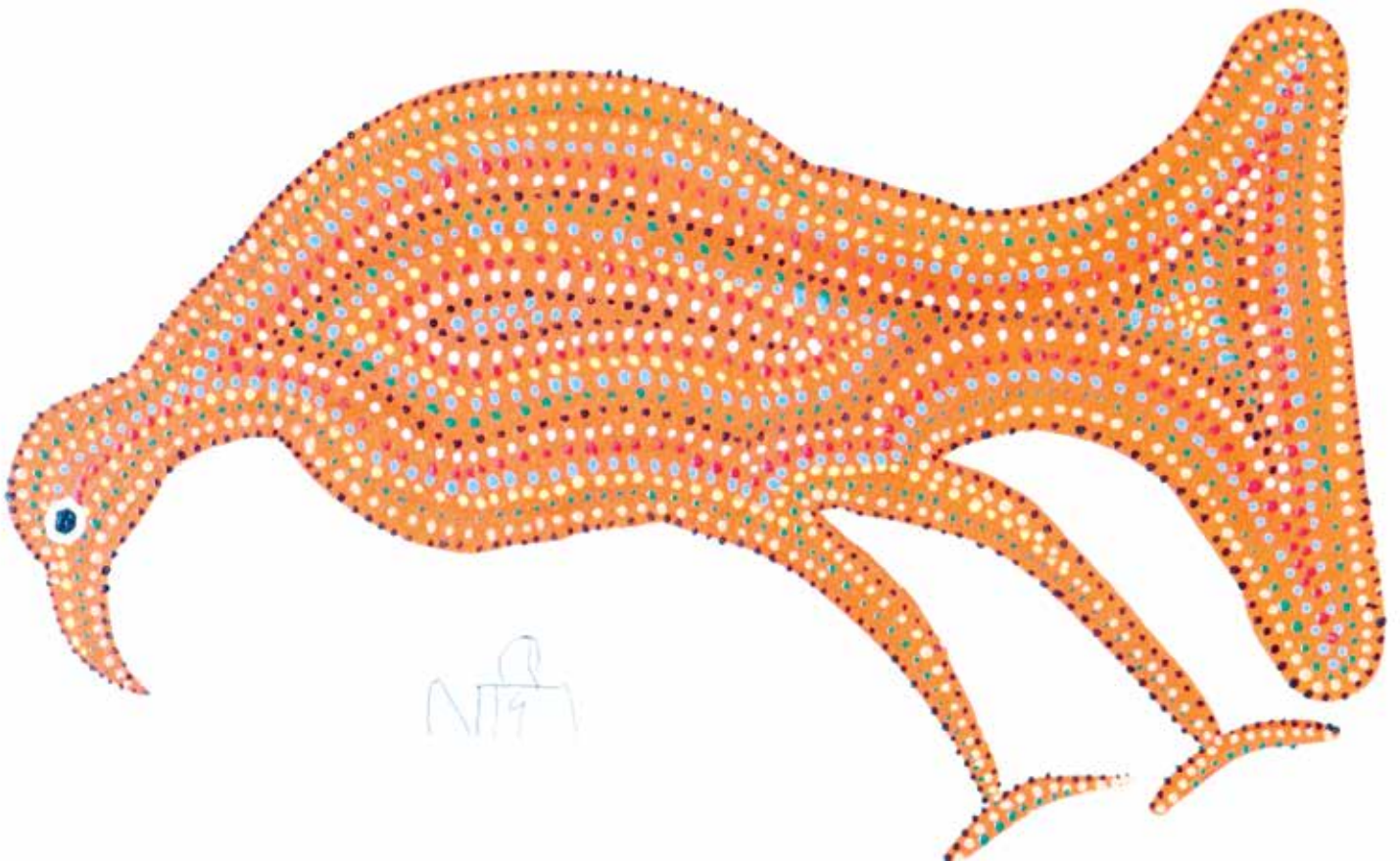
THE ART OF THE BHEEL



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Ojas Art is a Delhi based art organization bringing forth the newest ideas in the art space and presents thought provoking art at the festival every year. The Ojas Art Award will be an annual feature, exploring different genres in tribal and traditional Indian arts, and recognising and celebrating artists who fuse together contemporary ideas with their art. The 2017 edition of the Award focusses on Bheel Art and in 2015 and 2016 the focus was on Gond Art and Mithila/Madhubani Art forms respectively.



A distinctly versatile entertainment company, Teamwork has roots in the performing arts, social movement, and the corporate world. Their expertise lies in the areas of entertainment such as television, film – documentary and feature, and the creation and development of contemporary performing arts, visual arts & literary festivals across the world. Teamwork produces one of the world's largest literary gatherings, the annual Jaipur Literature Festival.



ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival, since its inception in 2006, has been a celebration of national and international writers encompassing a range of readings, talks, literary lunches, debates, performances, children's workshops and interactive activities. In 2017, about 2,50,000 people attended the Zee Jaipur Literature Festival with more than 200 speakers from all over the world. Music, along with literature, plays an important role at the ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival. ZEE Jaipur Literature Festival is world's largest and only free literature festival.

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Ojas Art Award

Adivasi societies are not fossilised societies. The historical legitimacy of... forest tribes lies in recognizing their way of life and in analyzing the significance of their contribution to Indian culture since early times. – Romila Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to 1300 AD

A few years ago, I met some accomplished Gond artists in Delhi and really liked their art and the history behind it. Subsequent reading and a visit to Bhopal revealed a lot. The legendary artist J. Swamintahan recognised the importance of the indigenous arts within the contemporary framework, which eventually lead to the establishment and development of institutions like Bharat Bhavan, IGRMS and Tribal Museum.

The museums are not only custodians of the history, but also encourage artists to help evolve and further develop their art by introducing contemporary ideas and elements. Libraries, museums and archives, have a lot of pedagogical material on the historicity of tribal and traditional arts but not much on the current artists who were helping in keeping this art form alive. I found a lack of recorded contemporary history and documentation, which is even more glaring when compared to their mainstream counterpart artists who graduate from art schools and then proceed to having shows in art galleries and furthering their careers.

Over the decades, many art forms have been lost to time and it is important to keep the surviving ones alive. There are many institutions and galleries that have been working for decades towards this aim and thanks to their efforts many of the art forms have made it this far. I felt one of the best ways to further the indigenous arts would be by creating a sustainable model in which the art flourishes and artists are motivated to further their creativity.

To create a sustainable model, greater visibility for the indigenous arts in the mainstream would be a starting point. Exhibitions in galleries, publications and documentation will make collectors and institutions consider



Ojas Art Awardees Lado Bai and Subhash Amliyar at JLF 2017



Sanjoy Roy (MD, Teamwork Arts); Anubhav Nath (Director, Ojas Art) and Sean Anderson (Assistant Curator, MOMA, New York) with Lado Bai and Subhash Amliyar at JLF 2017

these artists and their art more seriously. Also, the documentation would help create contemporary records and history.

With these thoughts, in 2014, we proposed **Ojas Art Award** to Teamwork Arts, organisers of Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF). Annually, an indigenous genre of art will be shortlisted and working artists will be encouraged to apply. The winners will be felicitated in Jaipur at JLF with a cash award and an exhibition of their artworks; followed by *Satrangi*, an exhibition in Delhi focussing on the contemporary voices in the genre per say and subsequently exhibition/s overseas. They were rather enthused by the concept and readily agreed. In 2015 we held the first award, exploring the genre of Gond Art. In 2016 we explored Madhubani–Mithila and for 2017, Bheel is the genre in focus.



Anubhav Nath with Subhash Amliyar

The Bheel people find a mention in the epics of *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* and are the most populous tribe in India. Their art with its dots and points has a very strong resonance with Australian Aboriginal art, which is considered to be among the oldest surviving art forms.

Lado Bai and Subhash Amliyar won the Master Artist and Protégé Artist awards respectively. The exhibition showcases their works and works of some of the other artists who applied for the award.

Through the last three years our exhibitions have gotten a great response from the media, attracted numerous visitors and introduced collectors to *new* art forms that are actually thousands of years old. Most importantly, the artists see this as a value add in their lives and careers and are motivated to do more with their artworks.

The Ojas Art Award project is an attempt to create a sustainable platform for marginalized art forms and to try and make this a start-point and not an end-point. We, as a team are thankful to all our supporters, especially the artists who have gotten us this far.

Anubhav R Nath

Director, Ojas Art
August 2017

Bheel Art: An Introduction

Nestled in the environs of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tripura, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and even parts of Sindh in Pakistan, Bheels form the largest tribal aggregation in the South Asian Region. Drawing their ancestry from Lord Shiva; figuring as the ardent devotee of Lord Rama while he was wandering in Dandaka forests during the exile period; as mentioned in Mahabharata; and prominently figuring in the historical annals of written history throughout the last two millennia, Bheel cultural traditions have endured the vacillations of time, migrations and geographical variations.

Pre-dating the Aryan migrations, known as the 'bow people' by virtue of deriving the etymology from '*villu*' or '*billu*.' Ekalavya was recognised as the most skilled archer even by Dronacharya, the teacher of the all-time great Arjun. Bheels have been great warriors and have fought against Mughals, Marathas, and British.



Speaking *Bheeli* as their colloquial language is called, the traditions and culture of Bheels have been a subject matter of great fascination for anthropologists and heritologists alike. Agriculture is the mainstay profession of the majority of the Bheels today.

The main concentration of the tribal sub groups exist in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Vasava, Bheelala, Tadvī, Dholi, Garasia, Mewasi, Bhagalia and Rawal are some of the major Bheel clans. Owing to contiguity of the geography, Vasavas are also settled in Gujarat in addition to Dungri and Barda sub groups. In Maharashtra, the dominant ones are Kotwal and Mavchi.

Deep rooted traditional culture and religious practices of Bheels have given rise to well-preserved art forms. Worshipping deities like Vaghdev, Khandoba, and Sitalmata, Bheels are fond of music and dance. Ghoomar dance form embedded with their own classical musical metres and style are a rich source of oral history. Dance drama performances by Bheels during the rainy festivities of the month of *Shravan* can enthral the viewers throughout the night.

Deft sculptors of their traditional deities, human and animal figurines, their creations are seen at their best during week long fairs Shivaratri festivities. Bheel art is deeply imbedded in the day to day life, rituals, worships, social get-together performances, fairs and lores. The walls of the dwelling places are finely painted every year with community deities, auspicious symbols, human and animal figurines, flora and fauna, and sometimes also the votive figures to ward off inauspicious fears. Indigenously extracted organic pigments mixed with fine mud, forms the inexpensive yet colourful medium for both, vivid paintings made using rag twigs and for delicately shaped mural reliefs. A wide range of subjects for Bheel art are provided by a large variety in local rituals and beliefs of the widely scattered tribal sub groups.

Preservation, cataloguing and promotion of rich and most ancient Bheel art thus becomes our national service, giving a sense of pride to every art enthusiast.

Dr Neeru Misra

Dr. Neeru Misra is an author, historian and cultural heritage consultant.

Facing page
Lado Bai
Anek Mor, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
72x96 in



Lado Bai
Jungle Mein Shikar ka Drishya, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
38x48 in





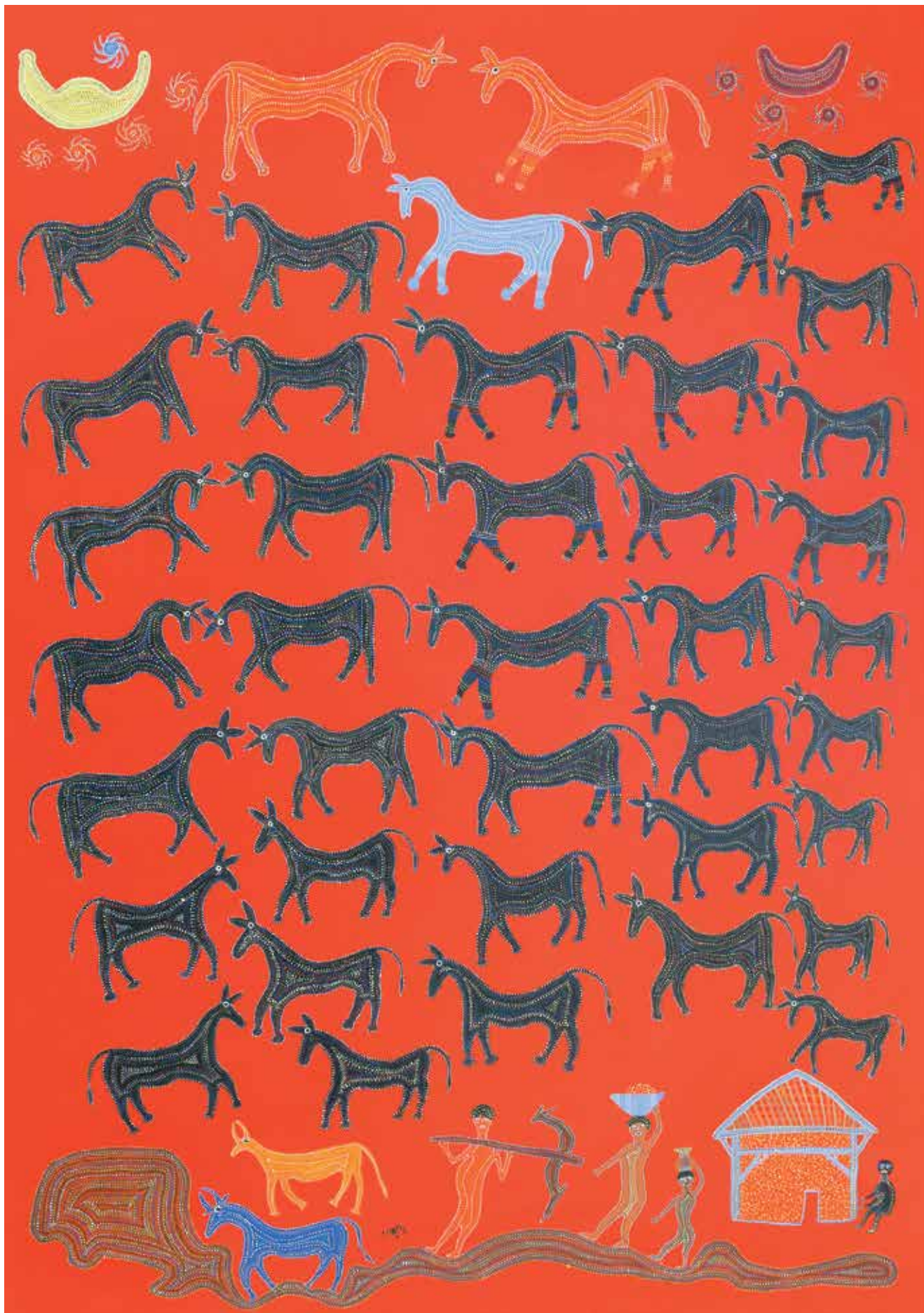
Lado Bai
Ganesha, 2016
Acrylic on paper
7x10 in



Lado Bai
Ganesha, 2016
Acrylic on paper
10x14 in



Lado Bai, *Gulaabi Mor*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas 70x94 in



Lado Bai, *Laal Pithora*, 2017, Acrylic on canvas 70x98 in



Lado Bai
Tittir, 2016
Acrylic on paper
7x10 in



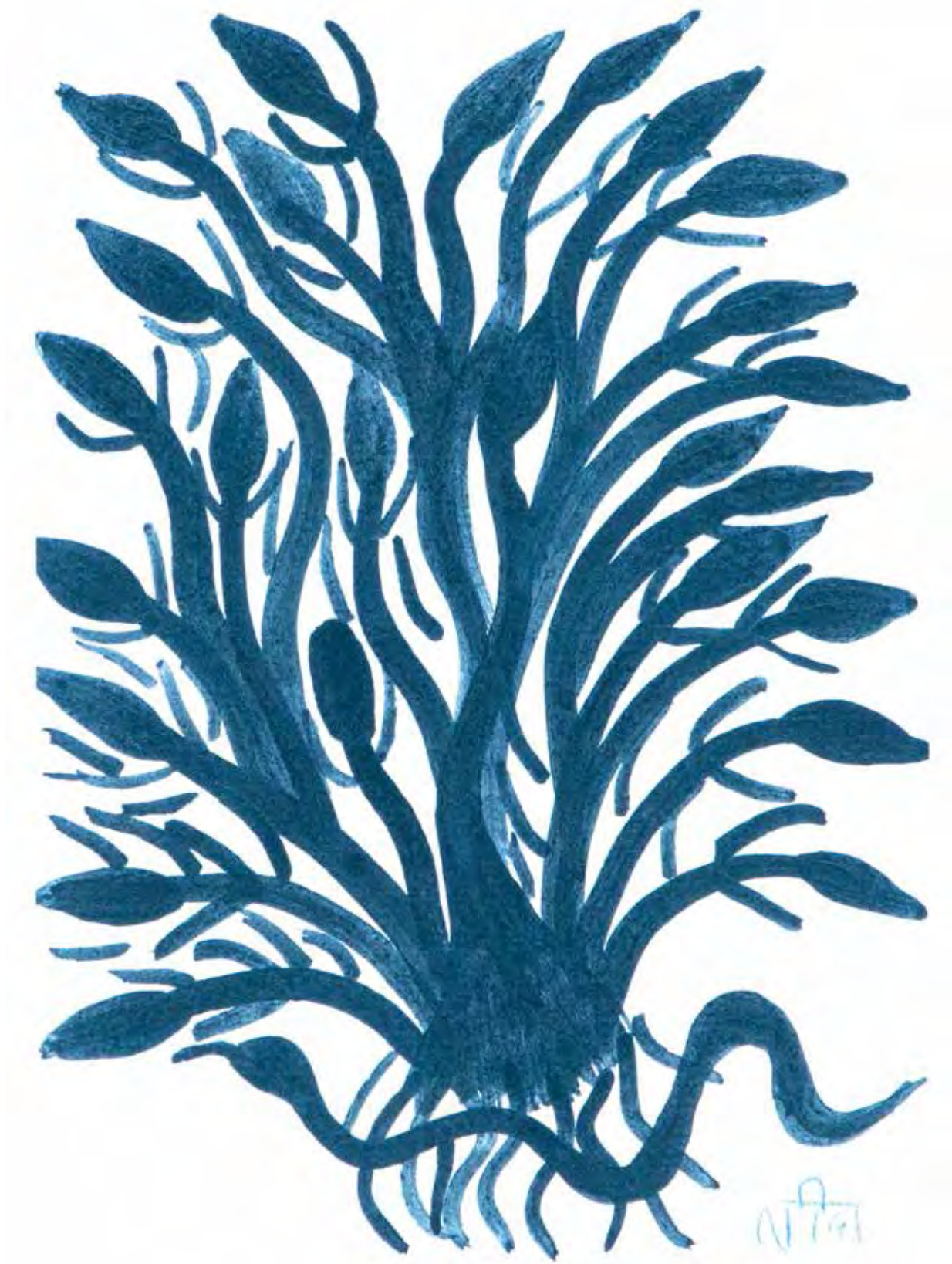
Lado Bai
Baccho ke Saath Mor, Early 2000
Acrylic on paper
11x14 in



Lado Bai
Hiran, 2017
 Coal on paper
 14x20 in



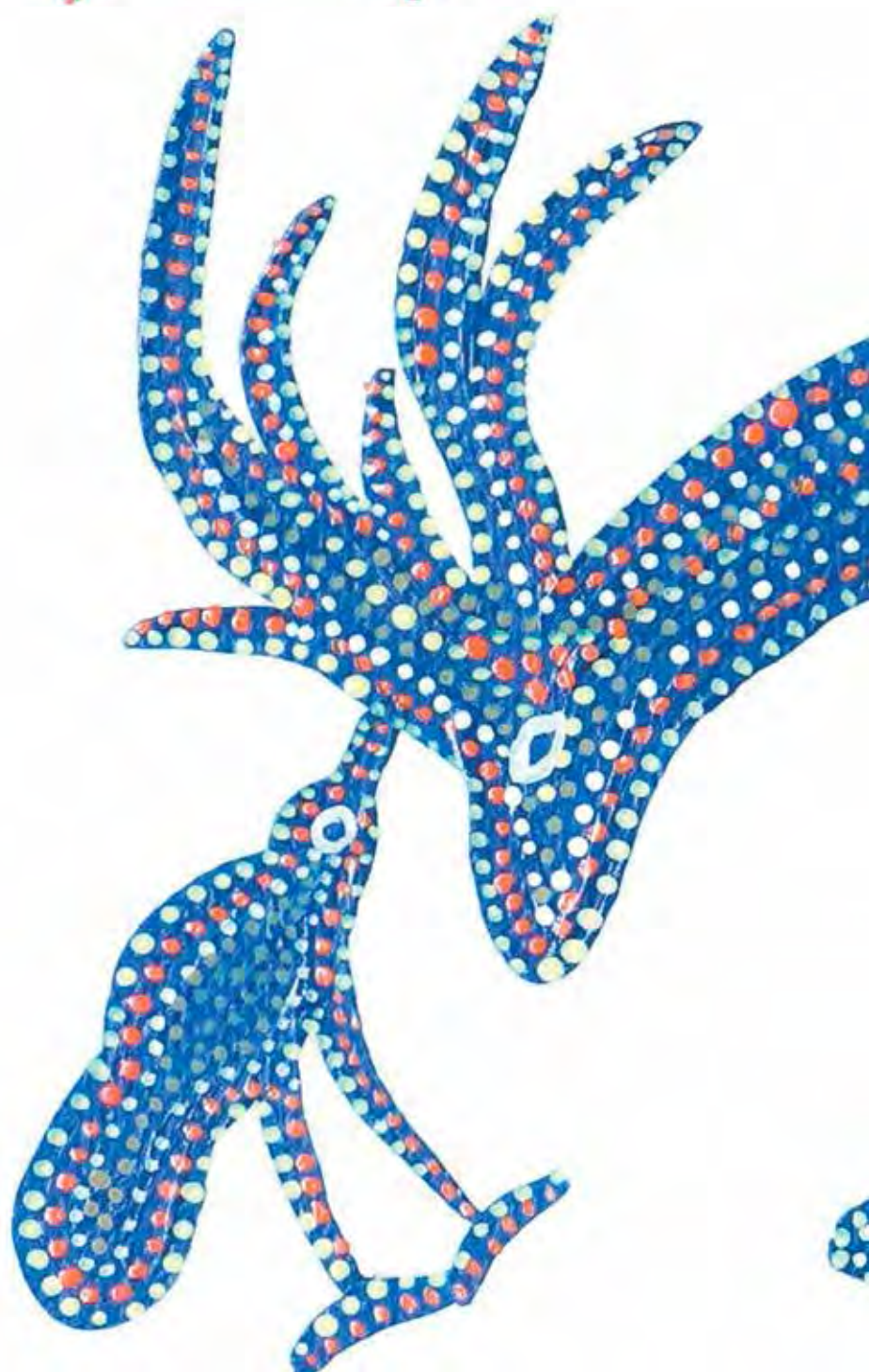
Lado Bai
Mor aur Pakshi, 2017
 Coal on paper
 14x20 in



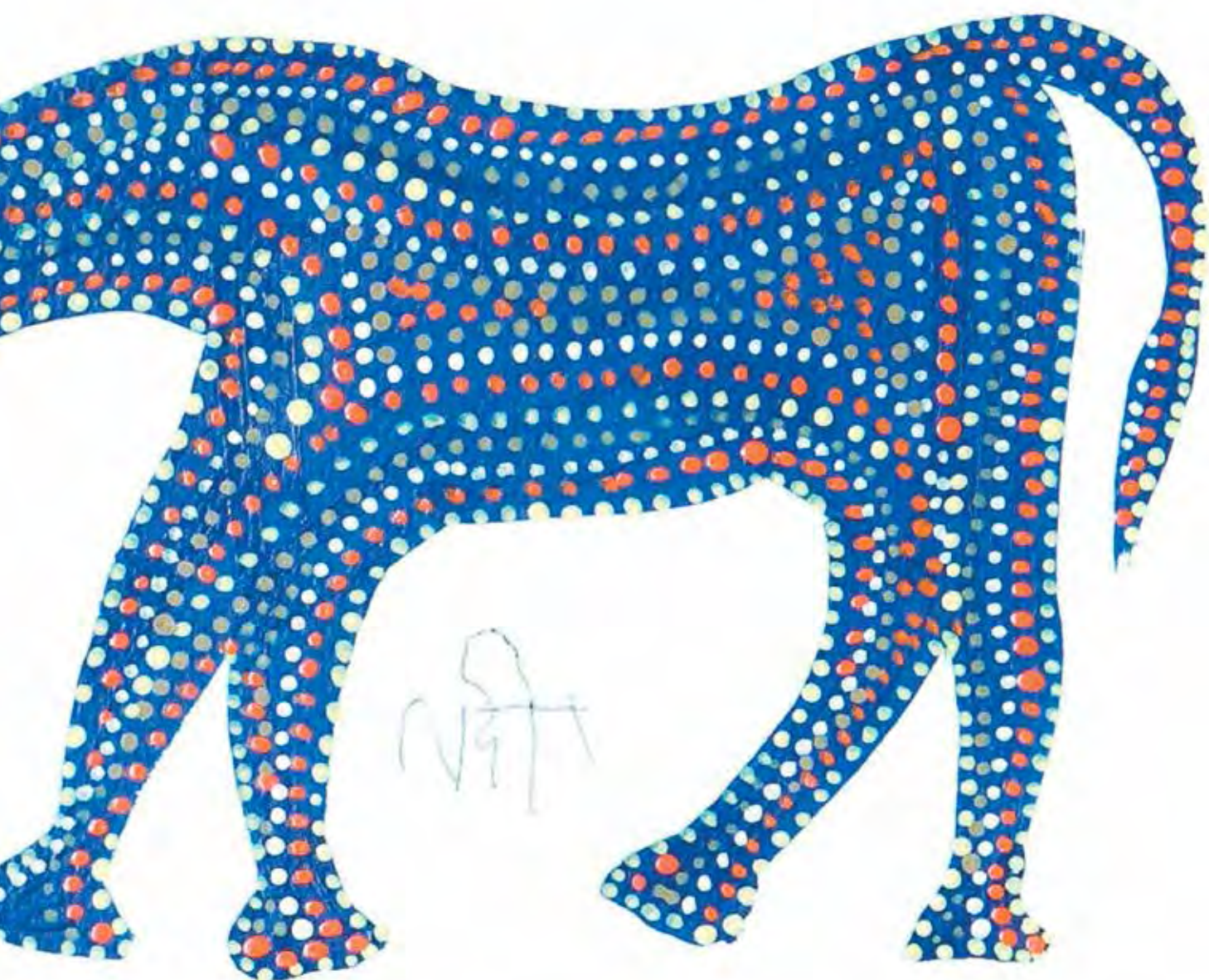
Lado Bai
Ped aur Saap, 2017
Coal on paper
7x10 in



Top
Lado Bai
Mor-Morni, 2016
Acrylic on paper
8x11 in



Right
Lado Bai
Khelte hua Hiran aur Pakshi, 2017
Acrylic on paper
8x11 in





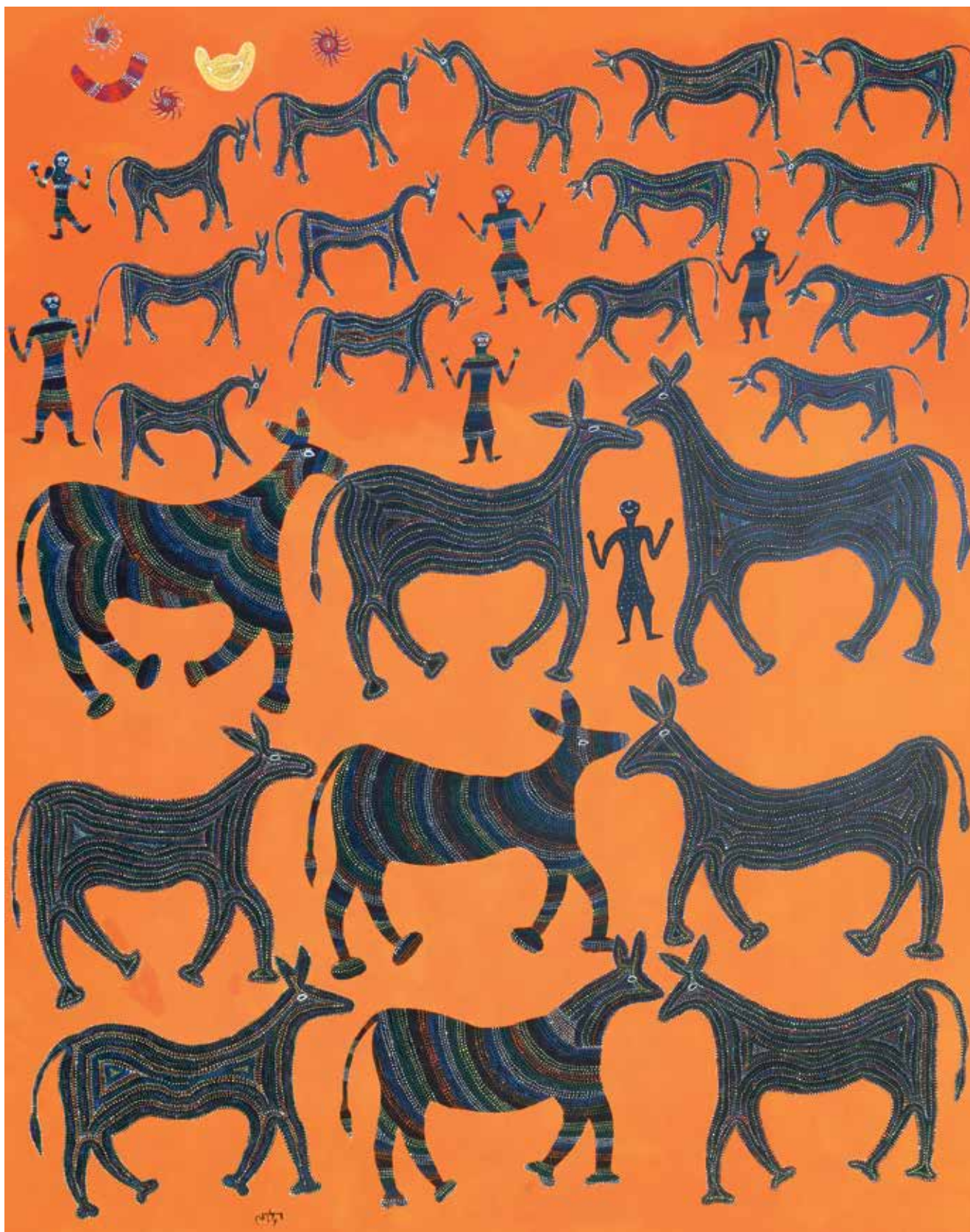
Lado Bai
Pakshiyaan, 2016
 Acrylic on paper
 11x15 in

Facing page
 Lado Bai
Pakshiyon ka Ghar, 2017
 Acrylic on paper
 11x14 in





Lado Bai
Ped pe Makriyaan, 2016
 Acrylic on paper
 11x15 in



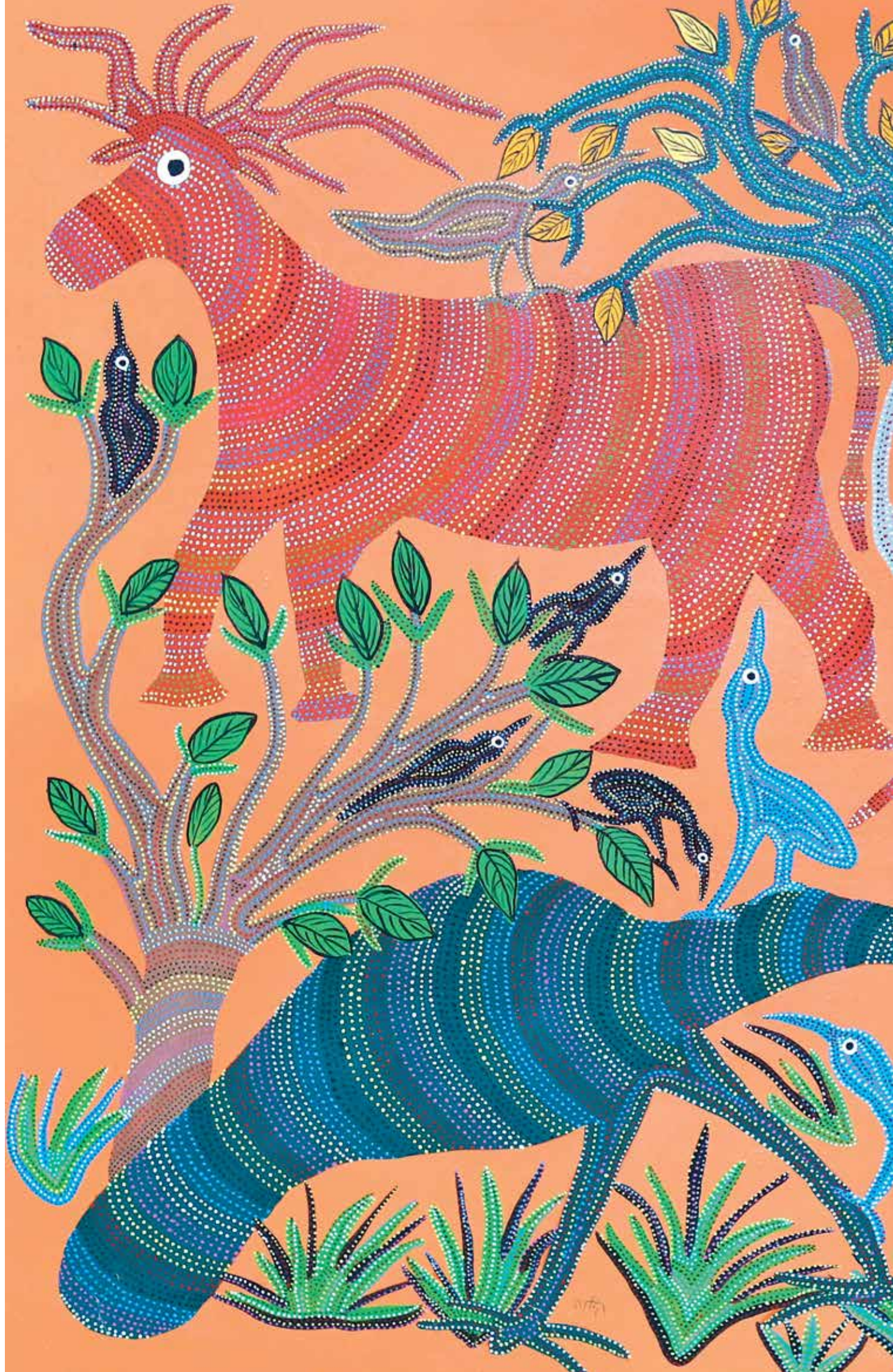
Lado Bai
Pithora, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
72x90 in



Lado Bai
Humara Gaon II, 2017
 Acrylic on canvas, 72x96 in



Lado Bai
Ped ke Niche Hiran aur Mor, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 39x28 in





Previous page
Lado Bai
Jungle ka Drishya, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
30x50 in

This page
Lado Bai
Tittir Pakshiyaan, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
48x34 in







Lado Bai
Humara Gaon I, 2017
 Acrylic on canvas
 72x96 in

From Clay to Canvas: Bhil Art Form in Transition

N Shakmacha Singh and Prof Sarit Kumar Chaudhari

“The scope of Adibasi imagination is not contained by the constraints of naturalism though it hovers over nature and derives its sustenance from it.”
(Swaminathan, J. 1987:34)

The Bhils inhabiting parts of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra are a major tribal group of India occupying this territory from ancient times. Despite their relative loss of ground to new settlers and exposure to modernization, Bhils and Rathwas (a sub-tribe of the larger group of Gujarat) still retain their age-old practices of painting, carving and clay-relief decorative arts. According to the 2011 Census, Bhil is the most populous tribe with a population of 4,618,068 constituting 37.7 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribe population. The Bhils of Madhya Pradesh are mostly concentrated in Dhar, Jhabua, East and West Nimar Districts. They have been migrating but the ethos of their cultural values, customs, traditions and art forms still remain.

The Bhil gallery (Gallery No.4) of the *Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS)* encompasses a segment devoted to the display of vibrant Bhil paintings and clay relief art forms signifying the historicity of Bhil art. The gallery also houses panels (non-accessioned) that are reserved for demonstration by artists periodically.

Bhil art imagery encompasses religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals and is strongly embedded within their social and cultural belief, ways of life and natural environment. From simple clay-relief on walls- marking festivity, ritualistic paintings, wood and stone carvings, pottery, terracotta art, rich ornaments and tattooed bodies, the Bhil, Bhilalas and Rathwas have been able to preserve and express their tradition over the centuries. There



Clay-relief on wall showing Bhil Woman



*A scene of Gol Gadhelo. Photograph
by (late) Anandilal Parek some 60
years ago. Source: IGRMS archive*

have been several changes in concept, styles and medium among the Bhils but the central theme remains largely unchanged.

This article explores the Bhil concepts of Gal Wapasi/ Gol-Gadhelo and Gad-Parv/ Gad-Gadhera, which are widely represented in Bhil Art.

THE RITUAL OF GAL-WAPASI/ GOL-GADHELO

This colourful artwork depicts an age-old practice of Gal/Gol celebrated by the Bhil tribe on the second day of Holi festival. This ceremony is observed to appease the presiding deity, Gal Dev, protector and reliever from distress, pain and ailments. In this ritual, the person who prepares to undertake the ceremony as a mark of thanksgiving suspends his body from the pole of Gal, (the pole erected in the name of Gal dev) and take rounds three, five or seven times¹.

A strong pole is erected by the villagers and a structure is raised with supporting pillars to prepare a *Machan* (platform) for the ceremony. On the top of this vertical pole, a long horizontal log is pegged (*Chakri*) to attain a balance. One end of the log is for the person who prepares to conduct this ritual service and the other end is firmly tied with a rope for manipulation from the ground. A large number of people gather to view the ceremony. Typically, womenfolk dance in groups, elders take sips of the hukka (hubble-bubble) and people sit on the machan (platform) in support of the performer. The sacrificial rites by the *Badwa* (religious practitioner) are also depicted.



A panel of art work depicting the scene of Gad-Gadhera ceremony of the Bhil tribe

GAD-GADHERA/ GAD PARVA

In this clay-relief work, Bhuri Bai recalls her younger days when she lived with her parents in Navapara, Khangera, Gujarat and participated in a Gad-Gadhera ceremony.

This social ceremony is primarily aimed at the selection of a suitable mate. Marriage through examination is practiced among the Bhil, especially in Gujarat but is negligible among the Bhils of Madhya Pradesh². After Holi and on the eve of *Akadashi* (first day of lunar cycle), the Gad-Parv is organized to examine the physical strength, power and ability of eligible bachelors. A big wooden pole is smoothened and smeared with oil.

On the day of the ceremony, the pole is erected and a bag of jaggery, coconut and some coins is fixed on the top. The unmarried girls encircle the pole, holding stick sand brooms in their hands and dance in circles. There is an outer circle comprising of men who also dance and seek an opportunity to break through the circle of girls. It is a challenging



Bhuri Bai, a Bheel artist at work

attempt, as the oily and slippery pole is difficult to climb. Finally, the man who ultimately climbs the pole and retrieves the bag has the right to propose marriage to any one of the girls from the circle. The artwork also shows puppeteers, a man raising a flag in support of his friend and men playing music and drums. The finale is a sacrificial scene which marks the successful execution of the ceremony.

PITHORA PAINTING

Pithora painting of Rathwa is sometimes referred to as a ritual writing and symbolizes life. Every imagery in the painting is significant and shows the benign presence in the marriage ceremony of the Divine beings – Baba Pithora and Pithori, where all creatures - big and small, are invited in the ritual service.

Pithora symbolizes life and all that comes with it – walls are painted to usher peace and prosperity, they are painted to vanquish illness and bad luck. When a person makes a wish, *tipna* – five dots – are marked on the wall and if the problem is resolved happily, the pithora painting ritual begins (Mulchandani :2007).

Pithora, a ritual wall painting depicting the myth of creation is very characteristic of the Bhils and Bhilalas of western Madhya Pradesh and Rathwas of eastern Gujarat. The main theme of the painting is the marriage procession of Pithora and Pithori which is attended by all beings and are made by painters called *Lakhindra*, who are commissioned worshippers. As a part of the ritual, the Lakhindra first prepares *douna*, small bowls made of *Khakhar* leaves (*Butea Monasporma*) and fills them with colour. White is made from lime, green from *sagaun* (Teak) leaf extract, black from the lamp black, and red from *sindoor* (vermillion), with oil. First he paints the sacred enclosure, then the figure of Baba Ganesh smoking his hukka. At this point, tobacco is offered to Ganesh and the painter himself partakes the offering. The second figure to be drawn is that of the black horse with a rider, *Kathiya ghoda*, who is requested to inform everyone that Pithoro is being painted and that everyone is invited for a community dinner. After this four white horses of Pithoro, facing each other, are painted. Finally, the remaining figures including Rani Koyal, a two headed mare of the god of rain and clouds; the animals; bows, the step well; *panihari* (women carrying pitchers); women churning butter; the one-legged man; the moon, the *chhinala* (Hussy) represented by a copulating couple are painted. All of these figures are essential and are integral parts of the Pithoro painting which is considered incomplete if even a single detail is found missing (Shah: 1996)



Bhaddu Naro and his associate performing Pithora painting in Gallery No. 4 of IGRMS



Dhaba, dome-shaped, miniature votive shrine, terracotta; Bhil, Jhabua. Source: IGRMS Archive. Photograph: Late Anandi Lal Parek (1960)

SHRINE OF BAPADEVA

Among the popular votive terracotta figurines, horses and a min used for offering with a miniature shrine called Dhaba. Horses symbolise a vehicle for the divine being, a symbol of prowess is seen in three dimensional existence in terracotta art forms. Horses occupy a significant status in tribal life. As a symbol of power and force, the horse is used extensively as an offering and as a vital motif in tribal art. Gods and heroes are often shown riding horses. A shrine devoted to the village deity exhibit large assembly of terracotta votive offerings. After a wish fulfillment like child-birth, or recovery from an illness, votive terracotta horses are offered at the shrine of a village or forest deity by way of propitiation and thanksgiving. These forms are meant to be offered along with terracotta horse-figurines at the shrine of Bapadeva, as a thanksgiving. Usually made on the wheel, they have an opening for placing an oil lamp inside (Shah:1996)

CONCLUSION

Taking Bhil Art as a case study, it can be said that tribal or indigenous art forms are essentially inked with their evolving tangible and intangible domain of culture and need to be understood from a historical perspective. It is evident that across the globe such communities are passing through a phase of transition as they are exposed to multiple agents of change. Naturally, its reflections can be traced in their creative domain as well as in their emerging cognition concerning sacred or secular elements of culture or worldviews and in their everyday nuances of life. When we try to understand this changing phase of Adibasi or indigenous art forms in the wider context of our collective civilizational journey then we may appreciate. J. Swaminathan's (1987:36) perception as he says, "Representing the innate creative genius of the Adivasi people, just as we respect our own, we are seeing them as living in commonality with us. We see our fates inexorably linked together, and the new artistic ethos can only be born if this commonality is realized".



Suraj Bhil making a painting of Tiger during Museum Painting workshop on "Baagh", IGRNS archive

Footnotes:

1. Interview with Gangu Bai on 30/7/2017, IGRMS, Bhopal
2. Interview with Bhur iBai on 30/7/2017, IGRMS, Bhopal

References:

1. Shah Shampa (1996) edt, *Tribal Arts and Crafts of Madhya Pradesh*, Map in Publishing Pvt. Ltd. Ahmedabad and Vanya Prakashan, Bhopal, p.p. 100-101
2. Ibid, pp. 45-47
3. Mulchandani Anil (2007), *Mud and Mirrors, Discover India*, Media Transasia Publication, October 2017, Vol.-20 No. 10, p.p. 24-31
4. Patel D. Ashok (1998), *Bhil Janjiwan Aur Sanskriti*, Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, Bhopal, p.p-81-82
5. Swaminathan. J (1987), *The Perceiving Fingers*, Bharat Bhawan, Bhopal, P.38.



Subhash Amliyar, *Junglee Billi*, 2015, Acrylic on canvas, 34x25 in



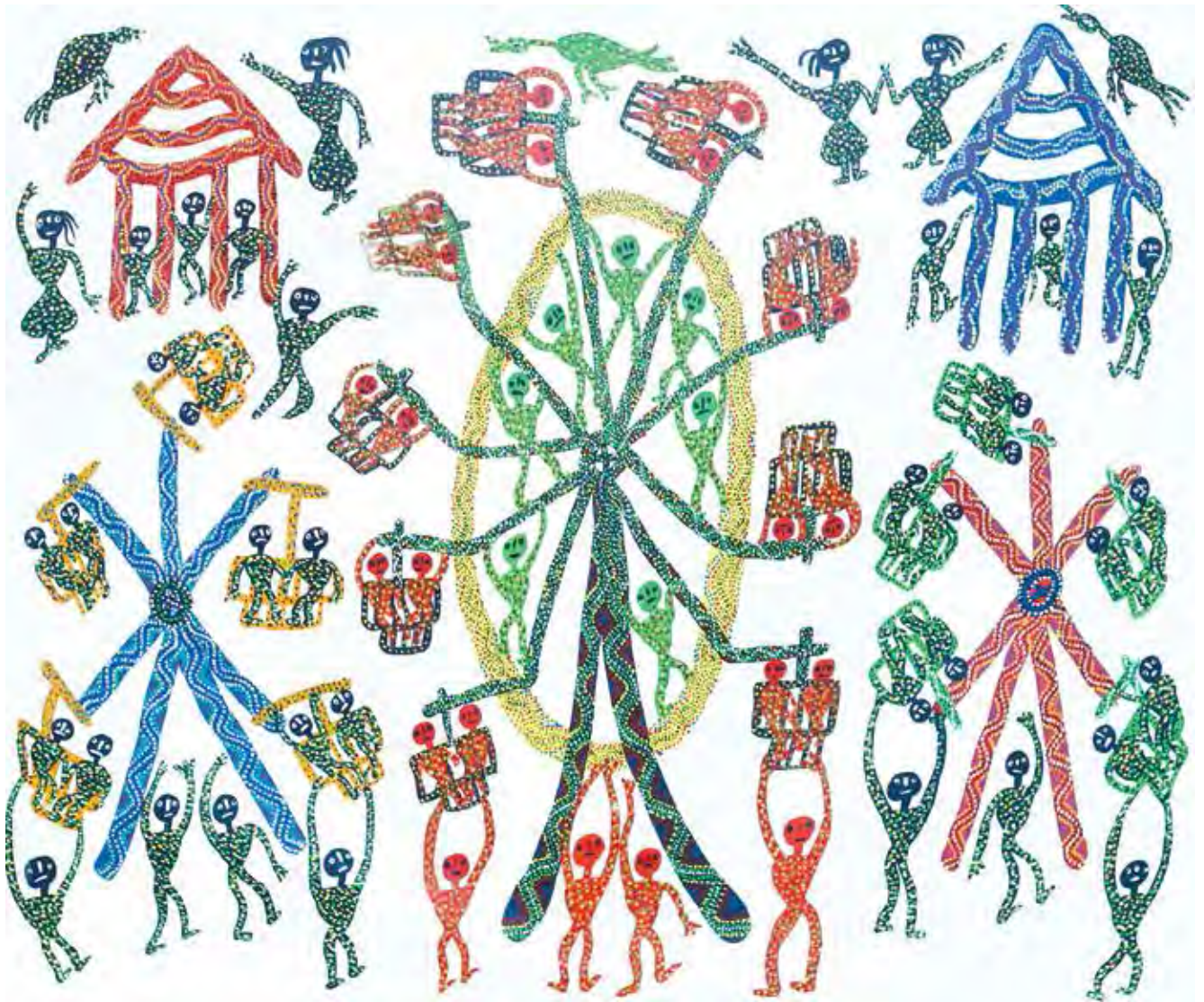
Subhash Amliyar, *Rang Biranga Mor*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 72x96 in



Subhash Amliyar
Gatla, 2016
 Acrylic on canvas
 35x33 in

Facing page
 Subhash Amliyar
Ganesha, 2015
 Acrylic on canvas
 34x25 in





Subhash Amliyar
Bhagoria Mela, 2016
 Acrylic on canvas
 37x31 in



Subhash Amliyar
Gad Bapsi, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
35x32 in



Subhash Amliyar
Shararat, 2014
 Acrylic on paper
 36x28 in

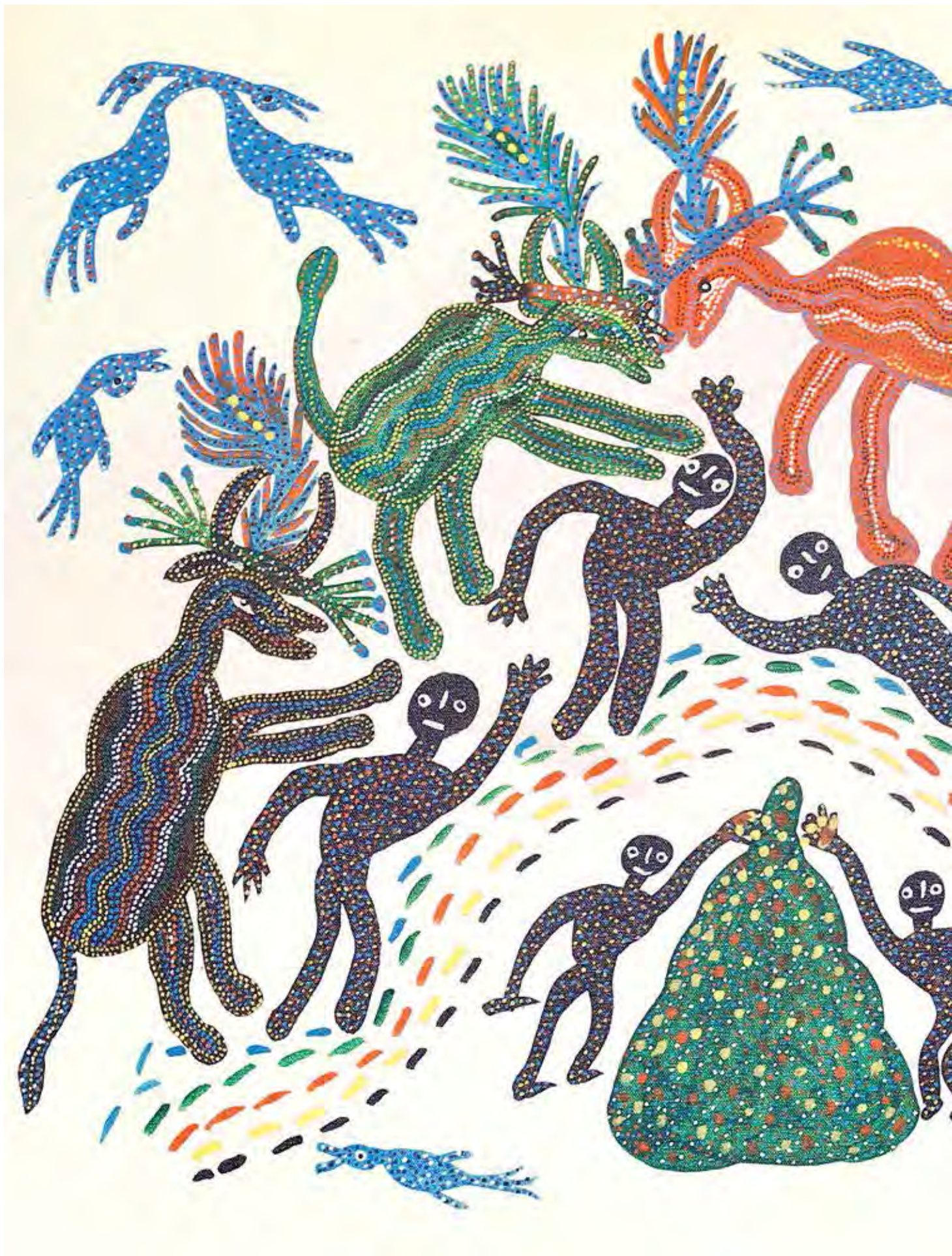
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Elephants, 2015
 Acrylic on canvas
 34x25 in

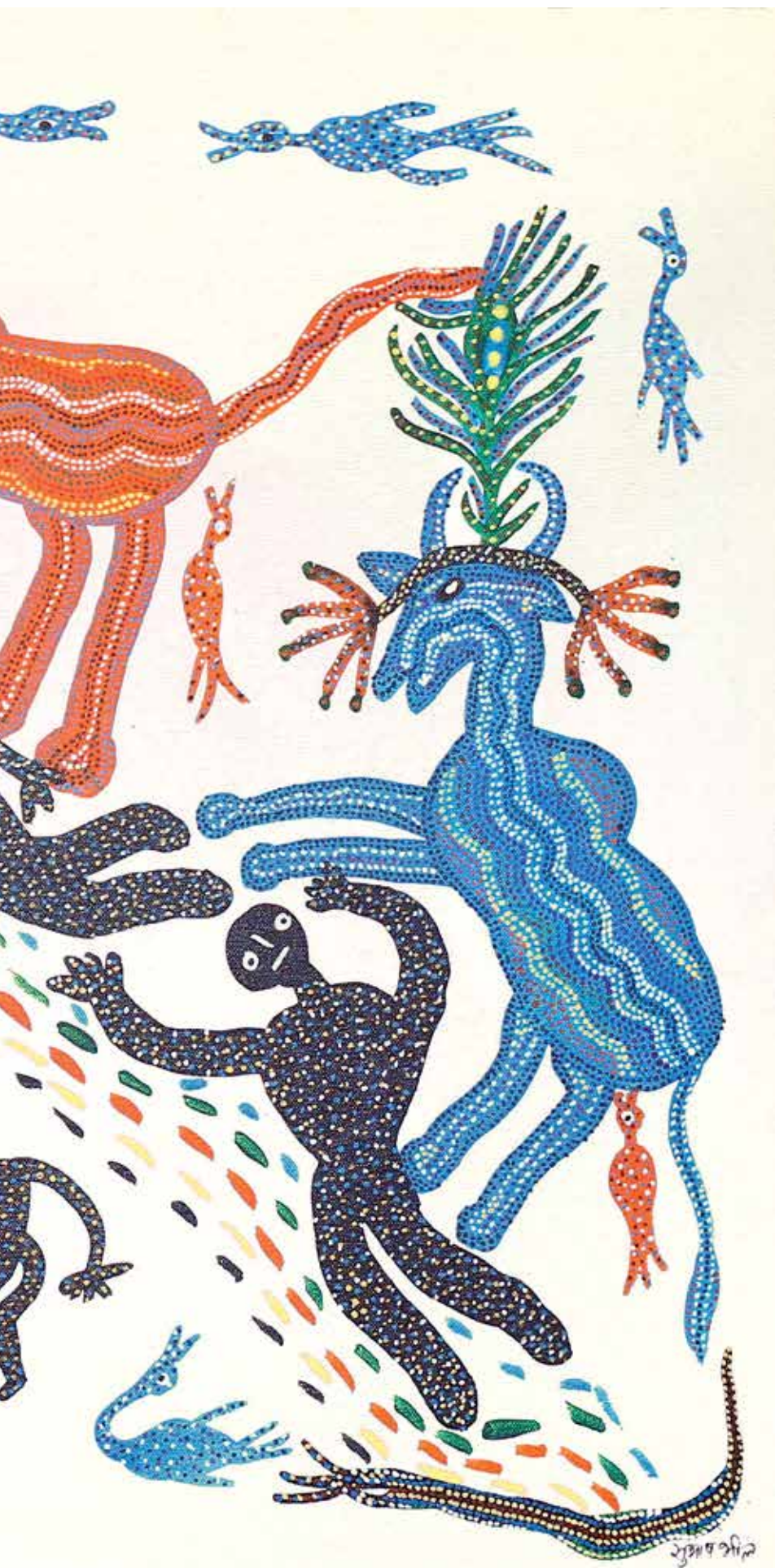




Subhash Amliyar
Gaay Dour, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
40x22 in







Subhash Amliyar
Gohari, 2014
 Acrylic on canvas
 26x35 in



Subhash Amliyar
JLF, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
72x96 in

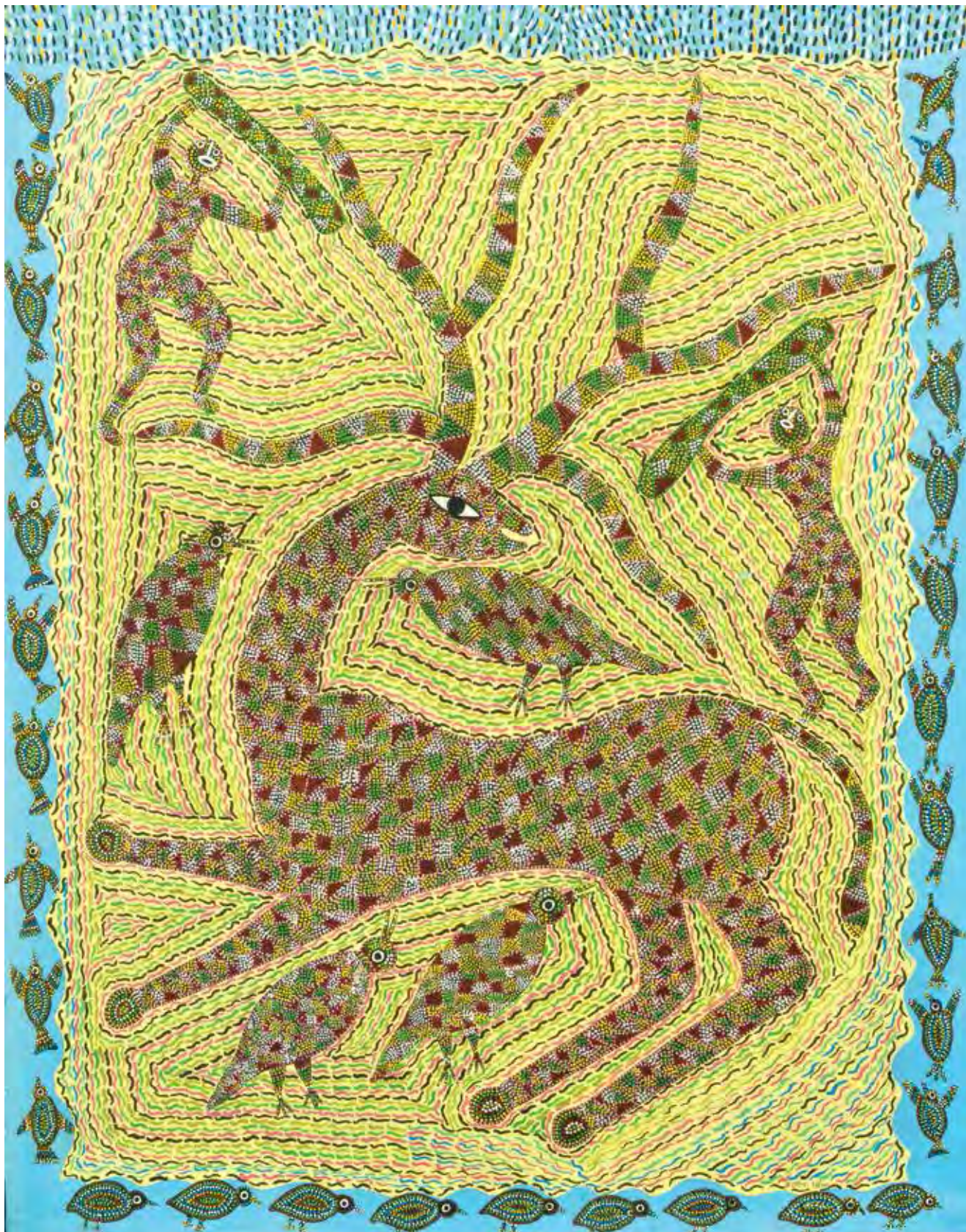
Facing page
Subhash Amliyar
Jai Jiv, 2013
Acrylic on canvas
35x25 in



Subhash Amliyar
Khatriji, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
26x36 in







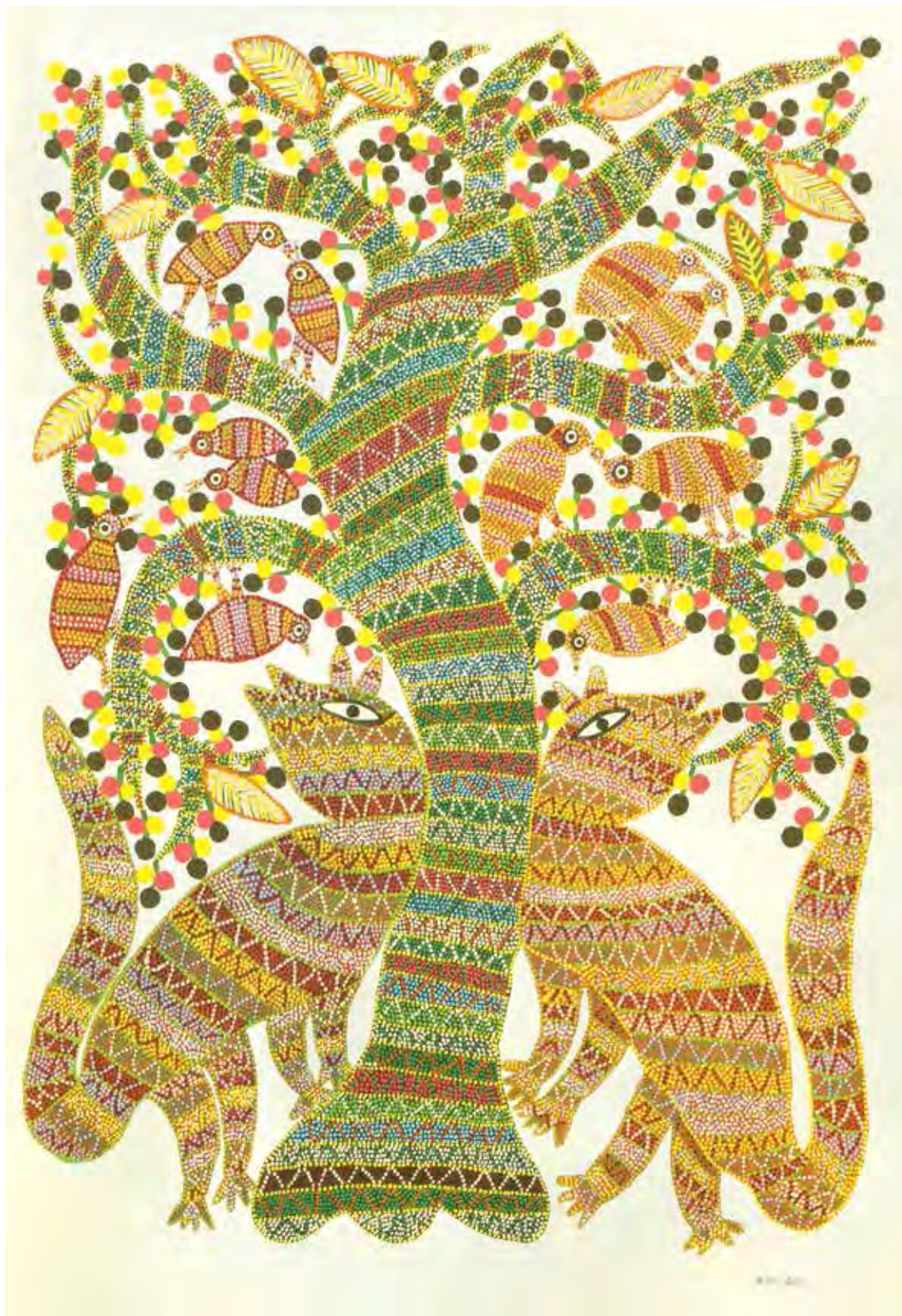
Sher Singh Bheel
Hiran, 2016
 Acrylic on canvas
 36x29 in

Facing page
 Sher Singh Bheel
Mor, 2016
 Acrylic on canvas
 37.5x24 in





Sher Singh Bheel
Naag Devta, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
35x28 in



Sher Singh Bheel
Umari, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
35x25 in

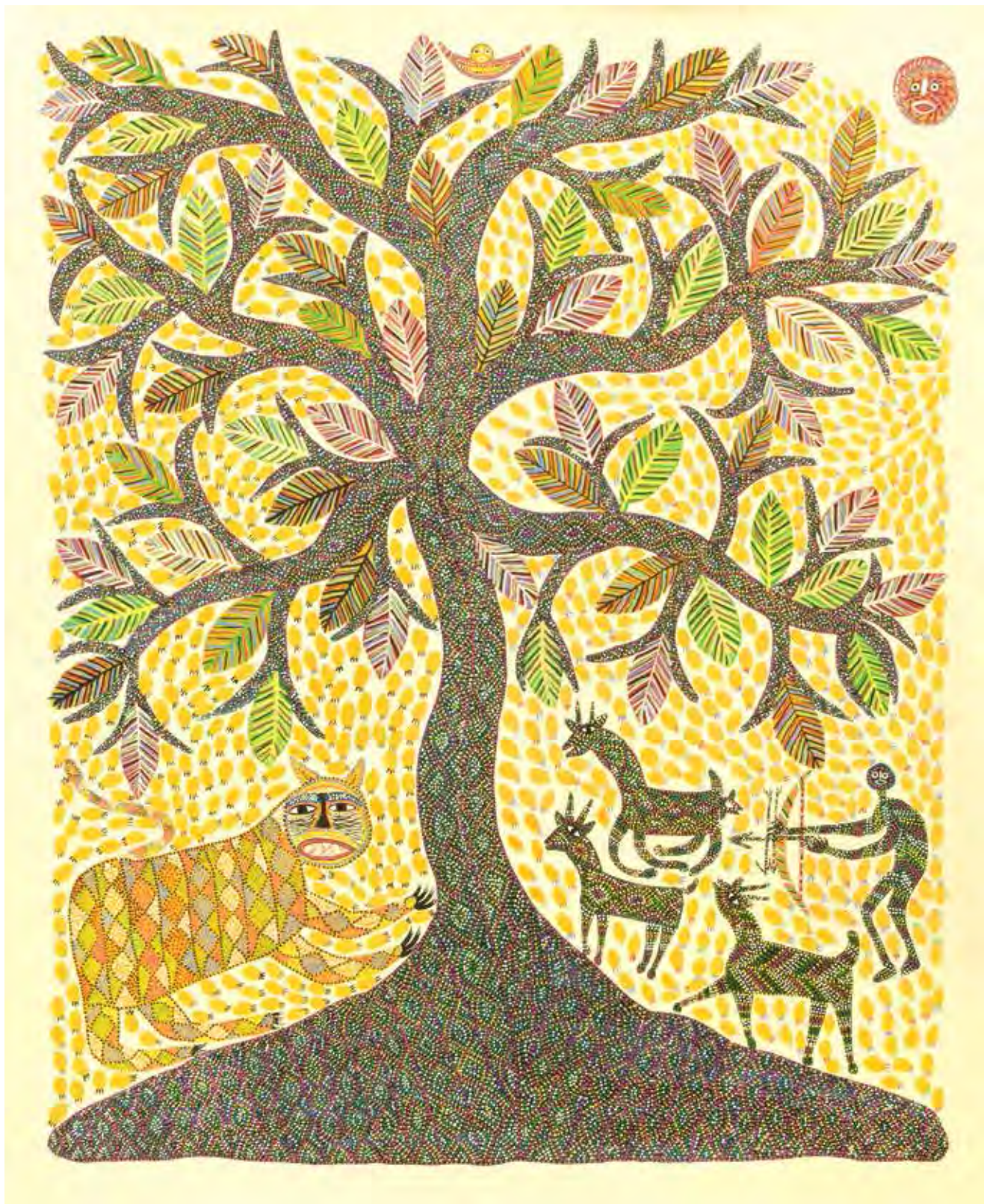


Sher Singh Bheel, *Baba Dev*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 36x28 in





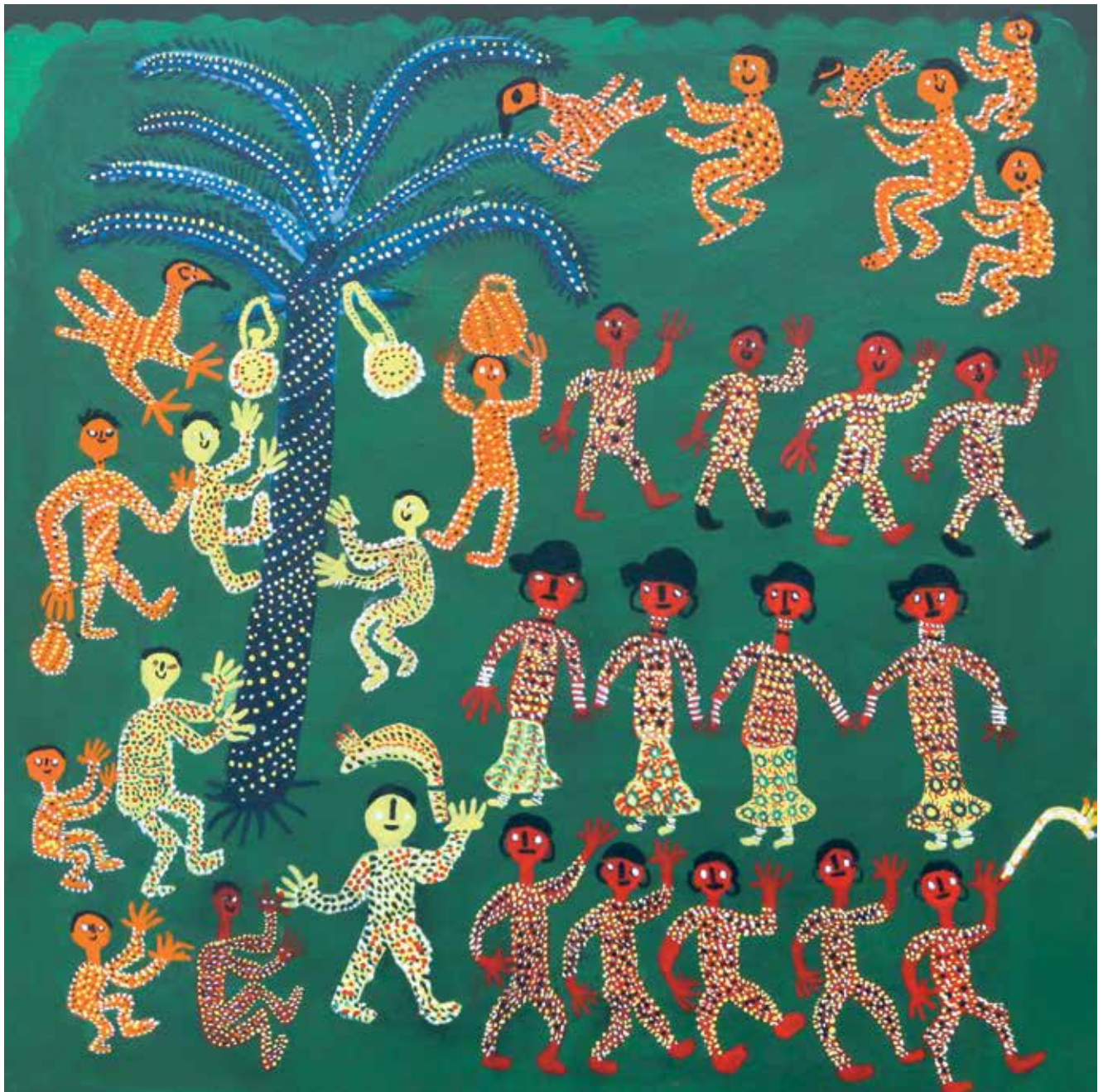
Sher Singh Bheel
Mahua, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
36x30 in



Sher Singh Bheel
Mahua ka Ped, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
43x35 in



Bhuri Bai
Gal Gadela, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
22x34 in



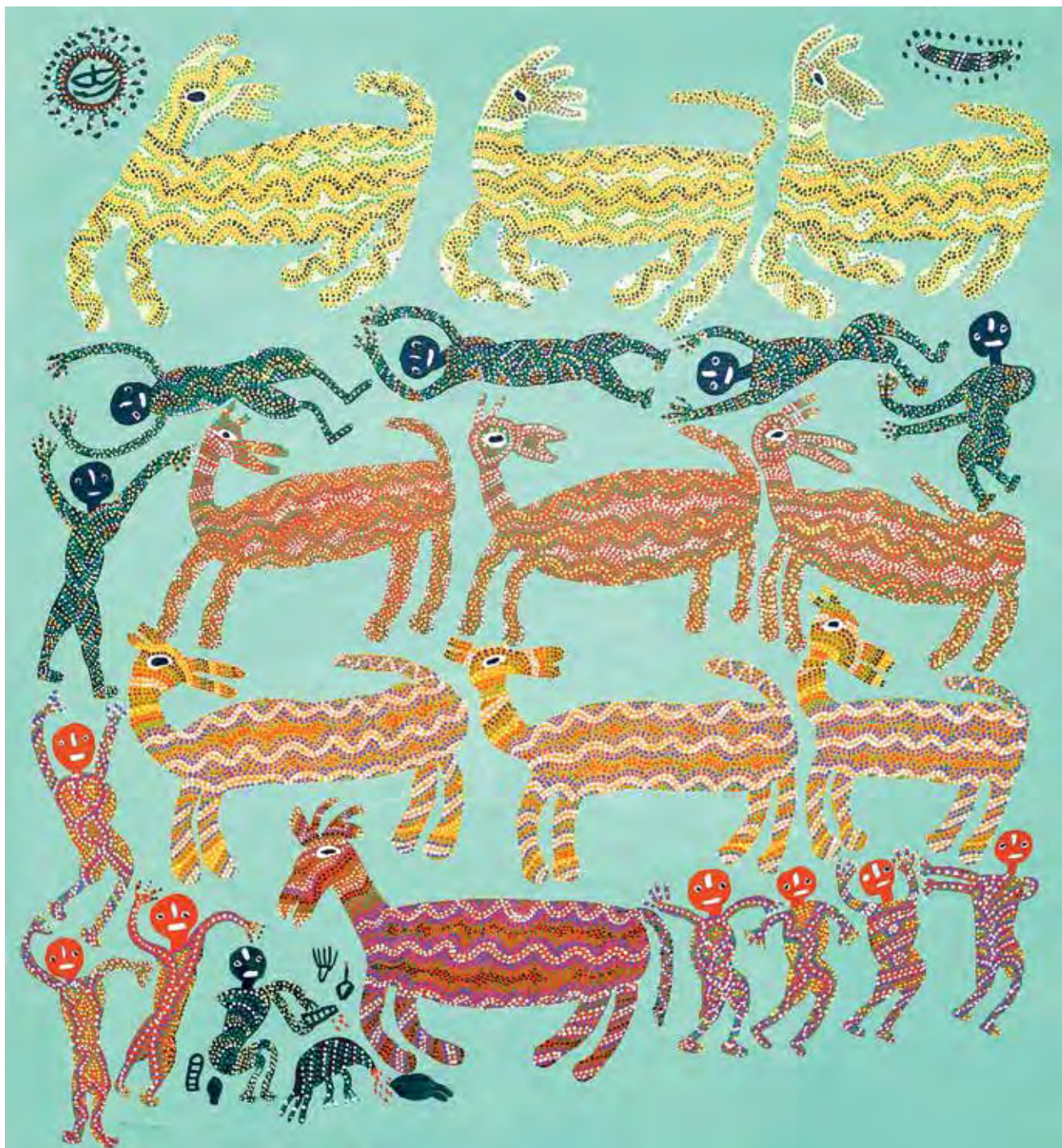
Bhuri Bai BB01
Mera Gaon, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
27x27 in



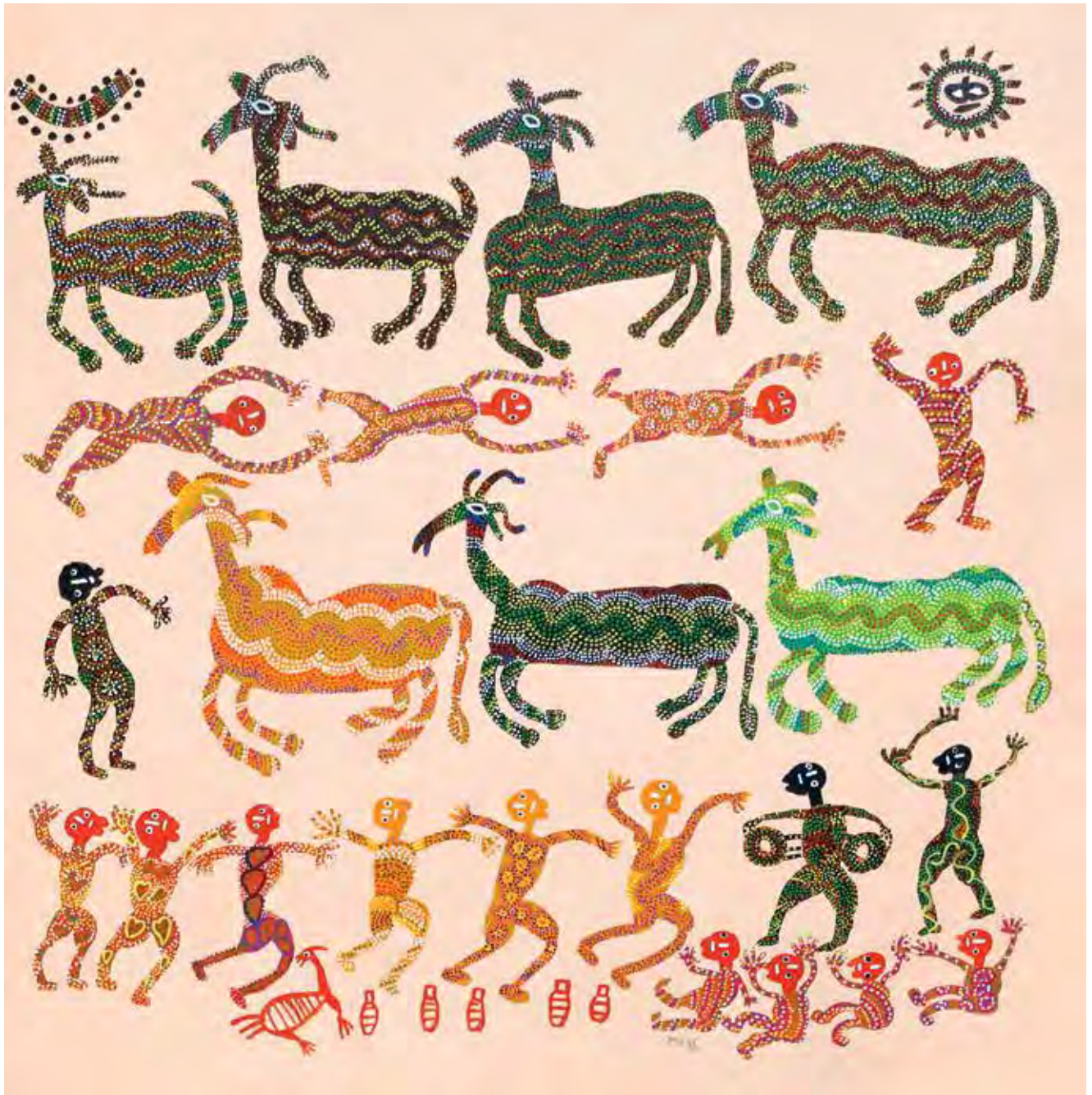
Bhuri Bai BB02
Gaon, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
34x32 in



Bhuri Bai BB03
Gal Vapsi, 2017
Acrylic on canvas
34x32 in



Gangu Bai
Gohari I, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
37x40 in



Gangu Bai
Gohari II, 2015
 Acrylic on canvas
 35x35 in

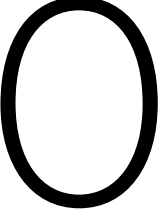


Gangu Bai
Gad Bapsi, 2010
 Acrylic on canvas
 37x33 in



Gangu Bai
Barasingha aur Pakhsiyaan, 2014
 Acrylic on canvas
 43 x 37 in

Signature strokes

 On a scorching summer day in Bhopal, walking with a lady with rustic innocence, through a dingy lane with shabby walls on both sides, where one house gazed another with brown imperturbable faces, I reached her house with dark rooms, where only sunlight came in through the front door. Offering me a glass of water the lady tried to make me comfortable. I stared at her kitchen and was amazed to see that she still cooks in earthen pots on a coal and wood fire. Spending time with Lado Bai, a Bheel artist in her home, I was transcended to the tranquil memories of my village holidays.

Under the growing situation of cultural contact and within the growing impinge of 'civilizational pressures', tribal art is experiencing a deadly blow. There has been a decline in the general popularity but the vastness of the form is undisputable. Madhya Pradesh is the heart of this art form, where it is still preserved and practiced.

To understand the essence of Bheel art I visited Bhopal. Interestingly, on my way to the guest house, the driver suggested art museums among the main tourist attractions. My aim was to understand the historical journey of this art form and see how it compares to Gond, Warli and Madhubani, which are surely more popular.

A stroll through the arcade of IGRMS is nothing short of walking through an entire hamlet inhabited by different tribes, disseminating imperatives of social cohesion- prevalent and homogenous in rural hamlets. The sanctity attached to natural resources – forests, flowers, leaves and farms with sculptures of men and women have been brought to life by artists like Gangu Bai, Bhuri Bai, Subhash Bheel, Ramesh Katara, Jambo Singad and many more. Their art works depict their ethnic narratives and cultural stories emanating from their daily lives. The theme of their artworks revolves around rituals like, *gal bapsi* (a thanksgiving ritual), *gadh gadhera* (a ritual to select bride-mate), *gai gohari* (cattle festival) along with Bhagoria (a pre-holi carnival) and Pithora.

Bheels are considered among the most primitive tribes in India. It is believed that Valmiki, who wrote the *Ramayana*, was also from a Bheel. As per experts and museologists Alirajpur, is considered as the original land of Bheels and they migrated to Jhabua in search of water and fertile lands.

The lives of Bheels centre around the wait and search for water. Bheels make pithora paintings on their walls to wade away hardships and pains. Dots are the signature stroke of Bheel paintings, influenced from 'rain drops' and 'maize', both integral for their survival.

In Madhya Pradesh Tribal Museum, there is an amalgamation of anthropological attribution and sociological significance of different cultures, customs and rituals of indigenous peoples such as the Gonds, Rathwas,

Bheel, Baiga, etc. Sculpted and styled by artists and craftsmen, hailing from remote corners of the state the museum is nothing short of a 'communication pool' propagating beliefs and traditions of tribal people. Bheel artists Lado Bai and Bhuri Bai are a part of this museum and discoveries of the visionary J. Swaminathan, whose contribution in tribal art is unparalleled. During his days in Bhopal, Swaminathan appreciated the skill of the tribal people, who worked in the museums as daily wagers and encouraged them to transfer images from wall to paper and canvas. Thus, Bheel artworks transformed from *mittichitra* (mud paintings) to paper and then canvas.

Interacting with Bheel artists closely and seeing their old artworks, it is evident that some of the artists are influenced by contemporary art and other tribal art forms. Ashok Mishra of Tribal Museum opined that the 'irony of society is the desire to live in urbanized spaces, but we want tribal people to remain in a 'cultural cage' while we are on a 'development' spree.'

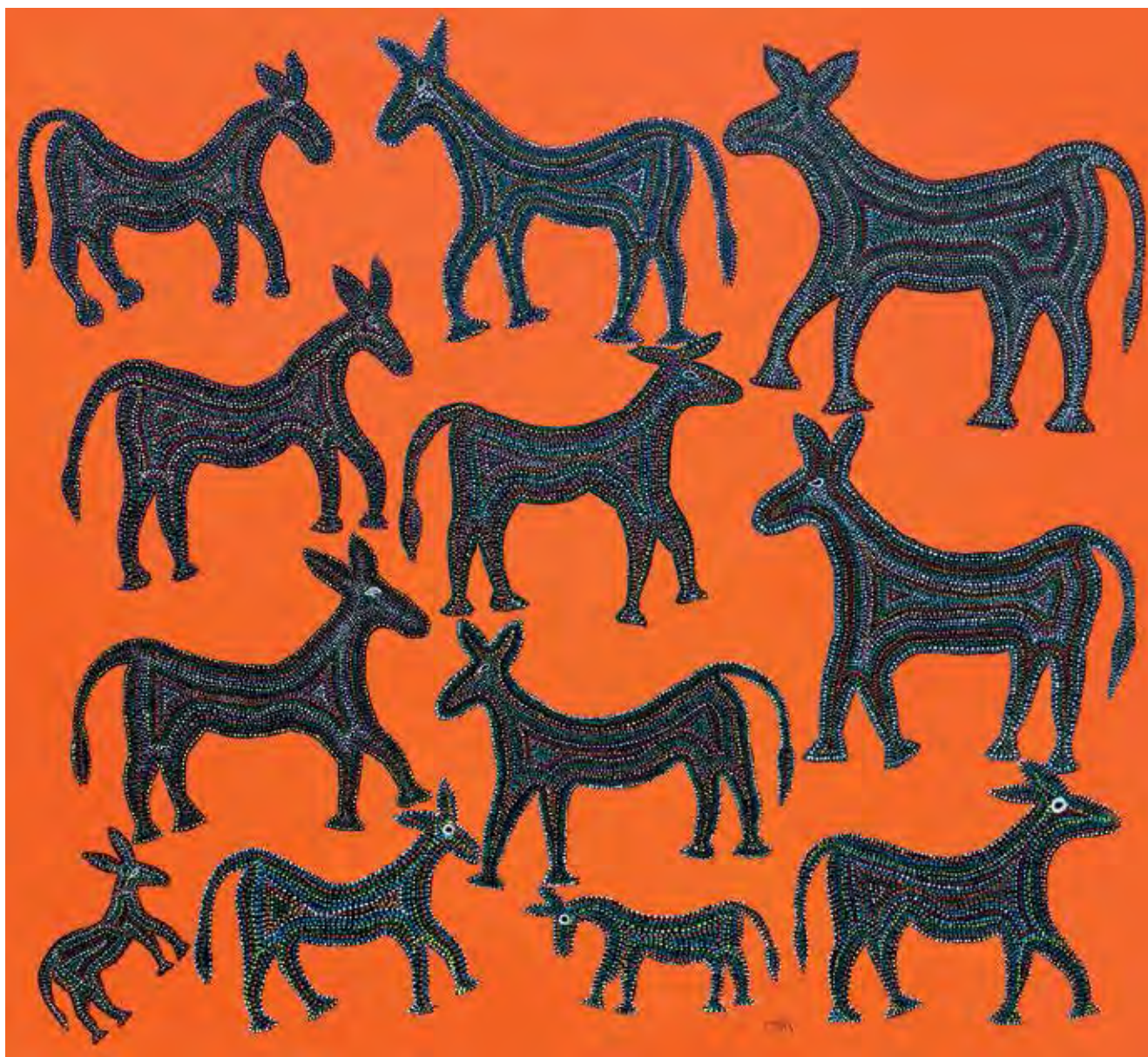
Story-telling is a strong element in Bheel art and artists depict various stories on a particular rituals. Devi Lal Patidar, Professor at Bharat Bhawan, said that 'Bheels are a reserved community and have historically suffered from issues like migration and dialectic problems. Now, there is great interest in their way of life, culture and art and many scholars are researching on them.'

Knowing their rituals and aesthetics one learns that their way of life is actually progressive and Bheel women have practised the right to choose their partners since time immemorial. Bheel artists, mostly women are getting international recognition for their art. Recently, a film, *We Make Image*, was made on the journey of the Bheel tribe through its art. Also, their works are being included in illustrated books.

It may be concluded that in the course of time society progressed but tribes like Bheel got dismantled. Once upon a time, they were hired by the Maharajas as warriors but at present they struggle to survive. To some extent their art practice becomes necessary for survival. In the current state, their skills are overshadowed by modern technology. More support to their art and culture would make the community more self sufficient and it would also be a step in the right direction to help to preserve this intangible part of our heritage.

Urmila Banu

Research Associate, Ojas Art, New Delhi



Lado Bai
Pithora, 2015,
Acrylic on canvas
38 x 40 in

About the artists

Bhuri Bai (b. 1961)

Bhuri Bai was born in Jher, Gujarat and got married in Madhya Pradesh. She is among the pioneering artists of the early generation and learnt her art from her mother, Jhaboo Bai. She is considered to be the senior-most artist in her generation and is referred to as *Bhuri Amma*. She works as an artist at IGRMS and is well known for her murals, some of which are a part of the permanent collection at IGRMS and Tribal Museum. Her works have been exhibited at institutions like IGNCa and Lalit Kala Akademi (Kerala). She has participated in numerous workshops and her works are a part of *Between Museum and Memory*, published by Tara Books, Chennai.

Gangu Bai (b. 1967)

Gangu Bai was born in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh. She learnt painting from her family while doing chores during festivals. She started painting on walls and floors in her childhood and since last fifteen years, she has been exploring painting on canvas. Gangu Bai works at the IGRMS, Bhopal and her artworks imbibe close relationship of Bhils with Nature along with their culture and rituals.

Gangu Bai's main motifs are *gatla*, *gal bapsi*, *gad bapsi* and *gohari*. When she paints the *gatlas*, as the memory pillars are called, she remembers her ancestors who are still around to protect her. With portraying *gal bapsi* in her paintings she recollects her awe when as a child she saw the ritual. She has participated in numerous workshops and exhibitions and her works are a part of *Between Museum and Memory*, published by Tara Books, Chennai.

Lado Bai (b. 1964)

Lado Bai is the Master Ojas Art Awardee, 2017. She belongs to the pioneering early group of artists of this genre and was among the first Bheel artists to have worked directly with J Swaminathan. She works as an artist at the Adivasi Lok Kala Academy in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. With the encouragement and support of the Indian modernist Jagdish Swaminathan she has developed a contemporary language of the traditional Bheel art form. Nature is the predominant theme of her works. Her art reflects the spirituality and animism of her community. Her artworks revolve around the animal kingdom and Bheel rituals and festivals and each of her canvases demonstrates an episode of a larger story from folklore. Her work is in the collection of Bharat Bhavan, Indira Gandhi Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal and has participated in numerous exhibitions and workshops.



Sher Singh (b. 1987)

Sher Singh was born in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh. He started learning the art at a young age of 7 from his mother Bhuri Bai of Jher, one of the pioneer contemporary Bheel artists.

In his painting, he depicts stories of the different rituals like Ghatlas, Gal Bapsi and Gal Gadera. He has developed a very unique colour palette. Instead of sticking to just tradition, Sher Singh incorporates his daily life into his painting. He is always searching for inspirations, stories which he turns into mesmerizing paintings. Recently, his works are featured in *We Make Images*, a film by Nina Sabnani, IDC, IIT, Bombay. He held a solo show of his works in 2016 at Nazar Art, Vadodara.

Subhash Amliyar (b. 1985)

Subhas Amliyar is the Protégé Ojas Art Awardee for 2017. He has been painting for the last 4 years and learnt from his mother Gangu Bai, an eminent Bheel artist. He works at the IGRMS, Bhopal.

Nature in an anomalous form is the prime inspiration for his artworks. Animals and birds are the important elements of his paintings. Apart from this he also works on the themes of *gatlas*, *gad bapsi* and *gal bapsi* which depicts the idiosyncratic rituals of the Bheel community. Each of his artworks is imbued with a pastoral quintessence. His book *Visit the Bhil Carnival*, published by Tara Books is based on his artwork on the Bhil carnival of Bhagoria.



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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.

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Cover:
Lado Bai
Pakshiyon ka Ghar, 2017
Acrylic on paper
11 x 14 in

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