



Rerouted Realities  
**Santosh Kumar Das**

OJAS  
ART





'My Solo Exhibition', 2012, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch

1st May 2012

# Rerouted Realities

## Santosh Kumar Das

Curated by Kathryn Myers





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# Santosh Kumar Das

Ojas Art Award was initiated in 2015 to recognise and honour the best indigenous (tribal and traditional) artists. In 2016, Madhubani-Mithila was the chosen genre and Santosh Kumar Das was felicitated as the Master Artist.

SKD, as I now refer to him, fascinated me — his life experiences were truly unique. Essentially, self-taught, he went to MSU, Baroda to pursue a degree in art and then decided to come back to his native village and pursue his own traditional style. Had he continued to stay in Baroda, his career may have had a different trajectory but he was sure of his decision to move back to Ranti.

In 2016 itself, we started the conversation about his solo show, and three years later it is happening! His artworks were spread between Ranti, Delhi and Mumbai and after many trips back and forth, we were able to collect a good body of work together. The process became faster after my visit to Ranti in early 2018.

Being a prolific artist, spontaneity and sensitivity are truly SKD's strengths – drawing right now, singing the next minute and narrating a story soon after. His artwork *Ojas* is an example of these qualities. All the elements in this artwork are from the gallery premises — Banyan Tree, Reclining Buddha, paintings displayed in the gallery, a sculpture by KS Radhakrishnan in the garden and the most special is his self-portrait, very sensitively interacting with the sculpture.

SKD's towering personality, gregarious laughter along with his almost theatrical story-telling makes him a true performance artist.

His perseverance is remarkable and he likes to work in a documentary style, narrating his stories by creating a series of multiple works. One of his most famous is the Gujarat series, created in 2002 that got him international fame and has been exhibited in various museums and institutions all over the world. His other prolific series are on Tantra, Krishna, Buddha, Monsoon and Lovers.

Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani holds a special place in his life. By creating a vibrant curriculum he has been able to impart contemporary Madhubani art training to hundreds of young students and tried to keep them away from falling in the trap of copy-work.

Technically a mid-career artist, *Rerouted Realities* is his first true solo show, which adds a greater responsibility for all of us at Ojas Art. Hopefully, this exhibition will mark the beginning of a glorious and successful innings ahead.

Anubhav R Nath

Director, Ojas Art

New Delhi

January, 2019



Ojas, 2016, Ink on paper, 30 x 48 inch

# Of magical and mythical worlds

I come to this reflection on the work of Santosh Kumar Das as a painter and professor of studio art for over three decades. Even so, I am often at a loss for words when encountering such arresting works of art. While relishing the visual elation of art that defies deconstruction, with an equally strong desire I long to decode the strategies, secrets, and subterfuge in works of such visionary ingenuity. It is with such opposing impulses that I respectfully approach Santosh Kumar Das, whose paintings I first saw not in India but in the United States, in 2005, when works from his powerful “Gujarat Series” appeared in the Asia Society’s groundbreaking “Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India” exhibition in New York.<sup>1</sup>

In February of 2002, a Fulbright Fellowship brought me to Ahmedabad as a visiting artist at the National Institute of Design. Immersed in their superb library, the intensifying acrid air quality didn’t unduly alarm me until I was politely informed that my lecture was cancelled as the city was burning. Thus commenced weeks of horrific communal riots throughout Gujarat, where over 1000 people were killed and countless more injured. As the rest of my Fulbright program progressed far from Gujarat, in Tamil Nadu, the memory of that time began to fade and fear was supplanted by the deep and lasting bonds I forged with Indian art, culture, and, most importantly, individuals. Thus, when I encountered Santosh Kumar Das’s images from the “Gujarat Series” in New York that day, I experienced a startling sense of recognition that perhaps had greater resonance for being out of context. A bridge and a bond was created not only to that indelible experience in Ahmedabad but also to my first revelatory encounters with Indian indigenous art, which I had neglected as I focused on and followed the rapidly multiplying paths of contemporary urban art. Although “Edge of Desire” included over forty artists, my own artistic tastes and subjectivities drew me to the strong graphic presence of Santosh’s exquisitely refined works. Despite the solemnity of the subject, the work radiated an uncanny beauty and emanation of light that characterizes so much of his work which more typically recounts the delights of life rather than despair. Santosh credits the twenty-three works, created early in his career while searching to define his own identity within the Mithila tradition, as a crucial learning experience that opened him up to a more unlimited range of subject-matter.

Santosh’s achievements, as an exceptionally versatile contemporary artist rooted in tradition, can be best understood and appreciated in the context of the artistic atmosphere he experienced at his family home in the village of Ranti. Mithila painting is named for a large region in northern Bihar that extends to what is now southern Nepal. This art practice is also often commonly known as Madhubani, for the town near to where the greatest concentration of artists who practice it live. Traditionally painted on walls by women, the most common form of traditional Mithila paintings depicted elaborate and highly symbolic images made for marriage rituals. Also included in the early Mithila repertoire were Hindu deities, scenes from the epics, and aquatic imagery as metaphors for fertility. Although now paintings are often made on exterior walls and in public spaces, traditional Mithila works were created on the more intimate interior walls of homes. For this reason, this art practice was not known to a wider public until a young British official, William G. Archer, found the sumptuously painted walls of destroyed houses following a devastating earthquake in 1934. Returning six years later, Archer and his wife Mildred meticulously documented paintings on homes that had been rebuilt. The transition



from walls to paper came primarily after independence, in 1947, when the Indian government launched development projects to promote and market culture, one of its strategies to help alleviate poverty. The use of paper gained more momentum in the 1960s, after a severe drought in an effort to create more patronage through a famine relief project. As painting on paper ultimately helped record and preserve a repertoire of traditional themes, it also opened up, particularly for women working in this traditionally matrilineal medium, untapped reservoirs of creativity and individuality, expressed through a greater breadth of subject matter inclusive of everyday life, autobiography, and women's issues. However liberating this might have been for some, it must have also taken an act of courage and resolve to depart from the traditional themes that were so fundamental to cultural identity, and still deploy effectively the unique Mithila style to other subject-matter and surfaces without losing potency and ritual significance.

Although as a male artist, Santosh Kumar Das represents a more recent trajectory of Mithila art practice, his innovative work derives from a cultural history and family environment steeped in tradition. Das is the most common surname for the Kayastha caste who practice the exquisite linear form of Mithila art, *kachani*, traditionally made through fine closely-spaced marks in black and red inks. Santosh learned how to paint by observing the women in his household in the village of Ranti: his mother Savitri Devi made elaborate marriage and domestic ritual paintings on the floors of his home, and his aunts Karpoori Devi and Mahasundari Devi were painters, as were their daughters-in law. If that were not enough inspiration under one roof, the household servant Dulari Devi, took up painting and has now become recognized as one of the region's leading artists. Although Santosh was drawing since he was a child, entranced by familiar illustrations of Indian deities seen in popular calendar art and cinema posters, in the 1970s, immersed in this artistic atmosphere he began a more dedicated painting practice in the Mithila style. Continuing the collaborative creative atmosphere in his household to this day, his nephew Shantanu Das, and Shantanu's wife, painter Mahalaxmi Karn, who studied with Santosh, regularly consult with him about ideas and visual strategies.<sup>ii</sup>



Saraswati and Landscape, 2004  
Ink and Acrylic on paper, 22 x 15 inch

Additional influences and experiences entered Santosh's work through an unusual route for a rural artist - five years of study at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Although he honed his drawing skills there, he claims to have felt limited in what he could learn because he was not prepared to understand the work he saw in Baroda. Fellow students introduced him to the work of western artists such as Paul Klee, Joan Miró, or Pablo Picasso, and he enjoyed interactions with esteemed Indian artists who visited to Baroda such as the painters Manjit Bawa

and Jagdish Swaminathan. Faculty such as the noted painter Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Santosh describes as a wonderful catalyst who encouraged students to learn from different individuals and sources. Indeed Santosh attributes his growth as an individual to the joyful generous fraternal environment he experienced in Baroda. Upon returning to Ranti, he decided to “return to the roots he had known so well and so clearly.” Eventually he felt dissatisfied with his painting and looked for inspiration to the work of celebrated Mithila artist Ganga Devi, describing being “besotted by her austere divine line.” After ten years of drawing “extensively and exhaustively” he felt that it no longer made sense to create works in the traditional Mithila idiom and in 2000 began to develop an understanding of his own technique and potential - creating his own “school and style” of Mithila art that he felt reflected a different approach.

While he credits the real strength of Mithila art as a “language,” particularly defined by its “powerful line,” a glimpse into his extensive sketchbooks provides insights of how he translates his insightful and imaginative observations and thought process to both individual images and extended series. Fittingly, Santosh was the first teacher at the newly created Mithila School of Art in Madhubani where he taught for many years before returning full-time to his own work.<sup>iii</sup>

For practical reasons of scale and portability, some Mithila art is now created on canvas, but it is the material quality of ink on paper that I find most compelling in Santosh’s work. Sometimes his line seems to slide over the smooth paper surface and at other times feels more etched and carved. Working directly, without first sketching out such complex compositions, must be an act of courage where “accidents” are cleverly incorporated and likely take some works in uncharted directions. Although his monochromatic images technically have just two tones — black and white, or red and white — the alignment of marks placed in close proximity generate a seemingly limitlessly inventive range of tones, textures, forms and objects. The most incidental details are lavished with the same devotion as his images of the divine. While Santosh is truly a master of the monochromatic palette, the introduction of color both organizes and complicates his compositions. While a mirage of colorful marks and shapes moving in multiple directions can feel like camouflage, strategically placed color accents provide a sense of focus. Hue, tonality and saturation used in large velvety flats of color, paired with strategically placed tangencies and overlays creates a spatial ambiguity that can at times feel quite dizzying.

Santosh’s design sensibility might be characterized by extremes of excess and restraint, intention and intuition. While some images embrace the stylistic conventions of Mithila art, his work is also singular in how it breaks with convention. For instance, rather the densely marked page typical of much Mithila art, Santosh also makes ample use of deliberately positioned voids - white, black, or a luscious color. One recurring way Santosh organizes space is through having figures, objects and patterns float in the milky space of the page. One such example is “Ojas,” a witty self-portrait where Santosh encounters works of art in the gallery, sometimes making cameo appearances that are amusing to identify, in an “anti-gravity” space. It is interesting to imagine some of these images as slowly moving animated light boxes or magic lanterns whose relationships might be reconstrued through chance abutment and overlay. Another common compositional strategy Santosh often uses can be seen in images such as “Saraswati and Landscape,” as well as works from the marvelous “Krishna” series where every portion of the page is interlocked in an intricate visual puzzle that requires some time to fully comprehend. In groups of curious “mirrored” images such as several on the theme “Flying in Love,” repetitive

forms and patterns create a vortex between figures suggesting the weightlessness of swirling passion. Likewise, the charged space between two “Brooding Men” draws attention to subtly similar gestures and barely bemused expressions. Here, meditating humans and birds frozen in motion elicit a deep state of suspended reality. The use of an active negative space also occurs between pairs of devotional figures from Hindu mythology where the white of the page serves as both figure and ground. The elegant juncture of milky arms in “Radha Krishna” puncture space while projecting forward a disproportionately large bird and flowering vines, creating a spatial inversion. Santosh’s frequent use of the traditional Mithila method of abbreviation in his figures - a profile head with one eye visible – allows these reductive symbolic forms to pair with elaborately embellished details creating alternating currents of visual energy.

With the stage set by Santosh’s refined and often radical visual vocabulary, real, imagined and mythological narratives unfold. A significant body of ongoing work for which he holds great affection is his “Krishna Series” which he began after returning to his creative practice full-time in 2008 following many years of teaching. Santosh describes becoming lost in these images, in “an immersive state of calmness and emptiness.” His love of Krishna imagery began during his childhood when he was mesmerized by posters and prints that he copied endlessly and thus internalized. As a student in Baroda he was exposed to classical dance forms such as Kathak and realized that Krishna was a major theme. While for Santosh, Krishna is primarily the great dancer and musician, over time, other sides of Krishna began to emerge in his imagery as “prankster, lover, philosopher, diplomat.” In these exquisite and often elaborately composed retellings of familiar episodes, Santosh unleashes a full range of splendid color and pattern. The diversity of images in this series provide not only striking points of comparison and contrast, but brilliantly showcase his versatile and tireless creative ingenuity.

The classic image of Krishna playing his flute offers Santosh a breathtaking range of opportunities to portray the mesmerizing quality of music. In several images of a forwardfacing Krishna with an internalized gaze, the viewer is positioned as devotee while Krishna is lost in his music. In others, Krishna is in profile, allowing us to witness his entrancement from afar. In one particularly arresting image, a rich black void frames a red radius of flowers where Krishna occupies the still center of a centrifugal force of sound. In another combining both black ink and color, Krishna’s “brain” appears to reveal a magnified vision of the world his sound permeates. However - considering the multiple perspectives and optical illusions Santosh often teases his viewers with, by a shift in point of view one can also see this image as Krishna by the edge of a river, perhaps at “the hour of cowdust” where bearded sages, cow herders, animals, birds and trees luxuriate in his music. In yet another more curious image, two flute players, one tiny and one large – perhaps as devotee and deity - are fused together on either ends of a red heart-shaped form filled with the leaves of a giant tree. The smaller figure is completely lifted off the ground while on the other side of the tree trunk Krishna leans elegantly, a luxurious stole of peacock feathers cascading down his side. In perhaps the most alluringly strange image of the series, Krishna is clothed in camouflage-like sharply angled shapes with his head a cubist profile adorned by green spirals. This unusual piece in its entirety resembles an elaborate surreal mosaic that advances Santosh’s artistic range into increasingly innovative territory.

The story of Krishna subduing the writhing snake demon Kaliya offers Santosh optimum opportunity to orchestrate a full symphony of shape, pattern and color. In one image Krishna

stands on the snake who frames his body, its head twisting up to gaze at him across a luminous peach colored void while the tail appears behind him in a field of saturated green. In contrast to these alternating color flats, the rest of the composition of densely filled water and lotuses is patterned like a patchwork crazy quilt. In an even more visually baroque “mirrored” Krishna, both deity and naga wear a partial skin of water, while alternating colors and patterns suggest a dream-like passage of time or seasons. Compared to the heightened nearly psychedelic visual density of these particular images, others in the series, by contrast, are strikingly austere with a haunting iconic presence.

Several images in the Krishna series portray different episodes in the fraught relationship between Radha and Krishna from the Gita Govinda. In one, Krishna dances for Radha in a field of golden yellow, while his other hand reveals a sudden opening of blue, like the lifting of a stage curtain. Using broad passages of flattened saturated color, this highly theatrical image evokes the miniature painting tradition that the story is so associated with. Appropriately in some images, with a bit of characteristic humor and perhaps as a humbling act of devotion, Santosh portrays himself in the act of painting a larger-than-life Krishna, a green and red parrot balanced on his flute. The “Krishna Series” has clearly offered Santosh continued gratification in revisiting and reinventing familiar stories and images which is a considerable challenge based on the multitude of Krishna images that already exist in so many forms of Indian art. His contribution to the evolving and still relevant mythology of Krishna in this distinctive series is perhaps the best evidence of the replenishing nature of true creative devotion.

The ordinary and the accidental are also magical mythical worlds in Santosh’s hands. In an unusual red-ink series featuring farmers and fisherman, he observes and imagines a world where farmers cultivate vertical fields and men wrestle giant fish through a buzzing energy of alternating marks and patterns. The beautifully minimal “Monsoon Series,” with its creamy expanses of white paper, was inspired by his encounter with a sudden lashing storm in Gandhinagar. Here he repeats just a few essential elements: a dhoti clad Brahmin trying to maintain control over an ungainly umbrella, a puddle and/or goat, and piercing rain that sometimes lifts the figure completely off the ground. A few incidental but skillfully attended to details provide particular delight – prayer beads, *Rudraksha*, and curlicue tufts of hair, Sikha, flying askew. Together they create a snappy sense of motion that enhance the humorous portrayal of a futile struggle with the elements.

A centerpiece of this exhibition are two breathtaking panoramas, “The Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj I and II.” Created in 1999, they are being seen in this exhibition for the first time. While in other extended works such as the “Gujarat Series,” a story is told through individual frames or chapters, here the story unfolds as an expansive panorama. The images resemble early Mithila murals as they extended across and up the wall, as well as other forms of Indian narrative art that make use of multiple tiers and registers to relay elaborate visual narrations. Rather than delineating frames with decorative borders, a device used in some traditional works, Santosh makes use of functional elements such as a meandering pathway dividing walking figures above from those sitting below or figures whose feet hover just above the heads of those below. In the second panel, the level of visual complexity increases as three tiers of imagery often seem to spill from their frames. Unlike the more familiar mythology of much of Santosh’s works like the “Krishna Series,” the story of Hansraj and Bachharaj is a more uncommon and regional tale

Santosh learned from his grandmother. Thought to have originated from the southern plains of Nepal close to Bihar, it makes sense that the story might have migrated across the border. An elaborate parable of good, evil, retribution and redemption, at times recalling the Ramayana, the story evolves from two related events - the death of baby sparrows orphaned by their dead mother and killed by an evil stepmother, and princely brothers Hansraj and Bachharaj who befall a similar fate of abandonment and treachery. Fortunately avoiding slaughter and surviving difficult conditions in the jungle, they are eventually found and raised by a kindly flower-seller. Through many twists and turns in the story, the princes are returned to their father, the evil stepmother is justly punished, and the dead mother returns to the family in the form of a bamboo flute. Santosh is necessarily selective of what episodes to illustrate in such an elaborately magical story, but once the tale is understood, it's a true delight to see how he orchestrates this vast panorama by selecting, translating, and linking individual scenes. In a large continuous narrative of such density and complexity, Santosh is characteristically adept at positioning and alternating clusters of images and space to provide clarity, visual rhythm and pacing.

Whether inspired by the world around him or the domain of religious iconography and myth, Santosh Kumar Das reimagines and reroutes conventional and mythical realities. On a path that began with his cultural and familial inheritance of traditional forms, he first identified what was essential to Mithila art - its language of line - and from there developed his own distinctive dialect, timbre and tone. Like many individuals who leave home and return transformed, through his vision, ambition and expansive spirit, rooted in, but not bound by tradition, Santosh Kumar Das exemplifies how to live as an artist in the world.

### **Kathryn Myers**

Professor of Art

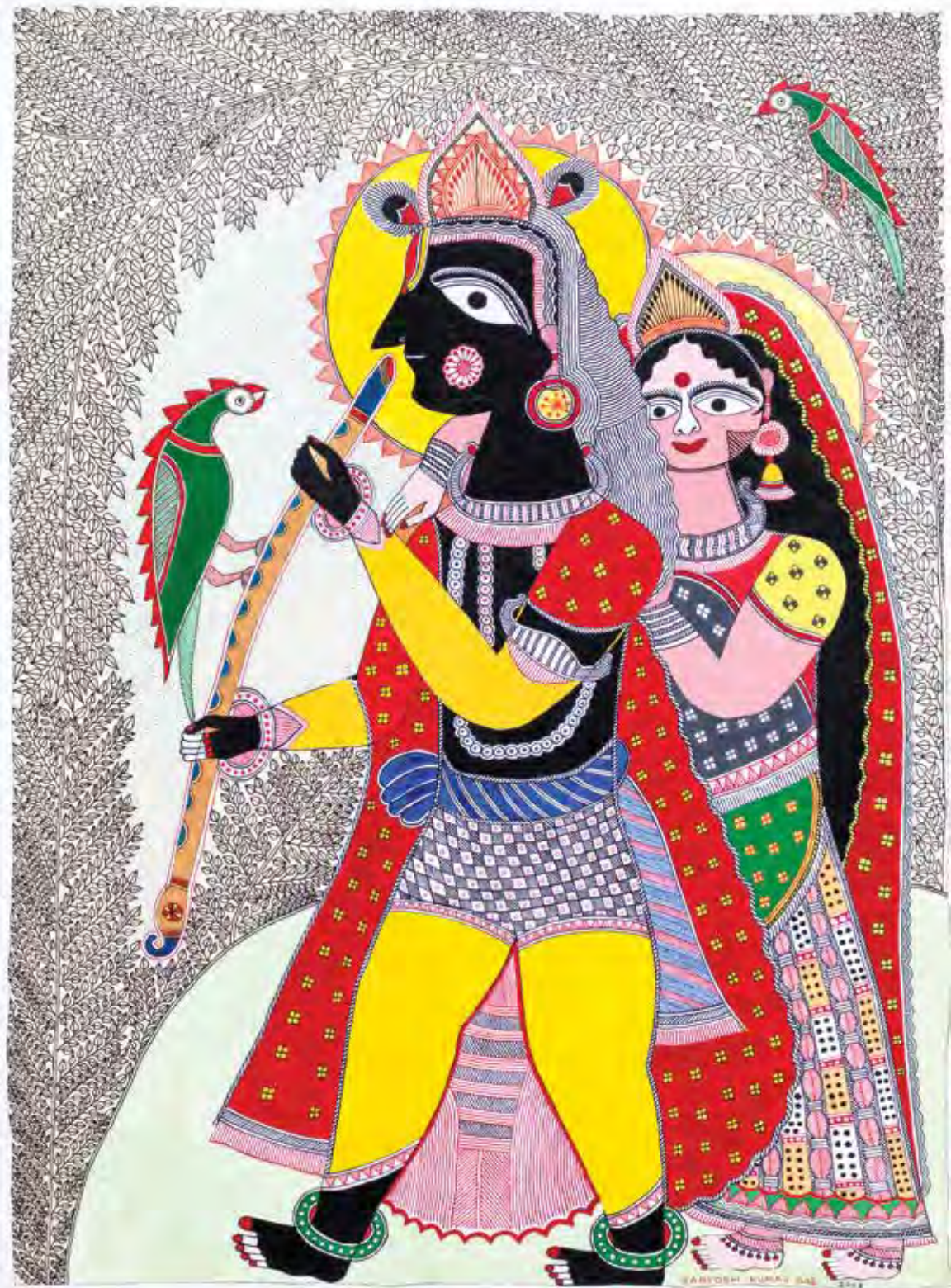
The University of Connecticut

*Kathryn Myers is painter and Professor of Art at the University of Connecticut and was a Fulbright scholar to India in 2002 and 2011. Her video series, Regarding India, features interviews by contemporary Indian artists, including Santosh Kumar Das who is the first indigenous artist in the series.*

- i "Edge of Desire, Recent Art in India," curated by Chaitanya Sambrani, was at the Asia Society Museum in New York March 1 – June 15, 2005.
- ii For information about the origins of Mithila art and Santosh's family background I am grateful to numerous sources, most significantly "Santosh Kumar Das, The Gujarat Series" an Introduction, Kamala Visweswaran. The South Asia Institute, The University of Texas at Austin, 2006, and "Mithila Painting, The Evolution of an Art Form, David Szanton and Malani Bakshi, Ethnic Arts Foundation, PinkMango, L.L.C, 2007.
- iii Many phrases in quotes and other insights have come from a video interview made with Santosh in 2014 for my series Regarding India as well as questions posed to Santosh for this text.



*Krishna and Gopi*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna Radha*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna-Govardhan*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x30 inch





*Krishna and Kaliya*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 14.5 x 22 inch



*Krishna Dancer*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x30 inch



*Krishna Plays with Kaliya*, Acrylic and ink on paper, 14.5 x22 inch



*Krishna Blue*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna Red*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch

# Keeping art traditions alive

I came to know Mithila Wall paintings around 1960-61 through a small publication on Indian folk art written by a British Art scholar named William G. Archer.

Professor K.G Subramanyan had shown me some drawings or photographs of drawings that were made by painter Haku Shah - an ex-student of Prof. Subramanyan. Shah had gone to Madhubani on an assignment and had copied those drawings. Until then, I had never seen such beautiful and eloquent use of lines. I was mesmerized by the various kinds of textures and tonalities it created. Since then, such lines as used by Madhubani artists have influenced my visual vocabulary.

In 1969, there was a drought in Bihar. Shrimati Pupul Jayakar, the then head of the Handloom Board and a personal friend of Mrs. Indira Gandhi convinced artist's associated with the Handloom board to go to Mithila.

Mithila women already knew how to draw on paper, although traditionally their main forte is to draw on walls.

The handloom board supplied them with good quality paper and other art materials, and these drawings on paper were exhibited and sold at emporiums in metropolitan cities, leading to its popularity and survival.

Such government initiatives have worked positively. More or less in the same manner, when another employee of the handloom board had become familiar with Warli in the village of Ganjaad in Maharashtra where he found a man named Jivya Soma Mhashe. He convinced Jivya to make traditional forms of the Warli wall painting on paper. Jivya agreed even though such traditional art practices were considered to be "Women's Job." Drawings that Jivya made on paper were exhibited by Chemould Art Gallery in Mumbai.

Since then, Warli art forms have also become popular. Fortunately commercial success didn't disturb the tradition, rather it encouraged more men to practice this "Women's art".

Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal is another positive consequence of government's initiative. Shri. Ashok Vajpayee, a poet and art critic in his own right was then Cultural Secretary for Madhya-Pradesh Government. In my opinion, it was mainly his vision and initiative that India got such an art centre. Bharat Bhavan brought together the practitioners of visual arts, literature, theatre and music from all over India.

Furthermore, late artist Jagdish Swaminathan was appointed head of "Roopankar" (Plastic art) section department of Bharat Bhavan where he assembled an excellent collection of tribal and rural art alongside contemporary urban art.

Swaminathan ensured that all the art camps that were organized at Bharat Bhavan had contemporary urban practitioners who interacted and collaborated with rural and tribal artists. Swaminathan believed that rural and tribal arts forms were an integral part of Contemporary Indian Art and did not see them as "ethnic" art forms.



Images courtesy © Jyoti Bhatt, 1977

Yet, Government interventions have not always been successful or beneficial and have sometimes caused adverse ramifications.

Although I have recorded many insensitive and unimaginative Government interventions in my diaries, which I do not consider necessary to list here.

**Jyoti Bhatt**

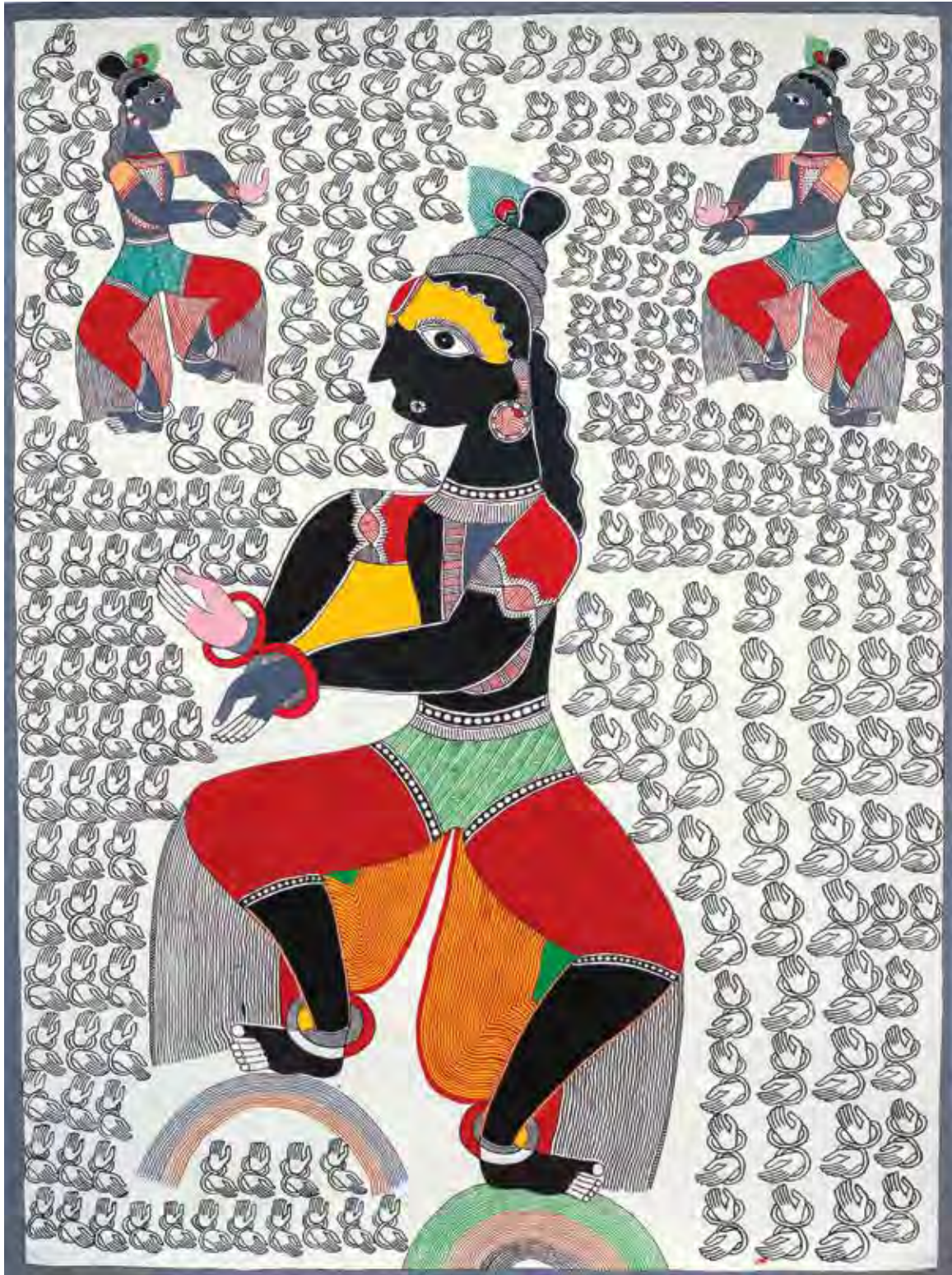
Vadodra, November 2018

*Jyoti Bhatt is an Indian artist best known for his modernist work in painting and printmaking and also his photographic documentation of rural Indian culture.*



*Krishna kills Bakasura, 2008*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch





*Krishna as a Dancer*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna and Balram, 2008*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Dancing Krishna*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch





Facing page:  
*Krishna and Me I*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 14.5 x 22 inch

Above:  
*Krishna Plays the Flute*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Birth of Krishna, 2007*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x30 inch

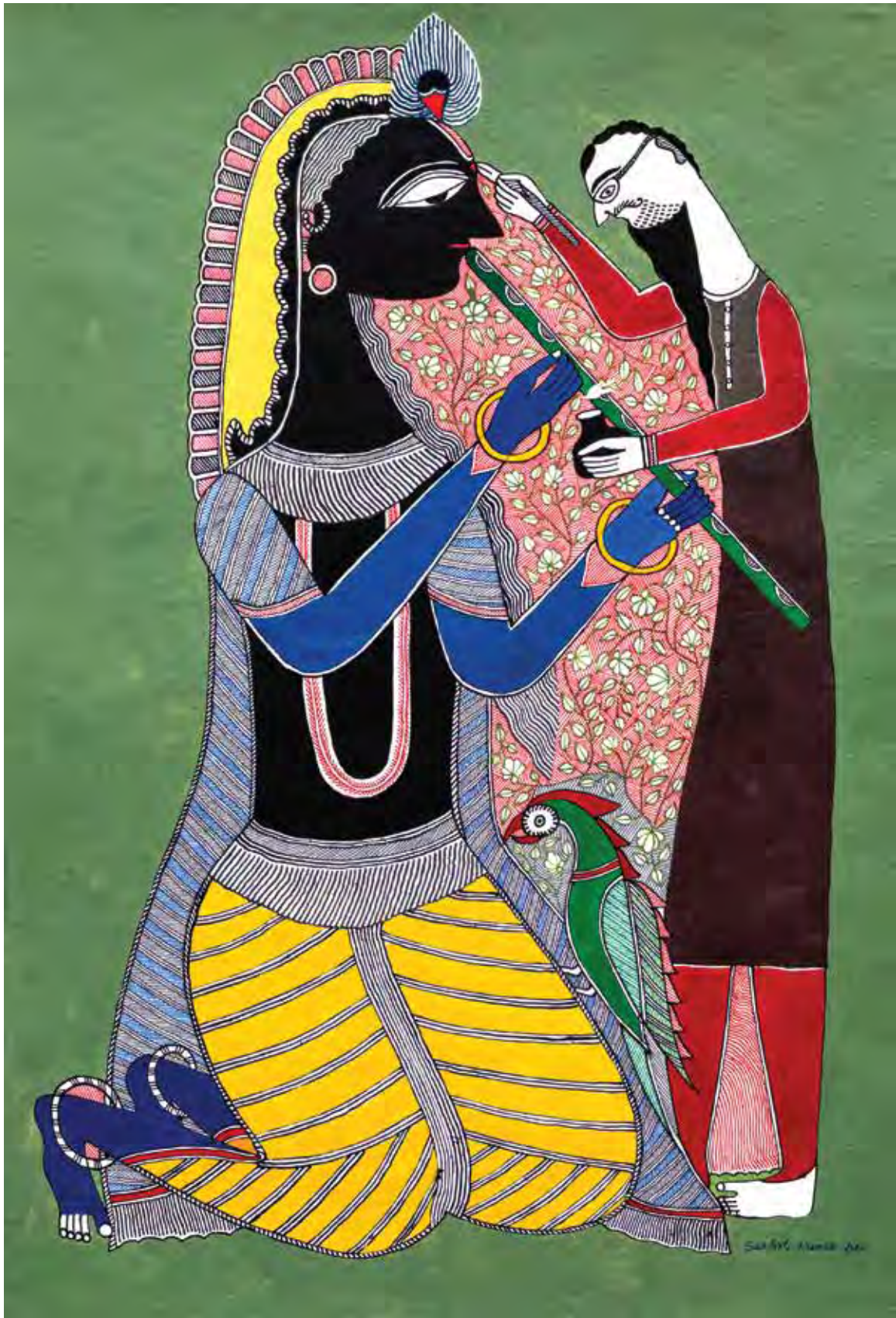


*Krishna and Gopis*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch

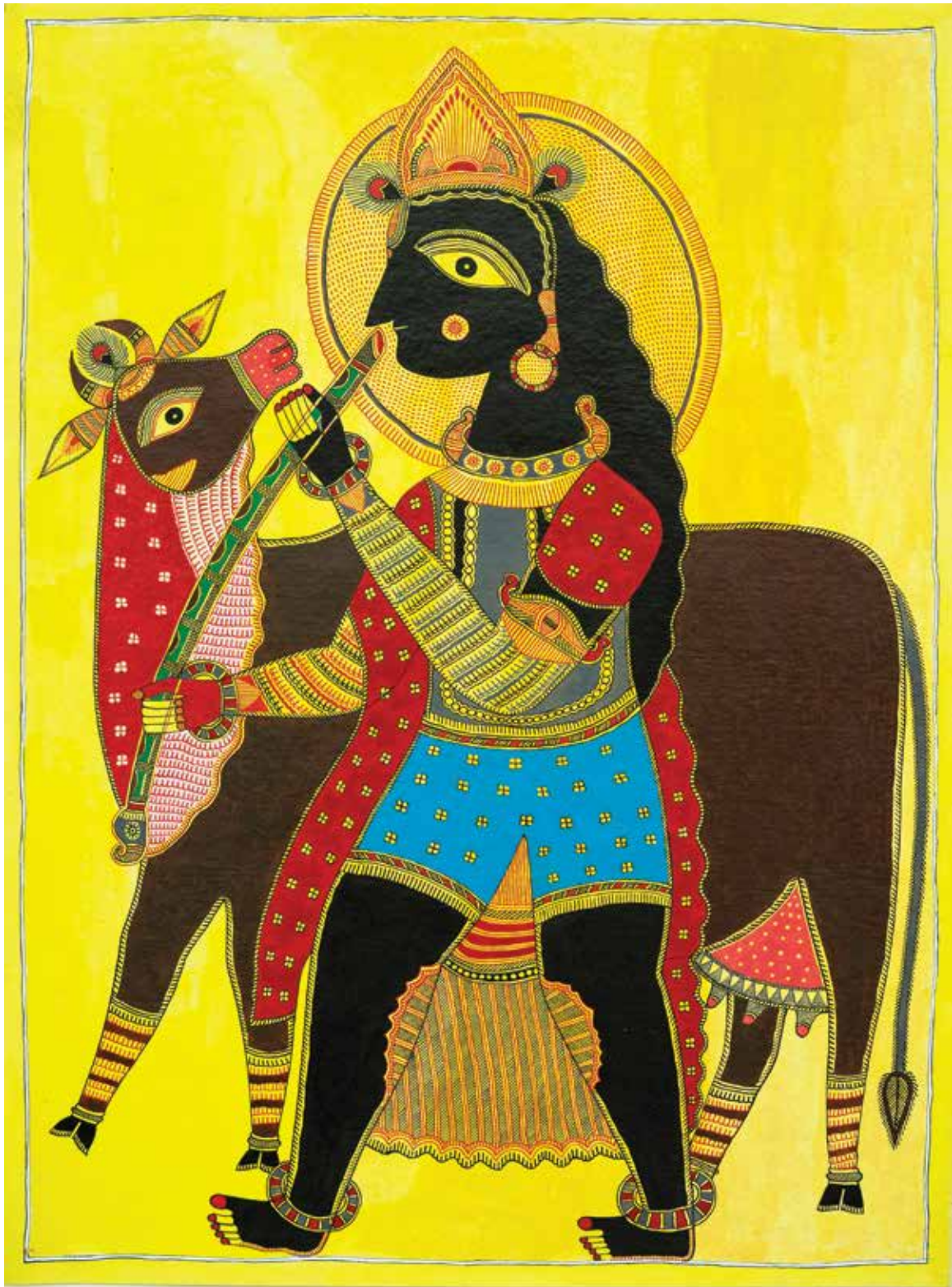


*Krishna and Me III*, Acrylic and ink on paper, 14.5 x 22 inch

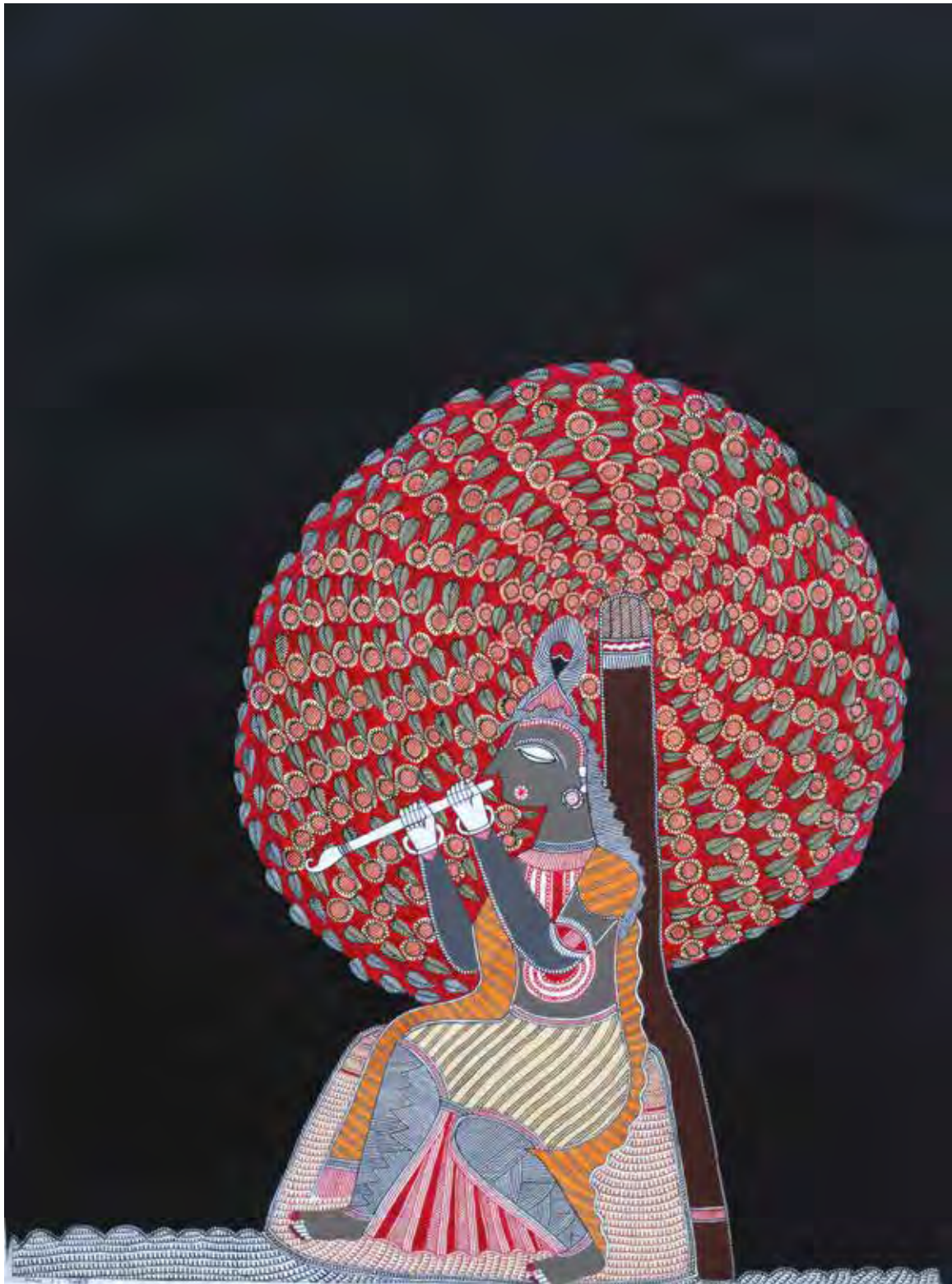




*Krishna and Me II*, Acrylic and ink on paper, 14.5 x 22 inch



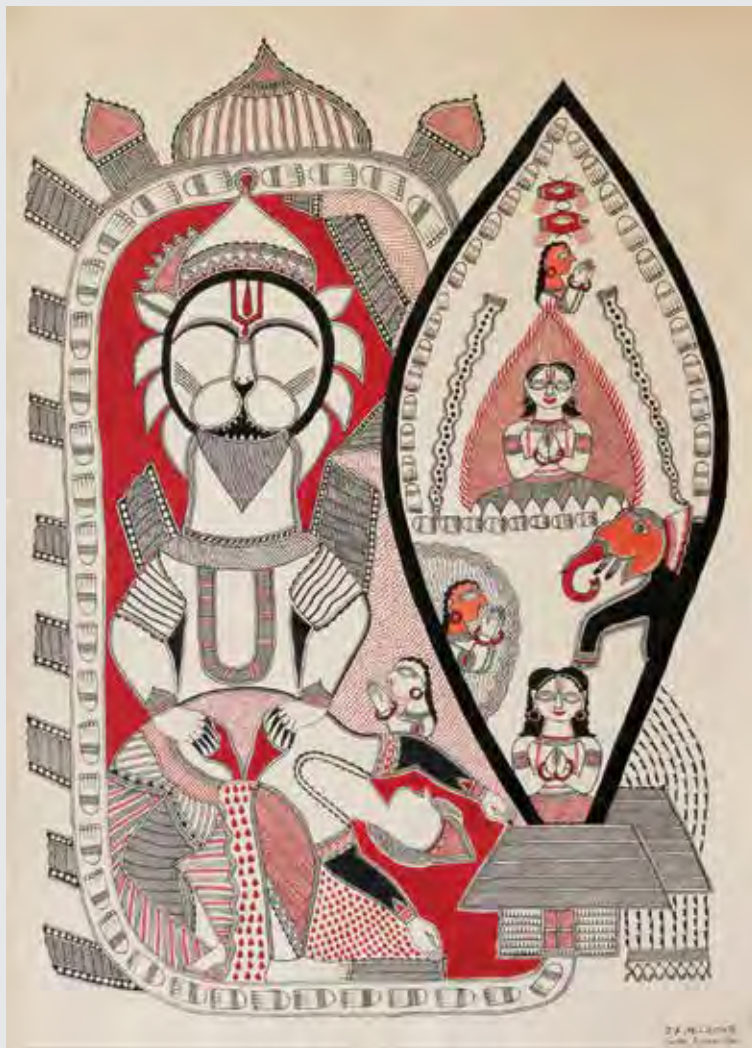
*Krishna as a Cowherder*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna at Night*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch

## Mapping memories

She is seated on a neatly made bed, holding a hand fan; the room has no other furniture, just the lantern and a window open to dark skies. That is how he remembers his mother, in a room barely lit, sleepless as she struggled to breathe, her frail body wracked with coughs. There was a glowering luminosity to the black she prepared with the soot she had collected through those sleepless nights and when she finally created her drawings, it was 'magical to see light reincarnating as colour on the paper she made her compositions on.' Those memories lingered even as life took him elsewhere, to distant cities where he struggled for years to find his oeuvre. In retrospect, the search proved to be futile, because Das realized that the strains of the song that were haunting him stemmed from remembrances. Back from MS University, Baroda, to his village in Bihar, he found his Guru in Ganga Devi, and began his pursuit anew. From this juncture on, he never looked back.



*Narsingh and Prahlad, 2005, Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch*

In Das's magnificent narratives, the saga of his memories come alive, the vast landscapes, the hills, forests and the songs of the people as they go about their daily rituals and chores. Alongside, is the presence of the new worlds they now inhabit and stories of migration that find expressions. Fascinatingly, ancient myths and fables co-exist with painted versions of modern life, with their political and social dilemmas. Magnificent icons that were a part of his childhood now form a part of his iconography that also dwells searingly on what he experienced during the Gujarat riots. In his painted world, *ghagra*-clad women gossip and Krishna stands beneath the flowering Kadamba tree; surrounded by birds and animals, he holds the flute at his lips, and the surrounding forests holds still.

Das speaks of a time long past, when life was simpler, almost as if he were reaching back and retrieving memories. The sacred and divine mingle with the domestic and intimate everyday rituals and on his canvas—in his hands, the interplay comes alive. As he paints, Das listens and hums along with his favourite musicians, his muses, Bhimsen Joshi and Lata Mangeshkar, the words now familiar from memory. From an introspection on life and vagaries of human existence, Das creates a fantastical world that is part mythical and part a comment on the urban realities he is a witness to.

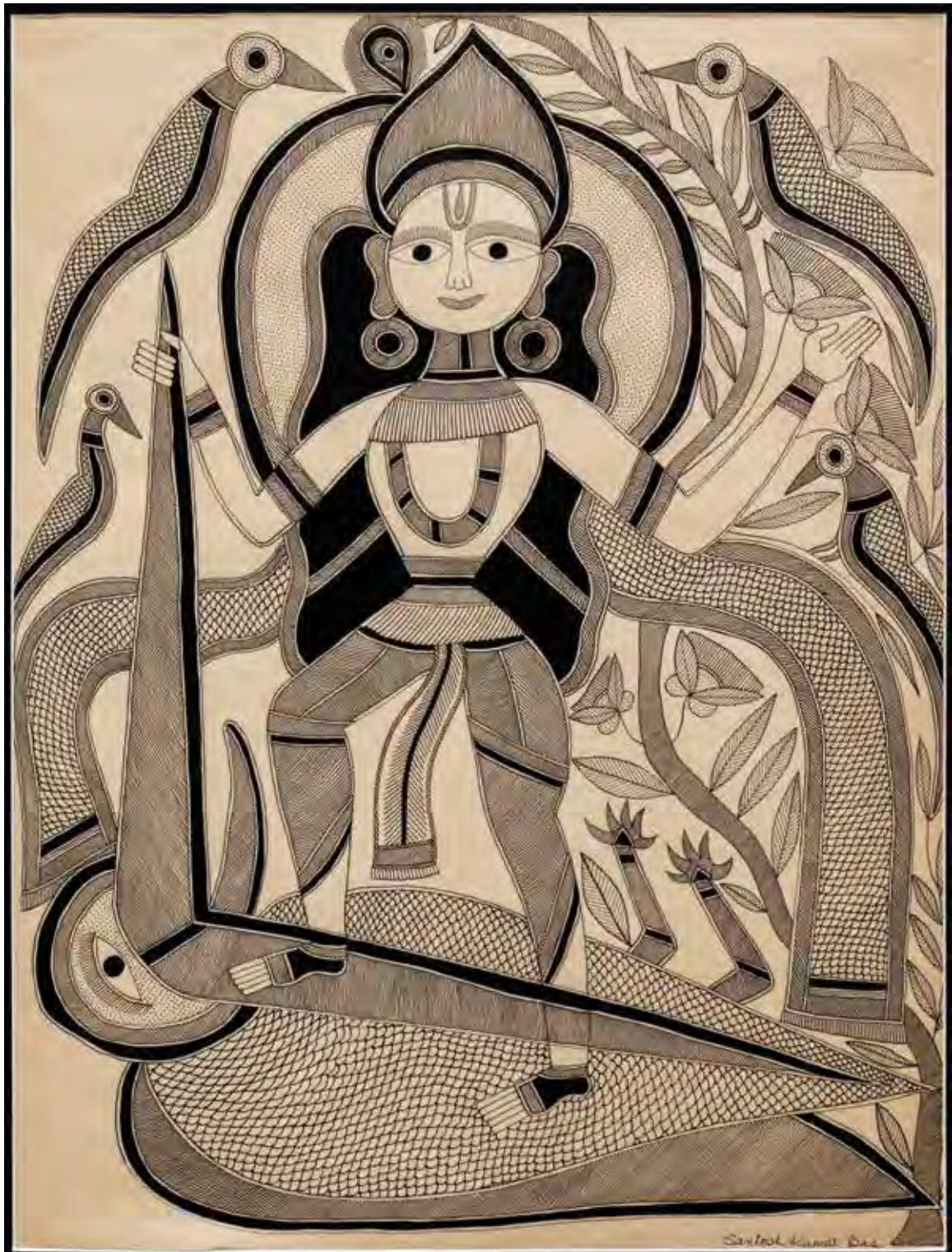
It is not always the grander spectacles of life that moves him; he talks wistfully of the sudden shower of rain that comes pelting down (when he was once in a three-wheeler headed to the Ahmedabad railway station) taking the pedestrians by surprise and how they scramble with their umbrellas. These quotidian incidents too become a subject of his artistic exploration.

Santosh Kumar Das acknowledges Ganga Devi as his inspiration and it was perhaps her iconography that inspired him to draw from life around him. Ganga Devi's intricate depictions that captured the nuances of lives she encountered appealed to him immensely, and in his own compositions, he evolved a vocabulary that gave credence to his inward world of myths, allegory and memory.

In the present suit of works, two paintings of Krishna have just been included to complete the show. What joy, what luminosity in the colours! The figure of Krishna playing the flute is timeless and magical. There is a chimera-like quality to the work that seems to offer, at the end, the audacity of hope and optimism.

## Ina Puri

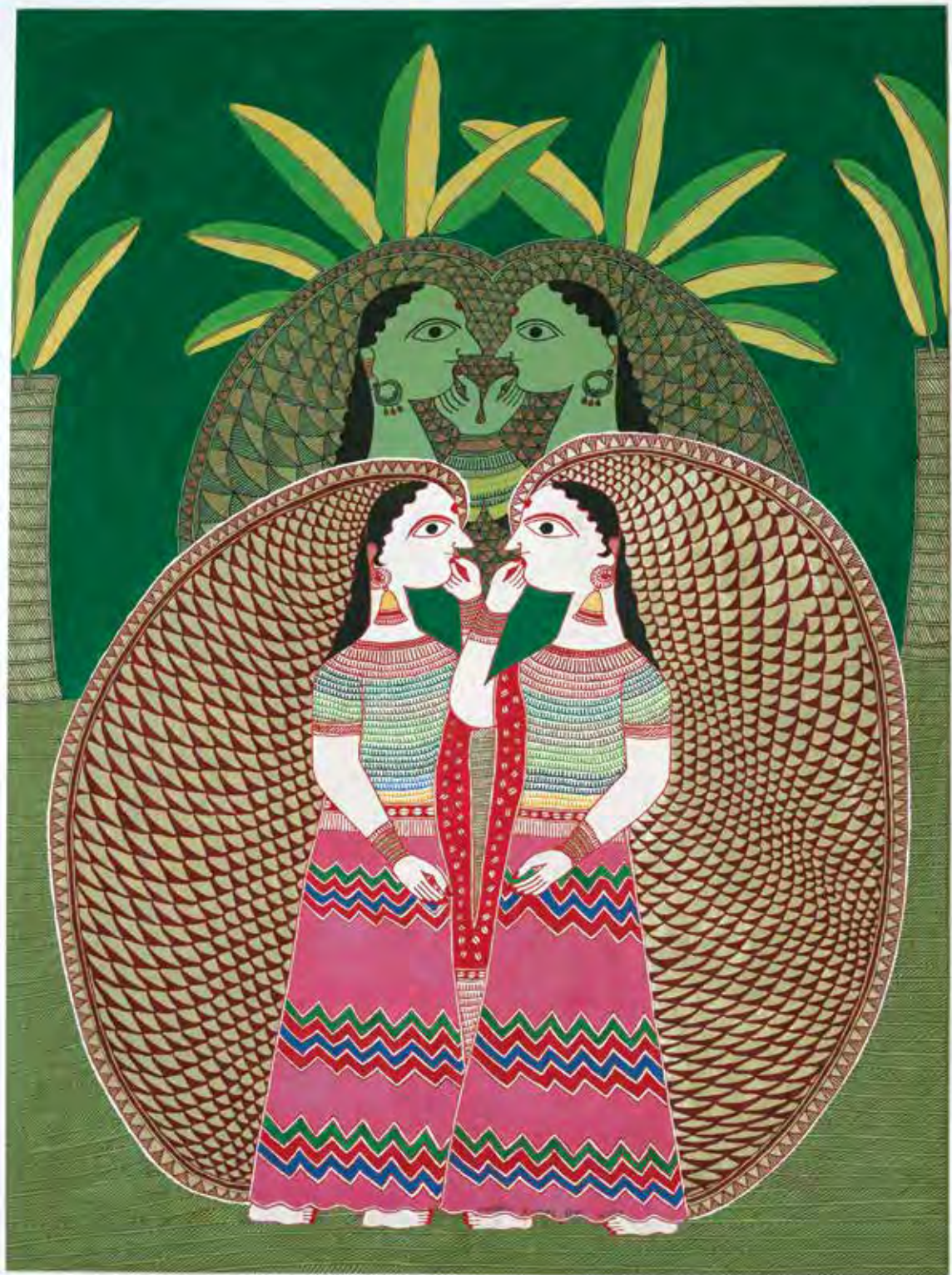
*Ina Puri is a Documentarian and Curator.*



*Krishna Kills Bakasura*  
Ink on paper, 17.5 x 23 inch



*Untitled, 1992*  
Ink on paper, 17.5 x 23 inch

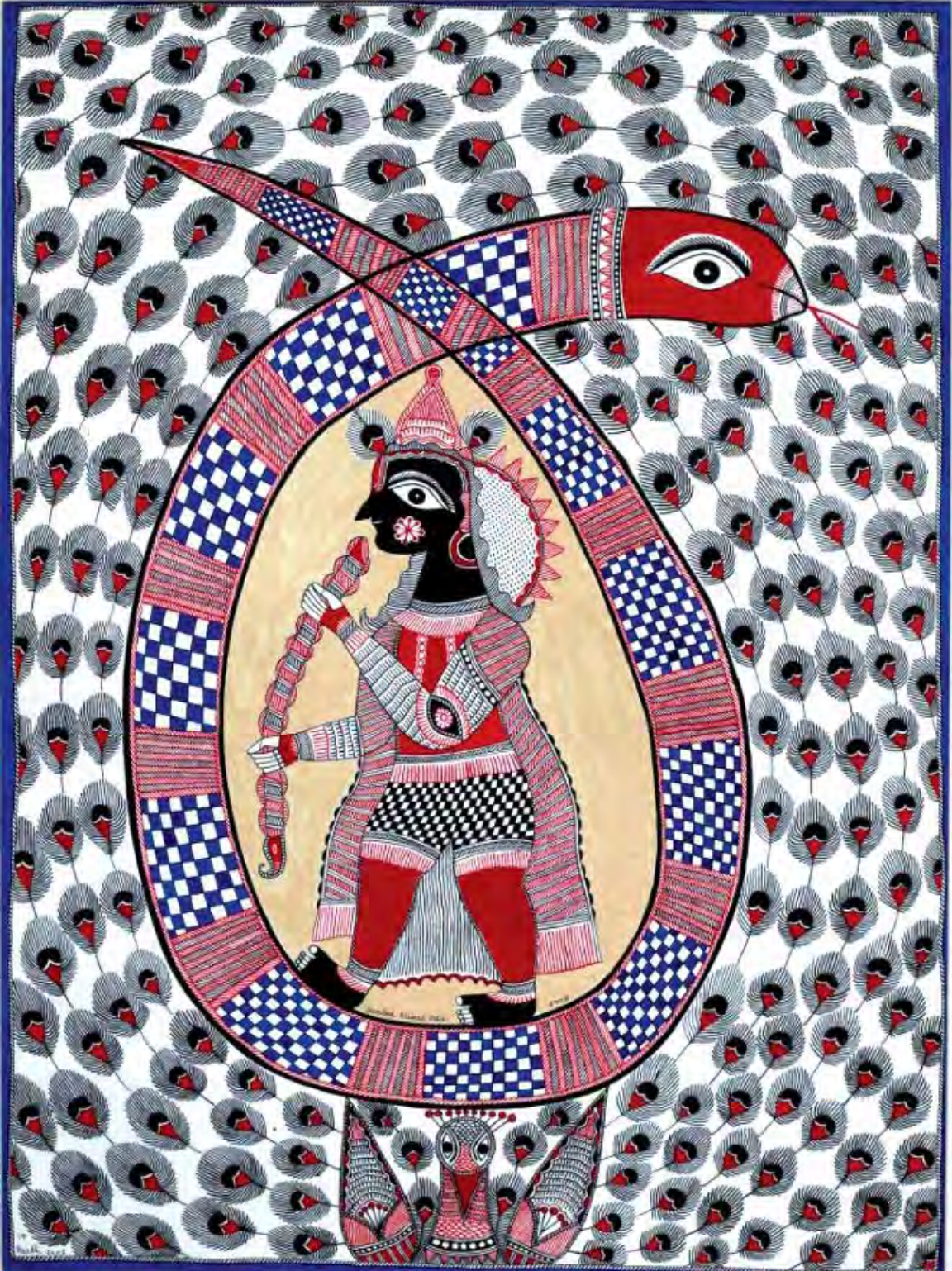


*Gossiping Women*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch

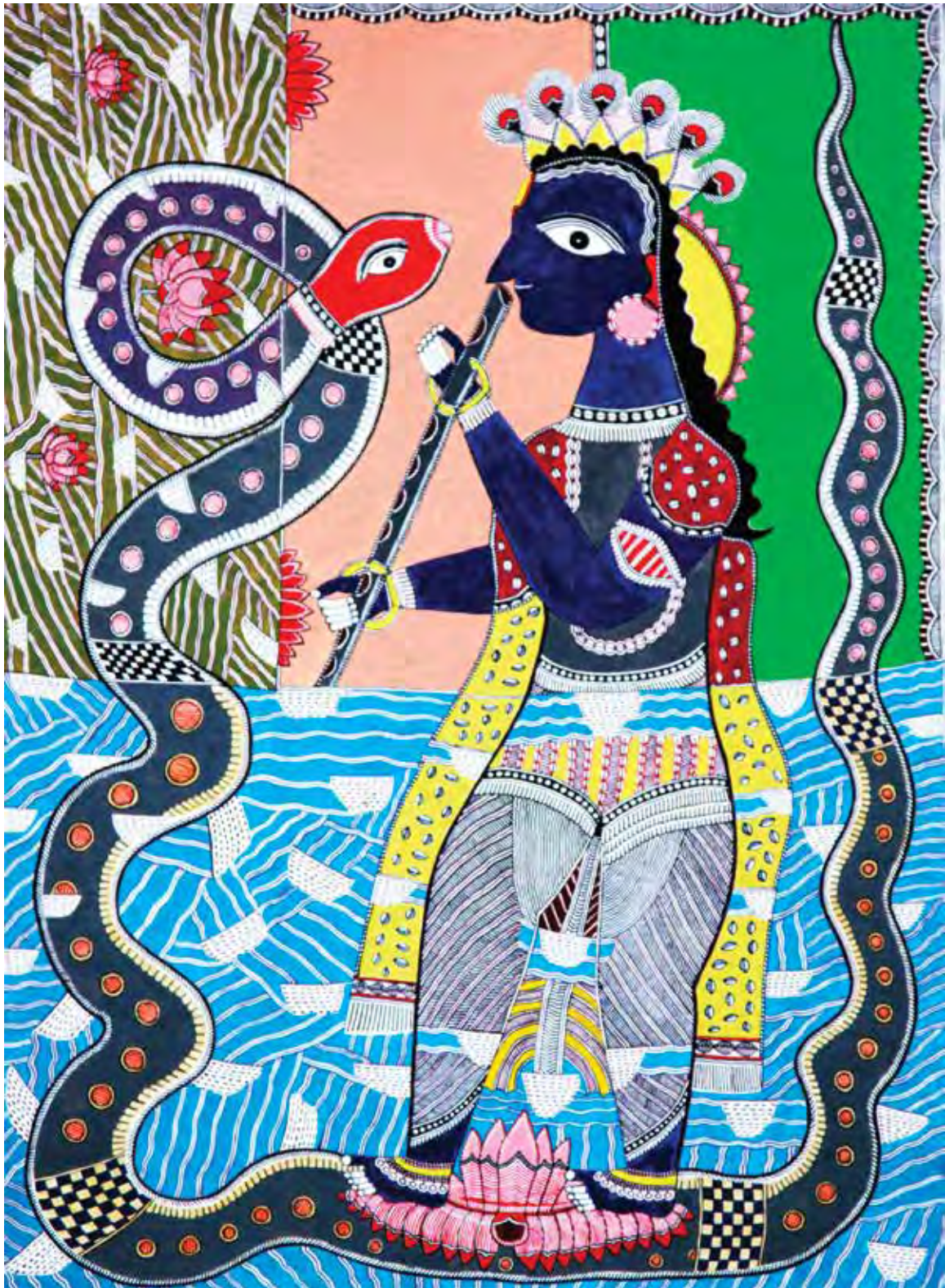




*Krishna under Tree, 2008*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna and Snake*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna Playing Flute*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Untitled,*  
Ink and paint on paper, 22 x 30 inch

# Transcending all boundaries

Since 2013, through my association with the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani, I have had the opportunity to meet and get to know several prolific artists in the region. One of them is Santosh Kumar Das, a most admirable artist, teacher and human being. His ability to speak of intellectually rich matters in the simplest of forms struck me deeply, and visually too, his work carries a seamless integration of complexity and naiveté. One of the few artists who forayed into formal art training at MS University Baroda, his return to his village marked a fresh era in the exploration of Mithila painting, that lives on and evolves in the work of those whom he has taught.

Working on an exhibition for Wellcome Trust UK in 2015, I was extremely happy when the curator showed me an online image of “Hanuman brings the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) to the relief camps”, which I knew was a beautiful piece by Santosh and one of the 22 images he did on the Gujarat riots of 2002. They wanted to borrow or acquire the work for ‘Tabiyat – Medicine and Healing in India’, a comprehensive exhibition looking at medicine through the cultural lens – investigating the home, the street, and the clinic (CSMVS Mumbai – 2015-16). The work, a contemporary, hard hitting commentary that relooked at the classic representation of Hanuman bearing the Sanjeevani laden mountain back to an injured Lakshman, became a much discussed piece in the show that displayed a rich variety of historical, popular, and contemporary expression. Santosh is in love with all the subjects he chooses to draw artistic inspiration from – he sees poetry in line, and sings his colours. Whether the Krishna series, the Buddha, the Rain series or Kali – the works resonate with the innate energy and aesthetics the artist bestows them with. I have observed the manner in which his work receives as much positive response and audience understanding in his native village Ranti, as in an art gallery or museum in urban India or abroad. His painted language transcends all boundaries and preconceived notions of artistic knowledge.

**Lina Vincent**

December 2018

*Lina Vincent is a Goa based art historian and curator focused on socially and environmentally engaged art.*



*Krishna as a Musician*, 2008  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Krishna Reflection*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch







Facing page:  
*Saraswati*  
Ink on paper, 14.5 x 22 inch

Above:  
*Krishna in Lotus Flower*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Encounter*, 2017, Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Annapurana Mata and Shiv*, 2016, Ink on paper, 28 x 40 inch



*Lovers*, 2016, Ink on paper, 30 x 48 inch



*Encounter II*, 2016, Ink on paper, 30 x 48 inch



*A Dancer*  
Acrylic and Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Saraswati II*  
Ink on paper, 14.5 x 22 inch



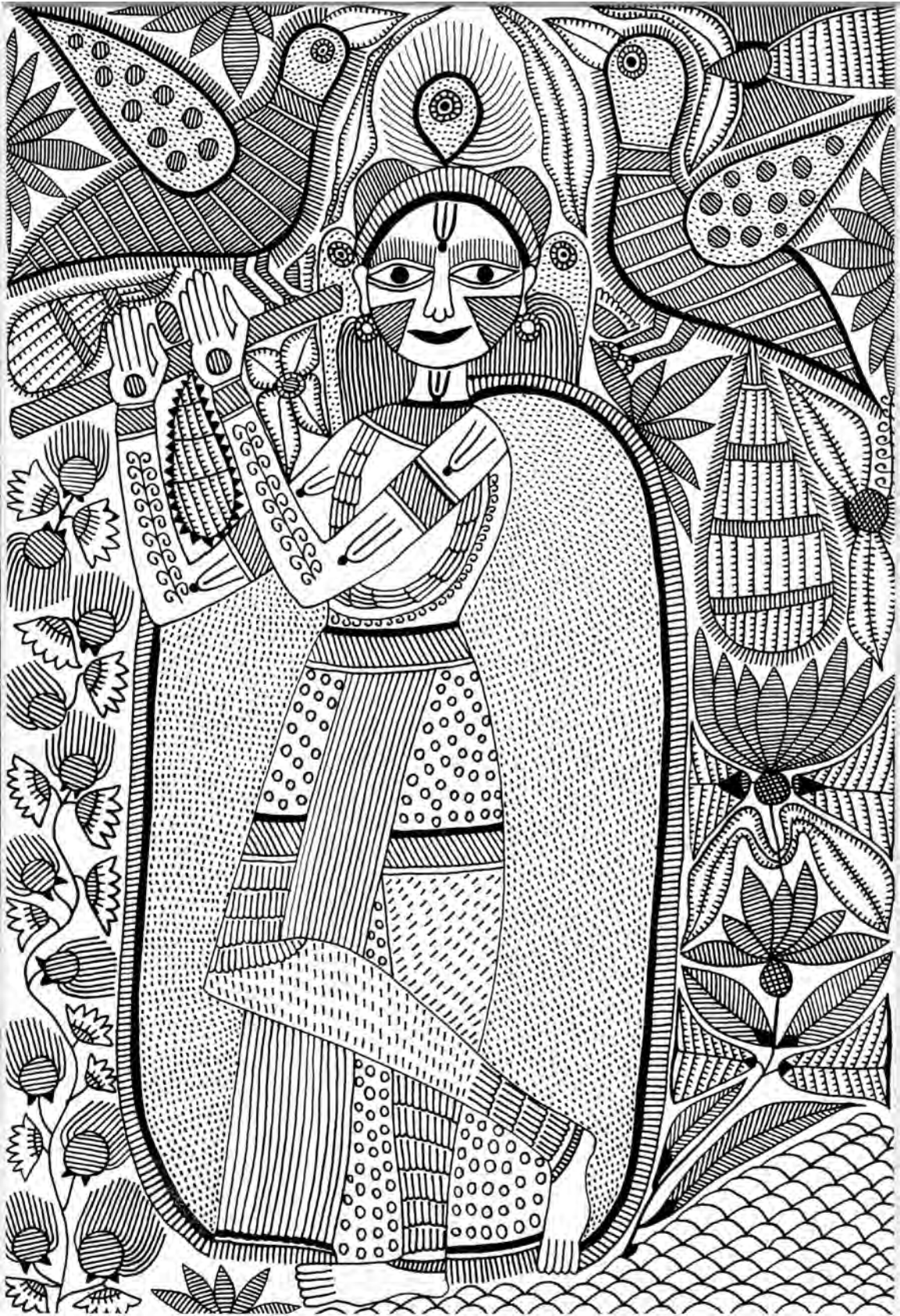
*Untitled, 2017, Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch*



*Untitled, Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x30 inch*



Untitled  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 8 x 11.5 inch



Untitled  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 8 x 11.5 inch

# Notes of a song

Santosh Kumar Das is more than an artist, he is a Guru. I became his student in 2017 as a Fulbright scholar. My own research examines India's living traditions broadly from an economic perspective, but the essence of understanding the value of art often lies in understanding the process. In the tradition of many anthropologists before me, I set out to learn by doing. Underneath motif, iconography, and narrative so often privileged in the study of Mithila art, Santosh revealed to me its most vital essence: *line*.

For years I knew Santosh from a distance. His legacy with the University of Texas at Austin, my own academic home, dates back to the earliest days of his career. In the 1970s, he began work as a translator with American anthropologist Raymond Lee Owens. This relationship fostered Santosh's further development as an artist - supporting his pursuits at Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, the flourishing of the Ethnic Arts Foundation and the Mithila Art Institute where he laid the foundation of a generation of painters. Decades later, the South Asia Institute in Austin hosted Santosh, and designed his first trip to the United States in 2005, for his widely celebrated exhibition, *The Gujarat Series*, featured here in this, his first solo show in India.

It wasn't until I undertook this brief apprenticeship with him that I gained a greater appreciation for the unique elements Santosh brings to the process of painting. Where I once knew Mithila art as defined by its conventional tools and forms, Santosh taught me its uninhibited nature. In his own solitary rhapsody, Santosh performs his paintings. His execution of bold spontaneous line remains fluid with the deepest layers of this tradition, which comes alive in his hands. To work with him is pure joy. He prepares his workspace in what can only be described as self-designed ritual: while singing refrains from classic Bollywood melodies, almost dancing within the space, he will work until he can rest into the exact posture that will suit the mood of the piece. Most striking is the poise of his own instruments. The nib or brush floats like a conductor's baton in one hand; a pot of paint rests delicately in his opposite palm. Lines appear on paper like notes of a song. What lands on paper is an extension of his body, and his work visibly buzzes with the current of an energetic circuit. Black becomes a vibrant color in his confident direct application, always steady, without any hint of a preliminary sketch.

**Katie Lazarowicz**  
Austin, Texas, 2018

*Katie Lazarowicz is a Doctoral Candidate, PhD in Asian Cultures and Languages at the University of Texas at Austin*



*Untitled*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Untitled*  
Acrylic and ink on paper, 30 x 22 inch



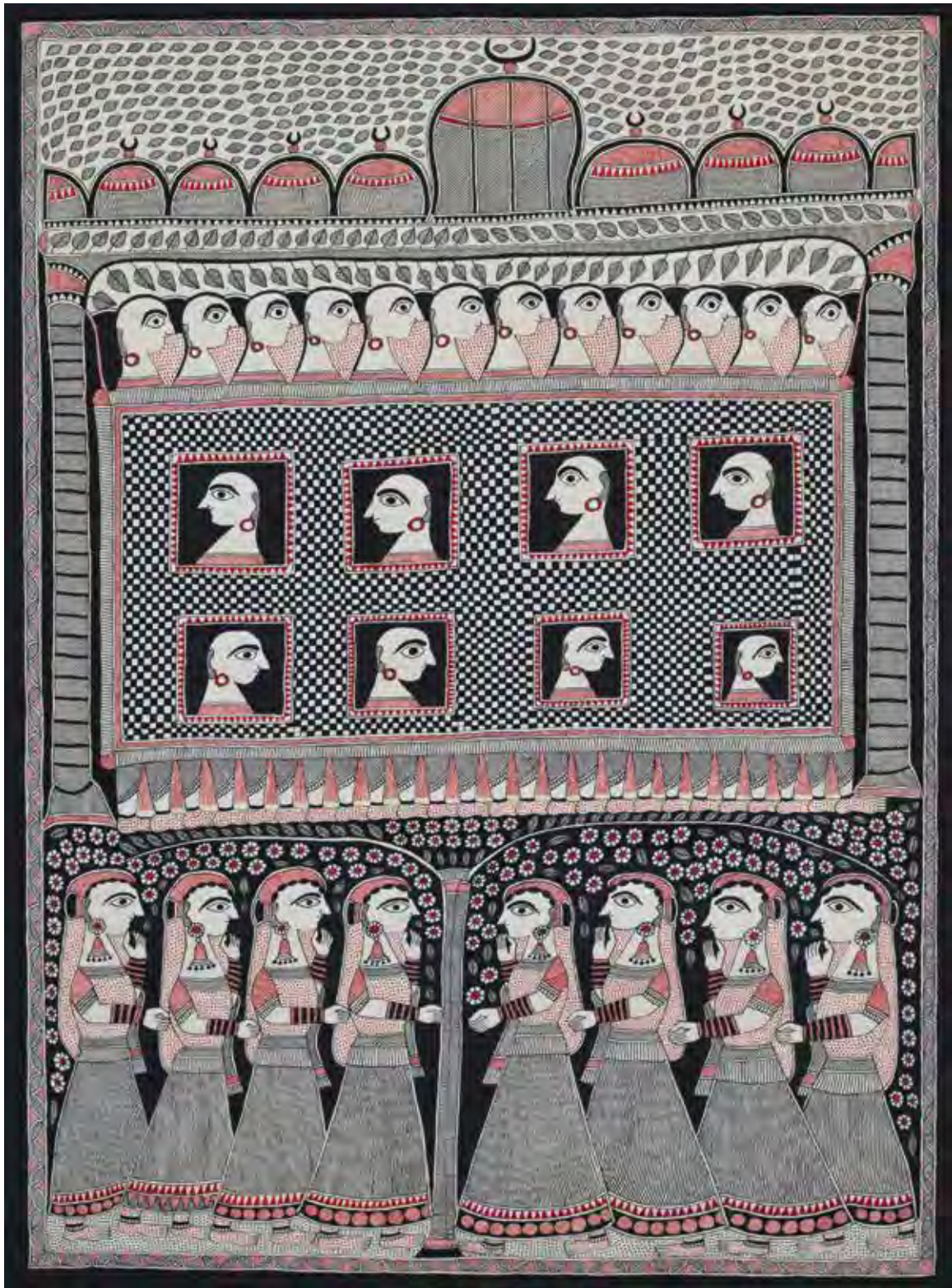


*Muslims (left) and Hindu (right) in warring camps separated by trident and burning lotus, 2002*  
Ink on paper, 15 x 22 inch



*Mother Earth (center) weeping for the victims of the Gujarat Violence with Lord Shiva (right) angrily invoking goddess Durga (left) to punish the rioters, 2002*  
Ink on paper, 15 x 22 inch





Muslims families finding shelter in the Shah-E-Alam Mosque, 2002

Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



# The Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj

As narrated by Santosh Kumar Das to Shantanu Das.

Once upon a time, a king and queen lived happily with their two sons, *Hansraj* and *Bachharaj*. The royal family enjoyed observing a family of sparrows that nested in their gardens. Unfortunately, the she-sparrow passed away and the he-sparrow was left with the two fledglings.

Soon, a stepmother-sparrow joined the nest. She didn't take well to the fledglings and told her husband to get rid of them. Helpless and distraught, the father-sparrow tried to resolve this situation but failed and had to turn out the fledglings from the family nest – leading to their immediate death.

On seeing this family turmoil, the young princes, Hansraj and Bachharaj felt insecure and made the king promise that he will never remarry, in case of their mother's death. As destined, the Queen passed away appointing *Benimahtha*, a loyal courtier, as the custodian of the young princes. Forgetting his promise, the king married *Laxminia*, bringing home a step-mother for his sons.

One day, the princes were playing in the garden, and their flying ball hit the queen. Infuriated, the queen hid the ball and hurled curses at the young princes. The same evening, the queen arranged clay pot covers under her bed, resulting in an intriguing sound, each time she moved. The king was inquisitive to learn about the sound and *Laxminia* agreed to tell him the secret if the king promised her a wish. The king readily agreed.

The queen revealed the secret and in exchange asked to have both the young princes slaughtered. The king was aghast but was helpless as he was bound by his

word. Furthermore, she asked to see the slain princes' heart and liver.

As destined, *Benimahtha*, came to the princes' rescue and saved their lives. The queen was presented with a freshly slaughtered goat's heart and liver as proof of *Hansraj* and *Bachharaj*'s murder.

The two young princes were left alone in the forest and started feeling thirsty and hungry. In search of water, they decided to follow a flying egret, thinking that it may guide them to water. Call it divine intervention, the egret made a stop at a gardener's hut and the two young boys also stopped there. The gardener's wife took pity and fed the boys.

After having rested, *Hansraj* related his plight to this kind woman, who was livid and in her fury spat out a vicious curse, "Oh, merciless Queen, may you remain barren. Oh, merciless King, may your back always be wounded." The gardener's wife raised the boys as her own and they grew up to be ace sportsmen.

A football match was staged for the royal couple, and *Hansraj* and *Bachharaj* were playing in the lead. Coincidentally, the flying ball hit the Queen's forehead and she accused the boys of purposely aiming at her. The King intervened and in an effort to gain some clarity, inquired about the boys' lineage. On hearing his name as their father and their names as *Hansraj* and *Bachharaj*, the King could not believe his ears. He immediately summoned the royal astrologer who checked the charts and confirmed the young boys' claim. On confirmation of their lineage, the King brought the princes home.

The previous queen and the mother of the princes had burned a sack of bamboos and buried the ashes in the palace backyard. Out of the burned ashes, grew a bamboo shoot. The bamboo was offered to a *dom*, a bamboo basket weaver, who on trying to cut it was warned by an overhead voice, "Stay away you untouchable." The *dom*, didn't bother and cut the bamboo. The same voice instructed, "You may make baskets out of the top and bottom, but the middle part is to be used for making a *bansi* (flute). Play the flute only when told."

As instructed, the *dom* made a flute from the mid-section and presented it to the king with the warning to not play the flute only when instructed.

After that, each night, while everyone slept, the previous queen would emerge from the special flute to look after the palace, her sons and lastly tended to the King's back, before returning to the flute.

*Santosh Kumar Das worked on these scrolls for more than a year. He started with wanting to narrate the story on a single sheet but as he progressed, the artwork became more ambitious and the second sheet was even larger. This is his largest single work to date.*

The King was surprised to wake up to a well kept palace.

Finally, the king decided to keep vigil as he felt that there was uncharted activity at night. He saw everything for himself -- the cleaning of the palace, the princes being cared for and when the Queen went to tend to the King's wounded back, he questioned, "Who are you?"

The Queen confessed, "My Lord, I am neither an evil spirit nor a ghost. I am your wife and *Hansraj* and *Bachharaj*'s mother."

The King recognised her instantly and apologised profusely for breaking his solemn promise and asked her to never leave the palace again and the family was reunited.

On realising his folly, the King banished the evil *Laxminia* and once again, true happiness prevailed in the palace and in the entire kingdom.





Details: *Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part I*, 2000



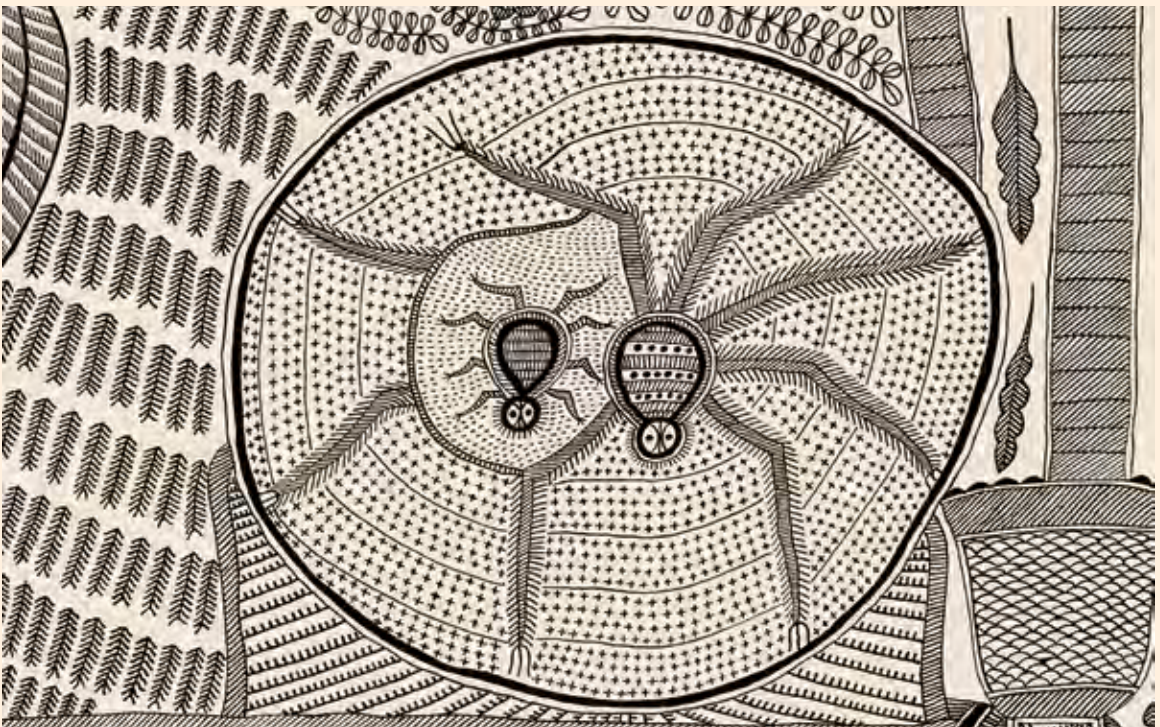


Details: *Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part I*, 2000



*Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part I, 2000*  
Ink on paper, 37 x 72 inch





Details: *Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part I*, 2000



Details: *Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part II*, 2000













*Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part II, 2000*  
Ink on paper, 56 x 125 inch

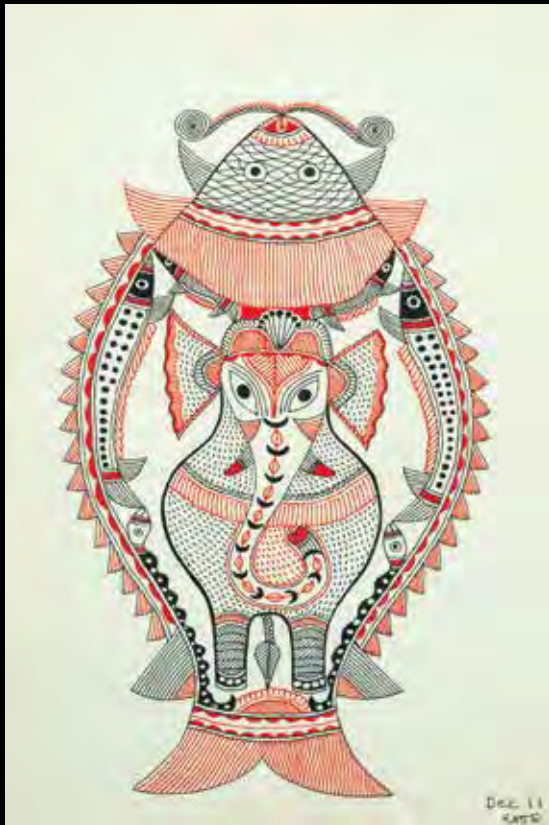




Details: *Story of Hansraj and Bachharaj Part II*, 2000



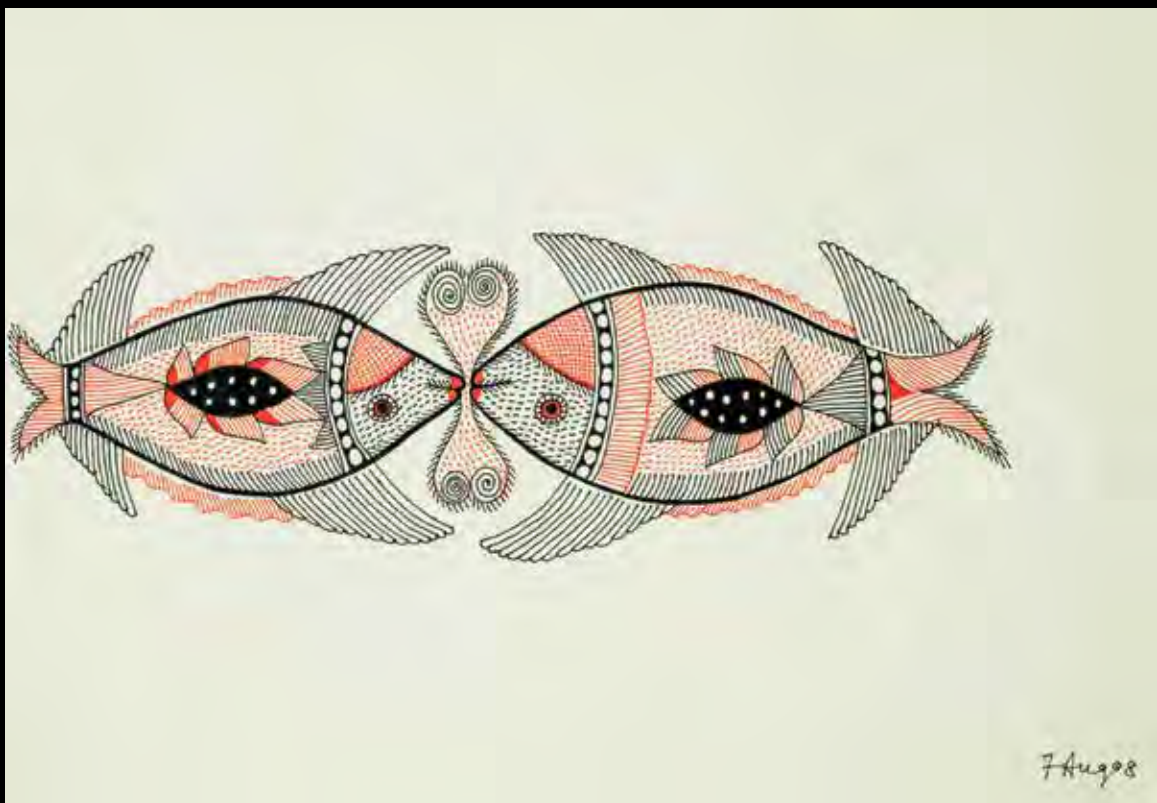
*Fish VII, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch*



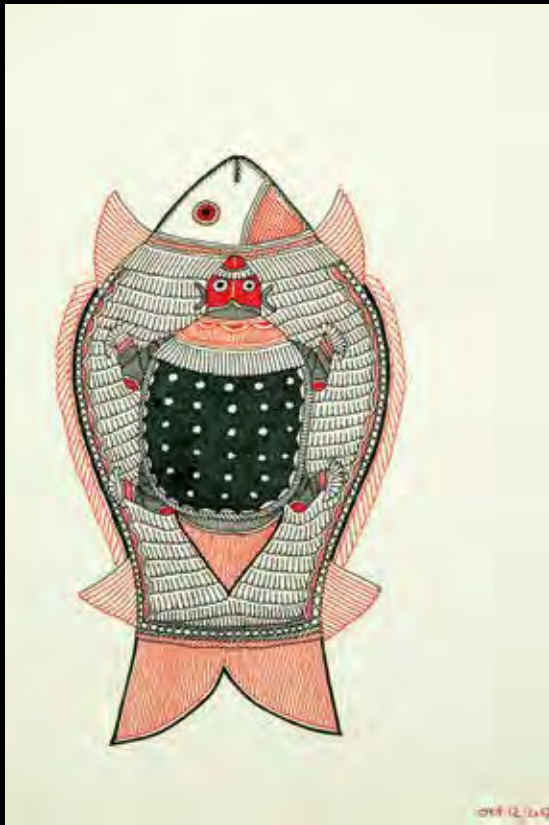
*Fish I*, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



*Fish II*, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



*Fish VI*, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



Fish V, 2007, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



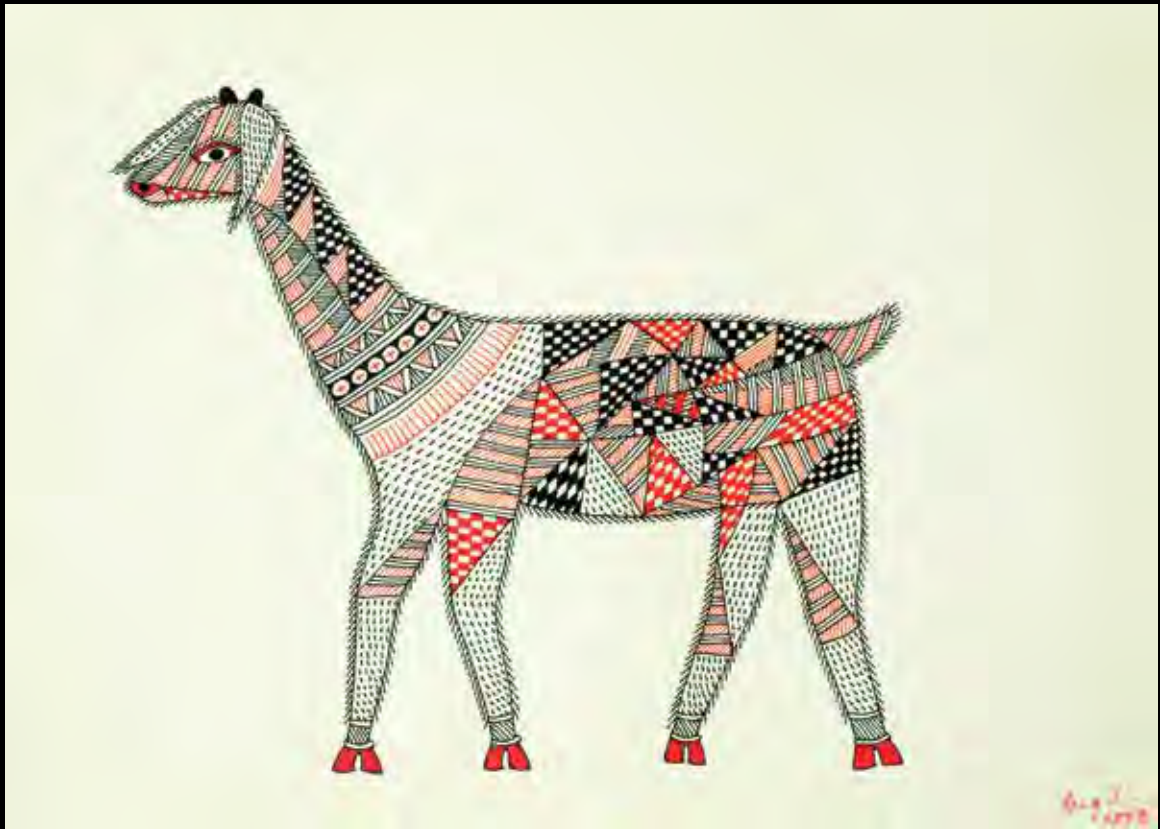
Fish IV, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



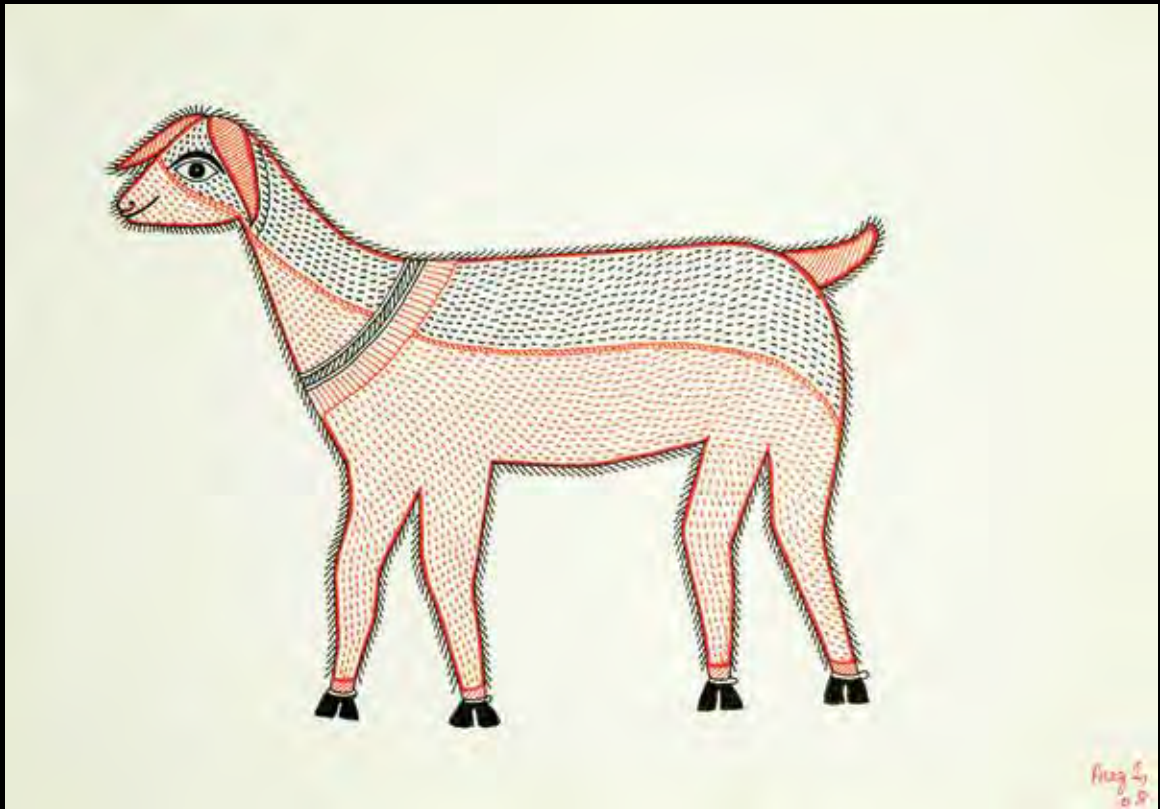
Fish VIII, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



Fish III, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch

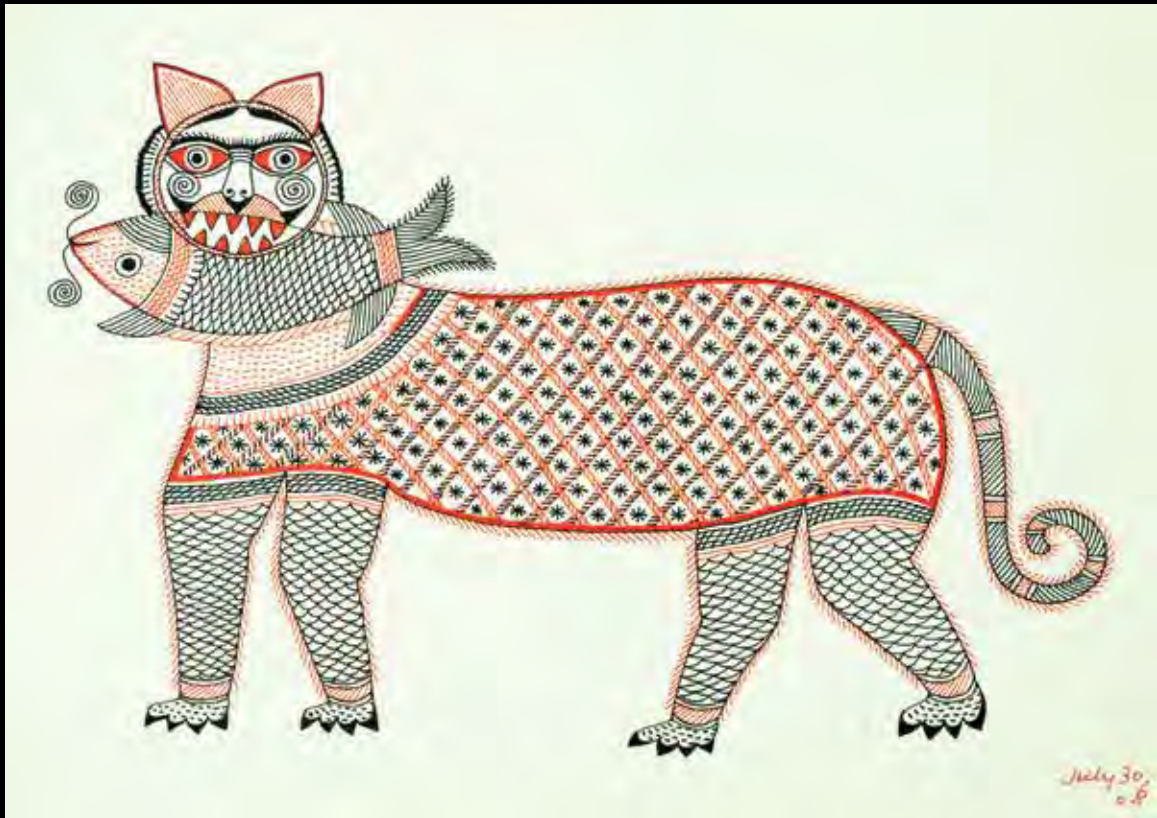


*Goat II*, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



*Goat I*, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch

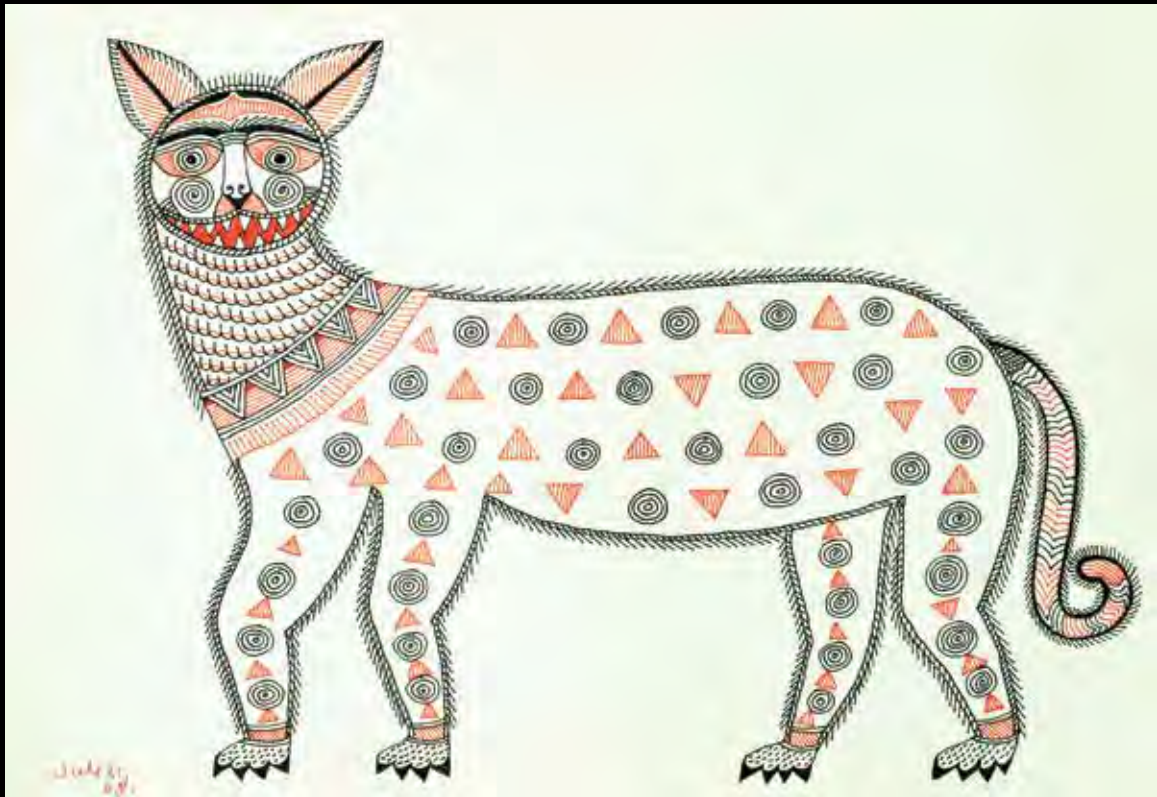




Cat II, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



Cat I, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



Cat III, 2008, Ink on paper, 12 x 8 inch



Biker, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



Gajaraj I, 2012, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



Gajaraj IV, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



Gajaraj II, 2012, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



Gajaraj III, 2012, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



*Tiger*, 2012, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



*Untitled*, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



*Untitled*, Ink and paint on paper,  
30 x 22 inch



*A Peculiar kind of habit*, 2016  
Acrylic and ink on canvas, 72 x 96 inch



*Untitled*, Ink and paint on paper,  
30 x 22 inch



*Experimenting with Form 1*,  
Ink on paper, 15 x 11 inch



*Artist as a Musician*, 2015-16,  
Acrylic and ink on canvas,  
72 x 96 inch



*Experimenting with Form 1*,  
Ink on paper, 22 x 15 inch



*Blooming face of a lion, 2014*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Yoga performer, 2014*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Casting the net, 2014*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Reflection, 2014*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Fish Caught – Fish Free, 2014*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch



*Flying in Love, 2017*  
Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inch

# About the artist



Photo courtesy: Shantanu Das

## **Santosh Kumar Das**

b. 1962, Ranti, Madhubani, Bihar, India

### **Educational Qualifications**

B.A. (Hons.) English, Lalit Narayan Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar, 1984.

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, Gujarat, 1990.

### **Positions of Eminence**

Research Assistant to Naomi Owens, an ethnomusicologist from USA in 1980's.

Director, Mithila Art Institute, Madhubani. 2003-2008.

### **Solo Exhibition**

*Rerouted Realities*, curated by Kathryn Myers. Ojas Art, New Delhi, 2019.

### **Selected Exhibitions**

*Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, curated by Aurogeeta Das and David Szanton.

McClung Museum of Natural History & Culture at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, 2019

Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, British Columbia, 2018

Frost Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, Florida, 2018

Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2018

The Faulconer Gallery at Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA, 2017

*Paradox and Play*, curated by Katie Lazrowicz including works of Olivia Fraser and Tarshito, Ojas Art, New Delhi, 2018

Artisan's Gallery, Mumbai, 2017

*Satrang: Madhubani-Mithila*, Ojas Art, New Delhi, 2016.

*Tabiyat – Medicine and Healing in India*, a comprehensive exhibition looking at medicine through the cultural lens – investigating the home, the street, and the clinic, CSMVS, Mumbai, 2015-16.

*Vernacular in the Contemporary* curated by Annapurna Garimella, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi, 2010-11.

*Gujarat Series* exhibited in *Sach ki yadein, Yadon ka Sach*, Ahmdevad ni Gufa, Ahemdabad, Gujarat, 2007.



*Gujarat Series* exhibited in Patna Fine Arts College, 2007.

*Mithila Painting Evolution of an Art Form – A* retrospective show at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, 2007.

*Edge of Desire, Recent Art in India*, curated by Chaitanya Sambrani, Asia Society Museum, New York, 2005.

Museum of Crafts and Folk Arts, San Francisco, 2005.

*Beneath the Banyan Tree*, Syracuse University, New York, 2001.

### Talks

Dhaka Art Summit, 2018

TEDx, Jaipur, 2018

India Art Fair, New Delhi, 2017

Asia Society at NGMA, Mumbai 2007.

University of Texas, University of Oklahoma,

University of Syracuse, John Hopkins

University in 2005

### Awards

Master Artist, Ojas Art Award for Madhubani-Mithila Art, 2016

### Movies

*Regarding India*, Kathryn Myers, 2014

*Naina Jogin: The Ascetic Eye*, Praveen Kumar, 2006

### Books

*Black: An Artist's Tribute* by Santosh Kumar Das, Tara Books, Chennai, 2017.

*Mithila Painting, The Evolution of an Art Form*, David Szanton and Malani Bakshi, Ethnic Arts Foundation, PinkMango, L.L.C, 2007

*Santosh Kumar Das, The Gujarat Series an Introduction*, Kamala Visweswaran. The South Asia Institute, The University of Texas at Austin, 2006

### Collections

Tokio Hasegawa, Mithila Museum, Japan; Syracuse University, New York; Ethnic Arts Foundation, California; Oberlin College, Ohio; Ali Bongo Ondimba, President of Gabon and Devi Art Foundation, Delhi

### Thank you to :

My Parents, Shyam Krishan Das and Savitri Devi for letting me follow my dreams.

Raymond Lee Owens & Naomi Owens, who played an important role in my life and journey and convinced me to go to MSU, Baroda.

Mary C Lanus for supporting me through my Baroda days.

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh for letting me explore my creativity in Baroda.

David Szanton and Ethnic Arts Foundation for supporting and showing my work.

Shantanu Das, my nephew for being there for me unconditionally in multiple ways.

Prakash Kumar Karn for his love and kindness.

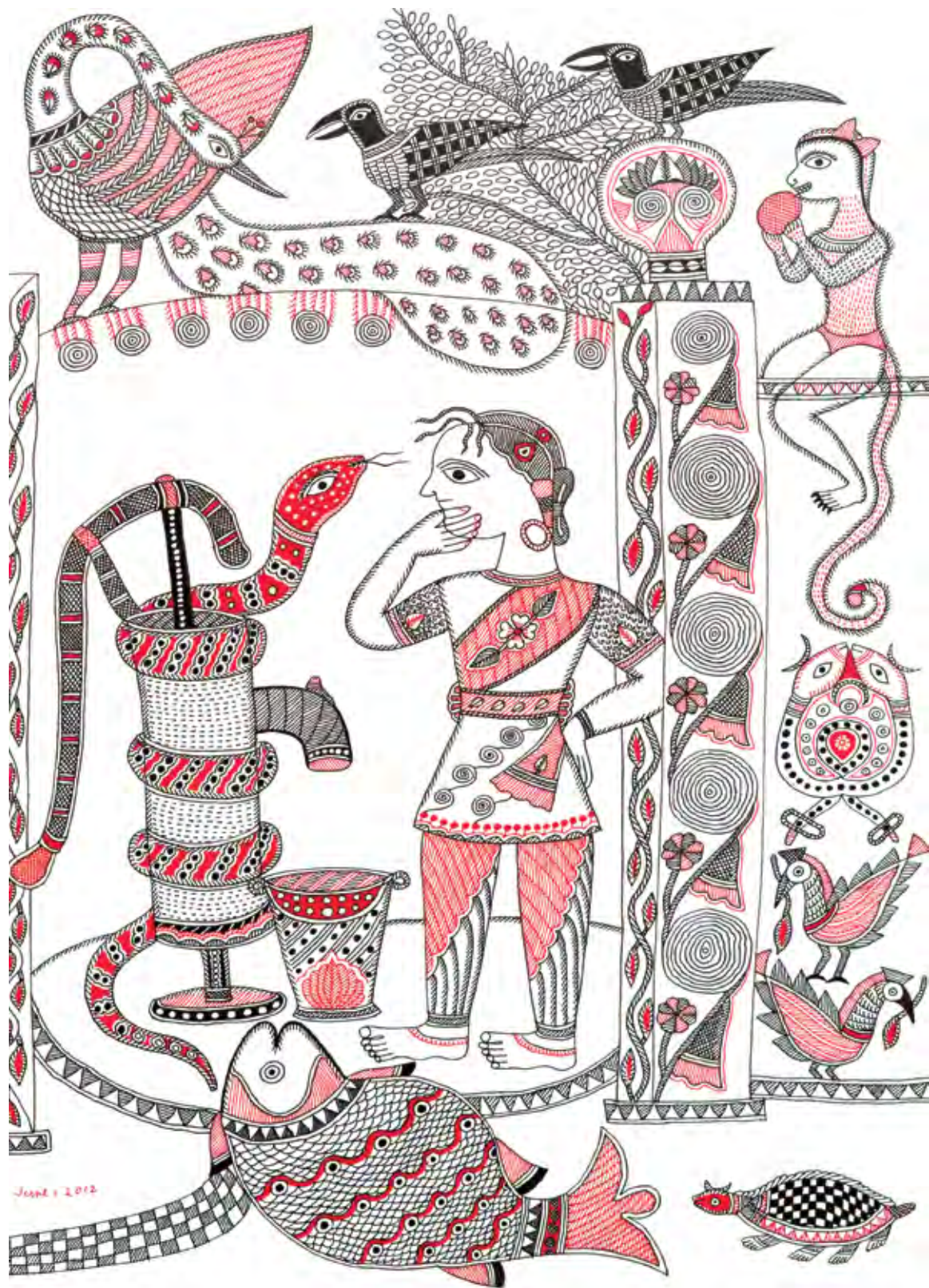
Kamala Visweswaran and Mani Shekhar Singh for bringing light to my Gujarat Series.

Susan Wadley and Tracey Black for hearing my stories.

Kathryn Myers & Praveen Kumar for making movies, which were seen by many.

Gita Wolf and V Geetha for making the book happen.

Anubhav Nath for believing in my work.



Untitled, 2012, Ink on paper, 16 x 12 inch



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