

## Exploring the Iconography of Retelling

Text: Jason Keith Fernandes

The works that one encounters in *Retelling*, the exhibition of the recent productions of Karishma D'Souza, should be seen as more than works of art. They are in fact icons from a contemporary mystic, and could be put to good use not only by other mystics but by a wider population. Contrary to popular understanding, icons are more than objects of ritual adoration and worship. They are in fact bridges that span the gap between a textual tradition and practice. One can look at Christian practice, for example. The image of a saint is linked not only to the hagiography of the saint but to the Biblical narrative. The use of iconography encodes a complex story into a single image for the viewer. Subsequent to contemplation of the image, the viewer can hope to imitate the life of the saint, who attempted to imitate the life of Christ. The iconographer is often familiar with this wider textual tradition, and through the use of charged symbols, communicates meaning to a practicante of a tradition. They offer crunched lessons for contemplation with the idea that these will then be put into practice.

In many ways, Karishma D'Souza is an iconographer for our times. Unlike conventional iconographers, however, Karishma does not stick within a single tradition. She is rather like the mystic, who is never conventional but always transcends boundaries to plumb unexpected depths and return with powerful insights for contemplation. Thus, Karishma draws inspiration from the mystical poems of such figures as Sant Kabirdas, and the Kashmiri poet Lal Dedh. Her references range from the Jataka tales and the lives of the Bodhisattvas and the Buddha, the brahmanical Puranas, to more contemporary issues of violence of the Indian state against the populations of Kashmir, Dalits and tribals.



Karishma also works in the tradition of the iconographers through the symbolic charge that she presses onto the colours on the canvas. Take, for example, the use of gold for the ears of the sleeping Buddha in the work titled “Burma Buddha”. Karishma would have the golden ears bear three meanings. The first refers to the most common understanding of gold, as precious; thus, the gold ears designate that to hear or listen is what is most important. The second offers a more anti-materialist, and perhaps iconoclastic, suggestion, that gold is an inert metal, and the golden ears are dead objects incapable of hearing the pleas and prayers of supplicants. The third reading that she offers is where the similarity of gold with yellow is played on to suggest that the city in the background painted in yellow appears golden only in the distance; closer inspection reveals that the yellow emerges from sand, not gold, and hence is liable to disintegrate at any moment.

Blue is another colour that runs through the works in *Retelling*. Once again, we could commence with the signification of blue through reference to its location in “Burma Buddha”. Blue is used in this canvas to represent what the artist calls “peaceful, expanding space”. Karishma is also aware, however, that blue is the colour associated with the Ambedkarite movement and hence with Dalit pride. Given the manner in which the caste-critical poet Kabir is taken up by some Ambedkarite groups, it is no wonder that “Sand Castles” is marked by a plethora of blue circles. Each of these circles is a reference to a couplet of Kabir

from the *Bijak of Kabir* (compiled and translated by Linda Hess and Sukhdev Singh).

Take, for instance, the circle on the top left of the canvas that refers to the following:



A raft of tied together snakes  
In the world-ocean.  
Let go, and you'll drown.  
Grasp, and they'll bite your arm.

Or the second circle in the bottom row that features a tear within a millstone that illustrates the following:

seeing the mill turn  
brings tears to the eyes.  
No one who falls between the stones  
Comes out unbroken.

If blue is symbolically charged in Karishma's works, then so is water, once again signified, as is common, by blue. Water bodies, and especially rivers, are present in almost every image on display. Unsurprisingly inspired by the verses of Kabir, who seems to be critical in this phase of her work, the river is linked with the idea of overcoming:

Use the strength of your own arm,  
Stop putting hope in others.  
When the river flows through your own yard,

How can you die of thirst?



The river is present not only in “Wastelands: dead pasts”, but also in “Chembur”. The foreground of “Chembur”, alive with indoor plants, references the home of her grandparents in the suburb of Bombay that Karishma remembers as one of the first “very nurturing” spaces she encountered. Outside the home lies an empty and terrifying landscape snaked through by a river that represents the limits that must be overcome on the journey towards adulthood. Given the title of this canvas one can’t help but imagine that despite the emptiness the view outside her grandparent’s house is actually suggestive of an urban landscape. Urban landscapes in Karishma’s earlier works are often either empty of people suggesting the anomie and isolation that marks contemporary cities.

The water bodies in “Guarded city: unseeing” reference a poem from the Kashmiri poet Lal Ded, from the compilations in the book *I Lalla* (selected and translated by Ranjit Hoskote):

Three times I saw a lake overflowing a lake.  
Once I saw a lake mirrored in the sky.  
Once I saw a lake that bridged  
north and south. Mount Haramukh and Lake Kausar.  
Seven times I saw a lake shaping itself into emptiness.



Emptiness is also the theme of “Guarded city: unseeing”. While gated communities represent security from the population outside the grounds of expensive residential colonies, Karishma inquires whether this shutting off does not create an anomic sense of isolation. With curtains drawn over windows, represented here by the thick black lines in the centre of the canvas, no one looks in, and no one looks out either. The choice of exclusive surroundings ensures that the very environs become frightening. This image also makes reference to the political situation in Kashmir with the island in the top background represented by an island with chinar. Reading deeper into the canvas, the gated community could also refer to the Kashmiri people forced into house arrest. The chinar of Kashmir stand mute in testimony to the violence forced on these people, who are encircled by orange red-hued hills on all sides.



Similar hues are also present in “Himalayan landscape: unseeing”, where the orange tents represent Hindutva and the red on the horizon, blood.

As if in response to the violence represented by walls is the image “Lal Ded”. In this case, the wall, a symbol of violence, is also marked by the

hues of orange and red, but it is split apart by the ever present river and calls to mind the verses from Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall":

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

Perhaps this splitting of the metaphoric wall through persistence, in this case of aquatic force, is the resilience that is referred to in the poem from Lal Ded that has influenced many of the works in this collection:



Resilience: to stand in the path of lightening.  
Resilience: to walk when darkness falls at noon.  
Resilience: to grind yourself fine in the turning mill.  
Resilience will come to you.

While many of these canvases make visible reference to places that Karishma has visited, the image that relates most to the Goan context is "Wastelands: dead pasts". In this image, the blue neck of the figure emerging from the water is a reference to the Puranic myth of Shiva Neelakanta. In this myth, Shiva's neck turned blue when he consumed the poison that emerged from the fabled churning of the ocean of milk. In this image, the neck is part of a larger feminine figure that could be construed as a reference to the idol of Gauri, worshipped in some traditions a day before her son Ganesh. The present day Gauri is, of course, the brahmanical usurpation of the vernacular mother goddess

Santeri, who is worshipped by the marginalized communities of Goa in her self-embodied form of the anthill. In this case, Santeri emerges from a wasteland that has been created thanks to the effects of the mining industry.



The state of affairs that Karishma depicts in this canvas need not necessarily be read as an impotent lament for our future. Rather, there is a peculiar Christian imagery that can also be read into this image through a reference to the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel. The Old Testament records the Prophet Ezekiel as having a vision of a valley filled with very dry bones. In this vision, Ezekiel is commanded by God to prophesy and put flesh on the bones and subsequently restore the bones to life. The vision, therefore, is one that promises hope – that even in the darkest of hours, a return to values can in fact bring redemption. This, I believe, is one of the messages that one can take away from this icon.

In *The Death of the Author* (1967), French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes argued against the need to incorporate the biographical context of the author or the meanings intended into the reading of the text. Instead, he argued in favour of the independence of the artistic production of the author. The moment the work was produced and subject to the gaze of the audience, the author was dead, and the work had a life of its own, gaining multiple readings based on the gazes of infinite numbers of individual readers. A great liberation is made possible through such a position, allowing for the proverbial thousand flowers to bloom. Given that each person is now enabled to bring their own experiences to the reading of the text or image, this diversity allows

for an expansion of formal political democracy into the realm of the social.

To adopt Barthes' method while viewing the works of Karishma D'Souza, however, would leave us that much poorer. For Karishma's works have the potential to be more than just objects of art. Even though many of Karishma's offerings in this exhibition focus on what could be seen as hopeless situations, I believe that these icons are in fact tools through which we can refocus our attention on issues of concern, issues that scream out for justice to be done, and work towards resolving them. They have the potential to shake off the illusion that we are captive and focus on what really matters.

To understand these icons, though, requires that we enter into the textual world that Karishma has created. The possible problem that we encounter, however, is that this textual world is rather dense, given that each canvas is often inspired by more than one text. While this makes for a particularly rich canvas, it also points to the flip side – to the liberation that Barthes inaugurated. That is, with the absolute liberty to bring one's own reading to a text, there is often a cacophony of voices and little space for understanding. If everyone's personal reading is valid, and there is no fundamental base, how does one make conversation and move forward towards building a space of consensus? Perhaps the answer lies in the manner in which we twine engagement with the images and the producer of the images. It is towards this end that I urge that the works be seen as icons to be appreciated alongside the many texts that inspired them.

(Essay for the exhibition of Karishma D'Souza's works  
in *Retelling*, hosted by the Fundação Oriente, Goa from 13 Oct -9 Nov  
2016)