

## **BETWEEN VOWS AND WORDS: ANUPAM SUD**

### **Five Decades of Art Practice**

"Printmaking can never be totally predictable. It is like a sunrise over a landscape. You know what is about to unfold but never cease to be surprised by the revelation."

- Anupam Sud

It is often said that the darkest hour is before dawn. Darkness and shadow, obscurity and illumination can be considered essential metaphors in the manifestation of light in a larger philosophical sense. If one were to subject these values to a formal analysis of art, then it becomes clear that they become vital constituents for the emanation and evocation of the chiaroscuro. A compositional device of contrasting light and shade deployed as a modelling technique, it is an effective aid in an artist or stage director's toolbox, capable of unfolding time as well as piercing the heart of darkness. Anupam Sud is a grand master of chiaroscuro. The artist has over the years administered it to an intense, almost meditative and exacting investigation. But what are the sources and meaning of the strange life drama in Anupam's world, a realm suspended between light and dark, theatric vows and broken words?

Anupam's practice of more than five decades defies easy classification and periodization. The sheer volume and scope of the elusive and discreet artist's oeuvre escapes any such attempt. She is perhaps one of the most significant Indian artists especially in the context of her extensive engagement with printmaking. Anupam has also consistently mounted a sustained enquiry into the human form and its existential predicaments.

Born in Punjab three years before Independence and brought up in Shimla, Delhi was to be the centre of her creative pursuits, first as a student of painting and later as a reputed teacher of printmaking in Delhi Polytechnic (later College of Art, Delhi). Anupam's evolution as an artist, from the 'plate' to the 'palette' has been a story both exemplary and singular. She demonstrated the will and fortitude of a young woman silently

and slowly subverting the archaic notions of male supremacy and puritan idioms of modernism. Trained by Jagmohan Chopra—founder of printmakers' collective Group 8 in which Anupam was the youngest member—she quickly developed her own pictorial vocabulary and style.

Labour-intensive and unforgiving albeit a more democratic and readily transmissible form than painting, the medium of printmaking made a deep impression on Anupam. Her multi-coloured collographs tending towards abstraction would be replaced by monochromatic and figurative etchings and photo-prints at the Slade School of Fine Art, London where she secured the British Council Scholarship. Anupam brought back to India many of the printing techniques, compositional elements and assiduously documented chemical formulae, and continued to practice and inspire generations of students through her disciplinary rigour and compassionate teaching.

Anupam's symbolic universe is a dimly lit backstage where men and women rehearse their scripted roles and seductive power. They impersonate characters from mythological and everyday narratives, and adorn or undress their bodies in the never-ending costume drama and rituals of life. These figures with perfect physique and stoic expression—at times indistinguishable from mannequins and anatomical models given their lack of any marker of identity—are often placed in an urban setting which seems accessible but only in appearance. Within a system of light and shadow and high tonal contrasts, Anupam imparts a particularly cinematic quality, *noirish* and uncanny, an atmosphere forbidding in its emptiness yet suffocating by the looming threat of an ever-present gaze or erosion of personal space. Such an emplacement of human figures, especially women, make them appear extremely vulnerable and provide a sense of impending danger.

Sinister and enigmatic, deceptive and unreal, these compositions also carry a subtle sense of humour, playfulness, and even mischief. Anupam's works are often presented in the style of a puzzle or a game. Word puns and visual clues in the form of half-open chest of drawers, dice, or headless torsos, are important in the staging and decoding of mystery in her universe. Despite being figurative and exhibiting a great formal coherence, the plot and content of her works preclude any narration or elucidation. The onus of exegesis is thus placed on the viewer situated in the interstitial space between the fragmented signs and their conspiratorial undertones. S/he is expected to traverse the speculative terrain of interpretation, quite like the couple in *Between Vows and Words* (1995)—trapped in the twilight zone between the enunciations of promise and the terms of agreement unmoored and floating without syntax or meaning.

- Roobina Karode

## Artist Bio:

Anupam Sud was born in 1944 at Hoshiarpur, Punjab but spent a substantial part of her childhood in Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. By 1960, her family had migrated to Delhi where she pursued a Diploma in Painting from the College of Art (1962-67). She was the youngest member of Group 8, a printmakers' collective started by Jagmohan Chopra (1935-2013). Between 1971 and 73, Sud joined the Slade School of Art, London, under the tutelage of Portuguese artist Bartholomew dos Santos to further her study in printmaking. For nearly three decades after her return from London, she taught at the Printmaking department of College of Art, New Delhi. Sud's practice largely focuses on various intaglio processes and printmaking techniques composing themes focused on the human figure. Over time, her practice has evolved to include other mediums such as painting, charcoal, pastels and ink.

In her five decades of art practice, she participated in numerous group and solo shows across the globe including her first major solo exhibition - *Graphics and Drawings: 1971-89* in Art Heritage, New Delhi; her first retrospective *Transgression in Prints: Anupam Sud, Four Decades* at Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi; and the major retrospective *The Soul (Un)Gendered* organised by Delhi Art Gallery, New York in collaboration with Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in 2019-20. Sud is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including the British Council Scholarship (1971), the President of India's Gold Medal (1973), Sahitya Kala Parishad Award (1976, 1980, 1984, 1992, 1993), study and travelling fellowship in printmaking at the Centre for International Contemporary Art (CICA), New York granted by the Alkazi Foundation (1990), Charles Wallace Research Grant (1998) among others. Sud currently resides and practices in Delhi.