



Untitled (detail), 2008, oil on canvas, 152 x 92.5 cm



While some of Kerala based Sosa Joseph's varied art works—pastels, watercolors, oils and pencil—mine the possibilities inherent in realistic evocations, others attempt the same with evocative abstractions. One can wander through her small and large format paintings, their relatively spare images, refreshingly at odds with those loaded with frenzy or ambiguity, in what often passes for profundity in the conceptual claustrophobia of a great deal of current art practice.

In Joseph we have an artist who refuses to browbeat us with message as she continues to deploy every day images crossed with fantasy. At heart is her very personalized agenda based on visual experience that is deeply felt at the level of her own life and its emotional climate. An added depth is proposed by the incorporation of purely representational elements or the sensuality suggested by movements and textures, an effect enhanced by the different ways she uses paint. Sharing equal space on her list of priorities is her concentration on refining and expanding her means of working. The visibility of layering underscores the importance of the painting process itself, while the mixing and re-mixing of her colors often whitened down to the consistency of pastels even in her watercolors and oils, enables her to achieve subtle chromatic and textural nuances with thin layers of paint.

Outlines, at once tentative as well as sensitive, delineate the sometimes naively painted motifs. But the scattered brushwork and sketchy, animate characters and symbols, conceal far more serious concerns than those perceived at first viewing: Joseph's is a personalized mythology, a framework within which she constantly explores questions concerning her own life and environment as well as those eternal conundrums that have to do with beauty, power and truth. At the same time with a subtle and indirect viewpoint, her works also investigate women's roles, identities, emotions and histories through the topical and the local.

Water is a constant leitmotif as well as often a metaphor for the self in this artist's paintings. She abstracts from life constantly, at times possibly substituting a painted image for her own presence. Whenever this seems to happen, the image is invariably resonant and recurring as if conjured up in dream or reverie. In Joseph's paintings water is in a state of perpetual flux. The same image in different places and moods appears in transformations of translucent overlays or whirling vortices, its shades of textured hues creating a diffuse, somewhat unsettled background for her harvest of aquatic forms. Some of these are eerie and hybrid, others are more recognizable like the shrimps and crabs that forever scuttle for cover as they weave in and out through seaweeds, across liquid washes of layered pastels rife with grayed pastels rife with grayed neutrals, stony jades and luminous aquamarines as the artist identifies a palette that stops short of full strength saturation.

The works are connected with an implied narrative that reverberates with images of coastal living. Nature in these works is often aqueous and always bountiful, spilling over with the catch of the day: assorted fish ensnared in gossamer nets that billow and pool with the push and pull of the tide, even as a clutch of tuna can be seen stacked upright in a clay pot, probably getting marinated for the family's evening meal. The latter depiction is a gem of a painting, a miniature oil on canvas, where the artist achieves subtle painterly nuances through a restricted palette of flame reds, pinks, terracottas and grays—the colors of the sky and earth—with the leisurely glow of a slow embrace. The artist breaks her usual pastel tempo in this work with textures that are both delicate and deliberate, right there, and full of feeling.

Every time Joseph succeeds in balancing her interest in the subliminal world of memory and fantasy against her repertoire of conventionalized forms, the resulting works, like the one above, turn more complex and evocative. This happens once again in different ways with two of her very dissimilar landscapes, both among her large format works. The one with the dramatic, dark grey canoe that cleaves the picture plane, a haunting image surrounded by an exquisitely pale but incandescent water body, and the other, a vertical presentation of a river flowing upstream that looks at first glance like a gigantic tree trunk freckled with pitted bark.

Paintings like these unfold with extended viewing. As a result, the waters of the first one get gradually shot through with the tender pinks, blues and yellows of a fading sunset. The work recalls a vision of poetic lyricism in what is for this artist, an atypical and rhapsodic containment of romanticism. Both as image and idea, the canoe serves as a visual trigger that activates the symbolic value of the painting: a boat adrift in a looming expanse of water, an atmosphere of mystery, the suggestion of a voyage perhaps of self-discovery. Meanwhile the second work devolves into a dark, rippling stream beneath the dry-brushed, pitted bark, and the freckles into ducks and teals trying to ford eddies and cross-currents in a plankton ridden stream. This time another kind of containment takes place that of realism. The graphic impact of the finely etched imagery sets the work in the natural world, full of recognizable images that have become intriguing in their conjugations.

A great deal of the time the paintings in this show teem with fantastical permutations of animal and marine life that mingle and merge with little concern for territorial imperatives. It is perfectly in order for instance, to see elephants, goats, geese, pelicans and a battalion of fish line up to confront an equally varied army crossing over from the other side of a stream. Partaking in a similar temperament is the artist's ongoing fascination with the visual properties of

unlikely images of Egyptian mummies, cropped body parts and mysterious ovoid shapes laden with light. Cryptic and collective titles like: 'Limits of Understanding' and 'Object Lessons', add their own shades of enigma. The world above the waterline also has a quirky significance as disembodied hands fly dragonflies as if they were paper kites, or the truncated image of a cat or a frog already half out of the frame adds a zap to an unexpected disappearing act. Every time a foot kicks back into the frame or a rat skips jauntily out of another one, leaving its tail behind, an Alice in Wonderland quality adds to the dream-like sense of dislocation.

At the same time there is this frequent withdrawal by the artist into domestic space with all its hotchpotch of kitchen clutter, some of it artfully rearranged as if in still-life formations, others with mild distortions playfully depicted. These works, invariably small format close-ups, are rendered in a graphic, naive and semi abstract mode that may well be interesting to follow up in time to come. Representations of pots and pans, mugs of tea, vegetables, the artist's signature flowers and clusters of coconuts abound in this genre, as does the ubiquitous jackfruit, its tough and prickly form violently hacked open with a knife, its fleshy, damp innards revealed. Hinting at the symbolic possibilities of the fertile, the sensual and the violent existing as if in some duplicitous tandem, the image could be construed as a reflection of the female experience.

There is a profusion of graphic detailing in this show that implies expanse and variety. The elements depicted, all emanate from the artist's world—the actual and the fantasized; together they give the work its underplayed but genuine imagery. Joseph's is an art practice with both personalized and universal content, an art very much involved in painterly processes and in the privileging of intuition, emotion and imagination. Or to paraphrase the writer and the mystic Thomas Merton, hers is an art of "cosmic humility.... responding with boundless vitality and joy to all living things".

**Kamala Kapoor**  
Mumbai  
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## Sosa Joseph

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GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEINRUECKE



Based in Kochi, Kerala, Sosa Joseph was born in 1971. She holds a Diploma in Painting from Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Mavelikkara and a Post Graduate Diploma in Painting from M. S. University, Baroda. Sosa has held a solo exhibition, 'Tenacity of the Moon' at Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi (2005). Her work has been included in group exhibitions at Schneider Museum, Oregon, USA (2006), Triva Contemporary Art Gallery, Trivandrum (2007) and Kashi Art Gallery, Kochi (2007).