

Arpita Singh Makes Her Mark

When Singh came to a crossroads in her art, she went back to basics: the line and dot.

By John Yau | 21 October 2018



Arpita Singh, "Sunset at Kasauli" (1976), oil on canvas, 35.375 x 29.125 inches
(all images courtesy the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York / New Delhi)

In 2017, I [reviewed](#) an exhibition of 33 works on paper, *Arpita Singh: Tying Down Time* at Talwar Gallery. I would be remiss if I did not review this follow-up exhibition, [Arpita Singh: Tying Down Time II](#), also at Talwar Gallery (September 8–November 17, 2018), which, like the first exhibition, contains many works that have never been shown before.

Singh, who was born in Bara Nagar, West Bengal, in 1937, graduated from the School of Art, Delhi Polytechnic in New Delhi, where she learned about the work of Paul Klee and Marc Chagall, among others. After she graduated, she became an artistic consultant for the government-funded cooperative, Weaver's Service Centre, devoted to preserving and promoting the tradition of the handloom, where she was initially hired to look at handmade shawls. Studying the structure of shawls and other types of fabric made on a handloom had a profound effect on her. Arpita Singh, "Untitled" (1981), watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 15.5 inches

In 1972, she had her first solo exhibition of dream-like paintings in which untethered figures inhabited an abstract space inspired by Chagall. While the exhibition was widely praised, Singh had come to a crossroads and did not know how to proceed. Her response to this crisis was to go back to basics – the line and dot.

Between the 1973 and '82, the focus of the two Talwar exhibitions, Singh explored what could be done with this basic vocabulary. Almost all the marks in the 2017 show were made with black poster paint and ink. In the current exhibition, Singh begins adding lines and planes of color. However, for those who saw the first show, it is useful to remember that a number of works here were done concurrently with ones displayed last year.

I was reminded of the first line of Charles Olson's poem, "Maximus, To Himself," which begins: "I have had to learn the simplest things/last." Limiting herself to dots and lines, Singh commits herself to working with the simplest marks she can make. There is something relentless about the way she goes at it — mark-

making without devolving into a signature gesture or flourish. One feels that she continually refuses the comforts provided by a style. The results are astonishing.

According to the art historian Deepak Ananth, who has written a major monograph on Singh, the artist was inspired by the Paul Klee quote from his *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1960): “An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk’s sake.” In an untitled watercolor dated 1981, Singh’s patchwork of muted colors to depict shrubbery, a building with railings, and the sky shares something with Klee’s faceted depictions of cityscapes. By this time, having largely limited herself lines and dots for a decade, she is ready to move on.

The exhibition includes 28 works on paper and one painting, “Sunset at Kasauli” (1976). Her materials include ink, poster paint, pastel, and watercolor. She also incises lines into the paper or, in the case of “Sunset at Kasauli,” into the paint. In many of the works, the different materials she uses attain different marks and effects. These layered, incremental works share something with Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings but are in no way derivative. Singh got to this place by herself. Her lines are blotchy, scratchy, insistent, dense, clustered, curling, straight, skipping, winding, and repetitive, like a rain of black thorns. She uses the watercolor to add planes of color, but also to create an atmospheric counterpoint to the density of the lines.



Arpita Singh, “Untitled” (1981), watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 15.5 inches



Arpita Singh, “Untitled” (1982), watercolor on paper, 19.5 x 15.5 inches

For Singh, the aim was never pure abstraction. Landscape is clearly on her mind when she begins dividing the works into three distinct areas, each defined by the kinds of marks she makes and the materials she uses. But even as she approaches landscape, the marks remain abstract rather than descriptive. In “Sunset at Kasauli,” the materiality of the paint is central. We see clots and daubs, smeared surfaces, and gouged lines. With its thin band of red sky along the painting’s top edge, and its profusion of short and long scratched vertical lines just below it, I felt as if I were looking at a state of quiet turbulence.

“Untitled” (1980), an ink on paper hanging just to the right of “Sunset at Kasauli” in the current exhibition, shows Singh’s mastery of her simple means. Compositionally, the work is divided into four areas evoking a field, trees, foliage, and sky. The sky is defined by a triangular space extending down from the top of the paper, which the artist has left unmarked. The largest section starts at the bottom edge and takes up more than half the paper: it is made of ink brushstrokes that

become a dense black field accented by scattered short horizontal lines and shapes defined by unmarked areas of the paper. On the left side of this black field, Singh has made a cluster of wave-like marks by wiping away the ink before it dried. That decisiveness adds to our experience of this remarkable work.

Just above the black field Singh has made a meandering row of short vertical brushstrokes, which one is apt to read as trees, especially since the artist tops them with undulating flurries of small, irregular marks evoking foliage. And yet, I would also say that Singh comes right up to the threshold of the representational but never crosses over. The marks remain fully abstract within a landscape format. Can you make an ink drawing that brings to mind Vincent van Gogh but does not look like his work? Can you do something in your work that he would never have done, such as wipe away the ink to make another kind of mark?

At the same time, there are works done in pastel and poster paint full of marks as delicate and resilient as dandelion fluff. In other works, she uses watercolor to build an open, precarious structure of different colors. After nearly a decade of limiting her marks, Singh returned to figurative painting with a vocabulary of abstract marks. It seems to me that Singh should be known internationally. Her figurative paintings and these abstract works on paper add up to an extraordinary achievement.



Arpita Singh, "Untitled" (1980), ink, pastel, and poster paint on paper, 27.75 x 19.75 inches



Arpita Singh, "Untitled" (1980), ink on paper, 26.75 x 32.75 inches

[Arpita Singh: Tying Down Time II](#) is on view at Talwar Gallery (108 East 16 Street, Manhattan) through November 17.