

Prints from Nature

Artist Sonia Mehra Chawla pushes the boundaries of fine art printmaking while examining the fragility of the natural world



An artwork from the exhibition

POOJA PILLAI

SONIA MEHRA Chawla was in her early teens the first time she visited the Sundarbans. The artist, who grew up in Kolkata, was awed by the wild landscape and it is perhaps this early encounter that forms the basis for her recent artistic engagements with the natural world. "Scapelands", an exhibition of her recent work is currently on display at Tarq in Colaba, and it underlines Chawla's examination of the organic world and our relationship with it, and integral to this examination is her use of photopolymer gravure, an innovative fine art printmaking technique.

Trained in painting from the Delhi College of Art, Chawla worked with printmaker Anupam Sud during her early years. She continued her engagement with printmaking at Atelier 2221 Print and Edition Studio, which was founded by Pratibha and Dakoji Devraj. Chawla was able to fully devote herself to pushing the boundaries in printmaking techniques thanks to a residency grant endowed last year by the Charles Wallace India Trust and the British Council India. She says, "Photopolymer has been used in industrial processes, but has only recently been introduced to fine art printing. A drawing or photographic image on a transparent film is placed on the photopolymer plate and is then exposed to ultraviolet light. It requires a high degree of precision and accurate testing before the final prints are made, since the slightest mistake means you have to start from scratch."

Chawla has long been interested in examining the natural processes of growth and decay besides being influenced by a sense of the fragility and impermanence of life. This is also tied to her own personal experience of being pregnant and feeling



Sonia Mehra Chawla

vulnerable. She has thus found herself, over and over, trying to represent the natural world in a way that emphasises its ephemerality.

Perhaps it is her preoccupation with these questions that has tinged the works in "Scapelands" with an anxiety over environmental degradation. For example, the loss of tidal mangroves looms large over each of the prints. She says, "I've been documenting the mangroves at the Sundarbans and Pichavaram in Tamil Nadu for five years, and I've realised that we can't describe the mangroves as a species. These are entire systems, that harbour innumerable other microsystems." Merely photographing these landscapes might capture their lush beauty, but Chawla needed to find a way in which to convey the welter of emotions that she had come to associate them with, and which would do justice to the contradictions of constant change and ancient stillness that they held. This need converged with her preoccupation with printmaking techniques, and photopolymer gravure became an essential part of the story she narrates through "Scapelands".