**** [PRESS RELEASE]

The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art presents

**Submergence: In the midst of here and there**

**ARPITA SINGH | Six Decades of Painting**

Curated by Roobina Karode

Preview: January 29, 2019, 6.00 pm onwards

Exhibition continues till 14th July 2019

KNMA-Saket, 145 South Court Mall, Saket, New Delhi

*“Inherited memory gives you form, not the exact situation which may have been faced by my great-great-great-great ancestor. I may have just inherited the shock or delightfulness of it”*

*- Arpita Singh*

The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art is delighted to present the first ever retrospective of one of the most significant women artists in India, Arpita Singh (b. 1937, Baranagar, West Bengal). This exhibition gives an extraordinary opportunity to view the six decades of her art practice. Engaging with her complex view of the world through her seminal paintings, drawings, sketches, watercolours and diaries, it traces the evolution of her distinctive visual language. The museum collection houses sixty artworks of Arpita Singh, and approximately 160 artworks are on loan from various private and public collections in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata, Fukuoka and New York. The exhibition resonates KNMA’s commitment to highlighting the artistic oeuvres and practices of female modernist masters with in-depth retrospectives; previous retrospectives include Nasreen Mohamedi and Nalini Malani.

In comparison to many of her contemporaries in India, Arpita remained intensely involved with her chosen medium of art-making. With her modest and intimate paintings she persistently probed the modernist tradition, particularly the narrative-figurative, extrapolating on the universal and multiple modernisms. As the title ‘submergence: in the midst of here and there’ suggests, the exhibition intends to explore the relational space shared between different objects and characters in Arpita Singh’s works. The idea of submergence here is interlinked with the different notions of space: symbolic, lived and perceived, that she pictorially builds. Her protagonists with bodies half-submerged/half-immersed in thick layers of paint, appear like ghosts, impersonations or votive figurines representing the dead and the departed. Her canvases begins to resemble a game-board, collecting and depositing evidences in between the painted layers, creating a labyrinth of textures and spaces. The central gallery of the museum consists of paintings depicting different stages of a woman’s ageing body: from childhood, adolescence, maternity and old woman with sagging breasts to a lump of flesh lying on the ground, engulfed in a swirling frenzy of the world around. Arpita Singh’s rendition of mother and child is remarkably unique, owing to her own experience as a mother. She further layers it with the ways in which women are perceived in a context-reliant society, from care-giver and nurturers to hauntingly silent spectators, hinting at a sea of unnoticed labor. The gaze of her protagonist is often fixed outside the canvas, challenging the customary seeing or observance of other’s life through a window/quadrilateral opening. Works like *The River Project* (2007) highlight the vulnerability of the naked female body or exposure of the ‘self’ to an external world, further complicated with the presence of dressed men in black suits. Moreover, the gaze of a female painter on her male subject can be seen in paintings like *Man with a Black Jacket* (2005), *Man with a Glove* and *Watching* (2004), where one encounters different representative masculinities.

The exhibition invites a simultaneous reading of the artist and reading Her, the woman-character-actor in her canvases. It proposes several entry points into her obsessive yet bold and creative worlds, scattered with signs and marks like aeroplanes, cars, flowers, gardens, city maps etc., groups of men and women entwined in non-linear narrative, sometimes situated in mythic pasts or day-to-day routine, writ in humour. Each of her work is as intimate as a diary-entry, documenting the everyday trepidations that surround her: thoughts, voices, events, news, and evokes different locales.

It is arranged in thematic clusters/groupings like ‘The Running Stitch’that focuses on the layered textures in her work that sometimes resemble stitches and weaves, drawing on Arpita’s experience in designing carpets and textiles during her formative years. Another cluster of works under the ruse of ‘Home, heart and the streets’ brings together the domestic environs of home and stark clutter and noise of the street outside and urban complexity. Her interest in maps, with networks of roads, alleyways, roundabouts and directions grew stronger after a visit to Shekhavati, a town in Rajasthan known for its architectural and historical havelis decorated with painted murals. A section in the exhibition explores how Arpita employs map as a means of drifting and navigating the conscious and the semi-conscious states. Her mappings are reworking-s of a geography that already exists, and have both revelatory and concealing potential. She merges the internal and external landscape, with in-between signposting of political and historical events. Each painting stirs different memories, dreamscapes and real life encounters. In the 1990s, she began to interplay with word and the image, writing down the name of the object alongside the painted image onto her canvas.

Many of her iconic paintings will be on display after decades. These works form the locus of the curatorial narrative of the exhibition, with other artworks carrying the resonances and forms outlined by them. The exhibition showcases a large body of her early watercolours and drawings from 1960s to 1980s that distill her impressions and intuitive explorations in muted colours. Arpita graduated from the Delhi Polytechnic in late 1950s where she had already developed a style of painting colorful abstracts, architectural facades and motifs, geometrical patterns, experimenting and using lines, dots and etchings with playful swiftness. Concentrating upon each etching and stroke with completeness and a slow but definite induction of reds, browns and yellows along with black. Describing this phase, she says, “I needed to understand a few things before I did any more figurative work. It was like practicing handwriting.”

At this time she was also re-looking at the style of artists like Paul Klee and keenly observing and familiarizing herself with traditional Indian arts, especially miniature paintings, while working as a designer at the Handloom Board. During this phase, she is seen approaching the canvas fearlessly, almost with a child-like excitement, unafraid of ever going wrong. This attitude and urgency must have risen from her troubled childhood memories of witnessing death from close quarter, encountering riots in Kolkata and Delhi, which inadvertently requisitioned her with confident imagination and visual execution. The phase is interspersed with figurative paraphernalia of fairies, aircrafts, butterflies, guns etc, and gently edges upon political starkness of those times. She began to infuse bursts of pinks and blues and myriad figuration, especially with male forms which became part of her first solo in 1972 at the Kunika Chemould Gallery, New Delhi. However, it was not until 1990s before she enters the narrative bent and begins to incorporate mythical characters from grand epics.

A gallery is dedicated to Arpita’s interpretations of mythological narratives, including a large triptych canvas *Searching Sita through Torn Paper, Paper Strips and Labels* (2015), especially commissioned by KNMA, which will be unveiled at the opening preview of the exhibition. On this occasion Mrs. Kiran Nadar, Founder and Chairperson, KNMA says, “I’m very excited to present this rare visual feat of Arpita Singh’s retrospective. She is among the first artists I acquired when I began my journey as a collector, and share a deep bond with her works. We at KNMA hope that this exhibition will bring increased visibility and scholarly attention to her oeuvre.”

Exhibition also includes key works from the 1990s with neighbors, friends and family, primarily women, as theme, reflecting on the many histories that individuals carry. For instance ‘Amina Kidwai with Dead Husband’ (1992) an oil on canvas or ‘Ayesha Kidwai with Grandma’ (1990s) are works which borders on quasi-biographical narratives chiseled out of residue memories. They consist of multiple layers, both in terms of imagery and color palette, with the protagonist often clad in sharp contrasting white. For instance, Ayesha Kidwai, was a neighbor to Arpita, who often appears with ‘symbolic images of power’ and dynamism like air planes and cars in the paintings. Arpita uses a naïve grace to portray Ayesha, against a busy backdrop composed of a garden or full of several significant yet anonymous characters. An onlooker may or may not be acquainted with the personal stories behind these set of paintings but certainly senses an air of melancholy and loss. One sees the psychological and the political merging in her paintings, often with mutual overlaps. Texts enter her works as imprints of violent histories, mourning, or maybe negotiations with traumas. Using it both as texture and descriptions, she builds a unique aesthetic combination with elusive surfaces and each layer adding meaning to the subject/content.