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## Friday Review Delhi

Published on Fridays

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### A contemporary touch

**Shalinee Kumari**, a young Mithila artist from a village in Bihar, re-interprets the grammar of her art in a modern context in her first solo show in the U.S.

PHOTO COURTESY FREY NORRIS GALLERY



Pushing the frontiers A work by Shalinee Kumari.

To many of us, Mithila or Madhubani paintings, over the years, have come to mean colourful and vibrant works laden with myths and legends, sold either in upmarket emporia, handicraft stores, Dilli Haat or on the fashionable pavements of Connaught place. But little do we know that in Madhubani in the Mithila region of Bihar, from where the style originated, sustained efforts are gradually ushering in a wave of change in the style. Twenty-three year old artist **Shalinee Kumari**, one of the representatives of this transformation, is expressing contemporary concerns in the traditional framework of Mithila folk paintings. A few of these specimens will be on display when the artist has her first ever solo exhibition at Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco on June 18. The artist responds to the issues of global warming, terrorism and sexual harassment of women, etc., in the series.

In the past Madhubani artists like Sita Devi, Ganga Devi, Pushpa **Kumari** and Jamuna Devi brought in innovations but taking a huge leap is **Shalinee Kumari** — one of the very few artists tackling purely contemporary issues in this genre. Portraying the monster of terrorism, **Shalinee** has depicted the Mumbai Taj hotel burning and next to it is a man in shackles and crying. A number of snakes stand for terrorists.

#### The power of women

In yet another, the upper half of a woman's body is likened to Goddess Durga, a snake is wrapped around the lower half. It is interesting to note, how a snake, a metaphor of energy in Kohbar ghar drawings of this style — the paintings made on the nuptial chamber of the newly wed couple — has been reinterpreted as an evil force. "The idea is to show how on the one hand a woman is so powerful and on the other, she continues to get oppressed by a man. She doesn't realise this nor is she aware of her strengths. I am working towards an entire series on women's exploitation which I hope to conclude by 2011. In that, I will even offer a solution," relates **Shalinee**, a product of Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani imparting training to the younger generation of Mithila painters and instilling in them a modern outlook.

The staple subjects like deities, rituals and customs have given way to relevant issues of today because that's what, the artist says, she is witnessing. "Earlier, it was only the BBC news on radio which connected me to the rest of the world but now, I also gather news and views by watching DD news," says the artist from Baxi Tola — a small village of 1,000 people in Bihar. Shalinee's four trips in a week to her university in Darbhanga from where she is pursuing post graduation in Geography is the only time she gets to travel outside her village. "Observing people in the four-hour bus journey and also the advisis on the university campus engaged in small-scale business provides me enough fodder for my paintings," says **Shalinee**.

SHAILAJA TRIPATHI

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