

SHABIR HUSSAIN SANTOSH  
*Beyond Myth & Metaphor*

Shabir 2020



# SHABIR HUSSAIN SANTOSH

## *Beyond Myth & Metaphor*

Curatorial Essay by **Archana Khare Ghose**



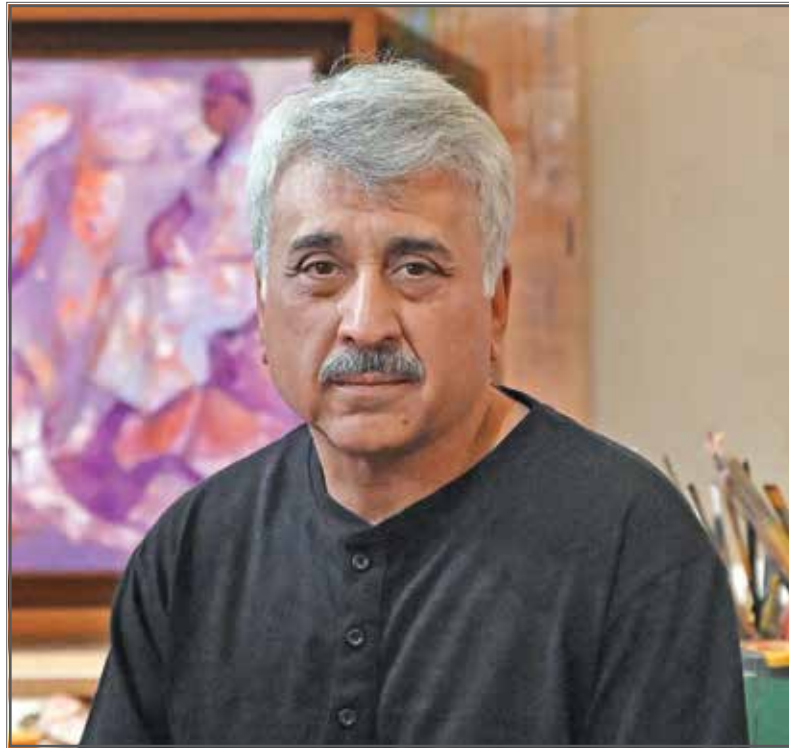
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## Shabir Hussain Santosh

**b. 1962**

*“For me conceptual metaphor is a product of the way human beings are and the way they interact with their physical and cultural environments.”*

Shabir Hussain Santosh crafts a distinct visual language rooted in abstraction, myth, and emotional memory. His works pulse with layered forms—figures dissolve and re emerge through tonal contrasts of shadow and light, often weaving in threads of mythology, feminine energy, and nature. Rendered in austere monochromes or vivid palettes of heat and hush. While his lineage traces back to G. R. Santosh, Shabir’s voice is entirely his own—reflective, intuitive, and contemporary. His art invites stillness, asking viewers to sense, not solve, what lies beneath the surface.

## CURATORIAL ESSAY

### Beyond myth and metaphor :

One of the most cherished things in the run-up to this piece on Shabir Hussain Santosh, that will stay with me for a very long time, is the luxury it afforded me to watch him work at his studio. Over numerous trips to his cosy studio in the unique Bharati Artists' Colony in East Delhi, I was fortunate to witness this genteel artist engage in solitude with his works—canvases that almost seemed to be speaking to him as he surveyed them in deep thought, then made mental notes on some sections of the works in progress, or gently lifted them up to be set aside for framing as he felt satisfied with what he had accomplished.

As I watched him work, wrapped in contented silence, over several wintery afternoons, a quote by the American painter Paul Jackson Pollock (1912-1956)—a major

figure in the abstract expressionist movement—kept bobbing up in my head like flotsam and jetsam of a long-lost cargo: **'Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is.'**

All those who have known this low-profile and soft-spoken artist would instantly agree that Shabir Hussain Santosh—a man of few words, refined demeanour, and innate grace—is best discovered through his painting and not by having a casual conversation over tea and snacks. Just as he discovers himself through his painting, we discover him through his works.

It is merely a coincidence that like Pollock's, Shabir's language too has, of late, veered towards abstractionism, with very pronounced shades of the fabular, which we will examine in greater detail a little ahead in this piece.

As new visitors to the art world of Shabir Hussain Santosh would gradually discover through his paintings in this comprehensive exhibition, his work is rooted in myths, both that humanity holds collectively as its heritage, and that we create personally as individuals.

### Painters as Mythmakers

Both the Western and Indian art worlds are replete with examples of paintings inspired by mythology. We have innumerable examples of the direct portrayal of Indian mythological heroes by artists in this part of the world—right from master painter of miniatures, Bichitr in Mughal emperor Jehangir's court in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary artists like Vikrant Bhise creating new mythologies related to the Dalit movement, and so much more. If we turn our gaze to the western hemisphere, we have

world-renowned examples of the paintings of western mythological characters and stories by the likes of the Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), the Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), or the French neo-classical painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), among several others.

But modern artists, both in India and the West, pushed the envelope long ago in creating nuanced portrayals of well-known stories and characters from humanity's shared pool of mythology. At one point in time, the famous work of American realist and impressionist artist John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), *Triumph of Religion*, which is a well-known landmark at the Boston Public Library, USA, was considered a representation of mythology with a 'modern' touch.

In the postmodern world, even that aforementioned 'modern touch' seems too direct a portrayal of mythology, a little puerile for contemporary aesthetic sensibilities that have seen and done far more with the aid of technology than was considered possible even half a century ago.

Postmodern artists have interpreted mythology in rather disruptive ways, often juxtaposing modern questions with ancient lores, and have achieved great success too. Some globally renowned names that immediately come to one's mind are the American Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) and American photographer Cindy Sherman (b. 1954), whose works have variously blended African, Graeco-Roman, Renaissance, Norse and Germanic myths with urban

concerns and even war-related trauma. Closer home, Pushpmala N. (b. 1956), the Bengaluru-based artist, has followed in Sherman's footsteps in creating photographic self-portraits but she interprets well-known Indian mythological characters in postmodern settings, and often questioning social ills, established conventions and popular beliefs.

### The Interpreter of Myths

Are these the only tropes available to artists processing mythology through their art, but would rather have it more personalised, internalised and less subversive? Of course, not! In between the worlds of realistic portrayal of mythology on one hand and its reinterpretation on the other, comes the fabular, that personalises the myth, locates it in the heart and mind of the artist and renders it as a relatable picture of postmodern mythology.

It is in this context that Shabir's work draws in a viewer instantly. Even if one doesn't understand the whole historical evolution of mythology in painting, there is something decisive that pulls in the onlooker, to engage with the characters and their stories, to understand their predicaments, join in their roller coaster, and just as easily, slip into the nuanced colouration and brushstrokes that slowly reveal the artist's signature.

Shabir is a voracious reader, and his studio, if you face away from the side where his easel and canvas are set, you might as well mistake it for an author's study. The tomes lining the shelves, wall to wall and floor to ceiling, are proof of how much of human history and mythology he has consumed to be able to distil it into his highly individual, myth-infused works that tread the middle territory between realism

and abstractionism. I spotted *The Planetary King: Humayun Padshah, Inventor and Visionary on the Mughal Throne*, by Austrian art and architectural historian Ebba Koch, lying close to his work table. It will not be a surprise to see elements from this encyclopaedic volume in some part of his ongoing works. "I have always been an avid reader, soaking up everything about rich mythology from every corner of the world," he says, surveying his study-cum-studio with fond eyes, resting every few seconds on some book which, perhaps, evokes some recollection.

**It is this distillation of mythology—extracted out of its original setting and placed gently on Shabir's canvas,** perhaps juxtaposed with a mythological character from some other timeframe, some other part of the world, and thereby allowed to engage and interact

organically—that lends his works the quality of a fable.

I take a while... in fact, more than one studio visit, to immerse myself fully into his nondescript yet strong characters that become a part of his narrative. It is only when my mind is satiated with the individuality of those innumerable characters that I decide to turn my attention to the brilliance of colours that one cannot help but notice on his canvases.

### Master Colourist

"I've been told by many that my colour mixing and colour schemes on canvases stand apart. I am not surprised at how many people comment on colour, when generally, onlookers are more likely to get intrigued by the theme of the painting. I must say I owe it to my father," says Shabir with a smugness that can only come from a legacy as rich as his, which

I would not delve on just yet but address later.

We shift our focus from the canvas to the palette, to see the mish mash of dried paint competing for attention with the fresh fluidity of paints from a just-opened jar or tube. Bright colours dazzle, catching your attention for the presence of rather unusual combinations. More often than not, a purple pulls you in. But wait! It's not a purple but streaks of red and blue reveal themselves, holding on to their individual identities.

"You see, brown is not just brown for a painter. For that matter, a particular shade of brown may work in a particular situation but not in another. To use it in my exact, specific context, I have to tweak it, twist it and get just the shade that I need. For a lay observer, this may not make much sense, but for a professional artist

and a connoisseur of art, these tiny details put together make all the difference in the way an art work shapes up," he explains.

The patient man that he is, Shabir then painstakingly elucidates his point with the different shades of blue and purple that he has succeeded in drawing out on different canvases. An important aspect about his painting to note here is that Shabir doesn't draw and then fill the canvas with colours. He directly paints, brushes and colour moving to the tempo of his thoughts as his mind simultaneously conjures up the imagery that needs to be expressed.

As one gradually listens to him explain the nuances, one is swept away into another fabular world where characters and colours created by the artist sway to the rhythm created by him, and him alone.

“I was very aware and anxious of painting as a young student, especially if I knew that my father was watching,” says the artist, recalling the time when he was a young student of art—he completed his Bachelor in Fine Arts (Painting) from College of Art, Delhi, in 1986. And his watchful father was the world renowned protagonist of neo-Tantra movement of Indian modern art, Ghulam Rasool Santosh (1929-1997).

Santosh senior would watch his son for a while and then come over and teach him the tricks, and apply paint on the son’s canvas in practical demonstration of the minute nuances that an individual artist perfects only after years of practice. “He would especially tell me the little intricacies that he himself had mastered after working in a particular technique for decades. Among those things,

**my sense of colour and its very specific application developed under his alert direction,”** says Shabir.

On other occasions, Shabir has mentioned to me how his father’s circle of friends—all renowned artists of their time such as K. S. Kulkarni, Bimal Das Gupta, J. Swaminathan, Sankho Chaudhuri, P. T. Reddy, Sunil Das, Paritosh Sen, Jeram Patel, Satish Gujral, Ram Kumar, A. Ramachandran, Shanti Dave, as well as writers such as Krishna Chaitanya, Santo Dutta, Richard Bartholomew, S. A. Krishnan, A. K. Dutta, Keshav Malik and Prayag Shukla—would converge and have deep discussions on art at their residence. “Those sessions would be so engrossing that I, as a young kid, would forsake playing outside with children my age, only to be able to listen to their profound conversations on art. I

cannot specifically pinpoint as to how many nuances of painting and understanding of the art world I picked up innately by just being a passive participant in those sessions,” says Shabir.

### **His Father’s Son**

So far, I have deliberately not touched upon a topic that is a matter of great pride for the artist but can easily become an elephant in the room if not addressed rightly. This topic is the heavy duty and weighted legacy that Shabir carries on his shoulders, of being the son of one of India’s most well-known and important modernists, Ghulam Rasool Santosh.

Given the fact that following in his father’s footsteps meant he would always be up for comparison, I must say that Shabir showed great courage in following his heart. He really couldn’t have helped being

his father’s son; **a lifelong love for painting was, after all, in his genes.** Nor could he have escaped growing up in the culturally rich atmosphere at home, given his father’s brilliance and the wide community of creative people that got agglomerated around him by virtue of him being a pioneer of a new movement in modern Indian art, the neo-Tantra movement.

A bigger act of bravery for Shabir was to have succeeded in creating a totally individual artistic vocabulary that bears no resemblance to his father’s well-known and signature language, of both pre- and post-Tantra phases. He paints like a painter should, in his own unique language, which has evolved gradually, giving strength to his identity and establishing him as a seasoned practitioner of the language of modern art.

The artist was born in New Delhi in 1962, the pre-Tantra phase of his father’s career; it was in 1964 that Santosh senior had an epiphanic spiritual experience in the Amarnath caves of Kashmir, one of the great seats of Shaivism. Ghulam Rasool was a Kashmiri born in Srinagar who had taken on his Hindu wife’s name Santosh as his own, in a bold step challenging established religious and patriarchal norms. Already an established artist known for his realist Kashmir landscapes, figurative works as well as an evolving abstractionist language, Santosh senior’s career catapulted to another level with Tantra, when his son was still in infancy. One can only conjecture the atmosphere that a young Shabir Hussain Santosh was exposed to right from his infancy.

“It was definitely not easy being my father’s son,” says Shabir, almost

with a whisper. By the time Shabir joined the College of Art, Delhi, in the early 1980s, his father was a towering personality in the world of modern Indian art, placed at the peak of the pyramid occupied by only a few other artists. Even much earlier, in 1979, his father had already won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his anthology of poems, *Besukh Ruh*.

“I feel incredibly lucky to be his son, to be the son of parents who were so ahead of their times. My father was a Kashmiri Muslim and my mother was a Hindu. In a move that was unheard of, he took her name, which must have silenced all their critics. Art was part of our lives and we grew up surrounded by paintings, poetry, literature, and more,” shares the artist.

It was that very atmosphere that encouraged the young boy to become independent in thoughts

early on, and strive towards finding his own path. Even just a quick glance at the artist's works from the past several years is enough to confirm his independence in thoughts and actions, and his strength to create a style for himself as an artist despite his father's aura. In a telling comment, his father's early works from his personal collection that hang on different walls of his studio occupy only a peripheral presence, without trying to overshadow the work of the current master of the studio, almost as if watching the son's works in admiration from afar.

Jasbir Santosh, his wife, became a member of the family when Santosh senior was at the peak of his popularity, a stalwart in the world of Indian art. "Right from the start, I was the most comfortable with him, and he really made me feel at ease in a new family—ours

was a cross-cultural marriage, after all. Plus, I knew nothing about the arts whatsoever," she recalls. It was this atmosphere of ease in which Shabir's career too was nurtured, and encouraged to chart his own path.

### **Painter with a Photographer's Eye**

As Shabir embarked on his own individual journey, along the way he discovered a love for photography that has evolved into almost like a second skin for him. It is difficult to decide if the beauty of his native Kashmir conceived the desire to take up the lens, or a love for photography helped him rediscover different dimensions of the stunning landscape of Kashmir. Either way, his photographs of Kashmir are expressionist studies of the superlative landscape that can evoke a range of emotions, especially if one makes multiple

visits to the place, and is able to find unison with the towering mountain peaks, lush valleys, dense forests, clouds like tufts of cotton, and air that is truly pure. Given Shabir's innate ability to find a connection beyond the mundane, he is able to see from the heart's eye, which results in his expressionist paintings and photographs.

Shabir shares that he goes to Kashmir regularly, taking off with his DSLR camera every few months, especially after an intense period of painting in his studio in New Delhi. "When I am working on my paintings, I get totally confined to my studio as I don't want to break the rhythm and momentum. But, after a few months, one needs a change of scene and I pick up my camera and head off to Kashmir. The outdoors provide a perfect foil to the preceding period of indoor work," he shares about the

balance that both kinds of work bring to his practice.

While speaking at length about his photography practice is beyond the scope of this write-up, one can't help but see some very obvious references of both in each other. His paintings, for instance, have a certain photographic quality—I'm not referring to photorealism—because even when populated with figures, they evoke a sense of duet that mountains, clouds, forests and rivers play with each other in the pristine landscape of the valley.

The way figures blend into the abstract background, the way different elements of a composition segue into each other, often punctured by rows of triangles that appear like mountains on the far horizon—all somehow point to the artist's subconscious mind registering

elements during his photography trips that take novel forms in his paintings. The palpable, emotional quality of his paintings, one can safely conjecture, owes to his expressionist tryst with the landscape of Kashmir.

And it surprises me, as I sit in solitude connecting dots about the environment and experiences that have shaped the art of Shabir, to realise that it was only a matter of time for mythmaking to become an integral part of this universe. It had to be the spine around which all the sentient aspects of the artist's practice—his unique, emotional response to painting as well as to the landscape of Kashmir—would come together, like the hydrogen bonds that join nucleic acids forming the ladder in the double helical DNA strands. Just as the DNA gives an individual their characteristics, so does mythmaking give primary

character to the art of Shabir Hussain Santosh.

In sublimating the numerous mythological stories and characters from all over the world through the filter of his photographic eye, years of painterly training, unique colour creation, and ability to translate his reticence with the spoken word into a bustling language on the canvas, Shabir Hussain Santosh creates a world of fables that is not set in stone but open for unique interpretation of each onlooker. Now, let us see what we make of it.

**Archana Khare Ghose**





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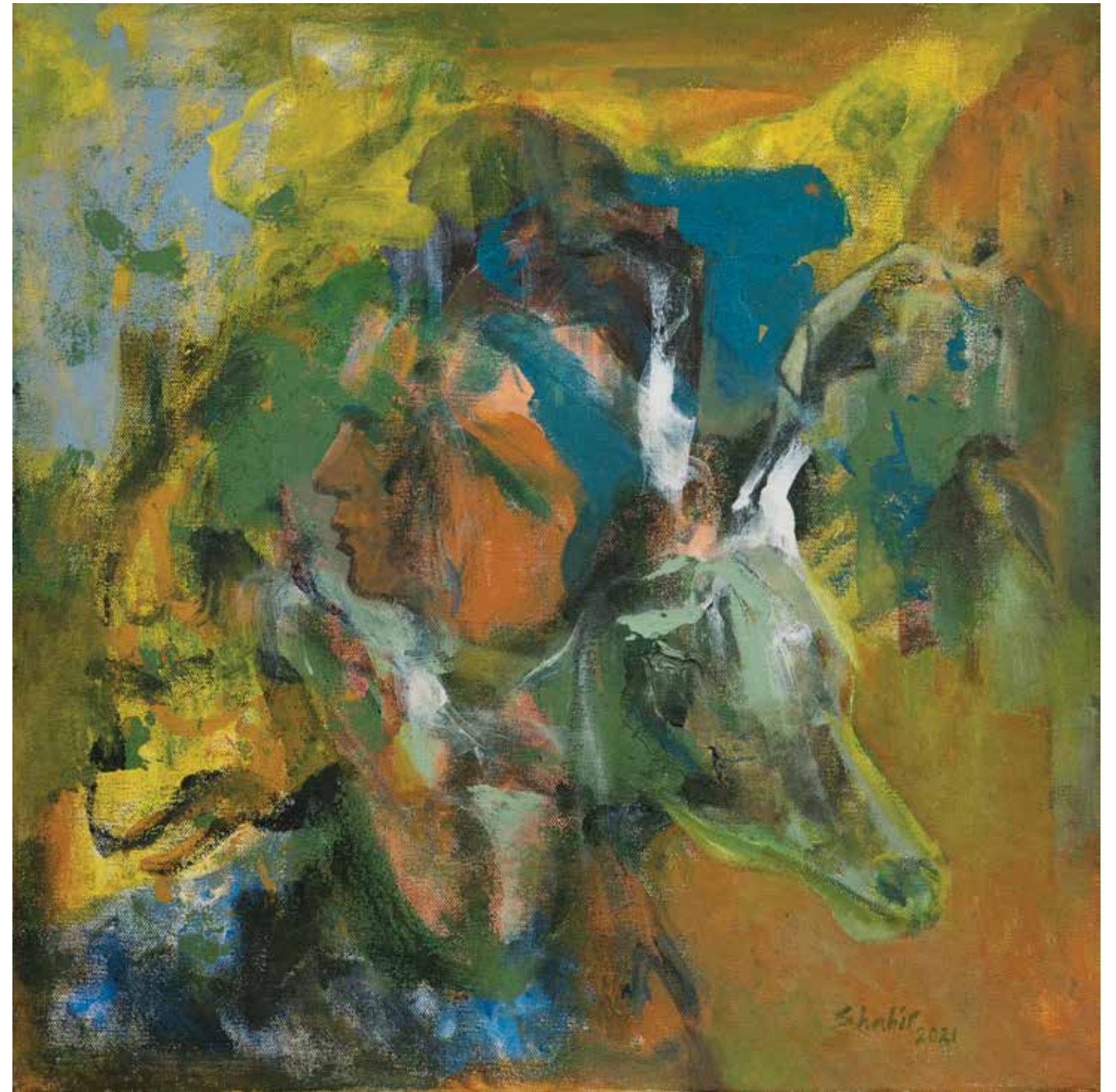
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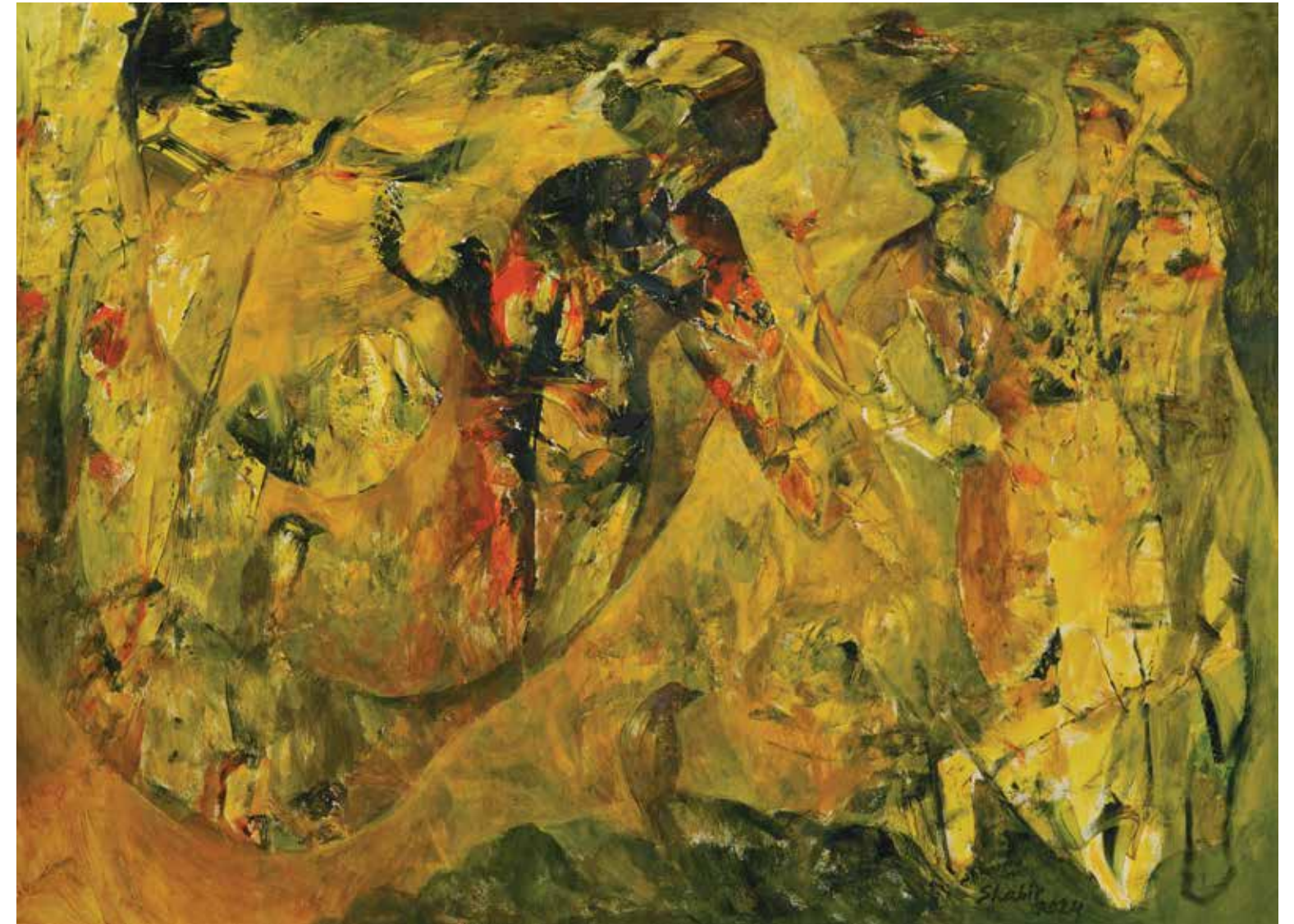
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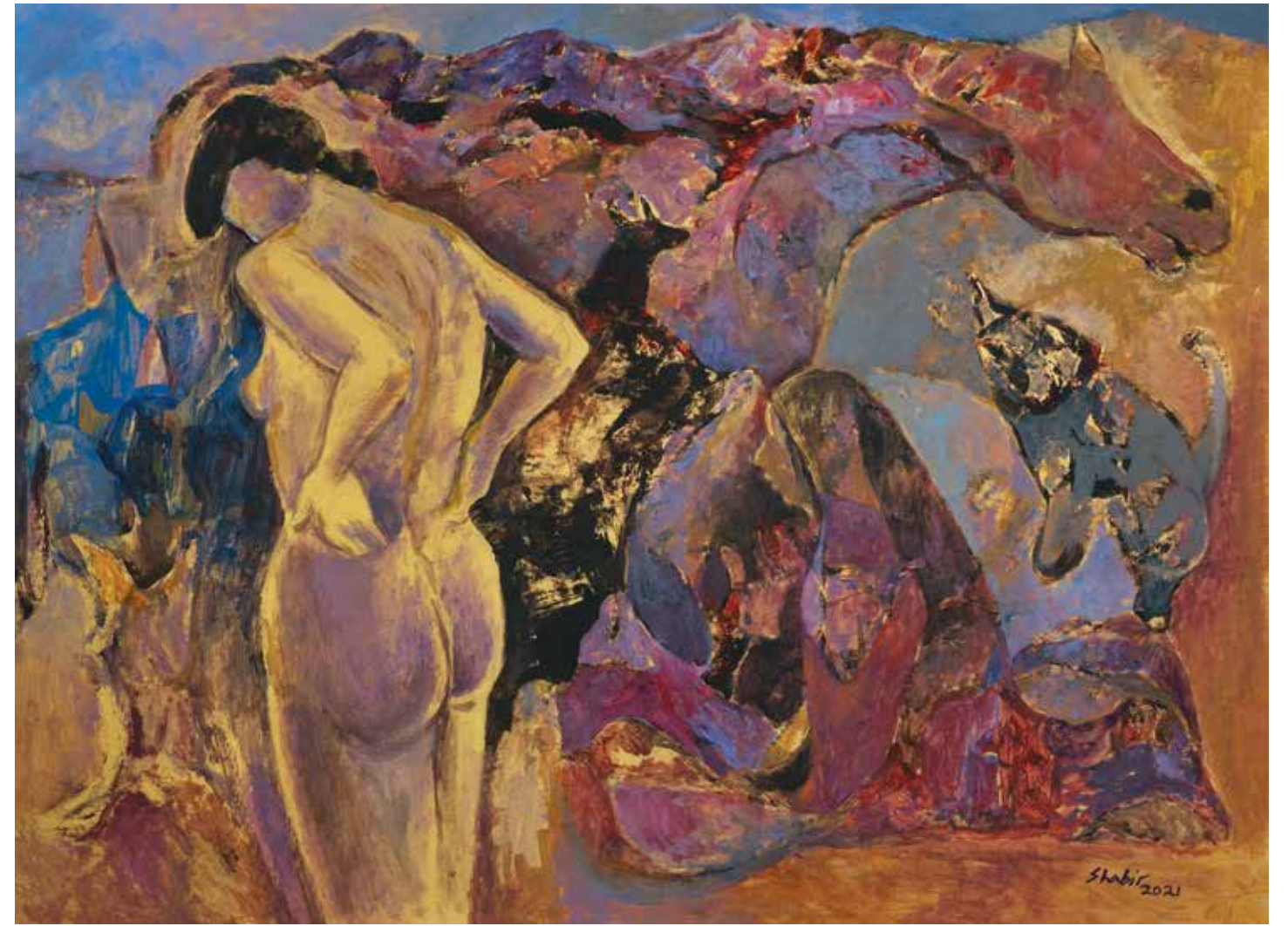
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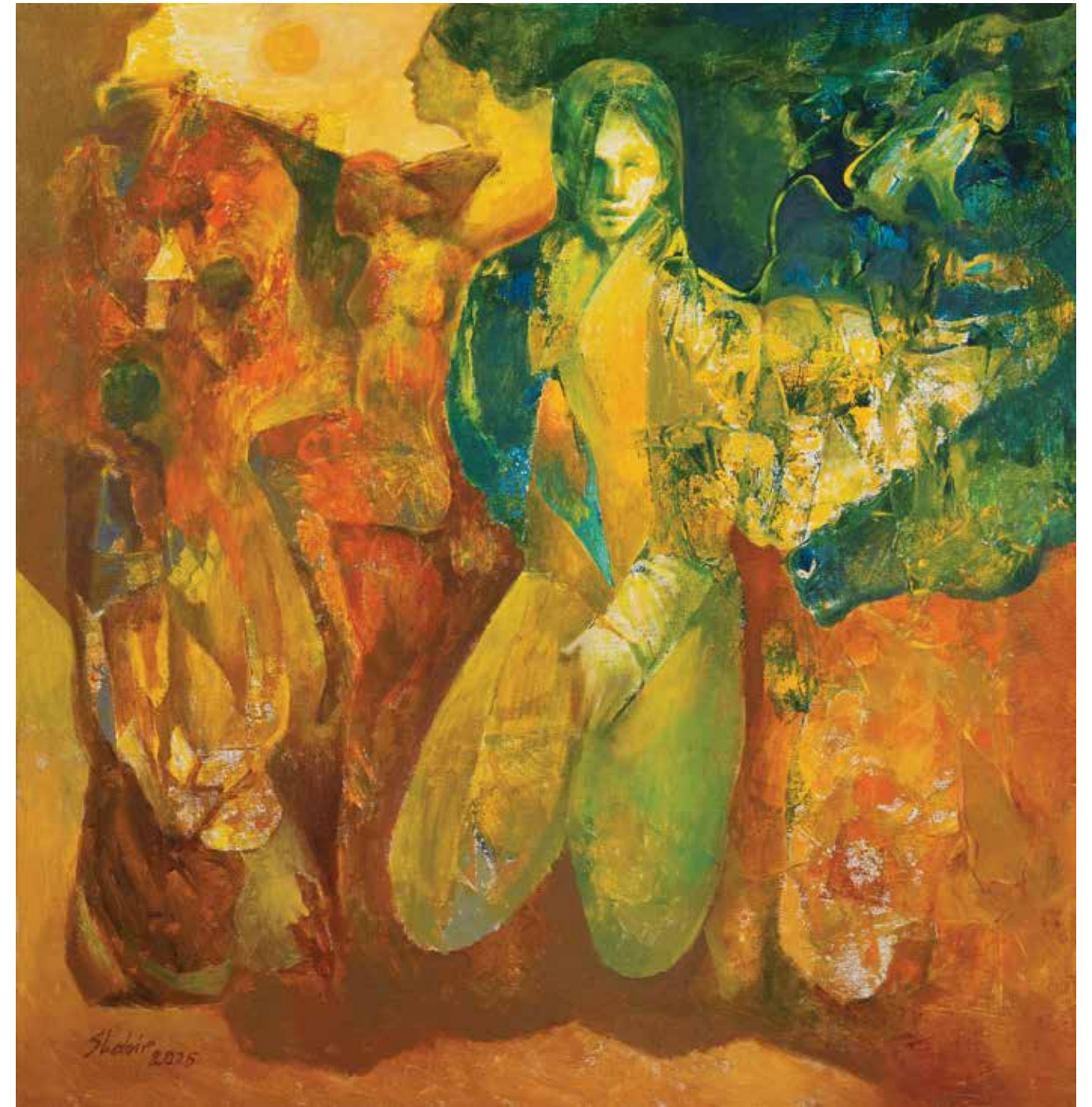
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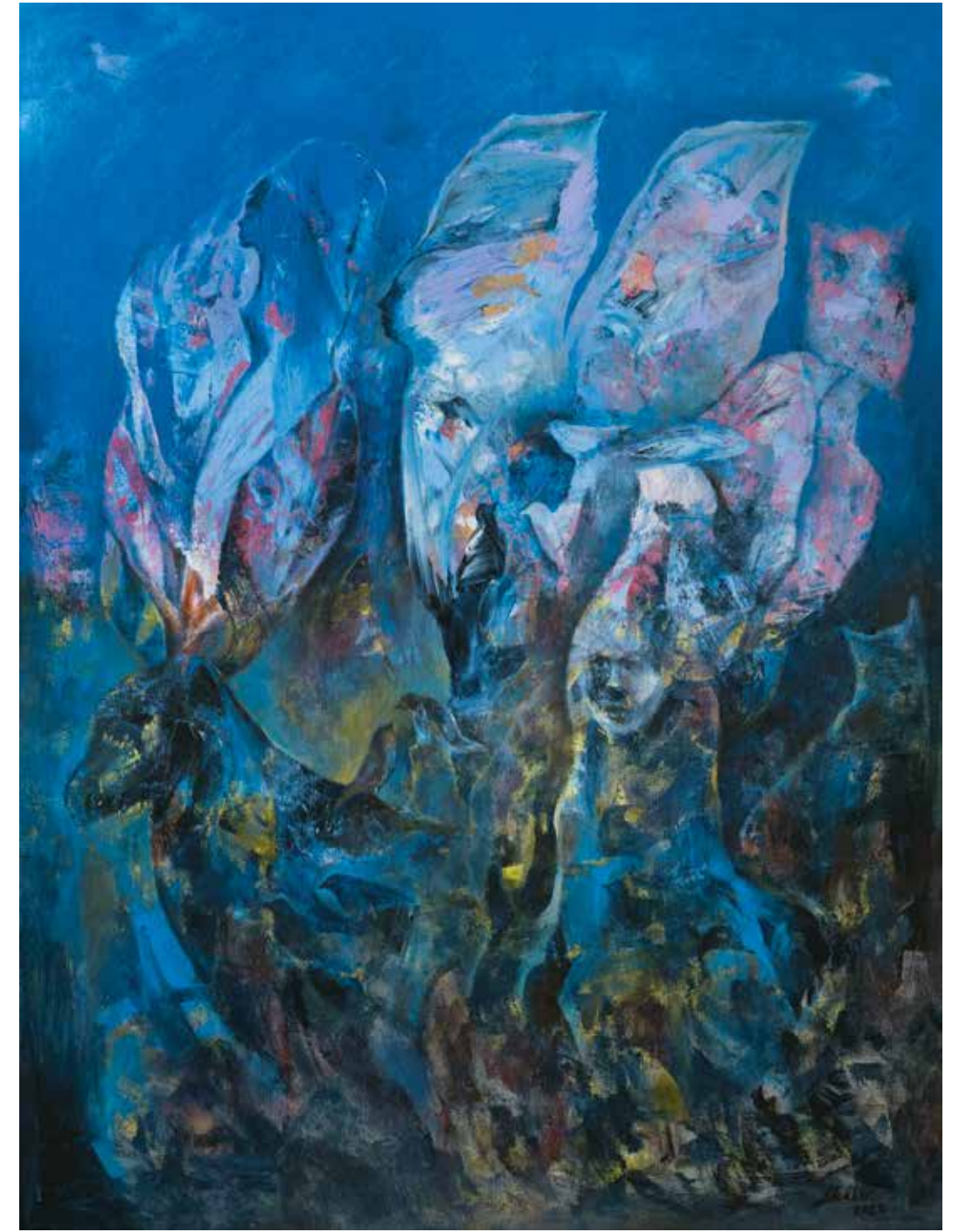
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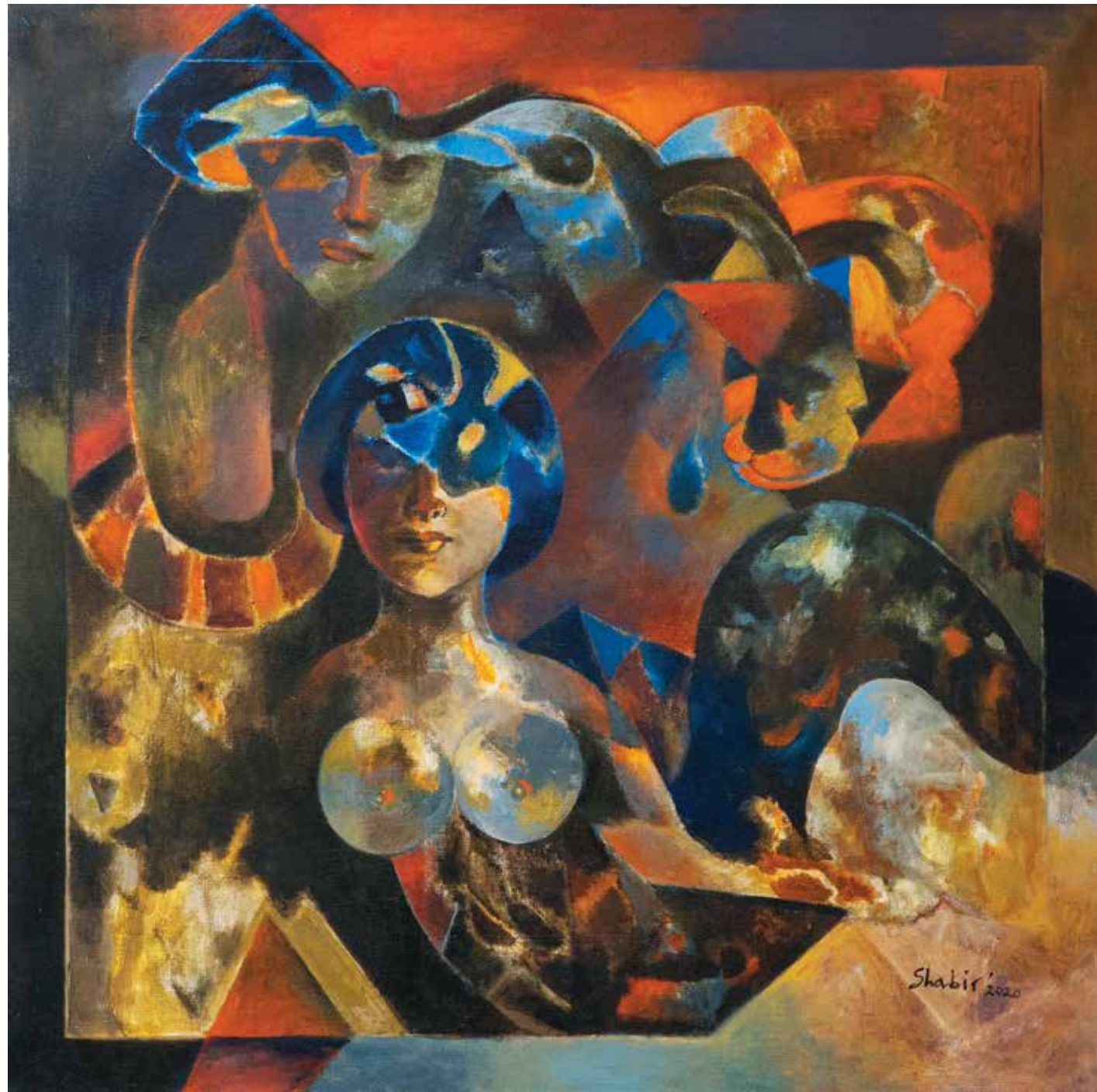
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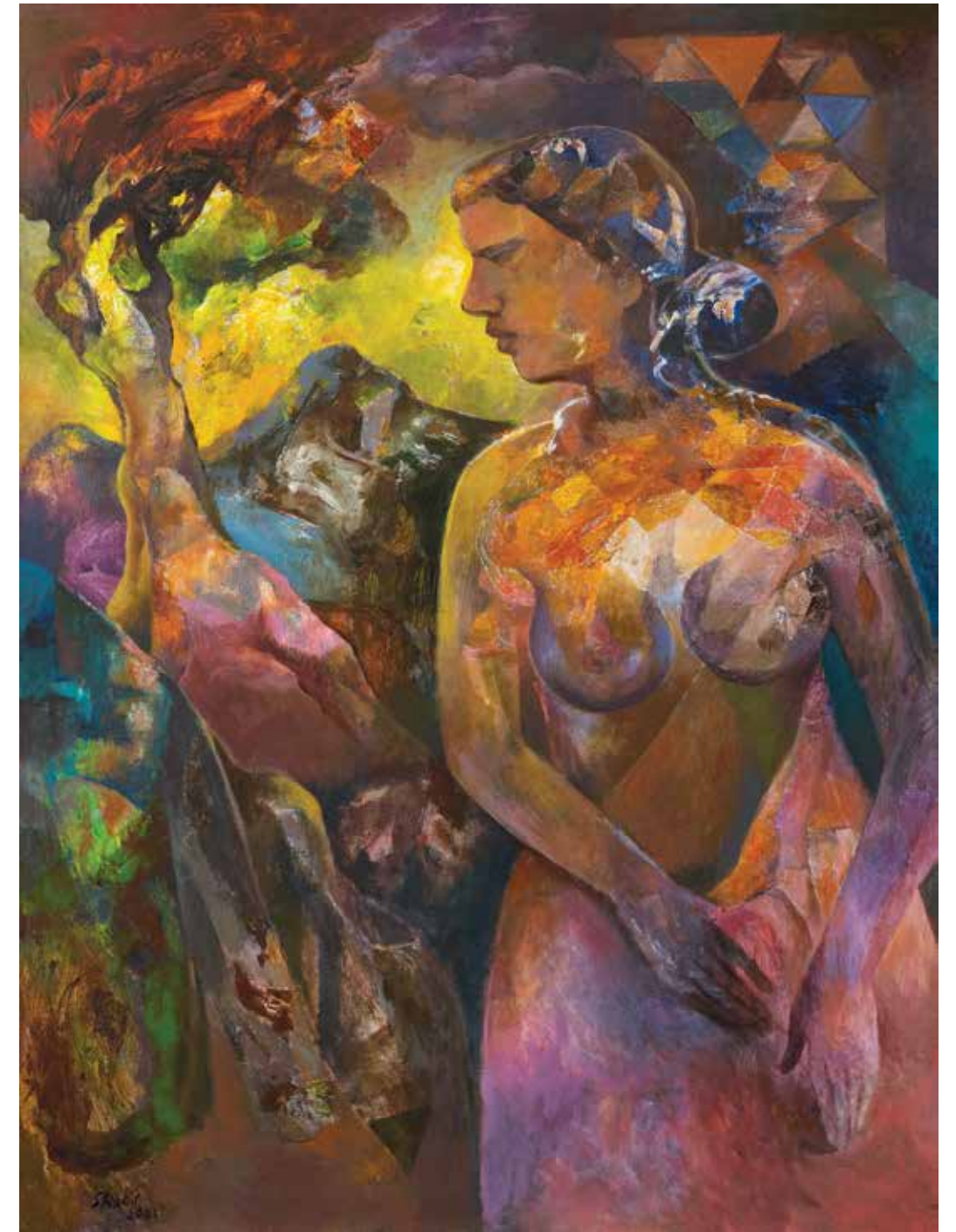


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