

Interview with Mamta Baruah Herland  
by Pranjal Mudoj

➤ **Current status**

Living and working full time as fine art artist at a studio in a town just at the outskirts of Oslo in Norway.

➤ **Native place/ village of Assam**

Laluk in Lakhimpur (close to Arunachal border Itanagar)

➤ **About parents and siblings**

My father was late Dr. Upendra Nath Baruah and mother Sri Moti Annada Kumari Baruah. While we were little, my father received an All India scholarship and left to in Sunderland, England. However, due to his own health condition that started with Astma the decided at that time decided to return to Assam in 1973. My mother who was apparently healthy and took care of my father and the family however died of cancer in may 1990. Three years later too my father died of cardiac arrest in July 1993. I have two brothers still living at Laluk in the district of Lakhimpur and a sister now living and working as lecturer at SNDT women's University in Mumbai at the department of textile. I am the youngest in the family.

➤ **Schooling and professional/formal education**

I can't remember where I started my first schooling but I guess that would be the time at LP school at Laluk, followed by long list of schoolings from school at Sunderland (UK), Ipswich (UK), High school at Laluk, Lakhimpur girls' school and very briefly in Tezpur before I finally completed my Metric examination from Laluk. I first started my college at North Lahimpur, then again got my self transferred to the following three different places in India; Shillong, Guwahati and Madras.

I had constantly tried different roads in my studies to get where I am today as I always hated studies, felt I had very little motivation because didn't know what I wanted. I completed my pre-university degree from Shillong College in Meghalaya. Later I was admitted to BA degree course at Cotton College in Guwahati but I decided to travel to Madras where my older brother was doing his Engineering degree. My plan was to do a diploma course in computer instead, and find a regular job. Well, I didn't come that far before I had an opportunity to move to Norway, I was offered a place at FHS, Folkehøyskole. This was for me a unique opportunity to experience Norwegian culture and nature, learn Norwegian, and participate in an array of exciting activities along with other young people from the rest of the world. It is a place where one does not have usual classes. They offer certain lines/groups which one can choose freely on their own. Once joined a line it should be the main group for the rest of the year.

After completing the year, I continued with subjects within the dept of science at the University of Oslo. Except after a while I decided to take a break from study as to work and earn some money to support myself. I realized during that period when my artistic abilities were becoming rather transparent to my friends and colleagues, and it was only after I got married in 1994 I took my vision as a serious ambition and moved to study art instead. While we moved to Australia in relation to my husband's job, I took the possibility to study Visual Arts at Sydney College of Arts, and later coming back to Norway I went to do Graphic Design in Oslo in order to combine Art and Design.

I worked for a Norwegian art magazine 'Kunst for Alle' and also at an advertising company in Oslo before finally I went to England to complete a Fine Art Masters

degree. I was also offered to pursue PhD studies within digital art at Camberwell College in London as a continuation of a research in new media that I instigated in my MA standard, but soon found out to be too theoretical and decided to end my further education. I thought as an artist it was important to focus in the practice of art rather becoming an art theoretician.

➤ **First painting and formal training in painting**

My first painting was traditional linoleum cut print, which I made in the first year of my cross-disciplinary study at NFH in Norway in 1987. I am still very proud of that work. I had pressed out black pigment on a special paper. It was my spontaneous effort to create a character of melodrama and desperation through implication of light revealing a woman's profile. I don't know why I portrayed this particular character then but somehow I guess it was a reflection of my own approach at that time of my life.



*Desperation 1987*

However my formal training begins in about 1997, when we returned from Australia. With lots of inspirations, passion and strength I worked both at night and day. During those days I was basically making paintings of nature and landscapes using brush and oil paints. I have had few exhibitions already by 2000 and sold a number of paintings.

➤ **Inclination towards painting**

My inclination towards painting became more apparent only in my adult age. I didn't show any sign of talent in my early age because I guess to become an artist was not considered as a real profession and I never did put colour into canvas in those days. On the other hand I enjoyed doing performance (acting) and was fascinated by films and stories. Nevertheless, it was seen as an unattainable ambition where no parents living in a small place like Laluk would feel safe to let a young girl move around with a camera crew of men. However success of becoming an artist came to me with many failures and my emotional beliefs. And, more I travelled more I have become stirred and captivated by the vision of beauty of the world that always enforced me to capture the sensations of those experiences the way I know best.

I also consider art activity as a way of getting freedom and creative expression. And painting was the only way I saw was possible to portray those visions with an intention to stimulate others. Furthermore, my artistic expression is my way of capturing the different ideas and vision which I constantly experience and perceive in my daily life.

I usually do not like reading much, and never had patient enough to finish reading a book to the end. Rather my interest lies in experimentation and exploration of new techniques and new tools. In the western world art practises are changing rapidly due to the internet, digitalisation, and globalisation and so on. Digital art (or *computer art*) is a recent, yet relentlessly evolving form of expression used by many artists world wide to extend the potentials of traditional painting, photography and graphic design, thus allowing these three realms to mutually influence each other. During my studies in England, I realized that is an opportunity for artists to exercise the timely media to reflect various artistic expressions.

➤ **Journey from Assam to Norway**

As I have mentioned earlier, my road to Norway was no smooth highway. While I was at college I always wanted to travel, explore and meet other people. The last thing I wanted to do was to study sciences or study at all. And due to constant alterations from my educational institutes in India, I was not able to establish permanent friends circle in Assam then, except few family friends. As far I remember, our family in Assam was a very happy one, but I can't say that I was a happy child, and at all times missed my parents who were suffering from bad health, and it was always like a dark cloud hanging over my head wherever I made my move. Since I moved out from Laluk apparently for the purpose of studies, I was basically on my own drifting away longing for something more exciting and liberating. At that time a friend of mine living in Denmark moved to Norway encouraged me to come to Oslo, and that was also a reason I had chosen Norway instead of another country. During my first year of study in Norway during 1986-87 I looked for a part time job at a retired home in order to finance myself, where all the employees and the elderly people became my own big family. This was also a very effective way I have learned to speak Norwegian in practice instead of only theory, advantage was also that usually elderly people converse slowly and therefore it was easy both to converse and understand. I have since continued living on my own until I met my husband in 1993, and the year after we got married. We have been travelling a lot since then.

➤ **Your medium of art/ painting**

As an artist I use number of methods and mediums to communicate ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Although I have my Masters Degree from the department of painting, I basically like using computer as my tool to create digital collages and digital paintings. The medium was relatively new and most of the artists were not confident about employing it at that time. Moreover, I have integrated few of my graphic design skills learned for the purpose of commercial use and into a process of non commercial original art work. The source of my artistic activities generally originates from my own archive of photography that are being transformed, and in many cases synthesized with available computer software. Furthermore, my paintings sometime undergo a process of applying layers of manual laser photo transfers on canvas and splashing paints on the same canvas. It is when I find art as serious, playful, sentimental and yet as intellectual challenges. This way I like my work to expand in different possible artistic dimensions and genre that future combine the aesthetic of technology with a sense of spirituality and transcendental emotion. I prefer diversification working with

different ideas and expression and have no intention of confining myself to a specific medium, style or a genre.

➤ **Favorite medium of painting**

My favorite medium of painting is Mixed Media, where I can incorporate most of my other creative practices by means of different medium into a single art work. It is rather the process- originating from an idea, finding source materials, manipulating and reconstructing events, and finally transferring to the paper or canvas with final application of paint generating originality and uniqueness.



*Dimension*

➤ **Other favorite forms of art**

Video is another area I enjoy working with as this is a unique way to capture a true living moment, where the expressions are more authentic unless it is staged by the artist. As an example, while I visited Lahimpur town for a day, I had a possibility to witness a baby monkey that was caged in a box and being watched as an object of an entertainment whereas I felt extremely suffocated and distressed for the soul of this baby monkey. This simple video clip which I named 'Monkey Business' can be watched now at the website <http://www.youtube.com/user/mamta07>

➤ **What r the themes of your art forms and favorite amongst these**

Usually my themes vary according to my surroundings and mood, and now days mostly have to consider both the creative and the marketing strategy as well. But things that I most would like are the landscapes around the world that imposes some surrealistic sense to me yet sensation of spiritual uplift. I like an aesthetic to sustain in all my paintings either through theme or color. However, since as an artist I do want to speak in different artistic languages and experiment ideas, in most cases it becomes project based and therefore conceptual in nature.

➤ **Inspiration behind art work**

My first and soul inspiration came from the nature's four basic elements air, earth, fire and water that incorporates references to the word 'Alchemy' , and by the most powerful fact that fire lives the death of earth and air lives the death of fire, water lives the death of air, earth that of water.

However in course of my artistic journey I have become more driven by what is new and seem to be unique, to create images that simulate the imagination of the onlooker instead of being the expression of imagination of the creator. Nevertheless the underline of my work is in some way to stimulate feelings despite the media used.

I am known to be a very sensitive person. I can hardly watch certain movies or plays without tears running from my eyes. I also have active subconscious mind even while asleep, dreams of surreal imageries that I interpret symbolic to my life. I think it is important to understand that what we call surreal is in fact a realism of the subconscious and not the matter of fairy tales or fantasy. It is predominantly the subconscious where originates inspiration behind my activities.



*Heaven & the Earth*

➤ **Place of nature in your work**

I like to engage myself mainly in the interpretation of inner and outer landscapes where land, people and places takes shapes to a creative atmosphere of wonder and imagination through which unifying various aesthetic expressions. It is important for me that my works directs to a common passion, for I believe nothing in the universe can ultimately resist the cumulative worship of the collective soul. I also celebrate personal insights and individualism and want my vision to resonate with positive energy and follow the path towards nature's truth where I live my passion and rejoice in my creativity.

➤ **How do u see lives and people and how do they reflect in your work**

As I have become knowledgeable, I am able to distinguish lives, and people as truly spiritual beings, and realized that the feeling of 'pain' is the same for each and every one of us and is a common denominator. Recently I am thinking about the landscape of the spirits of human kind, the life that they share and somehow contribute to the mass spiritual world. It was quite a stimulating and thought provoking moment for me to experience how simple yet how complex we make our life to be.



*Thirst*

Themes like child labor and abuses, climate changes, self irony are being expressed through my work few times. I have contributed three works to CAUSE and one to the Common Ground touring exhibition.

[http://www.myartspace.com/viewer/gallery/?subscriberid=sc3q4fpyh9qcbvp1&gallery\\_id=w00umlzy59xzaaa2](http://www.myartspace.com/viewer/gallery/?subscriberid=sc3q4fpyh9qcbvp1&gallery_id=w00umlzy59xzaaa2)

I am at present working in a project that highlights a collective emotional and spiritual energy which can be perceived as an expansion of free flowing pattern of liberating ideas and voices creating characters, places, believes and attitudes in a prevalent global picture. I believe that the way dynamics of spiritual energies taking shape at the age of global communication, interactions, digitalization, multiplication, ubiquity, abundances and so on will change the way we see the world and it will only broaden our mind and give us meaning of our time. Remote places and ideas are now being exposed in an enlarged pattern of spiritual energy shaping to a unique common showground with the message of integrity. I believe this idea has an analogy to the philosophy of Alchemy, all which is about spiritual rebirth and renewal. However, the main objective of my work is creating work that resonate positive energy and evoke emotion. I have different category of works and each category of my work incorporates sensitivity with existing means of technology that improvises various tools and mediums accessible. For the most part I work within the domain of digital art, acrylic and mixed media paintings, and video. The themes and issues are often being stimulated by journey of my own experiences as being born in Assam, India, have travelled various countries, residing in Scandinavia, having experiences of different landscapes and culture therefore being influenced by immense diversities. As a result I find myself contemplating the colorful shades of the worldly and the spiritual blend that somehow exists in coherence and it is where I am discovering the aesthetics of all kinds.

➤ **Again what's the role of people/ human nature/ humanity in your work**

I believe the basic role of people is to share and spread knowledge, being responsible and to be their own spiritual leader. Here art plays an important cultural and political role being vehicle of communication with different messages that hopefully spring some empathy and accomplishment. We should cultivate peace and prevent human

rights abuses. It is especially in the interior places like in India where women and children undergoes most obscured torments, where they are unprivileged, deprived and have no means of learning, and sadly no action has been taken by the law.

➤ **What of human being attracts u more- human sorrows/sufferings or happiness and why**

Oddly, sufferings attract me more than happiness in this world, as from my own sorrows of lost, struggle, loneliness and feelings of need I empathize the emotional damages that could cause in another person. However sorrows in others somehow tend to lighten spiritual magnificence and impose impact on others. It is because it poses questions and preaches one what really happiness is. Or is there happiness? How do we define happiness? How can we manifest happiness in the material world? Quest for predictions and believes are more enlivening then living each second in presence, it is like walking to an edge of a cliff where one reaches the pinnacle of the truth where there is no return.

➤ **Thought about Assam from abroad**

As you know I have been away from Assam for a long time and less I saw more I got detached, especially after my father died in 1993. However no matter how brief my visit was each time after 2002, I have come back with great bearings in my mind. Well, because I guess I have matured, learned and for the first time I was able see Assam from a distance and with a clear comparative vision and also with an objective approach. I am now able to value the uniqueness it has of its own. Assam has a beautiful green landscape, tea-states, wildlife, Bihu festivals, Muga, Slik, rivers and oil that are unique to the state, moreover with the tribal's around Assam further enhancing its diversities. I became aware that there also exists a total spiritual coherence even being inhabited in a great chaos and dirt. What I like most of Assamese is that we love simplicity but I must say that I also noticed that Assamese people have little laid back attitude. Don't you think?

I feel it is important to preserve the authenticity of Assam, its language and its culture. Although, by spreading knowledge I also mean that people of Assam should focus critically about hygiene and health issues. How will it be possible for Assam to attract foreigners/tourists to a country where there is no decent public restroom? I strongly think basic education should be free and compulsory in Assam, at least to the elementary level where one could read, write and understand. It doesn't mean that they need to be doctors and engineers or need any kind of college degree. It is only necessary to be able to read instructions and signs to follow the rules and laws imposed by the government for the sake of corporate benefit and welfare of Assam.

➤ **Few lines about u and your hubby/ present life**

I met my husband, Geir Herland in 1993 in Oslo and married the following year. We have no children. Geir is a business consultant and have worked in various management positions in mostly IT and Telecom companies. It was Geir who basically inspired me in my career in Art. He is kind and generous in nature, and we have visited India together few times, but it was in October 2006 he visited Assam for the very first time. Being a Norwegian living in rich and beautiful scenic land, he too appreciated Assam's remarkable nature and kind, and warm people.

Geir is a reader, but also likes to go skiing, both cross country and slalom. I have to admit that skiing is not one of my favorites even after so many years living in Norway.

However sometime I force myself to give others company. But I would occasionally like to cycle and swim. Together we have traveled different countries, like the US, Spain, Italy, England, France, Germany, Greece, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Sweden, Denmark as well as traveled nearly all over Australia before we left for home in 1997.

➤ **Honors and exhibitions**

I have won few art prizes, among others for the work titles 'All about Me, Me & Me'. This work has been constructed by hundreds of small photos I have taken of my self and reconstructed by replicating to a large single portrait. It was my commentary on female obsession and vanity.



*All about Me, Me & Me - 07*

I have exhibited internationally, amongst galleries in New York, London, Madrid, Barcelona and Ferrara, Italy and participated in the International Biennale of Art in Florence (Firenze) in December 2005. My art video works were shown in Russia at the Novosibirsk State Art Museum – 'Temporary Identities', and in Moscow, NCCA, National Centre for contemporary arts, 'Video Arts', and also in USA, Indiana University Kokomo Art Gallery – 'Indiana International Video Art'. In addition to private collectors, my works are purchased by commercial companies, The Norwegian Council of Cultural Affair Municipalities in Norway, City council in England, Oslo International School and The organizing committee of Guanlan International Print Biennial in China. At present I am member of few non-profit artists' organization, in one of them where I am also the chair person, and therefore it requires lot of responsibilities and follow ups.

I am planning to have a solo exhibition at Nehru centre in Mumbai in 2009. I would also like to arrange an exhibition in Assam in the future but have not been able to establish any contact so far.

Mamta B. Herland, 13.03.08  
[www.mamtaart.com](http://www.mamtaart.com)