

Confronting Mythology

*"My brother said be careful,
My sister said beware.
When you're walking on the sidewalk
You'd better walk with care.
You'd better pay attention
And listen to these facts,
'Cause your life will be in danger
If you step on any cracks."*

— Children's author **Crystal Bowman**

ARTIST Renee Kumar has been paying attention to the cracks in the sidewalk.

When her oldest child entered his junior year of high school, Ms. Kumar began riding her bicycle around her West Windsor neighborhood to help cope with the stress of the college search.

"It was like being a kid again, as well as a good way to get exercise," she says. Looking down at the cracks in the sidewalk, she was reminded of the artist Paul Klee, and she began to see images in the cracks. Sometimes it made her think of clouds, other times, the cave paintings of Lascaux, France. And the images got her imagination working, telling stories.

Two years later, the result is *Cracks in the Road and Other Stories*, an exhibit of 30 watercolors with handmade paper on view at the Queenstown Gallery in Hopewell through July 10.

"These are very deep pieces," says Marc Udell, who has owned the gallery for the past year. He first met Ms. Kumar when she was part of a *Watercolor Anarchy* show at the gallery, and has since become a collector.

As he talks, Ms. Kumar arrives at the gallery with her last work for the show, hot off the press: "Karma: Wheel of Miss Fortune." From a distance, it looks like a Ferris wheel, and there are symbols on the paper that look like they are from another culture, another time. Ms. Kumar is less interested in the literal messages of these symbols than she is in the emotions they evoke.

She recounts a story from when she had been gallery sitting at the Gallery at Mercer County Community College, where she had a work, "Jacob's Ladder," exhibited in the Mercer County Artists show. It contained paper with Chinese writing on it, and at the suggestion of a friend, Ms. Kumar used the paper upside



With lyrical titles and saturated colors pieced with text and handmade papers, Renee Kumar faces the shadowfield

down. A visitor to the gallery offered to translate it for her: "Going toward the light."

"Now that's karma," says Ms. Kumar.

For another painting, "Surrender Dorothy," she uses the found letters "ept," because there is a pregnancy in the work. The painting's title came from a friend who had been laid off from a corporate job. "She was a beautiful woman who was suddenly dumped and wondering where her bearings are," says Ms. Kumar. "How will she move on? Will she surrender, or find the strength to move on in mid life?"

Ms. Kumar's titles are often lyrical, and she says this is because she used to write poetry. Sometimes the title comes first, sometimes she creates the title after the painting has been completed. It all has to do with movement, she says, and the titles and pieces begin to evolve.

Besides Klee, other artists who have influenced Ms. Kumar include Miro, Georgia O'Keeffe and Alexei von Jawlensky. Her husband, Teddy, who is senior technical director, vision and robotics, at Sarnoff Corp., was the inspiration for "The New Archetype."

"He was talking about making computers have feelings," she says. "So I began to wonder what the archetype for children in the future would be, when robots and computers have feelings. This image was the inspiration for the show."

Ms. Kumar, who grew up in Boxford, Mass., and studied developmental psychology and children's creativity at the University of Massachusetts, where she also met her husband, didn't pick up a paint brush until she was in her 30s. She has studied with local painters Barbara Osterman, Pat Martin, Margaret Johnson and Patricia San-Soucic.

"I love texture, and free play with paint," she says. Reading Joseph Campbell, "I learned that the job of the artist is to bring forth myth. I went very deep, and it was a painful, personal process. To be given a show is an honor, an open-ended and free way to explore the self."

In her painting "Life is a Myth/Play in the Shadowfield," "you find the difficult, ugly parts of yourself you have to make peace with," she says. "The shad-