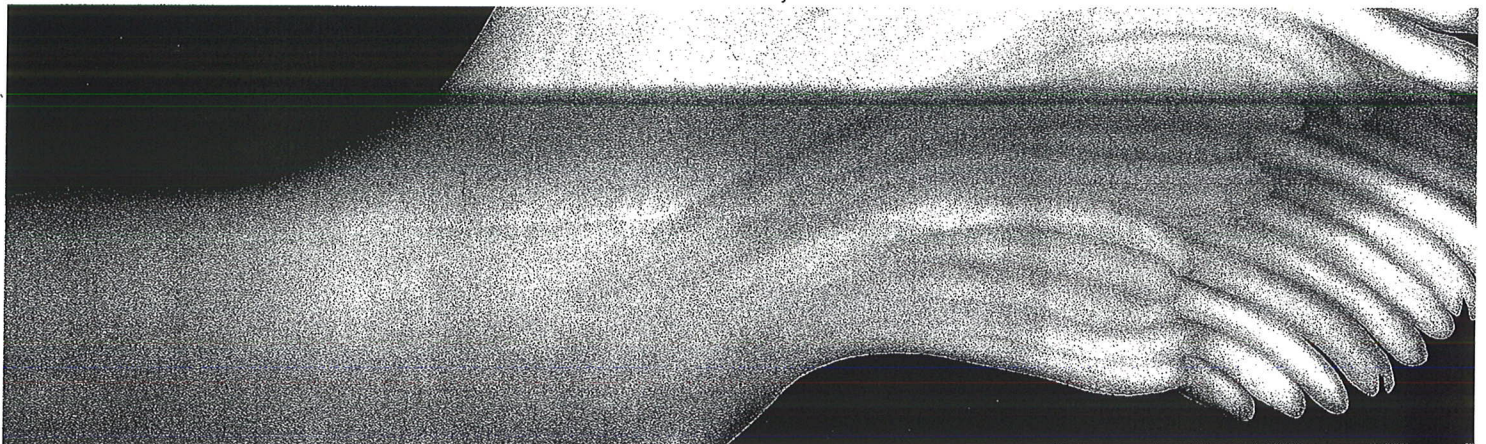
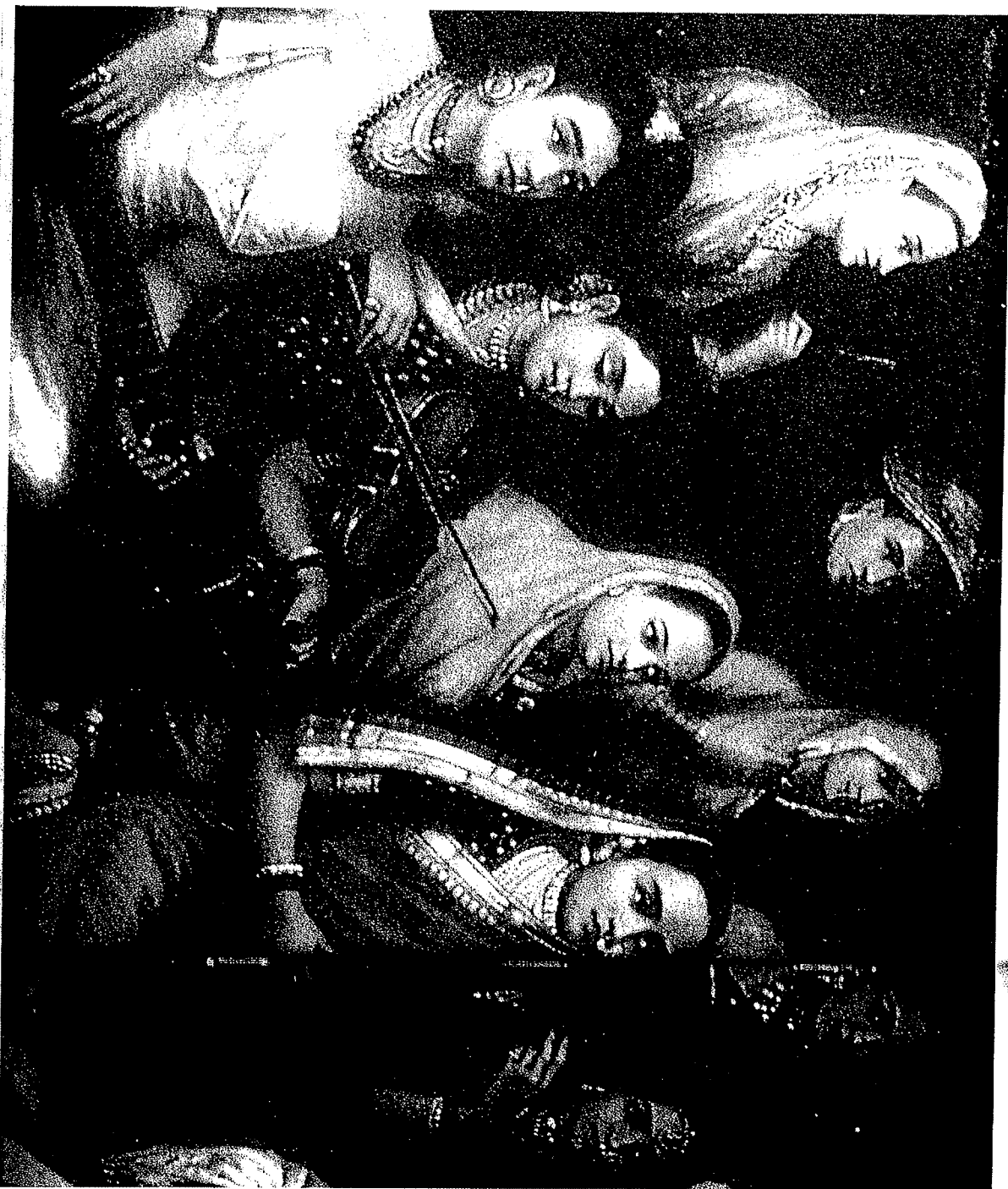


O T H E R R E A L I T I E S

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1
Ravi Varma
"Galaxy", 1893
Oil on canvas
Collection:
Jagan Mohan Palace, Mysore

Introduction

Even as the definitive contours of contemporary Indian art begin to get formed, it is worth noting that there is a constant gestative friction which it has to contend with. It is an art which, linked with the uneven course of history on the one hand and on the other with hybrid international influences, leads at its best to successful negotiations with the "other". The period of birth itself was fraught with ambivalent intent. The art institutions established by the British by the mid-19th century facilitated a knowledge of Western neo-classical art albeit through the backdoor with the initial attempt being to develop the "craft" tradition. This was to lead to an even greater ambiguity as the students were on the one hand taught to "imitate" reality and on the other to adhere to their own indigenous techniques and finally to achieve a successful fertilization of two contrary modes. The J.J. School of Art in Bombay for instance submits in its annual report of 1857-58:

Another point is to bring Indian designers face to face with nature. Their tendency is to repeat traditional compositions which have come down to them from a distant age without refreshing or even glancing at real life. Hence they degenerate instead of improving. The grotesque images with the shapes of men and animals in all parts of the Hindu temple are unredeemably bad. Their sculptured foliage is purely abstract in character. It seems that the safest way of attempting to regenerate this defective and artificial manner of design without destroying what it has inherited from European schools of art is to set the student to copy faithfully the objects of nature, men and women, the beast, vegetation, the mountains that surround him and to leave him to digest the knowledge thus acquired. Thus, a school of design would in time arise, native in the best sense, owing its sense of accuracy, truth, and natural beauty to European inspiration but moulding its material into purely Indian types.¹

However, it was with Ravi Varma who used naturalistic means to paint subjects from his own environment that European academic art began to make an impact on the Indian imagination. Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was not the product of British academies, but had taught himself the art of oil painting by watching the Dutch painter



2
Amrita Sher-Gil
"Brahmacharis"
Oil on canvas; 86.5 x 144 cm
Collection: National Gallery
of Modern Art, New Delhi



Theodore Janson in the Travancore court. He made paintings which depicted people from his surroundings dressed in their traditional costume. Their alluring quality and iconic stances met with popular success (figure 1). Even more in demand were his historical-mythological scenes which invoked a sense of national self-esteem.

Decrying the Western means used by Varma, a specifically indigenous method of painting was introduced by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and his followers. The Bengal School, as it came to be called, made rarefied pictures which drew from many Indian art-historical sources: Mughal miniatures, Ajanta murals, as well as the Japanese wash technique. The orientalist mode of the Bengal School had little to do with contemporary reality while romantic notions of a monolithic "Indian" past which was in some way heroic was itself a fallacy. The works however were beautifully crafted and exquisite gems in themselves. But recent research, as for instance by Ella Dutta in this volume, has shown that Abanindranath later not only geared himself to the existing reality but also the techniques developed by him significantly influenced artists like Ganesh Pyne and Lalu Prasad Shaw.

The earliest forbears of modernity in Indian art were artists like Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–41), and Jamini Roy (1887–1972) whose work though very different from each other had a common aim: that of finding an authenticity of expression. In doing so each of them had to contend with the complexity of several languages of art existing at the same time and find a means of inventing or synthesizing one appropriate for the present. Amrita Sher-Gil, born of a Hungarian mother and a Sikh father, had left her bohemian Montmartre life in Paris and returned to India to find her roots as an artist. Paintings like "Hill Men" and the later "Brahmacharis" evoke all the gravity and dignity of the lives of people in India (figure 2). Deriving his impulse from the *pata* paintings as well as the painted terracotta and wooden toys and figures of Bengal, Jamini Roy used the simplicity of form and earthy colours while retaining a modernist stance. Rabindranath Tagore's brooding expressionistic portraits emerged from the depths of the unconscious and their distilled essence spoke of his own anguish. The Viswabharati University at Santiniketan established by Tagore was to inspire artists like Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij to create art related to the environment as well as to indigenous traditions and contemporary international movements as an expressive means. A form of contextual modernism as Siva Kumar would have it began to take shape with these artists which also focused on adopting and adapting traditional means such as the use of



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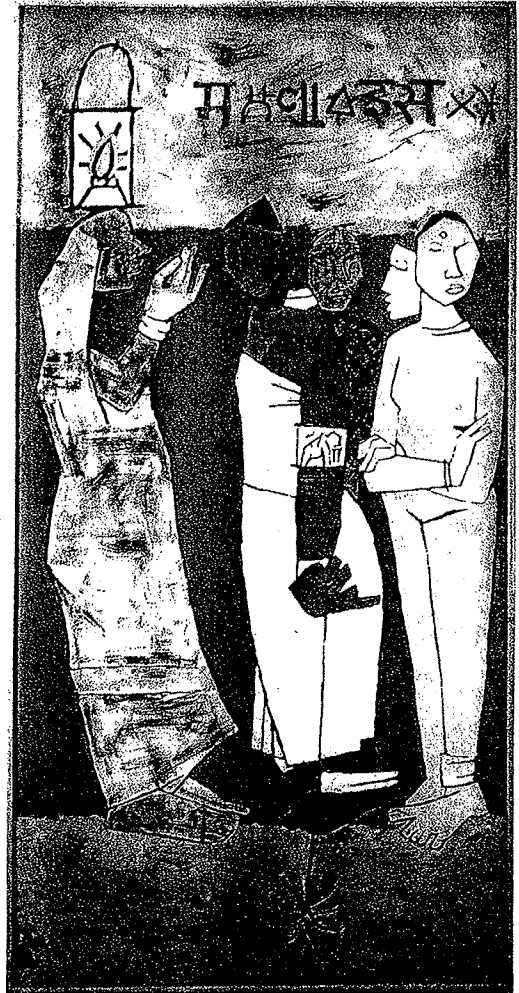
wasli and earth pigments (see his essay). It is Siva Kumar's contention however that these aims only reached a successful fruition with the later Santiniketan artist K.G. Subramanyan. Meanwhile Jyotindra Jain sheds light on the interventions of urban forms on folk art and the consequent creation of a hybrid, popular mode. More specifically, his focus on the Bengali *pata* style accounts for the easy assimilation of the modern within a well-rooted, lively tradition.

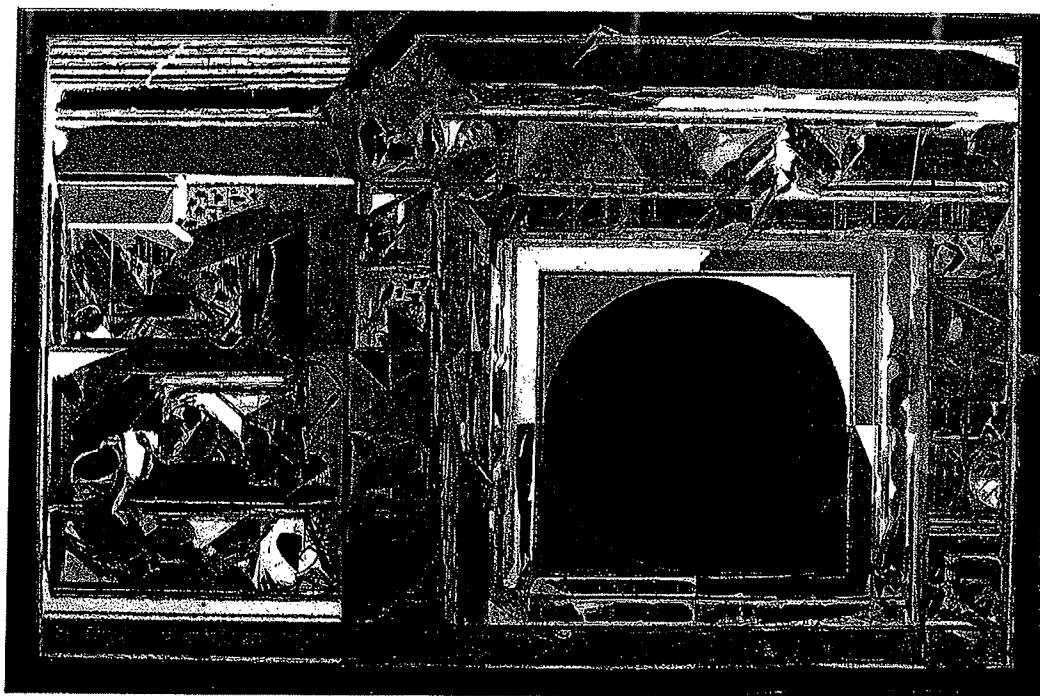
In the year of Independence, the Progressive Artists Group formed in Bombay and its influences on later art practices were significant. Artists like M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara, S. Bakre, and H.A. Gade rejected outright the revivalistic methods of the Bengal School. They also opposed the academic styles taught at the schools of art set up by the British. The artists made a strong thrust towards modernism, attempting to take historical reality fully into account and incorporating it into the present (figures 3 and 4). The emphasis on plastic values, rhythmic tonality, and pure hues was to gather force. The ranks swelled to include others like Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar, Krishen Khanna, V.S. Gaitonde, Bal Chhabda, and Mohan Samant. Much of the energy of the group however was depleted when Souza left for London in 1949 and Raza for Paris soon after. As practitioners of modernism these artists were forefronted on the national stage in the ensuing years.

While Paris was the Mecca of the art world at the time, some Indian artists turned for their inspiration towards Mexico in admiration of the heroic attempts of artists like Diego Rivera to forge a modernist movement. For instance, Satish Gujral returned from Mexico with a different expressionist fervour and combined it with his own pathos about Partition. J. Swaminathan, a personal friend of the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, spoke passionately against the technocratic, authoritarian culture of the West and for the magical potency and symbolism of folk and miniature artists (figure 5). In the south the Cholamandal group formed by K.C.S. Paniker mixed occult with graffiti to script anecdotal passages on the surface defying perspectival space (figure 6). The neo-tantrics like Biren De and G.R. Santosh invoked the ancient erotic symbols of tantra and attempted a reinterpretation of tantric diagrams and their associations with the cosmos. Meanwhile Ganesh Pyne, Bikash Bhattacharjee, and K.G. Subramanyan began to form Independent interpretations of modernism. Pyne's shadowy figures reflected the Bengal School, Bhattacharjee used surrealism to depict his own milieu, and K.G. Subramanyan employed the wit and parody of folk

3

M.F. Husain
"The Spider and the Lamp", 1956
Oil on board; 229 x 125 cm
Collection: Artist





tradition, the bazaar, and 19th-century glass-paintings to make wholly inventive motifs. A towering figure Meera Mukherjee appropriated the lost wax method of the Bastar tribals to create works which were archetypal as well as contemporary. Many others were to contribute to the making of images in these fervent times.

By the '70s there is a move towards locating the works as artists begin to describe the life around them shorn of all mysticism. The language of modernism was considered pertinent only to signify and articulate the image. As the artist Gulammohammed Sheikh put it, "The various groups of artists are heterogeneous, as far as styles of their works are concerned and one could say that even ideological affinities are loose and liberal. But the most distinguishing feature of the art of the younger artist is the growing involvement with the local environment, its shift from generalities to specific areas of interest. This has led to an approach which is more realistic and intimate."² Consequently the figure is resurrected in the works of artists like Bhupen Khakhar, Gulammohammed and Nilima Sheikh and Vivan Sundaram in Baroda, Gieve Patel, Sudhir Patwardhan, Nalini Malani, Navjot and Altaf Mohamedi in Mumbai, Arpita Singh, Jogen Chowdhury, Manjit Bawa, A. Ramachandran, Anupam Sud, Mrinalini Mukherjee, Samshad Husain, Rameshwar Broota, and others in Delhi, and Laxma Goud and D.L.N. Reddy in Hyderabad. There is a burgeoning of forms which borrow from tradition as well as international pop art suggesting a tilt towards the outer world. Bhupen Khakhar with great pun and parody brings in the street and the common man with his contrary and myriad lives (figure 7). There is incessant invention and frequent crossovers.

A new internationalism emerged with the Festivals of India at London, Paris, and in the United States in the 1980s which spurred a greater awareness and opportunities for Indian artists to interact

4

S.H. Raza

"Maa", 1981

Oil on canvas; 183 x 275 cm

Collection: Bal Chhabda and

M.F. Husain



4
S.H. Raza
"Maa", 1981
Oil on canvas; 183 x 275 cm
Location: Bal Chhabda and
M.F. Husain

with other countries.³ At this juncture it seems pertinent to consider the vexed question of the hybridity of art forms. If contemporary Indian art is really imitative of the West then is the praxis of Western art itself "pure"? The question is rhetorical since there is no such thing as "pure" art and in fact art can only evolve because of influences and implantations from other sources. As is well known, Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, and many others had derived their inspiration from African, Persian, Oceanic, and Indian art and the incorporation of the "primitive" finally resulted in the modern. If in borrowing, art was not considered derivative as Thomas McEvilley is at pains to point out in his article, then why should it be so in lending? The hierarchical notion that only art from developing countries is imitative and not when the same process takes place in the West points towards an inherent bias. The paradigms of modernism in Asian countries are considerably different according to John Clark who observes here, "The difference of position derives ultimately from Euramerica's claim to have invented, and therefore to retain purchase on, modernity. This claim, whilst true in a rather simplistic developmental history, disappears the moment it is accepted that modernity invents itself everywhere it is required for a new relativization of the pasts of any given culture or group of cultures. The principal condition is that these cultures need to – and are capable of – carrying out this relativization."

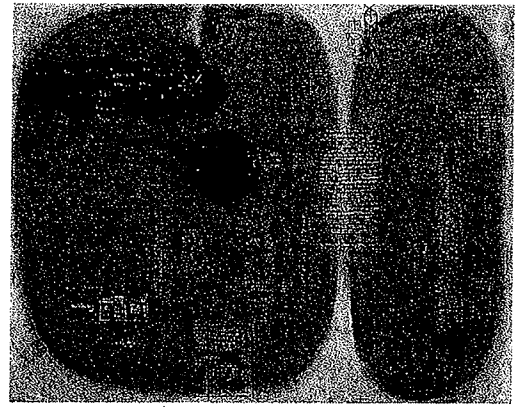
In this volume some of the debates which have centred around contemporary Indian art in the past decade have been considered. Indeed there have been as many questions and counter-questions which have arisen around art in India as there have been diverse forms. Many of these have debated the contentious issues of modernism which to this day remain open-ended. Leaving aside the rather rhetorical question of whether there exists an Indian modernism, we have dwelt on three equally important issues. The form of modernism which is basically *Eurocentric* is seen as the norm, but as Thomas McEvilley argues it is essentially a Western concept. The second and related idea is that there are many modernisms and John Clark delves into the peculiarities of *Asian* modernism. R. Siva Kumar in his essay finds that *contextual* modernism given birth in Santiniketan is probably the most consequential and has strong roots in India, and Ella Dutta provides new perspectives on the



5
J. Swaminathan
"Untitled", 1991-92
Oil on canvas; 81 x 117 cm

contribution of Abanindranath Tagore in the socio-political context of the time. The conceptual basis for the present collection of essays is to foreground issues which have occurred around Indian art in its different phases rather than a mere chronicling of modes. Thus these are in the nature of debates rather than an elucidation of styles of art which are by now well known. While questions have often been asked about Indian art some of these are now consolidated to provide a perspective on prevailing modes. Thus the preoccupation with modernism in the 1950s gives way in the '80s to locating forms and generating a greater expressiveness about one's own reality. It is about this time that subalternism takes centre stage where the plight of the common man, the feminist, and the marginalized aim at altering consciousness. It is interesting to note in this context how notions of time are treated in Indian art. As Susan S. Bean points out, even when contemporary artists deal with the present moment there is a transcendentalism which provides it a distinctive character. She states here, "While the time-situatedness of contemporary art applies to work created anywhere in the world, the temporal aspect of contemporary art in India is unusually rich because of the complexity and sophistication of co-present philosophical, theological, and scientific concepts." While dealing with a whole crop of women artists who have made their presence felt in India, Gayatri Sinha speaks of a "feminine space", rather than feminist art, whereby the feminine consciousness is applied to a whole plethora of political and social issues.

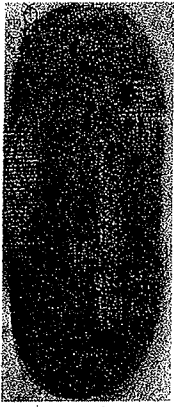
Notions of pluralism and multiculturalism infect the artists of the '90s, as there is a confident borrowing from all cultures and frequent crossovers. Free of any colonial hangover, the young have none of the self-doubt of the earlier generation as they resort to pluralistic modes – installations, earth-works, conceptual, performance, and video art. Ravinder Reddy, Dhruva Mistry, Sudarshan Shetty, Anita Dube, and Valsan Kollerri are some of the sculptors who resort to multiculturalism outside the precincts of the gallery, while Surendran Nair, Rekha Rodwittiya, Vasudha Thozur, Natraj Sharma, Atul and Anju Dodiya contend with hybridity, fragmentation, and pluralism within the frame of the canvas (figure 8). A whole host of younger artists like Shibu Natesan, N.S. Harsha, and Jitesh Kallat evolve an even more avant-garde vocabulary for the articulation of the new sensibility. Even as cyberspace opens out its super highway for interactive and modular art, the anxiety of passage can be sensed in many. Yet the leaps in consciousness also yield unexpected, perhaps forbidden zones which provide a new sense of freedom.



6
K.C.S. Paniker
"Words and Symbols"
Oil on board: 121.3 x 151 cm
Collection: National Gallery
of Modern Art, New Delhi

7
Bhupen Khakhar
"Picture of their Thirtieth
Wedding Anniversary"
Watercolour: 110 x 110 cm





7
Bhupen Khakhar
"Picture of their Thirtieth
Wedding Anniversary"
watercolour; 110 x 110 cm



8

Atul Dodiya
"Scapegoat", 1998
Oil, acrylic, and marble dust on
canvas; 213 x 152 cm
Collection: Czaee Shah, Mumbai

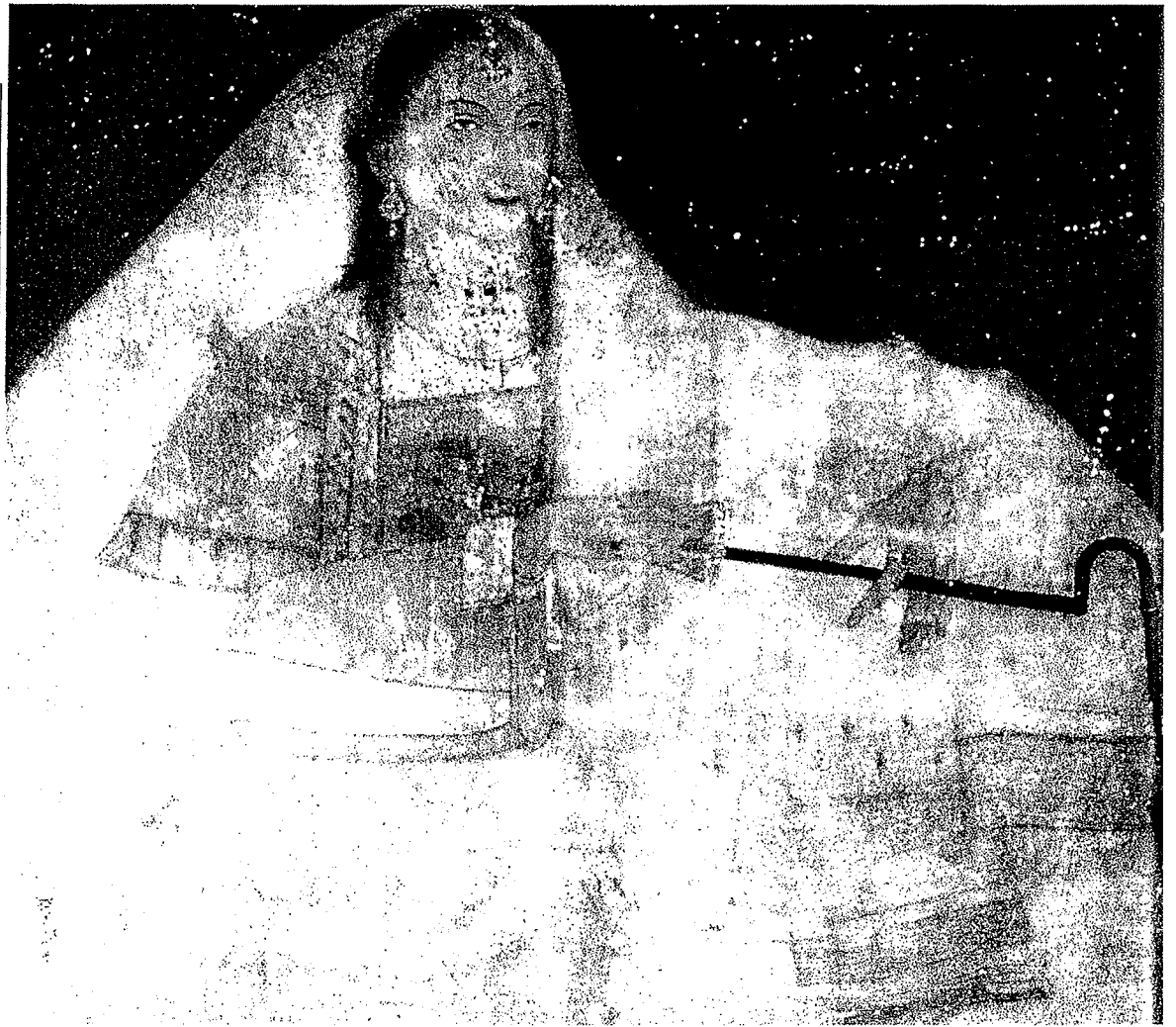


The new debates centre around pluralism and its consequence at the "receiving end" where the flux of forms often becomes inchoate. Is a possible subterfuge taking place where multiplicity is really a disguised ethnicity fitting the requirements of post-modernism as conceived in the West? Is there an authenticity of forms or a mere imitation of what is prescribed elsewhere? The changing parameters of post-modernism and their articulation in the works of some artists are reflected upon in my essay. Finally, diasporic art, an increasingly important component of art practices is considered by John Bowles.

The last section of this book has extracts from significant writings which relate to the contentious issues of Indian art from its formative to its present stage. These will, hopefully, act as markers which register a different note from the one which has been conventionally stated. It is worth noting for instance that the earliest notion of the "modern" as delineated by Tapati Guha-Thakurta positions itself squarely in an imaginary Hindu past. The subalternism of the middle period is not without its problematic aspects as pointed out by John Clark. The transculturalism of the '90s can also be a carnivalesque affair and Ajay Sinha elucidates this. The processing of debates in this final section aims at sharpening an awareness of art and its related situations. This can then lead to further reflections on art practices in India.

NOTES

1. *The Sir J.J. School of Art Report, Bombay, 1857-58.*
2. Gulammohammed Sheikh, "New Contemporaries", *Marg* 31/2, March 1978, pp. 87-112.
3. The Festivals promoted Indian art and culture and were sponsored by a special commission headed by Pupul Jayakar. They were held simultaneously in London and Oxford in 1982, Paris in 1985, and in Washington DC the year after. They served to place Indian contemporary art among other forms on a wide platform.



Ella Dutta

abanindranath tagore

a new context

Attempting a rethink on Abanindranath Tagore is a task riddled with ambiguity. Is he to be seen as the founder of a new school of painting, the Bengal School? Do we take into account his links with the nascent nationalist movement? Or do we only consider his achievements as an artist? These and several other questions, arising out of the particular socio-political context in which Abanindranath gave rein to his creativity, have to be answered.

The ambivalence pursued Abanindranath through his life and even after his death. In 1912, Queen Mary of England bought a painting by Abanindranath called "Tissa, Asoka's Queen". The well-known jurist and orientalist, John Woodroffe commenting on the activities of the Indian Society of Oriental Art said, "Its earliest and best product is to be found in the work of Mr A.N. Tagore.... The beauty of his work is a sign of what may be given to the world...."¹

When an exhibition of Indian paintings was shown in Paris in 1914, a French paper singled out Abanindranath's work for its "intimate and symbolic idealism".² The painter was praised for the strength of his style.

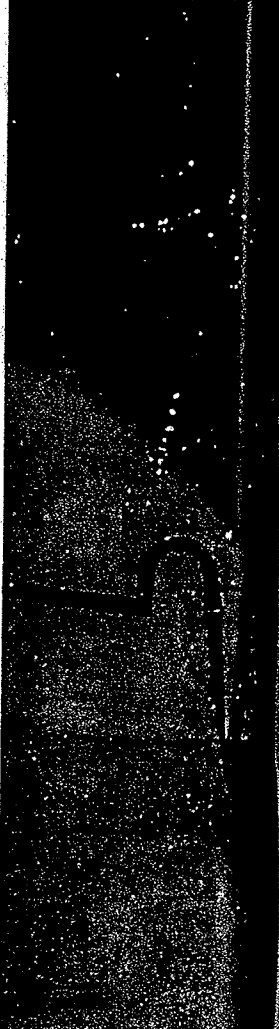
Such praise and patronage were only one side of the coin. There was a flip side to the success and acclaim. Throughout his life Abanindranath faced flak for the art movement he originated, from the academic realists, from the apostles of international modernism, from a section of Bengali middle-class intelligentsia who were more drawn to naturalistic representations. The criticisms built up to a crescendo over the years.

In 1941, Amrita Sher-Gil dismissed the Bengal School as being entirely illustrative. She did not find any pictorial merit in them.³ Mulk Raj Anand was another harsh critic. In a paper delivered at the Coomaraswamy Centenary Seminar in 1977, Anand stated scathingly about the works of Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar, and others, "Unfortunately, however, some of us who saw the actual works of these artists, found in them neither the substance of traditional sculpture, nor the poetical intuitions of Rossetti and pre-Raphaelites but mostly imitations of Mughal miniatures and some Ajanta figures, in surface prints, liquefied, so as to create an artificial ethereal atmosphere."⁴

Illustrative of more recent popular opinion, in the millennium issue of a news weekly identifying one hundred people who shaped Indian ideas in the 20th century, Abanindranath did not even find a mention. So where lies the truth between these polarities of approval and rejection?

His Artistic Vision

Before we analyse Abanindranath's position in 20th-century Indian art, a closer look at the so-called Bengal School will give us a clarity of perspective. The very term has a feel of the "other". Just



I
Abanindranath Tagore
"Mumtaz"
Watercolour and wash on paper;
14 x 21 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi



2
Abanindranath Tagore
"Badshah Shah Alam"
Wash and tempera on paper;
25.1 x 7.8 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi

as sweet shops all over India refer to two categories – Indian and Bengali sweets.

When Abanindranath pioneered a new style of painting, assiduously followed by a set of disciples, it was referred to variously as oriental art, a new style of Indian painting, and so on. The works of Abanindranath and his disciples were referred to also as New Calcutta School or Neo-Bengal School. The term Bengal School came into currency much later when the style of painting began to be practised throughout India and in the course of time was questioned and challenged by other artists.⁹

Abanindranath as an artist, aesthete, and writer was a man of rare sensibilities, imagination, and thinking. As an originator of a new style of painting, Abanindranath's contribution cannot be entirely judged in the context of the Bengal School. To get a measure of the artist one has to gauge his influence on a later generation of painters. There is also the fact that Abanindranath was a key figure in the debate between indigenism and internationalism that has been central to the development of modern Indian art.

Abanindranath was born in 1871 into the illustrious Tagore family of Jorasanko in north Calcutta. As a child, he did not show any interest in formal education, but he was fortunate in being part of a family which gave free rein to creativity and encouraged its expression.

The details of his life are very familiar by now. In 1891–92, Abanindranath began receiving lessons in the Western academic style of painting from O. Ghilardi, vice-principal of the Calcutta School of Art. After Ghilardi left, Abanindranath had another stint of lessons in oil painting from C. Palmer, a teacher trained at South Kensington, England. Palmer's lessons were rejected by Abanindranath when he was asked to draw from a human skull and was revolted by the idea.⁹ These lessons in realistic painting left Abanindranath dissatisfied and frustrated and he began to look elsewhere to create another idiom. At about the same time, his search for a new language of expression was reinforced by some external stimuli.

One was an illuminated manuscript of Irish ballads in the art nouveau style that came into his possession. The other was a portfolio of miniatures of the Delhi *qalam* which was presented to him. The magnificent sense of design and fine craftsmanship in both the illuminated manuscript and the portfolio appealed to his sensibilities. He began to experiment and blend various elements to redefine a new way of painting for himself.

categories – Indian and

a new style of painting, it was referred to as Indian painting, and so on. The term was later when the style of painting in India and in the course of other artists.⁵

te, and writer was a man of great influence. As an originator of the Bengal School, his contribution cannot be denied. To get a better idea of his influence on a later generation, it is a fact that Abanindranath Tagore was between indigenism and the development of

to the illustrious Tagore as a child, he did not show any special talent. He was fortunate in being encouraged and encouraged

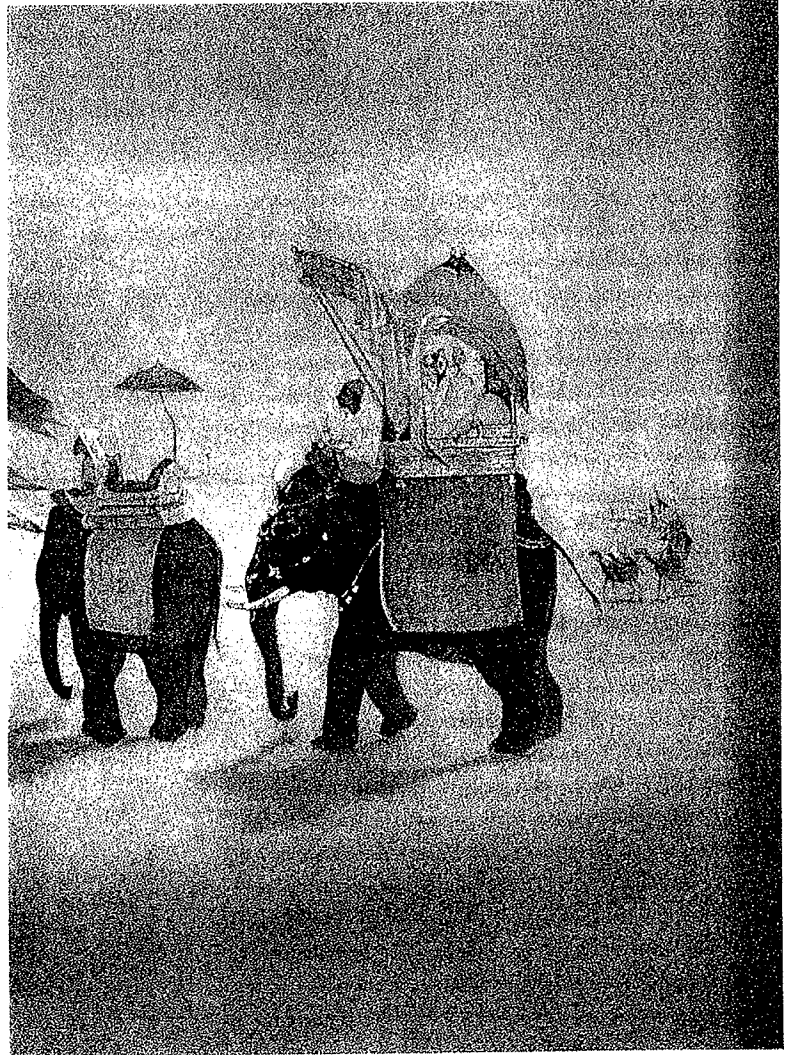
liar by now. In 1891–92, when the Western academic principal of the Calcutta School of Art, Abanindranath had another stint as a teacher trained at South India. His works were rejected by the jury from a human skull and other subjects in realistic painting. He was frustrated and he began to look out for the same time, his style was reinforced by some

of Irish ballads in the session. The other was a style which was presented to him which was fine craftsmanship in his portfolio appealed to his sense of self. He blended various elements of self.

Towards the closing years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, other meetings took place which spurred Abanindranath into even newer courses. In 1897–98 he met E.B. Havell who was then principal of the Calcutta School of Art, and through Havell he became acquainted with other orientalists.

These were momentous encounters. For Abanindranath, it meant support and approval of a refined and knowledgeable audience. For the orientalists among Havell's circle, Abanindranath was the ideal vehicle for reviving a glorified vision of India's past. A similar view of the worth of Abanindranath's work was held by the emerging nationalists.

On a different level, an encounter with Kakuzo Okakura in 1902 had a more critical influence on the evolution of Abanindranath's language of painting. Okakura, who was a strong advocate of a pan-



3
Abanindranath Tagore
"Emperor's March to Kashmir"
Watercolour and wash on paper;
24.5 x 27.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi

Asian aesthetic, offered Abanindranath the opportunity of experiencing the subtleties of Japanese painting. This marked the beginnings of the "wash" technique which became a hallmark of Abanindranath's style.

The development of Abanindranath's oeuvre will be discussed later. For the moment, some broad features of his style need to be mentioned. Abanindranath worked out a visual language marked by soft colours, delicate lyrical figuration with gracefully drawn elongated fingers, and rich decorative elements wherever there was scope. Abanindranath also referred to literary, mythical, or historical sources for the subjects of his paintings.

Over the years, a stereotype was created which spread throughout India and was eagerly appropriated by commercial artists. Whether it was the illustration of a dancing girl on a calendar or a scattering of jasmines on a tin of talcum powder, flashes of Abanindranath's evocations could still be seen in the 1960s/'70s. The reason behind such a spread was the first batch of Abanindranath's students at the Government School of Art. Abanindranath's work as a guru continued at his residence in Jorasanko through the Bichitra Art Club and later through the Indian Society of Oriental Art.

Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Ganguly were Abanindranath's very first students. Others who soon followed were Asit Kumar Haldar, Kshitindranath Majumdar, Sallendranath Dey, Samarendranath Gupta, Surendranath Kar, Sarada Charan Ukil, and K. Venkatappa. The students in their turn went on to head art schools all over India which then ensured the dispersal of Abanindranath's style of painting. But with the exception of Nandalal Bose, who tried to chart a new course at Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan, all the other disciples followed the master blindly. This resulted in a replication of Abanindranath's style without the spark of individual genius.

However, there is no question about the uniqueness and deep impact of Abanindranath's artistic vision. No matter what claims he made for nationalism in art in *Bharat Shilpa* (Calcutta 1909), art for him did not have to communicate a message. It was enough that it create a mood, express the artist's perceptions of the world around him, convey an emotional state.⁷

Both Benodebehari Mukherjee and K.G. Subramanyan have commented on Abanindranath's childlike sense of wonder with which he absorbed the world around him. Abanindranath himself mentions in his autobiographical writings some of the images which played on his sensibilities – moonlight seeping through

4
Abanindranath Tagore
"Surangama (From *King of the
Dark Chamber*, a play by
Rabindranath Tagore)"
Watercolour; 45.7 x 22.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi



4
Abanindranath Tagore
Surangama (From *King of the
Dark Chamber*, a play by
Rabindranath Tagore)*
Watercolour; 45.7 x 22.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi



5
Abanindranath Tagore
"Stormy Night"
Wash and tempera on paper;
21 x 30.5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi



shuttered windows, a pair of red slippers, a silhouette of his favourite maid projected on a whitewashed wall, a lotus carved from white marble reflected in a looking glass, and so on.⁸

Elaborating on this point, Subramanian wrote that Abanindranath "was a born romancer; both in his painting and his writing he had an alchemy of touch, investing his actual descriptions with the far-awayness of dreams and his fantasies with a strange palpability, an ambivalence one associates with a child's imagination." Abanindranath recognized this quality in himself and made full use of it in the vivid, whimsical, playful stories he wrote for children.⁹

Even during ordinary conversations, Paritosh Sen once recounted to me, Abanindranath could slip into whimsicality suddenly. We note this in many of his works. Consider "The Goat" and "The Monkey" in wash and tempera. This quality of imagination is particularly manifest in the "Arabian Nights" series where the reality of the world, seen from the south verandah of his Jorasanko residence, mingled delightfully with the fantastic vision of an exotic Middle-Eastern cityscape.

Abanindranath's mature views on art are clearly enunciated in the Bageshwari Lectures instituted by the University of Calcutta (1921-29). Subramanian refers to them "as the most authentic compendium of his views and methods of approach".¹⁰ Beautifully written, the lectures are like a sparkling, gurgling stream spontaneously and effortlessly throwing up complex ideas. Translating the language replete with visual imagery becomes a Herculean task.

Nevertheless, I have attempted a rough translation of excerpts from his essay "*Jati o Shilpa*", the seventeenth lecture in the Bageshwari series, to illustrate his true feelings for art as a form of pure expression shorn of such baggage as nationalism.

Abanindranath says, "The nation cannot be the mother of art, nor can there be a union between nation and art. That always takes place with the artist. During springtime, flowers bloom on the shrubs in the garden. Seeing the blossoms, it would be a mistake to think of the owner of the garden as the creator of the flower. You must remember there are elements like the spirit of spring, mother earth, the gentle south breeze. The breath of life blown by the nation can spark national pride but cannot blow open a bud into a flower. Even in national parks created by the state, the flowers don't bloom at the nation's command."

He further goes on to emphasize in the same essay, "When a nation survives on the accruals of its past, it may continue to preserve its national identity, but it would be increasingly difficult to maintain the quality of its art and other creative expressions. Art thrives on its integrations with the present – not alienated from the past, but not entirely directed towards the past."¹¹

So much for all the charges of revivalism hurled at him. The truth of the matter is that Abanindranath sought to give expression to the emotions and images that stirred his inner self. It is also equally true that his soul responded to some evocations in the visual languages of the past.

His aversion to Western academic realism with its accent on anatomical accuracy strongly articulated in oil comes through in the seventh Bageshwari Lecture, "*Shilpa o Dehatatwa*" (Art and Anatomy). Abanindranath describes the human body as standing erect between the two poles of sky and earth. He says, "Medical anatomy is like the wire tied taut between two pegs. But artistic anatomy is different. Its real description is like the different rhythms seen in the growth of trees, vines, flowers and leaves burgeoning and branching out sinuously with the caress of breeze and touch of light."¹²

His Works

To get a measure of the totality of Abanindranath's development, one must turn to Benodebehari Mukherjee's chronological catalogue of Abanindranath's paintings. The catalogue provides an invaluable guide to understanding Abanindranath's evolution as an artist. Except for some early drawings and pastel portraits, Abanindranath did not usually date his paintings. He signed his works variously and from 1913 onwards used a seal presented to him by Okakura. From around 1918, he also used a seal with a Ganesh icon. Both the signature and the seal formed an integral part of the composition.

Up to 1895, Abanindranath worked in European technique. Some sketches of landscapes and portraits of his family members belong to this period. In 1895, he received an album of miniatures of the Lucknow *qalam*. He did the "Krishnaleela" series between 1895–97 comprising twenty paintings. According to Mukherjee, this set shows the artist's interest in textures.

From 1897 to 1900, he developed an attraction for Rajput and Mughal painting. The period is marked by bright colours and decorative composition as in the paintings "Buddha and Sujata", "Building of Taj", and "Abhisarika". "Death of Shahjahan",

6
Abanindranath Tagore
"Rabindranath as Baul
Mendicant"
Watercolour; 10 x 5 cm
Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi



6

Abanindranath Tagore
"Rabindranath as Baul
Mendicant"

Watercolour; 10 x 5 cm

Collection: National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi



7

Ganesh Pyne
"Death of a Dream", 1957

Watercolour; 16 x 21 cm

Private collection

although painted in oil on wood at this time, belongs to a later period stylistically, says Mukherjee.

Between 1900 and 1911, his style underwent another transformation. Besides Kakuzo Okakura, who first came to Calcutta at the invitation of Swami Vivekananda, Abanindranath met in this period the two Japanese artists sent to India by Okakura, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso. His encounters with the Japanese style of painting brought about a radical change in technique. "Bharata Mata", in which for the first time a secular figure was iconized, was typical of this phase.

During these years, Abanindranath also illustrated the *Rubaiyyat* of Omar Khayyam and the works of Kalidasa, drew portraits from Mughal history, and so on. The period is marked according to Mukherjee by "texture, atmosphere, deep interest in portraiture and dramatic expression". These are the qualities which shaped Abanindranath's distinctive style and influenced artists of a later generation.

Between 1911 and 1920, after a visit to Puri, although he continued to use the wash technique, his style changed to a heavier, opaque quality from the use of white in wash. This was one of the most fruitful periods of his career. He did several landscapes, a genre which had not interested him greatly earlier. Now a fuller female form with heavy ornaments appeared in his work. "Tissa, Asoka's Queen", bought by Queen Mary, belonged to this phase. He also painted a number of Bengali stage performers. The sensitive paintings "End of the Journey" and "Portrait of the Artist's Mother" are of this period. Both paintings are tinged with the melancholy that creeps into many of his works. Consider the earlier "Death of Shahjahan" or "Head of Dara", for example. He did many animal life paintings at



8
Ganesh Pyne
"Winter Morning", 1955
Watercolour; 19.5 x 14.5 cm
Private collection

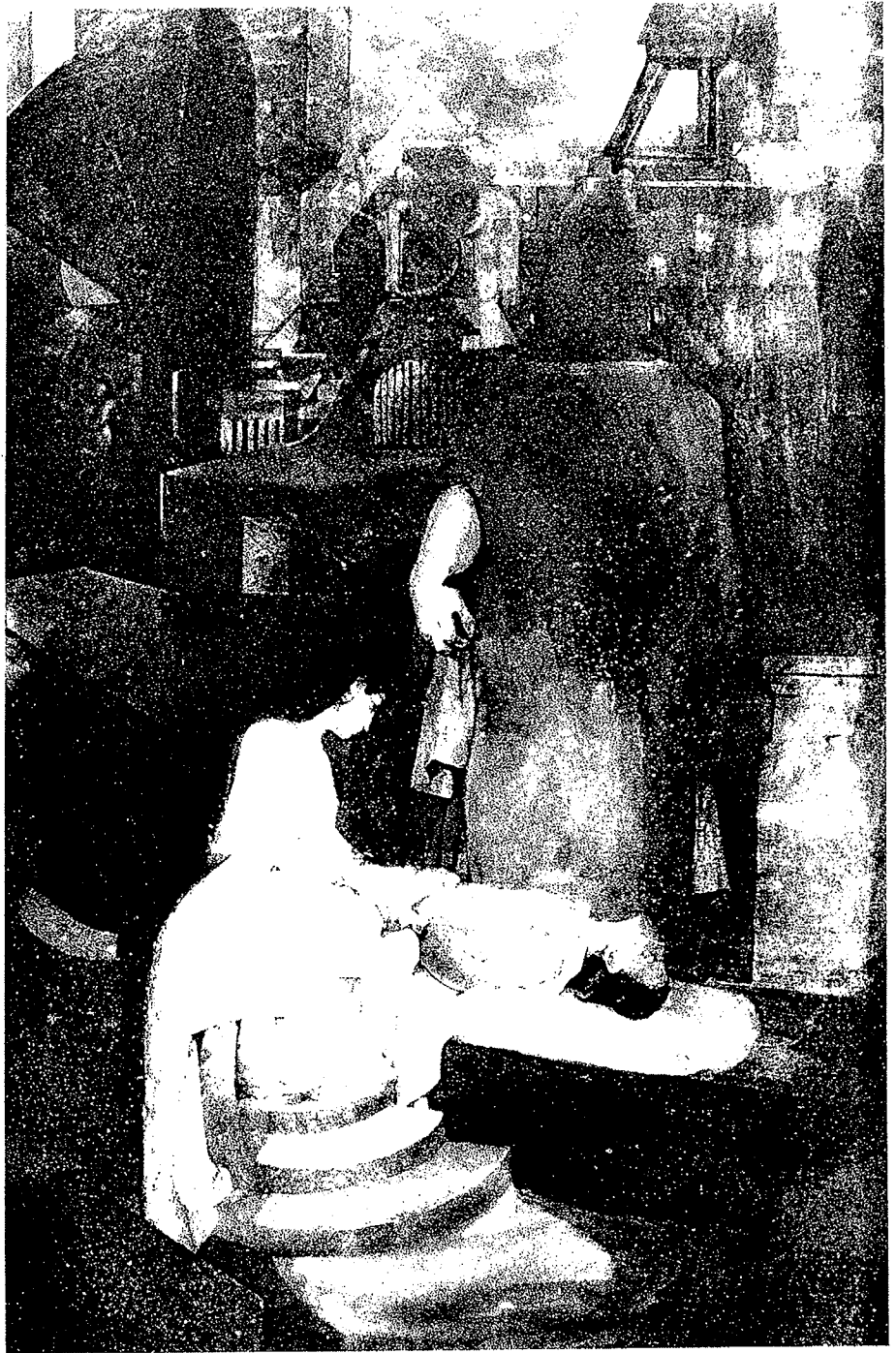
this time. Also illustrations for Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, as well as Puri and Darjeeling landscapes.

The next stage in the development of Abanindranath's art was witnessed between 1920 and 1930. These years were marked by attention to structural aspects of composition. The textural quality had disappeared and the treatment of the figures was flat. The palette was bright. He did many portraits in pastel towards the end of this period. There were quite a few landscapes of the Bengal countryside done during this phase. There were also many paintings of fauna including the "Playmate" series to which the well-known "The Monkey" and "The Goat" belong.

The culmination of Abanindranath's creativity was the "Arabian Nights" series done in 1930. The inventiveness, the imagination, the decorative elements, the wash technique, all contributed to making this an outstanding phase in his oeuvre. Here he invested the distant shores of his imagination with a reality with which he was familiar – a reality that was nonetheless mysterious and alluring. According to a list compiled by Mukherjee from Abanindranath's family members, there were 45 paintings in the series.

Abanindranath stopped doing any important painting after "Arabian Nights". Instead he wrote *jatras* based on mythological themes. In 1938, he once again experienced the urge to paint and

9
Ganesh Pyne
"Rakta Karabi", 1957
Watercolour; 42.5 x 28 cm
Private collection



9
Ganesh Pyne
"Rakta Karabi", 1957
Watercolour; 42.5 x 28 cm
Private collection

did a large body of folk-style *pata* paintings. These works were characterized by a generous use of black, which Abanindranath generally did not employ, and a carefree feeling. The two prominent series of this period are "Kavikankan Chandi" and "Krishna Mangal".

From 1940 onwards, Abanindranath began to make toys or what he called *katum kutum* with twigs, bark, driftwood, and other found objects. His fondness for texture and whimsical forms saw full expression in these works.¹³

Both Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose have recorded Abanindranath's wash technique. Mukherjee divides the development of Abanindranath's technique into two periods. He writes, "First Period: drawing in pencil; space is filled in mostly with transparent colour; the whole surface is laid over with a colour-wash; the colour-wash is allowed to dry; the paper is dipped into water and taken out to dry; the colour is now fixed. After this another coating of colour...may be given. This process may be repeated indefinitely.... The purpose of this kind of colour-wash is to make the object hazy and break the surface of the paper...."

"Second Period: The colour coating in his wash became more and more complex and he began to use opaque colour and transparent colour alternately for wash...."¹⁴

Nandalal Bose paints an even more intimate portrait of Abanindranath's technique in his Bengali book *Shilpacharcha*, where he details techniques, mediums, and material. Bose describes Abanindranath's fondness for English transparent watercolours. He would open the flat box of watercolours and touch his brush delicately on the pigments much like a master pianist would the keys of a piano. No one would make out over which notes the fingers had flitted. Bose also noted that Abanindranath liked some of the cool toned blues and red hues like French blue, indigo, neutral tint, mauve, crimson, and carmine. Abanindranath used white in his wash in such a way that it created the effect of a good tempera. This is particularly visible in the "Omar Khayyam" and "Arabian Nights" series.¹⁵

His Legacy

As mentioned above, with the exception of Nandalal Bose who led the Santiniketan school into new experiments with visual language, most of Abanindranath's immediate disciples followed the master mechanically. In the process, they lost out on his crispness, tonal variations, and expressions of atmosphere. Among the artists of Bengal who were not his followers, there was a lot of criticism of his worldview.

It was not till the end of the '50s that Abanindranath's vision inspired a young artist in the Government College of Art in Calcutta. The fledgling artist was Ganesh Pyne. Pyne had once described Abanindranath's paintings as "softly-intoned soliloquies". From the mid-'50s onwards, the figuration and colouring in his paintings were deeply influenced by Abanindranath. One could see the same finely-drawn, lyrical, sometimes sinuous lines. In such paintings as "Death of a Dream", the colour palette had the same resonance.

It was in the early '60s that Pyne began to change his figuration using stiff, angular lines. The colour tones also became darker and he turned predominantly to the opaque medium of tempera. But Pyne shared with Abanindranath a common goal. The painting became a vehicle to convey mood, emotion, atmosphere; and not so much social comment or intellectual ideas. It was a surface on which fleeting flashes of remembered images could be recorded and textures could be created.

Spanning generations, it is not difficult to understand why Abanindranath and Pyne shared such a spiritual kinship. Both artists have a profoundly poetic sensibility. The melancholy in Abanindranath's works deepened into angst in Pyne's temperas. Both are masters of line capable of great lyricism. Most importantly, both bring to their view of the world, a child's sense of wonder and innocence.

It was Pyne's declaration of Abanindranath as a source of inspiration that forced many to re-examine Abanindranath's visual language minus such contexts as the Bengal School and nationalism. It brought to the fore an artist who had evolved a unique, sensitive, personal style.

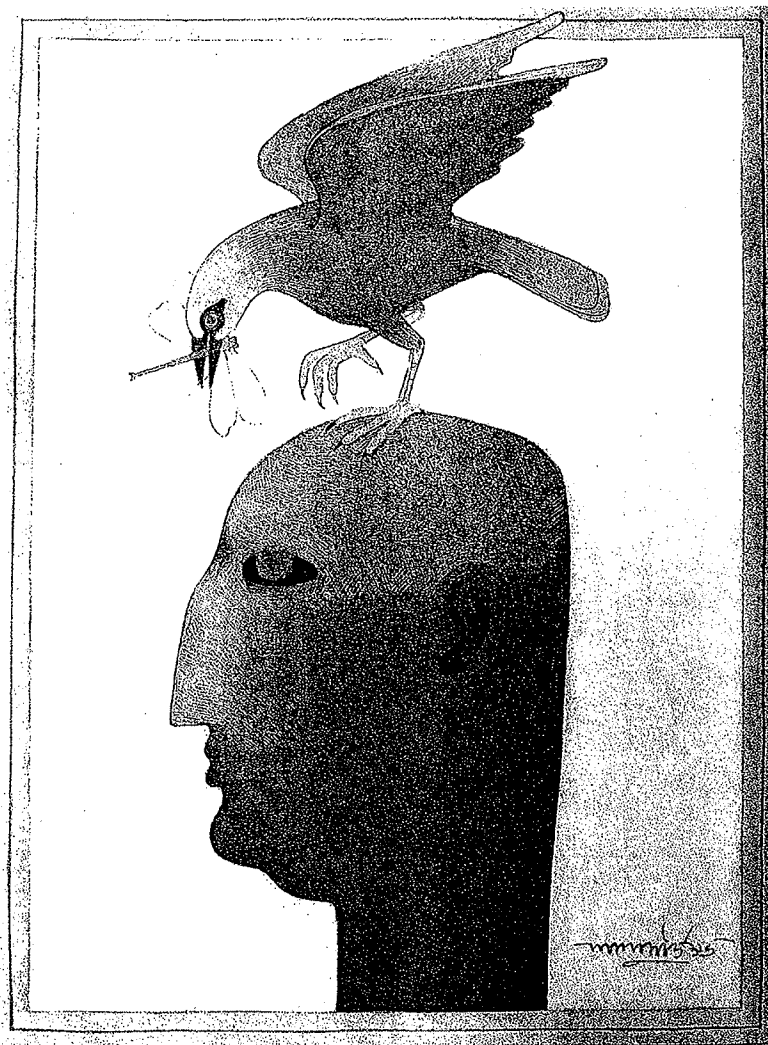
The course charted by Abanindranath once again came centre stage when some of the younger Bengali artists of the '50s and '60s turned to a miniature format. There were Dharmanarayan Dasgupta's playful temperas done from the '70s onwards. But Dasgupta also showed the influence of folk styles.



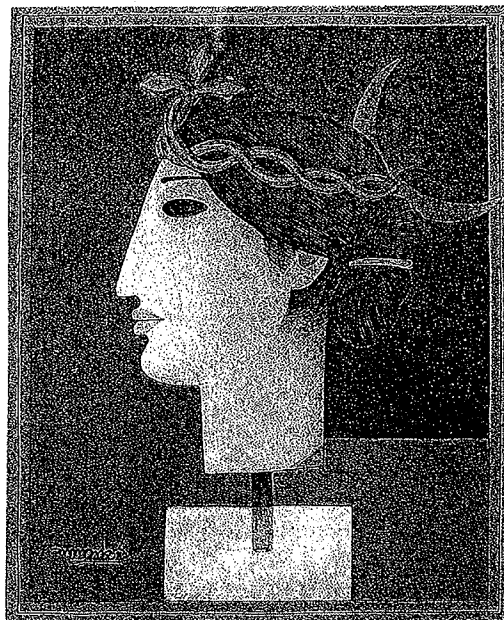
10
Lalu Prasad Shaw
"Rai Baghini", 1998
Tempera
Private collection

Lalu Prasad Shaw, a contemporary of Pyne at art college, was known for his modernist, abstract, monochromatic lithographs. He began to paint miniature style temperas from the '80s onwards. Shaw says that in his youth Abanindranath's paintings stirred him. One developed a sense of kinship with the works from repeated viewings. The wash paintings attracted both his mind and his eye. He tried to paint in the medium but not being fully conversant with the technique, the works suffered from some weakness. He gave up using pure wash technique.

Shaw sees one area of aesthetics which he shares with Abanindranath: a sense of Indian identity. Apart from some indirect flashes of the Bengal School in his works, Shaw says his style of painting also has a blend of styles from Rajput, Mughal, and Kalighat schools. Abanindranath's wash technique was distinctly his own. When Shaw uses wash with tempera, it is only to create atmosphere. Shaw



11
Lalu Prasad Shaw
"Untitled", 1996
Tempera and wash
Private collection



12
Lalit Prasad Shaw
"Queen", 1996
Tempera and wash
Private collection

asserts, "If Abanindranath had not arrived in the world of Indian art, a bridge between traditional art and contemporary Indian art would not have been created."

According to Paritosh Sen, the charges of revivalism against Abanindranath are not important. They have to be seen in the historical context of the times. Shaw also feels that Abanindranath has to be seen against the socio-political backdrop of his time. And finally, as Subramanyan writes, other artists may have greater vocabulary or powers of expression, but few could create a new language like Abanindranath did.¹⁶

NOTES

1. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 315.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 380.
4. Mulk Raj Anand, "Coomaraswamy Darshan", in Gulammohammed Sheikh et al., eds, *Paroksha: Coomaraswamy Centenary Seminar Papers*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 11.
5. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
7. Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay, *Abanindranath Tagore* (NGMA catalogue), New Delhi, 1988, p. 34.
8. *Ibid.*
9. K.G. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus, 'The Phenomenon' of Abanindranath Tagore*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 61.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
11. Abanindranath Thakur, "Jati o Shilpa", *Bageshwari Shilpaprabandhabali* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1962, pp. 210-11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
13. Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay, "A Chronology of Abanindranath's Paintings", *Chitrakatha*, Calcutta, 1984, pp. 361-78.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Nandalal Basu, "Wash", *Shilpacharcha* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1986, p. 106.
16. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus*, p. 62.

Lalit Prasad Shaw
"Queen", 1996
Tempera and wash
Private collection



Yashodhara Dalmia

the paradigms for post-modern art in india

It could be said that modernism in Indian art is barely half a century old, as it was only by the 1950s that it began to manifest itself in a powerful manner. A concerted attempt at nationalism from Ravi Varma to Abanindranath Tagore was to leave its imprint on art and forge a unity among several diverse styles at the start of the 20th century. By the late '40s, immanent energies in modernism began to gather force and led to practices which broke the shackles of academic art. These were harnessed initially to the aspirations of a newly independent nation in its quest for selfhood. Even at that stage, modern art in India was imbued with notions of identity and its strivings were always informed with devolving contours. Thus the modernist mode in India, never free from the historical destiny of the people, was to find its self-expression consistently blended with political and social aspirations.

It has often been contended that art in India is both hybrid and imitative. That would be a contradiction in terms, for modernism as it took root in the West had avowed its affiliation to universalism and internationalism. Then again when artists like Picasso borrowed from African sculpture or Matisse from Persian miniatures it was to lead to "high modernism". In a similar vein the borrowing of Picasso's inventions by Ramkinkar Baij or F.N. Souza were considered derivative art. The implicit hierarchical notions contained in such labelling were only to come to light later.

The formation of the Progressive Artists Group in 1947 acted as a watershed in that a definitive move towards modernism was to be made by artists henceforth. The Group – which consisted of F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara, H.A. Gade, and S.K. Bakre – opposed both the revivalistic tendencies of the Bengal School as well as the academism of the British-situated art colleges and forged a link with the historical reality of the present. They were to construct their forms from the medley of schools that existed in the India of their time as well as international modes. While taking hybrid realities into account, however, their allegiance was to plastic values in art and in that they were unabashedly modernist.

It was only by the 1990s that artists began making works which went beyond the frame of the painting and extended into real space incorporating actual, everyday lives. The gallery began to be substituted by public space, and site-specific works which aimed to marginalize commodification began to rear their heads. As with modernism, the impetus for this came from the international arena as also from circumstances within, where the need to register reality in all its shifting hybrid forms

1
G. Ravinder Reddy
"Head of a Woman", 1990
Polyester resin fibreglass;
59 x 43 x 66 cm





2
G. Ravinder Reddy
"Woman with Flowers", 1990
Gilded polyester resin fibreglass;
59 x 43 x 66 cm



3
G. Ravinder Reddy
"Sitting Woman", 1995
Polyester resin fibreglass;
104 x 90 x 87 cm

became compelling. By the mid-'90s a number of young artists had begun to make installations and site-specific art objects even as others continued to work in the conventional mediums of painting, sculpture, and print-making. Before discussing the implications of these, however, we need to reflect on some of the debates that have arisen around the new modes in the past decade.

By its very nature multiculturalism and the emerging cross-fertilization in art breeds hybridity where the contours of identity are blurred. This has led to the belief that a kind of globalism in art is taking place which will result in an unhealthy homogenization. Often voiced by the Left, this argument by itself is untenable since historical processes have shown that appropriation implies a passivity on the part of the "victim" which is by its nature non-existent. As Partha Mitter observes, "For example, Edward Said, in his classic study, *Orientalism*, chooses Marx's famous statement, 'the orientals cannot represent themselves; they must be represented' to show how a certain body of knowledge about the orient was pressed into the service of colonial ideology. An unintended effect of such a postmortem has been to perpetuate the very stereotype of the passive orient which his own work set out to challenge. Both orientalists and their critics, who are diametrically opposed to each other, essentially treat the history of the colonisers rather than the colonised."¹ The colonized are not after all mute but have active responses which can transform the nature of knowledge.

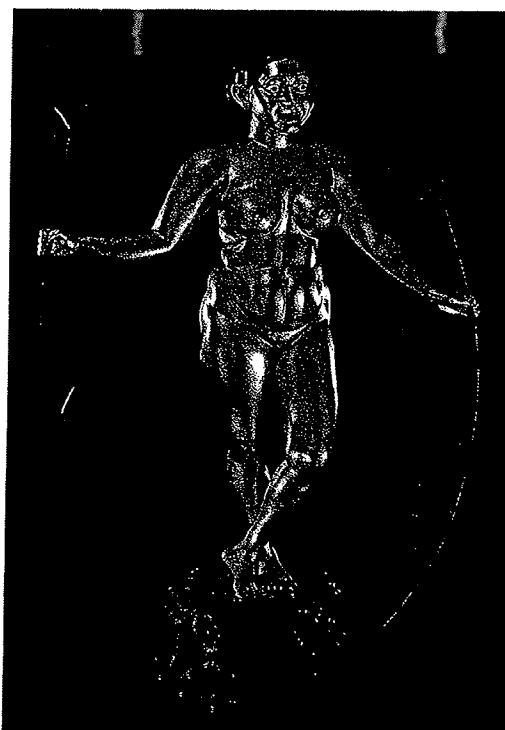
It is felt that just as the underlying nexus behind modernism was white, male, and colonial, similarly multiculturalism is an aspect of global imperialism that transnational corporations find convenient to espouse. But if internationalism spells out the last phase of imperialism, surely the best way to counter it is to appropriate the means to our end rather than reject multiculturalism? Would we have denied modernism or its parallel activity in culture simply because of its colonial origins? In blurring our identity, as some of the examples below will show, we have actually facilitated our own vocabulary and dynamicized it by incorporating new perceptions.

It is at the same time worth considering whether, in espousing the cause of pluralism, we are becoming a showcase for the West, a kind of ethnic museum. The carnivalesque aspect of multiculturalism cannot be denied and needs to be scrutinized. As the art historian Geeta Kapur pointed out at the "Traditions/Tensions" seminar held at the Asia Society in New York in 1996: "A continued insistence on eclecticism and its conversion to various ideologies of hybridity within the postmodern can serve to elide the diachronic edge of cultural phenomena and thus ease the edge of historical choice."² Kapur validates a space which is a "real battle ground for cultural difference"³ where as against hybrid solutions there is a dialectical synthesis. In so doing we do not have to serve causes, subaltern or any other, but heighten our own perception of multiplicities. In heightening polarities without homogenizing we would sharpen and arouse sensibilities. We would then be offering a critique of the globalized, transcultural notions of the Third World served up to us and also harbour no other interests but our own. I propose now to discuss the works of three artists who exercise their choices as well as create distinctive modes of visualization.

Contemporary Iconism

In a hybrid climate, the sculptures of Ravinder Reddy invite attention because of their presence. While their abundant sensuality alters notions of post-modernism, their brassiness creates a diachronic edge to art as spectacle. Reddy's lifesized female heads from the '80s, made in terracotta and polyester resin fibreglass, were reminiscent of his earlier biomorphic works with their humps and curves. These large heads which he coated with thick car-paint, which retained a neutrality, were essentially urban





4
G. Ravinder Reddy
"Woman with Lotus Flowers",
1998
Synthetic polymer paint and
goldleaf on polyester resin
fibreglass; 212 x 148 x 63 cm
Kenneth and Yasuko Myer
Collection of Contemporary Asian
Art

types with their brightly painted mouths and "modern" coiffure secured by plastic bands (figure 1). Some of the heads were painted in gold with streaks of the underlying red showing here and there, re-creating the brilliance of idols in Nepal, Thailand, or Japanese Buddhist temples (figure 2). Their iconicity was emphasized by their wide enamelled eyes which are often attached to the Hindu cultic images at Nathdvāra or Mathura. As the art historian Ajay Sinha points out, "In spite of the maximum alertness in their expression, these heads are dispassionate and impersonal, as if they were embodiments of some mysterious, mythical life, or perhaps venerated objects."⁴ The later heads became qualified by details from the streets of his native Andhra leading to greater annunciation. Thus in "Krishnaveni" (1996-97) the high arch of her eyebrow and hair lead on to a luxurious braid which seems to reach out to the sky. "Woman from Kapulpadu" (1996-97) has a shell-like bun from which the glowing face emerges as if from a cornucopia.

Alongside these, Reddy had begun to make lifesized figures which in their abundant sexuality are reminiscent of the *yakshis* of Bharhut and Mathura. In a marvellously full-bodied golden

sculpture simply titled "The Woman" (1995), the traversal of idioms from the classical to the profane is extraordinary. The exaggerated folds of her flesh are marked by intersections which could at the same time be expressions of a ritual diagram. She seems to straddle both the mythic and the real world. While her face is alert, the turn of her body in a theatrical posture suggests an alignment with some translucent sphere. In "Sitting Woman" (1995) the blue figure sits with her legs astride in a posture of having a bath as well as to incite ritual fertility (figure 3). In another magnificent sculpture the woman holds two plants almost as an extension of herself (figure 4).

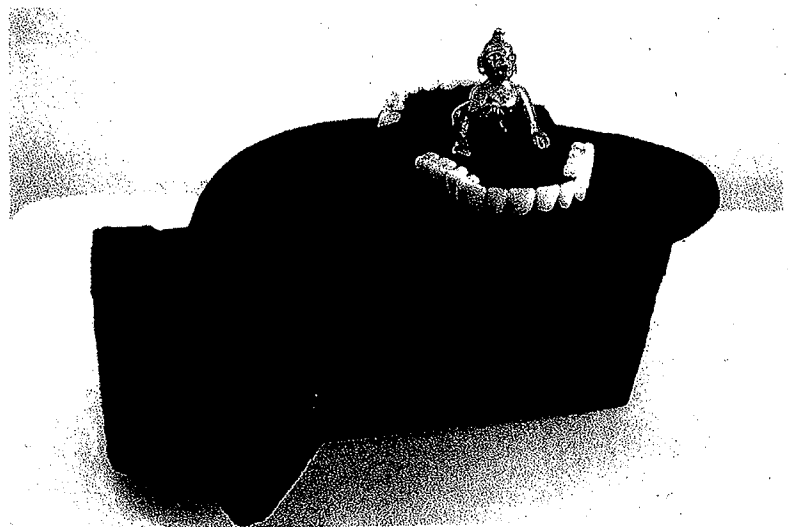
In coalescing the ritual, mythic, the street and the everyday, Reddy visually surfs many frontiers of art that have emerged in recent times. In many ways his work could be seen as installations which concretely extend into space and invite other realities. Yet the participatory aspect is absent, for Reddy's voluminous masses cannot be honed into but stand apart from the audience. As the artist Gieve Patel states, "their sensuality is serene, in most instances the sexual impulse does not speak of excitement but of fulfilment."⁶ The objecthood of Reddy's works places them undeniably in the present and yet their decodifications seem to be heraldic.

Ritual Art

The ritual comes to the fore in many installations in India and creates an expectation of Third World theatre. Yet the street, the bazaar, a Muharram procession, or the paan shop could themselves be considered site-specific art works rooted in popular practices. Ironically when these are imported back to the country as an aspect of internationalism they have been democratized and released from social rigidities. As the artist Anita Dube points out, "This is certainly paradoxical, as is the paradox of a convoluted 'return' – where installation and performance return to our cultural space via this democratized route, as genres to break down 'fine art' hierarchies and straitjackets but not as social ones. It is also ironic that in India, within contemporary art practice, installation and performance methods have been immediately appropriated and again hierarchised by the cultural elite as a marker of their superiority, whereas actually installation and performance should have returned via the



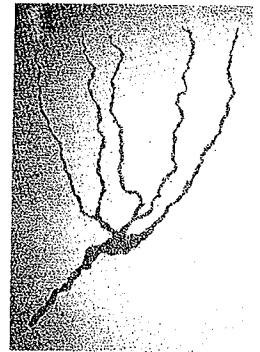
5
Anita Dube
"Seduction", from "Theatre de Sade", a 13-piece sculpture-installation, 1998-99
Glass, velvet; 40 x 12 x 12 cm



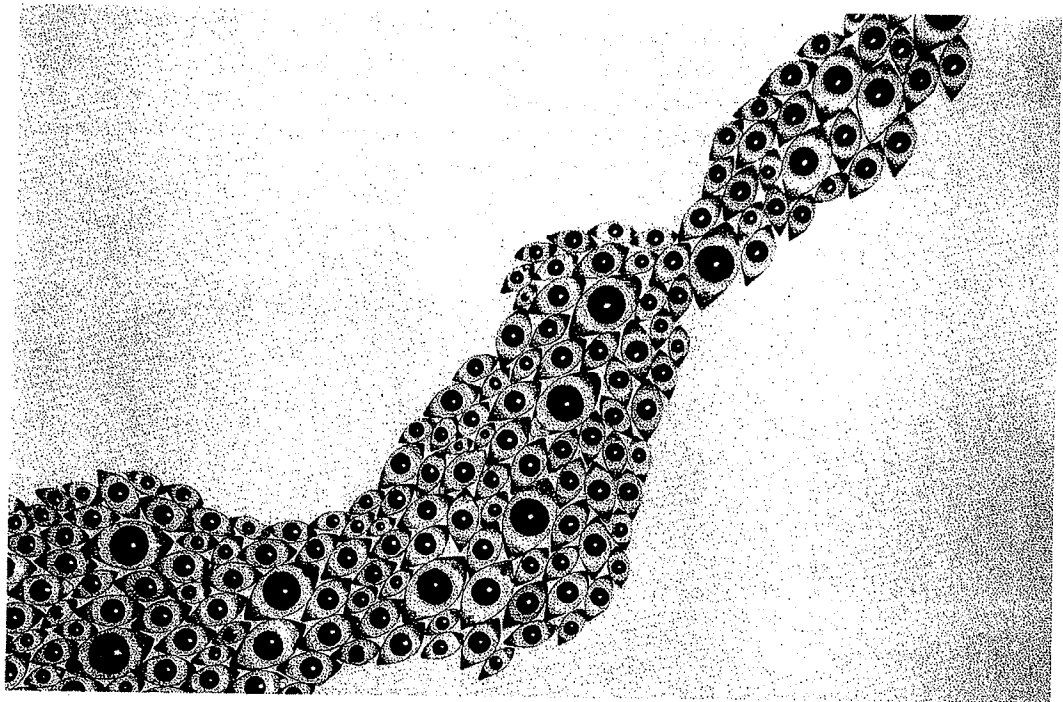
6
Anita Dube
"Victim", from "Theatre de Sade",
1998-99
Wood, dentures, velvet, brass idol

democratic principle to its real life sources in the base, among the ordinary people."⁶ Installations which by their very nature break hierarchies and the isolation of "high art" exist in this esoteric space when they are "returned" as it were.

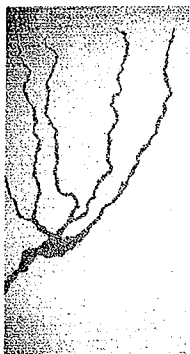
An artist like Anita Dube uses the more intimate and personal aspects of ritual which are carried over to a public site. In a remarkable series in 1997, titled "Silence (Blood Wedding)", Dube uses human bones as her basic armature, embellished with red velvet, sequins, and beads. The jewel-like spectres in the shape of a fan, a garland, etc. indicate a love relationship but with a cutting edge. Dube's involvement with death (her father was a surgeon and died a few years ago from cancer) is in the form of a retrieval where its knowledge creates the passage towards a fuller life. Yet the restoration, as the colour red indicates, is not into complacency but into alternative modes of existence like that of a lesbian or even an Oedipal relationship. As she states, "I wanted to keep the auspiciousness of red within Hindu custom, but also profane this with suggestions of a lesbian marriage, even an incestuous marriage (with one's father for example). So the 'silence' here is a reversal, a rebellion that takes on death and patriarchal cocksureness."⁷



7
Anita Dube
"River/Disease", 2000
Installation with found ceramic
copper eyes
Dimensions variable



8
Anita Dube
"River/Disease" (detail)



7
Anita Dube
"River/Disease", 2000
Installation with found ceramic
copper eyes
Dimensions variable



8
Anita Dube
"River/Disease" (detail)

In her recent "Theatre de Sade" series (1999) the dark, threatening side of Eros is revealed where the animal masks and instruments of torture are made in a choking black (figure 5). The most compelling of these are glistening white dentures stationed in black velvet existing of their own volition in an omnipotent state. In a startling juxtapositioning of metaphors she places a golden brass idol of the infant Krishna in the tub of dentures and then positions these over a black square (figure 6). The ritual act of bathing the infant god lovingly performed by women all over India is here counterpoised by the menacing dentures. According to Dube, "For me the world of found objects has opened up new territories, including tradition. So when the context of an object – such as an idol, ritually worshipped in Hindu homes – is critically re-placed, the tension is very palpable. At that very juncture of this terrible juxtaposition is the space for thought in my work, the conceptual space."⁸

The popular aspect of ritual emerges in a work like "River/Disease" (2000), made entirely of ceramic copper eyes which are placed on Hindu idols in Mathura and Nathdvara to "bring them to life". The eyes of varying sizes are placed like a stream moving upwards on the wall (figure 7). These regurgitating, reflecting eyes, now bulging, now subsiding create an uneasy sensation of having a life of their own, each one seemingly alive, separate from the other (figure 8). Perhaps the most public of her works, for Dube these speak of mass migrations, primarily during the Partition of India in 1947 as reflected by the five rivers of Punjab. She states, "The eyes are like people for me and this could speak of large migrations in history. It could be from Kosovo or the migration from Pakistan to India. The sheer vulnerability and the futility of these migrations is expressed by the eyes. It also has to do with the village-city migration which is fraught with despair. Lastly these could be cells growing uncontrollably one from the other like a tumorous disease."⁹ As with the rest of her work there is a cutting edge to "River/Disease" for its enticement prepares you for the brutal truth. The seemingly endless proliferation of eyes could be peering into your conscience.

The trajectory from the personal to architectural spaces and to the public arena was accomplished by Dube with the means of found objects. These as she pointed out changed the complexion of her work, inflecting it with subtle nuances which were often beyond her control. These were also works which introduced the popular and the common as an intervention which could provide the same works with several sub-texts.

Street Signs

The cacophony of the street enters the works of the artist Atul Dodiya in a forceful manner. The carnivalesque quality is delivered in a relay of images which pass the memory membrane in several registers. The street signs and movie posters, the small-scale operators of consumerism, the hand-made images sensitive to the smallest fluctuation of public feeling are all grist to the visual mill, and are churned up in a lengthy array. The dynamism of the street provides constant impetus for change, and Dodiya draws upon this in many of his paintings.

"Sour Grapes" (1997), an oil and acrylic work based on a south Indian oleograph found in a Bombay street vendor's display, shows the god Vishnu lying on the mythological serpent Sheshanaga. He is surrounded by a litany of gods praying to him and begging his intervention in saving the world (figure 9). From the navel emerges not the great god Brahma but a polymorphous deity, a conflation of Dodiya's own face with a Picassian cubist portrait. The superimposition denotes the affinity between the three-headed Brahma who can in his wisdom see in all directions and the multiple perspectives of cubism which radically altered art practices. The gaudy clothes of Vishnu as well as his film-hero



9
Atul Dodiya
"Sour Grapes", 1997
Oil and acrylic on canvas;
175 x 122 cm

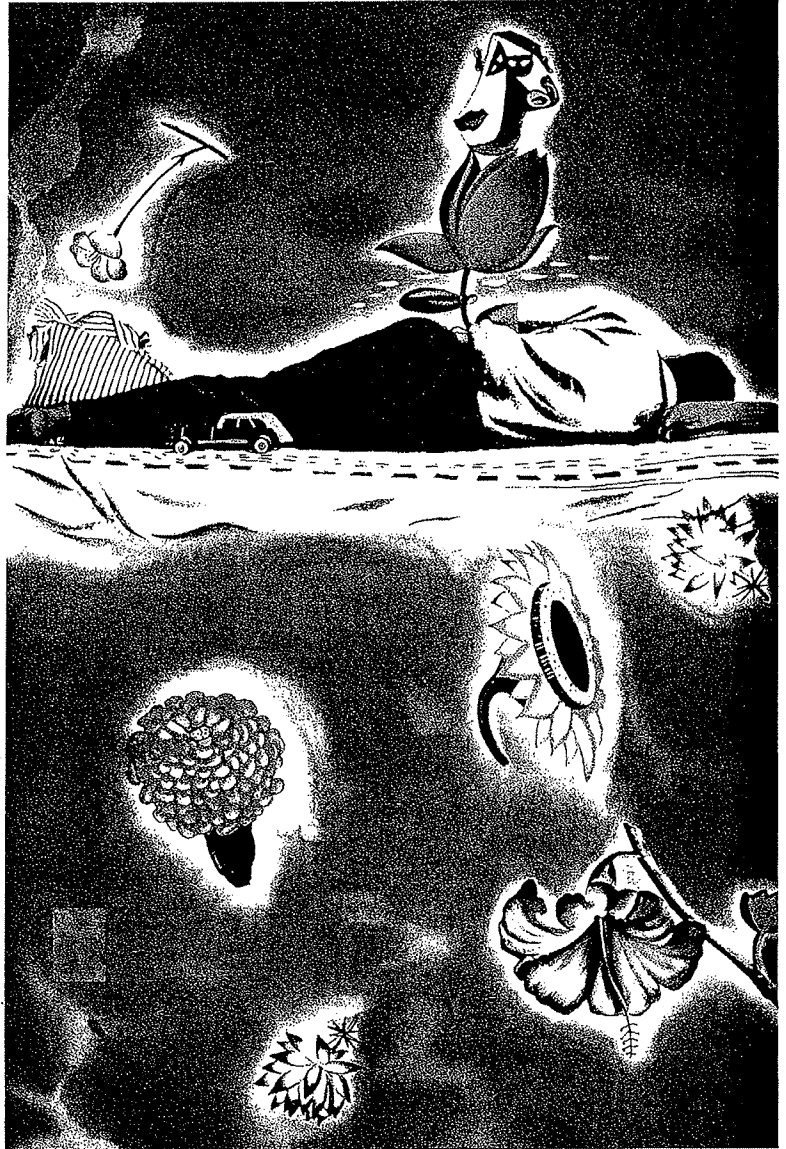


10
"A lunch box with Indian icons"
Tin; 17.5 x 25 x 7.5 cm
Conceived in Seattle, made in
China, and sold at the Brooklyn
Museum in New York

countenance are reminiscent of calendar art and he decontextualizes this by truncating the form and foregrounding it (compare figure 10). The close encounter with an image which is normally seen at a distance relegates it to a primary position. The deep apocalyptic blue which is liminal in places elevates the brassiness of the painting.

The inclusion of the most popular form in Indian art today and experimental practices of European painting with Dodiya's own self-image provide the multiple texts of the painting. Although he has mostly stayed with the medium of painting, for him the canvas is not a mere container of

11
Atul Dodiya
"Fool's Day", 1997
Oil, acrylic, and marble dust on
canvas: 183 x 122 cm



images. Instead it works as a volatile surface which interjects several levels of reality. While retaining its painterly quality, the canvas incorporates elements from conceptual and video art and creates a fluid interactive space within its frame. In an echoing linkage, the supine auto-portrait is far from passive in his case where its inert nature allows for a fluid interaction with his surroundings. In a painting like "Fool's Day" (1997) for instance, the artist's own figure substitutes for the horizontal Vishnu with his back to the viewer. The rosebud which emerges from his navel with a parody of a cubist head keeps watch with its multiple vision (figure 11). The bright flowers scattered all over the picture space faintly evoke Hindu rituals as well as the bright plastic flowers found in pavement



12
Atul Dodiya
"Gangavataran: After Raja Ravi
Varma", 1998
Oil, acrylic, and marble dust on
canvas; 213 x 152 cm

shops. In cosmic time, Vishnu yawns and turns and a century passes. The small yellow taxi skimming the surface could be negotiating the vast recesses of consciousness suggested by this painting.

The heroes of art history for Dodiya are artists like Marcel Duchamp and his discovery of found objects which questioned modernism's monolithic self-image. But he also resists the Duchampian and Dadaist hegemony by countering it with other inventions from his own memory and history. In "Gangavataran: After Raja Ravi Varma" (1998), the oleograph which has devolved into the comic strip of the present, has the god Shiva awaiting the descent of the Ganga (figure 12). The celestial river in this case has been substituted by the Duchampian "Nude Descending the Staircase" while Duchamp in silhouette gazes at this chimera from memory. The two masters, the binary styles of found objects and street art, the international and the local are evenly matched in this vivid work. Finally the outstretched shadow of the artist himself provides the visual counterpoint which asserts its freedom to reinvent metaphors from history. As the art critic Ranjit Hoskote writes, "He counters the absolutist's desiccated monoism with alternative readings, a plurality of versions; he reclaims tradition from the fossil-worshippers by inserting his own preoccupation into it, revitalising it for the present."¹⁰

While the original impetus for installations has come from outside, it has at the same time a characteristic rootedness in India. The post-modernist metaphor also stems from the logic of historical and social memory. The usage of street and popular art, the visual seepages from the environment, and the use of waste and recycled material have all served to provide a distinct flavour to site-specific works here. The hybridity, fragmentation, and multiculturalism from the international arena intersect inherent multiplicities creating a fusilladed landscape. Perhaps the heady intermixing of these has led to the burgeoning pluralism of the present. In its formative state it is to be seen if this will lead to sharply defined modes which provide an impetus to future works.

NOTES

1. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
2. Geeta Kapur, "Dismantling the Norm", paper presented at the "Traditions/Tensions" seminar, Asia Society, New York, 1996.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Ajay Sinha, "Transfiguring the Ritual Body", *The Art News Magazine of India*, vol. 2, issue 2.
5. Gieve Patel, G. Ravinder Reddy, *Painted Sculpture and Relief*, catalogue for show at Sakshi Art Gallery, Mumbai, 1991.
6. Anita Dube, "Is Installation Relevant to India", *The Art News Magazine of India*, vol. 4, issue 2.
7. Kamala Kapoor, "Sieve-O-Physis, Interview with Anita Dube", *Art and Asia Pacific*, issue 26.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Interview with the writer, New Delhi, May 2000.
10. Ranjit Hoskote, *Atul Dodiya - Recent Works*, catalogue for his show at the Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, March 18 - April 5, 1999.

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taran: After Raja Ravi
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c, and marble dust on
13 x 152 cm