

Tatva/ The Essence:

Six Distinctive Brush Strokes

By

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Creative arts have been inextricably intertwined with life in India from the ancient to the contemporary, as the living arts of the classical, folk, tribal and contemporary traditions continue to develop and evolve, assimilating newer influences within conventional wisdom and old practices described in highly sophisticated treatises such as *Silpashastra* and *Visnudharmottara*. Drawing on abstraction of the universe and its natural habitation, Indian artistic expression has traversed widely diverging domains from *mandalas* (circle or polygon grid square) to mathematics, *tantrik* (mystical approach to spiritual ascendancy) to ritual, astronomy to cosmology, philosophical to factual and symbolic to figurative; as variedly represented in the temple statuary of the early period, subsequent illustrated manuscripts of the medieval era and increasingly now narrative and conceptual art in a wide range of media and matrix that attracts international acclaim for its intrinsic merit as well as monetary value.

The Elemental Play

The essence or *Tatva* of contemporary Indian art as manifested in the eclectic mix of narrative and figurative with an undercurrent of abstraction in this group exhibition features new works by six of India's highly accomplished artists, each playing around with different elements in variable styles in his/her own distinct genre.

Six is a significant number in the Indian context. A reference to the sixth sense resonates with extra celestial connotations. Half a dozen comes mid way possibly center stage striking a balance between the past and the future, inner and outer worlds, tradition and modernity and also self and society. Numeral 6 written upside down turns 9. As one takes a closer look at the work by each of the six artists, a panoramic view of multiple perspectives of a multifaceted, multihued, multicultural civilization in its myriad manifestations begins to emerge.

Each artist represents a distinct school of art practice, thought and background. Using variable elements endowed with different characteristics, their work embodies

a concurrent underlying synergy between an outer personification and an inner visualization. Though playing with different elements with distinct brush strokes in their varied styles and layers of colours, their work seems to emerge from within a given temporal or cultural milieu.

The elements that govern the universe- wind, sky, water, earth and fire are consistently and variably represented in Indian visual and performing arts as well as literature. The significant role that these elements play in our sacred and social life is behind much of the Indian creative force and expression whether one looks at the elite or popular culture. In fine arts in particular, they have continued to be a source of inspiration as well as a subject for reflection and creation over the centuries in abstract form as well as figuration or narration. The artistic creations springing from these elements represent a synthesis within a plurality of cultures and images as the artists continue to draw with an equal élan from India's glorious past and contemporary context enriching the art scene in the process. We will look at the work and the background for each artist in the exhibition individually to try and analyze the essence and ethos of their creations.

Distinctive Brush Strokes

Anjolie Ela Menon a self-trained artist has had to maneuver through an eventful life and her multiple roles as an army officer's wife, that involved frequent transfers and travels, as well as a mother and now a grand mother to find time for her art. As she settles down every morning to work in her studio, located in the busy area of Nizamudin in Delhi, she can see from her window the hustle and bustle of life outside. It is the beauty and joy together with the rough and tough of the struggles of the common people that makes a discreet appearance in much of her work. Immersed in sensuousness and beauty, her canvases are earthy and realistic, as they reflect on the softer side of her subjects, their physical beauty and the emotional quotient, together with their fight for survival where men and beasts learn to coexist. Her palette in fine brushwork is remarkable for its balanced compositions. Her men and women sitting or standing and surrounded by other symbolic accessories that frequently appear in her frames add to create the realistic atmospherics that her work emulates.

Internationally recognized for her easel paintings and bold colourful figuration, Anjolie is an innovator by preference, who has experimented with computer art as well as with kitsch and sculptural forms amongst others. Her work in terms of its contents and themes as well as medium and treatment, is symbolic of coming of age of women artists of India.

There is an interesting range of her paintings in the show. *Kaavadiya* is a beautiful portrait of a devotee that exemplifies Anjolie's expertise in bringing to life a new phenomena that takes a feverish pitch amongst the Indian masses once a year. Her *Eden III* is an evocative recreation of a classical tale. The beautiful nude lying with her face down and partly eaten fruit together with a view of some rarely seen images of landscape and wild life in her work, give the composition its amazing aura. In *Endgame* another work in oil on masonite her familiar figure, is painted in a sad and softer palette with arrow like lines piercing through a meticulously drawn patterned garb that adorns the partially covered slender body. We encounter her favourite *Goat People* in her newer work that also include a sensitive portrayal of different times of the year that draw on her love for colour and form. Her experiences and encounters with the world and its people add up to make her work a sensitive and personalized reflection of contemporary reality.

Deeply spiritual, **Arpana Caur's** finely executed work that is partly autobiographical seems to spring from her religious and spiritual leanings. Notions of time, life and death and a mystical search for harmony and peace underline most of her creations that have a depth and a mystical tone. Much of her figuration is self-portraiture and her creative oeuvre is a reflective of her experiences of growing up as the only living daughter of a single mother. The mother daughter duo of considerable literary and cultural merit has had to face the world with a resolve and in a subtle tone and poetic palette, the internalized scars and struggles some of which seem to come in a self denial or denunciation mode while the rest appear as impositions disbursed by the society and politics, surface in her work. A search for a worldly love, a heavenly bliss and a spiritual enlightenment is a recurring theme in her work that includes figures flying in the air or floating in water trying to break free of bonds.

The play of light and shade is remarkable in the yogic yellow see-through layered garment that adorns her intricately drawn petite female surrounded by groups of other women as seen in *Body is just a garment* busily engaged in stitching with needle, thread and cloth. Drawing on folk art traditions of *Kantha* embroideries practiced by women of West Bengal and *Phulkari* in Punjab, she brings into focus issues around struggles and status of women in India and their sexuality. The same theme and title in another work gets a reinterpretation when the body of her protagonist is turned upside down. Note worthy are the surrounding scissors and tape that not only cut to size the cloth that she wears to cover her body and protect her modesty but that can also be used to measure the depth of her pain and scars which restrict her freedom.

In *Day & Night* Arpana focuses on time that moves on while her women continue to work diligently trying to thread things and link people together. *Rivers of Time* is a finely executed work featuring the twin religious Lords that she worships, Budha and Baba Guru Nanak, whose mystical teachings of harmony and humanity are more relevant in today's strife torn world than ever before. The gentle ambience on their magnanimous faces and the shimmering holy string in their giving hand that lights up the world, evoke feelings of love, kindness and generosity.

Jogen Chowdhury well known for his pen and ink drawings and masterly cross hatchings and works in calligraphic patterns creates telling tales combining satire and anger with fine technique and sensibility. Some of his work reinterprets folklore of Kalighat tradition for today's audience in pastels, paint as well as hand mixed media on paper or oils on canvas. The men and women in his paintings – malleable, fluid, erotic and opaque with hands, feet and parts of the body, twisted and odd shaped, appear hauntingly discomfiting and naked even when clothed.

His multifaceted and colourful personality and experiences as the curator for the Museum at the historic residence of the President of India in Delhi and subsequently as a designer with the weaver's service centre at Chennai and until recently as a teacher and head at Tagore's Vishwa Bharti University in Shantiniketan West Bengal together with his creations as a painter, poet and writer that have taken him around the world are all reflected in the maturity of his work. Despite some ups and downs in his personal life the spiritedness of his perceptive mind continues to be the source of an immense energy and quality in his work.

The titles of four of Jogen's works in the exhibition make reference to a scar or wound highlighting his aversion to the gruesome and macabre. He brings into focus the indignity that people suffer in times of social and political upheavals. The nude figures in pastels here include both men and women seated, standing or lying down and in one case with back to the viewer but head turned around and looking or searching for something or someone. In *See My Beauty, Don't See My Scar* the seductive nude possibly a courtesan stands with her body in full profile, her hands teasingly covering the breasts, as she invites the beholder to partake of her charm while attempting to hide her scars and forget about her pain. In contrast is the image *See My Scar* where she seems to have given up hope as she feels let down lying low in pain. The *Head, Hand* and *Woman* in dry pastels are three strong fiery works where the artist plays around with dualities of space, form and colour to convey his anguish, highlighting the morbid and melancholic in shades of burning reds and pinks. The blank face in flaming red, twisted mutilated nude female figure of a widow with shaven head and the scarred hands with in-turned long fingers in these works– suggest helplessness in the face of aggression as men get beastly inflicting indignity on lesser mortals.

Paresh Maity a watercolourist and painter at equal ease with landscapes or figurative work, has mastered the art of colour and perspective, to make compositions in all sizes and forms. A hard working and meticulous individual who is also a keen observer with a mature sense of design he has come a long way from humble beginnings within a short span of time. A captivating narrator painter he creates his fables with a great sense of drama. People friendly Paresh is a compulsive traveler and the sites he visits and the characters he meets during his sojourns around India and elsewhere feature in his work adding an unmatched vibrancy.

There is an aura of romance, beauty, poetry and passion around all his work. His focus is on celebration of life and sexuality, rather than issues of conflict. The carnival like atmosphere comes through even in the titles of his works that include

The Light. The sexual beauty of the female figure is brought alive in his seductive nude in mixed media work on board *The Grace* that stumps the man seen pining and hiding in the frame. Love games played between men and women and the intimacy of their relationship are recurring themes in Paresh's figurative work that seems to derive its inspiration from erotic sculptures that adorn the temples at Khajuraho, Ajanta and Ellora besides their elaboration in *Kamasutra* (Sanskrit text book on the science of erotics). There is also a strong influence of folk forms and a rustic rural charm in bearded figure of the itinerant musician in *Singer* possibly a *boul* (folk singers of Bengas) with his musical instrument and wearing traditional earrings. 'The King' holding the sword, attired in battle gear with a horse standing beside, looks grand and powerful.

Paresh's love for colour and the finesse of his palette can be seen in the flaming yellows, mustards, browns and reds and blacks that he uses in a host of shades and combinations. His images are narrative inspired by folklore and landscapes and his brush strokes are bold and beautiful that come in spontaneous and rapid sweeps. The media he uses for each work is meticulously planned and applied to prepare the base in a particular mix. His technique and texture are carefully worked on to create a passionate aura and poetic beauty that surrounds his fiery artworks.

Acknowledged for his modernist approach **Prabhakar Kolte's** long association with Sir J. J. School of Art initially as a student and subsequently as a teacher in **Mumbai** has helped to hone his skills as a painter par excellence. Widely traveled and exhibited the artist has retained his abstract oeuvre that is immersed in the geometric forms and unspecified symbols. His paintings on paper and canvas are in measured short brush strokes. His colours can be light shaded or in dark impressions depending on his frame of mind at a given moment. There is a mix of premeditation and spontaneity that gives his work their special feel and appeal.

The works in the show like his others are untitled allowing the viewer to see them inside out and take them for what they mean to each. Universal elements of air, water, earth, sky and fire seem to interest him, as do landscapes and cityscapes. Lines, squares, triangles and dots feature in his work, as do *mandalas* and other ritual and cosmological references.

The shapes of his frames in the exhibition range from a vertical work where one gets a glimpse of the skyline through the windows of crowded interiors in shades of brown, red, mustard and black, to horizontal rectangles possibly of rural hamlets near a water body or river with boats in the distance in blues and other colours.

Yusuf Arakkal, a man of many parts has had to struggle on the streets of Bangalore, before undergoing a formal art education at a later stage in life. His experience in a variety of media- computer graphics, portraiture, drawing, painting- in oils as well as watercolours, print making, ceramics, collage, sculpture, murals, photography and design besides creative writing and literature have all impacted on his work. Though impulsive by nature, he mulls over his ideas for long periods of gestation before getting down to work. The choice of medium for a particular work is dictated by the

idea/ thought that he wishes to express. He finds oil a malleable and translucent medium and works in layers- first the canvas is prepared and covered in gray, followed by a coat of glaze, over which layers of white and other colours are applied to give it a character commensurate with the content or theme. Yusuf works hard and fast, often in series with an interesting mix of abstraction and narration and subjects spanning social and cultural issues.

Constantly in search of new themes and dreams, Yusuf during the last few years has been working on a new series *Points of Reference*, paintings that are inspired by European masters. There is an interesting fusion of east and west and an interface between his figurative and urbanesque work with a touch of abstraction in this series. The frequent reference to his picture perfect Kerala landscapes is however replaced by patterned décor and clothes in these works, offering a contrast with the despair reflected in much of his work that is unlike his own winning streak and flamboyant personality. The oeuvre of his work is modernist though his technical finesse comes from his stint as an understudy with a master of Tanjore paintings, at an early stage in his career.

In Solitude.., Homage to Francis Bacon, Continuous Despair and *Into Darkness*, titles of the works signify the premonition of the frame of mind that governs these creations. The mysterious horizons, dark skies and filtered light peeping through dark holes of browns and grays and blacks with faint water mark like impressions can be seen through these oils on canvas. The lone figure seen against a dark wall with a flicker of light peeping through at the back, seems to be in a self destructive mode holding in his hand a blue cup possibly filled with poison. The famous portrait of Francis Bacon positioned centre stage with his dog sitting beside, in the triptych bordered on either side with a face in different moods and expressions in blacks, browns and a stark red line in the middle is the artist's homage to the legendary master whose work seems to have had a lasting impression on Yusuf's own creativity. The two images within one canvas in *Continuous Despair* of a sad bare footed man lost in his thoughts offer a counterpoint in his patterned designer shirt and the red line and blood drops on the floor. The same man possibly the artist himself reappears as a triplet in *Into Darkness*, with all three figures facing the wall and searching for the open sky in distant horizon.

The Essence

The essence of contemporary Indian art as reinterpreted in the current body of work needs to be appreciated in its interrogation and foregrounding of wider issues both public and private. Women and men artists alike are pushing boundaries to break barriers. They boldly use self, the body as well as personal encounters and experiences to speak for the whole and their passionate and compassionate art pouring speaks about the duality of life, its joys and struggles, the opportunities and

challenges resulting from current 'glocal' (local and global together) context and politics. A search for roots and individual identity is also articulated in refreshingly renewed use of classical and folk-art traditions and forms. The mystique of divine reality transcending time, space and eternity is conjured up in a montage of new and colourful visual imagery. There is also a blurring of ideological affinities and demarcating lines between the foreign and the indigenous; issues of morality and sexuality and old and new, bringing the classical and the popular together in an interesting interface with current realities, modes and methods in free abandon.

The spectrum **of** the six artists' work in the show offers a lucid illustration of the scenario. Anjolie Ela Menon's lone figures with distinct markings and in softer undertones are realistic and grounded, reminding us of life as lived in its varied hues on this earth. Deeply spiritual and personal, Arpana Caur's work featuring garments that envelop the body, which in Indian mythology is itself like a garment made up of earth and other elements, has a depth and a poetic quality. Jogen Chowdhury's paintings, seductive and erotic, come across as creative outpouring of anger and fire sometimes in the form of disgust and at others as lust. The fire of desire and passion as reflected in Paresh Maity's vibrant range of yellows makes a re appearance as a source of light and glow in his captivating canvases marked for their masterly perspectives and amazing palette. Prabhakar Kolte in his fine abstract work seems to point to the horizon where the sea and the sky merge into one another, while Yusuf Arakkals' creativity evokes a melancholic feel possibly suggesting a lurking celestial danger.

These varied images in themes ranging from the sedate to violent, politics to erotic, mystical to sexual, are beautifully strung together almost like a garland of differently shaped and coloured flowers, that are born of distinctive creative hands and minds. The assemblage speaks of the convergence of *rasa* (juice/aesthetics), *raga* (tune/theme), *rang* (Colour), *rekha* (drawing) and *roop* (image) as the elements in their creativity that make these works, despite the tonal variations in their voices and styles, come together as a harmonious collective of contemporary Indian art.