

TRANSAVANTGARDE

In contemporary Indian Art

A genuine avant-garde movement in visual art is no longer possible today in the true sense of the term. It happened last time with POP and not any more afterwards. Not that new thoughts have stopped emerging since POP but these are based on the 'isms' developed earlier and are more like Beethoven's twelve variation of a theme, innovative as one listens to the movements but are easily identifiable with links to the central theme. Since the days of classical modernism in the West, it appears in retrospect, that all significantly original ideas in art are like a panoramic spread with peaks appearing in predictable intervals. Interestingly, the heights of the peaks vary little with one another signifying no art movement is more or less important from other art movements and all contributing to the mainstream of modernism in art – the way a major river gains in volume of flow by its tributaries and loses depth as it reaches its end-point of meeting with the ocean. That is to say Conceptual Art of the comparatively recent era with its associated 'happenings' and 'performances' is not better, or less in significance, to movements like, for instance, 'Bad Arts' – the exponents of which proudly exclaims their singular devotion and obsession on deliberately created stylistic crudity. In between the two extremes of art today, with the emotional charades of 'neo-expressionism (and neo-Dada) on one end and the cerebral permutations of the 'conceptual art' on the other, lies a near-endless variety of artists who wish to consciously avoid such extremes.

Contemporary Indian art is characterized by such a scenario in which a large number of practicing artists keep their faith in acquired skills to draw and paint and avoid using extremities of the imported variety. Ability to visualize pictorial metaphors and proficiency in translating the same in line and color on canvas and paper usually characterize them. In these they differ mostly from their contemporary practitioners of the extreme kind who often relies on borrowed skills of other artists they consider not enough artistic. Art of those down the middle path is also distinguishable with their unmistakable contemporaneity and varying degree of comprehensibility without being obvious. They are true exponents of transavantgardeism as they exhibit little faith in creating visual shocks of the extreme kind.

This exhibition is an attempt to showcase this trend, in contemporary Indian art, with the works of a dozen practicing artist aged between thirty to seventy. Seema Kohli from Delhi is the youngest of the lot

while Laxma Goud predominates over the rest in age and importance for the right reasons. The span of four decades that divides the working life of the dozen artists chosen for this show, it is expected, will take into account the generation gap that separates their individual thought-process while, at the same time, will demonstrate the continuity of artistic ideals. There are several reasons that lend additional support to the logic behind the choice and are worthy of a closer attention.

Historical evidence throws up an interesting role reversal in public response to modern art. In pre-War days it reached its nadir while, in post-War days, the same public welcomed modern artists with open arms and much enthusiasm. In Europe and also in the USA large exhibitions were organized to celebrate victory of allied forces over the oppressive voice of the Nazi. These important and landmark exhibitions offered due honor to those artists of the modern era who defied Nazi dictum to continue their professed path of modernism even in exile. The public, faced with the hardship of daily life in the war-ravaged world, was more than ready to embrace the artists whose work they understood only in parts, if at all. A very significant increase in the footfalls to these large exhibitions almost converted such art-events like a mass-entertainment package to showcase art with a social message (of the failure of the Nazi war-machinery to suppress artistic freedom) even though it still retained its abstracted vocabulary with little hint to unscramble its coded thoughts. In sharp contrast to pre-war skepticism, modern and post-modern art soon gained the status of being newsworthy. Artists and their life –style and also the market-valuation of their art received journalistic attention. Even the Government of the concerned Nations, sensing the popular perception, came forward to offer State patronage to post-modern art in the form of International Art Fairs like Venice Biennale in Italy, the Bienale des Jeunes in Paris and the Documenta in Kassel, Germany.

Such a genuine degree of sympathy of public towards contemporary art, even with its increasingly abstracted profile in the hands of not a few, was not what the artists concerned had faced earlier. One thing that had triggered such a dramatic polarization was the changes that slowly yet steadily took place both in the mode of representation as well as in the selection of what is worthy of representation in art. Visual arts, historically speaking, had always been choosy about what it represented. Religious themes and stories from epic and historical anecdotes, in addition to royal portraiture were once considered as fit enough for the artists' brush. Changes in artistic subject matter, initiated by Dutch-Genre, got a major boost in POP Art with its singular attention on commercial consumerism. They brought about the needed revolt to not only in the subject-matter but also equally so in how to represent such 'new' thoughts in art.

It is indeed debatable whether the success of the POP could have happened in pre-War days when the State-sponsored support was minimal in modern art. Government-funded major art museums played a leading role in offering institutional recognition to such 'avant-garde' art movements. Such Institutional role also took place in post-Independent Indian art but with little success for reasons now well known and not worthy of repetition here. Contemporary art still remains largely alienated from the intelligentsia and also from the common masses even though it received, in the very recent past, a dubious boost of fiscal investment, which did not last long. In this background of conflicting evaluation of social role in art, and that of artists' role in society they belong to, this exhibition offers an opportunity of assessing the significance of a dozen practitioners who wish to bring back popular sympathy and understanding to contemporary art.

Laxma Goud was born 1940 in Hyderabad and Vaikuntam followed him two years later, in 1942. The two had a few things in common like going to the same art school in Hyderabad followed by advanced studies at the M S University and sharing the privilege of being tutored by K G Subramaniam in Baroda. Arguably the more versatile of the two, Laxma has excelled in almost all branches of art and has recently moved into sculpture with his series of high reliefs in multiple-hued terracotta, often transformed into bronzes of limited editions. His fame however rests almost entirely on his graphic rendering of contemporary life in and around the rural India, mostly near his hometown, in which he had successfully injected a broader perspective of his philosophy in life. This ability of raising a particular individual to the level of a contemporary visual icon, infusion of humor in the projected relationship on woman with goat and thereby generalizing the role of procreation in nature, and using a linear mode of representation in lyrically graphic lines are what distinguishes Laxma's role in art today. Vaikuntam, hailing from a similar background has also highlighted the ethnic quality of life around him but has developed a unique mode of representation by accentuating the design-quality of caste-marks and ethnic attire of local populace. He utilizes his signature-like style of representation and elevates the status of people he paints into a deistic level, like the positioning of a rural couple to mirror the accepted imagery of the proverbial union of Sri Radhika with Lord Krishna, happily playing their hand-made bamboo flute. Yusuf Arakkal, five years junior in age to Laxma Goud, also hails from the South. He was born with a silver spoon in a royal family in Kerala but chose to labor it out in the field of art instead. His matured phase, during the last decade or so, is characterized by a significantly emblematic representation of ordinary objects, like pots and common plants shown in this exhibition, in which he manages to extrapolate an anthropomorphic quality with remarkable ease.

Paresh Maity, Sanjay Bhattacharya and Seema Kohli live and work in Delhi while Ganesh Pyne and Suhash Roy, Manoj Dutta and Ashoke Mullick do so in Kolkata. Each of them represent a singular approach in developing their idiosyncratic style of representation while achieving a contemporary look complete with a cutting-edge sharpness that is less ornamental and more vocal, less emotional and more logical, exhibiting little penchant for superlatives. Pyne's lame Fakir, resting with a tea-cup while seated comfortably on a high-back chair, tells its own story and invites the viewer to add their own version to complete the same. Jayasri Burman from Delhi and Manoj Dutta in Kolkata differ from the rest in both their chosen style of depiction and the things they wished to depict. Jayasri has playfully projected the image of a girl next door into the proverbial goddesses of learning and of wealth, in the imagery of Saraswati and Laxmi. A personal dreamscape, in the delicate stylization of Manoj Dutta, attempts to draw the viewer into its spiritual depth, something that is missing in the conflict-ridden life in an urban metropolis. His art simultaneously offers an eyeful of mental bliss while, at the same time, makes one aware of the same flora and fauna vanishing out of our life with ever-increasing greed of modern civilization.

This collective output of a dozen artists offers a genuine visual clue to art of the transavantgardists in India today.

Arun Ghose

Kolkata, 6th August 2011.