

Seven witnesses to a metamorphosis

In these troubled times, art is more a wandering than a journey.

Whether one is an artist or an art-lover, it is in these meanderings that one comes across something — a moment, a shape or a colour which illuminates — which makes hidden life come to light. ALKA PANDE reviews a volume that looks at seven artists and their pictorial language.

"SEVEN", aimed at bearing witness to the ceaseless metamorphosis that accounts for the richness of Indian art, is a book that explores the growth, evolution and transformation of the art practices of seven seminal voices in contemporary Indian art (Akhilesh, Manish Pushkale, Rajendra Dhawan, Sayed Haider Raza, Seema Ghurayya, Sujata Bajaj, V. Viswanadhan). Of the seven, four of them — Bajaj, Dhawan, Raza and Vishwanadhan — live and work in France. Yet each has succeeded in articulating an original voice (an original form, the form of their roots) to the artistic debates in a world that is larger, and more accessible, than ever before.

The book is not so much about contemporary Indian art practice as it is an exploration of a certain moment in time where these seven artists are brought together by an underlying thread of continuity. They share a passion for and preoccupation with colour, with abstraction, with minimalism, with pure line and form and a trajectory that is common to all.

Whether it is Vishwanadhan, who after an accident started exploring grains of sand and their textures, or Raza, who eschews the mundane and routine to seek to explore and portray the mystical and indefinite, each of the "seven" share an affinity and fascination with the abstract and meditative.

A man "of" this world yet "distant" from it, Sayed Haider Raza is one of India's great icons. Founder of the Bombay Progressive's, he rose like a meteor in the modernity of Indian art. In the contemporaneity of this art, he is a metaphor for timelessness. Time and again on his frequent annual visits here, he speaks of the inner vitality and dynamism of India. The energy, the spirit and quintessence of the land of his birth dominate his personal space, from which emerges his external space — the canvas. Raza is both the *rasa* and the *rasika*. As an artist, he creates work in which he positions not only himself but also takes the viewer into a meditative experience through the abstraction of his

own perceptions.

Frequent experimentation has been one of the constants in Sujata Bajaj's artistic journey. From ceramics, fibreglass sculptures, terracotta, fabric printing, printmaking, woodcutting, oil painting to, now, working with mixed media and acrylic on canvas, she is invariably experimenting and changing.

The "seven" are again linked by yet another continuous thread which links the art practice — energy.

Ashok Vajpeyi, celebrated Hindi poet and critic, Vice-Chancellor of the Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University, and founder of several cultural institutions, is the hand behind the evocative and insightful text of the book. Rather than adopting an art historical manner of viewing the

particularly engaging.

The protagonist of the book — Raza — eloquently discusses his preoccupation and fascination with colour and his path towards meditation. "Through my research in Paris, I realised the importance of the language of painting, and gained an awareness of the vital elements that constitute the life of form and colour coordination. With meditation, reasoning slowed down and intuition prevailed. It has been and is an elevating experience towards spiritual perception in painting. I aspire to the pure white Bindu, the supreme image of peace."

Meanwhile, one of the younger artists who provides the "insider's voice", Manish Pushkale describes his own relationship with colour. "Colours have a special role to play in my pictorial mutations. My colours convey a sense of displacement or de-centredness, of being unhoused. The merging of the transparent layers of many colours gives rise to a galaxy of light that is like the sound of celestial of the *japa*. The one colour that is abstracted in this galaxy of light stands for total realisation."

Seven is an unpretentious, easily accessed gateway to the often-chaotic world of Indian abstraction. For all its lavish, glossy and expensively produced leaves, it somehow does not provide the art historical facts, the wider perspective and multi-vocality. Under no pretence of being "critical" or provocative, it provides a clear uncomplicated vision of the seven artists within its fold. Lucidly written, it succeeds in engaging the artist. Each artist's practice is illustrated with a comprehensive collection of images that go a long way towards describing his/her artistic development, which, while not entirely making up for an absence of acuity and analysis, does provide a fair overview of the genre and the seven's individual trajectories. (The book was released in Chennai by the Apparao Galleries on March 14 and has been published in a limited edition of 600 copies.) ●

Seven Contemporary Indian Artists, Text: Ashok Vajpeyi, Ravi Kumar Publisher: M/s Artemisia Ltd.; Bookwise (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2003, p.210.



works of the seven, he adopts the more personal stance of one well versed in the arts. He views the artists from his own personal sense of aesthetics — that of a polyglot — which obviously spills over into lovely poetic titles to the essays which may not necessarily be a seminal discourse or a discussion on the context in which the art was produced. But they certainly provide a sensitive look at the work itself.

The personalised artists' statements — that form such an integral part of the book — are rendered all the more significant for the intimate, and indeed, rare window into their world. The inspirations, frustrations and evolution of forms, concepts and imagery as described by the artist are