

IN SEARCH OF BINDU

The sky closes in as blue grey clouds swirl down the mountain-side. You can stand and gaze up as the snowflakes dapple the air, vanishing on touch like thoughts at random, like a whispered prayer.

The spaces that loom before you can whisper in the silence of a painted prayer.

That is perhaps the only way you can describe the works of India's premier abstract guru Paris based painter Syed Haider Raza.

Raza's works have emptied themselves of any embellishment and instead been swathed by the splendour of an austere geometricalism.

The search is sacred, the mood one of plaintive meditateness and as he stands on the threshold of 80 years of a well lived life it was but ordained that he should spend his birthday in the land of his birth and in the capital city of Delhi.

"In my work as a painter, the revelation of 'Bindu' as a centre of gravity has been a major event. It is the perception of life in the seed as energy condensed, it is the vitality of the point in form vocabulary. Akin to music, the same image can express various moods, known and unknown, leading to the highest spiritual experience. I aspire to the pure white Bindu, the supreme icon," said he on September 3, 1999.

In a rare amalgam three galleries came together in the capital to do uncanny things last week.

Ravi Kumar of Kumar Gallery brought out a art nouveau kind of book of prints with Raza.

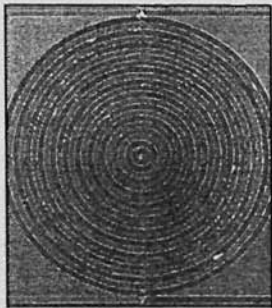
Vadhras had a show of Raza's paintings looking back at three decades and Art Today put together the young Bhopal artists of this generation in a torch bearing tribute to Raza's oeuvre over many years and his yen for promoting youth.

But to crown all these activities at ITC Maurya Sheraton last week a historic gathering of sorts congregated for the launch of the book by Ravi Kumar as well as the presentation of an honour to Raza form the French Government.

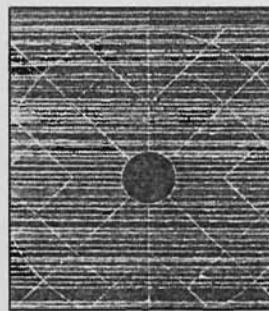
It was an evening that also unravelled the brilliance of the



Clockwise from above: *Rajasthan, Bindu and Kundalini* by Raza



artREVIEW
BY UMA NAIR



poet bureaucrat Ashok Vajpayee.

"When he reads his poetry, people forget about my work," said Raza in humour. This was a confluence that distilled the very intensity of creation.

In the book, an interview with Raza touches upon a thousand little details. The nature of his evolution, of the Bindu, the importance of his own inner music and

his quest for the sacred essence in the form of an iconic intent.

"I love beautiful things," he admits, "I love colour. I come back again and again to colour. What could be more exciting than that I take a painting on the theme of *Panchavai* where all the five colours are involved? That I could once again sing in space the glory of the five colours?" held he.

colour harmony, statements which can be peaceful and which could be a part of *Roopadhyatna*, a concept dear to some of the Indian painters today. And I would be able to realise paintings that are not just plain and simple but which are charged by emotions and spiritual feelings," added Raza.

In the midst of death life persists/in the midst of untruth truth persists/in the midst of darkness light persists, said Gandhi. Raza dwells on the words and partakes his viewer of a sojourn that is subliminal to the core.

The book that contains a series of prints reflects his visual prowess in ways quite unimaginable.

And it is here that one must mention the most important exhibition that has been culled by Sharan Apparao which just concluded in Mumbai.

It has been seminal and given an amazing overview to art lovers about my work," says Raza. The show has put together works that have been done over four decades.

Raza's *Matheran* (1972) is an acrylic that speaks in the darkened hues of a smouldering ember. While the vermilion flirts with the spaces of darkened intensities it is his handling of the planar level that excites your gaze.

Intriguing how in his *Rajasthan* there is the confluence of colour, while in *Satpura* there is the summation of inner energies to echo an ascetic sonata.

Whether you look at his *Bindu* or at his early abstracts the fact remains that tonal modulations for Raza are the emanation of the urge of his soul.

In terms of a design venture this book is one of great intellectual appeal as well as deeply sensitive to the soul.

Conferring Raza with the Order of Letters from the French Government was perhaps a grand gesture in Indo French relations.

Raza reigned supreme as the week went by and he came to each event with a sanctity that was reverential and a vintage charm that was infinitely mellow. So much like his own works which speak more like a painted prayer.

“I have an inner music”

catalogues, etc, piles of journals and invitation cards from the Pompidou Centre, Maeght Foundation, a working table with watches, one of them constantly showing Indian time, a Shiv lingam, some Jain miniatures, a conch shell, a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi, many Ganeshas in bronze, a wooden statue of some *devi*, a sketch by Pablo Picasso, a little temple in the corner, some posters on the wall, poetry books by Kabir, Tukaram, Majaz, Rilke, and Rimbaud. On the table, there's a phone, on the side table a fax machine. Every morning before Raza starts work on the canvas he meditates and prays — invariably a few lines of Rilke in French translation, “To catch the continuous message which emanates from silence”. And sometimes a wish: “Let God take away everything but not this fever of the soul.”

On the sofa set, on which Raza also takes his afternoon nap, we sit and talk in mid-June 2001. It is all too often interrupted by phone calls and faxes. Apart from friends, collectors from San Francisco, New York, Berlin, Mumbai, and Chennai call for new paintings. Raza is polite but firm — he thanks them but invariably expresses his inability on grounds of slow work. Sometimes, young NRJ couples land up in Paris to book works by him in advance. He is appreciative of the gesture and respects their vulnerability to his work, but he's unwilling to do much business.

He wishes to conserve all his energy to do the kind of work he wants to, unconcerned with money, market or fame.

Raza, in his ultimate phase, has taken to a poetics of simplicity, intensity and passion. He is forever celebrating being in colour. There is unmistakable humility rooted in confidence and competence. The painterly aesthetics and the spiritual concerns meet in consonance. The gap between life and art has narrowed. Raza lives to paint and paints to live. He is no longer worried about his identity as a painter. He is in Paris and yet in India. He would heartily endorse the view of Gertrude Stein: “But what good are roots if you can't take them with you?” Raza has carried his roots with him and they continue to nourish him both aesthetically and spiritually. In his work, as in his life, he is at home.

At home with Raza

As he celebrates his 80th birthday this month, poet Ashok Vajpeyi draws Paris-based painter Sayed Haider Raza into an extended conversation on his rich life and work. In an extract from his forthcoming book, Vajpeyi reveals why the artist remains so distinctly Indian

On his stay in France:

It has helped me not only to see what was best in the painting of Nicolas de Stael, Mondrian or, shall I say, Soulage, to name just a few, it has given me the possibilities to come to develop my own technical potential, command over the language, painted language, that I am using. I don't forget my childhood and youth and I don't forget the lessons I received here: to start with the elementary problems of colours, lines, space, form. France is a country where sense of proportion is

ite Du Couvent on Rue de Charonne in Paris was originally built in the 17th century and functioned as a convent for nuns. After the French revolution, it became residential quarters. On its second floor, the Indian painter Sayed Haider Raza has his studio and apartments: one in which he has his studio and lives with his French artist-wife Janine Mongillat; and the other, which Janine uses as her studio. Trained in the painterly values that Paris offered and belonging at one period of time to what is known as the Paris School, Raza has moved decisively towards a more rooted vision, which has imbibed *le sens plastique* and reinvented it with many Indian ideas. It has blossomed into something uniquely Raza, an inclusive vision whose alchemy now supercedes the merely French or the specifically Indian.

Raza's studio is difficult to describe. Apart from part of the floor cluttered with colour tubes, brushes, cups, other odd instruments as also white stretched canvases of many sizes on the easels, the rest has racks of books. There are books on art, Hindi and French poetry,

extraordinary in buildings, in art, in literature, in life. It is also important in art and painting. Now if I didn't have this aggregation, I would not have painted *Tam Shunya* or *Bindumad*, the radiating black. I realised the importance of black. I link it with Indian thought. I think that black is the mother colour, the mother of all colours.

On how his major inspiration comes from the world of literature, poetry and ideas, philosophical, spiritual and religious:

I do believe that the greatest stimulation that has come to me is from poetry. There are extraordinary things which have been said in Indian poetry, in Hindi and Urdu poetry, in French poetry, things which are really coming from the depths of the heart with conviction which can be conveyed only in words. These things are very difficult for a painter to say because the medium used are words, not paint. The painters have also said very beautiful things time and again. But my inspiration has been the ideas of writers or painters and even musicians such as the Ustad, who said: “See with your ears, hear with your eyes.”

On why he doesn't play music while painting anymore:

I think I have an inner music which is more important than the finest music I could hear on a record. And this inner music very precious to me, it is my music, it is my tune and I feel it can be heard only in silence. I don't want noise, I don't want

interruptions. I am with my beloved, I am with my idea. I feel that a total concentration is indispensable when I am working. Wherein past, present, future unite where the genetic memory, the rac unconscious, your training & your learning, your life of everyday all come together a very strange and indescribable manner and you are able to say the essence of what you have to say, be it painting or in poetry. This is pure state of emancipation which is beyond words.

(Extracted from Raza by Ashok Vajpeyi. Published by Ravi Kumar Publishers, Paris, and Bookwala India. Distributed by Varney B20, Delhi. New Delhi. Price at Rs 7500. Price of deluxe edition with three original size screens/albums, Rs 17,500. To be released in New Delhi on February 28. Also Mumbai's Jehangir Art Gallery is host a week-long retrospective of Raza's work.)

