

Criss-Crossings : S.H. Raza and Manish Pushkale

No introduction is necessary for Sayed Haider Raza or the Progressive Artists Group, Bombay, of which he was a founder member in 1947. For decades now, Raza's work has gained national and international recognition for his attempts to revitalize Indian philosophical thought in art. Three years ago, he set up the Raza Foundation in New Delhi, to scout young artistic talent, recognize and encourage their pursuits by initiating a dialogue, exchange ideas and share forums. Raza believes that younger emergent talents from India are making significant contributions, placing Indian painting on the world map while rooted in their history and consciousness. The Raza Foundation issues two awards each year, a form of empowerment to an aspiring artist/painter and a writer/poet, whose works exhibit self-driven personal convictions and historical consciousness.

This exhibition shows no strains of generational conflict as it celebrates the coming together of two generations of artists - Manish Pushkale, a 2002-3 awardee, who at 30 is developing a vision of his own with S.H. Raza, 83, who is arriving at simplicity after almost 60 years of work. The common denominator in their artistic practice is the shared inspiration from homegrown philosophies and indigenous artistic sources. Raza is enthusiastic about sharing the platform with a new generation, "I am very keen to walk with the younger generation, share their creative energies and space...and it is sheer delight to look at the works of Seema Ghurraya, Smriti Dikshit, Sujata Bajaj and Manish...the vitality is incredible..."

Looking back, Raza's journey is far from ordinary in the way it has shaped his thought processes as well as his visual expression in art. Gifted Islam at birth, his introduction to the belief in the 'unseen' was the start of a long journey. To invoke or to orient oneself to the unseen, then is hardly a problem for one who carries this consciousness within quite unconsciously, by habit. In the absence of an externalized form, the acts of daily prayer perhaps help establish a relation with the intangible and the untouched, and in due course faith takes an edge over reason. Thus a consciousness of the power of the formless grew in Raza, which is articulated through words and symbols and reiterated through his works that visually reverberate as if with the magic of recitation and resonance.

In Islam, there is also an engagement with the temporal, the unfinished sense of time. Human existence remains impermanent, unfixed and in the process of traversing destiny into an afterlife, and the human remains a *musafir*, a traveller who is pushed by the desire for a destination beyond the body and the material world. Something similar is reinforced in a line from the Upanishad, which says- "the eternal cannot be grasped, by the transient senses or the transient mind..." The inadequacy of the body seeks spiritual engagements. In that sense, Raza has internalized the beauty of both Sufism and the Hindu philosophy- he can recite the Quran and cite the Gita with equal passion. He says, "I am proud to be born a Muslim, and am equally proud of having studied under extraordinary Hindu teachers." The Hindu philosophical thought, the idea of *dhyana*, of *darshan*, the notions of the *Brahman* and the *Atman*, all were deeply engaging for Raza who pursued ancient philosophies and their treatises on self and the universe with dedication. For Raza, the gesture of closing eyes in front of the deity evokes a similar feeling of 'turning within'. **Later, Christianity came into his life with his wife and with Paris.** The learning from these sources of inspiration has synthesized beautifully in his seeking 'a sublime form' in his art, reinforcing the idea that spirituality and true knowledge transcend barriers and invented human divides in the name of religion.

Raza's work has always been about representing 'energy'. His artistic career began with an interest in capturing the immediate, the instantaneous moment of encounter with nature. As an ardent traveler- he traveled to different places- to the mountains and ghats, rivers and terrains, cities and countryside. Indeed outdoor locales were his early subjects that he painted in quick, brisk energetic strokes that captured the fleeting moods of nature or the momentum of urban life, dispersed in the encounters with the external environment. Raza wandered these 'outer' spaces to finally arrive at his 'inner' space of the intangible and the spiritual. Once in Paris, in 1953, the 'sense of the immediate' seemed to diminish, as if, Raza in his nostalgia of India, was mapping the distant, the unseen and the untouched -the Indian consciousness of centuries within the geometries of living that he carried within his mental folds. Choosing in his art, a non- representational mode, abstracting nature and existence into a geometry of colour and form perception, Raza moved away from empirical modalities

and processes of analysis, routing his work in a spirituality that resonated with oriental flavor and colour. In departing from India and settling down in Paris, one witnesses the evolution to energy of a different kind- energy from latent sources- of memory, metaphors and mysticism. The concept of *bindu* and its *anant sambhavna* (myriad possibilities) subsumed him forever... To quote Raza, "As far as my work is concerned, I am coming to crystallization of a potent symbolism in its simplicity and elasticity. The process is continual and through elimination, my means are getting more and more economical and I am looking at my destination without the superfluous and the unnecessary."

Raza's works have often been categorized as abstract, but his paintings should not be ascribed to an art for art's sake' category, as they evolve in the context of themes that are deep-rooted in concepts of Indian philosophic thought. For Raza, the titles of his works are significant, and though he has stripped them of explicit narrative, meanings are not extinct within them. In fact, it is within this context that his non-objective imagery can be most appreciated. Condensed energy spills over from one painting to another, whether working with a magisterial sign of *Bindu*, the seed/ *Ankuran* or *Kundalini*. "For more than 55 years, I have been trying to articulate the *Anant Sambhavna* of the *Bindu*," says Raza. To him, Nature is contained with continual repetition and renewal. It is symbolic of life- forces and has been personified and celebrated in his art. In these recent series of works done in acrylic on canvas, Raza has explored aspects of femininity, its powers of creation in *Kundalini*, *Germination*, and *Bindu*- all painted in nuances of blue, indigo, black and white. He adds, " For this show, I am working with the theme of *Nari Shakti*, the creator rather than the created, exploring aspects of femininity and its latent energy of *kundalini*... the female form is far from being passive in our culture, where her innate powers are worshipped."

Space for Raza over the years, has become more and more non-objective as it turned away from ordinary consciousness and representations of seen reality. In his form making, space has become the ground plan, the receptacle, on which he paints his rhythmic breathing forms. His regular companions- the square and circle remain his preferred figures in geometry to begin with. The transformation of the two dimensional plan is gradual and graded as Raza layers over layer to liberate the visual form from the rigidity of the formal structure. In the process, form acquires presence, energy, light, airiness and the flutter of a transiting soul... The energies of line, colour, space and form flow into one another making concentric paths and creating an unbroken rhythm, a perpetual whisper if you will. His colours are like echoes, like verses of a prayer that reverberate. The potent nothingness/ darkness at the centre illuminates the edge, the outer rim radiating light, the *Bindu* (point) then becomes the *Brahman* (universe) in the act of expansion and contraction.

The bright colours, rhythmic lines and patterning of the Rajput and the Mughal miniatures, the symbolic hues and spatial planning of the Tantra, the emphasis on the 'inner rupa' rather than literalness of the outer form, have been significant insights in developing his language of painting. Raza remains deep in Indian thought, referencing Indian sources both in life and painting, polarizing the static and dynamic through spiritual hermeneutics.

The pursuit is endless in creating the 'formless in form' for in invoking the formless/spiritual, there is no finality or totality. It is almost as necessary and routine as daily prayer, infused each time with a fresh hope of spiritual ascension and redemption. It is the power of endurance that is tested here, as the artist adopts the role of a *sadhak* immersed in his *sadhna* /meditation, spending years sitting under a *bodhi* tree or then standing on the rock, in the need to conquer the temporal and the transient through his spiritual form.

Manish Pushkale has been working on the concept of *samayik* (which means *japa* or chanting) for the last three years. Manish works in oil on canvas with a minimum intervention of the brush to give the canvas a thinned colour bath. His entire process is worked out by the use of a cut-piece of fabric that acts as a sponge that absorbs the excess pigment and extra shine to impress the texture on to the surface, all by the process of taking away. This method comes real close to carving in sculpture where the form is shaped by subtracting the excess material or then in etching where the unnecessary is wiped off. Manish thins down the consistency of oil to the transparency of watercolour, applying layer upon layer till the desired effect is achieved. The painting emerges gradually... there is no apriori knowledge of its final shape and look. For Manish, his innovative methodology determines his process-oriented work.

In Manish, there is no extravagance of means – the elements themselves are frugal and there are many omissions practiced by him in his self-disciplining stance in front of the canvas. Manish strives for freedom within set restrictions. For instance, colour and line both are muted and toned down in his work. The artist wants to transcend the fixity and finiteness of space within the borders of his canvas. He desires the continuity and expansiveness of the experiential space- hence the creation of mirages, shadows and shafts of light that trick the eye and the sense of touch, to bring into focus, the illusory nature of things. One observes paths of light emanating from the grid like underlying structure that may have 9, 6 or 4 squares to begin with, but is superimposed with triangles, squares or circles on it. Space is energized by Manish through different directional and rotational pulls that result from the play of full and partial images through repeated and intuitive realization.

Indeed, space is hardly ready made for visual artists, it is tailored by them for desired ends. Raza and Manish both use the definiteness of certain shapes such as the square, triangle or circle but strive to transcend its limits and diagrammatic quality by stepping out of the grid (Manish) and creating a breathing heaving form. (Raza). Manish arrives at a brilliant visuality with his primary tool, the fabric fold, creating the illusion of folding and unfolding, veiling and unveiling spaces. For him the many folds are more than a technical device- together with the fibres of fabric, they enrich the image, as Manish seeks poetry in a crease or tear transferred on the canvas. The exercise becomes intense for both of them as they seek fresh ways and means to transform finite geometric forms to a metaphysical order.

It is interesting to me how Manish negates the objective reality in his meditative spaces, literally doing away with the object and retaining only their 'shadows' (there are no shadows without objects) Released from their body and weight, the earthly dimensions of images/things are extracted to arrive at a *sanyastha* form. In the process, his work emanates light, transparency, airiness and a sense of open- ended continuous movement through a rhythmic flow. The transference of impressed textures onto the canvas with an intuitive sense creates the contrast of empty and occupied spaces, of depth and projection. The dichotomies of the spiritual and material, the inner and outer, are played out in the realm of the aesthetic adventure. Manish's colours are undefined, asocial and hardly ever symbolic. In their formal mediations, Raza and Manish have their own strengths. Raza's works dazzle with rich, saturated colours, Manish's canvases glow with soft, muted tones. The pictorial surface of Raza is animated by the tactility of paint while Manish works towards smooth, serene, reflective surfaces. Both, Raza and Manish relinquish traces of individual ego and autobiographical narratives in the seeking of a higher revelation in a single expressive continuum.

The Sufis elaborate upon the need to create an emptiness within, a condition of total receptivity for the *nur* /light of the Divine to illuminate the centre within our being. The creative act becomes the means for the transference of energies from within into artistic forms, placing the artists repeatedly at the brink of a knowledge-empty and evacuated state, awaiting divine intervention to start afresh. In articulating the essence of the *Bindu* and *Samayik*, Raza and Manish have overcome the lure of visible phenomena, exploring their shared spirit through chosen individual trajectories and struggles.

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