

## ART



Exile exaggerates the fantasy. Dreams of the displaced have always been enduring themes in the history of art and literature.

Those imaginary homeland of the uprooted. A memory deliberately sabotaged, distorted or mythified.

When one goes through the celebration of this turbulence at the Lalit Kala gallery, organised by the French Embassy, the dual message is clear. India, in its present and primordial manifestations, is a solemn, subdued, and even angry, image within the contemporary artist. And the sophistication of that image is beautifully alien. These works, paintings and sculptures, are by Indian artists who are voluntary exiles in Paris, or who were in Paris in their formative years.

It has always been Paris. The chosen workshop for the castaway. From James Joyce to Beckett, Kundera to Kadare, Paris was that distant listening point from which some of the finest minds of this century decoded the mysteries of living. And it continues to be a city of culture, art and literature. Perhaps the only city which takes Dostoevsky literally: "Beauty will save the world." Cynics may say that only the ruins remain now. But as Marc Fumaroli, a professor of rhetoric and society in Europe at the College de France, wrote in *The Times Literary Supplement*,

# Memories of the displaced

*India emerges as a perfect abstraction on the canvas of the displaced painter. S. Prasannarajan on an exhibition of the artists benefited by Paris*

"with a bit of luck, some reliable intelligence and the instincts of a Boswell, it is still possible to see interesting literary figures in Paris."

And some interesting Indian painters too. Of them, undoubtedly the master is Raza, and any reflection on his intense "bindu", a point to infinity, defies an answer. It is a search, a permanent meditation. Remember his words: "It is hard for a painter whose language is that of form and colour, to describe in words the complexity of artistic expression. For it remains essentially mysterious, above all because it is an integral part of an activity in which powerful forces accumulate and function in enduring relationship between the intellect and more latent tendencies. The mental part, which consists in knowledge, is one of the weaker partners in that group of forces of instinct and intuition which go into action in the moment of creation. The best works of art are achieved in a climate of a kind of second state, conscious analysis there being carried out to the detriment of the good working-out of the object."

Raza, a product of the Nagpur School of Art and the Sir J.J.

School of Art, Bombay, left for France in 1950. For three years he studied painting at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Winner of the prestigious Prix de la Critique, he has had numerous solo and group exhibitions at galleries worldwide. And his "Bindu" has over the years become a focal point in the cosmic labyrinth of creativity. As Pierre Gaudibert notes, "...so it is that the Bindu which holds all the potential for 'becoming' is transformed in Raza's work into a cosmic egg gestating in the heart of the earth, ready for germination even as it remains the starting point of the process of artistic creation. Thus, plastic order and plastic logic are with him, as with Klee, as much a constant preoccupation of his artistic approach as a component of a dual sacredness: that of demanding, mysterious and silent creation and that of the primal energy of the universe embodied as a microcosm in that creation. The work of art is not a pure receptacle of spirituality and magic, rather, it is invested with magic and spirituality with means proper to art, ceaselessly renewed ordering of active plastic elements." This spiritual, and metaphysical, inquiry through dark and other sharp shades has been at its best in the Raza of the 80s.

For the 53-year-old Viswanadhan (he never looks it) too, Paris has been literally the last resort. The serene depth in his works could have only been achieved by a man who travelled through all those landscapes which no canvas can contain. At one point in his wandering, when death stood patiently outside the door, he had to confront that question, "Who am

I?" While recounting his bohemian life with this writer some months back, he explained the genesis behind that inquiry into the meaning of the five elements. (See his movie *Ganga*.) His works have been exhibited in major European galleries. And the show at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris was a great honour for Viswanadhan. Though there are religious motifs in his geometric creations, the subterranean turbulence of which are camouflaged by stark and light colours, the formal discipline is achieved by his exposure to Europe.

Even in the grey, nostalgic landscapes of Ram Kumar, in the Raphaelesque beauty of the early Anjolie Ela Menon, in the typically Keralite — sometimes South Indian in general — symbols of Akkittam Narayanan, one cannot miss the European sophistication. As critic Keshav Malik aptly writes in an introduction to the catalogue of the present show, "...Paris continues to be the magnet, for behind Paris are not only many galleries and museums, but the sheer weight of a highly disciplined aesthetics. If the foreign artist living in France is really in touch with such critical cum creative tradition, his work is likely to expand, find a dynamic human forum."

Other major attractions: Paritosh Sen capturing an enigmatic, ambiguous moment — the gesture says it all — of a woman among flowers; K.V. Haridasan's seemingly tantric image of the primal energy; Madhoor Kapur's photographically true recapturing of moments in everyday life; Sajata Bajaj's compositions on an inherited tradition; Sunil Das's captivating portrayal of beauty in hazy moments of self-realisation (doesn't he say, "your truth is my truth?"); Suraj Ghai's grotesque image of sacrifice; Shakti Burman's celebration of the exotic; Jogen Chowdhury's faces of hardened feelings; Amitabh Sengupta's depiction of the memories of the present, which in its effortless harmony looks timeless... to name a few. Mohan Kumar's "The eternal lover and she" and Valsan Koller's work of the ultimate sacrifice of the helpless, are two sculptures which make the exhibition so varied and intense. And Mohan Kumar has no inhibitions in admitting that he owes his success to Paris.

Once outside the gallery, one has to admit that the unknown provides infinite possibilities for the restless creator. They are not definitely too French; French is an added touch of subtlety. Thanks to the "cultural state," India of the imagination continues to be a perfect abstraction.



The helpless:  
A sculpture by  
Valsan Koller

