

THE SUBLIMINAL WORLD OF RAZA

YASHODHARA DALMIA

For half a century we have been witness to Sayed Haider Raza's subliminal paintings which transpose us to a world of meditative rumination. In the depths of intense tonalities or within the regurgitating void of black there is a resurgence of the life force which returns us to the world. In this virtual play of life and death we are faced with the essentials of Raza's vocabulary incessantly arranging itself to new epiphanies.

In his endeavour to carve an identity, the breakthrough came for Raza when the brilliant colours of the miniature schools began seeping into his modernist oeuvre. His city landscapes, shapes of buildings and rain washed streets, became bathed in the heat and passion of the land and irradiated his canvases. The reds, yellows and blues swam in unpredictable trajectories, creating a litany of remembrances. Thus *Rajasthan* played itself out again and again, first in an orderly placement of the primaries, then tumbling over each other and finally in an upheaval of passion.

As one of the leading members of the Progressive Artists' Group in India, Raza had paved the way for a modernism rooted in his own context. When he apprenticed himself to the Ecole de Paris in the early fifties it was a means of enriching his syntax of modernism and not as an end in itself. It was with a summer residency in the U.S. in the sixties that Raza was quick to imbibe the influences of the Abstract Expressionists, as a freer play of colours began to enter his canvases. His strokes of paint loosened and began to straddle the surface, the self-imposed grid withered, and the expressive layers plumbed the depths of existence.

The dense, brilliant surface spoke of the hot colours of his land, in its valour but also in bloodshed. The violent repercussions of the Bangladesh war in the seventies was expressed in anguished strokes with deep serrated reds which refused to curtail their dripping. On one side the seeped colours overran the canvas on the other they became enmeshed with each other in ridged frenzy. The despair of his country became his as Raza drenched his work with red.

It was in this fluid state that the colour black began to play an increasing role in Raza's oeuvre. For black was the mother of all colours and the one from which all others were born. It was also the void from which sprang the manifest universe. His childhood experience where he had focused on a central point on his forehead to gain concentration became the nexus of his archived memory and re-surfaced in his work as the pivotal black *bindu* or circle.

In Indian metaphysical belief the *shunya* or void is not empty but redolent with possibilities. This energy centre became the focus of Raza's works in the coming years. As he stated, "There was a state of emptiness. I stopped painting for a while. I tried to look within instead of looking around. It was a complex and very difficult period when everything seemed dark and empty. But I continued. I followed my states, my intuitions. And from this blank space emerged a black point. This black point grew and grew and became a black circle...A certain electric charge came which engendered energy. The condition of the subway became clearer and slowly colours started appearing. White, then yellow, blue and red. It was obvious that along with the initial black this would form the colour spectrum. And this so much belonged to us in India. So much belonged to me."¹ The *bindu* began emerging on his canvas, the dark epicentre which would generate the brilliant swirl of colours. In works like *Germination* the colours emanate majestically from each other letting loose a tapestry of incandescent reds and yellows as they cavort the surface.

Some of the most haunting works of this period are those which evoke the night such as *Dark Night* where the limnal sheaths of black are illuminated by sparks of white light. It also formed the most potent of his childhood memories:

"The most tenacious memory of my childhood is the fear and fascination of Indian forests. We lived near the source of the Narmada river in the centre of the dense forests of Madhya Pradesh. Nights in the forests were hallucinating; sometimes the only humanizing influence was the dancing of the Gond tribes. Daybreak brought back a sentiment of security and well-being. On market-day, under the radiant sun, the village was a fairyland of colours. And then, the night again. Even today I find that these two aspects of my life dominate me and are an integral part of my paintings. There are a multitude of variations, but it has its

departure point in an experienced feeling, even if the real problems are of a plastic nature."²

The apogee in this oeuvre is reached with *Maa* where the flaming tongues of colours on one side is counterpoised by the still depths of the black orb on the other. Below the painting is the inscription *Maa lautkar jab aaonga, kya laonga?* suggesting an intense yearning for home. Raza chose to juxtapose calligraphy with his painted forms in the manner of the miniatures to enliven the sensory experience of the work. Enclosed within the flickering frame of red and black which iconizes the painting while heightening its artifice, the work remains a deep sublimation of his bond with his country.

As with Mark Rothko, black is one of the richest colours in Raza's palette and signifies a state of fulsomeness. However for both painters, colours plumb the depths and are not simply used for their own sake. As Rothko stated, colours imply "...basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom...The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point."³

In an even deeper extension of his work Raza arrived at *bija*, the seed which is the core of existence and which gives birth to the fecund, fertile world. Just as the minutest particle has the potential for the creation of existence, the *bija* led to the bifurcations of light and dark zones in overlapping metaphors of water, earth and sky in constant motion. It was the understanding of essentials in their elemental forms which led to the awesome evolution of the universe. In a suite of paintings titled *Fertility* in the nineties, the effulgence of colour is juxtaposed with blank spaces to emphasize the binaries of light and dark, dynamism and staticity, creation and destruction.

In his evolutionary manner Raza's ruminations began to arrive at the *Param* or the *eternal Bindu* where soft shades of ochre, green and white are transposed from light to dark in subtle nuances conveying a sense of movement. In *Naad Bindu* the dense black centre itself dissolves into diaphanous sheets of grey which turn white at the edges rotating around the central orb. These monochromatic circles which expand into translucent space create a climate of exquisite delicacy. As the black disc metamorphosed into zones of atmospheric colour there is a sense of

merging with the lightness of being. If *naad* denotes the eternal rhythm underlying creation then the *Shanti Bindu* which followed emanated in its rarefied colour harmonies the enveloping peace which wrapped the universe.

In his more recent works, however, Raza climbs down from these ethereal heights to delve once more into the world of shimmering colours. As an incandescent red traverses the hemispheres or aqueous blue plumbs the depths there is an exploration of life and death. The grid loosens once again to reveal a swirling, swishing universe of brilliant colours which swim across the canvas. We are reminded of Rothko's observations, "The spectator must move with the artist's shapes in and out, under and above, diagonally and horizontally; he must carve around spheres, pass through tunnels, glide down inclines, at times perform an aerial feat of flying from point to point, attracted by some irresistible magnet across space, entering into mysterious recesses – and, if the painting is felicitous, do so at varying and related intervals.....Without taking the journey, the spectator has really missed the essential experience of the picture."⁴ There is great ascension as the strokes soar upwards to the nether worlds. There is the cacophonous havoc of tidal storms which threaten to destroy all life for its re-creation. And there is the epiphanic, ecstatic exploration of the four corners of the world with liminal blues and reds.

As the wheel comes full circle for Raza there is an awareness of the past which continuously exists in the present. The artist's oeuvre of primaries is matched by a luminous black which gets explored to its fullest capacity. We see that his colour cycles are matched by a conceptual stream which continuously archives deeper ravines. This restless craving for a renewal of means and methods is the essential aspect of the works of Raza.

Notes

1. Raza in an interview with the author, Mumbai, January 1991
2. Raza quoted by Jacques Lussaigne in *Raza Anthology 1980-90*, Mumbai 1991
3. Mark Rothko quoted by Diane Waldman in *Mark Rothko*, Thames and Hudson, 1978
4. Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, Edited and with an introduction by Christopher Rothko, Yale University Press 2004

ENDS