

## GENESIS

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Against the primordial space of infinity appears a black circle; its white rim of light shimmering and scarcely perceptible... A fine white circle now surfaces against the black void, radiating sharp diagonals of light, resonating with energy... Below these pictures; inscribed; a verse from the legendary poet Muktibodh which seems to hark back to the beginning of Time:

From the black void (*shunya*)  
Floats / emerges the perception of the world

In the logic of painting, light emerges from the dark abyss, aspiring to ever greater brilliance: colours emerge from light, for without light there is no awareness of colour. Moving from the intense black epicentre of a circle, spinning out concentric circles of white light... To be edged at the four corners of the square with primary colours of red, blue, yellow and pristine white... To expand yet further into alternating tones of chrome yellow, orange, green - graduating to complexities of the colour spectrum.

This is the Bindu: a focal point for meditation. A circle, stabilised by a square; a sun exploding with latent forces of energy; or, if you like, the earth made whole again, restored to its unity.

It is this elemental form of the circle, primeval in its origins and rich in its associations, which becomes the sole source of inspiration; the leitmotiv in Raza's paintings.

## II

When Sayed Haider Raza was barely a boy of eight years, in his native village of Kakaiya, in Madhya Pradesh, he was introduced to the Bindu: The school master inscribed this on the wall of the schoolhouse, a simple form to still his restless, roving imagination... Three decades later, when Raza returned on a pilgrimage to his village, the Bindu was still visible on the wall: but for him, the exercise had become a moment of initiation towards

bringing order into chaos, into a world that was rich with nuances and filled with mysteries.

Raza spent his youth in the heart of India, close to the earth, in ecstatic communion as it were with nature. The dense forests of Madhya Pradesh became the feeding grounds for his volatile imagination. The rituals of the Gond and Bhil tribals widened his experience to a world-view centred on the sacred order of the universe. Most significant of all, the power of the sun in central India, creating or destroying life on earth, became a hallucinating image... At night, dark hostile forces preyed upon the imagination, ghosts like flickering flames. The reassurance of light came at daybreak, with the radiant colours of the market town.

These haunting images from the past remained with Raza through all his forty years spent away from India. Memory plays a strange and fascinating role in that it feeds on images of the past - all the more so if we are separated by time and place. In the mind's eye, these experiences are retained to be intensified on the canvas.

Twenty years later, the Bindu surfaced in Raza's work in Paris with tremendous force and clarity: the brilliant *Black Sun* (1953) appears in the sky, scorching the houses scattered in mud ochre... dominating the parched landscape of *The Earth*... spinning out circles of energy as the Bindu, bringing colour to earth as *Surya*.

Nature had become a pictorial metaphor: the forest, the river, the ravines, parched earth. The sun magnified a hundred times, exploding with energy and dynamism as the sole luminary. The earthscape, textured with the signs of human habitation and furrowed with time. These formed the essential components of his work in the '60's and '70's.

These are compelling forces, existing for all time without beginning or end. Hence they seem to be suspended in a timeless zone, as magnetic forces that control the sacred order of the universe.



### III

Since 1950, Raza has studied, lived and worked in Paris, in an atelier situated in a sixteenth century convent in Rue de la Charonne. Religiosity of purpose combines with meticulousness in his search for precision - for a methodology in painting. In an interview published in 1986, the artist comments that his years of training in France have influenced his concern with Form, "le sens plastique". The orchestration of colour and form generates vitality, in the birth of an image.

Pictures of the '70's such as *La Forge* represent an exploratory stage, conjuring up in their depths the forbidding forests of Madhya Pradesh. These paintings are intuitive, restless assertions of the brush, still searching for a central theme. The paintings entitled *Ma* summons up the last stages of this phase of gestural expression. In 1978 the *Bindu* reappears as a central force, suspended between two square areas of light and dark, an epicentre poised in space.

In his statement at the Visual Arts East-West Encounter held in Bombay in 1985, Raza presents his argument:

My present work is the result of two parallel enquiries. Firstly, it aimed at pure plastic order, form order. Secondly; it concerns the theme of Nature. Both have converged into a single point and become inseparable; the point, the bindu, symbolises the seed, bearing the potential of all life, in a sense. It is also a visible form containing all the essential requisites of line, tone, colour, texture and space. The black space is charged with latent forces aspiring for fulfilment.

The Elements are the principles which govern Time and Space, to infuse order into the universe: To express this concept, the artist resorts to the principles which govern pictorial language: the essential vocabulary of the point, line, diagonal, circle, square and triangle. He is selective in his choice of one form of the circle or the triangle, or the circle in the square, to

suggest the magnetic power of the Elements. By these measures, deceptively simple, order is imposed on the canvas. He realizes:

By very simple means  
I am convinced  
one can attain infinity!

This concern with pure geometry and its signification can be misconstrued to suggest the approach of a formalist, or a structuralist, or even that of a neo-tantric. Nothing could be more misleading.

In 1983 Raza was asked by the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi to participate in an exhibition to be held abroad on the Neo-Tantric movement. He declined to show his work. His reply is significant because it suggests how he views his own work in the context of contemporary art in India:

My using a "circle" or a "square" as key motifs  
do not make my paintings Tantric, even if I  
have called them "Bindu", "Sourya" or "Zamine".  
I am aware, Tantric Darshan is far too complex.  
I know little about its beliefs or rituals.  
My involvement in work is essentially with  
the life of form, and all my efforts are directed  
towards a coherent pictorial logic...

#### IV

A painting also possesses meaning other than Form or Metaphor. In the ultimate analysis; it reflects the artist's perceptions, feelings experience. Although these pictures do not belong to experimental reality, they resonate with memories of India, resulting from an innate sense of aesthetics.

In Raza's studio at Paris, small objects bespeak his Indian origins, gleaming among the dark wood and austere walls of the ancient convent. On the bookcase, a burnished black stone found only in the sacred waters of the



Narmada river and used to signify the presence of Shiva. A white conch-shell, dazzling in its purity, used in the rituals of prayer. A wooden figure from the temples of Gujarat, with huge magnetic circles for her eyes... Rugs sing of the rich colours of earth, textures glow with the vibrant colours of Rajasthan... In an inexplicable way, his paintings are imbued with the same mood, the same vibrancy, the same sensibility.

The artist returns to indigenous sources of inspiration because, as he remarks, "Rajput and Jain paintings appeared more vital than the prestigious Moghul or Persian miniatures". The so-called Rajput "primitives" have contributed explicitly to the fabric of his pictures, in their colour orchestration. This is an art born of love and war, of passion and poetry, which shocks and startles the viewer in its intensity. The bold use of blood-red and pitch-black combine with brilliant chrome yellow and white interspaces, as best exemplified in paintings from Malwa and Mewar from the seventeenth century. They have left their impress on Raza's pictures, such as those titled *Rajasthan* and *Saurashtra*. A final touch is imparted by his definitive use of strong black borders to the image - as though we are removed in time and gazing upon an icon.

Indian music and poetry, both have remained for Raza an endless source of delight and revelation. Fragments of Hindi poetry are inscribed on his pictures in devanagari script, relating these "abstract" images to human experience. The large canvas titled *Ma* resonates with a nostalgic yearning to return to his motherland: in the verse which is inscribed, as well as in the vibration of colours of passion.

The poem, the song, and the painting on the same theme, possess an intense relationship to each other. The word *raga* for Indian melody derives from the sanskrit root *ranj*, to "colour" the heart of man, stirring up in him a range of different emotions. Each *raga* is sung or played on a specific arrangement of melodic notes, to create a particular mood of the pristine dawn, or the riot of spring, or the ambivalent feelings of a heroine awaiting her lover. In response to the *raga* is created the *ragamala*, a poetic allusion in visual format.

The combination of image and poetry in Raza's paintings is therefore in keeping with the classical tradition of the *ragamala*. He creates a "mood"

wherein all our sense are alerted: when we see and hear and read in the totality of our being. He exclaims:

colour in Indian art is ecstasy !

A critical assessment of his pictures should point out that there are endless variations on the same theme. But Raza has no apologies for repetition. He refers us to the ancient Indian practice of *japa*, used in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, where the incantation of certain syllables can lead to intense devotion. He uses the analogy of music: a maestro performs and plays the same raga on several occasions with improvisations: in each case, in a different climate, the validity of his performance is judged by the intensity of his expression. As in music, so in painting, the same theme may be explored again and again, leading to a heightened pitch, a deeper awareness.

Focusing the mind on the Bindu has led the artist to find a deeper, fuller experience. In this case, it has led to a revelation, to the germination of new life! From the Bindu has emerged the new series of pictures begun in 1988, entitled *Ankuram*, the germination of the seed.

## V

Gorbio, where Raza and his wife Janine live during the summer months, is situated up in the mountains at a distance of seven kilometres from the intense blue sea of the Côte d'Azur. On his way to the studio every morning, the artist looks in at a church that is rarely visited. Five minutes of quiet meditation. For him it hardly matters whether this is a church or a mosque or a temple. The solitude, the quietening of the mind, yields the same effect which he was taught as a boy in his village of Kakaiya in Madhya Pradesh.

In the garden of the studio there grows an ancient olive tree. Cherry, plum and fig trees are planted in this garden of paradise. Bamboo stalks rise against the hillside, mimosa with tiny yellow blossoms, deep red begonias, pink petunias, purple lavender. Bona, the black cat, lies asleep on the broken white steps of the patio...



These details are not insignificant; for they compose the environment to which he is susceptible. In sun and light and open air, colours have a luminous quality, so vividly realized in his pictures. There is poetry in the tendrils of green shoots, passion in red flowers, magic in the evening air at Gorbio as the full moon slips out from behind the mountain. The process of assimilation goes on, even if, as he says, "I want to see with my eyes closed". But what he sees is a metaphor of the life he knows.

A few years ago the artist found an image in stone that crystalised for him an idea in tangible reality. Shaped rather like a key and inscribed with an inner circle, it resembled the innumerable *yonis* that are found along the ghats of the river Narmada. He placed this stone at the entrance to his studio, filled it with earth and planted seeds. Each spring tiny tender shoots of grass grew up in this circumscribed space, fertilized by the sun.

This image and idea becomes fundamental to his new phase of work of ~~work~~ on Germination. In these new pictures the Bindu has begun to move distinctly; through space and through the canvas. Occasionally this move is three-dimensional, as though the sun in orbit or the earth is thrusting up and out of the canvas and moving with great speed. In these pictures the red and the black meet like two entities, two polarities, like a man and woman, between them, within two triangles are the new plants that have been born. Space, the Earth would seem to be pregnant! To quote from Raza's new discovery:

The black Bindu is placed in the centre of the earth  
like a foetus moving in the womb of the mother!

This image and idea becomes fundamental to his new phase of work on Germination. In an inspired moment it is possible to "see" suddenly how the sun; the sole source of light and energy on earth, fertilizes the earth to bring life into plants. This becomes the new leitmotiv, energising one canvas after another. They are imbued with an inherent pictorial logic, as well as the logical development of the idea of the Bindu.

*Geetii Sen.*