

Formless masterpieces light up DAG

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Al Capp, the famous American cartoonist, didn't have the highest opinion of abstract art. He called it the "product of the untalented, sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered". Throughout the last century, as art moved from the quasi-abstract Impressionist movement to more and more radical schools, this sentiment was repeatedly echoed by humorists the world over.

Abstract art, writes curator Kishore Singh in his introductory essay to the Delhi Art Gallery's (DAG) exhibition of Indian Abstracts, "cannot be easily explained, yet has so many constructs as to become a cliché, especially when there are multiple meanings to each theory... If modernism means a paring down of the realistic to the altruistic, a sum of its parts, then abstraction is its natural destiny that alters all specifics till there is no more recourse to an actual inten-

sity." A natural progression, then, of the artistic gaze, abstraction is a sacrifice of form at the altar of full, unencumbered expression.

In India, the abstract art movement has been characterised by an attempt to break free of Western influences and establish a national identity. In a way, it came more naturally to Indian painters. "Where abstraction in modern Western art evolved primarily through elimination to arrive at the essence," writes Nandini Ghosh, "the Indian psyche may find itself more intimately attuned to the abstract given the fact that the 'formless' universal is a principal component in traditional Indian philosophy. The fact that the divine is conceived in the *siva linga*, the *shaligrama*, and the goddesses imagined as manifesting in the uncut rock to which perhaps the insertion of a pair of eyes sufficed to designate her identity, points to the essential difference from the notion of mimesis... that informs the pattern of



Works by Biren De (left), S.H. Raza (centre) and F.N. Souza (right), part of Indian Abstracts

European thought."

Like previous such shows at the DAG, Indian Abstracts is as much an academic exercise in chronicling the abstractionist movement, exploring the artists' motivations and influences, as it

is an exhibition of paintings. But it is an exhibition of some of the best works by the foremost Indian abstract artists — V.S. Gaitonde, S.H. Raza, Ram Kumar, Nasreen Mohamedi, Zarina Hashmi, Jeram Patel, Shanti Dave — as well

as lesser-known abstract works from other prominent artists like Husain, Souza, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Rabin Mondal.

The paintings demonstrate the diverse ways Indian artists approach the abstract,

even questioning its very existence. (Gaitonde, for one, rejects the entire notion of abstract art, says it doesn't exist — since artists do, in fact, work within a framework of noticeable forms, even if they are taken out of

context — preferring to use the term "non-representation" instead.) They vary in scale, from Dave's complex, layered oil-on-canvas paintings and Raza's Rothko-inspired impasto landscapes to Hashmi's and Mohamedi's

serigraphs, which express inner turmoil through severe geometric lines. Some, like Biren De's neo-Tantric paintings of a dynamic spherical form that signifies the motive force of the universe, delve into deep spirituality; others, like K.C.S. Paniker's playful canvases that feature gibberish masquerading as intense calculations on an astrologer's almanac, use the abstract form to make tongue-in-cheek social commentary.

The avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas once said that "abstract art ended

Venue: Delhi Art Gallery
On till: 30 September
Timing: 10 a.m. — 7 p.m.

with Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. To continue it is senseless." While Malevich's painting a century ago took abstraction to its logical conclusion, this exhibition underscores the fact that in India at least, the limits have not yet been reached.