

THE ABSTRACT AS REALITY

Conceptual art filters abstract ideas into realistic, accessible works that stir up memories and speak in volumes, says Daniel Pinto



Protected, an oil painting by Gayatri Mehta

A child reaches out to a paper boat with colourful toys being pushed by a tiny stick figure. The scene is from artist Gayatri Mehta's childhood-themed exhibition *Above Everything* that was recently displayed at the Jehangir Art Gallery. The art is accessible and vivid, and the mood is one of joy and exhilaration.

The artist elaborates on what she sought to convey with her playful work. "When the children have their peers and their play, they are above everything. The innocence, fascination and ignorance of childhood are gone from our lives, and we miss it because of our competitive nature and the want to gain and perpetuate what we have. Children make and break and enjoy doing both. It is this feeling of exhilaration, pleasure and joy which I've left on my canvas," she says.

Mehta, joint secretary of the Bombay Art Society, terms her realism-infused style conceptual art. "I look at the objective images around and out of that, I associate it with my own concepts and ideas and then I develop different kinds of conceptual compositions for the representational part of my images. But my concepts are related to some abstract ideas," she says.

She counts Vasudeo Kamath, Manoj Sakale and European masters of portraiture Hans Holbein, Frans Hals and Diego Velasquez among her influences. "I used to paint right from my childhood but I took up art very seriously from 1996 onwards. And from 2002, I've been having shows continuously. I completed my masters in visual arts last year with portraiture as my main subject," she says.

The artist, who uses reference photographs, and fills in the rest with imagination, says, "In 2002, I worked on the Manohar Mumbai concept where I looked at beautiful



Muzhe Ab Lautado Bachpan, an oil painting by Gayatri Mehta

I want to narrate, and accordingly I compose the subject in my painting — **Vasudeo Kamath**, artist

places of the city and painted them in such a way that Mumbai was shown as a nice place, and not a garbage bin. There was also a conceptual series on Ghats in 2007."

Few Indian artists, according to Mehta, create conceptual or representational art and she credits Kamath with being amongst the first.

Asked whether he indeed pioneered conceptual art, Kamath modestly chuckles that he doesn't know. He says he never seeks to describe or illustrate when he is painting. "I want to narrate, and accordingly I compose the subject in my painting. Sometimes the subjects

are from myth, history or even life experiences, but I try to synchronise the concept through the painting, not to illustrate or explain the event. The realism in my painting is a tool; it's not to showcase skill."

He further explains, "To give an example, you can say there are two types of dramas or films: commercial and experimental. In the former, you try to put the concept of that drama or the film directly without explaining it. It's the same way in painting also. I work to control myself so the painting does not go towards illustration or explaining the event. What is obvious should not be there. That's why

sometimes I take the freedom to take different colours, which may not be as realistic. I take freedom with the light arrangement, and sometimes the proportions as well.

At the same time, the artist says his work is not abstract. "I like abstract paintings to see, but not to paint. It is not my blood."

Artist Prafull Sawant throws more light on the subject. "In representation art, there are figure-or nature-related forms and I create realistic art from models — say, a girl or a man — in front of me and develop their paintings and create a concept based on them," he says.

For Sawant, the style, as a medium of communication, has a plus point. "Because these paintings are realistic, the common man gets its joy very quickly.

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