

SMART ART



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Lost in translation

A couple of days ago, I had a *déjà vu* moment when an artist and scholar countered a request for deciphering an intangible work of art with the argument, "But I don't respond to abstract art." For many art-lovers, abstraction is a theoretical, therefore, problematic, concept. How are you supposed to react to something that has no decipherable form? What is it you are supposed to be looking for in an abstract painting? What makes an abstract idea a work of art when you cannot even begin to understand it?

In many ways, this is exactly the conundrum that viewers face when they fail to "respond" to forms of distortion. Pleasing, "decorative" paintings that they admire are dismissed as lightweight. If aesthetic is not the benchmark for a great painting, what is? Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* is powered by the idea of violence; F N Souza's studies of women, however misogynistic, are about voyeurism; Tyeb Mehta's *Kali* and *Mahishasura* recall not so much the struggle between good and evil as much as of the ferocity between two opposing forces.

To the extent that you can understand these forms makes it easier to study and accept as modern art, but when alteration assumes significance for itself, the painting becomes a rockier territory to negotiate. And yet, when the country's most expensive artists are masters of the abstract, how can you fail to ignore its presence?

V S Gaitonde commanded a price close to ₹24 crore at the close of last year — a benchmark for Indian art — which serves to highlight the importance of understanding what the artist himself



Untitled by Ambadas

had termed his "non-representational" paintings. If there is an idea central to Gaitonde's art, it isn't easily obvious. Mostly, he doesn't bother to offer the viewer any concession by way of a form to hold on to. Even critics refer to his paintings on the basis of their palette — the "green" work or the "yellow" painting. To his credit, there is something mysterious, and luminous, about these paintings; you imagine a subterranean depth; a hint at some undecipherable shapes merging in its mysterious folds.

S H Raza's form of abstraction is easier, whether his "gestural" period when the thick impasto created a collage of colours within the field of the painting, or, of course, his post-'80s work which is an ode to the symbolism of *tantra*, even though he himself steers clear of any claims to tantrism. Having recently had the chance to study a large body of abstract works by Indian artists spread across a century, I came to two conclusions. First, that the genre has attracted more artists than might have been assumed, perhaps because it remained a phase in some of their careers, but clearly one they felt the need to experiment with before moving on to more familiar figurative or narrative styles. And, second, that "understanding" is not critical to responding to an abstract work of art.

Abstract artists do have some notion on which they base their art, refuting suggestions that it is dictated by randomness that obviates the need of an obvious form. Artists Ambadas, Shanti Dave, Zarina Hashmi, Jeram Patel, Krishna Reddy, Prabhakar Kolte, Ram Kumar and Paris-based Viswanadhan remained true to the formless for the bulk of their careers, finding within its ground a space for their creative outpouring. Confronted with their canvases, one is overwhelmed by the use of colour and brushstrokes. The result has the ability to move the soul, to make it sing. I cannot think of a more powerful response to art than something that stays with you — even if you sometimes fail to describe what it is about it that moves you.

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