M.F. Husain 'painting' with the computer.

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Computer aided canvases

By GAYATRI SINHA

M.F. Hussain has described it as a "landmark in the history of art." But can creativity that flows from a microchip take a big byte out of traditional painting techniques?

State of the Art, an exhibition of computer aided canvases mounted by Abhay Mangaldas and Gallery Espace opens at the National Gallery of Modern Art on February 12. In this meeting of mind and machine, the brush and the byte, nine leading Indian artists were invited to work on a new generation of Apple Macintosh computers, and create computer aided canvases. With the aid of a 'mouse' the artists could use simulated materials like brushes, paints, pastels, charcoals, and so on, and choose from a pallette of about a million colours! Within seconds, they could make images appear or alter, advance or recede and introduce other photographed images, sketches or written texts with the help of a digital scanner. Thus Raza introduces a hand written Urdu couplet, Prabhakar Barwe uses a photographed safety pin, and so on. The entire process of this technique will be emonstrated live at the NGMA during the exhibition.

The results of this experiment are 21 large canvases in which the pictures were transferred onto canvas from the computer image with computer controlled ink jets to achieve a very flat uniform texture.

The reaction of the artists to this new medium ranges from cautious conservatism to exhilaration. Atul Dodiya who has done a very conservative Landscape with cow and Interior with a Lamp says candidly, "My approach was careful. I didn't want to fall prey to 'just playing' with this new 'toy.' I think experimentation and freaking out are important, but it shouldn't become an immediate infatuation." Prabhakar Beware who echoes the same fears of loss of creative freedom uses the computer for its "two dimensional and graphic possibilities," as is evident in his experimental works, Eighty Five Safety Pins and the Third Apple. At the other end of the scale, Husain exults in the association of the 'mouse' with Ganesha, and Akbar Padamsee enthusiastically hails the immense possibilities in the permutations and combinations offered by the computer's use of colour and so on. This is very evident in his three paintings Nude 1, 11 and 111. S.H.Raza who resides in Paris and worked on his three paintings in the show for a month says, "I had seen a lot of computer paintings in Europe and was slightly hesitant to embark on this new adventure. But the potential for space perception, its power of manipulation, and the use of the computer's memory is enormous. This is a unique and pioneering experiment."

Even to the casual viewer, it is apparent that computer aided painting may have the benefits of speed, and mechanical dexterity. But there is much that such painting loses out on, in terms of texture, depth and light. For instance, an artist like Navjot painting Canvas within a Canvas uses near monochromatic colours that are lost in the process of mechanical printing and enlarging. Then again, computer lines are like graphs, jagged, and a perfect outline cannot be achieved -- something very evident in Manjit Bawa's painting Goddess and the Lion. In the process of enlargement, the image also gets a diffuse grainy effect. And where Indian artists delight so much in textural effect, the flat graphic finish of the machine gives an entirely different look. Not surprisingly, many of the artists have overpainted with oils or acrylics, to give a depth to their paintings, as in Manu Parekh's Untitled painting of the Benaras ghats at night.

Ultimately, the most successful paintings are those that can best exploit the medium. Laxman Shreshtha's three abstract paintings, which revel in the possibilities of shape and colour with all the rich tonal effects of the computer's pallette, stand out. Then again, there is no timid conservatism in Hasain's searing paintings on the recent communal flare up in Bombay. Inferno, Metamorphosis and Dreams are highly charged works that transcend the somewhat impersonal effects of the medium.

A beginning has been made, and the possibilities of the medium may well have a profound influence in the long run not only over painting but also industrial and commercial design. "This medium is better suited for graphics," believes Manu Parekh. And Manjit Bawa has the last word when he says, "What oil can do, nothing in the world can. And a computer is the last thing to create that effect. This is very useful as a tool but on the whole, Indians are conservative. When they hesitate to buy original paintings, how will they respond to this new medium?"