

Hindustan Times
Feb 5, 1978

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARTISTS (M. F. HUSAIN, BHUPEN KHAKHAR, AKBAR PADAMSEE, RAM KUMAR, F. N. SOUZA, J. SWAMINATHAN) by Geeta Kapur. Vikas, New Delhi, 1977. Pp. 225 plus plates in black and white 72. Rs. 75.

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CONTEMPORARY art in India is yet at a stage when it needs a self-conscious and methodical revelation of its sources, its stimuli, its language and metaphors, and still more, of its protagonists. While one cannot assume a sufficiently objective viewpoint so as to define its purposes, it is high time that art was not limited to a progressively narrowing circle of artists, critics and gallery owners, that it spread its magic and appealed to a larger number of the reading and thinking

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public. The fact that Geeta Kapur's book champions the cause of art, and indeed of the artists, is necessarily to be viewed in this context. Her expose of six Indian painters is a most conscientious and competent work of six essays lucidly written, making art all the more intelligible in terms of art expression explored through personality.

The author suggests in her introduction that she is not concerned with art movements or groups or manifestos, but with individuals. Her choice of six very different artists is therefore quite deliberate, to set out a pattern and methodology closely followed in these essays: of preparing the reader, through the socio-cultural environment and experience of the artist, to lead most logically to his form of expression. One essential point links these Indian artists, which is the "discovery of such forms of expression that sift his unique experience and signify it socially." Here she is returning to her theory of "indigenism" which has been explored in her essays published some years ago in *Vrischik*. It must be appreciated, however, that in this book she has shed some of her dialectics and very complex phraseology; and the statements that emerge are that much more lucid and readable.

Subtitles to each chapter provide the leitmotif which runs through the work of the artist as well as of his life. So we begin with Francis Newton Souza who is "Devil in the Flesh" incarnate (and relishes every moment of it) and who writes most articulately of Satan, of beauty death and the diabolical, of churches and his beloved Goa that inspired all this fecund, potboiling imagery in his pictures. We move on to Maqbool Fida Husain, the itinerant gypsy traveller in "Folklore and Fiesta" who moves from city to town to village, collecting a vast storehouse of popular imagery teeming with symbols which in turn has prompted his popularity to grow. Then we turn to Akbar Padamsee: to his secluded, remote childhood and impairment of speech from age eight to fourteen, which intensified as it were, his visual experience and preserved his "spiritual isolation from the rest of the world." In all his manifested work, from his prophets and nudes with a "position of uncompromised solitude" to the vast overpowering canvases on the great mysteries of nature, he leads us to an awareness of his deep personality, on "the Other Side of Solitude".

One is tempted to pose here the question, irrelevant perhaps, as to what has determined the selection of these six painters? Do these six crown the present-day pantheon of Indian painters? Not all of them are on par, on the same power level, or spiritual level, or in terms of success. If one were to compare Bhupen Khakhar to Swaminathan or Husain, it appears that three "generations" of artists are spanned. Some of these painters, such as Souza, Swaminathan and Husain, have

a certain flamboyance to their personality. Some of this spice and colour is caught in their gestures, their passions, their weaknesses, their moments of success and of limitations.

A picture of Souza (and of his energised canvases) is not complete without mentioning his obsessive talk of his own virility, and then, with contradiction, of the way in which he pops three or four vitamin pills into his mouth with each meal. To complete Husain's image, one would like to see a mention of his public demonstrations of painting, his participation in "happenings", which have certainly added to the legend of Husain, if not to the calibre of his work.



Prophet by Souza

In each essay the attitude adopted by Geeta Kapur is one of a healthy, searching criticism beginning with the artist's background, and moving on to his values and philosophical approach to art, and concluding with a discussion of his paintings. In certain cases, however, as for example with Swaminathan, one feels that too much emphasis is placed on philosophy and ideology so that he emerges more as a habitual rebel and as a "philosophic misanthrope" rather than as a painter. While it is certainly true that Swaminathan has frequently turned art into a public platform for causes which have little to do with the activity of art, the analysis of his paintings leaves the impression of their being a weak, redundant, and unfulfilled bag of theory.

Too often, it seems, a painting is used to support a point of view, rather than the content analysis beginning with the painting itself. In certain other cases, as in dealing with Akbar's logical progression from painting icons to prophets to nudes, moving one step closer from the divine to the human, the analysis is superb. It also deals with peripheral questions such as the fact that both Padamsee and Souza were painting prophets almost at the identical moment in time, and the fact that there is some relation (inspiration?) with that remarkable bust of the bearded man from Mohenjodaro.

The book deals incidentally with certain critical and significant events in the contemporary art world in India. For example, the story of Akbar's return to exhibit in Bombay in 1954, when his painting of *Lovers* sparked off a furore by being branded "obscene", fascinates us as a turning point in contemporary values. The fact that he was charged under a Criminal Act for "corrupting public morality" is a comment on attitudes to art in the 50's which has changed radically in the 1970's. Again, the quotation from Swaminathan's Manifesto of the Group 1890 is significant, in suggesting the radical swing of the Indian artist from embracing Western attitudes and movements, to renouncing it completely, and polemically

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