

# An Artist in a Floating World

**A sleek black coffee-table celebration of Raza's 80 years in painting and poetry**

■ by Madhu JAIN



**RAZA**  
By ASHOK  
VAJPEYI  
RAVI KUMAR  
PUBLISHERS  
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colour plates)

with poet-bureaucrat Ashok Vajpeyi—interspersed with Raza's poems, thoughts (in his handwriting, in English and in the Devnagri script), and Vajpeyi's long poem on Raza—comprises the first part. The second includes an exquisite folio with a selection of prints from the painter's work from 1946 until last year.

The verbal jugalbandhi may at times meander, like conversations after a nice Parisian summer day lunch: the painter and the poet chew over art, life, religion, philosophy and personal highs and lows. But there are some revelatory moments. Conscious that this is the winter of his life, Raza appears particularly meditative. The painter is keen to set down the evolution of his work and what

IS IT A BOOK, A FOLIO, SCATTERED poems, calligraphy or a niftily-packaged interview with thinker-poet S.H. Raza? These days it is difficult to tell with coffee-table books: anything and everything goes. In this case, everything of the above, and more, wrapped up in ultra-cool designer packaging in sleek black.

The art-book folio, a celebration of the Paris-based painter's eight decades, comes in two parts. The conversation-interview

he is going through internally. It is the importance of the process of his work, and his seminal tryst with the "Bindu" of Indian philosophy and its impact on his painting that he wants to convey. A state of his art address as it were.

Raza takes great pains to discourse about how he developed his "expressions towards" the nine rasas in Indian tradition. But he is at his lucid best when he talks about the actual process of painting. "I treated colour as if it was a life element in our body, the lines were like veins. The painted surface like flesh, geometry like the structure, like the bones in human body ... that I could suggest the essence of living experience."

What Raza appears to abhor the most is being a painter who does not transcend the physical planes. He won't paint the life "of a labourer as Fernand Leger did". "My struggle," he adds, "was not on a physical plane, but on an emotional and spiritual plane, from where I draw my images." He frequently draws his inspiration from prayer and begins work after he says "Namaskar" to a statue of a devi in his studio.

Another leit-motif in Raza's ponderings is that he is not an illustrator. "It is possible to paint a picture on Rajasthan, it is possible to paint a picture of the most evolved form of the soul. I do not want to illustrate. I am

not a photographer. I am not a reporter of a magazine. I am not painting the most beautiful woman on the earth. I am making a reflection on the female entity."

Raza may have a way with words, softly seductive as they may be even though there are times when you suspect that there is some metaphysical mumbo-jumbo going on. But his meditations with colours and forms are what linger on in the mind, particularly some of his early works like *Haut de Cagnes* and *Black Sun* in the early 1950s and later works when the gesture was as important as the colour or indeed form.

In fact, when you look through the folio of prints you can't help but remember the metaphysical poet John Donne's words: "For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love." In other words, the pictures don't need the words. ■

NEERAV DAVE



**POET-PAINTER: Raza's meditations on colour**