

MANJIT BAWA

Evolving Images

A culmination of the artist's search for roots

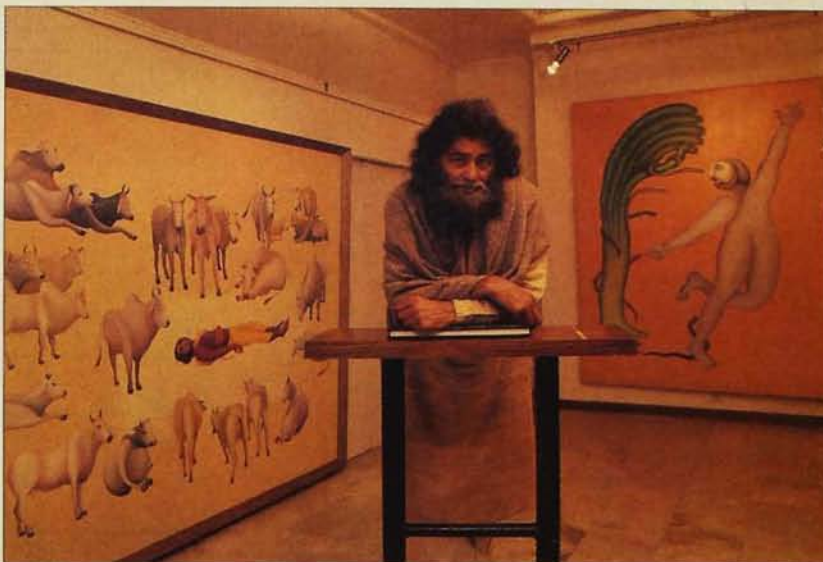
By MADHU JAIN

NO wonder the cows are coming home to moo. There are lots of them on Manjit Bawa's canvases in his stunning show which opened last fortnight at the CCA Gallery in New Delhi. Two of the oils which had the bovine personae were tagged at Rs 6 lakh each, others for not much less. Nor did the buyers seem to bat their lashes in disbelief for longer than it took to say Manjit Bawa.

Now Manjit Bawa, with his lean and hungry look, grizzly beard, shoulder-length locks and long kurtas which seem to sashay to an unheard melody, is certainly no Krishna figure. None of the butter-stealing cowherd's cherubic chubbiness here. But by birthright those cows are his: he was born in a *gowshala* (cowshed) in Dhuri, Punjab.

The legacy from Bawa's father, who loved his cows to the extent of living in the cowshed, and his childhood—the divine lover, cows, *Heer Ranjha*, the *Panchtantra*, sufism, folk tales and the Hindu pantheon of gods—are still part of his repertoire of metamorphosing images, forms and feelings. But the 52-year-old painter has over the years painstakingly evolved new figurations, an altered-state mythology.

Bawa is showing his oils in an exhibition after an interlude of almost 14 years. The significance of this exhibition is in the fact that it is a culmination of a phase of Bawa's search for



Bawa at his first exhibition of oils after an interlude of 14 years

roots, his efforts to evolve traditional imagery into something truly his own—"to put in things that I've never seen". Or anyone else for that matter.

Legs which could be arms, or forelimbs of animals; cows which seem to move on his flat-coloured backgrounds like deer; or human forms which give the impression of being as malleable as plasticine but hang suspended as if in some otherworldly ether on those perfectly painted stark and smooth-as-silk backgrounds.

In fact, Bawa has done away with angles and angularities. In the elegantly penned catalogue, painter and friend J. Swaminathan writes: "There is a certain bonelessness, a pneumatic quality to Manjit's figure which echoes both Pahari folk painting and the tantric frescoes of Himalayan Buddhism."

The pictorial baggage of the landscape painting of his



Bawa's early oils: changing forms





His forms convey movement despite the arrangement of flat colours



childhood has undergone many avatars on the way to the present organic simplicity of rubberised, featureless forms. But the journey has not been easy. At the Delhi College of Art, he did a lot of the "folkish stuff" which included the gods, cows, creeping insects and the mountains.

Somewhere later came the disillusionment. "I saw a lot of world art, read biographies of artists like Van Gogh and Cezanne and saw our own miniature paintings and asked myself what I was doing. It was nothing... Just plain stagnation." So, in 1976 he abruptly stopped painting for two years. "I rejected all my work." And began to draw, limb after disembodied limb. Then one day, when something clicked in his mind, he started putting those limbs together again: "I joined them gradually, like a meccano set."

THE forms which evolved after Bawa's single-minded pursuit of limbs were initially just solid. But gradually he began to add eyes and ears. "It began as a basic form, like a baby which is a lump in the tummy. Then from the lump comes an eye and some little hand comes out." Bawa may be playing mother but not God: "My images don't come from anything. They come from the form itself."

Bawa's technique has also evolved to suit his changing sensibility and personal growth. He first sketches, endlessly. The sketches are then made into drawings. The drawings are made larger. And then he draws the figures on tracing paper, the last stop before they are traced onto the canvas. Bawa has also done away with strokes and applies the paint (only linseed oil) on the canvas in such a way that there isn't even a hint of a gesture.

Most painters marvel at his play with huge masses of flat-coloured spaces, of tension on his canvases, even though they are almost empty. Painter Paramjit Singh who was with Bawa at the Delhi School of Art and has closely followed his friend's work, doesn't think all the work in this exhibition is of a piece,



A miniature painting: a new direction for Bawa

but he considers Bawa a very original painter and is impressed by how he manages to convey movement despite the arrangement of flat colours "which are usually dead".

In some ways Bawa may be a painter's painter. His uniqueness and search for form are rarely questioned. Multi-media artist Satish Gujral appreciates his ferreting out of roots. "Both his imagery and content have a genuine character."

Bawa is still journeying. This time from the big to the small—the very small. He's now doing

miniature paintings—hidden in his studio are a few exquisite paintings which are probably among the best he's ever done.

At first glance, they may look traditional. But these are Bawaesque forms on paper. Bawa uses a magnifying glass on a stand above the paper and then paints with brushes with very few hair. He took a few tips from miniature painter Badri Lal from Bhilwara, and even borrowed some of his paint.

Next on his agenda is a book on *Heer Ranjha*. His friend, Madan Gopal Singh, will write the verses in English and he'll do the paintings. He feels this epic is timely in the post-Ayodhya age because of the secular message of this paean to love. As for Ram, Bawa thinks that after December 6 "he must be queuing up outside the British High Commission, wanting to leave and become a refugee with all the other Indians".

So, while Bawa follows the notes of that elusive flute, his prices soar along another path. CCA Gallery-manager Sadhvi Bhullar says that if she were to raise the prices even further, collectors would still buy the works. "The NRIs are lapping it up." Recession is for other people.

Bawa too feels that it's high time living artists had a "slightly more comfortable life". "If artists in the West can sell in millions and people feel happy, why can't we? Why pay those prices for dead painters? Ravi Varma is an awful painter. *Kabhi zinde aadmi ko dedo*. (Give it to the living, sometimes)." ■