

ENGAGING WITH DIFFERENT WORLDS

As she sits thinking – something that she constantly does, now in front of a canvas, now a *wasli*-sheet, or her much-loved shikishi board – Manisha Gera Baswani seems to look at the world through the interstices of her mind. There are riches everywhere, but decisions have to be made about what to take in at what time: explore, examine, even turn on its head, she appears to say. If, in the process, there are things that get left out, they can always be turned to later. Meanwhile, it is time to concentrate.

I recall being very struck, when I first saw it, by a series of paintings that she places now under the rubric of 'Space'. Suddenly, it seemed to me, she had discovered a world that stretched out far, far beyond our own. Great galaxies had formed there, and planets moved about; space existed on a scale that one could not even imagine; there was no blue on the horizon of time there. And she wanted to enter that universe. But at her own terms, and in her own manner, the telescope being only of limited use. The night sky was filled with stars 'the breathing' of which needed to be felt, as the poet Fikr Taunsavi said once; and the trajectories of heavenly bodies needed to be 'corrected', or ordered differently. So she set about doing it, provocatively, on small *wasli*-sheets that one associates ordinarily with intimate little paintings belonging to the miniature tradition. With an assertiveness that took one by surprise, but with great painterly precision, she began to create images that were meant to be a parallel to the universe outside and above: a universe visible to the mind, not the eye. The small scale was no hindrance, as she knew from the miniature tradition she was increasingly engaging with at that time; and reference to states of mind, or to imagination, was what it was all about. A different kind of geometry was brought in as an aid; new signs were invented; and stray memories of the earth were slipped into frames. It looked as if sense had been made of it all. But then, suddenly, as if aware of the hazards of getting lost in that unknown-ness, Manisha would bring in something very concrete, very close, into the picture: a fragment of a colourful tent, a flapping wing, a crawling insect that would startle and make you jump back. References to two different realities were perhaps being created. When, in her 'Home-Made', a honey bee strays away from its hive, and into a corner as if to see whether something could be drawn from the whirling spheres below, one wonders if it is not the near and the far, the known and the unknowable, that are being brought together. Or, at the other end, when, in her 'Flight Path', large avian creatures wing their way far above what looks like a segment of a dark, heavenly sphere floating in space, one is left speculating whether there are thoughts here of that cosmic flight of birds that the great 12th century Sufi poet, Farid ud-Din Attar, wrote about in his *Mantaq ul-Ta'ir*.

It is just possible that here one is reading, as is one's wont, meanings, or thinking thoughts, that were not intended. And that there was as much playfulness as

gravity in Manisha's mind when she painted images such as these. Or that it was simply the shapes and the colours and the associations that these images inevitably brought with themselves that she was celebrating. But one sees that even when she simply soaks herself in youthful fantasies, and responds to pop sights and sounds, much like any young person of her age leading a 'contemporary' life, an underlay of thought keeps clinging to her work. Even when she was painting, as 'a citizen of a borderless world', as she avers she then was, one can pick up comments that she is making on pop-icon-worship, or find her altering the context of the celebration of celluloid heroes. There may not be any finger-pointing in her work towards the disruptive, if undoubtedly heady, influence that Elvis Presley had come to wield – someone said recently that the day that Elvis shook his pelvis as only he could, all mothers in America lost control over their young sons and daughters forever – but there is no smell of burning incense either, blue suede shoes and rhinestone belts notwithstanding. What is interesting is the manner in which she 'indigenizes' the homage paid to these icons: stencilled roses and lotuses spring up around the silhouetted image of James Bond; 'sacred' footprints that clearly belong to no saint or deity, surface, and are wreathed in flowers. The spray painted, garishly coloured, designs picked up from the backs of trucks, or from steel trunks meant to stuff dowry items in, are the obvious source for these motifs, but she employs them to telling effect.

This, it seems to me, marks Manisha's entire work: her willingness to throw herself open to a very wide range of influences, and then to engage with them, resolutely. Throughout her artistic career, informed by thought as it has been, she has been constantly on the look-out: registering, absorbing, internalizing. With wide-eyed interest and acceptance, she would take in the uplifting sights and colours of Ladakh, peer through the murky interiors of dilapidated *havelis*, hear the lazy sound of ageing ceiling fans. But everything would end up in her burgeoning bank of ideas and images upon which she keeps drawing, without exhausting it. What seems to run like a golden thread through her work at the same time is the influence of the tradition of Indian miniature painting. There is no borrowing of images from those glorious pictures, and she has been able to resist the obvious temptation of appropriating themes or lifting passages. What she has learnt from them is how to build layers of thought and embed them in a work. This, combined with a turning towards precision and crispness of execution, forges a clear link between her work and that of the past. She works patiently, untiringly, when it comes to matters of technique. She would work away at achieving a specific effect, obtaining a particular glow in her colours. If she wants mud to glisten like gold, she would not give up till she succeeds in it. If, towards a clear end, one layer of pigment has to be laid upon another, and yet another, she would keep on doing it till she reaches there. Occasionally, she might decide to indulge in a witty variation upon a celebrated image. As she does in her 'Cyber-nayika', a take-off on a painting from the famous *Rasamanjari* series. Here, as dark clouds fill the heavens above, and rain pours down in steady streams made up of pearl-strings as it were, the loggia at right, where one

would have expected a wistful *nayika* to be sitting, waiting, is bare. Instead, in the centre of it is placed a telephone instrument, with connecting wires snaking their way around; below that, discreetly but slyly inscribed, is a 0-900 series number which one knows to be all too commonly used for engaging in erotic conversations, or worse. The message, and the satiric intent, are clear. But this is not what one speaks of here, as far as Manisha's engagement with the world of early Indian painting goes. It goes much deeper, and she keeps coming up with works that are strangely quiet, and affecting. Like her 'Five Mile Beach' or 'Ashiana'. As one pores over the minutiae of detail in these, and the sheer elegance of craftsmanship, one knows that with works like these one can hold a long, meaningful conversation. They ask questions of you and your assumptions, and lead you gently towards the realms of alternative thought.

I remember seeing long ago a science fiction film by Michael Crichton: *Westworld*. In that – in a resort called Delos, I think – holiday makers are persuaded to make a choice and enter into one of the three worlds on offer: the Roman World, the Medieval World, and the Westworld. One can gain a brief glimpse of each from the outside, but enter only one. And when one man, having decided, steps into the Westworld, it becomes all too real an adventure, complete with a robotic but inimical Yul Brynner whom you cannot escape from. In some ways, the body of Manisha Baswani's work till date, also offers the viewer choices. There are of course no threatening presences here, but you can have different encounters. There is a range of worlds she creates. And as insects crawl majestically over the surface of the moon, velvet trousers hint at pent-up passions, and fountains throw up incredibly fine sprays of water, she seems to ask us to take our pick. Till the next choice might come along.

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