

Manisha Gera Baswani

Manisha Gera Baswani's visual language is evolving into a more subtly layered articulation. In her most recent works, Baswani has achieved a great deal of drama in her colour palette. The use of gold, red, orange and velvety blue- black recalls the sophistication of the art deco period. The richness of colours hints at the intensity of some mysterious vision which is counterpointed by austere, geometric forms – circles, squares, fan-shaped segments. It is as if the profound and calm images contain beneath the surface deep yearnings for an ideal.

Like the young, post-modernist generation of artists, Baswani enjoys experimenting with a variety of material other than paint. Like them she dips into mass culture for some of her images even as she uses quotations from visual languages of her own and other cultural traditions.

And yet Baswani stands apart from her peers. With an imagination sparked by fantasy and whimsy, Baswani is unafraid of being different. She is not disdainful of tradition. Her work is steeped in empathy for her ethos noticed in the choice of colours, metaphors or decorative language. Her irony is gentle and not acerbic. There is no angry subversion in her imagery, but a tongue-in-cheek sense of fun at the absurd juxtapositions evident in our contemporary culture. Her quirky sense of humour balances the lyricism in her expression. A speculative look at the forces of nature give a spiritual dimension to her work.

Baswani loves to explore different scales and mediums. After painting in the miniature format for a while, she has worked on large oils in her recent series. The oil medium is not new for her. She has worked with it earlier and is once again using it after an interlude. She appears to be equally at ease with the luminosity of gouache, the transparent delicacy of watercolours, the viscosity of oils, the soft, intriguing texture of dry pastels.

Much of Baswani's sensibilities were honed during her art training at Jamia Milia Islamia University from where she completed her masters degree in fine arts in 1992. Her teacher, A Ramachandran played a significant role in unleashing her creativity. Almost in continuation of Santiniketan philosophy Baswani was encouraged to evolve her own creative expression. At the same time, she was inspired to learn the visual traditions of India like the miniatures and the murals, the folk and tribal arts. Her imagination was charged by the mysterious ways of nature and the symbiotic relationship with organic creatures.

Baswani did not follow her guru's style mindlessly, but evolved a language of her own. For instance, Baswani unabashedly incorporates stylised, decorative elements in borders, in foregrounds or as overall motifs and occasionally as the central image. Sometimes the decorative elements act as a frame for her images which she then boldly breaks creating an interesting tension between the central image and the frame. These decorative elements are taken from Indian visual traditions, from European design vocabulary, from architecture, and even from the energy of the graphic techniques of mechanical reproduction. It is interesting to observe how the face of Elvis Presley is bled into the background and repeated innumerably as a dynamic decorative feature. Similarly, the silhouettes

of restlessly wheeling birds presaging a storm creates a compelling relationship with the central image of a night sky.

After her postgraduation, Baswani won a French government scholarship to study art in Paris in 1993. She took this opportunity to travel extensively and look at the collections of all the major museums and galleries in Europe. Consciously or unconsciously, Baswani was enriching her vocabulary.

On her return from Paris, Baswani joined Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts. She worked on a collaborative project between IGNCA and Xerox of Palo Alto in the USA, for a multimedia rendering of the literary classic Gita Govinda. She was selected to design the art motifs and icons, a practice that she has absorbed into her own language. This backdrop is essential in understanding the subtleties of Baswani's style.

Baswani's imagery in her recent works is fresh. On the one hand, she continues her love affair with icons of contemporary culture. The gun-toting James Bond has given place to "The King," the phenomenal pop star Elvis Presley, whose image refuses to die. Baswani's predilection for music has a role in the choice of the icon.

Baswani focuses on the symbols that go to make the persona of the superstar. There is the shiny, black stretch limo, the shirt with the long, soft collar open at the neck, the famous puffed-up lock of hair. All these are embellished with ornate festoons, preserving a nostalgic memory. The paintings capture the spirit of kitsch and revel in it. Baswani introduces a crisp note by using repeats of silhouettes of Presley's head in countless ways.

While earlier the artist concentrated on gouache, watercolours and pastels, her turning towards oil has brought new depths in her work. Baswani shows her painterly skill in the very large paintings done in oil. Compared to the detailed, meticulous, sensitive miniatures of the last few years, the oils indicate a new direction.

Earlier Baswani painted lush interiors in greens, blues and pinks. The ceiling fan appeared as an absurd incongruity in the medieval, miniaturist setting. In her recent works, limitless space has become the source of the painter's contemplation.

Alongside the oils, Baswani is continuing to work with her familiar mediums. Her recent passion has been the subtly-textured, Japanese Shikishi paper. Baswani has used the paper in an innovative way integrating it with her visual language. These come in various sizes and shapes – squares, rectangles. Baswani has made good use of them particularly in the Elvis Presley series. Long panels have been enhanced with different decorative motifs to express the iconisation of the singer.

But the most impressive of the new series of images are the views of the night sky. The intense romanticism of the starlit, blue-black, night sky is captured in globular forms or fan-like arcs. The curved segments have a Japanese, minimal elegance about them. The profoundly beautiful calm of the nocturnal expanse is sharply jolted by the presence of a scorpion. This finely painted creature with its

vicious sting points to the presence of evil in a complex creation where the limitless experience of truth, beauty and goodness is disturbed by the intimations of mortality, corruption, evil. Baswani has painted in this series a number of creatures who evoke disturbing emotions – a menacing owl, a furry fly, a caterpillar. The eternal struggle between spirituality and demonic forces seem to be reenacted.

In direct contrast, the artist has heightened the lyricism of the starry sky by juxtaposing flying birds. At the same time, she seeks to upset the perfection of the moment by using images of wheeling birds in the background frame hinting at the impending storm. The formal beauty, the sense of order, hints of dramatic conflict in the night sky series offer a compelling vision of life.

Baswani obviously likes to explore opposing poles. On the one hand, she skillfully uses the potential of the conventional mediums like oil, watercolour and so on. She shows great discernment and sensitivity in their use. On the other hand, she responds to the spirit of the times with great élan. The shimmery visual dazzle of contemporary culture finds reflection in her works. Like an acutely tuned seismograph, Baswani's sensibility registers the slightest tremors in visual culture.

She flourishes unusual material giving a certain piquancy to the images. Always on the lookout for kitschy stuff, Baswani has used flocked velvet wall paper, machine-made lace and other shiny edgings, glossy stickers to introduce points of contrast, to break the formality of a painting. These elements of shock can provide a lightness of being, a sense of fun, but also a glimpse at the beauty underlying the sharply opposed elements. The image of a stone jaali mounted on a simulation of a painted wooden frame fixed with heavy screws gives an idea of the painter's preoccupations.

Baswani's paintings are marked by the play of opposing forces. It is not so much the social reality that she is concerned with but an interior reality that she likes to ponder on and express. She is among the rare breed of painters who have no qualms about swimming against the current. In the process, she has achieved an originality of expression enriched by elements from the past and the present.