

a ramachandran and roobina karode in conversation

between soliloquy and sharing: views unedited

artworks are sites for conversations, inviting viewers to prod, probe and penetrate into aspects of their visuality, often transgressing boundaries to enter the realms of the intangible, taking art back into life from which it germinates. Conversations around an artist's body of work can be especially interesting when the exchange of thoughts and insights is informal and unstructured, allowing for an uninterrupted flow of instinctive responses, intermittent pauses and sharing of views.

This conversation revolves around the works of Manisha Gera Baswani in the form of unedited thoughts and ideas between two of her former teachers, eminent artist A. Ramachandran and art historian/curator Roobina Karode. Both taught Manisha at the Jamia Millia University while she was pursuing her Master's Degree in Painting and have since, keenly observed her evolve from being an art student to an art practitioner over the last two decades.



in wait 1991 watercolor on paper 5.5 x 4 in
feast 1992 oil on canvas 48 x 36 in

R.K. The recent works produced by Manisha Gera Baswani mark a pronounced shift from her previous body of work that emphasized a dense working of imagery through intensive laboring in transparent layers of tea stains and acrylic. How do you see that?

A.R. An artist often does not plan the shift in his or her work. It occurs quite naturally in and through the demand made by the work itself. I would like to see it as an evolution rather than a deliberation. It is also a form of challenge that artists take on to bring in newer and fresher ways of artmaking.



time 1998 watercolor on paper 14 x 12 in
kyoto 2008 tea water pencil and watercolor gouache on paper 41 x 31 in

R.K. It's interesting that Manisha has continued to enjoy working on paper and she has relished the big and small format, working almost in the manner of a Renaissance oil painting that is built layer by layer through a long period of time and involvement.

A.R. Yes, Manisha has enjoyed the versatility of mediums especially working on paper, exploring the potential of pencil, crayons, tempera and watercolor, even tea stains and often using mixed-media as her preferred form to arrive at aesthetic formulations.

R.K. Going back to the works displayed here in a larger format, how would you describe her working?

A.R. She is someone who is quite at ease when working intuitively, weaving thoughts into lyrical forms.

R.K. True, her work seems to have an organic quality, emerging bit by bit, stroke by stroke.

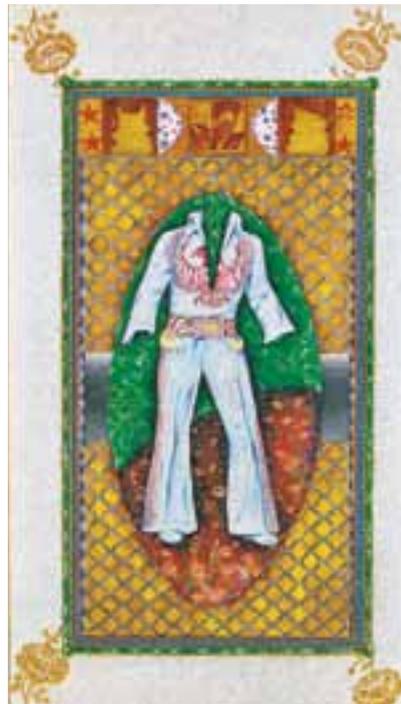
R.K. One of the works has a row of horses that distinctly are a very important motif in the painting. Manisha shared with me that she had seen an exhibition when in Kyoto. The work is also titled KYOTO. She must have carried images in her memory of the place that have spilled over in the work, both consciously and subconsciously.

A.R. The creative process works both ways. Somewhere, you know, it comes, of course, subconsciously. I don't know. But then, once it comes



out subconsciously, the artist should ask why and what is being referenced through the motifs. I mean, you cannot explain it by saying that six horses in that painting were made purely to bring to the work a formal balance...those wheels, concept of wheels etc. are all major images in Buddhist art. But it's interesting Roobina how this work has acquired the complexity of a Tibetan Thangka of an early Chinese period and how Manisha has built up such a complexity into it, without even knowing it. Actually if I look at Manisha as a person and as a student, the first work which made me notice her is a painting she did of a table with a table cloth that had portraits of her family drawn on it.

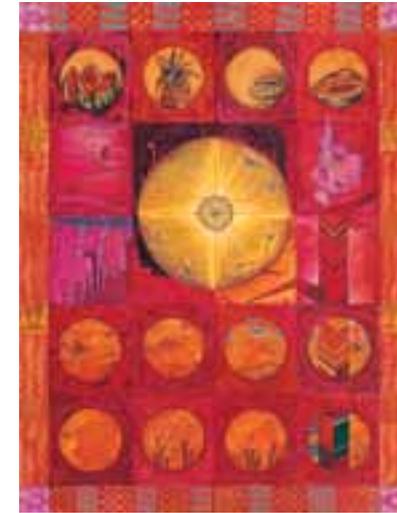
family 1995 watercolor gouache on paper 6.5 x 5.5 in



the king's court 2001 watercolor gouache on paper 18 x 10.5 in

R.K. Yes, I know the work you are referring to. What in the work specifically held your attention?

A.R. Strangely, while I cannot remember all the work she did as a student at Jamia, I still remember that painting. That work symbolizes to me even today what Manisha is as a person. As I understand, Manisha as an individual oscillates between orthodoxy and unorthodox ideas; she confronts her own conditioned mind because she's a person who is too much attached to family and moral values of her early upbringing. That is why she doesn't behave like many of the younger generation of post-modernists, who in life have had to go through a kind of revolutionary effort to break free of constraints. They broke many rules but strangely enough, Manisha remains within that spectrum of a well knit family. Her duty as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother:



milestones of memory 2000 watercolor and gouache on paper 20 x 14.5 in

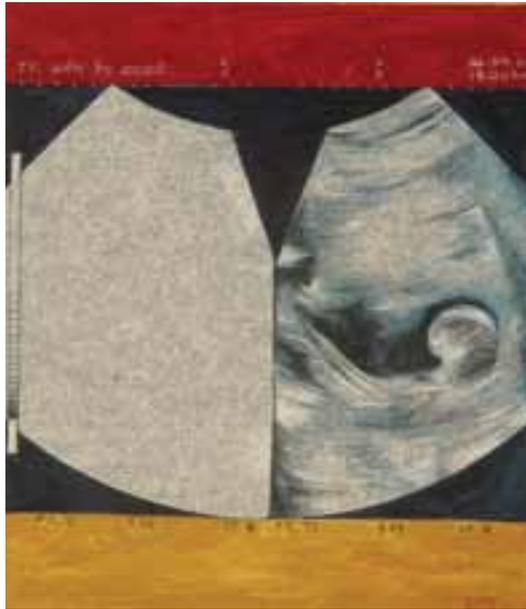
all these things are met equally, with equal attention—as much as she gives to her paintings. So that is the remarkable thing about her. Because she wanted to become an artist, she did not sacrifice the other values of life and she is also proving that it is not necessary to be doing something very outrageous or something which is very unconventional to prove that you are an artist. Post-modernism comes through your work actually, so to me, post-modernism is only a new language, you know, it's not a new way of life. So that is why when a poor post-modernist becomes rich, he behaves like a capitalist, simply because it's just a style he's adopted, he's not adapting to a philosophy, but whereas in the early romantic period or something, Van Gogh painted in a revolutionary manner, but he also lived in a revolutionary way. So did Ram Kinkar, to give an example.

R.K. How do you remember your early days as a painter when you were expressing your concerns on a larger than life scale?

A.R. I was a painter who expressed political ideas in my early days as an artist, and then went on to doing works in which I was probing more into the value of tradition and how to interpret a language. So this is all, to me the problems of language. The making of a personal vocabulary and iconography has been a central concern for me. I don't get worked up to the extent that I want to prove that I am an extraordinary artist. Extraordinary



cyber nayika 2002 gouache on shikishi board 9 x 11 in



heart throb 2001 watercolor gouache on paper 5 x 4.5 in

qualities have to come to your work. So most probably in that way, Manisha is a true student of mine. She didn't break any rules but remained honest to what she was doing.

R.K. You were an influential force at Jamia, in setting up the Department of Fine Arts and building it up with your commitment and presence.

A.R. Basically I was facilitating, inventing and thinking out ways of opening their vision. In some way, you could say I was trying to bring their creativity forward.

R.K. As I look at her recent body of work, Manisha has communicated certain experiences that are related to personal loss and anguish purely via the intensity of drawing and accentuating a single visual form. She brings in the violence but through an abstractionist gesture and not in obvious and frontal ways.

A.R. Of course she can. I see no aggression in her or her work compared to other women contemporaries of her generation.

R.K. You mean to say she is neither confrontational nor a crusader of gender politics.

A.R. That also is a result of her upbringing. I would like to say, she got her freedom without fighting

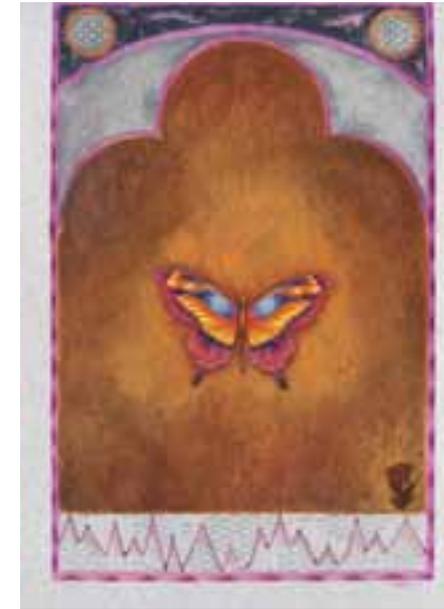


tooth fairy 2004 watercolor gouache on paper 13 x 9.5 in

for it. Her parents are sympathetic so naturally that gave her the courage to do her work without any resistance, which is a very rare thing. If you look at many of the young Indian artists, men and women, they have had to go through varied kinds of rebellious acts to prove that they are different, but Manisha never had to do that. Perhaps that in some way has been perceived as a disqualification, from the point of view of other artists if you ask me. Basically, I think maybe she is perceived as being "too normal" and her life is "too sorted" to express differently. She believes that it is the language by which she can explore things rather than by playing with her life. So it's fair enough. Maybe it's not very impressive to her generation and her peers, but I think there is no harm in being a normal human being and doing good work.

R.K. Absolutely. But maybe she does feel isolated from her contemporaries who have chosen video, performance and installation formats to express their concerns.

A.R. I still think if somebody practices post modernism today, it is only a romantic notion and is not workable as artists today are dealing with a very highly charged



deep sleep 2003 watercolor gouache on paper 33 x 23 in

art market. So this kind of idealism doesn't work and nobody practices either even though they pretend to be practicing. Basically everybody is looking after their own, you know, establishing their status as an artist, making the value of their work go up and being seen at major art events. Manisha is a part of the movement but not exactly so. She's neither too far ahead of this nor is she too behind the movement. She's inside it but her work keeps intact her sincerity. She has a very restless spirit, which is very interesting to my mind, the way she runs around and does hundreds of activities. You know that means she's charged with enormous energy, the way she has taken up photography for example, that has shown me that whatever she picks up, she does it with great finesse.

R.K. And sustains it. I remember in her early days of photographing the art fraternity, she met with a lot of resistance but she has been committed and has pursued it quite seriously over the years.

R.K. Did you know that she writes poems and, that too, really well? Have you read any of her poems?

A.R. No. I haven't read any.



velodrome 2006 watercolor and pencil on paper 12 x 9 in

R.K. To digress a bit, the training in the arts at the Dept. of Fine Arts at Jamia and the curriculum did develop in students skills of composition, sensitivity to colors, and skills to manipulate paint on the surface. But they largely show some anxiousness when asked to speak about their art making. I was thinking how important then it is for an artist who embraces art as a non-verbal expression and much more an experiential activity, to articulate her work in words. I sense that Manisha too wants her voice to be felt through her work and not through the feeding of text and explanations.

A.R. Basically Manisha is an intuitive artist. She is not an intellectual artist. An intuitive artist sometimes gets far better things than an intellectual artist because the intellectual process is a strained one. The problem with many of the artists today is that they have many brilliant ideas that they put across either in an excessively labored manner or by a reductive simplicity.

R.K. What I meant was that there are artists who reference images consciously and after having thoroughly gone into its history like you do. You would have already understood what has culturally come down till that point when you want to use it again

allegorically, reinventing myth or history for yourself. And there are artists who are too immersed in the "process of making" which is neither methodical nor too measured. The passion of the process is sometimes very difficult to translate into words.

A.R. It is not necessary. The viewer often walks away because he doesn't carry encyclopedias and dictionaries. So you do not evoke enough of the enthusiasm that is required to look at a painting. Personally, I feel that art has remained elitist because we have made it such a cerebral activity that we don't allow the viewer to enter it. It has become like a forbidden land. The viewer walks away feeling ignorant and too ill-equipped to understand such profound ideas. There is a big gap between the public and the art movement in India.

R.K. Is its inaccessibility disruptive or is it distancing art from the public?

A.R. Today we are once again rethinking art for community, art for all, asking more than ever, 'Who is the art for?'

R.K. Back to Manisha, how do you think she is approaching her art making?

A.R. In her case, it is a kind of an outburst of her mind. If you see the larger works, which are displayed here, four of them are relatively early works. She has shown distinctly a takeoff or a departure from the previous works. All the compositions are filled with forms and sub-forms and things like that and then she's trying to fill up the whole picture space with the little images and overlapping of images, using different colors for the washes and bringing subtleties and tones. That is something you do not see in these recent series of works. Here, when I look at these sparse and single image works, I look at them as a works done in a phase of transition to something much bigger and closer to her life at the moment.

Secondly, the experience of personal losses, one after the other, in the last one year has brought about a subtle change in her attitude and led to her own assessment of herself as a woman. Whatever she's trying to do now is a reflection of that. You find embryonic forms and some kind of turmoil with it.

R.K. I felt the same thing when I saw these works. It evokes a sense of fragility, vulnerability and rupture through forms painted as emptiness, void

and an interiority that is only experienced, not seen. The pool of blood has some strong connotations and the use of red dominates this recent body of works.

A.R. I think it's a transition.

R.K. Yes, it's a transition, certainly a transition but she has made a shift in the process...

A.R. It's bound to be.

R.K. But sometimes it's the saturation with your own work that leads you to dismiss certain things.

sprout 2012 pencil watercolor charcoal on paper 24 x 18 in



A.R. She still has great possibilities to explore with regard to her previous works. I am thinking of the kinds of patterns and back and forth movement that you find in an artist's work. Often artists revisit their own work and find a way through it.

R.K. Are you talking about a thematic shift?

A.R. It's not a thematic shift; there is some violence in this...

R.K. I do see a thematic shift, a change in her consciousness about herself, her body and

the surroundings.

A.R. The miscarriage must have left a very deep impact on her mind. It's a rude shock to recognize a failure of the internal system.

R.K. Yes, women tend to live with it, they keep thinking about it in different ways. You live with what has left you and carry the guilt of inaction. It keeps coming back as a bad dream. The unspeakable emotions get magnified into forms that express an inner violence, internal angst and uncertainty.

A.R. So in a nutshell, you know, basically when I started I referred to an early work which I reiterate sums up what Manisha is. Manisha's world is still in her and within her family. So even if she seeks some injustice to issues in the world outside, she will not respond because her mind is not tuned to that level. To me, she is quite an introvert in her work. People see her as an extrovert because of her social nature but basically I think, as an artist, she's an introvert and there is something which is very difficult to explain and still hidden in her mind. To put it a bit harshly, it is like a dead embryo which is coming out little by little in parts, ejected out of the mind and body. Even when I look at those feathers in the next work, it echoes the same feeling.

R.K. Yes. Indeed. You are absolutely right. The feathers are marked with their destiny of being discarded, of being the ones that have fallen off, left the body. There is a sense of withering away in the way they have been painted, fragile and open to being blown away with the wind.

It's also interesting how she extracts content by abstracting form through an expressive economy.

A.R. These works do exercise restraint of the color palette and brushwork. What she is aiming at is both formal and conceptual clarity.

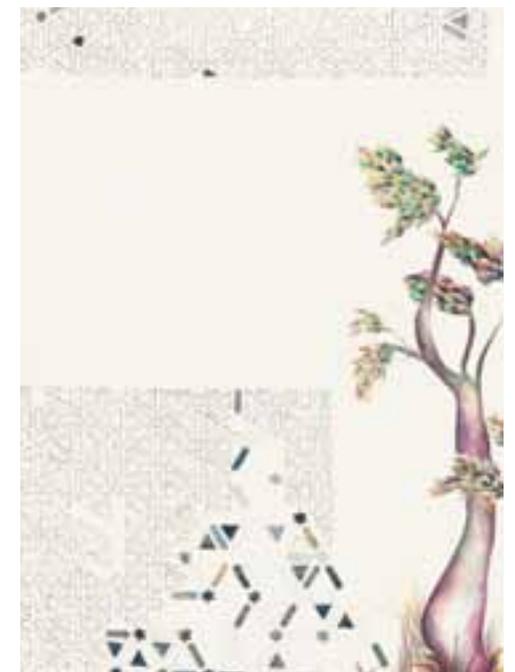
R.K. Interestingly, though the forms are simplified, they exude the sensuousness of the flesh and the massy textures of clots, knots, shreds and open fissures. The imagery of the recent works has embryo/egg/womb forms, touches of blood, of tearing out. I see her seek precise equivalents to translate her inner experience into concrete images of his expression. The meaning is now embedded in the fragment, in part and in the remnant.

A.R. There is also a mature use of watercolor, charcoal and pencil color to bring out the delicate veins, folds, volume and depth, all necessary for

the intimate and yet controlled revelations.

R.K. The indulgent form-making in the large-format paper works with endless preparation of tea brewing, darkening through sun and saturating the tones of tea color, its earthiness contrasted with muted and rich pastel colors, dense imagery in registers have given way to a paring of the layers in order to arrive at the bare form. And if we keenly observe these works, the presence of undulated surfaces, crevices and veins appear in them and resonate with the treatment of the works titled Sprout, Fissure and Whirlpool. Only that it gets amplified here to convey her state of mind.

A.R. An artist's experiential life translates in some way, into his or her work. It's too early though to predict a new direction in Manisha's work. But certainly, it is an affirmation of her artistic drive and immense talent that is yet to unfold.



mosaic and olive tree 2006 watercolor and pencil on paper 12 x 9 in

a. ramachandran is an internationally acclaimed artist based in New Delhi. He has had several major exhibitions to his credit including his retrospective in 2003 at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. He has been decorated with the Padma Bhushan, one of the highest civilian honors granted by the Indian state for outstanding achievement.

roobina karode is an art historian, educator and curator with post-graduate specialization in Art History and Education. She has taught Art History and Aesthetics at various institutions in Delhi, including the Jamia Millia Islamia University, College of Art, The National Museum Institute and the School of Art and Aesthetics in JNU. Karode has curated many thematic and monographic exhibitions and written extensively on various aspects of Modern and Contemporary Art. She is the director of the Kiran Nadar Museum of contemporary art, New Delhi.