

In Transit

Writing on art, one often finds the absence of an obvious narrative or content baffling. As a critic, one seems more compelled to read the work rather than see it. But as an artist I suppose, one could perhaps indulge merely in the etiquette of painting without having to interweave messages in it. When a painting stands on its own and discredits the need to message or sanctify the presence of a loaded meaning, it often raises a larger question- of relevance, of purpose, of the very nature of art and its practice.

Manisha Gera Baswani relishes the act of painting that allows for a transformative imagination to shape her pictorial language. Over the years, she has moved away from painting figures placed within orchestrated spaces and corners of her domestic environment. Colourful and nuanced, her earlier figures were carefully placed within orchestrated spaces. Feasting her eyes on furniture-objects, curtains, carpets, floor patterns, she ruminated carefully to use them as select details when she constructed her painted world of cropped views, nuanced carefully to dramatise the convergence of the inside and outside.

Manisha has always been drawn to the possibilities of colour. For instance, tents float in a dense sea of deep blue color or a ceiling fan hangs from nowhere in a fantasized landscape with glowing colours. These adventures in naïveté were conducted in quite a sophisticated way, both in oil and watercolour. As an oft-employed strategy, she fragments her human and animal figures, using them partially as transformed formal motifs that add to the lyrics of her pictorial composition or are edged obliquely to create a particular asymmetry.

With the passage of time- years in fact, her subject matter and content has become increasingly incidental, used only as an excuse for the arrangement of coloured shapes and an overall rhythm. Consistently chasing the moment of action, she wholeheartedly engages with visual abbreviations and codes that are located within the private and the social domains. Oscillations between oil and watercolour, even gouache have been significant to explore not merely the medium's sensibilities but also the challenge of scale and relative amplifications or reduction of visual elements. Driven by the urge to chase the purity of forms, strategizing formal devices for the visual spectacle has now become a never- ending game. Manisha as an artist can entrench her entire being in the playing out of simple (and complex) tactics of visual representation.

Her primary engagement continues to be with space which is also 'surface' in a two dimensional work. Nebulous space is pictorially explored and articulated in innumerable ways- confined in frames, let loose in an expanse, tightened by drawn borders and shelves and freed by nomadic painterly gestures. To me, her earlier preoccupation in painting was with the framing of objects and figures in unconventional ways via dramatic viewing angles- unreal and yet made to cohere into an aesthetic structure. Those deliberated spaces of the interior gradually transformed into open fields, imaginative landscapes and lush habitat of animals. The loosening up of the structure was also an exercise in simplification and abstraction of realistic details. In many of these works, Manisha creates the nuanced world entirely through tea water stains, the muddy smudges creating the soft and hazy imagery through

delicate working. Using the golden *shikishi* board, the animal world is preciously painted, with glistening shadows of birds flying freely over distant lands juxtaposed with the animal in the foreground.

But Manisha keeps returning to the architectonics of space almost with a vengeance. One finds frames within frames, with flattened and nuanced grounds layered or elevated on top of one another, now addressing the problematic of space and movement. Singular crisp motifs of a flower, leaf, butterfly, garment or simply an arch are delicately arranged within the bordered area. For instance in the works titled *Desert Rose*, *Silken Threads*, *Flora Fauna Filigree* and *Thandi Hawayein*. Interestingly, the patterned and decorative borders become critical for the visual integrity of the composition. Though the works resonate with the tradition of Indian, Persian, Pakistani miniatures, it is clear that Manisha is intervening to evacuate the narrative drama and focus on the empty arches, frames, props or scaffolds of the pictorial structure that represent evolved modes of connecting spaces. Alternately, the world compressed within a baseline and a skyline with a lonely minaret (*Ashiana*, 2004) and intricate paths recall the Basohli miniatures as well as Egyptian paintings that Manisha was once again drawn to after her visit to Egypt. The play of circles, squares and rectangles moves ahead into oblongs and arches, repeating shapes while innovating arrangement. Geometry becomes expressive as it takes on new connotations by its witty use. The distant view of landscape is framed within a small window-like frame surrounded by elaborate undulating patterns and borders all around. Manisha enjoys a little perspectival insert that a window with curtains allows for in a two dimensional space- creating as if a sacred niche that installs an icon or a symbol from popular urban culture.

The well-known artist and scholar A.Ramachandran was her teacher during her student years at the Jamia Millia Islamia University and continues to be her inspiration. Though Ramachandran paints in the figurative tradition imbued with meticulously rendered patterns in dreamy, mythic compositions, Manisha has of late been moving steadily in another direction, towards a semi-abstract form of representation, successively editing and extracting the mundane into an exotic motif/feature. As she steps out of the pictorial confines to break the static geography of her world, she uses the airiness of the untouched paper to playfully juxtapose perspectival screens in the form of stencilled patterns, versus transient nature. One can observe the wilderness of Nature turn into floral arabesques and precise geometries into fluid patterns and rhythms.

Another series of works that are skillfully executed capture traversing flight paths, cosmic maps, star-studded nocturnal skies: for instance, *Star Gazer*, *Navigator*, *Home-Made* project the flattened utopian view of the universe. Manisha assembles independent frames to install them either as topsy-turvy views of *Blue-Skies*(2006) or the golden sun with many glimpses of the nocturnal expanse as in *Rubics by Midnight*(2006).

One of the most recurrent features of her current works has been the screen *Ijaali*, itself a significant part of Islamic architecture that Manisha seems to find captivating. Residing in the vicinity of a Sultanate monument in New Delhi, she seems to be assimilating a lot of visual stimulants during her daily walks around the place. The enclosure of the courtyard, the passages, the rows of arches, and the stone '*jaalis*'

that subdue the tropical light from entering the interiors are for her fascinating experiences of spatial geometries and the inward and outward orientations. There is a definite shift from framing the imagery to the frame itself, that is employed in various novel ways.

These large paintings of screens are the most effective in their articulation of a dematerialized reality. A consecrated gold ground is prepared with much nurture and care. For instance, in *Bursting at Seams (2006)* and *Kingdom of Heaven (2006)*, the *jaalis* are beautifully painted as illuminating screens, with soft glow of light passing through their multiple perforations. It is the layering of the pigment, its desired smudging and suffusion that transforms form into formlessness, transcending the physical into a meditative space via the play of illusions. The impenetrable night sky adds to the mystery of location and place. The final painted image resembles a space prior to representation.

There is a case in Manisha for a plural art practice: though “Art for Art’s Sake” is now used mostly in a derogatory sense, Manisha stands for artistic autonomy as she prefers to be subversive in her practice by not taking on art as a social responsibility. She believes art cannot be bogged down to any one purpose or tied down to politics and reform. Art for her is a liberating force that both empowers and endures the mundane in life.

Manisha in transit, shifts gears to fluently move from painting on a large canvas to the modest ‘*shikishi*’ board or then using designed velvet wall paper carpeted directly onto the board in precise cut shapes. *The Island* is one such work where ready-made floral designs of the wallpaper are carefully balanced through levels of relief. Henri Matisse’s *Red Studio* has taken on a new life to accentuate the play of illusions. Even if there is a feeling of completion in the individual works, in Manisha, there is no sense of finality. Tomorrow then, she may be doing something else!

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