

Art in the new age

CONTEMPORARY ART EXPLORES AND REDEFINES CREATIVITY. ARTISTS ARE BENDING THROUGH METAL, TERRACOTTA, TEXTILES, WOOD AND MORE BESIDES PAINTINGS. WE TAKE A DEEPER LOOK

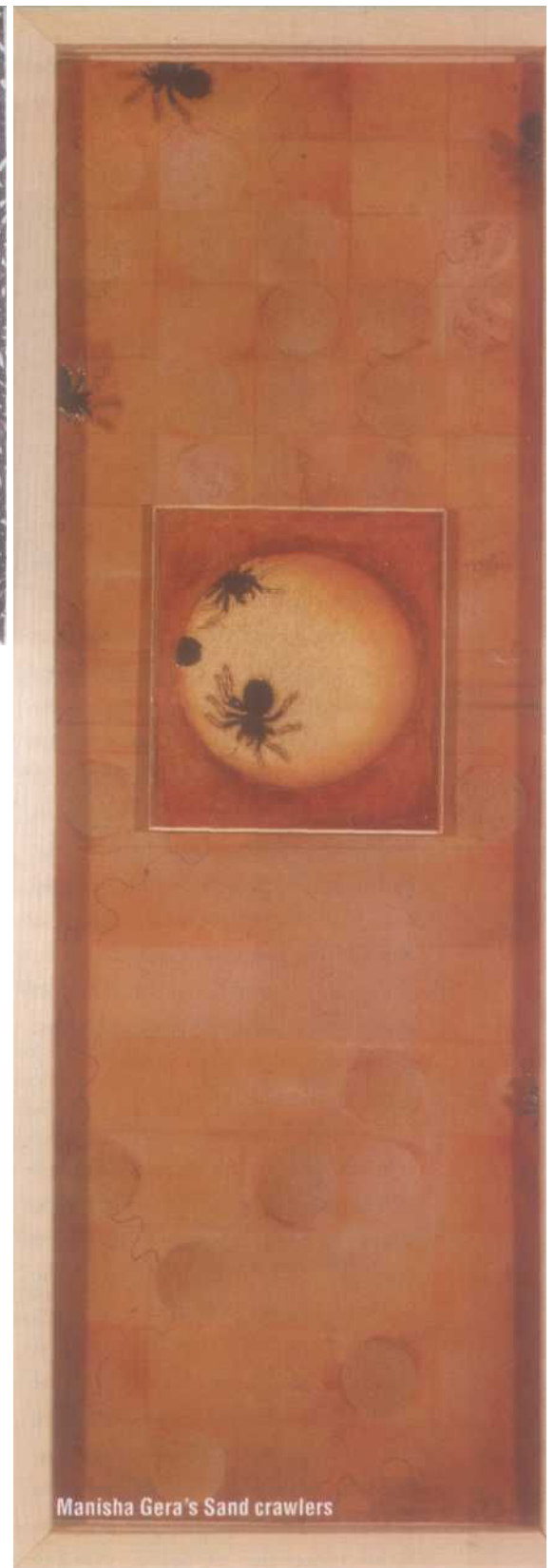
Gopika Nath

The parameters which define art making have changed. Today, textiles, digital prints and photographs rub shoulders with ceramics, glass and canvas. This brings into question the very notions of art and what it implies in the present context.

Through centuries of mankind, art making has defined the aesthetics of a particular generation or era. There were movements that redefined this as time progressed and we have paintings, sculptures and textiles that tell us stories beyond the personal expression of the artist. In the ancient Indian context, works were not signed as the individual identity was not given prominence. Today that has changed. The individual has come into its own, so much so that even in Art, there seems to be no real collective thinking, no collective social or political angst or message. The essential fragmentation of Post modernism has been embraced. It is no longer lamented, for the sense of 'wholeness' that



Work by Manisha Bhattacharya



was once known is long forgotten. Our lives a frantic life. Multitasking lort attention spans is the new age 1 and art is no longer about spirituality. That's old hat!

Referring to the process of art viewing Russian artist and writer on art, Wasiley Kandinsky (1866-1944) noted With cold eyes and indifferent mind the spectators regard the work, Connoisseurs admire the 'skill' (as one lires a tightrope walker), enjoy the quality of painting' (as one enjoys a pasty). But hungry souls go hungry away." He lamented the neglect of inner meaning, which he said "is the life of colors" and the "vain squandering of artsitic power" known as "art for art's sake" When I think of work that I have been looking at over the past few ths, I cannot help but agree for when you take out the spiritual, you take away the essence of life and the work of does not "send light into the darkness en's hearts", as it should, and as has been considered "the duty of

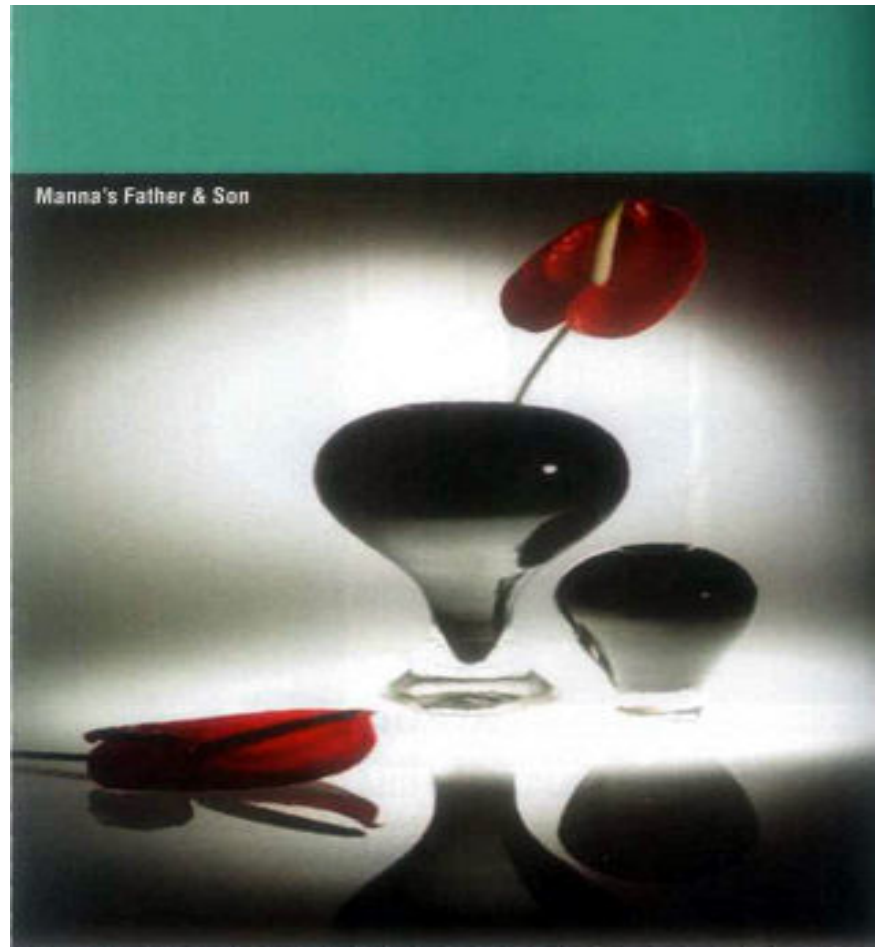
artist."(Schumann). Yet ironically spirituality is the latest buzz in this new age. Recently the National Museum in New Delhi, showcased works from The Tapi Collection — Masters of the cloth. This collection which is privately owned by Praful and Shilpa Shah of Garden Vareli Mills Surat, focussed on Indian textiles traded to distant shores. The exhibition had works from the 13th century onwards and it was indeed delightful to see such magnificent textiles so well preserved through the passage of time. Most of these have been found in South East Asia, where because of their strong textile culture, these fabrics were revered and preserved as family heirlooms. It gave us a very precious opportunity to see the dexterity of skill and creativity that Indian craftsmen had risen to in dyeing and printing. From the famed Gaj Patolas to the printed textiles from the Cholamandalam (Coromandel) Coast that redefined the lifestyle of Europe with the well known Chintz to unsurpassed Jamewars, the exhibition

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was a delight. Historically enlightening and technically humbling, one was left in complete awe.

It was a moment of great pride to be a part of this incredible legacy, but one couldn't help but notice that these textiles which essentially made their way throughout the world did so because of their intrinsic beauty that encompassed not just skill, creativity and technique of production but sheer utter devotion to the whole process of making which is painstaking and laborious to say the least. However, savvy traders explored the demand such that the craftsman's adeptness in technique was exploited to an extent that in this 21st century, what we are left with is a carcass; the inner meaning, the spiritual light, the creative prowess that provided impetus for development of the awesome skills of production, is all but lost. The Indian craftsmen today have lost their prestige and glory because the world that did not have their technical skill was allowed to impose creative ideas, changing the traditional, dual role of the designer-craftsman relegating them to nothing more than skilled labour. Nothing short of a tragedy.

In a bid to re-infuse crafting with a renewed dignity and creativity, there is emerging a new kind of artist in the urban artist-craftsperson and 'Terra Natura', an exhibition showing the work of five ceramic artists (Gallerie Nyaa) exemplified this. Focussed on structure, line, shape and weight, these works though largely ornamental, have their roots in the traditionally functional dimension of pottery. Manisha Bhattacharya works with the Japanese Raku



objects that are 'muscular'; yet by introducing the concept of lighting from within, she brings in a contrary lightness despite this otherwise solid, apparently impenetrable character. Vineet Kacker's Sutra Stones, inspired by the hand-carved Tibetan 'Mani' stones, are an extension of his repertoire which reflects Buddhist iconography and thought. They do not intend to be representative and often present contradictions which the viewers are expected to experience and resolve by themselves. It is somehow not easy to accept ceramics in this mode, where the message outweighs the function, but the idea has some appeal, for it brings back the focus of art making to include a kind of inner

meaning. Christine Michael, P Daroz and Ela Mukherjee were the other artists in this show.

How we present our work is gaining momentum. Advertising, marketing and packaging, the fallout of a consumerist culture are making an impact in the world of art as well. However, artists/designers tend to short-change themselves by over-emphasising this and not having the confidence to let their work speak on its own. In the case of 'Shades of Grey' by Manna, India Habitat Centre, this worked to the designers' detriment. Philosophy is integral to life, but to expect the user to reflect upon the symbiotic relationship of father and son through two function-

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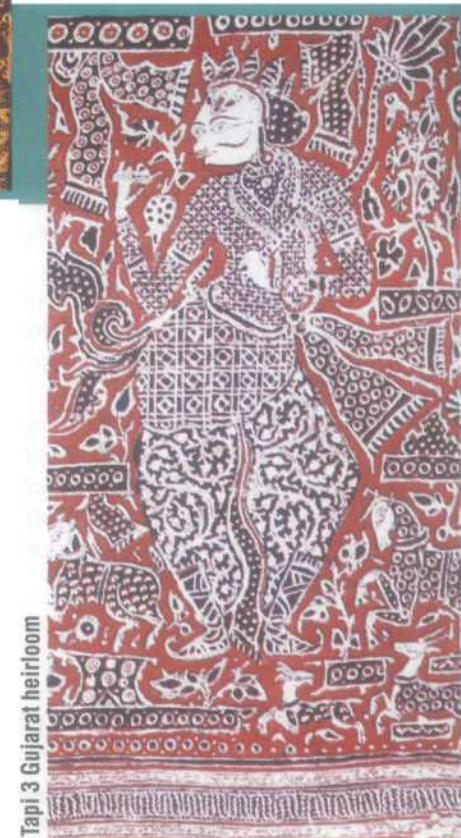
al glass vases is, I think, asking just too much. It's a case of forcing a 'spiritual' meaning where it does not exist. But then you may well ask what is spiritual? What did Kandinsky mean by inner meaning? And today when art is newsworthy for the crores a painting fetches at art auctions, what else can matter in a consumerist world, driven by material rather than spiritual needs?

The difference between Kacker's work and that of Mandira is that the former is an artist-craftsperson who makes the pieces himself while the latter works with craftsmen, where she is just the conceptualizer, not involved in the physical aspect of crafting. This fragmentation of the process has resulted in a reduced spiritual quotient primarily because conceptualization does not undergo meditative contemplation through the ritual of making and through this evolve in idea, technique and creativity as would occur when the artist and craftsman are one. Impositions of ideas by virtue of design tend to remain superficial rather than become integral to the work when the roles are thus divided. Design and Art serve different



functions in society but the practitioners need to recognise this and present work accordingly. Therefore what is somewhat acceptable in Vineet's work appears misplaced in Mandira's. Amitava Das's solo show presented by Palette Art Gallery was by contrast well presented, where the rather daring red wall behind a series of paintings augmented the work and the entire exhibition with its vibrant energy, providing an antidote to the artists' otherwise controlled expression. It was a pleasure to see each canvas with enough space so that the energies of other works did not intrude the viewing space, but the works in themselves were

disappointing. The marks are involved, they have evolved over time and now form a visual vocabulary easily identifiable with Amitava who works on canvas with oil and acrylic; but it is well not impossible to understand what he is trying to say. His stance is highly intel-lected excluding the viewer from the intimate revelations of his internal dialogue. In the context of a spiritual culture, it is deemed that the mind must be left behind, it obfuscates rather than illuminates and this is what seems to be in evidence here. Manisha Gera's work, on the other hand is exploratory in a more accessible vein. She delights with her constantly changing preferences be it Elvis and his gyrations or little bees meticulously painted with watercolour and tea water.





A highway as viewed by Sandeep

works do not endear visually. They Her stance is inquisitive and playful but it is never irreverent which is what makes the expression interesting. I have enjoyed watching her meticulously paint her fantasies. She has explored a fascinating world and tempted my senses but now I want to know what she has perceived beyond the cognisable painted forms. If she succeeds in delving into depths beyond those she has grown comfortable with, I do believe Manisha can lead us, with her inimitable sense of humour and curiosity, into a realm most of us would not dare.

Probing the depths is to find oneself Artists have the luxury to explore this and share it with a world that cannot yet indulge such spiritual aspirations. To have the scope and the inclination to follow a spiritual path, we are told is a privilege that has been earned. To be able to fathom the depths of nature, to attempt to understand the intricacies of life is not child's play. But we are still playing. We do not care to let go of the

material culture to embrace a spiritual one; to have the courage to surrender ourselves to forces beyond the physical and intellectual world that we are familiar with. The unknown is fathomable if we dive into its depths but when spirituality is not part of our lives but another dimension of it, something we do rather than something we are, can it truly be intrinsic to the work we do in this world?

Sandeep Singh a photographer, born in Punjab, now based in London is unusual in this. His recent exhibition of black and white photographs at The Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre was called Silence. Here the photographer removed all signs of human form examining in what is a rather daring endeavour; the world without us. He wants to displace us from the mechanical, concrete and digital world we have created to understand its implications in a future which he says is what will isolate us. The works do not endear visually. They are brutal in their stark

honesty and compel you to think. He creates a that is eerie, without illusions, almost without hope, for can you play football without people? But this is exactly what he says will be the future if become slaves to technology. Here beauty lies in the truthfulness of the idea and the way this has been perceived and presented. This is the essential quality that adds the all important 'inner meaning'. A work can be visually deformed, it can be beyond the comprehension of the intellect, but if it resonates in the heart and draws the viewer into its ambit; it succeeds. In the ancient Indian context the grotesque and the sublime co-exist as the 'Rasas' that define the code of aesthetics adhered to by traditional artists and craftsman.

Technocrats argue that the very purpose of technology is to create levels of efficiency to give us the time to discover deeper realms of being. Artists are visionaries and in this sense, design seems to be the idiom for today for this is largely what one sees, even in the painted works. Maybe the artist-craftsman is the key to a return to the fabulous expression and dexterity of skill on display through the Tapi Collection. A return to an era of art making that has its roots in the traditional practices of ancient Indian art, where art and craft were not differentiated as we tend to today, and neither was this, as Coomaraswamy has said, extraneous to the work that man did to earn his bread or pursue his spiritual practice; but enriched the man "corpus anima et spiritus". ■