

Caught in the Folds

Gopika Nath appreciates American artist David Schorr's uniquely Indian images.



David Schorr. Varanasi White. Silverpoint, tinted gesso and gouache on khadi Mutkha silk. 28 x 20. 1999-2000. Images courtesy: Mary Ryan Gallery, NYC.



David Schorr. Madras Duet. Silverpoint, tinted gesso and gouache on Bengali ikat khadi silk. 2000.

For the conventional painter, the canvas is a cloth. For David Schorr, the cloth is the canvas.

In India, the new-born child is swaddled in a piece of cloth and the dead are wrapped in a 'chaadar'. Textiles have always had an important role to play in our lives. It is however the unstitched fabric and the way it is used in India that draws this artist's attention.

Schorr, who has shown his work earlier last year at the IHC, New Delhi and is showing now at the NID, Ahmedabad, is fascinated by the pleating, swagging, crumpling and creasing of fabric: the rhythm of the cloth when it is opened from its ironed folds to be draped or when it is folded along its length. He says, "The folding of cloth in India (like the washing of the body) is an aesthetic ritual, and the only parallel I can think of in the U.S. is the way two soldiers fold a flag together; or two intimate friends, a bedsheet. Otherwise, the flat cloth yardage, or as it is called in India - meterage - is an alien experience to most of us".

Textiles have always occupied a special place in Indian culture. In the Rig Veda, weaving is seen as a sacred act - "The sacrifice is spread out with threads on all sides...Weave forwards, weave backwards..." These ritual repetitions harmonize with the chants and their metres. Textile-making' has been a special activity on the subcontinent: the inherited skills of the weavers and the patterns they have created have always been a source of great pride.

David Schorr however is not interested in the resplendent brocades of Benares, he is instead inspired by the dhobi ghats. He is not seduced by the Kanchipuram silks, but fascinated by the South Indian men going about their everyday lives, wearing lungis. He is particularly delighted by the way they 'play' with the ends of the fabric and make it a part of their gestures during conversation or while walking. It therefore struck me as odd that he should then choose to flatten the fabric, which is the 'canvas' that he

works upon. Schorr however says, "The fabric starts its life 'flat' and then takes on the form and life of the body. I therefore use it as it appears just off the loom - which is flat!"

Schorr uses an involved process to prepare the fabric, making it almost paper-like in its quality by coating it with layers of gesso which are sandpapered as well. He then works with egg tempera and silverpoint to draw sensuous folds using the grid of woven checks as a background which we are never allowed to forget. It is there under each painterly image, beckoning the viewer, luring him into its geometry: there is a poignant analogy here, that of the human spirit that serves to live within the confines of the body, soaring free now and then, defying at times, the conventional norms laid down by society. Not tearing the moral fabric, but folding it to suit oneself - reflecting perhaps the kind of life, the artist himself would like to lead.

This constant point / counter-point pattern is laid out in the way Schorr contrasts the checks and plaids of the fabric with the sensual folds of the clothes he paints against them. Almost all the paintings in his exhibition are based on drawings of male models - the fabrics and the garments draw our attention to aspects of femininity ever-present in every male form. In *Varanasi White*, the figure is almost absent, its presence alluded to by the way the fabric is draped and the way in which its gender identity is confused.

Schorr also makes references to Kabir, the weaver poet in his discussions. Schorr's metaphorical works are attractive in their employment of detail; the expression is controlled and austere, it

is never ever stark or harsh. Assiduously avoiding the production of any sexual overtones in the sensually presented cloth-folds, Schorr's is a unique cross-cultural journey. As an American inspired by quintessentially Indian subject-matter and material, we find in him , a perfect example of a trans-national artist, a man at home in both the worlds.
