

BETWIXT THE LINES

Review of exhibition by Australian artists Pippin Drysdale
And Maggie Baxter at Anant Art Gallery, New Delhi

Australian artists Pippin Drysdale and Maggie Baxter exhibited some of their recent ceramic and textile works at Anant Art Gallery in New Delhi. The diminishing of physical boundaries have brought into play, greater exhibition of and interaction with international artists, broadening the hitherto perceived horizons of art. Pippin is an internationally acclaimed ceramicist who is deeply inspired by the desert landscape of Australia and also influenced by the culture of the aborigines; while textile artist Maggie Baxter has found an affinity working with the craftsman of Kutch in India. The materials are as diverse as is their inspiration and they each have a peculiar involvement with these at differing levels. The line is the underlying commonality in the works of these two artists. Pippin has evolved this as her leitmotiv and Maggie has explored it primarily for the purposes of this showing

When an artist is inspired from the depths of their soul, viewing their work is a spiritual experience and this was what one felt upon seeing the delicate porcelain vessels, meticulously crafted by Pippin Drysdale. The touch is as smooth as fine silk; the colours dance vibrantly, evocative of the abandon of vast desert spaces and tones, but with a sense of refinement and sophistication; honed over years of making hundreds of pots, to achieve the level of perfection on display. The process is arduous and intense and it takes days to complete a single vessel. The form is simple but the surface fascinates with its iridescent multilayered glaze.

She says that these vessels are based on her memories of a trip to Ayres Rock; “of the infinite intimate sensations and colours to be found on the long trek round its base”; of its extraordinary capacity to “catch the colour in each moment: of a thousand ochre’s, greens and blues between shifting shadows; not the stricture of its geology.” It is these passionate memories that guide her.

The Australian desert-scape may be alien to the average Indian mind and eye but this does not in anyway constrain the viewers’ response; for in her own deep and intensely honest involvement with this scape, Drysdale has brought forth its essence, creatively transforming this into delicate porcelain that lends the aesthetic dignity of natural spaces to the modern urban living environ. From the land that inspired her, she has re-created through earth, another form, another surface which needs neither explanation nor introduction for each vessel is eloquent in form, texture and hue.

Textiles are synonymous with India. There is considerable awareness here, of the kind of excellence that can be and has been achieved. This makes it exceedingly difficult for any contemporary textile artist, for they are competing with centuries of knowing; centuries of innovation; centuries of crafting that remain unsurpassed to date. Maggie’s tryst with Indian textiles began some 15 years ago and her fascination remains unabated. She has a lot of fun going to Kutch but often wonders if the work she does there has any impact

upon the lives of the Kutchi karigars. The simple concept of uncut cloth has been explored by her in different ways, primarily using block print and some local embroidery skills. A sculptor by education, she now explores cloth as a sculptural form where draping the body is how she expresses herself.

In this exhibition an interesting element has been presented in the way that Maggie has innovated upon the traditional method of cutting a churidar pyjama, which she has then used as an unstitched garment. This could be a skirt or a shoulder wrap or alternate between the two, as you fancy. Unfortunately, there were no labels to explain this complex idea, so unless you had the privilege of a guided tour, you probably missed the point.

One artist is an intense, deeply involved perfectionist, revealing with sophisticated restraint and discipline, deeper and deeper facets of a singular experience; the other is willing to experiment, travel and explore more & more on a physical realm. These two dimensions present a varied approach to life and creativity, where one is drawn explicably to the eloquent emotion and intensity of Drysdale's fragile porcelain expressiveness yet also charmed by Maggie's more robust approach. One is repetitive in nature; the other prefers variety as is evident in her penchant for experimentation. One veers towards perfection while the other is more casual and nonchalant. The contrast is evident, compelling the viewer to speculate on what lies betwixt these two lines of thought, drawing equally from intensity of devotion towards perfection and robust experimentation; if one ever could!

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