

Tradition and Individual Talent: Re-interpreting Mythologies

JohnnyML

While art does interpret images from traditional and contemporary visual discourses, it also tends to create a new set of visual codes that need further interpretation both by the artist and the viewer. This is an ongoing process within the field of visual culture production. But Smitha Menon, even when she identifies her space within global art scenario, is reluctant to be an 'interpreter' for the viewer. She wants the viewer to take active participation in the process of understanding the images depicted in a work of art.

"Art, for me, is something that soothes the eyes and I don't want to interpret art for others," Smitha Menon, who goes by the artistic name 'Tina' says with conviction and clarity. Living away from India, Smitha has found her inspiration from the land of her origin, its vast variety of mythology, folklore, narratives and above all, from the ever alluring traditions of visual representations. Smitha, while being convinced about her religious detachment, does not hide her inclination towards spiritualism; the kind of spiritualism that only an artist could live and impart. Her works, a series of paintings in acrylic on canvas, prove her point. These paintings capture the attention and imagination of a viewer mainly because they are varied in themes, stylized in representation, sensuous, humorous and intriguingly simple.

Simplicity of visual expression comes from a deeper understanding of the components that constitute the totality of a work of art. Each part of the painting should be harmoniously attached to the other element next to it and the artist should be allowing the abstract values of these components to flourish on their own within the perspective of the viewer, while he or she makes deliberate efforts to regroup these abstractions and comprehend them within the given thematic and visual parameters. The thematic of a work of art, though very important for the artist, becomes a context for her to experiment with the painterly effects that she could produce on the pictorial surfaces using both the academic figuration, which could otherwise be called 'Indian painting style' and the Expressionistic figuration that has been a universally accepted art style of the 20th century. Hence, playing between these two notions of style, Smitha brings forth a very unique style, blending the essence of both adequately and purposefully.

It is said that the artists who live away from their own places of origin intensely feel and experience the cultural realities of their motherlands more than the artists who live in their own countries mainly because of the physical and philosophical distance as well as the vantage point given to them by the existing situations and the experienced parameters within which they spend their daily lives. At times, this distance and advantageous status could lead to a sort of romantic nostalgia for all what has been left behind there in the parent country. This could lead to the birth of somewhat a political art, which the artist himself would consider as an escape route. At other times, this distance could help the artist to understand the socio-political realities of the parent country and express them through a series of allegorical narratives.

Smitha Menon's infatuation for the Indian mythological themes comes not only from her deep rooted understanding of her motherland but also from the internally felt need for allegorically reacting to the situations there. To do this or while doing this, the artist need not be overtly political as one would expect from the political activists or social activists. Here Smitha's spring board is the image of Ganesha. As a child she has been seeing the image of Ganesha in various forms mainly within the context of religious worship. But as an artist living elsewhere, away from the religious context in which the image of Ganesha becomes purely religious, Smitha found it so fascinating to emulate the challenging physiognomy of Ganesha. According to the artist, it was not the religious connotation that made her move towards Ganesha but his enchanting figure.

Something that started as a formal infatuation grew into something deeper in Smitha and she started studying Indian mythology closely and even a cursory look at her works would prove that she has a certain leaning towards this particular stream of Hinduism called Shaivism (the Cult of Shiva). For Smitha, Shiva comes through Ganesha as Ganesha is Shiva's son. Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha and Subramanya make a family unit. More than any other family described in the Hindu mythology, this family has strong resemblance with the nuclear family system of our contemporary times. When Shiva and Parvati are together, they are a very much loving and loveable couple, who are at their sensual best. When they are with their kids, they are the best parents in the world. Also, when Ganesha and Subramanya come together as brothers, their exchanges are just like any other brothers.

It is in this family unit that Smitha finds interesting episodes to recount in painterly terms. Though she has gone deep into the cult and mythology of Shiva, Smitha re-interprets them in her canvases as if they were a modern couple. Using art historical references, she adopts and experiments with certain postures of this family from the popular calendar prints as well as from the Kalighat paintings. She almost brings them into mundane situations where they could be seen as just ordinary human beings engaged in different daily activities including conjugal intimacy. Through the condensed narratives of a family, Smitha indirectly comments on the situations within the nuclear families. They are a contained unit however there could be different pushes and pulls as manifested in the erotic proximity between the parents and the sibling rivalry between the brothers. Smitha is very sensitive to these facts that the viewer is transported to a very interesting domestic realm where conflicts are contained in a very affectionate manner.

While dealing with the topic of nuclear families through the Shiva symbolism, Smitha had already gone through the history of Buddhism and the image of self questioning Sidhartha had grabbed her imagination. A self questioning Siddhartha and a Siddhartha who abandons his family and its comforts have a central place in Smitha's creative life. After reading Hermann Hesse's 'Siddhartha', Smitha was a changed person. A series of Buddha paintings was the result of this engagement with the life of Buddha and in this series Smitha experimented with various phases in Buddha's life incorporating defining symbolism of Buddhism into her paintings skilfully in order to highlight the connection between the painted figure of Buddha and the backdrop against which these images appear.

In a similar vein, Smitha also has done a series on the Devi cult, a part of Hindu religious philosophy. Again, Smitha's interest is not in the ritualistic part of these religious symbolisms. On the contrary, she focuses on the power and presence of women in the Hindu mythology as manifested through

the Devi cult. Here in this series, woman appears in various guises of Devi; at time she is calm and serene like Saraswati or Laxmi and at other time she is ferocious and fearsome like Durga or Chamundi. Smitha makes aesthetic linkages between her Shiva Series and the Devi Series as these are intricately connected with domesticity of a woman and her individual existence in an open society. Through the clever re-introduction of a set of religious symbolism, Smitha brings forth an aesthetical re-reading of life as depicted in religious texts as well as seen in our contemporary times.

Smitha's paintings uphold the feel of a sense of belonging. Even in the Buddha series, though Buddha is all about renunciation and a sense of non-belonging, with a lot of care, Smitha depicts Buddha's connections with his surroundings. Whether he is under a tree either reclining or in a meditative posture, Smitha paints him as if he were a part of the whole scenery. Similarly, in all of her paintings that depict a couple or a couple accompanied by others, she makes them a part of the single unit. For her each individual is an abstraction of values and when they are put together they make sense as a society. Here, her aesthetic view goes hand in hand with her ideas on style and stylistic experiments, as mentioned at the outset of this essay.

According to the artist, even when she depicts allegorical narratives out of the lives of Gods and saints, she concentrates more on the rhythm of the constituting elements. One could see how Smitha facilitates the interplay between various geometrical and organic forms that come repetitively in the background of these paintings. Her training as a graphic artist helps her in this department. They set the tone, as in a musical score and the metaphorical images are placed against these forms. At times they are part of the architectural setting within which the protagonists are found or they are just a part of a larger landscape or interior at other times. Though these elements are apparently decorative they embellish the visual effect of paintings, Smitha uses them with discretion and deliberation as she liked to bring in the traditional attributes of the icons in a more stylistically rearticulated fashion in her contemporary visual takes. Hence, they show their allegiance to the past and tradition while keep pace with the changes happening to the visual discourse of our times. Besides, these elements carry their pristine nature of auspiciousness within the context of representation. These are the visual techniques developed by various masters in the Indian painting tradition, to which Smitha arrives quite naturally as she too carries the flames of the same tradition within her even when she lives in a foreign shore.

JohnyML

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