

The World of Jayasree

[Jayasree Chakravarty is a well known figure in the art world. She has exhibited in various galleries in India and abroad and her paintings are found in private collections and in the National Gallery, New Delhi. She is reticent about her works and not too vocal about her achievements. Her paintings one feels are a philosophic apprehension of time and space. She is a full time practising artist and a loving and dutiful daughter looking after aging and dependent parents. Her experiences at home and abroad have shaped her artistic temperament and are the primal force behind the balance one finds in her paintings. Tapati Gupta spoke to her about her art a few days after her last show at Gallerie 88, Kolkata ended in April. Excerpts:]

T: Your art seems to spring from a very deep source within you. Am I correct?

J: Maybe, yes certainly . Life and experiences have seeped deep.

T: What kind of experiences, if I may ask.

J: The experience of place for instance

T: India, the world? You travel a lot.

J: Yes, that is my passion. But in the instance of my recent big paintings that were displayed at Gallerie 88, it was Salt Lake.

T: Interesting, unexpected.

J: Maybe, but it came naturally to me. You see I have seen the place grow and develop since I was a child. In the 18th century as history witnessed, the place was watery, swampy, a sweet water lake. Hence the aquatic creatures, the snails and the fish. The water and the slime. The flowers of land and water. Then came the activity of preparing the soil and layers and layers of sand and soil were deposited to make the ground firm. Then came the constructions and then my neighbours, those faces that float about in my paintings.

T: So in these paintings you have achieved a synchronic relationship with time. You have gone into the deep abysm and backward of time to days when you and I and your neighbours were not there...

J: Yes, then all came, the solid ground, the houses, the faces. Some of it happened before my very eyes.

T: The aquatic life, the slimy, creepy, crawling creatures, the snakes and the snails, the fish that occur so frequently in your paintings, they emerge from your intricately worked background and are there and not there.

J: (Thoughtfully) They are part of the environment, a real part of time too.

T: There seems to be in your paintings a working outward, from the centre to the periphery, an energy emanating... There is also a struggle between

bondage and liberation, a restlessness in the fish but also rings binding its body. Creatures enmeshed in their habitat.

J: (after a moment of silence) No, it is not like that always. Not the same movement always. I do not begin with precise plans, but just let the composition evolve on its own volition. I am guided by it. I paint and paint...As for bondage and so on, yes I guess that's right.

T: So there are no initial sketches. And mostly spatula work.

J: Right. I hardly use brush. I also use my hands and fingers.

T: Do you think in terms of the colour first, or the subject matter?

J: Can't say, Maybe it comes all together.

T Do you have a daily routine, a particular time for painting?

J: Oh no. I paint at any odd hours, in between waking and sleeping, in snatches or at a stretch.

T: You love to do huge paintings, you have great stamina. Many of these in this recent show were as big as 71"×53".

J: Others as small as 10"×9"! There was a painting that occupied an entire wall of my home and I enjoyed doing it.

T: Your persistence is exemplary, looking after the house, your old parents, and then painting at this rate. You have also done installations before. And you have also worked in gauche and mixed media, though here it is oil and acrylic? I wonder, what is your inspiration? Who are your favourite artists?

J: Difficult to say, There are phases when I think it is Van Gogh. Then it is someone else....

T: Frida Kahlo?

J: Oh she is great, absolutely. Much greater than Diego Rivera. . And such suffering !

T: In the family, who encouraged you?

J: My father. He bought me paint and drawing books.

T: And now?

J: My friends.

T: Coming back to Salt Lake and these your recent paintings, do you see Salt Lake as Salt Lake? Or is there a metaphoric displacement, I mean does it become symbolical of a bigger sphere?

J: Well certainly my travels enlarge my mind and there in the corner (pointing to a painting) is the Golden Gate Bridge. There are various architectural

landmarks of the western world as well as bungalows. These images come and go and are embedded in the basic format.

T: You love maps, topography, contour maps?

J: Certainly. You can see it in the way I approach the composition. Layer by layer the ground is built up, I care for texture, I feel the emanation of images through the layers.

T: Your recent work I find is more packed with images than used to be your former. There is greater density and depth, though the individual style is recognizable.

J: Yes, that comes of accumulated experience. I am not the same as I used to be. To understand my work and its evolution one has to see how I live.

T: I find those faces very well defined and each one different, though they are drawn with black lines mostly, they have a certain solidity and yet they float about in time and space.

J: They are my neighbours.

T: Your art is truly unique. Thank you. Just one more thing. Are you always in the mood for painting?

J: As I said I don't have to wait for mood, I can paint at any odd time.

T: So you are always in mood. If one keeps looking at any of these paintings for a long time they seem to start moving. Very kinetic and suitable to the theme and approach. I find them full of surprises like the monsoon in Darjeeling. The clouds disperse temporarily from one spot and a breathtaking view is revealed. Different images, dreamy domes, red roses, something like a sea horse or a beautiful profile suddenly strikes the eye and we wonder why we never noticed it before, since there is no cloud cover on the canvas! And these images, specially the faces are so living despite the abstractly conceived space they inhabit

J: (Pensive and silent).

T: So painting is your life. What is your hobby?

J: I have no time.

T: But if you had?

J: I would travel and travel.

Yes Jayasree does do a lot of travelling and it is all mapped in these huge canvases, that seem to move and swirl with the vibrancy of the earth colours, the sea greens and sepia, yellow ochre and cobalt, chromium and inky blues. The texture is a variation of granules and corrugation. The range is time past

and time present merging into and through each other. There is a rucksack in her mind.

It seemed to me that Jayasree Chakravarty has a mental domain exclusively her own and is shy of discourse. Right at the outset of the interview she said, "My friends went on and on discussing my paintings and I fell asleep." To me it seemed that she was a traveller even in her sleep who would wake to find herself in the terrain she dreamt of. ✍️✍️✍️✍️

✍️