

## THE ELUSIVE BELOVED

BEAUTY and difficulty are at the very heart of the paintings of Akhilesh. The large number of abstract paintings he has assembled in the last 25 years gives an unprecedented view of the cumulative logic of a career that can be read as a before-and-after story: experimentation at one end, rationalist abstraction at the other. These paintings are the record of an intimate physical relationship between the artist and his work and the movement of his brush is like a voice in low, confiding conversation – a lover talking to a lover.

Also apparent in seeing dozens of his paintings together, is their wide chromatic range. The varieties of reds, blues, yellows, ochres and greens are astonishing – no two reds are the same, neither are two yellows or two blues, and their distinctive qualities carry expressive weight. If with all these variables factored in, the artist comes across as a colorist of unsuspected sensibility, he is also an artist, we discover, who works out his compositions largely by intuition.

It was with images from Nature – that inexhaustible source of inspiration – that Akhilesh took his first leap into abstraction. His abstract paintings have a link with his childhood memories. Coming from Malwa, on the border of Rajasthan where Nature abounds in fascinating colours as also carrying with him the tradition of the regional folk art which reflected all these hues. Akhilesh became obsessed with colours. For the first 10 years of his life as an artist, (1978-1988) he worked in black and white just to understand colour. One of his notable creations of this period was "Portrait of Landscape" (ink on paper) in which he worked out free-flowing grids, filled up with dismembered mosaics. Some other works resembled aerial views of handmade roof tiles or the intimate experience of a natural environment, but they always held a deeper meaning other than that expressed on the surface. These paintings are like a symbolic knot tying up the multiple strands of Akhilesh's early career. From that point on, the artist shifted gears. He entered the phase of abstract colouration, though there was no insistence on universal primaries. He says: "Colour by itself is a concept. Painting mere colour is a challenge by itself. To put a single colour – a vibrant individual colour – is like entering a totally uncharted territory because in using a single colour you have to reject all other colours and along with that all forms

and lines that could emanate from them. For this kind of painting, the artist had to be in

top form with his chromatic vocabulary. There was no sky here, there were no stars. In fact, this was a solid door shut firmly on Nature. It was painting talking a new, self-invented language.

The artist never believed in any style or working in series. But his works, (now on display at the Easel Gallery, Chennai) though untitled, are a continuation of the large number of acrylics and dry pastels on canvas as well as paper which he created during this visit to Benaras in 1996. All the Benaras paintings with a single title "Has it something to do with Benaras?", though lacking in any literary element, sparked off a sense of secret rhythm in their enticing combinations and manipulations of colour. There were no explicit images, only layers of colours and freeform patterns. He created thin blue vertical lines which changed the whole story of the canvas, yellows passed over yellow, yellows ran behind reds; blues presumably put down first, ran behind everything else.

'His paintings in 1997 are refinements of work from the earlier years.

In his compositions such as "She is wandering in Blues", "How blue is Blue", "Red Wandering II", "Green, how Green are you?", "Yellow decoded" and "Yellows about themselves", one senses that he has taken the motif of the single dominant colour square to a point of no return. Surely, one can imagine that he has achieved his long-sought ideal of harmony, absolute flatness and absolute balance. But the artist has a problem. Whether the goal is Utopian or one of pure beauty, any work of art also opens up, within a pictorial system ever threatening to close, the kind of challenges and possibilities that are a source of concern. Painting, far from being a source of enjoyment for him, constitutes a suffering – "suffering with colour, suffering with form, suffering with line, and ultimately suffering with life itself".

In a lucid statement, Akhilesh says: "Actually it is no enjoyment to paint. It is a false notion for people to say that painting gives pleasure. Or for musicians to say that music gives them pleasure. You have to understand that the capacity of a human being to do things is limited, that you cannot go the way you want. In painting too, when you are in front of the canvas, you have the feeling that you are a non-entity. You can't visualise, you can't work

out what you want, and this perception generates a kind of pain, causes a kind of suffering. It reminds you of failure, of death."

The artist makes a delineation between experimentation in art and the final result. "These two are quite different states. When you see your own work and find that this is not what you wanted to create, you keep on experimenting, keep on painting. But a stage comes when you have to face the canvas and accept that if what you have created is not good enough, you are a nobody. In front of the canvas, there is no time-frame, no degree of achievement. All that the canvas feed back in that time is short, the world is passing by and if you want to arrive at your goal, there should be an end to trial and error, readjustment and erasure, leaving the only path to take where discipline and amplitude and confinement and release are synonymous."

Though the artist was initially inspired by Nature and its colours, he does not believe that his works are in any way "portraits of Nature". "I don't believe in this kind of representation. In any case, I am not happy with my work, whatever I am doing. The happiness which I derive lies in the process of my painting. It is encoded in the moment when I am entering the canvas ... it is only at that moment that I am alive." Where then does the "suffering" come in? "In the tension that arises because I cannot meet my beloved. I cannot capture her." Is she a woman?

"No, it is colour. I am unable to arrive at the colours I want to create.

They are always eluding me, always disturbing me," says Akhilesh, thereby putting a burden on his art, on himself, and on us, his audience. From the beginning of his career upto this point, he has indicated in different ways that painting isn't about formal audacity or self-expression or about having a good time or pushing a creed. It is about believing in a chosen language, to use it to ask questions, to ask them beautifully and with eloquence.

Akhilesh, 41, a graduate of the Indore College of Art, has exhibited widely in India, in several countries abroad, lectured on contemporary Indian art in the United States and co-curated an exhibition of five Indian painters at the Asian Arts Centre, Maryland, U.S. But by far his most important contribution to Indian art has been in the designing and setting up of a museum of contemporary, urban, folk and tribal art of Malwa at Lal Baugh Palace, Indore.

His exhibition inaugurated at Easel Gallery, in Chennai, by eminent artist Reddeppa Naidu on August 6, 1997, will continue till the end of the

month.

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