



Rummana Hussain: "I draw upon established mythological sources and attempt to recreate new myths which arise from the reality around me"

The quiet miracle

Content-oriented, with man at the centre of her universe, Rummana Hussain's paintings relate interpersonal sagas in particular, and those pertaining to a crumbling society at large, her chief concerns being with everyday life events, says **Anahite Contractor**

There is a quiet miracle in mundane life and life-events, if only one can sense it. Rummana Hussain exhibits her paintings in oil and water colour striving to express this, through her medium.

This artist has spent two formative years of training at Kent, UK., from 1972 to 1974. Rummana undertook a course during this period which, according to her was, "basically in textile designing, but was eclectic enough to arouse interest and provide exposure to several mediums and art forms." For the next few years, she lived in Calcutta and Delhi, before moving on to Bombay, during which time, she gathered numerous nuances of life, culture, individuals and the relationship between these factors—numerous enough for each one to permeate itself through her artistic

temperament and her psyche as a human being, on to the waiting canvas. This is Rummana Hussain's first exhibition in Bombay.

Content-oriented, with man at the centre of the artist's universe, these paintings relate interpersonal sagas in particular, and those pertaining to a crumbling society, at large. "My concerns," says Rummana, "are with everyday events, because it is the representation of life around me, which I aim to project in my work."

Societal concerns reveal themselves in Rummana's work. The fragmentation of a unified culture possibly manifests itself on the canvas, in her interpretation of myth. The occasional encounter with mythological figures is etched out at a fallible, human level, so that one confronts an Icarus who reflects the isolation of urban environs. *Pandora's Box*

is a canvas which deals with the letting loose of evil and its consequent manifestation in the existing situation.

Rummana substantiates this by stating, "I draw upon established mythological sources, and attempt to recreate new myths which arise from the reality around me." Thereby, she forms metaphoric relationships between different societal norms, set in different time-periods.

Rummana's comment on "the collapse of the social system and the destructive elements that threaten our society" gains ground, here.

A viable intercourse of human beings and all that concerns them, surfaces from Rummana's works, effectively. Her need to "communicate with my spectator" is somewhat like a theatrical device, where distancing is merely a technical feat; barring that, the performer

spectator and the situation are all contained within the concern of existential conditioning.

Out of this existential irrevocability, arises a fantasy world of winged figures which the artist acknowledges as a recent phenomenon in her work. Even so, the degree of the fantastic is abated and eventually, myth and ritual merge with the mundane, in order to produce a holistic vision of life and art.

In Rummana's style, one observes a marked tendency toward post impressionistic ideals. *Tale of a man who carries fish* is Van Goghish in technique. The pigment and its application are both impassioned and immediate. However, Rummana's style lacks the sophistication of a mature artist and once the raw edges ripen, the astute directness of her work can turn

into a credible language incorporating both, ruggedness and refinement.

The artist maintains simply, "I have a certain distaste for elegance and harmony; the juxtapositions brought about by my use of myth, aims to break the peaceful monotony of a given situation." This is plausible in the context of technique but is still not capable of redeeming a painting, such as *Woman with landscape*. The overall derivation from this work is that of calendar-art because Rummana does not care to subvert the populist image into a pun or a simile. The woman in the painting, could belong to a *bidi*-wrapper or an Indian matchbox. What business, pray, does she execute on a Rummana Hussain canvas?

The Indian origins of Rummana's work is evident, even as she maintains certain

western standards, both in form and content. On the one hand, is the meticulous image of the Devi—the mother goddess representing hope and resurrection, and on the other, an angel traversing across Colaba. Stylistically too, her work incorporates certain nuances of the west (post-impressionistic as well as Expressionistic features) and again, it bears a cogent semblance to what is known as the idiom of the Baroda school. However, it ought to be conceded that both standards may be eventually incidental to a style which is prominently eclectic.

Rummana maintains admiration for Breugel, especially for the reflection of "the popular consciousness of his time" in his work. A similar patchwork of the socio-cultural ethos across a span of centuries is seen in Rummana's work as well. To this end, the motifs in the background of all the works of this artist, are not an arbitrary mishmash for filling space; all the details, whether figural, architectural or of different scapes, are constructs from a sensibility which absorbs life in its simultaneous dimension.

Moreover, her absorption in theatrical devices gives impetus to the structure of each painting. According to her, she uses "subsidiary figures" as images "with the intention of creating movement using either a circular or diagonal motion." Postures and situational rendering, support this further.

Just as the last point is not always of the least importance, it would be pertinent to mention here, Rummana's treatment of colour. She relies on pure colours in order to bring about an impassioned rendering of her vision. This, however, is a "conscious arrangement" with an "organised intensity," so that they neither destroy each other, nor imply a placid harmony." Tonalities of pigment, shadows and highlights are all dismembered segments from a brilliant assembly of pigments. Colours clash with systematic regularity so that they are enjoyed for their own sake, and enhance the overall picture-plane. There is an inherent attraction in this gaudy family emanating from Rummana Hussain's palette.

The watercolours are considered "preparatory" by the artist. A playful humour is observed in *Looking for Tales* in which exists an integrated image of a woman splitting a fish's mouth as if to draw inspiration, thereof. This is a personal joke on the artist's imagery which often resorts to the depiction of fish. A *Dialogue* portrays a conceptual self-image, grabbing a fish like a microphone and confronting her earlier protagonist—the goat. What ensues from this incongruous watercolour is the prattle of a peculiar conversation. Alice in Artlandish.

Rummana Hussain's style turns full circle on its creator, now flippant, now intense. And there it was. Wrenched from common flotsam of knowledge and experience, the miracle lies like the precious one, shying within its oyster.

A thinking painter

ART

Rummana Hussain's paintings are strong in their figurative impulse and rich in symbol and metaphor, says **Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni**



Rummana Hussain's first show in Bombay, undoubtedly makes a stunning

impact. After studying art and design in Britain between 1972 and 1974, she has held shows of her paintings in Calcutta and Delhi and has also been seen in a number of group exhibitions.

Hussain's paintings are strong in their figurative impulse and rich in symbol and metaphor. Around man, she sees the play of destructive social forces—violence, corruption, ritualism and exploitation, which cause the collapse of the social system. She focuses on these themes.

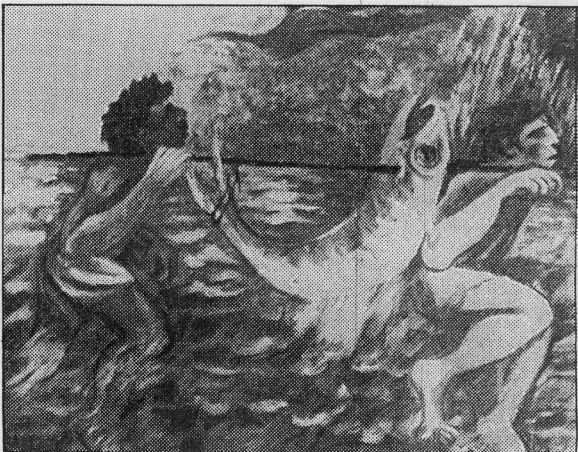
It is worth considering her canvases one by one. *The Immersion* is a playful re-enactment of the immersion of Ganesh. The idol weighs down the figure of the man who is carrying it. Its proportions are typical of the slightly bizarre touch which Hussain gives to her supernatural creatures. In *The Dark Times*, Hope is lying dead on a rock, but there is an angel in the sea. Here, there is a

and one feels she has a right to use this colour style.

Reclining figures and batlike creatures people her canvases. She admits to the influence of Brecht's poetry and the Flemish painter Breughel's works, but Chagall also seems to have influenced her. That her palette is entirely different from Breugel or Chagall gives her much credit.

In many of her works fish assume monstrous proportions and strengthen the link with fantasy. One such work is *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*. This is painted in vivid greens and blues. There is a curved figure of a fisherman complemented by a reciprocally curved figure of a fish, completing a circle. The circle is cut diagonally by the line of the sea. Here, Hussain gives us an aerial view of fishing boats—a touch of inspiration that enlarges conventional perspective.

One of her most expressive works is *The Angel and Colaba* (Colaba is where Hussain lives)—a dramatic juxtaposition of myth and reality. The figure of an angel carrying within it the figure of a woman occupies a large part of



The Pall Bearers by Rummana Hussain: strengthening the link with fantasy

detailed treatment of architecture in the painting.

One of her most notable works is *Parable of the Blind* with a Pied Piper-like flutist leading blind people and blind rats. The rats are falling into the water which occupies half the canvas and the goddess Kali rides a tiger in one corner. There are people crying up to heaven from the edge of a cliff with bats flying around. The painting is typical of Hussain's deceptively raw manner.

She uses warm, sometimes positively loud colours, but these are balanced by her intricate and original imagery

the top of the canvas.

Some of Hussain's works are literal—like, *Fragmentation and Collapse*—but on the whole her work conjures up shades of surrealism while remaining studiously expressionistic.

Rummana Hussain will always be considered a thinking painter. If she had adopted a more sophisticated technique, she would have perhaps lost the great force and honesty that characterise her paintings.

Rummana Hussain
Paintings
Jehangir art gallery
Till April 10