



# Such a Long Journey

Artist Jaideep Mehrotra's on the railway tracks. Maria Louis is bemused...

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BAJIRAO PAWAR

## EASEL

**A**FTER YEARS OF moving lock, stock, barrel and family from Worli to Breach Candy to Walkeshwar while his ancestral bungalow was being razed to the ground to make way for a spanking new state-of-the-art edifice, the peripatetic Jaideep Mehrotra is finally at home... and at peace with himself. You heard it in the sigh of relief that punctuated the self-conveyed news that he was moving... yet again. You perceived it in his tranquil smile and relaxed manner of speaking when you bumped into him at art exhibitions and events thereafter. But now, when you observe him in the setting of the spacious abode he shares with his beautiful wife Seema and their two daughters (10-year-old Anoushka and her younger sister, Mallika) you understand why.

Perched atop the building that has replaced his childhood home, the much-coveted duplex apartment in the heart of the concrete jungle is flooded with natural light and blessed with a view to die for. From the tall glass windows inset into two walls of his 15th floor living-room, you can feast your eyes on the breathtaking sweep of Worli Seaface while a couple of windows on the opposite side afford a glimpse of the quaint old-worldly fishing village that was an intrinsic part of his growing years. Incidentally, this is also the only view offered by his studio—which is conveniently located next to the master suite.

Spectacular though it is, the view from the top is not what you first notice when the artist personally escorts you from the unassuming entrance with its rough-hewn nameplate bearing his characteristic scrawl, to the classic furniture in his understated living-room. It is the walls of the passage and living room that capture your attention, for they are a testimony to an extraordinary artistic journey that begs to be recorded. Drawings and oil paintings jostle for attention with resin sculptures and digital prints... evidence of his versatility. But when you come face-to-face with Jaideep's latest oeuvre, you stop abruptly in your tracks...

A distant cry from the surrealistic paintings that have built up his artistic reputation, here is a seemingly naive body of work with pun-filled situations and whimsical titles like "Fanta Orange" (showing a boy selling the orange cold-drink Fanta... and a man fiddling with his cell phone ... Orange mobile), "C+++ rush hour" (painted like a TV screen, reminiscent of CNBC's Rush Hour, complete with a news ticker running at the bottom and showing the crush of commuters during peak-hour travel) and "Weight a minute" (depicting the obsolete and elaborately-decorated weighing machines that one still comes across at railway stations in India). What's more, unlike his earlier solo exhibitions, all the works revolve around a single and rather simple theme: the Indian Railways!

During a career that spans almost four decades, Jaideep Mehrotra had his first solo exhibition at age 12—followed by numerous solo and group exhibitions, both in India and abroad. While oil painting remains his forte, he is equally at ease with various other media and his repertoire embraces sculptures, digital-based prints, films and installations. Considered a pioneer in the field of painting in the digital medium in India, he has the distinction of being the first Indian artist to have his own website on the Internet as well as the first Indian artist to have his catalogue on an interactive CD-ROM format. But with his current offering titled "Retracked", the pioneer of futuristic art seems to have backtracked on his convictions and you are faced with a conundrum.

How do you respond to an artist who behaves like an excited schoolboy with a new toy while demonstrating his latest effort for the first time? You consider your options. Either you could be non-committal about what you are not convinced about, and then go on to write a dismissive review or you could apprise him about your skepticism and invite him to share his concerns and motivations. If the person in question is Jaideep Mehrotra and you are someone who has watched



with interest his ingenious approach to painting over the past decade, it is not easy to dismiss the aberration in his content and style. You decide to be candid—a rather fortuitous choice... for not only do you discover a new dimension to the work on display, but you begin to unravel a personality that is refreshingly simple beneath the trappings of fame and fortune.

"The attitude in these paintings is more that of the observer than of looking into a crystal ball, as with my surrealistic works in the past," he admits with equal candour, when challenged. "It is also more passive than aggressive. I've always wanted to work on this theme, and I decided to do it now—before the ever-changing art scene moves away completely from realism into abstraction and conceptual art." Jaideep is holding a solo show in Mumbai after almost five years, and this exhibition showcases only his oil and acrylic paintings on canvas. Whatever happened to his experimentation with new techniques? "Well, the subject matter was kept intentionally in the tradition of realism, but with a new approach to the technique of applying colour and texture to the canvas," discloses the artist who revels in exploring new and untried territory. "I have used both oils and acrylics together, a combination of traditional technique with contemporary hues." Here is someone who would like to challenge the notion that water and oil don't mix!

"Retracked", his retrospective journey (to be exhibited at Jehangir Art Gallery from October 14 to 19) could well be viewed as a collection of autobiographical paintings. After all, the situations he depicts are drawn from his personal experience. "No doubt, it's a personal journey of evolving," he agrees. "It's about growing up with vivid images of going to school or work by train, and how distant it seems to me in my present lifestyle. The younger generation has other options in modes of travel and communication, so they may not carry the same memories that I do of my youth—the innumerable journeys by trains, the smells and idiosyncrasies of every state and station we traversed. The boy yelling 'Fantaaa O-o-range' and 'chaaaaiii', the tea served in *kullads*, still leave a gritty taste in my mouth. I wanted to relive those years."

But that's not all there is to this exhibition. "The Indian rail system, which inextricably linked the length and breadth of the country long before the airlines or e-mail, is a part of us all and I'm attempting to relive the essence of what we were and are about. So, on another level, 'Retracked' encompasses the state (of India) as it stands in reference to today's social and political climate." Admittedly, some of the paintings could spark off a debate—especially the one titled "Division that multiplied" (depicting Gandhiji as a force responsible for the great divide

consequent upon the Partition of India). But this is no sensationalist ploy, for Jaideep truly believes that if the Father of the Nation had not nodded his assent, there would have been no Pakistan... and probably no bomb blasts?

Although he has not experienced the trauma of Partition first-hand, Jaideep has very definite views and he is not afraid to air them. "I feel that the communal riots and the bomb blasts have their seeds in the partition of India," he insists. "I've only heard stories and incidents about the Partition and the trauma it spelt for families on both sides of the border, but it always conjures up images of refugees atop trains and in crowded stations. When I embarked on this project, it did not occur to me how vast the subject is and how challenging. In these paintings, I have tried to capture my impressions and associations of rail travel." Watching the changing scenery, studying different hues and colours along the interminable tracks, observing various characters at stations—are only some of the memories etched in his consciousness.

A lasting memory of his itinerant lifestyle as a student, when he travelled to and from his boarding school in Ajmer, is of the books he read on those long journeys. "I read anything that I could lay my hands on, and buying a book at the station always marked the beginning of every journey," he recalls fondly. "The longer the journey, the more I read, picking up books from stations along the way. Books always transported me into another world." It's no wonder that some of the enduring images from this exhibition are related to the written word. There's "Wheeler Dealer" (his impression of the AH Wheeler bookstalls that are present at almost all the stations in Mumbai) and "Paperback Rider" (a hazy image reminiscent of Platform nine-and-three-fourths in the Harry Potter series), among others.

As you can gauge from the playful titles, Jaideep Mehrotra has been rather self-indulgent this time... but no less inventive and original. We grant him the luxury of this flight of fancy, for he evidently needs to get the past out of his system before he continues his journey into the future.