



He is evoking his vision in vivid colours. With a brush and chip

By RASHMI UDAY SINGH

FIGURE this one out!

It is the honeyed middle of the night. The city slumbers, its pulse rhythmic and relaxed. At least temporarily. Armed with a flask of coffee, Latin Jazz cassettes, wearing soft cloth shoes a shadowy figure drives across Bombay.

He enters a large, deserted but opulently appointed office overlooking the magnificent Apollo Bunder. He softly pads across the huge, black-floored hall with its high, gold leaf ceiling.

And then strange things start to happen.

He climbs a rickety, 12-foot ladder, walks onto a shaky wooden ramp resting precariously on stacks of old oil drums, takes a look at the blank wall ahead and clambers down.

Only to climb up again after taking time off to move back 40 feet and examine the huge wall in its entirety, this time announcing his presence to the sleeping

office with loud strains of saxophone music from the stereo set up in a distant corner.

He carries his paints, brushes and palette, and you realise that the massive wall ahead is actually two large pieces of stretched canvas which he will paint on.

All night. Every night. And he does this continuously and systematically for three months of nights.

Reminds you of Lawrence Block's Burglar who painted like Mondrian, doesn't it?

MANY MONTHS later, in the jostle of office traffic in this dagger-shaped city, his car snakes up to the same office. This

time he is there to sign the huge, 14-foot painting which completely dominates the office. And as both the photographer and I look on, he whips out his brush to sign — 'Jai'.

That's Jaideep Mehrotra for you. A strange mix of opposites, he is unlike any other artist I know. Simultaneously meticulous and inspired, incredibly disciplined and yet highly strung, technologically innovative but emotionally primitive, he is in equal parts mad artist, techno buff, audiophile, doting father and husband and his own supercharged manager.

Well known for his surrealist canvasses, thought provoking water colours and intriguing sculptures, his works now command sky high prices.

Having toyed with several different art forms in his formative years, Jaideep ultimately evolved a distinctive offshoot of surrealism which is described by its followers around the world as super humanism.

But labels don't mean much to him,

and what Jaideep would prefer viewers of his art to focus on are the strong social statements which they make, often overtly and with transparent simplicity.

He is equally well known for all the commissioned paintings he has done for business houses. "The reason I take on work from companies is that they give me enormous freedom, have huge spaces to play with and most importantly," he adds "my work is viewed by a cross section of people who use the premises."

"Look at this one," he says gesturing around the foyer of Sterlite Industries where he has been painting, "already hundreds of people have seen it and I love to watch their response."

So his art hangs in foyers and lobbies of giant companies, but right now his attention is riveted on the enormous possibilities of one of his great passions — the computer. The other two are his wife and daughter.

Whenever he refers to his state-of-the-art Power Mac 7100 AV, his voice takes on a special lilt, his eyes sparkle behind the Gaultier spectacle frames and his adrenalin obviously does a fox-trot.

"It is important that computer-generated art is viewed as an independent art form," he says emphatically, "and not compared to water colours or oils."

So for his latest exhibition which kicks off on March 18 (on till March 23) at the Jehangir Art Gallery he has 10 to 15 prints of five such pieces. Since these prints have a lifespan of 20 to 25 years, they are of 'museum standard' and of course there will be only a limited edition of each.

He will also be exhibiting some of his canvasses, water colours and pen and inks. And running through it all is the theme of "confronting the gods". Of depicting the contemporary symbols of god-hood, of filmstars, of politicians, of the god of the stockmarket... all captured in his startlingly vivid and hauntingly realistic style.

On display will be his resin and fabric sculptures too, which are intriguingly expressive. Jaideep has produced them after two years of research. "I worked backwards at it. I visualised the effect I wanted, then I sculpted the fabric and resin accordingly," he says happily, quite pleased with the effect of the fabric, but definitely setting his sights at evolving more perfect and three dimensional forms.

Jaideep's great strength is his willingness to experiment with all kinds of media. Art has no demarcations, he insists. "Art

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is art as long as people enjoy it," is what he believes. And what he obviously practises.

Behind each of his works (be it resin sculpture, canvasses, water colours or computer art), are years of research and painstaking experimentation.

He takes care to see that he uses Windsor Newton or Holland — paints that last — and premixes of Stand Oil so that the dark coloured paints on his canvas do not crack.

In short, he fuses both art and science with dream and reality to recreate his private vision which grabs you by the scruff of your neck and makes you think.

You may not think like him, but you certainly can't ignore his world. You may not understand how he manages to be so scientific and yet so artistic, so temperamental yet so organised and you may get a bit infuriated by his precision-edged-just-so approach to life, but you have to hand it to him.

I find he shakes as brilliant a bloody Mary as he cooks an exotic chinese dish, and puts his enormously active mind behind every thing he does.

It must be something to do with the fact that his first exhibition of paintings was held when he was 12 years old. He then studied commerce, ran an export house, a printing press and then threw up his lucrative Nigerian business to paint full time.

And now that he is in the business of painting he is as determinedly getting to the art of the matter.