

Going Solo

His paintings speak a thousand words, quite literally. Noted artist, Jaideep Mehrotra, is gearing up for his solo show to be held in Mumbai after a four year hiatus. Here's an exclusive sneak peek into his latest series as he speaks to Society about art, technology and what took him so long...

BY UJWAL SALOKHE

Jaideep Mehrotra's simplicity and the warmth of his countenance speak volumes of the humility he exudes for an artist of his calibre. One wonders what took him four years to host a solo show. He almost immediately says, "Well, generally, it takes me a long time to put together a set of work. But, this particular set that I am working on right now took me a little longer because I had to research a lot to get to where I am. And, I had another show in Delhi in between, but it just had a lot of canvasses, it was not a series like this one. Here, I was taking a little longer than usual."

For someone who seems like a man of few words at first, Jaideep manages to break this notion when he talks about his upcoming exhibition. With child-like excitement, he shows his works, unveiling them in words, one at a time. The first one has a reddish background, a human figure, and three chairs chained together to the left of the painting. Before one can get flabbergasted, Jaideep comes up with the explanation, "The person in the painting is Mao Tse-Tung. He was a dictator who had a sort of positive interest in changing the way China was. It was indeed in a real mess when he came to power. He actually went into farm lands and created a socialist structure to help out the poorer segments. The idea behind the painting was that people eventually change their perceptions once in power. I have used the chairs to show the game of power and the chairs chained together show a precarious balancing



act. What is interesting is that when you actually move closer, you read what is written, it says, "With all good intentions, when in power, the vision becomes blurry."

Speaking at length about the series, he says, "The whole concept of this series is that we are talking of two separate entities. Even as you interview, everything is digitised, whether one speaks, paints, writes or expresses oneself, even memories are digitised. So, it's almost like there is a tangible and an intangible, and they are coming together at a certain point and together, they make harmony. It's almost like we, in our everyday life, don't realise that there is a part of us that is floating in a cloud somewhere."

When one mentions digitisation, one cannot miss but mention the fact that Jaideep has been one artist who has always thought way ahead of his times—whether it is being the first artist to own the very first interactive catalogue on a CD ROM or digitising his works. He insists, "It's just a question of acceptance. Like, when cameras came out, people who were painting called it rubbish, saying it would never last. Then, they developed proprietary processes for making gelatine silver prints which were archival and they didn't fade for years. Once that happened, people accepted photography as well. Today, there are processes that give you a life of 100 years. Even when acrylic was introduced, people were sceptical, but today, I think most artists use acrylic



Painting of Mao Tse-Tung

Another painting from his latest series



which I guess is more environment friendly than oil." He continues, "Even when artists are painting realisms, they are using references of photographs. You don't see people sitting by the seaside or lake side to paint anymore. When new things come out and new technologies are available, people are always reluctant to accept them. When I started digitising, it was almost like people had made me an untouchable saying that they won't buy my art because they felt I was working on the computer. They didn't want to see that this was next generation art. One can't keep destroying natural resources indefinitely. There will be a time when one will have to accept the change."

His latest series indeed took him very long; a four-year sabbatical is no mean feat. Explaining the complexities of this series, he says it was complex because he had to work with the structure of the text which was generated by different programmes to create an image. "So, I would create the image, generate a texture and then print it to completely synchronise it with the painting so that both could be in absolute sync with each other. That took time."

He also had to develop an entire system to give a touch-feel kind of a look to the entire series. "It is very tangible yet very intangible at the same time. Initially, I would use very basic digitised structures like the 01s binary and then create an image based on that. And then, as time passed, I started making it more

Shammi Kapoor's portrait



complex, adding text to it. Texts give messages in numerous ways. So, the canvas is not a singular piece, it has so many levels to it depending on where you are looking at it from. You will discover layers to it. All my works have that aspect and it works on various levels. Also, what I am trying to say is that even our memories of people who achieve something will go. So, there is a cloud, intangibility there. All our life, our existence is in our head and it belongs to us only as long as our heads function," says he in detail about the use of text in all his works.

Another painting from his current series that catches one's eyes is a painting of Shammi Kapoor. With a shimmering white background, courtesy a treated canvas, the painting from a distance almost gives the viewer a feeling of little arc lights lighting up the background. A perfectly artistic tribute to the entertainer, Jaideep informs that the painting was his way of expressing his love and respect for his friend. Speaking of his association with Shammi Kapoor, he shares, "He was a good friend and somehow, it is a little hard to believe that he is not around anymore. A common denominator that got us close was that we liked what we were doing with computers. Apple had even invited us to grace an occasion together and thereon, we maintained contact. When I launched my CD ROM in 2000, which was the first interactive catalogue, he launched it for me."

Jaideep can't help but continue remembering Shammi, the person. "He always had that zest for life. He was a very nice human being. Even in his troubled times, when he couldn't walk and was on a wheel chair, he got himself an electric wheelchair and would treat it like a sports car. He would make fun of his situation and enjoy that because he knew there was no alternative but to do that. His later years were very hard for him and I know that because we were friends, and he would express that pretty often. I remember I had this show in 2007 at the Jehangir Art Gallery and he was there. We had organised a sofa for him and he sat there for hours since he would find it difficult to climb steps or move around. Seeing the number of people who walked up to him, shook his hand and got his autograph, one could not imagine that at that age and stage in his life, people still had that kind of adoration for him. And then, to suddenly think he is not there, it's difficult."

A self-taught artist, Jaideep started showing his works at the tender age of 12. However, he isn't one who really enjoys basking over past laurels. Being someone who believes in pushing himself to achieve something higher than what he already has, Jaideep loves new challenges. Displaying a healthy stroke of nervousness, Jaideep says, "Every single time, I have

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been nervous. I never take anything for granted. It's not like people are going to buy my stuff by just looking at the signature. I have not reached that level yet. I guess, even if I reach that level, it is important to be able to keep challenging myself and going beyond." He adds, "Every time I get comfortable, I like to break that and do something different. I don't like that comfort level. That is what art means. That whole creative process is to actually challenge oneself and be able to see something instead of not being able to see it. It's there, but one has to put the combination together."

His commitment to adapting, moulding and updating himself with the changing times is evident. It is certain that his patrons have missed his passionate work and masterpieces in the four years that went by. We sure are looking forward to his exhibition this December! <<