



SERIOUS PLAY

MUHAMMAD YUSUF WRITES ABOUT AN INDIAN ARTIST WHO HAS DISCOVERED THE SERIOUS ELEMENT IN PLAY

Indian artist Jaideep Mehrotra has a self-taught world view that parallels his metier as a self-taught artist. His paintings are on view at 1 x 1 Art Space, the art gallery run by Malini Gulrajani till Dec. 21. The show is titled *Alchemy of Play*.

Mehrotra has a style that defies slotting. He is figurative, surreal, hyper realistic and multi-dimensional. He works in oils, acrylic and water colour and is also known for his sculptures made from fabric and resin. To keep with the times, he has walked into the digital domain of installations, web-based art, giclee, a/v depictions and short films. Quite a palette there!

Says his wife Seema, his muse for 17 years: "My husband is inspired by anything. The views from his studio, the weather, the city of Mumbai, relationships, watching a child or an animal, situations, politics — all these and more brighten his canvas."

Mehrotra is a pioneer Indian artist who took home to India the beauty of the Gulf region. He worked in Dubai during 1974-78 as a manager at a printing press, dealing in accounts and human resources! It was a pure passion for art — he describes it as breathing art — that made him chuck up commerce and take to humanities.

Says Seema: "At that time, there was not much in the way of painting Islamic themes. The art field too was not too prominent. It had not become an integral part of Gulf life as now. After my husband went back to India, he did paintings of horses and the desert. That made people sit up and take notice of the possibilities that existed here." No man is a hero to his valet and perhaps no artist is a mystery to his wife. Seema says that Mehrotra started off as a surrealist, but he is always figurative. She could have a point.

Bloodline is a diptych (acrylic and oil on canvas). Measuring 8ft x 4ft, it describes the birth and

growth of a child. In one panel, birth has just taken place; the umbilical cord still attaches the child to its mother. The other panel shows the child, now grown up, flying a kite. But the kite is still attached to its hand, just as he was attached to his mother. Dominating the picture are falling leaves and roots, symbolising death and life. It is the artist's way of showing the co-existence of birth, death and life. (This is where Seema is right bang on: though the painting has undoubtedly surrealistic elements, the figures of the child, leaves, the kite and the roots of the tree are very clear. The painting also explains the title. The artist has juxtaposed critical subjects like life and death with kite flying. Play has been transmuted and takes us to serious reflection).

Effervescence, a 6ft x 9ft acrylic and oil on canvas, reminds us of bubble-shaped spaceships, Martian landscapes and the rocky terrain of outer planets. Bubbles

Jaideep Mehrotra with gallery owner Malini Gulrajani.

float in deep, dark space. The artist says he was inspired by diaphanous soap bubbles, which he then alchemised into planets. An everyday sight like playfully floating soap bubbles thus has been turned into a question of our relationship to the scheme of things entire.

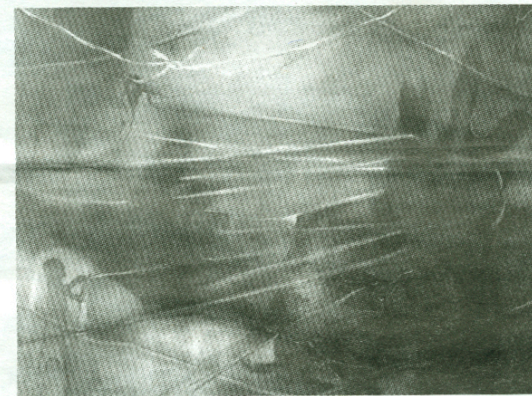
Fine Balance, another diptych, is 4ft x 8ft in size. It is a remarkable effort in juggling the play of relationships. Or, as the artist puts it, he ties "between agreement and acquiescence, delicacy and subtlety, of crudity and the brusque." Right in your face are the partly dressed figures of a man and a woman. Significantly, the man is juggling an apple, with all its symbolism. The figures are cinematic though unidentifiable. Her dress is lovingly created while he looks very much like a screen hero or ramp model. In the background are malnourished and Caliban-like human creatures, who are running away from danger, tumbling from a height or even committing suicide by jumping off, perhaps from a high rise. Mehrotra shows how temptation and closure lie precariously side-by-side in life.

Feline Crib depicts a cat (in consideration to the size of the subject, the painting, which is an acrylic and oil on canvas, is manageably only 3ft x 4ft), which warily looks at its saviour/tormentor. The animal is trying to figure out the temperament of the person looking at it. But given the threatening figure and the dark colour in which he is painted, we fear for the cat! A crib, which is a place for rest or play for its inhabitant, is thus transformed into a place of watchful wariness. How the dice falls could be a matter of life or death

Mehrotra focuses on the clothes that hang out of homes, talking of people who live there. He says (rightly so) that one can figure out who lives in a house by the clothes that hang out to dry on the clothes line. "There is a woman's dress;



Seema



immersed in his work. Early on, he was inspired by Dali and American artists Mark Tansey and Mark Close. But he later struck off on his own.

Since he is also a social commentator (he has some unkind words for fundamentalisms of every sort) and his paintings are also social commentaries, on probing, he also spoke on today's art scene. He had some glorious words for Eastern art in general and Indian contemporary art in particular. "I was in New York during April-May this year," he says. "I visited nearly 50 galleries. There is a lot of demand for Indian art which, in terms of variety, quality, content and extent of experimentation, is blooming. In comparison, the West is stagnating! I feel that the art that now comes out of Europe or America is not of the same quality that used to come out during the Renaissance or post-Renaissance periods, for example. Of course, there could be speculation in the Indian art market. But there are many serious buyers of Indian art too."

Mehrotra is triumphant. He can afford to be. A veteran of many shows the world over, his works are purchased by discerning buyers. He is very much on the "wanted" list of contemporary artists. He has a number of corporate assignments for major companies to his credit.

He grows on the viewers, just as he grows on gallery owners! Says Gulrajani, who is sponsoring him: "I have been working with him for the last seven years. He reveals more secrets the closer you go. There are lots of layers to his work."