

The Art of Togetherness

Artist Sheyna Baig makes her American debut

by Pallavi Sharma



"Lotus Girl"

A recent exhibit at the Walter Wickiser Gallery got people excited. One enthusiastic visitor to the New York gallery even took a painting right off the wall. Of course, he had purchased it earlier. Laughing, he said he couldn't wait any longer to get the piece home.

The source of the excitement was the American debut of Sheyna Baig's art. Her recent works have traditional themes, yet their perspective is uniquely fresh. And their gentleness, warmth and simplicity are reflective of Baig herself.

For these works one should thank not only the artist, but also her parents, the Indian cricketer Abbas Ali Baig and his wife Vinu. The artist explains, "My parents put a box of paints in front of me to keep me quiet when I was three years old, and I haven't stopped since." Baig left her home in Delhi at the age of 13 upon receiving a

scholarship to study in England. Ten years later she returned to India with a degree in fine art and English literature from the St. Martin's School of Art & Design. She feels her separation from her homeland instilled in her a deep appreciation of things South Asian, which is often evident in her work.

The New York exhibit had a number of dominant themes, such as "togetherness — with oneself, with each other, with nature." Many of the works featured children, and are reminiscent of Baig's debut exhibition in India, which was dedicated to "the child within" and the exploration of human innocence. She explains that the inspiration for these paintings came from children she knows, those to whom she taught art and from street children. Her media include a combination of mixed materials, such as glass, mirrors, sand, oil, acrylic and even pipal leaves. "The transparency of the glass," she says, "enables one to see beyond the painting to the eternal natural elements of sand, rice paper dipped in tea, jute and pipal leaves."

Baig says her inspiration also comes from "the harmony and positiveness in Indian art, Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* and Buddhism." Her attraction to the "harmony between man and nature that you find in the old Indian miniatures," is reflected in her three miniatures, *Intizaar* (The Wait), *Ishaara* (The Signal) and *Ishq* (Love), which depict the Hindu figures of Radha and Krishna. Other pieces enable one "to see themselves through nature," through mirrors embedded amid the mixed media.



"Spaces in Togetherness"

Another common theme found in Baig's work is footprints, which she feels are "reflective of humanity — we are all walking through life in different ways, yet we leave the same footprints." Her piece *Spaces in Togetherness* features a pair of orange and pink footprints. One of each color is inside a garland of flowers, while the remaining prints are outside of the garland on opposite sides. The work, which is immediately striking, becomes more so after the artist explains that it is symbolic of two people being together yet also preserving their own space. The gaps in the garland illustrate that the people do not feel trapped in their togetherness.

On a trip to Thailand, Baig was inspired by the lotus, which she also incorporates into many of her works. The lotuses and lotus leaves featured in a previous show in India, *Aashnayi*, (meaning togetherness) are beautifully rendered using a combination of watercolors and digital printing on

hand-made papers. The artist's enthusiasm for this group of works is very evident, and almost contagious. She explains that the lotus is a symbol of purity and new beginnings which "however murky the surroundings, keeps its beauty."

Twelve of the eighteen pieces featured in the exhibition have been sold. Baig attributes her success to her family: "I am very close to my family — what I know about love and giving I learned from my parents and brother." She draws on this background for all of her works. "I just do what I feel. I hope what I feel is reflected in my work." If what she feels is harmony, simplicity and an admiration of nature and innocence, Sheyna Baig has nothing to worry about.



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