

# Mixed media

Sheyna Baig's debut exhibition proves to be a runaway hit. **Rajlakshmi Bhattacharya** reports

Her canvases speak of the age of innocence, their appeal direct and fresh. In an era of superfluity, here is a woman who is unpretentious and refreshingly original. Sheyna Baig, daughter of India's former Test cricketer, Abbas Ali Baig, does not believe in expressing her experiences through a maze of convoluted ideas. Instead, her works have an almost fairy tale-like quality which would fascinate even the ordinary man on the street. With her debut exhibition at Delhi's Habitat Centre, Sheyna has proved without doubt that her works are not the produce of a dilettante.

The 50 canvases are, in her own words, "dedicated to the child within — for whom each moment is a new beginning." She captures this effervescence in several ways: through school-going kids sharing a secret, her brother's gleeful expression from behind the window bars, a forlorn girl's peeping visage in a gossamer pipal leaf or boys blowing on the dandelion. Even when she paints a cobbler boy mending a shoe, his expression is joyful. "We were coming back from Puri when I watched a bubbly shoeshine boy tackling his job without any fuss."

Baig's eye for the mundane which she "would otherwise have taken for granted" came with her schooling and college in England. While painting isolates the artist in her, the interaction with children — both affluent and poor — whom she teaches art, has given

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Sheyna Baig (above) and (left) one of her canvases, 'Under the Kadamba tree'

her the inspiration for most of her works. "Ideally, I would like to devote half my time to painting, and the other half to something practical."

Her need for a practical job took her through India when she worked as a production co-ordinator for API television during the Wills Cricket World Cup, the India versus West Indies Test series, and the India, West Indies, New Zealand Triangular series. But soon, she chose to return to painting which she had started at the age of three.

A box of paints from parents Abbas and Vinu started her life-

long passion with the canvas. Even at the age of 13, her talents were impressive enough as to win her a scholarship to the Millfield School in England. While there, she studied art and literature though the warmth of India never quite left her. It revealed itself through her use of "warm mango yellow, vibrant oranges, a particular green and the glow of the afternoon light". Completing her graduation from the St Martins School of Art and Design in London, she came back to India, a qualified artist and a confident woman.

Today, the 30-year-old Sheyna,

loves to use cool blue, pale green, dull gold and shimmering pink that are soothing to the senses. "The colours are more English than Indian," she says. But despite the different layers in her work, she starts each of her canvases with red. "It gives me that shield of warmth," she says.

A look at 'Dusk', 'Reaching Out and Reaching In', 'Day Dreaming' and 'Joy' takes the onlooker on a journey through reality and fantasy. Also, here is an artist who has found peace, even if it is through her early initiation into Buddhism. "It says the essence of all religions is the same," she says softly.

Which is why her canvases are often strewn with or moments from the life of Krishna, the

Kadamba tree and jasmine flowers. "I owe it to the influence of Indian paintings," she adds. Her mediums are a combination of prosaic materials — glass (for transparency), sand (which gives movement) and oil or acrylic. In addition she uses *saal* and *pipal* leaves, *chattai* and *chik* to give her paintings an earthy solidity.

Sheyna's close kinship with nature makes her themes ever-green. She drew her philosophy of life from Rabindranath Tagore's poem on the palm tree. "The earth on which the palm is rooted signifies old values, while the tree's branches spreading out to the sky is a metaphor of new discovery." Inspired by the inherent harmony of nature, she has chosen to portray "through different mediums and textures, the balance, the continuity and the interconnectivity of the myriad situations that we routinely come across in our everyday life." Something as trivial as gold threads sewn through rice paper reinforces this continuum.

Her attachment for home and the hearth finds voice in her grandmother's portrait. Baig has also done a portrait of Don Bradman commissioned by the legendary cricketer himself and that of former American ambassador, Frank Wisner. Her current exhibition, a sell-out ("with only seven left to go") has left her exhausted. "I want to get a week's sleep," she sighs warily. It has given her the feeling "of being peaceful but not wise. There is so much to do...." But as beginning's go, Sheyna couldn't have hoped for a better one.