

Unity in Diversity

Woven images of Surendra Pal Joshi

Had Surendra Pal Joshi opted for printmaking he could probably have been, if not better, an equally powerful printmaker. The way he builds up his canvases involves quite a bit of printmaking techniques. He often masks out or stencil out certain areas and uses printmaking process in transferring textures of woven fabrics on his canvases. Stencil and transfer of textures or images from one surface to another are very basic printmaking processes. Surendra uses these techniques forming prime elements of his paintings in a highly innovative way. Although his canvas is not devoid of conventional brush strokes, his main concern is more on creating the desired visual effect. He goes on scratching, scrapping, rubbing, erasing and doing anything until he reaches to a take off point and soon after he lands up with the final stroke of signing up his canvas.

Surendra Pal Joshi started his formal training of art at the College of Arts and Crafts, Lucknow way back in the eighties. From the very beginning he had very good control over drawing and sketching. His lines were firm and powerful like copper plate etchings and engravings. Although during the course of studies he did a sizable number of etchings, his emphasis was more on exploring painting techniques. Being an optional subject, printmaking was considered as a lesser art form those days and was not much acceptable to most of the teachers. The teaching method in the Lucknow College of Art was heavily influenced by the Western academic pattern and water colour wash technique was in vogue. No wonder then, printmaking had little room in the art world except for adding technical knowhow. But Surendra, a shy and low-profile young man from a hill district of the then Uttar Pradesh- now Uttarakhand-- had his own aspirations. He was not convinced with the rigid teaching methods and tried to avoid following prescribed norms even though he had little choice to deviate much since he had to complete the course of study and secure a good position as well. Surendra always aspired to live in the world of his own imagination. He had his interpretation of the world around him and it started reflecting in his work. He was trying to evolve a strong visual vocabulary for himself. His extremely polite behavior and sweet temperament had already made him quite popular with the fellow students and teachers. A number of teachers who appreciated his individualistic approach were keen to take him under their fold. Surendra was financially

hard pressed those days and had applied for the State Lalit Kala Akademi's scholarship for pursuing printmaking. One of the senior artists suggested him that he could be considered only if he changed his medium from printmaking to painting. Surendra was hesitant to accept this proposal and was ready to forgo the scholarship. He had to be convinced that he should not be temperamental and should shift his choice in order to avail the scholarship. At the initial stages, he had to struggle hard to pursue his expensive creative activity in the period when there was hardly any art market. He had to do illustration work to sustain him but never compromised with his own creativity. After completing his graduation he shifted from Lucknow in search of a career and finally settled down in Jaipur where he got a teaching position in The College of Arts.

This was the beginning of a new chapter in Surendra's life as an artist. He could concentrate on pursuing his creative activities with a renewed vigour. He studied in depth the contemporary art trends in India and the West. In the beginning of twentieth century Indian artists became conscious about their global identity and felt the need to start afresh. A general feeling was that there had been a break in the continuity of Indian art traditions and a rethinking was required to explore new idioms in art, but confining to our own aesthetic tradition and art practices only might take us nowhere. With the result, the artists of Bengal looked up to the Japanese style while the artists of Bombay—now Mumbai--, other important art centre in India, moved towards the western idioms. Almost all the artists of Progressive Artists Group, which is considered one of the pioneering groups in contemporary Indian art, started on the lines of western impressionistic school.

Indian art tradition dates back to 5000 BC and is recognized for its elaborate, technically and intellectually complex expression. Various styles and forms of art were practiced throughout India and neighbouring countries under cultural and religious influences of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and later, Islam. A beautiful blending of various ideologies generated a uniform approach in visual arts, indigenous to the soil. The art practices formed a social activity and were not confined to the groups of intelligentsia in the society. The language of art was commonly understood with wider participation of the masses and the artists were aware of cultural and religious philosophies which formed the basis of their creativity resulting in ever-evolving language of art. Unlike the western art, the need

to identify art or brand it as some 'ism' was perhaps not felt, but all the elements which flourished in the western art movements such as impressionism, expressionism, cubism, surrealism, minimalism and conceptual art etc. were present in this tradition.

In the beginning of twentieth century, Dr. Anand Koomarswami examined and evaluated Indian art in its right perspective. He felt the need to relook at the traditional Indian art along which was till then studied by the archeologists. He inspired Jacob Epstein and Erik Gill, two most important early modernist of England, who incorporated Indian aesthetics into their works. This resulted in the production of hybrid sculptures which formed the roots of what is considered as British Modernism. Unfortunately, during the British rule in India, the European art heavily influenced Indian art scenario and ultimately resulted in an identity crises for Indian artists

Surendra was well aware of this situation. He had always been down to earth in his everyday life. He knew precisely the secret of his personal identity even in a global context. He knew that being Indian artist involves a rootedness to one's own soil. Although he studied western art idioms to update his knowledge but never solely depended on them. He searched his own surroundings for creative energy and found enough unexplored areas within his reach and found that being contemporary doesn't mean following a branded style or manner in which a work of art is created. He knew preciously the meaning of being contemporary is to be with the time, and the time at Jaipur's Jantar Mantar is 5:30 hours ahead of Greenwich. This realization prompted Surendra to search the time element from within the social fabric of which he himself is a part. This resulted in the creation of a powerful series of paintings where he has used tana- bana, interlacing two sets of yarn to form a single unit, a 'woven cloth' simulating unity in diversity of our social fabric.

Being an artist of post-Independence era, Surendra Joshi is quite aware of his cultural identity. He has also extensively studied Indian, Western and most contemporary art forms. He believes that visual arts shouldn't be bordered but all the same, he seems proud of being a part of our indigenous cultural and folk ethos which has been his prominent source of inspiration. He has no reservations regarding external influences which he considers as natural and universal if they are not intentional and imitative and come in a natural and interactive manner.

In the recent years, Surendra Joshi's creative activity has gone through a worth-watching transformation. After earning repute as a painter and a muralist he has expanded the area of his art by venturing into the world of installations. Creating installations has been a part of Indian tradition since time immemorial and are still practiced to commemorate various social, cultural and religious happenings in our folk life. In his new pursuit Surendra journeyed to his roots, his childhood when he used to actively participate with his mother and other womenfolk of the neighborhood in the act of making installations during various festivals. The most exciting aspect of these installations was the reuse of ordinary material that was easily available within the household itself. Looking at his recent installations in time frame one can find great similarities in the installations of his memory and the ones that belong to the real world. That's why Surendra's installations appear as the contemporary versions of age old traditions using newer elements. The material used in his installations is also unique. In most cases, they are safety pins of various sizes and they too are commonly used in every household. In some of his works, Surendra has used lights which not only enhance their visual appeal but also give them a supernatural touch. Irrespective of change of medium and material, there is a consistency in his creations which represents artist's very own and individualistic approach. To quote a few of his creations from an enormous array of works created over the years is a difficult task. However, he can undoubtedly be placed in global context as one amongst the most contemporary artists of the time.

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