

Madras

# THE SPIRIT OF TOMORROW



"Visual ideas have a vocabulary of their own that one has to give some time to understand."

Saleem Arif. Born in Hyderabad, 1949. Studied at the Birmingham College of Art and the Royal College of Art, 1969-75. Awards include: Young Sculptor of the Year, 1971, Sunday Telegraph Competition; Arts Council of Great Britain; Italian Govt. Bursary, Florence 1984-85; exhibited series on Dante's "Inferno" at New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras...

I was born in India. And though I have lived in England over the past 18 years, I personally feel very Indian. I have absorbed too much of Indian culture to feel anything else... I was 17 and had just done my matriculation when I went to England.

ression. But going to England literally released all my inhibitions, so I was able to be adventurous enough to join an art college... My father is one of my main sources of encouragement now. Very open to my profession, now that he knows I enjoy it.

"Coming back to India to travel has been one of the most profound influences of my life, which rehooked me into the Asian sub-continent and my cultural roots. My culture has been my main influence, rather than any particular person. I like miniatures quite a lot. I like particular European artists very much, like Paul Klee and Rembrandt. Looking at their work, you find you are interested in their visual ideas, rather than their subject matter, which is the gloss. The real armature inside is the visual ideas. If I find something in a work that I am attracted to, I hope I learn something from it. In the long term, may be subconsciously, I get influenced... Oddly enough, one of the main contributors to my work was my tutor at the Royal College, Philip Rowson, who has written a book titled "Drawing." He has written simply about drawing and how to look at it. That book has been more a catalyst to my visual ideas than, maybe, paintings, particularly in the work I am showing here."

Saleem Arif. At the Sarala Art Centre. Face like a faun, eyes kajal-lined. Tapering hands in graceful motion. Neat, curly mane tamed to catch the summer glints just so. Ethnic fashionable attire, kurta tucked into jeans. Almost as picturesque as his works...

"The way I started painting was strange. After returning from a college trip, I did some

work about a personal experience I had, but without being conscious of it. Thus, I discovered to my amazement that I was a visual person. When I really started finding myself in my work, I was, I think, 22. I need to work at my ideas slowly, rather than look for a rush of ideas. My temperament, makes me take a long-term view of things...

"Actually, most of my earlier work was imaginary... explorative... formative. It was like the alphabet to me. I thought: 'Once I have a body of work, maybe it will make up some words, or even eventually a sentence.'"

"I was brought up on an old tradition of Islamic literature. In my father's house, as his guide on a journey to heaven; another story called Isra is about a nocturnal journey through the different stages of hell."

"I am, by nature, a browser of books. At the Royal College, I found a copy of the Divine Comedy, which was, I think, illustrated by Flaxman and Gustave Doré. There was something familiar about the illustrations, but I couldn't immediately grasp what it was. I tried to read Dante in an English translation, but found it very heavy going. I think I re-read the poem 23 times because I was intrigued before I started understanding something about the first canto. I was so absorbed that I found I had started working on the visuals without consciously thinking: 'I would love to do this.'"

"What I found fascinating about the Divine Comedy was that, in one work, you could get the positive, the negative, and the in-between. That is very rare in works of art. When I found all three elements in one work, I felt it was something I would love to explore. For the first time, I found I was using literature as a force to catalyse my visual ideas."

"I have looked at whatever I could get hold of — manuscripts in Italy, material in the British Museum on the Divine Comedy. So, I was aware of what had been done already."

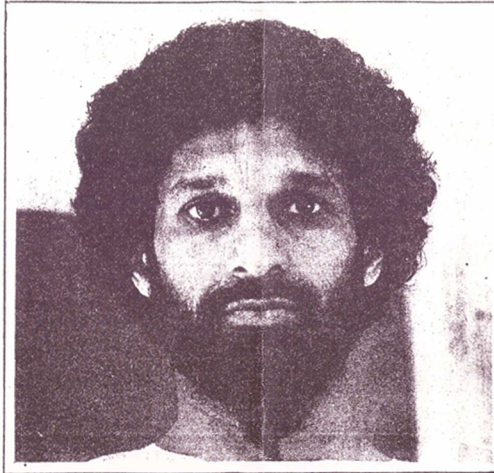
"The initial works on Dante were done in late 1975. Then, I travelled for a whole year in India. Between the end of '76 and '77, I did my first set of drawings. It was immediately after my return from here. I found the Indian culture had somehow surfaced the various colours I had in me — they were raw, bright and primitive (poster colours and gouache). I used a thin layer of white paint because I thought: 'If

I was looking at hell, I was looking at it behind a curtain."

"They way the format happened... it was either the intensity of the moment or a moment of grace. It evolved because I imagined the burning of hell would rest away whatever the fire touched. To symbolise the burn-

ing of hell by tearing the edges of the paper is, the most obvious thing you could think of. Yet, it is probably the first time an artist has done this... Especially, the internal structure of each work is such that the external format demands its own shape. The inner forms are very much interwoven

and part and parcel of the whole. "By the time I did my second set on the Inferno, ('79 to '80) I felt I needed some rest from colour. I just wanted to use the forms, the iconography, with just black ink and brush. But, in doing that, I found the white space really wasn't doing anything. So, I added an acrylic texture over it, and found the white space became more



A. Capalano

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SALEEM ARIF talks to Aditi De.



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active and complemented the black, and the work became a whole visual unit.

"The third set was like a final one for the Inferno. I found I wanted to use a different medium, water colour. Again, like a moment of grace (this was the first time I was using this medium), I thought of using water colour and then doing pen and ink work over it. That was simply to recreate the atmosphere of a glowing flow of lava after a volcano erupts. I was trying to recreate that kind of texture. In the final '80 to '81 set, I find the visual ideas are much more formulated."

because I want to go back to it with fresh ideas. I hope I will be able to do a better job than the Inferno by first absorbing other visual ideas. Ideally, the series on the Inferno should be seen alongside Purgatory and Paradise.

"Most of the work in this gallery was finished in '81, except for the linocut prints, which were done in '82. What I have been doing since then relates to the spiritual in man. The format is larger, and the medium is ready-mix temperas. I am also just beginning to use oils. This is still in its formative stages..."

Saleem Arif. Soft speech flecked with Indian intonations. English in thoughtful flow, with the odd Hindi affirmative thrown in. Occasional tug at the wispy beard as he pauses in reflection. Eyes taking in the viewers passing through the gallery. Soft-soled, he walks up to engage another mind in ideas...

"FIRST and foremost, I think I paint for myself. I don't think I consciously paint for the public. I work with visual ideas purely to discover what I have within me. I feel time is the best judge. In the long term, the worth of any work is in its ideas, in itself, not in any advertisement."

"So far, I have been the most severe critic of my own work, but fruitfully so. Of course, one is open to other peoples' judgments. If there is something constructive — even if it is from a small child — I feel it is my duty to think about it. I shouldn't feel I've got it all. Sometimes, you learn from people who make comments purely by chance."

"In my present work, I have had to reflect to see how I have evolved my ideas. In spite of the

moments of grace, there is a lot of donkey work you have to do. These are times when you have to think visually. My approach is that of an artist rather than a scholar, though my work relates to literature.

"My subject matter of hell is not something most people would like to live with. But the theme passionately interested me; I could relate to it because of my interest in the divine. It is important to remember that visual ideas need some time to be absorbed. You have to look. I am not worried if not many people come to see my work. If even

"I feel there is no better compliment paid to an artist than when a normal person, who doesn't know very much about art maybe, but is interested, selects one of your best works, then pays some money for it, and exhibits it in his/her home. It is better that the work should be in somebody's house, on display, rather than in your own folio. You have to be practical about it."

"Personally, I do part time jobs in London — one day a week usually — which gives me enough money to live for the rest of the week. Right now, I am working on a commission, a ceramic mural worth 4,000 pounds, which will keep me going for maybe another year. I would make no excuses to say 'I don't have enough money so I can't work.' Maybe I would say 'Because I don't have money, I am able to work.'"

"I have found that I don't understand anything if I expect works to come out like exercises. Visual ideas have a vocabulary of their own that one has to give some time to understand. I am now 35 years old, and I hope my better works are still to come. If there is still a certain difficulty in my work for people to see and understand, I hope they will read an article by a friend who has talked to me and who has been able to understand my work..."

Saleem Arif. Through Dante and Islam, through tradition and the contemporary, through India and England, he looks ahead. Searching within and without, in colour and contrast, in theme and dimension, forging on. How will his visual eye contour the future?

SATURDAY PAGE

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