

Newspaper, the new inspiration for contemporary Indian art

Contemporary art in India is drawing inspiration from a collage of new mediums, the most striking among them being daily newspapers and the internet. And Vadodara-based contemporary artist Ashutosh Bharadwaj's works reflect just that.

Bharadwaj, whose works are on display at the Vadehra Art Gallery in the capital, is one among the current crop of contemporary painters who are falling back on alternative mediums, the internet and references from the past to colour their canvases with symbolic images and figurative forms.

According to 27-year-old Bharadwaj, the borders between mediums are blurring and new art is about gelling all forms and formats together. The show titled 'Sleepwalker' opened here Saturday and will close June 5.

The artist, who has shown his works in New York, Venice and South Korea, uses old newspaper clippings for ideas and research.

'Who said newspapers are cut and dried? It depends on how one reacts to news. Sometimes they act as imageries, themes and slogans to convey an idea,' Bharadwaj told IANS here.

Bharadwaj has a huge collection of clippings, carefully filed over the last four years. 'I often browse through them for new ideas.'

His multi-layered canvases use reportage and a documentary style, as a result of which his paintings, mostly in oil and acrylic, come across as a cross between promotional campaigns for brands and realistic landscapes touching upon gut issues.

His canvas, 'Induced Epidemic', a triptych (an early Christian form of panel painting usually found in sets of three) in oil on canvas, was inspired by a small newspaper clipping. 'The clipping was about gadgets people design. It described a gadget to shape noses, which resembled a clothesline clip (like pincers). I loved the idea and the motif. And stored it,' the artist said.

Later, Bharadwaj chanced upon an image of a man-made carnation flower, about 7-feet-high, on the net. 'I found that the hybrid flower and the nose-clip made an interesting connection,' the artist said.

He laid it out on the canvas in two segments - the blue clip at the top and red-and-russet carnation at the bottom. The overall composition, he said, was inspired by lifestyle television channel Zoom. 'I liked what they were showing and it influenced my canvas.'

In his three-part series, 'God has Alzheimer's', Bharadwaj uses newspaper headlines of the Sensex bull runs of 1997, 2000 and 2008 to show progress and the ensuing chaos. And the title for the painting is sourced from the blurb of an old interview in a newspaper.

'Those three words stuck. I don't even remember what the rest of the story was all about,' he said.

His themes range from economics to social issues and span almost everything that appears in the news dailies. For instance, 'Animal Farms', another three-part series with a hen, eggs, dairy pigs and a badly reproduced version of a stylised Chinese cloud (forming the sky) as the central motifs, is

a comment on mass productions and the assembly line economy of affluent Asian nations.

'I used a broiler hen which lays an egg everyday to symbolise the mass production and the bad copy of the Chinese cloud to show the influx of cheap Chinese goods into the markets,' the artist said.

Bharadwaj also fell back on 'Jahangirnama' (a chronicle of the life of Mughal emperor Jahangir), Rajput miniature paintings and European farm paintings for some images in the series.

The artist makes use of Mughal miniatures and chronicles like the 'Adventures of Hamza' and Spanish painter Goya's dark images to address issues like poverty and corruption. The horrors of the Gujarat riots creep into his frames as Bharadwaj grew up as an artist during the riot years.

'Contemporary paintings are harking back to the past to pick up ideas and metaphors from Mughal and Rajput miniatures and the European Renaissance paintings and carrying them forward with innovations. A canvas painted in 1500 AD makes a different statement today, if repainted,' he said.

'It is like we cannot make another Qutab Minar, but we can definitely work on a old building to make it look different and new,' Bharadwaj said, explaining the current trend in contemporary art that is borrowing heavily from ancient figurative forms and gradually moving away from abstractions and symbolism.

The bottom line for the brand new lot of contemporary artists, says the painter, is to borrow ideas from the past and the present genres and place them in a space so that they talk. 'But what you want them to say depends entirely on you,' he quipped.

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