

My art sits well in Indian as well as American homes: Sabavala

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After 27 one-man shows spanning a career over five decades, renowned artist Jehangir Sabavala's final solo exhibition, his first in New York, was a fitting finale. But for the 79-year-old Sabavala, his journey as an artist, in the true sense of the word, has just begun. He spoke to *India Post* at the opening of his exhibition, *Occasions of Light*, at the ArtsIndia gallery in Manhattan.

Q. How much has your art evolved over the years?

I am not a person who believes in radical changes, that's not my temperament. I have tried and worked hard and never given a statement before 3-4 years. I paint a lot, I paint very slowly, I believe in a graph. At the end of 3-4 years when I show my paintings and you see them, you should feel that whoever has done it has put in a lot of hard work and it is visible in the effort, finish, the technique and hopefully the talent also.

Q. What does your style of painting suggest?

When I paint I hope to let the viewer grow with my paintings, not choke him off. I like to work in depth and I am utterly classical in my use of tools. My effort is entirely limited to my hand and now I produce without even using a palette knife. If I was 20 years younger I would probably be fascinated to use the computer, use the graphics, etc. But there's still so much to be said by utterly classic methods.

Q. Who do you paint for?

I have been fortunate to be liked by all kinds of people, the cognoscenti to the ordinary. I have had a wide appeal, a hop skip and jump appeal throughout. Ever since my first exhibition in 1966, almost every show has been a total sell out, there's no stock...I don't have anything for myself...now I think I should kept one or two of every work of mine.

Q. How important is it for you to know whose wall your paintings hang on?

I am very proud of being an Indian, but I feel, a piece of art should be international. It's interesting if you can't tell the nationality of an artist when you look at a painting. My paintings are in-



ternational and it's very difficult to know where it is from. My art can sit more or less in an Indian's home or an American's home for that matter. I have been lucky I have a very good Indian clientele and an equally big Western clientele.

Q. Do you as an artist make political statements through your paintings?

I would say no. I don't like to make political statements. If you are a socio-political painter you must feel deeply the wounds and hurts in the world, the pain, the famines, the riots, human tragedies...I can't just sit and depict this on canvas just because it is topical. I have to have the conviction and I question my own integrity to do this. How many painters in the world have struck

a cord through their socio-political messages? Who am I to make these statements? Even if I feel or see it, it becomes artificial.

Q. What do you think of today's young artists and their 'art'?

The spirit of the young is very clever. I don't follow it myself, mentally I am bogged. Recently, at an exhibition, I saw an elaborately done box that was supposed to be a 'musical painting.' I was prompted by

somebody to press something on the box and then whole thing erupted into a fire works of noise. I just jumped out of my skin! No, this is not for me, I can't relate to it either spiritually or emotionally.

There's quite a lot that's rubbish in modern art. In London once, I went to an exhibition and as I got off the car, I saw this red carpet and wondered if it was for me. Even as I walked down the carpet two pretty girls rushed at me and said that the carpet was part of a painting. 'You are walking on the exhibit' those girls said to me. How was I to know, it wasn't even marked!

Q. What does an exhibition in New York mean to you?

It does mean a lot. But my concern is that there isn't a single white man here to see my exhibi-



Jehangir Sabavala with his paintings

tion. That's the wall we have to break. Your art has to break through so it isn't ghettoized. I participate in all the big auctions — Christies, Sothebys etc. — they send me photographs of their big auctions, when I ask them, because I want to see who the audience is. Ninety-eight percent of the times, you can't find a white face, except the auctioneer. This too will change, but it will take time and I don't see it happening till another 10 years. And I may not live to see that.