

Loneliness and longing in colour

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New York

IT WAS fitting that Jahangir Sabavala's last solo exhibition, at the Arts India Gallery in New York, was a mix of a riot of breathtaking colours and haunting, pale contours, defying space and dimension, tradition and modernity. In one sense, the show epitomised the octogenarian artist's life of sequestering himself within lonely walls, conjuring up structures in dreamlike rain-haze oils. However, it was also like he had finally noticed the colours of Holi and daubed it in generous portions on to his canvases. Looking at some of the paintings is as beautiful as fireflies in the night that blossom in our imagination into rainbow hued butterflies.

Ramrod straight with the demeanour of a colonel in the army who never quite retired, Sabavala has gentleness and frailty. It is this contrast that is visible in abundance in his paintings. If one were to pick one painting to describe the power of the show, it would be *Riding The Thermals*, a 50x60 inch canvas, hung on the wall facing the length of the gallery. The wings of the birds, caught from an alleviated point, higher than clouds, overshadow the landscape, including huge sun-drenched mountains. It is a riveting painting that dwarfs reality. The further one goes away from it, the more compelling it becomes to gaze upon.

When I question Sabavala on the sense of longing and loneliness in most of his paintings, he reaches out and touches my hand. "I feel it too, but it is my world," he says earnestly. Yet, question him on the Gujarat riots, or the political turmoil, and he is like a toddler who does not know the world of con-

doms. It is not hard to fathom that Sabavala's ephemeral world is his paintings; the canvases perhaps drink colours from his mind.

The theme of infinite pathways is strong in Sabavala's paintings. In the series on Sentinel Trees; the dart shaped domino like trees cannot hide the impossibility of their act: trying to guard the path to the unknown, the meandering paths that are in symbiotic unity with the horizon. In the series *The River*, the water even as it has a resurgent, rejuvenating effect on the landscape, cascading like a luminescent wave of moonlight with quicksilver sediment of life, is also the symbol of flowing for unseen miles away, flowing listlessly through frigid, arid zones.

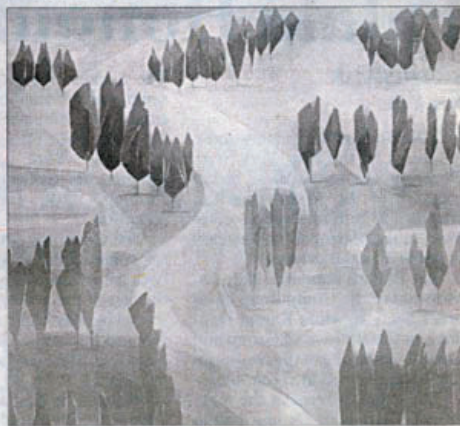
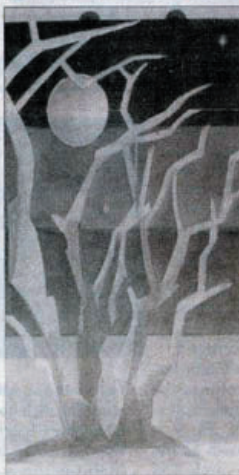
Sabavala says that he does not keep any of his paintings at home. "I turn them away to the wall once they are done," he says. It is the way he works, systematically, exploring theme after theme, till it is complete, then going to another painting, with the vigour of a young lover.

The one series that Sabavala says that he will return back to is drawing cityscapes. He says the skies of Delhi and New York are the same. It is the skies that inspire him to build the skyscrapers that have windows of throbbing light and life. Yet, in Sabavala's world, the sky is a rampaging monster. In its bosom hide the mysteries of all life on earth. Look closely and one can see dragons, and sea lions, a cavorting moon and a horse carrying the message that all life below is at the mercy of the heavens.

This is not just art par excellence, but therapeutic, reflective art. It is almost like looking at meditative waterfalls. Kudos to Arts India Gallery for giving New Yorkers a chance to get a glimpse of an artist whose colours become indelible with age.



Clock wise from top: Stag Antlered Trees II, Brooding Sierra, Sentinel Trees III. Inset Jahangir Sabavala



NORTH AMERICAN EDITION

