



Celebrity painter Satish Gujral returns to New York after 28 years with a display of his work inspired by traditional miniatures

by Anil PADMANABHAN

SOME YEARS AGO, SHEHNAI maestro Ustad Bismillah Khan and painter Satish Gujral happened to travel together. In a proud moment, Khan dug into his bag and pulled out a small clipping from the *New York Times* detailing one of his virtuoso performances. Gujral turned to his friend, thumbed down the news report and told him that a talented artist like him deserved an entire page—not a few lines of reference.

The painter's response stemmed from his passionate affection for his own country and a complete disdain for any western endorsement. If fact, it is this passionate disdain for western acknowledgement that has kept this multifaceted artist out of the American circuit.

His return to New York—after his last show in 1974—was predated on the Indian window made available jointly by Gallery Arts India and New Delhi-based Art Today. The three-week show that was kicked off last Friday by Lalit Mansingh, India's ambassador to the US and also a personal friend of Gujral, has done quite well for itself.

The first few days witnessed a sale of a third of the 24 paintings that had been put up at the exhibition. The paintings have been priced between \$4,000 and \$13,500. According to the gallery's director, Prajit Dutta, another clutch have been put on hold, which in effect meant that nearly half

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FOCAL POINT: (from left) Gujral with Wisner, Mansingh and Solarz

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the paintings on display had already been sold.

"We are delighted with the show and with the response to it. On the first day alone we had 350 visitors including Congressman Stephen J. Solarz and former ambassador to India Frank Wisner. And we've had a uniformly positive response," says Dutta. Many people are already familiar with Gujral's earlier work, though one of the outstanding things about it is that his style has changed from decade to decade where most senior artists are loathe to change. "That is what we found most attractive about hosting Gujral," adds Dutta.

The artist who has sustained his energy over five decades, first displayed through his paintings on the



Partition, and then continued to experiment with form and content. Enrolled at the Mayo School of Art in Lahore at the age of 13, Gujral pursued his art education later at the JJ School of Art in Mumbai, then in Mexico between 1952 and '54 as apprentice to the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. By the late '50s, Gujral was an element of the Indian arts world and social scene in Delhi.

Mansingh recalls that on his first visit to Delhi in 1960 when he was initiated into the social circuit, he was greeted with the sight of "Satish surrounded by the high and mighty of Delhi". Thereafter, the artist continued to experiment with his art and now in his latest series of work focuses on the subjects of miniature paintings.

"Gujral elevates

the performer to grant him the level of the inspirational. As he delights in the call of these drums, the artist's muse is Ganesha, the tutelary lord of the arts, blessed and benevolent son of Shiva Nataraja, the divine dancer," explains art critic Gayatri Sinha. "In these paintings, with their swift flow of internal rhythms, the artist restores dignity and grace to his subjects as much as he affirms the restorative potency of art as a way of life," she adds.

Expounding in a similar vein, Sundaram Tagore, curator and gallery owner, says: "Gujral is an extremely important artist in the context of developing modern Indian art. His beautiful work straddles the world of romantic figuration and possesses a contemporary cogency. All his work is contemporary, but it also harks back to the past."



### INTERVIEW ■ SATISH GUJRAL

"Indianness is the idiom."



**Q: Your previous exhibition in Manhattan was held long back in 1974. Why did it take so long for you to return?**

**A:** I stopped having my exhibitions here after 1974 as I did not want a stamp of modernity. I come here with an ethnic baggage. I want Indians to come with their identity. Indianness is the idiom. I am seeking recognition for Indian art and am emotionally attached to the Indian identity. True nationalism will become true internationalism.

**Q: Could you elaborate?**

**A:** The tragedy of Indian culture began when it came to modernity. By modern we think western. We have no modern ideas of our own. We test our ideas with what we have seen in the West. I do not believe that great ideas make great art. It is the great artists that make them. Hence, they make insignificant objects and make them significant through art.

**Q: Unlike other artists who were drawn either to Europe or to the United States, you went to Mexico. How did this**

**impact your art form?**

**A:** I owe my entry into Mexico to Octavio Paz. In Mexico, I discovered India. I also had the opportunity to meet intellectuals like Pablo Neruda and even Fidel Castro and have also worked with David Siqueiros. The Mexican influence taught me to look in my own backyard. I discovered mediums like terracotta, ceramic, granite and papier mache.

**Q: You have continuously experimented with form. What about your exhibits on display here in New York?**

**A:** I took inspiration from Indian miniatures. Traditionally, the theme was to paint love and court life. Later, under Sikh influence, it expanded to paintings of common people. I have followed this lead and hence my paintings in this exhibition dwell on common people.