



It was apparent a landmark event was underway at the opening of Jehangir Sabavala's 'Occasions of Light' exhibition at New York's ArtsIndia Gallery on April 19.

Sabavala is, clearly, a major Indian painter. That it took so long for him to exhibit in the United States is a telling comment on the state of fine arts for Indian painters in America.

Many expatriate painters struggle just to survive in the dog-eat-dog world of contemporary art. The late New York-based F N Souza was a rarity. So is, on another level, Natvar Bhavsar.

The Sabavala exhibition had been to New Delhi and Mumbai before arriving in New York. Of the 25 paintings on show, only two remained unsold on the day after the Manhattan opening. The gallery owners said they were 'fully confident' those two would also sell out before the exhibition closed May 12.

Some 150 people turned up for the opening, despite an unexpected storm that dumped some much-needed water on midtown Manhattan. The gallery made its first sale on the opening night.

At 79, Sabavala is dapper. I heard one lady say, "He is the most elegant painter I have ever seen in my life." Her description was one many would have agreed with.

The paintings were priced between \$13,000 and \$18,000. Some were 45 x 60 inches, some 60 x 40, others 50 x 48 inches. They are 5 feet x 3 1/2 to 4 feet, which makes them large paintings, or 'medium-large' as Sabavala describes them.

Though recognizable in style and execution as Sabavala's, some changes were evident. For one, there is the palette, which has moved from soft to bright color. Some of the paintings — for instance, *Smoldering Sunset* and *Sunburst* from 2001 and 2000 respectively — use a blazing range of red tones rare for Sabavala.

The subject in the current exhibition is equally unexpected. There are cityscapes

'If you are very honest, you succeed little'

...Painter Jehangir Sabavala tells T J SONY

spread out under rampant skies, skyscrapers with their windows lit or dark, massed clouds scudding overhead. Sabavala has rarely painted the city.

And whereas his paintings have previously tended to be deserted landscapes and seascapes, in the current exhibition the human figure seems to be everywhere, again a significant development for the painter. In some of the works, people crowd together on the canvas, as in *Pilgrimage III* (2001), which is 60 x 45 inches.

While human figures were rare in Sabavala's work (and when present it would be one or two insignificant, faceless and featureless figures in an overpowering landscape) earlier, in the current exhibition they are better defined. They seem to have made some purchase against the encroachments of geography and time.

Sabavala told *India in New York* the work in the current exhibition began after the publication of Ranjit Hoskote's critical biography *Pilgrim, Exile, Sorcerer: The Painterly Evolution of Jehangir Sabavala* in 1998, around the time of the artist's last major one-man show. The 25 oils on canvas in the exhibition were produced over a four-year period between 1998 and 2001.

Sabavala's career stretches over 50 years of tumultuous Indian history. The current exhibition is his 31st one-man show. Though many of his paintings can be found in private collections all over the US, he has never before had a solo exhibition in this country.

"At one time there was no opportunity," he said. "Where could you show? When I

started there was nothing, no galleries, no press, no media. I'm talking about 50 years ago. In these 50 years one has been fortunate enough to live to see the change, all that one worked for, to get the lay public interested in such a thing as painting."

Today things are decidedly different. In Mumbai, when Sabavala's exhibition opened, there were 800 to 1,000 visitors every day. "It was a unique experience, of a contact between a painter and his public," said the painter. In New York, he had a similar experience.

Sabavala has never been the sort of artist who worked inside an ivory tower, exhibiting for only critics and buyers, uninterested in the general public. In fact, he has cherished contact with the city, and the people interested in his work.

"When you show," he said, "for better or worse, that's the risk you take, it is to contact the city and have as vital an engagement with it as is humanly possible." For this engaging artist, exhibiting is a special time, a time when all the defenses artists have traditionally erected between themselves and the public must come down.

"When it's time for a show, you're off the pedestal. If somebody asks a simple question you give him a simple answer. If he asks a sophisticated question, you must be prepared," he said.

Sabavala is prepared for a wide range of responses from the public. "You do get the four letter word, and rightly so," he said. "It's a huge public, and there will be someone who does not get it. I think he is absolutely justified. You take it in your

stride, with the overwhelming response on the other side."

The mythological references and the visionary light that suffuse much of Sabavala's pictures are not deliberate, says the painter. "It's not conscious, believe me," he said. "It either happens, or it doesn't. I struggle in a classic parameter to experiment and work, and I do believe the mind has a lot to do with it."

I asked if the parameters he works within are liberating or confining. He said in his case, they 'liberate, but slowly.' One painting typically takes five to six weeks from the first sketch. Then he makes a master sketch of things he likes and does not like in the early sketches.

"It doesn't jump," he said. "But if you really follow it and look seriously you will see how the thread grows, how the weave takes place, how the warp and the weft is clearly visible."

He works from 10 am to about 6 pm every day. "It's hard work," he said. "It's not easy. You have to give up a lot of things. Travel, for one. Travel throws me. I need to be at least mentally in my own place."

The pictures are structured and well thought out. Sabavala's preliminary black and white sketches are already fairly complete before any color is applied. He calls it a slow process of layering and building.

"There is the steel structure and the engineered structure, then you have the texture, which is your flesh, then the color. Then you have to soften it and it must be a painting," he said.

Sabavala, at 79, is still evolving. He is as curious and thirsty as a young artist. He says it is only now that he feels sure of what exactly a painting is. "I'm very sure now of what I call a painting, as opposed to what might be technically proficient, able, many things, but not necessarily a painting," he said. "It is a triad of the senses. The painter may fail but he makes an attempt."

And then he said: "Finally, if you are very honest, you succeed very little."