

## Tangible, Intangible, Palpable, Ineffable Space and Spirits

In one of Tara Sabharwal's water colors a boat carries three figures past what looks like a New York waterfront on water that could be the mythological ocean under Shesh Nag.

"I might be making pictures about the web of life and the figures that weave themselves in it," she says, "but I am more conscious about constructing spaces, and though that 'making space' for uncategorized, layered, subtle emotions". The pictures don't evade their subjects or the thoughtful feeling that they evoke, but if they were sentences they might also trail off, a little playfully. Are these abstract interior-scapes made out of negative space as much as positive space? Are they narratives.? Both, probably.

The pictures are resonant but not paraphrasable visual statements that prompt you, as a viewer, to tell yourself a story and then to feel suggestions of a state of rest or equilibrium that is brought to being out of the elements of the busy world: man-made apartments in one place and open air 'barsatis' in another, nature—vegetative and primordial sometimes and domesticated other times—and most movingly an intimate, peopled world. A mother. A child. A father. A spirit in between worlds.

Sabharwal's human figures are put through permutations and changes in relation to each other, played like phrases in music. They are distinct at one moment, seeming biological, even autobiographical. In another—or from another angle—they are merging, spectral emanations of spirit or mood. The newest pictures can seem very somber but they lead toward the other side of despair. They are "dreaming each other," the artist says of her people, "in a melting space. At root they are the basic primary things that one has felt."

She describes her painting process as starting by arresting the waverings of the mind. "It is pre-identity and driven by the unconscious," she says. "What I am thinking of really is not thinking ... my process begins when I enter into a state where I am in the moment, playing and watching, not thinking of anything". If you sit with her amid her work, she talks about the themes that rise from the pictures in the same breath as she talks about her formal strategies and goals. "When I make a very dense area, I have to make another dense area around it," she says. "Along with space there are also walls of time. Different times woven together. The mathematician part of me is trying to make it balance."

Heritage and influences are more interesting when an artist makes them open questions. In Sabharwal, the flattened perspective and the color palate harken to Mughal and Deccan miniature painting and its later reinterpretations from Baroda or, perhaps, Shanti Niketan. The vegetation could be from an Indian jungle—a grove in the Shivaliks maybe. But "style" here also draws on foreign painting and landscapes. The way the figures hold themselves recalls Edvard Munch over whom Sabharwal says she "flipped" when she first saw his work. She has been interested, too, in non-art paintings made by psychics in a state of trance. Of her work's dream-like qualities and possible metaphors, she reminds you, "for somebody this might be figurative reality."

The scale of Sabharwal's work has a modesty that rhymes with an aesthetic project she sums up like this: "I want to make pictures that you have to grow into a bit. When you see them I'd like them to draw you in, not just hit you over the head with a 'Wow'. The 'wow' can come afterwards as a subtle afterglow, and when the two kinds of experience coalesce'. Looking at these pictures, narratives suggest themselves and you feel the pathos of personal life. At the same time, they drive toward balance and calm. They give glimpses of pre-conscious experience or perhaps it is something mystical. Catching those glimpses puts you on your toes. Connecting with the balance in these pictures is a fluid and playful thing to do, because the balance is always shifting. Feeling it happen gives great pleasure.

Andy McCord  
New York  
29 May 2013

Andy McCord is a freelance writer, poet and Urdu scholar, currently working on translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz from Urdu. He grew up in India where his father worked as a medical doctor and later studied in Benares. He currently lives in New York City.