

Tara Sabharwal
by David Olivant
(Darlington Art center show catalog, 1989)

In the pictures of Tara Sabharwal, we are confronted by a bewildering variety of images which enchant us but also undermine our confidence in things. They are at once alluring and disturbing. They suggest a trance, a state in which we float from one thought to another, inexorably and expectantly yet often being surprised, sometimes even horrified. These are vulnerable paintings, composed of a raw tissue, at times harsh and nervous, at times delicate and intimate. To be engaged and understood they demand a commensurate vulnerability and openness and a willingness to drop established expectations and to slide into a state, a reverie and expose ourselves directly. Without succumbing to this we become merely observers of a dazzling but confusing spectacle all too easily dismissed as eccentric fantasy. Once the burden of this enchantment has been accepted, when the spell has been succumbed to and our eyes are conditioned to this unfamiliar light, threads of meaning can be discerned, coalescing and shifting apart again. In many of the pictures a person seems to dream the world around herself, but the things she dreams are often themselves dreaming. Everything is held together by this fabric of dream. The polarity between the self and the world, the dreamer and the dream is eroded away and an orgy of constantly proliferating forms is generated. Everything is constantly pushed towards an invisible edge over which it just fails to tip. Within this dream particular images become significant, almost like bridges to another level of being.

A tree is also a giant head, which might be conversing with a cloud. A quite insignificant object in a room becomes something else in the dream of the landscape seen through the window. New meanings are constantly being created in this way. At best the pictures are always open-ended evoking new possibilities and new questions.

Sometimes a picture has the fluidity and integrity of a single organism but often we find it to be a type of ad-hoc concoction, improvised out of incongruous elements. A fragment of a memory sits uneasily in a contemporary landscape, this in turn may be swallowed by a huge animal which is congruent with the trunk of a tree, which in its turn is the stem of a plant in a room.

On the human level characters multiply into the component parts of their personalities. A drama of separation and protection begins, a drama which can be comforting and unnerving. The sheer emotional range is impressive. Whereas in one painting a character is ravaged by despair and solitude, wasted by his own malnutrition of the spirit, in another painting the energy of a character can create whole worlds, like the God Krishna.

The debt to Indian mythology is enormous, and the influence from miniatures as well as European artists like Blake, Munch and Redon or Chagall could be fruitfully dwelt upon. However, what is peculiar to Tara's work is the interplay of traditional themes and philosophies with a personal conflict and search. I feel that in Tara's work as in Munch's, that it is at the limits of personal struggle that the universal insights are encountered. The schizoid-fracturing of the characters into smaller independent particles, is at one and the same time the fundamental and creative process in the work. It is redeemed at its extreme point, the point before chaos of the belittling and almost comical idea that whilst we dream the world, the world is also dreaming us.

It is this creative balance, which Tara has inherited from her Indian culture which ensures that her pictures remain the dazzling and engaging spectacle which they so patently are.