

Tara Sabharwal
By Ivan Prescott
(Cymroza Gallery Catalog 1987)

Tara is a painter who was born in India, and studied at the Baroda college of art but also spent several years in the U.S. and Britain and took her M.A. at the Royal College of Art in London. Since this is really the first time she has shown in India, though she has exhibited quite widely in England, it was felt necessary to provide a loose introduction to her work. It should be stated from the start that despite her training in and familiarity with the Indian and European traditions of art, her work does not involve itself in a polemic of the relationship of the one tradition to the other, although obviously there is apparent in her work engagement with the contradictions between the two traditions, and an attempt to utilise aspects of the language and thought of each.

It is difficult to write about a painter who eschews the attempt to verbalise about painting, and whose work itself is elusive in feeling, and who is creative in a playful rather than an analytical way. Let me insist, therefore that the analysis which follows is my own interpretation, and is not meant in any way to suggest an analytical approach in the work itself.

The work Tara executed at Baroda, under the guidance of painters like Bhupen Khakhar and Ghulam Sheikh, had evolved out of the desire to develop a language which welds together figures and deepspace, via a tightly knit surface web of interlocking shapes. This language essentially seemed to be a marriage of certain aspects of Cubism and the piling up of coloured planes parallel to the picture surface, so familiar to Mughal style painting. The purpose of this language, without doing justice to its subtleties, is largely to allow the expression of a 'narrative' which is both simultaneous and unfolds in time, as well as the juxtaposition of elements from more than one narrative. The conception of time is rather of a series of static incidents than of a continuous unfolding. Tara's pictures of this time, however, whilst coming to terms with this linguistic heritage, seemed oddly contradictory. Somehow the disposition of groups of figures within this network of coloured planes led more to the sensation of imagery with its meaning and significance cramped and obscured than of the unfolding of meaning through a narrative structure. This, I think, was largely because for her, the imagery was not such that it could be ordered within any framework based on the historical progression or retreat of time. This was vindicated by the work which followed.

Coinciding with her admission to the RCA in London, the weblike superstructure gave way to stretching and contraction, and in places disintegrated with the demands of the imagery. There followed a series of pictures which, loosely speaking, owed a lot to Romanticism, and her increased and firsthand familiarity with the work of painters like Titian, Goya, Palmer and Munch. These pictures were no longer confined by the sense that movement happens within the province of proportional space or of measurable historical time. Instead the flow of mnemonic images creates a different sense of movement and a different hierarchy between objects. This was also linked with a deeper realization that the handling of a body of paint, its articulation and sense of gesture as paint, all things largely absent from the Mughal tradition, are capable of an immediate registration of the movement in time of subjective experience. This Romantic tendency reached its apogee in the series of island pictures and landscapes, although it also found expression

in a number of works where a mystic affinity of figures with plant forms and with landscape elements was projected, with everything appearing to conspire in an orgy of vegetational proliferation. Here again Tara was approaching the other aspect of her debt to modern Indian painting, which finds its source in painters like Jeram Patel. However it seems to me, as had happened earlier, the language itself was too powerful and too exclusive to allow the subtleties of the imagery to speak through, and consequently the imagery became either heavy-handed, separated itself from the larger structure of the picture, refusing to participate in the melee of brushmarks and forms, or was engulfed in it and virtually vanished altogether.

I think that the significant breakthrough occurred about three years ago with a series of pictures which utilised elements from other pictures which had been discarded. What had not been realised in the earlier pictures was that it was precisely the formulation of a consistent language, or if not consistent, then a language which evolved across the picture surface in a regular and demonstrable manner, in the tradition of Munch or Khakhar for instance, that was jeopardising the validity of the imagery. What had been needed to convey the complexity and timefree associations of unconscious or intuitive experience, was a process involving accident, and a language permitting the juxtapositions of opposites and contradictions, a language which was anything but consistent. Of course the move towards this via collage and assemblage has brought Tara's work into an area of certain very predominant twentieth century artistic concerns, and her understanding of Freudian theory and Ehrenzweig's subsequent revaluation of structure in art on the principle of unconscious order and undifferentiated vision had given her the conceptual rigour she needed to go through with this.

Tara had already begun to explore inconsistent, fragmented expression before she used collage and assemblage technique. Given figures could be read ambiguously and the same pictorial space would contain two recognizable objects superimposed on each other; the ridge of a hill also acting as the spine of an animal, etc. This is something which also has a precedent in the Indian tradition where one large animal contains within its contours the tessellated forms of many other animals. Though Tara still utilizes this, it generally means that the language has to remain consistent to support and provide a secure base, a ground in conventionality, from which these double and multiple readings can be made. Furthermore, this inevitably enforces a certain two-dimensionality on the work, as double readings generally depend on congruity of contour or outline, and a greater sense of volume reduces the chance of a double reading. Also, if double meanings are multiplied across the surface of the picture, they lead to an impression of overall flux and destroy any hierarchy of meanings and images in the work, which would again have led to the Romantic problems of the language becoming too exclusive.

Collage and assemblage provided a direction around these problems, and the informality of these compositions has now permeated through to pictures which don't directly employ these techniques. A picture like *Reflections in the Mirror, 1985*, would not have been possible without works like *Woman with Glove Puppet, 1983*, yet in the former there is hardly any use of collaged elements. The same can be said of *Woman by the Sea, 1986*, which, whilst being worked continuously in the traditional way on a single surface, would not have been possible without the experience of assemblages. Witness the difference between this and *Magical Voyage, 1983*, a picture more squarely in the Romantic tradition, done prior to the collages. *Reflections in the Mirror* has a sense of

pieces of distinctly separate realities jointed together, and many of the edges feel cut or torn, in spite of being painted.

Amongst the collages Tara has completed, the earlier ones tended to call more attention to their own process and announced the collusion of disparate realities by an emphasis on torn edges, and the textures of different papers. However, the imagery still remained fairly consistent and derived from a uniform source. The imagery directly depicted and symbolized the interpenetration between different worlds and the collaged elements reinforced this. Originally, therefore, the collage was supportive of the pictorial symbolism as in *Women with Puppets, 1983* where there is a sharp distinction between the interior world of the three women and the outer world with the male figure, bridged by the simultaneous participation in both of the puppets.

The recent collages are the direct result of the dismemberment of earlier compositions, reassembled. Work of this order is necessarily disorganized by the standards of our normal judgment. But what for anatomy is an amputation is for intuitive experience a totality. As Leo Steinberg explains in his essay on Rodin:

*Rodin's work demanded the extension of this simple logic to any anatomical cluster and more than that: not a part **for** the whole but the part **as** the whole and its wholeness wholly immanent in the fragment.*

There is also a close parallel with the Surrealist preoccupation with *objets trouvés*, although with Tara the finding is from earlier rejected pieces of work. Here it is not just individual figures which are cut out and repositioned but whole sections of pictures, seemingly regardless of the figuration. Now the aesthetic effect of collage do not reinforce the imagery but instead the collaging and assembling process itself creates new interaction of images. This produces possibilities which are inconceivable within a normal process of working and are partly the result of accident.

I have always felt that the nature of Tara's images is evasive; they are not icons, but momentary recapitulations of moods. If a meaning as such can be extracted, it is not through a direct reference to the meanings of figures as symbols, but by an oblique understanding. The images are neither metaphors for something beyond themselves nor are they purely that which they depict; instead they are the hardening and crystallising of fleeting states, suggestions of something. The aim is to hold the mind in suspension across a field of possibilities rather than to arrest it in a concept. This process of gentle suspension, which is more popularly described as the 'poetic' element in a picture, is the greater the less expected is the juxtaposition of images, lines and shapes. It is precisely the lack of the familiar which renders this 'poetic' state possible. It is for this reason that assemblage and a language derived from it are so central to Tara's work.

With respect to this content another distinction of language in Tara's work is crucial and deserves mention. The juxtaposition of incongruous elements is plastic and pictorial rather than figurative and illusionistic, and this has been so from her earliest work. It is not the presence so much of an unexpected image within a continuous narrative that portends the meeting of two realities, as might be found in Surrealism, or Bosch for instance, nor is it a jump in scale, a major preoccupation of Indian culture; it is rather a pictorial cleavage, a disruption of the picture surface and its consistent relationship to what is depicted. This of course is not reserved only for assemblages but is present on a more subdued level in much of the work where one finds a bewildering array of different mediums used within the same picture. This has meant a reduction to the

number of oil paintings as this medium lends itself less easily to mixing with other materials. This pictorial disruption suggests the notion that there is no ultimate reality, but that behind the play of phenomenal images is a continuous state of becoming and of interactions of different realities. This filters through to the imagery in Tara's work but it is not, as in a Bosch or Mughal miniature, restricted to imagery. In these it is more that the order of the divine or ultimate reality disrupts the illusion of phenomenal reality. The fragmentation of the pictorial elements is so complete in certain of Tara's pictures (see *Yakshi, 1984*), that the figures themselves are threatened with total disappearance, to leave the pictorial dismemberment completely exposed, as it were. However my own preference is for the pictures where the images act as guides or points of orientation within this general disruption.

Tara's work is inevitably uneven in quality, an unavoidable result of her embracing of chance combinations and dismemberings. My preference, however, is for work which takes the risk involved in utilising arbitrariness in the compilation of images. One finds all too frequently in contemporary painting an evenness of result predicated on an early formulation of mannerisms and the use of imagery with a demonstrable validity or accepted symbolic reference. It is the disregard for safe pictorial formulas and an opportunism which has analogies with playfulness, that for me guarantee the creativity and inventiveness in Tara's work. I feel this the more surely with my own ineptitude in summarising or categorizing the work.