

## Thus Spake Zarathustra

Thus Spake Zarathustra-“man is something that needs to be surpassed”.

The image of the stoic figure balancing itself on fragile poles made of eggs is indeed unsettling. Edged out of his comfort zone, the male protagonist in Ebenezer is perpetually caught in awkward stances, difficult postures and dramatic foreshortenings, evolving into an emblem of energy and pathos. Thus the apt title to the suite of drawings and fiberglass sculptures that portray the artist in various *avatars* of the Superman, performing daring feats-living on the edge to experience and rise above the ordinariness of life. Caught in moods of introspection, confrontation and resilience, he walks a tight rope, carrying huddled masses on his head, confronting risky situations of the everyday. This interface with reality is given a hyperbolic twist by imaginative and improbable encounters to intensify the silent angst as well as protest of the artist. Like many a vanguard artist has done before, Ebenezer too questions the existential status of man in a disoriented world.

Thus spake Zarathustra- “I want to teach men the sense of their existence, which is superman. Zarathustra spoke of the superman as lightning out of the dark cloud.”

Having indulged the medium of charcoal and dry pastel for almost two decades, Ebenezer’s drawings are intensely evocative with their charged malleability, saturated with the blackness of the charcoal rubbed into the white body of the paper to take on a symbolic dimension, while building the figure’s corporeal presence. The spontaneous layers of working without the possibility of erasures makes it necessary that he arrive at a mental visual image before getting intimate with the raw material in his hand. In the process, the soft tones of charcoal and pastel are merged with an unusual force creating self-emanating figures caught in the theatrics of performing daunting tasks. The luminous illusionism arrived through proportionate juxtaposing of black, grey and untouched white sculpts out the body/flesh of the images from the surrounding dark and nebulous space. Prone to smudges while working through touch with a direct rub of the charcoal or pastel on the surface by his thumb or finger, Ebenezer masters the controlled messiness of the medium for its raw appeal and expressivity.

The aesthetic impulse articulating expressive tones of dark and light in his stark charcoal and pastel drawings stands in sharp contrast with his bedecked sculptural pieces to play on the ambivalent emotions of pain and pleasure, of strength and fragility, conflict and reconciliation. Self-referential by way of using the self-image (portrait and body), Ebenezer reinstalls the archetypal man as the load-bearing pillar of not just his life but carries forward others who need to be

pulled out of their submissiveness and incompetence. The guardian/protector is a recurrent image in Ebenezer taking on many forms through many generations.

The heroism, sometimes tinged with doubt brings about the pessimism of the stoic figures- they neither scream, sigh nor express any outward pain. The sustained tensions of his figures poignantly hold what Antonio Gramsci termed 'the pessimism of the intellect countered by the optimism of the will'. In self-scrutiny, images often depict 'the self analyzing his other' enhancing the psychic layers trapped within the sensual body. One of the compelling images entitled *Father Taught Me to Swim* speaks about one generation teaching another to swim and in a metaphoric sense, survive the harsh currents of time by mastering the art.

Like many of his contemporaries in Delhi, Mumbai and Baroda, Ebenezer in the late 1980s was inspired by the visions of the Italian Transavantgardia, especially with Francesco Clemente who lived and worked from his studio in Madras. The subverting of the 'classical figurative' for a personal iconography in painting triggered imagery replete with flame tongues, buoyant dream figures and mysterious spaces. Though drawing upon past and immediate sources, Ebenezer has never appropriated the image without its potency for reinterpretation. For him, the quest for meaning in art primarily took on the function of critical investigation where in history, mythology and autobiography collided into poignant signs and symbols.

Ebenezer's artistic temperament with shades of pessimism and fatalism has to be seen against life-experiences of his formative years. For Ebenezer, these were also the beginnings of a problematic relationship with Christianity. Its morals and ideals became a mean to question not merely the outside world but also his own identity (Indian Christian) that he found too complex to be straight jacketed into sheer caste, colour or race. It is interesting to start with his hybrid name- Ebenezer Sunder Singh. (Sadhu) Sunder Singh was a sikh saint referred as an Indian apostle of Christianity who dedicated his life to preaching Christianity throughout the world. And his biblical name "Ebenezer" means 'Stone of help' that messiahs and prophets carried to mark the extent of God's help to His followers. But Ebenezer went through a sense of acute helplessness when he was barely fifteen with the sudden passing away of his brother. This personal loss left him shaken- the first taste of human mortality made visible the delicate line between life and death and pushed him towards questioning the inadequacies of received faith and knowledge. The dichotomy between fate and reason, divine plan versus individual action became more pronounced than ever before, depleting his inflated sense of the self.

In the Indian context, F.N. Souza is a significant exemplar and an influential force in this discussion. His volatile temperament had scathingly attacked the

hypocrisies and addictions that he believed Christianity offered along with moral taboos and suppression of human spirit. Souza scoffed at priests: he didn't spare Christ either. Deluded by the redemptive promise of Christianity while confronted by the painful realities of life, he willed his own destiny and declared his protest through his provocative stance in art. Decades later, Ebenezer's art resonates this engagement but also takes it further in a different form. While Souza's brutal imagery spews venom and aggression through excruciating distortions and physical incisions on the drawn and painted body, Ebenezer holds the anguish of existential burden within the human form and presents his figures in meditative restraint. The figures sometimes carry an expression of enduring angst in the name of faith. Like Souza, he draws upon familiar themes of betrayal, guilt, doubt, resurrection and transfiguration from Christ's life to reflect upon the fallible nature of man. The beheaded John in a platter, Christ bleeding with a crown of thorns, the doubting Thomas checking Christ's wound and the effortlessly floating and rising Christ in Resurrection are compelling visual images for Ebenezer to recurrently source in order to address his humanistic concerns.

Another trajectory that comes to mind is that of Rameshwar Broota's generic man, out on an existential quest, standing vulnerable and exposed to the hostility of the world around. While Broota meticulously labours the surface scratching the whites from the blacks of his canvases, Ebenezer paints in ejaculatory blurts of white acrylic on his large canvases. The engagement with the male nude body becomes obsessive in Broota, exploring both the temporal and the immortal in man. Ebenezer, in a similar spirit, treats the body as an ambivalent medium, a source of both inspiration and anxiety. While the sexual and spiritual become inseparable in the manipulation of the self as it navigates through indispensable frictions, lies, flaws and illusions that human life holds, it is Zarathustra who becomes the catalyst of change. The homoerotism of Bhupen Khakhar's autobiographical figure and later his ailing body seeking catharsis, have also left a deep impression on Ebenezer's thought process.

The self-image in Ebenezer's drawings/paintings pitches male valor, accentuated through a heroic struggle against his environment, his strength and resilience recurrently put to test. He is the guardian, the protector or the mother (represented by the male figure) carrying the burden of ignorant masses, protecting the helpless child or then caught in the precarious act of balancing himself with the elephant on his head or the slippery shoal of fish under his feet. Ebenezer inevitably falls back on the Nietzschean ideal of 'will to power' to overcome what cannot be escaped- to grow stronger through conflict and master the will to survive.

But the superman is not an easy ideal to realize. Reflecting upon the patriarchal constructions and prescribed notions of masculinity, Ebenezer dispels the myth of male virility by exposing his vulnerable self, acknowledging contrary to belief, that

the strong are also susceptible to suffering and are unnerved by unpredictable and risky situations. The protagonist holding on to a bunch of guns is symbolic of the physically weak, requiring more and more weapons of power.

Consequently, the constricting idea of male heroism is deflected by Ebenezer giving way to the feminine energy/*shakti* to preside over the male body- it takes on the role of the mother, the nurturer or the procreator who protects and shapes the yet unborn. Ebenezer draws analogies between the artist and the sensed mother in him, labouring the artistic form after its germination to bring it to life. His work is acutely attentive to the interiority of his being, feeling things inside rather than outside.

Counter to the overwhelmingly haunting figure in his drawings, the sculpture pieces represent a disembodied self, imbued with the sense of the baroque and the sinister. Having extensively worked with life-size figures in terracotta and fiberglass, what we see here are body casts simulating his head, hands and feet, ornate with glitter and colour, jutting out of the wall or lodged in a row under nuanced illumination for a theatrical effect. In a distant way, reminiscent of Robert Gober's ailing body-pieces that are placed in unexpected positions in gallery spaces, Ebenezer dramatizes encounters by the play on scale, for instance, believe it or not, the human palms cradle with ease a pyramid of wrestling elephants or the gaping mouth throws out a flamed tongue to acquire surreal dimensions.

While the amputated body of saints in Western Art History and the suffering body of Christ become direct references here, Ebenezer also questions the idea of 'suffering as purification' that is endorsed by most religions. The irreverent embellishment with use of beads, sequins, pigments and tridents turn the sculpted objects into bearers of human content, provoking and sustaining conceptual meaning. The torturing of the body has been perceived as an assertion of one's unshakeable faith in "God" as well as a transcendental act. In India, devotees seeking supernatural energies to transcend pain and mortality can be witnessed on the streets performing acts of torture for the redemption of mankind. They pierce their cheeks or hands with knives, spears and are purged of their ordinariness. In Ebenezer, the blood soaked human head echoes a death ritual. In another, the head is adorned with cut-mirror-pieces with razor sharp edges pressed onto its flesh and crowned with thorns covered with beads. In another, the head is turned upside down, balanced on strands of hair, stressing literally a hair-raising experience. These acts of self-estrangement represent existential ambiguities and difficult choices that one encounters at every juncture of life.

Fragile, yet not broken or shattered, Ebenezer's figures oscillate between feelings of fear and hope, taking on the challenges of the everyday with its

unknown promise. If humanity has to sustain itself, then for Ebenezer, the self must learn to surpass itself for Zarathustra spoke, “man is no less than a miracle.”

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