

Sakti Burman

from his sketch book

The recent works by Sakti Burman, were originally done as studies or designs for full size paintings. It is a standard practice with artists to jot down their pictorial ideas as soon as they come or when they plan to launch a major project of painting. Not exactly doodles or jottings, but studies or *etudes* by great artists have always been highly valued both independently and as an aid to the study of the artist's ideas and images in the making. Sometimes studies are as good as the final works that the artist would let go out of his studio but those left behind were later found and treated as just different versions of the ones which were first exhibited. Van Gogh is a major case in point. He did drawings and sketches as studies for every painting. But he also replicated with variation the same painting several times. Only one of such replications he would have liked to be included in his *oeuvre* and the rest were to be treated as studies. He preferred to make distinctions between "hasty studies from nature and meticulous studio works." But later on it was difficult to judge "where a study ends and a painting begins."

It is the same with these miniature size water colours if, of course, we make the old academic distinction between studies and paintings. For, Burman has a way of doing the most casual sketch or drawing, even art jottings, or simply doodles with such an input of creative zest and tidy execution that every page of his notebook can be framed separately as a small painting complete in itself, as has been done here.

Since these works are in water colour and Sakti Burman has forged his own manner of handling the medium, we need to discuss here briefly the use of water colour in making drawings, sketches and studies and how Burman came to the use of this medium in the manner best evident in these works.

Tempera, oil and water colour, it is in that order that these mediums of painting have come to the artist's palette in the history of art. Though tempera and gouache or body colour, soluble in water, had a vogue long before oil became the favourite medium of the Renaissance artists, water colour-pigment ground and suspended in water and applied in transparent washes on paper - took a long time to be reckoned as an expressive medium on its own in the West. Finished watercolour paintings were done for sale first in Holland in the 17th century. Till then and even afterwards, water colour and gouache were used mainly for design or studies or cartoons for preparation of works in another medium or for washes in quick drawings and sketches from nature. In the East, tempera, gouache and water colour - in manner and mode unlike anything in that medium in the West - had worked wonders for centuries until oil appeared on the art scene during the colonial rule. But western art history and the mode and manner of art making became the dominant content of our colonial art education, which produced generations of art students ever since the middle of the 19th century and ushered in the modern era of Indian art. As a student of the Government Art College in Calcutta in the late fifties, Burman too had his training in the technique of transparent water colour on white paper. Along with many of his now famous contemporaries he attended private training given by Dilip Dasgupta, famed for his excellent handling of pure British technique with a feel of breezy execution. Burman also did water colour sketches and drawings from nature while he was a student in Paris and afterwards, visiting Italy and towns on the Mediterranean coast. An ardent admirer of Rembrandt he often did seascapes and city scenes in pen-and-ink backed up by tinted or monochrome wash in the manner of the Dutch master.

At home, in his studio, he would of course fill his sketchbooks with brisk wash drawings or small water colours, evoking figures and forms from imagination, as studies for oil or watercolours often inspired by the contemporary French masters, such as Picasso, Braque and his disciples who dominated the Paris art world. He would make these studies not in the British mode but more freely, often laying opaque washes. Once a drop of water fell on such a passage of thick wash. Instantly the pigment layer broke into hundreds of tiny particles creating a surface of marvellous iridescent texture. Gradually, experiments with fractured paint layers yielded for Burman his own way of doing watercolours. What happened is not only something remarkable for his style and technique which he adapted even in his oils but also in the content of his imagery. For those tiny textural particles shaped as if on their own into motifs and characters taking on features of myths and fantasy which have ever since peopled the canvases by Burman.

The current suite comprises studies done in 2004-10 and as such they are not those early impromptu works in which the young artist chanced upon his own way of doing watercolour and gradually developed from it his signature style and technique and got his distinctive form and content. These are as spontaneous as those early studies, no doubt, but they are the product of a far more mature hand and imagination and much of their content comes from the elaborate repertoire he has built over the years of forms and figures, characters and themes. They are familiar to those of us who have been watching Sakti Burman's oeuvre, ever since Burman began to make an impact on the art scene in India and abroad.

Burman's repertoire of techniques and styles, forms and figures, however, is not a stock of finished pictorial materials. In fact these casual works as sketchy as studies or as complete as paintings see the birth of his ideas and they add to his ever growing stock of imagery in seminal forms which appear with fresh variations, embodying fresh ideas and often in entirely new pictorial settings in many of his prints, watercolours and paintings. Many of them remain ever in their seminal formats and others are developed later in more meticulous and enriched painterly details.

What are the ideas that we see in the works whether they are done germinally or finally? The artist is well known for evoking a pictorial world that is a cross between the real and the imaginary. Most of his canvases sport figures or faces, sprightly young men and women who are at home in this world with birds and animals often mythical in shape and nature. The moods and meanings with their visual correlatives first germinate in these sketches and studies. The characters and creatures, which inhabit the miniature world of these watercolours, seem to loom up fresh, at the flourish of the magician's wand, in a void out of nothing. Most of them appear with a joyous gestural expression that has certain out-of-this world purity rounded off with an aesthetic harmony.

They are delicate, sylphy creatures filled in part with, or shaped out of, smoky mass of textures, lightly stained gray and pink, blue or orange and encased often in naive airy lines too fine and casual, yet too strong to define the lightness of their being. Even the mythical birds, half avian half human, have a strange way of impacting as real winged creatures. This mix of the mythical and the real is so seamlessly done that they acquire a force of reality within the frame of each work. And this reality is built with a great deal of care for each detail whether of the figurative content or of the spatial, textural and chromatic components. Textural passages comprising broken bits of washes and colour sediments ensure a dense feel of unstructured cluster of specks and spots. These nebulous clusters, effects of a technical wizardry of handling the medium, are by themselves coarse, rough and freckled as corroded plasters of a damped wall and as such have

nothing in common with the spirit of the imagery marked by an unearthly beauty of innocence, purity and harmony; but they lend a weighty counterpoint to the potentials of the pictures' dreamy sweetness. The textural patches are strategically treated with colour and line to shape out of them the figural moulds of the characters, their torsos, limbs, often faces, heads and strange headgears. Lines have both a naivety and strength; in these instances they suggest rather than define the figures and forms and often they firmly contour a beautiful idea rather than a real tangible character. Burman's palette is limited in range and confined generally to soft light sensitive and even washes in gray or pale blue laid to evoke an overall airiness of the themes and motifs and spaces. This placid base is gently ruffled by the splintered ink and wash passages where the artist employs cool and warm shades of pink or sepia, sharp red, dark blue and piquant orange and dull yellow—all in moist stains or in fluid concentration to tone up the dusky gray textures and to lend emotional dimensions to the characters. From the repertoire of his strategies Burman makes most of the textures along with a minimalist use of colour and line to flesh out in lively figurative idiom the pictorial ideas that haunt his imagination. He

Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothings

A local habitation and a name.

Figurative idiom often has a tendency to exhaust the meaning and mood it exudes. Not that figurative artworks never defy any attempt to interpret them once and for ever. Art history is replete with instances of masterpieces which yield fresh meanings to every generation of art audience and often their interpretations vary from individual to individual. Representation through figures and forms, however, runs the risk of projecting the "referential function" of the image as limits to its meaning. The famed Italian author,

Umberto Eco in his *Infinity of Lists* (2009) speaks of the infinity of aesthetics:

[...] aesthetic tells us that a form can be infinitely interpreted, finding new aspects and new relationships every time, and this can happen both with the Sistine Chapel and with a monochromatic painting of Klein or Rothko. But a figurative work of art [...] nonetheless possesses a *referential* function: a narrative told either in words or images tells us that in the real world, or in a possible one such as the world of fairy tales or poetic imagination there are objects or situations of this or that kind.

What Eco goes on to unfold is that infinity may be conveyed even through forms in figurative art: in the countless "objects or situations of this or that kind" evoked in paintings or enlisted in poetry of a particular genre. Nevertheless he raises a valid point about what limits the meaning in a figurative artwork in a general way.

Burman's art, whether or not the art of infinity, has ever presented through figurative images a world, neither a real nor a possible one, but definitely a world of poetic imagination, which is peopled by figures and characters, sourced seemingly from myths and legends, even though, of no specific references. Imagery comprising highly imaginary characters, humans or animals, located in undefined spaces or in aspects of unfamiliar logical or pictorial relationship, or given unearthly gestural expressions or dressed in fancy clothes represent a world far removed from the one of our experience or knowledge. Myths, legends or epics or fairy tales create in the most free play of imagination even an impossible world unshackled to the logic of the realities we live and know. We often think of the world glimpsed in Burman's imagery—whether in his *paintings* or in his *studies*—as mythical, judged by the tropes they include not only of forms and figures but also of the spaces and settings in which they appear. To think of this pictorial world as mythical is of course one way of interpreting his paintings and if

this fixes a general framework of approach to every individual canvas by Burman, then there is a danger of denying that the forms in his imagery can be “infinitely interpreted”. Such framework, however, is no bar to the potential diversity of interpretations. The provenance of the faces portrayed in Tagore’s paintings is generally believed to be somewhere deep down the abyss of the poet himself. Within this framework, however, each such image may yield more meanings than one.

But do Burman’s paintings “possess a referential function” as narratives “told in ...images”? *Myth* and *legend* are words that create by themselves a context of narrative discourse. Undoubtedly in figurative artworks, figures, singly or in groups tend to enact a story, or may be, an episode, without beginning, middle or end or such a figure is as a focussed point in a narrative sequence. A canvas by Burman is no exception. Nevertheless it is not “a narrative told in images”. Rather it leaves all options free for the viewer to guess what might have gone before and what might come after, thus ensuring the possibility of free and varied interpretations. After all no work of art is worth a second viewing if it has all its meanings revealed at the first.

This is all the more true of these *studies* as can be told apart from his regular *paintings*. Studies are by nature fragmentary, done with a sketchy casualness, they were originally meant to be treated as part in a complete format of painting. But modernism values such sketchy jobs as they capture the first flush of the artist’s careless creative rapture. As a result the forms in the studies, even though figurative, have by nature, no specific referential function nor do they make up a story either each by itself or all of them taken together. The viewer is however free to weave his own narrative to locate the boy who gravely ponders if his small hand can take for long the full weight of a large bird perched on the back of his hand; or the bearded young man curiously looking out of a framed photo at a strange mythical bird with the head and breast of a human female; or the avian-bodied pretty lass turning her back on the young lover wooing her behind a screen of orange mist. Responses to each of the characters in this series may vary from viewer to viewer and may not always tend to weave a story. Looking at the child with infinite wonder in his innocent eyes, one may oneself wonder whether uneasy lies the child’s head too, that wears a paper crown or one may be curious to know whether the crowned queen reigns in a fairy land where they have the magical power to take on the body of the feathered creatures, or whether the young rider mounted on an ass is an asinine human or wearing a mask like Shakespeare’s Bottom.

Framing these queries while looking at the pictures or constructing a narrative out of them is certainly an interpretative response to the forms in the images. But such response is born less out of the referential content of the form than out of the imaginative excitement it stimulates in the viewer. Visual arts get across to the audience through forms which flesh out not merely “objects or situations of this or that kind” but multifaceted experiences and ideas minimally contoured in forms and figures of visual correlatives. Burman’s art does not represent a visual reality but makes visible an imaginative experience, all the facets of which are neither precisely pre-defined nor can be grasped ever exhaustively. Each time we come to them they assume a fresh kaleidoscopic rearrangement.

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