

Manish Om Prakash and Vera Wise

BRIAN GRISON

Manish Om Prakash and Vera Wise share interesting characteristics. Neither can claim formal art education, and this freedom from academia has cultivated strong personal attitudes. While at virtually opposite poles of ambition and intellectual sophistication, their paintings illustrate the power of clear-sighted devotion.

October 13–31

MANISH OM PRAKASH'S PLAYFUL MUSE
Winchester Galleries, Oak Bay

Manish Om Prakash was born in Amritsar, India, in 1963. His artistic biography and ambitions, which began when he was a child, are complex and unusual.

As a precocious child of six who liked to doodle, Om Prakash attended art classes until the day he innocently made the mistake of correcting a teacher's figure drawing. Fortunately, his older sister Pratibha "took him under her artistic wings"; she was eleven years older than Manish, and his first art mentor, as well as a second mother. She taught him everything she was learning in her senior high school art classes. Though she too was talented, her own ambition was to practice medicine like their father.

Fortunately, even through their medical studies and practice, both Pratibha and her father helped Om Prakash. Because their surgery demanded that they thoroughly understand human anatomy, they were able to teach Om Prakash to accurately draw the human figure, even from memory and imagination. As well, the medical journals in their library were helpful, in particular the English journal, *Clinical Symposia*, with its masterful illustrations by Frank Netter (the "medical Michelangelo," *New York Times*, 1986), and *Abbottempo*, a pharmaceutical periodical with occasional articles about physical and psychological ailments of artists. Om Prakash remembers reading about the eye problems of el Greco, and a Freudian analysis of Van Gogh's relationship with his ear.

The conflation of Hindu, Catholic and classical Greek references in Om Prakash's art has other sources as well. While his family is Hindu, his parents were interested in all cultures and religions. His mother explained Greek myths as often as Hindu scriptures and cosmology. His academic education by Dominican monks and nuns, with its Christian and Western atmosphere opened other doors as well. Recognizing his talent, the school principal allowed him to explore his private library of art books. Om Prakash explored Greek mythology and discovered Salvador Dali, an academic painter despite his Surrealism.

After high school, his family did not encourage Om Prakash to become a professional artist; instead he completed degrees in neuroscience.

To mollify him, Pratibha introduced him to her friend, the Indian artist Promilla Luthra, who taught at an all-girls college. After all the



Manish Om Prakash

female students left for the day, Luthra guided him through botanical illustration, 19th-century painting techniques and colour theory—the rudiments of academic painting. By age 20, he was so devoted to French academic figure painting that when another instructor tried to introduce him to Cubism, he was affronted.

While Om Prakash has not practiced neuroscience in India or Canada, since immigrating to British Columbia in 1988 he has worked as a government policy and planning advisor for the seafood industry in this province. In the evenings and on weekends, he paints. Except for a solo exhibition at the Lalit Kala Akademy (the National Gallery) in Delhi, his exhibition career has been in Canada, specifically at Winchester Galleries.

The viewer will discover the influences of Om Prakash's multicultural and many-faceted background at his fourth annual solo exhibition at Winchester Galleries.

Pan and Syrix refers to a particular

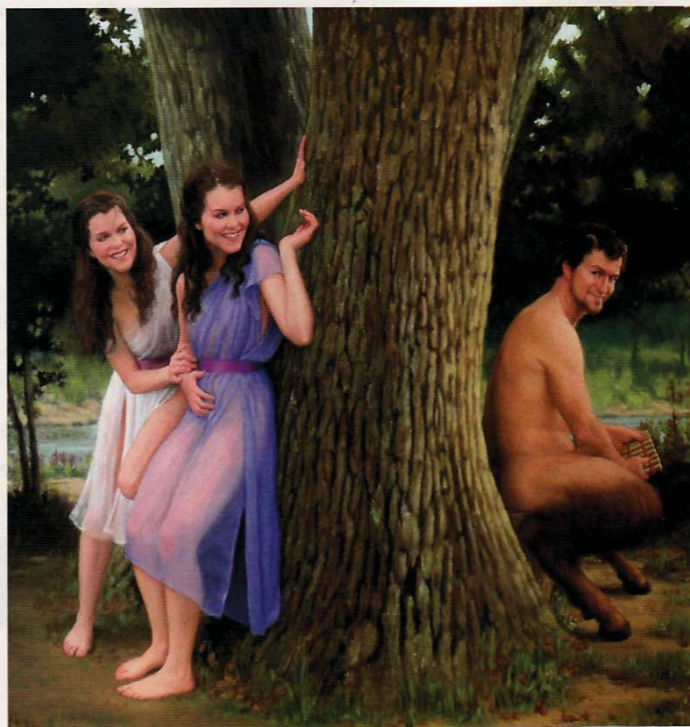


PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL



"Anna with African Daisies" Manish Om Prakash, 40 x 38 inches, oil on canvas

chaste nymph who was pursued by the amorous Greek god Pan. She begged the river nymphs' protection. They (rather unfairly, in my opinion) turned her into hollow water reeds that made a haunting sound when Pan's frustrated breath blew across them—so he cut the reeds into the first pan pipes.

As suggested by the beautiful translucent Indian veil (*dupatta* in Hindi) that Syrinx wears, Om Prakash conjures a more liberated version of the myth. This time, Pan is already practicing his panpipes when he meets a more modern and independent nymph who, with her friend, coyly teases him from behind a protective tree. Though the artist's creation and his rendering look classical enough, the veil and the un-idealized, un-godlike figures give the painting a startlingly modern sensation.

Even without mythological references, *Anna with African Daisies* resembles 19th-century portraiture more closely. However, like all figures in Om Prakash paintings, Anna is a good real-life friend. While the child is not playing an idealized role in the painting, we sense that her self-conscious concentration on the daisies matches the artist's concentration on both them and her. The painting links child, flowers, artist—and even the welcome viewer—in the same exquisite and precious affection that Om Prakash brings to all his subjects.

As well as a warm, if challenging, portrait of another good friend, Bizet's "*Habaner*" (*Personification of an Aria from "Carmen"*), Om Prakash's visualization of a classical French opera from 1875 slips further away from 19th-century painting. While (parenthetically) evoking a certain provocative model painted by Edouard Manet that scandalized the French Academy in 1863, this painting encompasses a modernist play with style. Despite Om Prakash's careful rendering with glazes and subtle brushstrokes, and his disdain for cubist composition, Bizet's "*Habaner*" is actually an abstract study of colours and shapes on the flat canvas, a way of seeing the world—and art—that academic painters resisted.

◀ "Pan and Syrinx" Manish Om Prakash, 40 x 38 inches, oil on canvas



"Bizet's 'Habanera'" Manish Om Prakash, 24 x 36 inches, oil on canvas

Being now a thoroughly 21st-century artist, Om Prakash would never be a successful academic painter—his conflation of Greek myth, Hindu cosmology, Christian emotions and personal meanings would not have fit into the narrow range of subjects acceptable to the French Academy. This is fortunate for Om Prakash—and his audience—for it has allowed him to develop into a kind of artistic guide through a thoroughly Canadian drama of multiple stories with multiple messages about who we are becoming today.

Manish Om Prakash's "The Playful Muse" runs Oct 13 (preview 10 a.m.-5 p.m.) through Oct 31 at Winchester Galleries, 2260 Oak Bay Ave. An opening reception will be held on October 14 from 1-5 p.m. with artist; music by Elizabeth Ely, harpist.