

# FRONT ROW

By Kate Cino

**VIVID AND SENSUOUS** Manish Om Prakash is playing me the music that inspires his work. Images come to him best through the chanting haze of new-age sounds. "Right here in the song," he says, gesturing, "I can see the dancing women coming into view, scattering petals in a sway of fabric and light." His hand twists in the air, echoing the sensuous grace of the approaching women. Following close behind them is a young man, perfectly sculpted in a



of innocence through the pose of a young boy. The boy, whose cupped hands overflow with berries, pauses for a moment to look down at the fallen fruit. He exudes both classical beauty and youthful vitality. The figure is surrounded by forest, rendered in delicate shades of green and gold. Sunlight dapples the treetops and collects in pools along a shady forest path. A glimpse of water glistens through the trees. Avid collectors of Om Prakash's work — and there are many — are already competing for the

circle of light, head turned in rapturous profile toward a mighty elephant. The young man delicately leads the elephant, and they seem bonded together through the graceful, twisting trunk. The scene is all light and energy, joy ascending, a human/animal celebration.

Visitors to Om Prakash's third solo show at Winchester Galleries in October will see equally vivid paintings. His strong, sensuous images are an exotic mix of cultural references and time periods. The artist seeks to integrate the archetypes of myth with our present-day human emotions. In the process, new legends are told. To illuminate and validate the shifting intensities of human feelings, Om Prakash incorporates the help of allegorical beings. These beings, springing from his varied experiences and background, include Indian deities, dark muses, archangels, tragic heroes, mysterious presences, Madonna/child figures, enlightened Buddhas and medieval saints. Ordinary people also appear but are transformed into something special by a chance configuration of light, or a moment of introspection. "In my paintings, I like to imagine that I have just walked into a place and stand unnoticed. I capture this special moment like a snapshot, then move on." This gentle approach is also shown in the artist's choice of imagery. "I have always disliked violent, warlike images," he says.

The contemplative nature of the artist comes through in his finely detailed and sensitive drawings. Largely self-taught, he studied such Renaissance artists as Michelangelo and Caravaggio as a youth in India. His drawings show mastery of the medium through delicate rendering of form, expressive shading and emotional content. These qualities are also present in the artist's paintings, which will be featured in the upcoming Winchester show.

Some of the latest paintings include a new element: lushly painted landscape backgrounds. Inspired by Bougereau, a 19th-century romantic painter, Om Prakash is now posing figures in a landscape tableau. One new image, called "The Fallen Berries" (2001), captures an ideal moment

right to own this richly evocative painting.

Om Prakash's finished canvasses are built up from numerous layers of translucent oil glazes. The luminous quality of the skin tones, the glowing colours of the fabrics, and the rich, dark hues of the backgrounds are built up painstakingly, layer after layer. Om Prakash resumed painting in 1995, following a seven-year break, after being encouraged by the owners of Winchester Galleries. He stops in front of the first painting that he completed at the time, called "Ganesh" (1995). The painting, which was months in the making, is a potent tangle of human and divine, eros and compassion, hope and apprehension. It is a reconnection to a rich, imaginary world.

Work by Manish Om Prakash shows at Winchester Galleries, 1545 Fort Street, October 21–November 10. Opening with artist in attendance October 21, 1-5 PM. For more information, call 595-2777.