



ROBERT  
AMOS  
ON  
ART

# Striving toward simplicity, purity

Few can draw with such skill, yet Manish Om Prakash, by nature, is never satisfied with his work.

The paintings of Manish Om Prakash have been something of a mystery to me. Often the subjects are naked young men, lost in reverie. They seem indebted in equal parts to the musculature of Michaelangelo and expansive life-breath of Indian sculpture. In conversation with him before his show at Winchester Gallery (1545 Fort St., until Nov. 10) I learned a lot more about what motivates this artist.

Prakash was born in Amritsar in India's Punjab province, the son of a doctor. His father wanted him to follow medical studies, though Prakash already loved to draw and paint. As a compromise he studied science — which included drawing maps and diagrams — and came to Victoria for a masters degree in neurobiology. He works here with the fisheries department of the provincial government.

As an artist, though, Prakash had his training in India. Noted artist Promilla Luthra recognized his talent when he was just a boy, and she offered to teach him. Her classes were at a women's college, but young Manish was allowed to sit outside the classroom door and learn what he could. Luthra was a surrealist painter, a fastidious hyper-realist, and she taught him the precise blending of oil paints which is a feature of his style.

"I love Dali," Prakash observed. "I saw his painting of the Crucifixion on the cover of the *Reader's Digest*, and that's where my style started." Other inspirations were Raphael and Caravaggio: Prakash, from the start, focused on the human figure.

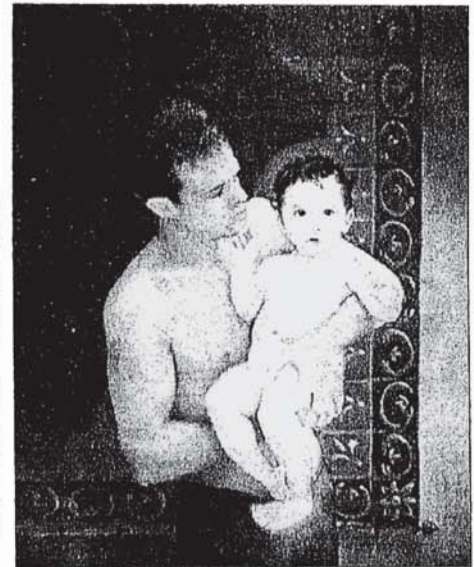
"Just the figure," he repeated. "Not a table or a chair, or even a cloth. I like the figure to speak for itself." His figures exist in an ideal atmosphere, free of the heaviness of gravity. Each of his models is cast in a theatrical light, spotlight from the top left corner.

The poses he depicts are often derived from Indian classical dance. Torsion is crucial to the effect, a twist between the upper and lower halves of the body. While legs and feet beat out a rhythm, the arms and torso tell a story.

"I want to tell the whole story by gesture," Prakash explained. "I believe this is the key."

What story is he telling? Is there a homosexual subtext to his imagery? The artist didn't answer me directly, but expressed his intentions more fully. His goal, he says, is to paint sensuality, not sexuality.

We discussed the figurative work of Charles Malinsky and Attila Richard Lukacs, whose technique Prakash admires. But he has a great dislike for violence, for things that depict uneasiness and dom-



*Towards ...*, by Manish Om Prakash, an oil painting on canvas, 60 x 42 inches, on show at Winchester Gallery, 1545 Fort St., until Nov. 10.

ination. The boys and young men in his work — considering an apple, leaning against an elephant's trunk, looking in a fishpond — are painted from models but actually represent himself. His subjects are often based on memories of his own childhood.

Prakash, like many immigrants, admits to being a bit rootless here in Canada. He lost his mother during his childhood, and while Prakash was a student in Canada his father died. He clearly longs for a past, an India he can't return to.

"If there is a paradise on earth," he told me with emotion, "It's there with my family." Precious memories, elevated to myth, inform his paintings.

Inspired by new age music (CDs by Enigma, and Delirium, and B Tribe), the artist sees visions. "It's a visual image, I actually see this." We were discussing his big picture, *Hylas*. In it, over a young man, a bevy of women swirl about in a spiral of cloth. When the concept has become clear, Prakash photographs models, "trying to make the models fit my image. It's not possible," he confesses. He makes up for the shortcomings by redrawing them from his own considerable knowledge of anatomy.

The results are crisply rendered in outline, and delicately shaded with sanguine pencil. Few can draw with such skill, yet Prakash, by nature, is never satisfied with his work. He's aiming to express a simplicity, a purity, an innocence which he can never retrieve.

In fact, *Innocence* is the title of this exhibition. He has painted noble young women with flowers, babies in their fathers' arms. He is striving for "a clarity in colour, thoughts, action, light ... That to me is an innocence that stays. A pureness of thought and action, not vulgar, not sexual."

There are many reasons why this artist feels vulnerable. "Every time I exhibit," he told me, "I feel naked. I worry that people will think I sit and look at fish, or gaze at apples. I wonder why I am exposing my feelings."

As we parted, the artist beseeched me to give him my criticisms. Surely, with such exacting work, there are always points of technique that could be improved. But his sincerity, and the purity of his motives, cannot be faulted.

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