

MEETING MOHAN

I remember meeting Mohan Das at his apartment in Karachi, almost a year before the painter passed away on 31st August 2023. During my visit, Das seemed his usual self. Cheerful, enthusiastic, and pleasant – surrounded by his wife, young daughter, and an aging mother – he kept on showing his paintings, works on paper, drawings, sketches. Till that encounter, I was not fully familiar with his life and past, but later came to know about his “journey as a cinema board, truck and rickshaw painter”; his BFA (hons) and MA (hons) in Fine Arts, in 1999 and 2002, from the University of Sindh; his teaching at the Karachi School of Art, and the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture; as well as his private academy of drawing and painting, The Fakhta School of Arts.

Mohan Das's death is mournful, but not an unusual event, because every day, hour, minute, second, people are leaving this world. However, when we look back at the life of the departed, we question, whether the person really disappeared, or is still present in some form? Sometimes more alive, more visible, more loved compared to his/her short physical existence. Vincent van Gogh continued to survive after he committed suicide at the age of 37. Preserved in/through his art – widely displayed, viewed, admired, collected at the museums and galleries, beyond his native Netherlands, and adopted France.

It takes some years, and much expertise to envisage the future of an artist, but knowing the works of Mohan Das, one can imagine that he won't be forgotten easily or permanently. He dealt with a number of ideas, images, and techniques, which would remain relevant; since he investigated the link between the local and foreign, between the indigenous and international – in an unusual language.

The blend and merger of local and international – actually demands a bit of revision and research, because ‘indigenous’ historically has been composed of outer interventions, exchanges and influences – from the Aryan invasion to the popularity of Masala Paneer Pizza in South Asia. Also, foreign is not a frightening realm any more, especially with Kamila Harris, Rishi Sunak, Sadiq Khan at top positions, along with millions from the subcontinent – visible and indispensable, while living, working, and enjoying life in the West.

In his previous exhibition (The Gallery T2F, Karachi), Mohan Das compared and connected visuals from European art history and present day living: urban and rural, domestic and public, leisure and duty. This concept has been a constant concern in the aesthetics of Das, as observed in a series of paintings created between 2012 to 2018 – part of his posthumous exhibition. The work collected for this show reveals not only the artist's craft, but his unique turn of mind in interlocking objects, concepts, practices. For example, the painting *Apple with Adam and Eve*, consists of a pattern of apples in varying hues, however, these apples are not the ones made by God, or those crucial in the episode of The Fall; rather, they are the repeated logo of Mac products. Once viewed through this web, one deciphers outlines of a classical European painting that depicts Adam in the company of Eve, reaching for an apple in the Garden of Eden.

In a sense, both the story of the apple from Paradise and the sign of apple products belong to the west, as much as to other parts of the world. But Das moved away from this strict divide, as his work is more about the architecture of perception. What you see and what you see through. Like the canvas *Cloud with Creation*, in which regular waves of cloud shaped forms eventually disclose the iconic fresco *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo. The Florentine genius appears again in the work titled, *Michael and Michael*; with the sculpture of David positioned next to the American pop star, both entangled in the net of circular shapes. There seems to be a hidden text connoting the sexual preference of the rock star, and its relationship with a perfect male nude.

Mohan Das used circles to combine images of diverse nature/origin. For instance, you see a surface composed of evenly placed dots with a shift in shades, and which, from a distance, turns out to be the painting, *Rouen Cathedral*, by Claude Monet, suggesting a new way of reading reality in the age of pixels. But more than that, Das's work indicates other socio-economic issues, like in *Mona Lisa with Gas Cylinder*, by recreating the famous portrait, and placing a utilitarian item in her hands. This painting, from 2014, subtly suggesting a situation about scarcity of fuel, is a reflection on the two worlds/ views. In the West, people with uninterrupted electricity distribution, gas supply, water facility can have the luxury to enjoy art, literature and other feats of culture, but in our surroundings, basic/banal necessities overpower the impulse to appreciate higher ideals. Hence Lisa Gherardini is not just joining her hands in a coquettish manner, but is being functional, clasping a gas cylinder.

The comparison and conflict between the two hemispheres/ways of existence is evident in Mohan Das's *Ingres ki Deewani*, appropriating the figurative painting by the classical French painter, and converting it as a part of transport art from here. Adhering to the norms of truck art, Mohan Das added Urdu text, peacocks on both sides, stars, Ajrak sheet, as well as a small mirror reflecting the likeness of the painter.

With work like this, Das, intentionally or intuitively, addressed the theme of assimilation. Of what is authentic and what is borrowed. Because most of the stock/traditional visuals of truck art have genesis in the European/art Nouveau imagery, like the painting of the French master has its roots in the Orientalist Art, inspired from visits to the North Africa and the Middle East.

Mohan Das never verbalized these threads during his life time, but one assumes that, with his qualifications, exposure and experience, Das must be thinking of these dichotomies and disparities. In another painting (*Illusion with Vincent van Gogh*), he recreated the portrait of the French Post-Impressionist, as a source/beam of light and colour. Only when you squint your eyes, can you identify Van Gogh. Mohan Das' work could be a comment on the Dutch artist's search for the sun, since the sunlight – split into sections of varying wavelengths – are composed of the face of the painter, who died early, miserable, and poor.

Probably the myth of Van Gogh relates to the story of Mohan Das, since the works exhibited after him, certify that the artist was not just a painter, but the explorer of complex concepts; perhaps destined to be discovered posthumously, like Van Gogh and several others.