

(For Art & Deal Magazine)

SOUNDBYTES FROM AUSTRALIA

“I often visited India in my mind, and when I finally had a chance to go there, it reminded me of all my influences in life”, veteran light artist Roger Foley Fogg

“India is the mother of the world!”, prominent Pop artist Martin Sharp

“I prefer Indian contemporary art to Chinese. It’s not as mercenary and the artists are more proud to show their culture”, top contemporary artist Dale Frank

“I’m reading the Bhagwat Gita. I find its philosophy extremely powerful..” 60s’ artist Robert Green

“Thukral and Tagra have done an installation here on an extremely significant issue on the life of Punjabi immigrants”, Russell Storer, Curator, APT6, Brisbane

“I’m particularly fascinated by Lord Krishna’s stories that I first heard of while visiting Vrindavan”, colourist Elisabeth Cummings

I made my recent trip to Australia at the peak of the Indian media bashing against this continent nation. But rightfully so. The string of attacks against Indians hasn’t been a figment of our imagination. They’re real and they’re unfortunate. Very few racist in nature but they’re assaults nevertheless. And then, in an absolute contrast to this, my 20 days in Australia was all about how much India is loved by artists there. Its been a constant source of inspiration for the artists of the 60s. And today, contemporary Indian art has a strong presence in various art shows across Australia.

I was invited to Sydney for the opening of light artist Roger Foley Fogg’s latest show. The largest work which is about 20 metres long is titled ‘Spirit of India’. With some conceptual inputs from Indian artist Dhiraj Singh, Fogg has used LEDs, ropelights and pinewood to incorporate images of the creation of light and a representation of Goddess Lakshmi. This includes the sun, light waves and a tiny ‘Om’. Fogg says that many of his 60s light shows were inspired by the colourful Indian Gods, the mandalas and the concept of Karma. In fact, in one of his light mandalas, he has used acrylic mirror in the background for the viewers to catch their reflection and in a manner urge them to look inside their self to introspect. A magical show, to say the least.

There’s also a video installation that Fogg calls the ‘Newsreel’. It features one of his best known work, the Christmas tree of light at the Darling Harbour in Sydney. But Fogg’s India connect continues here too. What he has captured on camera can take many of us Indians by surprise. It’s the beauty that surrounds us that we often overlook. His love for lights took him all the way to Baroda to experience the night of Makar Sankranti. A roof top view of thousands of kites and fireworks in the sky was an expected show stopper in his Newsreel.

Apart from India, Fogg has also managed to dedicate an entire work to his old friend Martin Sharp. Australia's most prominent Pop artist of the 60s, Sharp was largely influenced by the life and works of Van Gogh. Fogg's light installation brought to life Sharps' version of the Starry Night using yellow and blue LEDs. Interestingly, Sharp himself uses florescent colours in his acrylic paintings that glow under a strong flash of light. The Museum of Sydney is currently showing a large retrospective of his works. It gave me a chance to understand Sharp's long career which is peppered with influences from Van Gogh's art and life, American singer Tiny Tim's music and his tragic death on stage during a performance. But Sharp's art is not his only claim to fame. He penned down some songs with Eric Clapton for the British band Cream. He was also the illustrator for the cult magazine of the 60's 'Oz magazine'. In fact a certain controversial episode in the history of this magazine reminds me of what our grand artist MF Husain has had to face because of his creative expressions. When I met the editor of the Oz Magazine, Jim Anderson, he told me about how he and his team faced obscenity charges in a much publicised trial in London in 1971. It was sparked by a special issue of the magazine that was designed and conceptualised by school kids. But it was misunderstood as an obscene issue created for school kids by the adult editors! The charges were as strong as "conspiracy to corrupt public morals". Jim and his team were found not guilty on the conspiracy charge, but were convicted of two lesser offences and sentenced to imprisonment. Today, Jim is a freelance photographer and is a huge fan of the Auroville ashram in Pondicherry with its philosophy of the commune, after having spent several weeks there.

I found this fascination for Indian spirituality with other Australian artists too. Robert Green is reading the Bhagwat Gita nowadays. He's given it a break as it makes for heavy reading but the work that he produced while reading it is hypnotic. His large portrait of a woman is more like a Westernised version of Goddess Kali. Colourist Elisabeth Cummings loves going to Vrindavan. This is where she first heard about Lord Krishna and his childhood stories. "I would love to have a little boy like Krishna, he's absolutely adorable", says Cummings.

But it wasn't just the artists of the 60s whom I met in Australia. If I dreamt strong enough, I could have bumped into some ancient aboriginal artists too! That's what their folk tales and art is all about. Dreams. After some bush bashing in the Royal National Park, anthropologist Les Bursill took me to site of some ancient rock engravings which are now fading away with time. They can't be seen unless you splash some water on the rocks to highlight the forms. Each engraving is inspired by the story of a dream. What I saw on the rocks there was a dream about the Wagalag sisters giving birth, hiding the placenta to protect the spirit of the infant from the great Creator Serpant. These dream tales were their way of understanding and balancing what nature offered them. Contemporary Australian artist Dale Frank's latest show Ice Age is also about nature finding balance after global warming. "I try to balance the colours on my canvas just as nature finds ways of balancing itself", says Frank. Once you see Frank's large canvases, it does feel like you

are entering a dreamscape of vibrant colours that have flowed over the canvas and settled in a niche that belongs only to them!

The contemporary art scene in Australia includes not just Australian artists but several others settled there. There's Arie Levit from Israel, Hitesh Natalwala from India, Karma Phuntsok from Tibet, Dadang Christano from Indonesia and many more.

But our stars like Jitesh Kallat or Subodh Gupta are quite a rage there! At the Asia Pacific Triennial 6 (APT6) in Brisbane, most of the visitors huddled around Subodh's Line of Control – a gigantic mushroom cloud of utensils changing an image of destruction into one of abundance. APT6 Curator Russell Storer's favourite is Thukral and Tagra's installation on a very significant issue today – the lives of Punjabi immigrants who travel overseas for good money at the cost of their family life. Indian artists have had a significant presence in this triennial right since 1996, having shown Nalini Malini and Vivan Sundaram. You'll be surprised to know that visitors fly down from Indonesia, Japan and Singapore to check out this show!

Public art is significant in Australia. Apart from a Henry Moore sculpture that caught my eye in one of the many splendid parks in Sydney, a special show on the 40th anniversary of the Kaldor Public Art Project could easily be one of the biggest hits of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Celebrating 40 years of groundbreaking contemporary art supported by art patron John Kaldor, the exhibition contains archival material, photographs and unique television footage. Some famous names associated with Kaldor are Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Gilbert & George, and Jeff Koons. The latest installation has been created by Japanese artist Tatzu Nishi titled 'War and Peace and in between'. It's about two perfectly normal rooms housing huge sculptures on war and peace. The drawing room has a large head of an equestrian sculpture jutting into the centre table. The bedroom has the equestrian charging over the linen sheets!

What I'm looking forward to now is the 17th Biennale of Sydney starting in May this year featuring works by Cai Gou-Qiang, Lousie Bourgeois, Jennifer Wen Ma, Raqib Shaw and many other top names in art today. But why couldn't our stars make it to the list? Here's why. "Oh I absolutely love the works of Bharti and Jitesh. We just got a bit stuck with logistics and dates...", says curator David Elliot. What a miss, given the current climate of Indo-Aus relations!

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