

Looking at Past and Present : Gulammohammed Sheikh

“The world as it came to me... came almost invariably manifold, plural or at least dual in form...” - Gulammohammed Sheikh

This quote by painter, critic and professor Gulammohammed Sheikh captures the essence of his practice, which explores several key dichotomies in art and culture, such as the relationship between history and memory, as well as the confluence of varied sensibilities in Indian art. Sheikh was born in 1937 and has primarily lived and worked in Baroda since he enrolled at the Faculty of Fine Art at MS University in 1955. In the 1960s, he studied at the Royal College of Art in London, where he received an associate degree.

In this topic, we explore some of the unexpected juxtapositions and narrative-building strategies that exist in his work by studying one of his seminal paintings that he made upon coming back to India.

“Returning Home after a Long Absence” : Look a little closer

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Returning Home after a Long Absence reckons with his homecoming and tries to find a point of convergence between childhood memories and his profession as a painter.

Looking at the background of the painting, we first notice the courtyard wall — a recurring theme in Sheikh’s work that separates his past and present. He also adopts art historical references from European and Persianate traditions without hesitation, showing us that both visual cultures are a part of his world.

For instance, the centre of the work features an image of the Mi'raj, or the Prophet Muhammad’s ascent to heaven, iconography often associated with Islamic art. We also see angular rows of houses that bear visual similarities to 14th-century paintings from the Italian Renaissance centre of Siena. Sheikh’s own imagination comes to play in his depiction of angelic figures wherein we see references from different cultures.

Let’s now turn to the foreground, which shows a central figure of a woman who is based on a photograph of Sheikh’s mother. His decision to feature her in the painting is important because it connects the work to his own life and memory, a signal of his return home.

Many artists quote and borrow imagery from art history, but what does it mean when such complex references are personal and when history is memory?

In reference to his work, Sheikh has explained that his paintings are not a result of a single moment, but instead an aggregation of phases that unfold as he works. In this way, he introduces two different aspects of time -- the presence of historical and other references in his works, and the time it takes to work through a painting itself, which is its own period.

“It’s not that you don’t refer to things . . . The process is neither totally conscious nor totally subconscious. There are phases in which you work—a painting is not done in a single moment. It is done over a period of time; and in that, it’s not one kind of painting that you do, because times change, you change, the world changes, and then you decide.” - Gulammohamed Sheikh

Building Narratives

None of the elements we’ve looked at in *Returning Home* stand alone, instead they build a story. His works often present an “itinerary of images” that can be read in different ways. This aspect of his practice has been inspired by looking at the murals at Shekhawati, in Rajasthan, wherein the physical movement of the viewer is essential in grasping the scale and structure of the paintings. He thought about these in relation to the way he built stories across his canvases.

In one of his series of works exploring themes of migration and displacement, Sheikh appropriates a ‘Kavad,’ a portable shrine that contains multiple folding doors, each painted with scenes from Hindu mythology. In Rajasthan, Kavadia or Bhatt priests commissioned artisans from the Kumawat caste to create these objects. Sheikh also presents the structure of the Kavad in a much larger scale, depicting saints, folk characters, the sufi mystic and weaver, Kabir and even Gandhi, sitting together. By showing elements and figures that represent different times and spaces in the same frame, the works defy temporal, spatial and cultural limitations. One of the panels we see here, in fact, also has a version of ‘Returning Home.’

Conclusion

Having looked at how Sheikh builds complex narratives with historical and personal references in his paintings, we can now take some of the tools we’ve developed to understand broader relationships of 20th-century Indian art to recent and distant pasts.

Bibliography

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