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Culture

Gun in the garden

Sakti Burman's new works are a gentle reminder of the violence around us

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Sakti Burman loves the deep blue sky; the mighty, benevolent Durga; men and women perched on swings and on peacocks; happy children; and fruits and flowers. These are some of the things that have populated his canvas in the five decades that he has been painting. They cohabit with splatterings of brilliant, multicoloured hues of paint, resembling Italian frescos. If another artist were to describe his paintings best, it would have to be Michael Stipe of REM when he sings, "Shiny happy people holding hands/Shiny happy people laughing."

In that sense, Burman's sensibility is childlike, and his works are dreamlike as Freud originally described dreams: "a wish fulfilment". There has been almost no cynicism in Burman's art. But at 74, some of that innocence is gone. The works in *Enraptured Gaze*, the ongoing solo show that opened at Mumbai's Jehangir Art Gallery and travels to New York's Aicon Gallery from here, are not very different in look, texture and impact. The crucial difference is that the REM song now only partly describes them.



Old world: Paris-based Burman in his Delhi studio; Susan Singing in the Evening (2008) on display at Jehangir Art Gallery. Harikrishna Katragadda / Mint

In *Durga et le Monde* (2008), the goddess has little Ganesha on her lap, but is surrounded by two weapon-toting half-man, half-animal figures—a partly veiled woman pointing a gun and a man in a jacket surreptitiously looking for his enemy with a revolver in his hand. In *Now and Then* (2007), Shiva is with an upside down, sharp-clawed animal and other mythically Indian figures, while a suited man, standing next to a forlorn-looking woman points a gun at the god. In *Susan Swinging*

in the Evening (2008), men and women from a Western world share space with a *lungi*-clad Indian villager, animals, and a multi-headed Indian deity. Guns and spears punctuate the harmonious coexistence of these disparate figures.

The artist whose work fetched Rs73.6 lakh in Sotheby's sale of Indian art in London in May 2008, explained this shift in his raspy voice, over a long distance telephone call: "In spite of my desire to continue painting about the pleasures of life—and you must know that I still love the sight of love—I had to express something about violence. It came naturally, as if my instincts told me I had to do something about violence all around the world." Most of these works have been in the making since 2005-06 and were completed last year.

They mark a significant shift for an artist whose works have been a wilful and seamless fusion of Indian and European motifs because it is a gentle, yet unequivocal statement about the world we live in. Burman had resisted the dark, nihilist movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism when he arrived in Paris as a young artist and chose instead to emulate the pre-War, cheerful picturesqueness of Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard.

He explains the new imperative guiding him: "There is something about the way we see violence today. It can be on the road, in the park or in a hotel; unexpectedly, you will have to face it. Violence has forced itself into my mind against my will and has combined with memory."

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Burman's imagery is largely shaped by memory. He spent his childhood in a village called Bidyakut in what is now Bangladesh and then moved to Kolkata, where he graduated in fine arts at the Government College of Art and Craft. Durga as a leitmotif in his works recalls Burman's enthusiastic participation at the local *pujo* when he was growing up in Bengal. Most other Indian figures in his works are inspired by his visits to the Jagannath temple in Puri and the sun temple in Konark, both in Orissa, where sculptures depict a rich profusion of mythical man-woman or animal-man figures.

This show reminds us that Burman is above all a master craftsman. His fresco-inspired, speckled paint application technique has few parallels in Indian art. Another distinguishing and abiding feature of his artwork is the aged, faded look of the canvas—as if, brought out of an ancient museum, it has been hung under the gallery's spotlights.

Enraptured Gaze is refreshing to eyes used to looking at the hyper-reality of digital and three-dimensional art, or to the dark and the absurd that many artworks engage with today. But for their gentle reminder that the man with the gun is in our midst, Burman's new works urge us to look forward to happy dreams.

Enraptured Gaze, at *Jehangir Art Gallery, Kala Ghoda, Mumbai, till 20 January*; at *Art Musings, Colaba Cross Lane, Colaba, Mumbai, from 21-31 January*.

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