

Coin, a painting by Justin Pommany



THE Promiscuous yet lonely, genial yet visibly indifferent — a living, breathing paradox — she's been the unsung muse that many an artist has courted since forever. Embodying anachronism with her innate passiveness and her overt vivacity, she has seduced all. Fascinated by her diverse and all-encompassing facets, artists and patrons have been left spell bound. She's ambiguity personified, versatility exemplified, life's likeness — she's Mumbai.

THE FACELESS MUSE

By SHWETHA NAIR

Geographically labelled the city of seven islands and historically referred to as the Gateway to India, Mumbai's liaison with the artistically inclined began centuries ago. The infallible city has donned the roles of inspirer, facilitator, lover, shelter, remembrance of the nine Greek muses for all who sought a creative spur. And while it is said, *Every historical period re-creates the muse in its own image and endows it with the qualities, virtues and flaws that the epoch and its artists need and deserve*, she is one muse who has defied time. Some of her greatest romances have been with poets, architects, writers and the visual artists — the painters.

Veterans, fledglings and new age artists alike, all have found an indomitable muse in Mumbai. So much so, that celebrated artist Laxman Shreshtha's Mumbai-fixation, made him "run away from the picturesque hometown, Kathmandu way back in 1960" and brought him to the city. "She is the perfect muse for a painter who's struggling, searching for that artistic urge," voices Shreshtha. "Abstract paintings" though they may be, the mountains, streams and natural imagery in Shreshtha's works are symbolic of the "struggles and achievements" that are part of Mumbai's chaotic lifestyle. Ironically enough, the city that never sleeps bestows "a sense of peace or seclusion that precedes any creative work" for this artist.

The city is a mirage of towers rising from the blur of sea and sky...stories of eyes open on the night, taking in barges, bridges, streams of halogen lights. The flashing dreams now seen, now gone..., reads a poem accompanying seasoned artist Jehangir Sabavala's landscape reproductions of Mumbai. Though references to Mumbai in his earlier paintings were oblique, his recent endeavour *Occasions of light* sees this inspiration translate into perceptible form for the first time. "I

think it's her vitality, variety and visual imagery — that of the different people and perhaps even more of the spirit that stimulates an artist like me," avows Sabavala.

Another artist who realised the city's potential, only after she visited Mumbai's older twin, New York, is Brinda Miller. Born and brought up on the sounds, smells and colours of the Mumbai, she believes that no other city offers such diverse landscapes. Fascinated with the map of Mumbai,

Miller has painted murals that trace the city's curvaceous creeks and take you on a visual hike through the city's landmarks — Crawford Market, Kala Ghoda, the Gateway, et al. "It's Mumbai's quirky aspect of organisation in disorganisation that inspires me the most," asserts Miller.

And it's not just the old school of art that finds Mumbai muse-worthy. New-age artist Justin Pommany's first ever solo show, *Non-Biodegradable Memory* sees Mumbai as a "work in progress" city. Pommany explores the underbelly of this metropolis "where life is in a constant flux, people are



The City I, Jehangir Sabavala's landscape reproduction of Mumbai by night

adjusting to a changing ethos, living alongside piles of non-bio-degradable material that surrounds our daily living." Incorporating a focal bright plastic-like colour (reminiscent of the cables), combined with hologram reversals, carbon and fiber alongside more conventional material like oil and acrylic paint Pommany brings forth the plasticity versus the elasticity of Mumbai. "It's like looking at something always under construction, rebuilding itself — roads dug up. Not just the topography but the people and the mindset," describes Pommany.

Conventional paintings aside, bohemian artist Shilpa Gupta is simply amazed by the visual culture — the hoardings, the colourful local trains of Mumbai. One such unusual work *blessed-bandwidth.net* exposes religion as the key component of current global anxiety. In this work we embark on a tour of the Mausoleum of Saint Haji Ali or the Hindu Siddhi Vinayak or the Christian Saint Michael's Church and such important places of worship sacred to particular faiths in Mumbai. Whatever be her agenda, Mumbai figures in it. Ergo, you can take an artist out of Mumbai, but you can't take Mumbai out of the artist.

Mumbai map mural by artist Brinda Miller for the Mumbai traffic police

