

REVIEW ARTS

A state of flickering consciousness

VISUAL ARTS

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There is, quite literally, a dizzying quality about the paintings of Ramakrishna Behera (*New Works*, Bose Pacia, till October 16). If you have ever had the misfortune of experiencing the giddiness that precedes swooning, you will probably relate to Behera's montage of distorted shapes in a more visceral way than many healthier viewers of his art. With their densely involuted structures, layers of crumbling, murky forms, and patches of fathomless darkness, these images may recall for you a state of flickering consciousness, when the world with its myriad bits and pieces struggled to cohere in your senses.

Based on the principles of Op Art, laid down by Bridget Riley, the reigning queen of the genre, Behera's compositions throw up bizarre challenges to the eye. He chooses intensely realistic moments, such as a cup of coffee lying on a table of a café inside a shopping mall, only to render it almost unrecognizable. By the time Behera is finished with this innocuous little thing, it is as if you are looking at the object reflected in a shattered mirror. As the cup lies tucked away in a corner of the canvas, the leaden air surrounding it seems to pulsate rhythmically, converging towards, or emanating from, the brownness of the coffee.



Book Open on Bed-table

And it is not just the material world that flows in and out of this tiny cup; the entire universe, with its stars, planets and galaxies, melt into it or erupt from it, as if out of a big bang — it all depends on your perspective. You may even feel as though you are looking at the scene through the eyes of those humanoid characters in the film, *Matrix*, reckoning with the ordinary in extraordinary ways. Indeed, there is very much of a suggestion of the menac-

ingly hyper-real about Behera's images, as his reference to Tarkovsky in the title of one of his best paintings makes it adequately clear. In this work, a black shadow-like trail of darkness cuts through the air, as the room around it spins, on the verge of being overpowered by a mighty earthquake.

A sense of the calamitous never quite leaves you even as you move on to Behera's splendid experiments with natural forms (the landslide on the way to Ladakh) or with historic monuments (the Ajanta Caves, the 64 Yoginis Temple at Hirapur in Orissa). Broken into wild arches and curves, these are truly anarchic set-ups, blossoming or closing in on themselves like the whorls of a wild flower. The regular, but unobtrusive, glimpses of cosmic phenomena — in the revolving planets or bursting stars — lend a mystical aura to these vignettes. Such artful interplay of perspectives turns what could have been perfectly



Yellow Flowers in Mr. Jangid's Garden

mundane moments into something rich and strange.

These tricks of perspective, especially the effect that Behera achieves by employing them, inevitably bring to mind the great master of experimental art, the Indian-born British artist, Anish Kapoor, and especially his magisterial work, *Cloud Gate*. Installed at the Millennium Park in Chicago, this massive bean-shaped structure made of welded stainless-steel plates looks like a giant UFO, sprawled in the heart of a bustling city. The entire Chicago skyline is reflected on its upper surface, and is rendered disturbingly askew by its

polished mirror-like exterior. People are able to walk through a hollowed archway at the bottom of the sculpture, and to see themselves turning and twisting into misshapen creatures on the shimmering walls. If you could have walked into the world of Behera's paintings, you would probably have experienced something similar.

While wide open spaces in Behera's work clearly have a vertiginous effect on the viewer, confined rooms and corners can be even more unsettling because of their claustrophobic associations. A few colourful shirts hanging on the wall and a book fluttering away on the bedside table, rendered in Behera's distinctive style, suddenly seem to have shrunk the room around you into a tight focus. It is as though you have stared long and hard at something closely until your eyes have turned watery, and the subject of your gaze has started melting into your tears. Behera's works, whether they make you look far or near, also push you to venture beyond the obvious.

Perspective plays a crucial role in Behera's art, to the extent that he risks making a fetish out of it. Although he has successfully adopted an unusual style for this show, one would expect him to eventually outgrow it and move on to newer challenges.