

Nilima Sheikh

Painter

'The physical act of painting is therapeutic'

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Nilima Sheikh is a painter.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I immediately want to disconnect it from anything formal. Because I fear seeing it eaten up by all sorts of formalistic approaches—not only religions but all kinds of cults and practices. It is something very unique for everyone. For me, it is first about a connection with nature. I do not mean it in a philosophical way. But in a very practical way, through art.

How does it happen?

The whole business of art is about transforming, about changing what is real into something different. Spirituality is exalting. It takes you beyond. But how do you find it? Seeing a child sleeping, a special moment in a relationship ? Yes, but those moments cannot always be reached. Whereas when you do something like painting or singing, you have far more ways to will that exaltation. You can ask for it. You can push yourself towards it.

Art allows you to make creative things out of nature. You not only enjoy it, but can also make something out of it, out of reality, the way you want it. Those moments do not always happen, they come in bits and pieces. But when they do, one feels both empowered and humbled.

Do you then feel like a conduit for something else?

I suppose that yes, one feels in some way like an instrument. I also think of all the art that has happened before me and that allows me to do it. I know that I will never create something more amazing than what has already been created. It's not about that. It's simply about the ability to create.

Was the urge to paint always there in you?

Not as much when I was younger. Today, it is a core, basic need. I cannot live without it. It is also therapy. The physical act of painting is therapeutic as you bring your mind, your body, your sensations all together. When I am not painting, I feel its absence.

When you create, is the impact you have on others important to you?

When I work, I have very few people in mind except some critics and some people who are responsive to my work. The desire to reach out to a wider audience comes later, but it is not that important.

Is there in all this the idea of a divine force?

That's a difficult question. I did not grow up with formal religion. I met religion mainly through art, as some of the best paintings in the world are religious. I can see that religion has been a major driving force for a lot of people in the world. I do not question that at all. But I haven't felt the need for it.

Perhaps I share the religious experience of so many artists that it fills up that space. Let's say you listen to a traditional song, to some bhajan—you know that only religion could evoke that kind of emotion. The same goes for a painting of Christ. So I can share these feelings, but they come into me filtered by art and history.

Are we here to accomplish some specific purpose or mission?

I think I am more aware of it as I am growing older. I have more sense of the things that have been chartered for me and not entirely willed by me. And there is always a struggle to accept that. Life is easier if you accept, and flow with it. But sometimes I resist. When I was younger, the immediate preordained thing was being a mother and having to look after the children. Simpler, more immediate destiny and tasks! Now it has changed a bit.

A lot of your themes are political and social. Is it part of your purpose to raise people's consciousness?

Certainly, it would be true for projects like the ongoing one about Kashmir. I feel I have learnt a lot there and want to give back by sharing the vision of Kashmir I have evolved by working there.

If there were such a thing as God and you could ask Him one question, what would it be?

I think I'd be too scared to ask. There are certain things which are most important to us, which touch us most, and that one does not want to know. And I'd prefer to bumble along ignorantly.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

I'd like a chance to do it again. And maybe be a fish as I love water so much? No, I am joking . I think I'd still like to be an artist. Even though it would be expecting too much luck.

I feel quite privileged to be an artist.

What is your idea of happiness?

Family, a lot. Though when the children were smaller, it was simpler. Seeing them asleep in the morning, for instance, felt so peaceful. It changes when they grow up. But still, it is a major source of happiness as I can contribute to the family. And, of course, happiness is also about doing enough painting, and being with nature.