

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh

Artist

'Poetry and painting allow me to be free'

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There is a great distance between what artist Gulam Mohammed Sheikh envisions in his mind and what a painting becomes, between thought and action, even if only a few seconds separate the two.

What does the word spirituality mean to you?

I think that to begin with, I should put this word in a historical context.

When it first came to me it had connotations of religiosity. Also, it was associated with a sense of mystery, a kind of oversimplified mysticism, packaged in some soft form.

So I was skeptical, and avoided using the term. I did not want to go into these areas and instead, attended to others.

The other fallacy was that it was considered opposite to material - amorphous, vacuous, therefore insubstantial, with no quality, no sensuality. I felt uncomfortable with the whole idea so I avoided it. But if I were to think of spirituality today, where would I locate it? And is it at all possible to locate it? As an artist, it would be very simply in the process of painting or writing. And I would delink it from religion or mysticism. I am not exactly sure how I would define it, but I can at least say that I have felt at times a certain sense of exaltation.

It comes rarely, and without calling, out of the blue. It then disappears without a hint. You may not know what the sensation is but it leaves you with a sense that you went through a palpably different experience, an experience you cannot cast into a mould of being religious or mysterious. It actually does not distinguish between what is physical or material and what is not. It is an experience you cannot fully comprehend.

Music on the other hand, or certain kinds of music can also give me this sense of exaltation, but in a more physically palpable way, in a more direct way – where I can pinpoint and say this music moves me very deeply.

Can you tell us more about this sense of exaltation in art?

It may not be instantaneous as with music, you may work for weeks or months on a painting before it happens – and it may also never take place. I have never fully understood it.

Several forces are at play - your body, your brush, the canvas you paint upon – how and where do they come together so that there is a confluence? I have no answer to that.

Is everything I paint first envisioned in my mind? Absolutely not. There is a great distance between thought and action, even if only a few seconds separate the two. You think of a straight line and the hand paints a curved one. Why? There are many forces commanding through your body. You eventually make something different from what you had envisioned. So the process of making art is so complex that no language can define it.

Still, could you describe how a painting is conceived? How does it start, how is it born, how does it unfold?

I do not know if there is a process of birth. Every moment it changes and it is very difficult to reconstruct how it happened. You pass through many phases.

A lot of it is hard work and perspiration. And you never know why something comes out of it, why something emerges from the colors and canvas. It is very difficult to define it. There are multiple forces working alongside the process of folding a brush and painting.

You come across gray areas, areas that are difficult to grasp. So it is very difficult to pinpoint and say this is how it was born. Yet I would not say it is a mystery. Because the word mysterious makes it sound insubstantial, non graspable, fuzzy. Everything is graspable. There is no distance between the physical or material and what you call spiritual. They are all moving into each other, continuously.

How did art come into your life?

I grew up in a middle class Muslim family in Gujarat. Art was one of the things taught in school. So I picked up pigments and started painting.

My eldest brother also did painting but could not get out of the family - being the eldest, he had to work, and did his matriculation, then took a job. Eventually he became a postmaster and never painted. Somehow it was denied to him. I was the youngest, three brothers had already gotten jobs before me, so I was left to do what I wanted. My father thought I was reasonably talented so why not go and study art. But we had no money. I then happened to meet a senior painter from Ahmedabad, Ravishankar Raval, who told me about the art school in Baroda, and made arrangements for me to be there. I didn't even know there was such a thing as the art school. And I had never gotten out of our small town. It was all so new.

Once I reached and discovered Baroda, there was no question of going back to my small town. Come what may, I would stay in Baroda. And there, I discovered a vocation.

A small town brings all kinds of inhibitions and terrible restrictions that prevent you from being truly free. Men and women rarely mix. Painting or drawing are not respected as a profession. Besides, in many ways you are bound by religiosity. So for the first time in my life, I was away from all those restrictions and could freely explore.

Later I realized that we consider religion as a kind of a property. We think we should give it to our children since we inherited it from our forefathers. We take it as a precious gift to give to our

successors. But in the meanwhile, we do not take the opportunity to question, to go outside and explore other belief systems. We are born in a certain system and think it is the ultimate one while all others are suspect.

Muslim children are usually sent to madrassas where they learn to recite the Koran (which I did) without understanding a single word of it. None of the Arabic gets translated. I kept asking for a translation, but was unable to get it. On the other hand, in school, I chose to study Sanskrit. I learnt the meaning of hymns and myths, I could read the Upanishads. So I knew more about other belief systems than the one I was born into.

Was yours a religious home?

Not terribly so. People live their own life within which religion plays a role. But more than religion, it is a sense of the sacred that guides people. Wherever it is found people are drawn to it.

Many of the customs we followed in our family would not fit in the Muslim system and were more social, community, or class rituals.

Is there such a thing as destiny for you, does the concept of God talk to you?

I grew up with it. But it was given within a system.

To me, certain forces work in a particular way and produce a particular result. I do not feel they are preordained by a larger force called God for instance. I always felt I am moving through an experience and somehow I must find my way. And how do I find it? Poetry and painting became my indicators, they became my way to be free and explore. They gave me a sense of personal liberation. In my first year of college, I managed to acquire many color pigments and I could simply mess up, freely, I could play, I could explore and break boundaries, I could move into areas I had never imagined existed. It was so liberating.

In a nutshell, painting and poetry allowed a personal quest to get liberated.

Where are you on that quest?

I went through so much. So many experiences, so many phases of life, sometimes you reach something, sometimes you lose. It is all part of the journey. And the desire to explore is always so strongly there in me.

Coming back to the idea of the spiritual, art has been a way to connect the sacred and secularism. Basically, I have no doubt that the sacred needn't necessarily be in the realm of the religious, or associated to a belief system. That is why I decided at some point to make shrines, in the form of a kavad, a wooden box that opens up in all four directions and tells a story. The first one was called 'Journeys'. I have a travel bug, and I have wondered all over the world. That wanderlust is still there.

If there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

I do not know whether I have such a question. And I wouldn't know whom to ask. The very fact of being on a quest is about unraveling something intriguing. So the entire process of writing and painting, of simply being is actually about asking a question – a question formulated differently every time.

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

I do not know whether this is a unique birth or if there will be another one. I like the idea of cycles, so I wouldn't choose to come back as the same. But life is so fascinating, it leaves so many doors open to so many questions. One life is definitely not enough. The world of experiences is far too great. So if life were to come to me again, it would be better.

What is your idea of happiness?

I don't really know. Good food can give me happiness. Looking at my grand-child gives me a great sense of happiness. Love, if you encounter it in your life, brings happiness.

There are so many ways to describe happiness but I do not really know what it is.

Maybe, if you were to touch upon the sense of being, that would be happiness. And art allows you to do so – it doesn't allow you to grasp the whole sense of being alive, but at least a part of it.

Yet, there may of course be other realms of happiness which I have never encountered.