

Tyeb Mehta

Artist

'Painting isn't about the reality I see'

Sun Feb 04 2007



Tyeb Mehta, Artist

What does spirituality mean to you?

I would imagine that spirituality is for those people not concerned with the common worldly affairs. They look beyond, material things do not matter to them. Only very few people are entirely so. But for me, I have tried to find answers unbound by the many traditions and conventions we are surrounded by, and all the rituals that people perform.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I am a believer, I believe in God and in its many manifestations. There is a divine presence and force around and in all of us.

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

Well, painting just happened in my life. I grew up in a family for which cinema was a major obsession. As a boy, I admired the painters employed to paint film hoardings, but basically I wanted to make films. I worked as a trainee-assistant but was disappointed with it all. Coming from a closed community,

I felt totally lost and alienated from my environment, spending those years drifting, haunted by fear, until I joined the J J School of Arts. There my teacher gave me Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Arts". It was a turning point in my life, and I decided to focus on painting. After that, I always felt that something was pushing me, an intuitive vision, a force telling me that no matter what, I shall become a painter. That vision gave me the strength to go through the very difficult times of my life.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

It is expressing my inner being through painting. Painting is not something about the reality I see outside, but rather something that comes from within. Every painting is a new exploration. It is about letting the painting grow in me, and finding a presence.

What is the role of spirituality in the world of the arts?

When growing up in a marginalized community, I was in a closed system. Once I moved out of it, I became part of a world system and could find inspiration in Hindu & Buddhist sculptures or the Christian Stations of the Cross. And so as much as I believe in the Prophet Mohammed, and am deeply affected by the narrative of Husain's martyrdom, I equally believe in the presence of Shiva or Kali. Any artist actually always has a vision of what he will do one day. Mine was that I would paint a mother goddess – that I would paint Kali. The way people usually portray her, with the tongue outside and so on is not Kali for me, but merely a sign of Kali. I had to find some way of painting her presence. I lived with her image for more than three years before even thinking of putting it on the canvas. And finally was able to do so in 1988.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

As spirituality and painting are so intertwined for me, I would mention a major life breakthrough, which took place in New York in 1968, at the Museum of Modern Art, in front of a painting by Barnett Newman. There, I finally understood that I could preserve the sheerness and radiance of large areas of colour, without sacrificing the figure. I came back to India and went on trying it for weeks until one day I gave up, and threw black colour to destroy the canvas. Instead, it all fell into place. The diagonal was the solution. And my painting was never the same again.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

I was born in an orthodox Muslim Shia sect called the Bohras. We were not accepted by the rest of the Muslim community and lived ostracised without mosques or minarets, prohibiting music, dance, painting. So I was a freak for that community! Of course I had many more inspirations. One I would mention is Krishnamurti. Every time he came to India and gave a talk, I was there. He advised to forget everything, every book like the Koran, the Bible and so on. He compared them to a ball thrown against a wall, which would necessarily bounce back at you. Instead, you ought to go much beyond the wall, trying to find the answers on your own.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

I would like to be a creator, of any kind.

If there was one question you could ask god, what would it be?

Allow me to create one painting that will stay with people forever, that people will talk about for ever.
I have yet to create it...

What is your idea of happiness?

To find a partner who can spend an entire life with you, and participate in all that you are & do.