

Dhruva Mistry

Transcript of a chance meeting with Picasso 2006

D: *For many years, I wished that we could meet. Perhaps, youth and inevitable difficulties of time might have made it impossible. However, I am delighted to welcome you as my much awaited guest. I hope you will be able to spare some time.*

P: In Elysium, I met Bharata, the Indian aesthete. Your sage encouraged me to see India, so I am in Gujarat on my way to the north.

(Pablo greeted D by looking straight into his eyes and disarming him with a friendly flash of smile and brisk embrace as he entered D's studio. In a short while, D brought him tea and breakfast. Soon, P. was sitting at the balcony table with hollowed black apples of his eyes made more motionless by him staring at the sharp shifting shadows created by leaping zigzag of a newly built street. His face, a bold and confident mask of etched calm seemed propped by the hands that made him a painter and man. Like other wanderers of his kind, P seemed to have reached D on his journey. Soon, P rolled his eyes and addressed D with a sunny grin.)

P: Since we have met, you may begin.

D: *I find your work refreshing. At my birth you were 70. As an art student in 1974, I had seen a black and white photo-print of Guernica. In 1983, I bought the poster while in Europe. Then, as a visitor from a developing country, I admired your mastery of classical tradition which allowed you to strengthen the conception of art as an emotional medium with dynamic power and vitality rather than formal or abstract perfection.*

You would have noticed that India is a living civilization with ever evolving values and a willing eye for learning. Despite national as well as international languages like Hindi and English apart from variety of regional languages, many face difficulties of learning. 'Classical' in Indian art remain an elite domain. There is growing influx of things from the West and rest of the world. Today, primitive, tribal, folk, classical, traditional, sacred, popular, modern and post-modernist experiments create a foxing visual climax. With modernism as a beacon of hope in 1900, we began to review our cultural past desiring to revive 'Indianness'. After a long march to freedom, in 1947 we became an independent republic. Between the World Wars, we were engaged in our freedom struggle from the British rule. Euphoria of independence got marred by the religious divide created by the partition. In 1947, Indian Progressive Artists and other groups began championing cause of 'modernism' by the time you had finished with significant 'isms' of the 20th century art.

Your analysis and simplification of form, individual Cubist exploration and discovery of forms with an idea of work of art as an object in its own right, not merely an image or reflection of reality outside itself is captivating. From 1900, our artists' began a difficult and a kind of distant learning. Our modernity may not command aggressive inventiveness of yours in Europe or the West. Indian artists remain shy, unnoticed and unacknowledged. You may find me little defensive, even argumentative for our democracy. You do know complexity of the monster in determining reality and are familiar with dramas of life and death colored with the atmosphere of Spain, its bullfighters, beggars, circus folk and its poets and painters. We love our Gods and believe in their battles against ignorance and evil.

P: To me, there is no past or future in art. Art does not evolve by itself. Unlike many former colonies, India is culturally rich with philosophy, literature, art and history. I love surging temple mounds, adorned by sculptures carved with the light and amour under the sun.

D: *Having spent most of your life in France do you feel burdened by being Spanish?*

(P seemed to retort with agile movement of hands and elliptical conversational style;

with references and associations rather than mulling over ideas with a sense of ease with himself.)

P: What I express interests me more than my ideas. I live life as it presents itself like a flower, fruit and tree.

D: *While conversing with outsiders, most easily visible and experienced contradictions of India make me rather self conscious. Do you think that new religiosity sentiments can be a mortal enemy for artistic freedom?*

(P's face wrinkled in a silent laugh of derision. He rolled his eyes and looked at D blankly with a mild grin with the breath of morning air. Then, he stretched himself as if to feel the smeared set of wrinkles across his forehead like a Shaivite priest before quietly uttering words without moving himself.)

P: We all know that art is not truth. If we were cultured, we would not be conscious of culture. We would regard it as something natural and would not make much fuss about it. If we knew the real value of this word we would be cultured enough not to give it so much importance. A government which would punish an artist for choosing the wrong color or the wrong line would be an impressive government. I caricature my interest beyond remorse to see the brighter side of life. Learn not to believe what you say when there is no answer. As for me, paintings are made in the same way that princes make their children: with shepherdesses. Desire to understand all must humbly see all that is useful. Dare to refuse playing the game of those who are defeated beforehand.

D: *Since economic liberalization of the 90s contemporary Indian art offer extraordinary assemblage of ideas with much greater visibility. Painting is perceived as much desired commodity. Lack of good writers on art and critics does not help the situation. Does growing popularity of your work make you feel elated?*

P: Everyone who wants to understand art should try to understand the song of a bird. Primitive sculpture has never been surpassed. How do you explain to yourself the disappearance of this marvelous simplicity? It is due to the fact that man ceased to be simple. If you balance yourself at the brink of abyss you'll fall. Everything depends on under what circumstances it springs up and the promptings of the epoch in which it unfolds. You see, Indian software industry is doing a world of good. The ideas of people change and with them their mode of expression. There are neither concrete nor abstract forms. I do not wish to classify everything. There is only communication between what sees and what is seen. I am not convinced if art can be made by drawing up a program to follow like young diligent students performing their tasks; not painting but making art. Without understanding positive and conclusive elements of search in research the artist lose himself in mental lubrication. Perhaps, this has been the principal fault of modern and post modern art producing the invisible and therefore, the unpaintable. This may have given rise to all that we see as 'art'. Despite painting for somebody, I do not belong to demand and supply economy of art. In the solitude of my work, I relish 'Rasa', the bliss of knowing Brahman.

D: *Your contribution to Modern art in first 50 years of the last century remains unparalleled and remains inspiring for many artists. I neither belong to interactive crowds or groups of artists nor follow fads and movements. However workable, I can't claim inheritance to passing fancies and exotic isms.*

While in London, I traveled to see and understand things. My curiosity led me to stay on to carry out my work from 1981-1997, which I did by minimizing material needs like owning a house, flat, car and other gizmos. It was a near Spartan mission to learn dealing with difficulties and beginning my life of an Indian artist in early 80s. Nonetheless, like a secret treasure, I kept looking at the poster of Guernica as a reminder to look into the work. It is a construct of human violence and pain in black and white as compared with seeing smaller reproductions in books. Yours is throughout knowledge of space and distances between desires, dreams, and nightmares. Your curiosity leads me to the depth of your fateful vision that turns it into a brave object.

Bombing of Guernica led you to reveal science of proportion and anatomy of anguish in a record time of May-June 1937. Your emotional tenseness, a mood of foreboding, preoccupation with anguish is evident in number of sketches, drawings and painted study for the work. Your concern for mythological image of the Dying Horse and minotaur reminds me of the battles of Indian Goddess devouring buffalo demon and the Weeping Woman; wrath of Kali as annihilator of evil. Your ability to postmortem emotions seems to expel wailing sentiments and acquired 'correctness' of contemporary life. You seem to free yourself by expelling pain through your total involvement in finding the real with its own form and weight. Hence, I call my drawing based upon Guernica 'Expulsion of Pain'.

(P slowly moved his eyes and focused upon the poster of Guernica and threw a glance on the Dying Horse and moved it to the ominous shadow of a standing bull before closing them for some moments. Opening his eyes he picked up a glass of water with renewed interest.)

P: To find what I want to draw, I must begin drawing with ideas as simple points of departure, just as they come to mind. It can be difficult to be able to pinpoint them. It is not so easy to enter into indifference and stay there. What do you mean by 'Expulsion of Pain' ?

D: *While learning to draw from you, I feel oblivious to outer things. You too work from the masters, all kinds of art and nature. Rather than seeking 'pleasure' you seem to have a way to expel 'pain' of being alive. Your line and mass with subtle shades of gray offer mighty architecture of form. Your ever growing vision for clarity helps open unknown paths. To follow Guernica, I did set out with the sensation of leaping into the work to find linear bridges which wire the drama. In the end, I seem to have found a kind of solarized geometry of 'things' with gravity firmly strung in the picture space. Application of paint on two dimensional surface make the best comment a sculptor can make on painting.*

I made my first computer drawing in 1989 and worked to enlarge and reduce its scale with a printer. By 1996, personal computer had become one of my tools. Since 1998, I began to learn working with drawings for wire and sheet metal constructions. My recent sculptures in steel use digital vision and technology. Unlike enlarging photographic images, computer allows scaling of the work with minimum loss of quality. It is absorbing to understand how you would have drawn and painted an aptly lit drama of cruelty, horror and indignation at the destruction of bombing of the Basque capital. I can imagine you making subtle changes in your facial expressions while drawing, mixing paints, dipping brush and painting and making formidable corrections with grays and black and white by painting over areas creating a sensation of bursting into space. Unlike your smaller study for the work, the scale of the large work contain certain urgency with drips following moments of tenseness as you must have climbed up and down a stepladder and paced about back and forth to look at consequent findings. It must have been a dialogue of decisions with canvas and paint till early hours of the night. Studying evolution of Guernica from your initial pencil study till the end of the piece is like a peep into the furnace of ideas. Since 1937, history has revealed numerous wars, massacres and growing acts of terror. There is an insatiable appetite of the media to cater stories of crime, terror, atrocities and wars.

Unlike invisible pressure of life in London or a spell of working at local art school, computer seems to offer rational freedom through its virtual scope, actually affecting true work in real practice. Through its connectivity, I communicate apart from preparing technical files required to make my larger works in steel or other materials; without using clay, plaster and sculpting tools. My studies and variations of drawings from Guernica are called 'Expulsion of Pain'. Apart from number of variations of the drawing, there are several color studies leading from one thing to another. The work serves as a digital blue print of horror, ready to be filled in with riot of colors when communal tension cause unwarranted suffering and pain for people. In the land of nonviolence and Gandhi, agony of 2002 riots remains unprecedented, with tacit fears of explosive violence.

Like Rajasthani puppet show with mustachioed folk, wide eyed kings and fairy pink queens, horses, swords, shrieks, drum and squeaks; Guernica remains a tightly woven tableau of forms with movement and shapes befitting geometry of horrors as a lantern lit drama allowing me to search and find objects in the dark recesses of the work. With varying density of line, I inserted my drawing, worked upon areas and composed the work until it mirrored picture of my imagination. Bull, the ominous silhouette of power, wailing woman, dropping of a dead infant, shrieking horse, frightened bird, house on fire, crawling woman, falling figure and door, lantern of hope, dimming light bulb, blinking civility, broken sword and lance, teary eyes, weeping wounds, scattered limbs, torn book, knives, broken spectacles, arrows and rubble reveal a state of anarchy.

Still, news and images of horror continue to make headlines. When wild stories of communal tension continued in spring 2002, I got busy working with 'Expulsion of Pain'. Having worked upon the first line drawing of Guernica, I looked at the Battle of San Romano by Uccello revealing art and science of perspective and problems in optics to represent reality. His sense of patterning, geometric construction and natural feeling for abstract pictorial design with Florentine colors and wavy flags seemed part of his brooding action. Uccello's scale of the murals would have appealed to you with the dead, the tempest, lightening bolts and fury of the wind woven together with great care and skill.

P: Yes, an idea is like an egg; hatch it to find out what it offers to you. For me, 'man' and 'beast' command compulsive attention.

D: *Your design reveals spatial essentials of 'Battle of San Romano'. I felt that Uccello's battle scene revealed not just similarity of terrain but primitive brutality in the rural areas of the district. Dusty roads, fields, hillocks, sparse vegetation and scant people resemble a known landscape. It reminded me of despair of Masaccio's 'Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden of Eden'. The couple, as a construction of objects in nature; using light, defines construction of body involving violent movement that recall prime portrayal of emotional stress. In my drawing, Maya, the archer of desire seem to be expelling the couple. Incidentally, Masaccio died at an early age of 27!*

P: I see. What does 'Expulsion of Pain' mean to you?

(P seemed to have not closed his eyes for a while and brushed his fingers over them as if to place ideas into his mind before opening them with an undisturbed stare of an outsider.)

D: *You had called Guernica a picture of all bombed cities in 1937. Since then, there have been Vietnam, Bangladesh, Rwanda, Drafur, Combodia, Bosnia and other wars. The world is witness to the colorful images of terror of 9/11 at the World Trade Centre, Afghan war and more recently for the second time war in Iraq. Series of acts of terror from Tiananmen Square, 7/7, the London bombings, 7/11; Mumbai and others. People seem to be subconsciously prepared for possible act of terror. As TV and news media compete for viewers around the clock, digital transmission of anguish becomes unnervingly urbane. Rapid pace of trade, industry and progress seem to expel pain with little fuss. Most people work to make ends meet and greet images of dream and comfort with the touch of a button. It is a form of mass connivance in the emerging economies with their cultural values. Inevitably, wounds of violence leave invisible scars upon ideas of freedom and consciousness.*

Children's predilection for grotesque TV cartoons prompted my son to call my coloring of 'Expulsion of Pain', "a super 3D!" In opposition to your black and white tonality, I want to paint over the drama with bright colors. Even in color, it is difficult to avoid your formidable grip of tonality. I wish you had employed Indian palette for a change as in our miniatures, where drawing, composition and application of paints play significant role based upon exquisite observation of nature. Painting is like a screen as well as a mirror. 'Modernism' seems to have affected art more than our fascination for European realism since the Moguls. Inadequacy of optical realism and use of chiaroscuro since Ravi Verma, his oleographs, its impact on popular calendars and hand painted cinema hoardings seem well replaced by the flow of hi-tech cameras,

DVDs, projectors, mobile phones. There are alluring images in the form of clippings, advertisements, downloads and digitally printed hoardings as well as snapshots for Indian 'photo realism'. Thus, painting becomes 'half true' rather than 'not true' for rapid proliferation of images that surround us.

P: If I were born Indian, I would have used spatial and emotive possibilities of forms with Indian colors. Your exuberance for drawing, sculpture and painting is obvious. I see how you work to unlock your vision with variations of thought and process. Life in India reveals a lyrical joy. From early on, I was drawn to the contrast in life like a primitive to find 'gravity' and density of objects. In 1900, modernism offered necessary punch for painters reproducing the world. It seems to me that photography is everything that painting isn't. It marked the beginning of an end of an epoch profiting from newly acquired liberty of photography. Therefore, I make painting for the 'painting'.

D: *You know well, how often you have worked to understand and analyze works of masters for a better insight. Interestingly, several artists with different skills used to work together to produce our priceless miniatures. We do not quite care for chronicles and pay scant attention to detail. Nonetheless, we don't shy away from imitating the good. Recently, Art auction are among the hottest attractions in our art scene. You see, the world is waking up to Indian economy and Indians about her art through bidding for necessities of acquisition.*

P: I had seen adaptation of 'Waiting for Godot' in one of the new republics from the former USSR. It is time to update old and complex social systems into new equality of excellence. An artist needs success. Success is dangerous when artist begins to repeat oneself. Success can be obtained without compromise, even in opposition to all prevailing doctrines. However, it must always go to those who flatter the public taste. To make oneself hated is more difficult than to make oneself loved. To achieve a degree of practical comprehension of the form, you must work to follow the works of masters rather than adapt to things. Perhaps, easel and oils are still new and alien for the traditional ways of painting. I am comfortable with small format until it is necessary to work otherwise.

D: *Despite considerable Western influence, we hadn't had any foreign artist of consequence working in India. I wish someone like you can live here.*

P: Since advent of photography, there is reasonable turmoil. Art will continue its course since Modernism has opened the doors of possibilities of visual communication. However, I wish there were ateliers in India with master printmakers, professional founders for fine art casting, even stone carvers, potters and ceramists especially with incredible reserve of skills, artisans and craft knowledge. One can hope for better public and private exhibition 'space', a fair and discerning public capable of appreciating quality and excellence. Anyway, like nature, I must draw paint and sculpt the way I see each work as a new beginning. Now, enough of art my friend! I don't suppose this is 'the end' of our conversation.

(With an amicable disruption P began sniffing aroma of lunch being cooked in the kitchen downstairs. Before getting up he turned his head, flashed a smile and widened his eyes and rushed to the restroom; gesturing appetizing lunch and consequent siesta. D responded with a mild grin before peering into his mobile to check time and date. It was 12.35pm on Thursday, 13th July, 2006.)

Illustrations

- 1. Pablo Picasso, Guernica, Paris, Oil on canvas, 349.3x 776.6 cms, May 1-June, 1937, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sophia, Madrid*
- 2. Paolo Uccello, Nicolo da Tolentino leading the Florentines, Wood, 1456, National Gallery, London*
- 3. Adam and Eve expelled from the garden of Eden, Fresco, 1424(?) Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence*

4. *Kali consumes the Demon Raktabija, From Devi Mahatmya series, Gouache on paper, Pahari, 4th quarter of the 18th century, National Museum, New Delhi*

References

1. *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views, Dore Ashton, New York, 1972, ISBN 670-55327-1*