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Holy cow! Not so sacred anymore?

impressions Namita Gokhale



AS A WRITER, I have always been intrigued by the strong narrative element in Sidharth's work. Each of his paintings tell a story, and the symbols and metaphors he employs have a strong taste of poetry. Watching him at work, preparing for his new exhibition on the cow, I have observed how he relocates the same plot in different styles and situations.

The cow, once the natural focus of pastoral life, is a dysfunctional wanderer through the urban Indian nightmare. Sacred only in name, the cow eats plastic bags and rotting garbage in street corners; there are no green pastures in sight, no Krishna, the cowherd, divine effulgence to protect it. Instead, there are street children, wretched and displaced, victims of the same uncaring environment.

The exhibition, opening at the Religare Gallery on March 13, takes us on a journey through myth and memory, into the place that the gau mata has in the larger Indian consciousness. Yet

it is not a sentimental journey, as the artist also gets us to travel through the streets and slums where the same gau mata is daily tortured and crucified. Sidharth's cows are still, strong and patient. Their eyes are full of pain and compassion. They are captured in street crossing, in toxic dumps, in temples, fields and dream landscapes.

Together, the composite story of these canvases is told through a layered catalogue where art lovers and critics read and interpret the moving and hurtful tale of what we have done as a society to the nurturing animal Indians refer to as "mother".

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The Betrayal

THIS EVOCATIVE image of stillness and calm in the midst of Dionysian revelry contrasts and contexts the retulgent innocence of a virginal girl-child holding a young calf, surrounded by a horde of revellers. The figures in the background seem to be celebrating some pagan rite of passage, each in their own way, from ecstatic communion to calm devotion.

The painting is situated in time and place in a village near Mathura where, every year on Gobardhan day, a young girl from the area draped, in the garments of yellow pitambra and accompanied by a new-born calf, is worshipped by a frenzied crowd of local devotees — many of them only half-clothed, garlanded with marigold flowers, their foreheads crowned with plumes of peacock feathers. As they dance with wild abandon on the dusty riverbank, Sidharth's painting shows us the girl-child and her companion the calf, the objects of this fanatic faith, standing alone, silent and observant.

Sidharth's mastery over colour and tone is evident in the serene and radiant aura of the young girl and the calf. Around them the hues and texture of sand, dust and marigold create an arrested picture of frenetic motion. This ancient ritual is still conducted annually during



the period of the Gobardhan Puja after Diwali, in and around the Braj region. The revellers crawl under the frightened calf to receive blessings and benedictions. Ironically, while the virginal girl and new born calf symbolise potentiality, innocence and fertility, the very elements that sanctify them also make them social victims in a greed-obsessed contemporary society that routinely practices female foeticide and infanticide.

Sidharth's enormous talent for maintaining a strong narrative element in his work without compromising its iconic unity is very much in display in this deeply disturbing canvas.

Crossing the Bhav Sagar



THIS DREAMY moonlit nightscape has a deceptive air of simplicity, but contains many deep suggestions of psychic, intuitive and mythical resonance. A cow is swimming across the Bhav Sagar, the sea of emotions. It has an air of beatific certainty and resolution. Holding on to the tail of the cow, a young woman seeks to cross the same ocean. Her face reflects ecstasy, fear and bewilderment. Besides her, a tiny fish plops out of the water to observe, and perhaps silently comment upon, the scene.

What is this painting

about, exactly? As in much of Sidharth's work, it contains a sense of both stillness and movement. The intense expanse of indigo that dominates the canvas has been extracted from actual vegetable dye and has an almost unbearable radiance.

The three figures of the cow, the woman and the fish, represent perhaps the earth, the ego and the intuitive self. It is a mysterious, questioning scene which both moves and perturbs the viewer.

Namita Gokhale is a well-known writer and publisher