



Sanjay Roy in the set of 'Fruits Ripen and Rot'

■ FILM REVIEW ■

STILL TO MOVING IMAGES

Films by Artists at KIFF

Ratnottama Sengupta

When Maqbool Fida Husain won the Golden Bear in the 17th edition of the Berlin Film Festival, the year was 1967. I, in my pre-teen years, knew little about painting. But growing up in a family of filmmakers I was already conversant with the art of looking through the camera. So I was disoriented that the film critics of the time were baffled by what had impressed the international jury.

Royalty, tigers, ruins, hawks, school children, anklets, on the river bank - all these images moving only to music, not a word uttered. The jury at Berlinale were astounded by the richness of the artist's idiom that had breathed life into a Rajasthan that is rich in architecture as it is in painting, in costume as in music.

This dawned on me years later, when I curated the exhibition, 3 Dimensions, for the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society in New Delhi. It featured paintings, sculpture and graphic art or

drawings by artists from Husain, Satish Gujral, Ghulam Mohammad Sheikh, Jatin Das to Sanjay Bhattacharya, Paresh Maity, Mimi Radhakrishnan, Shadab Hussain, among others.

A unique feature of this exhibition was that all the participating artists had interest in another expression of art. So every evening of that week had seen a Ram Kumar and Mimi read their short stories; a Narendra Pal Singh and Jatin Das read their poems; a Sanjay Bhattacharya render Tagore songs of and a Shruti Gupta Chandra perform Kathak. Ratnabali Kant had staged a Performance Art in the presence of Prime Minister V P Singh who had inaugurated the week-long exhibition by reading his poems. And, on the closing day, I had screened Through a Painter's Eyes. That's when it dawned on me: it was the originality of vision captured by the 7-minute short film had won over Berlin as also Melbourne and our very own National Awards too.

Subsequently Husain, who had started out

from the tenements of Bombay by painting oversized hoardings of Hindi films on the sleeping tramlines at the dead of night, had at the ripe age of 84 made *Gaja Gamini* (2000) with stars such as Madhuri Dixit, and *Minaxi -- A Tale of Three Cities* (2004) with Tabu and Naseeruddin Shah. Ironically these films baffled the critics just as much as the earlier short film had. However the dazzling visuals of vibrant figures and colourful structuring of the (non)-narrative had found acceptance in the Marche du Film section of Cannes 2004.

I have since then tried to fathom what drives artists who are skilled at painting with oil or watercolour, or sculpting wood or stone, metal or clay, or creating graphic images on paper or linoleum, to wield the megaphone. Now, instead of holding the camera or editing the celluloid strips with their hands, they use their mind, their

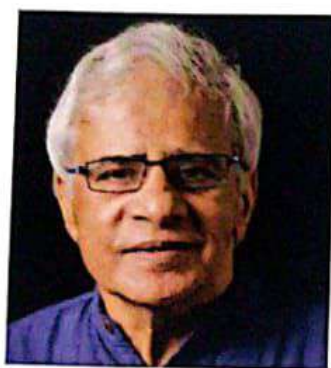
mind's eyes, their creative imagination.

Some other contemporaries of Husain too had, after attaining glory in the plastic arts, turned to experimenting with the new, ever evolving, ever contemporary art form -- cinema. In 1970, Tyeb Mehta, who had briefly worked as an editor, made *Koodal*, meaning 'Meeting Ground' on the Bandra station of Mumbai's Western Railway. The synthesis of images of humans and animals had won him the Filmfare Critics Award.

Cartoonist Abu -- born Attupurathu Mathew Abraham -- was a journalist and author who had worked for *Punch*, *Tribune* and *The Observer* in London before returning to work with *The Indian Express*. He was given a special award by the British Film Institute for the short animation *No Ark*, clearly a cryptic message deriving from the Biblical tale of Noah's Ark. Equally engrossing is the story of *Syzygy* also



Tyeb Mehta



Vivan Sundaram



Akbar Padamsee



MF Husain



Rameshwar Broota



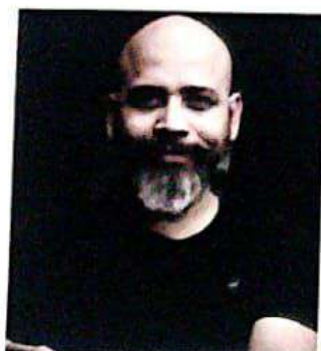
Gopi Gajwani



Ranbir Kaleka



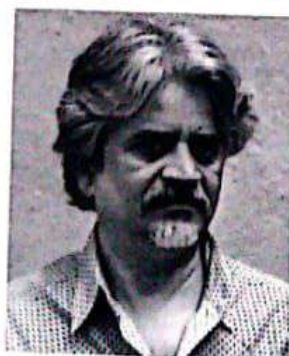
Bharati Kapadia



Pratul Dash



Veer Munshi



Babu Eshwar Prasad



Gigi Scaria



Sanjay Roy

produced by Films Division, and directed by Akbar Padamsee. This 16-minute short, premiered at a UNESCO screening in Paris 1969, had no narrative, no sound, or even colour. It only had lines evoking shapes typically used to refer to the alignment of celestial bodies. Only one man had stayed back till the end of the screening -- and he had said to Padamsee, "Most people could not understand your film -- it's a masterpiece." Reportedly that man had gone on to become the programming director at Cinematheque Francaise - world's largest film archive. That's where Indian filmmaker found Ashim Ahluwalia found a copy of Events in a Cloud Chamber, Padamsee's second film that was sent for screening at the Delhi Art Expo -- never to be returned to the artist. The lost-in-transit film has now been professionally reinterpreted by Ahluwalia.

NB: All these films were supported by filmmaking bodies, and though often baffled, cineastes realised theirs was a new way of seeing the visual expression that goes under the arching umbrella of cinema.

This desire to understand, adapt, and get under the skin of a modern medium had driven Tagore, a century ago from today, to paint expressionistic forms and also to film NatirPujo (1931). And today we find a band of artists from Delhi, Mumbai, Kerala and Baroda making films that bridge disciplines from landscape and abstraction to mimetic movement and drama. What are the notable features of these films that are mostly made on video? They too have little need for dialogue. Instead, their sight is supported by music of natural sound. If the objects they capture through the lens are arresting forms, vacant spaces can be just as inviting. When they have humans as their protagonists, they are keen to capture body language rather than drama. Colourful palette is not a foregone conclusion - monochromes and black and white can be more poignant. Because? Their visuals are but vehicles for commenting on social reality and for communicating philosophic content.

Legends or veterans, seasoned or sprouting, this intrepid band of adventurers includes Vivan Sundaram, Ranbir Kaleka, Gopi Gajwani, Rameshwar Broota, Bharti Kapadia, Babu Eshwar Prasad, Gigi Scaria, Protul Dash, and Sanjay Roy. They are a continuum of the spirit of experimentation that had driven Husain and Tyeb, Abu Abraham and Akbar Padamsee.

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1 Disclaimer 2016/ 9:40 min

By Gigi Scaria focuses on the sleight of hands by a magician

2 On the Road 2021/ 5:7 min

By Babu Eshwar Prasad is a nostalgic look at road movies that are part documentary, part adventure.

3 Sabash Beta 3 min

By Rameshwar Broota with Vasundhara Tewari applauds the galloping of a fleightly horse.

4 Leaves Like Hands of Flame 2010/ 5:34 min

By Veer Munshi likens the fallen chinara leaves to the autumn in the lives of uprooted Kashmiris.

5 L for... 2019/ 13:14 min

By Bharti Kapadia plays with the sight and - surprisingly - the sound of the alphabet.

6 Fruits Ripen and Rot 2022/ 4:21 min

By Sanjay Roy is a surrealistic look at the divergent responses to food that is central to everyman's existence.

7 How Far...? 2023/ 12:37 min

By Ranveer Kaleka is an elegy, a dirge, mourning the losses wrought to Planet Earth by human destruction such as war.

8 Burning Angel 2024/ 4:37 min

By Pratul Dash is an abstract story of the same destruction.

9 Turning 2008/ 11 min

By Vivan Sundaram is a silent, colourful comment on the waste created by consumerist civilization.

10 Time 1974/13 min

By Gopi Gajwani is a riveting tale of how relative a minute is to one in mourning, one waiting, and for one in love.

Kolkata International Film Festival