

the past  
was  
yesterday



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## THE PAST WAS YESTERDAY

In her studio, works are yet to be set in frames and lie scattered, like the leaves she so often likes to paint, hither thither. Sans frames, the works reveal—beyond their painterly surface - an almost sculptural quality. The wooden door with that rusted lock: just paint, you wonder. The painter explains that the sculptural dimension to the paintings is not by random chance but deliberately woven into her technique over the years, giving the motifs their feel of solidity.

And you start your dialogue, probing, probing into the narratives, the veiled elegiac notes, the parallel worlds that almost merge, about the life and times of Kiyomi Talaulicar. She speaks, gently and at length, since that is her way. That is what strikes you about her persona, immediately, the fact that she is never in a hurry, as she speaks, sharing her works with you, and later, you observe her as she works on her canvases, creating layer upon layer, deliberately bringing in that multidimensional quality that lends the paintings their sculptural construct.

Outside, the maximum city heaves and sighs, the rush of traffic on the roads below an endless scream of horns and car tyres rushing by. Within, there is the sound of silence, sometimes the strains of Mozart or Chopin, as she bends over her canvas, painting patiently. The austerity of her space allows just the occasional lightening of mood when her daughter Gayatri dances in, full of gossip and laughter about her day at college. Then, with her exit, silence rules again. The artist is back at her canvas, inhabiting once again her own floating world. Her concentration unwaveringly dwells on the work at hand and she is delicately painting the surface, adding texture, pausing every once in a while to inspect the painting, before moving to the next stage, a step closer to the effect she seeks.

Kiyomi's paintings are meditative and lyrical, the tinge of melancholia enhanced by the colour palette she favours of ochres, greys, blues, sienna, browns, flashes of blue and dark maroons. The dark gold glaze she treats her paper with reflects the feel of gold leaf used so strikingly in ancient Russian icons. The palette with its subtle, translucent colours is perfectly suited in the context of her narratives that hint at a nostalgia for what once was, her memories of yesterday, even as she has moved on, inhabiting a present that is exciting and radiant with promise. The different time zones of her past and present intercept as she shows me her paintings and I am fascinated to see how the two journeys converge on her canvas, in her works. There is that yesterday, I think, looking at the two chairs facing each other in one work, the reference to a younger self, the setting up home with little means but a lot of love. Over time the chairs have faded and stand as theatre props, as though witnessing a gradual shift from those times, as if the lead protagonists in the play were other people, strangers she had encountered fleetingly.

The presence of absence permeates through the works and like a leitmotif; there is the recurrent appearance of the chair, the empty chair waiting to be occupied. Fleeting, the image of a beautiful woman comes to mind, waiting, perhaps at the window, for a lover or a loved one to return, her glance occasionally falling upon the unoccupied chair. And I am reminded of Arshile Gorky's words: 'The stuff of thought is the seed of the artist. Dreams form the bristles of the artist's brush. As the eye functions as the brain's sentry, I communicate my innermost perceptions through the art, my worldview.'

Present: Kiyomi's world now is a tangle of responsibilities and commitments; she is divided between two passions and tries to devote her time to both art and music. Most often, art wins and she rues the fact that her musical equipment gathers dust while she bends over her worktable painting. Yet, she is a sought-after musician and escaping from her studio, she often gets together with musician friends to jam and play the guitar. It has brought her solace and tranquility, her music, in the aftermath of the terrible 26/11 assaults on her city, after her father's death.

About her personal trajectory, away from India for 15 years, Kiyomi returned to Mumbai, relocating her family in the familiar neighborhood she had grown up in, close to her old, ancestral home. There was that comfort of living in an area where she had gone to school, then Sir JJ School of Art, where she had met her husband Anant, before leaving it all to head for America.

A goldmedallist from Sir JJ School of Art (BFA, Painting, 1986), Kiyomi was offered a fellowship there that she couldn't accept as she moved to the USA in 1988. She attained an MFA (Painting, 1993) at East Carolina University where she won the Gravely Foundation Scholarship and the Liquitex Excellence in Art Award, followed by more awards and honours at different exhibitions held in North Carolina, Minnesota, New Mexico and Wisconsin, including the



Jerome Foundation/Women's Art Registry of Minnesota Scholarship in 2001-02.

The years were busy and apart from establishing herself as an artist of distinction, she now had a beautiful daughter to share her life with. She multi-tasked and with great efficiency not only spent hours painting and bringing up her child but also moonlighting as a musician, a guitarist.

Then came the decision to return and adjust to life in the metro she had once called home. And so she did, reconnecting with friends and several senior artists who had always been there to guide her as a young student, especially Altaf Mohammedi and Akbar Padamsee.

Altaf and Kiyomi had, through the years, kept their occasional trysts at Samovar Café to exchange notes and ideas. "In Altaf's company I would forget that I often felt an outsider each time I'd visit Mumbai, and it was with a sense of deep anguish that I learnt of his passing. My grief was very deep because I had lost a true friend. But then, I was also very fortunate to have had Akbar Padamsee invite me to his studio often to show him my works, as well as Kekoo Gandhi, who invited me to show at Gallery Chemould."

Circa November 2013: Against the wall stands a large canvas, the painting of a shirt on a hanger, stemming from a reservoir of memories associated with her father. The faded saffron material is breathing with the memories of love. It is a relic, a reminder of a man who was a laughing, loving man, a father who walked a little girl to school on her first day, holding her hand gently in his. The trails of her past weave their way in her work as if the past is her subject, the many yesterdays with their many, many memories.

There are smaller, more intimate works that draw from the household's inanimate objects but the artist seeks to invest in them a sense of emotive consciousness. Thus the clock, jars, chairs, ladder, the guitar, a flute, a twist of twine, leaves and shells appear haiku-like, visual poems that hint at mysterious histories. In contextual reference, one would like to contend that her style harks back to elegant classicism, a legacy she inherited from the distinguished masters of yore.

On a visit to Ladakh, she had found peace in the monasteries, spent hours meditating. Reflecting on her spiritual journey, she is persuaded that Buddhism has a role to play in our modern times; it has the power to heal the wounds inflicted upon society, its people. Taking a cue from her faith, Kiyomi's art explores the nature of life, its resilience that enables it to rise from the rubble, Phoenix-like. The Zen-like minimalism in her explorations extends sometimes to the paper she uses, staining it with tea/coffee to get a sepia-stained look. Her art captures timelessness, a lived-in solidity that is tactile, not squeaky-clean stainless steel, the objects she has painted have survived and with each, there is a personal history, an ownership and belonging.

The Rocking Horse, Swing and the portrait of When The Clock Stopped are steeped in this sepia-tinted melancholia, a yearning of what once was. The leaves, painted with delicate precision, are exquisitely veined, their fragility and impermanence symbolising the cycle of life and death.

In a playful departure, the artist has dedicated a painting to the genre of cave art and the naive images of the horse reveal the wonderment she has felt in the company of animals. She recalls her home in the woods years ago when she lived in a log cabin and where she'd often see the footprints of various animals in the snow. The trails of those memories continue to texture her works with its impressions of pressed leaves and occasionally the 'sympathetic magic' of cave paintings. The deliberate touch of realism is an interesting technique, giving the spool of thread or the pages of script, the cage and the film their intimate narrative. Each work of art reveals, beneath the layers, the stages of their evolution. The past was yesterday, today, the evening deepens and lights illumine the Marine Drive sweep as Mumbai prepares for the night.

Bed, birdcage, and a chest of drawers,  
the biggest shell, the flat and foot-shaped  
piece of granite I found myself,  
the paddle, and the portable ink-well;

the baby-book, the coffee spoons the blue enamel, the cloisonné coffee spoons with blue enamel,

where – where can I take them next?

Inventory, Elizabeth Bishop

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