

Tableaux of moods

Douglas and his charged world

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DOUGLAS looks set to become one of India's leading artists: he is a painter with evident gifts, he is young, in his early forties, and the way his work has gained depth over the last ten years or so makes one think that he will soon find for his powers an exact and clarifying expression. And when he has done so, it will be largely a solitary achievement. Though Douglas has been closely associated with Cholamandal artists since his student days and though the

ethos of the Cholamandal village (near Chennai) must have shaped him in some fundamental way, it is not easy to link his painting with the works of any of his contemporaries; neither can it be traced to anything of K.C.S. Panikkar, who was Cholamandal's guiding spirit.

Panikkar's mature work seems to be a cerebral examination – at first blush at least – of the nature of the visual sign; and a certain analytical attitude informs the work of many of his students. Douglas, by contrast, is a painter first, and last; one who is extremely ambitious with his medium.

This point is made for two reasons. First, because pictorial meaning in his recent work depends so much on the eye attending closely to facture, to the activity of the painting hand, and then because the larger movement of art in the last three decades has often called the powers of painting into question: either by abandoning it altogether for other mediums, or in the process of disputing the formalist dogmas of late modernism, which had given painting pride of place among the plastic arts (and the lingering attractions of which are due to the sophistication of Clement Greenberg's criticism).



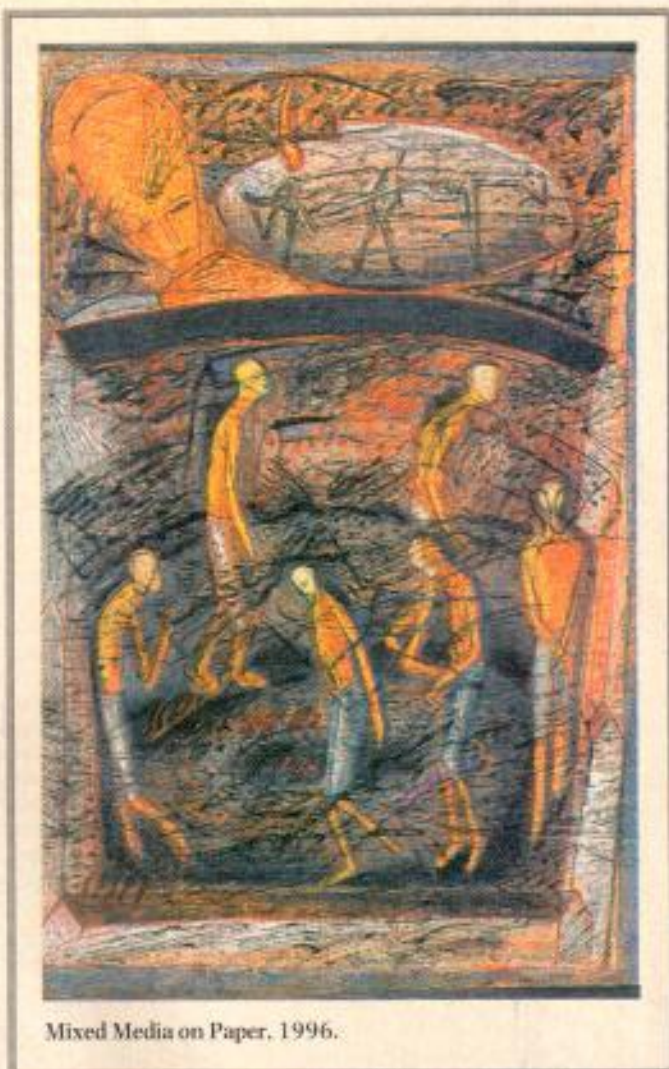
What still links Douglas to neo-expressionist painters is his willingness to take on large ideas and his ability to do so without compromising his work as painting. Eros – sexual energy as a primordial and pervading force, to which human nature is violently subject – is the thematic core of the work reproduced here. The diptych, however, lends itself to interpretation.

A range of alternatives emerged through the 1960s to contest formalist painting: pop, conceptual art, assemblage, installation, performance, process (these are some of the more common labels). All these practices attempted in their own ways to release the artist from a constricting reflexivity – formalist painting is “about” colour only; any other sort of content is anathema – so that he or she could tackle life, so to speak.

Looking back now, it does seem that the supposed death of painting in the 1970s was only an extended sleep. Besides, there were artists, notably of the School of London, who painted right through it all. Indian art did not seem to go through such crises (artists like K. G. Subramanyam probably prevented that). The seemingly sudden resurgence of painting in the early 1980s in the hands of the Italian “transavant-garde” and the German neo-expressionists produced the excitement of a Resurrection. Painting promised to reach again the heights its past masters had taken it to.

One needs to rehearse all this here because Douglas is most easily approached by referring him to recent European painting. When I first saw his work three years ago, its scarified figures and surfaces immediately brought to mind neo-expressionists, the more sombre ones, especially – Anselm Kiefer rather than, say, Sigmar Polke. (A more remote influence on Douglas surfaces then – but not now – might have been Dubuffet’s textuologies; but I hesitate to make any connection here since there is nothing ‘tachist’ or ‘primitivised’ about his painting.)

Douglas’s earlier work had been bound by a geometric abstraction and it is very likely that he was provoked to move past that by his contact with these very potent artists who were not shy of the figure and who freely used all the plastic resource of painting. That contact seems to have been an unusually enabling one; and keeping it



Mixed Media on Paper, 1996.

in mind will help the viewer orient himself to Douglas. But one has to be a little careful when referring Indian painting to Western sources. European neo-expressionism has its own formal history and looking at an Indian painter through that formal filter, in the absence of a similar past here, may raise expectations he cannot easily satisfy. (Souza’s success with the strategies of expressionist painting may seem to prove the contrary, but that depended on his becoming ‘westernised’ and ‘Christianised’ to an almost distorting degree, as Geeta Kapur argues in her essay on his work.) One has to ignore the foreignness of Douglas’s sources at some point and see whether the devices he has borrowed have been adapted well to the local habits of the eye.

Douglas relies on facture: specifically, it is the continual and variously modulated movement of sensuous attention back and forth between the pictorial surface and the picture plane

– between the mark made on the surface and the motif emerging in the plane – that generates and controls pictorial meaning coupled with, of course, the movement of attention across the picture. (Very roughly, the pictorial surface, with its marks and pigment, is what one ‘looks at’, while motifs and colours in the picture plane are what one ‘sees’.) Other factors, the symbolic content of motifs, for instance, should be regarded as augmenting this primary production of meaning. One may be able to respond to the surface even in the reproduction of the diptych (see page 72). The painting, in its dense working, quickly involves the eye and the tactile imagination. The crumpling and ridging of the ground – which is prepared by gluing thin paper to cotton cloth – is the elementary device used here, as in all his new works, to involve the eye with the surface. What holds it there is Douglas’s tactical command of the mark and the line: the inventive but perfectly timed and superbly controlled

release of their energies across, along and around the motif.

In the diptych, the transit between plane and surface is rapid and fairly even across the picture (except along the naked figure in the right panel): its composition – the disposition of motifs mainly – ensures that. This rapid going back and forth paces attention across the picture in a particular way; looking develops a more or less regular rhythm (off and across the naked figure; but along this the eye slips and slides).

In the second work reproduced here (see picture above), the movement of attention between picture plane and pictorial surface is differently modulated: the more stable composition and a relatively smoother brushing allow the eye more leeway in the plane as it traverses the picture.

Returning to the question of sources, the rhythm of looking is primarily a function of handling, design and theme. But it can also depend on

local uses of the senses, on the sensory economy of daily life around the work, so to speak. (Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy* is a persuasive account of how daily experience inflected looking in the Renaissance.)

Formalism, as one expects, rejects the claims of experience, and insists on the aesthetic 'autonomy' of art. To the extent that they see formalism as the logical end of modernist art, postmodern artists insist on subjecting art to the contingencies of daily life. (Pop art's manipulation of mass-media images is the obvious example; and the Process artist's use of organic matter – animal fat for instance – is another.) The problem with importing a device is that whatever shaping force was exerted by experience around it would very likely dissipate and some way must then be found to supply the lack.

Douglas seems to expose his painting to local experience sometimes; the obvious things to point to are the granular drops of pure and almost dry pigment in lower part of the diptych's right panel; the way colour is "released" from the grain here is affected by, for one, by our daily use of kumkum. But otherwise not: the picture of the "mastectomised" figure reproduced here depends on the coordination of formal pressures internal to painting (on playing off the physiognomic codes of the portrait against a more 'expressively' distorted figuration; on heightening the tension between the material fact of the thread stitched over the removed breast and the spectral 'opticality' of the remaining one).

The decision to expose the diptych to experience may have been prompted by the formal lacuna mentioned above, but his success in doing so shows that Douglas has adapted his borrowings well to local constraints. And, in fact, over the last four or five years he seems to have made neo-expressionist tactics so much his own: the tag is useful to indicate only a point of departure, from which he has moved a good way forward.

But one thing that still links Douglas to the neo-expressionist painters – and an index to their common ambition – is his willingness to take on large ideas and his ability to do



Mixed Media on Paper, 1995. The literal and 'surgical' use of thread in his painting of the 'mastectomised' figure, far from contradicting facture elsewhere in the work, actually augments it so that the thread is incorporated as thread – and not merely as a different material – without compromising its character as painting.

so without compromising his work as painting. Very broadly, Eros – sexual energy as a primordial and pervading force; to which our human nature, our bodied sentience, is violently subject – is the thematic core of the work reproduced here. The diptych actually lends itself to interpretation, to articulating the premises, so to speak, of what the picture proposes about reality. (The key is the peculiarly 'evacuated' volume the naked body has, when compared to the compressed density of the fish and the birds, and the sufficiency and geometric 'purity' of the cone.)

Giving a close reading – which would, ideally, show how the theme structures the rhythm of looking – however, seems risky here, for its plausibility would depend on the reader having access to the picture. But only a close reading would really bring out Douglas' reach and power, and show why his painting compels the mind to sense a world charged

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Ambition of a different sort seems to be at work in the picture with the mastectomised figure. The very literal and 'surgical' use of thread here – Kiefer's literal use of straw is an obvious parallel – far from contradicting facture elsewhere in the work, actually augments it so that the thread is incorporated as thread – and not merely as a different material – into the work without compromising its character as painting. Kiefer's demonstration that painting could, without loss, subsume matter extraneous to it was conducted in a context in which that extraneity had come to be deployed in very sophisticated ways: through the 'counter-practices' to painting mentioned above. That itself would have provided him with a developed sensory context, and thereby certain formal opportunities, to make his contrary point. We do not have that here: Douglas relies on thematic content instead and, again, only a detailed reading will show how the subsumption was accomplished through that.

In the newer work he has done through this year, Douglas has staged the same figures over and over in different settings. Given the currency of the word "narrative" in recent discussions of Indian art, it is tempting to look for story-telling of some sort here. That would, I think, be a mistake; it would threaten the coherence of these paintings; their formal mechanisms will not easily accommodate narration (in any usual sense).

It is better to look at these staged scenes as, simply, tableaux – rather than as flawed developments of action, produced by an inadequately pictorialised narrative impulse – whose function is to provide a mood, an emotive register within which, again, the movement of sensuous attention will develop.

Still, some of these new paintings demand a more adventurous approach. Their complication of pictorial incident seems, as such, insufficiently motivated; and seen beside the very sure work he had done earlier, they do seem a little tentative. But one hopes that the difficulties they pose are only what the eye should expect on unfamiliar formal terrain. ■

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