

Dialogue of self and soul

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Laila Sharmeen has built her reputation as an artist primarily on watercolours that show both versatility and control, and explore certain recurring ideas and themes: the self, the world, beauty and truth, for example. She has also done etchings, mixed media work and acrylic paintings that are distinguished by neat formal arrangements, an evocative use of colour and space, and an inwardly expanding sensibility that seeks refuge from the turmoils of the world in quiet moments of reflection. Sharmeen's views of time and reality are often angst-filled and disquieting, but she nevertheless hopes for a revival of the human spirit. Sharmeen's thinking has been influenced by modernist writers and poets such as Baudelaire and Eliot, but deep down, she persists in her romantic belief in the power of the creative imagination to change the world. One thus sees quite a few images and ideas from these two poets in her work, such as Madame Sosostris, the serio-comic clairvoyant who can read others' fortune but cannot prevent a bad cold; or the hyacinth, that elusive symbol of fertility and sexuality in *The Waste Land*; or images of darkness replete with a sense of evil, taken directly from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. One also sees how Sharmeen has taken certain ideas from these two poets and worked them into themes and motifs of her work: Baudelaire's probing analysis of complex emotional states, or Eliot's preoccupation with spiritual stagnation, alienation and neurosis, for example. In doing so Sharmeen seems to be reminding her viewers of the dire state of affairs the world has been pushed into. Modern men and women, she tends to believe, are victims of self-delusion, spiritual confusion and deception.

Sharmeen's work shows both a modernist preoccupation with time, flux, the loss of a centre and the disappearance of faith and a romantic concern for beauty and truth, imagination and solitude. Technology, she believes, is eroding our humanity. Morality has ceased to be a guiding force in human conduct. Eternal verities exist only in a poet's imagination. Faced with such unsettling prospects, she asks herself: What can be done? How can we get out of the mess we have created?

Sharmeen's latest exhibition, *Truth, Beauty and Me*, seeks to answer these questions, and, in the process, raise some new ones: What is the essence of beauty? or, What leads one to enlightenment? The exhibition, a solo consisting of some acrylic paintings done on canvas and paper, and some mixed media work plus a room-size installation brings some of her old concerns to the fore – those that reflect her unease about the human condition – but, as the exhibition's title reflects, it also shows her journeying inward for a resolution of these concerns. Sharmeen's work is becoming increasingly self-reflective, as she brings her own perceptions into play in examining the human condition. It is also to some extent leaning towards the philosophical, especially where she evokes pantheistic sentiments, and places much emphasis on the redemptive power of art, beauty and morality. Her attempt seems to be to extract

some underlying truth from visual experiences rather than merely record them. To that end, a visual element in Sharmeen's work is both an image and an interpretation of what the image means.

The exhibition displays of a number of series works, showing her recent shift towards the philosophical and the sublime: *Spontaneous Beauty*, *Intimations*, *Death* and a few small compositions titled *Elegy* (which accommodates a sub-series, *Black Rain*). If *Spontaneous Beauty* leans towards the romantic in its search for Wordsworthian 'beauteous forms' and a celebration of the creative powers of the imagination, *Death* shows the corrosive powers of evil. Certain recurring motifs in her work – the snake, withered leaves – are suggestive of her dual themes of evil and death. The exhibition, to a large extent, is a reflection on death – more precisely, on the rather tenuous connection between life and death.

Certain motifs, such as the boat, fish and *kash* flowers are, however, evocative of the powers of life. But these powers, at best, remain illusory. 'Am I beautiful?' she asks, but there is no clear answer. An artist's place in this world has also become uncertain.

Sharmeen's composition, in its visual arrangement, stresses on the interaction between space and form, and occasionally, textured surfaces for a gradual unfolding of her thought. Colours are carefully arranged: black now appears with a renewed zeal. But there are also moments of playfulness, as when she allows bits of brushwork to spill into the mounting. Overall, her work creates a fine balance between life and death, negating any strong, pessimistic pull. Even the elegies, in the end, point to a new beginning of the cycle of death and life.

The installation, Sharmeen's maiden venture in the field, is an elaborate arrangement that examines and comments on the contemporary human situation. It highlights her concerns over the loss of faith, of any anchoring centre of life and morality, and the fragmentation of life and imagination. Dust jackets of philosophical and other books by thinkers, social commentators and creative writers; a magic mirror that viewers look into at their own peril, since what stare back at them will be their own distorted faces; a fortune teller with a parrot picking up fortune-cards; a young woman sleeping on a bed with golden and silver magic wands at her head and feet respectively, which the viewers rearrange to wake her up – all create an effect of confusion, aimlessness and despair. The installation is a statement on our contemporary state of knowledge, on our eagerness to replace rationalism with fairytale solutions, and our inability to know ourselves. However, like her paintings and mixed media work, the installation essentially leads the viewers to a dialogue with their own inner selves. For, as Sharmeen believes, unless one speaks to one's soul, the problems that confront us today will remain intractable, and, eventually, beyond our comprehension.