

ROAR OF AN ANCIENT VOICE: ART, A LIFE

Decorated largely, holding a prestigious place in the global art community, the list of Prof. Pramodbabu Ramteke's achievements and honours is virtually never ending. Being among the senior most artists in the country, we are thankful for his vigour, enthusiasm and youthfulness at an age where most artists prefer comfort over passion. His long and illustrious career as professor in Sir J.J. School of Art Mumbai and Govt. Chitrakala Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur, and later as HOD Painting Faculty has helped inspire and build many artists who are themselves renowned today. Thus, his is not a single success story, but a chorus of his own and his many students. To call him a living legend is to say less, and indeed, one would place him in line with the old masters. His is a name that has inscribed itself in the pages of Indian Fine Art. However, I leave the task of dwelling on a detailed account of his career and material glories, so to say, for other critics, for my acquaintance with this artist is neither professional nor formal. His being my guru's guru, I consider myself lucky to have found a place near his footstool, to have had a chance to glimpse at him as the person he is, learn from him and from how his life and art simply blend into one, how he is way above the titles and honours the world has conferred upon him. I feel fortunate to have felt his warm loving presence and to be able to speak about him from personal experience and understanding.

For Pramodbabu, the world is the eternal play of form and colour. Every object holds its identity to him only in its contours, grace and essence. One feels like quoting Orhan Pamuk here when he once wrote, "I don't want to be a tree; I want to be its meaning." A poet of the universal language of visual art, his paintings seek to attack your very innermost, the soul of feeling itself and leave you astounded, helpless in your discovery. I remember how one of his very early paintings (1966), a pot design, held me speechless. It shows a rhythmic vertical flow lines, in light and shade, a flock of birds moving along those lines, and one little bird left behind, sitting at the bottom, looking on... In my mind, all at once, that little bird became the Happy Prince's swallow*, while his friends flew away down the sands of Nile, and he looked on, staying back

for love. And once again, not only did I rediscover the story, but also my own heart and understanding of what, after all, is love. To a viewer, is it not all a painting should be? A path of self- exploration.

If someone chooses to write a critique on his works without having met him in person, he has surely missed this master's greatest masterpiece. Chatting with him over a cuppa is a revelation... of a philosopher, a being of such wisdom that helps one levitate high above the clutches of reality. For him, joy and sorrow, happiness and pain, all condense upon a canvas, his release. As he puts it so beautifully, in the Almighty's world, the artist was sent to create a world of his own. Way past his seventies now, yet you see in Pramodbabu's eyes, his laugh, a child of barely ten, innocent, wonder filling him in every step at the mysteries around, fresh as ever, like a newly-opened bud dew touched. To be with him is to bask in his sunshine.

For Ramteke Sir, age is not just a number, it's how you turn classic. He feels that with each passing year, an artist can only progress, gathering downstream basket loads of experiences and understanding, giving his art a more mature, intense and finally, simple direction. Like a snake in its moult, the stages in an artist's life cannot but pass without breathing new life and vigour into him, pushing him to rise anew. Art is timeless, so is its creator.

*Reference from Oscar Wilde's short story "The Happy Prince"

Where most artists submit to a particular style and media and sometimes even stagnation, by the time their career reaches middle age, Pramodbabu continues experimenting with techniques, media, subject and form, in such ripe years. His art speaks for his versatility. Anything new attracts him. Few painters have worked in such diverse fields over such a prolonged period. This creator's satchel fills from every well, and ultimately swirls into his own unique elixir. For instance, I remember once asking him about the signature style in which many of his paintings have the eyes placed in them, in profile, one eye in the regular position, and the other in mid-air. He replied with a soft smile that they were something he'd been inspired on from traditional Jain paintings of Gujarat. A modernist painter, yet one finds

influences of various traditional styles in his works. His subjects borrow from reality sometimes, everyday scenes, social issues, sometimes mythology, and often that field of an artist's fancy that only he knows the key to. "Creatures of the strange world, in passing, your love." His vision. How so many of the canvases conjure up strange forms, unseen creatures of the sea, of deep earth or in flight, mere suggestion, mysterious, as a magical assertion of existence beyond what is visible, beyond common imagination, a declaration of freedom. As he believes, artist is the one who seeks his soul.

For me, Pramodbabu's portraits are a source of constant wonder. How he manages to grasp the model not only externally but also the person's character and his own understanding of it is something beyond explanation. Every painting, he says, is an artist's self-portrait. Perhaps that's how, as a bee explores all flowers but traces home to the hive every time, so do Ramteke Sir's paintings time and again return to that subject of his delight- abstract art. His path moves from the complex towards the simple, and his abstract and creative works, kept chronologically illustrate this principle. That quality of undefined in these works are the viewer's liberation. In this context, I would like to mention his one painting titled Freedom (2003). In the course of a discussion, I asked him once with reference to his abstract works in general, taking this particular painting as example, as to how did the process of such a creation proceed. In reply, he asked me what I saw in there. I said simply, a bird, and a striking blue, like the sky, or sea. He told me then that the essence was the vagueness and the simplicity. To say less and mean more. It doesn't have to start with a theme or a meaning or idea. You could add or subtract, but in the end it should feel. Indeed his recent paintings are like fluidity itself, that point, like in the creative process, where everything merges into everything else, only harmony and balance count anymore, all else like boundaries and definitions dissolve, the artist becomes one with his art, and out of terrible chaos emerges pure beautiful creation... what seeks not to be understood, only felt.

Art is a form of meditation, says Pramodbabu. He feels that it is the artist's offering, his prayer to the Supreme. The way some bend on their knees, others light incense, so an artist wields his

brush. Art is his faith, and like the Enlightened One, whose theme recurs in so many of his paintings, Pramodbabu has found in this faith, his ultimate surrender. Quoting Kabir, "All know that the drop merges into the ocean, but few know, that the ocean merges into the drop." And thus, like a firefly amidst the night of the immense cosmos, this artist has become a sun unto himself.

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Art Critic