

# EVERY tuesday

One Week in One Day

A Weekly dedicated to Art, Culture & Entertainment

4 Celebrating Diwali

7 Diwali with celebrities

12 Lakme Fashion Week

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## Lighting the Mind

Aditya Vyas

*Indian culture is known world-wide to celebrate life. It celebrates through worshipping those things which make life worth its while like the Lights, Colours, Music, Food and all that are the most beautiful and desired. It may be seen that even food which is needed to sustain life stops being a necessity during festivals as they are turned into delicacies to savour and that savouring is not merely to hold on to dear life but to enjoy.*

*Same is the case with light. We see the whole city turn into a luminous entity with all the homes festooned with electrical as well as the traditional lights during Diwali. Though these lights have an importance of their own the seers of the past wanted the humans to enlighten their minds, which is the real Diwali. It does not require the representative lights of any kind nor does it require any decoration or embellishment. What it requires is the desire to be better, to illuminate the minds of one's own self and others as far as possible. Perhaps illumination outside helps one to establish a communion with the soul within, and dispel the darkness. Illuminating lives can also be achieved through quality education, and imbuing values which the wise men of the past have left with us as a legacy and which as a moral, social and cultural duty should be passed on to the next generation.*

*What is life without colours? Diwali is yet another occasion to bring colours of life at its full play, through lights and through the joy that we share with others. Colours denote vibrancy and zest for life and the best way to bring colours to lives around is to smile.*

*Shubh Dipawali!!!*



Prafulla Dahanukar talks to **Rajendra** about the art scene in Mumbai, past and present, and her upcoming exhibition in Dubai on November 1, 2008

**P**rafulla Dahanukar, one of the most senior women artists in the country, is holding her solo exhibition of paintings at Dubai, where her senior colleague and friend M. F. Husain will be the guest of honour on Nov 01, 2008.

Prafulla Dahanukar has won many accolades; the list includes the Gold Medal for the best work of 1955 from Sir J. J. School of Art, Silver Medal at the Bombay Art Society Portrait Exhibition, the French government's scholarship for study at Ecole de Beaux Arts and Atelier 17 in Paris...and the list goes on. She was the President of Bombay Art Society and Vice Chairman of the Artists' Centre, Mumbai. For the last 30 years, she has been on the committee of Kala Akademi Goa, and currently is a president of the Art Society of India, chairperson of Artist's Centre and a committee member of Jehangir Art Gallery. She has represented Maharashtra at LKA, New Delhi between 1974 -79.

Prafulla's paintings change hands regularly at auctions held by Christie's, Sotheby's, and Osian's and have found the place in the collections of museums, corporations, banks, hotels and individuals world-wide. Her murals, particularly in ceramic, wood and fibreglass adorn many prominent building facades and interiors even today. Her 'mindscape's are a critically acclaimed series of abstracts; Rajendra takes a nostalgic trip with her...

**Rajendra :** You studied at Sir J. J. School of Art in the early '50s, when painting was not treated as a reputed profession, more so not for a woman; how did you get in to it? Did you have family support?

**Prafulla Dahanukar :** Absolutely! I had very good support from my family; when I told my father that I want to join art school, initially he said, 'Have you gone mad, painting has to come from inside, art can not be learnt in art schools'; when I



told him seriously and showed him some of my work, magazine covers which I did, he supported me. In fact he pampered me. In those days, I used to get four to five hundred rupees monthly pocket money that I used to spend on buying extra materials, which many poor students used. The day I got a gold medal, my father died.

**R :** How was the environment in J. J. School when you studied there?

**P D :** I took admission in 1950 and passed out in 1955; J.J.'s environment was mesmerising; it was different than today; the aura of that period was unique; Shankar Palshikar was the teacher famous for his ideals; Gaitonde taught us in first year, later he became a friend. For annual gatherings, we used to invite Kishori Amonkar, Bhimsen Joshi and other musicians. We used to have lot of fun in the annual gathering. B Prabha was my classmate, though she was older than me. That time J.J. School was the most reputed art school in the country and the most important thing was, students came to learn art out of urge and not as a profession.

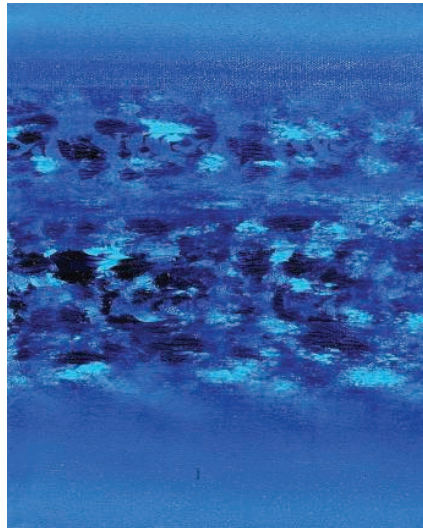
**R :** You had your first solo show at Jehangir Art Gallery in 1956 when the gallery was just four years old; were there serious buyers/art collectors around at that time? How was the art scene in Mumbai then?

**P D :** In 1956 when I had my first solo show at Jehangir art gallery, paintings used to sell at very low prices; Husain used to sell his paintings for Rs.250 to 300. I sold my paintings for Rs.75 and the highest price I got for

bigger ones was Rs.125. That was my water-colour show, which featured figurative paintings in a miniature kind of style. Those paintings were based on ragas, like a rendition of different moods of music in 'ragas' in pictorial form. Schlesinger, Langhamer, Lyden and many others bought my paintings; There were forty paintings in my first show and it was a total sell out. Karl Khandalawala inaugurated that show. Now common people visit the gallery; that time only particular class of society used to visit the gallery and common man kept himself away from that kind of space.

**R :** I have heard that Jehangir Art Gallery used to be given on rent for marriage parties also; is it true?

**P D :** Yes, they used to give it for functions;



but the practice was stopped later. The decision to rent out the gallery for marriage reception was taken by Soli Bataliwala, then the Hon. Secretary of Jehangir and that was the reason he had to resign from the gallery committee. Bataliwala was also in charge of Bhulabhai Memorial institute; I think it was given for marriage parties only on two occasions, I don't remember the year; it was stopped immediately as the very purpose of gallery was defeated and it was against the gallery constitution also. Bataliwala had to resign on this very issue. That time the gallery had no waiting list; some times it used to remain empty for a week or two, particularly in the rainy season. Today, the situation is different; there is almost a five-year waiting period for booking Jehangir Art Gallery.

**R :** You studied graphics at Ecole de Beaux Arts and Atelier 17 in Paris for a year under scholarship offered by the French government; what was your experience in Paris and who were the contemporary artists who influenced you there?

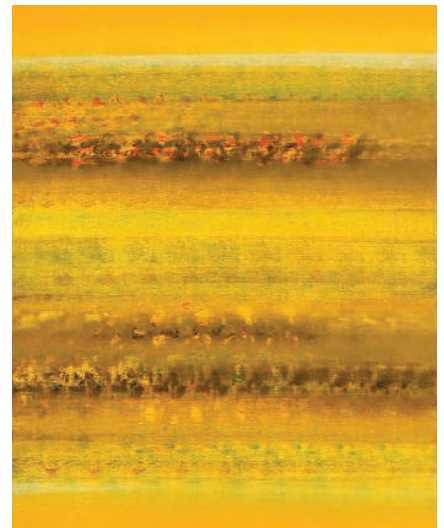
**P D :** That was a lacklustre period in Paris; there were no new movements and artists were imitating great painters, there was nothing new. Anjali Ela Menon and Shakti Burman and I studied together in Paris in 1961 at Ecole Des Beaux Arts. We visited Modigliani's studio; Teachers also were just teachers, there were no great artists in Ecole Des Beaux Arts. There were no big contemporary names sufficient enough to influence our art. I studied only graphics in Paris.

**R :** (interrupts )But you didn't continue working in graphics....

**P D :** I am a very spontaneous person and am also impatient. I find it difficult to wait while etching a plate in acid; then you have to remove the plate, get the print and if you want more edges, put it again for etching; I can't do that; I am not that kind of person. I work on impulse, which graphics don't allow; graphics simply do not suit my temperament. I discontinued it long back.

**R :** You have worked very closely with Gaitonde and Husain at Bhulabhai Memorial institute along with many other artists; what are your memories associated with those times?

**P D :** I had my studio in Bhulabhai Memorial institute on Warden Road (now Bhulabhai Desai road) where artists, musicians, dancers and theatre people worked individually in their studios; next to mine was Husain's studio; Ravishankar, Ibrahim Alkazi, Kalyan Sundaram had their studios there and so were Pilo Pochkanwala, Adi Davierwala. A K Hangal, Sanjiv Kumar, Shyam Benegal used to frequent the place quite often. Gaitonde had no studio of his own for many



years; he used my studio for eleven years and worked there. Our timings were different, he used to work in the early morning and late evening; I used to paint in the afternoon time.

I had a studio there since late fifties; I left the space around 1967-68; Gaitonde occupied it for two more years; then he also left for Delhi never to return here. Bhulabhai Memorial institute was an artist's paradise; many artists used to work there day and night; the studios were provided just on thirty rupees rent. That was a beautiful period. Those were just open studios, with half wooden partition and nobody took anything from anywhere; such was the honesty of the era.

I had a bad habit of singing while painting. I used to sing; but when you paint, you have to see it from a distance, that time I used to stop the singing; then Husain used to shout from his next door studio 'Prafulla chup kyon ho gayi, gaati raho, hamain bhi inspiration milta hai' (Prafulla, why did you stop, keep on singing, I also get inspiration)...(Laughs)...

Continued on Page 3

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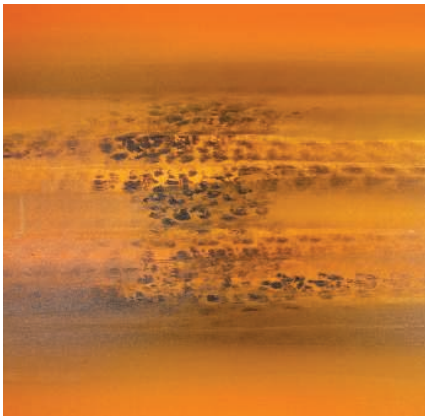
The environment in the studios was inspiring; that was the most creative phase in Mumbai's art world.

**R :** Could you share an exciting incident associated with Bhulabhai Desai Institute...

**P D :** (Pause)....There are many; I will share a story here; Rajesh Khanna got married to Dimple and threw a big party at the Taj. A friend of mine, Dina Pathak forced me to join in; while there Dina said, "Come, I will introduce you to Rajesh Khanna". I did not know Rajesh Khanna personally; he was a big star then. Deena said 'Rajesh, this is my friend Prafulla; she barely completed the sentence and he quipped, 'Kaisi hai re Prafulla'(how are you Prafulla). I was shocked. He again said, 'Mujhe bhul gayee'. I was so apologetic that I could just murmur, 'Sorry, I cant remember where we have met". Finally he said 'Prafulla, main wohi Jatin hoon jo tere studio me chai peeya karta tha' (I am the same Jatin who used to take tea in your studio). I was surprised; he was just a boy then, merely in his 20s.

**R :** Coming back to your art practice, your 'Mindscapes', buoyant and luminescent, create meditative spaces; the emotional textures, imprints of spontaneity, embodiment of energy and spirit are various adjectives used to describe them; I would like to add one more.... a mirage...that lures the viewer to enter deeper and deeper...inside it.... in a never ending journey. What do you say about it? What are 'mindscapes' for you?

**P D :** I depict the space that I feel. Space is the vast womb of the mother universe that



can take in everything; comets rage by, tsunamis come flooding in, earthquakes shake in anger, even the stars explode, but space continues to be just as calm. I would always be at peace when I paint. I look at the space which opens in my mind. I feel its vibrations. It is that ageless space and the vastness of nature that manifests. I get a feeling of being released in endless space.

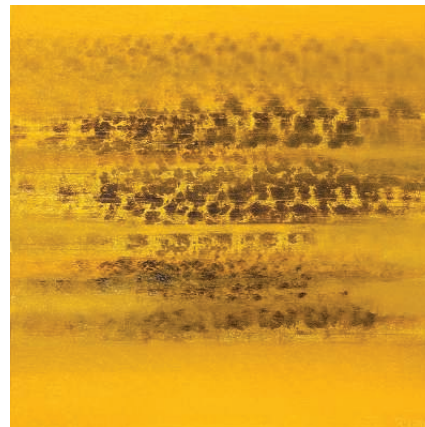
The permanence of space is so awesome! Whatever happens in the universe, space continues. Time passes, matter transforms and ages, but space remains unchanged! It absorbs the full fury of nature without losing its serenity! My 'mindscape' is a window for the mind to escape into this peaceful space. For me mindscape is a painting... to release

the mind's thoughts into that infinite space that brings peace to your inner self..

**R :** What would you like to say about the recent works you are going to show at Dubai?

**P D :** They are also 'mindscapes'; I began to depict this space in my paintings, which I called 'Mindscapes'. Through the years these paintings evolved and now they are more than my mindscapes. They are the 'eternal space' itself; the sea of tranquility, which will take you to eternity. I have therefore named these evolved paintings 'Eternal Space'. I believe that to love an object passionately, you have to look at it dispassionately; and that needs objectivity, achieved by placing it 'light years' away. Distance in space is measured in length of time. Space by itself is infinite. It is timeless. It is eternal. That's my painting, showing timeless distance... Eternal Space...that is the title of my Dubai show also.

**R :** You were a president of Bombay Art Society, elected member of LKA,



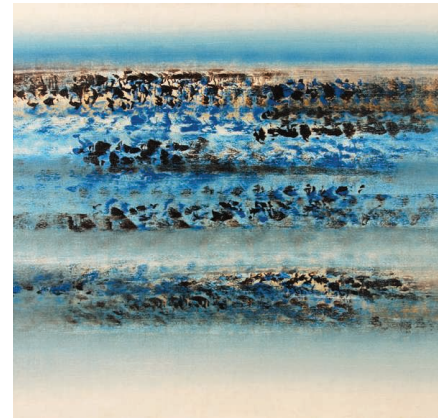
New Delhi, committee member of Kala Academy, Goa and at present Chairman of the Artists' Centre, President of Art Society of India. How did you manage to work for these institutions, irrespective of politics involved there, keeping your creative zeal intact?

**P D :** I never went in to the politics; I kept myself away from it. I worked with my simple ways with transparency, so politics did not affect me as an artist. The most proud moment for me was the centenary year celebration of Bombay Art Society in 1988. I was just a member then, K K Hebbar was the president. I planned the entire program, brought together Bhimsen Joshi and Husain; Vinod Doshi, Sarayu's husband, sponsored the souvenir. We started the 'Bendre-Husain Scholarship' in Bombay Art Society from the funds collected after the sale of that painting done by Husain in the program.

**R :** You have executed numerous murals; it is a different genre, quite conflicting with the kind of work you do now...(Interrupts)..

**P D :** I love to work in different media; The first mural I did was for Shiv Sagar Estate at Worli; I did that with glass pieces. Then I did many

murals, even out of India; I worked in ceramics, wood and fibreglass. I used to do landscapes and from there I gradually moved to abstraction, maybe in the early eighties. But I re-visited the figurative genre when ever I felt the need to respond; in the early nineties I did my 'vendors' series, then I did 'mother and child



series in late nineties; nothing is conflicting that comes from within!

**R :** At the age of 75, you climb the steps of Jehangir art gallery with unabated zest; what is the secret behind remaining young at mind and soul?

**P D :** (Laughs)...I have been very positive through out my life; that is the way one can remain young at mind and soul. Though now that I have a sprain in my ankle, I have to climb the steps carefully! (Laughs)...

**R :** Name three young artists you like?

**P D :** I like Anant Joshi, Jitish Kallat and Riyas Komu to a certain extent.

*(The paintings by Prafulla Dahanukar will be previewed on November 01, 2008 at Barclay's Bank, Dubai where M. F. Husain will be the guest of honour; the show will then continue from November 02 to10, 2008 at Majestic Tower Hotel. Dubai)*



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12 h