



# Within and without

Two artistic viewpoints of Indo-Korean painters, Mun and Devendra Shukla.  
Ammu Chaterji reports

**W**hile sitting at a table at the Park Hotel Chennai's seaside restaurant Aqua, Outside, the morning sun beats purposefully down on the still, blue water but inside, Devendra Shukla and I couldn't be more cool. He's a cool person, easy to be with, smiles a lot, I am merely cool, air conditioned cool.

Shukla and his Korean wife Mun, Delhi-based painters, recently held their first exhibition at the Forum Art Gallery, Inko, the Indo-Korean centre is to be congratulated for treating Chennai art lovers to this cross-cultural experience.

The city, which is fast becoming a favoured destination both for well-established artists and for younger aspirants waiting in the wings, is in the grip of an art attack. The art market, aggressively promoted by a spate of galleries, is drawing a clientele of both genuine *aficionados* and just plain old big-bucks buyers. An artist friend tells me some 'collectors' leave their paintings bubble-wrapped in the loft till the prices reach insane heights. I wonder how many Ruzas, Rindres and Caus are even now lying face down in a dusty loft, hermetically sealed, with only spiders for company?

Follow this interesting trend of thought. The wealth of an artist's imagination waiting to be sold (in a glittering auction, no less) only to be consigned to *another* loft? A tacit complicity between all parties concerned, perhaps?

But, back to the business at hand. Devendra Shukla tells me that he met more people with interesting responses to his work at his opening in Chennai than he met



**ORIENTAL STROKES:** (Above) Devendra's *The fulfilment* and Mun's *Unforgotten legend* (right)

mailly does in other cities. "People came up to me with so many questions about my work. It's interesting for me too, since I begin to see my work in a new way."

We talk a little about his work. "Every painting reflects that particular moment for me. It's completely spontaneous. I don't approach a canvas with any fixed ideas or thoughts, except for planning the basic division of spaces. After that, the energy that each

painting generates is like a mirror reflecting me."

While his work is a matrix of line and colour, the figurative element of the occasional human figure appears like some lone witness (himself) to a freely abstract cosmic *Maya*. Not surprisingly, Shukla tells me he invariably puts in the human figure last! See a certain justice in that choice.

A deeply spiritual person, he sees the discipline of painting as a meditative practice and, as an

aside, has an interesting anecdote to make that point.

Once, while in Finland to help set up a collaborative Fin-India Arts Society, Shukla discovered that the visa arrangements to get the process started were hopelessly mired in bureaucratic wrangling. His 'Indian' spiritual core helped him to laugh things off, an attitude that completely befuddled his Finnish counterparts.



I comment on one of his larger paintings, called *Imaginative Space*, where the diagonal division of space allows two clear areas of imagery. The yawning chasm in between — at once connecting and separating — reminds me of the foreshortened perspective of a Rajasthani miniature. Shukla tells me that, surprisingly, traditional Korean painting has elements very much like our own miniatures, especially the strength of the line. It

notch that up for my own mental file).

His Korean wife Mun, adopts a very different (though complementary) style, more in line with her cultural lineage. An accomplished painter who has also specialised in Lacquer painting from the Si Chuan Art Institute, China, Mun met her future husband Devendra when he was a research scholar at the Central Institute of Fine Arts, China. Two completely different cultural strands were woven together in a third and yet another cultural milieu.

Mun Shukla's paintings appear to work from a standpoint of introspection.

Preferring Chinese inks and water colours on cotton canvases, her work has a more dream-like quality, hinting at the preoccupations of the person within. One of her striking canvases appears deceptively simple but was probably the most complex to achieve. Layering colours, even bright colours, to arrive at a monochromatic glacial white. Mun's final

painting is a textured work of subdued beauty.

On my way out of Aqua, I try to ignore the restaurant's *piece de resistance*, a painting that celebrates — what can I say? — male genitalia. Only the most forgiving, gay person is likely to excuse its tasteless absurdity.

Artist unknown, but fully worthy of being consigned to some dusty loft, preferably face down.