

Drawing '94

## A DIALOGUE ON DRAWING

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**BK:** Sheikh, what kind of drawing would you consider as good because when we look at drawings, there are different types. One which at the end is a very finished product. To do finished drawing is the ultimate aim of the artist. The second type are those where the artist tries to conceive the ideas through sketches. And then there are certain drawings where the artist is trying to work out alternatives, say if he wants to do a landscape or a still life, he would do several drawings to work out the alternatives.

Manjit Bawa or Vivan Sundaram, they are doing drawings in a series to be exhibited. They start a drawing and end with one and that is all. It is one finished drawing.

**GMS:** Well, I have no problem with any of these kinds of drawing, there can be many types of drawing. I think each one of us, each individual would perhaps choose what is suitable to his temperament. There could be drawings which belong to these three categories, but there would even be more categories.

**BK:** Take Subramanyan – he does lots of drawings with pen and ink. They are not the final product. They are just a kind of passing thoughts one can even say this about Nandal Bose or Benode Behari Mukherjee. Their drawings are not for any painting nor are they finished products – they are in notes.

**GMS:** I would say that there is perhaps some difference because you know that they made drawings on postcards.

**BK:** They are not finished products....

**GMS:** No, they are final, they are what they are.

**BK:** This is going to be a show of drawings. How then will you evaluate – you said you don't mind either of this.

**GMS:** I would say that this is a matter of temperament and intention – whether you want to do something which is meant for exhibition or whether you do something which is on the way or whether you do it as a casual thing in your sketchbook. For instance, I enjoy some of your drawings which are in your sketchbook, which are half-finished. I may like them more than the finished drawings. But then you have also done some drawings, large ones, some of those big figures which you have exhibited, which I enjoy because they are halfway between painting and drawing. Personally, my interest, if you were to ask me, would be in drawings which are very personal.

**BK:** Now say when we go back to an artist like Matisse who did many drawings. Sometimes he would draw with a charcoal and another time he would do a finished drawing. But all of these were in a way part of an exercise for something which he was going to do in painting, so that ultimate aim was painting. So these are the kind of drawings which we might say were the alternatives for him. At time he started with a realistic drawing to end up with a simplified version of it.

**GMS:** Isn't drawing a bit like *riyaz* that musicians do – you draw, but it is not the final performance. You scribble, you doodle, you try things out, while you have perhaps some painting in mind. About the first category that you are talking about is that it's not going to end in a painting but is going to result in a drawing. Well,

personally I would have no problems with that either, here you impose a limitation upon yourself, I am doing this drawing and I am going to finish it.

Now Matisse – I saw his last exhibition in New York. There were these six or so drawings which I found very interesting. He had done drawings of a woman with plumed hat if I am not mistaken. He had also done a similar painting though not exactly the same. There is one drawing in pencil which is very fine, then there is one which he had done with crayon or charcoal which is not that fine, then there is another drawing which is very free flowing and then there are several....

**BK:** What I feel here is that he has been trying many alternatives before he wanted to paint or before he thought of a final version. Now I find this more interesting because the artist right from the beginning does not make any decision that this is the final version. In painting or in anything if the artist does not allow alternatives right at the beginning, I lose interest because I feel that now he knows what he is going to do. He is not interested in the risk. For the same reason I find M.F. Husain's work predictable, because from the beginning of his line he and we know how he is going to paint. So the 'Predictable' drawings do not interest me.

**GMS:** That's all right, but the thing is that personally I may not do something like that but I would be interested if somebody else is doing that; for instance Surendran makes his drawings that way and he had exhibited a large number of them here in Baroda and I was quite taken by those drawings and

that is something which interested me because they had obviously been designed and finished as drawings.

You said you were interested in Matisse and the alternatives that he was seeking. Let us think about it – something he does which looks very naturalistic and another thing that he does may not. The third thing he does is borrowed from....

**BK:** Islamic art....

**GMS:** Yes, some kind of a pattern or something which is Persian and Fauve combined together or a fourth thing can be something else. Isn't this a question of alternatives of language ?

**BK:** I think that he was trying out all the alternatives whether this finished one will suit his painting or the other. There are paintings where he has taken from those finished drawings. I feel that he kept his mind open and so he tried out two, three, four, five....

**GMS:** Let me explain. If Picasso draws, he may do many versions but it is within the same linguistic parameters. Same is the case with some other artists also.

**BK:** Yes, Matisse at a certain stage had done some murals where he had used a completely different language than he did in his paintings. He had done paintings which may border on very naive and then he had done others which were in a way very oriental. I think he had not kept his mind on one thing, he had tried many languages at the same time.

**GMS:** This is what interests me. I think it is interesting because the challenge is much more greater as you don't fall into a groove that an artist has a style and he works only within it and then style becomes a barrier.

**BK:** Another thing which I want to point out here is that all the time he had a model before him whenever he sketched while in our case the sketching from reality is minimal.

Is it an Indian tradition not to use models or something which is seen ?

**GMS:** As far as tradition goes, there is no precedent of actual use of models (barring some rare exceptions) but that does not mean they did not draw from life. I don't know but the use of models has more to do with our present, it comes from the art school training.

**BK:** Also, very few artists really go to a place and draw.

**GMS:** Santiniketan artists were very keen on doing that.

**BK:** ... at one stage.

**GMS:** Nandababu, wherever he went, and I think even Subramanyan carries that tradition. There might be some other artists who would do that. I know you do that, even Nilima makes drawings. Personally, I think it is a matter of temperament.

**BK:** There is also one thing which I feel much more rewarding that is while travelling even if you make a kind of half-sketch which is unfinished, it always makes you think. It is like a diary. As an artist, I think it is useful.

**GMS:** If I reflect upon what I have done, I draw on the canvas and whatever happens on the canvas is generally covered or erased. But now and then, when I am in the middle of a painting or when I want to think about it then I sit down and draw versions of it. Of late, however, I have tried making independent drawings also.

**BK:** There are times when you just do a drawing which is from sketch. If you go through your sketchbooks then you will not see finished drawings but two or three scratches of pencil marks.

**GMS:** Taking the cue from what you were saying is that drawing is a personalised activity, it's like writing a personal diary and this diary is not generally exhibitable.

**BK:** Now you come to my point. I said, there are artists who draw for exhibiting the works. They may not be personal or intimate or reveal their weakness.

**GMS:** Not necessary, I think personal or what is not personal sometimes overlap – there are parts of a drawing that may be very personal and something, which may not be personal. But it is true when you want to exhibit it then the personal element gets slightly reduced or changes. But I would not say that it is not personal at all. If I were to look at Vivan's drawing, I would not say that they are totally impersonalized drawings. There is a feeling which is very personal there, there is a response which is very personal to events, to imagery or whatever.

**BK:** But then you always feel that these are the drawings which are for an exhibition. Now that does not mean that they are bad (*laughs*). I am trying to point out an attitude.

**GMS:** It's not that but the thing is that this would be perhaps presuming. And he might have rejected some....

**BK:** He may have rejected some at the end saying *ye achchhe nahin hain* (These are not good ones), but they were all in his mind that these are the drawings I am going to exhibit, that I am doing for an exhibition. Like he did this Neruda series, then he did those fire things, so many drawings he had done about the Emergency. All these things one can feel were for an exhibition. You said a few minutes before that this is a very personalized....

**GMS:** No, I said there was a personal element in his drawings. The question which arises from this is that when we talk why do we generally think of opposites : we have something that we believe in or we do and we have something which is the opposite of what we do.

**BK** : Let me add to this the type of drawing which is appreciated in India is the final product. Say, Laxma Goud's work is also in a way a final product which is to be exhibited. So everything you start right from the beginning – you make a scratch and you know you are going to exhibit this. That is where you don't allow yourself a kind of freedom that you can just keep it in your store room, you want to scratch and do a bad drawing, you want to tear it up, all these things are not there.

**GMS**: I get your point and I think there is something important which is lost on way to the gallery. But to think of many ways in which does one's mind work, how many types of minds do we have (on our art scene) and what are the ways in which you find your freedom prevents you to announce a dictum. There would be many ways in which you find your freedom – it might not necessarily be through scratches and loud visual thinking but there might be many other routes by which you arrive there. And there is this problem of 'free' drawing – one type which is called spontaneous and under the name of spontaneity one goes on taking all kinds of liberties. It is laziness sometimes, it's not spontaneity – in which you do not let the form flow, you do not let the image grow. And then even naivete is manipulated. You find that under the guise of spontaneity everything passes.

**BK**: The other day when I was in Delhi, Vivan made a remark which still bothers me – he said that Indian artists can't leave anything blank, they want to overfinish, overwork on everything they do. I have been thinking about this remark, what exactly it refers to. Can you tell me about that ?

**GMS**: Very difficult to do without taking specific examples, but one can try (*laughs*). You see it's a sensitive issue. The thing is that you don't always know where you have realized an image and where you

overdo. Now if there is an intention of overdoing, like in melodrama you may stretch a point far and then you bring it to whatever conclusion and there is whatever logic behind it. And if it works, it works. But sometimes it does not work (*laughs*).

**BK**: We can again come back to this drawing, what is the corrective principle, say if you take Benode Behari Mukherjee or Nandalal Bose's drawings and if you were to judge what was in their mind, saying this drawing has come out well, because they used to go out and do drawings from nature and also they did not use models but they would paint the figure. Then we take another example of Amrita Sher-Gil's drawings, then we take the example of painters like say the Progressive Group, Padamsee and then the recent artists, or even Husain. There is some kind of basis they stick to and there are certain kinds where the corrective principle enters or new things enter into their work. Now how do you feel that 'this' enters one, and whether it has something to do with reality or not.

When I talked to *Jan Hoet* (Commissioner of *Documenta*), I had pointed out to him that at present I feel that most of the Western artists are concerned with the language of painting and we are concerned with reality. I think this is a very basic thing. Even with Vivan's drawings, he is much more concerned with language; at present he is not concerned with reality, I think Nandalal Bose or Amrita Sher-Gil are much more concerned with reality. Amrita would have a model and then try to draw. Nandalal will go to China and draw or paint a Santhal landscape. So what do you think is the corrective principle.

**GMS**: I don't have a recipe (*laughs*). Nobody has.

**BK**: No, no. I am not asking for a recipe. I am asking for your views on this. Let me also add. When I saw K.G Subramanyan in

Baroda he would be doing drawings of his house, with a brush, he would draw the chairs and the room and things like that. So he was all the time relating to things that he had seen and then transforming them.

**GMS**: Academically speaking there is a tradition of drawing from what they call 'life' and which they relate to 'reality', that means something that is in front of you, a landscape, a figure, a model, whatever. But it is a limited definition of reality.

**BK**: But I am talking about the corrective.

**GMS**: Can there be an absolute corrective for all kinds of drawing ? Wouldn't there be different correctives in the works of artists you mentioned ? Even a single artist may have different correctives as in the case of Matisse.

Why I am saying this is because I don't draw from one category, I draw from 'life' drawing category when need be, I may not, when not necessary.

**BK**: That is why this is very interesting – I draw from life all the time.

**GMS**: I enjoy your drawings because I don't do that kind of drawing. I enjoy the work of people who fulfil the absence in my own life and work. In a subliminal way you can appropriate the whole world. What you find interesting is actually what is very challenging. But then my temperament is quite different than yours. I would say that there could be many ways of doing drawings, for instance, one is that you draw what is in front of you, you draw from general memory, you may even draw something which you don't remember at all ! There may be things that you might just be creating there, you might even be creating memory for that matter – which is not named. I would say that there are categories which you would not be able to define, for instance, there would be one overlapping the other. Sometimes you may draw things which you may not have seen anywhere. But then I have a feeling that

when you draw there is a kind of visualization of something happening in the world, with your drawing, that an image comes into existence. And I think that is the point where one becomes very personal and you have that image which is totally personal in your mind, whether it is from memory, without memory or whatever it is. If you do that, or reach that very highly personalized image that is what interests me.

But Bhupen, what you do in your drawings interests me because you make all kinds of jottings. I do many jottings but I may do them in my mind and sometimes in a sketchbook because these jottings can be of use. This is a kind of resource storehouse from which you can draw your armoury.

**BK:** Like I go to *satsang* in Agra....

**GMS:** Do you exhibit drawings, and if you exhibit what are the factors that guide your decision? And then if you do that then perhaps you would make something finished.

**BK:** Right, exactly.

**GMS:** You would not show something which is unfinished.

**BK:** I would like that. One should really show something which is unfinished, but our audience, right from our art critics to artists are not prepared to accept this.