

Apurva Desai: The man with a beard

C.N. College of Fine Arts, 1982 is where we met Apurva for the first time. He had already been there for a year and was most familiar with the surroundings. We were all freshers and still finding our calling. From this day onwards there was no ignoring him or his presence, a sign of a man who would be everywhere almost at once and a man who was going to make his mark.

Apurva was a very dedicated son, the son of a man with great ideals; you could clearly see the impact his father made on this son. The idealism and communistic background branded the man that was and is Apurva. He was well read on the subject, though even then he was very interested in everything beyond communism and socialism that happened around him. When I left C.N. for other shores I had been with the class for only one and a half years. This was enough to start off a friendship that has lasted more than 20 years now. While I lived abroad Apurva would write me long letters on scraps of butter paper. These would contain everyday issues as well as his philosophies and clippings from the newspapers. All in Gujarati a language which I could read in print only and with the speed of a snail in a race. I also wrote back to him at the same pace in a mixture of Devnagri scripts. I visited the museums and the great Dutch masters and kept him abreast of European thought. His favourite being Vincent van Gogh.

Though he started off as an applied art student he soon shifted to the painting department. Even in the first year at art school he was a legend. He rode a bicycle with no accessories, so no brakes, no carrier, no chain guard, etc. He cycled everywhere and he sketched meticulously, starting with rolls and rolls of pigeons to tree trunks and roots. Many of us learned to sketch watching him in action. The class was lively with his presence and we sang and discussed works of art by Picasso, van Gogh, the impressionists and expressionists, but also movies. Apurva has always been a great movie buff, Clint Eastwood, Bruce Lee were his favourites at the time and he could mimic well. His other passion was food, even today not a visit goes by without the mention of food, if he hasn't brought something with him he will make sure he goes out and gets something or has someone bring it.

Unlike many others from the old city, he made that side of the city live for all of us. He was the ultimate “pol” resident and proud to be one. We heard the stories of the *masi*'s (aunties, everyone one was his *masi*), the kids and the happenings and the excitement. If you are not from the “pol” its like Disney World, once we tried to visit him and got completely lost in the maze. So one of the first things that I did on my return was make a visit to Apurva's house. Kite flying if not from his terrace is not having flown ever, its also the place where the who's who of town converge on the 14th of January. His mother cooks for everyone and his whole family is around.

Apurva to me is the quintessential artist. He eats, sleeps and drinks art. Many of his compatriots are not as obsessed with their profession as he is. This obsession with his passion is not just for himself, it is shared and it rubs off on anyone who comes in contact with him. He encourages his juniors, if required even financially supports them to better their art and skills. He openly describes his thought processes, his fancies, loves and dislikes. His creation is an open process and easy to read into. His philosophy laid out for all to see.

Therefore from the pigeon scrolls to the Ahmedabad city, Kolkata mines, Alang ship breaking yard, his daughter and his experiments with his emotions all of these can be recognised instantaneously as the work of Apurva Desai. A living man involved with everyday life. As he has grown and life has been more involved at the personal level, the black lines have gone out of his work. Colour has slowly crept in and the human figure has gradually taken centre stage.

My office wanted to bring out a calendar of the Dutch tombs in Ahmedabad and Agneya (Apurva's younger brother and our printer) and I were looking at options of using some photographs. When Apurva heard of our plans he offered what neither of us dared ask, he said he would sketch the tombs for the calendar. Agneya and I jumped at the idea and so our first calendar of the Dutch tombs of Ahmedabad was issued in 2001, his sketches a record of the state of affairs before the earthquake of 26th January 2001 and the restoration thereafter. In 2002 the Surat tombs were also brought out in calendar form to commemorate the 400-year business ties of India and The Netherlands. This was quickly followed up with a calendar for ICET a company training professionals for rescue operations.

It was then that he made a deal with Jan Meertens to facilitate a visit to Amsterdam and a visit to the Van Gogh Museum. As things turned out I was to be there at the same time and we were able to visit the museum together. A dream comes true.

Now a days, we still meet regularly. We still talk about art. We regret the forms it has taken in our city and we hope for better times. As he says most of the talent is today wasted in being an art teacher, neither student nor teacher is gaining from the partnership. There is very little originality and those that have it within them are caught up in life and sustenance.

In 2005 we managed to have the first ever-joint exhibition of the husband wife duo. Apurva's oil's with Kailash's aquarels at our office. Though their styles are completely opposite they can easily be displayed side by side. His canvases are large and hers are small. It is obvious that there is encouragement but no interference in their sense of aesthetics.

The days of Yadav sir are gone. His hazy painting of the Taj Mahal in college, which Apurva tried to make dust free only to realise that, it was painted as such. Rembrandt with his blobs of paint still able to portray such details. Van Gogh with his in your face life portrayal of the Potato Eaters; Pollock with his drippings; Picasso and his transitions in style, have all intrigued Apurva Desai, my painter friend.

Gauri
Art Historian