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'Dissolving Contours,' a show by painter Sohan Qadri, opens at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in NYC

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## THE ARTS

### Art

# Many incarnations of painter, poet, yogi Qadri

By Jyotirmoy Datta

**P**ainter, poet and yogi, Sohan Qadri has had many incarnations in this one life. Born in India in 1932, he was initiated at the age of 14 into Vajrayana Tantric rituals by Bikham Yogi, a spiritual master from Bengal who had taken up residence at a temple in the Kangra Hills. Qadri spent years in meditation in the Himalayas and in Tibet, studied art in Simla, had a solo show of his work in East Africa in 1966, before moving on to Europe and America.

He now lives in Copenhagen. He has a strong following in New York, where he had a major show at Tibet House. Last week, with the opening of his exhibition, 'Dissolving Contours,' at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York, and the release of his book, 'Seeker: The Art of Sohan Qadri' by Mapin Publishing in India and Sundaram Tagore Gallery in the United States, he can be said to be very much a part of, as well as an exception in, the New York art scene.

Not just in his content, even in his medium, Qadri's direction runs counter to most Western art. His medium is paper and chemical dyes — not canvas and oil paint. The colors are 'cooked' by Qadri in a vat, where the paper sheet is often left in its 'bath' for hours. He spoke with News India-Times about his life and his working method.

**Q** Why did you choose paper and dyes for your medium?

**SOHAN QADRI** Oil paint, the traditional medium of Western art, is opaque; it is the tool of the painter, who bends the brush and paint to his will. I let the painting paint itself. My paintings are never finished; they are forever becoming. To me, this is true about all 'reality.' There is nothing final or finished. Even the tree and the mountain are becoming, changing every moment.

**Q** How do you let your painting paint itself?

**QADRI** Once I was having tea at our studio at Ryparken 74 in Copenhagen with one of the painters I share the studio with when he asked me if my painting was finished and I said, no, it is continuing to paint itself, in that I had let the dyes soak into the paper, and work themselves out.

**Q** What kind of paper do you use?

**QADRI** I use a very special paper. Earlier, I used Van Gelder paper, which is 350 gram per square meter. Then I found Hanne Muhle paper, 400 gram per square meter. These are very heavy, very thick artisanal paper that I specially prepare to receive the dyes which I 'cook,' so to say, with glycerine, sheila, inks, etc. The colors are bright and transparent. I use textile dyes, like many artisans in India.

**Q** Well, after all these crafts secrets, tell us about your magic life.

## INTERVIEW



PHOTO LEFT, A book titled 'Seeker: The Art of Sohan Qadri' was scheduled to be

launched at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York on Sept. 16. With 83 illustrations in color, 26 in black and white, it is a Mapin Publishing production, in association with Sundaram Tagore Gallery. PHOTO RIGHT, Sohan Qadri.

**QADRI** Indeed it has been a magic life. I was born into a unlettered family in Punjab, away from electricity and...

**Q** Wait a second. Sundaram Tagore in the book that is about to come out says that's your bohemian-Buddhist fantasy. Your family was quite rich, with ties to Europe, and the yogi you talk about took up residence at a temple on one of your Kangra family farms.

**QADRI** Ah, Bikhram Giri! The illuminated Bengali from the Buddhist academic land of Bihar! He gave me an education you cannot have at Harvard or Oxford, he initiated me into *tantra*. He would play on the tabla, dance, do the *pooja* ritual. Then, at age 21, I wandered in the Himalaya, mingling with yogis in caves, teachers in temples and reincarnate lamas at Tibetan monasteries.

In early 19th century England, young aristocrats traveled to the 'continent' to round off their education when they came of age. In India, we have the world's highest mountain beckoning us. And Tibet. When my work was shown at Tibet House in New York, Columbia professor and true friend of Tibet Robert Thurman instantly responded to my work, because he has *tantra* in his veins.

It was a big exhibition. He has said some wise things in the book about me. We had not met. I didn't travel to New York for that show.

**Q** What makes it different this time?

**QADRI** My son, Soham, is coming to New York from Stockholm for the show. His mother is Finn, and they live in Stockholm. Soham was in India with me this year for a big show at Kumar Gallery in New Delhi. Soham told me afterwards: 'It's only now, after all these 24 years, do I know who and what my father is...' At this moment, while we are talking, he may have landed in J.F.K.

Bye. Meet you at the show.