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The dot among the dots: The works of Sohan Qadri

I am a dot

In the silence Of the wise

Sohan Qadri (1932-2011)



Only a poet, a painter and a Tantric yogic practitioner could engage with the mystic roots of spirituality. Sohan Qadri, one of India's greatest abstractionists in the genre of meditative moorings passed away early in March. It was at Kumar Gallery's 'Celebration' that collector and friend Virender Kumar had included a series of stellar works by Qadri which revealed his penchant for exploring the notion of emptiness or voids in a series of luminous, dye-infused works on paper.

Colours seeped and crept into wrinkles of meticulous meanderings . Qadri's early works on canvasses have found buyers at Sotheby's sales. He gradually moved to the turgid density of handmade paper. Qadri was

known to rhythmically serrate and puncture the surfaces of the handmade paper that he used as a part of his meditative sojourn.

At the Kumar Gallery hangs an early work by Qadri which hinted at the creation of the seed. The flamed tangerine spoke of an intuitive experience , in the creation of a composition that echoed the beauty of boundlessness in the island of experience. His was the language of orifices and elongated paths; he abandoned representation in search of transcendence. Qadri once spoke of early initiation and said he was taught by a dancer and musician Bhikan Giri who was more a seeker. "Whatever he did, I copied; he inspired me to join him in his rituals and, since I was good at drawing , he asked me to inscribe yantras (geometric designs used as meditation tools) on his mud walls," Qadri recalled. "His deep voice still resonates in my head - it made me vibrate.

He didn't talk much but just by being near him, I learned powerful rituals: visual (focusing on a yantra or a candle), aural (chanting or mantra), and the preparation for rituals (pranayama, the science of breathing). He was a master of prana, he'd breathe in and his eyeballs would pop out, he'd go into a trance.

I learned by observing him, by being with him for hours." Qadri's works were also shown at Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York. One look at Qadri's colour fields, and it's clear that he had an in-depth notion of opacity and the embers of timelessness in space. He often said that the act of painting itself was a transcendental trajectory in which he looked beyond himself, beyond skin. He said: "I look for what lies beneath, down deep where there is complete silence, complete darkness. Darkness is where peace is, it's synonymous to silence. Our universe is 99% dark, space is dark, we have very little light. We're replicas of our universe, we're dark inside. I call this the darkness of recognition. When you look at a painting, it arrests your thought process-your superimposition - then you imbibe it for a moment."

You can interpret it later, but that moment must happen. Yoga extends that moment-which happens in spite of you-into eternity: To live in that always, to have that taste continuously, in everyday life, right in the crowd, not on the mountain or in the cave. My search is for a samasara ,and you see that in the spine which is vertical." But what draws viewers to his paintings is the bhava, the quietude that is born out of vibrations in time. And the vibrations are centered along the vein of being.

These ripples of silence pulse with a peaceful pensiveness that is rare and somewhat born of a ritual of the concentrated moment. That is why he said: "My paintings are characteristic for their emptiness and peace combined in a radiation of power. Ultimately it is the energy that is contained and coalesced . It is not really necessary to separate oriental art from western art. Energy is universal and one for all life. Deep and true aesthetic perception is never geographically conditioned. The intuitive experience speaks all languages and knows of no formal boundaries." The percolation of colour seeps into the harmonic progression. Over the years, Qadri's work has gone through a distinct degree of distillation.

The lexicon of light and lines, along with the residue of textures forms the body of colour . And the experience is a symbolism that resonates in the very tenets of sadhana. Among Indian abstractionists, Sohan Qadri had an important place. A definitive book on Qadri by the Kumar Gallery in Delhi will serve to illuminate the evocative energy of Qadri's rhythms. Growing up in northern India, Qadri was exposed to Sufism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. He was initiated into yogic practice at the age of seven. His stay at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in search of higher truths shaped his sensibility and gave him a Zen facet. He was particularly inspired by Vajryana or Tantric Buddhism which emphasized the notion of sunyata or emptiness.

This is why he said: "A symbol is a step only, not a place to stay." His works act as planes of persuasion, inviting viewers to partake of a completely visual experience. Qadri was born in 1932 in Punjab, India . He received his MFA from the Government College of Art in Simla, India. He left India in 1965 and traveled through East Africa, North America, and Europe. He eventually set up a studio in Zurich before settling in Copenhagen where he lived for 40 years. His failing health took him to Canada.

An apt epitaph for Qadri would be F.N. Souza's words written in 1976: "He is a saintly man from whom an aura emanates. Try and expose him as a phony saint, and he emerges as a great artist. Try and put down his art as gimmick and he comes across as a profoundly learned man. Try to debunk his learning and he proves to possess all three - saintliness, aesthetics and wisdom" .