

M. F. Husain: Painter and the Showgirl

Continuing with his odyssey, the painter celebrates the myriad moods of actress Madhuri Dixit

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REMEMBER the *Didi tera devar diwana* number in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* (HAKK) when Salman Khan's slingshot hits Madhuri Dixit's swinging purple-clad bottom and she turns round, hands on hips, the fingers splayed outwards and sways backwards? Well, that slingshot hit another target too: M.F. Husain. Somewhere in the solar plexus no-doubt, but it also lands in the area where the creative devils inhabit the body of the lanky octogenarian. The artist, in fact, had walked out midway through the film the first time, but friends suggested he see it again—and this time in full. It was only when he saw the lady in her *Didi tera...* number that he was struck.

Husain is surrounded by huge paintings which are the result of an odyssey of love, obsession, or just a streak of marketing genius—Madhuri as Menaka with Vishwamitra, Madhuri with Meryl Streep, leaning over a bridge in Madison County and Clint Eastwood on horseback below, Madhuri as Radha with Nand Lala, Madhuri playing tennis at Wimbledon. Husain, on the eve of the exhibition at the Art Today Gallery in New Delhi to celebrate his 80 years and a collaboration with his new muse (they have formed a company, Madhuri-McBull Creations), is on a rewind to March when it all began. In a cinema hall in Ahmedabad, to which he went reluctantly and had his

epiphany

And now, 55 viewings of the film and much spilled acrylic later, Husain is still in a trance: That movement of the hips is out of this world. I have never seen such a dancer, and I have seen the best. Her words are transformed into body language. And as he talks, far more voluble than the year before, his long, bony fingers cutting figures in the air, his eyes less sleepy, words less mumbled and his beard less straggly, one suddenly realises that the actress has influenced more than his canvas. He's even copying her hand movements.

What exactly is going on? Uncannily, Husain always latches on to the latest icon, thus keeping himself always in vogue. He wonders about his Madhuri fixation: "Yeh kaunsa mor hai umar ka (What stage in life is this)? Is she Beatrice to his Dante? Circe? The Pied Piper? For Husain, it's more like "Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe". The painter and the showgirl on a show that has only just begun. A series of exhibitions—graphics, posters, stamps and then a movie which he will direct are on the agenda. It's not as if his creative juices had dried out and along came the actress who started it all going again. "I was busy doing my Theorama series, my religious series, Jainism and Sikhism were left, and Madhuri Dixit beech me aake tapak gayee (stepped in). I was doing my Dharam series and is ne taang araa di (intervened)."

The rest, if not history,

Husain describes his obsession with Madhuri as akin to Arthur Miller's famed fixation for Marilyn Monroe



Madhuri and Husain at Art Today for the opening of Husain's paintings of the actress.

is this exhibition. It seems as if Husain has taken Madhuri with her "ignituous" smile (the artist's coinage) and her dance movements with him in a time machine, down the decades of his work, introducing her to the many personas who have peopled his canvas.

A kind of M.F. Husain revisited with Madhuri in the driver's seat. Husain is more driven than driving, and this body of work is often too illustrative and unsubtle. He has always been quick on the draw with his paint brush, effusive about his infatuations and ambitious about his subjects—which take a grand swipe at history. But this time, it seems, being caught in a torrential storm of feelings and sensations, Husain is in a hurry. He says that Madhuri has "lit the fire of creation in me". And perhaps, he does not want that fire to dim before he finishes what, he says, is his "10-year plan". "If I did my Mother Teresa series for 10 years, I can do Madhuri for 10 years and more."

The artist talks about his present oeuvre using images which recall cinematic flashbacks.

Take the work entitled

Midnight Green at Wimbledon. Husain's fixation moves a bit from Madhuri and goes back years to Chris Evert Lloyd's performances at Wimbledon and Forest Hill. "She affected me. I loved the way she used her backhand. It was like watching a ballet"

The painting, bathed in an eerie green, shows Madhuri, faceless—as in most of his eight paintings and many water colours—on one side of the net, racket in hand, and a dog umpire with a cap sitting on the net at one end. "That is Taffy from HAKK. I put a

cap on him."

Madhuri as Radha with Nand Lala is the first painting of the series and the most convincing. There are glimpses of vintage Husain here. Madhuri now enters Husain's epic series as Radha. But she is only 11. An even

younger Krishna is playing a flute and Yashoda is shown as Mother Teresa. It is not the charm of the painting alone which makes it special—it is Husain's attempt to place the little drama in an abstract backdrop. The sky with its flashes of reds and yellows and its mood of conflict is marvellous.

The Madhuri factor, though, is more discernible in the Nautanki painting. Her sari draped the Maharashtrian way, her legs contorted as if in a blizzard of movements, but with all the grace intact, the canvas is quite dramatic and a touch filmi, with, as Husain's irrefutable notes say: "Tu aaj nachegi itna ke ghungroo tod degi (You'll dance so much today that you will break your ghungroos)."

Husain also takes Madhuri on his flight of imagination into the late '50s when he did his tempestuously violent series. Rape of Europa is perhaps the most controversial of the works and slightly jarring. McBull-Husain enters this canvas as a raging bull—Husain explains that he had done a similar painting in 1957, with a ferocious horse and "a nude clinging to its speed". Madhuri replaces the figure in the canvas and the bull obviously does not have gentlemanly intentions. Nor did Zeus when he came as a bull. But McBull's intentions, despite the threatening horns, he assures us, are platonic.

If Madhuri is ever present, Husain is omnipresent. "I am in disguise everywhere.

I am the bull. I am also Vishwamitra." The Madhuri as Menaka with due respect to Raja Ravi Varma is also Husain's nod to the Kerala painter. This work impressed Husain as a child. His rather studdish Vishwamitra, with a tiger's torso down his nude, ash-covered body has an amazing gesture. Standing upright, one hand covering his face, the elbow raised to avert a pleading Menaka holding a baby. The elongated figures are a far cry from Varma and unlike Husain's own work. Interestingly, Husain has introduced elements from his repertoire of images and symbols.

This is also perhaps the most personal canvas. As Husain elaborates in his notes: "I lived with a strong desire to reinterpret Menaka on my canvas all along, till Madhuri, who took more than half a century to be born and reach the silver screen told me: 'Here I am to enact all the dream roles in your creative outbursts on the canvases...'"

The painter has had many Menakas but no other woman has affected his work as she has... Is he in love? "This transcends love. I am almost in a trance... getting into that state of mind if you fix or look at something for a long time... images come..."

Platonic, then? "People say I am a gaga old man, trailing her. But I crave to see her in person and on screen."

Well, he's smiling — all the way to the canvases.



Star Wars : The Battle Resumes

The Cold War is supposed to have ended, so why is another version of 'Star Wars', the strategic defence initiative of the Reagan era, making a comeback in Washington? wonders peace and conflict specialist Mark Sommer.

JUST two years after its apparent demise, the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) — President Ronald Reagan's scientifically-suspect fantasy of an astro-defence against Soviet nuclear missiles — has been revived in the flimsy disguise as a 'Ballistic Missile Defensive Organisation' (BMDO). SDI, or 'Star Wars' as it was nicknamed, was launched in 1983 with the aim of creating an impenetrable shield across the entire North American continent.

It grew to become the most expensive weapons system in world history, an orbiting jobs programme that squandered US\$38 billion before being quietly shelved a decade after its inception.

Star Wars left few discernible achievements, and a trail of fraudulent experiments perhaps unparalleled in the annals in science.

As promised in their 'Contract with America', Republicans have moved swiftly to enact legislation calling for "development and deployment at the earliest possible date" of a nationwide missile defence system capable of protecting the entire United States against foreign missile attack.

President Bill Clinton is less enthusiastic about a full-scale revival of Star Wars but has not effectively resisted the Republican initiative.

His administration is itself pushing so-called 'theatre missile defence' (TMD) systems designed to stop a regional aggressor — say Iraq, or North Korea — from using ballistic missiles, armed with conventional, nuclear, chemical, or biological warheads, to attack US troops.

The implausibility of such scenarios is somehow never questioned in the Republican rout that passes for debate in the 104th Congress. It is seldom noted, for example, that

much dreaded Third World dictators are far less likely to develop and launch long range ballistic missiles than to smuggle bombs in suitcases or rental vans, as in New York or Oklahoma City.

Despite the manifest failure of its predecessor, however, the new programme's aims are no less grandiose or technologically infeasible and, over time, BMDO may prove still more expensive. Its proponents estimate that it will cost US\$50 billion over the next decade, nearly 50 per cent more than the Strategic Defence Initiative. Once under way, the price tag will surely rise, as is always the case with weapons systems.

The mystery of Star Wars' enduring appeal despite its inherent impracticability can be understood only in the context of the US economy's chronic addiction to arms spending.

Arms industries have long been engines of affluence in the communities where they are located, especially in the increasingly politically influential Sunbelt, Midwest, and South, hard hit by defence cutbacks since the Cold War's end.

Star Wars' renewal promises fat salaries for laid-off executives and technicians at Lockheed, McDonnell-Douglas, and other hi-tech firms and their tens of thousands of subcontractors.

Star Wars' supporters have been careful to seed contracts in hundreds of local communities in order to assure their political support.

While the ideology that rationalises Star Wars ostensibly opposes all governmental "meddling" in the economy, the programme is in fact a prime example of "corporate socialism", a phenomenon that is increasingly the norm in American business.

Private corporations,

working in tandem with politicians in districts that stand to benefit from government contracts, openly manipulate the decision-making process to favour their own interests.

Madly merging like most all other sectors of the US economy, arms manufactures form oligopolies that operate on hefty, built-in 'cost-plus'

profit margins, enabling them to achieve levels of success they would never attain without huge federal subsidies.

The return of Star Wars promises boom times for a small but politically influential technological elite with direct access to politicians like House-speakers Newt Gingrich, whose own Con-

gressional district in Georgia garners Pentagon dollars at 69 times the national average.

But Star Wars' revival also represents a fatal distraction from far more urgent domestic priorities and a disinvestment in the underpinnings of true prosperity.

In plunging ahead with its Star Wars revival, the new

Republican majority is also apparently oblivious to what its actions may do to already shaky Russo-US relations and the entire structure of nuclear arms control.

The initiative occurs in an atmosphere of renewed suspicion: NATO attacks on Bosnian Serbs and talk of expanding the alliance to Russia's borders have rekindled

Moscow's longstanding fears of encirclement by the West.

Moreover, if deployed, certain of the missile defences being developed today would clearly violate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, an agreement that many observers credit with having successfully slowed development of new offensive ballistic missile systems.

While Republicans have agreed to delay actual deployment until they consult with the Russians, they are unlikely to desist from deploying these defences on the basis of Russian objections if they are unwilling to heed Russia's vocal warnings today.

For their part, many nationalists and communists in the Russian parliament now advocate scuttling the START II Treaty in response to recent Western moves that they see as hostile to their vital interests.

This would be a consummate tragedy for the United States, Russia and the entire world. START II represents the most ambitious programme for multilateral disarmament in the entire half-century of the US-Soviet nuclear arms race.

But when taken together with NATO's eastward moves and the alliance's direct military intervention in the former Yugoslavia, the revival of Star Wars could help trigger a more general collapse of the nuclear arms control regime.

Weak and imperfect as it is, this system of treaties and protocols has applied the only brakes we have on an arm race that would otherwise run totally out of control.

Have Star Wars' proponents fully considered the ominous implications of their actions both for international relations and the US economy? Perhaps they are not as heedless as their behaviour would indicate, simply more cynical.

For the arms industry, the end of the Cold War has been a bane, and a revival of the arms race — while not a conscious goal — would be an undeniable boon for business.

Technologists and ideologues on both sides could resume their former professions, servicing and justifying a system of mutual hostility and manufactured conflict that handsomely benefits their private interests while steadily eroding the prospects for the neglected human majority. — IPS

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Miss World 1995 Jacqueline Auilera Marcano from Venezuela flanked by her first princess Anrica Martinovic (R) from Croatia and second princess Michelle Khan from Trinidad and Tobago. — AFP/UNB photo