



# art The Contemporary Art Scene in Sri Lanka

by Stanley Kirinde

THE CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE in Sri Lanka embraces many areas of artistic activity such as music, dancing, drama, cinema, graphic art, industrial design and commercial art, ceramic work and other crafts, and painting and sculpture. These subjects are provided as courses of study at the University of Kelaniya and at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies of that University. As these subjects cannot be covered in a brief article, it is proposed to confine this essay to the subject of contemporary painting only.

A brief survey of the recent past of the field of painting in Sri Lanka should help in appreciating the contemporary scene. To begin with we could consider the developments in the period before the island became independent in 1948 after a century and half of British rule.

The significant developments in the pre-1947 era can be considered under three broad categories. First, we observe the almost total demise by the end of the 19th Century, of the native tradition of painting. This tradition was a very ancient one, which, over a period of more than two thousand years, developed as a refined style of mural painting applied largely to the presentation of Buddhist subject matter in an easily understood form on the walls of temples and caves. Perhaps a notable exceptional to this traditional and religious painting are the 5th Century paintings of about 20 female figures in a niche on the Sigiriya rock in central Sri Lanka. This ancient tradition of mural painting can be divided into two phases. Firstly, there are the classical works found mainly at Sigiriya, done in the 5th century and those at Polonnaruwa done in the 12th Century. Secondly, there are the medieval paintings done in the period between the 14th-19th Centuries. Broadly speaking, the medieval work while being very decorative, sparkling and vigorous are less graceful and sophisticated than the paintings of earlier period. These paintings, both classical and medieval, are much like the work at Ajantha and the temple murals of South India.

The native Sri Lankan tradition faded away quickly during the 19th century under the impact of the current popular styles of painting which were introduced into the island by its

British rulers after the rebellion of 1848. It was the newness of the western style of painting which is referred to rather loosely as "Academic Art", which made it possible for the new style to undermine and supplant the Sri Lankan tradition. And, this new style was able to win over not only the westernised native community living in the cities, principally in the capital of Colombo, but also many country folk and even the class of mural artists known as "Sitharas" who for generations had practised the ancient art of temple painting.

## II

The compelling nature of the impact of the new European style of painting during the colonial era is conveyed in the observations made by a German visitor to the island — Earnest Haecckles. In his book "A Visit to Ceylon in 1882" he says that "dealing" with the natives for natural objects was most interesting..... when we agreed to barter. I had with me a number of small articles for the purpose. But the highest value was attributed to coloured prints.... and this says much for the artistic feeling of the Cingalese. They were immensely admired.... highly prized as return for presents and hospitality. Before long I found the best huts in the village (Weligama in South Sri Lanka) decorated with the products of German art.... headman came to call..... in the hope of receiving the much coveted prints. First in estimation stood the military — Prussian, Austrian, French, English and so forth. Next came theatrical figures, fancy portraits; then came pictures of animals, and last of all, landscapes etc., the gaudier the better."

Thus with the dissemination of such examples of popular western art, it is not difficult to understand the ease with which the native style of painting lost its appeal. But when the temple paintings done in the western or academic manner in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are examined it will be evident that their activity more often than not have failed to assimilate the new imported style.

For, these paintings do not indicate the Western dynamic mastery of the subject; nor the understanding of West-

ern colour harmony; nor the scientific laws of perspective and anatomy. Only, a rather naive charm animates the new paintings, but this is of little recompense for the destruction of the virile native tradition.

The second category under which the pre-1947 painting can be surveyed is the Revivalist movement of the 1930's. The larger objective of this movement was the rehabilitation of Buddhism. In painting it led to a striking achievement, the painting of a series of murals on the walls of the Buddhist *vihara* of Kelaniya (in the outskirts of Colombo) in a manner which attempted to revive the classical Sinhala tradition of mural painting found at Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa, and perhaps the Ajantha tradition as well, which the painter Solias Mendis is said to have studied on a visit to India prior to undertaking the painting of the Kelaniya temple. These paintings are today enormously popular and are undoubtedly impressive in scale and number. But a proper aesthetic evaluation of the work has yet to be done.

## III

The third category which has now to be considered is by far the most important in view of its immediate significance for the understanding of the contemporary Sri Lankan art scene. In the 1930's a group of radical artists — Harry Peiris, Justin Deraniyagala, George Keyt, Ivan Peiris, Richard Gabriel, Beling, Collette, Classen and Manjusiri with the patronage and assistance of Lionel Wendt, an artist of the camera, embarked on a mission to educate the art-loving public and popularize the developments in European art in this century, i.e. the art we call 'Modern Art'. With this objective in view they formed in 1943 the art society named the "43 Group". The formation of this group is perhaps the most important event in the field of art in this century. After 1943 the public and artists of Sri Lanka came to be increasingly familiar with the movements of modern art such as: Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism, Abstract Expressionism and other new movements and theories of art. The painters of the '43 Group' were all outstanding artists. A measure of their importance as artists is evident in the reaction to their work of John Berger of the New Statesman, when he reviewed

their exhibition in England in 1952. Berger went to the extent of saying that "In terms of their art they are trying to do nothing less than to solve the problem of a world revolution. That they occasionally succeed is far more significant than that they sometimes fail. My interest comes from my belief that Asia, rather than Europe will be the first to resolve a new, truly democratic tradition in Art." And, at about the same time William Graham commented in the art-magazine *Studio*, that "the most significant movement in Eastern Art today is to be found in Ceylon." The "43 Group" artists were certainly not overwhelmed by the European movements. They were innovators being acutely conscious of the island's rich cultural heritage, and each member of the group was able to evolve his own modern yet personal style with a distinct local flavour.

The most striking example in the island today of the application of a modern style in painting are the wall paintings executed by the most celebrated member of the "43 Group" George Keyt at the Gotami *vihara* in Borella, a suburb of Colombo. Keyt's temple paintings like those done by Solias Mendis at Kelaniya were inspired by the Buddhist revivalist movement of the time. But while at Kelaniya the attempt was to restore an old tradition, at the Gotami *vihara* there was a serious attempt to create a new tradition by presenting an Eastern subject, the life of the Buddha, in a Cubistic manner.

It is of some interest to note that during the years when in the world of Sri Lankan painting there was a revivalist movement as well as a modern movement, the country also witnessed certain political and social upheavals such as the riots of 1915; and the birth of the nationalist and the socialist movements. Yet these movements did not inspire any radicalism in the painters of either the revivalist or the modern schools.

Perhaps a little speculation can be permitted at this stage. The painters of the revivalist school and the modernists of the "43 Group" may have been either unaware of, or else excluded from their minds, any concern for the remarkable renaissance in painting that was at that time taking place in Mexico, where the

writer and philosopher politician Jose Vasconcelos, during his tenure of office from 1921-24 as the Minister of Education, was able to implement "a far-reaching programme which put art, aesthetic education and creativity at the peak of human achievement" and was able to achieve spectacular success in the field of painting by commissioning certain daring painters like Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueros to paint murals depicting the history, the nationalist struggle, and the life of the people of Mexico. The art historian Helen Gardner in her book, *Art Through the Ages* considers the work of these artists as "the most exciting painting in the Americas.... an authentic national art.... strong in social significance and of the highest aesthetic quality."

Of the painters who by their individual example have had an impact on the younger generation of artists working today, mention can be made of the academic painters such as ACGS Amerasekera and his son, Douglas, JDA Perera, David Painter and Stanley Abesinghe, who were influential Principals of the government School of Fine Arts and the painters of the "43 Group" who have already been referred to.

## IV

Today the work of the Sri Lankan painters of the present generation reflect in varying degrees the three categories of 20th Century Sri Lankan art discussed earlier. The academic style continues to be popular, but its possibilities which can restore an element of grandeur to the art of painting are hardly exploited. Revivalists too are yet in evidence, and are rendering a service in keeping alive the ancient and medieval styles, although there is an absence of new work on the scale of the modern Kelaniya murals. By far the great majority of today's artists are the inheritors of the legacy bequeathed to the country by the "43 Group". But whereas the enlightened painters of this group did not seek to establish in  *toto*  the modern but alien styles of 20th Century Europe and sought to revitalize Sri Lankan art by introducing new ideas and forms, the majority of painters today appear to have succumbed rather tamely to the Euro-American manner of Abstract Art with a concern for amorphous form and textural effects with

sometimes, a semblance of some recognizable shapes. Such works are extremely popular and are colourful and cleverly rendered. E H Gombrich, speaking of the abstract painter Kadinsky in his book, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, comments thus: "When I seriously compare my reactions to the best abstract canvas with some works of great music it fades into the sphere of the merely decorative." Gombrich's remark may well apply to much of the abstract work in vogue today when the 18th sculptor Falconet was faced with the prestigious position that antiquity enjoyed at the time, he pleaded "that we may be allowed, before genuflecting to consider the God." Modern art and its abstract variety in particular seems today to be enjoying the status of a God. But it's time that we consider this twentieth century phenomenon when that century is drawing to a close, and ask ourselves whether we should continue to genuflect in its presence any further.

Modern art, for well nigh a century has exerted a tremendous influence on painting in Sri Lanka. It cannot be denied that it has given fresh energy to, and revitalized the island's painting particularly in the second half of this century with the lead given by the "43 Group" of painters. However there is a need today to evaluate afresh the Euro-American centered field of modern art, closely scrutinizing it to assess whether this art and its ideas are adequate to satisfy the aesthetic needs of the Sri Lankan ethos. It is said that "the currency of art is debased if it is robbed of its national ore." If that is so, a fresh search for this life-giving substance has to be made in our indigenous arts, in our classical and medieval traditions of Buddhists and Hindu art of the region, in the marvellously luminous miniature paintings of the Indo-Persian schools, and even in the national traditions further afield. There is again a need to bring back humanism and a concern for form rather than mere style if we are to see once again paintings of a richness and grandeur that were inspired by the great religions and ideologies.

This paper was presented at the Fifth South Asian Dialogue held in February 25-27, 1997 by Centre for Policy Dialogue

## exhibition

# Mistique of Multiple Visuals

by Fayza Haq

KAMAL QUADIR, WHO HAD HIS SILK screen print exhibition at the Alliance Francaise had his mother to open the exhibit. "I could have got someone like Professor Younus to open the show but I felt I owed so much to my mother for inspiration," Kamal explains, "that I had to have her for the opening."

"I've tried many many mediums while I was at school — charcoal, acrylic, oil paint, and photography. I started silk-screen while working. It is a long process and took me approximately three weeks for each item. I do some of the work at home and some in the studio. The studio is 500 miles from New York where I stay.

"I prefer silk-screen because with it I can work at home, charcoal and oil are too messy at home. At New York I don't

have a studio and nor did I have the time. I work as a company analyst for the New York Chamber of Commerce. This is my third exhibition. I have had two shows at Oberlin, USA," Kamal says.

The medium is expensive. Travelling to the studio is costly. The work is also very toxic, I am supposed to wear mask and gloves. The studio has good ventilation. I went on weekdays by plane. The Sunflower '15 pieces alone cost me \$400," Kamal discusses his expenses.

Talking about his themes he says, "Being in corporate America. I point for my pleasure, painting allows me to go into a different world. It helped me get out of the conventional world I lived in."

Kamal adds '66' is about the way media desynthesizes our mind by repeating

the same thing again and again. News is repeated so often that it becomes a pattern of life. This is about a woman's child dying of diarrhoea in 1971 in a refugee camp in India. I have repeated it to Question people about the value of an individual story. There are many things that look like a part of life but when you examine closely there are many other stories. We need more information than what the newspaper supplies us with.

"Each print differs because in '71 when 3 million people were killed each death had an individual story. The images are negative because the positive image would be too common. I didn't want a Madonna image. I didn't hanker after a smoothe beautiful view. I used silver to make the pictures eerie."

"Days and nights with the Sun" have

fields of sunflower with individual flowers focused on the field. The artist has visited some sunflower fields from which oil is produced, one is a picture of night, another of day and the last is of dawn.

"Footsteps of the Ganges" has five different images. It begins with a natural scene of the Himalayas. It traces the Hindu culture. Moghal architecture is next brought in the last painting of the series goes back to nature, depicting trees in the delta areas.

"Fifteen" brings in 15 images out of the sunflower field. First the artist made one image and then felt motivated to make the other 14 flowers with different background. He felt that using the same backdrop would make it monotonous. "Imaginary Press-2" shows the news of the death of Nur Hus-

sain as if it actually got printed in "The New York Times." This is done in blue and white the rest of the page is purple and blue. Here the artist shows the double standard of democracy in the west where the news of a country with 120 million people is not printed whereas Nicaragua and Ortega are in the headlines.

Talking about the artists who have inspired him, Kamal names Fra Angelica, Picasso, Andy Warhol, John Pierson (his teacher at Oberlin) and S M Sultan who was a family friend. Sigmund Freud's writing have also influenced him.

Speaking about the technique of the silk-screen Kamal says, "I take a piece of silk and stretch it between frames. When I draw a flower or any other image

I use a water based colour. Then I use a roller to allow the oil based colour to penetrate through the screen. I have used two colours one to get the motif and the other to get the background.

"To get the exact image I sometimes photocopy the image I want on a polythene paper. There is a chemical called photoemulsion which is sensitive to light which I put on the screen. The light matures the chemical on the screen and makes it stable. Then I put the paint on it," while Kamal paints for pleasure, he finds art an effective way to approach social issues. He finds silk-screen a very interesting print making technique involving replication. The general absence of silk-screen in Bangladesh makes this exhibition potentially rewarding as the younger generation gets to know of this ancient technique.

## poems

### The Beach Revisited

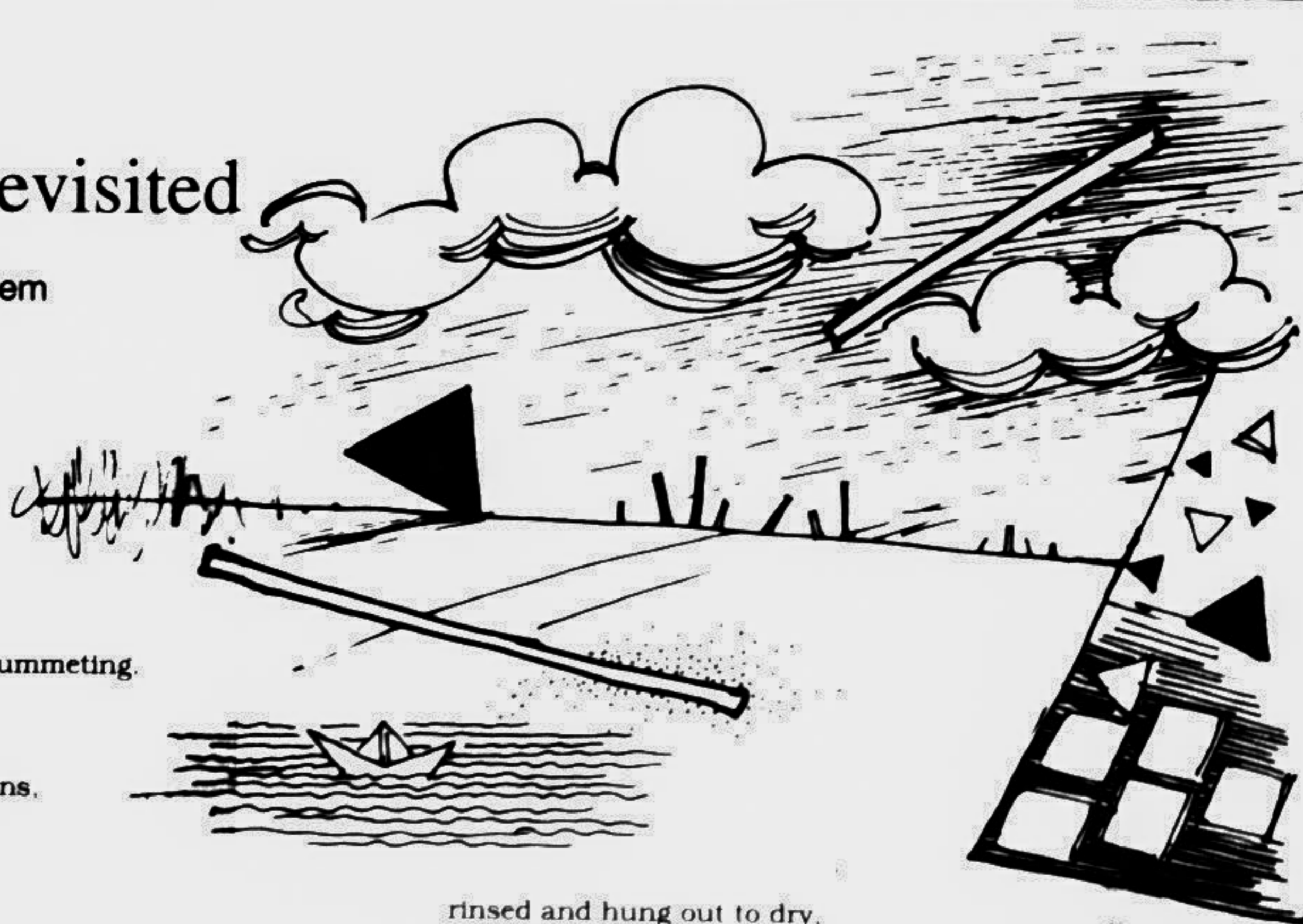
by Shakil Kasem

Across a million waves was the sun. Thrown up after a thousand years, and held on a hand with no fingers. A sheet of flame on which mirages danced.

The mind built humped bridges across a river of no promise, the budget, SPA, unions on strike, stock exchanges and the market plummeting. With not a bikini in sight.

Evenings descended like Dalisque tents on Buddhist ruins, and the woman chased Prufock barefoot across the sands. The past constantly whispered of the child, the wife, lazy strolls along the boulevards of Delhi.

The brain was washed,



rinsed and hung out to dry, the moon promised darkness and the senses took flight blowing out lanterns in the sky

### Village

by Gonoful

I went to a village far away where time turned upside down to hear you and learn your wisdom and you answered with strong winds and clouds but little rain

We travelled by cycle-van over a long dusty road, Night entered the stage on the way to Puttjani

The moon was full but cloud hidden trees and houses shown black in the horizon

Our driver struggled four wheels embraced the deep dry silt bird sounds and wind

and then from the opposite direction the moan of buffalo carts straining under loads of wood destined for distant cremation

Perhaps no answer is simple only patience and a willingness to see and hear for long the wind blows empty but much later as we slept, Puttjani was blessed with a rich, drenching rain.

