

TUESDAY OCTOBER 26, 1993

ARTS

Indian artists have wholeheartedly given their support to a unique movement to help mentally ill destitutes, notes *Minakshi Raja*

When the heart precedes art

The roster sounded like a *who's who* of the Indian art world; painters who normally might not be seen dead with certain other painters readily agreed to be seen at the current Shradha Samarpan exhibition at the Jahangir Art Gallery in Bombay. By the end of the first day about 40 paintings had already been sold.

From Paris, S H Raza painted the aptly-named *Compassion* for the show and promptly sent it by courier mail; Mansaraj in Toronto insisted in painting something new rather than have his Bombay gallery deliver one already in the city; Prafulla Mohanti from London donated his work *Shradha* as a gift, and so did Narayanan Akkitham, Sakti Burman, Lalitha Lajmi among 15 others.

The rest of the 139 painters retained 30 per cent of the prices they themselves had fixed, which were already lower than their normal prices.

What brought together these "pictures at an exhibition" that seemed to overflow from the gallery? The thought behind the process came jointly from Smitha and Bharat Vatwani, both psychiatrists who practise from their own Shradha Nursing Home in suburban Borivili near Bombay with another psychiatrist, Dr Ghanshyam Bhlmani.

"We both came from less privileged backgrounds," Dr Bharat explained. "I lost my father at an early age and money being scarce, I used to pay for my education by selling crackers during Diwali and going from door-to-door selling books for the rest of the year. Later, I won a national scholarship given to the 100 best SSC students in Maharashtra, and this helped see me through college where I met my wife."

"Because of our own backgrounds we always had compassion for the less fortunate, especially for mental patients. These are people who are unable to look after themselves, they are unaware of the extent of their illness, there is an ele-



Birth of water by Bhupen Khakkar

ment of neglect here because they have to depend on some other person to take them to a doctor for treatment..."

Psychiatry is an expensive treatment that can be afforded by rich people, though it is an unfortunate fact that mentally ill people also inhabit our streets, penniless and uncared for.

It is these people that the Vatwanis began to notice on their Sunday morning walks until one day, they took their first destitute patient back to their nursing home. The man was schizophrenic with delusions of a separate life from his real one.

The Vatwanis bathed him, fed him and treated him with psychotic medicine. As he regained sanity they repeatedly questioned him and eventually got his former address, and finally they were able to relocate him. Of the 200 such patients treated so far, about 70 per cent have recovered and the remaining few may have suffered a relapse because they stopped taking their medicine too early, and in this illness

medicine is of the essence. "Out-of-Bombay patients," commented Dr Bharat, "are easier to re-settle with their families than local patients. In the city where urbanisation has taken its toll, the family sees the former patient as another mouth to feed." A city family will look suspiciously at us at the time of rehabilitation, thinking they'll have to pay a hefty fee for the prodigal's return, while in the rural areas we are treated as living gods and the entire village will turn out to welcome us!"

One such patient is actually responsible for the present exhibition. A former student and lecturer at the J J School of Arts, Hemant Thakare was a gold medalist, but was removed from the school staff after a mental breakdown. His students worried for him and artist G S Adivekar, also formerly a J J student spoke to the Vatwanis. "Can you help him?"

They took him in, making him part of the family while his treatment was going on. After he was fully recovered, Dr Bharat decided to tackle bureaucracy and after four months of hard work Thakare got back his old job.

Hearing about his recovery others took an interest and agreed to collaborate with the idea of the exhibition which

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will, hopefully, collect Rs 20 lakh. "The artists' sensibility and responsibility towards these patients in very high," said Thakare, "and it is rare to see so many painters, 139 in all, exhibiting together."

"It's for a good cause," asserted both Prafulla Dahanukar and Mario Miranda separately, and finally it was this cause that mattered. The Vatwanis themselves admitted to being totally ignorant about



'Who spoke after the sonnet was over' by Rekha Rodwittiya

art, and it is this simplicity that seems to have appealed to each painter as he or she responded to the letter each of them received.

From Krishen Khanna, Anjolie Ela Menon, Vivan Sundaram in Delhi; Akbar Padamsee,

practitioner himself, besides being a well-known painter said, "I had been seeing these mentally afflicted destitutes on the city streets and always thought something should be done for them. The fact that the Vatwanis are treating them is work and needed to be done and something that is very welcome."

Dr Bharat was all praise for the painters. "They responded unbelievably well," he said, "even though they didn't know us personally. The biggest names gave us their works; they were all very sympathetic and one must never underestimate the decency of the artists."

"They knew we needed the money to expand our rehabilitation centre and they came forward spontaneously, which is so much more encouraging and satisfying than having to approach the government for funds!"

So far there is only this one institution in India doing his kind of work, and it is limited to Bombay. For every 12 private, paying patients that the Vatwa-

nis treat, they take eight destitutes that they have befriended on their walks. One such person was scooping up gutter water to drink with a coconut shell when a friendly arm went around him with an invitation to a hot cup of tea. It was also an invitation to recovery and freedom from mental illness.

The proceeds of this exhibition in which paintings are priced between Rs 15,000-30,000, will go towards expanding the Foundation's activities with a separate 4,600 sq ft centre in Bombay's Dahisar. The Vatwanis always limit their treatment to psychotic destitutes and do not accept drug addicts or alcoholics. "The idea," they said, "is to treat patients for illnesses not of their own making."

There are far too many painters with a conscience to name individually, but both famous and lesser-known names have risen to the cause with an enthusiasm and generosity that is rare today; it is a heart-warming endorsement.