Frozen in time

Malika Garrett is fast becoming the toast of the American art scene, writes **Mathures Paul**

DURING her travels she takes photographs. And on returning they become part of her many canvases that Americans love. Her many meetings with resilient characters and the desire to capture human connections have made Kolkata-born Malika Garrett a known name in the American art world.

She works with the palette knife technique and her medium is oil. "My work is very instinctive and I am constantly experimenting with paint but my primary tool is the palette knife and my sole medium is oil. My primary subjects are the simple everyday lives of rural Indian people and candid images and powerful memories are what make my subjects. These paintings are constructed purely by means of tones in heated orange, red and lilac and challenged by the blues, greens and purples. I stay away from the academic form."

Born in Kolkata, a city known for its top-notch artists, she left in 1985 soon after writing her ISC examinations from La Martiniere for Girls. "I received a full scholarship in art and wanted to pursue my dream of studying in America. India is full of talented artists and they have always been encouraging. Growing up in Kolkata, it was easier for me to choose art as Bengal is full of artists."

The city, its scenes and people, has inspired her themes to a great extent. "I am a proud to be Bengali and the images are from personal experiences and memories. I express what I see. My experiences of home always come through in my work. I don't think too much of technical details when painting. It's my understanding of a situation or a person that is important."

Away for 20 years, she keeps returning to Kolkata time and again. "But I cannot visit here often enough! Every other year I return, for my two children keep me busy. The Kolkata food scene, sounds, sights, colours are too vivid. I owe much of my success to my childhood spent in the City of Joy. My family instilled in me a strong sense of values. Bengali women with strong will power surrounded me. Once a part of Kolkata you will never feel like a guest."

'They expect a typical artist. Instead they find an average woman in a business suit. Art is my therapy'

Quite a few of Malika's paintings are scenes from north India, especially Rajasthan. "Since much of my work is about colour, I am drawn towards Rajasthan. I have always felt a certain connection with the desert and its people even though I have never lived there. Rajasthan has vibrant colours and beautiful people and such images have left a lasting impression on me."

Her last exhibition was held at the Art Station Gallery in Atlanta and she is planning to have an exhibition in West Coast. Besides painting she also works for a multinational company.

"It's tough to balance two careers. But I have been doing this for over 15 years and also looking after my family. When people learn about my dual roles, they are amazed. They expect a typical artist. Instead they find an average woman/mother in a business suit. Art is therapy for me."

It was a Greek art teacher in Kolkata who introduced Malika to the art world. Her confidence in her works came from winning an award at the Nehru Children's Art Contest. "My paintings are a mix of Modernism and abstract expressionism but rooted deeply in Indian tradition."

And here's another side to Malika ~ the photographer. "The photographs are those of a photo-journalist (she has worked for newspapers). I wait to capture a person unguarded. When I find the right person and the right moment I take photographs of them. I believe my pictures speak of a connection that I have with my subjects. I will most probably not meet the person I photograph a second time but his/her world will forever be captured in a frame. My very first camera was a Kodak Click 3 bought at Das Studios in Darjeeling. In college I was presented a Yashica FX 3 camera. Now I use a Canon EOS 20D digital camera but I miss my old Yashica and the old darkroom days."

Pulling at the heart strings

THE National School of Drama student, batch of 1985, was a diehard theatre person ~ until something happened and his first love became his second. Subho Joardar was like other aspiring theatre persons and participated in group theatre and drama workshops. "I was into theatre in a major way and did a lot of group theatre, theatre workshops and so on. But while playing different parts, I had a feeling that perhaps I was not being able to reach the masses. Around the mid-80s, I was called by Suresh Dutta from Calcutta Puppet Theatre to assist him in a fellowship he had received from Sangeet Natak Academy. I was to undertake an intensive survey project of south Bengal. I was to find out everything there was to know about traditional puppetry. It's now twenty years since I first discovered the power of the medium of puppetry. I was completely bowled over by the medium and gave up theatre to join Calcutta Puppet Theatre as music composer, scriptwriter and assistant to Suresh Dutta," says Joardar.

Theatre and puppetry were not his only pursuits. Joardar also worked as journalist for newspapers.

Joardar's new first love took him over completely and in 2000, he formed his own puppet group Banga Putul. Since the time Joardar took up puppetry, he has been taking his dumb friends to audiences all over the country and the world. "We have participated in international puppet festivals, conducted workshops and trained others in the art of puppetry. We have travelled with our puppets all over the country to attend and participate in puppet festivals ~ from Mangalore to Delhi to Kerala. Our puppet shows have found an audience in Karachi, Bangladesh and Japan," says Joardar of his love.

According to him, puppetry is one of the most powerful mediums around. "India has a rich heritage in puppetry. Contrary to popular belief, puppetry did not migrate from the West to Asia ~ the truth is that puppets made the journey from Asia to the West. But this rich medium, which has its origins before the times of Buddha, is in grave danger of becoming extinct," says Joardar, whose group participated in the Hutch Odeon 2006 festival.

But this puppeteer has certainly not given up and is trying his best to breathe life into the medium. Some theatre techniques have been incorporated so that puppetry appeals to a modern audience. "It is possible to improvise without messing with the purity of the medium. With inputs from stagecraft, puppetry can only grow, evolve into a stronger more visible medium. Two things happen that help puppetry in a positive way ~ first, traditional puppetry gets a fresh lease of life; the second benefit is greater and more complicated. Every medium sends a message across to the audience; whether it is a song or dance performance or theatre. It has been found through experiments by social psychologists in the West that puppets have a far greater impact on the human mind than if humans ~ celebrities or otherwise ~ try to send forth a persuasive message," Joardar explains.

The puppeteer wants to create a new level of awareness among the weaker sections of society through his persuasive medium. "Puppetry such a dynamic medium. The scientific reason behind its greater impact on humans is the defense mechanism that all of us possess. We automatically reject messages when the speakers are humans ~ whether it's a politician or a glamourous celebrity. But surprisingly, when people speak through puppets this defense mechanism breaks down and the audience becomes more vulnerable towards the message. You see, the puppet is inanimate, it is a doll, it has no personality. So, people tend to listen more keenly to a puppet's message. Therein lies the key to puppetry's power," he says.

Joardar has a self-imposed responsibility to society. "I want to revive India's rich repertoire in puppetry. It's so colourful and dynamic and full of historical importance, it deserves a wider audience," rounds off Joardar.

■ **Kajari Bhattacharya**

around TOWN

Breeding problem

BIRLA Industrial & Technological Museum will observe World Population Day on 11 July. Programmes for the day include an open house quiz at 10 a.m. and a lecture (Controlling of population is the strategy of survival in nature") at 11 a.m. Students studying between standards VII and XII can participate. To participate contact 22892815, 22877241-43.

The museum will also host a series of special science film shows for primary and secondary level students between 24 July and 16 September (except second Saturdays, Sundays and holidays) in the air conditioned auditorium. There will be two sessions ~ 10.30 a.m. to noon and 12.15 p.m. to 1.45 p.m.

Answer back

BIRLA High School invites you for the Kolkata regional final of the seventh Inter Institutional LN Birla National Debate on 11 July, 10 a.m. onwards. The chief guest would be Dr Mritunjoy Mohanty, assistant professor, Indian Institute of Management, Kolkata.

This year three centres have been added in the Kolkata region ~ Jamshedpur, Ranchi and Bhubaneswar.

The winners from these centres and the winners of the Kolkata preliminary round would compete with each other for a place in the final.

Not child's play

YOU want to explain HIV/AIDS to children. But you don't know how. As part of its work with underprivileged children throughout South Asia, Groupe Development has come up with two tools ~ a board game called *Malamaal* and an animation film, *Ek Aur Munnabhai*. The launch will take place on 11 July in the city and will be attended by Anne Marchal, head of delegation (development) of the European Commission, New Delhi.