THE WEEK
JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

ART TO HEART

Bart and the art of criticism

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Story Dated: Tuesday, November 13, 2012 13:18 hrs IST

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Arguably, the arts in India have not received the critical attention they so richly deserve. This in spite of the fact that we have had a long, multi-layered tradition of aesthetics based on critical analysis and theory of the arts. The tradition, starting with Bharata's Natya Shastra, flowed through two millennia. But, somehow, since the beginning of the 20th century, which marked the emergence of the so-called modernism, the tradition seemed to have dried up, particularly in respect of music, dance and visual arts. None of the classical and shastric concepts of analysing contemporaneous art was found useful. Nor a reinvention was attempted. What came in place by way of modern art criticism suffers from a degree of classical amnesia. The almost wilful disinheritance has forged a critical tradition which has no memory and is tragically confined to modern art.

But in this rather puzzling dialectics of ‘creative presence' and ‘critical absence', there have been remarkable critics who brought passion, intensity and inwardness to the critical effort. They tried to put artistic texts in broader contexts and discovered meanings which would have otherwise remained hidden.

One such critic remains hidden to ordinary viewers: Richard Bartholomew, a Burma-born poet who became a powerful art critic in Delhi in the mid-50s and wrote thousands of pages of art reviews and articles which remain a trustworthy guide to the visual arts of India from the 50s to mid-80s.

Recently, Bart published, with financial assistance from The Raza Foundation, a most impressive volume of 640 pages, titled The Art Critic. Geeta Kapur, in a brilliant introduction, points out that “what Richard did was to nurture the field of contemporary art, using metaphors and allegories of life, death and beauty. And though we might quibble a little with the poetry, he did, literally, forge a language—on the anvil, in the “smithy of the soul”, as Joyce would say.”

Richard did understand the limits of art-criticism. He was of the view: “Theories of art do not make a critic; he appreciates art the better if he understands, or tries to understand, the nature of the creative process. He must know that the artist's instinct, his capacity for exploration (or experiment) and his awareness of history, personal and contemporary, determine the quality of his vision. Every artist is great, significant or mediocre in proportion to how he manages to relate these factors in the understanding of reality.”

Making ‘the ability not to have to denounce life' an important element of his critical theory, Richard wrote about Shailoz Mukherjee: “Now that Shailoz has died, I like to think that, lonely and withered and self-protected as he was, he did not denounce life.”

While writing about a Raza show Richard says, “In Raza's art, the Indian palette triumphs over the avant garde image. His is a prismatic vision. Colour is his joy and his schema. He is interested in the life of colour and in the life he can depict through colour. There is no symbolism other than the symbolism and symbolic gesture of colour. The landscape is only a skeletal base, the structure of which we forget when we follow the gesture. The joints, the action of individual images, are not his primary concern. What is important to him is the leverage, the pulsating thrust of colour, its areas of dryness and of moisture, its even tranquillity, its swirls of tension and its gathering of energies into knots of sudden illumination.”

Richard believed that “no artist can escape criticism for it is aesthetic conscience”. He insisted that “besides objectivity, the painter must have what is most important, a sense of value. He must know psychic health from psychic sickness. He must be able to differentiate between desire and nostalgia, between what has actually been achieved and the intended goal. He must be able to evacuate the waste and the poison and assimilate nutritive criticism.”