

1. *The paint on your fingers prod me to ask you this – are we going to witness a new creative journey?*

May not be a 'new' one but yes, a 'different' one! All what I've been doing through this year was to paint... cajoling my fingers to be supple and propelling some courage to face an empty canvas! Past few years, the changing times have alienated me from making films... and I have found consolation in the blank canvas.

2. *A new innings?*

Yes at 70, in fact the 4th inning! I'm gearing up for my multi-city exhibitions planned at Mumbai, Ahmadabad and Delhi.

3. *Are you confiding in me that you are retiring as a film maker?*

My actions seem to lead me to that conclusion.

4. *Sorry, but why?*

Cinema has become very lopsided – more commerce, less art or aesthetics! In today's definition of successful film-making, the promotional extravaganza is so overwhelming that a person like me feels buried. The market diktats, the vulgarity of content, the heightened mediocrity suffocated the artist within me. Till now, I continued to do obdurately what I felt like doing from within. I cannot succumb to the external forces.

A similar question was asked to me when I had 3 consecutive silver jubilee hits back in 1978, 'are you leaving theatre?' I was asked the same again when I directed my first film *Akriet* – 'are you going to stop acting?' There has always been an overlap... you cannot draw a definitive line in between two expressions. I was very active in theatre when I had my 7 one-man shows as a painter. Most of my directorial experiments in theatre were after my successes with *Rajnigandha*, *Chhotisi Baat*, *Chitchor*. I acted in Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Khamosh* when I was already directing films and television serials.

5. *You dabbled in visual art and performing art... that too as an actor, director. What inspired you to follow this flow?*

I guess I experimented with the 'space' whether its 2 or 3 dimensional... explored its visual possibilities. Space and visuals are like a circle and a center of that circle... non-existent without each other. I guess I am inseparable from being an artist. Probably that's my essence of life.

6. *Of these 3 mediums, what are you most comfortable with?*

I guess 'Painting'... though a canvas scares and intimidates me. Painting is completely a self-based activity. Whilst painting, I am sneaking deep into oblivion. It's my dialogue with myself. Through films & theatre, I seek to reach out to an audience. It's a centrifugal acceleration... my dialogue with the viewer.

A painting exists for itself and in itself, whereas a film has a utilitarian existence. But I must say theatre offered me a 'real space' to work with.

7. *Did you not like the medium of film?*

No, no, I thoroughly enjoyed my acting career. I was immensely attracted to the structural flow of a script or the designing of a particular scene. I was privileged to work with every top director & technician in our country. Thus I could observe them sketching their own work in their own distinct styles. Cinema as a medium opened a Pandora's Box. Tools like camera, cinematography, editing pushed me into that world of *Maya*. With a childlike curiosity and enthusiasm, I started my career as a director of films in 1980. In 40 plus years, I acted in about 50 films; directed about 16 films - 6 in Hindi, 8 in Marathi and 2 in English.

8. *Why did you say that theatre offered me a 'real space' to work with?*

When I was a professional painter, I had a bank job during the day and was active with theatre during nights. That 3 dimensional space threw infinite possibilities of composition/layout, light & shadows, movement of live human presence, sound design, etc. The proscenium presented a mighty challenge of eliminating the unwanted clutter. I felt the urge to become a minimalist.

When I entered the world of dramatics, 2 extreme trends were prevalent. The NSD productions designed in the Alkazeer tradition with larger than life orchestration, grand movements set in opulent sets/lights/costumes. On the other hand, visually most unimaginative Marathi plays, trapped into a main stream format of presentation! Invariably, a naturalistic box set of a drawing room in a middle class house was the visual when the curtain opened.

May be, as a reaction to those prevalent trends, I explored my plays without any realistic props; instead, used human body and lights as my primary tools. I played with darkness which in itself had its own expression. I experimented with shadows

which evoked strong imagery complementing the dialogue. I did not explore colors though and only opted for grey, blacks. I also moved the theatre from proscenium to the open spaces. I resorted to abstraction to explore something which was already defined by and through dialogues. I attempted to deconstruct the spoken text while presenting an abstract visual context. It was exciting to experiment with such contrasting juxtapositions. I drew meaning of the words through the movement of forms that emerged from those. Such trials conferred a surreal setting to the play.

9. *So you experimented with theatre space as an abstract painting??*

As a creator, the joy I got while unraveling abstract imagery found through words was very unique. I find abstraction fascinating. Abstraction is not necessarily obscure. Abstraction communicates through all mediums, though the narrative arc of a painted canvas, or a film or a play differs in genre. Ideally even films ought to have layers of abstraction; if a film throws subliminal possibilities of exploration at the audience, I will scale it higher than the one merely unfolding a series of corporal experience. Unfortunately our viewers are usually spoon-fed with ready answers leaving no space for any sub-text, subtlety, finer nuances etc.

10. *Why did you move away from theatre??*

I started to feel that the words and sound are overpowering the other elements of theatre. I tried to distance myself from the solidifying experience that arose from the words. I wanted to explore the world of theatre beyond words. I have always strongly believed that a pause & silence is as important as spoken word or a piece of music or a sound byte. As a painter too, I have a similar belief; the blanks are as significant and meaningful as the filled portion of a canvas.

11. *You mentioned that 'a canvas scares and intimidates me'. Even now..?*

Certainly. I am a believer of genuine equality... among genders, different religions, various people of varied backgrounds etc. Similarly I believe that an artist is equal to his art. There is almost equivalence between me and my work. None better or lesser than the other! Despite this mental position, in reality I feel surrendered to the painting; I am at its mercy!!! Firstly the canvas, and then my finished work - both are actually testing my ability to lead the same to completion. My artistic strength or creative abilities are constantly being judged.... in which sense both are on a higher pedestal than me. Thus, though I am observing the space of the canvas to discover ways of expression, I am being observed constantly... being laughed at my लडखडाना, delusions, wrong choices, and failures... or being rewarded with instantaneous reassurances. It's like a wide open eye devouring me or watching my

mercurial movements, or a black hole pulling me inside for absorption. This process of one way assessment is confrontational, and almost simultaneously demands my corrective reactions. If I clutter too many forms in a space, it chokes me and asks me to clean up. If a small drop of linseed oil stops trickling, the space below turns quiet and sad... telling me to define it with the fading color being carried by that drop. It scares me as an artist... makes me fragile. Is it me who is painting or is it the space that is controlling itself?

Despite all this, I am grateful to the canvas – blank or filled, because whether through bitter disappointments or satisfying moments, it reconfirms my faith in my creative abilities. It keeps me melted like wax all the time. It becomes the source of my inspiration. It keeps me away from itself while keeping me tied to it. It keeps on posing dilemmas.

12. What dilemmas...?

Many antithetical choices – whether a canvas is blank, empty and neutral? Or besides its size, texture, color, is it the source that solidifies my forms & imagery? Is the canvas a mere reflector of a light ray or is an absorbent? Doesn't it provide me with a surface full of possibilities challenging my imagination and sensibilities? How can it be blank and empty? In fact it compels 'me' to be open, unbiased, and to that extent pure; I feel compelled to be bare... as a dictate from that blank space! If so, how can it be neutral?

Whether to use oils or water colors is another dilemma! Water colors emit tenderness, softness, compassion; which bring out vulnerabilities in a graceful manner. It soothes you.... one can write poetry with water colors. Water colors get absorbed in the surface, whether its paper or canvas. Those qualities of being one with the texture, the sense of intimacy brought through the transparent fluidity, its composed nature attract me tremendously. At the same time, I am fascinated with the robust thickness of oils. Its ability to not merge into the surface allows me to create a collage of emotions through dense layers of paint. The effects and the emotions created by these two schemes are conflicting to each other. Intermittently I take up this challenge of getting a water color effect through oils. To that extent, I constantly experiment with the technique of color application.

Whether to draw abstracts or realistic paintings is yet another dilemma?

13. Your exhibition is titled "Abstracts in Oil"?? Have you never dealt with realistic paintings?

When one is painting realistic forms, space is used as a utilitarian with specific shapes and figures in mind. The essence of the painting has already emerged and is defined on the canvas in terms of shapes, colors even before one begins to paint.

Somehow reality limits my imagination; the details bind my mind to its context. Whereas abstracts are full of infinite, unseen, unexplored, fluid, unfamiliar images... just like free-flowing, unshaped trickles! Play with surreal imbues endless metaphors which marvels me. Capturing the essence of a distilled but deformed reality challenges me more, than just recreating the appearances.

Also, abstracts give complete autonomy to the viewer to find meaning freely and to trace the mind of the artist. I have the freedom to peel off the mystery, hues, and the subconscious in an untamed manner. This choice for abstraction was easier to make as it was true to my dislike of regimentation and replication.

14. Don't you wish to restart your career as an actor simultaneously as a painter?

Do I look like a 20 year old with 6 packs capable of multitasking?? To be honest, all these years, there has been, on an average, at least one film a month offered to me as an actor. But those are all boring, uninteresting roles... no character, no meat, nothing I should own up! They just need some known face to fill that slot... A few years down the road when I see some good actors enacting those roles, I simply thank my ability to refuse those despite the alluring money offered sometimes. I ask these young directors a simple question 'Why me and not many others who are still running in the race?' Among all the stock answers they come up with, I believe in one – 'the audience still wants to see you on the screen!' For that affection and respect I get even from the remote corners of India, I am still ready to act provided the role has some substance; it challenges the actor in me!

15. When you retrospect now, are you content?

Whenever I retrospect, I feel that Camus' words etch out through my 45 years' career: 'I rebel, therefore I exist'. I started as a Painter, perhaps will end as one! A circle may emerge as a visual, though the path was never defined & linear. I lived through many forms - visible & invisible! The tangible success was fulfilling, but the pauses & blanks spanned through were equally intriguing. I am deeply content!