

Cultural Expression in Painting

BY MAYA GOHILL

Canada has been characterized as a veritable mosaic of ethnic cultures. A landing pad where people from across the world have constructed new beginnings, at times bringing very little with them aside from their culture, traditions, and language. It is to the benefit of an otherwise outwardly Western culture that Canada's immigrants have woven this country into a rich tapestry of cultural diversity.

In any given month you can find Calgary's expressions of cultural diversity, through dance and theatrical performances, festivals in the park, and musical concerts. But, there is

another way that the intangible expressions of traditional culture have been transformed into a timeless exhibition of culture – and this is through visual art.

In a city with a blossoming art scene, it is encouraging to see the range of ethnic themes that have manifested in the visual arts. Gone is the dominance of Western landscapes and cowboy paintings. Today we see the extension of Calgary's diverse cultures within the walls of many art galleries.

Take for instance Axis Contemporary Art at Art Central, where the saffron robes and Buddhist themes of Thep Thavonsouk's work often adorn the walls. Thep, an artist born in French occupied Laos adopted Alberta as his

LEFT Maya Gohill, *Battle of Arjan*

ABOVE Jeffrey Jinyu, *Sea Coast Illusion*, 20" x 24"

home in the early 1970s. While Alberta has remained his home, his pursuit of knowledge and art has since taken him to Taiwan, Japan and Hawaii, where he has learned each culture's traditional art forms. His work combines elements of impressionism and realism, and his style is a unique reflection of his travel and upbringing. The airy, ethereal quality in his work, contrasted with bright and bold colors reflects a unique blend of his adopted culture, and the culture of his homeland.

Also exhibited at Axis, the work of Cuban artist Jose Angel Vincench. From a distance these large-scale pieces look like pixelated portraits, reminiscent of artist Chuck Close. However, upon

further inspection one can see the underlying commentary of Cuba's political and social welfare. Each painting is constructed upon layers of government-funded Cuban newspapers. Superimposed upon these texts are large squares of color, which, when viewed from afar, denote portraits of Cuban political activists. Here, Vincench gives us a glimpse into the life of Cuba under socialist rule – a point of view that is made more potent through the subtleties and intrigue of art.

Upstairs, in Keystone Art Gallery, the salon-style walls are crowded with artwork from across the globe. One artist of particular interest is Raffaella Montemurro, an artist originally from Sicily who has been influenced quite heavily by the art of Mexico. Overt influences of Frida Kahlo are combined with an Albertan folk art sensibility, creating a style that is unique and lighthearted in nature.

Also found in Keystone, is the work of Jadranka Hodanic who hails from Croatia but paints locally. "My work is about memories. Houses, towns and courtyards emerge from my longing for Mediterranean architecture, landscape, heat and light I grew up with." These abstracted towns and landscapes appear to exist in a dream-like state, with a sense of serenity and solitude that flows from each piece.



Art that contains cultural influences need not only come from artists with foreign origins. Take for example, Morley Hollenberg and Isabelle Hunt-Johnson, also at Keystone. Both are artists from Western cultures who have drawn upon influences from Chinese brush painting.

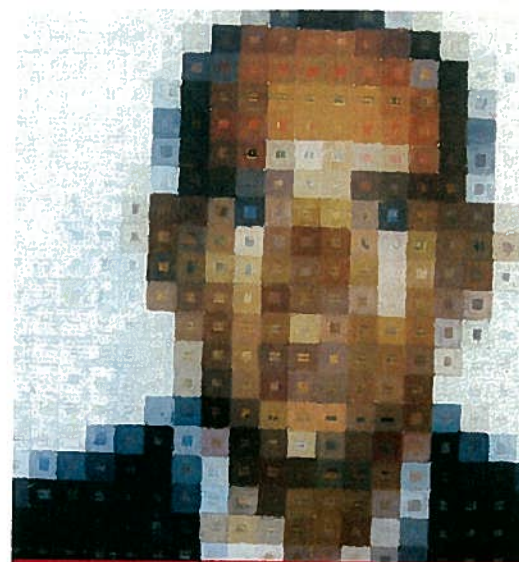
At Swirl Fine Art and Design, Jeffrey Jinyu's art infuses Canadian landscape painting with traditional Japanese and Chinese brush techniques. Jinyu's work is part of a broadening vernacular in Canadian art. Born in Beijing in 1957, Jinyu, after studying art in Tokyo, relocated to Vancouver in 2001. Jinyu says he "was overwhelmed by the physical beauty of the countryside in Canada," and that the move to Canada allowed him to "discover a new kind of beauty," in his work. His painting today is a meeting ground between his country of origin and his adopted country, creating an intercultural aesthetic.

As artists strive to make work that is meaningful, they draw upon subject matter with which they can find a deep-rooted connection. Often this manifests through the influence of their cultural background. My work is an example of this. I am a native Calgarian with a South Asian background, and although I have never lived in India, I find myself trying to connect to it through my art. Whether it is through the influences of miniature painting, Mughal art, spirituality, or the bright and bold colors seen in the textiles, it seems to regularly make an appearance in my work.

Like many artists who live in one culture and are influenced by another, I find that the contrasting cultures cannot be separated easily. In my own work there is also evidence of a deep love and connection to classical European art. Paired with the Indian themes, the result is a juxtaposing of

the two styles – a sort of East meets West sensibility. For me the feeling of knowing oneself and one's origins can be a strong platform for visual communication.

Art is not only a potent and provocative mode of communicating ideas and perspectives, but what makes art even more valuable is its ability to inform us about each other and ourselves. Thanks to the efforts of artists in our community who share their cultural insights and experiences with us, we understand more about the world we live in. Other galleries and studios that exhibit paintings with a rich cultural influence include Tyrrell Clarke Gallery, Chester Arts Studio, and Shisimiso's exhibition of the work by Aimee Qiu (until April 27th).



ABOVE Jose Angel Vincench, untitled, 16" x 16"

LEFT Raffaella Montemurro, *The Girl Who Cried Flowers*, 9.75" x 7.75"