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THE ARTS

The mythical connection

SHEILA ISHAM, whose exhibition of paintings opens tomorrow at the American Center Gallery, tries to create a fusion between eastern and western aesthetics, seeing man as one with nature rather than at odds with it. She spoke to AJIT DUARA about her work and the function of an artist as she sees it.

I find your work difficult. How important is it to you, as a painter, that your art should be accessible, not to the art historian alone, but to the visitor at an exhibition?

I don't feel strongly about that at all. I don't paint for people. I'm not motivated by that. I paint for myself. I don't even paint for museums or collectors or anybody. That's one thing that I think we have lost a lot of touch with in the United States. I think that the commercial aspect of art is always there, has always been there with some patrons, and will certainly continue to be there. It's a reality. It's not that I distrust commerce, but it's simply that I have a great reverence for the freedom of an artist; for the need not to be compromised, not to be subservient to commercial factors. I think the first commitment for an artist, because he chose to be an artist, is to express with the utmost skill and insight that he has, what he sees. And then, perhaps, his work becomes reflective of his times.

Do you feel that our times also include other outside influences for a painter — influences from other visual art forms such as photography and cinema? Can there be any pure art form in this century and in a country like America?

I have no problem with art that is influenced by any other form that exists — whatever it is, movies or television. In fact some very interesting forms have come out of it. An artist like Andy Warhol has been a big influence. Andy made people look in a different way and consider their culture in a different way. I knew Andy and I'd like to think that his work, the soup cans and things, will still be around 50 years from now. And they may. Who is to say? Andy did his thing. That's what is most important. I think Indian artists are now going back to their roots. It's not important for them any longer to have a New York image. But, of course, it's easier for them because they are the third or fourth generation. They are breaking away, just like in America we had to break away from the European tradition. So outside



The artist who has travelled the world, integrates into her work new elements from foreign cultures.

influences are very important.

What happens to an artist when he attempts to break with tradition?

Very interesting. An artist who is breaking his tradition often returns to ancient mythical symbols, to primitivism. It's a sort of cycle.

Back to the basics, as it were.

And I've noticed the same cycle in my paintings. I painted just animals for four years. And I studied them. I became very aware of their presence. And in the United States we have become so distant from nature, so industrialised, that it was perhaps an unconscious movement towards them. When I first painted the animals they were in their natural forms. But gradually the animal form began to split up into its many parts. And that, too, was unconscious.