

APPRECIATING Art

Waiting To Exhale

The essence of **Julius Macwan's** upcoming solo show is reflected in the simplicity, hardness, purity, stark and austere character of his works, says art dealer **Ashish Balram Nagpal**



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Interacting with an accomplished artist on the eve of a major exhibition is an exhilarating experience. There are so many questions to ask and so much more to discover. Here's a first-hand account of what's in store from Julius himself.

How this new show evolved:

There are two parts to this new phase. One is the part that has developed out of earlier phases and the other is a complete departure.

The first has been a logical progression over the past 20 years, including the five years that I studied at the Sir J.J. School of Art.

The departure began since my last show 'The Hierophant - The Hip In Red And Mauve', which was held in Mumbai in April 2005. It's been two years since. During this time I have gotten to do a lot of thinking, analysing, introspecting, growing and changing.

Sculpture and The Hip - a progression

The biggest shift has been my decision to sculpt. Actually I wouldn't call it a total shift because I had been

I have consciously decided not to reveal images of my new work before my show. I am only showing an image of the hipbone, and that too is in a partially finished, but at a very interesting, extremely fascinating stage.

It is actually the right representative image for the show. It is the seed from which all the other works have grown.

These days there is this tendency, for example in a creative field like the film industry, where the work is dissected, exposed in advance and generally hyped up in every way possible. I think that kills the magic.

Twenty years ago when we went to theatres to see 'Sholay' or 'MacKenna's Gold,' it was a mystery waiting to unfold. We had no idea who these people were, so then we formed our fantasies about what the movie could have to offer. These days you know more than enough about each and every aspect of the movie, its stars, their private lives, their wives, their dogs, and their interpretation of the characters, there is no mystery. There is no magic.

Usually on the eve of a new show, there is a rush of buyers who want to buy the works before the show commences. For this, images need to go into the market. But I didn't want to do that. I am from the old school. I want to unravel this thing of beauty and magic, which will stay in people's minds forever. I want to make an aesthetic change and create an aesthetic experience.

Experimenting with new materials:

Usually what happens after a particular show is that once I'm finished with it, I start a new phase of my life. It's like I've died and gone through a rebirth.

One fine day you get a vision, a revelation. I got a vision of my whole show and was able to see what is trying to take shape through me. I'm also a strong believer in the spiritual, the occult. I'm a tarot card reader; other than being an artist.

I follow my instincts. I see visions of my work before I do it.

The visions I saw of my forthcoming show had metal in it - steel. I've been putting motifs on canvases like the cross and the x.

For me these are very strong images, originating from the horizontals, verticals, diagonals I used

in my early years when I was purely an abstract painter. I started seeing steel crosses, thinking about these big steel crosses and knew I had to work with the hip bone.

The reason why I am talking of metal craft separate from sculpture with regard to the show is because apart from painting and sculpting, I have done things with metal in the paintings.

It all relates to the crosses and holes in my canvases. I like the act of cutting, making an incision, going in. The steel forms are doing a lot of cutting. Because of this cutting and sharpness, the material had to be steel.

The second reason for the metal steel is that I like black and white a lot. I feel colour is 'Maya', an illusion, which is a beautiful and necessary illusion nonetheless. I think in light and shade. It's only in the presence of light that you can see colour. Similarly, in steel you can see light and dark.

As an artist, I'm austere, hard (some say that applies to me as a person also!). This starkness and hardness has taken form in these new works. The colours that have been used are merely the colours of flesh.

I like the interaction of flesh and metal, the effect of light and dark. The interaction of bone and flesh, which is organic matter, with inorganic matter from the universe.

My work is like a metaphor for the forces and energies we go through, as well as create, in our relationship with the universe.

But then that is one level my work works on. The more you look at it, the more you think and you realize that it works on so many levels. On a cultural level, you see a role of sex, religion, conditioning, patriarchy and patriarchy, social cultures, personal cultures. Then there is the artistic and historical positioning

I do with my work. It's just too, too complex to grasp. It's not fair to pinpoint just one level of the many that my work operates on.

Getting Ready for the Big day! What the day and show means to me:

I find myself in a very unique position, at a very unique time. I finished my graduation from the Sir J.J. School of Art in 1991. The art world was different; it was very difficult to be an artist at that time. I had undertaken my personal journey always preferring to pursue happiness and growth, success was the least part I ever focused on.

The first thing I wanted to do was move out of big city life, recreate the life I had as a child. Goregaon,

headed in that direction since a long time, taking canvases off the wall and standing them on the floor or on metal stands... cutting holes in the canvas, making windows, painting them... and I did all this with the human figure.

I started opening out the human figure - particularly the female figure - exploring it as a life force and harnessing it in my works. In 2001, in my first solo, 'New York Sketches', in Chennai, I had made what has become a landmark painting in my career. It was a painting of a woman's hip in a thong. It was titled 'Mary' and for me it stood for New York City in the face of the 9/11 attacks. It was also a symbol of suppressed freedom breaking out and asserting itself, in the form of the feminine asserting itself in a masculine world which was suppressing it. Then in 2005 there was 'Blue Mary' with the bones showing through like an x-ray. And in my last show I had a painting of the hip bone itself, without the body.

I am drawn to this part of the body. It is the largest bone in the body, really beautiful, a meeting point. It is like a black hole, the universe, the place where birth takes place, where sexual energy emanates from; the seat of a cosmic energy in the body.

I started taking it apart; I made a hole in the canvas where the hip bone is supposed to be hollow. I tried to feel it, tried to make a hole and then step in and step out of it. This was a precursor to sculpting.

Early in 2006 I started to visualise sculptures of the hip bone combined with the forms of the cross and the x, two recurrent motifs in my work, and the development process started as I began thinking and analysing.

From Germination to Creation:

I don't jump into the act of painting. The seed germinates inside my mind. Similarly, I have been developing this sculpture and body of work over the last two years.

I started the actual physical process this year. It has taken shape as a lot of white metal, a subdued palette and a primal look. I started with the concept of metal, then worked in clay and then fibreglass. It changed my way of painting. After sculpting, when I painted again, I wasn't applying films and layers of paint; I was applying bodies of paint. Instead of adding decorative touches, I was shaping the mass.

Then the beautiful stage comes when the work starts taking shape. From the seed that you had planted, the oak tree is taking shape. You are then led by the work, when earlier you were nurturing it. Now it nurtures you. And it reveals to you what lies hidden in its DNA, and what it is meant to be.

I don't jump into the act of painting, the seed germinates inside my mind

where I spent the initial years of my life, was like a village in the 1980s. I used to run, play a lot. There were no cell phones, only black and white television with Doordarshan being the lone channel with Chayageet once a week. By the beginning of the 1990s, that way of life was lost.

I moved to Chennai. It was like the old world where I grew up, an old spiritual place. I started my own art school and then began exhibiting my work in Chennai in the year 2000 and found all my share of success. I felt that my work was ready to go where it belonged - all over the world. The place, which would give me such a platform, was Mumbai. I moved back in 2004 and did my first Mumbai show. I found myself in a strange and intensely contrasting situation of being a new artist with old and mature work, interacting with my college contemporaries who were now established.

I also realized how different I was and how differently I functioned in my own space, at my own time, without any pressures. It was a real challenge not to succumb to the very pressures of city life I had left.

Now there is this expectancy. People are looking forward to Julius Macwan's next show. Then there is also a segment, which has not seen my first two shows. So for a large section of art lovers, it is a question of 'what does Julius Macwan do, does he even paint?'

This time I have a very strong and nurturing gallery support, I am presenting my work on a good platform. It is the final step in my homecoming, communicating what I am, what I feel, where I'm coming from. This is the most exciting thing about this day, taking the next step as an artist and taking my work forward in the way that it deserves.

J - The Show and The Book:

Something I'm doing for the first time is printing a book that I've written. The show and book are both called 'J'.

J is the first letter of my name and the letter as the title of my show, stands for a point of view; a new point of view for looking at life, love, God, death. I look at this point of view as a second person. This show has this point of view in its most evolved form, most articulate, most hard-hitting form, so it is called J.

When I look back at how this point of view developed, it goes back to my J.J. School of Art days, the lost world. Also, now I am older, and I'm different from everyone else because of where I come from. I have lost where I have come from, and the book represents what I have lost.

We all had to write a dissertation as final year students in JJ. It was like a thesis.