

by Nilofur Farrukh

# Sensibility, the ~~DNA~~ of Creativity



Detail, Ahmed Parvez

Dictionaries are unanimous in the definition of sensibility as the ability to feel and perceive. It can also be read as the behavioral blueprint on the matrix of the mind. In the vast uncharted universe of creativity, this intuitive response appears as the sub-conscious beam that guides the process of selection. This in turn contributes to the evolution of a color and texture sensibility, and the distinctive way spatial conundrums are solved.

The term sensibility is an integral part of the nomenclature of art criticism and this article is an attempt to provoke a debate on the dimensions of sensibility and discuss its implications on contemporary culture and creativity.

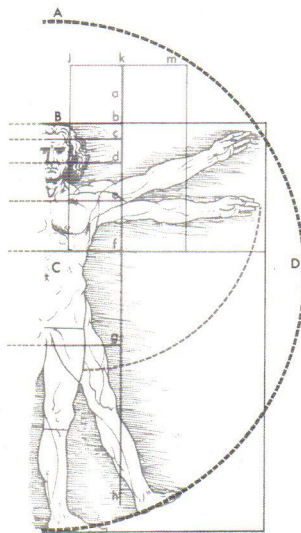
It is in creative endeavors like visual, musical and written compositions that we find a tangible

manifestation of sensibility. A closer look at the oeuvre of an artist makes it visible in the signature style. Pakistan's eminent painters, Bashir Mirza and Ahmed Parvez, both brilliant colorists, were driven by some inner compulsion to color- saturate the canvas, yet each had a distinct color sensibility. One looked at flora, as a point of departure for his abstract compositions, while the other could never banish the memory of the human figure from his canvas - his palette resonant with the jewel colors of South Asian miniature painting.

Not dissimilar to genetic tissue, experience can be seen as the major building block of sensibility. As affinity and

artist's reading and interpretation of the figure underwent constant change from the 'Persianized' idiom expressed in flat wooden figures to a synthesis of fluid and well molded figures of the *Ragmala*.

Created under different circumstances, art through the ages bears the imprint of the collective and personal sensibility of the people of its time. The intertwining strands of the personal and the collective sensibility have enjoyed a symbiotic kinship and they co-exist in the larger organic structure of geography and culture. It would not be inaccurate to say that it is through the prism of personal sensibility that every thing is first felt and perceived.



## Leonardo da Vinci search of the perfect male body to Picasso's cubist women

association, physical and intangible stimuli pile up in layers; osmotic action in the memory zone fuses it into something permanent. Experiences of a lifetime and even before birth are intuitively processed through filters to shape perceptive skills that inform responses. It is interesting to note that both personal and collective sensibility may share a cultural watershed, but are seen to evolve independently.

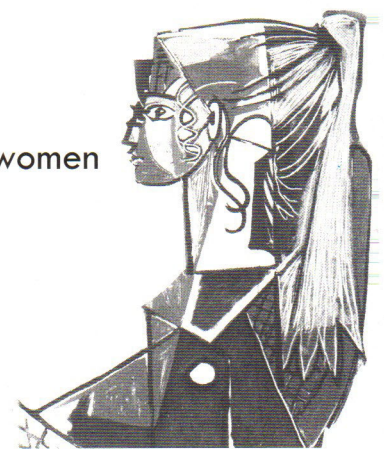
If an extra-terrestrial visitor was exposed to the human race exclusively through the artist's interpretation of the human race: from the pre-historic stick figures of the Alta Mira to the highly stylized Egyptian art, Leonardo da Vinci's search of the perfect male body, to Picasso's cubist women, Chughtai's graceful figures to Van Gogh's human angst, art history offers a bewildering array of figural and facial portrayals.

Even the scrutiny of a microcosm of South Asian art history like Miniature Painting reveals a progressive change. The

At the show *The Electronic Social Culture* in Toronto, organized by the South Asian Visual Artists

Collective, ten artists of Asian origin in their early twenties to late thirties were handpicked for a workshop that initiated them into digital art. While Asian sensibility and their newly acquired electronic expertise was their shared experience, it could not override a deep personal sensibility with which they engaged with issues of displacement. This was apparent in the diversity of their creative statement.

Gary Wang's untitled installation with digital prints of icons like Madonna and Jackie Chang looked at the pervasive influence of global entertainment media. It was in the translation of the names of these mega stars in Chinese,



Japanese and Korean that brought in geography and introduced local sensibilities as an active player.

*My Father Was an Astronaut* by Roselina Hung, alludes to the immigrant family of absent fathers that have to stay in their own country to pursue career commitments. In her web design project, Samarakoon, the duality in the global perception of Sri Lanka is evident. A Sri Lanka that exists as a lush paradise in the mind of the tourist, and the other seen by its people: a country locked in a fight for economic and political survival.

Borrowed from the digital advertising vocabulary, Pravin Pillay's billboard that dominates the gallery space spotlights

lines of the pre-PC and the PC generation. Perhaps for the first time, technology, since the invention of the printing press, has created such a 'sensitivity' gap between artists. The ones 'born with a mouse in their hand' navigate the cyber world with as much ease as they would their own neighborhood. Existing in a parallel universe that allows communication through its own encrypted language and where one can be immersed in a virtual world with a digital engagement that defines the physical, emotional and intellectual space. Cognitive development of this generation has been expanded by possibilities offered by the versatile digital matrix that welcomes intervention, appropriation and a dialogue-

### The imperative of geography can be lost in global anonymity



history. Through a heavily pixelated family group-photo taken in Africa during the early 1900s, the artist as the curator Sylvia Borda puts it, 'Investigates the nature of colonialism as a conditioning agent in contemporary boundaries of class, gender and race'.

The digital dimension of the show makes one keenly aware of the external cultural/historical location beyond the computer and the project can also be read as an exercise in the expansion of the artist's existing sensibility through a new experience.

Since the 1990s, when the PC began to make inroads as a creative tool, the art community has been divided along the

based interface. Freed from hierarchical systems like museums and galleries, this art exists in the PC and travels round the world in nine seconds. The imperative of geography can be lost in global anonymity, if the artist so desires, as the architecture of a borderless world of art goes up in cyber space.

With the fundamentals of conventions being challenged on this scale, how can sensibility be constant? Yet as the *Electronic Social Culture Exhibition* was quick to point out, electronic intervention in the creative process enters as a facilitator but not as a replacement of core sensibilities. The computer can

offer countless options, but the choice is still in the hands of humans who help birth the defining moment.

The synthesis of ideas, either through new experiences or intellectual discourse, has been the catalyst of change. The artists who embraced the enterprise of Modernism made a conscious choice to follow a new worldview. In this nihilistic drive to shun earlier artistic sources like nature, religion and culture, the modernists opened their parachute over an unknown terrain, which to them symbolized a new age vastly different from failed traditionalism of Europe after the first World War.

Modernism was an existentialist choice that remained trapped in an artificially constructed experiment that eventually ran

out of steam within several decades and gave way to Postmodernism.

The idea of postmodernism is being met with cynicism in many traditional societies whose age old experience in multiculturalism shows that postmodernism is nothing more than a face-saving theory that merely labels the logical end of an age that had a short self-life. The past experience, with the hegemonic dynamics of euro centric art theories are still fresh in their mind in which modernism, despite its universal claims, became a mechanism of western domination of global artistic expression.

Multiculturalism and diversity, the cornerstones of Postmodernism, are no strangers to older cultures where




diversity is a part of the indigenous mosaic. A Mughal Emperor ordered the translation of the Bible and Hindu scriptures, which were then created into illustrated manuscripts titled *Ramznama* and *Dastan-e-Masih*, something that was not seen in the court of any European ruler of that time or later. Geeta Kapur claims in her book, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, that artists of South Asia created their own hybrid form of modernism. This is a valid claim, as the modern art vocabulary became the vehicle to communicate issues of indigenous concern. So what we saw emerge was a parallel modernism guided by a different sensibility. This modernism was used as a loose framework to articulate personal narratives. This is clearly seen in the work of Francis Newton Souza who imposed his own brute interpretation on the established iconography of Catholic icons, seen through the prism of his childhood in Goa.

Sensibility is never static. Its evolutionary trajectory traverses



Mehnaz Tapal, c.2000, mixed media



the political as well as the social terrain. The genesis of modernist sensibility in Pakistan can be found in the South Asian dialogue with Western ideas.

This paradigm shift led to a debate no less intense and polarizing than Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Traditionalism in its fatalistic mode had been declared retrogressive by the national poet laureate Iqbal, yet the abstract dogma of modernism was culturally alien to the people. As creative adventurers like the Lahore Artist group and loners like Zubeida Agha began to chip away at the monolith of traditional art, modernism began to take a foothold as an alternate sensibility.

Geographical and political space in which the artist lives has been seen to influence art both at the subconscious and conscious level. The physical environment sometimes leaves a more permanent stamp on the psyche. I remember a discussion with Mahbubul Haq, a well-known modernist and educator from Bangladesh in the 1990s. We talked about the re-curring diffused imagery in the work of many of his countrymen and their affinity to watercolor as a pigment. He traced it back to the profound experience of the monsoon season. Long months when mist and rain-washed images entered the soul through their retinas from childhood to death. This experience was intrinsic to their lives and it was not surprising that it found its way on the canvases.

The same is true of the tradition of landscape painting in the Punjab. How can the vast tract of productive land with its long history of political cultural impact on the people be separated from their sensibility? It was only after I traveled through rural Punjab in different seasons, that I was able to understand the hundreds of shades between gold and green of planted fields and the rustic architectonics of the adobe hamlets that was always portrayed with such reverence and mystic insight by painters like Khalid Iqbal.

An anomaly, is the color sensibility of the people of the Thar desert whose crafts do not project the barren monochrome of the sandy desert but the memory of spring, when after every three years the desert blooms in a myriad of colors.

Is sensibility pre-programmed and determined by the time and year of our birth? Zodiac groupings would have us believe that way. Born under the fire, earth, air and water signs, every human born on this planet has a certain personality that influences responses. Ancient cultures like the Chinese and Indian have fine-tuned it to a science and it has gained currency in the global culture. Almost every Hindu child and some Muslim ones born in

India, have their *janam patri* or astrological chart drawn to determine their personality traits and the course of their destiny. This is looked upon mainly as a 'preventive' practice, like reading the future to avert discord and disaster. Even marriages and business mergers have to be validated by the astrological compatibility of the partners. In the West, where astrology was grouped with witchcraft and magic in the medieval ages and purged during the Age of Enlightenment, has become increasingly visible in the print and electronic media.

Just like chromosomes determine the genetic makeup, in astrology time, date and place, according to these ancient systems, impact the child's birth personality. The jury is still out on how much of our ability to perceive and feel is genetically pre-engineered at birth. One cannot but help wonder if this is some primordial software introduced to ensure the diversity of the human race?

Social engineering has been man's attempt to play god. The last most systematic attempt was by the Third Reich, when indoctrination overrode the natural moral impulses and an intelligent people became tools of genocide. Colonial powers have had centuries to carry out such socio-cultural experiments to prevent rebellions. Trevalyan, a loyal British civil servant in 1853, defended the institutionalization of culture dominance as 'necessary instrument of imperial policy'. This heralded a full-scale attempt to create the hybrid pro-colonial identity of brown sahibs, a phenomenon, extensively studied by scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.

In his essay, *Postmodernism/Postcolonialism*, Bhabha writes 'the enduring political lesson of postmodernism is to think of social agency without the mastery or sovereignty of an author. And in the indeterminate relationship between actor and author we are served the aesthetic and ethical challenge to live in disjunctive temporal landscape that leads us to restructure the past, so that the history of present - of our late modernity and/or post-modernity - can entertain the possibilities of the future as an open question, a negotiation with the passions and the pitfalls of freedom.'

In many of these postcolonial democracies where the leaders perpetuate the authoritarianism of the colonizers, abuse of

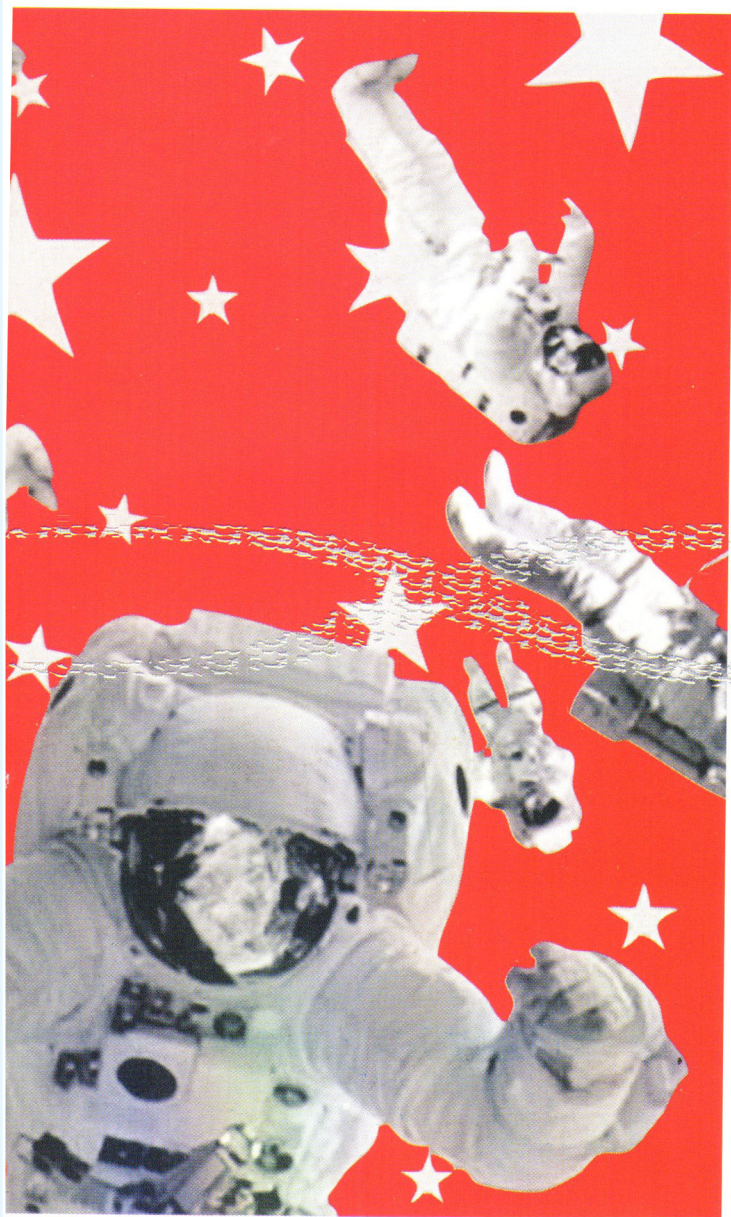
civil liberties has replaced freedom. Decades of a constant exposure to violence and lawlessness can brutalize the sensibility of a society. Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy in his speech in a seminar on *War as an Institution* spoke on how citizens, in long confrontational war-like conditions can become cynical, defeatist and despondent. This mutation of the sensibility creates unnatural aggression born out of a sense of inadequacy and anxiety. While selecting the works for *Pakistan, Another Vision*, a show of art from Pakistan in London, the curator, Tim Wilcox commented that he found the work unusually intense and serious. Where is the humor he asked? As someone who had lived in Pakistan all her life and grown up seeing the art evolve as a commentary on the social and political struggle of a post-colonial society, it took me a long time to understand how difficult it was for an outsider to truly understand a sensibility born out of these times.

A new phenomenon to emerge out of the industrial age is the urban sensibility that responds to the fast paced, stress packed existence. Not ruled by seasons or daylight hours, they work and play by man-made rules. The art that comes out of this frenzied environment is informed by the aesthetic of this wired existence.

The urgency and anxiety of this sensibility is translated through industrial material. The millennium wheel in London, through its size, construction and dwarfing impact is an ode to man's development just as the titanium shell of Guggenheim at Bilbao. The latest of these is the *Cloud Gate* sculpture of Anish Kapoor in Chicago. Made of a highly reflective metal in a twisted balloon form, the people walking below it can see their whimsical distortions in the concave and convex surfaces.

Sensibility and identity are twin engines that drive human actions. Sensibility is purely intuitive that evolves in the recesses of the mind that deal with perception and emotion, while identity is a social and political construct. It is a badge of belonging that resonates with the desire to live and work in groups. If sensibility can be defined as a skin that is wired to the inner person; identity is more like the costume we wear.





Na Hung, digital print (detail, installation) ; c.2004

Identity is the important socializing factor and gives the gratification of engagement and belonging. With lives becoming more complex in the last century, how identity is perceived has radically changed. Previously, the main identities were religious and ethnic. Today it has expanded with a greater awareness of racial, political, and economic differences. Two important identities to emerge are geographical in terms of urban and rural which are vastly different despite other similarities. The second is the transient 'time identity' that changes with the fast paced global evolution. Someone born in a pre-industrial South Asia has in a span of six decades negotiated several benchmarks of development. People of a shared sensibility can be divided by their religious identity like the Punjabis of West and East Punjab had everything in common but their religion at the time of the 1947 Partition. People are called homogenous when they share a large number of identities but sometimes a single strong identity can be a unifying factor. Separatist movements are spawned by a strong common identity wanting to assert itself. This is true of the Jewish Diaspora, that after World War II were determined to settle in a separate homeland. All their cultural and national identities took a back seat at this crucial time in their history.

With a large world population listening to the same popular music via TV, and the websites, and thanks to the billion-dollar music industry, watching the same Hollywood films and TV serials, and consuming the staple BBC and CNN version of global news, theoretically this shared experience would lead to a global sensibility. Yet there has been a resurgence of local identity reinforced by nationalism and regionalism. Maybe this is due to a political awareness created from a strong sense of the 'other' by the media. The sensibility of the deprived and the oppressed cannot be outsmarted by the strategies of simulation. The electronic experience recognized as simulacrum that mimics reality but is not reality makes spin and double speak resonate with unrealized promises and double standards, injustice and hegemonic designs thinly disguised under slogans of high morality. The numbers simply do not tally.

Reality and simulation have become the two visual references that inform the sensibility of the artist.

An outspoken, robust kid may prefer to identify with outgoing peers, so in some ways our sensibility may determine our identity. There is however a fine line that separates conscious and unconscious decisions.