

Indian Art - Sandhya Bordewekar

All About a Staircase and a Room

Vishwa Shroff is an artist trained in Baroda and Birmingham and Katsushi Goto is an architect trained in Tokyo. Both stay in Baroda where, at their shared studio, Vishwa makes her quixotic artworks while Goto is busy with architectural design and drawings. Sometimes, their work converges, feeding off each other's ideas and inputs and craziness to result in delightful, intelligent and quirky artworks.



Pages from Room



Pages from Room

True to their temperament, they have recently been making what are called Printmaker's Books. These are original artworks, produced in editions, of 'books' which may or may not have written text, but certainly have copious illustrations/drawings as prints, often created on paper hand-made by the printmaker and then bound as a book (also by the printmaker). Hence they are called Printmaker's Books. And they are now getting popular in India.

Why a printmaker's book? "Our concern has been to experiment with the way in which stories are told," replies Vishwa. "Both of us believe that a book is a complete form in itself, with the ability to generate space within the bounds of the book and for the reader, therefore both the format and the content of the book must co-relate to each other. How the book is handled must directly relate to how its content is read. It is our continued endeavour to explore the analogies and disconnections that are enhanced by the way in which the structure and storyline is dealt with."



Room displayed



Room displayed

The Vishwa-Goto duo presented their fourth Printmaker's Book called Room at the Raaga Numerique Gallery in Baroda in May 2011. However, what was amazing about the Vishwa-Goto book was that it was not at all like the regular Printmaker's Books that one has seen till date – it did not follow the standard text-on-one-page-and-print-on-the-opposite format. Instead, there was no text at all, and the book had a sculptural quality about it with the elaborate cut-outs that helped sort of 'carve' the book in terms of its depth/thickness.

As behoves an architect-artist that Goto seems to have evolved into, the idea for Room began with the image of a staircase. Explain the artists, "The concept of Room is two-fold, which started with us wanting to create a staircase running down the book. So it came, if there is a staircase, there must be a room, and if there is a room, someone must live in it. The book then comprises the physical space and the narrative juxtaposing upon each other."



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The 'someone' who lives in that space is a girl. The narrative is that of this girl growing up, commencing with her as an infant just home from the hospital to growing up to become 18 years of age, when she will leave for university, leaving the room and her childhood behind her. But the girl herself is not part of the artwork! Instead, the girl and her growing up are symbolized by the objects and the way they are placed in the room.

The artists explain this quite eloquently: "While creating the character of the girl, we asked ourselves: Can we portray a person, her characteristics, her activities and age with only the objects she may use? Is it possible to tell a story with the main protagonist missing? The challenge then was to remember enough from our childhoods, objects we may have used or to find objects that we assume children use as they grow up, imposing upon them presupposed activities and emotions of what, by now had become 'our' girl. Our girl grows up with every page as you go down from the attic into the room. When the room ends, the girl too has moved on. No more a girl, no more within the room that exemplify childhood fantasies." The staircase and a teddy bear are the only constants.

Obviously such a printmaker's book cannot physically work like a regular book, though it looks like one. There is no text, in the first place. When you open the book, you see the space from a bird's eye point of view, going down from roof to plinth, keeping its point-perspective as seen from the sky. The whole depth of the book is carved out painstakingly to accommodate the special requirements of each page but in a way such that the rest of the narrative following is not disturbed. It clearly proves that Katsushi Goto, in addition to being an architect-artist, is also an extremely skilled architectural model-maker. Structure, therefore, has an important role to play in his conceptualization.



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How did the artists think of the space? “The physical space came from observing how children have the ability to create a fantasy space. Sometimes under the dining table, or a sheet tied up between two chairs or maybe that desire for a bunk bed, which then becomes their space to play within, impenetrable by the adult as it exists only within the child’s imagination. It is this whimsical aspiration that we attempted giving a form to.”

Vishwa and Goto worked on Room to participate in the Monumental Ideas in Miniature Books (MINB), Part II, a project put together by Hui-Chu Ying, Professor of Art, The Myers School of Art, University of Akron, USA. The project limited the size of the printmaker’s book to 4 x 5 x 1 inches. That was one of the huge challenges of the art project. The size prompted the artists to put in a magnifying card as a book mark so that the viewer can see all the visual details in the book with clarity.