



A Grain of Mustard

Shastri Maharaj

shastri

yartgallery.com

The work speaks for itself. Though I am not a professional art critic, I would, however, like to share my own humble appreciation of the work of Shastri Maharaj, 59, and his newest exhibition.

My own personal immersion in the visual arts came in 1998. I had been a minor collector of paintings and small sculptures since about 1991. While languishing for nearly five hours with Carlisle Harris and a group of other mas players on Carnival Tuesday, Harris asked me to join what was then called the Trinidad Art Society. We were both playing in Peter Minshall's Red (my favourite Minshall band) and had been propped up on the wall outside the General Hospital for hours, waiting to cross the Savannah stage. It was during that decade that I first discovered the work of Shastri Maharaj. During those initial years, I was learning to allow myself to have views about art and to respond to it. Shastri's work helped me along that journey of self-awareness and trust in my own aesthetic. That's a lot to say but I promise you, I mean it.

I know it sounds trite but Shastri is an artist. What does that mean? Perhaps it means that he is someone who communicates by inviting us to treat his work as a looking glass; to respond to the question: what do you see? The reason why he is so effective at doing this is because he takes images which, on the surface, might appear tribal or austere or culturally specific and makes them broader and deeper. No matter who you are ethnically, or in terms of gender, or age, or hair colour or shoe size, his work is about you. How splendid is that?

Look at the two elderly ladies in an open field at dawn in one of his previous paintings which I have studied a great deal called, 'Furdé Morning'. In this painting, the two women stand in contemplative mode in a field in the early morning. They are rendered as if suspended, gracefully doing what any two elderly ladies might easily be doing at such an early hour: talking. But is the painting really about these two ladies? If you are truthful about what draws you to the picture, the answer could lie in the sense of familiarity and nostalgia that Shastri's images evoke. Yet the painting seems to suggest all sorts of possibilities beyond the canvas. The work reminds me of paintings by Andrew Wyeth, the

American realist painter who often placed single figures amid large, imposing landscapes. In a similar way, Shastri's work invites us to ask deeper questions that speak to a search for truth within his own work.

Make no mistake, to paint the way Shastri does is to be brave.

Let's look at the paintings in the current exhibition. They have such evocative titles: 'The Untamed Land', 'Friday Meeting', 'Somewhere in Grand Chemin', 'The Field', 'Baptism Hill', 'Quiet Interlude', 'Lingering in the Moment', 'The Mood Becomes Me', and 'Beyond the Green'.

Over the last two years, Shastri has spent time in India. Is it possible that he has drawn inspiration from what he might have seen or experienced in Delhi to the north, Central India, Hyderabad or Mumbai in southern India or the caves at Ajanta or Ellora?

I detect a shift in Shastri's palette choices – a bolder inclination to the dramatic use of red as well as fluorescent tones. Have a look at 'Somewhere in Grand Chemin' where diminutive forms are overshadowed by a gorgeous sea of red, purple, blue, green, and white. Look at the bed of gold in 'The Field' against an assertive grey and overcast sky, peopled only by corbeaux. Gone is the dominance of the pale pastel applications of previous work. The focus is more on light and its effect on landscape.

Unlike 'Furdé Morning', 'Somewhere in Grand Chemin' does not feature two anonymous women: the newer

painting features a man and a woman. The application of paint is more nuanced and lends the effect of greater visual detail. There is another painting in this show, 'Friday Meeting', that is entirely populated by a group of male figures, without a landscape in sight.

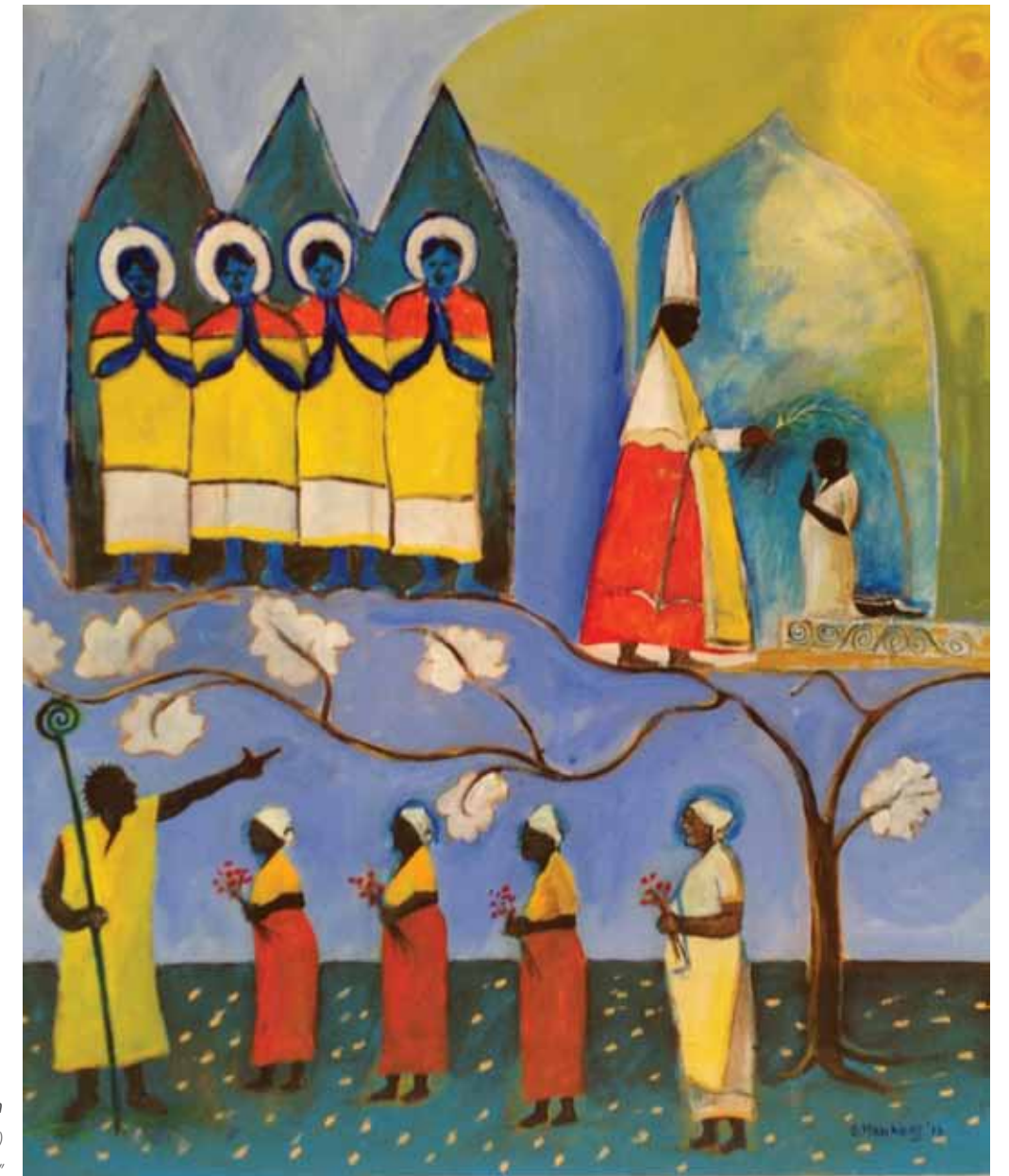
We live in a space which is drawn to oversimplification. There are those who would argue that Shastri's paintings are all about his East Indian heritage. But while India may have been an influence, the work transcends a narrow reading and, like classic Shastri, asks broader questions.

The current exhibition continues certain themes found in Shastri's work. While 'Friday Meeting' is full of people, other pieces are void of them and in this negative way, evoke society and man's impact on the environment. While there is less emphasis on family, the work heightens questions over social relationships as a whole and how we speak to one another on a communal basis.

What remains a truth throughout is that the consistent quiet tone of his work and the contemplation and self reflection they invoke, serve a far more dramatic purpose. The artist invites us all to consider how the gifts we all possess bring us in touch with something else, something divine.

– Courtenay B. Williams

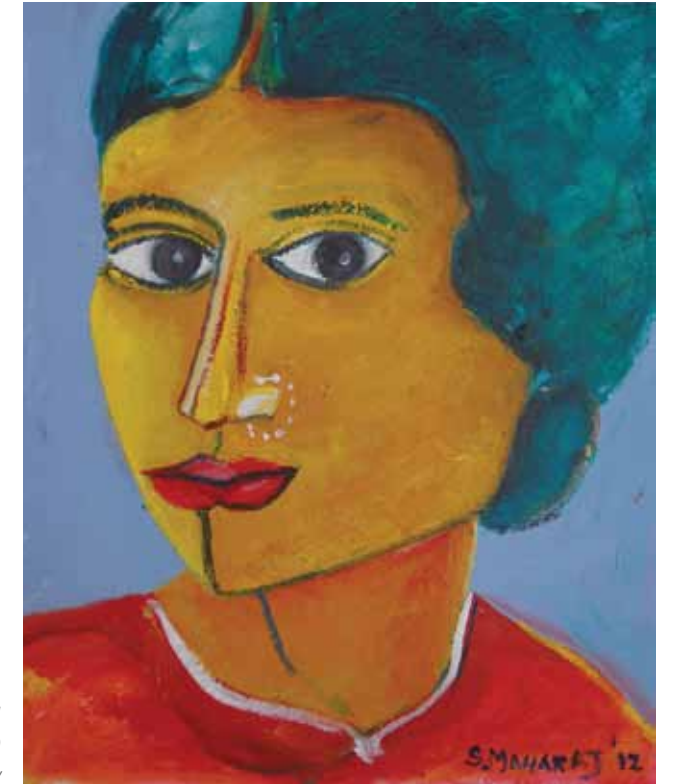
Immediate Past President, the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago



Rejoice in the Rebirth
(Acrylic on canvas)
28" x 34"



Baptism Hill
(Acrylic on canvas)
34" x 28"



I Met Her in India
(Acrylic on canvas)
12" x 10"



A Chance Encounter
(Acrylic on canvas)
10" x 12"



Far Away in India
(Acrylic on canvas)
10" x 12"



Somewhere in Grand Chemin
(Acrylic on canvas)
34" x 28"



Wait, Stop, Listen to the Silence
(Acrylic on canvas)
34" x 28"



Crop Time will Soon be Over
(Acrylic on canvas)
24" x 18"



Nature with a Passion
(Acrylic on canvas)
24" x 18"



Edge
(Acrylic on canvas)
24" x 18"



It is the Majesty of the Land
(Acrylic on canvas)
36" x 47"



There is a communion with the Spirit in these works. They speak of an ethos that is in celebration and an on-going awe. The Celestial union is strong, busting through... making way for sanctuary, solace and humility. – *Shastri Maharaj*

