

Oceanside, California exhibition of painter Arun Prem

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The main branch of southern California's Oceanside Public Library recently exhibited works by the local, self-taught painter Arun Prem. The paintings can be viewed on the second floor of the library until May 4.

Prem, 51, originally hails from New Delhi. With the partition of the Indian subcontinent at the end of British colonization, his family had left Pakistan for India. He emigrated to New York City for graduate studies, eventually making his way to California where he is the CEO of a non-profit organization developing senior transportation services in San Diego County.

The majority of the figures in Prem's paintings are female, representing a range of social types from the impoverished to Bollywood stars. He paints primarily single figures, beginning with the figure itself and constructing the scene around it. Though colorblind, Prem has been able to learn enough color theory that he can masterfully match earth tones with brighter clothing, transmitting some of the feel of India's vibrant humanity, with the dust of lifestyles still tied to the earth.

Immediately recognizable are his cooking figures. In these images, a woman is at work in a simple kitchen set up. His paintings *Dream er s* and *Resurrection Alley* have a gut-wrenching impact on the viewer, forced to wonder how the figures in these works got into such straits. Indeed, Prem says he hopes to convey as much as possible in realistic style. This he has accomplished and there is little speculation necessary as to the meaning of the images he paints.

On April 20, Arun was invited to speak before a small gathering on his paintings and answer a few questions from the crowd and from this reporter.

In the question and answer session, he spoke of the changes in attitude an artist experiences toward his or her own work. When asked how long he had been

painting, Arun replied, "Since I was very young. I thought I was really good when I was in school. Looking back, I thought I was really good, but I wasn't. Maybe I'll look back at what I'm doing now and it will be the same."

Another audience member asked if Prem had studied professionally. "No," he said, "I am mainly self-taught. In the beginning I said, 'No one can teach me,' I knew everything then. Eventually I began reading art magazines and learning color theory. My understanding of art and technique expanded. I realized there was more out there than I knew."

Asked about his influence and why he painted mainly Indian themes, he answered, "I grew up in India. I lived there twenty-five years. I suppose those twenty-five years were more influential than the last twenty-five in America."

Referring to how the influence of foreign art on Indian culture is regarded in that country, Prem said, "The Indian people do have their prejudice, but no one is of pure Indian blood. After thousands of years of attacks and colonization, there's no such thing. Culturally, southern India has remained more isolated. As far as cultural superiority is concerned, I think all Indians feel it relative to those from other regions. I don't feel that's justified."

Prem gave advice to struggling artists based on his experience, saying, "Access to the Internet with minimal computer skills puts you in a good position. I tried going to galleries and not just viewing, but getting to know artists. I've never met more unpleasant people. You leave that scene demoralized. I decided after this to market my art through the Internet and I've been successful in that. Now galleries are interested in my work." Following up on this, Arun told the WSWs reporter that he felt there were few artists attempting to

portray life in realistic terms.

We asked Prem about the painting that had first brought him to our attention, *Red Earth*, along with another striking piece, *Dream er s*.

WSWS: When I saw *Red Earth* in a cafe in Oceanside it caught my attention right away. I was struck by the humanity of the image, a woman struggling to perform the necessary activities of life.

Arun Prem: *Red Earth* actually isn't meant to show struggle, but rather the woman is working with exactly what she needs. It's very minimal. Behind the scenes, she's a member of the Bishnoi tribe, which has been recognized in recent times for their sustainable lifestyle. *Dream er s* is definitely about struggle, however. The man who is the main figure is exhausted and the cow, a stray, not a domesticated cow, is eating a non-food item out of desperation. There is a connection there between the two.

Arun Prem's work can also be seen on his website, www.oilpaintingsofindia.com.



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