



Boy Without Reflection 2004
305 x 152 cm
120 x 60 inches
oil on canvas

Reflections: With and Without

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by Peter Nagy

The case can easily be made for all art being psychedelic, that is being generated by the mind or aiming to intensify awareness or perception. Psychedelia, per se, is defined as having to do with hallucinogenic drugs and identifies a certain style of art, design and music propagated by the Hippie sub-culture of the 1960s. Yet both conceptually and stylistically, this Psychedelia has many antecedents. Surrealism, Automatism and Art Brut, Futurism, Symbolism, Impressionism and even Romanticism are schools of art that acknowledge the mind's pre-eminence over an observable reality, man's ability to self-generate his world, or, perhaps ultimately, the human condition of "culture" as an opposition to God's "nature." At the dawn of the 21st Century, adrift in a technological revolution that favours the dematerialization of the physical body by foregrounding telecommunications and whole super-structures composed only of data and images, our relationship to the Psyche becomes ever more complex, as it colonizes both Body and Spirit, hosts both the Self and the Social. Metaphysics (as in abstract philosophies but also the occult sciences) are beginning to become accommodated into Physics proper at both

the sub-atomic and the supra-cosmic levels; artificial intelligence acquires its own creative and associative (can we say neurotic?) capabilities; Reality has become a construct to be dissected in the laboratories of commerce and entertainment.

For the self-conscious and responsible artist today, the Psyche becomes part and parcel of an infinite stream of imagery and information, his practice inherently linked with the historical progression of pictures both in a pure state (trapped in an idealized bell jar) and perversely manipulated (as in living in the real world). Within the arena of painting, the artist may reject the new technologies available to create images today but needn't deny any of the multitudes of sources of pictures. The Indian context affords ever greater possibilities with a tradition of mythologically charged and changing images fostered through art, literature and religion that are certainly not contained within the sub-continent alone. Today, the collective unconscious, racial memory and traditional culture may be concepts more suspected than accepted but artists are often capable of adapting to and drawing from deep veins of psychic repositories with little regard for orthodoxies or contextual contingencies.

The stage then is set for an artist such as Ranbir Kaleka, one who is engaged with the world yet welcomes the opportunity to be sequestered from it, one who views the practice of painting as the individualized negotiation of over-stimulation, the celebration of the refinement of choices. All images are firstly encephalic and Ranbir's delectation resides in the mechanics of the hand and its coordination with the eye to generate these images through the primordial ooze of a pigmented material neither liquid nor solid. Painting for this man seems to be the site where the Self and the Social comfortably coalesce, where conflict is resolved through its suspension in a transparent condition, where all of history can cozy up to contemporaneity. This degustation of images that both

stands for and flows from the Psyche enables both consumption and contemplation, acknowledging both influence and individual will, the ego and its uneasy acceptance of historical antecedents. (There is a class of sea creatures known as Crinoidea that hovers between animal and plant, having a stalk firmly anchored by roots and, at the opposite end, a mouth that pursues its prey.)

My consideration will rest with Ranbir's large work from 2004, the oil painting entitled *Boy Without Reflection*. Though he has been experimenting with the medium of video for the past few years, this inquiry has seemed to further excite, rather than inhibit, Ranbir's painterly practice. As his work in video has exploited a painterly idiom, *Boy Without Reflection* seems to have acquired an increased sense of freedom in regard to both the technique and the content of painting. The work's formidable size (287.5cm high x 173cm wide) means it envelopes the viewer who cannot then experience its totality and must drift among its details, an untethered wandering further amplified by the work's numerous spaces, multiple characters and orchestrated effects.

It is as if this work samples from a wide variety of paintings that have come before it, by a wide variety of artists from diverse cultures and eras. It initially appears as a cosmology of sorts, similar to Jain monumental paintings which depict mystic diagrams or the cosmic man (Lokapurusha), albeit in an exogenous form. Ranbir posits a construction that bridges both Vedic mythology and Science Fiction, pairing corporeality with visual phantasms. This synthesis of seeming opposites is further pursued by a melding of figures and ground, where one seems to dissolve into the other, reminiscent of Henri Matisse's paintings from the 1920s in which models are interlaced with arabesque patterns both decorative and architectural. Certainly there is something of the theatrical Surrealism of Salvador Dali in *Boy Without Reflection*, but also the dramatic arrangements of figures one associates with Caravaggio's paintings or the ghoulish scenarios found in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. Ranbir may also have spent some time with Japanese cartoon animations, finding in them a fertile source of extravagant graphic effects. It is precisely in the varied use of abstract elements in the painting's background spaces where one discovers the most surprising quotations from art history. Here, deft manipulations of paint mimic the automatist styles of Andre Masson, Henri Michaux and Jackson Pollock but also the post-modern ironics of Gerhard Richter's non-representational works and even the parched look of spray paint as employed by Graffiti artists. Ranbir's palette runs from the patently synthetic to the luridly organic, his repertoire of illusory surfaces moving from solid to liquid to gaseous.

Though the Boy of Ranbir's work would seem to be engulfed within the maelstrom of his own imagination, at precarious edge to both seething violence and pyrotechnical fanaticism, we have the evidence that the artist has given ample Reflection to not only the purpose of painting today but also his own relationship with the world and its events.

Peter Nagy is an artist, writer on contemporary art, curator and director of Gallery Nature Morte in New Delhi