

AMRITA SHER-GIL

‘Perhaps it will fly away if I get up’

In a poem from 1934 Amrita Sher-Gil begins, ‘Perhaps it will fly away if I get up?’ First written in Hungarian, and found on a scrap of paper, the poem is an oblique ode, tinged by the existential, in which she is grasping at something fleeting, but exquisite: ‘Because I still want to say a lot/ Because rainy dawns are still needed.’ Her writing is unflinching in the same manner that her self-portraits are. Sher-Gil is most eloquent when she paints herself, because she is at her most daring. In the oil-on-canvas *Self Portrait in Blue Sari* (c. 1937) it is as though she is seated in the only sunbeam cast from a cloudy sky. Caught in its brilliance she is poised, watching us with glinting, intelligent eyes. Her hands remain unfinished, or perhaps this is how she intended them: slipping into a thinly painted, bruise-blue sari. As with every self-portrait, she is painting herself into becoming.

At the moment she wrote the poem, Sher-Gil was still living Paris, and by the time she paints herself in the blue sari, she has moved back to India and is working on her own, unique language. The works gathered here lead us there: early sketches and watercolours, of the period 1926-30, which already bear the mastery of form and composition from a painter of great prowess. Sher-Gil’s watercolours look astonishingly like oils. They are layered with purposeful brushwork, and are thick with paint and depth in heady shades of ochre and burgundy, aquamarine and silver speckled midnight blue. Where the watercolours give us delicate characters and settings, her sketches and nude studies are Olympian: sturdy figures with graceful poses drawn in charcoal or pencil on paper.

Many of the works here lead a double life. Sher-Gil has left on their backs an annotation, a drawing, or a dedication of some kind. This lends to the discreet nature of this collection, where each is a tenderly private note, a moment that requires further explanation. We are privy to a secret, slippery mind. In the paintings this is vividly apparent in the manner by which figures tremble and melt into literary tableaux, full of hidden tricks and configurations. In one untitled watercolour (c 1926-1928), a dark-haired woman wearing a shimmering lilac shroud frowns in one corner, as a counterpoised sculpture glides up an illuminated baton to the ceiling of a woody, dark room. In the deepest part of the painting is a thin, spindling staircase, noticeable only upon the closest look.

In another watercolour from the same period, a single, smiling figure bursts into the centre of the frame, their edges blurring into the surrounding scene. Behind this particular work, Sher-Gil has made an elaborate annotation: a drawing of a woman in a lace bodice and full-skirted dress. She has labelled her 'Berenice', from Edgar Allen Poe's eponymous short story. In it, Poe writes from the perspective of the character Egeus, Berenice's cousin. Egeus is intoxicated by Berenice, and wishes to marry her. He daydreams about her vitality and beauty, and imagines her 'roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours.' Both sides of the painting seem to draw out a similar vision of Berenice: a shadowless vision, leaping out of the frame, as though having shifted and startled the very fabric of time around her.

In a small transcript of a conversation between Nilima Sheikh and Arpita Singh (currently painted on a wall at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi), Singh says, 'But Amrita

Sher-Gil must have been lonely; it is now, so many years later, that we are there to talk to her.'

And so—let us enter that conversation. To revisit Sher-Gil’s work, today, is to see her with a clarity that only time can allow us to have: that even though this story has been told before, it will continue to reinvent itself, because such was the immense storytelling capacity of its narrator. Sher-Gil is, above all, an enchanting narrator, particularly of her own life. She kept diaries from when she was as young as seven or eight years old, and she is a full coherent narrative, with a grasp of language, image and tone. In the vividly illustrated pages of her childhood diaries she writes of fairies, princesses and queens, giving them inner lives—already trying to excise psychic desires, particularly of women. The drawings are coloured in with purposeful, bossy lines: she knows exactly what she holds true in her head.

In a third watercolour from 1926-28, the only one with childlike colours and form, a nymph-like figure rests in a tumbling green and yellow meadow, wearing a floating violet dress, dabbled with small white flowers with long, green stems. In a diary entry from August 1925, Sher-Gil writes of a figure named Azelda who bears striking similarity to the figure in this watercolour, ‘I saw her by a clear brook dipping her feet into its transparent waters... Her lips like pink rosebuds, her delicate features as if carved out of the whitest alabaster, her huge dark liquid eyes with her long curling eyelashes had the expression of sweet innocence... [a] Pearl pendant with three sparkling diamonds hanging from her forehead like great pure teardrops.’ From such a young age—Sher-Gil was only about thirteen years old at the time—she shimmers before us with the decadence of her eye and her propensity towards the dramatic.

In her life study nude sketches, Sher-Gil composes figures that occupy space with comfort and ease, gently catching the light. Their strength and defiance gesture towards a seminal moment in her artistic practice: when she first visits Cochin, and finds special frescoes in an abandoned palace. She writes eloquently of them in a letter to her sister,

‘what an astounding technique these people had, and what amazing knowledge of form and power of observation they possessed. Curiously enough, unlike the slender forms of Ajanta, the figures are extremely massive and heavy here. The drawing is perhaps the most powerful I have ever seen.’ The same can be said of her own studies of figure: she has an acute knowledge of powerful bodies, and they tear through the imagination with their particularly robust elegance and movement.

In a photograph from c. 1930, taken lovingly by her father Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, Amrita is ironing a tissue white sari spread out on the floor around her. She is on her knees and the fabric splays out in layered folds, like the petals of a flower, and she at its centre. The light glows as through from her, not just on her: startling and precise. ‘Photographs furnish evidence,’ writes Susan Sontag, and the photographs of Sher-Gil have filled the popular imagination as much as her work. It calls for an exegesis of the manner by which she chose to represent herself, bringing us back to her self-portraits. With her self-portraiture, Sher-Gil performs for us and she hoodwinks. She grips us tightly as she continues to revisit the limits of her own representation. She shows that the body does more than to display itself: it maneuvers, negotiates and unearths new ground. Sher-Gil reinvents the politics of seeing, and of being seen.