Paranjit Singh may take you by the hand for a walk into his painted woods. But he only accompanies you up to a point, leaving you alone to venture deeper into his incandescent landscapes. For, these are mysterious terrains that yield their secrets bit by bit—as you wander in them. Yes, there are trees, shrubs, bodies of water, and bits of sky. But the palpable absence of fauna, insects, birds or human beings only serves to reinforce the sense of mystery—and of timelessness.

Occupying that tantalizing space between realism and abstraction, Singh’s canvases evoke dream-worlds: the fruit of solitary sojourns in Nature’s labyrinth. For the Delhi-based painter these are “invented landscapes”, not those that sprung out of thin air: “I take off from the mood that a particular landscape has evoked.” The reaper of wild beauty has scouted landscapes from the rapidly disappearing ridges of Delhi, the Aravali Hills to the hillocks of Palampur and to the wild terrain of Scotland.

Singh is a Merlin of colours—ever conjuring up unexpected juxtapositions of pigments on his canvases to incarnate the “moods” and “essences of nature” that he has collected. Actually, it’s hard to imagine that the painter’s incandescent greens, yellows, blues, reds and jamuns (deep wine) have come out of his studio perched on top of his house. There’s no palette but scores of little plastic dahi katoris (small cups in which commercial yoghurt is sold) that contain the pigments. The alchemy, however, takes place on the canvas itself. Singh applies successive layers of pigment on pigment. And, like the impressionists (to whom he acknowledges a debt, particularly Claude Monet) he juxtaposes different colours with deft strokes to enhance the effect of light.

The light appears to emanate from within the pigment—often with a slow-burn quality that gains luminosity the more you look at the canvas. Sometimes, the strokes of the brush can be brusque, briskly done, and suggestive of a circular movement—perhaps of the wind moving through his landscapes.

Singh is also a demanding artist. Not only are we invited to see the hidden secrets of nature but challenged to hear its signs of existence, of being: the mind’s eye is called upon to hear the crackle of dry leaves and twigs underfoot or the rustle or the moan of the wind making its way through the landscape.

This series of 13 oils painted in 2007 and 18 black and white drawings on paper done over the past two years also marks a little departure. There is more play with impasto. Singh appears more concerned with the surface of his material as well. Not only is the pigment thicker in many places but the works (both the paintings and the black and white charcoal drawings) is more taut and dense, with fewer open spaces. It’s almost as if the painter is zooming in on nature and serving it to us as a close-up.

Madhu Jain, 2007
CONVERSATION WITH PARAMJIT SINGH
Excerpts of an interview with Madhu Jain

How do you get these bewitching colours and this luminosity that has a mysterious, slow-burn quality about it?

My colours are in layers. You can keep going into the different layers beneath. I use colour for perspective and light for body. I use strokes of colour like a language: the repetition of strokes is like repeating words...Basically my colours come from nature. In the 70s the sky on my canvases started becoming green, and then red. I realized that it was nothing new—it was all in nature. I enjoy creating new colours and juxtaposing them.

When it comes to light, well, you paint light. I was influenced by the French painters of the 19th century and their use of light. I admire the Impressionists, the post-Impressionists and German Expressionism. When I first saw their work as a student I wondered about their colours and light and the way light gave luminosity to the colours. I admired the surface quality of Van Gogh’s paintings and the works of the German painter Nolde.

Are your landscapes imaginary or real?

I never sketch on the spot. I just keep in mind the juxtaposition of different elements of nature, of different kinds of light. The details are gone. Just the mood remains. I take off from the mood that a particular landscape has evoked. It is an invented landscape. It doesn’t really exist, but you are part of it. It is the essence. You could call it the nucleus that you begin with. It comes from existence, from the essence of nature. For example look at this canvas with trees in water: it is not about trees and water. So, when I travel, whether it is
in the hills of Himachal Pradesh or in Scotland, I never sit down and sketch. I use the gifts of nature.

While there is something other-worldly about your landscapes—if I can call them that—they are from far from pastoral. Has nature ever appeared frightening to you?

Nature is not scary, but powerful. It has its own wildness, and that is what I love. The wilderness of nature...I like wild nature and often go to the Aravali hills not far from Delhi where you find rugged landscapes. I like the crispness and texture of dry nature and the breeze blowing in nature. Sometimes, I start with ridges and bushes and then forget about them when I begin to paint.

When you talk about your work you often use words like crisp and crunch...

I want to translate my perception of nature into my language that is made up of pigments. My search is for a tactile quality that can be perceived with the eyes. I want to portray the crunch of nature through the eyes to make people listen with their eyes and not their ears. I want to use pigment to paint the sound of the crunch you hear when you step on dry leaves. I want to capture the sounds of silence in nature.

And the mystery too?

(Paramjit bring out a painting in which the trees have been densely packed in. There is no foreground taking you into the work. It is more like a close-up of an image, like a cropped photograph.)

The sky is not available. You have to go further and beyond to find the sky. You are in the thick of the woods and you wonder what is coming next. I want to show the mystery of the woods.

I have always been curious about artist-couples? Your work is so different from what your wife Arpita Singh does. Do you discuss each other’s work?

I met her when I was a student at the Delhi College of Art. We were part of a group. We went to the ridges to paint, we roamed through Connaught Place, and we shared the same interests. We had friends...
in common. We were together for seven years like this and just stepped into married life. It was a 21 rupee marriage at the Rakab Ganj Gurudwara... We used to talk a lot about art in our group. We still look at each other’s work, we talk about art. In the early days of our student life we would go to Lodhi Garden and paint; the ruins formed the backdrop. I painted women in salwar kameezes, a family with cactus. I did many still lifes. The stones came to life before they disappeared, and only the environment remained.

Could you talk about the role light plays in your work, whether it is in your paintings or the black and white drawings.

Light plays an important role in my work because it gives character to the colours. It renders visible the mood created by the juxtapositions in nature itself. The same trees can evoke different moods in different kinds of light. Sometimes I think visually in black and white. This gives a more intense feeling of light and dark, whether it is in my paintings or my black and white drawings. You can imagine colours and put them on paper.

The role of light is more intense in black and white because you only have those two colours to work with. Thinking and working in black and white helps me understand the role of light in my work. Initially, I try to look at light in nature. Next I put it on paper. And after that when I put the colours directly on to the canvas. Light can be a very abstract thing: it changes character while you work. You have to see to the needs of the canvas surface, to the needs of the pigments. Some things are created on the canvas.

Is this where the spontaneity comes in?

There are so many things that I am unaware of that come to being on the canvas. Every detail is not preconceived. And it should not be. Otherwise, how will I enjoy myself? I have to let my paintings grow. It is the interaction between the canvas and me—from me to there (pointing at his work) and from there to me. It’s all about Ras. That’s why I am playing. It is a necessity...that I have chosen. Frankly, I paint for myself.
Most of the canvases look like mindscapes or imaginations of landscapes. Could you talk about how you can build all the elements of your painting?

The first sitting before the canvas is very important because I create a whole surface in the first round in about two or three hours without taking a break. And then I leave it until the next day... In the first sitting you make the foundation and in the second sitting you build the painting—just as you build with words. It is like using two words to build a sentence, and then you repeat the process stroke by stroke, layer by layer.

Can you talk me about your black and white drawings on rice paper?
Do you approach them differently?

The small works are done with charcoal crayons on paper. You imagine your colours in it. These works also have tight spaces as if you are walking in the same hills as in the oils. But the black and white works exist apart from paintings, even though my process of choosing colours for them may have come from the same source. Most of them have been done last year but there are several earlier works from 2004. These are looser, more realistic. I was more conscious of landscape in the more recent work. I have forgotten the landscape and am concerned with surface texture.

The black and white works appear to be more mysterious. They remind me of woods of childhood?

Dream woods, with hidden secrets? Perhaps. Nature is mysterious. I don't rub anything off. I did one lot on thick water colour paper. I just wanted to capture the shimmering sunlight and the dry, crisp paper with its movements. I have also used grass paper. I want to understand and exploit paper. My work is not about ideas. I am interested in the use of surface quality and the material used on it.

How did you think of becoming a painter?

I was good at drawing at school but not in any of the science subjects. My family decided to send me to an art school in the early 1980s. My grandfather was a professor at the Khalsa College in Amritsar.
joined an art school, and later came to Delhi where I joined the Delhi College of Art. It was a polytechnic at the time. Biren De and Shailoz Mukherjee were among the teachers there. Arpita also came there and we formed our own group. We talked about art; we talked about the French impressionists. Shailoz Mukherjee used to take us outdoors to paint, either to Talkatora Gardens or Mehrauli. I used to cycle to the Ridge. Sometimes I went there with the painter Rajendra Dhawan. We would set out on our bikes at 5 am and make landscapes. I was very fond of Delhi's ridges. They have played an important role in my development as an artist. I liked the wildness there.

The landscape on the outskirts of the capital also gave me a lot. Later when I was teaching at Jamia Millia I used to take students with me. One of the places we often went to was the Okhla barricade, where there were ducks and wild grass. The marshlands of the Yamuna were beautiful. We used to boat across the Jamuna. That area has now become a highway in Noida. We used to go fishing. I used to shoot partridges, cook them there and eat them with buns. Jamia allowed us total freedom. We used to devise our courses and had our studios on campus.

You have been consistently painting landscapes and nature for decades. How did nature get such a strong hold on you?

When I first I started there were all these influences from college. But later as I painted I began to draw upon my own experiences. I grew up in Amritsar. We did not have much of a city life. We used to go for walks in the outskirts of the city—there were no houses, just fields. In college Sailoz Mukherjee talked about the Expressionists and painters like Chagal, Matisse, Monet and Modigliani. But then when it came to our own work he used to tell us to go and paint what was in us. My childhood memories began to surface. While learning a language there are a whole lot of influences. Therefore, I looked for an avenue to express my feelings in my paintings.
Delhi College of Arts must have been a very special place in those days. Sounds quite idyllic.

It was young and fresh and new. There were no hangovers, no earlier traditions. You had a century of the Bengal School, 75 years of Bombay. We really started from scratch. Sailoz Muherjee introduced us to the French School. He talked about his moving through Europe during the Second World War... We were impressionable. Paris was the place. Paris came to us without our going there—as the Bengal school came to young students there. There was nothing in Delhi. Biren De came here from Calcutta, bringing with him an academic knowledge. Sailozda brought in nature, landscape and colour. He also nudged us to look at nature differently, to look out for its various moods and colours that may not have been immediately perceptible to us. However, he also urged us to "feel" what we saw before we expressed it paint, Jaya Appaswamy had been to Santiniketan and taught us how to look at nature and create motifs from it. Avinash Chandra was in the first batch, and he had a free attitude towards the handling of colour and pigments. I am a product of this environment. We had no school except the old monuments of Delhi. Coming from Amritsar, Madras was as far as any city of Europe.

You used to do a fair amount of still lifes earlier and even today you surprise us with them from time to time. Have still lifes played an important role in your evolution as an artist?

At Art School Avinash Chandra used to place different kinds of 'still lifes' before us. Painting them helped us understand the relationship between the objects and light, especially the play of light that brought out the reflecting colours of the objects. These became objects in conversation with each other. Giorgio Morandi's still lifes impressed us, particularly their simplicity and the sense of conviction with which they were painted. Later, I began to combine landscapes and still lifes in my work.

What about the human form? There were fascinating portraits you did early on in your career.

The human figure appears rarely in my paintings. And when it does, it
is usually placed in an environment in which nature or the outdoors play a major role.

What happened to all those eerie boulders and stones that were such an important part of the canvases of your earlier work? Some of those canvases were actually quite surreal with those strange stones that look prehistoric, even threatening in their stillness and strangeness.

Since nature is my primary concern I found a substitute for man-made objects. Right there, in nature itself were stones and boulders of innumerable shapes and weights—drifting or lying still forever. I started playing with those solid forms—the stones—in my paintings. I often used stones with the landscape as a backdrop. Eventually, the stones lost their gravity and began to fly. This period was from the early 60s to the late 60s.

This body of works looks quite different from what you were doing a few years ago. Even the strokes appear different.

In the 70s began to work with texture. Over the last five-six years I have been using more pigment. It has become thicker. The main change has to do with the surface which has become more heavy, tight and pigmented. I developed a technique of putting layer after layer of pigment, creating thereby different textures on the surface. I like the texture of nature—crisp and tactile.

Are you satisfied with the results?

Sometimes I feel very happy, sometimes I feel suffocated. Breathing space is lost with over pigmentation. You have to have air. You have a problem when it becomes too tight. This happens when you are too close to nature or to the foliage...lost in the woods. Painting is a journey. It is about seeing in the canvas before you. My colour strokes are drawings... not filling in colours.

I believe you don't like to be described as a landscape artist—why? I don't mind being described as such. I am definitely a painter of nature. What matters is the concept of landscape. I am a painter of

THE HOUSE
Oil on Canvas | 45" x 45" | 1970

STONE ON THE WALL
Oil on Canvas | 33" x 66" | 1970
nature, not an illustrator of nature. I paint the moods of nature and its other elements, like the air, texture...I use nature and I invent my landscape.

Do you ever see nature or a landscape as a woman?
My paintings are very sexual. There is eroticism. Landscape has its own eroticism. Nature has its own sensuality, especially when you are using pigments and relating to nature and the feeling involved with it. The crunch, the tactile quality, the joy and the pain—it's all part of the sensuality in nature. Nature is not celibate: it gives sensuality; it evokes your senses and moods, and gives you pleasure and joy. And when you interpret it through pigments it becomes more a game of the senses.