



MAPPING CLARE RICHARD'S JOURNEY OF SOUL SEARCHING

Gopika Nath



A journey to India ... looking forward to the drama of another culture, its people and the local colour. Here Clare Richards, a young artist from Cambridge, unwittingly embarked upon a journey of another kind - searching for her soul. In a foreign land, surrounded by exotic colours and images, alien to the English landscape, bewitched by the physicality of it all and sometimes suffocated by the sheer magnitude, Clare felt her soul's yearning to free itself from the limitations of a physical being. In her diary she notes 'What I am searching for is a means to remove myself completely - to create a distance through which I can separate from the physical environment. What a relief it would be to do this. Perhaps it really is the spiritual that I am seeking? Yet everything beautiful, I associate with the land. It feels that only by achieving this distance can I fully appreciate the space I occupy'

Art and spirituality are interlinked and often the struggle to evolve in both spheres undergoes a similar path. The need and desire to embark on this journey is defined by Kandinsky and exemplifies Clare's mysterious yearnings. He says:

Veiled in obscurity are the causes of this need to move ever upwards and forwards by the sweat of the brow, through suffering and fear. When one stage has been accomplished and many evil stones cleared from the road, some unseen and wicked hand scatters new obstacles in the way, so that the path often seems blocked and totally obliterated. But then never fails to come to the rescue some human being like ourselves in everything except that he has in him a secret power of vision.

This secret power of vision, of the seer, is each individual's ultimate quest and its attainment is only possible through suffering and struggle, enabling the spirit to display its invincibility by rising continually above these states to declare its triumph. The artist in Clare, through her work, creates her own process of struggle - a kind of subconscious endeavour where the seer and the artist are one and the same. Clare's approach is tentative. Her ambition, though lofty, is shy and apprehensive in its statement. The explorations of the figure are guarded, fragmented and incomplete in the sense of any



recognisable form, as if there is no real desire to explore this, or as if she really does not know how to. The figure seems to be a means to an end. 'In search of thee I found myself is an idea that she is inspired by and relates to through the feminine form, which is her known identity that others relate to and understand.

She uses handmade paper, calico and muslin, layered with plaster of paris and beeswax, using the machine to embroider this unconventional, 'obstacle ridden' surface. Her struggle is then translated into how she uses the machine in trying to embroider this fabric. The intensity of the process ultimately 'killed' the machine - a 15-year-old domestic Bernina that, Clare declared, 'suffered for her Art!



India is a country so complex, a country of contrasts that for any statement you can make about it, the exact opposite is also true.

Above: *Tracks*. 2001.
Wax, plaster, stitch,
Indian calico.
195x38 cm

The enormity of the struggle is aptly presented to us in the finished works, which have a spartan quality. However, if the viewer is drawn inwards, they reveal a subtle richness in texture, use of materials and in the needle's endeavour to stitch its way through thickly layered fabrics. Creating marks, leaving marks ...

Clare's courage in keeping these dark areas to herself is to be lauded, for through her chosen process she has allowed herself to distil the emotions and the resultant works have a sublime quality. Another aspect to these works that intrigues is the fact that Clare has not responded to the colours and drama of the deserts of Rajasthan and much of India that she visited. She was not only compelled to look within, but was seemingly unaffected by her surroundings and their visual richness. And above all, the artist was able to resist incorporating Indian textiles and motifs or even being inspired by them. Such restraint of the senses is commended in Indian spiritual texts (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter III, Karma Yoga, Verse 7) where, if the spiritual aspirant allows his mind to wander or be drawn to sense objects, it is viewed from an ethical and spiritual point as being hypocritical. I first met Clare Richards in 1999 when she was completing her three-month project sponsored by the Eastern Arts board for visual research and textile study in India. Clare then remarked to me that my work did not display my 'Indianness' and it is ironic that when Clare returned to the UK to map her journey, her work has emerged with none of the Indianness' she encountered.

Born in 1970, Clare grew up in the south east of England, in Hertfordshire. She has visited Morocco several times and in 1989 she spent 8 months on a Kibbutz in Israel. She has also visited Turkey three times in the past ten years. Through her travels, Clare has been able to distance herself from her recognisable identity in England. She is aware that only by achieving this distance can she fully appreciate the space that she occupies... in discovering the dimensions to her being that go beyond the form. An interesting aspect of this exploration is expressed

PAGE 12

Top left: *Varna*. Mixed media, stitch on calico. 160 x 120 cm

Top right: *Shiva and Parvati*. 2002. Hindu god and goddess. Contemporary street shrine. 200 x 50 cm

Bottom left: Woman against a green door. 2001.

Bottom right: *Ariel2*. Detail of mixed media, machine stitch on calico. 30 x 30 cm

PAGE 13

Sweet Pain. 2001. Plaster, stitch, Indian calico. 200 x 48 cm

mapping a journey of soul searching, begin with non-figurative works such as 'Aerial 2' where the ruggedness of the terrain is being observed from a distance. The touch of gold and metallic threads indicate her attachment to a material richness but only just so. In 'Tracks', the delicate surface of handmade paper is a collage in itself, which the needle marks with textures and emotions, with a kind of irreverence. The inconsistent and jagged lines of the thread are not attractive at a first glance. They reveal an inner tension, a kind of irritation with ideas that are festering. The artist has not intended that the works be joyous, yet despite the evident tension, they are surprisingly easy on the eye and heart. Herein lies the innate success of Clare's creativity. She has dealt with this enormous struggle and expressed it by sublimating the emotions and their intensity in the use of materials. This, to my mind is the most fascinating aspect of these works. The spiritual path is not always a pleasant one, the corners are deep and dank, the journey through them frightening and traumatic.

in 'Sweet Pain', where the textures and the marks clearly defy the boundaries of the form that is carefully delineated. The converse is true in 'Varna'. The two works together speak for various stages of progress and the emotions experienced.

India is a country so complex, a country of such contrasts that for any statement you can make about it, the exact opposite is also true. It is a natural womb for the emerging spirit and a country of which Max Mueller is noted to have said, 'If I were asked under which sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life and found solutions of some of them, I should point to India'. This environment seems to have been well chosen by Clare Richards for her journey of soul searching. The body of work that she presented to us in an exhibition at The British Council in New Delhi, India, has an important message for this world of ours that is under so much strife and tension over religious, ethnic and communal demarcations, for it reveals ever so simply that the spirit is universal... not Indian, nor British or any other nationality. It is beyond caste, creed and religion ... it just is.