

Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma

JULIE SAUL GALLERY

The title of this exhibition, “Cowdust,” comes from the Hindi word *godbhūli*, or “cowdust hour,” a term for the indistinct twilight hour between day and night when the herds return from pasture and a fine dust rises up from the road. This liminal time, characterized by flickering landscapes and blurring views, epitomizes the cross-cultural exchange central to the collaboration between Julie Evans and Ajay Sharma. It also describes the paintings themselves, resting as they do on the boundary between dreaming and wakefulness. The images blend the traditional and the contemporary, straddling eras and cultures.

Evans and Sharma met in Jaipur in 2003, while Evans was in India on a Fulbright scholarship studying miniature painting; the two have been collaborating artistically since 2009, creating exquisite works on paper that combine their individual techniques and artistic cultures—miniature painting for Sharma, primarily abstract painting for Evans. The eight works on view here—rendered in, among other materials, acrylic, gouache, and pencil—hover on the indefinite edge between abstraction and ornamentation, depicting minute iconographic forms on bulbous backgrounds of fluid and frayed color. *GreenMisstep* (all works 2010), for instance, delineates cloudy sky in the upper portion of a dark green oval with blurred edges; at the lower right of the oval, a sitting deck and little red women’s slippers suggest human presence, while a configuration of small circles in the foreground lends the composition the rhythm of a nocturnal raga for hidden lovers.

The works include multiple references to Indian culture, as well as to the country’s ecology. Peacocks, herons, tigers, and lotus flowers—fleeting elements of representation—insinuate themselves into compositions that remain predominantly nonnarrative, while small phallic and vaginal details suggest sensuality. In *DragonSprout*, a pyrotechnic fountain of rosy bubbles gushes forth from a central umbilicus, perhaps representing the central moment of creation of the world in the Hindu cosmogony, a burst of pure energy here embraced by delicate blue-green leaves. The artists allude to Hindu deities again in *CowDustHour*: Floating weightlessly in midair, Ananta Shesha, the five-headed serpent, represents the presence of Vishnu; Krishna’s strings of pearls hang against ethereal dark bubbles; and a sacred cow stands placidly above a pink cloud. Although small-scale, these paintings evoke both microcosm and macrocosm, terrestrial landscapes and celestial maps, in a timeless poetic and spiritual synthesis.

Other Western artists have used artists and artisans from south Asia to execute their works (Alighiero Boetti and Luigi Ontani, for example), but those assistants were mere executors whose identities remained any-

mous. Evans and Sharma, by contrast, devise a collaboration marked by parity. To render these detailed dreamscapes, both artists intervened numerous times, erasing or modifying the work already done, inserting new details, or making small adjustments to elaborate on the themes or celebrate the work of the other. It is as if the ego of each were dissolved, their individual personalities fused to the point of becoming almost indistinguishable. In this sense, the collaboration represents an unusual experiment: It highlights the potential for real transcultural exchange between East and West, while stimulating a reflection on diversity (social, sexual, and religious) and on dichotomies (female/male, chaos/order, abstraction/representation) in paintings suffused with poetry and grace.

—Ida Panicelli

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

Julie Evans and
Ajay Sharma,
GreenMisstep, 2010,
acrylic, gouache,
colored pencil,
mineral, and lac
pigments on
paper, 14 x 11”.

