

From a Garden in Calcutta

Essay by *Patricia Groves*

A child grew up in a horticultural garden in the heart of Calcutta. There, in the enchanted world of plants and flowers, the small child would run and play – and paint.

That child is now one of India's top contemporary artists. There is a web-like, diaphanous quality to Manav Gupta's watercolors; ephemeral shapes are caught in shafts of colored light. A bird perches momentarily on an invisible branch. It does not seem like the bird will fly away; but it could disintegrate into the forms from which it was made; or slip into spaces between colors. I am lost in a crowd of people who have come to the exhibition on opening night and I am not taking notes; but I am listening to what is said.

Manav does not give maddening answers like the painting is what the viewer sees in it. Instead he is eager to share his vision, to enfold those who come, in the coordinates of his dreams. He rides along on words, images and music, taking the unspoken language of his paintings into films and performances. This artist sees painting in a cascading vortex of rhythm, voice and dance. By painting to the cadence of poetry, the motion of dance and the exhilaration of music, Manav feels that he can encompass the scent, the spirit of the performing arts in image, on canvas ... that this is a step toward a more universal and multidimensional concept of painting in our strange, modern world of colliding sensory stimulation. Who is this man who would, if he could, hold the whole world in his hands? I will not answer in the enviable superlatives of the critical press to date; or dwell on his creative empathy with the former President of India as expressed in their illustrated volume of poetry, *Life Tree*; or overly remind you that he has sold at Christies... Instead I will go back to the garden.

One day, young Manav had to leave the garden to help his mother raise his little sister through difficult times. It was only when his sister was safely married that Manav could devote himself to his art – which he did heart and soul, like a lover finally re-united with the long-time object of his desire. Manav Gupta has the passion and drive of the once-thwarted visionary; he holds close the undaunted dream of the garden of innocence he left too soon, the Lost Paradise which he recreates every day with his paint brush.