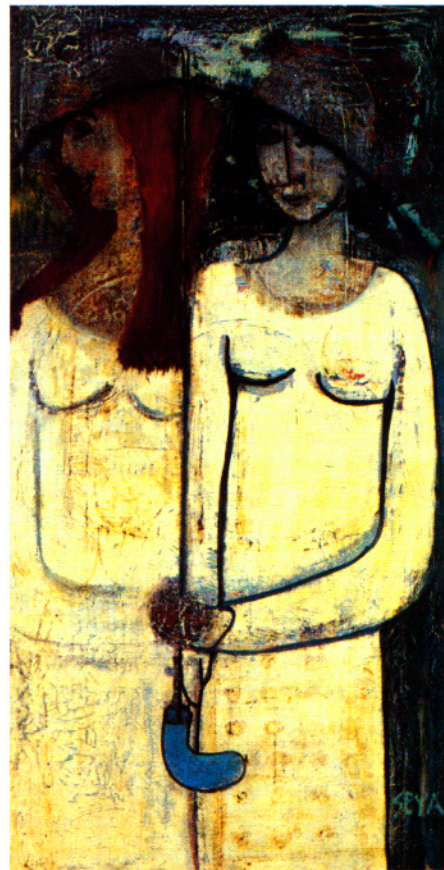


Seya Parboosingh is painting a love story. It's a saga that began in the 1950s when she first met her husband, the Jamaican *avant-garde* painter Karl Parboosingh, and it became an exploration of their relationship. Ask her about her work and life, and inevitably she tells you about Karl, whom she simply calls Parboosingh. Their lives are still inextricably entwined, even though he died more than 25 years ago. Since then, Seya's story has taken on epic proportions, reflecting her deepening understanding of how love transformed their lives and the lives of others. What started as a tale of two people now reflects her love for her husband, Jamaica and humanity.

All this has not made her more elaborate. Instead, the story she paints is like a haiku poem, simple but profound. Seya's painting has always tended towards minimalism. Her surfaces are characterised by a handful of motifs and images that she uses again and again. Typical are her silent female figures and seemingly-isolated objects drawn from nature. Flowers, fruits, birds, fish and angelic figures are painted so that they relate to each other, but still remain separate. Even when they touch they rarely interact; each object seems self-sufficient with a sense of wholeness. But partnered with one another, her subjects tell a story of cosmic unity and love among all things. In *Love Without a Doubt* (1999), one of Seya's most recent paintings, there are no figures; instead the canvas is covered with a light, fluffy, passionately red surface that suggests the elements of her world have melted like candy floss into blissful sweetness.

Despite their intimacy, there's nothing romantic or sexual about Seya's



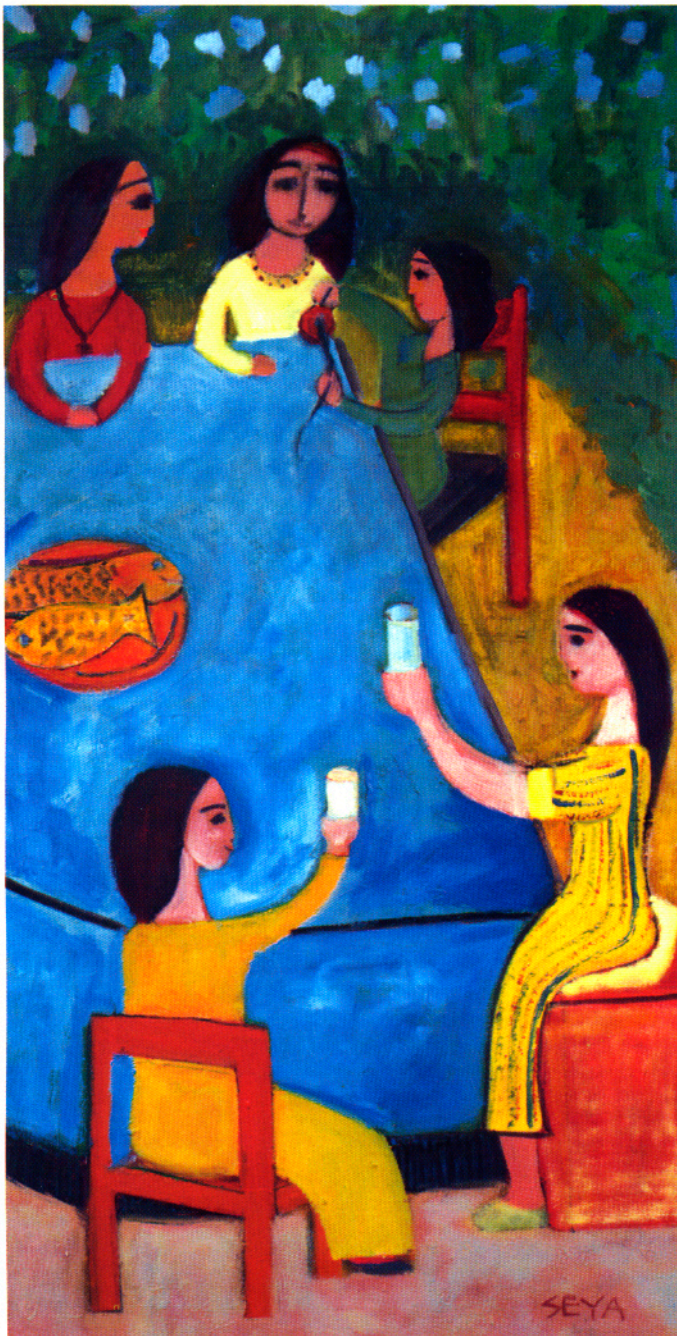
PAINTING A STORY OF LOVE



Seya Parboosingh's art tells a simple but profound story of her love for her late husband and for her adopted country, Jamaica. Through it, she has found a way of healing her spirit. Petrine Archer-Straw explains

Photography by Franz Marzouca

Left Love Without A Doubt, 1999, acrylic on unprimed linen *Above* Under An Umbrella, 1978, mixed media on composite board *Opposite page* Seya Parboosingh at home



paintings. Instead, they are intensely spiritual. The love they communicate is charmingly innocent and otherworldly, as if reflecting a child's view of the universe. Seya is a self-taught artist. She considers herself an intuitive, with no desire for formal training that might hinder her simple and direct form of communication. She says she doesn't use her physical eyes to see when she's painting, but instead relies on her mind's eye. *Love Without a Doubt* was painted in this way.

Seya's simple style also reflects a search for truth and purity. This has led her away from subjects in the material world, towards a form of abstract painting inspired by thought rather than image. Her interest in painting came from her love of poetry and her deepening relationship with Parboosingh: "My ideas started with poetry and then moved to painting. My interest was about trying to reach the same point of silence that I had found in poetry. Art wiped clean my mind of poetry, it was another form of communication that expressed more than regular life. My painting became a way to communicate with Parboosingh, a spiritual communication . . ."

Her quiet temperament and spiritual fortitude must have been the perfect complement to Karl Parboosingh's largesse, but coming from a protected merchant-class family environment in Allentown, Pennsylvania, she could hardly match his bohemianism.

They met in New York's Greenwich Village at a poetry reading. Parboosingh was then developing his reputation as the *enfant terrible* of the Jamaican art scene. He had worked in Europe as a modern painter, reportedly studying with artists like Roualt and Leger. In New York, he was something of an exile. Recently divorced, with a small child, he was struggling as an artist with no studio. Seya was struck by him instantly. "I took one look at Parboosingh and a light turned on in my head," she says now. It was a light that would guide her through a stormy but rewarding relationship. Within the first few days of meeting him, she decided she would provide him with a space to paint in her apartment. Instead, he moved in completely. After a year or



Left Seya at work: "You can't paint without touching a person that one meets in spirit" *Above* A Family Group, 1994, mixed media on canvas *Opposite page* Seya in her studio. A self-taught artist, she says she relies on her mind's eye when she's painting



She considers herself an intuitive artist, with no desire for formal training that might hinder her simple and direct form of communication

two of Parboosingh's coming and going, they decided to marry and live in Jamaica.

Life as Parboosingh's wife presented many challenges. The young Lebanese-American's decision to marry a black man was an anomaly to her parents; Parboosingh's unsettled life concerned them greatly, as did Seya's financial support for his artist's lifestyle. Parboosingh's decision to live in Jamaica meant that Seya was uprooted from her strong family base and brought to live with Jamaican neighbours and friends who were equally sceptical of the marriage. As she came to know him, she also learnt that Parboosingh had an abused and troubled background, and although he was gentle-mannered when they were alone, outside of their home he could be a boisterous heavy drinker with an eye for women.

Nevertheless, Seya was steadfast in her loyalty to him,

believing that God had brought them together because of their different experiences in life. She set about using her spiritual wholeness and the love she had gained from her own family to heal Parboosingh's psychic wounds. He initially thought her stupid for taking his abuse, but in time he came to respect her strength. Today, she says she stayed "because of the light", and because she knew that everything was about a larger picture of



healing their lives together. He had a need that she could fulfil, and she needed to learn about the extent to which she could reach out, as well as understand her role as a healer.

Seya began painting at Parboosingh's invitation. When he asked her to paint and to exhibit her work alongside his in the late 1950s, she saw this as his recognition and respect for what she was doing. On canvas, their styles were as dissimilar as their temperaments. Parboosingh's paintings were bold, hard-edged statements about Jamaican society, whereas Seya's works were placid, gentle glimpses into a quieter world of solitude. Similarly, in real life Parboosingh was in the limelight, at the forefront of the Jamaican modernist movement involving other artists like Eugene Hyde, Barrington Watson and the Guyanese visitor Aubrey Williams, while Seya chose to remain in the shadows, content with the routine of her painting and the work she could do to support her husband. This would be her role until Parboosingh died in 1975.

Seya's painting was profoundly affected by Parboosingh's death. Until then, her life work had been autobiographical and absorbed with her relationship with him. His death taught her to expand the power of love and healing. She remembers leaving

his hospital room smiling because she believed that nearing death he had resolved a lot of the anguish in his life. "He was free, at peace and finally in the light," says Seya. She recalls how their last words to each other seemed to tremble with the voice of God. Later, at the funeral, she realised how "cross-eyed" others had been in not recognising the deep connection that had existed between them.

She says it was then that she learnt fully that everyone touches everyone in spirit. "You can't paint without touching a person that one meets in spirit," says Seya. "By seeing them in the light you can see them and paint them as whole." The healings she had witnessed in Parboosingh was to become her calling after his death. She still lives and works in Jamaica, and her paintings are about keeping that communication and healing alive.

The concept of light is important to Seya: it represents the presence of spirit in her work. It is light that communicates and conveys healing. Technically, she tries to capture a sense of light and freshness by creating deftly painted transparent surfaces. Regularly, raw canvas becomes the base for her acrylic paintings in order to retain luminosity. But

sometimes this quality of light is captured more subtly in the glimmer in the eyes of her subjects or in the sadness of their smiles.

This feeling of light is evident in *Heart's Bouquet* (1994), which depicts the inner spirit of a close male relative. For some time Seya had been very aware of the difficulties he was having accepting his unique abilities. Like a prayer, her thoughts went out to him in an attempt to provide support. Although he lived far away, she connected with his light by using her painting as a form of communication. *Heart's Bouquet* is a loosely-structured composition with blotches of colour spontaneously smudged across the canvas. The figure that seems to emerge from the background holds a bouquet of flowers that represents gifts of the heart.

Like so many of Seya's images, the figure appears to be a woman who looks remarkably like her. She sees this resemblance as natural and says that despite its femininity, sexuality is secondary to communicating the gentleness of the spirit. Like most of her images, this one is not gendered, but rather represents pure spirit. Despite the wistful, even sad expression of the face, Seya's need was to refresh the soul of her loved one with the fragrance of happiness. Now she says he has become a warm full-bodied person.

"Now, my healing is not so much about Parboosingh. It started with him, but now it's him as much as anyone else. I realise that when I go out to people in spirit it's a release . . . it's like a blessing"

Not surprisingly, many of Seya's images focus on her immediate family of four sisters and their children. She also takes a keen but discreet interest in the lives of her neighbours in the apartment building where she lives. Her involvement with all these concerns means that she never seems short of messages to paint.

"My painting is the desire to reach that point within myself that reaches other people. It's born out of a necessity to reach other people, so I find different ways to communicate. I can't confirm these methods. I accept what I do as an observer to myself, and the more I do it, the more I accept

it. I have no other grand theories or methods. I find even dumb things make sense . . . Now, my healing is not so much about Parboosingh. It started with him, but now it's him as much as anyone else. I realise that when I go out to people in spirit it's a release . . . it's like a blessing."

Seya is aware that many people view her work as being "too simple to be serious." Some see her paintings as "naive" and lacking in depth, especially in a country where many artists are preoccupied with social ills as subjects. She believes her work addresses these concerns, but in a subtler way. Many of her paintings are about the pain of life in



Doves Feeding, 1999, oil on canvas
Below Heart's Bouquet, 1994, acrylic on unprimed linen

Jamaica, but she is keen to use them as a tool for healing and not for criticism. The difference between her paintings and what appears on the surface to be the "bolder" work of other painters such as Parboosingh, Milton George or Omari Ra, is that she does not want pain to show in her work. She says she tries to take her subjects through and beyond pain, to a point of happiness and love.

Doves Feeding, a painting begun in 1979, demonstrates the transformations taking place in Seya's work and thinking. It was inspired initially by the marble doves in the yard of the country house in St Mary where she had lived with Parboosingh. Over the years, the painting kept changing as she added and erased elements, trying to keep their interplay fluid. Then there came a time when the painting froze and she could not do anything with it.

Twenty years later, she believes it has finally achieved the freedom she was searching for: intuition told her to add another bird, and it transformed the composition. The background loosened up and she allowed her brush to "run around inside the

painting". Now she equates its warm yellow tones and the three doves feeding to the "freshness of a spring day". For Seya, maintaining that freshness is important to bypass pain—despite its many changes, the painting appears almost translucent with its lightness of touch. *Doves Feeding* shows no sign of being laboured. It represents love from the spirit that is pure and simple.

Now 75, Seya is at a turning point. The images that have been so pervasive in her paintings are giving way to surfaces that are even more minimal and subjective. They whisper her deeper understanding of spirit and its disconnection from physical reality. Like the completely white or black canvases of the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, her preoccupations are metaphysical. Seya is being challenged by how far she can reach in her spiritual learning. She is beyond the point of conscious authorship and painting to suit her admirers. She is painting a chapter for her story, whose ending is not yet clear. But she is beginning to understand its mystery. She says simply: "Some people just say they love the work and that's good enough for me." ■

