

ARCHITECT OF PAINT

COLOR, MOVEMENT, AND ENERGY ARE TOOLS OF THE TRADE FOR CALIFORNIA ARTIST SIDDHARTH PARASNIS
BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF



DOSSIER

REPRESENTATION

Hang Art, San Francisco, CA;
Sue Greenwood Fine Art,
Laguna Beach, CA;
Phoenix Gallery, Park City, UT;
Chroma Gallery, Savannah, GA;
www.siddharthparasnis.com.

UPCOMING SHOWS

Solo Show, Hang Art, May 1-31.
Group show, Sue Greenwood
Fine Art, June 4-30.

**THREE HOUSES
IN THE COUNTRY,
OIL, 48 X 48.**

BLOCKS OF BRILLIANT COLOR and bold streaks of paint. Highly textured surfaces and an almost cubist construction. These elements all merge harmoniously to create Siddharth Parasnis' signature architectural landscapes.

In the past year, the up-and-coming San Francisco artist has found much success with his paintings, which often explore the boundaries between abstraction and representation. One day recently, Parasnis reflected on his good fortune, saying he can't help but be amazed that despite the troubled economy, he has been blessed with sell-out shows. While other artists may struggle, he struggles only to provide enough work to his galleries. "I don't know what is going on. I can't explain it," he says almost sheepishly.

Earlier this year, the unassuming Parasnis was part of a group show at the Art Museum of Los Gatos in Los Gatos, CA, that featured works by a number of established artists twice his age, including the legendary Nathan Oliveira. The show, *Painterly Painting: The Next Level*, had its roots in the Bay Area Figurative Movement made famous nationally by prominent artists such as Oliveira and Richard Diebenkorn. But the mission of the exhibit was to spotlight a new generation of artists, like Parasnis, who are carrying on the legacy of those masters.

Although the 13 featured artists display different styles and subject matter, they all share a love of paint and relish merging abstraction with representation. At 32, Parasnis was one of the youngest painters in the exhibit. "I think he has a talent for vivacity," says Peter Champion, an English professor at Auburn University who wrote the catalog essay for the show. "I have never seen a painting of his that didn't jump off the canvas."

Indeed, Parasnis creates a distinctive sense of movement and energy in his work, often through his mastery of the paint itself; it swoops, slithers, and slashes across the canvas. *TWO HOUSES* is a good example. As Champion says of the painting in his essay: "The rapid lateral rhythm of the composition might suggest the way that travel imprints images in our memory." The scene con-







veys a swish of motion and color. Viewers have the sensation that they are rushing by the two structures, almost as if they were viewing them from the window of a passing car.

"It's all about the physical quality of the paint," Parasnis explains. "What paint can do to the canvas—the drips, the thick and thin paint, the bright colors, the mundane colors. I create the geometrics and then balance and create harmony with the paint."

When Parasnis isn't in his studio near the Bay Bridge, he may hit the road to drive through America's small towns and big cities. Or he may simply walk the streets of San Francisco to look at the architecture, studying the designs, shapes, angles, and geometric patterns. Buildings with a sense of history—from the stately Victorian mansions of San Francisco's Pacific Heights to adobe pueblos in New Mexico and shotgun houses in the Deep South—capture his creative eye.

Although he may begin a painting with a photograph of these

houses as reference, his works take on a life of their own as they evolve. Emotions and memories connected to the structures are incorporated and then filtered through his own imagination. But ultimately it's always Parasnis' relationship with the paint that is essential to understanding his art.

During the creative process, he applies paint, scrapes it away, and then reapplies it. In some cases, he may use house paint brushes to create big, bodacious brush strokes. The architectural structures are gradually simplified and distilled, details are shed, a window vanishes, a door disappears until he strikes a balance between likeness and abstraction that satisfies him.

For Parasnis, painting is similar to playing an engrossing game that he just can't quit. He can wile away hours removing paint and then putting it back again. "It's like an addiction," he explains. "I get into the game, and how long it is going to take, I never know." When in the throes of such creative enthrallment, he says it's as if he is "king of my own little world."



◀ **A BLUE HOUSE, OIL, 30 X 30.**
TWO HOUSES 3, OIL, 40 X 67. ▲

PARASNIS WAS 22 when he moved to the City by the Bay. He was born in Pune, India, a growing industrial city about four hours southeast of Mumbai. With a population of 5 million people, it has been called the Detroit of India because it is headquarters for the country's auto industry. It is also a burgeoning center for information technology and home to nine universities.

Parasnis grew up in the suburbs; his father was in the pharmaceutical business and his mother a lawyer. Early on he showed signs of the talent that would lead to his future career. He recalls sitting on the floor in his classroom and drawing pictures on his hands and thighs with a ballpoint pen. "I never wanted to solve math problems," he says. His mother would offer to buy him sketchbooks if only he would do his homework.

His parents were supportive of his interest in art, and they

weren't too surprised when he declared he wanted to attend art school for his college years. After graduating with a degree in fine arts from the Directorate of Art in Mumbai, he announced that he wanted to attend graduate school in San Francisco. Sad to see their only child move a continent away, his parents were, again, not surprised by his commitment to his art. Parasnis says he has always been an independent thinker and risk taker.

Upon arriving in San Francisco, it was love at first sight. Although he initially moved numerous times—"from a tiny cold basement to a stinky studio apartment with no private bathroom"—Parasnis soon settled into the life of a graduate student at the Academy of Art University. "The city is so vibrant, beautiful, and nonjudgmental," he says. "The weather, the architecture, the culture, the galleries, the museums. It all inspires me every single day. I was a stranger here, but it feels like home."

Recently, Parasnis moved into a condominium with a rooftop view of the city—a quiet retreat in comparison to his noisier





PARASNIS' PAINTINGS OFTEN EXPLORE THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ABSTRACTION AND REPRESENTATION.

◀ **A RED-ORANGE HOUSE 2, OIL, 30 X 30.**
HOMETOWN 18, OIL, 12 X 18. ▲

studio in a warehouse under the Bay Bridge. Amid the white walls and high ceilings, he paints and listens to music by Johnny Cash or Ray Charles. But it is the cacophony of the big city outside his studio door that feeds his art.

The sights and sounds of San Francisco influence his canvases, as do memories of Pune and Mumbai. Cities display multiple layers of color, movement, and energy—much like Parasnis' paintings themselves.

While the artist feels connected artistically to the abstract expressionists—he admires Willem de Kooning's brush marks and Mark Rothko's calm color fields—it makes some sense that it's Robert Rauschenberg's multi-layered collages that speak to him on the most visceral level. "Rauschenberg's work has tons of things on top of each other and then he may be hangs an old shirt on it," Parasnis says. "The things don't make sense together but the colors and textures combine to create a harmony. That's what I want to do, but with paint."

PARASNIS HAS BEEN steadily moving towards more abstraction the past few years, although he is not yet sure how far he will go in that direction. He prefers a spontaneous, organic approach as opposed to any well-thought-out plan for his evolving painting style. And he is uncomfortable with labels.

But museum curators like labels. Dieter Tremp, curator at the Bolinas Museum in Bolinas, CA, has been following the emerging artist's career. In an essay for the catalog accompanying Parasnis' gallery show at Hang Art this month, he wrote that the artist's latest works illustrate perfectly his move from representation to what he calls "expressive abstraction." Writes Tremp: "Formerly recognizable buildings have gradually become non-specific structures now primarily serving as vehicles for a dazzling display of abstract color fields containing intense surface activity in constant interaction with each other."

He cites three of Parasnis' paintings, A BLUE HOUSE, A BEIGE HOUSE, and A RED-ORANGE HOUSE, as examples of this new direction. "Shapes and dimensions of the fragments remain largely similar across the series, yet each piece stands alone and uniquely expressive as a result of independent treatment of the major color fields and of their intense interaction," he says.

Tremp compares Parasnis' new works to Diebenkorn's well-known Ocean Park series in terms of structure and palette. But ultimately, Tremp feels that Parasnis' paintings are one of a kind. "So much may be invoked by Siddharth Parasnis' art," he says. "Yet all of these paintings are uniquely his own—full of independent life, in a balance of sensuality and structure unlike anything else we've seen so far." ♦

Bonnie Gangelhoff is the senior editor at *Southwest Art*.