

Bruce Colburn: An artist with a social mission

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Islamabad

Alternating freely between abstraction and representation, French artist Bruce Colburn has attained fame in the art circles of Islamabad, both for the finesse inherent in his absorbing art pieces, as well as his strong faith in the social mission of art.

"I always say that if you don't contribute to a community, you don't belong to it," Bruce said while talking to 'The News' here on Friday. The artist arrived in Pakistan for a three-year term in October 2006 and has been painting for 22 years. For over a decade now, Bruce has been contributing 20 per cent of the proceeds from his exhibitions to non-government organisations promoting health and education. His first donation went to French NGO Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors without Borders) in 1998.

"If you are a professional artist, you should offer some of your time and artwork to programmes you believe in. For instance, if someone asks you to do a poster for a project working to promote girls' education, you ought to do it if you can. There are many ways to con-

tribute: you can donate money, or you can offer your time and skills," Bruce said.

The affable painter thinks all artists should approach groups or foundations whose work inspires them so that whenever the need arises, they can immediately be contacted. "Most of all, it should be personal. Artistic drive and social conviction should be one powerful force, guiding everything you do," he articulated. Bruce thinks everyone — not artists alone — has a duty to contribute something, whatever they have to offer, to their community. "That is the glue that transforms a group of people into a community."

When he came to Pakistan, Bruce wanted to continue his tradition of voluntary work so he surfed the internet, looking for groups working on maternal and neonatal health, reproductive health, family planning, disease and education. "I have done several projects so far, working with NGOs including Green Star Social Marketing, and I hope new opportunities for this kind of work will arise," said Bruce.

Bruce is inspired by numerous French and Italian painters and is influenced by Islamic art,

especially calligraphy and geometric abstraction. In fact, he claims to have learned abstraction from Islamic art. "Islam has an unrivalled tradition of abstract geometric art, but most of my favourite works are by anonymous artists. Much of the beautiful Moroccan tile work, Syrian metal work, and Tunisian stone carving, for example, were made by artisans whose names have not come down to us," he pointed out.

Bruce derives pleasure from painting what he sees around him, and does so with a passion that enables him to transcend the barriers of time and space, and access the very soul of the ordinary people and commonplace locations that preserves on his canvases. He has had 24 exhibitions of his work, the last two in Islamabad. "I started very late, doing my first painting at the age of 19. Most people start at a very early age, but sometimes in life, you stumble onto something and you know in a flash that this is your life's work," he said in a reminiscent tone.

Bruce has learned a lot about art in Pakistan. "I am really impressed by the Gandhara School of Art, particularly its rich sculptural tradition. I also

like the decorative art here: between the Moghul miniatures and the thriving artistic expression in textiles, jewellery and truck art, Pakistan's art is powerful indeed," he said.

Bruce prefers watercolours because they are portable and convenient for outdoor painting, but works in oils too, which are cumbersome and require a studio set-up. "In fact, I like both mediums because they are complementary," he quickly corrected. Bruce fell in love with watercolour while in Pakistan because he believes that the medium is perfect for capturing this country's light and high colour.

Responding to a question about public response to his art, Bruce said it has been very warm and very direct. "People here are honest in their reactions to work: they'll tell you if they like it, and more important, they'll tell you if they don't. I appreciate that honesty — it's the only way painters learn about how their work comes across," he said.

Bruce has adapted well to life in Pakistan. "My home in France is in a neighbourhood with mostly North African residents, so I feel right at home in Muslim quarters. I am familiar

and comfortable with the culture. On the other hand, I'm used to crowds being a mix of men and women. I know that Pakistan is different that way, but I prefer more gender balance," he frankly stated.

Bruce is an alumni of Haverford College, Pennsylvania, where he studied Fine Arts. He grew up in the United States and worked and lived in France. He attended the summer programme of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1986 and was awarded the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation grant for painting. After working for the painter Nell Blaine for three years, he moved to the US Virgin Island to paint and teach. In 1993, he moved to Paris, where he painted and exhibited for 12 years. His works are included in over 100 private and public collections in 14 countries.

"There is so much attention these days on what divides people. I use art to project what we all have in common and what should unite us," concluded Bruce, who does not have any exhibitions planned for the immediate future, but would like to find a venue for an exhibition in the spring or fall of 2008.

