

Going beyond the obvious

By Nonika Singh

MY first interaction with him came a cropper. A fledgling journalist then, I had no clue that I was face to face with a UK-based internationally acclaimed sculptor and visual artist, Avtarjeet Dhanjal, about whom noted art critic Richard Cork had said "An invaluable contribution to understanding the achievement of an artist who, nourished by the tension between the cultures of East and West, occupies a singular place in contemporary sculpture." And he point-blank refused to enlighten me. The interview was simply not granted.

I left with bitter memories, finding some comfort in the words of well-known lensman Diwan Manna who had organised the meeting "He lives far away. How were you to know his background?" Those were not the days of computers when as information was just a click away and the world a global village.

But as destiny ordained, I was to meet him again and again. Only this time (God bless the Internet revolution) I was more than prepared to take on the mercurial, albeit immensely gifted, man. Since then, many interviews later, we have developed an easy rapport. I have grown into an avid admirer of the simple man from the village of Punjab who has put his vision on the world map what with his site-specific works dotting the US, the UK and Brazil. He, too, has lost the condescension he once showered on me and replaced it with a grudging approval, if not outright admiration.

But Dhanjal has since not given up his contempt for journalists who do not do their homework. In several Press conferences, he has made his derision over simple basic mundane questions apparent. He wants and expects journalists, to go beyond the obvious to

understand the fact "where a scientist's logic stops, an artists' intuition begins."

No wonder, the lecture he delivered one recent evening we organised by the Chandigarh Lalit Kala Akademy was titled "Beyond the object". An artist, Dhanjal, firmly believes, is not an object maker but a harbinger of new ideas, new thoughts and new vision.

But all through the sideshow, the while the art connoisseurs were spellbound by his ability to sense and translate the intangible, to use natural elements and imagination to transform the space, many were clearly bored. Perhaps, Dhanjal is not a man of masses who can hold the audiences captive with glib talk. Thus, he gave no sound bytes one could gush over. Those who prefer be quotable quotes had to contend even with sublime remarks with still were deeper implications, which either went over their head or they were

simply not interested in.

So, every five minutes or so a bunch of them not only had the nerve to walk away but even sake bang the doors as they departed unceremoniously. All this while as Dhanjal was telling them to pay heed to their inner voice, to the silence within to guide their creativity; they were busy shattering the harmony his works alluded to.

"An artist," he remarked 'imagines beyond what can be imagined.' But the lesser mortals clearly are happier with the object. They would rather delve into the solidness of what can be seen. Yes, in their lexicon, even the delicious *pakor*s that were served after the lecture are preferable to the timelessness of the ethereal. Man, someone in the audience pointed out is a nomad. But certainly is not mad enough to forsake the object. That must remain an artist's privilege and prerogative, as well as his idiosyncrasy with which he hopes to win the world. ■