Myth unfolded on the wayside

Routine incidents of daily life, recast as myths, turn into canvases by Ramchandran, ***Ratnottama Sengupta*** *discovers at Shridharani*

"Look," Ram[illegible] pointed to the calf frisking around its mother. The Santhal maid was pulling away the milching cow. That moment, witnessed in Santiniketan years ago, had given birth to a painting that holds a prized position in the NGMA collection. "It involved no cerebral exercise in the studio," says Ramachandran. He recounts the incident to underscore the importance of reality to an artist. "You have to see everything, experience every sensibility, then express it in your own visual idiom," he adds.

Ramachandran was, in other words, offering a key to the world, on view at Shridharani, where he recasts modernity in mythical terms. He even mythicises himself. At the core of this world is the five-panel *Iconic Self Portrait With Umbilical Mahua Tree.* Here the artist, entranced with his brush and palette, is the creator, Brahma. But he sits like Vishnu, the preserver resting on a cobra, from whose navel springs - no, not the lotus- seated Brahma but the Mahua tree, branching out in all directions, bursting forth in blossoms that resemble the sperm.

The petals, besides embellishing the creeper that spreads to entwine the panels on either side, also signify creativity. But imbuing nature here with the sensuality we reserve for humans was not the work of a fine imagination, says the artist. "The mahua flowers, I noticed, actually look like the sperm."

Reality does not have to travel a long distance to find its pictorial language, as far as Ramachandran is concerned. Having internalised tradition as a child perambulating the temples in Kerala, he maintains: "Myth, interpreted in the light of your experience, can offer you a world of new images."

Ramachandran points at *Hanna And Her Goats* to substantiate the statement. Hanna, strong limbed and straight-backed, gazes on at the future. Flanking her are two figures, two tribal women, with antlers growing out of their hair, their thighs and legs curving into hoofs. "I had seen this tribal girl in Rajasthan. Her frisky goats did not make her lose her composure." When he sought to recount the experience visually, he found a ready reference in the *padmasana* Gajalakshmi, playing wilfully with two sturdy elephants.

Ramachandran can go on, and so can his canvas. "Jamburani was in a field where there were tobacco plants growing everywhere." The girl had spoken boldly, warning him to watch out lest he tripped. On the canvas, the spirit of abandon takes the form of a tobacco plant that wildly grows from Jamburani's skirt to engulf in its fold the earth and the sky. Reality here is not attired in myth but is simply a lyric where Ramachandran is looking at the composition, the colours. The human element here is as important as nature, and the decorative embellishment an integral part of the composition.

The artist, Ramachandran insists, has to work from reality. But reality is not necessarily about poverty. "If the Santhal woman makes me think of a figure cast in bronze, I don't need to remember that she has only two rupees in her pocket," he argues to stave off criticism about romanticising poverty. With the same conviction Ramachandran fends off charges of cloying his canvas with decorative elements. "Embellishment," he reminds you, "is important for splitting space and creating modules." While the Chinese used blank space for the purpose, we in India have always used decoration.

Ramachandran harks back, in effect, to the approach of his gurus, stalwarts of the Bengal school including Nandalal Bose, whose insistence on an indigenous pictorial language had earned them the notoriety, in the '60s, of robbing contemporary art movement of its vitality. "Why did he have to stand apart when all others were talking of European art and modernity? Because he was talking of a basic quality or character of pictorial language," he explains, a trifle exasperated. "There has to be something basic about us, because of which an Indian does not become a Japanese when he lives there. Nor a Japanese an American."

Nandalal was overshadowed by political developments following Independence, Ramachandran realises. In those years even Nehru spoke of "coming from the age of cowdung to the age of science." But many mistakenly thought it applied to culture as well. "They strove to understand Michelangelo and Leonardo better than our miniatures." But artists are not journalists; "they can't go on reflecting the day's political mood," believes Ramachandran.

The shifting of stress from its original concept of art education - a fallout of trimming the Visva Bharati syllabus to fall in step with UGC - has deprived Kala Bhavan of vitality, feels Ramachandran. "A system of education which produced such diverse talents as Krishna Reddy, Satyajit Ray, KG Subramanyan and Sankho Chaudhuri must have had something unique."