

Master of contrasts

KG Subramanyan's latest exhibition reconfirms his love for contradictions



The colours bouncing off the walls immediately catch one's attention on walking into the Art Heritage gallery in Delhi. It is only after a closer examination of the burning reds, blazing fuchsias and bright indigos that the subjects of the paintings — lively monkeys, decorative foliage, humans engaged in quotidian acts and fearsome deities — swim into focus. Veteran artist KG Subramanyan's work has always been distinguished by the coming together of the mundane and the spiritual. Myth and reality unite in much of Subramanyan's work, as do modernity and folk traditions.

As a painter, sculptor and muralist he has worked on a range of mediums from terracotta bas-reliefs and glass to woodcut. Art making according to Subramanyan consists not just of the artist's ideas but also the mediums he works with, which is why he gives it equal importance as the subject matter. Having experimented with weaving and toy-making, he has even created witty children's books, which are

jocular retellings of the Mahabharat and Ramayan.

While his mediums are diverse, his style clearly recalls the confluence of the effects of Modernism on the Indian sensibility. His Fauvist application of colour and expressionistic lines depart from the traditional folk methods of prescribed hues and controlled lines. His devi images do not evoke gentle goddesses in domestic bliss. Instead, they tend to be fearsome figures that brandish weapons and ride atop tigers.

"I have always believed that both the devi and the asura (demon) are present in all of us, and it is the struggle between these two forces that makes life interesting. In order for a person to grow they have to experience the push and pull of these two powers," says Subramanyan, who just turned 90 and commemorated this landmark with an exhibition that took a year to complete. Talking about the devi figure, he adds, "Every artist has his recurring leitmotif. While for (Pablo) Picasso it was the bullfight, for me it is this clash between the dark and divine forces."

Over the decades, Subramanyan has become more confident in his use of colour, moving toward a brighter palette, while his lines have grown stronger and more spontaneous. But his interest in experimenting with medium while uniting the modern and the traditional continues to inform his work. He believes that all growing traditions have a growing resilience and the ability to innovate.

Some of his innovations have been in reverse glass painting, examples of which abound in this recent show. For instance, 'Couple' is a jocular take on domestic discord where husband and wife appear to be splitting hairs; what is interesting is that they both face the viewer, appealing to the audience to referee their dispute. What is most telling is the thin line of negative space that runs down the middle of the composition, separating the couple. The technique involves painting on one side of the glass but displaying the other side. Byzantine artists employed this technique in the 19th century although it has an older history in India. Much of Tanjore painting

is done using this technique, dating back to 1600 AD.

Subramanyan has also been a professor and taught at Santiniketan's Kala Bhavan and MS University, Baroda. He carries the influences of Santiniketan that aimed to revive a sense of pride in India's folk and miniature traditions and the modern narrative style of the Baroda School, where painters like Gulam Mohammed Sheikh brought a contemporary approach to the Mughal miniatures.

Painter Indrapramit Roy, a student of Subramanyan during the '80s, recalls the most inspiring aspect of his teacher, often referred to as Mani-da, "Four years ago, when KG Subramanyan was 86, he was asked to touch up his own mural at Santiniketan, he responded by painting it afresh. When he broke his leg last year, we thought it would slow him down but he finished a huge mural-sized work for the India Art Fair! That is the spirit that keeps him going at 90," says Roy.

"I have earned my living as a teacher of art but I would say I have been more of a student than a teacher. The process is less prescriptive and more about absorbing and learning together with your students — it is an endless process," says Subramanyan. He himself studied under famed painters like Benode Behari Mukherjee, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij at Santiniketan whose works were seminal to the making of Indian art history. From Baij he learnt the balance of spontaneity and formalism in painting, while from BB Mukherjee and Bose he imbibed the love for Indian mythology and literature.

Subramanyan is known to doodle as much as he is known to paint. In this exhibition, we glimpse some of his spontaneous line drawings in monochrome, where the liveliness of a hopping monkey or a bird in flight is captured in one fluid and clean stroke. The confidence and surety of the line can only come from years of practice and a highly developed aesthetic sense.

New Works of KG Subramanyan runs at the Art Heritage Gallery, Delhi, till April 20.

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Bold and beautiful
The veteran artist's work combines myth with reality
ART HERITAGE GALLERY

