

Tradition's living tree grows off-shoots

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In a giant, colour-saturated painting, a wide-eyed Durga floats above two smug-looking tigers, her several arms holding several knives and lotus, objects typically found in iconic illustrations of the *devi*. To her right, half-length profiles depict ordinary women, while one red-haired man in a cap and a hoodie seems to be stalking a black-haired young girl. The expression on her face mirrors that on the goddess — they both look irritated and vulnerable at the same time. A white object that looks suspiciously like a sanitary napkin lurks above them all.

In an adjoining diptych, a blue lungi-clad Hanuman appears shouldering the Anjaneya hill which, in this depiction, seems to be sprouting mushrooms. The canvas to his left has common monkeys frolicking about in domestic terrain, with tables and vases of flowers as part of the scenery. In both these paintings, the mythological and the real present not as much a contrast as a sense of continuity — both spatial and temporal. They also frame the uninterrupted flow in



(L) Hanuman and (R) Couple by K.G. Subramanyan

artist K.G. Subramanyan's endeavour to stay true to his roots over nearly a century.

At 90, Subramanyan (or Mani da as he is fondly called) stands as one of the few modern Indian artists who persist in exploring the classical and its relevance in a fast-altering context through his work. The artist/historian/writer/illustrator/professor's work has always dwelled on the real and the imaginary, and sought to find an overlap between them. This is illustrated amply in his latest series of works, currently on show at the Art Heritage Gallery as

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— K.G. Subramanyan

part of his 90th birth anniversary celebrations.

In a conversation with professor R. Siva Kumar, transcribed for the catalogue ac-

companying the exhibition, he talks of this approach. "My main interest was once in the passage of the objective to the abstract. Abstract to mean



here an image of relative anonymity. Which allowed it a variety of interpretations [and] gave it the ability to play various visual roles. Now the cross-connections I am interested in are more complicated. The images are more than visual. They have a complex identity, diverse cultural associations and background lore," he says.

This complexity arises from the tension between the symboliser and the symbolised. Hanuman, for instance, finds refrain in present-day popular culture as the true hero of the Ramayana as well as a

point of comic relief. He is a god, a loyal pet, a monkey on a leash you see at traffic signals, a trickster to sets Lanka on fire — but he is always worthy of devotion. Similarly, Durga is every-woman; she is a symbol of anger and purity; she is part of north-Indian Hindu households. So is the woman of modern times — a repository of family honour, ironically imprisoned within this value system.

This set of works, extracted from his latest series called Mythologies, has a surfeit of all things and people mythological. Bulls, tigers,

Venue: Art Heritage Gallery

On till: 20 April

Timing: 11 a.m. – 7 p.m.

mermaids, fish, goddesses, horses, birds all straddle the binary of reality and imagination as they switch from objects of veneration to things that form the misc-en-scene of contemporary life. The painting *Icon 4* does this quite literally with a straightforward depiction of a homely shrine, with framed pictures and other accessories of worship decorating the canvas.

"In a culture where the Gods have to incarnate themselves as human beings (sometimes even as animals) to come to the aid of fellow humans, they are rarely perfect; they too have their weaknesses. This then gives one ground on which to speculate about a human being's ascent from beast to divinity and the possible alternatives," adds Subramanyan. The world he presents is a two-way street: Gods are humanised, while human beings are elevated to the status of divine.

Madonna, the mother figure in Catholic mythology, becomes the face of a series of 10 portraits, where she is imagined in a different eth-

nicity, race and religion in each frame. This ploy isn't always flattering though. In the diptych called *Sati*, for instance, Lord Shiva stands holding the corpse of Sati as per the myth; alongside is a painting of a woman mourning the death of her husband/child as society looks on. Subramanyan uses mythology as a weapon of criticism as well as a tool to foster cohesion between generations and civilisations.

But, more importantly, he attempts to bridge the gap between the entrenched binaries of good and evil, defeating the fixity of notions as they persist. "Each tradition has areas that grew in response to the needs and aspirations of a society, its ideas and sensibilities. Each tradition comes to have an inner code of discipline or grammar, which prevents radical extensions. But it also has certain take-off points that accommodate innovation and thus allow a new vision and dimension to its expression," he explains. Even as he channels the philosophies of cultural theorists like Claude Levi Strauss and Roland Barthes, the ongoing attempt is to invent a new mythology, or at least, craft a novel interpretation off.