

TREASURES IN THE SHADOW

Art historians and curators from the West are identifying and willingly playing up relatively "unknown" Indian artists whose works they find fascinating. These could prove to be good investments, says **Indulekha Aravind**

► (Right) Ramesh's painting is part of the series, *The Corner of Four Sisters*, that was inspired by four women poet-saints such as Andal and Lal Ded; (far right) another one of his thought-provoking works, titled *Building Castles in the Air*



The gracious, leafy environs of Manikyavelu Mansion in Bangalore, which houses the National Gallery of Modern Art, is currently hosting its first solo exhibition of a living artist, "Remembrances of Voices Past", by V Ramesh. The canvases, spanning over a decade's work from 2003, include *The Corner for Four Sisters*, exhibited at the India Art Fair — a series inspired by four women poet-saints spanning the 5th to 15th centuries: Lal Ded, Karaikkal Amma, Akka Mahadvi and Andal. The large canvases are thought-provoking, and have been executed beautifully.

Ramesh is a senior visual artist, and his collectors include Religare's Malvinder Singh and Deutsche Bank. Yet, a layman might not be familiar with his name or works. "For some time, Ramesh has been orbiting the penumbra of Indian art — to

come from the Baroda school and to occupy the penumbra is interesting. Contemporary Indian art is a place of noise, of bleeding hearts, of people who wear their heart on their sleeves — what made Ramesh remain in the shadows?" critic Sadanand Menon remarked at the inauguration of the exhibition, during which Ramesh chose not to sit in the front row.

Why, indeed, do certain artists inhabit the shadows, to paraphrase Menon, despite impressive credentials? There could be a variety of reasons, says Menon, starting from the personal, that is, the temperament of the artist who might choose not to be pushy, or his location, away from a major metropolis. "Art historical writing in India has also progressed along certain paradigms — the artists who don't fit into their categories could fall between the cracks, and remain invisible," he says, over the phone, later.

"It's quite true that many artists vanish into the margins or are never recognised for their true achievements because their work departs from the conventional narrative. But sometimes, this also happens because the climate of reception is simply unable to grasp, name or in any way engage with what an artist is doing," says art critic and independent curator Ranjit Hoskote. "That said, I don't think there's a single formula for success or singular narrative of arrival either," he adds.

Menon gives the example of National Institute of Design founder-secretary Dashrath Patel, a contemporary of MF Husain. Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee in Bombay. Patel was also an architect who collaborated with Corbusier, a ceramist and a photographer, though he never had a solo photo exhibition and only one of his works is in ceramic. "I curated an exhibition of his works in 1990, where I had people coming up to me and asking where I had been hiding him.

I replied that he had always been right here."

Tunty Chauhan, curator of Gallery Threshold, which has been showcasing Ramesh's works since the late '90s, says while the general public might not recognise him, "the discerning collector" has always had him. "There is an art that exists in the market, in the gallery and which graduates to the museum space. Each has its own niche, and quality,"

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says Chauhan. Neither is lack of recognition from the public unique, she says pointing out that Tyeb Mehta and VS Gaitonde's works were recognised much later.

Artist and art historian Suresh Jayaram, who founded the artists' space, I, Shanthi Road in Bangalore, says it seems to be destiny that while some artists have been recognised early on, others receive near-mythical status towards the end of their lifetime, or even after that. "Why shouldn't an artist of the calibre of Gaitonde have got recognition when he was ageing and alone and living in Delhi?" he asks. Ganesh

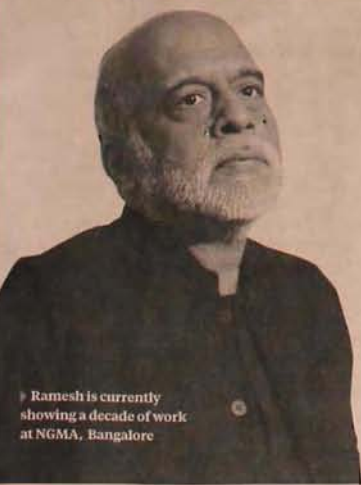
Pyne, who passed away in 2013, is another artist whose prices skyrocketed only recently, when one of his works was sold for ₹2.3 crore to a private collector. Commenting about Ramesh's works, he says he would not agree that he is in the shadows. "He is a very prominent artist but he might not be seen as a Subodh Gupta because his journey is more inward and his medium is more conventional. He is going deeper into what he knows best."

The choice of an artist to be quiet need not necessarily affect his valuation, argues Jayaram. "It is an individual's freedom to choose a certain path. It is an artist's wish to remain anonymous, or be in the public sphere, or to take part in mega exhibitions." Chauhan says Ramesh's works are not undervalued (The works on display at the gallery are priced upwards of ₹3.5 lakh, going up to ₹20 lakh).

Jayaram agrees that a certain cutting-edge kind of art practice might get preference over the others. "But that all depends on gallery owners, curators, the trends at biennales, and triennales and the globalisation of art. There might be a certain

amount of cronyism in the promotion of specific artists, says Menon. This is not entirely unfair, since galleries are not charities and money is being invested, but owners should take a long-term perspective of what their contribution to the art scene is going to be, he says. "But galleries are not capricious, they have a reason for selecting the artists they want to promote or project and more often than not, it's because they see a commercial benefit," says Menon.

Lack of early public recognition is not unique to Ramesh alone. Both Tyeb Mehta (left) and Vasudev Gaitonde's (above) were recognised much later in their lifetime



► Ramesh is currently showing a decade of work at NGMA, Bangalore