

(Clockwise from below) Works by K G Subramanyan – *Madonna with lotuses*; *Recollections*; the artist



Storyteller's Canvas

KG Subramanyan celebrates his 90th birthday with an exhibition of new works

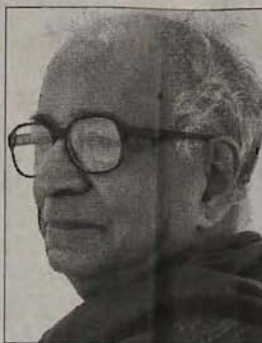
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THE basement walls of Art Heritage gallery are a storyboard. Like age-old murals, the acrylic sheets on display tell strange stories of yore—distorted images of men and women amid “Hanumans” and “Satis”, along with a “Madonna”, who appears time and again with lotuses and monkeys. Straight out of Vadodara-based “artist-storyteller” KG Subramanyan’s drawing book, these paintings comprise his latest solo at Triveni Kala Sangam, titled “New Works of KG Subramanyan” on his 90th birthday.

The exhibition, comprising 90 works, takes visitors through a continuation of his oeuvre that spans over 70 years. “My work is an ongoing process,” says Subramanyan, over the phone from Vadodara. The Padma Vibhushan awardee didn’t make it to the Delhi opening. “Nothing is pre-planned. I paint not for the world or the market, but for myself,” he says. Indeed, the intense colourist in him reemerges with the exhibition. The doodle-like images stand out in

stark contrasts of hues—bold blacks, greens and reds dominate the drawing boards. *Hanuman I* and *II* shows monkeys suspended in time and age, engaged in a wordless dialogue with each other. *Couple* shows a man and a woman looking ahead in wordless animation. Even as one wonders if the artist, who is popular for his remarkable murals across the country, is indeed trying to tell a story through his mute characters, he replies, “I’m always telling a story, mostly about myself. Even if I recreate old stories, I give them a personalised treatment.”

One of the pioneers of modern Indian art, Subramanyan is known for his engagement with diverse mediums—paper, board, canvas, reverse acrylic sheets, terracotta plates and even wooden toys. Having



started painting as a vocation at the age of 20, the artist has extended his love for storytelling from painting and creating murals to writing and creating illustrations for children’s books. His last one, *The Tale of the Talking Face* (Seagull Books), a parable illustrating the story of a princess whose autocratic rule brought suffering to her people, came out in 1998. “I want to make more,” he says, almost with a sigh, “but I’m getting too old. I haven’t written any story for some time now and I have no immediate plans.”

The 90-year-old’s artistic growth, apart from brief stints in London and New York, straddles three states—Kerala (where he was born), West Bengal (he studied in Shantiniketan) and Gujarat

(Vadodara, where he lives and teaches now). One wonders if his diverse identity translates into his art as well. “Is there a language closed to itself? There isn’t. Visual art is open for everyone. And I don’t have a style, I have a language,” he says.

The artist has also had four retrospectives in his lifetime, the most recent was in 2003 at National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi, and even though he’s far from being “done”, he thinks they are necessary. “From time to time, one should always look back,” he says, even as he toys with the idea of a retrospective celebrating his centenary year with a snigger. “I don’t know, but if there’s a sizeable body, maybe it will happen,” he says.

The year-long travelling exhibition, organised by Seagull Foundation for the Arts Kolkata, originally opened in Vadodara after Subramanyan’s birthday this year. It will travel to Chandigarh, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Kochi, Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata, ending at Shantiniketan in February 2015 when he turns 91.