


TIME • TRACE • TRANSITIONS

Gallery Sumukha

BANGALORE

Jan.16th – 30th, 2001

Gallery Sumukha

24 / 10, BTS Depot Road, Wilson Garden, Bangalore - 560 027. Tel : 080 - 229 2230

Feb.16th – Mar.10th, 2001

FINE ART COMPANY

Raheja Chambers, Linking Road, Main Avenue, Santa Cruz (W), Mumbai - 400 054. Tel : 022 - 605 6455

Apr., 2001

Galerie 88

28-B, Shakespeare Sarani, Calcutta - 700 017. Tel : 033 - 247 2274

Photography	:	Mallikarjuna Katakol, V. Arvind D. Raju, Rm Palaniappan
Text	:	Sadanand Menon
Design Consultant	:	Rm Palaniappan
Paper	:	Lekyem 175 gsm, Cover 300 gsm
Scanning	:	SPS Colour Scan, Chennai - 600 014
Printing	:	Sudarsan Graphics, Chennai - 600 017
Reproductions	:	From : 'Major Trends in Indian Art', Lalit Kala Akademi publication (with permission)

TIME.TRACE.TRANSITIONS

Sadanand Menon

"In contemporary art, the imprint or impression is often interpreted as a trace. The trace allows us to reconstitute our history, our geneology, our heritage. However, given our present situation where one is so hard pressed to establish a sense of history, of historicity, what one might do is to create traces, collect scraps".

Scrap-collection has become a heroic artistic task in our times. Seductive, free-floating constellations of slough, shards, detritus. Remember T.S.Eliot: *"These fragments I have shored against my ruins"*. The passage of time leaves a trace, a crease, a wrinkle, a crack, a wedge, a tear, a stretch mark — each of which is the map of a trauma, a transition. The artist's task is to lurk at these animated thresholds of disjuncture, ambush fugitive time and recover the relics (*"Scooped from the Sacred earth, where his dear relics lie..."* — Wordsworth). Today, pixel technology even enables a total recovery from the site of these ruins.

But what quantum of matter does an hour-hand displace? What imprints do a seconds-hand leave? Where does time go? At the cosmic crossover of a new year, a new century, a new millennium, it is not inappropriate to be curious about what connects the dead past with a new dawn. In that brief collisional moment of the 'then' and 'now', we are jolted awake into a charged moment between past and present. The interim is a transgressive juncture.

K.C.S.PANIKER
'The Word II' (1963)
Oil on Canvas. 89.5 x 77.5 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademis' Publication

L.MUNUSWAMY
'Birds and Animals' (1962)
Oil on Canvas. 122 x 126 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademis' Publication

It is a juncture at which all images, traces, shadows, even mere reflections are invested with the burden of memory awaiting an artistic rite-of-passage for release and restitution, a return to the fulness of their original promise. This is the magical line where we can try and locate the specific conditions for the encounter between artistic modes and shared dreams, the dialogue between individual psyche and the collective consciousness.

A.P. SANTHANARAJ
'Prodigal Son' (1965)
Pen & Ink, 56 x 44 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademis' Publication

M.REDDAPPA NAIDU
'Ramayan - Dream of Thrijata' (1979)
98 x 152 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademis' Publication

This exhibition with four leading artistic representatives of the Madras school is not fortuitous. S.G.Vasudev (60), C.Douglas (50), K.Muralidharan (45) and Rm.Palaniappan (43) are as different from each other with respect to origins, background, language, beliefs, and artistic impulses as chalk from cheese. It is a bit like asking U.R.Ananthamurthy, M.Mukundan, D.Jayakanthan and Ashokamitran to write up a joint novel together. Assembling these artists under one roof raises obvious questions of affinities, affiliations and alliances. Can the visual experience of seeing their works together provide us insights to a larger set of concerns where artistic imaginations meet, connect and converge on to a common canvas?

The exhibition gives us a chance to try and understand the formative ideas in the Madras art school from about fifty years ago when, through the intervention of artist/teachers like K.C.S.Paniker, S. Dhanapal, A.P. Santhanaraj and L. Munuswamy, it staked a claim, along with other metropolitan centres around the country, to challenging the prevailing colonial and pre-colonial orthodoxies of art practice. It also gives us an opportunity to look at the hundred years before that when certain pradigms related to 'art' were constructed in our society.

The Madras School of Art and Craft was set up just a little prior to 1850, about the same time as art institutions like the South Kensington School of Art and Design (today's Victoria & Albert Museum) were being set up in England. After a particularly successful showing of decorative Indian arts at the Crystal Palace in London, it was felt that both preservation and reform should be acknowledged as the intent of the art schools in India — that is, to preserve and promote the Indian artisanal/technical base while, at the same time, teaching Indian artists to draw and paint nature in the fashion of the European art academy.

This conceptual schizophrenia was to profoundly affect the direction of the pedagogic vision of the art school. It also constituted a new and distinct kind of visual vocabularly with its wilful mix of the European idea of space loaded with Indian decorativeness. Another distinctive input imparted then was in colonial cartography with technical frets for surveying, aligning and mapping. Since cartography has always been a device for territorialisation, the current manifestations of this skill in products of the Madras school seem like some deviant representation.

The third specific approach introduced into art teaching in the Madras school was the practice of rendering ornament from past architectural monuments as line drawings, isolated from their original context and thus applicable to any surface or material. These enormous documentary details were collated in a series of 'pattern books' which, besides being a storehouse of information, also became the templates that manufactured public taste and

K. RAMANUJAM
'My Dream World' (1972-0)
98 x 152 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademi' Publication

K.M.ADIMOOLAM
'Shadow of Infinite' (1979)
Oil on Canvas, 112 x 112 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademi' Publication

R.B. BHASKARAN
'Untitled' (1977)
Etching & Lithography, 45 x 59 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademis' Publication

S. NANDAGOPAL
'Ritual Image' (1977)
Silver-plated copper, 120 x 23 x 120 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademis' Publication

'currency', simultaneously being responsible for the eventual obliteration of elements that were not recorded in these volumes. It also laid the base for a certain orientalist, decorative and mock-traditional notion of art from India, so lauded by revivalists like William Morris and others as 'primitive' Indian art.

The reason for elaborating this is that these elements of patterning, decorating, drawing and mapping continued to remain the highpoints of the Madras art school's approach. So much so that the anti-colonialists and indigenists like Paniker and his colleagues unconsciously enunciated these very same principles and devices as their mode of a nationalist 'recovery of space', including a multi-layered approach to building and crafting the painted surface in the manner of a palimpsest. The craftsmanship was all there but the process became formulaic with overstated repeats of patterns.

Paniker's method of 'graphic patterning' had its origins not in any oppositional stance as was imagined, but in the very intricacies of what was institutionalised as art practice by the historic Madras school. It is a legacy that has travelled long and still haunts succeeding batches of students.

Paniker, Santhanaraj, Munuswamy, Dhanapal were all, of course, stating their ideological reaction and opposition to the populism of Ravi Varma's Western academic style and its crude 'cut-out' of figurative detail. The central idea they explored was 'patterning', based on the premise that the grammar of patterning "has nothing to do" with laws of nature and that it is the faculty of patterning,

not senses, that contribute to knowing and picturing. This then, was the mantra for 'free' picturisation, bypassing 'vulgar' realism. The pattern was, thus, fetishised as the superior principle of non-Western art — Indian, Arabic or Chinese — with its complex geometries and calligraphies. This entire argument has been uncritically bequeathed upon succeeding generations of students of the Madras school.

The works of the four artists on display in this exhibition are distinguished both by their methodological inheritance from the Madras school as well as by their significant departures in recent years. All four artists are united in their shared discomfort with available surfaces and their anguished treatment of the canvas as a veritable laboratory of experiments.

The surface looms large as some sort of epistemological barrier between the artists and what they want to grapple with. Getting under the skin of the material and making it as resilient as blotting paper becomes a chosen preference. The approach is epidermal, subcutaneous, decorticated. They need to build and layer the surface to enable a surgical incursion to the depths.

Douglas literally washes and bathes his canvas or surface several times in water and other liquids until it yields to a malleability of temperament. He can then cleave, rift, split and sunder it before layering with crayon or burning with carcoal or stitching with thongs and rendering it as delicate and vulnerable as a kite in high wind. Vasudev feeds his canvas quantities of oil to render the surface

V. ARNAVAZ
'Garuda' (1985)
Colour inks on paper, 32 x 47 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademi' Publication

S.G. VASUDEV
'Vilkollai' (1984)
Oil on Canvas, 120 x 120 cms

S.G. VASUDEV
'Fantasy' (1965)
Oil on Board, 35 x 60 cms

S.G. VASUDEV
'Maithuna' (1988)
Ink on Paper, 24 x 31 cms

fleshy before stomping and daubing it with absorbent textures and gouging the colour out. Muralidharan works on his surface like a mason piling mud, sand, sawdust, textile rags, newspaper, anything that will enable him build in a subtext. Palaniappan, in his consummate craftsmanship, lays graphic grid over another graphic grid to a level of complexity within which the geometry of line he pulls out reveals its guts as well as explicates a principle as elegantly as any 'string theory' would do.

For each of them, the surface is visceral, supple, incarnate. This analogical 'body' upon which they set to work with surgical precision or hatchet violence constructs a physiological spirituality enabling an unselfconscious play of personalised pain and wound. It permits of a working with raw and direct sensation that claws the surface each time to a perpetual sore point. Of course, the geneology of this practice returns to Paniker's piercing the surface with hooks and other such travails set up by K. Ramanujam and V. Arnawaz.

The other significant commonality and connection is their intense engagement with line, as opposed to mass. It is almost as if they consciously overlook the rich treatment of mass in temple architecture, bronze icons or painted textiles in the South and dematerialise it to its armature, denuded of substance, merely in order to highlight form. It is, in fact, remarkable how artists from the Madras school find their base in line, which becomes like their primary conceptual material.

Palaniappan calls his process creative removal of colour so that "I can be seen as writing a painting". This play with line was also

part of the polemics of the teachers at the school. Munuswamy's advise to "bury the line" and make it the invisible nervous system of the painting was directly contrary to Santhanaraj's dictum: "Expose the line; don't hide anything". It was like two edges of a knife, one for cutting and the other for spreading butter. They were free to take from any source. For Palaniappan, the line evolved into a psychic stylus influenced, as he acknowledges, in no small measure by the pen and ink introspections of K.M. Adimoolam and the freedom and spontaneity in the lines of a mentor like R.B. Bhaskaran. Palaniappan employed it as a specific signature to exult in the possibility of tracing change and movement. He also acknowledges the space and liberty to experiment that A.Alphonso provided in his alma mater.

C. DOUGLAS
'Untitled' (1991)
Mixed Media, 95 x 132 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademi Publication

C. DOUGLAS
'Rain' (1997)
Mixed Media on Canvas, 56 x 44 cms

Muralidharan may be credited with uniquely breaking free of the lyricality of space in the tradition of the Madras school and inserting the notion of a polyvalent and contentious space within which his mythological figures engage in contemporised narratives. This might also be the best example of how the templates of the earlier patterns and geometric unities have been dismantled to expose the space behind the space and its vibrant relation to the pictorial space. For both Muralidharan and Palaniappan then, the notion of 'negative space' works as a potent resource for the multi-textuality of their intent.

Muralidharan's conception of space then, is that of an inspired muralist. No wonder he takes inspiration from Vasudev's mural in a theatre complex in Chennai. S.Nandagopal's folkloric motifs and Reddappa Naidu's journey to 'source' and 'root' were his

building blocks. Bhaskaran's spontaneous, 'child-like' freedom in expressing nature-symbols too has been a connecting reference in Muralidharan's own work.

K.MURALIDHARAN
'Composition' (1975-76)
Oil on Paper, 56 x 44 cms

K. MURALIDHARAN
'Mystic Valley' (1981-82)
Mixed Media, 91 x 91 cms

Vasudev's refined negotiation of the inheritance of line, pattern and decoration has been clearly the most dramatic, signifying an open attitude to his own past. Growing with the strongly catalytic influence of Munuswamy's exaggeration of line on the one hand and Paniker's '*Words and Symbols*' on the other, Vasudev's penchant for order was to pull him deep into the interiority of the formalism at the heart of the Madras school, before he swung around and reinvented himself as an artist who utilises his phenomenal skills to revitalise his sources. While space and form meet most lyrically in Vasudev's work, he has now emerged with a part ironic, part connotative pictorial manner which is supple enough to accomodate the new critical content in his narrative.

Douglas walks the tightrope between contemporary angst and classical convictions. He is clearly aware of the dangers of bypassing all social reference and going exclusively to material. "It is a prison," he admits. Yet he increasingly chooses body itself as material, investing it with magical properties of bearing collective disquiet, somewhat like Edvard Munch. "I'm only body," he echoes Nietzsche. Yet one suspects it is only a romantic stance. What Douglas really brings to his work, as only his hero Ramanujam brought before him and as another current hero Bhupen Khakhar reinforces, is abundant wit. In his latest

canvases, on display in this exhibition, Douglas has suddenly chosen to publicly unmask his other persona and what is revealed is a new force violently freeing itself from the compulsions and commands of his seduction for formalism and seeking the liberty to even lampoon the 'Mysore Sandal Soap'. He seems all set to peel off the face of his canvas the thin filament that separates the banal from the chimerical and the morbid from the charming. The question that provoked him to cruise down this constricted alley is equally witty: "Are we contemporary enough", he furrows his brow in mock seriousness. "Anyway, why not take the bazaar to the gallery?"

Here are works then, no longer seeking the security of the school they were weaned in, openly self-reflexive, self-interrogative and ready to make new beginnings in the new times.

The prospects are rich. As the astronomer, Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington, has said: "*This space between the stars which I have called a desert of emptiness, is not entirely empty. There are traces of matter everywhere*".

And those traces too, will construct universes anew.

Rm. PALANIAPPAN
'257 / ME 671117' (1982)
Enamel on Canvas, 91 x 91 cms

Rm. PALANIAPPAN
'Document-X 23' (1994)
Mixed Media Graphics, 56 x 76 cms
Courtesy : Lalit Kala Akademi Publication

C.DOUGLAS : Born in Tellicherry, Kerala, in 1950, Douglas enrolled in the Madras School of Arts & Crafts in 1971, after a stint at Balan Nair's art school back home.

A diploma in Painting in 1976, also brought him close to the Cholamandal group of artists, chiefly K.C.S.Paniker and K.Ramanujam, whose self-torturing works particularly inspired Douglas's artistic impulse. A quarter of a century later today, Douglas is rated among the most significant of the younger group of artists whose works never fail to confound and seduce.

From 1981 to 1988, Douglas spent a turbulent phase in Munich, Germany, working, learning and exhibiting at the Haus der Kunst and other venues in many German cities. His dialogues and exchanges with German artists have left deep impressions on his subsequent work.

Returning to live in Cholamandal in 1989, Douglas has retained a creative edge with his self-imposed physical isolation. At the same time, he has provoked enormous critical interest with his periodic participation in major solo (*at least seven*) and group (*over 45*) exhibitions in India and abroad.

Douglas's works are today part of several collections and he has been winning a steady stream of awards, including the Tamilnadu State and the National Award for painting (*1992*). He received the Government of India's Junior Fellowship (*1991-93*) and Senior Fellowship (*1994-96*).

In 1994, Douglas went on invitation to the European Ceramic Centre at Hertogenbosch, Holland, to explore the ceramic medium and has held a few exhibitions of his work. The same year he also received the Charles Wallace Trust Fellowship. He lives and works from Cholamandal Artists' Village, Chennai.

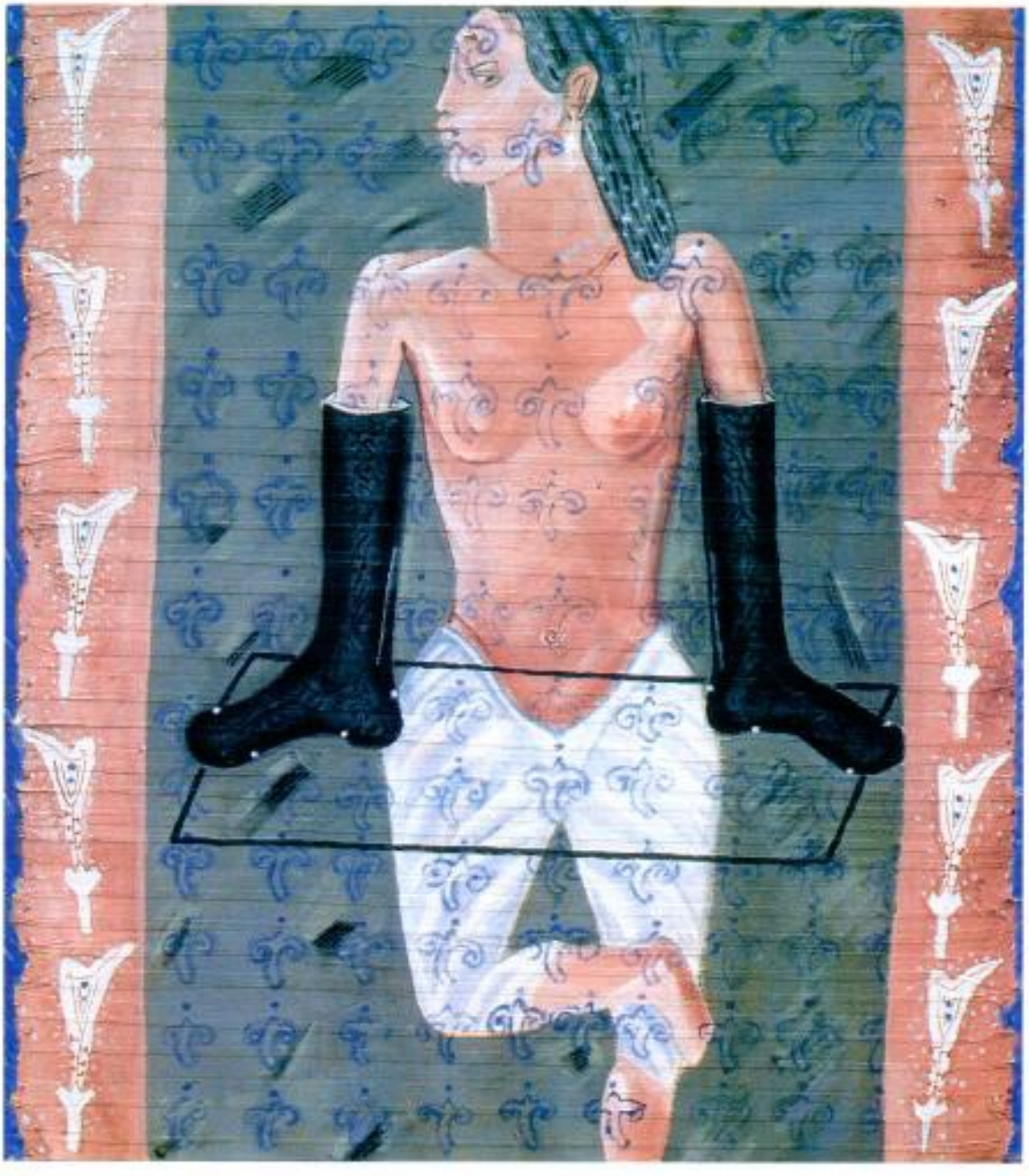
C. DOUGLAS, "Mirror", *Mixed Media on Canvas*, 106 x 90 cms, 2000

C. DOUGLAS, "Drip", *Mixed Media on Canvas*, 90 x 130 cms, 2000

C. DOUGLAS, "Drip", *Mixed Media on Canvas*, 90 x 130 cms, 2000

C. DOUGLAS, *"Spoon", Mixed Media on Canvas*, 121 x 121 cms, 2000

C. DOUGLAS, "Curtain Time", *Mixed Media on Canvas*, 90 x 130 cms, 2000



C. DOUGLAS, "Window", *Mixed Media on Canvas*, 90 x 118 cms, 2000