

Speaking in tongues

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The work of D Ebenezer Sunder Singh in his latest show — called Thus Spake Zarathustra — at the Pundole Art Gallery is a study in contrasts.

D Ebenezer Sunder Singh speaks of energy, elephants and the superman in his work. Ramya Sarma finds out more about the artist and his fascination with metaphysics

The darkness prevails, punctuated by sparkling brightness that is startling. The work of D Ebenezer Sunder Singh in his latest show — called Thus Spake Zarathustra — at the Pundole Art Gallery is a study in contrasts, of flashes of 'lightning out of the dark cloud', shades of grey interrupted with vivid splashes of pink, orange, lime green and blue. His charcoal drawings have a depth almost frightening in the tortuous contortions of the human figures and fantastical in their scope of perception of a mysterious world.

"In my work I have a physical and a metaphysical element," Ebenezer explains, "like the figure of a man with babies around him, one lying on his hand, or a man falling with a foetus held in his splayed fingers." The drawings, all in shades of black, "remain unlit. I don't mean black as in darkness," he says, "only a gradation from black to white — black needs to be worked to create the different shades," the varying intensity.

When he paints in colour, "I use very bright hues. And my drawings, even in blacks, are very light related." What he did was "to make this metaphysical thing work in light. And in this show, the light effects work very well in the sculpture — there are bright hues, with sequins and beads."

The idea of the superman is strong in Ebenezer's work. His inspiration comes from Nietzsche, whose book Thus Spake Zarathustra defines the concept in 'I want to teach men the sense of their existence, which is super man...as lightning out of the dark cloud.' The artist believes that this definition could be used to describe his work, as "a contemplation of myself, my energy growth. Nietzsche said there is no god to help man; only super-man, or Zarathustra, can help man." This ethos is captured in his Superman sculptures, where tiny gold-painted, bead-dotted elephants are held, one tumbling over the other, in huge black, sequin-splashed hands. "There is some sort of energy between my hands. I articulate it with these images. The elephant is a symbol of energy as well."

Heads are a refrain in the sculptures on show. And tongues are a prominent feature of each, as is seen in *Tongues*, an installation of 15 lime-green heads, each with a tongue of a different colour sticking out of its mouth.

According to Ebenezer, "The tongue is a sensory code, and the head is a connotation of speaking in tongues. The work, my thought, is about words, communication, and sensual and sense-related communication at that." In *Sky*, that tongue is elongated, just a hairsbreadth away from touching the ceiling. The images are "intense", and the artist is "trying to bring their reasons for existing to the fore as subtle symbols". In *Hair Grows*, he speaks of a "contemplation of life and death, of dead cells growing. It is a sort of very fundamental question in life — life goes on and hair keeps growing, even as you cut it, even after death. It is an intense question on life."

The sequins and beads are novel, though Ebenezer says that "I have been using sequins for a while now, even on my canvases — as I paint, I throw them on top, paint over them, and then throw on more. This time I am using them on sculpture — the sculptures come out of my drawings." It is all about the "contrast between my dark drawings and the sculptures that are very bright and light." The sequins catch the light and create scintillations that add depth to the darkness of the hands, the heads, the charcoal drawings.

All the figures that he creates are male. "It's because I am male," Ebenezer explains. "I understand the world through my understanding of myself, my world, my education, my own being and my energy." In his work, "there is more of Ebenezer in the idea of the person I draw or sculpt." This post-modern philosophy, essentially one of deconstruction, implies that "all interpretations of anything are valid. You cannot make someone understand something from his point of view, but only from your own."

And in that interpretation, Ebenezer makes his point: man looking for superman.

Thus Spake Zarathustra, Pundole Art Gallery, till May 31