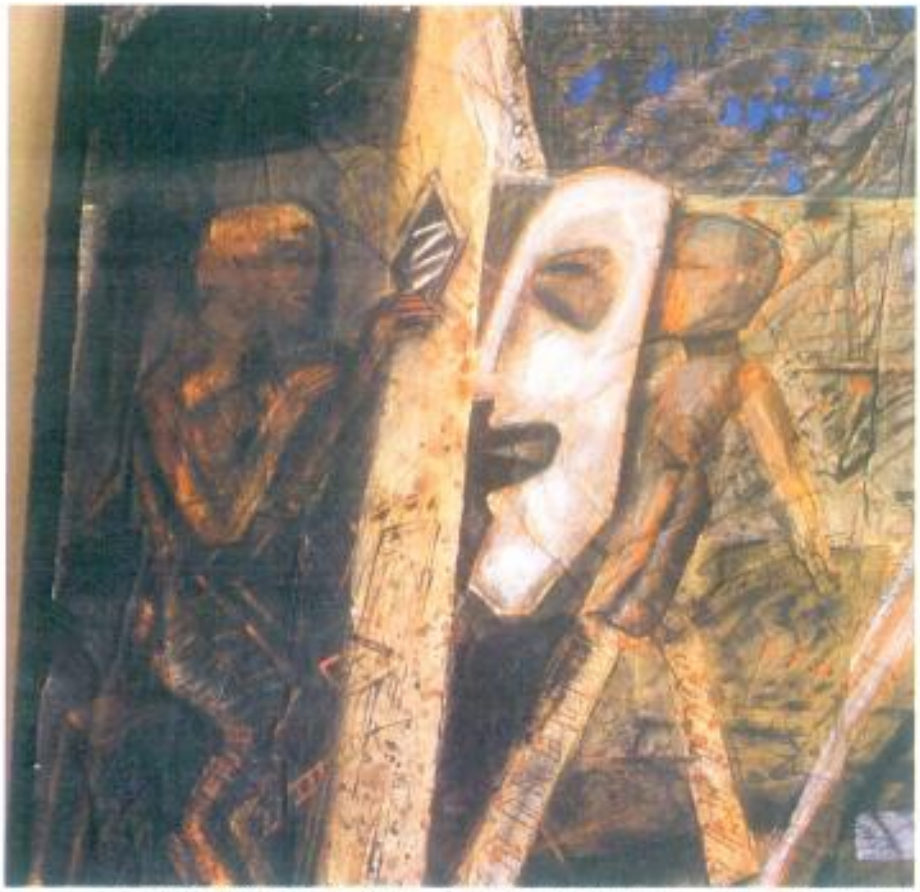
Cholamandal's Prodigal Child

Geeta Doctor talks to C. Douglas and discovers an artist trying to find his centre at the margins.



Untitled. *1993. 112 cm x 119 cm. All photographs of paintings courtesy Sakshi Gallery.*

Untitled. *Mixed media on paper. 1992. 78 cm x 104 cm.*

Images of botched births, strange couplings, of mechanically induced experiments that suggest a medieval alchemist hunched inside a vaulted cell or attic or, in today's context, a metal visored technician tinkering over a stainless steel fusion of human embryos in a petrie dish, fragment the canvases of C. Douglas. At the same time they are filled with a luminous intensity. The sombre shapes are overlaid with a phosphorescent network of waving lines, flying fish, floating birds, stigmata, striations, starbursts like those made by the scrabbling motions of innumerable tiny crab-like creatures digging themselves into the wet sand that are like the residue of Douglas's long-time affinity with the sea.

Indeed, it is difficult not to imagine Douglas himself as one of those thin shelled crabs digging himself into his quaintly charming cottage at Cholamandal, the artists' village on the outskirts of Chennai, next to the murmuring sound of the sea on the Coromandel coast. His sea-green eyes peer at you as he brushes the tangled spirals of black curly pirate's hair from his broad fair forehead. His talk itself spirals around the air in short bursts of indecision. "You've heard of Camus's stranger? No, hmmm, what I mean is we are like that, strangers, outsiders. You know what Paul Valery says. Or Eliot's *Wasteland*. When I look at some of my work I am reminded of Eliot's phrase, 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'. But why am I saying this? You know Eliot's *Wasteland*, don't you? That is my method of working. Sometimes, I like to use the sand as a texture for my work, or tea stains, or tear the paper, or walk over , crumple it up, which is why I prefer to work on paper, or any fragments that are there to create my own surface".

He paraphrases Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, gives a short summary of the ideas of Basavanna, the twelfth century Kannada reformer, and describes his treks to sit under the trees listening to the anti-lecture lectures of J. Krishnamurthi. "It's not the subject matter of the *Wasteland* that interests me, but the technique. What made him write it. It reminds me of the work of Iyappa Panikker. You know he speaks of *sandhya*, twilight, that time between night and day. It's a very important idea for me. The experience of *sandhya*".

Every question of art elicits a monologue on the work of some European artist or the other. But, when I mention the possible influence of Anselm Kiefer, the German artist, who also used sand, seeds and earth matted on the surface of his paintings, and whose earlier works often featured

strangely empty attics and wooden beamed halls burning with dry flames, attenuated forests of trees marked with wounds where the branches might have once grown, Douglas reacts with irritation, " Why don't you leave all these German artists alone, I owe much more to the artists closer to me, like Arnawaz and Ramanujam". The very next instant he is talking about George Baselitz, (there is actually an elephant painted upside down hanging on one of the walls of Douglas's cottage), about Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde and Bernard Dubuffet.

Stories of his mythical shyness abound. They date from his student days when he left the cool green waters of his native Kerala, drawn by the powerful presence of K.C.S. Paniker, Principal of the Government School of Arts and Crafts at Chennai, at a particularly tumultuous period in its history and went on to become one of Paniker's proteges at Cholamandal. Cholamandal was founded by a group of artists, most of them young graduates from the Government School of Arts and Crafts, to allow them to practice their vocation in an atmosphere of collaborative enterprise, where each one would also work at some craft that would bring in the money for the shared facilities of the community.

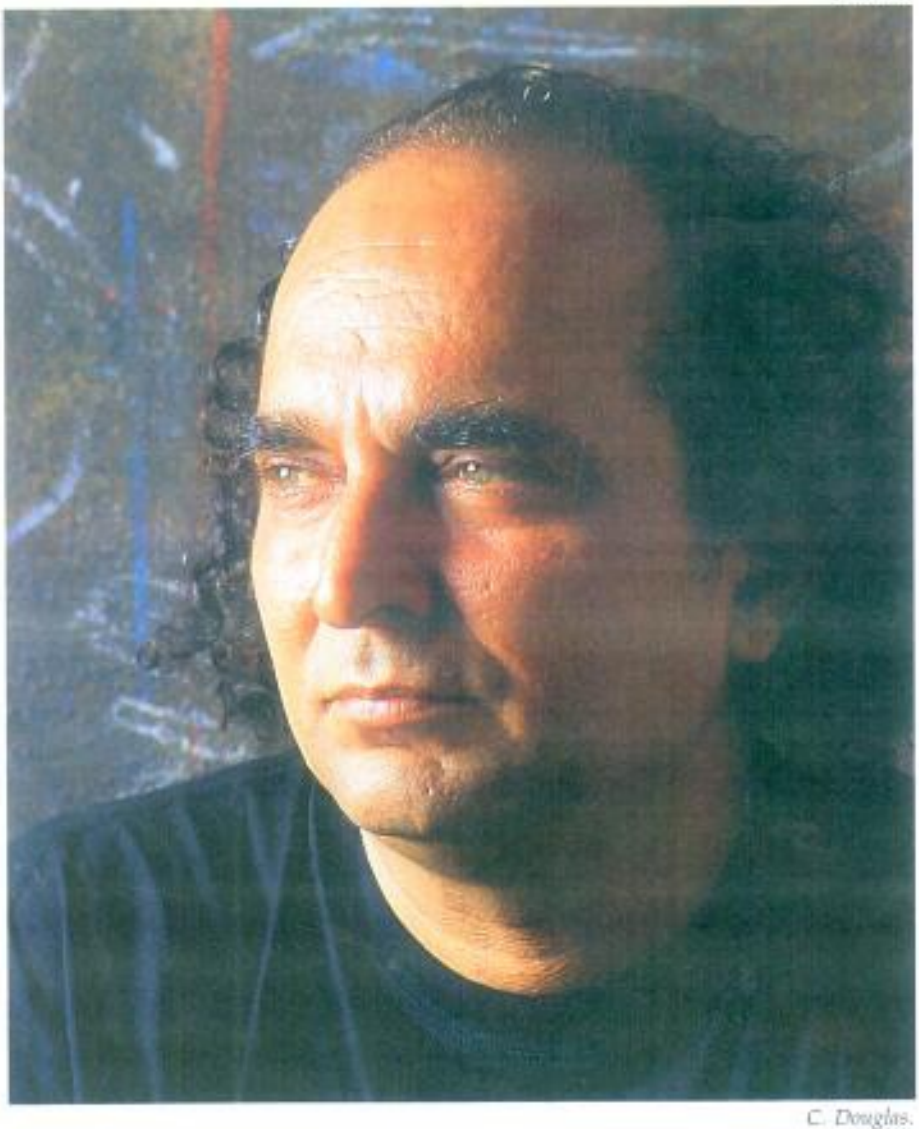
It's fanciful, no doubt, to think of Paniker now as a Prospero figure presiding over a rainbow coalition of artists, all seeking a new world through the practice of art. Certainly it was his unique brand of artistic experimentation that spurred the others on, as he tried to negotiate a path between the confines of tradition, which was particularly strong in the south and the heady excitement of modernism sweeping in from the west. Towards the end of his life, Paniker had tried out and rejected both the facile cubist impressionism, allied to an attempt to forge a national identity for an emerging secular democracy and the folksy revival of tribal, Tantric and other motifs.

One of the other members of this community was Ramanujam. He was an obsessive type of personality, who could barely communicate with others and eventually committed suicide, after poisoning the only creature close to him, his dog. In his paintings however, he inhabited a subterranean world of such imaginative invention that even today these strange, blotted-out lines filling out the serpentine landscape full of towers, passages and mythical creatures create a powerful impact. In the corner of each of his paintings, there is invariably a picture of the artist with his hat and dog, riding out to seek new adventures of an erotic kind.

Douglas was drawn to this archetypal outsider. As he describes it, his first impression of Ramanujam, sitting in isolation under a banyan tree at the College of Arts and painting was that of being in touch with a shamanic figure. Is this a romantic re-creation of events? Because in his lifetime, Ramanujam was certainly more ridiculed and ignored than admired. We shall probably never know. Douglas on his part had already

"We all discuss fragmentation. But what is fragmentation? Fragmentation is about mutilation. Mutilated body, mutilated language, mutilated imagination. It's about displacement in the context of your traditional culture".

S ANIVAR



C. Douglas.

In Circle. *Mixed media on paper. 1996. 180 cm x 120 cm.*

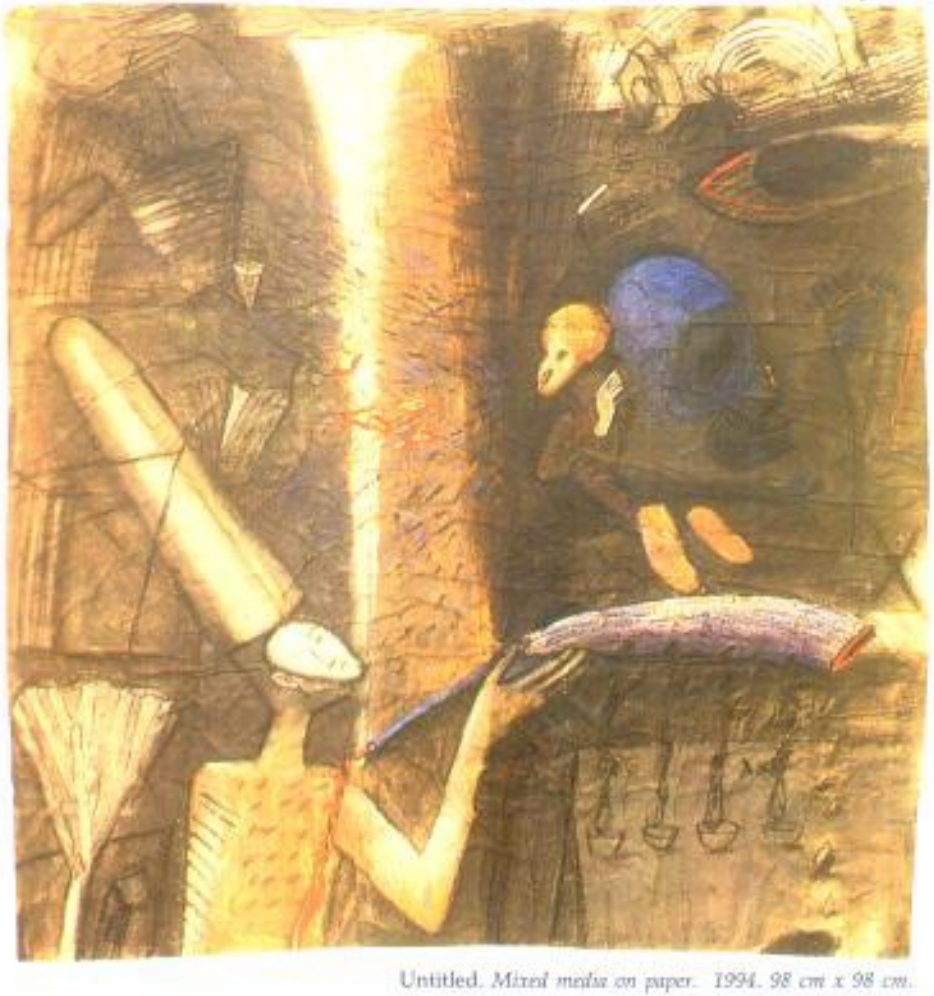
rejected the dialectical materialism of his peers in Marxist Kerala. In Ramanujam, he felt he recognised that state of pure empathy with the forces of the earth, the eternal female, the sub-conscious amniotic memory that carries with it the echoes of our oceanic beginnings, that was close to his own readings of his favourite poets.

It is not surprising, then, that the earlier works show Douglas preoccupied with ovoid forms and foetal shapes uncurling in a recurring dance of life. These soon gave way to highly patterned abstract forms that have a mathematical exactness. This period coincides with almost a decade spent in Germany. Douglas had married, fathered a son, experienced the freedom that his close readings of European authors had led him to believe as the ideal. In a drawing entitled *Poisonous Love* from 1986 he displays the furious energy, the intense scribbled lines, tea stained blotches and repetitive stabs of the ball point pen with which he marks the paper, that embodied for him the Dionysian frenzy of the spirit unbound. Even today, he claims that drawing is an act of mutilation, a kind of a penance that an artist performs to express his particular vision.

As against this, there were the carefully structured grid-like paintings. As a commentator wrote at that time, "Caught in the opposition, Douglas's paintings lost height and prepared for failure. The formalistic flat pattern was disrupted. They became less harmonious, less articulate, a cry, an animal, an echo, primitively human. He starts making textures, holes, mixes media, draws on torn papers, feeling unresolved by thought, starts to win over the structure. The approach is widely integrative", (Henry Schavoir from Lalit Kala Contemporary 35).

We must question that last sentence. The sojourn in the west had only underlined his feelings of displacement. It had, however, fed Douglas's need to steep himself in the ideas of all those writers and thinkers he had admired from his earliest days. "I'm glad that I spent my time in Germany and not in Paris. If I had gone to Paris my work would have taken a wholly different turn, become all surface colour and form. The French are a very rational people. The Germans are romantic, ecstatic, metaphysical. They believe in following their instinct". He quotes from Nietzsche and Hiedegger, Herman Hesse and Kafka and explains his admiration for neo-expressionism and the COBRA painters. There's no doubt, however, that he had to get back to Cholamandal.

The transition might have led him from one ghetto to another more familiar one. For without Paniker's leavening presence Cholamandal had become another closed society of artists closely defending their tiny hearths. To Douglas, however, the incestuousness of this situation appeared to steady his vision. The claustrophobic atmosphere became the landscape for some of his most liberating compositions as in the diptych painted in 1995-96. The closely patterned grids had been smashed open. The interior spaces shattered with a cataclysmic force that suggest both destruction and rebirth.

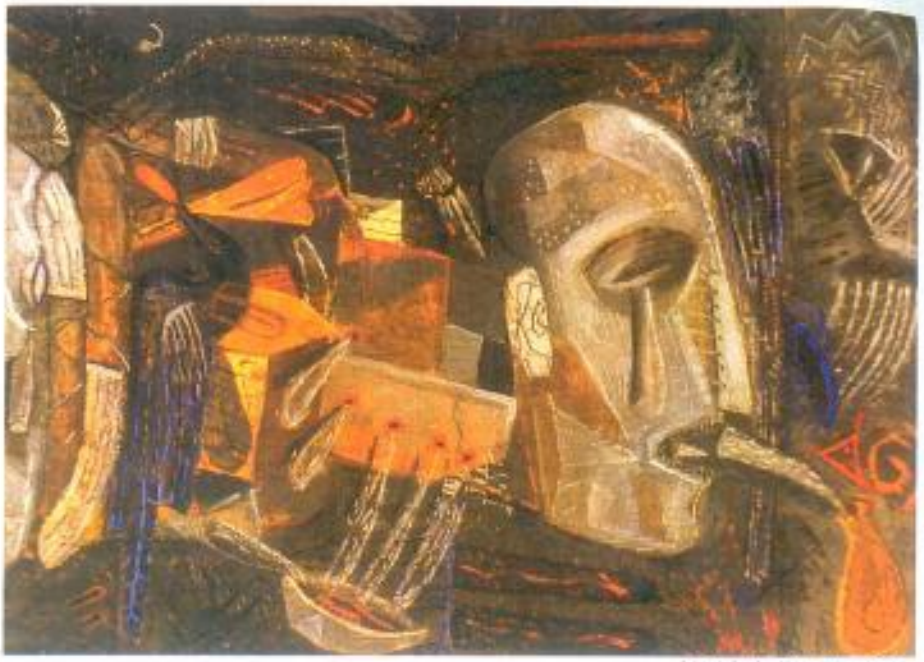


Untitled. *Mixed media on paper. 1994. 98 cm x 98 cm.*

Inside an embryo, two dogs are stuck together forever mating. The body is pierced through with nails, the arms mutilated. It is a world turned upside down, though there is some residual order still as a pendulum oscillating in the foreground suggests that there will be some return to the centre yet.

It's in the densely worked textures that the drama remains. The artist has sought every means possible to escape from a narrative structure that can be de-coded into one type of myth or another. He works on the surface of his paintings and yet tries to assure the viewer that it is anything but superficial. The scabs, the wounds, the gouging of the paper, the sutures that bandage a woman's partially mastectomied chest, while she measures her life on a string, are offered up for view with a detachment that never becomes voyeuristic. He tips the viewer into his deepest fantasies and asks for nothing in return but that he or she enters the world with a view to experience it.

"We all discuss fragmentation. But what is fragmentation? Fragmentation is about mutilation. Mutilated body, mutilated language, mutilated imagination. It's about displacement in the context of your traditional culture. That is what you learn in the west. When I lived in Germany they said – you don't understand our language. You can learn it, but you can't really understand it. You can't be authentic. There is something called Duchampian aesthetics, which you can never understand or experience...That is what the Anglo-American cultural history tells us. What we can do is reach our own centre. Because their centre is something that we cannot reach, because they tell us that you can't ever reach it, we're at the centre, you're at the margin, you've been marginalised. If we cannot reach the centre we have to create our own centre at the margin. We have to be proud of our loss, of our marginalisation. At the margin there is the mutilation that has happened, so when I work on paper it becomes the first body. The body is like this woman. She does not have a breast, the breast is stitched and we don't know what happened to her and we look at this woman, she looks like the mother of this child...It's about the artist and the language. This fragmented, mutilated body. The artist today is unable to be authentic. Roland Barthes once said photography is quotation which is what artists are doing today. Quotation. Fragmentation".



Untitled. *Portrait*. 1995.

At the beginning of our talk, Douglas spoke of his yearning to go back to the Koduvally bridge in the haunts of his youth and to stand there in the twilight, which he describes as the margin between the day and the night. "It's not just a sentimental longing to go back to what I call *sandhya*. *Sandhya* is a threshold. When you are standing at the margin, you are at the threshold of something new. You can internalise *sandhya* and make it a new experience. You can find your own centre there, in the margins".

An early abstract.

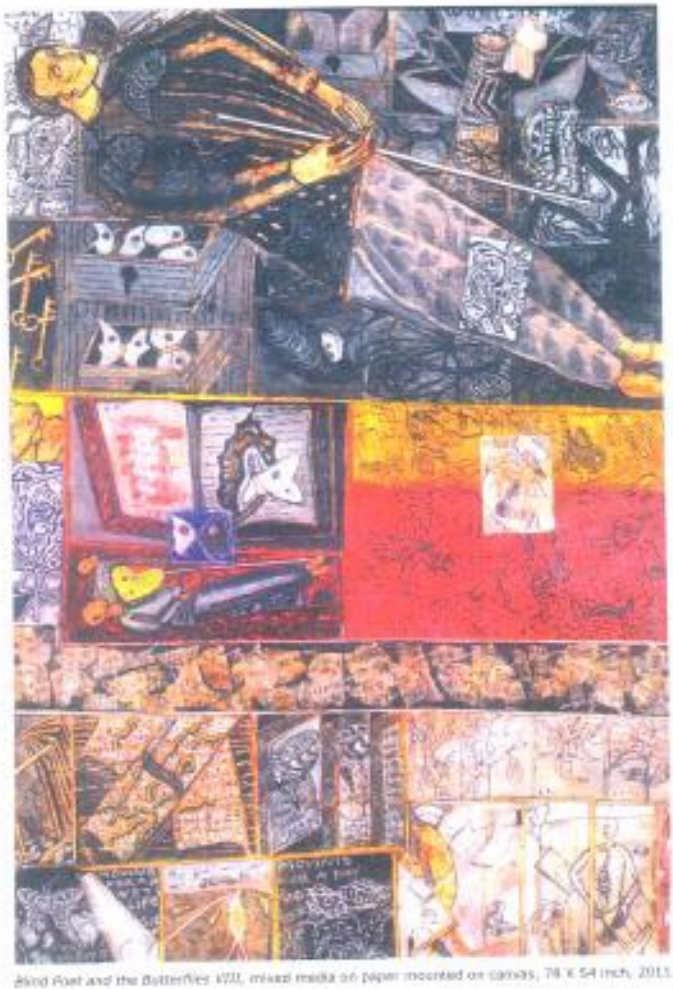
S ANWAR

C. Douglas with a group of young artists at Cholamandal.

The main exhibition area opens into a hall having two adjacent walls covered with wallpapers bearing images of the worn out walls of a dilapidated colonial building. The massive, denuded, ancient and yet sturdy walls with their verticality transform the gallery space into a primordial one. Found bricks, as old as three hundred years glued to the wall paper jut out of it, on which miniature furniture made of German silver – a chair, a table, a bookshelf and a wardrobe – are clinically arranged in groups. A pillar built with rubble filling up scaffold of iron rods stands before the covered walls. Caught between its past and the present, the city confronts its ruin. On another wall photographs bearing images of the same furniture that are placed inside the deeply weathered furrows of an old colonial structure metaphorically signifies the crammed life it has in apartments that spawn and sprawl around the post-colonial city in multitudes. A dead tree, that was uprooted by the personnel of the state's electricity board, with a dozen implements of all sort hanging down from its branches, stands in the middle of the gallery space. The bleak and eerie ambience speaks of a fast changing city where its colonial history fades out only to get replaced by the box-like apartments, and a world going gaga over its consumerist fetishes. Rathin reconstructs a third section of the gallery with cartons bearing popular brands and logos that stand out as signifiers to an entire sociology. Everything in this reconstructed room from ceiling to its walls, from the furniture to its floor brim with a dull pallid brown tint of the cartons, traversed by red logos of the manufacturers. The last section of the gallery comprises of several drawings produced from various mediums – fur, twine, ink, paper cut-outs reflecting upon their maker's caprices and a series of tools – sickle, pliers, pistol, knife – carved out from baked bricks. The artist is concerned with form and functionality; natural and manmade objects; the encroachment of man upon nature. Although the individual set of works (installations, drawings and sculptures) break up the exhibition space in a way that leaves the show somewhat incoherent, the artist's venturing into a wide range of materials proves his future moorings and endless possibilities of reconstructing time and space.

'And my Eyes Fill with Sand', Rathin Barman, 21 December, 2011 – 4 February, 2012, Experimenter, Kolkata.

Image courtesy: Experimenter



Blind Poet and the Butterflies VIII, mixed media on paper mounted on canvas, 78 X 54 inch, 2013.

12 / CHENNAI

Butterflies in a Hall of Mirrors

Vaishnavi Ramnathan

Art Chennai, which concluded on 18, March consisted of exhibitions, displays and public art initiatives across Chennai. Of these, one was an exhibition of mixed media paintings and installation by C. Douglas at Focus Gallery.

The 'Blind Poet and Butterflies' series marks a shift in C. Douglas's style, where he takes his work forward not by building upon the flat coloured, relatively sparse imagery of his previous 'Missed Call' series but by returning to a much earlier style of working that was densely painted and layered. This non-linear trajectory is reflective of his larger engagement with circularity and recurrence in his 'Blind Poet' series where the subject (poet) becomes the style (poetic) and vice versa. Metamorphosis and transformation are constant concerns in these works as C.Douglas makes repetitive use of images of butterflies, cocoons and caterpillars. The natural process of the butterfly's transformation also seems to be used by C. Douglas to refer to the inevitability of the poet transferring his own vision to the butterflies. On one hand, if the poet were not to recognise the vulnerability of the butterfly that needs to carry false eyes on its wings to deter predators and somehow try to help it by giving his own vision, then the poet would no longer remain a sensitive being capable of any artistic endeavour. On the other hand, since any creative act involves giving vision to an image, the butterflies endowed with the poet's vision are akin to the verse he creates. Therefore, one may say that within the world of the painting, the image of the butterfly represents the various other images evoked by the fragmented words written on the paintings. This shifting of familiar meanings results in the butterflies and the words floating unanchored on the surface; the crumpled surface and tears marking the uneasy relationship between the wor(l)ds within the painting and those outside. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the meaning making process is evident even in the dynamics between the poet and his art; the butterflies although being born from the poet, once created, no longer remain only in his sand crusted

Blind Poet and the Butterflies IV, mixed media on paper mounted on canvas, 53 X 41 inch, 2011.

and tactile world as they glow in shades of ultramarine and red ochre.

The positioning of butterflies in these works speaks of many things. For example, the butterflies hover not only on the surface but are also found fluttering inside drawers, as though the poet's restless secrets have finally found release before the gaze of the viewer. However the large rectangular works with grey coloured fractured spaces inside made the viewer feel that s/he was in a gallery of life-size mirrors, confronting one's own image in the figure of the blind poet. Since circularity is an underlying theme in these works, where one form also refers to another (a rectangular painting format referring to a circular one and words with different meanings being represented by the image of the butterfly), one figure (poet/artist) refers to another (viewer) and one painting contains within it other paintings (in terms of having multiple frames); the butterflies inside drawers seem to be not just a voyeuristic peep into the secret world of the blind poet but also a representation of one's own secrets. As the viewer stands in front of these paintings the mirrored surface captures the gaze of the viewer and it is the viewer's vision that seems to be given to the butterflies. If 'words needs words', similarly the blind poet needs the viewer to create poetry and the viewer needs the blind poet and his butterflies to give vision to his/her secret thoughts. In this sense, these paintings by seeming to focus on the absence of vision speak about the primacy of vision where the mere act of looking at these works makes each viewer the creator of an autobiographical work.

'Blind Poet and Butterflies,' C. Douglas, 11 March – 13 March, Focus Art Gallery, Chennai.

Image courtesy: Vaishnavi Ramanathan.

BIENNALE

"

Raqs Media Collective, 'On Curatorial Responsibility'

Responsibility, after all, is all about being 'answerable'. To be 'responsible' means, first and foremost, to answer, to respond, to be responsive. We could say that curatorial responsibility consists in taking the position of being a custodian of the ethical, authorial, pragmatic, and programmatic energies that act in concert to transform the occasion of a biennial into a process whereby (for the duration of the event) a space of creativity, display, and discourse is rendered public in a manner that articulates criticality, intelligence, pleasure, and an informed response to the matrix of social and political relationships that tie local contexts to global realities. … The question of how biennials could be responsibly curated in the future requires us to think a little bit about time, because any questions about the future are really enquiries about how we want something to continue, or about how prepared we are to ensure its continued existence. "

[in Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Øvstebø eds., *The Biennial Reader* (2010), pp. 285-287]

Certificate of Authentication
22nd October 2007

Artist: C Douglas
Title: Mirror Showing Nothing II
Medium: Acrylic on canvas
Size: 80" x 55"
Year: 2007

This is to certify that the above painting illustrated by C Douglas is an original work by the artist. I certify the same.

C Douglas
Artist