



Ceramic sculpture – work done at European Ceramic Centre, Holland.



C. Douglas – portrait.

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STANDING apart from the art scene and producing at his own pace, Cholamandal artist C. Douglas has nonetheless gained an audience for his singular oeuvre – his mixed media works on paper. His audience has increased space with his output, which is to say, slowly and at irregular intervals. He has earned the kind of fame that seems destined to make no waves: like the succinct, unforced grandeur of his paintings, it thrives on an air of privacy – forthright but silent as to its origins.

Douglas was born in Tellicherry in Kerala in 1951. He seems to have spent the early Seventies studying half-heartedly for traditional academic qualifications. He trained for a time in his home town in the art school of Balan Nair and eventually arrived at Madras in 1971 to study fine arts at the Madras College of Arts and Crafts. Within three years of his securing a diploma in painting, he left his homeland, choosing Germany as his destination, and though his decision was risky, it also opened up new vistas for him.

What was the German art scene at the time of Douglas' arrival at Munich? Not just the present but the whole of German art in this century arises from a complex potential of energy that exists between the poles of expressive figuration and analytical to contemplative abstraction – between biting realism and poetic idealism. Not only expressionism but also the Bauhaus, the smithy of International Modernism, was German. What of these was more in tune with the German Soul? The so-called "wild" painting also represented a remarkable potential within German art, reflecting a tendency to reject all trends and labels. This individualism was not a shell but a creative response to the experience of the ideological straitjacketing in the past and was intimately bound up with the creative dialogue between the intellectual and spiritual past (as in the works of Kiefer).

Douglas, whose initial approach to art was concrete, minimal and abstract – rather grammatical – came within the fold of German Expressionism and as he

an informal and lyrical structure. In the Seventies he had begun drawing with pen and ink and water colour. The surface was filled with a net of calligraphic lines and dots – dense and loose – and instead of breaking with the past, he exploited the calligraphic drawing without inhibition, making use of inventive figurative motifs. This was the beginning of his transition from an unconscious surface-working to a "certain clarity about self-referential work."

Soon he gave up canvas and oil and started working on paper with ballpoint pen and lead pencil. This helped him get away from the formal works – sometimes he tore the paper with the pencil with which he was drawing. He found that a line of lead pencil was different from a pen and ink line because the lead-pencil reflected. His works had by this time become fragmented and a new approach had been taking place considering the diverse characteristics of the material he was using. What was obvious was the deliberate unity achieved between material and image and all his symbols and techniques were driven to unravel the predicament of the modern man, his alienation with his own self, his roots and the cosmos. He was pursuing an art of continuous fragmentation and renewal that was as contemporary and familiar to him as his backyard and expressed the impartial wonder that things begin and end just where they are.

Inspected up close, the works had a compressed energy that held up clear and vibrant, across a room. The intensity was baffling, as if unintended, out of hand. Motifs of dwellings like caves, male bodies pierced by arrows, a murderous man floating above a nude sculptural woman whose femininity may have been violated, human beings striving for the freedom of flying birds, a female figure with a slashed breast – these are views that touched off an alarm: the world was at rest, everything fitted neatly with everything else – yet bristling with disturbance that seemed imminent at every carefully tended edge. There was something inclement beneath the imagery, a brux-ism out of key with the highly accomplished technique and an elegant mood that