

In the cavernous folds of disorder

The area of his canvas is a cauldron. An urgency to engage with the spectres of art that oppress and gift you as well, are the underpinnings of Cholamandal artist C. Douglas' works, on view in Mumbai recently, writes Roshan Jagatrai

face his research in incantatory drones. The seething amber, sienna and clay-red tones and repetition of pictorial devices are the constituents of this drone. Douglas has been refining it for many years in his career emerging with individual intonations in a method of image-making that is akin to stream of consciousness writing. Free association of event and experience and cinematic devices like the fade-out and dissolve are ways in which he manoeuvres the unities of time.

Douglas is Kerala born and has thrived at work because of a series of migrations — physical and metaphoric. It is not a unique kind of life because those who pursue art in this country, usually travel, work and learn at one or more of the four major centres of formal art education here. The exile metaphor is often deployed. It expresses the desire to belong, to move away and return — not only to a place but to a time — the present.

Douglas too has been through a pattern of home and away. After studying at the Government Arts and Crafts College, Madras, he journeyed to Munich in Germany and settled there for a decade during the '80s and early '90s. Back in India, he chose to recluse himself in Cholamandal Artist's village. He works from here and produces slowly. His last solo show in Bombay was five years ago.

His paintings, too, have halting and somnolent rhythms with mists, veils of vaporous substance and steam enshrouding his private odyssey into the unconscious. They may not have a grand manner of riling of art movements across the centuries but their choral and melancholic musicality demands to be heard. His works have things to say about art development.



He is prone to using mud, its sullen hue and dull opacity foisting an air of biblical antiquity or Buddhist monasticism. Douglas seems to be investigating a landscape of love, death and salvation

His sparring with Old Masters — Italian, French, German as well as his confreres who make art and sculpture in the climes of Chennai — generates a framework for surface and materials recalling every kind of art practice from Adyar to Munich. He is bothered about the status of internationalism and global art, but wilfully isolates himself in Cholamandal as though he is seeking purity and silence after his marking of a hermit's trail through art history and the present.

It has to be one hell in which he finds himself and operates from. A vague and quiet state of angst ex-

udes from the cloistered spaces he creates, with a hint of the receding perspectives. It is an indication that he likes to essay with illusion and space especially those of imprisonment. The vaulted monumental enclosure of a chaitya hall or an interior arched, nave of a church are also caught in the shadows of his mud smears. These suggestions in his work convert the anxiety-filled settings into humming, vibrating zones where salvation and a state of beatitude are promised.

The lanky figures, tomb effigies (when they are drawn horizontal) are devised from racial types that resemble African and Medi-

terranean peoples and the *bhikshu* iconography of Indian and Japanese Buddhist art. The blessed or the cursed man, drawing up the waters of life from a nether world, pouring it in an act of ritual cleansing is shown as the devotion of an alchemist churning the waters into fire.

Every painter stores a wish. An urgency to know and engage with the spectres of art that oppress and gift you as well, a state of bliss are the underpinnings of Douglas's modest looking oeuvre. Double meanings and ambiguity are creeping sensations manifested. It also makes for a seductive invitation to explore and traverse the body of the painting. He is resourceful in his ideas of staging a premonition even as he refers to the Mannerist and Baroque styles or a Zen pen and ink scroll. He haggles with the legacy of the Renaissance, with Cubism and German Expressionism. The area of his canvas is a cauldron, simmering with further gestures as that of the still and trembling Koodiyattam actor delineating the lustrous beauty of a beloved's eyes in mesmerising movements of palm and fingers.

The surface, mapped as it is by monks, insomniacs and holy vigilantes, conjures an emanating procession of homages: Matisse and circularity and the group form. A whispering tribute to Bosch is tucked behind a colour slab. The obeisance and questioning of Van Gogh and Munch are incessant occurrences. In an obsessive and sometimes out of proportion repetition of the oval form, Douglas resurrects Brancusi from the sepulchral mists of his paintings. The columnar thin frugality shaping the *bhikshu* type of human divides the space into a procession of vertical forms. There are no punctuations between

the facades with group figuration of French Cathedrals and Benode Bihari Mukherjee's fresco "The Medieval Hindu Saints".

The slender welded copper sculpture of his contemporary, Paramasivam at Cholamandal sneaks its shadow into Douglas' craft. And K.C.S. Pannicker's words and symbols are fused into the calligraphy which Douglas seems to inscribe into the lava-like core of the image. A beast or bird brass sculpture by S. Nandgopal or P.S. Nandhan may also play fugitive in these mind-scapes — handiwork of a painter, seeking the three-dimensional satisfaction of the object-making artisan.

Tranquillity perhaps, amongst many other things, is utopia. Douglas may be pontificating thus, inhibited and restrained as his work is, seeming to falter in the bland spaces. The schema of the surface is disorder. He plunges into it and lets through the experience that he is lost in the cavernous folds of a quilt — a childhood nightmare. He proportions it with inventiveness with his earth materials. Along with mud he has used

watercolour, conte pencils and charcoal. In his earlier works he had sprinkled layers of sand — similarly toying with the idea that he has to rid himself of the ghost of the decorative and decadent flat surface, and approximate the textures of bas-relief or the look of a wall, or mural, extract a feeling of sculpture and gargoyle and yet hang onto the exquisite heritage of early painting.

It is this two-fold awareness in his work — an ever encroaching chaos which is also a fertile potential he is moving before our eyes — that imbues his work with a nimbus. We are not subjected to the pictorial ammunition of an artist but rather, induced into looking at the colours of premonition, at his lurking and signifying agents, such as all the classical and contemporary mentors. His paintings do pull us up short into a kind of reactive self-awareness. You can take in Douglas' oeuvre best by persuading yourself that you are not being compelled into the private hell of a painter but are being restored to the sanctuaries of tradition and history. ■

