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The art route

SARASWATHY NAGARAJAN



The Hindu Rajan Krishnan. Photo: Special Arrangement

Rajan Krishnan's art draws inspiration from the past and the present. He outlines his idea of art, and also traces his passage to fame and recognition, as Saraswathy Nagarajan listens

For his solo exhibition 'Ancestry,' which opens at Aicon Gallery in New York on June 2, artist Rajan M. Krishnan has returned to his village by the river to take us on an evocative voyage through the banks of the Nila. He has attempted to capture the ebb and flow of memory and reality in 16 paintings in acrylics that depicts people, objects, flora, and fauna of a land nurtured by a river. Like a photographer, he has zoomed in on the various animate and inanimate objects that characterise life on a river bank in Kerala.

"I have always been fascinated by memory and actuality. Ancestry is a continuation of two of my projects – 'Enroute' (2006) and 'Memoir' (2007). Every day, we add and subtract from our memory. What we think is alive and real in our memory is shaped by events and people; it might differ vastly from the 'seen reality' around us," explains Rajan.

It has been a long and eventful road to fame for this artist who hails from Cheruthuruthy, near Shoranur in Thrissur district. As a teenager, his first brush with art was as a self-taught graphic artist when Mohanan, a friend of his, sought his help to design some pages of a magazine. "Prior to that my idea of an artist was a person who painted signs and posters for political parties," laughs Rajan. His work for Kerala Book Centre took him to Shanker Type Foundry in Shoranur where he learnt to design fonts. It opened the door to a new understanding of art and its myriad applications in daily life. He polished his innate skill in drawing and colours during his student days at NSS College, Ottapalam. As an active member of the student wing of a political organisation, he was much in demand to paint and design posters and banners.

"Srirama Menon, the then Principal of the college, encouraged me in my artistic endeavour. It was an exhilarating experience when I began painting using watercolours and oils," remembers Rajan. Unni Menon, one of the judges of an art competition, gave Rajan a set of books that transported the youngster to the land of Goya, Van Gogh, Rembrandt and other European masters. "That was when I knew art was my destiny," adds the artist.

Hub of cultural activities

After sweeping the prizes at almost all inter-collegiate competitions, the young graduate in Economics moved to Thiruvananthapuram to enroll at the Government College of Fine Arts. "The capital city is a centre of year-long cultural

activities and the four years there exposed me to the best the city had to offer in terms of music, cinema, literature and theatre. I also gained a close circle of friends, many of whom are leading contemporary artists of India," says Rajan. Later, he moved to Vadodara for his post-graduation.

Unlike several artists from the State who are based outside Kerala, Rajan, along with some of his contemporaries such as Zakir Hussain chose to return to their home ground. Possibilities of displacement, financial problems, struggle and lack of patronage and support did not prevent Rajan from taking the path less taken.

"It was a challenge and I was not perturbed by the lack of support, financial or physical. I did not perceive those hard times as a sacrifice either. Money was a problem but I was confident that financial success would follow," says Rajan with a beatific smile.

But paint and canvas were and are expensive and so Rajan was keen on addressing those issues. "I like to work on large-scale paintings. An artist is like a magician. He can create art from nothing. I used charcoal and hand-made paper, some of the cheapest material available to an artist, and put together an exhibition at Kashi Art Gallery in Kochi in 2004," says Rajan, who had by then moved to Kochi (in 2000).

His first solo called 'Little Black Drawings' gave him the much-needed boost to his career and Rajan became a name to reckon with on the international art circuit. However, Rajan put away his brush and did not take it up till 2005 when he resumed painting. "Our climate is not suitable for oils. In fact, one of my works in oils that won an Akademi award got spoilt. So I wanted to wait and experiment with acrylics, a new medium for me, till I felt comfortable and confident about using it," explains Rajan.

His first acrylics were exhibited at 'Double Enders,' an exhibition curated by Bose Krishnamachari. And memorable shows? "Many. But perhaps one of the most memorable was when Charles Saatchi bought a major work of mine 'Substances of Earth,' which was exhibited as part of the 'The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today,' a show from India that was presented by Charles Saatchi in his newly built museum in London. Another one was 'The Silk Road,' in France which exhibited works of 30 artists from Asia. I was one of the artists in that select group."

Time may have added more than a dash of grey to his frizzy crowning glory but fame and commercial success have not affected the soft-spoken, down-to-earth man who still dreams of nurturing a visual culture and a young generation of artists in his home State.

Creative spaces

Walden, Rajan's serene studio-cum-residency at Irinjalakuda, embodies his vision. A 100-year-old pond is the centre of attraction of this quiet landscape that Rajan has envisaged to encourage artists in Kerala. He says he had dreamt of such a space right from his days in Thiruvananthapuram when he had stayed with a group of masons. "They would leave for work and that is when I would paint. It was not a sacrifice. I enjoyed every minute of my one-year stay in that little house. I decided that when I earned sufficient money, I would develop a space for artists to work," says Rajan. Walden is open to all artists who want a space of their own to court the muse.

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