

Mythologies: Recent works by K G Subramanyan

Born in Kerala in the early 20s and educated at the Presidency Collage, Madras and at Satiniketan in the 40s K.G. Subramanyan is an artist whose perspectives on art and life carry resonances of an early engagement with the nationalist movement in which Gandhi and Tagore loomed large. As a teacher and perceptive thinker closely associated with the art collages at Baroda and Santiniketan, and as a designer-consultant associated with the Handloom Board and the World Craft Council he has had a seminal influence on the art and design practice of the last fifty years.

Equally exemplary and versatile are his achievements as an artist. Subramanyan's versatility comes partly from the diverse materials he works with as a painter, muralist, printmaker, sculptor, and designer; and partly from the flexibility and layered richness of his visual language. The latter allows him to move from one level of communication or expression to another with great ease and without compromising on his individuality. The ease with which he does this today – be it an illuminated book or a mural that wraps a whole building – is the outcome of long years of enquiry into the syntactic structures of representational conventions and is truly phenomenal.

An artist known for making materials and processes speak, he is also acknowledged today as an artist with an incisive insight into the human world with its winning sensuality and unsettling complexity. Subramanyan does this by using the many registers of language to slide from high seriousness to irony, celebration to subversion, descriptive rendering to lyrical evocation, fact to metaphor, and from the real to surreal with the ingenuity of a consummate craftsman and the alertness of a nimble thinker.

These qualities that mark him out as an artist also inform his recent work on view at Galerie 88. Presented under the rubric of 'Mythologies', this suit of twenty-four paintings offer a sly and playful view of the world around. Not as it would be captured in documentary photographs of a sociologist but as it is reflected and refashioned in the artist's mind who looks at the world through the transformative filters of avatars. The play of metaphorical readings that he introduces into the imagery is complemented by his handling the materials and the process of making. Done on specially made handmade paper he does not cover its surface with pigment but uses it along with pigments and lightly handled brush work to produce an open ended interweave of marks, forms and space. By not covering up the process of making but leaving it open he compels the viewers to become complicit partners in his playful and open-ended readings of the world.

Occasionally he squints at the world grimly but more often he smiles at it with amused pleasure. He is a thoughtful viewer for whom the future is not all doom and the past is not entirely barren. And the world is not a place he where he merely lives in but he wants to build. The assuredness, the energy, the engagement and the innovative playfulness his works display affirm that at 90 Subramanyan is wisely informed and reflexive but not closed to seeing the world anew and thinking afresh. This makes this doyen of Indian art also one of its most vigorous and vibrant practitioners.

Galerie 88 is happy and privileged to present his recent works to mark the 25th anniversary of its presence in Kolkata. The exhibition is on from the 15th of Dec. 2013 till the 31st of Jan 2014.