

Yusuf Arakkal

Artist Interview

Could you elaborate on your experiences at the beginning of your career as an artist?

It was since high school that I developed an interest in painting. In fact I got a number of prizes for inter-state competitions. But my family was not supportive of my interest in art and did not encourage me towards this field. They wanted me to be lawyer or take up some 'professional' degree, so it was difficult. Finally I ran away from my home in Kerala and came to Bangalore. In Bangalore, it was a struggle; I was on the streets for over a year and a half. I tried to make ends meet by working in hotels and construction sites. I then met Sarah's (his wife's) father, who happened to be a distant relative of mine. He helped me. Yet with the urge to survive on my own, I took up a job in Hindustan Aeronautics as a training apprenticeship. Through all this I continued my painting. Around 1965, I met an artist Jay Verma, a relative of Ravi Varma who was an academic portrait painter. He was the one who gave me the basic education in art. By '68, I started showing my works, doing all kinds of things with no particular direction. It was then that I felt the need of an academic qualification. I did a course in Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore, which was at that time a small affair. After completing my education, I was ready to explore new possibilities in painting. It was after my education in Chitrakala Parishath that I wanted to venture into the art world as 'Yusuf Arakkal'. It was by this instinct that I destroyed all my previous works, which I did in my student life or just gave them away. In 1974, I had my first one-man show at the Alliance Francaise, Bangalore. The exhibition was a success. I sold all my works.

Your works, previous or recent, appear to be on the periphery between figurative and abstract. Is this a deliberate effort?

I have done a lot of research into abstraction. I consciously attempt to make a synthesis between the figurative and abstract form. Earlier, my figures were jarring in an abstract background, but as I developed my art, the figures appeared to 'fuse' into the background. In the 70's when most artists in the South were doing abstraction, I was propelled to do figurative works, recollecting my struggle, capturing images from my somber past. The critics in Chennai really chewed me up, calling me 'a progressive who didn't care'.

How did Egypt inspire you to work with wood and copper? (Works from an exhibition in 2000)

I am an addictive traveler. I love past civilizations and react to new situations. After a detailed tour down the River Nile in Egypt, I came back with a vast knowledge of their glorious history and achievements, and felt that we are paupers in comparison. I eventually started working in copper and wood, which was frequently used in Egypt. (Actually they didn't work in copper, but gold! I used copper as a substitute) In fact, I exhibited one of my works in an installation show in Egypt, which consists of 4 wooden constructions and two copper sculptures with the sand from pyramid at Giza.

To understand your work better: the monochromatic use of color, the vastness shown within the restricted space of the canvas and the frequent use of black, is this a natural evolution or a deliberate attempt?

I don't know. The Wheel Series that I did in the 70's is all in white. It depends on the subject matter. For me black is the strongest color. I have studied the works of Rembrandt and Vermeer. And I am greatly fascinated by the use of light in their works, especially Rembrandt. He influences me, and why not, he is, after all, a great master. A critic had once commented that my work had a 'glowing darkness'. And that is exactly what I want to achieve.

You have exhibited your work all over the world. Could you comment on the different reactions and responses you achieved?

In most of the art shows that I have participated in, I have unfortunately not been present. But wherever I have had the chance to be present, I have been enthusiastic to hear comments. In 1987, at the ninth International Biennale in Brazil, in which I was appointed Commissioner of the Biennale, I remember the positive response I got: there were many Latin American visitors; one of the comments in the book said that the 'work was very strong'. It was very encouraging. For my work, in the '86 Biennale, I got an award. It was unbelievable. In '93 when I had a one-man show in France, I sold all my works; it was very well received.

Is there any particular remark that you remember?

During the last New York show in '97, I did the 'Ganga Series'. It was a large show. I remember at that time, a critic of the New York Times, Robert Hutchinson commented - 'what I liked is the people you have painted with the presence of the river'. And that is exactly what I wanted to hear.

Your recent works, the ones you are going to exhibit in December, show your interest in the great masters. Are they a direct adaptation from their imagery? What inspired or initiated you to take from Western Art?

I first got the idea for this new show in 1992 when I was in Paris, working on my 'Kite Series'. I got a call from a friend in Germany, who asked me to work in the Museum of artist Kathe Kollwitz, in Berlin, an artist I greatly admired in my younger student days. I feel she is the best woman artist of the 20th century. I was very happy to get this opportunity. I started doing 2 drawings in graphite based on her works, working continuously in the museum from early morning to the end of the day, for three weeks. When I came back to India, I did twelve paintings based on twelve drawings. But I didn't start the series immediately. Recently, I participated in a group show in the Art Today Gallery in Delhi, and did two paintings based on these drawings. I have taken images from Van Gogh's chair, from Modigliani's nudes and Picasso's work. I have attempted to get the essence of their work and not their technique, as I want to assert my artistic independence. These works have come out well and have given me an insight into their works. Studying these works is a great art education for me. It is unbelievably complicated, but thankfully I have got the required precision.