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ART

EMAMI ART IS CELEBRATING THE BIRTH CENTENARY OF KG SUBRAMANYAN WITH A SPECIALLY CURATED EXHIBITION. RICHA AGARWAL PENS HER THOUGHTS BEHIND THE SHOW



KG Subramanyan's artworks



KG Subramanyan is regarded as one of the most significant and original artists in India, whose birth centenary we are celebrating at Emami Art in April through the opening of a major exhibition of his works, curated by Nancy Adajania, and a series of associated events. Born in 1924 in Kerala, Subramanyan had a unique vision shaped by his extraordinary eclectic reception of global modernist trends and our rich cultural antecedents — from classical to popular and rural art and craft traditions of India. Over his seven-decade-long career, he created a vast and vibrant oeuvre, studying lines, forms and colours with alert and open eyes and their subtle connections to various cultural sensibilities, transforming some of modern art's critical concepts and conventions.

Widely admired by generations of artists, art historians, cultural thinkers and writers, Subramanyan studied at Santiniketan in the 1940s and throughout his life, he believed that his creative life was like walking in the footprints of his famous teachers Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij. Many look at him as the foremost exponent of the Santiniketan School, who, through his artistic creations, teaching, writings, and translation works, established in a new light the relevance of Santiniketan School and Rabindranath Tagore's thoughts and ideas behind it in our times. Although he hailed from Kerala and spent most of his professional life teaching at MS University, Baroda, we

always recognise him as Bengal's own artist due to his passion and massive contribution to Bengal art. Much has been written on KG Subramanyan, and his work has also been widely shown in numerous exhibitions, including retrospectives. However, 'One Hundred Years & Counting: Rescripting KG Subramanyan' is by no means merely another solo show of the artist. The research-based survey exhibition, which brings together over 200 of the most important artworks from his long and intensely productive career, sheds new light on the great diversity of his art,



Richa Agarwal

working methods and ideological frameworks. In addition to showcasing the famous drawings and paintings including the so-called 'reverse paintings' for which he is better known, the exhibition provides a rare chance to see some essential archival materials, preparatory designs, layouts for his children's books and wooden toys, which he made for the institutional art fairs in Baroda. Here, Subramanyan emerges truly as a versatile artist — a great painter, designer, writer, illustrator, muralist, poet, and innovative craftsman.

In this, we can see Nandalal's pedagogical influence on him, which values resourcefulness over professionalism. One of the most significant curatorial aspects of the show is that it invites us not to look at and enjoy the artist's works but to see them in connection with the other artist's works. The artworks by Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore and Benode Behari Mukherjee, in photograph and original, as well as an excerpt from Ritwik Ghatak's film, that crop up here and there in the exhibition, produce a new space for critical understanding and appreciation, placing Subramanyan in a specific context of cultural memory, history and practices. So, the exhibition, while celebrating the genius of the modernist master, is also an invitation for us to think, bringing to the fore some essential yet under-represented aspects of his work.

Since its inception in 2018, Emami Art has been committed to bringing the best of South Asian art to the city. Parallel to the exhibitions of established contemporary artists and young talents, we have held several

large-scale projects on historically significant artists, such as Kartick Chandra Pyne (1931-2017) and Lalit Mohan Sen (1898-1954). These projects, which involve original research, intensive documentation and mindful curation, have immense learning value, allowing us to reassess their lifework in broader historical and artistic contexts. Indeed, like the artists I have mentioned above, Subramanyan is also a historically significant artist, but unlike them, his life and work have been widely known and talked about. Therefore, the nature and orientation of this exhibition are slightly different; it is concerned not so much with representing his entire oeuvre systematically and chronologically but with understanding their relevance in contemporary discourses. The one hundred years is not just a measure of time but a perspective, a lens through which we can see the great artist not as an individual talent but as a connected personality.

I have never had the chance to meet KG Subramanyan, a remarkable conversationist known

for his extraordinary erudition and wits. However, I am very fond of his drawings and paintings, and I bought his work for the first time around 2008. I am fascinated by his use of vibrant colours and effortless, playful execution style, which remind me of both Matisse and our country's rich miniature paintings and folk art traditions.

Colour is a constituent rather than an ancillary part of his work, giving it a mood of celebration and enigma. The art historians have extensively discussed the use of colours in Subramanyan's paintings, and I am no expert on adding anything new to them. I want to share his beautiful remark, which many of you are familiar with, which was published in his exhibition catalogue.

In answering why colour gradually became central to his later paintings, he replied: "I suppose as you grow older, your appetite for colour increases. I recall an incident in Dostoyevsky's novel where an ailing priest says that his vision of the world is so heightened as to seem to be made out of gems and precious stones."

How he relates the colour to old age is fascinating. While admiring his use of colours, I must also say that Subramanyan's use of black and white was equally remarkable. The preparatory designs or layouts he made for his famous work 'War of the Relics' are a suitable case in point. His most well-known black and white work is undoubtedly the large two-story painted mural at the university campus of Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan, which he did in his mid-eighties. The masterpiece epitomizes not only his great artistry but also his lifelong dedication to art.

We feel proud and privileged to host a solo show of such a great artist at our gallery in Calcutta. An earnest tribute to him, this exhibition has a long gestation period, and we received help and cooperation from many institutions and individuals. Particular thanks are owed to Naveen Kishore of Seagull, who knew Subramanyan closely and published most of his books. We are deeply grateful to him for his generous help and advice. We also thank the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, Baroda, for allowing us to show Subramanyan's toys from its collection. These rarely-shown small sculptures showing his deep interest in handicrafts are the show's added attraction.

Rabindra Bharati Museum, Asia Art Archive and Mrinalini Mukherjee Foundation cooperated with us, sharing rare archival photographs for the show. Much of the exhibition represents the fruits of our curator, Nancy Adajania's intensive research, curatorial planning, and dedication to the project. The exhibition would not be what it is without the collective endeavour.

I believe the exhibition will enchant artists, art lovers, students and critics, opening up a new way to interpret his legacy. The centenary marks no end but a new beginning to rediscover the great artist in newer ways. Our exhibition is a small step towards it.

Richa Agarwal is the CEO of Emami Art. The exhibition previews today and will continue till June 21