

# At home in the world

Kerala-based artist Ratheesh T.'s new work explores matters of the moment in his richly toned portraits and landscapes, says **Tejal Pandey**

There is something to be said about autobiographical works. A self-reflection, it's the slight sliver of an opening where artists let their audience in on otherwise closely guarded inner worlds. For Trivandrum artist Ratheesh T., whose work has been largely concerned with the mutative relation between man and his environment, both inner and outer, a shift has been made. In his third solo show, *Recent Paintings by Ratheesh T.*, the artist turns the lens directly on himself. This is done without the intricate complexity of his earlier works.

Where before one was sucked into his maze-like, polychromatic imagery – magnifying glass in tow, now one stands back. Away but not aloof. The artist's canvas, still overwhelming in size and detail, has simplified in its content to a great degree and yet demands a gaze just as invested.

## Evolving vision

The show commences with a fearlessly nude self-portrait where the artist not only rids himself bare of his own clothes, but going by the pile of branded, western attire lying around, also perhaps of a certain identity. In this shunning of the modern, there is a celebration of the native, the traditional. One has to look at the work on the wall across as proof, where the artist adorns a *mundu*, a *lungi* wrap typical to Kerala.

It also reflects in his persistent use of earthy, rich colour. But who is the artist? Is he an outsider trying to be an insider? Is he caught between the two worlds of old and new? On the brink of a new evolved metrosexuality. Is he the local being mocked by the locals? Or is he the observer, the layman, trying to make sense of the changing landscape that he



**Invested gaze:** (Top) 'Kiss Clear Pond', 2016, oil on canvas; (below) 'Saami', oil on canvas. ■ COURTESY RATHEESH T. AND GALERIE MIRCHANDANI + STEINRUCKE

finds himself in?

"My earlier works had butterflies, animals, birds and trees. I was younger then, and filled with unrealistic expectations of the world. These images were a metaphor for my desires and beliefs then. The years have exposed the futility of those expectations and today, my works are about the reality that I see", shares Ratheesh. His work on one level is reminiscent of artist Sudhir Patwardhan's introspective tableaux, where the artist is omnipresent, if not overtly then as the silent onlooker. In Ratheesh's case, the populated Patwardhan cityscape turns to a quieter country setting, which is so-

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Artist

metimes as layered and brimming with activity ('Allotted Land'), and other times equally removed and mysterious ('Mysore Road'). What's most refreshing is the vulnerability of a man, in sync with contemporary life, that Ratheesh does not shy away from exploring. The delicate self-portraits of the artist kissing his daughter, looking over his wife's shoulder at the wild boar caught in the torchlight or managing a laugh as Sami threatens to light his beard are fine examples of this.

## Symbols of beauty

With Ratheesh, the personal feels political. There is no delineation of space that he binds himself by. The home, the kitchen, the backyard is as much his as is the street, the forest and the outdoors. In a realistic turn of perspective, the subjects are surely no longer exhaling butterflies (another symbol of change) and perhaps the stumps of cut trees have been cleared to make place for new settlements. The artist, quite like the skeleton in 'Maranan', or like all of the people in 'Allotted Land', is letting life take its own course. "My quest for clarity in vision has been my only constant source of inspiration. Through every new work, I seek truth and clarity," says Ratheesh. In the meanwhile, one is left to revel in moments of everyday beauty, like the clumps of jasmine floating on the placid face of a clear pond near the artist's home.

Ratheesh T. *Recent Paintings* is ongoing at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinrucke until November 20