

Sosa Joseph: Flow of Consciousness



Taking it back to the Pamba River and to sights and sounds that she grew up with, Kerala-based artist Sosa Joseph's latest works are a refreshing take on the 'purpose' of life.



Sosa Joseph, A Viper in the Sugar Cane Field, 2021, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

Many years ago, when a big group of young curators visited Sosa Joseph's studio in Kerala, we were all struck by the complete lack of any pretension or 'arrangement' in her workspace. There was something deeply organic in the way the paintings 'manifested' in their space, almost like they grew out of the walls and the furniture. This organic connection with her work and the complete interiority that Joseph displays in her process, still appears to be in evidence in her solo show, 'Where Do We Come From?' at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke. The artist's paintings seem to take over the wall space at the gallery.



Sosa Joseph, Gift From the River II, 2021, oil on canvas, 42 x 96 inches.

A Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda post-graduate, Joseph's work has been cited as 'faux naïve', because even though she does have naïve elements in her paintings, especially in the manner in which she renders the forms, there is something extremely mature and worldly about her expressions and concerns, especially in the way she deals with the female experience. The large canvases are filled with the local village folk who appear to be crowding her mental space and finding expression here in the ambience of the quiet gallery in Mumbai. Joseph shares that she finds crowds interesting and challenging to paint because even though people throng together, they continue to remain distinct.

There is a certain 'deadpan summation' of elements in the painting as if it were potentially a micro-vignette in a larger scheme, where these micro-episodes accentuate the slightly edgy, almost astringent wit underlying her vision of the 'sheer randomness' of the quotidian drift, the 'purposiveness without purpose' of the figures that people these paintings.

Joseph's works never reveal all and she as a painter, shares even less of the process of her paintings, or the reason behind why she chose a particular subject. "A certain level of reticence, (sic: about one's work) is good, isn't it? I must not bias viewers or introduce barriers to viewing. I also don't want to restrict free interpretations of my work by talking much about them," says Joseph, in a conversation with John Mathew. An artist who encourages the works to speak for themselves, she also believes that a work of art is 'just there', it need not be defended or explained.



Sosa Joseph, Duck Farmers, 2019-21, oil on canvas, 108 x 118 inches.

“I paint because I enjoy painting, and I choose something to paint because I am interested in it. It’s as simple,” says the artist adding, “My only concerns, quests, and considerations are formal and aesthetic; what is more important to me than what I paint is how I paint it. I hardly ever set out to paint with a ‘concept’, or ‘theme’ in mind, or to ‘say something’ or ‘make a point’. Themes manifest; they present themselves based on who I am, what my worldview is, or what moves me. It’s not a conscious choice I make for each canvas. Art, at least for me, is not driven by an agenda,” she says.

Joseph is clearly trying to make sense of the world around her, of understanding the unfamiliar by contextualizing it against what she knows, of contemplating the idea of where we come from and where we belong. It is all cushioned by the intentional solitariness of women that lies under the creative energy of women painters like Amrita Sher-Gil, Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh and Nalini Malani, to name only the Indian painters — all women, unsurprisingly — who are Joseph’s precursors in this vein. The body of work largely draws upon the river. “...The people whose lives it flowed through. I mean River Pamba. That’s the leitmotif, if I may say so. I was born and raised on the bank of this river. From our house, I could see and hear the river,” says the artist. Her evocations of the river are both actual and metaphoric, rich in its room for interpretation and readings besides its lush greenness and vast natural power. She even thought of the river as a representative for all water bodies around her.



Sosa Joseph, The Ferryman and his Jaundiced Child, 2019, Oil on canvas, 107.2 x 57.8 inches.

“When I was a child, about six years old maybe, I would wake up from a nightmare during the siesta, and cry out loud, almost every day. And then, I would go out into the yard in front of the house, sobbing all the way, and watch the river and the woods beyond. I used to think the opposite bank of the river is where the world ended!” It is perhaps that childhood wonder and sense of intrigue that she tries to capture.

It has taken her about three years (some works go back to having begun in 2017-2018) for her to produce the show her last solo of a large body of work that was in Sydney in 2018. We can also expect to see a large work at the India Art Fair, this April-May 2022. Her solo goes on till March 05 2022.

Cover image: John Mathew

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