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Untitled, 2005, Charcoal And Tea Wash On Paper, 104 X 245 Cm

Walking Through the Expanded Miniatures

JohnnyML recounts the formative years of Aji VN and locates his current art practice amongst the works and deeds done during his five years stint at the Fine Arts College, Trivandrum.

Aji VN's latest solo show at the Mirchandani+ Steinruecke Gallery, Mumbai brings back a lot of sepia toned and black and white memories. Here is an artist who has shifted his original location and found a home in foreign lands. However, it does not seem that the change in the locale has shifted the context of his art production. Aji places/produces his works in the context of a rigorous journey, a journey undertaken for the pleasure of it.

During the late eighties Aji, as a student of Trivandrum Fine Arts College, was inspired by three things; love, music and the life lived by an artist as seen in Irwin Stone's biographical fiction on Van Gogh, 'Lust for Life'. There was another bible; Letters to Theo, a collection of letters written by Van Gogh to his brother Theo. He wandered through the narrow streets of Trivandrum, singing 'So ja raja kumari so ja' (a love ridden lullaby sung by K.L.Saigal) and 'mein to tumaro na' by Bhimsen Joshi. He was always looking for something, which was ungraspable and this search induced him with a sense of melancholy. His landscapes became worth memorable as they were tinged with this sense of melancholy. He saved his life by flying on the wings of fancy.

I clearly remember a portrait done by Aji sometime in 1988. It was the portrait of a young girl, who used to come as a live model in the painting department. She was beautiful. The perennial melancholy of the administrative city of Trivandrum was etched in her face. She was a destitute and was forced to work as a hooker. A model during day time and a hooker by night. Aji was pained to see this. He made a beautiful portrait of this girl. On the day that he finished that portrait, in the Golden Hill Palace lawns, sitting against golden rays of the setting sun Aji told me, "I finished her portrait." It almost sounded like, "I had her". Such a passion was in his voice. Then he sang his favorite song, 'So ja raja kumari so ja'.

The portrait of this girl, though it was done during his graduate studies and was over- burdened by the post-impressionist brush strokes, had some kind of attraction, an attraction that defined Aji's lust for life. The girl was portrayed against a blue sky, lit up by a few psychedelic stars, a la Vincent Van Gogh's 'Starry Night.' In several ways, this work is pivotal in Aji's creative life. Perhaps, he did not paint that girl again. Later he did not

bother about her life either. But that portrait was a landscape in the form of a girl, an essence of his mental journeys. The contours contained a land, where Aji wanted to escape.

Italian Trans Avant Garde art took artists by storm in early nineties and Aji was one of those youngsters who got caught by its force. He went on working a landscape superimposed by his self portrait. He became the girl whom he painted once. The starry night gave way to vast stretches of receding lands where drops of fire sprouted like weeds. The burning embers did not look like ritual lights. They looked more like doors of final deliverance; the burning of knowledge.

Aji's forte was oil on canvas. His sojourns in many places made him to find a new medium and it turned out to be paper. Paper attracted him considerably. Slowly he tuned himself to the calling of it. Aji's latest works done on paper using watercolours and charcoal interestingly shows a period of transition. The expansion of the girl's portrait into self portrait and from there to the depiction of animals, Aji has finally reached to a place, before he crosses over to a new land, which is desolate and ruined. Like a man who happens to pass through a barren land, he captures a desolate site, horizontally stretched with dried up and cracked down brown earth, complete with dark thick bushes and amidst there you see a fragmented human skeleton.

Whose skeleton is this, one would tend to ask. Was he a passer by like the artist himself? Was he the last man stood against the conquerors who plundered and pilfered the area and left it dry? Who knows that it is the skeleton of a man? Can't it be that of a woman, raped and abandoned to die? This enigma has always been there in his works. Whether it be his 2006 charcoal drawings or the earlier works that depicted the mutant animal imageries, the enigma persists. Mutant monkeys, the huge ascension of a flight of steps etc evoke a feeling of ethereality.

Though Aji insists that whatever imageries he does come out of his experiences as a traveler and the lands that you see in the paintings are his mental-scapes, one would tend to see a streak of art historical awareness in the stylistic changes that he has deliberately brought in the new set of paintings. One is reminded of the Mughal miniatures. The lands that horizontally recede look like a close up look at the verticality of the miniature paintings. The trees that densely grow vertically evoke a sense of expanded miniatures. The animal imageries too have the rotundity of their predecessors in the miniature tradition. However, Aji sticks to a singular perspective. He does not use multiple perspectives as practiced by the miniature artists.

There are two works in this exhibition that make the viewer feel that Aji is going to take a new direction in his works. These two watercolour on paper works show the vertical and horizontal branches of a tree. According to the artist, it need not necessarily be interpreted as trees. The monochromatic feel of other works is replaced by the fungus like patches of blues and reds. According to the artist, these works came to him quite unexpectedly. Then he decided to retain them, perhaps to take off from there to newer lands.

Aji used to be a prodigal son. Hence, there always used to be a house that is on fire, in his works. One could say that he burnt down his 'home' metaphorically, not once but several times. There was no going back to the home. The idea of burning down the house is still there. Persistence of memory for the artist. What if the son does not go back to home? Parents can always come to him.

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