

ART

## Landscapes of memory



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**Dutch-Indian artist Aji V.N's ongoing show is a multi-faceted journey that explores unknown worlds that reside within**

Thiranottam is a part of a Kathakali dance ritual, where the audience is gradually introduced to the performer, who initially peeks out only in bits and sounds from behind a curtain, before emerging in his entirety once the curtain falls or is pushed away. Artist Aji V.N. likens this act to the creative process. Even as one writes, one sees this analogy playing out. At the beginning, there is only an inkling, a hazy illusion of an unformed thought, of what one hopes to create. But it's slowly towards the end is when the idea becomes clearer and clearer,

leading one to eventually arrive at the finale – the completed work. “Start the work and follow the demands of the art works. You have to listen to the demands,” states Aji, earnestly harkening to a stream of consciousness technique that permeates his workflow. One gets a strong sense of an active inner life in the artist’s mind even as he explains this course of subconscious meandering with precision and easy clarity. An almost palpable, thriving, pulsating world of inner thoughts and emotions comes alive through the 18 oils on display at Aji’s ongoing solo show ‘New Oils on Canvas’ at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke.

Created between 2013-2017, these landscapes feel like fleeting visions of countryside that one passes by on their way to some place else. Then again, the detailing is so intricate that it’s hardly ephemeral. They seem to live somewhere between that eternal moment between dreaming and waking up, where everything is crystal clear, yet suffused with imminent haze. The trees here form big fuzzy masses, delicate as cotton candy but porous and finely defined. The branches, Hockney-esque in their distinction, yet without the stark sharpness of wintry or autumnal exiguity, seem abundant and verdant in a monsoon-like glory. Suddenly, one feels pulled back to that biology class long ago, wondering if these trees could be more deciduous or less coniferous. There might be no definitive answer to that, as they are but figments of the artist’s imagination. An imagination that is rich with mixed, lived history, both personal and general and of both his native Kallissery, where he grew up as also of Rotterdam, which has been home to him for the past two decades.

## **Art as communion**

Aji is clearly in touch with his Malayali roots, proof of which is evident in his analogies as well as his work. Glimpses of Kerala, with its innate coconut trees and backwater beauty makes an appearance, if only briefly, perhaps for fear of “exoticizing it”, in about three paintings. The artist speaks fondly of his native memories, owing his initial interest and pursuit of art to teachers that moulded and encouraged his talents, as also to his own interest in science and physics that helped him understand how things work from scratch. The fact that Aji’s panoramas are created from imagination, but still look real, as if photographed by camera, is enough to give the viewer an understanding of the artist’s ability and knowledge of the subject painted. Aji is quick to add that he is “...more interested in the invisible things...which you cannot paint.” As much as the

audience is welcome to view and glean meaning based on their own comprehension, the emphasis is more on the way the work makes you feel. “Art is more like a communion of two minds, than a collaboration,” reflects Aji. Good art most likely stirs something within, that might be difficult to articulate in pen and ink, but can instead be a laudable base for fresh new work of art to spring from.

Aji’s inspiration comes as much from memory as his present. Explaining how our surroundings are ganglions of activity he says, “Whatever happens has many layers of reality,” and when one separates these layers, one can see the multiple realities. “I try to extract my realities,” he adds, addressing those inferences that hold some meaning to him personally. It all percolates perfectly to Aji’s notion of creating work “which you experience”. His paintings then take on a cathartic bearing, where what he paints is the output of an amalgam of his layered realities and interactions with the world outside and its ingestion within.

## **Searching for self**

Unlike some of his earlier work, these “constructed landscapes” are almost wholly devoid of any human presence, save for one particular artwork where there is a slight male figure in the foreground. His face is turned away and his clothing – a white T-shirt, is as generic as it gets. Aji steers clear of including human forms within his frames, seeing their presence as “distracting from the main focus”. Aji sees himself as the artist that is on a path to self-discovery, on a “search” of the true self, where ambiguity is key. It’s like a secret shrouded in mist that you need to traverse to get home. Be it the geographical ambiguity of his landscapes or that of the slightest human presence, he cannot risk the chance of indulging in any “hindrance to where you (he/the artist) want to go”.

Beyond these basic boundaries lies a cosmos of creative possibilities, inhabited by constant clashes of the real and the surreal, of the mysterious and the ordinary, of the inside and the outside and of the here and the beyond. Could it be dawn, could it be dusk? Are those storm clouds approaching or retreating? His colour palette, that spells strong undertones of grey, heightens the enigma that cloaks these spaces – familiar and foreign at once. The oily sheen coating the painting makes it look like a dream that will disintegrate and disappear at the slightest touch, while the creamy smooth brushwork with no traces of

prominent strokes pronounces its deliberate anonymity. Aji affirms that this approach was intentional, as he wants the artwork to be seen for what it is, without any associations that might create bonds and biases. If it were possible, he adds further, he would even resist signing the artwork under his name, so as to completely disassociate from it, acknowledging the role of the artist as a mere medium that will help discover or unearth the unknown truth.

In an age of copyright war and patenting infringement, this affinity to anonymity seems like the light at the end of the tunnel. Perhaps distance is the answer and Aji, who cites how Buddha too “took distance to reach a solution” might truly be onto something. What that might be, will remain to be seen, till the day the curtain falls and the bigger picture reveals itself.

Aji V.N. New Oils on Canvas *currently ongoing Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Colaba until September 30*

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