

The Artist and his Backyard

Ratheesh T's detailed works capture the intimacies of small-town life in Kerala, notes **Anuj Daga**.



Ratheesh T. *How Are You, Who Are You?* Oil on canvas. 78"x120". 2018. Image courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke. © Ratheesh T.

Ratheesh T's oils on canvas at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, from the 5th of September to the 20th of November, seem to defiantly guard aspects of life that come to constitute meaning and identity within his immediate community. The nonchalant naked artist standing in the centre of the room in *I Am (Cleaning Pond)* greets the viewer rather defensively. The ripped wall of the house exposes us to the nullah over which it is probably built. The clothes scattered all over the furniture create an uninviting environment. Any attempt by the viewer to know more about this mess is rejected by the artist's smirk and is assertively shielded by his bare body.

In *How Are You, Who Are You?*, the semi-naked artist, now wrapped in his lungi, is busy with the ritualistic preparation of puttu in the kitchen – with grated coconut kept on a table and the pressure-cooker on the counter alongside. As he fills up the puttu vessel with rice flour and coconut, he alerts himself, yet allows the pigeons who appear to be regular visitors to the kitchen, free play of the room. Showing his back, the artist seems too engrossed in his domestic chores to engage with the viewers. *Kiss (Clear Pond)* presents a daughter and father sharing an intimate moment at the edge of a lake. Filling up the background, the lake with floating flowers, reflecting skies and buildings, frames and isolates the two from the rest of the world. In *I See You*, the protagonist is seen teaching his partner to fend off a boar that has possibly strayed into their backyard. His warm closeness to the woman in the dark, whose eyes he covers to mask fear and the torchbeam with which he stuns the beast, creates an aura of private trust around them. Being witness to this moment makes the viewer feel like an intruder.

The artist's rootedness in his village and community life and his autobiographical

explorations allow us entry into his world while maintaining a measured distance. While on the one hand, these scenes from his daily life strongly assert his Malayali identity, the viewer is strategically othered through moments that might embarrass or induce disengagement. The characters in the paintings do not always lend themselves readily to the viewer. Ratheesh's works thus often turn the anthropological gaze *in* and leave the viewer feeling estranged about his status as an observer.

Two paintings lay out details of everyday public life. In one work, the viewer is led into an overlooked backyard with dense trees where we see a dilapidated toilet block, with a broken vent pipe, built away from the main house. Amidst discarded household junk, rotting coconut shells, bottles, banners and the national flag is the toilet wall scribbled with everyday gibberish and political opinions within which the life of the community unfolds. The life of this community is detailed in another painting where interdependencies and close knit relationships among its people become visible. In the foreground, you see three young men carrying a large cutout of the hammer and the sickle, cutting their way across an everyday scene in the village, gently lamenting the *state* of communism.

Saami presents the artist protagonist wearing a t-shirt and jeans being approached by villagers with wonder, mischief and merriment. The women washing themselves by the stream and the dark men cleaning their teeth with datoon laugh at what appears to be a new avatar of the artist. An old friend plays funny tricks with a cigarette lighter – he playfully threatens to set the artist's beard on fire. The artist stands un-defiantly, lost in thought, a benign smile on his lips. The artist is now an outsider. /