

# Street theatre

Everyday scenes from Kerala through the sophisticated painterly eye of Sosa Joseph

BY SANJUKTA SHARMA  
sanjukta.s@livemint.com

You can't miss the prosaic in Sosa Joseph's paintings. Like Bhupen Khakhar's *mofussil* mise-en-scènes, the 42-year-old artist vivifies her immediate surroundings. "My studio is near a bazaar," she explains, when we meet the day her new solo opens in Mumbai. She has been living and practising in Kochi, Kerala, after completing her postgraduation in painting from the MS University of Baroda.

Joseph paints cattle, hens, women, dwarves, tea vendors, boats, coils of wire, animals sculpted in cheap-looking moulds, *meen* (fish) in thick-rimmed bowls, fragments of broken domesticity like parts of a transistor—some of these coalescing meaningfully in her canvases.

What *Are We? I, II* and *III*, the three largest pieces in the new show *Unspecified* at Mumbai's

Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, are hyper-referential, busy and seemingly absurd. Their protagonists are women, standing out partly in black veils, with exaggerated features and a melancholic survey of inanimate objects around them. There are men in tattered clothes and flip-flops, children playing and in the middle of somersaults. In the most ambiguous of this triptych, a row of women, old, young and small, look intently at a bunch of broken domestic emblems—as if in queue to acquire things already destroyed. Most of the works on display at this show are covert ruses against patriarchy.

One of the few contemporary women artists from, and working in, Kerala, Joseph plays down the inimical and political potential of her works: "I think the idea is to look beyond the women, and the local things. There is more to it than a feminist or political message. I am more interested in the



NAYAN SHAH/  
MINT



**Tail order:** (above) *Who Are We? I*, an oil on canvas at Galerie Mirchandani+Steinruecke, Mumbai; and *Joseph*.

sum of the references and what they could mean. I don't decide what my painting will be about before making it."

Gallery co-owner Ranjana Steinruecke, who brought Joseph's works to Mumbai four years ago in a solo, says Joseph appealed to her first because she was committed to exploring the medium of painting. Joseph's paintings do secrete a steely aesthetic discipline—sophisticated in the way she uses paint to emphasize movement and meaning in her characters. She exagger-

ates one thing or one feature of a face with broad strokes. A refreshing aspect of her art is looking at the potential of the medium itself—the survival of that old stuff, paint, in an age of installation and video. Painting is free and up for experimentation.

"While male artists from Kerala have such a remarkable presence in the contemporary art scene everywhere, she is quietly working in Kochi. This show is a quantum leap from her first in terms of craft," says Steinruecke. The artist, who lives with her family, tells me: "There is not much of a community of artists where I work. Kerala is like a big village; every place, village or city, is the same."

Joseph has also shown at the

Kochi-Muziris Biennale and her work has travelled to the Schneider Museum of Art, Southern Oregon University, US.

She is the youngest of five children from Parumala, near Kottayam. Her father was a Communist, a local politician, and her mother is a devout Catholic. "I was always torn by these two extremes, and in the family only I finally followed my father and rejected religion." After completing school, she left home for a diploma in painting from the Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Mavelikara, Kerala.

"The college was only 8km away from home, and we were two girls in a class of 30 students. It was almost like sacrilege," Joseph laughs, "Most women artists from Kerala I met at Baroda took the safe way, got married soon after college, as is expected in Kerala society, and moved on," says the artist. Joseph's rebellion was rewarding. She returned to Kochi and started painting in a space all her own.

*Unspecified is on till 15 May, 11am-7pm (Sundays and Mondays closed), at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, 2 Sunny House, 16/18 Mereweather Road, Colaba, Mumbai. The works are priced from ₹22,000-5 lakh.*