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Paradise Regained with V.N. Jyothi Basu

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Among the 13 phantasmic drawings and paintings in *The Outlier*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke's exhibition on V.N. Jyothi Basu (b. 1960), sits an unassuming paper work labelled "Untitled V" (2006). Delicately rendered in colour pencils, it lingers around like a passing dream in a haze of hallucination; a quiet outlier, born in a trance. Basu's dreamlike vision foregrounds an arcane tower on paper, a totemic column marked by natural and preternatural ciphers, a linguistic superstructure of mysterious symbols that obscures as much as it reveals. It is through this whimsical opacity that he excels in concealing or revealing his message: an iconography that is sensuous as well as ironic, tinged with a fantasy that gratifies as much as it disturbs. The tower stands as a familiar beacon and an alien monolith – a metaphor par excellence for attempting to decipher Basu's artistic practice. To my mind, this drawing is perhaps the most indexical *objet d'art* found in the exhibition, a guiding compass helping us navigate the other works on display.

The Outlier is a time capsule of artistic euphoria, bringing together Basu's contributions from the 1990s to the late 2010s. It conjures up a landscape of supreme fiction (to take off from the title of Basu's 2006 exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery), where the artist resides as its esteemed author but also unreliable narrator. This is made obvious in the oil painting "Farewell Party" (2004), the first work that greets visitors and is arguably the heavyweight champion of the exhibition. A close look at the columnar forest makes one wonder: Are these inorganic husks of concrete, hollowed out for settlement, or biological creatures of otherworldly mutations? Through this surreal visualization of numbers and forms that cover poles, and often take the shape of eyeballs, toes and unfamiliar orifices, Basu conveys a mix of agony and ecstasy. This is a flowering, nay, showering of wisdom as well as ignorance, recording a life that is both eternally suffering with the unfamiliar, as well as fascinated and made alive with the promise of it. In Basu's hand, art-making becomes a pensive speculation, metamorphosing our familiar environs into an endless treasure-hunt for symbols and meanings.

Where, or how, does he find such a cartography of life? Underscoring this symbolic landscape is a frank openness: a quiet embrace of multiplicity, where diverse expressions coexist, unforced and free; what Jonathan Goodman in 2006 called a "concomitant presence of several different kinds of time." In occupying different places and phases at once, Basu becomes a fugitive. Unlike other artists who chase the perfection of a unique visual language, he remains cloaked in ambiguity, carrying critiques of social norms that weigh as heavily as the images themselves. For Ranjana Steinruecke, the artist (the very first to be represented by the gallery) has always been an elusive figure. In calling him an "outlier," she notes: "Jyothi has never chosen to maintain a constant studio practice. This is an artist who says what he has to say, and then stops, until he chooses to start again." From the very beginning, Basu has been *the* idiosyncratic artist's artist. Trained in Fine Arts from Trivandrum and Baroda, he became a member of the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association (more popularly known as the "Kerala Radicals") in the 1980s and developed a distinct style, reflecting on the shifting social and technological landscape of the subcontinent through unorthodox concepts and new-age media.

After a hiatus of ten years from art-making (during the course of which he worked as a set designer for Malayali television channels like Asianet and Kairali), Basu returned to the canvas in the late 1990-early 2000s, with a new painterly order that was bursting, multiplying as well as prickling. This was an ephemeral, ethereal and fantastical emergence – a resurrection of a figure who emphatically and empathetically responded to his reality, singed with social, ecological and militaristic transformation. From this period, we have the grim oil painting "Rays II" (1999), which denies any kind of sovereignty over comfort and familiarity. Hoving into view a foggy horizon conquered by monumentally alien forms that seem to tear the heavens apart, the artist leaves us at the doorstep of humanity's final judgment. Are we witnessing the golden rays of salvation, or a raining hellfire of damnation? In teasing us with hope, but only for a bleak future, Basu introduces us to a special kind of violence: an assault of the unknown, in a world (our world) that has become foreign for its inhabitants.

The charcoal drawings "Tree" (1998) and "Home" (1998) are also in sync with this imagination of a frightful, thorny world. They are whimsical comments on a society that continues to foster hostility, while steadfast in movement (ahead, or backwards?). This is where the artist truly comes into his own: in realizing an artistic strength that is chimerical, yet underlined by the implications of history. In the stillness of a two-dimensional medium, Basu records electric pulsations – especially evident in works such as "Three Trees on a Beach" (1999) – that course through glimpses of the future as well as foundations of the past.

In terms of style, the works in *The Outlier* reinforce the artist's sensuous desire for colour. The pristine walls of the gallery are imbued with a highly articulate palette, mixed with expressive gestures of thick oil paint, a delicate handling of pencil strokes, and grainy whorls of charcoal. From finely outlined landscapes to palpably visceral pigments awash on canvas, we find a voice committed to engaging with the world and his practice. It is only in this sense that I believe Basu forgoes being an "outlier," and remains manifestly central to the artworks and the show. "Untitled I" (1999) and "Untitled IV" (2006) make this intriguingly literal, with the artist's signature stylistically composed onto the paper, with a banner that announces his hand as much as it identifies him. Is this arrogance and a desire to be recognized as the progenitor of a surreal new world order? Or an innocent footnote of acknowledgment in the grand design of history? Perhaps it is neither or both.

I recently had a chance to look at Nagji Patel's drawings on display at Bikaner House, New Delhi. Complimenting the quietude of form and balance that his iconic sculptures are known for, Patel's drawn lines turn vegetal and animal forms into poetic metaphors and abstract matter, faintly hovering around the edge of recognition. These transformative images felt similar to Basu's otherworldly landscapes; the former's organic forms seemingly populating the latter's world. In the end, this is perhaps *The Outlier's* biggest calling, presenting us with a multiversal vision of where we are, and where we may be, wherever we look.

The Outlier is on view at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, New Delhi, from June 12 to August 23, 2025.

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