

# The artist as craftsman

The draughtsman, the painter, the sculptor and the weaver come together in the canvasses of artist SG Vasudev, currently on show at the NGMA Mumbai



Vasudev's Earthscape at Cholamandal. It had this sense of space and togetherness. We learned to be accommodative and to be a human being first. Fifty years later, it's still existing." After his artist wife, Arnavaz, passed away in 1988 due to cancer, Vasudev moved to Bengaluru with his seven-year-old son. There he met and married another single parent, journalist Ammu Joseph. "Through Ammu Joseph, I met activists, journalists and filmmakers, so my interest in those fields also grew." This is alongside his interest in literature, theatre, music and poetry. Which is why his exhibition includes five outreach programmes, from a concert by Hindustani vocalist Venkatesh Kumar to a recital of AK Ramanujan's poetry. "My retrospective is not complete without these things. Picasso's Cubism attracted architecture, painting, music, theatre. So, we should form similar connections in India."

Vasudev has formed long-term connections with his collaborators as well: both, his weaver Subbarayulu, and his apprentice in copper reliefs, his "right-hand" man, have been with him for a quarter of a century. "Collaborations can't be made in a day. You've got to understand each other and work with the medium." He knows artisans are dab hands at their work, and says, "I consider a craftsman equal to an artist."

**WHAT:** Inner Resonance: A Return To Sama **WHEN:** June 29 to August 11; 11 AM to 7 PM **WHERE:** NGMA, Fort; 22881969 **ENTRY:** ₹10

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CHARCOAL, oils, copper and silk threads are like putty in SG Vasudev's hands. He can bend them to his will, whether it is beating copper sheets with a hundred different tools or dyeing threads to match the colour in his brain. His retrospective, which is currently NGMA-hopping, and is in the city after Bengaluru, has to sum up 60 years of his experimentation with different mediums. This includes 28 copper reliefs, 37 tapestries and 300 paintings and drawings. But, he says, "You can't say that I have arrived. I think I'll be ready with another retrospective in 10 years. I have an itch to do something different. If you don't have that, you're a dead person."

Like most artists, Vasudev has more to say on the easel than on tape. Which is why his works speak for him. And, what a sophisticated yarn they tell. One painting, Fantasy, is a quasi-abstract vision in cream and grey. It's dotted with mountains, rivers, dogs and symbols, in a style reminiscent of tribal paintings, but rendered by a master. A series of copper reliefs, with trees chiselled on them, is treated differently each time: either the leaves look like paisley, or the fruits look like Saturn, or the

branches look like tree rings. "At one point, I questioned myself, whether I'm going to follow Western art or break [the mould]. For nearly two years in the '60s, I didn't see any Western art. I kept sculptures from Bastar, Tanjore paintings and Mysore School paintings in my house. So what happens is, every morning when you get up, you see them and somewhere they start influencing your mind. And, because of my interest in Kannada literature and poetry, it brought in new [ideas] in my paintings, like the folk and

traditional art of Karnataka. Once your base is changed, you can continue with it."

Vasudev's base was originally forged in Madras School of Arts and Crafts, the foun-dry of the Madras Art Movement. "When I got into the school, I was considered an artist. We never had teachers teaching students. The principal, KCS Paniker, allowed us to go into any section we wanted: ceramics, pottery, carpentry, enamel work. That freedom was there, and that really helped me in using craft in art. So, a lot of artists from the

same school created something very, very different. Each created their own [path]." And sometimes, that path led them to utopia, 9 km outside Chennai.

The Cholamandal Artists' Village, established in 1966, was started by Paniker and about 25 faithfuls, including Vasudev. "We experimented with batik for two years, which we could sell very well. [We realised that] even if we worked for two hours a day, we could make enough to earn our livelihood. So, we bought 10 acres of land, formed a co-operative, and called



SG Vasudev's retrospective is divided into nine sections at the NGMA. PIC/SURESH KARKERA

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