

CONTAINING
MULTITUDES

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S.G. Vasudev

Curated by
Johnny ML



Bharat Art Space Gallery

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CONTAINING MULTITUDES

-Johny ML

*'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain
Multitudes)'*

-Walt Whitman

Modernists confronted contradictions; they, in them contained contradictions. By repeating themselves in forms and themes they simply followed the dynamics of this contradiction that they never thought a negative qualification. On the contrary, the modernists celebrated contradictions to the extent that they became deep and expansive in their artistic output. In their limited lives, perhaps they contained multitudes. The apparent simplicity became a camouflage to cover up the largeness they actually possessed.

Looking at the works of S.G. Vasudev, one of the veteran modernists still going strong in making art using various mediums, one could wonder what kind of an insatiable urge that goads him to work. For someone searching for political ideas making performative gestures in works of art Vasudev's works may not provide potential ideological ground for critical discourses because the aesthetics that Vasudev has been pursuing for the last six decades has a lot to do with the philosophical aspects of life on the planet of earth than the quotidian political ramblings.

A few themes are recurrent in Vasudev's oeuvre. Themes like 'Tree of Life', 'Theatre of Life', 'She', 'He' and 'Rhapsody' encompass his ongoing concerns, emphasising his interest in exploring the existential meanings of all the life forms on the face of the earth. These themes, within the Indian ethos, have deep philosophical meanings that have imbibed by the folk artists and modernists alike. Tree is envisioned as the fundamental form of earth itself and all living/life entities are the integral parts of that tree.

This is a subtle critique, if one wants to see so than as a way of approach to life, of the present age known as Anthropocene where every aspect of life forms is pivoted around human deliberations, which Vasudev had arrived at even before the discourse was theoretically forwarded and a became mainstream talking point. Growing up amidst strong and varied folk and traditional cultural practices must have helped him in learning the fundamentals of this philosophy in childhood itself.

Another dominant theme, 'Theatre of Life' is a universally understood one but Vasudev's interest comes not just because of its universality but his genuine interest in the traditional performing arts in Karnataka. For him theatre is not just

a Shakespearean one where characters come, do their part and exist once the role is done, but an active site of human engagement with emotional and intellectual depths. Instead of seeing the whole world as a stage, Vasudev sees the stage as the world itself. Vasudev neither does project the tragedies of the Greek drama nor does he highlight the existential dilemma of the protagonists in the pre and post Renaissance theatre. His theatre is the theatre of living experiences.

Vasudev's 'Faces' that are given definitive titles as 'She' and 'He' are the extensions of the theatre of life. Their mask like expression and the intense gaze make the viewers to see themselves reflected on them. Shorn off of all the special features these paintings become open templates that could host any identity according to the spatial positioning of the onlookers. Their perennial innocence is slightly confusing as their penetrative gazes could expose the fiery intensity that they carry within themselves. As aforementioned, in this contradictory presentation of images, Vasudev in his works carries the largeness of the multitudes, their varieties, depths and intense affinity for a meaningful and celebratory life.

Copper Reliefs and Tapestries

Copper reliefs have a very special status in the oeuvre of Vasudev. There is a historical continuity in terms of the making of a regional modernism when it comes to the alternative mediums that the artists of the South India had used during the booming days of the neo spiritual aesthetics that they were instrumental in proliferating as a part of their experimental practices. Though Vasudev didn't align himself with the style or content of that particular stream of modernism, he chose to work with the mediums that brought a special vigour to his artistic pursuits.

Tradition and individual talent should find their mutuality at some junctures or interfaces of creativity where they flourish without any conflict. While modernism/s elsewhere looked for newer materials and methods the regional modernists found their energy from traditional methods and materials giving them a newer edge of articulation. Vasudev absorbed the traditional skills of the metal beater-craftsman and expressed his thematic concerns in his hallmark modernist style. Vasudev's copper reliefs move away from the two dimensional but textural surfaces that he creates in his paintings and push back themselves from them being full blown sculptural reliefs. This in-between nature of his reliefs emphasises their tactility as well as illusionary three dimensionality.

Vasudev's affinity towards traditional skills practiced as a part of the village economy comes to play a pivotal role in the making of his tapestries. Even before famous western artists like Cornelia Parker and Chris Offili took to the idea of working with traditional tapestry making methods Vasudev had started working with a set of traditional weavers from Karnataka. Becoming a conduit between traditional skill of making tapestry and the modern aesthetics Vasudev has been creating painterly tapestries that not only show the visually appealing frontal part but also the hindside of it that leaves the ties and dies and all the handiworks and blemishes open for public perusal.

Metaphorically speaking, revealing of the process and the labour involved in the making of tapestries tell volumes about the very magic of making a work of art. The magic, though looks enthralling and enticing from the front there is a lot of hard work and pain behind it. Vasudev seems to tell his viewers that in art there is always an initial mark making that refuses to be hidden by the polished surfaces. His tapestries are not just about the transference of painterly images into woven ones but they are also about unveiling the mysteries of making art itself.

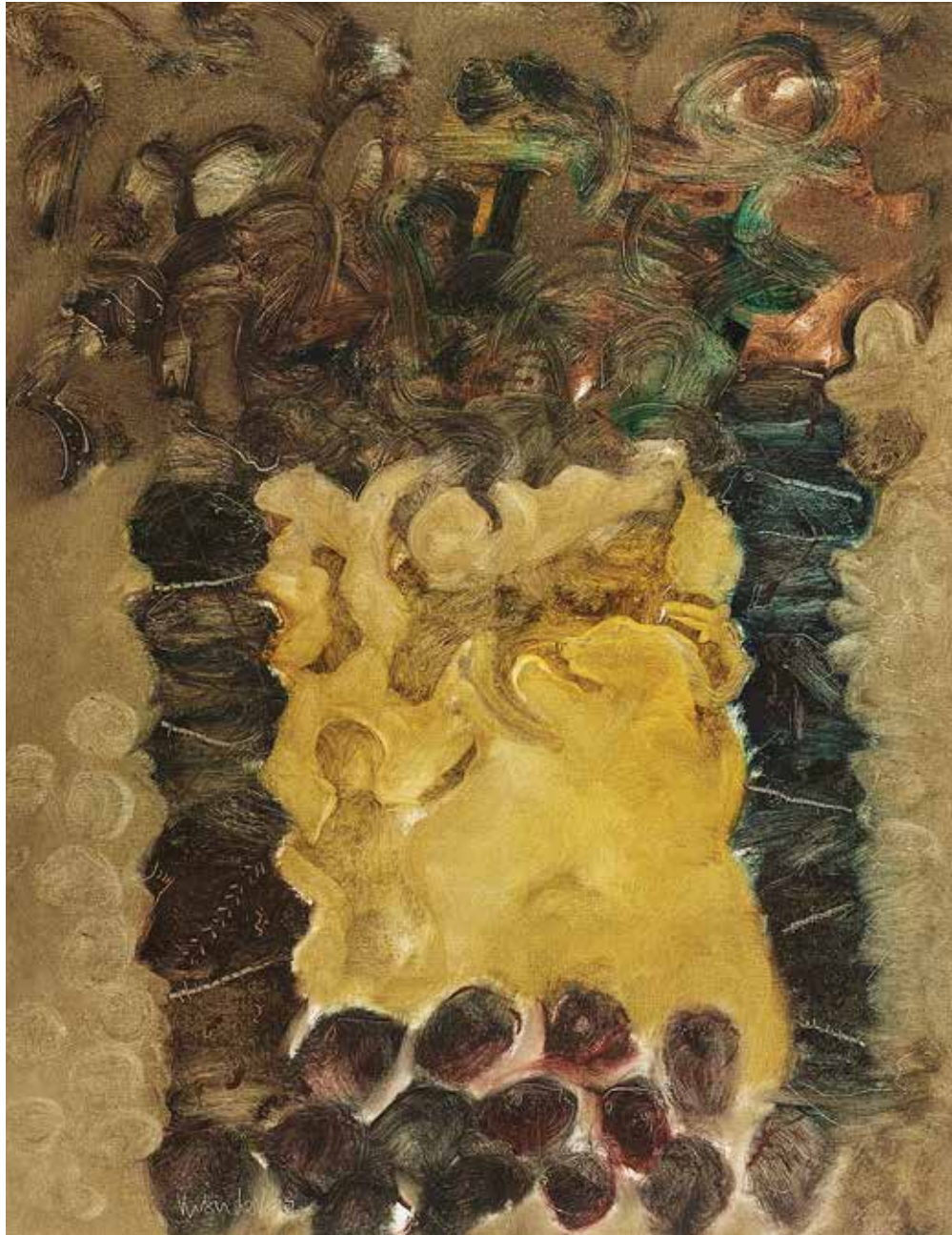
Painterly Surface and Abstract Qualities

Vasudev's works appear to be simplistic at the first glance but gather depth and width with each considered looking. The surfaces of his paintings remind the viewers of the paintings that had been painted by the primordial humans in the ancient caves. Scientific studies have revealed that even before the homo sapiens started making art the Neanderthals had done their bit of aesthetical expressions in the caves. The paintings of Vasudev connect us directly to the very history of painting, which was initially mark making, the humankind's first efforts towards registering their presence and aspirations.

The ritualistic attributions of art perhaps show how the early humans were not just making images but something more than that. They were trying towards getting the essence of things and events portrayed on the cave walls. Vasudev's works have that quality of capturing the essence that we call today as abstraction. The apparent presence of trees, landscapes, human faces and other beings provides us with an outer layer and once we are through that layer of visual experience, we are invited to unravel the hidden layers with more and more human and animal figures moving animatedly within the painting. They appear as the absences with the surrounding spaces marking out those absences, as if they were the palm impressions on the cave walls created by blowing pigments from mouths.

The textural quality and the resultant abstraction demand further ocular journeys from the viewers. They are expected to discern the images according to their cultural consciousness. Hence, the titles of Vasudev's works provide an initial guide; for example, Tree, Earth Scape and so on. Looking for a tree would definitely reveal a tree but something more around it. Images lying submerged within the brushstrokes slowly make their appearances, creating a visual game or a virtual trip into the painting. A painting titled She may present a female face but she is not the only one in the painting. Around her or hidden within her hair that transforms itself into a landscape there are other images that constitute an ensemble of events.

Vasudev is an artist who demands meditative focus from the viewers in order to understand his works. For him, his artistic creations are not illustrations of a subject. They are created as object experiences contained in the chosen formats; painting, copper relief and tapestry. His oeuvre is large and varied in terms of mediums and methods. His works contain multitudes and in him Vasudev contains the multitudes of living beings.



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
87 x 113 cms
1997



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
90 x 60 cms
1997



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
87 x 87 cms
1997



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
120 x 86 cms
1998



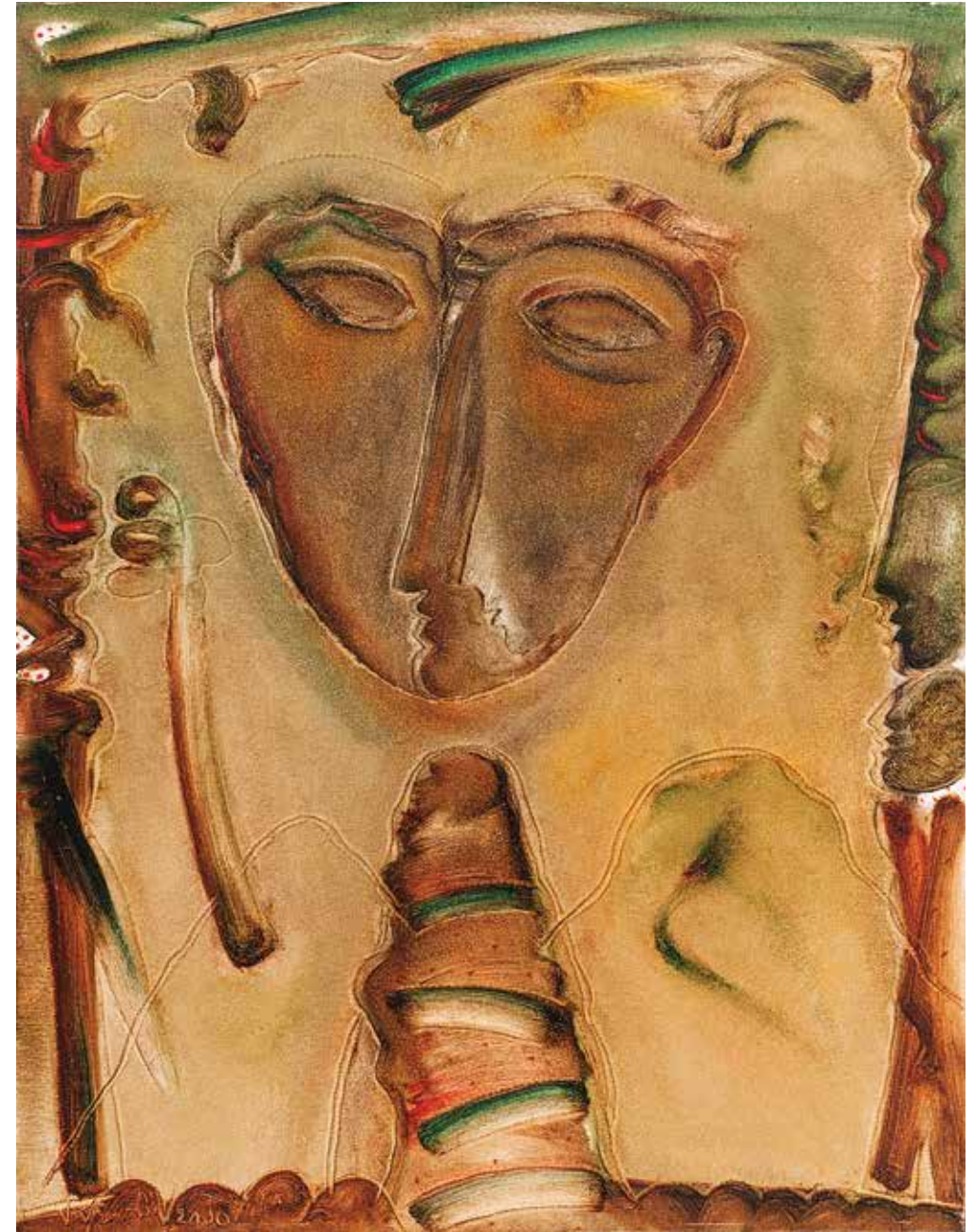
Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
91 x 91 cms
1998



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
92 x 122 cms
1998



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
87 x 113 cms
1999



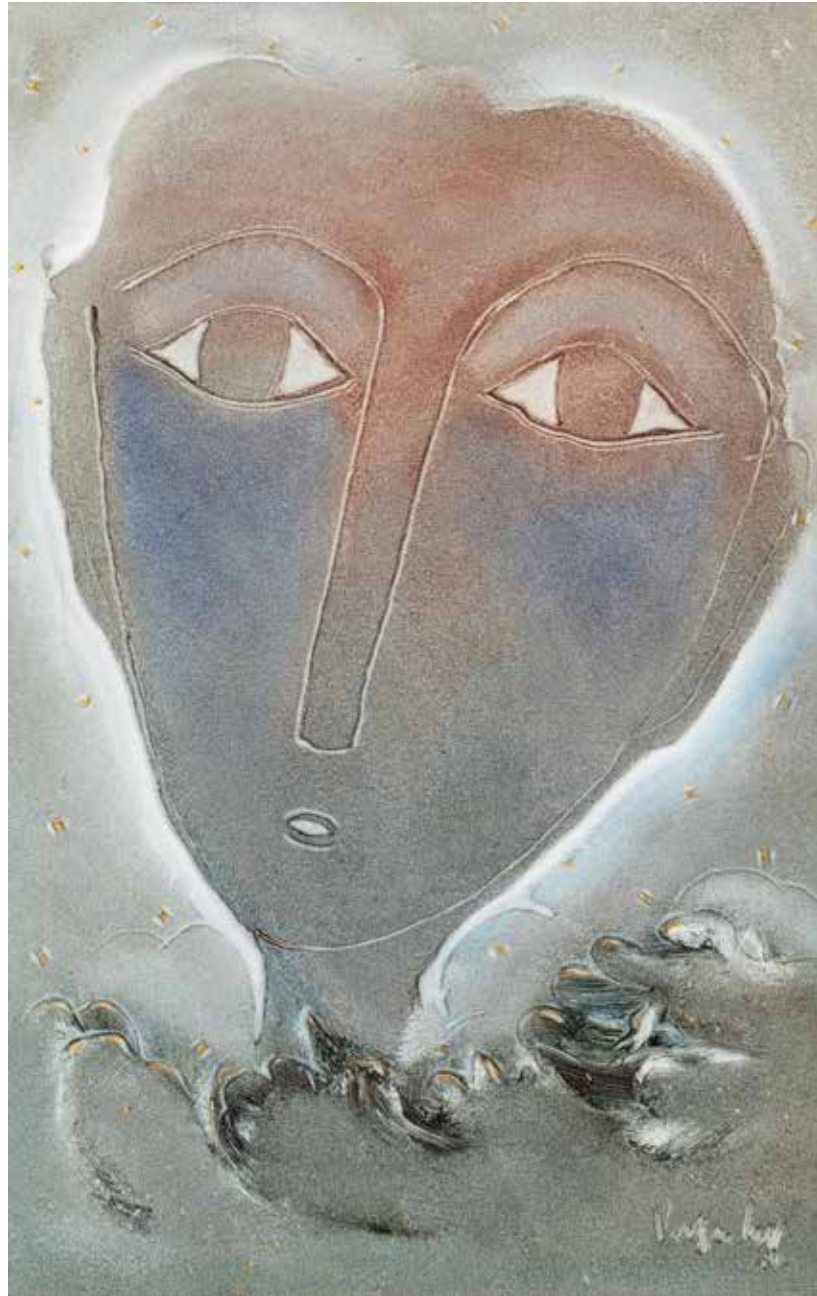
Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
87 x 112 cms
2000



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
92 x 92 cms
2003



Landscape
Oil on Canvas
92 x 72 cms
2004



She
Oil on Canvas
55 x 85 cms
2004



Theatre of Life
Oil on Canvas
122 x 122 cms
2006



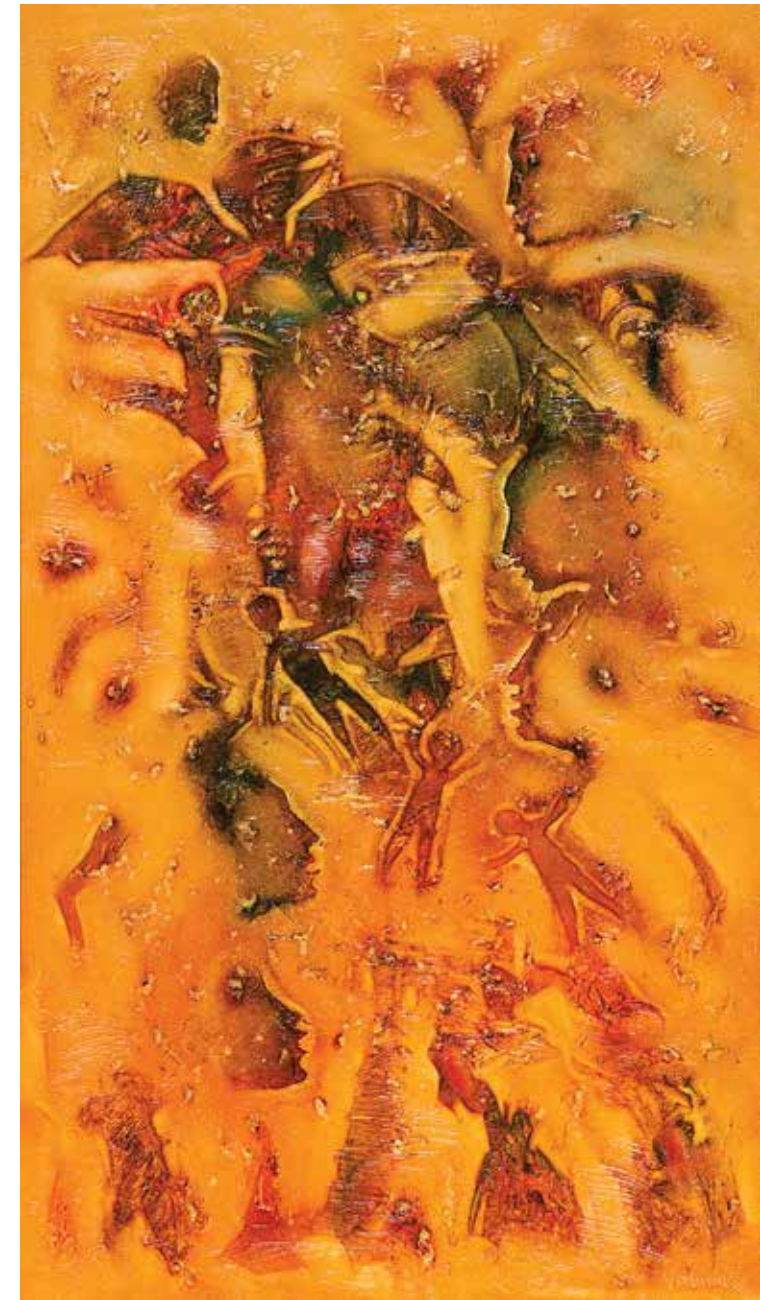
Tree and Worshippers
Oil on Canvas
54 x 150 cms
2006



She
Oil on Canvas
176 x 108 cms
2006



She and Tree
Oil on Canvas
153 x 122 cms
2006



Rhapsody
Oil on Canvas
84 x 145 cms
2009



Tree
Oil on Canvas
92 x 122 cms
2010



Tree
Oil on Canvas
120 x 120 cms
2011



Landscape
Oil on Canvas
102 x 102 cms
2014



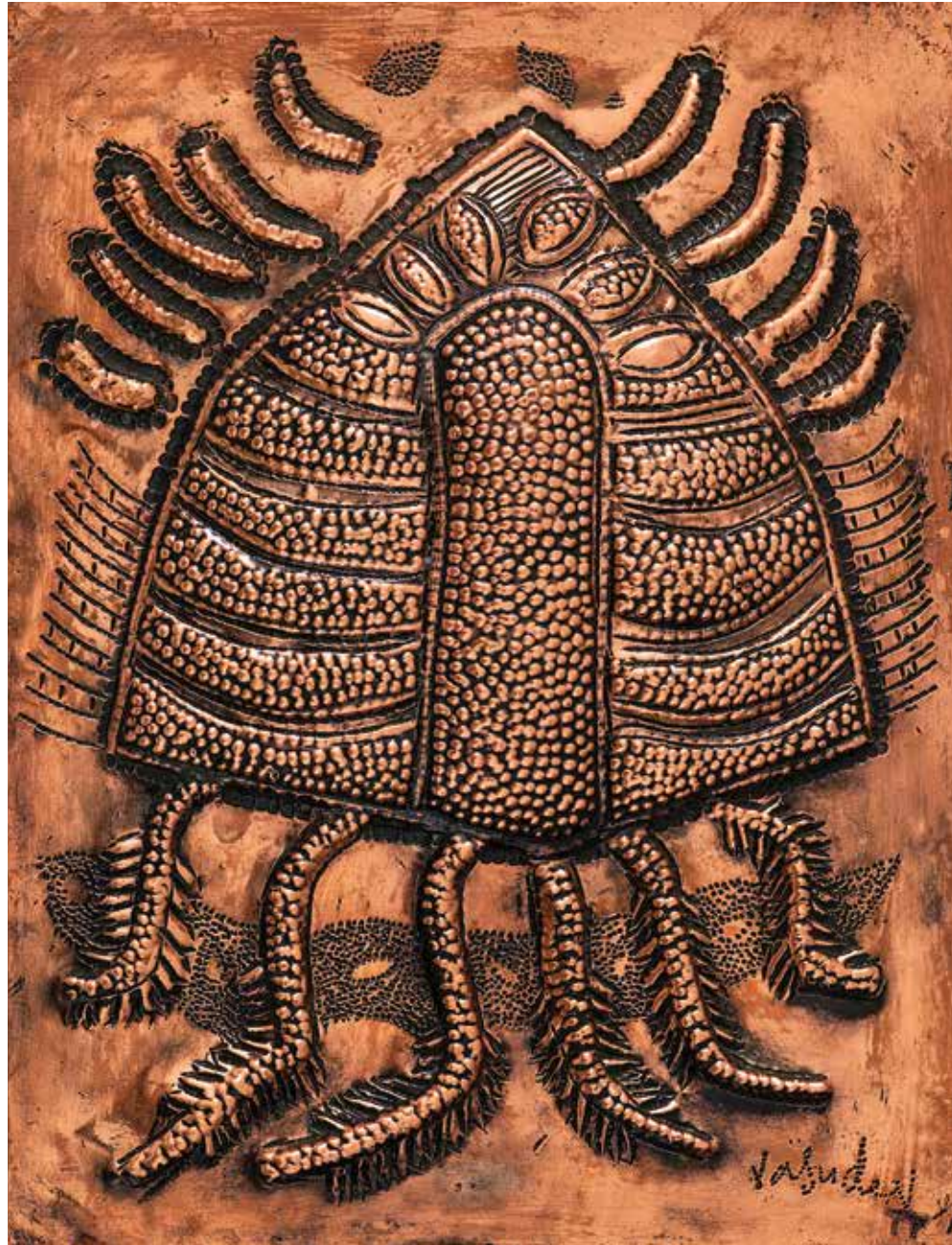
Landscape
Oil on Canvas
19 x 71 cms
2014



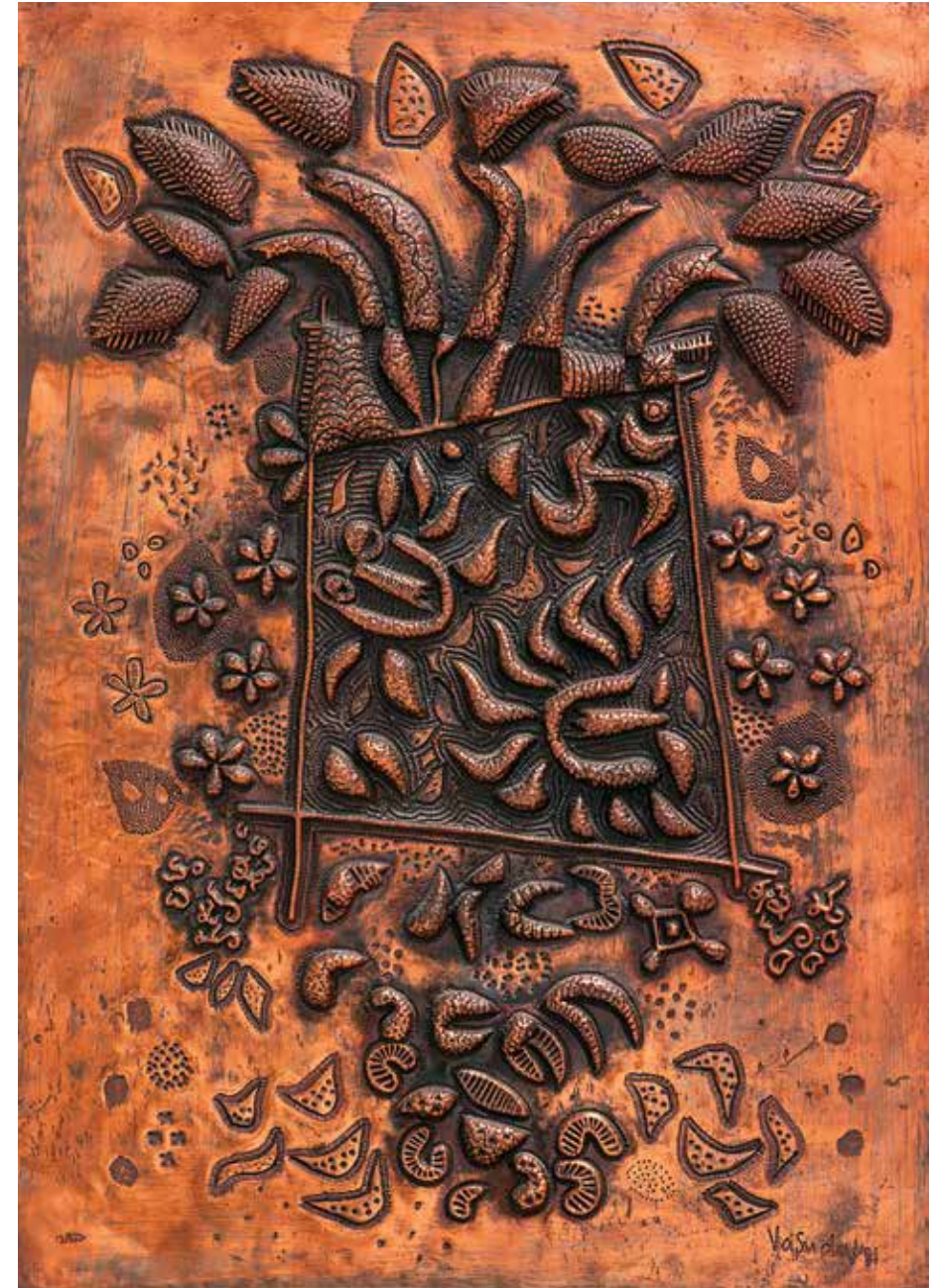
Rhapsody
Oil on Canvas
54 x 150 cms
2016



Tree
Oil on Canvas
54 x 150 cms
2017



Tree
Copper Relief
19 x 24 cms
1977



Tree
Copper Relief
31 x 43 cms
1981



Tree
Copper Relief
31 x 47 cms
1988



Surya
Copper Relief
42 x 55 cm
1989



Earth Scape
Copper Relief
45 x 45 cms
1993



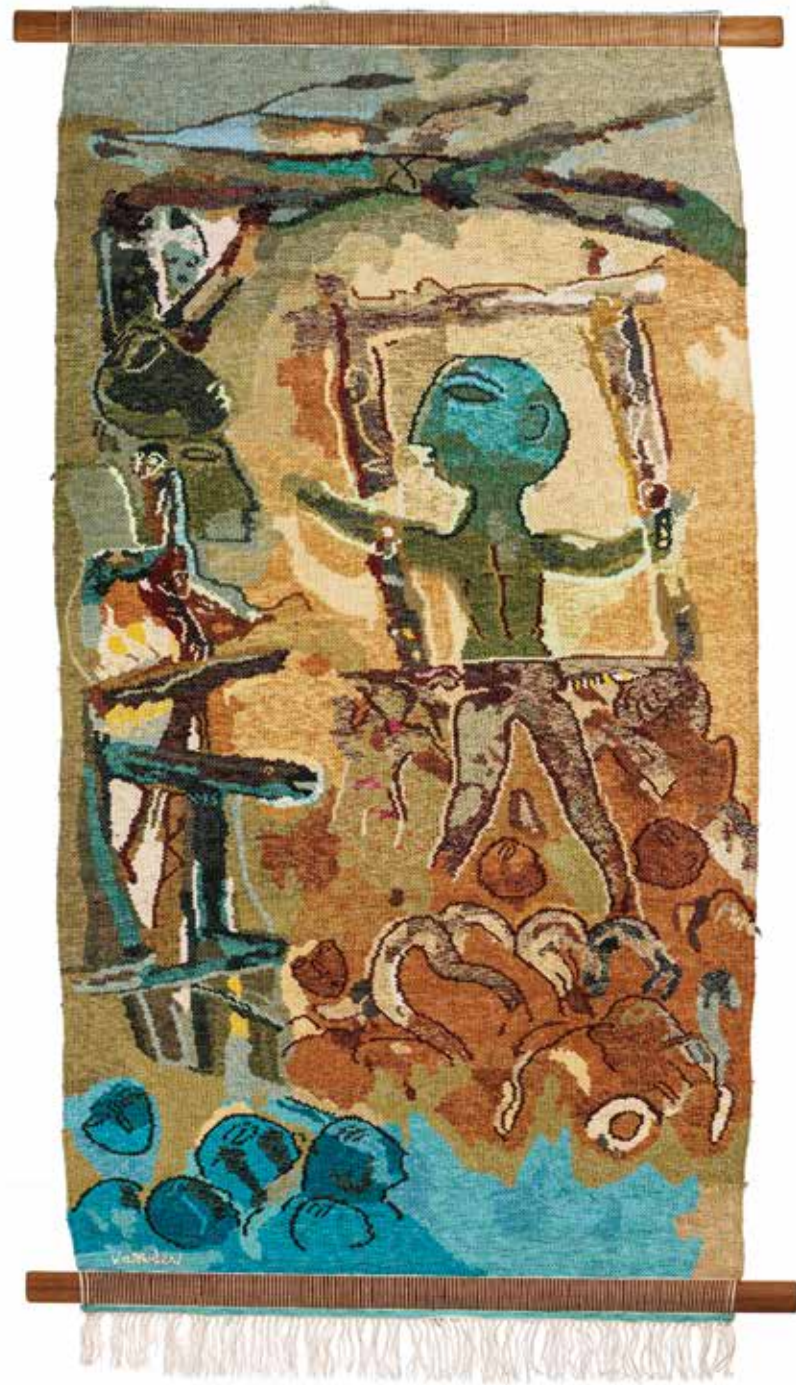
Theatre of Life
Copper Relief
72 x 98 cms
2002



Rhapsody
Copper Relief
60 x 31 cms
2010



Tree and Monkeys
Tapestry
96 x 146 cms



Theatre of Life
Tapestry
92 x 167 cms

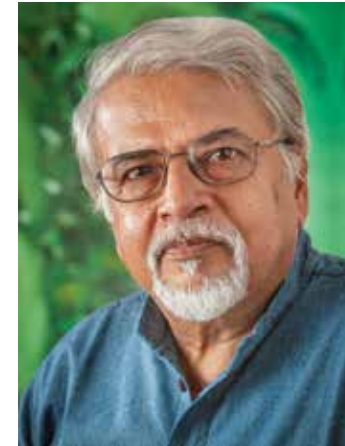


Earth Scape
Tapestry
91 x 168 cms



Human Scape
Tapestry
110 x 130 cm

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY



S.G. Vasudev

Born in Mysore (Karnataka) in 1941, S.G. Vasudev received recognition as a painter early in his career. While he was a student of the Government College of Art, Madras, he won the National Award from the All India Lalit Kala Akademi in 1967. Awards from State Academies of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, besides prestigious Karnataka Rajyotsava Award, Venkatappa Award and Paniker Puraskaram.

Vasudev is a founder-member of the Cholamandal Artists' Village on the outskirts of Madras (now Chennai) where he lived and worked till 1988. He now lives and works in Bangalore.

Vasudev works in various mediums (drawings, paintings, reliefs in copper and tapestries in silk). He became well-known for his "Vriksha" (Tree of Life) series, which evolved over nearly a decade, turning into the Tree of Life and Death in the latter half of the 1980s. He also explored the theme of "Maithuna" (Act of Love) through a series of drawings, paintings and copper reliefs. Eventually his tree grew into faces titled "Humanscapes" and "Earthscapes." The tree is still sometimes visible in his series titled "Theatre of Life," and "Rhapsody".

Vasudev has participated in several important group exhibitions in India and abroad. In addition, he has held solo exhibitions in different parts of India and the world (including the USA, Canada, England and Germany). Exhibitions of his drawings based on the late A.K. Ramanujan's poetry and translations, titled "Tribute to Ramanujan," have been held in Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, London and Chicago. Vasudev is founder and managing trustee of Arnawaz Vasudev Charities, a non-profit organisation providing financial assistance to young artists and art-related initiatives since 1989. He has helped in establishing Visual Art Department at the Bangalore University, National Gallery of Modern Art Bangalore, Ananya Drishya and Art Park, both, artists' initiatives.

Vasudev conducted his Retrospective Exhibition titled "Inner Resonance- Return to Sama" at National Gallery of Modern Art, Bangalore and Mumbai, and also at Lalit Kala Akademi galleries, Chennai, during 2018-2019.

CURATOR BIOGRAPHY



Johny ML

Johny ML is a writer, translator, art historian, art critic, art curator, editor of art magazines, poet and a prolific blogger. He has three post graduate degrees in Creative Curating, Art History and Criticism, and English Language and Literature.

His writings related to arts, culture and politics have been published in several print magazines like Creative Mind, Art Illustrated, newspapers and weeklies in English and in Malayalam. He is the founder editor of India's first online art magazine, mattersofart.com. He also founded and edited one of the most popular online art journals, artconcerns.com (now defunct). He has been an editor of the Art and Deal magazine and has guest edited Art Etc. He contributes to Art India Magazine, Creative Minds, Art Journal and many other exclusive art magazines. Currently he writes in all major online and print newspapers and journals in Kerala and around the country.

He is one of the pioneering curators in India who worked towards bringing respect to curatorial practice. He has curated path breaking shows like 'Small but Significant' (2000), 'Dreams: Projects Unrealised' (2003), 'Twilight Zone of the Great Indian Digital Divide' (2004), 'Compensation for What has been Lost' (2006), 'Video Wednesdays @ Gallery Espace' (2008-2009), 'Lensing-it' (2011), 'Thekkan Kaattu' (47th Annual Exhibition of the Birla Academy, Kolkata), 'LoC- Line of Control' (49th Annual Exhibition of the Birla Academy, Kolkata) 2016, 'It's Big' show of Po10tial artists group at Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bengaluru, 2016; He also curated three phenomenal shows for the 50th year, Golden Jubilee Exhibitions of the Birla Academy, Kolkata in 2017-2018. The other important exhibitions include 'Cartist Project' Jaipur, 'Goa Reloaded', 'R.A.P.E – Rare Acts of Political Engagement' Delhi.

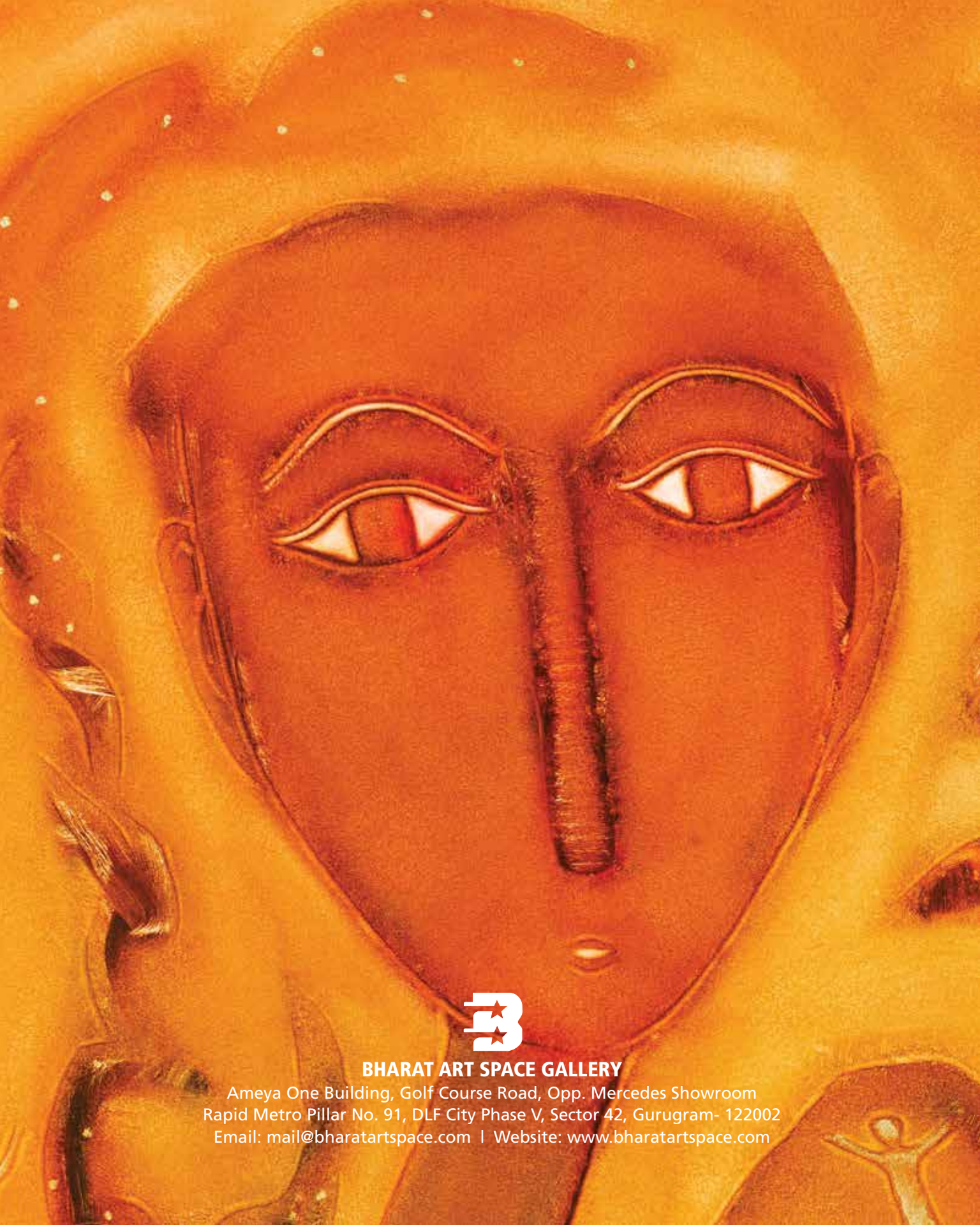
In 2009 he undertook a 3000 kilometers journey across India to research on how art and art history are taught in small town art colleges. His writings on this journey are available on artroutes.in and in his blog. He was the Project Director of the United Art Fair (2012) and Pune Biennale (2015)

His blog, www.johnyml.blogspot.com is a platform for his continuous response to various issues he addresses within the art world and a variety of other realms.

He has authored eight independent books so far and has contributed to various volumes. K.S.Radhakrishnan (a monograph co-authored with R.Sivakumar), By All Means Necessary (a collection of essays from his blog published by the Kerala Lalitha Kala Academy), The Circle of Life –the Art of Siddharth (Prakriti, Chennai), B.D.Dethan and his Distinct Style (Suryakanthi, Thiruvananthapuram), Straight from Life –animal and bird imageries in Ram Kinkar Baij (Musui Foundation, New Delhi), In the Open (Ojas, New Delhi), Timeless Bronze (Uttarayan, Baroda).

He is a well known translator who has translated twenty five books so far. He translates international literature into Malayalam. 'Mistress' by Anita Nair, 'Eleven Minutes' by Paulo Coelho, 'Embers' by Sandor Marai, 'Distant Star' by Roberto Bolano, 'I Married a Communist' by Philip Roth, 'Famished Road' by Ben Okri, 'Black Book' by Orhan Pamuk, 'New Life' by Orhan Pamuk, 'Inferno' by Dan Brown, 'Brave New World' by Aldous Huxley, 'Lost Symbol' by Dan Brown, 'Strangeness in my Mind' by Orhan Pamuk, 'Astonishing the Gods' by Ben Okri (all for DC Books, Kerala) and 'Ramkinkar and His Works' by K.G.Subramanyan (Musui Foundation, New Delhi) to name a few.

Johny ML lives and works in New Delhi



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