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Monday 21 September 2009

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Art Talk

Marta Jakimowicz

Subramani drawing *Literal to metaphoric* The new exhibition at Samuha (August 22 to September 8) makes one appreciate the slowly growing number of young artists who coming from modest, often provincial backgrounds, instead of jumping into ready, radical ways, reach out for their own contemporariness by starting from direct and involved observation of the immediate surroundings.



Subramani's portraits depict his friends and people living in a village near Mysore registering the partly natural and partly eerie changes that are occurring in traditional rural life in the proximity of globalising urban phenomena. Equipped with a fairly conventional education at Ken School, Bangalore, Subramani begins what it allows – academically literal portraits in charcoal on paper. Exposed frontally with the kind of passport photograph indifferent objectivity, they are carefully rendered in sharp detail, string contours and dark hatching and emphatic, plasticity-inducing tonalities. As such the images convey the naivety of the method and its use that simultaneously captures some of the naive, un-pretended simplicity, roughness and raw energy of the subjects both as individuals and human types. The task is taken very personally, sincerely, with a quiet passion, and in certain cases the degree of slightly stylising over-stress acquires much intensity, while elements like shiny or starry eyes, floral meanders and moons around and behind the heads add to the sense of immersion in fantasy and aspiring. The artist involved in theatre who signs his Kannada poems scribbles on the portraits half-English conversations with his friends. If many of these works are self-limited, sometimes the jerky layering of the languages, emotions and realities bring about a bolder metaphoric imagery which can be quite enchanting without losing its coarse, straight-in-the-face rooting. Here come the gently precise and rather lyrical hybrids of cultural metamorphosis. A beautiful girl with phantasmagorical multiple pupils has a hairdo of soft caterpillars - somewhat repulsive yet promising to turn into butterflies. Rustics in turbans and saris are entranced listening to walkman music. The best impact is achieved when Subramani lets himself go a bit wild but retains the actual with sharpness and delicacy and with some poetic humour while translucent colours accentuate and lift the drawing. This happens especially in the image of a punk-headed, athletic youth with a pickaxe.

Critical nostalgia

Coming after many years, K S Appajaiah's "The Persistence of Memory" (Gallery Blue Spade, August 8 to 21) revealed a very positive development. Resisting the previous aesthetising and K G Subramayan-dependence, the paintings prove authentic. They deal with reminiscences of childhood in a rural landlord's household while establishing a personal idiom whose formal elements reflect the subject matter with its different strata and qualities. It is a nostalgic but critical or sadly warm recollection. Single motifs of its evocation are placed against vast canvases like amid the stretching and blurring space of memory – a warm-rough mood over the abstract translucence of rugged hazy stains or the starkness of macho power on even, dark planes. The objects triggering atmosphere, an old-fashioned iron, baby bottle or kerosene stove, are rendered with a mild realism as if filtered through photographic Xerox and partly covered in precious gold-leaf. The tenderness of the images may link motherly protectiveness with its divine embodiment in the infant Krishna icon, but it also remembers the subordination of the exhausted mother, sketchily frail here. Such pleasant objects-signs, a lamp or a ceiling fan, poetically suggest dangers attracting moths and bees to perish. By contrast, the plastic hyper-realism of the animal trophies and guns against the expanse of old documents of land-ownership and banknotes speaks sarcastically about male power. Sad irony pervades also the artist's references to Duchamp among practical domesticity and to book knowledge faced by weirdly grinning skulls. Whilst the latter lets one think of Atul Dodiya, the installation with a trophy is the weakest contribution. If one appreciates Appajaiah's new works to a fair degree, their design ingredient waters them down somewhat.

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Wounded frames

K Venkatesh has been consistently documenting disturbing or charming but always vital sceneries, phenomena, processes and people around here. His visual-expressive character of his images, as it should be in photo-journalism, arises directly from the state and look of what he shoots. Consequently, his prints in aesthetic terms oscillate between the obvious and the highly charged. His latest series of "Metamorphosis" (CKP, August 24 to 26) views of ordinary houses being demolished in Bangalore for development are particularly effective.

With some uprooted trees and excavated foundations, most photographs approach quite frontally interior rooms now accessible and framed by the wounds of the removed walls. There is gravity, vulnerability there and a feel of intimate absence.

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