

Murals as markers of time

By Sujatha Shankar Kumar · The Hindu · 3 min

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gita hudson

Artist and documentary filmmaker, Gita Hudson, has 44 paintings in her current show at Varija Gallery titled ‘Murals Revisited’ inspired by temple art. These works are an effort to conserve the traditional temple arts of Tamil Nadu as much as a meditative arts practice. Gita’s artworks in this collection relate to three time periods and dynasties: Pallava, Pandya and Chola of 600 to 1200 AD, the Vijayanagara and Nayak paintings circa 1300 to 1650 AD and the Maratha Paintings to the Colonial Period circa 1750 to 1950 AD.

Gita made these paintings as time permitted, establishing a continuum over four years. Primarily an abstract painter, she says, “It was always relaxing to paint these murals. Abstract painting consumes so much more energy.” Having a long association with DakshinaChitra, she was attracted to the conservation of art in monuments; this led to concern about the lack of holistic preservation methods

and vandalism.

How it began

Gita's initiation into this form happened quite by chance when she was at a temple in Thiruvanchuzhi. "A sparkling image in white, gold and blue simply appealed to me," she says. And she translated it into a painting.

Another time in Madurai, she saw craftsmen from Kerala commissioned to restore murals at the Meenakshi temple. When she delved deeper, she understood that Tamil Nadu temples are not all of one style, varying over time periods and dynastical reigns. "The earliest temples are over one thousand years old. I realised while the subject is so vast, I knew only a minute portion, that too more as an artist than a historian."

In her search for a comprehensive history, she stumbled upon a concise document, 'Paintings in Tamil Nadu,' by Job Thomas. "He had classified three categories beautifully, which were easy to understand." It was while making documentaries that Gita discovered the long-lasting impact murals and sculptures of the past had on many senior artists.

Suryamoorthy comes from the ancient town of Poompuhar. Vidya Shankar Sthapathy and the late Veerasanthanam hail from Kumbakonam, a town with

hundreds of temples; Veerasanthanam used to paint murals and sell them to pay for his school fees.

Alphonso Arul Doss's stint at the Kumbakonam college inspired him. Gita visited several temples. Also art history specialist K.T Gandhirajan shared photographs of brilliant works done during the Vijayanagar reign, some from monuments that were not easily accessible. "For me, the oldest periods are the most appealing; paintings between the 12th and 17th centuries are highly sophisticated. Possibly because of patronage they were able to devote themselves fully to their arts practice. In those days, temples were cultural hubs and social centres. People went there for ceremonies and functions and all the art became concentrated there," says Gita, who stresses the importance of acquainting ourselves with the stories behind the murals. Just as heritage trips by art historian Chitra Madhavan and Gandhirajan give people an insight into our marvellous history, Gita feels art should aim to educate.

Gita decided to magnify portions of the murals, as her intention was never to replicate an entire frieze. "Many artists have reproduced paintings in the 1950s and '60s but mine is a take on murals in oil on canvas." The effect is quite stunning at times as such expanded versions are hardly seen, the originals usually of smaller proportions. Also, as Gita edits portions, we are encouraged to imagine

the rest of the scene that is not available. Her 'Women in Palace' has four women bedecked and holding lotuses, looking out at, presumably, the queen.

In 'Women at the Temple Procession,' the focus is on women devotees standing with folded hands in a crowd, while the subject of their gaze is not seen. Like a modern textile adaptive of an ancient pattern, these capture our attention with imagery in a new context and in the use of a contemporary palette of flush pinks, magenta and crimson. "You can never get tired of temple art, the precision, the colours and the form," says Gita finding endless inspiration.

Camera and canvas

Gita has made 23 documentary films on artists, which have been screened widely in India and internationally (Gandhi Centre in Washington and British Council, London). Her films on Achuthan Kudallur, R.B. Bhaskaran, Vidya Shankar Sthapathy, P. Perumal, Alphonso Arul Doss and C. Douglas were featured at a curated festival in NGMA Bengaluru in April this year.