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A whirl with water

InKo Centre hosts the artwork of six artists in an exhibition called Waterless, Watermore, dedicated to the people who faced drought and floods with equanimity



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Photo | Ashwin Prasath

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CHENNAI: Chennai has a lot of memories with water. It has come to us as a necessity, allowing us to live our day to day lives and simply existing. It has come to us as an elixir, quenching our thirst when acute heat takes over the city. And it has also come to us as destruction, taking over the streets and houses with floods. To recognise this complex relationship with water, InKo Centre launched their art exhibit 'Waterless, Watermore' on Tuesday, dedicated to the people of Chennai who have faced the adversities of droughts and floods with equanimity.

“This exhibition came out of a chance conversation with artist Thejomaye Menon. It is about this perpetual concern we have and the oscillation we face between possible paucity and excess of water; water being such a primal element. This is a Chennai-based experience. For people who live in this city, the resilience of those who have to face this kind of constant oscillation, what is their response and how varied. This response is to what is a local and global phenomenon because Chennai is not an exception by any stretch of the imagination. One part of it is how we deal with these vagaries of the weather but also, in terms of individuals, from birth to death, there is a connection (with water),” shared Rathi Jafer, director, InKo Centre.

And every connection/response is unique. Where one would expect only blues and whites on the wall, there is a kaleidoscope of palettes instead. The exhibition showcases the work of six city-based artists — Asma Menon, Gita Hudson, Jacob Jebaraj, Kavitha Prasad, Shailesh BO, and Thejomaye Menon — who express interpretations on the element with a sprinkle of their own twist.

A new outlook

Asma Menon sees it through a series of bright colours. Pinks, blues, greens and yellows jump out from her canvas, paintings that have an almost childlike quality in contrast to the weighty subject matter. In complete contrast, across the room, are the works of Gita Hudson. Monochromatic black on white or white on black on canvas, her paintings depict the water as a saver and destroyer. The black on white artwork is startling, even eerie in some ways but leaves you engrossed in noticing little details among the busy surface.



While, unfortunately, the two artists were not present at the venue, the rest walked us through their artwork and inspirations. With a play on space, Jacob Jebaraj's artworks bring conversation to water restoration, patterns and movement. The same are named Water Way, inspired by the philosophies of J Krishnamurti of the Theosophical Society. "His philosophy is that water can fit into any shape. It can flow into a river, transform into a small stream, get into a farmer's land, and become something else. Water has its own way," he explained. One of his artworks is also inspired by water restoration, particularly one of the first attempts by Karikala Cholan some 2,000 years ago. They observed water patterns and decided upon a barrier where they can make a reservoir for further cultivation, he informed.

Where Jacob's work highlights the movement, Kavitha's canvas speaks in layers. Her art showcases stark differences with one exuding serenity, and another chaos. Both feature symbols related to the element — a crescent, crocodiles, fish, and more but one calms with its blue hues and another creates chaos with its slashes of red. "I started as a water colourist and think like one still. I have drawn up on water as an element, as ancient Indian epics speak of it. For me, water is meditative, because when you look at it, you don't see only the water. You see reflections, you see light and you see dark patches as well. What I have drawn is not by looking at something but with the memory of looking at it," she said.

Texture trails

Some artists take from larger, shared phenomena and others build out of personal experience. Raised in Karnataka, Shailesh was used to the rainfall nearly half the year but his move to Chennai brought another reality where "there are no rains, there is only flood," as he puts it. Playing with water colours and negative space, Shailesh's work looks delicate and brings in a human element to plays with the other aspects. "My paintings always have two elements and there is always tension between the two like the North and South Pole. I started creating a tension between the human and its surroundings," he shared. He opens up on his thoughts during the process of painting: from recognising that water rolls, not flows, to seeing the strength of the element when it tore holes in the paper lying around in his house.

Human elements feature on Shailesh's canvas but on Thejomaye's, they take an inanimate turn. With her 3D work showcasing pots and taps, she creates themes relevant to our reality. "I have worked with pots and taps because that is what you see but they also show the deeper meaning of the beginning of life. The pots indicate females and taps indicate males. There is also flora growing out of the plant which is all earth; the beginning of all life, flora and fauna is because of water," she explained. One of her artworks shows a bird's eye view of pots on the floor and footprints seeking it, an interesting take on perhaps scarcity and drought.

We may share the element of water; what with it being all around and inside us but it is evident that while we see the same thing, we take back different interpretations. The exhibition will be on display till September 30, 2022 at The Gallery, InKo Centre. The same will be released on Prism for those who would like to view it online.