

Home > Cities > Chennai

A rooted tribute to the rural

Filmmaker Gita Hudson chronicles the life of artist P Perumal, his works, and his love for his village in her documentary



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The exhibition will be on display and sale till March 5 at Ashvita's in Mylapore.

By Archita Raghu

Express News Service

CHENNAI: With the hills in the backdrop, crowds carry fire-lit pieces of cloth and dance to the sharp drum beats at their village festival — these memories leap from P Perumal's skillful fingertips onto a canvas. Unfinished rough sketches transform into landscapes where village folk work on fields, a group of blue-shirted men play football or crowds throng around Jesus Christ.

These frames fill filmmaker and artist Gita Hudson's 30-minute documentary aptly titled Perumal's People. Her lens faithfully captures the spirit of Perumal, who passed away in 2019, as we meet the artist after only encountering his

paintings, people, and rustic and rooted landscapes. “The scenes I saw in my childhood never fade from my memory. Even today, I recall and paint them. That is where my originality lies and that is what has brought me recognition,” says Perumal on his hometown, Koomapatti in Srivilliputhur.

In a quiet nook of Mylapore, a handful of curious spectators encounter Perumal at Ashvita’s Art Gallery. For some, like me, it is a first encounter with the fresco artist, an integral part of the 1960s Madras Art movement. As a national scholar in drawing and painting from 1962 to ‘64, he had many awards to his name, including the Lalit Kala National Akademi Award.



From devotees at the Andal Kovil in Srivilliputtur or children performing oyilattam at Virudhunagar’s Vatrairuppu, Gita interweaves frames of the people the artist pursues on his canvas. Background scores on drum beats from Shivashakti Kalai Kuzhu and Kannan Kumar punctuate the film.

The artist, surrounded by his paintings, recalls dancing in a trance during saamiattam as a child. This trance is forever present in his artistic style as the colours that fill his faceless figures continue to dance. “The painting comes alive whenever I stand before them,” Gita tells the audience post the screening.

Perumal explains how his childhood was spent moulding clay, or painting whitewashed walls with natural pigments during Thai pongal. Long after he left his village for the Government College of Arts and Craft (now Government College of Fine Art), the artist said he had forgotten his village. Yet, his frames never stray from the rural landscapes, which are far from the usual romanticised pastoral scenes.

‘No artistic airs’

The film is simple in its premise just as the man it seeks to document. “He wore a white dhoti and shirt and was very blunt. He didn’t have any of this artistic nonsense. When he paints, you can see how many ways he has treated people

differently on every canvas. You know they are simple folk but feel their suffering,” Gita tells CE.

Complex theories and art lingo do not muddle the conversations. Refreshingly, Perumal skips the usual cliched answer of choosing art for human suffering but instead mentions he enjoys painting, enough said. In a world often dictated by political correctness and landscapes fill galleries, Perumal has a free-wheeling conversation where he breezily discusses his opinions: current artists aping the West and art cannot be modelled on religion, that he enjoys the work of Picasso and Van Gogh.

While Gita had four-five hours of footage, she had to chop and stitch together scenes, making sure not to exceed 30-40 minutes. The filmmaker, who has several films on the movement’s artists, says she aims for the personality and the artwork to bleed through her work.

The film includes clips from his village, his studio in Tambaram, and even speeches from a one-day Lalit Kala Akademi camp. Briefly, I wonder if the film could have provided more context on the Madras Art Movement and the big names dropped like KCS Paniker, DP Roy Chowdhury, or Anthony Doss CJ (the latter features in the film). Perhaps, it could have paused to explain politics or the communities it records. But the film succeeds in what it sets out to do: document Perumal and spur further dialogues. Garima, a student, says, “I came in blind, I don’t know much about art. This is a good way to be introduced to an artist...The conversation in the documentary felt raw where there was this unabashed frankness in expressing opinions.”

Curation charm

The artist’s paintings have been put up on the walls of Ashvita’s. They have been curated in a progression from the village life, celebrations, and finally, by the end of the artwork on Christianity, explains Nafeeza, community engagement manager of the gallery.

The artist mentions in the documentary, the thoughts of his village, the agony, deaths, festivals, and joy stays with him. Perumal's people continue to dance in the eternal drum beats captured on canvas.

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