

Series of documentaries to showcase lives of painters, sculptors who defined Madras art movement

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CHENNAI: When he was arrested for hitting a policeman, artist M Suriyamoorthy spent a month in a Chennai hospital for the mentally ill because his advocate told him that was the only way he wouldn't be thrown in jail.

Suriyamoorthy then spent his days evading hospital staff by hiding in bushes and sketching other inmates engaged in their daily activities because he was didn't want to lose touch with art.

Suriyamoorthy, who received a National award when he was 21, forms one of the subjects of Gita Hudson's series of documentaries on painters and sculptors who defined the Madras

art movement from the 1960s to present day, which will be screened free of cost on Saturday at VR Mall as part of the Madras Art Guild 2020.

"My only regret is that he never got to see the documentary on him as he passed away in 2012, the year it was completed. He was drawing till the day he died, even from his hospital bed."

Hudson, an artist, embarked on her mission to document city artists in 2005, with artist Achuthan Kudallur, who

was a friend, being her first subject. "I believe we need to profile these thinkers who made a mark in the art scene," said Hudson, who adds that the series is ongoing, with a few such as one the sculptors of temple cars in the pipeline. Apart from screenings at film festivals, Hudson's documentaries do the rounds at art schools in the country, "helping students connect to masters of the past".

Like Suriyamoorthy for instance, who mashed his Siddha practitioner father's medicines together to create art work, which he sold as "medicinal art"; or Veera Santhanam, another Chennai artist, who was also an activist for women's rights, and a textile designer. "A little remembered fact is that he was an actor as well," says Hudson. "He played a puppeteer in the 2010 film Aval Peyar Thamizharasi. His paintings incidentally were inspired by puppetry." Veera Santhanam died in 2017.

Hudson's documentaries are a montage of conversations with artists as well as visits to their homes and studios, which reveal aspects of their personalities and eccentricities.

Artist C Douglas, for instance, says Hudson, uses a lot of blue colour in his paintings. At his home too, one will find several shades of blue. "Achuthan is a voracious reader and had interests ranging from science to philosophy. Artist D Venkatapathy was one of the first to build a house in Cholamandal Artist's Village in 1967.