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## CHAPTER 4

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LINEAGE OF ABSTRACTION WITHIN THE MADRAS ART MOVEMENT: 60'S AND 70S

With his nativist ideology K.C.S. Paniker initiated an approach to art making, creating a rippling effect among his colleagues, peers and above all to a group of enthusiastic and committed students who banded together under him. Though there were dissenting voices it only lent greater vibrancy disallowing homogeneity or stereotypical standardization. The spaces created by tradition and modernity is where the group finds its location.

Paniker's colleagues in the School of Arts and crafts were S. Dhanapal, H.V. Ram Gopal, R. Krishna Rao, P.B. Surendranath, L. Munuswamy, A.P. Santhanaraj, and Anthony Doss. Paniker as the head of the Institution wrought important pedagogic changes with lasting implications. What is relevant here is that it was an environment that facilitated a nurturing of the movement as the long shadow of D.P. Roy Chowdhary faded gradually. This enabled aggressive creative statements, in keeping with the contingencies of the time - an identity crisis in the 60s that made it incumbent to establish a different trajectory within the broad canvas of the national modern. This engendered an experimental and an exploratory tract when pictorial and plastic Indian art traditions in conjunction with regional arts and crafts were studied for an art practice that would engage with the contemporary agenda involving nativist program. With these various exigencies operating, it was the collective intelligence and the contributions of each artist that made possible the regional development of the modern art movement.

Contemporary art derives from older art and art grows out of art. The Madras Art Movement was a process and a development that was initiated during the regime of D.P. Roy Chowdhary. Its contours were established in mid 40s and began forming its specific characteristic features during the second half of 1950's and early 60's. With K.C.S. Paniker in painting and S. Dhanapal in sculpture as its leading figures these two dedicated and committed artists set a momentum for an authentic modernism rooted in the region's cultural heritage. Eventually they became the torchbearers of this new direction. The art school served as a locus for developing a trajectory for the unique regional development. Simultaneously such an agenda opened up space for greater exploration in various techniques, painting materials and variety in supports. These experiments that were nurtured within the institutional matrix by senior artists as Paniker, Munuswamy,

Santhanaraj, were supported and enhanced with traditional repertoire enabling a visualization of the regional idiom in painting, sculpture and other decorative crafts that formed an integral part of the curriculum of the Art School. The ideological truisms of the Madras Art Movement were realized through the visual elements of line, space and color, which primarily played an identifying role. Ideationally it advocated the repertoire of the regional stockpiles of forms to play a major role as mediations for artistic expressions. These defining categories set the momentum for an art movement aptly encapsulating the regional modern within its parameters. But these were not fixed as paradigms to be essentially followed as set trajectory rather it allowed flexibility and the artists freely operated within it.

It is not possible to isolate the Madras Art Movement from the pan Indian art scene in the process of its growth and development. The Southern region inevitably is an integral part of the 'imagined community' of the so-called Indian nation. In the nationalist discourse modernism was tied up with the ideology of modernization and modernity as analyzed earlier, and had at its crux an 'anti-western, retroactive element named tradition to account for'<sup>1</sup> This was introduced to heal the rupture of colonialism, and restore the civilizational memory. It is in the revaluation of the so-called 'retroactive element called tradition' that the Madras Group searched with integrity. The intermingling of the Dravidian cultural conventions of the Southern region with clever and craftily appropriated and assimilated stylistic European idioms allowed for the emergence of the art movement.

Within the Madras Art Movement it is possible to draw out two broad specific areas within which the artists visualized their creative temper. This was the 'figurative' and the 'abstract' terrain<sup>2</sup>. Artists have worked within these two conventions that have had different implications in different cultures through the centuries. And within the Madras artistic circuit these two strands of stylistic representations though not dominantly marked are visible enough to make this distinction. This is to say that for certain artists the preferred mode was figurative but bordering on the abstract. For instance it remained visibly figurative in Santhanaraj's or Vasudev's works demonstrating strong implications of crossing over to abstraction. Therefore it disallows definite distinctions to be made within the Madras Group, but for purpose of clarity and study in this chapter, the focus would be on abstraction, as certain artists preferred this language for their creative expressions.

It becomes necessary at this juncture before proceeding to study abstraction within the Madras Group to briefly outline the works of two artists within the post-independence milieu of the very

early 50's. These were the two notable teachers at the institution namely R. Krishna Rao [1915-] and H.V. Ram Gopal [1925-1980]. Both the artists owed their allegiance to D.P. Roy Chowdhary. But Ram Gopal was an artist with a larger vision who while advocating the European modernist styles in consonance with Paniker, was not too much in favour of utilizing the regional art forms for artistic creations that Paniker was gradually gravitating towards. It was Ramgopal who introduced line to be employed as an innovative and vital element that was explored intelligently, creatively and with an 'Indian' sensibility by majority of the artists. The students on their part because of their open-minded approach, the thrust and encouragement that they validated and initiated, revered both these artists. And I would like to put forward the argument by reiterating the two schools of thought, one after Roy Chowdhary and the other after Paniker's that largely led to a divide; and within this categorization these two artists played a pivotal role. The selection of the two artists has been premised primarily to illustrate the prevalent two schools of thoughts in the late 50's when Paniker took over as the Principal of the Institution.

#### **R. KRISHNA RAO [1915- ] EMPIRICAL EXPRESSIONS**

"Painting is an art made not only of pigments on a surface, but also of signs in semantic space. The meaning of a picture is never inscribed on its surface as brush strokes are; meaning arises in the collaboration between signs [visual or verbal] and interpreters"<sup>3</sup>

R. Krishna Rao [Figs. 1 & 2] declared that, "I derive my inspiration from nature – flora and fauna, mountains and rivers, the sun and the moon, valleys and pastures, the sea the bounteous earth.... I am an admirer of the architecture of the temples... with special interest in sculptural and architectural details"<sup>4</sup>. He takes the posture with his creative expressions as empirical and perceptual in opposition to Norman Bryson who situates a painting as a sign in a semantic space. The artist's engagement with perceptual reality disallowed exciting semantics to manifest his practice. His works could be characterized as having a 'natural attitude' based on the strength of tactile values. And so for Krishna Rao 'what painting depicts is what everyone with two eyes in his head already knows: universal visual experience'<sup>5</sup>. In drawing a parallel with this naturalist attitude, I wish to advance my argument that Krishna Rao mediating through the Bengal School wash technique and coupling it with themes derived from outdoor life particularly the rural settings was creating realistic renderings of romantic light effects. [Fig. 3] In doing this he was approximating or came close to academic realism that was favoured in the colonial art schools. The predilection of Krishna Rao towards romanticized landscape rendering could indirectly be

also the influence of the English landscapists in the watercolours of Roy Chowdhary distilling in Krishna Rao's depiction of ruralscapes. The sun-drenched and evocative pastoral scenic delineations are a ubiquitous phenomenon of the region, which the artist explored passionately through his medium.

Krishna Rao's predilection and temperament prevented him from going against the grain of perceptual directed pedagogy prescribed by Chowdhary. His subject matter was sourced from crowded festivals, temples, market places and street scenes redolent with regional colours. Krishna Rao if he had evinced interest in modernist formulae could have transcended the purely visual with its mimetic emphasis, to create individual expressions that admirably would have become visible as his signature style.[Fig. 4, 5, & 6] Nevertheless the dominant aim of the image in the 'natural attitude', as Krishna Rao manifests is the communication of perception from a source replete in perceptual material that is the artist, to the site of reception eager for perceptual satisfaction that is the viewer. This mode of operation favoured Krishna Rao as he professed a lack of faith in modernist formulae similar to his mentor Chowdhary. Krishna Rao pursued this particular mode of naturalistic rendering because the viewer/layperson could easily identify and relate with it

This raises the question of the familiarity of modern art styles within the city of Madras [Chennai] and its appreciation to enable the artist to market his paintings. The city analyzed in Chapter II was a conservative stronghold, where the privilege of patronage was accorded to performing arts, but was not so favourably disposed to the visual arts. And for Krishna Rao the crux of the problem lay here. Krishna Rao expressed inadequacy to continue with other modes or forms of expression precisely because of these economic factors. Dance and music existed in the traditional context, which was disrupted for visual arts, thanks to colonial art schools. And due to these contingencies, Krishna Rao largely catered to the prevailing taste and aesthetics in late 50s and early 60s.

### **An Artist-Teacher**

Krishna Rao marked his respect and allegiance for D.P. Roy Chowdhary by insisting on the norms of empiricism foregrounding perceptual reality. Towards this he impressed upon his students to work in watercolour medium –his preferred choice - as it allowed easy facility for intimate and personal expressions. A broad range of impressionist brush strokes, structured and organized to be skillfully mimetic characterized his works in rendering the genre of rural

landscapes, urbanscapes, village festivals and the temple architecture. The pattern of his paintings was sustained by a pictorial structure that consisted of curves, dots and marks to affect the desired results. Arguably his deft skills optimized the optical and tactile effects.

Krishna Rao's engagement with mimetic representation markedly personalized his works. But it nevertheless had its drawbacks as a facile character manifested his watercolours resembling those of all the others who went through the rigors of this medium. This is because Chowdhary had introduced the method of rendering watercolours, developed and practiced by Abanindranath Tagore that had become the defining technique of the Madras School in 50s and 60s. Nevertheless, Krishna Rao's works sun drenched and crowded with humanity, realized with broad defining brush strokes and lack of details, border on quasi abstractions [Fig. 7].

Krishna Rao though confessing to the impact of western influence predominantly in the deployment of technique and tools as mentioned earlier, his oeuvre undoubtedly projected a regional vision as his themes derived from epics, mythology and Christianity. His rural sensibility engendered for him the penetrating insight of rendering the architectural magnificence of great temples at Madurai, Tirupparankunram, Srirangam and Thanjavur. This explained his affinity in the use of the ubiquitous motif of gopuras that emerge as a dominant trope in his works. Interestingly Krishna Rao in keeping with the Dravidian ideology to signify Tamil identity utilized the motif of gopuram to operate as a cultural sign when he was asked to design the official seal for the Tamil Nadu government in 1961 [Fig. 8]. This cultural marker implicates regional specificity associated with social practices and political ideologies.

Krishna Rao's drawing was largely inspired by Frank Brangwyn the English artist while Claude Monet touched his sensibilities in painted expressions. Proficient in rendering any subject matter he categorically avoided the seascapes, strangely confessing to the fact that he was no philosopher. This confirms his approach to art plainly enjoying the titillation that nature and environment provided.

In the 60s when Cubism was studied as a modernist expression he evinced keen interest. And not surprisingly he rendered the cubist style with the theme of Krishna, underpinning a strong consciousness towards Indian ethos even if the medium and technique were modern [Fig. 9 & 10]. Strong Indian sentiments pervade his works as he explicates, "the kolam drawn in front of

our houses in Tamil Nadu is a design derived from a sign, which in turn comes from a signature; therefore Kolam is a symbol of our ethos”.

In drawing, Krishna Rao stressed the fundamental autonomy of perception to serve as the strength of the artist and made this precept fundamental to art teaching. In reinforcing this pedagogy he was inspired by Picasso who stressed on drawing as the foundation for art education. And categorically Rao understood drawing as an empiricist's reality, since the artist had the perceptual world before him as a predetermined source to verify his experiences when he selectively organized his sensations as a painted statement.

Not that Krishna Rao was averse to any experimentation and explorations, for he had made forays into abstractions evolving expressions that were marked with strong patterning. This approach characterized his individual vision [Fig. 11]. Given his grounding in design since he was heading the commercial art section in the institution, the schema of his abstractions have patterned decoration in which he juxtaposed his lines with bold modulations of colours. But he did not pursue in this direction since it was not economically viable. What prevented him from exploring the language of abstraction was its lack of direct correspondence with the natural world that would not evoke any appreciation from the traditional and conservative public of Madras. This was rationalized on the grounds that since there were no art galleries in the city, nor aggressive dealers and neither an art market so to speak, the artist had to depend entirely on the foreigners attached to various embassies and who inevitably patronized the artists at the institution<sup>6</sup>. Or else it was the Victoria Technical Institute, which channelized the works and sold it to the public.

Krishna Rao vehemently spoke about the salability of his works only if the patron/buyer could relate to it. G. Joseph an alumnus of the institution whose work was acquired by the Mysore Museum and a contemporary of Rao, though talented could not make headway with the art market for the same reason given by Rao. He also painted the everyday genre and did not experiment to further his creative ideas, reinforce this mute point.[Fig. 12] But Krishna Rao with the stability of the teaching profession and opportunities for commission – to strengthen his financial status - could have emboldened to chart a different trajectory. He had neither the inclination nor the predilection to do so because of his stubborn allegiance to Chowdhary in a typical tradition of *guru-sishya paparmpara* on one hand and a professed lack of faith in modernist formulae on the other. And these factors made it difficult for him to be radically different. His creativity hence remained pegged to stereotyped and fixed genres.

### **H.V. RAMGOPAL [1925 – 1980] EXPRESSIONIST VISIONARY**

A protégé of D.P. Roy Chowdhary, Ram Gopal [Fig. 13], who hailed from Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh, was an artist with admirable technical skills. To him goes the credo of introducing line as the main player of creative expressions in the Madras School <sup>7</sup>. [Fig. 14] Krishna Rao with K.C.S. Paniker and others, 1960s. A dedicated teacher he inspired and drastically changed the mindset of the students to work towards individual thinking, reordering and effectively manipulating traditional elements to strengthen traditional character. Though this was not an intentional move it unconsciously was leading towards an identity that collectively was established in the 60s when the nation itself was in the throes of liberating itself from the Euro-American hegemony in the visual arts.

His expansive vision can be gauged when he explicated that “a work of art should never be confined within the narrow bounds of linguistic and other constraints. The artist should extend his vision from the environment to the spheres beyond”<sup>8</sup>. Undoubtedly it underpins a strong reaction to the nativist/regional agenda that Paniker was vehemently propagating and to which Ram Gopal reacted with characteristic opposition. Believing in the strength and integrity of his vision he was not in the league of artists who could be pressurized to follow in the staid footsteps or to fall under the spell of rhetoric. And in projecting such a mindset he was a true inspiration to many of his students enabling them to think and operate independently and freely. It should be reiterated, that as an artist, he might not have defined his territories in terms of individual style or signature. But his distinctly different mode and approach to thinking was a stimulating factor, inspiring many a young and impressionable minds opening tracts for them that set the tone for variety of creative expressions, within the precincts of the School of Arts and Crafts.

An expressionist in his creative domain he had freely borrowed from modernism to eventually evolve his style. Professing no faith in conceptualization or cerebration, he instead favoured subjective expressions that were projected powerfully [Figs 15 & 16]. In this direction he seemed to have been affected and stimulated by the works of Van Gogh, which he predictably established with his bold and individualized brush strokes, consequently marking it as his signature. Strongly opposed to blind imitation of any modern artist he believed in the strength of his own personal vision. The conceptualization of abstraction for him was a process that was gradually evolved by the artist in response to the experiences of life around him. In his works he reduced the content of representation to focus on the motif expressively. His works testify to this



process as he moved from linear expressions to painterly. His style is informed of Van Gogh's choppy strokes and his compositions negate the illusionist dimension to imply only play upon the surface that was both modern and traditional. Color was usefully deployed reflecting his subjectivity, when he explicated, "color is life. Color is charm. I wish to go to the spirit of form and transmit my experience in terms of color. In this process there is a possibility of bringing forth a new vision, a new syntax in the field of art quite different from those we are now familiar with. I strive for it as long as I remain an artist"<sup>9</sup>. Ram Gopal's works tended towards European movement especially of the Post-Impressionists. But the striking dimension of his oeuvre was the brilliant draftsmanship that initiated a trajectory to become an identifying mark of the Madras Art Movement.

All senior artists unfailingly mention Ramgopal as a man of rare and distinct vision whose creative imputation pushed the frontiers of the Madras Art Movement subsumed in the artistic endeavours of his students. D.P. Roy Chowdhary his guru had this to comment "one would find in his pictures those emotions, which touched every human being and he had expressed those emotions in a very straight forward manner". A versatile artist his striking characteristics were his sensitivity of line and freshness of feeling for colours in different media.

The importance of Ramgopal as an artist-teacher during those crucial moments in late 50s and early 60s within the institution rests on his calibrated efforts to personalize expressions that served as catalyst for his students. It allowed them creative freedom without imposition of set ideas on either their thinking or visual statements. His novel approach in making line the main protagonist of expression opened up tract for aggressive mediation of this particular element within the Madras group. [Figs. 17 & 18]

### **Abstraction the Madras Experience**

As mentioned earlier a broad categorization of styles within the two decades of the 60s and 70s in the Madras Art Movement were Abstraction and Figuration. Pamker has been analyzed in the previous chapter as a seminal artist, who offered a reading of his works, as quasi-abstraction, which served as his dominant mode of expression, in which he privileged signs and symbols from his region to play an important and defining role.

Beginning with abstraction, as a genre, it found favour with many in the group. I wish to emphasize that of the different approaches and conceptualization of the language of abstraction

practiced by the continental artists; and exemplified in the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich; it was surprisingly the American Abstract Expressionism that was closely studied by the Madras Group as Stephen Kinza notes, “ They were consumed with the challenge of finding an Indian response to the sort of art that was coming out of the west. They were influenced by Rothko, then De Kooning and later by Twombly, Jasper Johns and Frank Stella. Madras is where Abstract Expressionism was studied closely”<sup>10</sup>.

Within the Madras Art Movement the artists who made abstraction their vocabulary were foremost among them L. Munuswamy, K.V. Haridasan [his tantric formulations], V. Viswanathan, K. Adimoolam, P. Gopinath, Achuthan Kudallur and the graphic artist RM. Palaniappan. The abstraction that these artists practiced had a range from international to national to regional. Munuswamy, Adimoolam and Palaniappan’s projection of their abstract language found favour with international character while the others largely produced works that had a regional bias in keeping with the ideology of Paniker. These differing approaches created heterogeneity within the mode of abstraction as practiced by the artists of the Madras Group. It also distinguished the Madras Group from others within the pan Indian milieu that had employed the vocabulary of abstraction as well from other international abstractionists.

### **Abstract Art: An Introduction**

Abstraction in its aesthetic aspect was a historical phenomenon in the visual arts, wherein representational or mimetic subject matter was discarded. The artist either sought to abstract from observable forms of life, or began making patterns of shapes, volume, color and line that was self referential and autonomous with a ‘significant silence’ in terms to content with reference to social and cultural context. Fundamentally abstract implied a removal, a drawing out from original location, and enforcing movement of elements from one level to another or from one original plane into another. Over the past century, the lure of abstraction has proved a central pre-occupation to many significant artists, and its impulse so strong that even now at the beginning of a new century, it remains an option to many of them. Twentieth century abstraction philosophically was a pervasive means of resisting the materialist view of the world to what Hegel prescribed as progress enunciating dematerialism, the triumph of spirit over matter. Historically Cezanne’s dictum enabled the possibilities of reducing nature to geometric equivalents. In the process it axed interests of differences between varied subjects like portraits, landscapes, still life etc. and privileged the continuity between them. This move repudiated three-dimensional space and established the picture plane as continuous without hierarchical values.

Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich carried this idea to its extreme.

### **The Challenge of Space in the Language of Abstraction**

In abstraction, pictorial space is predicated on an entirely different spatial system. This was largely differentiated from the authoritative perspectival space that had dominated the arts since the Renaissance. Cézanne was pivotal in opening up the possibility of allowing perceptual and natural vision to incorporate the 'truth' revealed by the artist's own shifting perspectival viewpoint into the picture plane. Besides Cézanne's contribution; this also included the invention of photography to force a rethinking of spatial representation, Symbolism's imaginative 'turning inwards' replacing a desire to represent the outside world and new theories of optics and color. Towards this problematic negotiation of space should be added revolution within the discipline of physics, with theories of relativity and divisibility of the atom. These were centrality of modernist agenda playing a dominant role in the construction and configuring of space.

For the artists the formal choice lay broadly between the 'grid' and the unquantifiable 'field'. The latter after the Second World War was grounded in the possibilities of a sensuous, imaginative and far-reaching landscape of the mind. 'Grid' was peculiar to the working methods of the artists of the late 50s and early 60s. The basis of all grids was patterning. It was abstract art since it was the logical outgrowth of all over painting [Jackson Pollock]. Grid painting was a rationalized geometric extrapolation from all over painting similar to colour field paintings but with a structure. It had the capacity to evoke visual textures of sensuousness and played with flatness to provide the tension of flirtation with decorativeness. In this respect it is possible to apply the structure of patterning to folk culture and to some extent to miniature tradition in India. Within the international hegemony the spotlight of focus on folk and tribal culture together with miniature canonical tradition in the Third World countries had important bearings especially on the character/nature of abstraction as it evolved in India. Within the national modern varied forms of folk art culture especially floor decorations and wall paintings provided important point of reference for its development especially in the 60s within the question of Indian authenticity and ethos. This however opened up diverse possibilities of exercising creative freedom within the abstraction practiced by the Madras Group. What fed into their choices besides the native option was also their view of abstract pictorial space.

From early 1920 onwards the impact of European Modernism had been felt on Indian art scene in the cubists works of Gaganendranath Tagore. Abstraction as a matter of fact has been pointed out to be an elite domain, since Tagores' boldly explored it in the decades of 20s and 30s, but at the same time was felt to be a tract of art language that would not attract patronage or buyers<sup>11</sup>.

Until the 40s abstraction as a language remained unfavoured by majority of artists. This was due to nationalist agenda taking priority when a large number of artists were involved in establishing a style or an expression that would reflect the Indian ethos. Although it cannot be demed that during the nationalist struggle artists like Amrita Sher Gill, Gaganendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Ramkinker Baij among many others were working individually for a different expression in which they had combined Indian subject matter with modernists stylistic features. These included cubist fracturing of planes elicited in works of Gaganendranath Tagore or Gauguinesque mode of figurative delineation integrated with Indian color sensibility in the oeuvre of Amrita Sher Gill or the surrealist exploration of the subconscious imagery in the works of the poet Rabindranath Tagore. In the plastic arts, Ramkinker Baij had moved away from terracotta as a medium to expressively using cement in his group compositions of Santhal family with his Impressionistic surface texture-embodying expressionist feel at the same time.

It was since the late 40s after the nation had won its political freedom that the nationalist ideology largely ceased to be the basic determinant of aesthetic choice and the artists could creatively and freely react themselves to the modern international trends in art. The exhaustion of emotional urges inscribed in the lyrical and sentimental styles of the Revivalist movement of the first half of the century also led artists to search for something more rational and pure, unconnected with nationalist sentiments and literary connections. The decade of 40s also marked the establishment of various progressive groups in Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi each with their independent agenda. Of these groups the Progressive Artist Group of Bombay [1947] considered the first self-conscious modernists in India strategically adopted abstract pictorial elements of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism to establish their identity without any residue of the nationalist sentiments. The absorption and assimilation of quasi-abstract figuration in the late 40s has been because it had a vitally different approach to making pictorial space, which also satisfied a need for a change of artistic intentions.

However abstraction made its forceful intervention in the mid 50s in the Indian scene when Indian artist with European experience returned to India to mould the post-independence artistic

milieu. They brought back with them semi-figurative style that was based on post-war French development in abstraction. They introduced the aesthetics of color and texture in Modern Indian art, which until then was dominated by narrative and meaning. The decade of 50s witnessed the nation marking economic and cultural progress. And in the visual arts the Indian artists largely had appropriated European modern movements/styles with their awareness within an imagined international artist community. Two apex organizations were established around this time namely the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Central Lalit Kala Akademi at Delhi in 1954. These two agencies promoted contemporary art as demand arose for its application to production and industry. More significant was the growth of patronage especially from commercial houses, galleries, institutions, public and the foreigners. These various factors enhanced the acceptance of contemporary art and abstraction as a genre gained valency that by 60s had won general appreciation. Artists during the 50s and 60s who showed predilection towards international abstraction were N.S. Bendre, J. Sabawala, V.S. Gaitonde, K.S. Kulkarni, Ram Kumar, Akbar Padamse, Shanti Dave, Ambadas, among number of others. The abstract painters are significant because they set the scale for the painterly skills in India.

In Madras at the art institution Paniker was experimenting with a group that manifested a different sensibility. Within this constellation of artists there were a few among them who though rooted in the nativist ideology preferred abstraction as a language of their creative expression. The commonality between them was and is this essentially shared abstract vision with plenitude of reference to nature and culture. Culture here implied a process of self-construction. This was a process of sourcing and appropriating various art forms, credibly translated and transformed by the artists, who significantly would evoke it in their painted statements reflecting subjectivity that eventually would lead to a construction of identity located as they were within their regional milieu. The stalwart within the Madras Group and a very senior artist after Paniker was the enigmatic and virtuoso L. Munuswamy whose exploration of abstraction was based on a different perception.

## **L. MUNUSWAMY [1927- ] GESTURAL ABSTRACTION**

### **Ideological Terrain**

Munuswamy [Fig. 19] along with A.P. Santhanaraj [another senior teacher at the School of Art] was a seminal art practitioner within the Madras Art Movement. He was a senior artist after Paniker. In analyzing the crucial role played by Munuswamy it is important to contextualise him in relation to Paniker's espousal of nativism. Munuswamy in his search and exploration of

modernity was equal to Paniker, and yet differed substantially from latter's preoccupation with tradition. The abstraction that he created had an international character, particularly his affinity to Abstract Expressionism although this was emphatically manifest in its gestural language. He too like Paniker does not lose his touch with the corporeal world and maintain the credence of semblance-dissemblance. This bases itself upon his manipulation of line that he dexterously employs. And a strong primeval expression pervades his works in their stark minimalism and daring boldness of forms. [Fig. 20]

Munuswamy's vision was progressive, one that could be characterized as experimental and exploratory. He chalked his identity within the Madras Art Movement by grounding his ideology in a larger world tradition and not within a narrow parochial outlook. Nevertheless whatever the personal philosophy of both Paniker and Munuswamy, his agency served to chart a different trajectory that enabled his students to draw together and formulate their creative expressions. He nevertheless is strongly lauded as an exemplary teacher by his students who today are eminent in the field of painting like Alphonso, Bhaskaran, Vasudev, Adimoolam, Gopinath Viswanathan to name a few. He researched modern masters in their iconography, style and techniques particularly the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Cubists, and Expressionists including the Minimalists. He assimilated their stylistic expressions to charter a vanguardist outlook i.e. a drastically different trajectory among his contemporaries.

The technical and artistic experiments that he was involved with, within the spectrum of Internationalism, meant a resistance to the institutionalization of Paniker's nativist agenda. For he declared "Indian tradition is something one just cant get away from"<sup>12</sup>, but at the same time he posited the values of cultural ethos, that should not be homogenized within the Southern region and or/Dravidian culture. Rather his emphasis was that culture should acquire a status quo within the consciousness of the Third World internationally. This becomes relevant especially in the 60s when there was a virtual stasis and new paths had to be forged within the broad canvas of Internationalism and of evolving Third World identity. Munuswamy with his daringly different, energetic and aggressive vision within the institutional matrix proved a catalyst for many young aspirants.

Munuswamy's zeal, dedication, individualistic vision and single-minded pursuit in artistic endeavours was asserted when he stated, "the philosophy of commitment to art is tragically replaced by the creed of self-promotion. Yet in the midst of all this, one occasionally hears the

feeble voices of dedicated minorities pursuing their own vision and ideology against heavy odds"<sup>13</sup>. Yet subsumed within this cryptic statement was perhaps his alienation conditioned by his defiant approach, yet savouring an attitude of a mendicant to pursue art without material gains or due recognition. Dynamic and interactive as a teacher, manifestly innovative and experimental as an artist, but an introvert and hostile as an individual is what amply defines his persona.

Within the Art Institution, Munuswamy's status as student and later as teacher in the 50s and 60s allowed for an education that exposed him to learn lessons from national modern discourse, pioneering works of Bengal School artists and pedagogy under Chowdhary. Standing at a threshold when he wanted to make mature expressions that would be identified with his artistic persona, he turned towards modern European masters for inspiration. His works reflected this assimilation and he moved beyond for further experimentations. He considered his position within the Madras Group as the 'feeble voice of dedicated minorities pursuing their own vision and ideology against heavy odds'. By gesturing to the dominant voice of Paniker and his thrust towards regional/local tradition, Munuswamy expressed his antipathy towards those painters who in a bid to express 'Indianness' painted themes from Ramayana or Mahabharata. The artists indulging in recreating the epic stories to generate an aura of authenticity were denying the narrative its true representational spirit, which for Munuswamy was crucial. Instead the artist suggests that cultural ethos is negotiable through what he terms 'robust technique'. Along the same track of thinking that is of reflecting 'Indianness' Munuswamy described Neo Tantricism as 'meaningless and irrelevant outside its ritualistic content' that had deluged the art scene in the late 60s.

The practice of privileging technique, making forays into the use of different material for supports and exploring the use of synthetic pigments remained at the forefront in the institution. It was Coomarswamy's view that the best of traditional artists were "designers and themselves skilled in many crafts" suggested a model to Munuswamy that the modern artist could profitably emulate. He made a conscious effort to pursue versatility as central to art and teaching thereby rendering experimentation in medium and technique as consummately vital. His teachers and colleagues Paniker, Dhanapal and Santhanaraj also echoed similar ideas.

### **Personal Track of Exploration: Early Formulations**

In his art Munuswamy negotiated the elements of line, space and color. The exploration of these came to him naturally since he had breathed its ambience from an impressionable age. His

predecessors were icon makers and the homely environment was thick with temple talks and hymns sung as homage to its deities. Though surrounded by siblings of his age he found it difficult to communicate with them and gravitated towards art for expression, communication and fulfillment. Anjali Sircar reflects on his childhood days thus, "He intuitively worked in close relation to nature and was able, as Wordsworth put it, 'to see into the heart of things'. Lines formed as he held his pencil or crayon and arrested attention for an essentially aesthetic experience. Like a person who has a message to deliver, he was endlessly propelled forward by the spectacle of his own performance which at a later date led him to claim a basic style in art that survived all his experimentations"<sup>14</sup>. It is this ability to look into 'the heart of things' from the naive and innocent perspective of one untutored in its significance that engaged Munuswamy later to evolve his vision, productively marked by a different approach.

Munuswamy's attention was drawn equally to nature and culture. His early works privileged nature as he came to grip with his art mastering and controlling the elements of visual language. It is only much later when he had moved beyond nature that he brought his attention to focus upon cultural values and ethos that set for him a convenient model for appropriating international modern idioms. This naturally veered him towards abstraction, making it possible to draw from the richness of life and his own experiences the essential requisites, transforming to become the leitmotif of his compositions.

Munuswamy joined the School of Arts and Crafts on the insistence of his grandfather in 1956 graduating with a diploma in painting in 1961. He joined the faculty as a teacher, later appointed as principal in 1971 and retired in 1986. Munuswamy as a student had the unprecedented advantage of working with three personalities who were different from one another but each with their brand of dynamism. These were D.P. Roy Chowdhary, S. Dhanapal and K.C.S. Paniker. "Roy Chowdhary", said Munuswamy, "was aristocratic in his lifestyle and considered to be a prince among artists...His pattern of life was clearly set, but I could hardly fall into that pattern for I realized that the tenderness in me would not be able to withstand the onslaught of his virile rugged dominance. It was precisely in this context that in Dhanapal I found the nearness and oneness..... of two individuals. His linear dexterity...soaked in native richness...gave me the direction I was to take. Yet I could not turn away from the new introspective spirit of K.C.S. Paniker himself an accomplished draughtsman and a painter, he never underestimated the need for personal accomplishment and identity, linked with the native genius. It was he who introduced me to some of the best painters of the Impressionist school of painting in Europe."<sup>15</sup>



Munuswamy's complex and withdrawn personality is manifested in this prophet statement that also largely conditioned the character of his art. His awe of Roy Chowdhary's rugged and virile persona in direct contradistinction to his tender personality finds echo in his predilection towards the female form, relating to her subconsciously with associative qualities of motherhood of values of caring, tenderness and nurturing. His close proximity to Dhanapal was based on his patriarchal approach allowing Munuswamy comfort levels in communicating. This was crucial as it allowed Munuswamy that space of freedom in which his creativity could roam unhampered.

It was the inspiring and intellectually stimulating rich environment, where discussions on art were the order of the day that helped Munuswamy to eloquently formulate his vision as he interacted with his teachers and peers. Passing through spectrum of various influences from Impressionism, Postimpressionism, and Fauvism to Cubism, including Minimalism he imbibed the working methods, approaches and techniques of these modernist artists. This made possible a process of introspection that allowed him to plan and evolve his individual style. His output at this time in late 50s and very early 60s was prolific when he worked out numerous drawings and paintings to discover new expressions [Fig. 21] His commitment as he experimented with art was total. These experimentations were in the field of material, techniques and subject matter/iconography.

### **Problematic Space**

Munuswamy not only had to contend with technique and medium whether oil painting or mixed media but also had to wrestle with the problematic space to realize his ideas. His primary concern lay in this direction, which was to achieve a planar effect without recourse to perspectival formulations. This was a problematic struggle with the early pioneers like Paniker, Dhanapal, Santhanaraj and Munuswamy among many others. By assiduously working towards eliminating the third dimension that was entrenched with academic realism a precipitate of colonial pedagogy, these artists after their exposure to modernist works attempted to explore the picture plane divesting of its illusory dimension. Equally an aesthetic study of Indian canonical pictorial traditions had brought an awareness of organizing space in a patterned or a decorative pulse. His manifest preoccupation and concern was also with line and color and worked towards synthesizing them. His thin application of colours on the canvas was in keeping with his experimentations, jettisoning opacity to play with transparency. This had the effect of enhancing the luminous quality of his hues and tones. And Munuswamy justified this method of thin transparent color applications to move away from binding oppressive space, so that his palimpsest brushed applications would allow a free movement of his imagination, which the opacity of the

paint otherwise would block. In his oil technique gently brushing on colours with thin transparent brush strokes, he comes close to appropriating the wash manipulations of Abanindranath Tagore. While the latter built up the structure of his works through repeated wash in water colours, in which, the composition gained strength with every layer. Munuswamy on the other hand employs the same method but in a different medium for different effects. It is this dimension of his painterly methodology that lends credence to his oeuvre and makes his expressive lines and colours to play a synthesizing role in projecting his vision. This gradually dissolved the dimensional illusion, which according to his view has crippling effect on creativity and prepared the way for bold experimentations. He said, "one's creative talent are sacrificed as it limits experimentations" and binds one to produce a faithful copy.

Before arriving at this decision to do away with faithful representation he had gone through an exercise of dedicatedly studying every aspect of the genre from still life to portraits, landscapes, everyday scenes on the street and a variety of routine human activities. But his mental space would not admit of these quotidian representations after a spell and he transcended it to create abstractions that were decidedly of a different category.

#### **Gestural Rhythms: Personalized Abstraction**

Munuswamy's engagement with the material qualities of line, color and space pushed him towards abstracting forms that were derived from the rhythm of life. It should be reiterated that though he was an active participant within the Madras Art Movement that was flaggingly attempting to establish its identity from the periphery of the country, his works mark a different signpost that would create ripples on the younger artists who were his students and later emerged as leading players in the Madras Group. Nevertheless his move towards abstraction also marks the strength of his individual vision and espousal of a different approach that in no way would reflect the nativist agenda that Paniker was propagating. What sets him apart from the others within the group was that he did not employ symbols nor folk or tribal imagery nor was he concerned with ritualistic translations in color and line as the younger artists Gopinath or Viswanathan would transcribe later. His resourcefulness lay in meaningfully and consciously extracting his iconography from people around him. The difference from Paniker was more in terms of Munuswamy's acceptance of Western modern in form of the abstract style. Also Paniker did not encourage complete retrenchment of representational elements from painted expressions.

Munuswamy hence consciously chose the language of abstraction to validate his creative expressions, obliquely transgressing to also have the regional character play a meaningful role. This was not a conscious attempt but unconsciously sneaking in, as Munuswamy's sensibility was regional borne. By emphasizing 'regional sensibility' is to unambiguously reiterate an artist's identity within his milieu that eventually would draw out particularized experiences to which he related. Munuswamy's environment inhabited and crowded with people pushed him increasingly towards divesting his imagery of inessentials that he sourced from the cadence of life around him. This he particularly explored because of his sensitivity to people and made numerous sketches in pencils and crayons of population in rural areas of Tamil Nadu.

Like Paniker his preoccupation was to negate the illusionary dimension and let his forms appear on the surface in a play of decorative designs. This fundamentally was the struggle of the entire Madras Group. His construction of the painting started without any preliminary drawings, since the whole surface of the canvas became a playground to realize his ideas. As Munuswamy says, "when I begin to paint, I begin to get new ideas and I link them up as I go forward instead of reverting back to the original and re-working on it. My canvas is a panoramic one, unrolling as I progress in thought and develop my own technique"<sup>16</sup>. This partially explains the fragmentary nature of his compositions imparting an appearance of a scattered incohesiveness. As he progressed with his mediation in line and colours, his forms internalized over years intuitively shaped his ideas on the canvas. Capitalizing on his extemporaneous visualization of imagery pushed forth by his deft skills he linked together all his forms with playful sensuous thick lines. [Fig. 22]. It could be emphasized that the commonality of the use of line enhanced the character of the Madras Group within its heterogeneous operations. Line it could be argued is a universal element exploited and maneuvered by artists for their individual form. But in the instance of the Madras Group it was a line that was studied and evolved from the Indian pictorial and plastic Southern dynastic traditions. So it bears the cultural burden when made visible by the artist according to his individual temperament.

Munuswamy working through the 60s explored extensively the questions of theme and technique and zeroed onto the human figure to mediate his abstract expressions. His 'representational' theme constituted the female figure that he argued was more in the nature of an object to negotiate the space on the canvas. In order to technically realize and explore the dimension of space in relation with human imagery he battled with his ideas and brought forth his conceptions in hundreds of drawings those according to him were "unconventional, vigorous and dynamic

with a personal touch”<sup>17</sup> considering his drawings to be anything but conventional when a comparison is made between those produced by other artists within the institution. [Fig. 23]

This particularly would relate to Paniker, [Fig. 24] Alphonso [Refer Fig. 135], Adimoolam, [Fig. 25] Santhanaraj, [Fig. 26] and Haridasan, [Fig. 27] among others. While Paniker’s drawings were realized with short strokes building up a density, Santhanaraj and Haridasan’s had a rhythmic languidity. Alphonso and Adimoolam’s drawings were consistently developed between the choppy strokes and rhythmic continuous contours. Munuswamy in his drawings developed a wide range of strokes from short and choppy to thick and thin to continuous rhythmic line [Fig. 28]. He built up the structure of his composition on the strength of short parallel choppy strokes comparable to a Van Gogh’s painting<sup>18</sup>. This personalized technique, vigorous and restless gave his drawings an unconventional character.

If Munuswamy developed personalized techniques and drawings it was largely to fulfill his creative agenda. He understood that “life has an indescribable depth communicated without a language” and made attempts to engage with this depth of life through his pictorial medium. He conceptualized his imagery that were divested of inessentials and delineated and rendered with free flowing, casual, nonchalant linearity and colour tones. His exploration of the line was versatile capable of invoking imagery or signaling dissolution. [Fig. 29] The colours had a wide spectrum from soft tonalities to strident dissonances invoking moods. His abstract imagery thus imparted a primeval energy in the way he worked the loaded brush on the canvas. [Fig. 30] The assimilation of the modernist masters also enabled this engagement but he vehemently clarified that he was neither derivative nor imitative. His works were beyond the comprehension of his guru Roy Chowdhary who commented “I don’t understand you” but nevertheless allowed him the space for his explorations.

The subjectivity of Munuswamy was mediated primarily through the figure of the woman – a dominant imagery subsumed within his exploratory agenda. The representation of the woman assumed a ‘female form’ that he collapsed with his language of abstraction, essentially objectified to facilitate his experimental investigation. The human form particularly the female form had intrigued his imagination and he had designated various roles to her. “It’s a fact that the woman is the life force Shakti. The creative and protective love generates from woman and it is the female form that has inspired and haunted man right from the day of creation. Every artist, even from the pre historic days, has interpreted the female form with utmost care and sensitivity. The

great Indian temples are enriched with innumerable female figures in all their beautiful postures moods and expressions. The rhythm of life itself vibrates in the female figures"<sup>19</sup> Munuswamy, evokes a romanticized vision of the 'woman' conflating the rhythm of life in the representation of her form.

What is implicated is the problematic of the male gaze with the issue of representation. Here the question opens to the cultural formation of reality deeply embedded in social relations, where representations make available forms of subjectivity. In the case of Munuswamy it is the gendered relationships between the male artist and female subject that underpin his subjectivity. This defines his private domain, as also the power relationships in a patriarchal society. His female nudes though largely abstracted conflate the optic and the tactile creating the gaze connoting the intensity in which knowledge and pleasure mingle to create a field of vision. In this directed vision the image that is equated with the woman is reduced to a body. The notion is clarified when Munuswami emphasizes, "I am a humanist – I get involved. When I draw I do so with the utmost love." The terms 'humanist' and 'love' inscribes his intense engagement with female subject [Fig. 31]. An approach as this load his female forms with erotic overtones. This clarifies his subjectivity, which does not eschew the erotic and the sexual yet he transforms the female form as an object for exploration. His abstracted female nudes thus emphasize the tactile quality wrought ingeniously with the play of colours, tones and the versatile line. Says Munuswamy, "Unlike the structure of the male form that is rigid and runs in straight lines, the female figures are in curving, flowing lines, carrying the imagination of the artist forward endlessly.... symbolizing that life...is an unending cycle"<sup>20</sup>. These concepts explain the insistent curves that inhabit his works creating gestural rhythms that characterize his abstractions. The play of linear curves in his compositions assumes dominant centrality eventually creating a typology for his expressions. Through the agency of the female body, which he constructs as an 'object' or 'form' Munuswamy explores the language of abstraction reducing it to decorative patterning with its implied rhythm. [Fig. 32]

The sensuous abstract imagery is subsumed within its playfully aggressive brush strokes. These gestural strokes also suggest an analogy with primitive imagery relating to its simplicity of form and directness in delineation. The essence of the figure thus emerges with clarity mediated through the tools of line and colours; both the elements carrying an aura of sensuality. Munuswamy in employing the highly abstracted human figure was not serving a metaphor or a symbol or a sign as many of his contemporaries within the country were doing. His paintings of

the **The Lotus Woman**, [Fig. 33] **The Swan and the Lady** [Fig 34] and **Rhyme** [Fig. 35] clearly reflect his preoccupation with lines and tones.

It is interesting to note that these were produced in 1960 at a moment in the Art Institution when there were discussions to move away from the flagrant Eurocentered modernism to introspect on the regional traditions. The strength of his abstraction was that it defined the regional grain linking his Indian roots with his abstract female world. For clearly his female forms were derivative of the women peculiar to the region of Tamil Nadu. It is the body of the female form that has to bear the burden of Indian identity and rescue the artist from charges of derivativeness. The realm of politics of representation within the country was gendered.

His female forms largely projected an affinity to Paul Gauguin's Tahitian women and inflected Henri Matisse's intensity and vibrancy of colours. But it was the line of Indian pictorial tradition observable in murals at Sittanavassal and Lepakshi that concretized the graphic design in an easy and graceful flow of rhythmic cadence. The past was linked with present by the validity of his contemporary expressions and there was a continuity of thought and tradition. This manifests the construction of 'Indianness' integrating European modernist stylistic features with traditional characteristics that ultimately gave it an international appeal in his works. This approach also helped redefine traditions, which the artists in Europe were consciously avoiding for producing different aesthetic statements. These varied approaches in Munuswamy's works allow him to mark a posture of difference from those within the country as well within the Madras Group. His body of works though consanguine with others was created differently. Within the Art Institution where the debate on nativism was a major issue with Paniker, Dhanapal and Doss among others, Munuswamy was configuring his identity by his intransigence away from the narrowly defined parochial agenda.

Munuswamy's works centering around the female form, becomes the carrier of Indian identity and means of escaping the charges of derivativeness. His fixation on the female form can be explained through his biographical information, which relates from the period of his early childhood to a stage when he lost his wife. Says the artist, "I do not particularly remember my mother. I was brought up in a large joint family where my mother found little time for me....I used to feel lonely and deprived. What I could not have in real life, I have tried to get in a world of mine by recreating them as drawings and paintings in differing moods and shapes. I have tried to compensate the physical absence of feminine love with the presence of graphic imagery"<sup>21</sup>.

However Munuswamy negotiating his experiences through the abstracted female imagery [reduced to their bare linear essentials] simultaneously established an expressionist value to his forms in his compositions that has a commonality of expression with William de Kooning. In his gestural brushstrokes, passionate use of colours and fractured/distorted forms she strikes a resonating posture with the American abstract expressionist. Also in a departure from Greenbergian ideology where figural representation was strictly proscribed, Munuswamy adopts the human imagery to inflect and subvert the officially sanctioned abstraction of western modern.

The 70s' in Munuswamy's oeuvre mark a different approach. He expressionistically capitalized on the theme of 'woman and mother' becoming a cathartic process for his personal tragedies. Line that was the main player in his compositions took a center stage and defined the representation of the woman either sensuously or severely to express his torment. The female form was fragmented and parts of the body scattered or suspended in space held tenuously by his dominating line. The colours were drained off to focus on the gravity of the image. The tortured mind interceded the angst through his creations in what marks it as abstract expressions. His works in the early 80's after this phase continued in a similar vein for having come to terms with reality he was able to paint dispassionately particularly the form of the woman. His statements were reductive aesthetic expressions and could be read across the canvas as abstract landscape, rhythm of waves, the flight of a bird or the swaying of grass. [Figs. 36, 37 & 38]

Contextualizing Munuswamy within the Madras Art Movement as one who was not convinced of Paniker's nativism undoubtedly singles him out to be different and intellectually aggressive with his interpretations of experiences. His sensibility undeniably was grounded in his hometown of Madras indirectly negotiating his regional identity within it. Though his female forms have universal appeal/identity they nevertheless are within the Indian traditions in their attitudes and postures, sartorial attire and physiognomy [Fig. 39] accompanied by birds and animals. The gestured rhythms, bearing affinity to Abstract Expressionism, was mutated with Indian signs and symbols. By implicating the canonical Abstract Expressionism that had gained momentum and valency in America of the 40s and early 50s this movement particularly negated any social realities for pure autonomy of art. In the case of Munuswamy his sensibility was grounded in the lived realities responding to its stimuli in the form of representation that was gendered and to which he passionately reacted with his personalized idiom. This differentiated the abstraction of Munuswamy within the Southern milieu leading towards an international appeal. He nevertheless

stands apart by his intellectual subtlety, conceptual originality and analytical clarity and still remains an integral part of the whole Madras Art Movement. It is this character of heterogeneity that also marks the movement and prevents it from being homogenized.

### **Regional Abstraction and its Individuation**

The Madras Art Movement from its nascent stage was traversing an abstract path through its development in painting that privileged human figuration. The trajectory towards abstraction is clearly implicated in the quasi-abstract works of K.C.S. Paniker. Munuswamy initially produced works in 1960 that were quasi-abstract leading to absolute abstraction. It is interesting to draw a comparison of abstraction practiced within the Madras Art Movement with American Abstract Expressionism and its critical support by Clement Greenberg.

To maintain the superiority of cultural values in the designated term 'high art' Greenberg arrived at this position as a response to the brutalities of war hence devolving any extra references to reality but introspecting within the formal qualities of the irreducible medium to project it as pure and autonomous art. This concept led to objectification in art. In this respect within the constellation of the Madras Group the abstractions created by the mentioned artists had strength of cultural bias, of privileging local culture abstractedly in terms of its sights and sounds and with Neo-Tantricism their creations also became metaphysical concepts as the works of Haridasan reflects. This marks an important departure from the Greenbergian critique. Though carrying the nomenclature 'abstract' with its superficial adoption of gestural rhythms as Munuswamy subjectively had explored the other artists Viswanathan, Gopinath, Achuthan particularly delved into their culture replete with ritualistic rites and primitive imagery to subvert it within modernist norms. By translating these cultural signs to operate as a language of abstraction they defied the Greenbergian monolith. In this process it also allowed for abstraction to have regional validity without being labeled as derivative and simultaneously it also marked a posture of differentiating it from the International and national modern. These were certain determining factors that lead to defining the movement with regional overtones.

Partha Mitter analyses the slant towards abstraction in two decades after Independence. According to him, "The 1950s to 1970s were dominated by non-figurative art, a global phenomenon. The backdrop to it was the politics of cold war; the free world artists identified with formalism and abstraction, while narrative art was dismissed as being comparable to the socialist realism in the U.S.S.R. The critic Geeta Kapur writes, 'we developed a quiet, almost a



quiescent aesthetics. The...figure was withdrawn from the work of some of the major Indian artists leaving behind the merest signs of human presence in nature'. Paradoxically decolonization made Indian artists more conscious of their identity as they confronted global modernity. Indeed the tensions generated by the conflicting demands of modernity and national specificity became a major preoccupation of third world countries<sup>22</sup>. And within this framework the artists from South, the Madras group were attempting a recognition of their identity within the national modern. In contending their identity within the nation they were at the same time making an effort to establish their countenance within the international framework an agenda that was equally rigorous, but nevertheless crucial.

Within the constellation of these abstract artists each of them predicated an individualized sensibility. Gopinath with his biomorphic forms, Viswanathan with his minimal geometric configurations, Adimoolam with his sensuous naturescapes, Achuthan with his myriad play of trigonometry of lines and shapes, K.V. Haridasan with his mythical-mystical configurations and Rm. Palaniappan's cerebral journey through his print-making medium. And all these artists manifest a brilliant sense of color play and organization. The abstract paintings created by them posited cultural values [vocabulary] of the South to define their creative expressions in the visual medium.

While in the West, modern artists had rejected by and large [with exceptions like Marc Chagall] the worth of traditional arts in relation to modern experiences; the perceptual rethinking by the Madras artists under the prevailing contingencies of reflecting 'Indianness' did exactly the opposite. Ideologically this dichotomy of modernity/tradition in the cultural space of Madras Art Movement addressed their visibility as an artist group from South India within the larger framework of the nation as well as within the international community. A search for roots and reworking of cultural signs of kolams, ritualistic yantras, the iconic images, the performing arts [*Kuttyattam*, *Theyyam*, *Kathakali* from Kerala], with its accoutrements of powerful masks, costumes etc. provoked visualization of forms and imagery marking an important site for identity with regional invocations [Adi-Dravidian]. In their creative appropriation they evoked those characteristics of simplicity, unsophistication, boldness, iconicity, frontality effulgent colours and power of subjectivity to stimulate and incite visualization of imagery that eventually lent valence of difference between the pure formalism of International/ American modernists and also the national modern.

The artists in conciliating these varied art forms eventually froze them in time and space as their visual painted statements. The motivated eclecticism in this context conveyed artistic wit and nerve to construe a hybrid form that potentially would characterize it as regional/nativist. This set the Madras artists apart from European abstractionists in its ideology when the latter defined their prime motivation in the development of abstraction as a strong desire to turn away from the world of things condemned by Kandinsky as “the soulless material life” and by Malevich as the mundane artistic inheritance of the “rubbishy slough of academic art”. Banishing reference to worldly materialism became a central goal for the western abstract artists and it led both to search for formal purity and to consideration of ways of experiencing the inner spirit.

## NEO TANTRIC ART: SIGNIFICANT CULTURAL IDENTITY

### Introduction

The most programmatic and a compelling project in the 60s in search for national and cultural identity was Neo-Tantric Art, a term that was coined to denote a form of abstraction developed by a small group of Indian artists, particularly Shankar Palsikar, K.V. Haridasan, Om Prakash, Prafulla Mohanty, Biren De and Ghulam Rasool Santosh. **[Fig. 40 santosh, biren de and haridasan from rose]** Within a larger framework of internationalism in the consolidated third world Indian consciousness of artists and intelligentsia it had become imperative that art and culture - a spiritual construct of a nation - had to be national specific and not derivative of any other source. This related specifically to Abstract Expressionism that wrestled with it in the same decade that post-colonial art was born.

Abstraction as a genre in India could not be established as a conscious self-innovative notion since the idea came from the west. In adopting abstraction as a visual language there were charges of derivativeness for them and it still left the question of their identity unresolved. ‘Selfhood and subjectivity of Indian artists’, said Geeta Kapur ‘required acts of exegesis – often via the nation’. Canonical Tantric art was hence politicized within the national ambit as Neo-Tantric Movement following the publication of Ajit Mookerjee’s book on Tantra Art in 1966. The abstract character of this metaphysical art fundamentally served well and in its contemporaneity was at par with the west. Abstraction now could be fitted into the national agenda and identity resolved by linking it to religion, symbols and myths. The sanction from the international community largely was due to the newly aroused interest from a large number of American artists in oriental philosophy like zen, yoga and a possibility of creative exploration with calligraphic characters. Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey among many others appropriated the

spiritual dimension of these varied philosophy in their paintings and when Neo-Tantricism made its international debut it was accepted as part of an orientalizing philosophy therefore gaining mileage out of it by getting absorbed within the modern. The nation hence became a site of resistance for negating dominant Euro-American influences and gave added impetus to the reconfiguration of an esoteric ritual worship in Tantricism related to a scriptural brahmanic tradition.

“Within the legitimizing nationalist discourse, derivatives of textual brahmanical ritualism that were significantly the signs and symbols of cultural abstractions were still part of the orientalisating mystique of Indian tradition in its pre-modern symbol manipulation. The symbology of brahmanic ritualism evolved into a rationalized encoding of physical action. In this the material world was enhanced to an esoteric system of signs and symbols with incantatory sacramental objects used in the liturgy of worship that was the implicit dimension in the system of *yantra*, *tantra* and *mandala*”<sup>23</sup> For the practicing Tantricist, *mandalas* and *yantras* are ritual motifs, since most Tantric images serve as intermediaries between the transcendent and the immanent.

Traditionally Tantric forms had acquired and sustained their meanings through usage and cultural conditioning. And because of its high-powered secrecy in acquiring the tantric knowledge it was not subject to constant revamping. Eventually this system acquired a timeless quality remaining a dominant reason for its continuity and survived successive generations. It is interesting to point out that Karl Marx had considered ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional cultures’ like that of India as being completely irrelevant to the future technological progress. Speaking from a materialist viewpoint, this may be partially true. A market force that became operational when the Neo-Tantric art found a lucrative market abroad subsumed within the garb of ‘traditional culture’ also drove this ritualistic tradition valorized for national specificity.

However Neo-Tantric art cannot be categorized as one more in the series of hollow revivalism because this was not a pictorial tradition that was valorized in the late 60s within post-colonial India. It was religious based with sustained tradition of many centuries, which was given visibility and acceptance because of its affinity to certain stylistic developments in European abstraction. Hence it could be categorized as a genuine contemporary expression that arose out of the artistic necessities of the time. This was the result of social, political and spiritual upheavals that was part of the post-independent ethos

Central to the spirit of Neo-Tantric art was a nationalistic attitude where artist sought ways to keep hold of a traditional culture that was fast fading. As the very term suggested Neo-Tantric art linked the past and the present and its elemental forms were either integrated, translated, synthesized or imitated using contemporary materials/vocabulary to assert itself as an autonomous sign. In its deployment within the existing contingencies it moderated as a modern idiom, remaining secular whereby it was emptied out of its religious/ritualistic content and its formalistic elements found relevance when the artist through self-critical discipline judiciously combined it.

Western artists of the Twentieth century particularly Kandinsky and Mondrian dominantly have attempted to let the pictorial elements speak for themselves liberating them from identifiable objects and figures into autonomous form. What differentiates Neo-Tantric mode of abstraction from that of the canonical European was, that the western artists' 'deduced' abstraction rather than beginning with it through an intuitive understanding of means. Whereas in contradistinction, Tantra as an abstract art form stands apart from western approach because it 'begins' with it. While the former was analytical and logically concluded the latter implied an intuitive selection from a transcendental repertoire of coded symbols by the artists' for his resourceful articulations. What became relevant in Neo-Tantric Movement that gained currency in mid 60s was the superior status of a pre-modern ritualistic cult with an inherent potency of visual coded symbols that the contemporary Indian artist could freely deploy without the burden of religious association and transformed it to correspond to cultural signifiers sans its sanctimonious implications.

### **K.V. HARIDASAN [1937 -] PIONEER FROM THE SOUTH**

#### **The Tantric Ideology**

Haridasan [Fig. 41] was a pioneer artist of this movement in modern Indian art; initiating it within the Madras Art Movement under the aegis of Paniker who made the agenda of regional culture a dominant framework. And this move towards nativist indigenism reinforced Haridasan's importance in the South. According to Josef James, "In the Madras Movement an acquaintance with Tantric gave the group clearer expectations. Tantric symbols in clear contrast to the ones in modern European thought are formed out of a set of purely intuitive formulations and put together in Tantrism by means of a myth, which holds the intuitive formulations in one family. The scientificity of Tantrism cannot be disputed. It is as complete a system similar to European science with functional equivalents of its concepts, laws and truth conditions"<sup>24</sup>. Josef James validates the rationality of a pre-modern Indian cult to give it valency within the paradigm

of a techno-savvy First World and to legitimize its artistic operations within a Third World endorsed by the former, as keen interest was evinced by many Western artists. The cultural politics of Neo-Tantric movement hence gained momentum, and in the South, Haridasan an intellectually alert artist researched the rich vocabulary of ritualistic Tantric signs and symbols to create his visual metaphors. Haridasan exhibited autonomy in the free exploration of this ancient art form to detach it from its original context and read modernist sensibility in it.

Haridasan in moving towards this abstract vocabulary as a form of self expression went through a ritual of deep and intense study of Indian art that took the shape of traveling through the country and studying the icons and the structure of the temples with their implicit metaphysics of architectural science. This artistic journey was to comprehend the esoteric and the mundane, symbolic and decorative, narrative and expressive dimensions of Indian plastic tradition as he had already passed through the exercises of life studies, portraiture and sketches of empirical experiences. His working method consisted of preparing his canvas with thick impastos in white and then painting over it, euphemistically creating patterns and designs of architectonic character. Moreover it is the play of forms in a hyper-real geometric space notational in miniature tradition aiming at the cogent and poetic rendering of ideal truths that influenced a strong sense of design in his works. In this direction Haridasan expressed his ideas with clarity when he said, "In my landscapes there was a certain consciousness to arrive at a result which was intended to be broadly Indian. I was particular to realize a few qualities such as contrast, harmony and juxtaposition. The mindset of the painters in the South was engaged similarly"<sup>25</sup>. Technically the dimension of design was inherent in his works whether they were landscapes or still life as the painting **Layers of existence** demonstrate. [Fig. 42] Thus oriented towards patterning that strongly characterized his artistic sensibility Haridasan when he eventually gravitated towards the Tantric art form with its *yantras* or the magical geometric diagrams his approach and attitude was conditioned for freely evolving two-dimensional forms.

### **Painting as Myth Making**

Haridasan had considered the act of painting as myth making. In alluding to the enterprise of painting as myth making he transformed the mystical philosophy of Tantra to tell his own story. By a calculated deployment of *yantric* diagrams he created abstracts that had its own story/myth. Arguably the myth concerned notions of art and science in society in which the former nurtured the psyche and spirit. The term *Brahman* for instance was not to cling to an old idea but to connote the enigma of immeasurable presence. Just as the speed of light was the basic

constituent of physical dynamics, *Brahman* was meant to serve the same in being the 'ultimate' experience. His interest in the myth making was centered on the concept of '*maya*', the veil that concealed the truth the ideal image in the platonic sense behind the external manifestation. "To realize this dimension of mental vision one had to profess faith in religion and belief", says Haridasan. However he does not negate the primacy of the element of line, color, space and form in translating immediate experiences. But going beyond this basic truth, he thinks painting was essentially 'a sort of myth making'. Thus he valorized the mystical dimension of a religious ritual in order to transcend the analytical and material aspects of picture making to give an 'emotional depth' to work of art, marking it as significantly modern. Comparing the intuitive and analytical attitude of the Orient and Occident, he 'stressed the denial of 'supra-visual' realm in the western ontology, which was in direct contradiction to the Indian ideal of art where the concept of 'realism' was vitally distinct and different"<sup>26</sup>.

Haridasan's abstractions were not grafting of western formula on to traditional Indian mysticism in the name of being both 'Indian' and 'modern'. By operating from a cultural matrix, he goes against the grain of Greenbergian ideology expressed in formalism. The latter in order to save culture, intended to keep the domain of painting 'pure', which otherwise would be also contaminated by the mindless destruction that modernity with its promise of scientific progress had advocated strenuously. Though Tantric ideology rejected the values that were social and ethical, Haridasan in his works implied only the aesthetics – an aesthetic arbitrarily derived from a cultural source strengthened by repeated practice over several centuries to become contingent in the problematic identity both regional and modern. His effort in this direction was to make the mystery of life palpable already [made] apparent in pictorial and plastic traditions of Indian art. This ideology was succinctly clarified by J. Swaminathan when he stated that "the anthropomorphic imagination functioning in our miniature painting, the psychedelic use of colours in Tantric painting and the geometric use of space in all of our traditional painting have one end in view; not to represent reality or even analyze it, but to create the semi natural image which inspires man to contend with reality and what Philip Rawson calls the 'numinous' image"<sup>27</sup>.

### **Metonymic Constructions**

The compositional structure of Haridasan's creative statements revolved around select symbology namely sun, moon, mother goddess, genesis, fertility and *sakthi*. Tantra essentially was a broad philosophical concept conflating the trichotomy of *mantra*, *yantra* and *tantra*. *Mantra* was the

sound formulation of a particular syllable which when chanted repeatedly invested it with power. *Yantra* was the design and patterning. *Tantra* established the system of relationship between the two. This dramatically was an Indian concept of looking at man and nature in a single vision.

The dominant motif in the configuration of Tantra art was the *yantras* or geometric diagrams. These *yantras* were highly personalized diagrams envisioned by Haridasan to project his ideology based on certain fundamental concepts from Tantric religion like “*bija*’ the seed or source of life; ‘*jiva*’ or life; ‘matter’ male principle; ‘energy’, the female principle and the fusion of matter and energy. The seed in Haridasan’s art was symbolized by a central dot, the original point of energy which had ‘existence but no dimension’ and it made its fundamental originating movement in the shape of a female downward pointing triangle. From this original dot and the triangle evolved a series of interwoven triangles. The repetitive triangles represented the three *gunas* ‘*sattva*’-divinity, ‘*rajas*’-vibrancy and ‘*tamas*’-intertia, the interaction of which was the basis of cosmic evolution. Ovals, circles, squares, rectangles were diverse linear shapes that together with the straight line created patterned geometry implying symbology of this mystic art”<sup>28</sup>. Symbolism had its roots in visual experiences, the dimension of imagination and of artistic expressions forming an intrinsic part of the cultural patrimony that is strictly male evolved and male centered rituals from which it was selected for artistic expression. Of all the shapes Haridasan had a strong predilection for the oval, which he considered as a potent Tantric motif. This oval was suggestive of *Brahmāṇḍa* representing ‘*śūnya*’ or nothingness, the egg or the ‘*bija*’ the seed.

Haridasan’s interpretation and deployment of the semiotics of Tantric signs was personal. He interpreted human aspects in terms of natural phenomenon that was man in terms of fire and woman in terms of petal form. The whole concept of nature was conceptualized in the opposites of male and female, positive and negative forces of life, and that the world was a result of the union of these opposites. Conflating with this were the energies of the sun, moon, animate and inanimate forms that constituted this all-pervasive concept of life. Drawing his fundamental concepts from Tantric cult Haridasan derived the lotus, the stylized motif of fire, the elliptical forms and the idea of *śakti*.

His first group of Tantric paintings entitled ‘*Yantra*’ was exhibited in Madras in 1968 [Figs. 43, 44 & 45]. His medium in this series was water colours but soon moved to oils and acrylics the media in which he still explores his Tantric imagery. With the commercial availability of oil pastels it has become his most favoured medium today enabling a quick capitulation of his ideas.

His predominant works were in the *Yantra* series titled as '*Madhyanna Surya Yantra*',[Fig. 46] '*Bija Yantra*', [Fig. 47] '*Maya Yantra*', '*Jyotir Yantra*', '*Prakruti yantra*',[Fig. 48] '*Nivirti Yantra*',[Fig. 49] and '*Moha Yantra*',[Fig. 50]. Varying the monotony of these titles he had introduced the "*Brahma Sutra* series.

### **Aesthetic Dimensions**

Haridasan's mindset in exploring the creative field of Tantric imagery was largely philosophical. What is implied is his compulsion to bracketing out material considerations to chart his trajectory in the direction of art not as 'self-expression' but as a process of realizing a vision beyond self in an attempt to grasp an enduring meaning of life and existence. Haridasan as a modernist artist surprisingly deflects attention from his self in which his artistic statements are not the consequence of the process of his imagined visions but primarily explicate those philosophical ideas subsequent to his reading and interpretation of Indian philosophy. For Haridasan Tantra channelises a natural urge among humans for transcendence, that is, it opens up a reservoir of inspiration. This kind of approach to his creations of art works largely does away with the verity of material manifestations that forms the bases of perceptual vision. Art for him was not to profess; rather it was a path towards truth and self-realization as he understood from his reading of Tantric philosophy and towards which he also practices. Within a modernist milieu this type of approach to creation and visualization characteristically sets him apart because what comes to the fore is the individual and his creations. Whereas what Haridasan propounds is a selfless attitude in creation where his personality or individuality does not take precedence but allows these arbitrated symbologies and metaphors to guide his painted expressions.

In order to visualize these abstract concepts Haridasan puts intrinsic faith in his deployment of the visual elements of line, colour, space and texture. This arguably evolves his frames as articulately organic, creating an impression of the process of continuous growth. With meticulous precision his forms and shapes are organized in a pictorial plane creating an environment for a space of contemplative meditation. Here he aligned himself pictorially. The selective colours organized in various registers were harmoniously juxtaposed creating an effect of strong patterning and design. For purpose of similarity and resemblance parallels could be drawn with western artists and Haridasan's works comes closest to the Hard Edge Abstractionist painters. But J Swaminathan would axe such an idea and suggest similarities with Jain miniatures, the Rajput pictorial tradition particularly the Mewar school or the folk art with its titillating colored surfaces. Nevertheless Haridasan's works may project these superficial





similitudes, which in itself is very modernist where anxiety of influences as they come to bear upon the works is unavoidable as the artist is an integral part of his cultural and social milieu and influences operate subconsciously

One of his early formulations in Tantric mode was the '*Moha Yantra*', [1968] and '*Moha Yantra II*'. The elemental forms were all organic with his favorite oval motif dominating the center in which varied shapes and forms were placed implying the snake, juxtaposed with other recognizable forms of *linga*, the fire and the petals. The colours were both warm and cool judiciously positioned to create a serene effect. While this composition was ordered and cleanly organized the other painting '*Moha Yantra II*' [Fig. 50] has various elements of fire, *linga*, petals and quasi lotus as fully developed forms placed in pictorial space.

In 1974 he moved towards *Brahma Sutra*, [Figs. 51 & 52] in which his compositions were dominated by an oval, the center of which contains the '*bija*' or the seed, the node for all creations. Says Haridasan, 'in Tantra, *Brahman* is the basic concept, the axle on which the wheel of the phenomenal reality rotates'<sup>29</sup>. The convoluted lines created psychedelic effects, implying the continuous process of life and death or the '*samsara*' that, was the cyclical philosophy of cause and effects. Or another composition from the same series where the outer shape was in the form of a seed in the process of dividing itself with a square containing the circle in the center. Above and below were the implied triangles because the shape was not complete. The upward rising triangles indicated the male energy and the lower ones the female. And in aligning these forms in the upward and downward mobile axis it was a clear indication of the process of creation with either implied male and female powers or the '*purusha*' and '*prakriti*'

Haridasan as he gained proficiency in organizing the various selective symbols in his paintings, his compositions soon evolved as intellectualized products where craft and art melded with great precision to create geometry that was both organic [circles, ovals and curves] and inorganic [straight lines, rectangles, squares and triangles]. '*Nivritri Yantra*' [Fig. 53] [1975] exemplified this fully. His ideas had come to stay in his works, concretizing the select symbols, shapes and forms deployed with confidence. Krishna Chaitanya poetically commented on this painting as, "The values of optical art also gained by the play of perspective in the arrangement of horizontal striations, by the overlay of laminated planes of colours. The colours have been chosen with supreme judgment and are applied without modulation or impastos, singing out like the musical

notes of extreme purity. This is a chaste, orderly, high finished art, which has managed to reveal that the pure geometrical form has its own richness and sensuous beauty”<sup>30</sup>.

The exhibition of *Brahma Sutra* [1974] was well received by the czars within art critic circle where epithets were heaped upon Haridasan. Richard Bartholomew characterized it as an exhibition ‘of high order’ and typified it as “avant-garde” in which a fine repertoire of symbols, sign and motifs were archetypal<sup>31</sup>. Ratna Dhar Jha commented “On the more mundane level, it is a decoration with a flair for inventiveness and effect. Brahmasutra is the ontological study of the self and the superself, with generous recourse to symbols and metaphors. His paintings, following the literal pictorial interpretation of the scripture, gives the symbols design and structure that is entirely and uniquely his”<sup>32</sup>. From his native state of Kerala Professor M.G. Sashibhooshan considers Haridasan’s paintings as “visual delight. Some of his motifs spring from configurations of kolam and his metaphors are drawn from the psyche of Indian theism as concepts lent but transformed to suit modern sensibilities”<sup>33</sup>.

Implicated in the euphoria of these comments was the depth of originary in negotiating with cultural signifiers where creativity, and skill melded to create elements in a planar composition. Above all it was the depth of knowledge of the semiotics of a ritualistic cult essentially personalized for its successful deployment. His compositions indicated strong patterning, hard edges, were anamorphic and aniconic. [Fig. 54] Within modernism, patterning played with flatness and provided the tension of flirtation with decorativeness. Hence powerful patterning, nonhierarchical sublimation of symbols and decorative aura marked the field of his vision. This decorativeness was also inherent with many American abstractionists particularly Frank Stella, Mark Tobey. In many respects Haridasan’s works allows for comparison with American or other international artists but it is here that the similarity ends and the distinction begin. His philosophical approach to life conditions his artistic creations. They are not strands of stylistic influences that could be segregated nor were they inspiring springboards for his creations. The philosophy and his life meld to be one and integrated and no differentiations could be made between it. Haridasan’s paintings were not optical since he made no attempts to produce a likeness of identity by making colours and objects inseparable. His works were textured but distinct from the gestural marks of the Abstract Expressionists. And in a typical move these were also the characteristics that sets apart Madras Group from other artists within the post-independence development. And substantially his mode of interpreting the semiotics of Tantric

art was also at variance with other artist practicing this formulation within the post-nationalist modern discourse.

However for Haridasan moving and exploring the terrain of the *Tantric* ritualistic cult was not pedagogic but an inheritance that was not only cultivated but also a dimension of the collective subconscious. Crucially Haridasan was the only internationally acclaimed artist of the Madras Movement to have intellectualized an esoteric cult and suitably adapted to meet the contemporary criteria with his modern sensibility. Said Haridasan, “Tantric cult is prevalent all over the country and also examined by interested artists like J. Swaminathan in the region of Madhya Pradesh. But what is important is that there are regional variations and it is this distinction, which makes my work different from the others. My native state is Kerela and my family was involved with these daily rituals in which I also contributed in aiding my father in drawing the various yantras on the ground. These early impressions have stayed with me and I have always been inclined towards philosophy, where self-introspection is important. It is after studying the varied Indian architectural, sculptural and pictorial art forms that I gravitated towards Tantra art”<sup>34</sup> [In conversation with Haridasan at his Choramandal residence, November, 2001].

### **Tantric Art’s Exhibition Abroad**

Tantra art was a highly developed sign language and its elucidation was not possible outside the culture, which produced it. On the international scene it gained currency when the book by Ajit Mukherjee was released in 1966, and the ritualistic *yantras* or geometric diagrams were exhibited along with the book were shown abroad in various cities. The first show was held at Montreal in Canada in 1971 and titled as ‘Ten Modern Tantric Painters’, followed by ‘New Tantra’ exhibition at West Germany in 1984 and later at California and Australia [1985-86]. Indian artists’ initial euphoria of competing with international art market controlled by a nexus of dealers, critics and curators came under shadow, when they realized that it was too dense to penetrate. Reassessment and introspection led to the Neo Tantric Art movement. In order to overcome the dependency of the dominance of Western art, they sought inspiration from their own abstract tradition. Increasingly the need to forge an ‘Indian’ image was felt among the artists – an important factor in marketing their works to an audience that demanded an indigenous identity. The adverse effect of this was that in the guise of Neo-Tantricism spurious, dilettante and specious art works were produced for easy salability in the international art market. Observing a trend of this nature Geeta Kapur appealed to the artists at the 1971 Indian Triennale “to oppose internationalism and expose the galleries and government institutions that encourage such cultural titillation”. On asked to

comment about it Haridasan affirmed this subversive market trend in the name of 'exporting Indian contemporary art'. Another artist also named an art dealer in Delhi who aggressively pushed the artists to churn out such works because of its lucrative proposition. Artistic works coming under the general law of capitalist production perhaps may explain this phenomenon. As Vazquez says, 'the artist is subject to the tastes, preferences, ideas and aesthetic notions of those who influence the market, [art dealers in this instance]. In as much as he produces works of art destined for a market that absorbs them, the artist cannot fail to heed the exigencies of this market: they often affect the content as well as the form of the of a work of art, thus placing limitations on the artist'<sup>35</sup>.

In analyzing the works of Haridasan it becomes imperative to draw a parallel with V. Viswanathan who also operated from the cultural matrix and with a similar family background. Viswanathan's sensibility was also grounded in the cultural milieu of his home state Kerala, but his approach and mediation to Tantra art however was largely transformed by his émigré status in Paris. He left India in 1968 at a time when the Neo-Tantric Movement was making waves within the nation as a cultural alterity to hegemonic internationalism in defining its identity. Though the basic ideology was derived from the philosophy of Tantricism, both the artists have filtered it differently in their creations of visual forms. For Haridasan it was a literal transcription in employing the semiotics of the cult reflecting his persona in its intellectualization. Viswanathan interpreted the same ideology wherein he inscribed his 'self' where his body served as a mediating yantra to realize his artistic journey. Haridasan comments on the works of V. Viswanathan, 'he imbued Tantric imagery with his own personality lending his works a metaphysical presence. His colours resonate like Rothko while the mathematical precision of his geometrical elements have an effect on us akin to the sensation we experience upon coming face to face with Mondrian – one of absolute harmony'<sup>36</sup> [K.V. Haridasan, *Tantra Art and Modernity*, Lalit Kala Contemporary 37, pg. 36]. However it is Haridasan who remained a pioneer in this venture within the Madras Movement strengthening the nativist agenda for the establishment of the Southern identity.

Says Haridasan 'What made Tantra art sensational was the astounding fresh and modern imagery it contained. Inevitably the world wanted to see the examples of this unheard of a seemingly exceptional art including paintings and drawings'<sup>37</sup>.

## V. VISWANATHAN [1940 -] MINIMAL INTREPID GEOMETRY

“Honestly, I have a feeling I’m still a student. I can still discover with surprise and delight what already exists. Even, if I’m only an artist, with a limited canvas”. V. Viswanathan

Viswanathan [Fig. 55] is an artist with a rebellious mind set and his contribution within the Madras Art Movement was significant. His presence on the campus of the art institution coincided with the time when the debate on nativism was going on. The stimulating ambience caused him to become involved and active participant, wherein it provided space for expressing his polemical and radical views on art situation within the country. It is students like him and others with similar views and opinions that helped push Paniker’s cause eventually leading to the visibility of the Madras Art Movement.

Viswanathan’s lineage was from a family of Acharis that involved members to participate in Tantric rituals. Within his consciousness he carried images of childhood memories when he helped his father configure the *yantras* or the potent geometric diagrams on the mother earth for various rituals. This ritualistic cult known as *dhoolichitra* manifested primordial elements that lent simplicity in its geometric diagrams for meditation or yogic fulfillment. At the College of Arts and Crafts in Madras where Viswanathan obtained his Diploma in Painting in 1967 he went through the prescribed pedagogy of perceptual and empirical conventions. But his restless mind desired adventures beyond placid renderings. He worked with the human figure particularly the nudes but found it difficult to push through the sensuousness of form to transcend it to a personalized and stylized expressions. It was the interrogation of the epigraphy in the Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur that opened up the possibility of abstraction. In studying the abstract calligraphic line formation of the Tamil script it gave him an insight to explore it purely for its visual aesthetics. In his nude compositions he introduced the illegible script enhancing the formal outline of the nude to create titillating visual textures [Fig. 56].

A crucial intervention in 1964 was his encounter with an iconic black and red image of Kali in the temple at Calcutta. [Fig. 57 & 58] This initiated his thinking in abstracting cultural and religious signs, which he translated as a play of reductive shaped hues. The shape that he investigated with great energy was the triangle with which he romanced in many media - water colours, acrylics and oils. The polyvalence of the triangle in tantric rituals has expressed traditionally, man’s aspiration for divinity and in combination and juxtaposition has the versatility to create infinite permutations. This dominant triangular form that was the leitmotif of Viswanathan’s creations

implied the most powerful connotations of *purusha* and *prakriti* in tantric philosophy. Weaving his magic on him, the ubiquitous presence of the triangle in his canvases became an unmitigated synthesis to spell out his geometry that was a dynamic interplay of time and space. [Fig. 59, 60 & 61] “When you take on geometry as a dialectic...then it penetrates into veils of the enchanted unknown”<sup>38</sup>, said Viswanathan. His articulation of abstraction defied the Greenbergian internal logic of self-autonomy of art where the cultural narratives of iconography are deflected through the modernist abstract language. And interestingly what differentiated his abstractions was the simple oppositions between narration and iconography versus formalism that found no favour in this inflection of modernism, which Viswanathan practiced.

### Yantra VS Body

Categorically defining his body as a *yantra* [geometric diagram] with finite limitations, Viswanathan conflated his ‘self’ i.e. the body identifying it with his canvas. Through this ideology he transposed his personality into the work. Arguably Viswanathan in the tradition of Jackson Pollock claims “I am nature”<sup>39</sup>, obliquely laying claims to ‘I am the form that I create’. This could also be explained by assumption of certain selfhood predicated upon a gendered relationship with the subject matter. But this maxim or the utterance of ‘I am nature’ had become a paradigm in relating Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism to rituals of native North American artists. Viswanathan in materialising his forms on the canvas was enacting the process of a ritual through finite body gestures establishing power of meaning and desires in the creation of his forms. The metaphor for power was the space as vast and expansive as the oceans and deserts, and a sense of awesome feeling before the void. Further reinforcing the metonymy of space were the tantric mandalas configured on mother earth for fortuitous invocations, all of which translate to power and desire in his forms. The semantics of the geometric/*tantric* diagrams held no depth, but the surface imagery proved potentially rich for his creative fulfillment. His works though projecting simplified geometric statements evoke sensuousness in the complex display of not only triangular shapes but also the colours. It is this inveterate quality of sensuousness – translated in terms of shapes and colours that anchors it to reality and the lived experiences. Though his conceptual tantric derivatives were consanguine with the abstraction practiced by the Neo-Tantric painters within the rest of the country a movement that gained valency in late 60s as already analyzed. Viswanathan’s creative formulations remained distinctly different. This was because he consciously avoided symbols and formulae derived from *tantric* philosophy as G.R. Santosh and Biren De had employed. This perhaps distinguishes the works of Viswanathan and

Haridasan from the other practioners of the same movement thus reinforcing their regional sensibility within the Madras Art Movement

Viswanathan lays emphasis on integrating his self in close association with his canvas thereby clarifying the idea of his body as a *yantra* and hence finite. Art to him is not only an out of body experience but commingles and correlates with his physical being where the body as a signifier takes on a relational activity. And it is interesting to note how through the metaphor of the body, a repressed trope in the Greenbergian modernism Vishwanathan privileges, to establish abstraction as distinct from the western mode. He describes the process of creation, “as the arm swings in various geometric action of delineating straight, vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines ... a slow momentum builds up, a rhythmic staccato” [Fig. 62]. From his ‘being’ the forms fly out. The emerging forms are a configuration of triangles mainly – concentric, overlapping, playful, interlocking, engaging with dualities of subtlety and vigour, latency and obviousness. His works though projecting simplified geometric statements evoke sensuousness in the complex display of not only triangular shapes but also the colours.

The philosophy of life mutates in his creation and hence the signification of the physical being as energy, that engines the whole process. He postulates his creative dynamism as an illusion/intuition. The latter meaning tuition coming from within, the inspiration that makes him intellectually aware and equates it to the process of love making where personality disappears, the being is forgotten and arrives at a point of forgetfulness, the presence of absence and creation takes place at that stage. This interestingly also implies the erotic and the pleasurable, which were banished from high modernism and becomes the frame for creative endeavours. The ideology is materially clarified when he explains, ‘one paints by drawing a line, a line is then applied as a diagonal line at the base line, it invites another line creating dynamism different from representational imagery. So a square or a rectangle determines the links; and the trace of one inspires the other and the picture comes from within the space’.

### The Technique

In the light filled canvases of Viswanathan, the play of color and geometry is centrifugal. [Fig. 63] Color in his canvases is appropriated to be shapes that provide the framework for the organization of the whole composition. Particularly interesting is his management of white, which he treats as an independent entity or to frame other colours and vice versa. [Fig. 64 & Fig 65] Sadanand Menon eloquently testifies to the quality of light that emanates from his works,

consequent to the exploration of the white spaces. He says, “there are many artists who have mastered the art of arresting lights. It is only a few like Viswanathan who also know how to release it...The overall impact is of a journey through remote, recondite tunnels of darkness that gradually reveal a celebration of light at a distance towards which one must advance with preparation and necessary reverence.”<sup>40</sup> His poetic and lyrical chromatic values fundamentally were applications of colours building nuances of delicate transparency that effulges light, applying in thin colour strokes and gradually building it to the required depth. The trace of the first color becomes the guide for the next enabling a build up across the canvas. It is this interactive play between the brush and the colours that construes the numinous space of his implied geometry.

He equates his creation to an analogy of a singing bird. It is not the song of the bird that announces time in space, but it sings of time and narrates space. The painter, narrates the color, the light sings it. The contrasts, contradictions and harmonies return to the living and silent surface of the painting. This activity in emptiness is the reason for being the *raison d’etre* of the painter who is neither indifferent nor detached with reality around him. His contemporaneity manifests this act of demystification to engender a critique of opticality transcended through his calculated geometry.

Unlike Kandinsky who painted ideas, Viswanathan paints/communicates his ‘being’ as *yantra*, the resultant action creating an interface between the artist and the support when the numinous becomes experience with the trace of the brush stroke. Quoting T.S. Eliot, he says, ‘whether you paint or cut glass, there is always a trace left by the tool, in the movement of the tool, there is a sense of action’<sup>41</sup> His working methods are equally fascinating since he transacts with his frames not from the verticality of the easel but from the ground where the canvas is laid horizontally. This allows for an interesting analogy with Pollock’s method of executing a painting in which the support or the canvas was laid on the ground or horizontally in direct opposition to the verticality of the field of vision. In contrast to Pollock, conceptually it gave Viswanathan an opportunity to work from all sides, equating this working method to a cosmic eye that allows a temporal and spatial largeness. The conflating of his being with the creative process becomes an abstraction, a terrain Viswanathan explores with untiring energy.



### A Search for Identity

A near fatal accident while traveling in Germany, led Viswanathan to ask the fundamental question 'who am I'? While coming out of unconsciousness the doctors words 'who are you'? had reverberated through his consciousness. This led to a conscious search about this philosophical question and answered it in creating celluloid ventures of elements of earth, [Fig. 66] water and fire. The investigation of these abstract energies led to an extensive traveling within India that enabled a material engagement commensurate with mystical questions about life and death. The journey through a simulated eye of the camera led the artist to provide an extension of his visual dimensions into the essential categories of nature. By engaging with these forms in their benevolence and fury, he was clearly defining an extension of his artistic process from the fixity of the canvas to the mobility of celluloid. Every aspect of life and physical activity for Viswanathan is collapsed in the metaphor of challenge that is the salient feature of his creative ventures. Drawing parallels with the great Indian artisans who carved out *chaityas*, *viharas* and temples to the faith of an ordinary mortal walking on fire are no ordinary acts but the power of the mind to challenge the finite being as he is inscribed with the physicality of the 'body'. Viswanathan extends this ideology to name the body as the *yantra* a diagram capable of infinite extensions when challenged. As the *yantra* manifests the magical powers when invoked with the chanting of the *mantras*, so the body can perform similar functions when challenged. A metaphysical vision that, Viswanathan successfully comes to bear upon his canvases.

In the finite actions of the body, he translated the performative action of the hand in the materialization of the diagrammatic shapes and forms. Though Viswanathan denies any constructive influence of Pollock, the mediating philosophy of ritualistic action is akin to what Pollock derived from Native Americans from their varied rituals. In Viswanathan's case the body is fetishised to make his space performative of various shapes, as the numinous geometric spatial organization is the very crux of his creations. Space in his works defines and constructs, is material and sensual and neither empty nor intangible.

In Viswanathan's paintings the spatial text is made tangible through the movement of colours. In employing the shapes of triangles, squares, circles and the rectangles [Fig. 67] with the discursive body, he evokes the ritualistic diagrams that he had created with his father. The point of reference in his canvases to traditional Indian thought and experiences was purely at the material and technical level that was in terms of colours, brushwork and the canvas, implying obliquely

the noumenal space that he was exploring through geometric diagrams. In his works he transcends narration, historicity or mimetic representation to construct an interpretive thesis of existence and meaning. The episteme of his native region engendered for him an essentialist identity in Paris [Viswanathan today is a diaspora artist having migrated to Paris in 1968] where his works were recognized expressing an alien sensibility [read Indian] with warm colours dominating but not abstract in the Eurocentric sense. This strikes a posture of opposition with a European sensibility for which abstraction was a process of reduction and simplification of a representational derivative related directly to some object as Monet had demonstrated in his *Water Lilies*, Cezanne with his reductive color planes and the cubists with the fractured imagery. Hence it is the strong native identity – subsumed within the larger aspect of Indian nationality – which he pursued to make his works different in a European milieu that had abstraction as a dominant language in the 70s. Says Viswanathan, “though I was surrounded by Cezanne and cubist masters they remained inspiration to move ahead without losing my Indian identity in a surrogate country”<sup>42</sup> [in conversation with the artist at his residence, Chennai, August 1998]. By emphasizing these aspects Viswanathan clarifies that inspiration or influences as such had no direct bearings but what holds greater strength was what was deeply entrenched within his psyche – those collective memories part of collective unconscious that was to have valency.

#### **K.M. ADIMOOLAM: VERSATILE LINE AND POETIC NATURESCAPES**

“My paintings are abstract drawings. I draw color”.

An eminent artist within the Madras Art Movement, K.M. Adimoolam is well known for his black and white ink drawings as well for his abstractions that mark his signature style. In analyzing the oeuvre of this artist who was also a founder member of the Cholamandal Artist village, I shall briefly outline his drawings and lay emphasis on his abstractions. A shift was marked in his experimental vision of painting when he consciously adopted the metaphor of nature to create his abstractions.

##### **The Line as Text**

Unlike Viswanathan, Adimoolam [Figs. 68 & 69] was no ideologue, as he frankly professed, “I have never pretended to be well read or projected myself as a philosopher...and hence has never presented myself as a great intellectual”. His simple vision and approach towards life was collapsed in his drawings and paintings. Mediating through the genre of abstraction was one dimension of his artistic personality while the other was the versatility of enduring line – an

element that established his oeuvre as dynamically powerful and visionary. Significantly it was this seminal contribution that engendered for him an artistic eminence within the Madras Group.

Adimoolam hailing from a small village of Keerambur in Tiruchirapalli district in Tamil Nadu was a compulsive artist. His interest in art was marked from his school days, when he showed predilection towards drawing more than the learning of three R's. This was further enhanced by the presence of *sthapatis* in his neighbourhood who carried out commercial projects of portrait statues for local patrons. Since family opposition was negligible for the pursuit of an artistic career, it emboldened him to leave his native village for an urban sojourn to the city of Madras. His mentor in the city was the sculptor S. Dhanapal, head of the Sculpture Department in the School of Arts and Crafts. His seminal years at this institution under the nurturing care of the sculptor helped him negotiate a tract that set him apart from many others in the group.

In the 60's, in Madras, a discourse on Indianness was a significant agenda under Paniker. Adimoolam fitted into the group that the patriarch was shaping of the young crop towards a new rethinking of tradition. Adimoolam's natural flair for drawing and sensitivity to explore the rhythms of life logically veered him towards line to communicate his empirical experiences. Since line was seen as an integral part of the Orientalist discourse and as well promoted Indian artistic continuum, he believed it to be a magical player for his art, citing examples of Jain miniatures, Chola murals, Tamil epigraphs and palm leaf manuscripts.

Adopting line to serve as a basis for his expressions, he defined and redefined the multifaceted appeal of drawings making it the backbone of his art. He broke away eventually from the much-maligned 'academic drawing' [Fig. 70] that had been the mainstay of the colonial art establishment to create his own that would be marked by his individuation. Towards this the discourse on line had been initiated from the regime of Roy Chowdhary, facilitated through pedagogues like Ram Gopal, Paniker, Dhanapal, Munuswamy among others. Paniker had mobilized his personalized rendering of the line in his pictorial expressions and sketches that was characterized by choppy short strokes creating fudgy and furry effects. This was juxtaposed with the traditional line drawn from the pictorial and plastic imagery that defined the contours of whole compositions in a single rhythmic flow. [Figs. 71 & 72] It is interesting to note that among the members of the Madras Group, Adimoolam adhered to the precocious line in all its versatility in defining his expressive figuration. To the exclusiveness of color he worked his drawings with such depth that he became a proficient critic of its manipulations. His drawings spontaneous and

contemporary were aptly articulated to control and vary the tensions allowing for a full materialization of his figured compositions [Fig. 73]. The control was absolute and exploited it to the contingency of his creations. His virtual command over the line – short strokes, cross-hatchings, and tight squiggles –all contributed to the definition of light, shadow and spatial depth [Figs 74 & 75].

Line, a strategic dimension of his body of works, was eclectic in its derivation and Adimoolam derived his strength from Picasso,[Figs. 76 & 77] Klee, Dufy and Matisse from distant shores. Close at home the empathic line of his teachers A.P. Santhanaraj [Fig. 78], Munuswamy and S. Dhanapal counterpoised sufficiently with his temperament. Says Adimoolam, “the influence of Picasso’s creations on me was much deeper and faster [than Klee] which I clearly recall even now. The influence, which started in 1964, became very strong in the next three or four years and disturbed me deeply”<sup>43</sup>. Despite this eclecticism, what manifested radically was Adimoolam’s vision as he morphed them to suit his expressions, which he rendered dynamically with variety of media - pencil, charcoal, fountain pen, pen and ink and crowquill. Drawing on blotting paper, crowquill is a technique of manipulating the quill to spread the ink by stopping it in its progress of drawing a line creating powerful pauses enhancing the character of the imagery. This had been integral to his sketches and marked it as strength and individuating his creations.

Adimoolam mediating through line exclusively or strengthening and enhancing with ink washes explored a wide spectrum of themes, which in itself makes an interesting narrative within the Madras Group. His intense sensibility and sensitivity of observing life impacted on his works. The subject that he depicts with naivety and simplicity are from his home town nostalgically coming forth as in **A Devotee worships, Feeding on the Street** [Fig. 79]. His forms include both human, birds and animals rendered with easy felicity. Adimoolam negotiating line and wash tones have simultaneously ventured to create an endearing ambience in his works, which solicits an immediate appeal.

A draughtsman par excellence, Adimoolam’s drawings have the organic quality, that underlie his creations. Scripting his linear maneuvers, he was absorbed by this medium that facilitated creative statements with felicity of character, producing many series of which his **Gandhi Series** [Figs. 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 & 86] is most well known. His venture in this direction was to mark the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation in 1969. An ample opportunity was provided by the motif of Gandhi as a persona to play with his controlled line in form and space and in

contrasting shades. The **King Series** [Figs. 87 & 88] rendered in fountain pen to document the weaves and patterns on the royal costume followed the success of this. Of the King Series Adimoolam says, "I was struck by the decorative value of the princely pomp and splendour. The fact that they were just figureheads, spending their time playing chess or polo, going for animal hunts and maintained as titular heads by the imperialist regime came through in photographs" <sup>44</sup>. The spirit of these puppet monarchs was achieved craftily apprehended through one main light source, wherein shadows were created by hatching with very fine lines for the highlights.

Adimoolam in his linear and painterly drawings and sketches of the Gandhiji and King series was not mimetic but in a postmodern formulation was parodying the subject with a subtle play of wit. Adimoolam directed his apparently simple compositions to project an ordinary perceptual vision but corrugates as manifestation of cynicism exemplified in his Gandhi Series. Here the ideology of Ahimsa of the Patriarch was marginalized within the Dravidian regional polity in the Hindi Agitation that convoluted the Southern States in 1968. Similarly in the King Series the mute point of their impotency is reflected in the featureless, non-defined countenances. In their muted glorification was the irony of these monarchs who privileged colonial authority as a symbol of hallowed governance to their own detriment.

#### **Linear to Painterly: Sojourn into Abstraction**

Early 70's witnessed Adimoolam making forays into the rarified field of abstraction with a series of abstract drawings that was the polarization of his deep commitment to figuration. This significantly marked his artistic maturity, concluding effortlessly his period of figured compositions. In these abstract drawings he attempts to concretize the hackneyed lines to configure as geometric shapes and forms the inspiration for which came from nature in the shape of clouds, rocks and planets. As he worked at his visual language he morphed his organic forms betraying his conscious experimentation with his imagined geometry. It acquired a surreal quality as they float majestically on the plane of the canvas. [Fig. 89] These experimentations of Adimoolam are exemplified by the **Space Series** drawings that crucially negotiated the relationship between form and space, and light and dark in conjunction with his continued investigations of lines that was now employed for a different purpose. [Fig. 90, 91, 92, 93, 94] Soon it began to dawn on Adimoolam that he must introduce color in his compositions. It was a compulsion, which he felt and towards this end he worked methodically and carefully as he brought his works to another stage in its development. The genre of black and white drawings gradually transformed to colored abstraction with the aid of colored ink in his Space Series.

Interestingly colours became the main players to add a new dimension to his compositions lending an ambience wherein geometric shapes floated in a fluid space. The colours that he dexterously employed metonymed/paralleled the sharp definition of objects in terms of metallic blues, sulphur yellows with deep blacks. This series to a large extent clarified his experimentation with colours and also endorsed his sensitivity to the scientific researches in the field of space. Adimoolam in a material move towards his abstraction was not insulated from his environment as a set of conscious activities idealized by the post painterly abstract painters of the 60s, but rather reflected his awareness to technological advances and researches. By doing so he subverts this negotiation within the arena of high modernism and defines his interactivity within a cultural matrix.

Explicating a move in this direction Marta Jakimowicz-Karle comments, "The Space Series drawings, started in 1974, and continued for five years. The passage to this 'astonishing event' [as the artist calls the completely new phase], was facilitated by a short encounter with figural oils on canvas executed during 1973, and by another tendency that developed from his staple drawing practice which saw a clarifying and lightening of lines, limited almost to basic contours...The washed and the hatched lines sporadically evoke motion on the surface, in place of earlier partial plasticity."<sup>45</sup> Thus Adimoolam gradually weaned himself away from the expressive plasticity of line to congeal his forays as abstraction into the mysteries of the natural world. From a larger perspective of the cosmos with its underlying structure and intriguing patterns beyond human perceptions, he filtered it to the behavior and moods of nature. Adimoolam explicated this dimension of his creative thinking, when he said, "my ever creative and anxious mind provokes me to penetrate the Reality that lies beyond our vista"<sup>46</sup>. Subsumed in this utterance is the inflection of the philosophy that what appears to the eye is only '*maya*' or an illusion but a deeper 'reality' lie beyond material manifestation. Though this aesthetic is based on the *Sankhya* philosophy, it has reverberation of Greenbergian ideal refracted from Kantian aesthetics. But it is in direct opposition to Greenberg as he employed the metaphor of nature to achieve his creative ends.

Adimoolam like the others in the group had to grapple with the problem of illusionist dimension in his paintings and his Space Series marked the first signpost in the handling of the space problematic. This series was transitional enabling him to restructure his space, and allowed geometric forms either to be embedded or to be fluid. Compositionally, Adimoolam at this stage was clarifying color tones having done away with the active employment of line. This series also

dealt with abstract planes translated through colour. If line was the vital element earlier, space now became a challenge as he attempted to decipher the intangibility of space and the maneuvers within it. His attention therefore had shifted from specific areas to the total space of the canvas, from related colours to atmospheric tonalities. Deep introspection had ultimately led Adimoolam from the narrow confines of sharp lines to the unlimited gamut of colours.

### **Nature Through Metonymic Colours**

Without the crutch of line, Adimoolam composed his colours with a sensitivity that effortlessly carried him across the canvas. The bold white areas were not planned exercises rather the saturation points of his tonal experience. “His capacity to leave them speaks of his critical judgment, that is strongly intuitive as well as analytical”<sup>47</sup>. Nevertheless it also points to the noumen – a reality beyond what is perceived intellectually or visually as he materially invests his composition with arbitrated white spaces. His grappling with problematic space seems to have found a solution in the **Space and Forms, [Figs. 95 & 96] [1980]** through mediation with colours that enabled a material reading of the space across the surface rather than into it.

With confidence thus gained, Adimoolam now employed colours that were to prove significant. Demonstrating to be equally proficient with its orchestration, as he had done earlier with the versatile line, it marks his dedication and passionate compulsions. These experimentations paved the way for his pure abstracts, investing his vision of nature with colours “nature in its totality interpreted through colours without focusing on any aspect”<sup>48</sup>. Unlike Monet, whose field of vision was opticality that translated fleeting and transient moments of evasive light, Adimoolam’s forays into the world of nature and its moods was metaphorical that mediated his sensibility in terms of human emotions. Consequent to this the salient features of his frames were the cascading planes of colours; the broad strokes applied with palette knife - the tool, which defined his creative contours.

Inspired and moved by the myriad quantification of chromatic effulgence of nature, the images euphemistically were emotional moods. The appropriated imagery was noumenal – the world of nature, a thing in itself - working through it to significantly recreate their resonance and marked with visual authority. As he constructed his large canvases, building up layers with his palette knife and brush strokes the bricks of colours, metaphorically conveyed human emotions through the metonymy of nature’s moods - its playful gaiety, somber warmth, terrifying fury or gentleness to scintillating vibrancy of light. Adimoolam’s sensibility hence articulated the metaphor of

nature where the intentional transformation embodied the reordering within a vision for his non-iconic emotional abstractions.

“My canvases mirror my mind’s journey through nature, not as realistic landscapes or seascapes but in planes of colours creating an esoteric aura on a transcendental level”<sup>49</sup>. Adimoolam’s complicity with nature inscribed its gamut of moods and conflated the idea with human emotions. This perhaps accounted for its metaphorical mode and transcendence. There was neither mimicry nor mimetic strategies nor to read nature as the truth of things as Cezanne’s landscapes had prefigured; but a transcription of analogies of color that signified nature as his transcendent language. Ram Kumar, the Delhi based artist had essentially abstracted the bathing ghats of Benaras and generally the urban scapes with its textured life lived at every level into planar forms. Adimoolam in his abstractions eschewed the optical and tactile reality to emphasize not the culture of man but rather the pristine nature when he explicated that “though my work may appear to be a landscape or a seascape it isn’t. It is actually a land I can see and feel within myself. A limitless realm of fantasy that man has not tempered with”<sup>50</sup>. His was an appreciation of transience of things that had as its base the potent subconscious allowing his inherent locked experiences to have valence. Hence one radical change facilitated another, and the first half of the 1980’s saw Adimoolam indulging in colors and larger formats. He says, “how can I make my work simpler in color, shapes and design? I sit before the canvas, just looking at it Suddenly I decide upon one color and put a few strokes on the canvas, without being aware of how the painting will take shape. After I have placed two or three colours, I tune in something. The colours lose their identity and gain in dimension as part of the world I am going to create”. The tangibility of the trace of one provided a lead to the next mediated through his well-orchestrated palette ranging from blacks, blues, reds, greens, oranges, and yellow engaging in a dialogue to create a world that draws to its core. His color schemas generate feelings of elemental drives and boundless space. A strong gestural quality manifested his surfaces, exhibiting enormous technical ingenuity. But these gestural marks when compared with Pollock’s are in opposition to his manipulation of the non-traditional use of materials. Pollock’s attempt was to demonstrate the infinite possibilities of the human mind when concerns addressed free exploration of one’s ingenuity stymied neither by cultural specifiers or a daunting tradition.

Signifying a process of emotional precipitation via nature, Adimoolam’s colours semantically perpetuate his sensual love for the seasons with their myriad dance of tones and values. His unerring judgement towards color orchestration internalized over years of training and practice



created in conjunction with noumenal space, sensations that was 'infra thin' such as the feeling of the width of the piece of paper for the inexpressible subtle relationship between them. In addition to his color management that he brilliantly achieved the trace of the tool was his signature that Adimoolam postulated was the absence of presence. The patterned squares and confident slashes, the dynamic diagonals and the textured cross over of strokes made it a salient feature of his works remaining depthless depths [Figs. 97 & 98].

Adimoolam's works invite attention to the intrinsic properties of his abstracts i.e. the syntactical properties namely forms and structure. Each of the interacting color has its own function within a total web of rhythms and patterns. They were purely non- representational/non-iconic connoting nature to reflect emotional states of the artist and man in general. Their impact derives from the expressive brushstrokes juxtaposed with emotional referent of colouration. The analogy could be paralleled with music that has a non- semantic structure of expressive sounds so in non-iconic art of colored shapes they could be organized into aesthetic composition.[Fig. 99] For Adimoolam nature scripted and his imagination performed subsuming it as a paradigm of his whole created oeuvre. And he reinforced this ideology "the nature around me is the major source of inspiration of my paintings". It also provides the rhythm for the gestural play of colours. In the Madras tradition his paintings were bound by the strength of decorative design becoming a central premise on which the regional modern acquired a stylistic identity and distinguished it from both the western modern and the 'national' modern.

In the Greenbergian argument, artistic innovations proceed through formal self- criticism. But Adimoolam moved beyond this dominant Greenbergian canon deploying the metaphor of nature to resist formalism – a resistance, which became productive as a personal statement on the vagaries of nature by the artist. Through his abstracts Adimoolam was also protesting the dominating influence of Paniker who insisted on a nativist language as a mark of authenticity that should be the underlying phenomenon in the oeuvre of the Madras Group. Nevertheless Adimoolam demonstrated versatility in his body of works comprising figural ink drawings and sketches as well lyrical abstractions giving him a venerable niche within the Madras Art Movement. He stressed his regional sensibility, by sourcing his repertoire from the folk art deities sculptural iconography [Figs. 100 & 101] and images of his village in interior Tamil Nadu. Adimoolam to a large extent effectively corroborated with the ideology of the Madras group that had gained mileage from Paniker's initiative. Line though a universal element had been creatively and successfully employed from prehistoric times to the present. In Adimoolam's

works it takes on greater significance since he valorized it within the discourse of nativism offering possibilities that opened up avenues for defining its own brand of modernity. He applied his contemporary sensitivity to make it symbolic and narrative, abstract and figurative, decorative and representational.

### **GOPINATH [1948 -]: STRUCTURED COLOURS AND PLANAR FORMS**

The aesthetic of Gopinath's [Fig. 102] art was grounded in structured colours and planar forms derived from his experiences of life, cultural matrix and the plenitudes of nature. An encounter with his canvases is to experience an aura of meditative silence and contemplative ambience where imaginative freedom with logic shaped his pictures. The nativist agenda or indigenism that had informed the Madras Art Movement was implicated in the early works of Gopinath, but as he moved ahead and defined his terrain, he also brought to bear upon his works the myriad influences of the Eastern and Western art.

Gopinath's early years at Ponnani – his hometown - were visually and intellectually rewarding. It is a beautiful fertile province in north Kerala, known for its Malayalam poets and writers of the caliber of Kunjan Nambiar, Yerraseri and many more. He grew up amidst this romantic literature when it was at its zenith. The social and cultural ambience of his home province was deeply internalized for Gopinath, which began to make appearances in his works when he gravitated towards painting. His passion for drawing was instigated by his grandfather who drew *kathakali* mask on the wooden bench with charcoal sticks for him. His drawing skill from a tender age was his strength and these early nurturing experiences formed the artist within.

His uncle K.C.S. Paniker encouraged him to join the Government College of Arts and Crafts thus initiating him into art education. [Fig. 103] Gopinath vehemently stresses that his maturity in art was made possible through long hours of discussion on art history, theory and philosophy with Paniker and other senior members at Cholamandal Artist Village where he lived. These debates discussions and arguments facilitated clarifications for many young artists including Gopinath pushing them to think and create along different tracks and simultaneously investing them with confidence to grow and develop their art. Supporting him towards these new directions at the art institution during his formative days as student were his two revered teachers Santhanaraj and Munuswamy.

Gopinath in his search for developing his artistic language turned to western modernist masters for instructions in constructing and developing his compositions. From Cezanne he learnt a rationale of ordering vision through deployment of fundamental geometric shapes and forms. Picasso's negotiation of space through fractured and faceted objects allowing them to remain on the surface strongly affected Gopinath's approach to this major element in his works. Kandinsky's 'art of inner necessity' in which line and color articulated the representation of the 'spiritual state of mind' was to prove vital for his creative individuation. And the influence of Paul Klee with his reductive cryptic diagrams derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics as well his conceptual approach to Eastern mysticism was the strongest on Gopinath. He synthesized the compositional structuring of the European abstract masters with the canonical and folk art [Madhubani paintings] Indian pictorial tradition. The Madhubani paintings clarified largely the deployment of line for a simple and expressive method. These were to define his subjectivity in relation to his cultural formation, essentially delineating an approach that supported what could be termed as postmodern eclecticism which contrary to Greenbergian universalism foregrounded his regional identity mediated through the genre of abstraction. Within the Madras Art Movement in the early 60s when Paniker, Redappa Naidu, Munuswamy and Santhanaraj had vigorously employed line to banish the illusionist dimension, Gopinath used color to do the same with his structured space.

### **Compositional Formulations**

Gopinath initiated his exploration in painting through water-colours that were largely inspired from Paniker. His sensitive response to life around him underpinned his works, gradually working towards reducing extraneous sensory details to project only the essential. These exercises of retrenching perceptive forms pushed Gopinath in 1969 to make adventurous beginning, producing his famous and well-known 'Biomorphic' painting. This initial work was rendered in water- color and ink [Fig. 104]. In this particular instance the painted composition evacuated of identifying references and focusing on free play of line and forms milestones his advent into the arena of abstraction.

By 1970 he started eliminating recognizable figure from his works and moved towards using symbols, as Paniker and Redappa Naidu had done earlier. The cultural armature he recreated referenced the naive human forms in Madhubani paintings, kalm or the floor decorations, diagrammatic yantras, snakes, female goddesses and lingam. These were dexterously juxtaposed to create free but structured compositions as exemplifies in **Fish and Figure and Ritual**

**Memories. [Figs 105, 106 & 107]** The active embodiments of these cultural signifiers became characteristic of Gopinath's works particularly in his early abstractions.

Gopinath who had predilection towards structure was attracted to the studies of Indian art forms. He was particularly enthused by the South Indian Bronze icons especially the Nataraja. What attracted him to this icon was its aesthetic form that was held in dynamic tension by the arch of flames or the *prabhavalh*. This aureole reinforced its visual strength but more vitally was the idea of its containment within, allowing possibilities of its placement anywhere so that it could become an integral part of the environment. Gopinath argued that the structured form of the icon was conditioned by this particular formal element of the arch. He simply reduced the iconic formula as square inscribed within a circle. And it could contain anything. Consequently this circular element plays a decisive role marking a strong presence in his works, which visually enhanced its aesthetic appeal [Fig. 108]

Gopinath's philosophy of interpreting reality that is in a process of constant flux and change allowed the possibility of mapping these changes through the agency of the human form. This made it possible in his art to engage the human imagery as a leitmotif through the concept of mother mystique. Fundamentally an archetypal image based primarily on collective unconscious that is integral to a cultural matrix where social formations dictate many rituals. The collective articulation of a primal world perceived through fertility related myths and rituals embodied the cult of maternal principle as the numinous earth-spirit/mother goddess<sup>51</sup>. Gopinath mediating through these archetypal imageries is reliving his childhood memories of rituals performed for the mother and the snake goddesses. Correspondingly these rituals also configured *kalam* on the floor rendered in bright colours. From within these ritualistic cultural matrix Gopinath reinvents signs and symbols within which he situates his art. His construction of it simplifies visual symbols so as to dispossess it of its iconographic and metaphoric role, enabling these manifestations as correspondence in his painted expressions. By the subversion of the sacred Gopinath in his art bears affinity to works of Redappa Naidu and remains within the modernist logic towards secular affinity. [Figs. 109, 110 & 111]

In discussing and situating the works of Gopinath in a cultural matrix that is ritual based it also opens to the question of primitivism as an important part of modernist discourse. Picasso in looking beyond his national aesthetics was attracted to the primitive arts of Iberia and other Saharan countries. By appropriating its formal imagery within his art he paved the way for non-

Western cultures to play a seminal role. In contextualizing Gopinath's works within the nativist agenda it energises this parallel with primitivism but operated through rituals as well the inherited cultural traditions. This explains the varied signs and symbols which have been drained of its spiritual significance to operate as mere correspondence in their works. This hold true largely of Achuthan's works also

Stylistically in negotiating his imagery, he was informed in his works by the miniature tradition that helped clarify his notion of space. The simple powerful lines, the stylized imagery and abundance of bright expressive colours gave strength to his composition as it liberated him from the tyranny of three-dimensionality. These primordial elements inhabited his canvases in terms of melded colours and planes. He stated explicitly, 'there is always a human imagery in my pictures. The play is with the figures which I make it transparent with colours and details of structure'. The human imagery pushes through abstract vocabulary colluding craftily to emerge as geometric shapes of triangles and elliptical curves premising a regional specificity in the genre of abstraction derived primarily from cultural signs to operate as 'correspondence'. [Fig. 112] Interestingly Gopinath's insistence on the remnants of the human form continuing within his works recall similar explication by Paniker who did not put his faith in absolute abstraction and wanted a touch with material reality. It also reflects the strong native figurative tradition in art that has influenced and colored his sensibility. Predictably the human form though largely abstracted, has remained central to his composition, and through it he has negotiated his artistic sensitivity.

The **Biomorphic Series** that he started evolving in mid 70's were thus informed of his varied assimilated experiences from Paniker's Words and Symbols to Neo-Tantricism to a study of color experimentations in the artists like Kandinsky, Delauney, and Matisse to traditional art forms in Indian miniatures and folk art. In this direction he was aided by his imaginative freedom with logic that allowed the shaping of his pictures.

Gopinath, as he progressed in evolving his style and expressions, moved gradually from strictly structured works, i.e. from painstakingly worked and premeditated laboured sketches and colored drawings before confronting the canvas. This eventually gave way to an intuitive free mode of painting. This is where Gopinath marked his break to encounter the canvas directly without the rituals of preparation of grids and sketches. Of this approach said Gopinath, "it used to be chaotic

initially, but as colours were piled and worked out slowly, the order would emerge"<sup>52</sup>. It was this challenge that defined his oeuvre and paved the ground for the dynamism of his future paintings.

Gopinath's notion of these Biomorphs forms was premised essentially on the idea of continuous growth and movement. Materially in painting it was based fundamentally on the concept of color namely its juxtapositions and effulgent contrasts. By this method, his colours became an ideational element that was explored for its pure values. It was not pure abstraction; an idea, which was totally abhorrent to Gopinath, for he cautioned that, it is the entire nature and its interface of colours with human elements, that is made interactive. And he explored the forms within this aesthetics draining away residues of precipitate illusion to repudiate it completely. Gopinath similarly had affinity with the abstract artists of the Madras Group mentioned earlier of moving away from absolute formalism of Greenbergian character to activate the repressed trope of iconography and nature to conceptualize his works that would be distinct from Eurocentric abstraction. Gopinath in deriving his imagery from primitive art forms particularly the popular mother goddess images as well the decorative floor decorations or the *kalam* had initiated a new trend. That is cultural signs play a defining role and in doing so reinforce regional characteristics. In comparison with other artists within the country this move was confined particularly to the artists of the South. Because by mid 70s the figurative art had made a popular come back and the human form was actively deployed to communicate and become a vehicle for expressing social content.

His Biomorphs images and forms though derived from traditional and popular sources reveal the conceptual paradigm of his picture making manifesting the idea that every earthly thing has a meaningful inward image. This Platonic notion significantly underlined the fact that there was an idea behind every form of reality and that all events must be perceived in terms of evolving principles. It is this truth, which was persuasive in allowing him to mediate his forms through dominant employment of colours to become the main protagonist of his paintings. And to this end he manipulated, maneuvered and exploited every tone and shade, which would explicate his ideas. And color, as a light manifestation was not descriptive of any object, but an independent illuminating and a powerfully cognizant element [Fig. 113]

Together with planar forms, color became an all-defining constituent that mediated his compositions and studied it for its inherent characteristics. The color most preferred was red and extensively used. The predilection towards colours as structuring blocks in the construction of

his compositions was an inherent aspect of his traditional inheritance from Indian miniatures. This art form had laid premium on design, in conjunction with bright and flat coloured planes, remaining central to its aesthetics. Madhubani paintings with its insistence on versatile and productive use of line aided him to translate into planar formulation. The colours of Paniker and the line of Santhanaraj reinforced this further. These sublimated metaphoric expressions also scripted the strong design character, which differentiated the abstractions of Gopinath on the strength of cultural specificity of his native village from the strict purity of canonical High Modernism [Figs. 114, 115 & 116].

As he postulated, “the different forms have different tonal and structural values but they have to be co-ordinated for the purpose of the ultimate pictorial order. The division of the canvas into more than one plane is in order to create a greater area of planar space for structured colours. Ultimately colours and lines merge together while retaining their individual qualities. It is neither purely analytical [western] nor purely lyrical [eastern]”<sup>53</sup>.

Gopinath in his paintings does not profess to work out all the possibilities so much, as to refine the central idea, not to search for the new and different, so much as to move towards the form of thought, indirectly reflecting his perspective and transmitting his perceptual and cultural values. “Time” says Gopinath “has no role to play for me. I have patience. I can never say that my paintings are finished. I paint as a monk who says his prayers”. Josef James commenting on Gopinath’s work says: “Gopi is still experimenting using scripts and series in the same pocket of space available to make it grow with life. His colours have become bolder coming out more strongly and clearly. If he works this through he will be the colorist of the century”<sup>54</sup>. The statement projects Josef James formalist approach to his analysis of the Madras Group and particularly in this instance to Gopinath where he indicates his colored expressions as organic when he employs words as ‘grow with life’ [Figs. 117 & 118]. In this respect I wish to point out that in the analysis of the Madras Art Movement, painted creations or otherwise have been derived largely from the forms of traditional and popular sources in which the semiotics of cultural signifiers have played a calculated role to evolve a visual language. In the case of Gopinath as also with others, it comfortably situates his works within this paradigm since he partially addresses the episteme of native script, weaving it within his language of abstraction. This has established his trajectory on a cultural terrain evolving his style to be highly individualistic and personalized borne out of collective experiences

## ACHUTHAN KUDALLUR [1945 -] THE TRIGONOMETRY OF SHAPES AND COLOURS

### Early Struggles Towards Artistic Statements

Achuthan Kudallur [Fig. 119] defined his presence in the Madras Art Movement through his shared vision of abstraction and the commonality of color that marks the strength of his works. Achuthan was not an academically trained artist like the others in the group. His decision to become an artist came after intense soul searching when he debated possibilities of a career in science, which would serve no purpose intellectually though he technically qualified and received a diploma in the same. He came to Madras from Kudallur in 1963 armed with his writing skills and an interest in existentialist philosophy. Writing in Malayalam in the 60's was heavily dependent on the philosophy of Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre and Frans Kafka. However in Madras through the first few years of the 60s his reading and writings were influenced by Dostoevsky, Chekov, Hemmingway among others.

In Madras Achuthan acquainted himself with a few artists, joined a writers group and came upon the works of James Joyce and Tszra Proust in the magazine *Sameeksha* that was edited by M. Govindan. The same magazine also carried articles and visuals on great European masters like Rembrandt and Goya. He became enchanted and fascinated with their extraordinary manipulation of light and figural imagery.

Achuthan's predilection towards art was honed from a young age of four when his father, a schoolteacher, while teaching him alphabets drew a human face. This was his first encounter with shape in terms of lines; an interest that he sustained throughout his school days when he made copies of pictures that revealed his idea of the sense of proportion in delineating figurative compositions.

Achuthan's systematic gravitation towards the artistic profession and determination to take up painting as a full time profession was consequent to an incident in his life. While in Madras an artist friend from Hyderabad visited him whose working process and style was to leave a deep impress on his sensibilities. The construction of his paintings, Achuthan noticed was based on the technique of using thick impastos of oil colours, building up his grotesque human imagery with it. Both the encounter with the oil medium and the technique of rendering it was a revelation when he said, 'it was then that I first felt the "smell of color", and the impact of this reverberated in subsequent years.



He joined the Madras Art Club in 1971 [conducted as evening classes by the College of Arts and Crafts, where many of the artist-teachers taught aspiring and talented students who were not regulars at the institution] and studied human body and anatomy through the watercolour medium. It was his experiences here in drawing, sketching and painting that he made a decision of becoming a full time artist [Fig. 120].

Achuthan's incursion into the creative world was intensely debated by him and after passionate deliberations realized that as a writer and in future as an artist the written word could also be projected as a visual. His confidence was buttressed by enthusiasts who appreciated his works. He began to exhibit annually and his representational style was largely derivative of the German Expressionists and to a lesser degree from the Surrealists. With his creative experiments commencing with western modernist formulae, Achuthan slowly structured his figural imagery to assume dimensions of distortion and complemented it by arbitrary use of colours as pink for elephants, red for the faces etc. His sensibility towards color became acute and this marked his identity and signature style as he progressed in its dominant use. He identified certain colours as his favourite like the cerulean blue; all shades of red fascinated him and characterized some as the 'shouting yellow'. Color however had been the mainstay of his sensibility from the childhood days affected as he was by the sight and sound of his native village Kudallur by the river [Figs. 121, 122, 123, 124, 125 & 126].

Achuthan it should be reiterated arrived at his abstractions and color festival through a studied phase of figuration when he wrestled with the idea of composing his works primarily from figures and this preoccupation with human imagery led to color playing a second fiddle in his compositions. This is to explicate that the human figure was dominant in his canvas and he would explore it with arbitrated choice of colours like cobalt blue against a sky of ultramarine. The consequence of this was that the picture relied heavily on the central figure with the colours marginalized. It is through this process of examination of the structure of his paintings in terms of figured compositions and the employment of colours that he soon realized that the identifiable forms were slowly receding and he was veering towards non-representational art. Josef James commented on the pictorial problem Achuthan had with the figurative style "it slowly released itself out of the earlier intimacy and confinement and began to expand into larger issues of picture making. The earlier confinement to violent reds is slowly being broken. Both these indicate that issues of greater generality and depth are beginning to be contemplated by the painter"<sup>55</sup>.

### **Maturity To Abstraction**

Achuthan who shared his experiences of the world through his shaped colours was now gradually expanding upon the vocabulary of free abstracted forms. The visibility and awareness in this direction was precipitated through his intense involvement with the human form assuming dominance in his works. As analyzed he was a confirmed figurate who had invested no faith in abstraction, vehemently emphasizing the centrality of the human figure to lend credibility to a work of art. But all this began to retreat as he developed his ideas about figurations and colours and logically arrived at abstraction after going through the phases of Expressionism and Surrealism that allowed for mediation for investigation of his visual language. Achuthan during this exploratory phase had made his imagery to appear in the nature of coloured forms, beginning to assume configurations that bore affinity to a trigonometry of geometric constellations, as he played with it on the surface of his canvases [Figs. 127, 128, 129 & 130].

Achuthan who gradually arrived at abstraction now freely played with colours and shapes, which he had the capacity to hold them as coloured shapes eventually materializing it on the canvas. Towards this representation he was not far away in his ideology of expressing cultural ethos/values that were strongly internalized in the sights and sounds of his native hometown. His mental landscape was crowded with childhood memories of his home at Kudallur near the river. The experiences of the performance of magical rituals accompanied by the chanting of mantras and the rhythmic drumming in the fire light; the exorcism of the spirit with its quaint dances and eerie sounds; the festivals, and the *Kathakali* dances were mental images that Achuthan now recapitulated to translate and constitute his abstract vocabulary expressed as colored shapes and forms.

For Achuthan, as he matured in moving away from employing the human imagery as a dominant trope, color replaced this concept and assumed dominance subverting it from mimetic logic tied to the definition or description of an object, and came to possess an autonomous concept or an ideal, which was a refraction of reality – cultural or otherwise. Colours, which within his abstract regime, assumed a representational role of a thing in itself, for Achuthan, was a major step forward. In their employment he emphasized their autonomy since it was dissociated and disembodied from material reality. He now studied it for varied possibilities of its harmony and different permutation it could give rise to. This material color when logically extended would lead to dematerialization and hence assume its original pristine form 'light'. "Absolute color leads

to absolute light", says Achuthan. "Light makes operational the colours and a successful painting is radiant from within otherwise it is dead"<sup>56</sup>. And this was the strength of his perception that emphasized independence of color, form and line, as well the romanticism of the brushwork.

Fracturing reality into abstraction is not what he aimed to do. "I consciously avoid all representative elements, leaving it to my inherent visual culture to put things in order. And often I find it following the subtle rules of nature, the subtle geometry of creation. Straight lines, hyperbolas, parabolas or even an egg are all universal shapes that repeat in nature and they can always have mathematical equations. This is the fundamental philosophy in which every form has its sources in the visible world"<sup>57</sup>. This is a Platonic reflection nevertheless. The idea of not mutilating the perceptual world indirectly leads him to his culture wherein Achuthan like his contemporary Gopinath attempts translation of the sights and sounds of varied rituals and performances to actively play a defining role. By relating his visual culture to nature Achuthan was propounding the aesthetics of primitivism made visible through his native culture. The unique painted surface organized without reference to particular representation but rather to correspondences of cultural signs [performing arts, rituals, worships etc.] came to be determining aspects of his abstractions. It required an intellectualization equivalent to solving a trigonometric rider/problem. "To create an abstraction", says Achuthan, "one has to posit shapes and discover new vocabulary to materialize them. And in this respect no two abstracts of any artists can ever resemble, remaining distinct as their individual signatures"<sup>58</sup> [Figs. 131 & 132].

In his creative process the trigonometry of shapes fluidly marked his picture plane drawing a strong analogy to calligraphic strokes, as one connected with the other to create a character. Achuthan's process is akin to the creation of calligraphic characters as one form or shape leads to the next, filling the space of his canvas with chromatic effulgences. He cleverly related this process to a strong foundation in drawing which he stressed every artist should possess. In controlling the process of colored drawing he intended dissociation to underline the autonomy of its existence.

A cerebral deliberation accounted for his so called appearance of intuitive positing of shapes and colours. He worked tirelessly, his brush loaded with thin colours creating transparent strokes, allowing for permutations that were purely poetic as imagination and intuition consorted to be instruments of lyricism. His technical virtuosity in the masterly handling of oil medium enhanced his meaningful creations. Initially applying a base thin coat in either red or brown and when

partially dry he wiped it with a swatch of cloth or textured it by making an imprint of pressing into the semi dry paint. These he said were his creative springboards, allowing for a continuous process of linking, slashing, adding, subtracting forms and shapes.

Achuthan pays homage to the 'father of modern painting' Cezanne when he said that, "how often Cezanne walked on the quicksands of color. There was nothing romantic in his color build up. Such austerity was impossible for me to achieve"<sup>59</sup>. Monet and Kandinsky fascinated him equally in their process of reaching abstraction. Achuthan realized that the last phase of Monet in his Water Lilies accidentally rested on abstraction. Though Monet depended on the object world, they were slowly melting down into color doodles. When he read Kandinsky's 'confrontation with Hay Stacks of Monet', he agreed with the author that in a picture, there was only color and space built up with color. These were vital lessons for Achuthan in his journey towards abstraction that he acknowledged with gratitude learnt from great modern masters.

Abstraction has come to stay with Achuthan for he says, "I will continue with abstracts till I am tired like a great tree gone mad with flowers. A tree does not count its flowers"<sup>60</sup>. Achuthan introspected as the Abstract Expressionists had done; but he concentrated on the tangibles of cultural signifiers through figurative subject matter observed in various performing arts of his home state Kerala. In addition the richness of his gestural brushworks and textures enhanced the sensuality and painterliness of his abstractions. His intensity is his confession of despair, yet as shapes he holds them in the tranquility of his mind when his whole being becomes ablaze with rage and anxiety. And this when translated to his canvas approximates the imagery of happy and joyous forms [Figs. 133, 134, 135, 136 & 137].

Achuthan as an artist has concentrated his energies in creative endeavours both verbal and visual. He moved towards the visual but it also generated a dialogue within him that in the appreciation of dance, music and drama the actors or the author or the director gets a direct appreciation from the audience, whereas in the case of painting it is the few in the audience as viewers and the viewers are limited who appreciate his creations. And in analyzing this response, he categorizes it as 'secret wounds' of the artist that is invisible and lives with it<sup>61</sup>. He largely introspects on his being and the angst that he experiences in the process that leads towards the precipitation of his forms on the canvas. For Achuthan it is a constant struggle with himself and the canvas till the catharsis is complete

The three artists namely Viswanathan, Gopinath and Achuthan have developed their language of abstraction by filtering their individual approach through cultural signs, segregating their approach to abstraction from an overtly representational idiom and demonstrating that art was an act of intellectual will. These artists have worked within a broadly modernist framework, and their works spring from a radical, experimental relationship with cultural traditions where the process from transformation to correspondence was effected with visual symbols dispossessed of its iconographic and mimetic role. Abstraction as practiced by them was also the process of cumulative endeavours of the Madras Art Movement beginning in the 60's. Of these Munuswamy was a pioneer, Viswanathan and Adimoolam operating in the 60's were seniors in the Movement when experimentations with two- dimensionality of the canvas privileged other means. Gopinath and Achuthan were younger painters who came to their mature expressions in the 70's.

The abstraction evolved here had a regional character tinged with its dominant cultural values, emanating from Kerala especially in the works of Viswanathan, Gopinath and Achuthan. A question that arises here is why the culture of Kerala was dominant over that of Tamilnadu within the Madras Art Movement. This exigency was made manifest because in the South there were no Art Schools of repute except the Madras School of Arts and Crafts one of the oldest colonial period established institution. Consequently a lacuna was there for this pedagogy in the other three states and hence the students gravitated towards this locus. It was only in the mid 70s that Art Institutions came up in centers like Trivandrum, followed by other similar institutions at Bangalore, Hyderabad and Cochin. And this explains the number of students who came from Kerala to study at Madras carrying their cultural baggage that precipitated vitally in their works.

The cultural milieu within which these three artists framed their visual language was drawn from the myths, epics, religion, rituals, dance, music, astrology and *tantric* ritualistic practices. It helped to energise their artistic vision investing it with imagery of primordial power. This was translated as painted expressions. The myths provided archetypal patterns of mother goddesses and the *tantric* diagrams with its symbolic colours aided in increasing the abstract vocabulary. By freely borrowing from regional cultures it also empowered the position of the artists in their negotiation of the western 'influences' allowing appropriation of primitivism, an important component of modernist discourse as Picasso and Matisse had done on their own terms. Nearer home within the country artists like Jamini Roy and Nandalal Bose had done the same. And importantly within the Madras Group Srinivasulu who had appropriated the folk and tribal culture

of his native state according to his sensibility. This collective aspect of regional culture strengthened the nativist agenda of the Madras Art Movement to inform and establish its identity and simultaneously provided a common psychological and spiritual binding for their works. Thus the paintings by these artists though abstract embody potential human experiences that were multidimensional rooted in cultural milieus. And by understanding these conventions, the three artists were able to deliberate and formulate the aesthetics of their abstraction.

It becomes imperative at this juncture to point out that the cultural interventionist agenda these artists mediated for their creative articulation ran counter to Greenbergian formulation where the 'collapsing values in Western bourgeois society' preempted him to an insistence upon formalism as a way to preserve aesthetic values and hence some sense of culture. And this he attempted in his seminal essay of 1939, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* where he rescues culture by separating the aesthetic values of art from other social and political values. By a process of resistance to the homogenizing discourse of abstraction of the west the abstractionists of the Madras Art Movement loop back through the postmodern discourse in which cultural derivatives of their artistic expressions remain as mere 'correspondences' to effectively realize their nativist agenda. Today it is possible to read their works as heterogeneous interventions into the hegemonic discourse of abstract art as it emerged in the west.

If Viswanathan, Gopinath and Achuthan banked on the cultural signs, symbols and metaphors to expound their abstraction, Adimoolam employed the metaphor of nature to articulate his subjectivity and establish his abstraction as an art of thinking difference. He has often emphasized and reiterated that they are not mythologized processes of nature such as summers, winters and rainy seasons, but total aesthetic expressions for emotional referents.

Fundamentally in the works of the Abstractionists of the Madras Art Movement, by challenging the approach to their paintings they were partially engaging the active attention of the eye of the viewer, forcing the viewer to look at rather than through, and to see the form rather than read narratives or symbols. This approach, "parallels developments in the history of ideas and culture when ego psychologists explored the conscious and unconscious ego functions as mechanism of defense, adaptation and psychic integration. This method of functioning was akin to giving rise to the formal qualities in art. Hence the painter who discriminated color, shape, and texture, who manipulated materials, made aesthetic and practical judgments, exercised skill, was engaged in high-level ego functioning"<sup>62</sup>. Within the narrative of the Madras Art Movement, the

abstractionists of this Group were engaged in 'high-level ego functioning' as put forth by Ellen Spitz. Since in their creative expressions they prioritized concepts that involved experimentations and manipulation of materials, which juxtaposed with their extraordinary skills [read craftsmanship] were directly operating in a manner similar in their approach to ideas propounded by Paniker. That is an emphasis on the character of thought or perception as instanced in astrological charts, numbers and alphabets, yantras, iconic forms [Nataraja], dance and music researched from traditional art forms that would affiliate them with a greater sense of authenticity and identity within the cultural milieu of the country. And while in their paintings they elided the politico-economic milieu cosmetically just like their western counterparts, their reasons however were different. The political assertion is located in their will towards regional identity more understandable within the dynamics of the Dravidian movement than that of internationalism. With the result art was not meant to be interpretive, breaking the semantics between the artist and the viewer.

Hence to keep alive their visibility from the periphery of the country, which eventually allowed the emergence of regional modernity, one could underline the strong exploitation and privileging of formal values interpreted through cultural signifiers to relate to their mechanisms of 'defense' in their marginalisation/alienation within the art of the nation. Their artistic 'adaptation' is explicated through renegotiation of the already configured tradition and its visual vocabulary. While their 'psychic integration' relates to the most vital dimension of their artistic personality, namely to be inter-woven within the national mainstream prioritizing their identity as 'Indian' first and 'regional' later subsumed as a sequential process.

#### **R. M. PALANIAPPAN: A CEREBRAL VOYAGE [b. 1958]**

I need the entire universe to create my drawings.

R.M. Palaniappan

A young and dynamic artist in late 70s who signed his artistic venture on the Southern terrain after the Madras Art Movement had established its volte-face was Rm. Palaniappan [Fig.138]. Investigating and artistically interrogating the graphic medium of print-making, Palaniappan ably and efficiently chartered out his trajectory foremost among the others [for instance R.B. Bhaskaran, but a much senior artist] within the post Madras Art Movement, to become the internationally acclaimed artist in the graphic field within the Southern region. His reputation today is formidable in the vanguard of this medium as he continues to be preoccupied with experimentations in this particular field.

‘How can the density of the air and the weight of the people climbing the steps balance each other’? This incidentally was not a problem posed to any physicist but a scientific query by Palaniappan to establish the logic of his surrealist imagery that came alive on his canvas after he had visualized and titled it as **Flying steps on my Birthday** [Fig. 139]. A versatile alumnus of the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Chennai, Palaniappan does not have to bear the narrative burden that marked the emergence of the Madras Art Movement in the 60’s from the locus of this institution. A path already laid by his predecessors enabled him to expiate his artistic exploration to chart a trajectory that defined his modernism. Moving away from the quotidian genres of figuration/narration/ naturescapes/ still life, Palaniappan visualized mathematics and geometry – abstractions that rarely are grist to the artists’ mill. This new aesthetic language in conjunction with his print media marked him as innovative and daring.

His predilection towards science from a very young age had made it inevitable that he would pursue a career in this direction, but instead he became a graphic artist. While studying for his pre university in Devakottai [from where he hails and had his entire schooling] he entered an art competition and won the first prize. This created in him an awareness of modern architecture and an interest to pursue a profession in it. Since he was unsuccessful in joining the course in architecture he enrolled at the College of Arts and Crafts from where he graduated with a Diploma in Painting and a Post Diploma in Industrial Design [ceramics] in 1980. And with a family business of printing, for Palaniappan, the transition into printing methods and technologies was adventurous and fulfilling.

Palaniappan as a student had explored the various media of oil painting, [Fig. 140] watercolours, and pen and ink. Among the great masters of Europe Palaniappan was drawn towards Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci because of their vision and scientific temperament. The frescoes of the former made an impression because they conveyed a sense of levitation and lightness. While Leonardo’s mechanical drawings broadly described as working diagrams could be interpreted as leading towards construction of any objects. This broadened his understanding of constructing objects from engineered drawings. While many of the older artists within the art institution had put their faith and derived their inspiration from Northern Renaissance masters like Rembrandt or Rubens in the exploration of light, color and sensuality of the female form, very few among them have mentioned the Italian Renaissance masters.



Palaniappan's interest in the intangible and abstract dimension of space – to explore and make it a dominant element of his art- dictated the necessity of understanding the mechanics of flying machines [Fig. 141]. This facilitated his search in visualizing his fantasies at a very early stage of his student career. His first show that he held in 1979 while still a student already manifested his fascination for flight and science. After graduating, Palaniappan worked at Ghari Studios in Delhi where in the printmaking workshop he developed his penultimate series known as **The Flying Man** [Fig. 142]. This commenced his cerebral journey and Palaniappan since then has continued to explore the concepts of time/space and movement

### **The Articulation of Time/Space Intangibles**

The intangible and abstract conceptualization of time/space marks his works as future in the present. Palaniappan's deep interest in the illusive, abstract, unreachable, intangible concepts of time, space and movement transcend the material manifestation of science and technology. "There is a difference in perception between western abstraction and Indian abstraction. The true picture is not what we see physically; it is a *Maya* that is taking place between the physical and the psychological, and I want to record that. That is why I experiment with movement"<sup>63</sup>. In his desire to go beyond that is unseen and unheard he marked his search rooted in the Indian philosophical system where the physical world was the 'maya' or an illusion and that reality/truth lay beyond it. Since these were absolute and intangible concepts, Palaniappan ingeniously negotiated his ideology through forms that never conceded to static rigidness, rather were kinetic creating an illusion of continuous movement. Through formal elements of line and colour, Palaniappan evolved his visual vocabulary the contours of which closely ally with other artists of Madras Art Movement.

Palaniappan in his works scripted the dualities through 'mindscares' and 'realitiescares', that is, the world of vision and the world of facts. This duality is translated as correspondence to the world of astronomy and its intriguing universe and the science of mathematics with its abstracted signs, symbols and formulae that helped formulate and evolve his artistic lexicon. This philosophical cerebration led him through a series of works in oils, enamels and mixed media. His abstractions unequivocally conveyed movement in space translated as flying; the astral universe that, which is known and unknown, yet remains beyond the comprehension of human finite mind. His engagement with scientific and technological episteme was thus realized through artistic mediations. For Palaniappan the success in visualizing his concepts of time and space was rooted in his abilities to transcribe it through mediations of his medium, particularly the

graphic medium. His innovative efforts and experimental researches in this direction are noteworthy, since he had no predecessors within the Madras Art Movement who had ventured on such an imaginative track. In analyzing Palaniappan's artistic statements one factor becomes relevant and that was his deployment of words, symbols and numbers. The juxtaposition of words and images was an inherent aspect of the canonical miniature pictorial tradition and nearer home Paniker had spearheaded the movement followed by Sultan Ali, Redappa Naidu and to a certain extent Gopinath with the consummate use of the same vocabulary.

Palaniappan by using the abstract or geometric forms of numbers and words was moving towards the process of generating ideas for his exploration of the intangibles of time/space and movement. For at its crux lay an ambition for the artist to return to the roots of experience, to recreate the primary experiences uncontaminated by the attitudes attached to traditional visual modes, whether representational or abstract. Where Palaniappan marks his difference of posture with was the scientificity of his mental approach, when he said, "my art is the expression of physical and psychological perceptions of time/space/environment and movement"<sup>64</sup>. Though this scientificity largely transforms to metaphysics in his expression of the psychological perception of "time", which Palaniappan reads as another dimension beyond human perception or sensibility. His concepts therefore are a happy blend of scientificity with metaphysical abstraction, or between materialism and spirituality, efficiently negotiated through his graphic and other media, which are very different from his western counterparts.

### **Mediation Through Line and Space: Exploration of the Graphic Medium**

Palaniappan who initiated his career as a graphic artist in 1982 commenced with his first series titled **The Flying Man**. This was followed by the **Documents** and **Alien Planets** series on which he worked for eight years eventually bringing him national acclaim.

In these three series I wish to explore the visual vocabulary that Palaniappan had evolved and deployed successfully where the dominant dimensions were time, space and movement. **The Flying Man Series** [Fig. 143] was worked on white card where sixteen visuals were printed using lithography; **Documents** [Fig. 144] was mixed media graphics and **Alien Planets** [Fig. 145] was color viscosity and drawing. Charles Stroh, a Professor of Art commented on his series thus, "The visual elements vary from viscosity-printed plates with the warm cool juxtapositions to straight black and white presentations. Gestural lines imply a path of movement through space, an element of time, a unit of measurement and simply, the path traced by the human hand

as it moves over the plate”<sup>65</sup>. Palaniappan in these series navigates his expression through the intaglio process. The print then is eventually textured with line drawing, rubber stamps, wax seals, collage materials embossing, dots, arrows and other marks that served as notations of science and other modes of communication as largely employed in the army. His meticulous multi layered prints, rendered with exacting perfection could vex any connoisseur and one was left amazed at the wit and craftiness of his manipulation of the medium.

### **Line and Space: The Scientificity and its Temper**

Line plays a strategic role in Palaniappan’s works as it had largely within the Madras Group. This also indicates his pedagogy, which had entrenched the element of line as a defining program mediated through the institution. Line had essentially been the most economic mode of communication for transmitting ideas and messages whether didactic or otherwise.

The Dutch art critic, Els Van Der Plas has clarified the use of Palaniappan’s line, “generally there are three dimensions to a line. The first is a concept of line. The second dimension is the image of a line. The third is the volume of several lines. Palaniappan adds two more dimensions. The fourth is the intuitive drawing of a line he calls the active line. This line represents for him the concept of flying, the non-argumentative way of making art. It corresponds with his idea of the unknown. The fifth dimension is the psychological association persons have with lines, numbers and images. This is connected with memories and the past. These five dimensions are represented in his works through composition, symbols and colours”<sup>66</sup>. Says Josef James, “the line disposed into script is exceptionally handled by the artist; it does not denote continuity or direction. It does not function to objectify anything, not even movement, but is the pure graphic of the retinal movement, the kind of movement that takes place in the eye as it follows an impression...There is much more than the personal in the genius that he touches with his intensely graphic understanding of the line”<sup>67</sup>.

In this analysis we find the physical and the psychological forces implicit in delineating his perceptions of the intangibles that Palaniappan explored so innovatively with the minimum of means. As he searched for an expression of time/space and the movement within the hyper real world Palaniappan simultaneously brought to bear upon his works the abstract spaces of his mind that we eventually read as a process of intellectualization realized through a most simple element called line. His dominant focus was shape and movement and implied in the former were only two dimensions of line configured in a particular way to obtain the desired results.

This led him inevitably towards exploring words and numbers, as essential graphic symbols abstracted for particular usage and serving as mode of expression. And within the tradition of Madras Art Movement, words more so than numbers had configured, to allow for an innovative reappropriation of scripts, by artist like Redappa Naidu, Sultan Ali and Vasudev. It allowed differentiation and distinction not only from within the group but also within the national milieu. Palaniappan in using words and numbers for his artistic statements had largely imbibed this concept from his predecessors. But remarkably his approach and method was dramatically different and in confrontation to them. He was not attempting titillating textures as Sultan Ali had explored nor was he defining philosophical passages from the epics as Redappa Naidu had inscribed in his series. The versatility offered by words and numbers enhanced his concepts that fundamentally were abstract. That is, it extended his conceptualization towards realizing the difficult and immaterial time/space and movement. **Document Series [Figs. 146 & 147]**, was an effort in this direction in which he not only combined lines but also juxtaposed it with sealing wax, threads and rubber stamps. Anjali Sircar comments, "In the Document Series, he successfully has brought a strong perception of viewing line with its free flowing drawing and movement, but the artist has gone a step further in indicating a bird's eye view of aerial space in the lower portion of the print, whereas the upper portion signified universal space. Also he would imprint the Document on the center of any given part of the paper and simultaneously take cognizance of the remaining white surface as part of his total experience by writing out on it words and phrases"<sup>68</sup>. Palaniappan, inherently is making a statement on the technological advances in the sphere of space science and its implication on the human activity. Nineteenth century saw physical exploration of the earth and the feeling between the scientist and intelligentsia was what more could be invented or explored. A century later the 'universes' beyond the 'universe' comes under scrutiny, and Palaniappan's layered prints carries these significations. Hence the 'space' as an entity for the scientist, the astronomers, the mathematicians, the artists and philosophers takes on dimensions creating feelings of intuition and commonsense or mystical and knowable.

Palaniappan's arrival to Document Series was facilitated by the influence of certain artists who largely impressed him. These particularly were, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Robert Rauschenberg, Muybridge, Christo and Jasper Johns. These artists fundamentally were idea or concept oriented, subjecting their powerful and imaginative concepts that were rooted in cultural matrix to construct and carry out material experiments. Document Series of Palaniappan had the

strength of this conceptual approach with their material juxtaposition. That is Palaniappan effectively combined in his prints not only his ideas but also materials like thread, sealing wax and facsimiles. In making particularly use of these mundane office materials there was a subtext of sarcasm and wit operating parodying the lethargy or indifference associated with government bureaucracy. In the postmodern discourse Palaniappan's working methods stand testimony to the culture of ordinary in which mundane materials of everyday usage like thread and sealing wax make their appearance to reiterate its position within the culture of mass consumption. His works allows for a deconstructive reading across the surface making significant aspect of his art interactive and interpretive according to the viewer's sensibility and awareness, indirectly releasing the episteme of his spatial philosophy built on the opposition and relations between reality, surreality and representation [Fig. 148 & 149].

**His Alien Planet Series [Refer Fig. 145]** aimed at a feeling of alienness brought about by man's acknowledgement of the existence of planets known and unknown in the universe. The complexity of this concept is explored through a simple geometrical form the circle. The latter element at a spiritual level is equated to meditation, where it is understood as movement of thought limitless within a circle. In science, the implication is that definitions and forms try to explain the visible world. Circle then gets equated to the form of earth and moon, as it is explored in his Alien Planet Series. The method he adopted for this series gives an insight to his working procedure. Palaniappan worked on the metal plate for nearly a month having cut the circular shape to maintain the resemblance to the shape of the planets. Through the process of etching he created sixteen prints that he framed through a sequential placement. He reworked the plate each time after he pulled a print to the required depth and texture. This was followed by his color organization according to the 'representational' needs. Consequently his prints are dissimilar in their sequential order bearing affinity to mono-prints but technically different and distinct from it. Palaniappan in this series seems to be grounded in the modernist tradition. He attempts to maintain the uniqueness of each print by marking it as authentic. The versatility of his technical manipulation that he exercised with the plate enabled the realization of his ideas in a virtuoso manner.

The notion of space is dynamically relevant for Palaniappan's experiments in printmaking. Space as an element is numinous and has varied dimension within human consciousness, knowledge and intuition. In this context it become relevant to question as to how does Palaniappan elucidate the concept of space in his works? It is a common knowledge that any movement takes place in

space through time. This had been a driving experimental force in visual arts especially painting and sculpture. In painting, space was defined as two-dimensional when it had the measure of length and breadth only, but became three-dimensional when depth was added. This created an effect of 'looking through window' as Italian masters Alberti and Brunelleschi demonstrated and developed through laws of perspective. This essentially was the transposition of space to a picture describing it with geometrical or mathematical methods. The material aspect of this scientific discovery was a major breakthrough in a world of factual reality or as a world given to the eye. Referencing Palaniappan in relation to other abstractionists within the Madras Art Movement, they had made operational the cultural signifiers especially the performing arts with their colourful accoutments of masks, costumes etc., which the artists translated as correspondences in their works thus freezing them in time and space. Palaniappan also operated from the cultural matrix but made oblique use of philosophy through the intangibles of science and mathematical formulae. By science was implied also the scientific space as explained by Stephen Hawkins one of the great scientist of this era, "even what we think of as empty space is full of particles moving in closed loops in space and time. That is they move forward in time on one side of the loop and backwards in time on the other side"<sup>69</sup>.

The implicit duality as mentioned earlier between the world of facts and the world of vision was defined and made materially operational through space. This could also be the broad categorization of space as 'conceptual space' and 'sensational space' corresponding to two artistic attitudes known as 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian'<sup>70</sup>. However it was the 'sensational space' that was accessible to the artist during the creative act, but for Palaniappan it was the Apollonian space or mind space - an abstraction, in contrast to the lived reality, which made existence possible that intrigued and preoccupied him. And as Stella Kramrisch<sup>71</sup> has postulated that "India's most pervasive creation – Myth – is not of light but of space in contradistinction to the western Myth of light as in creation". This mode of intellectualization led him to employ symbols considered as points of memories along which the past was intuitively written because they were experiences either good or bad, spiritual or material. By doing so he traveled his past through the creative spaces of his drawings or the prints to transcend the individual and bring it into the realm of the real. Space was thus the first and last element, the beginning and end, the void and all pervasive in Indian tradition.

### Number Psychology

Palaniappan's innovative and different approach to space, for the translation of his metaphysical concepts in science and mathematics remained dominant in his works. A subtext of this space he referred to it was 'Number Psychology'. That is so far Palaniappan had employed various metaphors - words, symbols or diagrams - to translate his ideas of movement as they describe time and space. Now he actively deployed numbers for the same purpose. To the artist every number constituted an aesthetic shape through which he could express any movement. Says Palaniappan, "numbers interest me because they are both finite and infinite, static and moving"<sup>72</sup>. His preoccupation with numbers retrospect to 1979 when he had organized it to represent abstract codes, marking it as metaphors where the numbers could build relationship between human beings. Numbers deployed by him were dissociated from sensory affiliations and rather became a search for enhancing the dimension of his thinking for a definitive space. All these dimensions get clarified in his series titled **Number Psychology – Concept Pages** [pen and ink and water colours on graph sheet, 1985-89] [Fig. 150]. Fundamentally numbers were calligraphic traces on any support be it paper, canvas or a wall. Their intelligent ordering engages to create a dialogue thus mediating as thought expressions making it readable and hence applicable, [for example as one would read numbers with a certain logic to it and not simply as individual ones]. But Palaniappan instead has deposed the numbers in an arbitrary manner and not in their sequential order to create an artistic expression that was a perspective on mind space intuited by him to shift numbers out of their quotidian regularity. The works though scientific in nature with numbers, symbols and graphic formulae define his concepts and aesthetics of time, space and movement.

Palaniappan's aesthetics was a challenging interface between perception and cognition leading towards an abstraction of the art image and a conceptual presentation of psychological processes. His conceptual approach explored the complex relations between perception [time], memory [space] and identity; and in the process he produced works, which reflected upon the fourth [an intuitive idea of line as representing the concept of flying] and fifth dimensions [psychological association with lines in terms of numbers and images connected with memories and past] of the employment of line that became a measure of his innovative ideational visualization. It was to create new visual terminology that he juxtaposed and combined visual images and written texts or produced collages [threads and sealing wax] of disparate materials, which previously had not been employed in graphic prints.

Today Palaniappan stands tall among the constellation of third generation of artists in India having left his indelible mark by winning many a national and international awards. In addition to this he has had an opportunity to work under leading international print makers like Prof. Krishna Reddy [New York University], Prof. Paul Arthur Lingren [San Diego State University], Jeff Sippel and Bill Lagatutta [Tamarind Institute], X3 Group of London and John Crossely and James Collier of England [Master Printers]

Within the nativist discourse in the Madras Art Movement that gave rise to an arbitrary reordering of the regional traditions whether in major or minor arts, a large number of artists were able to define their sensibilities in this direction. By mid 70s the force of Paniker was on the wane, the Madras Art Movement was an established phenomenon and the artists had carved a niche for themselves within the pan national milieu. The 70s also marked the emergence of third generation of Modern Indian artists and Palaniappan's place is to be reckoned with. His exploratory incursion in the graphic medium differentiated and marked him as original especially in that he eschewed quotidian subject matter to establish the truth of science and mathematics. This scientific consciousness was wrapped in the philosophy of 'duality' that rooted him as Indian. The cultural discourse that originally gave rise to nativist agenda now loops back through the postmodern spirit for Palaniappan, to become a trope establishing his identity within it in the post Madras Art Movement. The term post here implies the effects such an art movement had within the precincts of the art institution as well outside it to make an influential debate on it.

Starting from Paniker all the artists within the Madras Group who practiced abstraction sought the Western model to repudiate the tyranny of third dimension. Paniker, Munuswamy and Adimoolam saw space as material to be retrenched so that their form and content would conflate to become a homogenous artistic statement. Viswanathan interpreted space as numinous a thing in itself wherein he collapsed his 'being' or self to project it as a geometric diagram [*yantra*]. Gopinath did not break completely with the illusion of space But he largely attempted to project his abstract space through division in terms of planes. He made horizontal divisions that euphemistically were ground line to differentiate varied planes. Haridasan and Achuthan largely patterned their space. It was non-illusionist with a sensuousness of play of visual texture enhancing their compositions. Palaniappan's space has utopian and technological connotation which references theory of relativity of temporal and spatial sequences



## End Notes on the Chapter

<sup>1</sup>Geeta Kapur, 'Indian Modernism' in the Catalogue Nine contemporary Indian artists, (date not given)

<sup>2</sup>To draw the distinction between the figurative and abstract or non-figurative is tricky. Though non-figurative strictly cannot be applied in the instance of the Madras Group because the element of caricatured human form prevails as a residue. If Picasso's *Guernica* has to be cited, which though largely inscribes a figurative idiom is an abstraction of human heinous acts of terrorism that projects the political narrative. Hence this distinction though problematic allows for a study of this type of broad categorization within the Madras Art Movement.

<sup>3</sup>Norman Bryson, Overlooking the Overlooked, [London: Reaktion Books, 1990] 10.

<sup>4</sup>A.S. Raman, 'Krishna Rao' in The Southern Accent, [Chennai: Tamil Nadu Ovia Nunkalai Kuzhu, 1999] 111.

<sup>5</sup>Norman Bryson, Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze, [London: Reaktion Books, 1983] 3.

<sup>6</sup>In conversation with Krishna Rao, at his residence in Chennai, July, 2000

<sup>7</sup>In conversation with Krishna Rao, at his residence in Chennai, July, 2000

<sup>8</sup>A.S. Raman, 'H.V. Ram Gopal, On Himself', in The Southern Accent, [Chennai: Tamil Nadu Ovia Nunkalai Kuzhu, 1999] 168.

<sup>9</sup>A.S. Raman, 168.

<sup>10</sup>Stephen Kinza, 'In India Pioneers of Modernism savour their success', *The New York Times*, January 29<sup>th</sup> 1998.

<sup>11</sup>Jaya Appasamy, 'Paths of Abstraction' in Lalit Kala Contemporary Nos. 19&20, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1975] 1.

<sup>12</sup>L. Munuswamy, 'As a Teacher Looks at it' in Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 37, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1991] 33.

<sup>13</sup>L. Munuswamy, 33-35.

<sup>14</sup>Anjali Sircar, L. Munuswamy, a Monograph, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi 1985].

<sup>15</sup>Anjali Sircar, no page nos. given

<sup>16</sup>Anjali Sircar, 'The Problems of Indigenous Sources of Inspiration', in Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 32, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi] 17.

<sup>17</sup>Anjali Sircar, L. Munuswamy, A Monograph, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1984].

<sup>18</sup>In conversation with Adimoolam, June 2002.

<sup>19</sup>Anjali Sircar, Five Contemporary Artists of Tamil Nadu, [Madras: South Indian Society of Painters year unknown].

<sup>20</sup>Anjali Sircar, no page nos. given.

<sup>21</sup>Anjali Sircar, L. Munuswamy, Monograph, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1985].

<sup>22</sup>Partha Mitter, Indian Art, [New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001], 206

<sup>23</sup>Explicated by R. Nandakumar in relation to the non-brahmanic indigenous traditions in the works of Kanhai Kunhraman in his essay 'The Unintentional Phallus', published in Haritham, [University of Kottayam, 1998], 23-24.

<sup>24</sup>Josef James, 'Metaphorical Content in Recent Contemporary Painting' Lalit Kala Contemporary Nos 12&13, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1971] 12

<sup>25</sup>Haridasan in an interview with S.A. Krishnan, Lalit Kala Contemporary 12&13, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1971] 26.

<sup>26</sup>S.A. Krishnan, 22-23.

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- <sup>27</sup>J. Swaminathan, 'The New Promise' in Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 40, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995], 19-20.
- <sup>28</sup>Anjali Sircar, 'Tantric Ideology through Art', The Hindu, March 11<sup>th</sup> 1979
- <sup>29</sup>K.V. Haridasan, 'Tantra Art and Modernity' Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 37, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1991] 35.
- <sup>30</sup>Krishna Chatanya, The Hindustan Times Weekly, Jan. 1977, New Delhi, quoted in the Catalogue titled 'Brahmasutra Series' exhibition held at Bombay, Feb.-March 1992
- <sup>31</sup>Richard Bartholomew, The Times of India, December 1976 New Delhi, quoted in the Catalogue titled 'Brahmasutra Series' exhibition held at Bombay, Feb.-March 1992
- <sup>32</sup>Ratna Dhar Jha, Morning Echo, December 1976, New Delhi, quoted in the Catalogue titled 'Brahmasutra Series' exhibition held at Bombay, Feb.-March 1992
- <sup>33</sup>M G Sashibhooshan Professor, Government Victoria College, Palakkad, Kerala, in the Catalogue titled 'Brahmasutra Series' exhibition held at Bombay, Feb.-March 1992.
- <sup>34</sup>In conversation with Haridasan at his Choramandal residence, November, 2001.
- <sup>35</sup>Janet Wolff, The Social Production of Art, [New York: The New York University Press, 1993] 18.
- <sup>36</sup>K.V. Haridasan, 'Tantra Art and Modernity', Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 37, [New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1991] 36.
- <sup>37</sup>K.V. Haridasan, 35.
- <sup>38</sup>Rupika Chawla, Symbology and Geometry in Indian Art, Exhibition Catalogue, [New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1998].
- <sup>39</sup>This fact was reiterated by Viswanathan with great vehemence in conversation with him at his residence in July 1998 at Choramandal Village, Chennai.
- <sup>40</sup>Sadanand Menon, 'Framing an Illuminated Field', Art News Magazine of India, Vol III, Issue IV.
- <sup>41</sup>In conversation with the artist, August 1998, Chennai
- <sup>42</sup>In conversation with the artist at his residence, Chennai, August 1998.
- <sup>43</sup>Theodore Bhaskaran, 'A Linear Tribute', The Hindu, Sunday Magazine, Sept. 30<sup>th</sup> 2001.
- <sup>44</sup>Ranjan De, 'When the Lines Moved', Indian Express, Chennai, 1999.
- <sup>45</sup>Jakimowicz-Karle, Marta, K.M. Adimoolam, The Trigonometry of the Cosmos, Catalogue, [Bangalore. September, 2000]
- <sup>46</sup>A.S. Raman, 'On Himself', in The Southern Accent, [Chennai Tamilnadu Ovia Nunkalar kuzhu, 1999], 52
- <sup>47</sup>V. Jayaraman, 'K.M. Adimoolam', in the Art Trends, Jan.-April 1980
- <sup>48</sup>Artist Statement, at his exhibition in July 2000 at Chennai.
- <sup>49</sup>A.S. Raman, 'On Himself', in The Southern Accent, [Chennai. Tamilnadu Ovia Nunkalar kuzhu 1999], 52

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<sup>50</sup> 'K M Adimoolam', in the Catalogue' Touchstone – Paintings, Graphics and Sculpture' 1990-91, Sakshi Gallery, Chennai.

<sup>51</sup>This idea is explicated by R Nanadakumar in his essay 'The Unintentional Phallus', published in Haritham – School of Letters, [University publication, Kottayam 1998], 23-24.

<sup>52</sup>In conversation with the artist at his residence in Cholamandal Artist Village, Chennai, December 2001

<sup>53</sup>Anjali Sircar, Blend of Lyricism and Analysis, The Hindu, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1979

<sup>54</sup>Vijayshree, 'Gopinath and his colours', unpublished M A dissertation, Dept of Fine Arts, Stella Maris College, Chennai, 1998

<sup>55</sup> Josef James, "A Search in all Honesty", The Indian Express, February 12<sup>th</sup> 1977, 10

<sup>56</sup>In conversation with the artist at his residence in Chennai November 2001.

<sup>57</sup>Elizabeth Roy, Achuthan Kudallur, The New Shades of Color, The Economic Times of India, Bombay, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1993s.

<sup>58</sup>In conversation with the artist at his residence in Chennai, November 2001.

<sup>59</sup>U.K. Bindu, Achuthan His World of Colours, unpublished M A. Dissertation, Dept. of Fine Arts, Stella Maris College, Chennai, 29

<sup>60</sup> U K. Bindu, 29

<sup>61</sup> In conversation with the artist at his residence in Chennai November 2001.

<sup>62</sup>Ellen Handler Spitz, Art and Psyche, [New Haven Yale University Press, 1985], 100-101

<sup>63</sup> Lakshmi Venkatraman , Reverse Reality, Catalogue [Bangalore. Gallery Sumukha, 2001].

<sup>64</sup> Artist's Statements since 1993

<sup>65</sup> Charles Stroh, Rm Palaniappan, Printmaker, Professor Kansas State University, Kansas, 1985

<sup>66</sup> Els Van Deer Plas, Indian Contemporary Artists, Rm Palaniappan, Gate Foundation, 1989

<sup>67</sup> Lakshmi Venkatraman , Reverse Reality, Catalogue [Bangalore Gallery Sumukha, 2001] 11

<sup>68</sup> Anjali Sircar, Art as Science, The Hindu, 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1991.

<sup>69</sup> Lakshmi Venkatraman, Reverse Reality, Catalogue [Bangalore Gallery Sumukha, 2001] 15.

<sup>70</sup> "Concepts of Space in Contemporary Art: Traditions and Interpretations" an article by Dorota Januszewsk in Concepts of Space Ancient and Modern, ed Kapila Vatsyayin, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 1991, 592 These concepts are derived from a statement based on the exhibition "Concepts of Space in Contemporary Art" held at the National Museum in Warsaw, 1984 The exhibition was meant to represent the concept of space, which was divided into 'conceptual' and 'sensational' spaces, two artistic attitudes known from the tradition as 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian'.

<sup>71</sup>"Space in Indian Cosmogony and Architecture, an article by Stella Kramrisch in Concepts of Space: Ancient and Modern', ed Kapila Vatsyayin, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 1991, 101-104

<sup>72</sup> In conversation with the artist at Chennai, March, 2002