

NOIDA 2015 - 2016 EXHIBITION

POND NEAR THE FIELD: FIVE ARTISTS FROM KERALA

K P Krishnakumar | K M Madhusudhanan | Surendran Nair| C K Rajan | N N Rimzon

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KNMA Noida, Plot 3A, Sector 126, Noida.

'Pond near the field' suggests a place within a place, a setting, a social space for conversations and a resting spot; it speaks of magical stories, of nymphs and ghosts. Taking the title from N N Rimzon's work, this exhibition layers these suggestions with specificities such as College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum and a peer-group.

This exhibition brings together drawings, prints, collages and diaries of five artists who were alumni of the College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum/ Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala: K P Krishnakumar, N N Rimzon, Surendran Nair, K M Madhusudhanan and C K Rajan. The five artists were among the first few batches of this new Art College formed in 1975, which was the first of its kind in the state. Rebelling against the outdated ideals of modernism and teachers from older generation, these artists along with fellow students were involved in a series of long-drawn strikes and agitations against the college authorities. The exhibition aims to reflect on the history of change and resistance in the academic pedagogy that were formulating among the youth of Kerala in the 1980s. It focuses on the generation inspired by Marxism, and followed the idea of commune, some of which attempts are now considered monumental in history of modern art such as the formation of Kerala Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association.

The period from the early to mid-1970s was also the time when the state of Kerala witnessed much political unrest, particularly with the extremist Marxist-Leninist-Maoist faction becoming a crucial political force. Coupled with the unstable state of the nation with the declaration of national Emergency (1975-1977) by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, paved the way for critical questioning and political articulation of these artists. The search for a new language and idiom to address these social issues became the driving force for creating such an artistic milieu. Late most of these artists went to Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan and Fine Arts Faculty Baroda for higher studies, continuing the correspondence with the subsequent batches.

The seminal 1987 exhibition 'Questions and Dialogues' of Kerala Radical Painters and Sculptor's Association held at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Baroda brought together the works of KP Krishnakumar, Jyothi Basu, K Hareendran, C Pradeep, CK Rajan, Alex Mathew, M Madhusudhanan, Pushkin EH, K Reghunadhan, KR Karunakaran and Anita Dube. A manifesto denouncing the commodification of art and challenging the privileged position of the middle class urban intelligentsia in art-making accompanied this exhibition. The brief span of Kerala Radicals until its dissolution with Krishnakumar's tragic death in 1989 forms the backdrop and undercurrent of 'Pond near the Field'.

On one side the exhibition 'Pond near the Field' showcases Surendran Nair's portraits of many of these Kerala-Baroda artists, along with the larger group of classmates and friends including K V Sasikumar, Ashokan Poduval etc., done during the college years in Trivandrum and Vadodara. The simple daily act of sketching and drawing, observing ones surroundings and the persona of friends and family, studies get etched with acts of wit, humour and the absurd that Surendran packs into the realm of the everyday. This peer-group, in this medley, acting within their environment offers nascent friendships and vulnerabilities, intellectual exchange, and discovering/reading cinema and literature together. While on the other side it exhibits works of three artists from Radical Artists' Association— K P Krishnakumar, C K Rajan and K M

Madhusudhanan—coupled with works of N N Rimzon who was also in close interaction with the informal group, and attempts to revisit the ideas and utopias presented by these artists.

The exhibition proposes to articulate this radical mix of political understanding, comradeship and artistic ambition. Presented together for the first time, these 200 works, pushes one to look through and analyze the shared vocabulary, conceptual premises, the wit and humour in the works of these five artists. C K Rajan's series 'In Search of Utopia' (1989-90) painted onto the back of flattened-out cigarette packets, hints at these utopias and aspirations of these group of artist-idealists. He repositions everyday material (such as cigarette packets and household objects), twisting and playing with their cause-effect relationship. The exhibition also includes Rajan's extraordinary set of 40 collages from the series 'Mild Terrors' made between 1992 and 1996 with images gathered from newspapers and magazines. These collages offer commentaries on the social and political events, capturing the changes that took place in India during the first few years of economic liberalization, the aggressive pace of development within cities, and the growing social disparities. The artist responds to a visual world that seems to have become unreadable due to startling, often uncomfortable juxtapositions, where the pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial coexist.

K P Krishnakumar's powerful brush and ink drawings take us closer into his internal world that is exploding with beast-man, minotours, imps, silhouettes, often inscribing himself within it, in the act of making art. Made mostly around 1982-83, there is an immediacy of asserting 'self' in these drawings as they point at elements and study-notes for his later sculptures. The setting of many of these drawings is an artist's studio, with maquettes, covered sculptures and models all around. According to Anita Dube (fellow artist and ideologue of Kerala Radical Artists' Group), "Before leaving Trivandrum for Shantiniketan, he (Krishnakumar) set himself the task of executing 100 drawings within a month, which he exhibited. Everything that instantly translated his emotion and thought, attracted him. These were also demonstrations of his intellectual and physical vitality, important ingredients in the construction of a heroic masculinity."

KM Madhusudhanan is a highly- regarded filmmaker on the international scene. His work confronts India's film history, colonial period and contemporary war politics, with influences from Marxism and Buddhism. In his series of 60 drawings 'The Logic of Disappearance: A Marx Archive' (2014) is a dialogue with the historical personages like Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin who appear as fragments from a certain past, yet perhaps they also point accusatory fingers at the turbulence of the neoliberal present, from Ukraine to the Middle East. It alludes to the fall of Soviet Union in 1991, following which enormous communist leaders' statues started falling in many places. The backdrop of these drawings is the continuously shifting position of those bronze statues. Madhusudhanan explains, "There was a lighthouse on the shores of my birthplace; these drawings have been created as image fragments made visible by its sweeping light." The series has been exhibited at the second edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2014) and the 56th Venice Biennale (2015).

N N Rimzon's artistic vocabulary is drawn from archaic motifs such as the earthen pot, the shell, stone and mountain that allude to ideas of fertility, departure, healing and violence. His drawings in the exhibition provide the mystical setting for an imaginary and metaphorical 're-meeting' of this peer-group: rural landscapes with a compound, palm tree, shrines, ponds and fields under starry nights, while an ascetic/devotee or a traveller responds and animates it. Exhibition also includes N N Rimzon's diaries from early 1990s onwards that provide insights into his process and sketches of some of his important sculptural-installations.