

SMALL  
Talk

with  
T VENKANNA

# PROPHET OF THE PROFANE

**P**ornography is the hieroglyphic he has been carving for a while now, the dark, ineffable recesses of the human sexual psyche. The blasphemy has only reaped rewards for T Venkanna, who happens to be the youngest Indian artist to have been picked up by The Saatchi Gallery, the eponymous curatorial yardstick initiated by advertising guru Charles Saatchi in London.

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PIC: DEEPAK TURBHEKAR



Venkanna's second solo is also being used as a reason to celebrate Gallery Maskara's second anniversary on March 15 (the artist is gallerist Abhay Maskara's discovery). Also the famed Berger collection in Switzerland, which owns over 1000 works by the world's leading artists, has cherry-picked three works from this latest suite; this makes him the 121st artist in their collection. For someone whose works started with Rs 19,000 per painting (and whose larger works now command Rs 12 lakh), the only way has been stratospherically up. Despite the success and the skill T Venkanna comprises an inarticulate, giggly maverick (his pictures speak for themselves, insists the gallerist during the interview). But over some cajoling, the artist's sexualised delirium does translate into a sizeable small talk.

"One painting has been entirely collaged out of porn magazine covers I sourced from a series Taschen, the iconic publishing house, came out with from a collection of girlie magazines from the '50s and the '60s. I like to use the sexual imagination to say many things. For instance there is an installation here with a urinal choked with toy soldiers, army officers who will eventually commit horrible atrocities. But that too is a sexual truth. All those armed forces trapped in such a frustrating environment. Something horrible is going to emerge from it. Therefore, I've used all these toy soldiers almost as a fluid choking a urinal." Venkanna wishes to suggest that sex and violence are connected; that sexual repression can only lead to more bloodshed than we've seen through epochs of lurid human history. A two-sided painting in which a leather 'cock' literally pierces through a vaginal depiction of a classical European nude is telling of how deeply the Baroda-based artist is steeped in the vile.

"I think it is important to turn the classical painting on its head. At the same time I am rather grateful to classical art forms because they give us a framework to play with. The self-portrait for instance. Do you see how I've tweaked that?"

**T VENKANNA IS THE YOUNGEST INDIAN ARTIST TO HAVE BEEN PICKED UP BY THE SAATCHI GALLERY DESPITE HIS TWISTED, PERVERSE IMAGINATION, NOTES VISHWAS KULKARNI**

And a twisted self-portrait it certainly is. A close-up of a penis (presumably the artist's) has been collated out of a pornographic, pointillist perversion. Many tiny, circular cut-outs of the artist's face go into creating a giant close-up of male genitalia. "The portrait is always a face, usually to take pride in how generations have emerged from a face. But generations don't emerge from a face! They emerge from what I'm showing you! So a self-portrait or a family portrait is not necessarily a face. The truth is down there."

How has working with an international gallery altered the spectrum of

his art? "Ecology. I think, thanks to Gallery Maskara, The Saatchi Gallery discovered a few works that have brought me closer to the concept of ecology and sex. My newer works, and this is something international audiences are responding to with much enthusiasm, connect the sexual imagination with ecological health and degradation alike. I am toying with both extremes," says the man with a wide grin, while pointing to frogs being copulated by lions, and lions violating yet another species.

Venkanna has a whole theory on how the lion is a motif for human ar-

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rogance vis-a-vis the ecology, something that informs part of his suite at display at Gallery Maskara. "The lion, you see, is the king of the jungle, just as the human is the lion of the planet. Do you get it?" But you're pretty spent and sweaty at the end of this session, even if the works are orgasmically luscious and striking.

*Sacred and Profane, T Venkanna's second solo, opens at Gallery Maskara to celebrate the gallery's 2nd anniversary at The Warehouse, 6/7, 3rd Pasta Lane, Colaba, on Monday, March 15, 6.30 pm onwards.*