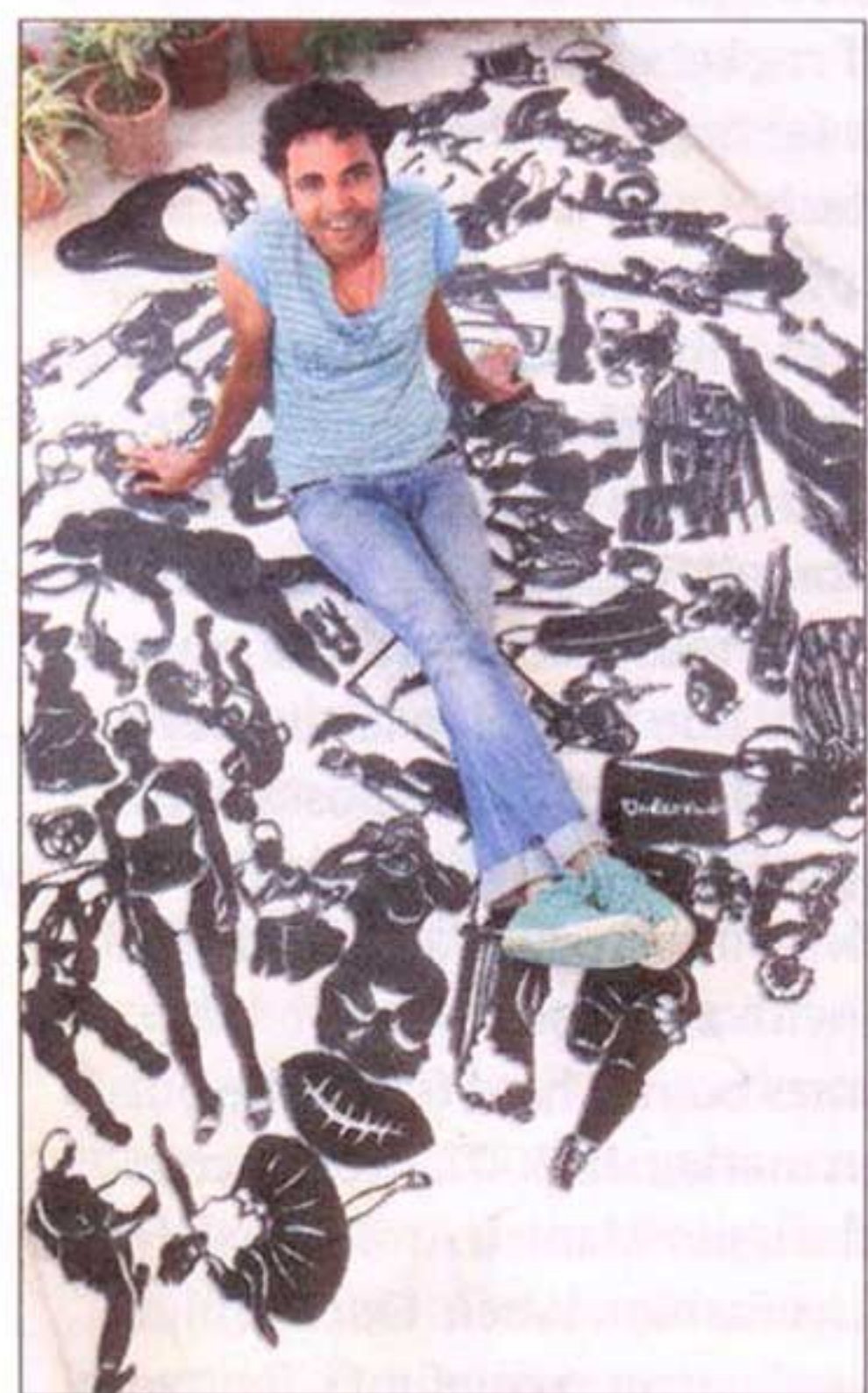




Image Breaker: (From left) Venkanna makes himself comfortable on the Walkway of Art; his version of *The Birth of Venus*; *Dream in Dream*, the artist's reworking of a Rousseau landscape, was bought by London's Saatchi Gallery last year



PHOTOS: BHUPENDRA RANA

Venus in Vadodara

Botticelli's Venus turns black on T Venkanna's canvas. The young artist is off to a solo show in Turin with more such irreverence >>>

by GEORGINA MADDOX

VENUS WOULD not have envisioned herself being born in a 400 sq ft studio in Vadodara, Gujarat. But there she stands, the goddess of love, in an ageless pose, her lustrous hair flowing, her hand coyly covering her modesty, exactly in the manner that 15th century Italian Renaissance master Sandro Botticelli had imagined her in his masterpiece *The Birth of Venus*. Except, on artist T Venkanna's 15x8 ft canvas, Botticelli's Venus is the darkest shade of ebony.

Venkanna's *Black Venus* is being readied for a solo titled *Nero* next month at Gallery Luce in Turin, Italy, where the artist will showcase the oil on canvas and an installation tentatively titled *Walkway of Art*, among other works.

The *Black Venus* is not a new idea, given that she made her appearance in Angela Carter's anthology of short fiction of the same name in 1985. The imposing work — it looms in Venkanna's modest studio — is the first such revisionist work in India. It's an almost flaw-

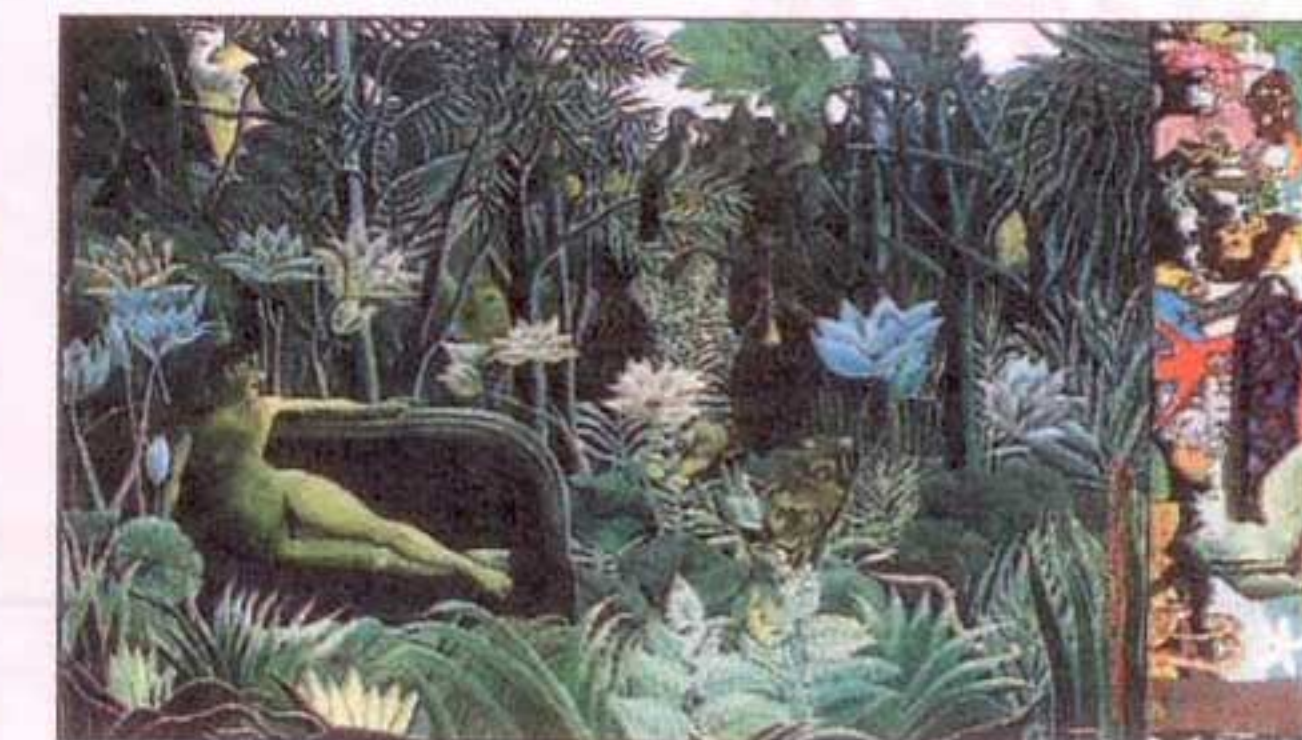
less copy of the masterpiece, with a line squiggled below, like the gloss of a graffiti artist who couldn't pass up the opportunity for cleverness: "The skin doesn't matter. If it is a matter of colour, I love BLACK." The Marcel Duchamp school of irreverence — the French artist famously painted a moustache and a goatee on a cheap replica of the *Mona Lisa* in 1919 — is obviously to Venkanna's taste.

But he insists that there is more than cheekiness in revisiting Botticelli for a

show in Turin. "First, it is about reclaiming years of history told from the white man's perspective; second, it challenges Botticelli's canonical definition of beauty; and third, it situates me as a painter from India who has for years been 'influenced' by and moulded to like a particular type of art," says the 30-year-old artist.

Venkanna grew up in Gajwal, a small town off the Secunderabad highway in Andhra Pradesh, and the landscape of the state, its lacquered toys and folk influences, were evident in his first solo at Mumbai's Gallery Maskara. Since that debut two years ago, the young artist has zoomed up on collectors' wish-list: two of his works *Dream in Dream* and *Two Moon* — again, reworkings of two paintings by French painter Henri Rousseau — were picked up by London's Saatchi Gallery in 2009. The prices of his canvases have gone up from Rs 8,000-Rs 10,000 to over Rs 10 lakh.

In Vadodara, though, he is one of the



artist crowd, zipping around on a humble Kinetic Honda, spending hours at the MS University's tea stall, on discussions which begin at art and end in politics. His apartment is a walk away from the studio he shares with four artists. He is a collector of porn — open his cupboard and a paper cutting of a woman, legs splayed wide open, smacks you in the eyes — and sexual politics has often found its way into his work.

The politics of a canon of white, male and dead masters (who he studied first at the Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University in Hyderabad, and later at the Faculty of Fine Arts in MS University), have both inspired and niggled Venkanna. "I like their work but I also feel oppressed by them," he says.

In his provocative third solo, *Sacred and Profane*, held early this year at Gallery Maskara, he heavily referenced master painters from art history. Marcel Duchamp's urinal morphed into a blood-spewing demonic monster and the lush forest landscape of Rousseau's *The Hungry Lion* (1905) acquired a menacing edge. "Rousseau's work portrays and celebrates the natural order of the jungle, the way it was intended to be — his colours are pastoral and calming. Venkanna faithfully represents the original yet intervenes by putting a red border that separates graffiti text all along the border of the painting," says art historian and critic Abha Sheth.

Back at his studio, a tome by HW Janson, titled the *History of Art*, which every art student has read at some point, lies on the floor next to a big cardboard box. Inside it are several figures cut out from black foam — Michelangelo Buonarroti's sibyl, the three soldiers from Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* and *Mona Lisa*, just some of the iconic images traced from Janson's book. "I plan to strew these on the floor, cover them with gold foil and create a walkway of art," says Venkanna with a cheeky grin.

The masters may turn in their graves when people walk on their art, but it is exactly the kind of outre effect that Venkanna is aiming at. "I am enjoying this play with the dead masters," he says. ●