

ZAIRA ARSLAN

IN more than 30 shows held over the past five years, Gallery Maskara has exhibited works made from some of the most unconventional materials seen in the city's art galleries. There have been installations made from plastic bags, orange scaffolding, cow dung, taxidermy work, dust and giant, inflatable dolls and horses. Some have been as high as the 45 ft height of the Colaba gallery, some have hung from the ceiling and reached the floor, and some have taken up nearly all the 3,300 sq ft of space on offer. And nearly all have, even in a small way, challenged preconceived notions of what art should be and, in doing so, have startled, amused, thrilled and shocked viewers.

This March marks the fifth anniversary of the gallery, and on the occasion, curatorial director Abhay Maskara opens a new show titled "Pancha Mahabhuta" (Five Great Elements) by one of the gallery's most exhibited artists, T Venkanna. In 2009, Venkanna's first solo exhibition was held at Gallery Maskara. "There are five works, each of which represents one major element — earth, sky, air, fire and water," says Maskara.

Suspended from the ceiling by string in the centre of the gallery are five circular wooden sculptures, one for each element, which, Maskara says, could also be thought of as line drawings.

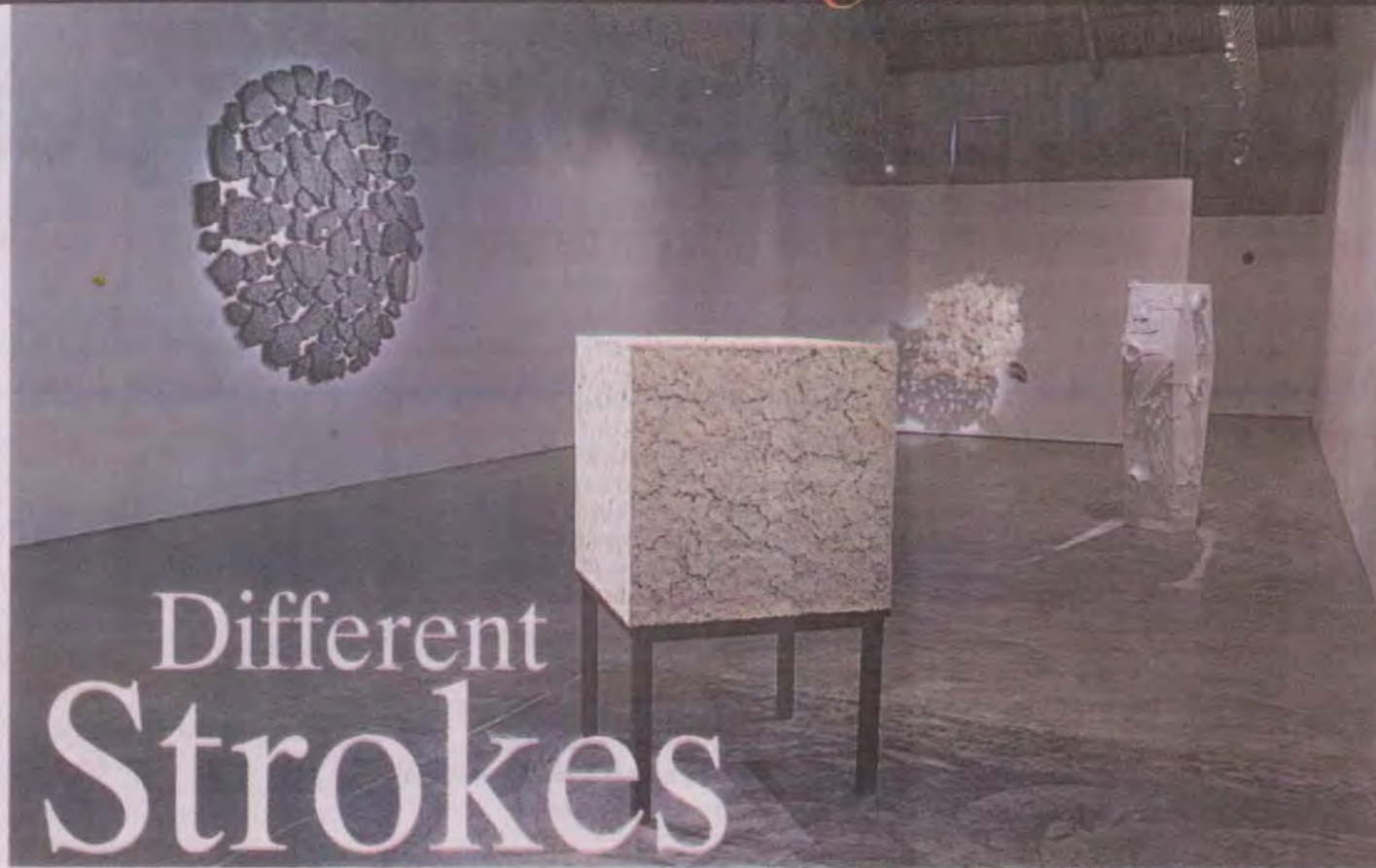
As is often seen in Venkanna's work, the figures in the paintings are nudes. The drawings on each canvas contain several layers of meaning, exploring the basic idea of these ele-

ments, while also exploring the things that might challenge their existence. Yet, this show might be one of the most conventional in terms of content that the gallery has hosted in a while. The last show, for instance, was a solo by Faridabad-based artist Shine Shivan, who explored questions of gender identity through his large, constructed fantasy creatures.

When Maskara opened his gallery in 2008, the idea, he says, was never to be different or host shows that were labelled differ-

## Different Strokes

From floating dolls to dust sculptures, Gallery Maskara, which celebrates its fifth anniversary, continues to showcase unconventional, edgy art



ent. The space was inaugurated with a show by Canadian artist Max Streicher, whose giant, inflatable floating dolls filled the gallery at the time. "It was our mission to show art that would push boundaries, but we have never focussed on the medium our artists use," he says.

A former employee of Microsoft in Seattle, Maskara opened the gallery out of interest. "The gallery was my way of getting close to the creative process and working with artists and their ideas," he says. It is an entirely



(Clockwise from left) Prashant Pandey's 2012 show "Shelf Life II"; "Tetanus Midas" in 2011 was Priyanka Choudhary's second solo at the gallery; Venkanna's solo at the gallery explores the five major elements. This is an image from "Sky"

private venture, which has given him complete independence and the freedom to exercise his personal choices.

The gallery has since hosted exhibitions consistently and also been the venue for a number of artists' first solo shows, including Venkanna, Shivan, Delhi-based Priyanka Choudhary and Jaipur-based Prashant Pandey. Each of them consequently believe Maskara has contributed to their journey as artists. "For me to have my first solo show — an installation of scaffolding — in that space was very important," says Choudhary. "The gallery space is so inspiring and Abhay is more about the art than anything else." Venkanna, too, believes likewise. "Abhay and the gallery have been genuine contributors to my jour-

### HIGH FIVE

TALK lists some of the attention-grabbing shows held at Gallery Maskara

**PRIYANKA CHOUDHARY'S** first solo exhibition, "Nul to Now", was held in August 2010 and comprised a gigantic scaffolding installation among other things.

**FEBRUARY 2011** saw a solo show by Belgian artist Ruben Bellinkx, titled "The Trophy", consisting almost entirely of video projections.

**IN JULY 2011**, Venkanna's solo show at the gallery, "Open Studio: Printmaking", was a seven week-long residency during which he created works using printmaking while being watched by visitors.

**TITLED HOLD ON**, a group show by artists Josh Smith, Mansoor Ali, Marek Ranis, Satellite Bureau and Stuart Keeler that opened in November 2011, explored the idea of holding on in a constantly evolving world.

**NARENDRA YADAV'S** third solo show, "Brought Up As Rabbit", was held in March 2012 and talked about the "western bias" among other things.

ney. He's more interested in the artists' ideas than the mediums they use. This has helped me tremendously."

With "Pancha Mahabhuta", the gallery has also opened a smaller space towards its back end. The two sections are partitioned by a wall. This space may, as it is now, feature works by artists other than the ones being showcased in the main space, or not, as the show demands. "It's a flexible space, but it will never compromise the main exhibition space and priority will be given to the artist," says Maskara.

## ART

# Natural resources

**T Venkanna's new works depict the imbalance created among the five essential elements**

BY DEEPIKA SORABJEE

Fresh from the faculty of fine arts, Maharaja Sayaji Rao University of Baroda, where he trained as a printmaker, T. Venkanna arranged charcoal-on-paper works around a large suspended installation at his first show. Quite a safe start, one would think.

What was not safe was what he had drawn. Reminiscent possibly of a young F.N. Souza, Venkanna displayed the uninhibited exuberance of youth in his exploration of bold sexual themes (you had to look for them under crushed charcoal and frenzied drawing). The show ran its course; the drawings that held a multitude of irreverent observations evaded protesters and attracted critical attention.

Venkanna's subsequent solo veered into areas of less surety. A mixed bag of canvases and installations weighted with references, it lacked the earlier direction, yet the skill remained. His third show has taken him back to his roots—a two-month printmaking show within the gallery was a fascinating trek into a constructed studio. At 33, one of the few young Indian artists shown at the recently concluded Kochi-Muziris Biennale, where *Pancha Mahabhuta*—five canvases and several wood sculptures—filled a room at Aspinwall House, Venkanna talks about these works, which have moved to Mumbai's Gallery Maskara. Edited excerpts from an interview:

**The show 'Pancha Mahabhuta' moves from a warehouse in Kochi to a former warehouse in Mumbai. Will it be installed in the same way?**

*Pancha Mahabhuta* are the five elements—earth, sky, air, water and fire. It is believed that all life,



**Eco warrior:** (left) Artist T. Venkanna; and one of the five elements from his *Pancha Mahabhuta* comments on the damage to the environment.

including the human body, is made up of these elements, and upon death the human body returns to and via these five elements to nature. But these five elements are getting increasingly imbalanced. People kill each other over land issues. Water is getting more contaminated, affecting fragile ecosystems. Fire is being used as a weapon against nature to burn forests, air pollution and global warming are serious issues. I created these works to depict the state of these five essential elements.

We will install the five canvases differently at the gallery so people can see each work in a new and close way (at Aspinwall House, one work was installed on the ceiling, one on the floor and three on the walls around).

**Since your first solo show, which was almost entirely charcoal drawings on paper, you've done installations, performances and works on canvas. Do you have a preference of medium?**

No, not at all. I am not thinking of the medium at all when I work. Exploring the image is the most important thing for me, and I experiment based on what is best for the idea I have in mind.

**You live in Vadodara, where a lot of young artists respond through their works to the rapid urbanization going on around them. Your work remains entirely personal. This inward gaze is unusual in a young artist today.**

I am more interested in work that relates to my experience and how

I feel about life. Sexual imagination is one part of life, but I am also interested in nature and beauty and how we think about all these things. I admire Henri Rousseau, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Francis Bacon, Bhupen Khakhar—what they did, at the time they did it. I am trying to explore the time gap between their master artworks by reinterpreting some of these artists' works in contemporary times. **Since 2010, you've had many solo shows. Take us through a day at your studio.**

I leave the house at 9am for the studio and return every day at 7pm. For me work is pleasure, so I work all days, including Sundays. I just work, sometimes without a show in mind, or even if the work will eventually be in a show or not. I have no assistants, and even though there are other artists who share the studio space, I work alone.

*Pancha Mahabhuta is on till 9 May, 11am-7pm (Tuesday-Saturday), at Gallery Maskara, 6/7, 3rd Pasta Lane, Colaba, Mumbai.*

Write to [lounge@livemint.com](mailto:lounge@livemint.com)

## the exhibition



# Drawing on the elements

Chaos is the underlying theme of a new series of paintings by T Venkanna, currently on display at Gallery Maskara.

Titled Pancha Mahabhuta (Hindi for 'Five Essential Elements'), the series comprises five works, one each dedicated to Earth, Sky, Air, Water and Fire. "The harmony between these elements of nature is becoming increasingly imbalanced due to human activity," says Venkanna. "It is against this backdrop that I have created the works to depict the delicate state of these elements."

Each work draws on images from sexual fantasies, contemporary history and landmark art works. The central image in 'Air' is a large phial, derived

■ 'Air', one of a series of five paintings on display at Gallery Maskara.

**WHAT:** Pancha Mahabhuta, an exhibition of paintings by T Venkanna

**WHERE:** Gallery Maskara, 6/7, 3rd Pasta Lane, Apollo Bunder

**WHEN:** April 28 to May 9, 11 am to 7 pm (Sundays closed)

**CALL:** 2202-3056

**ENTRY IS FREE**

from 20th century French-American artist Marcel Duchamp's installation 'Air De Paris', which comprised a glass phial filled with air from Paris.

Other motifs include skeletal mummies, corpses hanging by a noose and bloated sex dolls. "By drawing such parallels, Venkanna comments on how the five elements are used and abused today," says gallery director Abhay Maskara, where the exhibition marks the fifth anniversary of the art space.

Pancha Mahabhuta was previously shown at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale.

— Riddhi Doshi

Arts Fashion Literature Music Design Film

# platform

CREATIVE LIFESTYLE

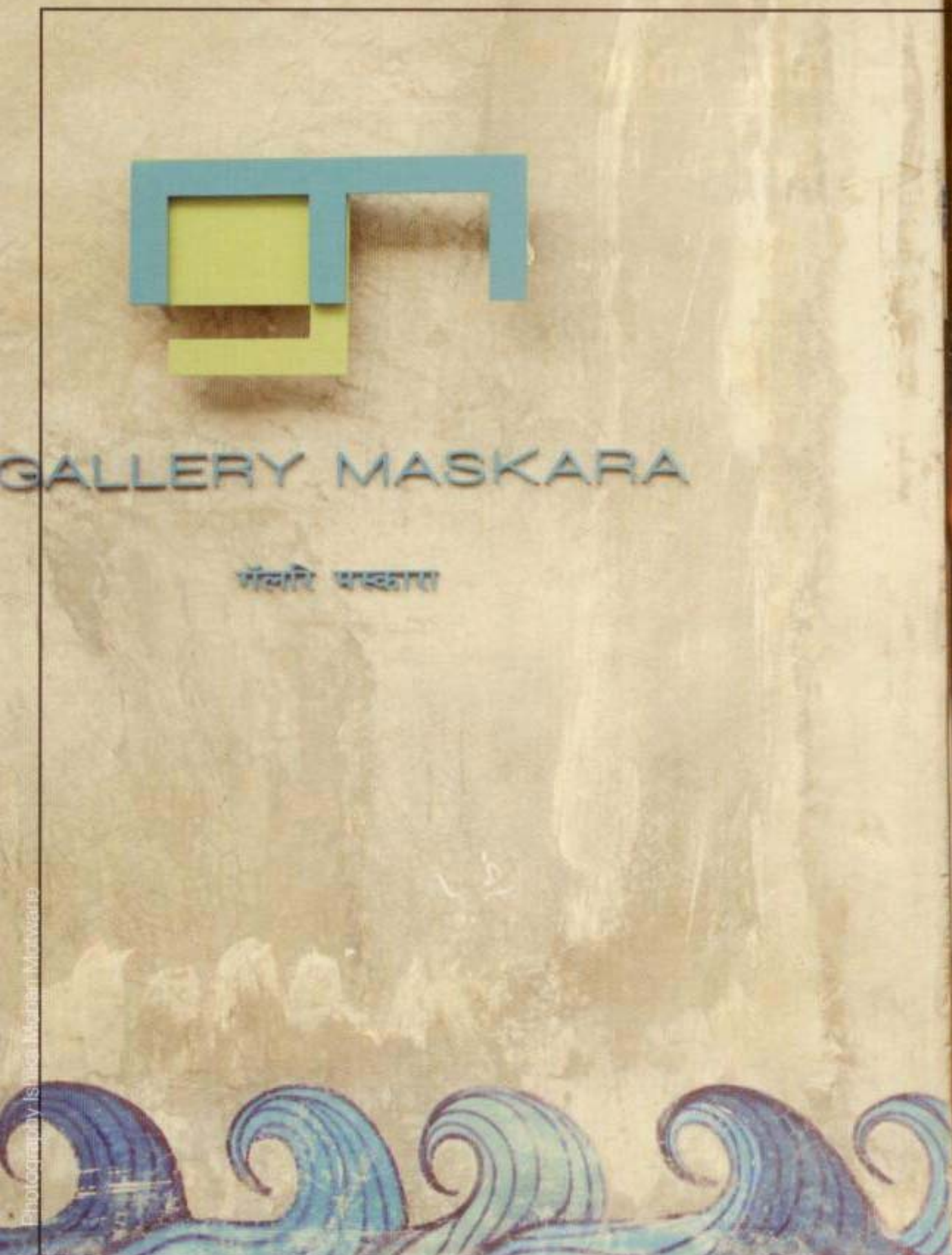
Jan/Feb 2012 ₹150



**YOKO ONO**  
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T. VENKANNA  
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BANI ABIDI  
AI WEIWEI  
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THE  
**BIG  
SHOW**+

ABOVE & BEYOND DIBAKAR BANERJEE TEJU COLE JEET THAYIL



## ➤ GALLERY MASKARA

## Director Abhay Maskara

**You work closely with T. Venkanna, what is it about his sensibility that impresses, intrigues and connects you to him?**

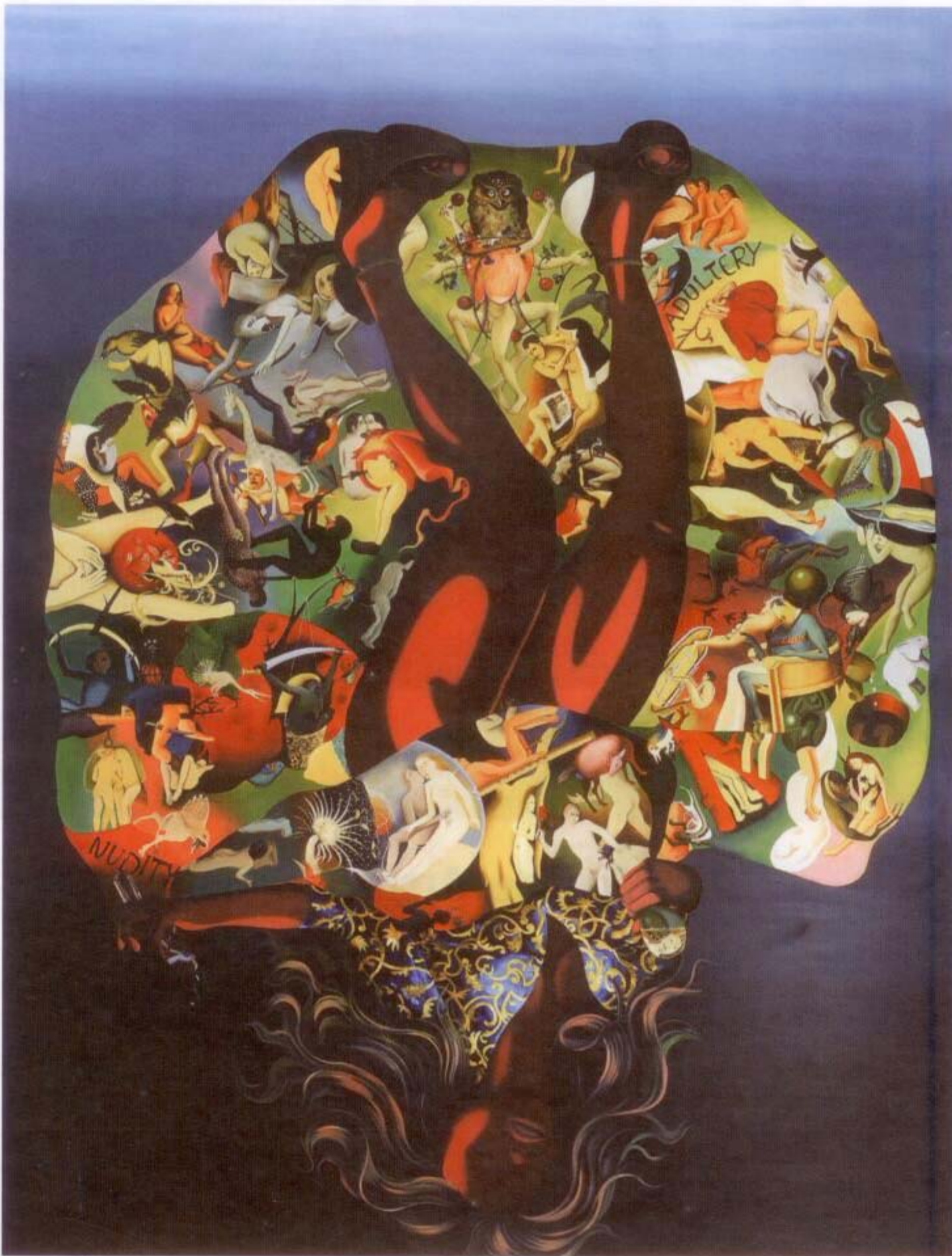
Venkanna has an uncommon raw talent along with unmatched intensity and dedication, which makes him stand apart from the rest. Rarely have I encountered someone so sure, so strong yet so free in the way he expresses ideas on paper, on canvas, in a performance or in any medium of choice. What I admire equally is his deep knowledge and interest in art history and the ability to see the world from the outside in, while always working from the inside out. There is rarely a repetitive thought

or image even when you stack up the over eight hundred unique works he has made in the last five years. The expressive quality, rhythm, and pace of his work is reminiscent of Basquiat, Mozart and Senna.

**As a curator/gallerist what is your interpretation of the work that he will be exhibiting at the *India Art Fair* and where do you see him go from here?** He continues to amaze with his reverence to the art of the past; re-interpreted irreverently in the present. As an artist you better be sure when you 'tamper' with iconic works

by Rousseau, Botticelli, Courbet, Hockney, Duchamp and now Hieronymus Bosch. It is so easy to go wrong, but Venkanna re-contextualizes the past in his own language, making the viewer re-examine the socio-political and cultural norms that existed back then and experience the work with fresh eyes. I see Venkanna as a leading torchbearer of his generation and the world will discover him as one of the great contemporary voices of our time.

**The art world in 2012 will be?** Unpredictable, edgy, exciting, young, energetic and hopeful...



*Under the Clothes, Hell*



**Deconstruct the series:** As a part of my practice, I have been (re)presenting certain imageries/motifs taken from artists of yester years (like Hockney, Rousseau, Mondrian, etc.) as well as from specific forms of traditional art. In my new painting titled *Under the Clothes, Hell*, I am referencing to a late 15<sup>th</sup> century work *Garden of Earthly Delights*, by Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch. The political and social context underlying this work was quite different when it was made. I re-present the imageries according to my idea, in the process critically evaluating the norms and terms that exist within contemporary society. **Inspiration:** From life, both lived and imagined, from nature and from art itself. **2012:** I am solely concerned about my work, which finds a way to take me everywhere. I have several important shows lined up in India, Singapore and Belgium so it will be an exciting and engaging year.

# Birth Of Black Venus & Other Works

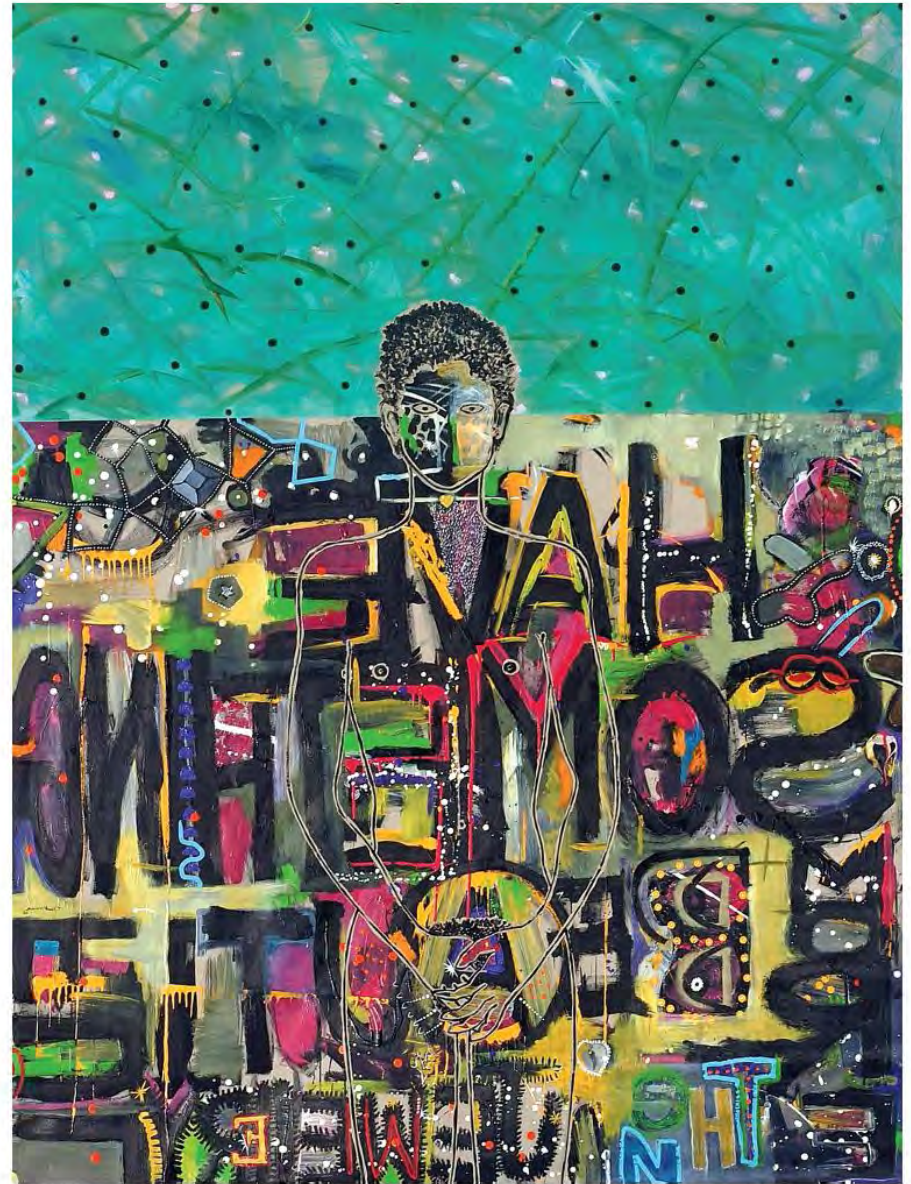
BY T VENKANNA



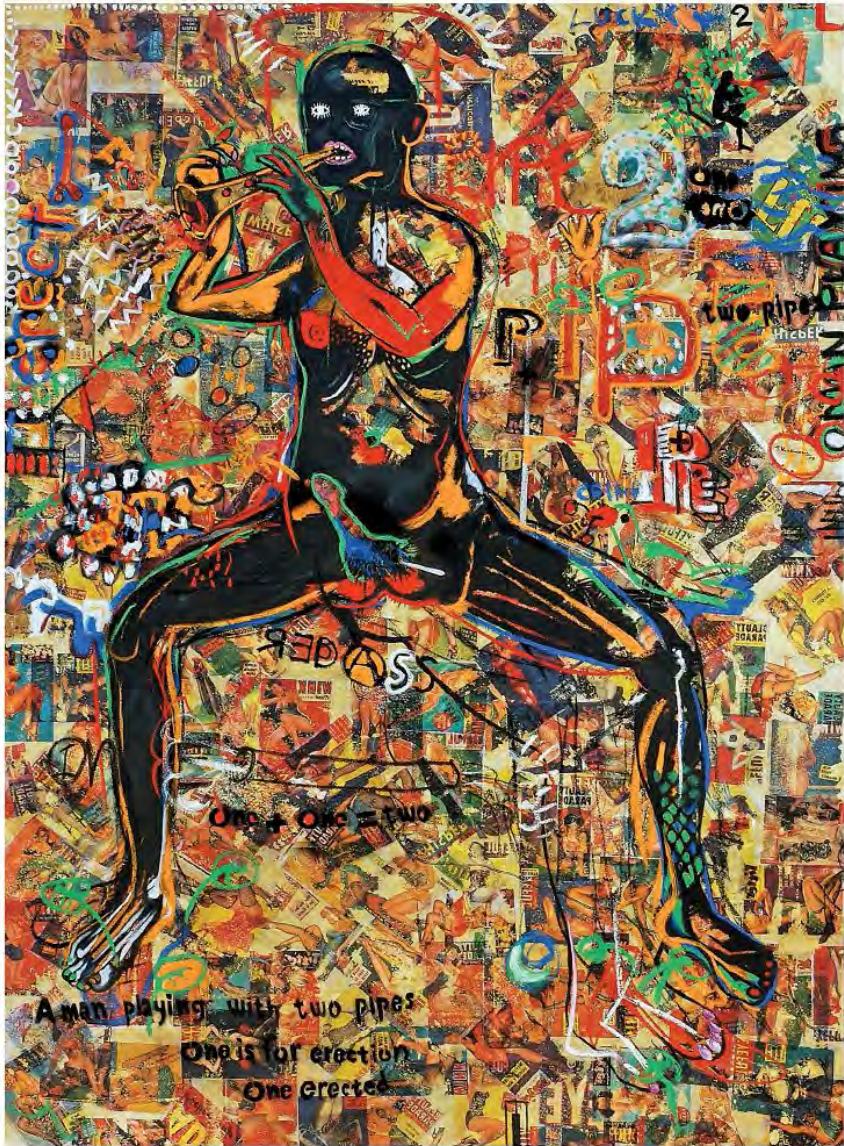
*Birth of Black Venus, Oil on Canvas, 102" X 162", 2010*

The predominant subject in T. Venkanna's works is sexual imagination which questions and confronts the stereotypical ways in which sexuality is understood and defined. In his own words, 'The sexual behaviour of human beings is habituated by societal norms and conditions. I believe it is due to this, that sexual fantasy gains importance in a human being's life and an individual achieves extreme pleasure out of this simple act of day-dreaming, wherein s/he escapes from the harsh realities of this world via an undisturbed and uninterrupted flight of imagination... In this endeavor of mine, I also have been (re)presenting certain imageries/motifs taken from artists of yester years like Hookney,

Rousseau, Mondrian, etc. as well as from specific forms of traditional art. The political and social contexts underlying these works are quite different. I represent these imageries according to my idea, in the process critically evaluating the norms and terms that exist within contemporary society.' His continuous persistence with this subject has stimulated his interest to explore imagemaking in all kinds of media, including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation and performance. His most important linguistic device is the integration of the personal and social using material as per the subject's requirement with complete freedom and ease.



*I Have Something More Beautiful Than Jewellery, Oil on Canvas, 96" X 72", 2010*



Man Playing With Two Pipes, Oil and Photo Transfer on Canvas, 90" X 66", 2009



The Real Self-Portrait, Collage on Canvas, 72" X 84", 2010





Hope for Love, Ceramic Urinal, Acrylic, Wood, 51" X 244" X 48", 2010. R - Hope for Love, Detail.



**T Venkanna** Among the most exciting young voices in contemporary Indian art today, he is definitely an artist to watch out for. He holds a MFA in Printmaking from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda and a BFA in painting from J.N.T.U, Hyderabad where he was awarded a Gold medal. 2010 was a good year for the artist. In March he had his second solo show at Gallery Maskara, Mumbai. In November his work was part of an exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei, Taiwan and he opened his first European solo show at Gallery Luce in Torino, Italy. During the same time he also

showed at Artissima 17 (Art Fair), Torino, Italy. His first solo performance is coming up at Art Stage, Singapore in January 2011. Previously, he has participated in several shows including at Gallery Maskara, Mumbai (2009, 2008), Kitab Mahal, Mumbai (2007), and Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai (2006). He is also one of the 20 artists shortlisted for the SKODA prize. His works are in major collections in America and Europe including the Charles Saatchi Collection (UK) and the Burger Collection (Switzerland), Swagemakers Collection (Netherlands). He lives and works in Baroda, India.

## NERO

**Sonia Nazareth** reviews T. Venkanna's solo show 'Nero' at Gallery Luce, Torino, Italy, and talks of the constellation of works that subvert the established notions of gender and sexuality.



T. Venkanna | Birth of Black Venus | Oil & Gold Leaf on Canvas | 102" x 162" | 2010

Constantly immediate and with raw openness, T. Venkanna creates new art for a new world. His storytelling takes various forms through constellations of images, collage, pastiche, the recourse to allegory, painting - all ways of thinking-in-pictures from which understanding emerges without having to be expounded. For his first European solo show 'Nero', that opened at Gallery Luce, Torino, Italy on November 06, 2010, Venkanna presented a selection of large format paintings, works on paper and a site-specific installation. Over the last few years, Venkanna has built a reputation as one of the more radical voices in India's contemporary art scene, and he more than lived up to that expectation.

Destabilizing received notions of gender and sexuality, the works in the show invited the audience to examine whether fixed notions of identity are desirable or even tenable. In *Birth of Black Venus*, 2010 - a seminal oil on canvas, Venkanna re-presented Italian renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, c. 1486, thereby broadening the category of what it meant to be beautiful, by his appropriation of the colour black for the Goddess emerging from the sea. Through this work he suggests that the idea of beauty is a man-made category of knowledge; rather than an inherent reality.

Although Venkanna uses both erotic and sexual imagery extensively in his work, he is not deliberately trying to provoke the viewer.

In fact he transcends what might be perceived as profane reality - by using sexuality as a trope to examine his most pressing concerns. These include the alienation and commodity fetishism that characterize modern consumer society. In *I Have Something More Beautiful than Jewelry* 2010, a highly layered large-format painting done in an expressionistic style, he encouraged the viewer to look beyond the tangible, to the hidden but potentially more meaningful aspects of selfhood. The graffiti and slogans painted liberally on the surface of the canvas drew attention to the created theatricality and constructed nature of the works. The audience was thus provoked to reflect rather than respond solely with emotion to the aesthetic of what they were seeing. Additionally, the text inscribed onto the body of the work pushed the boundaries between text as visual art and visual art as text, forcing viewers to rethink the status of both.

The installation on the ceiling of the gallery comprised of several hundred figures from pre-history to contemporary art. A unique play of negative and positive space was created by cutting figures out of sheets of black Styrofoam and pasting them in dense clusters on the ceiling. Primitive cave paintings, Van Gogh's self portrait, and Jeff Koons' rabbit were some of the works that made up this constellation of images. The installation was dedicated to making art



T. Venkanna | I Have Something More Beautiful Than Jewelry | Oil & Carbonum on Canvas | 96" x 72" | 2010

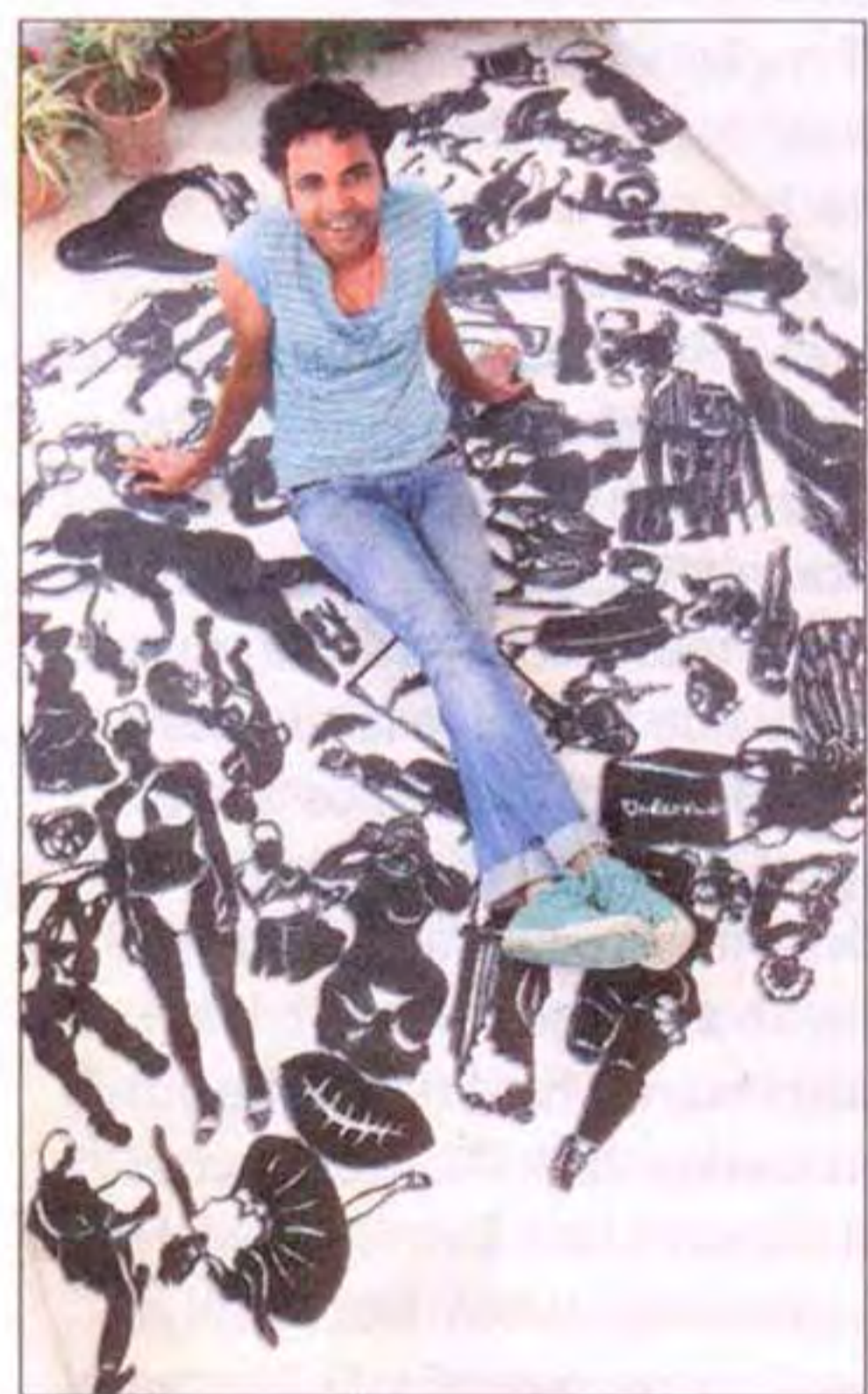
history a democratic experience - symbolically taking it out of a scholastic environment to make it accessible to a wider audience. History, it argued, is too important to be left to the experts alone, for it provides not only a means of interpreting the past but also a critical viewpoint from which to examine the present.

The power of Venkanna's art lies in how he transforms the wolves of his spontaneity into the shepherds of knowledge and beauty; revealing the world in ways we have always known but scarcely have the courage to admit. ☺

The show was on from November 6, 2010 to December 22, 2010. The Luce Gallery in Torino, Italy collaborated with Gallery Mascara, Mumbai for this show.



**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

**V**ENUS 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 outrageous effect that Venkanna is aiming at. "I am enjoying this play with the dead masters," he says. ●

## Sacred and Profane: T. Venkanna

Shubhalakshmi Shukla



T. Venkanna, *Untitled Beauty*, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 96" x 144" (Diptych), 2009.

MUMBAI: What makes the wholeness of T. Venkanna's visual representations is the closely knit up dissolution of its counterparts. In almost all the visuals of *Sacred and Profane*, show held from 15 March - 15 April, 2010 at Gallery Maskara, Mumbai, the base layer of his works proposes disintegration.<sup>1</sup> In his collage and mixed-media painted works Venkanna takes references from various European modernist and postmodernist art works. His reference to these works is more than mere quoting a particular time/artist from the history. He imagines a comprehensive representation employing words, symbols and art-historical references within which sexuality, through a phallic-presence, maps the relocation of a modernist identity to contemporary times taking into account the alienation of sexual identity.<sup>2</sup> If 'modernism' created a fetish by capitalizing on 'beauty' or female-body, Venkanna's admittance to the Dadaist/postmodernist attempts uphold its sinister side in depiction of a sexual fantasy. In *The Real Self-Portrait* Venkanna closely embarks upon 'pixillation' as a unit or inevitably dense component of a computer image. In this work, by minimizing the scale of self-photograph within the image of phallus, Venkanna adds to the anonymity of self-portrayal - the way repeated imagery in Andy Warhol's works lead to the desensitization of the *Accident* it projects; Venkanna's work leads to self-dissension on fetishizing sexuality.

In the large diptych *Untitled Beauty* one side features a painted collage in Dadaist style of the various parts of the female face which are constantly fetishized by the media and by society at large. This idea of collective beauty is but a fragment of the whole. The work makes reference to artists like Andy Warhol,

Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst and Paul Cezanne. The painterly quality is brought out in this haunting depiction of beauty that is at once horrifying, yet arresting in its presence and permanence.<sup>3</sup>

There is an undercurrent of sexual politics at work in the sculptural interventions by Venkanna. Often

the sculptures portray hybrid human animal (human figures with masks) in a posture of sexual intercourse with an animal.

'The lion heads the food chain in the natural world. He has ownership of both biological and sexual power. Man has assumed such a role and superseded all biological hierarchies within nature. Venkanna expresses dismay at such a violent and deviant shift with this work and calls for a return to order... Too Hungry Lion depicts what modern man has made of the natural order. He has wrested all power from the lion, as shown in his wearing a lion's mask, and he now commands and abuses all innocent underlings (human or animal) not only sexually, but completely'.<sup>4</sup>

Venkanna's works could be viewed through some of the above mentioned frameworks, where a social disintegration is proposed. There is no utopian vision, rather it confronts the world which might have been so, and come to interweave a sinister system within it. Fundamental to the quality of Venkanna's works is the trope of sexuality which he intervenes through his child like energy.

Footnotes:

[1] 'In the modernist work, the elements were fully integrated. Each element spoke only as a part of the whole, without a separate voice. In the realist-narrative work, the second-order parts as we called them had a life of their own, leading to a more open ended and less autonomous structure. In the new collage inspired works the elements are experienced as fragments, their internal relations

strained, distanced and at times uncanny. To bring such fragments together as parts of a work of art, the artist has to devise a structure of even greater openness. The structure has to have the resilience and breadth, and the wit, to somehow hold together the fragments of authentic meaning available to us today, without denying their reality as fragments...' Sudhir Patwardhan in "The Work of Art in these Past Few Decades", *Embarkations, The Millennium show at Sakshi Art Gallery, Mumbai, January 2000*

[2] In *Man Playing with Two Pipes* a singular demon like caricaturist black-figure with an autobiographical reference is painted with implied wit on to the backdrop of a sexual kitsch - a digital transfer of 50s and 60s British pin up magazines, construing a wit around entwined meanings of the numerical '2' and the pipes (one being the ejaculating penis while the other the blowing musical pipe).

[3] Abhay Maskara in the Press note for *Sacred and Profane*

[4] *Ibid.*

## Construct - Deconstruct: Puja Kshatriya

Jigna Padhiar



Puja Kshatriya, *Floating Men* - Construct-Deconstruct Series, Oil with Blade Scraping on Canvas, 50"x60".

MUMBAI: Puja Kshatriya exhibited paintings and sculptures at the Museum Gallery, Mumbai from December 7 to 13, in a show titled, 'Construct - Deconstruct'.

Kshatriya's interest in illustrating the human face and body continues from her earlier shows, namely 'Mapping the Terrain' (2007) and 'Reality and Metaphor' (2005). 'Construct - Deconstruct' comprised of eight paintings and five larger than life sculptures, aptly layered with references and metaphors, both personal and external to human.

A shift from, more to less, complex to uncomplicated, from youthful faces to the ageing and the frail, from the last show to this, Kshatriya seemed to have made a conscious effort in discarding complex elements and employed cleanness and austerity.

# Time Out

## Mumbai

### Review

#### Sacred and Profane

Warehouse at 3rd Pasta, Colaba

From the moment one enters the gallery, the profane part of Venkanna's exhibition is obvious. "Man Playing With Two Pipes" shows a decidedly naked man with a musical pipe and a second one that is predictably anatomical. Next to it is the back of the double-sided painting titled "Surviving", which shows a pronounced and protruding neck of a rooster (yes, you are supposed to think of the synonym). Tucked behind "Man Playing With Two Pipes" is Venkanna's "The Real Self-Portrait," a collage of an outsized male crotch made up of tiny photographs of the artist's head.

Perhaps the sacred elements referred to in the title are the famous art works and styles to which Venkanna refers in a number of his pieces. The front of "Surviving" shows a replica of Gustave Courbet's "The Origin of the World"



*Hope for Love*

but with the shrivelled body of the rooster stuffed into the vagina (his neck rigidly sticks out of the other side). *Sacred and Profane* also has Venkanna's version of Henri Rousseau's "The Hungry Lion Throws Itself on the Antelope". This painting is accompanied by a set of sculptures that show a man in a lion's mask mounting different

animals, including a rather tragic turtle. Marcel Duchamp's infamous urinal also makes an appearance and in "Untitled Beauty", references are made to a host of Western artists like Andy Warhol, Wassily Kandinsky and Damien Hirst. The sacred also makes an appearance in "Hope for Love", in which he has created an Eden that shelters a

copulating human couple from a dysfunctional world of inter-species sex and a urinal that spits out blood and soldiers.

Venkanna displays his artistic range ably in this show. He is a talented painter and gifted sculptor, judging from the toy-like wooden sculptures. However, despite the technical finesse in Venkanna's art, there is a hint of immaturity in his approach. "Surviving" is an excellent example of this, as is the idea of incorporating Duchamp's urinal in "Hope for Love", which is one of the most overexposed and overused pieces of contemporary art. Copying a famous painting runs the risk of seeming like an art student's experiment unless it dramatically reinvents the subject. There's no doubting Venkanna has the talent but instead of using older works as crutches, we hope he will find (and show) his own distinctive style and create original works in future shows. *Deepanjana Pal*

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.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

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-



PIC: DEEPAK TURBHEKAR

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.*



# Time Out

## Mumbai

Art

### Two in hand

Warehouse at 3rd Pasta turns two this fortnight.

When Warehouse at 3rd Pasta opened two years ago, it was particularly difficult to spot because gallerist Abhay Maskara decided to make the gallery's front door look like a collapsible, metallic shutter. Then in 2008, Brazilian graffiti artist Nina Pandolfo spray-painted one of her creations on the outer wall next to the shutter-door: a wide-eyed girl, hanging upside down from a branch, holding her dress demurely so that no one's sensibilities are offended. Since then, Warehouse at 3rd Pasta has been one of the easier galleries to find. However, its reputation rests upon much more than a coy cartoon girl. Over the past two years, the gallery has steadfastly refused to give in to commercial favourites even during the peak of the economic slowdown, when the gallery's air-conditioning bill was bigger than its earnings.

Maskara began the gallery with the intention of promoting new talent and two years down the line, he must be a very satisfied man. Aside from fun shows like Pandolfo's, Warehouse has showcased some bizarre, thought-provoking and intelligent exhibitions like *Mathesis Dub dub dub* by Avantika Bawa, *Sperm Weaver* by Shine Shivan, *In Determination II* by Monali Meher and Max Streicher's *Breathe*. To celebrate Warehouse turning two years old, it will exhibit paintings by T Venkanna, one of the artists Maskara discovered. Venkanna made his debut with an elaborate show of installations and drawings in 2009, titled *For Identity*. Clever as the works were, they seemed crowded with too many ideas.

The new works, which come on display this fortnight, show how Venkanna's style has changed in the past year. The paintings are much more graphic than what he had exhibited in *For Identity* and there are more references to various periods of art history and famous names like Pablo Picasso and Gustave Courbet. It's obvious from Venkanna's paintings that he loves using the human body to



Man Playing with Two Pipes

shock his audience. Instead of his face, "The Real Self Portrait" shows a man's genitals up close. In contrast to the outsized penis, the artist's face is tiny and placed in one corner of the painting. The style in which "The Real Self Portrait" is painted recalls mosaics from classical European art as well as the pixels of contemporary digital art. In "Man Playing with Two Pipes", the background is a collage made up of pin-up photos and one of the pipes in question is, unsurprisingly, a phallus. "Surviving" turns the female nude as painted by Courbet in his "The Origin of the World" into something grotesque.

Venkanna's new show is a rather vigorous celebration of masculinity. He's not the only one in Maskara's stable of artists to show an almost violent backlash against the idea of feminine power (Shine Shivan's show was all about phallic worship). In this anniversary show, Venkanna's tendency to demonise the feminine and glorify the masculine isn't heartening, particularly for women viewers. We'd feel less critical of his sexual imagination if he depicted the feminine as something other than a lurid pin-up or a monstrous man-shriveller. Being accompanied by children or parents at this exhibition is inadvisable. However, one thing is for certain. There will be no shortage of dinner-table conversation after seeing this show. *Deepanjana Pal*



# The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today

Saatchi Gallery, London

2 / 5



**Adrian Searle**

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 2 February 2010 22.15 GMT

**A** [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Her suburban Dream (2009) by Huma Mulji at the Saatchi Gallery, London.

Photograph: Jonathan Hordle/Rex Features

The Empire Strikes Back is a wet punch. One might expect Charles Saatchi to show just the sorts of things that are presented: a stuffed camel in a suitcase, a taxidermied dog morphing with a furry vacuum cleaner, photographs of veiled women whose burkas turn out to be pixelated with tiny porn shots, yet more of Subodh Gupta's over-familiar sculptures made from cooking utensils, a black medical cot piled high with tarry mattresses that breathe wheezily to the power of compressed air. There are painted gags about Jasper Johns, dystopian jokes about technology, including a rattling old Xerox machine with half its gubbins missing, and an army of figures made from old floor lamps, neon tubes, discarded bits of plumbing. I see a GCSE-level art project coming on.

## The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today

Saatchi Gallery,

London

Until 7 May

[See details](#)

This isn't to say that The Empire Strikes Back is all bad. Some pieces are worse than bad, others just obvious. A speech by Gandhi spelled out in bones adds nothing to any argument. It just took a long time to make. **T Venkanna's reworked versions of Douanier Rousseau are fun and sexy**, and so is Chitra Ganesh's cartoon of a liberated Indian - superwoman. Rashid Rana's pixelated view of an endless sea of rubbish is queasily beautiful, and – best of all – Yamini Nayar's photographs of half-abandoned rooms take us somewhere strange and oddly threatening.

A lot of the work looks exoticised for the gallery, the artists playing up their post-colonial otherness as a gimmick, rather than making art of substance. This exhibition gives us no clearer view of the art of a subcontinent than did a recent Serpentine gallery exhibition. There's also no film or video – areas where some of the best work is made.



## The Empire Strikes Back: Indian Art Today

Until Fri May 7 [Saatchi Gallery](#), *Duke of York's HQ, King's Rd, London, SW3 4SQ*

**Art: Art museums & institutions**

**By JJ Charlesworth** Posted: Thu Feb 4 2010

Unless you've been living under a rock for the last couple of years, you've probably noticed that India has become a big deal.

Whether it's Gordon Ramsay 'effing' his way round India's authentic cuisine, or another telly re-run of 'Slumdog Millionaire', we open-minded Brits are being culturally habituated to the prospect of a century in which India, along with China, will be ascendant, economically and politically. And the art world is happy to get in the culture game. After the Serpentine's 'India Highway' last year, The Saatchi Gallery rocks in with 'The Empire Strikes Back'.

It's a witty title for a show. Here, 'The Empire Strikes Back' is saying, is the product of India's struggle for independence from the old British Empire, finally realised in 1947. The show opens with Jitish Kallat's wall-sized rendering of Gandhi's 1930 speech on the eve of the 'salt march', the first great march of civil disobedience following the Indian National Congress's initial declaration of independence. Gandhi's words, calling on Indians to defy the British taxes on salt production, are formed out of letters shaped like human bones. It's a haunting piece; Gandhi's living, defiant words sitting now in dead silence.

To give shape to such an historic expression of the desire for human liberty in a mass of bones might suggest that this desire is futile - free or enslaved, we all die in the end - but by combining these opposites so precisely, Kallat's piece manages to point to how an ideal as elevated as liberty is always the product of a multitude of ordinary living, mortal people. People die, but liberty lives on in the world's biggest democracy.

Remarkably, then, Charles Saatchi's taste for big, visually striking chunks of sculpture manages to alight on art works that can contain more than a single, obvious message. This is perhaps because art made out of India's complex encounter with archaic tradition and democratic modernity can never be one-dimensional. So many of the artists work across three distinct questions - Indian art's dialogue with a once dominant Western modernism, India's political past and present, and an often conflicting attitude toward the cultural consequences of rapid economic growth and secular attitudes.

Subodh Gupta's sparkling accumulations of cheap, stainless steel pots and vessels, for example, offer a sort of Indian neo-pop-art - a giant UFO saucer, or a huge water-bucket overflowing with many smaller water pots - that buzzes with the intoxicating sense of an economy producing ever more, ever faster.

There are of course more pessimistic visions of accumulation; Tallur L.N.'s grotesque pile of black latex mattresses stacked on a hospital bedframe, inflating and deflating, offers only the accumulation of poverty that is still an Indian reality. Elsewhere, Mumbai painters T Venkanna and Atul Dodiya variously hijack twentieth-century westerners such as Henri Rousseau and Jasper Johns, in paintings that force Western primitivism and avant-gardism into historical dialogue with the mixed iconography of India's aesthetic traditions and its urban present.

And yet, catchy title notwithstanding, this isn't quite a show of 'Indian' art. Out of the 26 artists, five of them, though of Indian descent, were born and work in the USA. Two are from Pakistan, and one British artist, Shezad Dawood is included.

The 'Indian experience', then, isn't quite the same for those artists not actually living there, and it shows. Unlike their India-based colleagues, the 'diaspora' artists make work that is more formally complicated, more thematically inscrutable, and far less interested in the realities of Indian society. No doubt this is a product of the fact that contemporary art in India is only just emerging as a substantial public culture, with a sense of urgent realism that more comfortable Westernised artists can afford to do without.

Yet there are standout works here too; Chitra Ganesh's disturbing reworkings of comic strips depicting classical Indian mythological stories, rewritten into violent and subtly erotic narratives of feminine power and desire, exist at the border of Indian tradition viewed through western identity politics. There's no clear 'message', just some questions, and that's a good thing.

Of course, there are some classic Saatchi-style slabs of bog-obviousness to bump into. Huma Mulji's taxidermied cow, its body forced through a concrete sewer pipe with its head emerging from the other end, makes me wonder if there's a factory somewhere in India making big, lazy, comedy-prop sculpture for international art collectors to fill their foundations with. Rashid Rana's images of muslim women in burqas, composed of thousands of tiny porno images, grinds home another 'message' without too much subtlety. And there's no video. Video cannot be art, it seems, in the slightly surreal world of the Saatchi Gallery. But that air of surreality just about suits this Indian art, for whom Indian reality is not immutable, but changing every minute.

# TimeOut

## Mumbai

GET MORE OUT OF MUMBAI  
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**EXTRA**

What's on  
in Pune  
this fortnight

### For Identity

#### Warehouse at Third Pasta, Colaba

From the moment you walk in to T Venkanna's debut, it's obvious that the star of the show is a young artist. This is not because his works are raw but because of the sense of mischief that runs through *For Identity*. Venkanna makes no bones about being young, cheeky and somewhat preoccupied with sex. It's the theme that runs through most of the sooty drawings hung on the walls and anyone who has been inside a Shiva temple will have no trouble seeing the sexual innuendo in the sculptural installation that is the centrepiece of *For Identity*.

At the heart of the gallery, hovering in mid-air like a mothership, is an enormous papier mache crown. Below it, Venkanna has erected a pedestal and placed a tiny replica of the large crown on it. The fragility of the papier mache filigree and the solidity of the pedestal make for an intriguing set of contrasts. There's a third crown that's



*My Right Hand Middle Finger is Black*

created out of the shadows thrown by the papier mache one and it is up to the viewer to decide their nature. As insubstantial as they may be, the shadows crawl up on the pristine whiteness of the wall, much like the layers of images that swarm Venkanna's paper works.

The best of Venkanna's drawings are deep in the belly of the gallery. There are some fun textures created – for one drawing, Venkanna crushed charcoal under

his feet and then walked on the paper – and all of them ask of the viewer a little time. Images are layered into the works and obscured with doodles. Sometimes the doodles are too dense and the underlying drawing has to be sensed rather than actually seen. In "Ketchup in Kitchen", for example, it takes a while to figure out that the thing being sliced up in the pan is a penis. The leering faces in the background can barely be glimpsed through the smudges and scribbles. Look closer at "I'm Not a Fly" and the surface is encrusted by carefully-drawn flies with translucent grey wings.

Despite the literal darkness that fills Venkanna's paper works and the grim ponderousness of the exhibition title, this is a fun show once the viewer is able to find their way through the tangle of images in each piece. What Venkanna's drawings need is a little restraint so that they don't feel dauntingly crowded and impenetrable to the viewer. *DP*

# FORBIDDEN FRUIT

T Venkanna, a bold and scathing Hyderabad artist explores a world of fantasy



Ketchup in Kitchen

GEORGINA MADDOX

A PREGNANT man with a distended belly, a nightgown fraught with caricatures of animals mating, dismembered hands and objects of pain and pleasure and a soup kitchen that has more on the frying pan than food—here is a forbidden world of suppressed desire, curiosity and drama. Watch it unfold on gallery walls.

One guesses the artist T Venkanna was surely punished as a youngster for scribbling 'rude' graffiti on classroom walls. However his 'socially unacceptable behaviour' has led the artist to explore many avenues in the land of forbidden imagery, as the gallery going crowd dubs him one of the more radical voices in today's Indian contemporary art scene.

A solo show that confronts boundaries through frank and powerful imagery opens at Abhay Maskara's gallery this January 14. It includes pen and ink drawings, charcoal on hand-made paper and canvas along with installations that are currently being set up as this article goes to print.

Question: Does an artist become radical through merely daring to express profanities? The answer is obviously in the negative since we all know that merely making lurid images does not an artist make. Clearly there is a difference between the images made by Venkanna and those we see scribbled in the ladies first-class coupe, which are frankly misogynistic.

The artist who hails from Gajwel, a small town near Hyderabad, has a very strong subtext behind each image where the enquiry into sexual images is born of an interest in socio-cultural politics. "The sexual behaviour of human beings is habituated by the societal norms and conditions. I believe it is due to this, that the sexual fantasy gains importance in a human being's life and an individual achieves extreme pleasure out of this simple act of day-dreaming. Thus she/he escapes from the harsh realities of society via an undisturbed and uninterrupted flight of imagination," says the 28-year-old artist who studied art in JNTU in Hyderabad and then at Maharaja Sayaji Rao University in Baroda.

"Venkanna unashamedly confronts and questions the stereo-



Venkanna working on an installation

Naughty Nighty at Night



typical ways in which sexuality is understood and defined. This attracts me to his work," says Maskara who talent-spotted the artist for his first solo in the financial capital.

"Too big too small is the artist's gigantic installation, which puns on power, rendered useless. A large paper crown suspended from the ceiling is far too big to be worn and has no material value, while the golden one seated on a velvet cushion is too small for anyone to wear despite its monetary value." "I also investigate political realities in my work. I do believe that these are the power struggles that make the world a violent place, while sexual fantasy and image provide an alternative to this violence."

The show continues at The Warehouse till February 22. Parental guidance is suggested.

# Starting up



Gas station "Art not F..." by T Venkanna



A slow art market means more space for young artists like T Venkanna, says **Deepanjana Pal.**

In the Mumbai art world, January is generally a good month. The season, which kicks off between September and October, reaches its peak in the first month of the year as gallerists, audiences and buyers return from their Christmas holidays. This year, however, gallerists have been forced to recalculate and many have chosen to cautiously present less high-profile shows. For Vadodara-based artist T Venkanna, this is good news because he'll have less competition when he makes his debut this fortnight with a solo show at Warehouse at 3rd Pasta.

When the American financial meltdown struck last year, the world economy was left looking a bit like Pompeii after Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79CE. For gallerists in India, it meant that the average NRI banker, whose purchases have been key to the ram-paging Indian art market, was

staring unemployment in the face. A little more than eight weeks after the first of the American investment banks went bankrupt and as Colaba puts itself together after the November terrorist attacks, the city's art world is braced for the inevitable downturn in business. Among those who have restructured their calendars are FSCA, Project 88 and Bodhi Art, which decided to cancel an exhibition of works by painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel and instead stick with a modest group show. Recent auctions that have shown the big names aren't bringing in the record sums. Instead, it's younger and lesser-known artists, with cheaper works, who are being bought.

Gallerist Abhay Maskara is less perturbed than many in his fraternity. He opened the Warehouse at Third Pasta last year for the express purpose of showcasing artists who weren't big names in India and therefore wouldn't belong to the category of "commercially viable". He's decided to exhibit T Venkanna, the first Indian artist to have a solo show at

the Warehouse. Maskara first introduced Venkanna to Mumbai in the group show *Looseniefirst*. However, the exhibition is made up of drawings, which are more modestly-priced than paintings, and one sculptural installation.

After specialising in printmaking at MS University, Vadodara, for his MA, Venkanna has been making paintings, collages and installations. For *Looseniefirst*, he showed a series of collages exploring ideas of sexuality using images from comic strips. "I like seeing what a material can do with a subject," he said. "For me the idea is very important. From the idea, I decide what material to use."

Venkanna's installation for his solo is largely composed of two crowns, one enormous and the other small. "The concept behind this work is power," said Venkanna in a telephonic interview from Vadodara. "The big one is made from papier mache so even though it looks huge, it is made out of something that is not of much value. The little one is made of gold but because it's so small, it's also useless." Venkanna

is interested in the idea of power and its signifiers. "I find it interesting to see how we react to things, like how we tend to think if something is big it must be powerful," he said, referring to the impracticality of having a crown that's 20 feet wide.

The drawings are all from the past year. "They are all instinctively done," said Venkanna. "I like the quickness and energy of drawing." The titles he's given the works are cheeky like "Nutty Nighty Night" and "Art not F..." which shows a man lying down, emitting a cloud of creativity from his rear end. Like his collage works, the drawings mostly explore the idea of sexuality. Erect penises abound and sex turns out to be sometimes darkly humorous and sometimes violent. "It isn't about having a message but just having an expression of an idea," said Venkanna. "Sexuality is fun but what is there behind the sexuality, I don't know. That's why I'm drawing, to try and find out." See Warehouse at 3rd Pasta in Exhibitions.

# DEROBING THE MIND

A young artist pushes the limits of the sexual imagination in a fascinating show



VISHWAS KULKARNI

The good thing about Venkanna's success is that it has happened despite our art world. A lot of our esteemed gallery owners would visit his studio in Baroda, like his style, and cringe at the content.

"Can you work around the content?" they would request him. He didn't budge, until gallerist Abhay Maskara discovered him, and decided to showcase him uncensored at his gallery. The results are mesmerising.

T. Venkanna uses the sex-

ual imagination as his palette. This said, nothing is remotely erotic about the works here: they are more steeped in a disturbed, multi-layered, carnal chaos. These are almost demented, hormonally-overloaded scribbles that are so full of life that they transcend their pornographic syntax and emerge as a valid homage to the kink. Thus, a man turgid with pregnancy, a woman frying penises, men farting and masturbating – all perversions find their pride of place in *For Identity*, a show that strangely boasts of a contained, high-art quality.

"I like to play with the fluidity of the sexual imagination, the myriad possibilities that come to mind and brush when sexual thought achieves a degree of abstraction," says the young artist who has been picked up by London's Gallery Saatchi as part of their showcase to represent contemporary Indian art.

Venkanna, who usually

works with a good amount of colour, has chosen only black for his current show to indulge his personalised perversions. It gives his show a cave-man, atavistic edge, as though these works are meant to invoke some forgotten deities from a debauched, degenerate and yet an ironically liberated cult. In addition to the paintings a larger-than life crown hangs precariously in the air, at the centre of which is a small black stool, atop which rests a tiny red cushion that, in turn, buttresses a miniature golden crown. A reference to the penis piercing the vagina? The artist doesn't spell it out for you with this one. Maybe it's only your own twisted mind at play. Do find out for yourself when you check out what this prodigious wonder has to offer.

*For Identity* by T. Venkanna is exhibiting at Gallery Maskara until Feb 22.