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N Parsharamulu: The un-expressionist

The result of 10 years that Telangana artist N Parsharamulu spent to hone his idiom

N. Parsharamulu with his works at Mumbai's Gallery Maskara. Photo: Nayan Shah/Mint

The excitement in gallerist Abhay Maskara's voice is palpable as he points to one of the eight works going up on his gallery's walls, an evening before the newest exhibition's preview. Each painting—all acrylic on canvas, all following a three-colour scheme of black, white and just a hint of red—is called *Itself*; so is the exhibition.

Gallery Maskara is known to host young artists with a commitment to procedure. It often converts itself into scapes to house large installations such as Aaditi Joshi's sculptures of used plastic, Shine Shivan's provocative fabrications or T. Venkanna's printmaking machinery. Now, a white cube has come up at the centre of the gallery to hang four of N. Parsharamulu's canvases.

All the paintings reveal a distorted figure—non-gendered, bloated, white, mostly-human—surrounded by a rectangle. Four dots centre the frame for the viewer as though to pin down the objective and inorganic elements of these paintings. None of these figures has a face.

The onus is on the viewer to reflect on the painting, without the help that an expressive face might have otherwise offered. "Art is itself, but not an exact meaning. Therefore expression is only an expression, conceptualism is only conceptualism, modernism is modernism, Renaissance is Renaissance. Even creativity is only creativity. Art in its pure condition never implies temporary opinions and subjects," writes Parsharamulu in his artist's note, attempting to explain his choice to make the figures faceless.

At the age of 15, Parsharamulu joined as an apprentice to Balu, a neighbour and signboard painter in the small town of Karimnagar, Telangana, where Parsharamulu lives with his parents and three siblings. His father, now retired, worked in the government-controlled Singareni coal mine there. Parsharamulu would not only help Balu paint political signboards, but also make portraits of the newly deceased, which would hang in homes garlanded.

When Parsharamulu attended art school in Hyderabad, and later in Bangalore, where he did his master's in fine arts, he continued to draw portraits but hit upon a three-colour scheme, with black the dominant colour ("Unconsciously perhaps, this may have something to do with the mines," he says), and two red dots mimicking the cotton stuffed in a corpse's nose.

As a student in Bangalore, Parsharamulu happened to see a body on the railway tracks, and later visited a morgue. Though he was painting the dead, all the portraits that emerged from these experiences are strangely expressive.

It was also in college that Parsharamulu, who had studied in a government school till class X and knew very little English, took it upon himself to learn the language to access art books. "I would see pictures of Renaissance artists, or Francis Bacon, Edvard Munch and Van Gogh, in the books and I wanted to read what was being written about them."

Parsharamulu made several hundred paintings in these years, but often reworked or painted over many of them. For him, all those works were studies and, therefore, not complete works. Just before he began to work on the final 10 canvases in January, Parsharamulu created a series of paintings that showed similar distorted bodies in white-grey, with a predominantly black backdrop for relief, and dabs of red.

All the bodies, vaguely male and female, had faces, even if most were turned away from the viewer. Some lay inert in bed—rectangles with bed stands and bars that eventually disappear—others lay crouched near a sewing machine. One woman lay sprawled near a bottle of alcohol, another showed a few figures hanging from wires like carcasses. He wasn't painting his troubles or his anxieties, he says, but the general anxiety that underlies human experience. "People think I'm painting about my troubles, I'm not. This is about all of us."

Part of his discomfort about such interpretations has to do with easy conclusions, and it explains why the faces eventually disappeared from his canvas around the time that he began to think of his latest works as his "complete works".

In many ways, one could say that his practice over the past decade has led him to a perfectly honed artist's vision that seeks to pare, reduce and minimalize all possible "contamination" by the temporal, the subjective. But by doing so, Parsharamulu has also accorded primacy to one other person's expression—his own.

Itself *is on till 8 November, 11am-7pm (Sundays and Mondays closed), at Gallery Maskara, 3rd Pasta Lane, Colaba, Mumbai. The works range in price from `4 lakh to `5 lakh.*