

The Endurance Narrative: Reflections on Alexander Devasia's Past Works

The present show by Alexander is a retrospective presentation of the drawings and paintings done in the period of the historically significant 'Radical collective' and the period after its collapse. The movement initiated by the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association (1986-89), had risen like an exceptional, singular upsurge in the Indian art world, making an intervention into very basis of the structuration of the systemic making, viewing and circulation practices of the art world and proposing a counter practice. The movement created great hope and direction to all involved, especially those who dreamt revolutionizing the then available, established mode of art practice. Despite the vociferous assertions, the movement suddenly collapsed with the dramatic suicide of its leader K. P. Krishnakumar in a late December night in 1989. The event of the traumatic end, with the unexpected, sudden exit of the heroic leader definitely was a tragedy, and the disbanding of the group and the dispersal of the members became an inevitable consequence. Most who were part of the movement suffered tremendous sense of trauma and loss, and everyone was left to deal with the situation on their own terms – the larger narrative of the aftermath of such a disaster and the resurrection of the individuals from the ashes of the disaster is a history still to be written. However, for those who struggled and survived doing art and making a mark, it surely was not easy to gather strength, conjure up a continuity, live meaningfully and practice intervention while making it possible to stand within the world of art.

Alexander's life and works of the decades of 1980s and 90s interest me along with the works of other contemporaries such as T. K. Harindran, V. N. Jyothi Basu, K. Prabhakaran, K. Reghunathan, Anita Dube, K. M. Madhusudhanan, C. K. Rajan among a few more significant others. Each of them dealt with the terminal end of the collective in their own specific ways, and few of these trajectories are available or known in the contemporary art scene. Alexander's works are comparatively lesser known, and the present show specifically addresses this gap.

How do artists deal with losses of both personal and larger historical dimensions is a narrative that lent substance to Alexander's art. His art making practice in those troubled years; the very process of re-investing in art was a process of renegotiating with life. The very act of his moving around into actual locales carrying necessary tools, and getting deeply into immersive act of drawing allowed him a possibility to survive. Having pursued training in art making at the art institutions in Trivandrum and Baroda, his experience had also been importantly enhanced by making art in relation to the community. This had been one of the central concerns for Alexander, and early such experience was while living and working among the fishing community at Vettukadu, a village near Trivandrum. The ordinary folks and their lives inspired a possibility for art, and so Alexander wrote in the display note that "I believe that the possibility of making true art is enabled through brave responses to life and a self-identification to people." (From the brochure of the exhibition held at the University Student's Centre, Trivandrum, 1985)

The works on the show were done during such an exhilarating time; the morale and hope was shattered, and faith in anything having a radical possibility suddenly became absent. The intense pain - a sense of tremendous loss and agony combined with certain peculiar sense of guilt and remorse was the reality for all to deal with. Crucially, on the other hand, all had to also cope-up with the absence of any kind of support from the art world's mainstream. As such the Radical

movement had antagonized everyone in the art world and so there was none that they could have looked-up for support. Given that, in retrospect it is clear that it was by immersing in the alchemic processes of art making that could enable a resurrection for many or most others. Alexander is not an exception in such a process of struggle and resurrection, although his resilience asserted through his art making practice had amazed me, perhaps because of our closer proximity to one another. This is especially significant since the survival as an artist at a time when the life's going-on was so tough, how art making served as a proverbial straw to the drowning is exemplary in his instance. He was not an exception, but art making was surely a therapeutic process that helped to heal, and that in turn enabled a renegotiation with the world at large, especially with the rejected mainstream. The return, the compromise and the re-admission of the prodigal were slow but inevitable.

Although I have seen most of the exhibited works way back in the 1990s, I would have surely liked to take a fresh look at them, and this would have enabled me relate to the times and the art works better, which would have also helped me develop certain nuanced insights, perhaps more than I articulate here. Admittedly, my approach in this writing this is somewhat personal, and a bit informal too. Before doing this write-up, I was to visit Alexander, however, due to the recent floods in Kerala and the cancellation of the scheduled travel to Alappuzha, I couldn't see or talk to him in person before setting out to write this note.

As in the specificity of the historical context, it is pertinent that these works are done at a specific locale; the semi-rural milieu of Paravoor which lay at the southern suburb of Alappuzha, and Alexander's home in that village is close to the sea and is nestled in a small compound made of fences of bushes, creepers and shrubs, and surrounded by the fairly thick vegetation of tamarind, cashew nut, mango, coconut and other trees that lend a shady coolness, especially in the hot summer months. Surrounded by similar such independent small plots of land with dwellings occupied mostly by fisher-folk, the shimmering white beach sand compounds and pathways to homes, enabled a calm, secluded way of life that had the potential to heal the troubled and tortured psyche of the young artist. Carrying his necessary tools, he could further explore the less than four-square kilometer coastal town of Alappuzha. As such, this sleepy, nostalgic urban center is a strip of land intermittently broken by several canals and connected by bridges, and as such lays between the rice fields of the Kuttanadan backwaters on the east, and the Arabian Sea on the west.

From Baroda I visited Alappuzha twice a year where my parents lived. A couple of decades before, they had moved-in here from a village Kavalam in Kuttanad. I used to spend my long summer holidays at Alappuzha quite close to Alexander's home. Very often we met, and he showed me his works, while we kept-on our discussions on art and it's world. Some evenings we walked through the town and the beach, drank tea, beer or toddy at the village tea-stalls and toddy-shops. We also undertook travelling longer distances, as I was keen on studying and documenting the works of the artists who belonged to the Radical collective. We met and stayed with the good old friends from Baroda Prabhakaran at his home in Kozhikode, and Reghunathan in his residence in Punalur. We were also at the residence of Krishnakumar in Kuttippuram, where we met his brave mother and saw his sculptures and drawings. One day we also visited the village of the late poet Vayalar Ramavarma where Krishnakumar and Alex Mathew had

worked as a mark of respect, and had done sculptures and a mural in the late 1970s including a portrait of the poet in cement by the former.

The realism that characterizes Alexander's painting is simultaneously based on the actual, specific location and a possibility of a magical transformation of the site into an intense magical experience; infused with the spiritual-religious dimensions that imbue elements of dream and memory, which fuse into the paintings a certain mythical factor. There is a rootedness in these works as each of them evokes a sense of specific location and time, and beyond the immediacy of the place and time, they also simultaneously arouse memory and deep feelings of associations. In the apparent realism that Alexander worked with, there is an aspect of a conscious attempt at escaping from the realism/catastrophe, and this process of subterfuge was that enabled him to cathect into the reality of the ordinary people a distinct manipulation that brings in the aspects of magic, which more than a straightforward realism can often accomplish – the sources in their making are as varied as Latin American literature, particularly of Gabriel García Márquez, the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and subjectivity exploration of the Italian Transavantgarde, particularly the artists such as Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente among others.

The pen and ink and pastel drawing on paper in the show originates from diverse working contexts. Drawn at actual sites of the geographical location, the small scale of the drawings lends an intimacy. Comparable to the French 'plein air painting' of 19th Century, or in other instances when figures are rendered as in life study of a class room/studio, the incisive linear quality and the graphic rendition of Alexander is expressive and descriptive as he captures the dramatic expression. While the expressionistic stylistic mark of the figure drawing is an aspect commonly shared by most who were trained at the Trivandrum collage in the 1970s-80s, feeling for open-air landscape drawing is rather limited to only few of Alexander's contemporaries. Some of the portrait and landscape drawings included in the show are done in Baroda during 1985-87.

The identification with the rendered landscape exudes intimate knowledge of a specific locale, and these are impressionistic rather than realistic. Often, a painting done in the indoor would reflect the open-air drawings. The landscapes could be a thematic on its own, and figures are drawn from actual impressions at the site of drawing. The dramatic rendition of light and dark informs the deeper invocations of meaning in the representation of Alexander's imagery. The landscape setting often also becomes a setting for the mythical and symbolic narrative, which the artist develops more consciously in his later works. Dramatic, rendering of the poised light and dark, enliven the figures and objects as if caught between night and day. The rendition of feeble twilight that penetrates into the scene, as if the passing of the day and night, itself becomes the thematic of many paintings and drawings.

In 1994-95 Alexander had moved to live and work in Mumbai briefly, and further on he left to live in Germany for a prolonged period of time between 1998-2012, since by then he had married Sylvie Bantle, a writer by profession. During his stay in Mumbai Alexander had exhibited first at Gallery 7, Mumbai, and later a body of large oil paintings at Pundole Art Gallery, Mumbai, titled *Suspended Images* (1998). With these decisive moves Alexander had resolutely moved ahead in life and art, and I am happy here to express my greetings and best wishes when my friend Alexander is putting-up the works done in one of the tough periods of his life, and I would like to end this small note with a salute to human creative faculty.

Shivaji K Panikkar
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