

Review | Celebration by T. Venkanna | Gallery Maskara, Mumbai, India

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By Medha Kulkarni

It is difficult to try and describe T.Venkanna's art in a crisp, single word. A style of storytelling that shifts its avatars, traversing various forms – images, collage, pastiche, and drawing – replete with metaphor, Venkanna's work isn't constrained by rules and subsequently, neither by words.



'Celebration' T.Venkanna's show at Gallery Maskara, opened on 16th January until 7th March. Despite a heavy usage of erotic and sexual imagery, his mixed media paintings don't attempt to provoke the viewer. Sexuality is employed here as a motif to highlight his most pressing concerns and perhaps it is this very usage that has allowed his work to transcend what could be perceived as profanity, while exploring themes of commodity fetishism, isolation of the modern consumer society, among others.



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Upon entering the large warehouse like space of the gallery, my eye is immediately drawn to a striking painting occupying the centre of the wall on my left. Celebration, oil on canvas, depicts figures engaged in frenzied, bestial orgies, adding a touch of opulence to the celebration while the figures appear almost divorced from themselves. A brilliantly lit chandelier lights up this orgy, Meanwhile a bed lies empty, a metaphor for the sacred and it is this emptiness that gives rise and questions what we truly are celebrating?

Moving on, Living Sculpture explores the concept of spiritual homelessness. Venkanna's idea of 'home' takes the form of a robotic experience where the protagonist is lying in bed, his leg wrapped around a blow-up doll. It highlights the challenges to the present day social structure, identifying the fissures of isolation and emotional paucity.

While the themes may appear dark and/or bleak, Venkanna also maintains hope. He suggests love as a remedy for this alienation and insists it is vital, for the birth of a genuinely human society. Works such as Love Life I and II, Evolution etc. explore love in its myriad forms, celebrating freedom and pleasure and bringing to the fore the very aspects of love and sexuality that present-day society prefers to hide. Same sex couples, hermaphrodites take over Venkanna's foreground compelling the viewer to re-examine his/her notion of gender, positioning it as a suffocating and unnecessary social construct. The motif of Adam and Eve is employed to represent heterosexual, ideological majority and by placing this motif in the background, Venkanna makes a bold statement against the seemingly stable current hierarchy, setting into motion forces that aim to offset the normative.

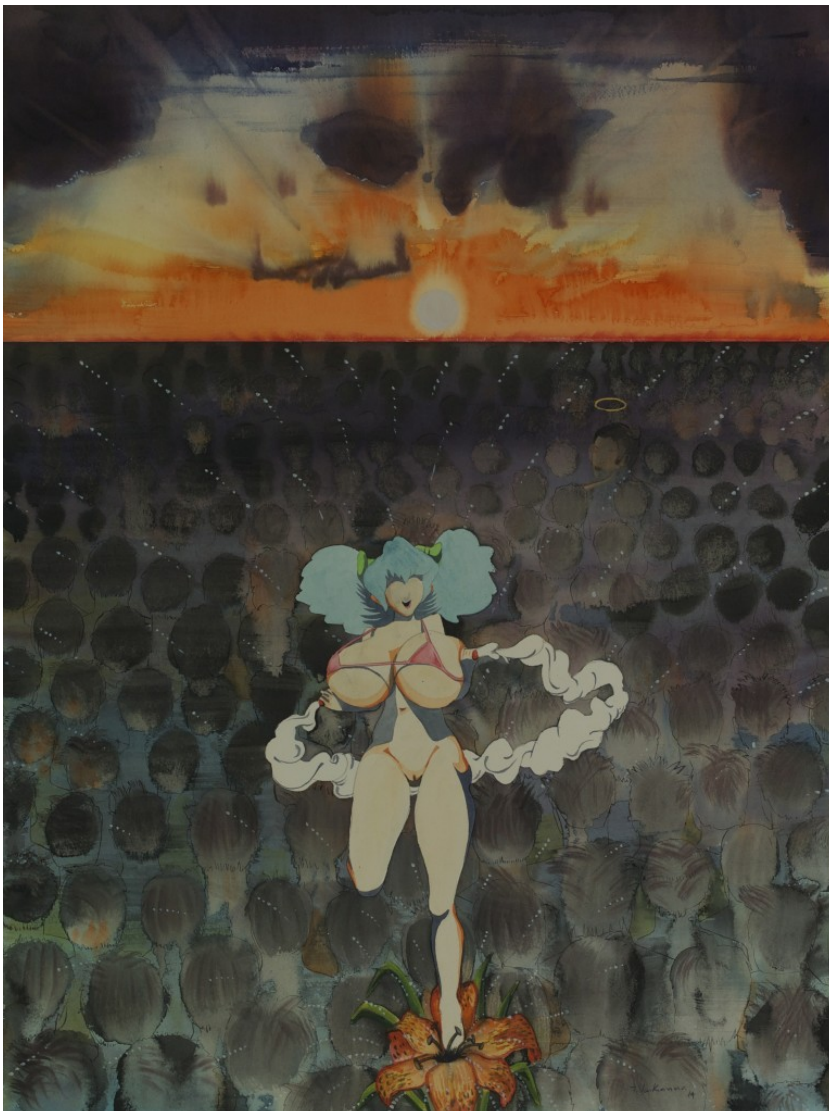


T.Venkanna, White on White, 2014, Watercolor and flower impressions on paper, 30 x 22"



T.Venkanna, Back, 2014, Oil on canvas affixed on board, 72 x 96"

Another interesting aspect of the artist's oeuvre is his effortless ability to move between styles. Works like *Back* seem like abrasive graffiti art and then there are works like *White on White* and *Black on Black*, delicate watercolours with flower impressions; yet there is a subtle unity in all the works, as if a quiet undercurrent passes through them all.



T.Venkanna, Untitled, 2014, Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22"

Venkanna's imagery too has a wide range of influences including traces of Manga, as are

visible in Untitled, where a girl steps on a lovely flower, positioned as if she were about to leap, surrounded by a sea of grey, unseeing faces amongst which only one turns around to look at her. He is marked by the barely visible halo around his head. It appears as though the sea of isolation is so vast that even the occasional call for help, for companionship, largely goes unnoticed.

The high-ceilinged gallery is divided into three roughly equal sections. The juxtaposition of Venkanna's brash-but-beautiful works against the sheer bareness of the gallery space itself creates a surreal space in which to view the exhibition. Venkanna's art strips the layers of off the world, revealing its core – one that perhaps everyone has always known but never admitted. By simply revealing it, giving it a visual Venkanna manages to throw up some poignant questions about human psychology while also gently pointing towards a possible solution.

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