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BREAKING NEW GROUND



T. Venkanna. *Floating*. Pencil and hand embroidery on linen. 78" x 86". 2023.

BETWEEN DEATH & DESIRE

Exploring the urgency of our instincts and the darkness in our hearts, T. Venkanna comes up with works that overwhelm, suggests **Jasmine Shah Varma**.



T. Venkanna. *Kismet*. Pencil and hand embroidery on linen. 87.5" x 116". 2022.



Installation view of T. Venkanna's temporary studio at Gallery Maskara. 2022-2023.

T. Venkanna's studio is a microcosm of the artist's mind. There is a wooden table in the right corner for making watercolours, drawings and small-scale works. A pile of brushes in a variety of sizes lies on an adjacent table. A few feet away there is a tall table with longer, wider, bushier brushes and a heap of paint tubes. Taped to the walls are small drawings, prints and some doodles made directly on the walls. Elsewhere, there are rolls of artwork and a printmaking machine. Outside this enclosed space, in the exhibition area, a dozen artisans from Lucknow's Kalhath Institute are focused, needle in hand, on detailed, embroidered artworks. There is a conspicuous vibe of feverish activity.

This space in Mumbai's Gallery Maskara has been Venkanna's temporary studio since 2022. Previously, he has worked out of Baroda, where he completed a Master's in Printmaking in 2006 at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M. S. University.

Venkanna hails from a quiet town, Gajwel, 60 kms from Hyderabad, Telangana. Until he was 18 years old, studying art was not on his radar. His father worked in the post office and as a Hindu priest. Many in his

extended family are priests. As a child, Venkanna enjoyed making art with poster colours and his hobby was copying images of deities printed in calendars. He found joy in making greeting cards during festive occasions to send to relatives and friends. At age 10, he even won a prize in a competition conducted by the State Bank of India. Growing up, life was full of play, with no pressure to study hard or map out a career. He didn't plan to study fine arts or become an artist. "I didn't know there were colleges that taught the fine arts until I visited Hyderabad for a teacher's training course. At the time, after the 12th standard, one would have to go to Hyderabad for further studies. Until then, I had never thought about studying art." Venkanna completed his Bachelor's degree in painting, earning a gold medal at JNTU, Hyderabad, in 2004.

While his art education in Hyderabad honed his drawing and colouring skills, it was in Baroda that he began to shape himself as a thinking artist. From experiencing the nightlife with peers, observing people at the railway station at 1 AM, eating out, and hanging with artists from all over the country, Venkanna began absorbing new experiences. It was in this transforming moment



T. Venkanna. *Still life*. Triptych. Oil on canvas. 72" x 144". 2022.



T. Venkanna. *Circus*. Quadriptych. Oil on canvas. 96" x 192". 2022. All images courtesy of Gallery Maskara.



that he wondered to himself, “I can do everything skill-wise, but what do I do going forward?” Studying art history and writing his own ideas down helped explore his potential and chart a path. His sketches, accompanied by thoughts jotted alongside, led to early graffiti-like artworks.

Studying the Western canon of art also inspired him to draw his own conclusions about art made in the past. He began to see their meaning in the context of his own circumstances. This resulted in works where he referenced famous artworks by Frida Kahlo, Henri Rousseau, Sandro Botticelli, among other artists. In these works, elements of homage, subversion and recontextualization are present with a touch of humour.

Nude figures intrigued Venkanna even before his art education in college began. Back in Gajwel, there were few sources to appreciate any form of visual art. As a teenager, he would get curious and reproduce ‘bold’ images from calendars and magazines like *Swathi*. At the same time, he also had access to images of art published in *Soviet Union* magazine, available in Telugu as *Soviet Bhoomi*.

Over the years, Venkanna has developed his own peculiar, robust iconography. There is an emphasis on opening up an informed dialogue about birth, death and procreation, which are the fundamentals of all beings on earth, in much of his work. These are his prisms for understanding society and humanity. On the one hand, he shows us fear, anxiety and acts of violence; on the other, there is lush beauty, harmony with nature and a sense of wonder. One element subverts the other, pushing the viewer to think along broader lines. A direct, linear understanding of his work would offer a limited perspective. The aim of the sexually explicit and often violent imagery isn’t titillation; it is rather to open discussions about gender inequality, discriminatory societal norms, sexual preferences, fertility, environment, human nature, animal instincts and the play of power. Venkanna says, “Life is not as happy as one thinks. There is a fear of life. There is darkness in all of us.” As a 43-year old male artist, Venkanna doesn’t shy away from addressing gender vulnerabilities. In the events and encounters he depicts, there is often an awkwardness but there is also an audaciousness in equal measure. Behind what may be construed as a semi-pornographic visual register of images lies art that speaks to a shifting self and its mythic pasts.

A 12-foot-wide painting titled *Still Life* is currently resting against a wall in the gallery. Venkanna says it is ready, even though it looks a little raw. The skeleton in the painting, he says with a smile, is his own body imagined after death.

Laying across the width of the canvas, the skeleton has become the breeding ground for wild vegetation. There are erasure marks that render certain areas opaque. Large white, red and grey blotches cover some of the painted bushes growing out of the remains of a cadaver, suggesting disruption but also new beginnings. Venkanna uses binaries and the trope of contradiction to create drama and meaning – beauty comes face to face with degradation, birth confronts death, love encounters malice, and desire straddles fear.

Venkanna has been working prolifically with printmaking, oil paintings, watercolours and sculpture, and since 2018, collaboratively, with embroidered works. Behind the calm, soft-spoken and beaming face, Venkanna is all fired up, working furiously in every medium that his ideas lead him to. Ask about his future plans, and after being at a loss for words, he says unassumingly that he doesn’t plan. He just works.

(above) **T. Venkanna.** *Hiding*. Pentptych. Oil on canvas. 36" x 120". 2022

(below) **T. Venkanna.** Photograph by **Abhay Maskara.**

