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ARTSEEN | MAY 2023

## T. Venkanna: *Looking for Peace*

By Pia Singh



T. Venkanna, *Shit*, 2017. Ink on rice paper affixed on board, 48 x 72 inches. Image courtesy Gallery Maskara, Mumbai.

T. Venkanna's affinity for figure drawing came to him in his teens. The artist went on to attend Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU), Hyderabad, focusing on print making in an environment dominated by figurative masters of the Telangana school, namely Thota Vaikuntham, DLN Reddy, and Laxma Goud. Later, pursuing his Masters at Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU), Baroda, Venkanna grew acquainted with the political, cultural, and conceptual dimensions of art, building a citational practice that spans Eastern and Western historical and mythological iconography—from Rousseau's *The Dream* (1910) and Botticelli's *Venus* (ca. 1485), to the friezes of Khajuraho and pre-Vedic, Buddhist Tantric symbology.

A recent presentation of large-format, ink on rice paper drawings at Modesti Perdrille, Brussels shows Venkanna's human, animal, and hybrid figures trapped in a purgatory of their own making. Somewhere between mortal and mammalian, Venkanna's uncompromising practice in painting, printmaking, and drawing captures the artist's earnest, urgent warning about the long term repercussions of man-made atrocities. Gluttonous, corrupt, and apathetic, Venkanna's figures are rendered in a tableaux of carnage so obscene, one is instinctively repulsed before being absorbed by a sense of schadenfreude, akin to Bosch's abominable landscapes or Dante's *Purgatorio* in the historicization of everyday evils.



T. Venkanna, *Looking for Peace*, 2017. Ink on rice paper affixed on board, 48 x 72 inches. Image courtesy Gallery Maskara, Mumbai.

Eschewing landscape conventions with strange creatures that revolt against any faithful representation, Venkanna points to the superficial essence of human tendencies. *Shit* (2017) posits a heavy-skulled newborn skeleton at the left of the canvas, prostrating before a diminutive black leather cushioned chair that holds a hunk of excrement. Beneath it, an anthropoid consumes its own filth. In between, a forest is erased in tessellated, triangular geometric lines—symbols of modernization that mean nothing against an inherently violent landscape. Following the deaths of more than sixty children in a hospital in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh in 2017, the work condemns the current government for its lack of accountability in the pedicide, performing as both tombstone and record of bureaucratic hypocrisy.

Venkanna sets brutality and death against natural landscapes, increasing the dissonance between phenomena. *Endless Journey* (2017) shows thousands of asylum seeking refugees losing their lives in attempts to emigrate to sanctuary cities by sea. Life rafts hold emaciated bodies, their horrific expressions emerging through dark, churning ink and brushwork. Newborns crown in rafts filled with dying bodies while apex predators encircle half-eaten torsos that hang overboard, lending a sense of confusion that is unified in the endless monochrome of darkness. Below this tempest, a red horizon line splits the diptych, dragging the eye to the bottom of the sea lined with bones. Mass death becomes both sacramental and mundane, forcing us to acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of suffering at such scale.

Largely created in the isolation of his studio in Baroda from 2016–2018, this body of work serves a portent to a global health emergency. *Looking for Peace* (2017) shows a crowd picking apart the assassinated body of Gandhi. Venkanna divides the canvas into a grid of seven; at its center is a futile scene of a postmortem attended by several political figures “looking for peace.” To the left lies Gandhi’s ink pen; to the right, the gun used by thirty-eight-year-old Nathuram Godse, a Hindu zealot from the right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to assassinate the central figure of the non-violent movement. Eyeballing the decline of democratic ideals in India, as the government continues to consider which histories deserve a place in academic syllabi, Venkanna offers a broader critique of how doctrines are consumed and regurgitated as nationalist ideals, without being questioned or completely understood.

*Death Before Life* (2016) shows an ominous peacock seated atop a body, picking at exposed entrails. A systemic line moves in disorderly patterns connecting the body to several spewing beastly characters, allies of Bosch’s human-animal sinners. The peacock, a biblical symbol of death and resurrection, picks at the deceased whose waste feeds interconnected forms of life. The cyclical nature of life and death, and the parasitic tendencies of man in nature are recurring themes in Venkanna’s work.



T. Venkanna, *Death Before Life*, 2016. Ink on rice paper affixed on board, 47 x 71 inches. Image courtesy Gallery Maskara, Mumbai.

In a cesspool of dystopic eroticism and death, Venkanna situates cultural mutations and historical transitions in the Bakhtinian grotesque. A suite of untitled works from 2018–2023 present's Venkanna's creativity in more open, gestural pieces. Veiled in washes of sumi-e ink blots, the viewer finds carnivorous genitalia and prolapsed, bulging bodies penetrating one another indiscriminately. Beastly lovemaking and anarchic ejaculate rise to the surface, tipping the viewer into a neurosis of the macabre. Contradictory to the artist's soft-spoken nature, his fluency in questioning the profoundest moments of life—death, lust, and a forthcoming series on birth—make art history Venkanna's primary vocabulary. By transforming us into witnesses who must look again and again until the brutality of this world, as frightening as it is, becomes inadmissibly real, *Looking for Peace* is an exorcism of evil disguised in the discourse of development.

**Pia Singh** is an independent curator and arts writer based in Chicago, IL. Born in Bombay, India, she is interested in the intersection between community-engaged practices and design thinking, focussing on the ways artists challenge disciplinary hierarchies. Pia founded by & for, a solidarity economy platform for cultural workers and artists, and has served as an arts organizer, gallery, and nonprofit director.

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