



Artist Balan Nambiar delves into native traditions; Below: His work *Vulture*

# BALAN NAMBIAR: LIVING THE TRADITION

WHAT YOU SEE WHEN YOU SEE

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How does one look at a senior artist like Balan Nambiar and understand his Modernist visual language – methods, materials and inspirations? Balan's play with scale and materials like cement and welded steel has a modern connection to industrial materials but his inspiration is native. His jewel-like enamels have another texture and aura, and are crafted with a different sensibility and technique. His early works were inspired by the architectonic and sculptural installations of Theyyam performances, the abstracted body becoming part of a modernist obsession with the simplicity of folk art. He belonged to a generation of artists inspired by an extraordinary teacher, KCS Paniker, founder of Cholamandal Artists' Village and principal of Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai. The philosophy of this school of thought was 'I have been influenced throughout my artistic career by the great Indian spiritual thinkers who explored the metaphysical and the spiritual worlds'.

Balan Nambiar is a quintessential Bangalorean, living and working in the city and being one of the prominent artists who has constantly exhibited outdoors. In the '80s when one of his public sculptures went missing Balan fought many battles with the city authorities who did not



Enamel construction

recognise the idea of art in public space. One of Balan's most enduring passions is teaching children on weekends, for free. Artist Pushpamala N and designer Sujata Keshavan are some of the star students who had attended Balan's classes as young artists and have achieved international reputations. Many others have become professional artists and credit their initial training and support to "Balan Sir". Balan is respected for his integrity



Bhagavathi cult, unique craft traditions like the mirror (Kannadi Bimbam), special bronze castings from Northern Kerala and Tulu Nadu and stunning Bootha masks and breast plates that have become collector's items, sought after by art dealers and auctioneers. Balan's first-hand knowledge of the rituals, living traditions and the cultural context of these objects makes him a rare artist steeped in tradition. He has the experience and a gentle voice of authority that came from a lived reality of North Malabar and its unique cultural and social situation that is transient.

The legacy of KCS Panicker, known as one of the best meta-physical and abstract painters, took to interpreting the country's age-old metaphysical and spiritual knowledge in the '60s, when Indian art was still under the influence of the Western painters. "That was the time when a few Indian artists were trying to break out of this Western influence and establish an idiom and identity of their own," he once said.

This had a lasting influence on Balan's art and he adapted the holistic integration of the primordial with the most sophisticated language of distilling the essential forms from ritual objects, architectural extensions seen in ritual performing (Theyyam) art native from Kannur.

The self-conscious search into native folk traditions that represented sacred iconography and abstracted the image to its basic elemental forms became an obsessive involvement for the artist. The human body was seen in geometric forms and was transformed into an iconic sacred status. These forms were recreated

into metal/cement sculpture, two-dimensional enamel panels.

In an interview with Pushpamala N he reminisces about the Bangalore he inhabited in the '70s. "I am like the cactus plant, which survives in the most uncongenial place! When I moved to Bangalore in the '70s, there was no proper art institute or gallery. The only other freelance artist besides me was the painter Roomale Chennabasaviah. I formed the Bangalore Art Club as soon as I moved here, where I ran evening classes for adults and children at the Max Mueller Bhavan. The Brothers of the Holy Cross had given me their big hall on St Mark's Road to use – I organised film shows, seminars, poetry readings, dance performances. I lived in an outhouse in the compound and did painting and drawing.

"In '73, Shankar Hegde of Hegde and Golay Watches asked me to do a sculpture for them. I made an 8 ft high welded steel sculpture symbolising time in front of his factory. He was very pleased with the work and offered me a shed and facilities to work. It was a lucky break! Most factories are not keen on artists using their space because they feel it is not profitable. In 1975 I had my first big



Valampiri Shanka

exhibition of large welded steel sculptures on the lawns of the Hotel Ashoka. There was still no gallery."

Rooted in rural India and resonating with rituals and performance arts of the South, a domain of his ongoing research, his Mirror Idol series is inspired by Kannadi Bimbam, an auspicious ritual object used by practitioners of Kalaripayattu and Theyyam that symbolises mother goddess Bhagavati. His recent sculptures are marked for their technical precision and based on sacred geometric principles. Balan converts his images into computer-generated designs, which are moulded into desired forms in a laser cutter. Balan has challenged himself with exploring of stainless steel to construct a complex sacred conch – Valmpuri Shanka – using the software Autocad.

Artists like Balan connect us to our sacred symbols through acts of creation and keep our mythologies alive as living traditions.

(Balan Nambiar recently exhibited at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai)

(Suresh Jayaram is a visual artist, curator and art historian; his column features perspectives on the Arts)