

Articles on Indian contemporary art by Swapna Vora

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## S.G. Vasudev: Moving lines, lines of light, longing and belonging

by Swapna Vora

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S.G. Vasudev said, 'My imagery is my ideograph.... The stain, the blob, and the stub drawing on the half dry painted surface are my means of expression'. He painted maithuna or sexuality, our mysterious need to belong, our hunger to create. Lines became patches of colour or textures: black lines, white lines, outlined objects floating or anchored. Islands of lives floated sometimes on plain backgrounds, with folk legends, golden hues, colour, decisive borders amid gleams of light, red gold, white gold.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

### S.G. Vasudev

At the still point of life, beyond the rotation and revolution of our lives, there is leela: Creativity, creation, recreating, showing the Self something anew, something playful, something mysterious. Recently, at a wonderful major retrospective in Mumbai, covering over 5 decades of his profound, prolific creativity, artist S.G. Vasudev said, "My imagery is my ideograph, with each detail worked out intuitively. The stain, the blob, and the stub drawing on the half dry painted surface, are my means of expression." He reached into nature, culture, history and the subconscious to create. (From Ashrafi Bhagat's writing). He

said that the core of art has myths, implicit and mysterious, but can reveal secrets. For years, he painted maithuna: sexuality, the unity of opposing principles and the resulting life and reproduction, the source of life and creativity. Love, instinct, our mysterious need to belong, a hunger to create and immense closeness, are all in maithuna. Maithuna involves inclusion, excluding nothing, since the whole universe is an expression of creation and destruction, control and, hopefully, grace. Sexual representation is seen as representation of devotion of the closest, the most emotional, joyful sort in Hindu temples, love between all forms, all life and matter: a very Hindu concept. Vasudev made about 300 drawings of maithuna before he painted this. (Maithuna (sexuality), mithya (lies), maitri (friendship): one wonders about their 'm' etymology!)



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

### 'Art' or 'craft'?

After violently quelling India's rebellion for freedom, (1850), the British had become powerful and wealthy and started 'art schools', which were created to use local crafts and get traditional craftsmen to make work expressly for sale abroad. They were not art schools teaching art, exploring cultures, artists and innovation, but rather like factories producing repetitive, saleable work. The Madras School of Art, (originally called the Government School of Industrial Art), where Vasudev studied, was strict and formal but sooner or later Vasudev had built and created his own work. The institution was created by the British to produce Indian craft: skilled craftsmen were required, not artists. Art needs skill but insists on imagination, and seeks to create something original even if that something has been done for centuries, because 'I must'. KCS Paniker changed that colonial aim of creating market driven craft, made to order and under him, the historic art school shared traditional treasures and regional knowledge along with modern methods and aspirations. No grand opposition or rebellion was involved: students just added more local knowledge, with an exposure to movements elsewhere in India. KCS Paniker had brought the two together, for drawing from each tradition brought storehouses of 'deathless energy'. This became the 'modern and regional art movement' from Madras, (Chennai), south India.

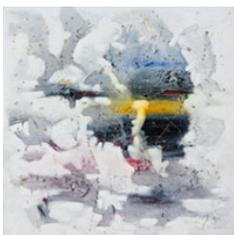


Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

After independence, under KCS Paniker, this school changed and was finally aimed at producing art: a style distinct from the rest of India. Vasudev had fine instructors: revered names like KCS Paniker, D. Munuswamy, Santhananaraj and Dhanapal who all insisted on sophisticated drawing skills. Santhananaraj said, 'Expose the line; don't hide anything' while Munuswamy said to bury it. However the galleries and artists' studios where students and professionals met, seeking kindred souls in public shows and private friendships, obviously

shaped many thoughts. While post independence in India was a fabled period with its own heady, bright energy, south India had always been a legendary land of devotion, of civilizations spilling with art. Now in Chennai, (Madras), artists shared kinship, connections, common concerns with many voluble discussions and the ambience was stimulating, path-breaking and worthy. The best artists of this era depicted a time of heady hope when no one was saying, 'In 5 years this and that wonderful improvement will happen.' It was happening right now, here in Chennai and Mumbai and there, in Bharat's hinterland.



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Art shows sometimes silently, often raucously, our history, or a personal story. Vasudev's mother was an artist and he started drawing early. He started studying for a degree in agriculture and sent cartoons to a daily paper. Then came the pivotal moment: a local art critic suggested he join the art college and thus he entered the ferment of the new art movement. Later, he and fellow artist Bhaskaran, guided by KCS Paniker, successfully carried art from the Madras school to Delhi and Mumbai. He said there was great enthusiasm as the boxes of art were opened: they got such an excited, encouraging response! An art critic wrote that while some northern artists were in awe of western influences, these southern artists carried tradition, fine skills and the Bharatiya ethos. The north was looking to the west, to the dramatic post-war influences in Europe. The south already had its own treasure troves for centuries, to pick from and innovate. Vasudev, from the rich south with its exhaustive culture, had this legacy of lines, colours, metal work, weaving, textiles, music, dance, etc.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

Vasudev's inheritance of 'line, pattern and decoration', wrote S Menon, has been most dramatic, signifying an open attitude to his own past. Vasudev, in addition to visual art, understood words, drama and music, traveling easily from language and sound to expression on canvas. He worked as an art director for plays, (Samsara and Vamsha Vriksha), learned relief work from a copper craftsman and from wood inlay artisans and 'went contemporary'. He worked with batik and later with woven tapestries. "To make a living with a craft is very possible," he said. The method he used for metal work was similar to repousse, and involved a lot of physical work while telling stories. He said although he used traditional techniques, his work looks different since it is handled differently. D. R. Bendre's poetry and in particular, Kalpa Vriksha Vrindavana, brought reality and similes, words standing for stories. Time, memory or one's own past, maybe a half remembered event can add meaning to art.



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31

Life, for Vasudev, implied creativity, painstaking creation and sexuality, the centers of many of his works. First, he coloured the whole canvas, worked on wet surfaces, then on stories, subconsciously remembered symbols, well-known acts of creation and ecstasy. His forms are sometimes indistinct but sharp lines outline them clearly, along with many free flat parts. He used impasto and moved to translucent paint, followed by fine final finishes. He created a series of works around themes: Maithuna, Vriksha, Tree of Life, Tree of Life (and death), Humanscapes, Earthscapes, The Theater of Life, He and She, and Rhapsody, reflecting his emotions and relationships, desire, transient time and people, all the forms that make the material of life. Painters create, noting the silent significance, the impact of some moment or some fresh understanding.



Fig. 32



Fig. 33



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36

Vasudev worked on the Tree of Life. (This is a different concept from the Kabbalah's Tree of Life which shows our place in the universe horizontally and vertically.) Here the tree shows abundance, which is Lakshmi. Sometimes his tree of life could be a depiction of planet earth: our provider, our playground, our place for living, our everything. India's much loved monkeys appear in his works along with mammals, snakes, trees, fruits and seeds. His static pictures show movement, growth and generation. Alas, soon the tree of life became the tree of death when he lost his wife, the artist Arnawaz Driver.



Fig. 37



Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40

Some of this wonderful work, he recreated as amazing, gorgeous tapestries. Maybe no one particular art restricted or activity beckoned him, for he worked with many materials and styles. Lines became patches of colour or textures. He drew black lines, white lines, outlined objects floating or anchored. Islands of lives floated sometimes on plain backgrounds, with folk legends, golden hues, colour, decisive borders and gleams of light, red gold, white gold. About Earthscape, a very lovely abstract, he says: "It came from my vision, it uses texture." Then he worked with a series of books and displayed them, old and tattered, but again with new drawings, with sharp lines, hanging like stiff clothes on lines. "Look inside them to see

what I draw”, he said. These books look like cloth, like Tibetan prayers, and one cranes to see sketches, old words, new verses. There is some simplicity but really it is akin to complexity, not naive but well-versed and knowledgeable, attained after crossing the far reaches of experience.



Fig. 41



Fig. 42



Fig. 43



Fig. 44

S. G. Vasudev, the established and prolific artist, is closely associated with all the arts. His best friends were writers, poets and other creative, aesthetic people. He speaks repeatedly of his close, inspiring friendships with the renowned playwright Girish Karnad and Kannada poets like A K Ramanujan and D R Bendre. Their literature had a definite impact on his own creations. At his exhibitions, he usually invited dancers and musicians to perform alongside and aimed at being as inclusive as possible. (Very different from many galleries which are icy wastes, resembling haute couture salons!) He welcomed the casual viewer!



Fig. 45



Fig. 46



Fig. 47



Fig. 48



Fig. 49

He said he was surprised to be invited to do this retrospective. “It took 8 months to prepare. I wanted visitors who had seen my work over the years.” He asked Miti Desai to design the show areas and galleries. (She created a truly wonderful, lyrical background for the display of Vasudev’s work of paper, books, canvas, metal, right across the NGMA galleries, spiral staircase, passage, ceilings and walls.) “I left it to Desai,” he added. There were videos too across the galleries, some about a very wonderful, moving line. Desai, who had helped arrange the exhibition in the gallery, too had created delight! He said, “She said a line was always moving through my work, ... a line that interconnects all my work a swift, sensuous line.” He brought in dancers, graphic designers, and musicians to perform alongside this retrospective. Several purposes were served: enhancing the show, offering multimedia experiences, exposing other artists and giving them a great, useful association with him, a well established artist. “I keep 30 - 40 works and I get other artists sometimes to select my paintings for shows. They can add value and a fresh eye. My paintings are like my children.”



Fig. 50



Fig. 51



Fig. 52



Fig. 53



Fig. 54

“My retrospective collection was not just my work. It had 15 outreach programs, including classical music, theater, a complete immersion in conversation. I enjoy telling people what I have done. Bengaluru had a full house for these programs.” Then he said delightedly, “One dance was based on my art.” He spoke of children, “Kids: there is no art competition for children,” he said firmly. “Each has his own way. How can you compare?” Then we spoke of masks, faces and feelings behind masks. Next he spoke of his home, “I got an architect to design my house in Cholamandalam, in Chennai. A farm house and a city house was designed by Edgar D'Mello. So we went around looking at houses, went for 3 or 4 months. I asked for a studio, a work space for my wife and kids' areas. I don't believe in Vastu but Edgar wanted that. (Vastu, the very ancient Hindu way of architecture, respects the flow of wind, earth, energy, sunshine, vegetation, etc.)



Fig. 55



Fig. 56



Fig. 57



Fig. 58



Fig. 59

“When commissioned to do something, I need complete authority from size to content to contract. I have done maybe 2000 works. For theaters too: one work was 90 feet long, another had smashed bangles and paste. After I did a public mural in Bengaluru, I asked a stranger, a visitor, about it. Can't say, my work might hurt someone! The passerby complimented him, 'I see the mural regularly, I come this side just to go past it'. Next, I worked for a residential complex and there, 60 plus families see it daily.”



Fig. 60



Fig. 61



Fig. 62



Fig. 63



Fig. 64

“Public art has to go through so many hoops. The authorities don't disturb music or dance but will question artists”, he said. “I want 'Am janta', (ordinary people), to see art". (Can we break the barrier for 'am janta' to come in?) He created an art park where 25 - 30 artists send work to be sold at a small price. 2 judges choose, no one questions their choices while the works sell for about Rs.1000. The committee changes every year and they select the artists and the art. Another program invites every artist for a month to Bengaluru to present and discuss his work at a 2 hour program, open to all.”



Fig. 65



Fig. 66



Fig. 67



Fig. 68



Fig. 69

He is influenced by all art. "I met Girish Karnad and we spoke Kannada, I got more exposure to Kannada writers: it was wonderful. We had parallel thinking. Made me think, literally think: What is India? What is 'contemporary'? My art depends on that. At Cholamandal, all artists come there to perform. They would just come and go. The poet Nissim Ezekiel brought my work to the world. Calling people to an event is also an art", we both nodded ruefully. "For example, maybe one can have, 'Friends of the NGMA'. Governments should start institutions but not run them," he sighed. "Trusts should run them. The government has its limitations."

### **Did you always want to be an artist?**

"I never really thought I would be an artist Everyone at home was a lawyer." He joined an agricultural college. "I felt tortured when I had to study science." Critic G Venkatachalam loved my cartoons and said to join an art school. "He convinced my parents. Sadanand Menon was not a writer but he liked my art and wrote about it. I get inspiration from everything. Once a week I visit galleries, both good and bad." (I said I too appreciate a little bad taste now and then!)

"I can't say I have finished, I have still to go on learning. Figures and abstract, I see colour, I see abstraction initially and then I paint." Recently in Mumbai, he visited a Gaitonde exhibition. "Such beautiful work", he said. "I see many forms, a number of forms, in the abstraction."

### **At his NGMA retrospective:**

We walk past his painting, a slender blue tree, white on white, an abstract of trees. Next we walk to see his beautiful and beautifully arranged tapestries: his work made into tapestries by a weaver. "Husain told me of a man in Bengaluru, who can weave. We have worked together for 23 years. It is very hard work: Set up a loom, choose the painting, which may be of any size, may have to do the sizing again. I have to see the reproductions, I get the yarn dyed. This is very tense work, very time and energy consuming. Had to make stretchers and frames for the tapestries. It is a struggle to get the exact colours, a small part may need a dozen shades of blue." He sighed, "Blue is very difficult." He is very particular that the backs of tapestries should be visible, beautiful and aesthetic. They are! Definitely glorious, tellers of shaggy tales! Next we saw Earthscape, a cut tree. There, he said, "Even ugliness can be so striking. Kali, or time, which reduces everything, makes things ugly. Can be so powerful, so ugly and so glorious." Then he had painted a tree with money, (money so loved, beyond reason, by so many)! Next, a man and a tree. "That is the Achal mountain", he pointed out. He used leftover canvas pieces and said, "It was fascinating to work on a small scale."

Artist Vasudev's lines were reproduced on the walls of the NGMA: They moved on their own, compelling and laughing, like a tossed sinuous black braid, occasionally touched with white. Lines that leaped and dodged. There were chalk drawings welcoming viewers on the staircases and walls: ephemeral stories made of white chalk on black backgrounds. Art brings us emotion, telling us stories that may be true or false, making us happy, indignant, sorrowful or .... Art can achieve that rare thing: make us change our set, long determined point of view, make us stumble by pulling the floor from under our feet, giving us an unforgettable, painful nose bleed or, if we are truly fortunate, rare insight.

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### **Bio:**

Among the most notable and successful Karnataka painters, S. G. Vasudev, (born 1941 in Mysuru, to S.K. Gopal and Rathamma), studied at the Madras Arts College. His inspiration

and efforts led him to create the Cholamandal Artists' Village, Chennai, which has proved so vital to support and nourish many contemporary, especially southern, artists. A founding member of this wonderful Art Village, he lived and worked there till 1988. He has spent a lot of time and sustained effort trying to assist artists from various genres to follow their creative inspiration. He now lives in Bangalore.

Vasudev has won many awards in India and abroad and fortunately his talent was recognized early, while completing his degree at the Government College of Art, Madras. In 1967, he received the prestigious National Award from The All India Lalit Kala Akademi.

**Awards:**

- 1994 Karnataka Rajyotsava Award, Bangalore
- 1988 State Award, Karnataka Lalit Kala Academy, Bangalore
- 1967 National Award, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
- 1965,79 Karnataka Lalit Kala Academy
- 1965,77,79 Tamil Nadu Lalit Kala Academy
- 1964-66 Government of India Cultural Scholarship for Painting

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**Notes**

Vriksha Vasudev: The Art and Times of S.G. Vasudev. Harsha from Popular Prakashan published this book on Sep 8, 2015. It was first launched in Bengaluru and later in Chennai.

The Government College of Fine Arts, (originally the Madras School of Art), Chennai/Madras is the oldest art institution in India. Surgeon Alexander Hunter started it as a private art school in 1850. Earlier there were traditional studios, age-old karkhanas and ateliers everywhere. In 1852, the colonial government took it and called it The Government School of Industrial Arts. In 1962, it was renamed as The Government School of Arts and Crafts and The Government College of Arts and Crafts, before finally being renamed again.

'The heart feels, the mind imagines, the skilled hand follows.'

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