

Surendran Nair on why he chooses names like Cuckoonebulopolis for his artwork and the increasingly touchy society we inhabit

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His paintings are like puzzles, full of cryptic clues that need to be decoded, so is the enigmatic Surendran Nair. Based in Baroda, where the 54-year-old shares a life and sometimes the studio with his more ebullient half Rekha Rodwitiya, the silver-haired Nair likes his privacy so much that he would rather retreat behind the make-up of the Kathakali personas he often paints. On canvas though, his strong imagery, personalized myth-making and theatrical tableaux initiate a compelling visual dialogue with the viewer. **TOI-Crest** caught up with the artist who has spent the last 18 months working on eleven oils for his first and ongoing solo show in the US. From bird women to swan men, meet the consummate shape shifter.

Why is your show called *Neti, Neti* (which literally means Not, Not this)?

I thought it goes very well with my work. You make things clear without clearly saying it. I use this concept in a strategic sense, nothing more; and I am no *advaiti*



Many would call your works surrealistic...

It is a misconception. I am not surrealist! That is, if one were referring to surrealism in the sense that it explores the unconscious or the subconscious; in the sense that it is something inexplicable, absurd or magical, to a lesser degree, I would still say no. But one may find a semblance of it in a degenerated sense, at a technical level.

Your encounter with censorship happened when the NGMA declared that your painting titled *An actor rehearsing the interior monologue of Icarus* offended the "sentiments of the nation" and removed it from the show. The "problematic imagery" was the rear view of a tiny winged male naked figure atop the Ashoka stambha. What is your reaction to censorship? Are you still intent on not showing at the NGMA?

It is sad actually that the individual 'artistic' expressions of its own subjects could offend the 'sentiments' of a nation! We have become such a 'touchy' society, and I do not know whether it has anything to do with this social phenomenon called 'untouchability.' It seems these days everybody's sentiments of all kinds

Whilst painting '*Yamini Bilawal*', I was remembering Andre Platanov's novel '*Soul*', in which there is a touching description of his protagonist nursing an old and sick camel

are on the verge of readily being wounded. Positions of resistance must always be contextualized in accordance with the relevance of time, and so though to date I have chosen not to engage personally with the NGMA, I don't view it as a closed option.

TV Santosh, Jitish Kallat, Riyas Komu, Shibunatesan...the list of artists from Kerala who have made waves in contemporary art is getting longer by the day. Do you think Malayali artists have a common artistic sensibility even while expressing an individual vision?

I am not sure whether we all share a common sensibility; I don't think so. Not the way the Bengal school in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did or like the Progressives who also have had shared common sensibilities in the '40s and '50s; or the Madras school for that matter who has had it in the '60s, or the Baroda narratives who held territories of common concern in the '70s and '80s. The artists you mention are individuals who have come into the fore about the same time.

Doctrine of the Forest: An Actor at Play (Cuckoonebulopolis), which sold for over Rs 2 crore at a Saffronart auction in 2008, has been called one of India's most iconic works. Tell us about it.

Let me say that I had no idea whatsoever of such a statement, and with all humility let me thank those who were so generous in their assessment. Now, it is difficult to talk about some of my works, for they tend to suppress the verbal, if I may say so. *An Actor at Play* is one such kind, and *Neti Neti* is another example. These works, I suppose, function at a level that is similar to say liquid; something that seeps into you.

The names of your works (Cuckoonebulopolis) are quite a mouthful. Any particular reason?

Although I may like a peculiar expression, word or phrase for what it is, I use it only if it makes any sense contextually. Here I was looking for a word or phrase that evoked a number of things, say for example, an idea of utopia, something strange, something funny, something complicated etc. etc. ■

Neti, Neti is on at the Frey Norris gallery in San Francisco till December 18

Neti and the swan-man

for sure. Of course I am aware of the fact that the very basis of such a negation is ultimately meant to lead you to what is permanent, what exists prior to existence itself, something eternal or un-negatable. And I think I like the idea of something that is not negatable in the sense of it as truth, but not god.

Among your works are many part-human, part-animal figures such as the swan-man in *The Melancholy of the Twelfth Man*. Why do hybrid anthropomorphic forms fascinate you?

I prefer to look at such images as composite creatures, not hybrids. Personally, I think it is a problematic term and it is also something much abused in post-modern discourses. It is a concept that seems to gloss over the problems of genuine conflicts. One doesn't need to hybridize oneself to get along with others or other cultures, so long as you desire no power over them.

It is very difficult to say why exactly this fascinates me, but it is fascinating nonetheless. Traditionally, such

imagery seems to come at you as if it is resolved of all the contradictions (at least in a formal sense, if not exactly in a metaphorical sense) that are apparent; as a single unity that houses the qualities of both the dissimilar entities which are its parts. In my works, it is here that I tend to deviate. I tend to keep the contradictory nature of its being alive, so that I may play around or along with the possibilities that it provides to look at other things.

You've been involved in student politics during the Emergency. You've also done works like *Et in Ayodhya Ego* which alludes to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Would you describe yourself as a political artist?

Yes, but I don't want it to sound grander than what it actually was. Our agitation basically was because of the problems that we had to face at the college (College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum where Nair did his BFA): the lack of teachers, poor educational facilities and unresolved legal issues pertaining to the college's affiliation with the university, to name a few issues. I prefer to see myself as an artist who is bothered about what is happening around us. So it is natural that my works reflect what concerns me, and it is important that it does reflect the same.

From classical Greek drama to Kathakali, which you grew up watching, theatre seems to have had a strong influence.

Yes. Theatricality or dramatic gestures or rituals — of which Kathakali and Greek drama are only two of the most saturated forms — have had an impact.



NOT, NOT AGAIN: One of Nair's paintings that form part of his show '*Neti Neti*' in San Francisco

The influence of classical plays is quite evident in your theatrical tableaux but you also have one work named after a raga.

While working on this one painting, I was constantly listening to a particular rendition of the Yamani Bilawal raga by Pt Bhimsen Joshi, a live recording from the late '60s. Yamani Bilawal is a compound morning raga that, if I understand correctly, uses the scale of both Yaman, which is normally sung during the evening hours, and Bilawal, which is sung during the morning hours, in the

Hindustani system of classical music. I thought it was absolutely a beautiful piece and the circularity, if I may call it that, of its unfolding seemed to go very well with the mood of my work. Besides, I thought I was painting an evening light, and once it was completed it looked more or less like a morning light. Whilst painting it, I was also remembering Andre Platanov's novel, *Soul*, in which there is a touching description of his protagonist nursing an old and sick camel. I was also thinking about what is happening around those arid zones of our troubled neighbourhood.

Art critic Ranjit Hoskote has said your paintings suggest an anthology of stories or a sequence of poems. Do you like to tell stories through your work?

I don't paint stories as such. But some of my works may offer the possibilities of reading a story out of it, not the other way around.

MYTH MAKER: Surendran Nair working on one of his Kathakali paintings



Pondicherry pickings

A poetry workshop on translation will debate the shape-shifting essence of old thoughts in a new tongue

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In his column in *The Spectator*, poet and commentator P J Kavanagh described a poetry reading thus: "The audience swelled to six in the end, and we all huddled in a corner." Few poets can call their audience a crowd and fewer still are allotted more than a corner, if not a crevice, to publicise their art. And while poetry's marginality doesn't discredit it — Oscar Wilde placed poets at the apex of art's pyramid — the short shrift it gets from the mainstream media makes one wonder about its future. Media inattention could perhaps be faulted for poetry's perceived ebb — and yet it flows.

An ongoing poetry workshop in Pondicherry will discuss channels along which poetry can run to new continents and languages. The workshop assembles eight poets, national and otherwise, who will chew on the nub of 'poetry in translation'. A product of the organisation Literature Across Frontier's (LAF), the workshop (from Dec 8 to 15) is named 'Poetry Connections:

A Multilingual and Multimedia Performance', and has been stagemanaged by the Jaipur-based literary agency, Siyahi. Besides talking translation, the poets will produce a body of work via music, visuals and performance, which will later be exhibited in performance at the inauguration of Prakriti Poetry Festival in Chennai (Dec 15), and Open Space in Pune (Dec 18). The poets are Zoe Skoulding, Arjun Bali, Robin Ngangom, Roselyne Sibille, Meena Kandasamy, Sampurna Chattarji, Bill Herbert, and Raphael Bendicht Urweider, and going by their past record, this poetic body should bristle.

Baring her mind on the difficulty of translating poetry, French poet Roselyne Sibille says, "The translation of a poem must not be the distorted shadow of the original poem, but a new poem in the language of the translation — a new poem as close as possible to the 'essence' of the poem in the meaning and the words used, while keeping rhythm and musical effects," she says. "It is especially difficult, because the poetic language is in itself different as regards the usual language (use of words, syntax).

The translations are very interesting, sometimes brilliant. But, they can never be the accurate equivalent of the poem in its original language."

Scotsman and bilingual poet Bill Herbert believes that translation is as primary a poetic activity as metaphor itself. "It too is about carrying things over from one perception to another, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange," offers the poet who says he's drawn to the linking of the non-primary and, more importantly, the non-European, languages through translation. "I've been working with Bulgarian, with Somali, with Farsi, with Chinese — I've thought for a long time that the Indian regional languages offer an interesting analogy with Scots' role in relation to English, and I can't wait to test the theory," he says.

Herbert writes dichotomous poetry in Scots and English, whose combined function he compares to the ocean and the sea. "English is the ocean, Scots is the sea: one offers universality, the other intimacy. With Scots I know the coastline — it's sharp and tender, a poetry of love and satire; I know the



HUB OF IDEAS: Arjun Bali with Raphael Bendicht Urweider of Switzerland at the workshop

"Indian regional languages offer an interesting analogy with Scots' role in relation to English. English is the ocean, Scots is the sea: one offers universality, the other intimacy"

seabed — I can reach back to six hundred years of tradition: Burns, Dunbar, Barbour. But the sea is connected to the ocean — with English I can take that sensibility to the world."

Extending that analogy, the workshop becomes the port of exchange, and it signifies change in the poet's practice — from a parochial parishioner to a workshoping, globe-trotting citizen. Meena Kandasamy who, apart from writing her own poems, has translated Dalit and Tamil Eelam poets, says, "I think this globe-trotting, networking is great because of what you share and what you learn. In Durban, I recently met the Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan and the Jamaican poet Mutabaruka, and it is brilliant to listen to their work which is about resistance and identity and war and victimhood. One comes away more sharpened, more militant, and with a more precise sense of the political and the poetic."

It is towards this end of collaborative evolution that the workshop travels. But it raises the stakes by summoning music, performance and videos to the room. Mita Kapur, CEO of Siyahi, says the most challenging part of the programme is the multi-media performance planned by the poets. "The content of this will depend on the body of work done during the workshop and a lot of improvisation and spontaneity will be relied upon since this will be designed at the end of one week spent together. The exciting part is the use of multi-media by the poets and the fact that it is going to be multi-lingual as well." And you thought poetry was dead. ■