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16 ARTIST, ONE SOUTH

From clay to copper, mythology to memory, this exhibition colours South India beyond the lines of convention













What happens when artists take familiar landscapes, childhood memories, mythology and cultural traditions, then see them through an entirely different lens?

The result can be anything from strikingly realistic portraits to abstract compositions, with artistic expression spilling beyond canvas and paper into clay, copper and naturally dyed fabric.

Beyond the Familiar brings these diverse approaches together, exploring how contemporary South Indian artists draw from their cultural roots while pushing the boundaries of artistic expression.

Coordinated by artist and educator S Vijayaraghavan, the exhibition offers audiences an opportunity to engage more deeply with each work. QR codes accompanying the artworks open audio descriptions in three languages, along with details about the artists.

The works draw on temple towns, village life, childhood memories, mythology, marine ecosystems and the politics of the body. Together, they reveal how a shared South Indian visual heritage is being reinterpreted through individual experiences, contemporary concerns and diverse artistic practices.

Gitanjali Maini, founder and managing director of Gallery G, says, "The curatorial thought behind Beyond the Familiar was to bring together artists who interpret the world through very different visual perspectives, yet remain connected by their cultural experiences and artistic journeys. We wanted to move beyond the conventional distinctions between realism, abstraction and imagination, and explore how these approaches often coexist within an artist's practice."

Heritage, reimagined

South India's cultural heritage is richly layered, encompassing architecture, mythology, ritual, landscapes, craft traditions, village life and the everyday experiences of its people.

What makes contemporary artistic engagement with this inheritance particularly compelling is that artists are not necessarily reproducing tradition. Instead, they are questioning it, reshaping it and finding new ways to express its continuing relevance.

N S Manohar's architectural compositions, Bharathi Senthilvelan's recollections of childhood, Priya Elayaraja's explorations of womanhood and cultural identity, and S Michael Irudayaraj's engagement with nature and marine imagery demonstrate the varied ways artists interpret their surroundings.

For these artists, heritage is not merely something preserved in the past. It is something lived, remembered, questioned and reinterpreted.

Their practices underline a defining feature of contemporary South Indian art: the ability to remain connected to cultural identity while continually developing new visual languages.

In Beyond the Familiar, nothing is quite what it seems. Familiar forms get a twist through colour and abstraction, while seemingly abstract works hide personal memories and cultural echoes.

Art rooted in observation

For Chennai-based artist Hemalatha Senathipathi, inspiration comes from nature, birds, animals, mythology and traditional Indian folk art. Her creative process begins with observing the world around her and drawing on the images and memories that stay with her.

"I observe things around me, and some images and memories stay in my mind. I use these ideas and my imagination to create frontal and three-dimensional sculptures. Through my work, I try to bring familiar subjects into new forms and express them in my own way," she says.

Her approach combines cultural familiarity with experimentation in form and material. "I like to simplify forms while keeping their beauty, character and expression. Birds, animals and mythological themes are common in many cultures, and people can connect with them in different ways. Though my inspiration comes from my own culture and experiences, I want viewers to understand and enjoy my work in their own way," she adds.

The nuances of artistic expression

What one artist observes in everyday life, another retrieves through memory, while a third transforms into an imagined visual world. Each offers a distinct way of interpreting experience.

Beyond the Familiar celebrates this diversity, demonstrating that contemporary South Indian art cannot be confined to a single style, medium or aesthetic. Its strength lies in this plurality, with the choice of material often becoming an extension of the artist's expression.

K Gukanraj explores the sculptural possibilities of ceramic stoneware, while Hemalatha Senathipathi works with copper, brass and enamel to create forms drawing on mythology, nature and the human figure.

Ranjini Jacob's ceramic works explore texture, fragility and resilience, while Sipi Sakkaravarthi uses natural pigments on fabric, bringing traditional processes into a contemporary context.

Alongside these works are paintings ranging from closely observed figurative compositions to layered abstraction.

"By presenting these works together, we wanted audiences to recognise that artistic innovation is not confined to a particular medium. Sometimes it is the subject that challenges convention; at other times, it is the material or the process itself. The exhibition becomes a conversation between different ways of making, seeing and understanding art," says Maini.

Modernism still matters

Gallery G believes South Indian modernism deserves a stronger presence in the larger narrative of Indian art history. Pioneering modernists from the region challenged established conventions and developed distinctive artistic languages rooted in their cultural environments.

Their contributions helped lay the foundations for subsequent generations of artists to experiment and evolve.

"By presenting a special selection of works by distinguished Madras Masters alongside contemporary practices during the exhibition's opening week, we wanted to encourage audiences to consider this continuity. Modernism should not be understood simply as a historical period that has concluded," says Maini.

Where familiar forms take new meaning

Many works in Beyond the Familiar resist easy categorisation. A recognisable subject may be transformed through colour, distortion or abstraction, while a non-representational composition may carry deeply personal memories or cultural associations.

Rohini Mani's work engages with identity, gender and colourism, giving figurative imagery a strong social dimension. Sajitha R Shankhar examines the female form through abstraction and symbolic imagery, challenging conventional representations of the body.

S Vijayaraghavan brings together familiar imagery, metaphor and contemporary visual technologies, while Selva Senthilkumar moves between recognisable forms and psychologically charged compositions.

These practices show that representation and abstraction need not be opposing approaches. Instead, artists move between what is visible and what is felt, between material and metaphor, and between personal experience and broader cultural meaning.

For Chennai-based artist Sipi Sakkaravarthi, everyday life and personal observation remain central to this process.

"There is no time here to dwell on imaginary worlds. For the life I live, my surroundings, the people, and my thoughts arising from them are what shape my artistic creations. Many a time, I unpack the reflections of my mind as visual imagery through my paintings. I document them. I communicate them to the viewers, allowing them to perceive and interpret these works according to their own evaluation. Ultimately, my creations speak for themselves and define who I am," she says.

That freedom to experiment lies at the heart of the exhibition. By bringing together different artistic languages, cultural references and approaches to material, Beyond the Familiar invites audiences to look beyond established categories and engage with the many ways art can communicate.