

## ART

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### With River of Faith, Jayasri Burman goes back to the roots of her inspiration

‘It is a lot about my learnings and un-learnings of being an artist and of being a woman’

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Jayasri Burman, Bharti, Acrylic on Canvas, 73x204inches, 2021

For millennia now, the Ganges has been revered and disregarded in equal measure, much like women themselves. Yet somehow, she still flows as she nurtures and ensconces generations in the subcontinent, with every bend she takes. More recently, she has also put up with the ineptitude of the human race as she gave refuge to abandoned, nameless casualties of the pandemic. This and more have been a source of insatiable inspiration and curiosity for artist Jayasri Burman since her childhood, which has now culminated into a show of enormous scale called River of Faith. As I sit down with her at Bikaner House on the eve of the opening of her show in Delhi, her eyes light up as she tells me more about what she calls her magnum opus. At 61, Burman is still excited, still inspired.



Jayasri Burman

“My relationship with the Ganges started when I was only a kid and I used to be zapped by how there would be pyres burning at one place and water for auspicious events being taken alongside.

As I grew older, I realised the

significance of the river in terms of mythology and geography,” she tells me. The set up for the show — featuring over 160 of her works created through the years but all finished in the last year — was still on and Burman was visibly tired. Her signature paintings with her take on deities surrounded by flora and fauna are part of it but what takes centre stage are her never-seen-before sculptures. Burman says that making sculptures was always her first love. “Though I have never trained in making sculptures, I was adamant on finishing these. You know while studying art, I would often break rules and land up at the sculpture centre to work there. I have always been fascinated by the art of making sculptures and it is overwhelming to see this exhibition come to fruition,” she explained.

But River of Faith is not just about mounting an exhibition for Burman, she tells me. “It is a lot about my learnings and un-learnings of being an artist and of being a woman,” she said. References to mythology in fluid strokes of her brushes are her signature, which Burman transforms into her beliefs about women’s freedom and independence. As she recounted the mythological story about Shantanu and Ganga’s marriage and how she had given up seven of her children to give them deliverance (or Moksha) at the cost of herself making the sacrifice as a mother, Burman drew a parallel with contemporary times as she talked about how the events of the pandemic and the bodies thrown in the river affected her. “I had to do something and I started making these sculptures,” she explained. Her inspiration is perhaps only matched by the sheer scale of these sculptures, one of which is even six feet high. Mediums vary from fibreglass and metal to clay but each tells the story of the divine feminine.

“The artist’s flowing compositions seem to question the distinctions the viewer often makes between matter and spirit because aren’t they relative modifications of one or the other? After all, the boundaries drawn should not be too definite. The seeker within her is inspired by beauty, harmony

and the eternal truth of the scriptures she has heard recited by her father from her girlhood days,” said Ina Puri, the curator of the exhibition. “While the world came to a standstill during the pandemic, Burman, an optimist, continued to believe that the darkness would lift; her faith gave her that hope. So she painted, creating a vast body of work, consumed by restless energy that saw her make massive sculptures in Kumartuli, Kolkata, when she wasn’t painting in her Delhi studio, every day, every hour. With River of Faith, Jayasri Burman’s most significant exhibition to date that opens at a time when the world is gradually making a recovery, it is as if the prayers of the faithful have finally been heard,” she added.

Colours, monochromatic canvasses, female deities nurturing and expressing freedom on a myriad canvasses adorned the walls of the exhibition space, with the massive sculptures paving the way outdoors. A sculpture wrapped in 24K gold foil is also part of this exhibition. Entering Bikaner House will instantly transform one to a fantastical world of flying creatures and the Ganga serving as both inspiration and fancy. On opening night, the queue of people from the city she has called second home since the 90s, is never-ending as Burman returned everyone’s congratulatory messages with a warm smile that I have hardly ever seen her without since making her acquaintance. What keeps her going? “The knowledge that between all the losses and victories, highs and lows, I will always keep learning,” said Burman promptly.

“Jayasri Burman is a name that has been lyrically attached to dreamy stories woven around mythology. Her presentation magically borrows from folklore, adding a dash of realism to fit the contemporary world and happenings. Ganga has many stories and myths circling around its waters that are interesting and perhaps not known to all. So this exhibition spins a visual imagery around those stories bringing alive the old tales, contemporising them to suit present times which is also the artist’s own perception of how she views life or how she would like others to view it. Her works are fluid, flowing and metaphorical, highlighting the tragedy of recent times with so many bodies laid to rest in the river. Nevertheless hope springs from the colours and beauty she presents as she celebrates the redeeming, rejuvenation and rebirthing nature of the waters of the river, which serves to remind us that we too should emulate and mould ourselves to lift ourselves from gloom and carry on with hope. River of Faith is a tribute to Ganga and her spirit, which she has presented through paintings and sculptures,” said Somak Mitra, director, Art Exposure, the presenters of the exhibition.

As we wind up the chat, Burman took me around the venue to show me her work. “And this is my jaan — my Jahnavi!” said Burman, as she animatedly told me about how many times she scratched off what she had done and would restart the mould again to achieve exactly what she had in mind. “I had to be perfect, especially because I am not a trained sculptor, you know. Jahnavi had to be perfect because she is Ganga and she is every woman,” Burman added.

River of Faith is on display at Bikaner House, Delhi, till December 19 and will then be available at Gallery Art Exposure in the city till March 2022. The exhibition can also be viewed online on [www.artexposure.in](http://www.artexposure.in).

*Pictures: Courtesy of Art Exposure*