

"STREET" - An Essay on the Reality and the Abstract of Yusuf Arakkal

Shoma Das

The identity of the characters is principally established through iconological and iconoplastic attributes although their figures are derived from those seen in Bengal folk paintings and icons. No alternate sociological or socio-historical affiliations are discernible in the rendering of these images.

Forty-five years ago, a boy fled the narrow confines of home for the freedom of the sidewalk. Out of this experience emerged a young man, deep and solitary, with a profound understanding of the agonizing, unfortunate human conditions. A 'reality' that, years later, would find expression in art. We are talking about Yusuf Arakkal - peintre par excellence.

His life has been far from easy. Born in 1945 into a wealthy family inhabiting the picturesque backwater regions of Kerala, he underwent intense pain and trauma when he lost both his parents at the tender age of seven. All of a sudden, "home" lost meaning, the atmosphere became stifling, and expression became difficult. By teenage, the free-spirited boy could stand it no more. With only thirty rupees in his pocket, he took a train to Bangalore where his uncle lived. Little did he know that Bangalore was a big city and that he would not find his uncle. Yet, the courageous boy refused to give up his freedom. He ended up on the streets, working in wayside restaurants and construction sites, living from day to day on daily wages for one and a half years, until his uncle found him. "I got my best education there," he says modestly. Today, Yusuf Arakkal is a renowned Indian artist in the international arena. That is why this brief history was necessary. It is important to understand the man, to understand his art. The truth about Arakkal is - you can take him out of the streets, but you can't take the streets out of him. Years of work on street-centric themes has only helped in evolving a distinctive style that is acquiring more depth and dimension with every successive series. The complicated parameters of painting are being refined in such a way that his art has acquired that masterful touch, while making his message direct and forceful. Arakkal's new series in oil is entitled "Street". It is a portrayal of solitary, unknown pedestrians on the streets of London - men of different age groups, from different walks of life, with unknown destinations. You never see their faces properly - they are passing strangers who have been caught in the action of walking, hurrying,



Yusuf Arakkal, *The Street*, 60" x 48",
Acrylic & Oil on Canvas, 2006.



Yusuf Arakkal, *The Street*, 60" x 48", Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2006.

standing, stopping. Man with a crutch talking on a cell phone, burly gentleman carrying a bag to the office, young man stopped in his tracks by a newspaper report. Arakkal caught them on camera, digitally manipulated them into black and white graphic images and then transferred them onto the canvas by 'serigraphy'. These concrete, realistic images have become the sole central figures in highly abstracted, visually dynamic fields. Sometimes he has used multiples of the same images for maximum impact - a technique that also helps the street to seem busy, peopled and active.

This strong human element, undoubtedly gives his paintings their enduring character. It is indeed remarkable that Arakkal is able to grab our attention so powerfully, compel us to focus so successfully and leave indelible imprints of his paintings on our minds. The "Street" has an extremely dynamic environment. Active figures placed in active fields give a sense of palpable motion. First, figures caught in mid-action and use of a single or multiple images in a diagonally progressive plane, lends movement to the expression. Second, the 'abstract field of existence' --- ground on which the figure or figures are placed --- is itself dynamic, being a collection of linear planes that move towards or away from each other at different angles. These serve as strategic lines of illumination and light sliding along these planes or emanating from behind or below these planes reinforcing movement. However, it is the large color fields on the walls or pavements that give the maximum momentum. The atmospheric use of colors - yellow and brown



Yusuf Arakkal, *The Street*, 60" x 48", Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 2006.

in some paintings or bluish green and greenish black in others - endows these areas with a throbbing, pulsating sensation. Short detailed brushstrokes creating highly textured currents move in different directions within the color field to bring about intense fluidity. Semantically, this mobile field with active currents may be the part active - part dormant mind of the individual. Fuzzy color strains gently move into gloomy black spaces - those dark, obscure, dilapidated walls that talk about the individual, or not. In contrast to the atmospheric colors, the black is local, flat and closed.

Arakkal uses lines, color and chiaroscuro in a clever way to make his figure the focal point in the canvas. "I use the right amount of light and darkness to make the figure stand out," he says. In true ténébriste fashion he does not like using too many colors - it distracts the mind and dilutes the message. Rather he works with primary colours, to arrive at a few subdued shades and few glowing tones. This allows him a high degree of control in portraying the emotional and existential state of the subject. Different tonal values interact with the different planes to create an optical sensation that powerfully transmits the melancholy. Arakkal makes "every square inch of the painting talk." Into this world where the figurative meets the abstract, enters symbolism, sometimes subtle, sometimes strong. Like the cross on the back of the man with a crutch, the stop sign where the young man reading a paper has suddenly stopped in his tracks, or the graffiti on the wall. Technically, they provide an excellent visual connect between the realistic figure and the

Different tonal values interact with the different planes to create an optical sensation that powerfully transmits the melancholy. Arakkal makes "every square inch of the painting talk."

abstracted space to produce cohesion in the entire painting. Fluid fields and graphic forms anchored within rigid structures - that is what "Street" is all about. Solitary figures in a fluid state of existence, moving within walls that are closing in upon them. There is light beyond the darkness of the walls but the protagonist is oblivious of this light that illuminates his space. Immersed in himself, in the immediacy of existence and action, he does not look, nor search the beyond. And so he exists, hemmed in by his 'closed space' from which he cannot escape. Stark realism and superb abstraction combined together make a powerful statement of human existence. Yusuf Arakkal has arrived at a mature art language that is all his own - to evolve or to change. We wish him all the best!

Note : The "Street" is a series of fourteen to sixteen paintings that is going with Art India, USA and Art Alive, New Delhi to Los Angeles in June, 2007. They will be exhibited in the Art India Gallery, L.A, in mid-June.