



MUMBAI SYMBOLS: Krishnamachari with the installation called *Ghost/Transmemoir* that has 108 LCD screens inside aluminium *dabbas*

Old ghosts, new demons

Bose Krishnamachari's new exhibition is a tribute to Mumbai and the migrants who have helped shape it

WHEN I enter his studio at Dahisar, Bose Krishnamachari is applying the finishing touches to the last of his latest works, a self-portrait. His face is projected to fill the six-foot canvas, with red the dominant colour. The portrait seems very different from the flamboyant style I associate with the artist, and I find out why: "I did it with a ballpoint pen," he explains.

The portrait is one of six that Krishnamachari has done for an exhibition titled *Ghost* in London's Aicon Gallery next month, besides some colourful abstracts and a couple of installations. The other five portraits are of ordinary people including his carpenter and two of his maids. "It is a random selection of people whom I know. The carpenter is from UP while one maid is from Mangalore. Their portraits project their insecurities as well as my own insecurities," he says.

So has he deliberately chosen an ordinary drawing tool like the ballpoint pen to sketch ordinary people? No, no such logic for Krishnamachari, who has also used frames made of finely polished aluminium with ornate patterns on the edges and a thin sheet covering the canvas. "They belong to a category called *arte richie*," says Krishnamachari with a mischievous smile. He goes on to explain that it is a coinage based on the Italian phrase '*arte povera*' which refers to the use of cheap material by artists for their paintings.

The title of the exhibition, *Ghost*, does not point to anything supernatural but to the memories of the artist, who has been a migrant in Mumbai for 22 years. It is also a play on the word 'host', says Krishnamachari, and refers to the city's hospitality over the years and the current hostility — read Raj Thackeray — towards outsiders.

The most simple component of the ex-



ORDINARY SUBJECT, EXTRAORDINARY TREATMENT: A portrait of the artist's carpenter. All the portraits in the exhibition, done primarily with a ballpoint pen, have frames made of finely polished aluminium with ornate patterns on the edges and a thin sheet covering the canvas.



DREAM AND REALITY: One of the installations is called *Amuseum* and is a model of the contemporary art museum that Krishnamachari wants to set up on the banks of the Periyar river in Kerala

'You have to be a capitalist to be a good communist. There is this critic who writes that today's artists travel in Mercedes cars. I ask, what's wrong with that? Only if you have wealth will you be able to share it'

BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI, artist

hibition — installation if you like — which Krishnamachari calls '*Amuseum*', includes a few architectural models and plans for a museum that the artist plans to build on the banks of the Periyar river in Kerala.

The museum is clearly influenced by Kerala's ancient architecture and Krishnamachari has designed it himself with the help of engineers. The title *Amuseum* is the same as that of a path-breaking exhibition that he conducted way back in 1992 to critique the chaotic state of art institutions in India and he says, "The museum, which may come up in three years, will showcase contemporary international art and will be spread over 40,000 sq ft."

But wouldn't Mumbai have been a better address for his dream project? "Blame it on destiny. I was supposed to see a plot near Parel but couldn't see it that day because of water-logging. Meanwhile, I saw this place in Kerala and liked it very much, so I decided to build it there," he says.

The other installation, called *Ghost/Transmemoir*, involves 108 LCD screens embedded inside aluminium *dabbas* (tiffin carriers) and hung from a

scaffolding with the help of strap hangers. The unmistakable reference is to the millions of train commuters in Mumbai and the *dabbawalas* who carry their home-cooked food. It is a modified version of the show with the same title that he had organised in 2006 and involves an assemblage of photographs and interviews with anonymous Mumbaiers. In London, Krishnamachari will provide visitors with headphones to listen to the random stories of people, like himself, who have made Mumbai their home.

Son of a carpenter, Krishnamachari had come to the city armed only with a JJ School prospectus, knowing precious little about art or its various movements. Denied admission the first year even though he did well in the entrance exam, he got through the following year. Sharing a room in a Saki Naka chawl with 15 other bachelors, he used to fund his own education by drawing portraits of customers in a restaurant. The London exhibition is a tribute to the city that made him a poster boy of the art world and a Page Three regular. "You have to be a capitalist to be a good communist," says Krishnamachari, whose father was a staunch comrade. "There is this critic who writes that today's artists travel in Mercedes cars. I ask, what's wrong with that? Only if you have wealth will you be able to share it," remarks the man who is known to have helped many a struggling artist back in Kerala. In fact, art critics in Kerala give him credit for helping create an art market in Kochi.

"Can I take your photograph for this project?" he asks, suddenly throwing me off my chair. "But I don't know if I am good enough," I reply. "If I was looking for glamour, I would have got Aishwarya Rai," he retorts. And I become part of his exhibition.

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