

ART & DEAL

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AT ^{dubai 2008} TAIR

CURATED BY BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI

ANANT JOSHI,

C K RAJAN,

HEMA UPADHYAYA,

JUSTIN PONMANY,

JYOTHI BASU,

MINAL DAMANI NANDY,

PARVATHI NAYAR,

AJI V N,

VIVEK VILASINI



Confessions of a Chromo - Maniac - Bose Krishnamachari

Johny M L

“There could be a section for my works in the proposed museum. But my idea is to showcase a comprehensive, historical and organic collection of contemporary art for a larger public.”
Bose ruminates.

These days Bose Krishnamachari quite often travels between Kochi and Mumbai. In Aluva, a small town near Kochi, Bose has acquired a huge piece of land for establishing a ‘museum’. Is it going to house the pivotal works of this maverick artist? “This museum is not my ego trip,” a soft spoken Bose says, while readjusting his posture on the beanbag placed at the corner of his studio’s reception area. His studio in Borivili West, a suburban town in Mumbai, already brims with his selected works and the works that he has collected from various shows. The museum is already on in his mind.

“There could be a section for my works in the proposed museum. But my idea is to showcase a comprehensive, historical and organic collection of contemporary art for a larger public,” Bose ruminates. For him ‘contemporary’ is an all encompassing term, which could encapsulate not only the works of Indian artists but also the works of artists from other countries. Bose thinks big and he thinks beyond geographical boundaries. Pointing to a small paper work neatly framed and displayed on his office wall, Bose asks, “Do you know whose work is this?”

You go near the work, train your eyes, scramble through your memory and try to decipher the name out of the hieroglyphics of a signature. “Justin Ponmany?” “Haaa...It’s a Sol Le Witt,” Bose smiles and proves, perhaps, several points in one go. But then the critical worm in your brain is activated. “If so, why did you zero in on Aluva to establish a museum of international quality? Is it a move from the global to the local?” you ask. Bose has several answers for such



‘Bombay X17’ Bose Krishnamachari, Justin Ponmany, Sunil Gawde, Riyas Komu, Reena Saini Kallat, Sanjeev Sonpimpure, Chintan Upadhyay, Jitish Kallat, Jyothi Basu, Anant Joshi, Yashwant Deshmukh, Prajakta Potnis, Baiju Parthan and Sheetal Gattani.



The Af-fair after party, Sudarshan Shetty, Seema Shetty, Abhijeet Tamhane, Riyas Komu [back visible] Lavesh Jagasia, Gopal Mirchandani, Parvathy Nayar, Bhavna Kakar, Zoya, Farah, Hema Upadhyay, Kamal Gulrajani, Bose [hidden], Anant Joshi

questions. But he counters you with another quip, “Why can’t it be?” What intrigues you is his nonchalant attitude. This Bose Krishnamachari sitting right in front of you is well known for his curiously titled works, solo shows and curatorial projects. And at times he sounds quite contradictory. In 1992, he presented a solo show called ‘Amuseum’ in Mumbai. Fifteen years after this eventful and monumental show, Bose is out here to establish a ‘museum’. In 2003, he did a solo titled ‘De-Curating’, in which he critiqued ‘rumor curating’ (curating shows by hegemonic powers using their power as only criteria to discern and select artists) and then he went on to ‘curate’ several shows in India and abroad. In his works he mostly addresses issues that are not limited by regional or petty sentiments.

But in 2006 he curated ‘Double-Enders’, a show of sixty nine Malayali artists living in India and elsewhere. Contradictions unlimited? Every time Bose does a show, whether it be a solo or a curatorial project, he faces criticism for these apparent contradictions. “Contradictions,” says Bose, “are historical

necessities.” His direct engagement with the contemporary history (-ies) has made him aware that history functions through contradictions. Having critical Marxism as the anchor and tool, Bose believes that there is a dialectical relationship between events and the ensuing contradictions can only flag out directions for human progress and enlightenment. “Only the flourishing of capitalism can facilitate the proliferation of socialism. Hence I don’t find any contradiction in being a Capitalist in order to realize Marxism in the materialistic world,” Bose says.

His belief in Marxian utopia and his self positioning within the corporatist dystopia should be seen as an artist’s fight against the loss of memory. In a global scenario where corporatism has ironed out differences and homogenized tastes, the maximum danger is posed through the erasure of history. Bose’s creativity is bent on resisting these erasures. In 2001, he made his personal philosophy on history visible through a painting titled, ‘Death of Memory is End of History and Self, Legends Exist only in Memory.’ Previously in 2000, he had done works with the portrait

AF-FAIR, Curated by Bose Krishnamachari, 1x1 Art Gallery, Dubai Sudarshan Shetty, T V Santosh, Riyas Komu, Bharat Sikka, Shilpa Gupta,

Prasad Raghavan, Anant Joshi, C K Rajan, Hema Upadhyaya, Justin Ponmany, Jyothi Basu, Minal Damani Nandy, Parvathy Nayar, V N Aji, Vivek Vilasini.



of images of Gerard Richter and Manson. These works done as double portraiture on multiple panels and titled 'Exist' explain how Bose, as an artist, who deals with memory of history and the history of memory, resists the modernist narratives in order to make memories distinct from passionate juxtapositions of layers.

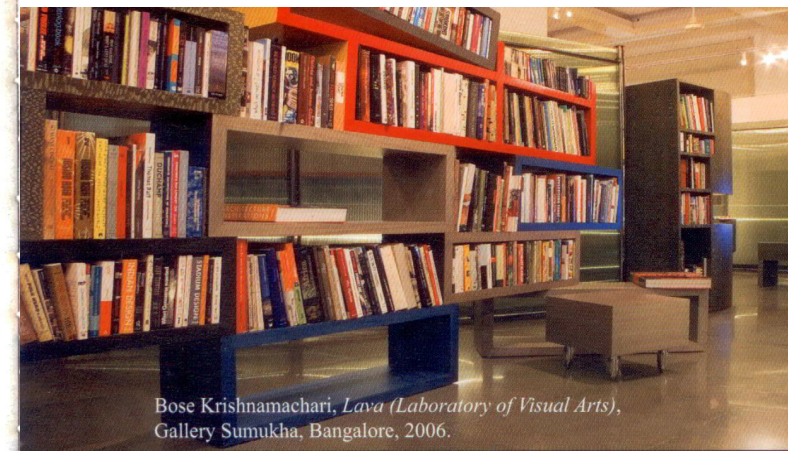
"Juxtaposition of layered narratives in the modernist works, I found, seem to be smudging certain nuances of the very narratives. I take a postmodernist position in my works from where I could articulate the distinctions. In these works, I de-layered the events, created grids and fields for placing the portraits of the artists like Richter, Manson, Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Hamilton, Pablo Picasso and so on. My decision was clear while doing these works and I did not want to overlap these artists' histories. But the collating edges become important, the zones of merger are marked out while distinctions are maintained," Bose observes.

Bose Krishnamachari's creative oeuvre is comprised of works done in a variety of styles, mediums and critical approaches. He moves from assemblages to installations, pure abstractions to extreme figurations, chic designs to mundane representations, spontaneous formations to well thought out constructions. Liberated in a multiple sense, he easily moves between a fabric designed out of his 'Stretched Bodies' paintings and a battery operated Rewa car painted in the same abstract style. Like his works, he too has a colorful personality; a personality cultivated and groomed by situations and history. Once Bose thought that anybody could do an abstract work of art! It was in late 1980s and he was still a struggling student at the Sir JJ School of Arts, Mumbai. Ask him to talk about his early days; Bose would soon look at you over his designer specs. "The same old story of

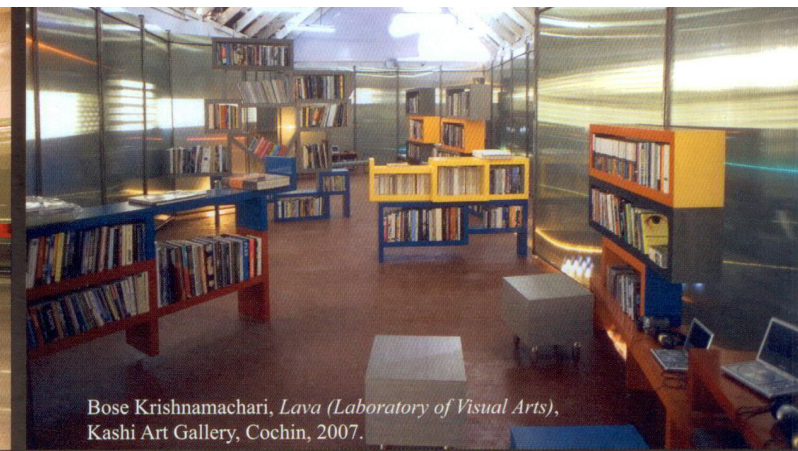
an artist. Nothing special. A child who used to draw well." But there is more to add. A rural boy who would have grown up to become a 'drawing master' in a government school in Kerala, became Bose Krishnamachari, one of the poster boys of Indian contemporary art- the story should be interesting.

"Near Thrissur, there was a private academy named 'Flash Art' that prepared students to become art teachers in schools. I did not know anything about modern art at that time. I joined Flash Art Academy to hone my skills but never appeared for any examinations. In 1984 I was drawn to the cultural activities centered around Kerala Kalapeethom. I used to do a lot of charcoal drawings on Newspapers and was interested in Surrealism of an artist called NKP Muthukoya. I liked the intricate paintings done by him. Also I became a theatre activist. I acted in several plays including those of Samuel Beckett and Brecht. Back home, my father was a follower of Communist party and my political views developed from the meetings held at home," Bose recalls.

Though a Marxist by upbringing, Bose is not a darling of the Community Party of India (Marxist) for he has always critiqued it from several platforms. But there was an apolitical period in Bose's life, especially during the late 1970s and early 80s. It was a time when Trivandrum Fine Arts College was boiling in/with radical left political activism. "I did not know anything about these things. Even I was not drawn to the formation of Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association (Radical Group), which was officially organized sometime in mid-80s in Baroda." What changed Bose's life as an artist was his tryst with the city of Bombay, sometime in 1985. He received Kerala Lalit Kala Akademy Award in 1985, for a work, which Bose now qualifies as 'something illustrative'. The award was a kind of moral booster



Bose Krishnamachari, *Lava (Laboratory of Visual Arts)*, Gallery Sumukha, Bangalore, 2006.



Bose Krishnamachari, *Lava (Laboratory of Visual Arts)*, Kashi Art Gallery, Cochin, 2007.



Bose Krishnamachari, *Lava (Laboratory of Visual Arts)*, Bodhi Art Gallery, New Delhi, 2007.



Bose Krishnamachari, *Lava (Laboratory of Visual Arts)*, The Museum Gallery (Bombay Art Gallery), Mumbai, 2006.

not only for the artist but also for some of his friends who were living in Bombay then. One of them invited Bose to Bombay and asked him to join Sir JJ School of Arts. "I went to Bombay, hoping that I would get an admission.

Soon I realized that it was not that easy to get through, as so much of politics was involved in the admission process," recalls Bose. For a year he lived in Sakinaka, a laid back northern suburb of Bombay, with fifteen bachelors, 'mostly doing portraits of people to eke out a living.' In 1986 Bose got enrolled in Sir JJ School of Art, 'with enough political persuasion', as he puts it.

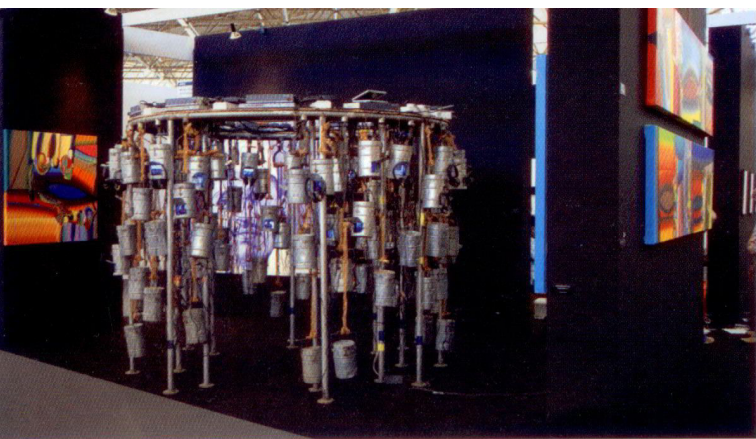
Charged up with ideas and considerably better skill, Bose soon became an influential figure within the college. "Prabhakar Kolte was my teacher. An intimate relationship developed between us soon and in 1990, even before leaving the academy, I did a solo show in Bombay and the foreword was written by Kolte," Bose recounts with reverence and love. The show was sponsored by the owner of Jaico Books and as the story goes, it was a 'sell

out' show. Ranjit Hoskote, a promising young poet and art critic then, titled his review with a comment by Bose, 'There are No Rules in Painting,' which drew criticism from various quarters.

Bose never accepted rules, especially when he was young enough to stand any kind of pressures on him. With a successful show in his bio-data (in 1989 he had done another solo in Kerala), Bose came out of the academy with flying colors, perhaps with highest marks ever scored by any student in the history of Sir JJ School of Arts. Bose and Ranjit Hoskote developed a special friendship between them and spent several hours together, reading poetry, discussing art and life in general.

Once out of the academy Bose soon found himself back to square one- same bachelors' accommodation, portrait painting etc. "I used to work in Mela restaurant, which was an exotic place with palm readers, musicians, portrait painters, magicians, stand up comedians and so on who entertained the guests. My earning per day was something between twenty rupees to fifty rupees." Bose has always been an art activist. The city of Bombay taught





Bose Krishnamachari, *Ghost / Transmemoir*, Amsterdam.



Bose Krishnamachari, *The Gossip Bath & The Moisturizer*, Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 7.5' x 13.5' (ABS Collection), 2004.

him language skills, high society behavior and these sharpened his survival instincts. Even after leaving college, he kept on visiting the place, mainly the canteen where he acquainted himself with young talented artists like Jitish Kallat, Reena Saini Kallat, Riyas Komu, Shilpa Gupta and so on.

“I called it ‘canteen art activism’ and it helped me to be in touch with new comers, their ideas, outlook and attitudes. I used to take these people with me to help senior artists when they presented their shows in established galleries. Working with senior artists has helped me a lot, I learnt all about curating a show from these sessions.”

A quick learner, Bose internalized events and people, which would take him to greater heights. In 1989, when Rajeev Sethi organized a famous show for the Times of India group, titled ‘Timeless Art’ in and around Victoria Terminus, Bose realized art can reach out to people in different ways. Some of the Malayali artists, who now stake their lives for galleries and art commodities, were protesting against Timeless Art, as one of the Radical Group artists was exhibiting in the show. “I did not know them, or then I did not even want to know them as I found them reactionaries,” Bose chuckles. According to him it was Timeless Art show and Pritish Nandy’s relentless efforts as the editor of the Illustrated Weekly of India that changed the complexion of Bombay art scene.

“Even before Indian economy opened up, Pritish Nandy realized the future of contemporary art. He wrote about it, supported

the artists and against all odds, gave huge coverage to art in Illustrated Weekly.”

Then happened the ‘Amuseum’ show in 1992. In this show Bose experimented with several mediums including painted old books, drawings on paper, paintings, assemblages, designs and installations. As he once stated, it was against all rules and against all odds. He called his forty drawings as ‘abstract portraits’, which we would see later developing into two huge projects in 2003, namely ‘Poets’ and ‘De-curating’. “Amuseum”, first showed in Jehangir Cowasji Hall, Bombay and later traveled to Bangalore and Chennai. In 1993, Illustrated Weekly, under the editorship of Anil Dharkar chose Bose as the one of the Faces of the Year.

“I was happy to be in the galaxy of talents like Shah Rukh Khan, Milind Soman, Madhu Sapre and so on, who all worked really hard to establish themselves in their respective fields,” Bose observes.

Bose was the first one to emblemize the city of Bombay through ‘dabba wallahs’. In 1994, when RPG did a group show titled ‘Bombay’ in Mumbai, Bose participated in it with an installation of ‘dabbas’ (tiffin carriers). His idea was to bring in the essence of Bombay, a city of dreams, a city that provides basic needs to millions of migrants, a city always on the move, a city that never sleeps, a city with its own dynamics of functioning even in the middle of utter chaos, through the phenomenally organized activities of the dabba wallahs who supplied food to thousands of working people in different establishments. Bose re-used the



Bose Krishnamachari, *De-Curating*, Sakshi Gallery-Mumbai (Gallery View) 2003.

image of dabbas in his 1995 solo ‘Objects of Attention’, New Delhi and in ‘Ghost-Transmemoir’ 2006, Mumbai. “The dabba is the icon of Mumbai and I could establish it as an aesthetic icon,” Bose says.

Already tipped to become big by mid-90s, Bose had the opportunity to travel in Britain in 1993 and US in 1996, supported by the British Council and Mid-American Art Alliance (MAAA) respectively. During these travels, apart from visiting museums and collections, he befriended artists like Francesco Clemente, Frank Stella, Joseph Kosuth and Anish Kapur. Then he received the Charles Wallace Award to do a post graduation in the prestigious Goldsmiths College in London.

“Institutions always want to make you conform to their attitudes and Goldsmiths was no different. But my tutorials with Craig Martin and Sarat Maharaj instilled confidence in me to do whatever I wanted to.” However, Bose’s final display in Goldsmiths College was noticed for its novel expressions and design oriented presentation.

Back in India in 2000, Bose found it difficult to do works on a large scale. “Art market had not opened up the way it is now,” Bose looks back. “Akbar Padamsee told me to work on paper. ‘It is not necessary to work on canvas always. Your confidence to do on anything is what ultimately counts’, he told me. I derived

inspiration from Padamsee’s words to do the works titled ‘Exist’.” He should have been in the path-breaking curatorial project, ‘Century Cities’ (2000) by Geeta Kapur and Ashish Rajadhyaksha at Tate Modern, London. The show was all about Mumbai or an emblematic metropolis of India. Though Bose had emblemized Mumbai in his ‘dabbas’, the curators chose to ignore it and Bose was not represented in ‘Century Cities’ project. ‘Politics, communitarian nepotism, rumors,’ contributed to the exclusion of Bose and it did hurt him. ‘De-curating’ (2003), Bose’s ambitious portrait project of Indian contemporary artists, as some people say, was a reaction to this ‘expulsion’.

“Yes, in a way it was a reaction, but soon the project grew beyond it.” Looking back, one can see that ‘De-curating’ was Bose’s attempt to grapple, negotiate and comprehend the idea of ‘curating’ itself. Also it should be remembered that when Bose did this counter-curatorial effort, in India, curatorial practice was in its nascent state, mostly abused by ‘self-appointed’ curators. Interestingly, ‘De-curating’ was not the first curatorial project of Bose. Once he had attempted to give ‘youngsters’ a chance through a curatorial project.

Riyas Komu, Justin Ponmany, Shilpa Gupta, Girish Dahiwalé and some other budding artists were included in the project. When it was about to take off, suddenly the artists grew ‘suspicious’ and they lost ‘faith’ in the curator. But he gained faith of a whole lot of artists in India with his ‘De-curating’ and then he curated the



Bose Krishnamachari, *Amuseum*, (Installation View), Bombay, 1992.



Bose Krishnamachari, *Amuseum*, 1992.



Bose Krishnamachari, *Stretched Bodies*, Cyramic Colours on Fibre Glass, 2004.

trailblazer show, 'BombayX17' in 2003 with a group of young artists who were making their presence felt with the irreverent and cutting edge art at that time in Mumbai. This show traveled to Kochi and Kochi became one of the art centers in India with this exposition.

'Ghost/Transmemoir' (2006), 'LaVA' (2006-07) consolidated Bose's position as one of the most daring artists in India and these shows traveled various centers in India and abroad. While 'Ghost/Transmemoir' dealt with the presence of city and its memories through dabba installations, transmitting interviews of Mumbaikars and paintings of 'stretched body' series, 'LaVA' focused on knowledge production and proliferation as art, conceptually and pragmatically independent and discursive.

Bose created one of the most important paintings of Indian contemporary art, 'Relocating the White Cube' (2005), in which he debated the origin, survival, collapse and regeneration of the white cube space of galleries as a site of contestation. This painting (though he did a few in the same series) brought in the dilemma of contemporary art, a discursive tool which constantly contradicts its own existence within and without the spaces of sanitized and ideologically driven commoditization. 'Bose's abstractions' are hot properties in the market. You remember, this artist had once thought of abstracts as easy things. With 'stretched bodies' as a major component in his oeuvre, he no longer believes in the 'easiness' of art, or to be precise, the abstract art.

"The stretched bodies come from Mondrian's comment on stretched lines. How could one stretch a line? Mondrian proved he could do that by running his brush again and again over the line he made initially. I stretch my colors, my strokes and my space. It is a minimal but powerfully humane practice. It is about stretching memories to history and vice versa. I would call myself a 'chromo-maniac' in these paintings. I express my chromo-mania by stretching my works," asserts Bose.

If we go by Joseph Beuys' thoughts, whatever Bose does is art; may it be a solo, participation in a group show, designing a catalogue, visiting an artist's studio, finding a new artist's works, displaying works in the gallery, curating a show, spotting talents, reaching out to people, attending an exhibition opening, or just attending a phone call- he does all this with style, verve and panache. He does not believe in art criticism and of late he has 'designed' a term, 'friendly criticism'. He insists that criticism should be done in a friendly context where all 'minuses' can turn into 'pluses'. You may dispute, but he believes in his friendly intolerance. But when it comes to his works, he resorts to a critical approach as evident in his latest critique on the lingering ghosts of imperialism in a work titled, 'To Let/Ghost'. Bose contradicts and he contradicts to conquer. And the consolation is that you can tell him that you hate him.

Photo Courtesy : Shankar Natarajan and Bose Krishnamachari.