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The Wizard OF POSE

Artist, collector, curator, designer, patron... these are just some of the many wands he waves. Will the real Bose Krishnamachari please stand up, asks MARIA LOUIS

THE IDENTITY CRISIS IS OBVIOUS, yet 45-year-old Kerala-born and Mumbai-based Bose Krishnamachari has come to represent the new face of Indian art on the international stage. He is as much at home hurriedly gulping *chai* while painting in his suburban Borivili studio as he is hobnobbing with the world's arterati while delicately sipping wine at a vernissage in Paris, Milan or Venice. Not surprisingly, he was among the handful of people that royal art collector Francesca von Habsburg from Vienna (married to the Archduke Karl of Austria) met when she came to India to acquaint herself with Indian art. "He is also a curator," she pointed out, "something I find lacking in India."

When Artcurial held their first auction in France dedicated to modern and contemporary Indian art in December last year, they referred to Bose as "the rising star of the Indian contemporary world and the curator of many exhibitions". That this artist-curator is a social animal to boot is

as evident on Page Three as it is from the fact that filmmakers, musicians, actors, theatre luminaries, fashion designers, bureaucrats and corporate czars in India unequivocally consider him their bosom buddy. With the designer tees/ shirts and trousers he now sports, a scarf or cravat jauntily tied around his neck, the psychedelic frames of his spectacles perched on his bald pate and snazzy shoes gracing his feet, the self-conducted magical makeover of Bose Krishnamachari from a reticent greenhorn fresh out of rural Kerala to a multihued and self-assured man of the world is complete.

Transformation is something Bose equates with the city that nurtured his dreams and forever changed his life. Not many know that he was a sickly child who had to be hospitalised due to a blood condition that left him semi-comatose. When he recovered, he came to Mumbai on a whim and a prayer to become an artist – but the authorities at the JJ School of Art refused him admission. He persisted and succeeded in studying fine art at the

institution that initially acknowledged his genius with gold medals and even appointed him to teach there while working on his MFA – only to rusticate him for questioning their methods; yet the rebel with a cause cheerfully took it all in his stride.

Over two decades after he tentatively set foot in Mumbai and shared a Saki Naka chawl 'flat' with a dozen other bachelors in shifts, laboriously sketching portraits at the Mela restaurant to support himself, Bose qualifies as the ultimate art impresario. But anyone who has observed him from close quarters since he burst on to the city's art scene and made an impression in the group show *Circling the Square* in 1995 will agree that he is an unlikely contender for this title. Speaking only Malayalam fluently when he arrived here in 1985 and armed with the smidgen of English that he picked up along the way, he has mumbled his way to the top with amazing alacrity. Today, he may exasperatingly still mumble out of habit... but he is perceptibly more cogent

CLOSE ENCOUNTER





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in expressing his thoughts.

Not only is Bose a renowned artist who sketches and paints in a variety of media, creates complicated installations that are considered high art and designs furniture (his father owned a furniture shop) – but he also spends a lot of his limited time and seemingly unlimited energy travelling around the country to unearth creativity, promote new artists and patronise them by buying their work when there are no takers. Consequently, he has amassed a number of art works – but most will not make it to the museum he is planning. While he will gift them to friends who appreciate them, the building he is all set to construct on the 40,000 square feet plot of land he has bought in Aluva, a small town near Kochi, will house the Indian and international art he has been collecting. He is matter-of-fact in that respect, “I

am an artist and I like to share. The important thing is to make your work and show it. There are a lot of young artists who have talent, but unfortunately we don't have any museums in India.”

The museum sketches, plan and model will be on view at *Ghost*, his forthcoming solo show at the Aicon Gallery, London, along with six portraits of migrant Mumbaikars rendered in the *arte povera* style (that employs cheap raw materials) and the compelling *Ghost/ Trans-memoir* installation (LCD monitors embedded into the bellies of 108 metal dabbas suspended on iron scaffolding with the help of hand straps otherwise found



in Mumbai's railway compartments) that was the highlight of the *Gateway Bombay* show at the Peabody Essex Museum in the USA last year. The tangle of wires, straps, headphones and metal containers is a play on the indomitable spirit of a city constantly on the move.

The busy artist has even more ambitious plans up his designer sleeve – among them a mobile library that will transport the collection of books and DVDs that comprise his installation *LaVa* (Laboratory of Visual Arts) to remote villages in the country. He has already taken possession of one of the four trucks he plans to redesign with cupboards, DVD players, seating and toilets for the purpose. The idea is to dispatch them simultaneously to different places, where people who have no access to such reading and viewing material can experience this moving work of art.

In the past four years, Bose Krishnamachari has curated eight shows – beginning with *Bombay Boys* at the Palette Art Gallery, Delhi, in 2004 and culminating in *Affair* at 1x1 Contemporary (whose interiors he also designed) and 1x1 Gallery, Dubai, this year. He initially received flak for promoting artists from Kerala in the shows he curated (especially *Double Enders*, which introduced Kerala's artists to Mumbai and acted as a springboard

to international acclaim for some of them), however he maintains that “a lot of talented artists are coming from Kerala, with the majority being migrant artists.” He likes to bring in a diverse audience for his shows – “I want to make the point that art is not just fine art. I've studied visual art and done a film appreciation course – so architecture, photography, film are all part of my curated shows and my own practice.” Besides curating a show at the Willem Baars Project, Amsterdam this November, and



curating a show every year at Bodhi Space and Bodhi Art, Mumbai from January 2009, recognition of his curatorial skills has also come from Arte Contemporaneo, Madrid, as he has been invited to curate the India Galleries section for ARCO 09.

He insists that what prompted him to begin curating art shows is the absence of good Indian curators and the lack of honesty in the point of view of those who attempt to do so. “Most often it is people with a literature background who turn out to be curators here – writers and critics, so they have a limited awareness of the art practice,” he declares. “Curators should be aware of what is happening, and where to find talent. They should be capable of picking up the spark.” He illustrates by citing the case of CK Rajan, a middle-aged artist whose spark he nourished by selecting him for a show he curated entitled *Spy* in 2007. Soon after, Rajan was invited to show at the Documenta. Held in Kassel, Germany, every five years since 1972, it is considered the most important exhibition of contemporary art and draws attention from all over the world. “That is like the Olympics for an artist, you know,” marvels Bose.

When the artist – who did his Masters at Goldsmith's College (University of London) in the theory and practice of art – curates a show, he does not accept payment from the galleries. “I am an artist. I practice, so I understand the practice as well as the theory. My shows are juxtapositions of talent rather than making meaning out of something. I am not interested in thematic shows, but I do believe in talented artists. Everybody should do well in life.” And that's the real art of Bose Krishnamachari the curator – the art of goodwill towards all. **V**

(*Ghost*, Bose Krishnamachari's solo show of paintings, drawings and installations, will be on view at the Aicon Gallery, London, till August 18).