THE 🐘 HINDU

Living with virtuality

RAMYA SARMA

The Hindu Artist Baiju Parthan. Photo Courtesy: Abhijit Bhatlekar

With his latest show on in London, artist Baiju Parthan reflects on how his exploration of mythology and technology contributes to his art.

He once floated through the halls of a media house, his glasses glinting with an almost-childlike glee as he saw the world from a different perspective. Baiju Parthan drew, he said mildly. From his prolific pen and fertile mind came illustrations that seemed otherworldly, often surreal, bizarre, from a reality that was not easy to visualise, leave alone comprehend; until suddenly, startlingly, it all came together brilliantly. And then he vanished, as suddenly, emerging anew as an artist with the same view of his world, his art selling like the proverbial hotcakes; his image as an artist soaring, albeit in the same gentle, detached, off-earthly way that he always seemed to have around him.

Tell him this and he will laugh, still gently, vaguely embarrassed. He lives in a world that to him is real, though perhaps not always practical, and he sees his art and his former job in the same light.

"I haven't categorised it as 'practical', but respond to a kind of feedback from the condition I live in. At one point in time I needed to survive, but those conditions changed when the job became non-essential. I am not saying that I did not have that idealistic notion when I was a student, that art was art and life were separate and that one should not sell art, etc., but I started looking at it differently. When you are a student you are full of idealism and when you are out of college, you are full of realism. Unless, of course, your tummy is full, you can't produce art!"

Learning something new

Study is a fact of life for Parthan, even today, 'established' as he is as a reputed artist. But to call him an 'intellectual', as many do, makes him blush. "The intellectual side was nurtured when I was a student; I kept on studying, enrolled for distance learning courses. It is a personal quirk of mine; I believe that as long as you keep learning something new, you feel young and hopeful. But I do not think I am an 'intellectual' in the sense of someone who is possessed with the notion of ideas. I am interested in knowledge." And he is also passionate about science, technology and the realm that computers have opened up to him. "I work essentially with 3D graphics directly linked with animation and virtual reality. I am now learning a bit of programming with Python, a scripted language used in 3D procedural animation."

This kind of not-all-there air hides a very sharp mind that is open and absorbing. And that has come from his youth, reveals Parthan, who is originally from Kerala but studied art in Goa. "I came from a very Marxian background with extremely well defined ideas to conform to social norms. I met this group of people that were the opposite and were much happier and for the first time I realised that I had a choice. This changed me. I was exposed to a lot of not-so-mainstream literature that was mind-bending and loosened up my ideas of the world. I did get very interested in anthropological studies, sculpture, mythology, all adding to my artistic growth." And he created his own reality in the process. As Parthan says, "Reality is what you make of it; it is up to you to extract meaning from it, depending on the peculiarities of your perceptual framework. You see the world depending on who you are and what you are. My whole idea of art itself got shaken up, almost 30 years ago. We were taught Western art history, as part of the curriculum; I was quite disillusioned that you had to be of British or Western origin to be an artist of substance. That was when I started becoming realist and earned a living."

From there on, it was all about exploration for Parthan. "At some point I got deeply involved in philosophy: the definition of the self in the western and eastern modes of thinking. The western self is self-aware and separated from what is around to become what you are; the eastern is more an inclusion that makes you what you are. The eastern self is also more inclined towards metaphysical thinking, while the western sees cause and effect. The way the self is organized defines how you make art." His own quest is something to do with knowledge "Every new piece of knowledge, once imbibed, can never be undone. I try and transform myself through learning...how far you can extend

yourself into yourself, your immediate family, the community, the nation. I have lived in a personal bubble, totally involved with my own pursuits ... job, art, whatever. One blocks out the environment to do what one is doing. At some point I decided that maybe I was being unfair to the rest of my life."

Symbiotic

His interest in technology, married to his passion for mythology is reflected in his art. Parthan sees them as symbiotic. "I think technology and mythology feed off each other. I am always hunting for metaphors that can be translated into symbols used in art. I studied mythology and got a chance to pit different systems against each other and find motifs like the hero myth, creation, etc. I am a hardcore science fiction junkie – that is where the two meet for me. Metaphysical becomes science fiction – Matrix is essentially the hero myth in a cyberpunk environment! You start finding parallels in these worlds." All narratives are indirectly quests of some kind. I enjoy the whole aspect of technology because it shifts perceptions, makes us extend our own selves in newer ways into the environment we live in."

The Show

Dislocation: Milljunction Part II @ Aicon Gallery, London, July 15 – August 20, 2011.

Baiju Parthan's new show at the Aicon Gallery in London is a solo, Dislocation: Milljunction Part II, which includes painting, photography, video and lenticular prints. Different styles of painting coexist within a single frame in some works, while in others, there seems to be a time-space continuum, with two different realities working together. There is a mirror effect in some; in others, computer code races vertically. Which world are you in, as a viewer? Are you in today or a time that is long past, that may not actually have existed? And should you be joyous, maddened, angered or just plain confused? That depends on you. Parthan just handles the controls in a subtle, clever, almost disturbing manner.

The artist explains: "This is actually part two of my solo, Mill Junction, held in New York in March, 2010. It was originally planned as a dual location show simultaneously opening in two venues of the Aicon Gallery, but I couldn't come up with the required number of works at the time. Hence the slightly modified title - Displacement- Mill Junction 2. It is about 'Bombay/Mumbai' as a city that exists in retrospect, solely as memory or recollection. It is also about how these memories get erased or modified through technological and social change." Parthan uses the city's iconic presences to describe the vestiges of a fast-changing cityscape. "The most coherent aspect of Bombay is the mill area – there's really no coherence otherwise through the city, since so many people live so many lives. In all Bollywood movies, the early black and white ones especially, the mill and the worker is so prominent. I haven't lived here during that time, but the vestiges of that reality still exist, seen in the symbols and motifs strewn around. As we move forward in time, the motifs vanish gradually – the mills become towers, the taxis give way to cars. I am trying to relate to them more personally, making a point of view."

The show has "paintings as well as modified photographs or photoworks, a combination of photographs and 3D graphics elements. The paintings form a series of 'soft graffiti' and are derived from photographic references. The paintings are intentionally defaced with over-painted ASCII computer code - today the (digital) photograph is actually a document made up of ASCII code which is parsed/translated into the image by the computer." Three photo-works titled 'Lunch Break' present the city environment from the vantage point of someone engaged in a First Person Shooter game (FPS computer games), an oblique reference to the vandalism the city is often subjected to by some political party or the other. Two large photoworks Titled 'Chorus' and 'Monument' are lenticular prints that create a virtual 3D-like space.

According to Parthan, "The show is also about the softening of our reality experience as information/digital technology and economy conquers every domain of human activity. Probably this is the first time in our intellectual history that we have two categories of reality overlapping each other – virtual and real - we have augmented our reality with virtuality." But the virtual transactions that we do, from paying bills to shopping to social networking, which happen away from hard-edged physical reality, soften the experience of everyday reality.

Keywords: Baiju Parthan, graphics and art

.