

Late Style and *Naked* Representation in the Works by K.G. Subramanyan

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The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but fur-rowed, even ravaged.

...and they show more traces of history than of growth.

-- Theodor Adorno [1]

The recent exhibition on K.G. Subramanyan, held at Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, between September 20 and October 11, 2024, has been one of several events lined up to celebrate the centenary year of the artist. Curated by art historian R. Sivakumar, the exhibition centrally works with the idea of 'late style.' In recent times, this term and trope has gained prominence within the curatorial discourse on contemporary Indian art. In 2014, Geeta Kapur curated *Five Exhibitions* at the Chemould Gallery, Mumbai, in which 'late style' featured in her reading of the works produced by Baroda-based artist, Bhupen Khakhar, towards the end of his life while he was battling cancer. In the case of the Subramanyan show, 'late style' harks back as much to Theodor Adorno as it does to Edward Said, [2] to primarily allude to music produced by an aging musician. Given the expertise that decades of experience bring to artists towards the end of their careers, their late productions exude a new energy, experimentation and verve. Different from their earlier mastery, the late works defy the logic of linear time. Unlike the metaphor of a plant used by art historian, Giorgio Vasari, to narrate different stages of artistic growth -- from a bud to a flower, and then to a fruit that ultimately decays -- an artist in a late style may lose the roundness of a perfect fruit. Instead, furrows of introspection and self-reflectivity about finitude shape work without discounting a certain playfulness.

It is this sense of a 'late style' that is proposed by Sivakumar as a new lens to see the works of Subramanyan from the last decade of his life. Does the awareness of time felt by the artist, that he had more years behind him than ahead, impact his work? Most of the displays have a quality of quick notations, as pointed out by the curator. The viewer would also notice that majority of these works are in gouache on handmade paper, with a few digital prints thrown in. Be that as it may, they appear almost like coloured sketches, as if caught between a preliminary drawing and a finished work. They capture 'work in progress' or 'thinking in action.' Most notably,

they are largely without titles. They span a range of genres that populate Subramanyan's oeuvre: portraits, landscapes, still life, female nudes, and even allegories. But they reappear in these works with a twist. These pieces are less paintings, than paintings on paintings, as they take the form of Subramanyan's commentary on his own practice. As if commenting on his methods, Subramanyan concentrates on frames within a frame, a familiar formal device that marks his signature style of painting. What is striking though is the manner in which such meta elements appear through figurative enactments. For example, a 2015 work has a girl standing outside the frame and yet pointing at it. Her gesture allows for a double reading -- it is both a deictic device to signal an act of speaking, and at the same time, it marks the artist's self-consciousness about the use of frames that divide the surface into smaller registers.



K.G. Subramanyan, "Untitled," Gouache on handmade paper, 2015



K.G. Subramanyan, "Untitled," Gouache on handmade paper, 2008

Turning to another painting from 2008, it is as if some characters from Subramanyan's earlier works have stepped out to look at themselves as painted subjects, or react to other painted images. Works of this kind, though painted with performative gusto and apparent spontaneity, fold in the narrative and the 'thinking about painting' within the same frame. In this manner, they end up qualifying themselves as paintings on paintings. If, at one end of the spectrum, there exists these meta paintings that appear to enable painted characters to turn into painted spectators by a reorientation along a 180-degree axis, at the other end are Subramanyan's most extraordinary paintings of the animal world, invested in high dexterity and skilful brushstrokes. With a few black calligraphic notations, cocks, crows, foxes and tigers come to life. Pent up with energy, they strive to speak with open beaks and mouths.



K.G. Subramanyan, "Untitled," Gouache on handmade paper, 2015

Subramanyan's oeuvre is largely dominated by glimpses of domestic interiors in which figures (often couples) enact their rendezvous. It is a fabricated world, where power structures often get inverted, and women, frequently dressed as goddesses, cock a snook at men. In several instances, there is a fusion of the interiors and exteriors, or even an intimation of an in-between space, where not only the sacred and the profane intermingle, but even genres collide. For example, a still life converses with a landscape, as seen in the view outside a window. While landscapes make fleeting appearances, what is even more rare is a cityscape, adorned with mass-produced images. This is part of a series painted in 2010, which has "Bangladesh" written in place of the artist's signature (this explains the recurring motif of mosques in these works). Out of this series, the most unusual painting depicts tall skyscrapers lining a dark and desolate path. In place of people on the streets, there are large billboards sprawled on building facades, featuring mainly female figures. Exuding a spectral presence, these second order images lead our eyes towards a mosque-like building receding into the distance.



K.G. Subramanyan, "Untitled," Watercolour on paper, 2010

Such an extraordinary work within his oeuvre is nonchalantly named "Untitled." One wonders why more specific titles here are considered redundant. Yet, if we listen to the images, they speak, they argue, and talk back. The responsibility of meaning making does not lie with the captions, but is fully transferred to the visual elements within each frame. These visually eloquent paintings reminded me of a question posed provocatively by the pioneering visual studies scholar, Susan Buck-Morss. We always need words to talk about paintings, but can paintings 'talk' about themselves using the language of painting? [3]

Words never eluded Subramanyan, as he was as adept with verbal language as he was with his visual imagination and skills. But the works presented in this show concentrate on visual arguments on picture making: that you can think with images, and converse with them, not via words but through other images. To me, his late style revolves around not only the salience of addressing what images want and about thinking visually. It also manifests itself when "the conventions find expression as the naked representation of themselves." [4]

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Figure Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," *Essays on Music*, Selected, with Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Richard Leppert, and New Translations by Susan H. Gillespie (University of California Press, 2002), 566.

[2] Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (Pantheon Books, 2006), 7.

[3] Susan Buck-Morss, *Visual Culture Questionnaire, October* (published by the MIT Press), 77 (Summer 1996): 30.

[4] Adorno, "Late Style in Beethoven," in *Essays on Music*, 566.