

## **For One To Be So Many: The Many Semblances of K.G. Subramanyan**

### **Sneha Biswas**

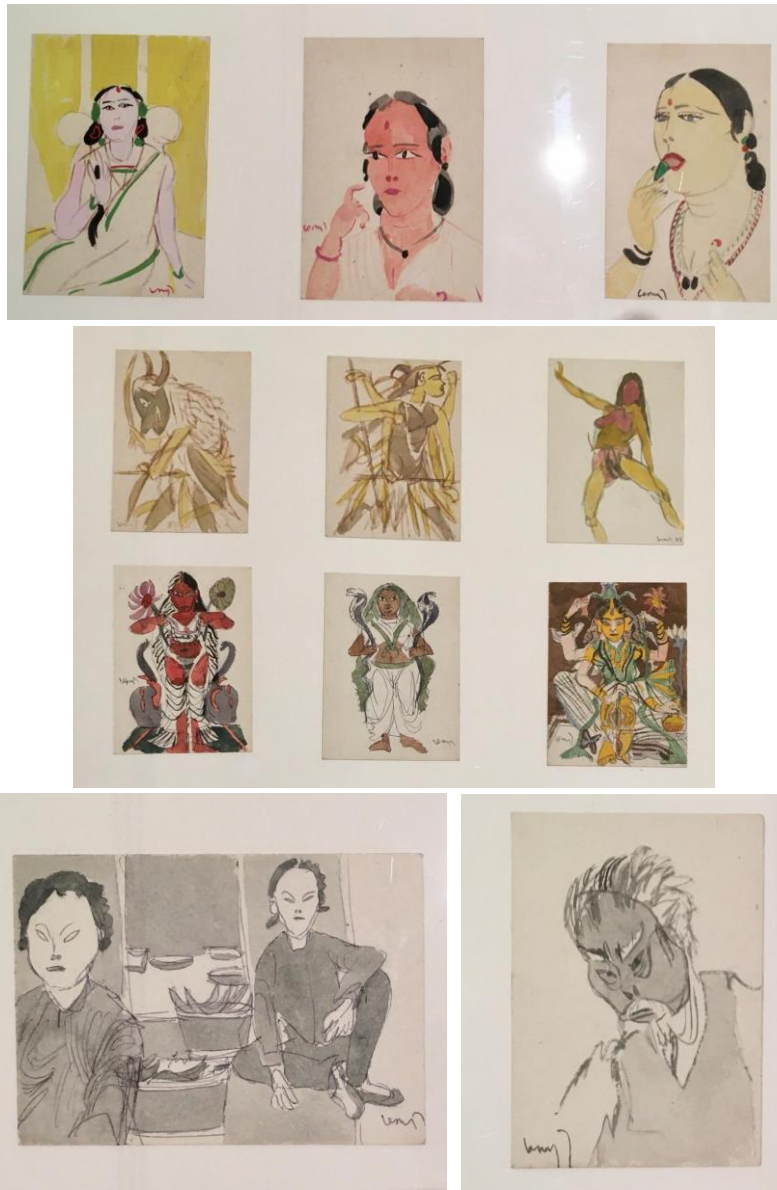
Among the various events that have marked the ongoing centenary celebrations of the well-known Indian modernist is the exhibition, *One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-Scripting KG Subramanyan*, curated by Nancy Adajania for Emami Art, Kolkata. The show is an ambitious, research-based survey that revisits the master artist in his most authentic self and with ceaseless relevance. Subramanyan's modernism was not grounded in the tenets of European modernism, but rather driven by the Petrarchan modernist attitude of pedagogical self-fashioning. A man of letters, he kept reinventing his aesthetic and political sensibilities throughout his life. Adajania captures this as she innovatively selects and brings together a comprehensive display of Subramanyan's lifelong work, including his sketches, paintings, sculptures, illustrations, toys, and writings, each of which reveals his in-depth knowledge of global contexts, while being deeply rooted in his own culture and tradition. She also reflects on how he honed his art as a craft, and the role he played as an institution builder, emphasizing that artists must educate and cultivate their talent.

The exhibition opens with a character from one of Subramanyan's children's books, *Robby*, first published in 1972 for the Fine Arts Fair of MS University, Baroda, and later printed by Seagull, Calcutta. The character is depicted as 'many' and 'none' at the same time. He is called by various monikers like "Baba", "Dumpling", "Booby" and "Silly", but claims he can be even more things—an ant, a bird, the funny bunny, etc. Subramanyan's scoffing humour shines through in the closing lines: "Do you think it is funny for one to be so many?" This feels like a charged, persuasive rhetorical question, the spirit of which travels through large vinyl print cutout stickers of other monochromatic figures from the same book, pasted on the surrounding floors and walls. Another similarly quirky figure can be found in Subramanyan's modern reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* in his 1996 children's book, *How Hanu Became Hanuman*. In this contemporized retelling, the ordinary ape Hanu becomes a heroic figure through his virtuous act of rescuing Raghu's abducted wife. The stories of the epic, and its divine characters of Ram and Hanuman, are reimagined as the Western superheroes Batman and Superman, as the artist appeals to the children of a newly globalized nation. As we journey through the exhibition, this fusion of cultural narratives and identities that permeates Subramanyan's oeuvre is vividly showcased in more masterful polymorphic representations.



May be  
 they named me  
 Robby.  
 But Pa calls me Baba  
 Ma calls me Dumpling  
 Sis calls me Booby  
 And Aunt calls me Silly  
 But I can be more still  
 Like the ant in the anthill  
 Like the bird in the birdcage  
 a funny little bunny  
 or jolly little polly  
 or a big-belted tiger  
 or a spot-quilted leopard  
 or a rip-roaring lion  
 or a gut-goring bison  
 or a but-butting billy  
 or a strut-strutting peacock  
 Spiky-spoky hedgehog  
 Gawky-walky camel  
 Do you think it is funny  
 For one to be so many?

Illustrations and poem from the children's book, *Robby*,  
 published by K.G. Subramanyan at the 1972 Fine Arts Fair in MS University, Baroda.



**(top and middle row) Postcard-sized casual works of female figures and goddesses.  
(bottom row) Sketches of women and an old bearded man from K.G. Subramanyan's 1985 trip to China.**

On a nearby table are postcard-sized quick sketches and small paintings of female figures, goddesses, hermaphrodites, landscapes, and illustrations of local people Subramanyan drew during this visit to China in 1985 on an invitation from the Chinese Artists Association. Quoting Siva Kumar, the curator states that Subramanyan was more interested in the daily lives of ordinary villagers than in the tourist spots and monuments of the region.

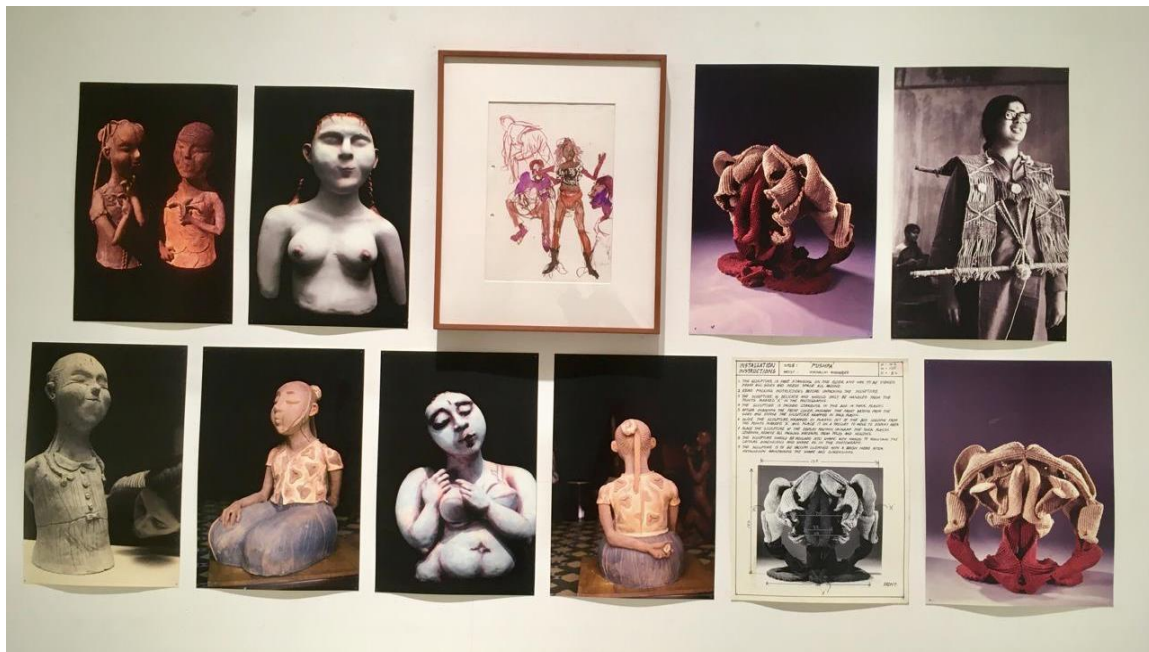
Subramanyan always invokes an incredible sense of active, playful transformation toward a new kind of becoming. His works are never still; they are infused with constant motion, an active 'kinesis' at the borders of otherness, but where the borders do not alienate but create a super-charged hybridization. As Homi K. Bhabha would put it, this does not imply impurity or degeneration but an arrival at new epistemic values, that blur the lines between fine art and craft, artist and craftsman, pre-modern and modern.



**(left) Sketches and collages by K.G. Subramanyan, Nandalal Bose, and Benode Behari Mukherjee arranged together. (right) Photographs of Abanindranath Tagore's Kutum Katam Toys (1930s onwards).**

Adajania not only points towards this fluid hybridity within Subramanyan's work, she does so by placing him in the context of his creative seniors/mentors and students, with whom he shared influences but also had differences. This comparative engagement is brought alive through interwoven montages of images and information in sections where Subramanyan's sketches and collages are juxtaposed with those by Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherjee, his toys sit close to Abanindranath Tagore's Kutum Katam pieces shaped out of drift wood, and images of his sculptures mingle with those by Pushpamala N. and Mrinalini Mukherjee. Adajania also builds an interesting connection between the oft-recurring figure of the *bahurupi* in Subramanyan's paintings and Ritwik Ghatak's representation of this same type in his film *Subarnarekha* (1965). Much like the character of Robby, this figure too highlights the potential of constantly shifting identities and forms.

Given the fact that Subramanyan's works are utterly aesthetic, Adajania succeeds in her attempt at guiding our minds towards a deeper critical discourse, rather than merely experiencing the exhibition for its aesthetic appeal. The imaginative associations made by the curation and the detailed wall labels allow viewers to go beyond a mere admiration of the beauty and creativity of the individual exhibits, opening their eyes to a coherent new perspective on the artist's broader intentions.



**Pushpamala N., Mrinalini Mukherjee, and K.G. Subramanyan's female figures arranged together.**

Adajania also introduces a feminist and psychological perspective in interpreting Subramanyan's representation of the female figure, which is often libidinally charged, aggressive, and perhaps slightly regressive. Frequently appearing as masquerades, carnal and pugnacious in bodily gestures, Subramanyan's female forms evoke anxiety and suspicion. Pushpamala and Mrinalini Mukherjee's female renditions are placed alongside Subramanyan's, to emphasize the contrast between a benevolent and a malevolent gaze. However, Adajania cautions against interpreting this solely as Subramanyan's unconscious misogynistic tendency, noting that there is also room for a sympathetic gaze.



(top left) K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*. Watercolour and ink on paper, 11.5 x 8 in.

(top right) K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*, 2001. Ink on paper, 10.5 x 7.25 in.

(bottom left) K.G. Subramanyan, *Polyptich 2*, 1998. Watercolour and oil on mylar sheet, 42 x 32.5 in.

(bottom right) K.G. Subramanyan, *Ageless Combat I*, 1998. Watercolour and oil on acrylic sheet, 75 x 51 in.

Subramanyan aptly sums up the energetic mood of many of his figures by calling them “dithyrambic”, alluding to the frenzied hymns dedicated to Dionysus in ancient Greece. Adajania also describes his art as “Dionysian” and “Rabelaisian”, hinting at a primitive core concerned with appetite—both sexual and consumptive behaviours—related to fight-or-flight responses. This suggests that instinctual drives determine human choices and actions beneath the guise of civilization. The curator further highlights the striking polarity in Subramanyan’s aesthetic choices. Like Rabelais, who revealed the truth about ideas and forms without appealing to the falsity of Platonic ideals, Subramanyan challenges these notions. He experiments with forms, textures and strokes, moving away from blending and naturalizing effects to embrace crude expressionism. Celebrating the graphic, the humorous and frivolous, Subramanyan eschews momentousness for a makeshift, craft-like effect with half-finished lines on abrupt, bare surfaces. Far from traditional European realism, his art does not tame fantastical imaginaries but caricatures, exaggerates and energizes forms and figures, making them demand full attention with their blazing presence.

A self-described fabulist, Subramanyan’s images also reject the serious loftiness typically associated with tradition. Instead, they provide testimonies of his inexhaustible reinvention of tradition, as he takes established motifs, making them lighter and free from the burden of representing the ‘Ideal’. His characters are neither purely sacred nor wholly deranged. For instance, he uses the *bahurupi* persona to represent gods and goddesses, rendering these divine beings as semblances or masks worn by ordinary, faceless subjects. A certain pantheism is at work, suggesting the divine resides in all, especially in the underrepresented (the class which anyway dresses up in these theatrical guises to earn a living).





Kala Bhavan campus at Santiniketan, and offer a sneak peek into his working process and collaborations with assistants like Gyarsilal Verma and Dilip Mitra.

While the exhibition does not focus on Subramanyan's tryst with politics, it uses his works to subtly reveal his profound political consciousness. This is evident across a range of works—the allegorical children's story, *The Tale of the Talking Face*, a veiled satire on the 1975 Emergency and the trappings of dictatorial power; a painting of an overstuffed peacock throne, which can be interpreted as a critique of hyper nationalism; and his final mural, *War of the Relics*, which captures the horrors of the Bangladesh War. In each case, the artist lays the groundwork for representing truth under the veil of fiction and fabulism, embodying the belief that truth is accessible only in its many semblances.

***One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-Scripting KG Subramanyan* is on view from April 5 to June 21, 2024, at Emami Art, Kolkata.**

#### **FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**All images are exhibition views courtesy of the author and Emami Art, Kolkata.**

*Sneha Biswas has a background in Art History and English Literature and is a practitioner and researcher, deeply engaged in the intersections of visual arts, critical thinking, and psychoanalysis.*