

MURMUR OF THE HEART;

MURMUR OF THE STREET

The Street. A place for many people. To move about. To reach a destination. To shop. To parade. To wait. To sing. To dance. To beg. To steal. To hide. To protest. To demonstrate. To hug. To slap. To moan. To bereave.

The street reveals a strange but authentic reality. A grandly walking policeman evokes fear. A long and eagerly waiting lover on the footpath makes for a moving sight. A one-minute salesman of umbrellas or plastic photo-albums, a ragged beggar picking lice from the unkempt hair, a bicycle thief, a nimble fingered pickpocket, a little girl who has lost her way, a whore with red lips and hungry stomach... they are all there. On the street. The found and the abandoned.

The street is littered with a million physical and metaphoric allusions. It is a place of many emotions, feelings, and meanings. It touches all the senses. It hides and creates tales: some concluded, many unfinished. It brings out the sham and hypocrisy of city life. And as one writer succinctly put it, street is a mirror calling down shimmering images.

No wonder, for both the poet and the painter, the street provides a fascinating stage to take the creative call.

* * *

From air to air,

like an empty net,

dredging through streets and ambient atmosphere,

I came....

- PABLO NERUDA

Yusuf Arakkal is a part-time poet and full-time painter. For him, the street holds special significance. Ever since he, as a young teenager, left home seeking an unknown destination in art, he has had a close association with it. His life and work have owed an absolute allegiance to it. For several weeks after leaving home the street became his home quite actually. As importantly, it doubled up as a classroom teaching some very important lessons that stand etched for a lifetime.

The street had then left its ineradicable impressions, marks, wounds and scars on the young and budding artist. Even as he emerged from its shadows and built a successful career and reputation, the street came back to Yusuf again and again; in reality, in dreams, and in images. Its haunting echoes reverberated on many of his expressive canvases with flickering colours and nostalgic rhythms. In every single series Yusuf has painted, the memories of street life have revisited him - with fresh views, knowledge and understanding.

Today, Yusuf is a well-recognized and respected artist. His art has been hailed by critics, collectors and connoisseurs. Numerous shows have carried his images across the country and outside. The artist himself is well settled in material security and comfort. Yet, in a corner of his heart, lives a young boy - orphaned before he was seven - with barely thirteen rupees in his pocket facing up to a fearful, lonely and uncertain world. His is a silent presence. Unspoken. Unimposing. Unforgettable. Unforgotten.

* * *

I painted, and my picture was like life;

I gave my figures movement, passion, soul:

They breathed...

- ANNIBAL CARO

The street scenes painted by Yusuf in this series present compassionate portraits of ordinary people integrated to a murky landscape. Sustained by subtle overtones of inner-city strains and tensions, they articulate a common if silent lingo, not proscribed by any academic vocabulary or scholastic syllabary.

The people in these images might not be the only ones Yusuf encountered in the isolated by-lanes of Bangalore several decades ago as an orphan and an emigrant. They include people he has seen in London, Lisbon, Singapore, and other places in recent times. The locale matters little, though. For, regardless of their residence, they are all inheritors of the same universal feelings, human affiliations and fundamental afflictions.

Brushed with a subtle touch of wry humour, they represent the real man on the street that is engrossed in his own simple worldly activities. He is an ordinary man, leading ordinary life; walking and waking, riding and reading, lazing and loafing, speaking and stirring, thinking and waiting... The engrossing depths and enduring perspectives of Yusuf's paintings absorb his ordinariness; his simple bicycle, newspaper, coffee table, mobile phone, crutch... Engulfed by a deep silence and solitude, the burden of loneliness sewed closely to the sweat of his toil, he still manages to hold on to a soft, tender but a firmly affirmative view of life. Knowingly or unknowingly, he also rejoices the sweetness of his freedom and choice.

Yusuf sights him under flickering light, along sepia smokescreens, long plastered walls, and mystifying pathways. Vertical and diagonal lines come unannounced on the images moving the eye to secretive corners and crevices. The cracks in the wall, the rough, grainy and falling plaster, and the vague signboards are the only props on view. The Warholian construct of repetitive image is not a ploy but an intentional tool to clasp the severity of loneliness and solitude. And bear a graphic authenticity of textured time and claustrophobic space.

In two fascinating triptychs, Yusuf presents a lonely kid looking at you with a sharp piercing stare. There is fear in his eye. There is also anger, a streak of protest, a silent defiance. As you look at the multiple images gnawing at you, you start wondering whether the murmur on the street could possibly be the murmur of his heart.

GIRIDHAR KHASNIS