

Manav Gupta

Essay by H. E Monika Mohta

I have known Manav for more than a decade now as one of the foremost contemporary artists of our country and a wonderful human being. I had a first-hand experience of the sensitivity, maturity, and depth of his versatile oeuvre, when I was the Director of Nehru Centre, London. We had hosted his exhibition, in 2010, titled ‘Ganga to Thames, on my eyot. Rainforests and the Timeless metaphors of dreams. An ode to Turner. A tribute to Tagore.’

‘Rainforests’, ‘Rivers’ and the ‘five elements of Nature’, and how people from different parts of the world relate to the issues of water, are recurring themes in his art journey.

At the Nehru Centre, he laid out a river full of plastics, amidst the exhibition, improvising with limited resources and material, to draw home the message of sustainable living – a consistent echo in his art practice since his very early beginnings, much before climate change became widespread conversation. Viewers were drawn to the mastery of light and colour in his paintings at the exhibition. I was not surprised at all when two of his works from the series, that were chosen by two different London based NGOs, for fundraisers for the underprivileged, did so well – one at Christie’s, London and the other at a Philip de Pury auction at Kensington Palace. Over the last decade his work has grown manifold.

I had a chance to attend one of his public art projects at the India Habitat Centre, Delhi in 2015 and experience the invention he is now known for – that of transforming quintessential Indian pottery into an international vocabulary of contemporary art, taking local to global. He had created a river in the heart of the city, as a large-scale installation. What was particularly interesting is that he did not stop there. On the bedrock of his creation, he invited public participation. A call to people to light a lamp at his ‘Ganga Waterfront’ brought a soul connect to the sacred river of our land. And he took its context beyond borders and religion to a global perspective of creating consciousness about respecting water and rivers, bringing environmental responsibility. It had an overwhelming effect. Everyone present carried back a lasting message that his art brought to light. Over and above, he created an outreach programme at the Waterfront with performances by leading dancers and musicians, dialogues between important stakeholders of society, to create an inclusive sensibility to his art’s message.

His environmental art movement had imbibed clay as its medium in 2013, in South Africa, where he first laid out a shrinking river, with inverted earthen lamps as droplets of water, at the floor of the National Museum, Pretoria. And he has built a formidable legacy of his art since then, addressing pressing global issues of sustainable development, water and climate change. His ‘excavations in hymns of clay’ series and his ‘arth – art for earth’ project are moving; the likes of which should equal, if not stand out, amidst the highest standards of quality in the international art world. And in the annals of history. His transformation of ‘chillam’ into ‘Rain’ and ‘Beehives’ and inverting the earthen lamp into a droplet of water to form the ‘River’, stand testimony to his power of thought, ideas, genius and his artistic brilliance. People have praised his innovations and the way he takes his art to the masses, the way his art embraces open sylvan spaces, trees, as well as architecture.

Manav is truly unique. And so is his art. His contribution to our great nation's art and culture landscape is unquestionable. I congratulate him on his twenty-five-year retrospective and wish him all success in his future endeavors.