

Kaleidoscope of creativity

By Diane de Beer, Arts Editor, South Africa

He first discovered art when he found it tough to deal with his emotions. He turned to his earlier happier life, revisited the environment that offered safety and warmth and drew on all of that to create his beautiful paintings.

Manav Gupta, who trained in Kolkata at the Academy of Fine Arts under Rathin Maitra and under his guru Vasant Pandit and currently works in New Delhi, is exhibiting Rainforests and the Circle of Life, hosted by the Indian High Commissioner, Virendra Gupta. It is a travelling trilogy of paintings, installations, films and performance on display at Pretoria's National Museum of Cultural History in Visagie Street until March 10.

"This was long before people were talking about climate change," he says.

But even as a young man, he knew he was connected to nature. And this was how this travelling exhibition was first developed, because of his wish to spread the message in a different way.

"People talk on many different levels about the climate and their concerns but sometimes the softer dimensions of the environment is lost."

That's what he hoped to capture with a series of promotional films, paintings large and small, performance art and installations.

Because of logistics, mostly out of his control, the full breadth of the exhibition isn't possible in the current showing, but if you can catch the artist on the premises, he will talk you through the work, a rewarding experience.

For an outsider, the references are there and one or two of the bigger works have an Indian feel, but it is the use of Indian philosophy and spirituality that centres rather than dominates the work. The approach is contemporary. There's a universal quality about his work that would make it difficult to pinpoint the continent it comes from.

Light, and thus hope, is what drives his work in a metaphorical and practical sense.

"It seeks you out," he says, and that is what inspires his quest for light.

Colour also comes into play. Something, he says, nurtures the soul, and has many different levels.

He had many cross-cultural influences as a child as his parents, who were both scholars, introduced and surrounded him with this richly diverse world. But more than anything, nature is the one single element that nurtured him most.

"I can only try to convey what I have experienced," he explains, noting he cannot paint cosmetically.

And perhaps that's why his paintings leave one with an emotional rather than intellectual response. But that's only part of it.

The fullness of his work only becomes clear as he talks about his performances which he derived from an ancient Indian experience called jugalbandi which means collaboration but in the past it was always a conversation between two musicians.

"I wondered why an artist and musician couldn't do the same?"

And this is where his live drawing started. Some of his country's most respected musicians have come on board and while they perform a particular piece of music, he will paint something in response to what the music says to him.

"I have always loved music and it made sense to me to try something like this," notes Manav, whose curiosity keeps propelling him into new worlds of consciousness.

Scale doesn't scare him even though most of the work displayed locally is almost postcard-size. One of his biggest challenges was painting a mural on a six-storey building, a corporate affair, expansive in scale.

"They wanted to create something that would make the building live," he explains.

And what he came up with is simply brilliant. He invited all the employees of Airtel, one of India's largest telecom companies, to participate.

"I used their work simply as colour and went from there," he notes.

What he created is similar to the movie Tree of Life. This is the tallest and largest three-dimensional indoor staircase mural by an artist — it covers about 464m² of visible frontage through a glass façade and 928m² of total painted surface.

Working on a 360° platform of canvases, video installations and performances he has also collaborated with dance troupes and audiences in public art projects besides his performances and exhibitions at different venues.

Gupta's works have been sold by Christie's, Bonhams, Phillip de Pury and are in leading permanent public collections around the world including the Parliament of India, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Royal family of Oman, Indian embassies abroad, Chitrakala Parishad and Birla Academy museums.

He has co-authored a book of poems and paintings with former President of India Dr APJ Abdul Kalam. He also creates single edition functional sculptures and public installations with varied media including iron, steel, wood, discarded roots of trees, glass, recycled scrap metal and clay for interior and exterior corporate and private spaces.

"It's all about the learning experience," he says.

Not only will he grow, so do those who experience his work. If you want to see how he reflects the light, first contact the artist, and see if he can walk you through the work — on site.