

anatomy lessons

16 July – 30 September, 2016

K. G. SUBRAMANYAN (1924 – 2016)

Artist . Pedagogue . Poet . Scholar

Celebrating his indomitable spirit

Curated by Roobina Karode



K.G. Subramanyan, *Anatomy Lesson*, 2008, Terracotta reliefs, 30 x 30 inches each. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art is pleased to present an exhibition celebrating the spirit of late artist K. G. Subramanyan who passed away on June 29, 2016. The exhibition explores his multifaceted persona, as an artist, pedagogue, poet, scholar, and an institution-builder. It includes 60 artworks from the KNMA collection, with few loans from private collections, his poems, illustrated books for children, reproductions of letters written to stalwarts like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Jyoti Basu and Benodebehari Mukherjee, and a video of images and material from his archives. 'Anatomy Lessons' also brings to public view his early works done in late 1940s and 1950s. The exhibition opens Subramanyan's creative world of story-telling to the viewers, inviting them to interweave their own narratives in the play-field revealed by his marvelous meditations that has influenced the younger generation of artists.

Below is the curatorial note on the exhibition by Roobina Karode, Director & Chief-curator, KNMA:

At 92, K. G. Subramanyan's undiminished spirit made an exit to rest forever in peace. A few years ago, I visited him in Santiniketan while in his late 80s. He was working on a mural, perched precariously on a ladder and in full action it was clear that his charged spirit hardly ever surrendered to his ripening age as he continued to enjoy the process of creating, with the enthusiasm of a child. What an incredible

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journey and a fulfilling life story has K. G. Subramanyan left behind for us, besides his prolific practice as an artist, it is a life hard to sum up in words and images.

The title of the exhibition 'anatomy lessons' thus addresses the artist's play with figuration, his myriad ways of drawing and painting life as it unfolds each day, rephrasing and reconfiguring his observations and awareness about the natural, animal, and human world. In a literal sense and as a response to the precarious world he witnessed in his later years, it highlights human atrocities through dismemberment in this terracotta frieze, with fragmented limbs and severed bodies, ripped apart in the streets, visible not too far from the window of one's home.

At KNMA, we believed it was most befitting to pay tribute to an artist who has been one of the pillars of 20th and 21st century art in India by mounting an exhibition from the KNMA Collection. K. G. Subramanyan could draw the world from so many angles and bring in perspectives from many cultures – his vantage point was never fixed, but always mobile. The exhibition presents to the viewers' glimpses of the artist and his versatility as a thinker, pedagogue, poet, and scholar through extracts from his writings, letters, poems, children's book illustrations along with imagery painted in various ways. His art practice embraced and expanded the use of an array of materials and mediums, where even scribbles, doodles, and sketches were instrumental in evolving an extensive visual vocabulary. The exhibition also presents select archival material from his archives digitized and facilitated by the Asia Art Archive.

K. G. Subramanyan's oeuvre represents conceptual richness and a remarkable deftness of his craft. His early works from the 1940s onwards emphasize his alert eye and receptive mind, responding to a spectrum of optical references from disparate traditions, evocatively drawing and painting schematic figures, motifs, signs and gestures, seeking equivalents of all experiences in a visual language. Our attention is drawn to the nuanced play between the graphic and painterly, precise rendering and freer brushwork, surface patterning and structural design, the decorative and expressive, working towards evolving a syncretic pictorial language. The formal and spatial articulation in Subramanyan's work thrives on strategies of hide and seek, opening of windows and closing of doors, prompting our gaze to peep inside and then step back to witness from a distance 'the unfolding of multiple stories'.



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K.G. Subramanyan, *Courting the shadows*, 2001, Oil on canvas. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*, 1993, Mixed media on paper. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*, 1981, Oil on paper. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

With great ease, he captures the delicate expression of Oriental painting and moves across the globe to examine strands of modernism in the West. His multi-directional practice overruled the divides of art and craft, past and present, high and popular aesthetics to open and stretch the vast ground available to rethink the possibilities of the 'modern' in the Indian context.



K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*, 1957, Mixed media on paper. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*, 1987, Ink & watercolour on paper. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

K.G. Subramanyan, *Untitled*, 1996, Mixed media on paper. Collection Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi

The exhibition brings together his first experiments in the medium of oil, for instance, in the *Mother and Child* painted in 1953, some works on silk and on board as well using gouache with a varnish. Viewers will enjoy the visual subtleties expressed in his reverse paintings on glass and acrylic, a medium he mastered and became an influence for artists from successive generations. The figural, abstract, and the decorative were interspersed in the vivid representation of both the mythic and the everyday. K. G. Subramanyan enjoyed the celebration of life in all its forms.

While working on this exhibition that celebrates the versatility and fabular adventures of the legendary artist, we were once again in the company of the vivid storyteller, the pied piper, the puppeteer-magician who playfully tricked his images into performative gestures, animating them with the stroke of his brush.

Roobina Karode
Curator