

**One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-Scripting KG Subramanyan**

Curated by Nancy Adajania

Preview on: April 5 – June 21 2024 | 4 PM – 8 PM

Dates: April 5 – June 21 2024 | 11 AM – 7 PM (Sundays closed)

Emami Art, Ground Floor  
Gallery 1 & 2

**The Exhibition is presented by Emami Art in collaboration with Seagull and Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, Baroda.**

**Other collaborators: Kolkata Centre for Creativity and KCC-Conservation Lab.**

**Overview**

In April 2024, Emami Art opens a major research-based, retrospective-scale exhibition of Indian modernist KG Subramanyan (1924-2016), curated by curator and cultural theorist Nancy Adajania. Marking his birth centenary year, this wide-ranging and critical survey, the largest in eastern India after his death, will situate and re-assess the artist in the larger cultural scenario of postcolonial India's unfolding modernism and affirm the continuing relevance of his practice.

Widely recognized as one of the most versatile and prolific artists, Subramanyan was also a great writer, thinker and pedagogue who studied art at Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan under Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij, and at the Slade School of Art, London. Spanning more than seven decades of his practice, this exhibition will feature more than 200 works, including his early paintings from the 1950s, iconic reverse paintings on acrylic, gouaches, marker pen works on paper, postcard-size drawings (especially his perceptive impressions of his Chinese travels from the 1980s), inventive toys made for the Fine Arts Fairs at the MS University, Baroda, between 1962 and 1979, and a significant amount of archival material not seen before such as handcrafted mock-ups of children's books, preparatory sketches for murals, and the maquettes for his powerful 'The War of the Relics' (2013). This exhibition will explore various aspects of his creative genius, aiming to dismantle the stereotypical readings that persist about the artist and his work.

**Quote by CEO, Emami Art**

"This exhibition is our tribute to KG Subramaniyan on his birth centenary year. Widely revered for his profound erudition and wit, he was a versatile and multifaceted artist who made the most original contribution to modern art practices in India after Independence, creating a powerful language which is highly eclectic. Curated by Nancy Adajania, this exhibition, with over two hundred works, aims to present the master in a new light, establishing new relationships and opening up new avenues of discourse and debates. Although he hails from Kerala and has spent most of his teaching life in western India, Subramanyan was Bengal's own artist. He studied at Santiniketan, and the practices and ideas of the place were always with him. Besides being an artist, he was a fine writer, poet and translator; his books, including the ones he wrote and illustrated for the children, have been widely read and appreciated. I believe the artists, art lovers, and students will enjoy the exhibition.

I thank Seagull and the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, Baroda for collaborating with us and particularly Naveen Kishore, for his generous help and advice."

(Says Richa Agarwal, CEO, Emami Art)

### **Quote by Curator, One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-Scripting KG Subramanyan**

“The centenary of an artist as wide-ranging in his concerns and expressions as KG Subramanyan offers us an opportunity to reflect on less evident aspects of his oeuvre that may have eluded sustained critical attention. In ‘One Hundred Years and Counting: Re-scripting KG Subramanyan’, I would like to present this seminal artist, pedagogue, crafts activist and policy thinker through a shift of focus. In his work, he engaged both manifestly and in subtle ways with the legacies of Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru. Today, all these figures have either been neutralised as icons emptied of content or vilified as bearers of historical error. The past is being weaponised in the political and cultural battle over who belongs and who does not. In such a state of permanent emergency, it becomes vital to revisit the practice of an artist-activist like Subramanyan – who taught us to address the past as critical agents, rather than as puppets of stifling traditions.

Through this exhibition, we will be looking at what is universally regarded as his political work, such as his powerful terracottas commemorating the 1971 Bangladesh War and the biting critique of the 1975-1977 Emergency in his children’s book, ‘The Talking Face’. While these works enshrine singular reactions to political events, it would be instructive to locate them within what I regard as his continuous process of political philosophising, a major part of which was carried out through what might too glibly be seen as minor genres: primarily through the children’s books that he produced over an extended period, but also his phantasmagorical toys.

While presenting Subramanyan’s memorable reverse paintings on acrylic, marker pen on paper and intimate postcard-size drawings, we will also be focusing on his work process through a considerable amount of archival material. For instance, the display of mock-ups of his children’s book, ‘When Hanu Becomes Hanuman’, handcrafted by the artist, as well as his preparatory sketches for the murals with textual and visual marginalia that reveal his ideological affinity for the Gandhian notion of an idealised village. This show will avoid the pitfalls of hagiography, by pointing up the contradictions and ambivalences in his evolving political stance. Within this context, Subramanyan’s ambivalent take on female agency and sexuality will also be engaged with throughout the show in a critical spirit.”

(Says, Nancy Adajania, Curator and Cultural Theorist)

### **Quote by Director, Seagull Foundation for the Arts**

He wrote. Like he painted. Daily. Lucid and clear writing without the prop of artifice. Honest to its core. Finely chiseled thought. Whether it was talking about art education and the craft traditions in India or his painting.

...

*On Politics:*

Through many decades of practicing his art and the art of being an involved human being and artist, he allowed himself to be deeply affected by the unfolding of the times and events around him, whether these were in our country or elsewhere.

*I think our response to events should come out of a deeply felt emotional reaction, which ties up, in turn, with earlier experiences or reactions. Like Picasso’s Guernica that moves from his response to the brutality of the bullfight to his response to war. I could at one time move in some of my terracotta reliefs, from my response to the devastation of a flood to my response to the brutalities of the war in Bangladesh, which eventually led to its liberation. Trying to underline the fact that the massacre of a group of human beings and their body count became marks of achievement for another group. But this can come about only when an outside event is perceived as an assault on one’s being. Superficial topicality and didacticism is something I choose to keep away from.*

*There are many things happening in this world that force you to react against them and to be an activist, to speak against them or take other measures depending upon your competence and ability. Just painting against them is a poor gesture. I do not however disapprove of those who do. My choice is to be an artist-activist—not an activist-artist.*

(Excerpts from 'Between the Real and the Imaginary', by Naveen Kishore)

### **Biographies of the Artist and Curator**

Born in 1924 in rural Kerala, **KG Subramanyan** played a pivotal role in shaping India's artistic identity after Independence. Initially studying economics, his involvement in the freedom struggle led to his imprisonment and debarment from college. He then joined Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, which proved to be an enduring association. Graduating in 1948, he worked under such luminaries as Benode Behari Mukherjee, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij. Subramanyan then taught at M. S. University, Baroda, and returned to his alma mater in Santiniketan as a professor in 1980.

Mani-da, as he was fondly called, seamlessly blended the elements of modernism with folk expression in his works that spanned paintings, murals, sculptures, prints, set designs and toys. His visual meditations contemplated human subjects and objects as distinct forms, characterized by vibrant colours and abstract shapes. Renowned for the sensuality in his imagery, reflective faces and nightly backdrops, his paintings reflected a cubist influence. Subramanyan skilfully blended romanticism with wit and eroticism, drawing inspiration from myth, memory and tradition. Beyond his visual artistry, his writings have laid a solid foundation for understanding the demands of art on the individual.

Spanning more than seven decades, Subramanyan's art was featured in over fifty solo exhibitions, receiving prestigious awards such as the Medallion of Honourable Mention (Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil) and the Lalit Kala Akademi's National Award. In 2012, he received the Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award, for his outstanding contribution to the arts. He remained dedicated to teaching until his retirement in 1989, following which he was appointed as a professor emeritus at Visva-Bharati.

In the later stages of his life, Subramanyan lived with his daughter in Baroda, where he passed away in 2016 at the age of 92. His contributions have left an indelible mark on contemporary art, blending tradition with innovation.

**Nancy Adajania** is a cultural theorist and curator based in Bombay. She was Joint Artistic Director of the 9th Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2012). She has curated a number of pathbreaking exhibitions including, most recently, 'Woman Is As Woman Does' (CSMVS Museum with JNAF, 2022), a first-ever intergenerational mapping of the works of Indian women artists, filmmakers and activists against the backdrop of the women's movement in India. Adajania's other major research-based exhibitions include the retrospectives of artists Navjot Altaf, Sudhir Patwardhan, Mehli Gobhai and Nelly Sethna.

Adajania has proposed several new theoretical models through her extensive writings on subaltern art, media art, public art, collaborative art, transcultural art and the biennale culture in the Global South. For more than two decades, she has written on the practices of women artists of several generations by deploying a trans-disciplinary approach that melds art history, feminist theory, anthropology, activism and philosophy.

### **About the Institutions**

**Emami Art** is a leading Indian contemporary art gallery and a platform for cultural production. Established in 2017 in Kolkata, Emami Art represents emerging, mid-career and established artists and organises a dynamic programme of exhibitions and public seminars. Since its inception, the gallery has curated and hosted intimate and large-scale exhibitions and regularly participates in national and international art fairs and conferences. With a focus on a future-forward, complex, multi-dimensional approach that echoes South Asian history, the programme explores socio-cultural and geo-political narratives about visual art practices today. As part of its

knowledge-sharing and archiving activities, Emami Art regularly hosts talks, seminars, panel discussions and conversations between artists, curators and audiences to create a safe space for critical engagement. Deeply committed to promoting a regional, national and international agenda through innovative and alternative programming, the gallery places emphasis on knowledge production and socially conscious themes. Emami Art aspires to be a catalyst of change, research, innovation and inclusivity and welcomes all sections of society.

**Seagull** has been actively supporting and nurturing the arts in India—especially the fine arts, theatre, music and cinema since 1972. Across the years, it has promoted collaborative activity across and within the different arts disciplines, networking, exhibiting, sponsoring, designing, printing and publishing, and making available documentation and critical commentary across the arts. Seagull had set up a publishing wing Seagull Books 1982 that publishes world literature in English translation, serious non-fiction, culture studies, performance studies, art and cinema. Under the same umbrella, The Seagull Foundation for the Arts founded in 1987, supports three major initiatives: *PeaceWorks*—which aims to strengthen values of mutual coexistence and respect for all communities; *History for Peace*—a network of educators and members of civil society in the subcontinent, serving as a platform for discussion, debate and the exchange of ideas pertaining to teaching and learning of history for peace and understanding; and *The Seagull School of Publishing*—A three-month course in publishing, editing design run entirely by industry professionals.

**The Faculty of Fine Arts at MS University, Baroda** is recognized as one the foremost art institutes in the country and also globally. The faculty was founded in June 1950. For the first time in independent India, a programme of study was introduced to offer UG [Bachelor of Visual Art /Diploma in Visual Art, PG [Master in Visual Art /Post-Diploma in Visual Art and Master of Fine Arts [Museology] Courses and Research facilities in its various departments like Applied Arts, Painting, Sculpture, Print Making and Art History & Aesthetics. The emphasis was laid on individuality through knowledge of Indian and Western traditions. It has since then made a definite mark in the field of Visual Art and remained at the forefront of the art education scenario in the country. The Faculty has produced world-renowned artists in seven decades of its conception. It has a history of outstanding faculties many of whom are recipients of Padma-Bhusan and Padma Shree Awards apart from being awarded numerous State, National and International Awards and Fellowships.