

Rajkumar Sthabathy- Paint is the person - Indran Rajendran

“Color helps to express light., not the physical phenomenon, but the only light that exists, that in the artists brain” – Henri Matisse

It is not a surprise that the old master painters of Indian art who did the world famous Royal fresco portrait paintings on the walls of the dark corridors of various temples in the south of India are mostly anonymous. We do not know whether these fresco portrait paintings were done by a single individual or a guild of painters of ancient days.

But now the story is different. Today we are dragging the individual artist in flesh and blood in front of his own canvas. When I was there in the studio of Rajkumar Sthabathy , located in Auroville, an international city near Pondicherry in India, I realized that I am with a new generation artist with international recognition with more energy and intuition . Many of his large works I found in his studio were having a stamp of his own in his realistic watercolor portraits of various Indian characters with multiple ethnic identities .

Interestingly he is a lonely traveler in many parts of India - during Kumbhamela and other festivals - in search of models for his paintings of various ethnic groups found in his own colorful Asian Subcontinent which is the world's second most populous country . In all his series of paintings – Kumbhamela series, Varkari series, Tamil face series , Various of light series, Memories of Maharashtra series - he experimented with watercolor portraits with different light and different tones.

By applying vermilion for face, , mixing Prussian blue with brown, mix black with vermilion to get brown tone and contrast colors for sky , red or brown tone inside the eyes instead of white space, Rajkumar is achieving the desired results of ethnicity in his works. He considers his own signature is also a part of the

painting. In the process of his painting he always travels from dark areas to light areas. Mostly he starts from eyes to move towards still lighter areas of the canvas.

Because India is facing hybridism in the cultural globalization today, the water color portraits of various ethnic groups and individuals made by Rajkumar Sthabathy is playing a significant role in addressing the problematics of ethnicity and meaning. The feeling that we may be losing the cultural identities in the wake of Globalization Rajkumar Sthabathy is desperately trying to document the ethnic faces by means of his wonderful watercolor works. But still it is implied that the aesthetic aspiration for experimentation with watercolor is the main reason for the paintings of Rajkumara Sthabathy.

No doubt , Rajkumar Sthabathy is having a heavy baggage of art history on his shoulders. When he is dipping his brush in the water- color medium, the finger prints of the art history of Indian tradition of water color is automatically come and try to settle over his canvas. Two major water-color traditions, one from Britain (mostly followed by the Madras School)) and the other from Japan (highly practised by the art movement led by Abanindranath Tagore in Bengal) came and tried to give a two -way -push on the water color techniques of Indian artists. Abanindranath Tagore in his rejection of the western style, he turned to Asia- mainly Japan in his effort to structure a Pan-Asian aesthetic for the purpose of standing apart from the western one. Okakura Kakuza, one of the founders of the first Japanese Fine Arts Academy has researched and redefined the traditional Japanese art of “wash technique” . The technique was further improvised by Abanindranath in India. After a thin transparent layer of water- color the painting was literally dipped in to water (Japanese never did it) which washed away some of the color and yet another color wash was given on it. With many more successive color and water -washes tender tones were brought out on the canvas. Following this further many Bengal artists like Asit Halder, Chugtai, Samrendra Nath Gupta were trying to change the wash technique in water color painting.,

In Madras Presidency , Devi Prasad Roy Chowdhury , who was the principal of the Madras School of art and crafts was experimenting with watercolor in multiple ways. For example, in one of his water color work titled as – “An inmate of the harem” one can find that he used a pencil, pen and ink with water color

highlighting with gold and white on paper. At that time many of Madras artists were also working extensively on water color works.

When D.P.Roy Chowdhury (Bengal) , K.C.S.Panicker (Kerala) , Gopal Gosh(Bengal) , Narayana Rao(Andhra) , Ramgopal(Andhra) and other artists from Tamilnadu like G.D.Paulraj, G.D.Arulraj, G.D Theagaraj, P.B.Surendranath,Masilamani,M.S. Devasahayam , S.P.Jayakar came forward to experiment with water color works, they have tried synthesizing the British and Japanese watercolor techniques in search of a compositional purity . Artists like G.D.Balraj were very famous for their water colour works.One of the water colour works by G.D .Paulraj depicting the Champak stadium was collected by the England cricket Board. The 12 watercolor works of Gopal Gosh were printed every year as Burma Shell calendar continuously for 15 years.

Today Rajkumar Sthapathy , as a painter is fully enjoying the luxury of using the water color medium with full freedom . He has identified an inbuilt unpredictability in water color which encourages him further to go for an intuitive response in his portrait paintings. The unpredictable nature of the water color medium “ which is affected as much by humidity, gravity, the way that heavier particles in the wash settle in to the undulations of the paper “ (in the words of Alan Lee) inspires him to convert his realistic portraits in to creative art works. The majority of the works of Rajkumar Sthabathy , painted after finishing his formal art education in Kumbakonam College of Arts , are watercolor portraits carrying unique and luminous consistency of their own.

As an artist born in Pollachi , a deep town in the south of India and studied art in Thanjavur, the seat of Tamil art and culture where the world famous Brihadeeswarar Temple , a treasure- house of Chola fresco paintings is located, Rajkumar Sthabathy is much influenced by the world famous Chola period (1000 A.D) royal portrait paintings like “the Emperor Rajaraja and his teacher Karuvurar “.

Just like the anonymous Chola painter who has taken a keen interest in the depiction of the portrait painting with the long eyes, perfect nose, graceful lips, lovely chin, full cheeks and ringlets of hair, details of costumes and

ornamentations, Rajkumar Sthabathy as well takes special care in portraying every detail of the portrait.

At the same time when he is so much engrossed in bringing out the details of the portrait, Rajkumar as an extraordinary water colorist, never fails to take fullest advantage of his spontaneous medium. In all his watercolor portraits we can observe a meaningful automatism is in operation. By leaving certain areas of his canvas, untouched by the brush, he is capable of bringing in an intuitive realistic portrayal of human faces. The white light itself seems to granulate as it falls on the both sides of the nose with an incandescence that is very responsive to the richness of the flesh. He adopts it for hair and clothes as well.

In the process of a dialogue between Rajkumar Sthabathy, the artist and watercolor the medium , by applying vermilion for face, mixing Prussian blue with brown, mix black with vermilion to get brown and for sky contrast colors, inside the eyes instead of white space some color Rajkumar is achieving the desired results for his works. He considers his own signature is also a part of the painting. In the process of his painting he always travels from dark areas to light areas. Mostly he will start from eyes to move towards still lighter area.

When he is responding to the medium , the medium in turn is responding to him. I strongly believe all his water color portraits are the result of his dissatisfaction with portraiture that resembles people.

In short , we can say that , as for as Rajkumar Kumar Sthabathy is concerned paint is the person.

Illustrations- 1 Rajaraja and his teacher Karuvurar, Chola period, 1000 A.D ,
Thanjavur

2 D.P.Roy Chowdhury , ““An inmate of the harem” - pencil, pen
and ink with water color

highlighting with gold and white on
paper

3 abanindranath – “ Journeys end” – Japanese water color wash
technique, 1913

4 K.C.S.Panicker - “Boating scene”-watercolor

5 G.D.Paulraj - “Feeding the bulls”-water color