

MYSTICAL MUSES

Amma, Akka and Lal

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JASMINE REVOLUTION: In 'Pining for an Absent Lover', words from Akka Mahadevi's poem float like petals on the canvas

It is not often that a painter puts poetry in a context that heightens it. But then V Ramesh isn't your average artist. His muses are unusual: three almost forgotten saint poets. The all-woman cast includes Karaikal Amma, a fifth-century poet from Tamil Nadu, Akka Mahadevi, a 12th-century poet from Karnataka and Lal Ded, a 14th-century Kashmiri poet.

The three poets were separated by centuries but they shared an intensity of devotion and a refusal to conform to the conventions of the day. Their words resonated deeply with the 53-year-old artist who breathed new life into their lines with his brush.

"In the last four to five years, snatches of poetry have been coming back to me. I just couldn't resist," says the bearded artist who has been using text in his work for the past few years. But his new

exhibition at Delhi's Gallery Threshold which showcases luminous oils and delicate watercolours is more like a visual tribute to verse. "People today are obsessed with looking good but Karaikal Amma prayed to the god to make her ugly so that male attention wouldn't distract her from her devotion," says Ramesh, who was fascinated with the physicality of the poets. Akkadevi was dubbed the naked saint because she defied convention and stayed naked like a male ascetic. His work on Lal Ded, who used to roam naked as well, resembles a rich Kashmiri carpet whose weave expresses her poetry as well as her story. Two knotted cloths dangle from the top right-hand corner of the canvas and recall the legend in which a merchant gave her some cloth to hide her nakedness. Lalla tore it into two halves and slung them over both shoulders. An insult and a kind word would each merit a knot on either side. At the end of the day, she went back to the merchant and he found there were an equal number of knots on each side, suggesting that both praise and ridicule should be accepted with equanimity.

At the bottom, Ramesh has painted a bowl filled with stones and topped by rice since Lal Ded's mother-in-law often used that ploy to give her small servings. "The poem is a narrative and so are my paintings," he says. "They tell stories." The viewer may have to show some patience but he is confident the work will speak to them.

"It's like a sweater that can unravel - start pulling the wool and one thing will lead to another, " says Ramesh, who loves Carnatic music as much as painting. His life in Visakhapatnam, where he teaches art at Andhra University, gives him the time to indulge both these passions. So does the Baroda product ever regret the time he's spent away from the art market hothouse? "I did have some twinges of regret when I was younger and my contemporaries were getting rich. But not now. " The ever-smiling artist even escaped the India Art Fair's frenetic party circuit when he was in Delhi recently and chose instead to have a quiet Hyderabadi biryani with his friends. The quiet pace of life lets him do extensive research. While Ramesh couldn't find an image of Lal Ded and shaped her with her own words, he found a Chola bronze of Karaikal Amma in a museum. "She was an old hag with sagging breasts but the bronze made her beautiful. "

He also loves to work and rework his canvases. "I have to chase him before every show or he'd just paint over and start again, " chips in gallerist Tuntty Chauhan. The work titled Pining for an Absent Lover, a painting based on a poem by Akka Mahadevi, took over a year. My lord as white as jasmine - words from Mahadevi's poem - appears to float across the painting. The visual effect is one of whispers and murmurs, with the words blurring and almost disappearing into the rich blue paint. But the small white jasmine flowers glow brightly across the body of the canvas like tiny jewels.

"It was difficult to translate words into a visual language, " he admits. But then words are all he had to paint his pictures with.

**'Why Cross The Boundary'
is on at Gallery Threshold, Lado Sarai,
Delhi, till Feb 25**