

Looks and Frictions in the Artwork of K.P. Reji

A JANAL Talk by Prof. Satish Poduval

Summary: *Over the past two decades, K.P. Reji's paintings have set up interesting frames to engage with contemporary reality in India. The lecture, by focusing on four of Reji's key paintings, will explore how he points to the fissures and the sutures that characterise Indian society today.*

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Kerala Museum and K.P. Reji

It was entirely appropriate that Kerala Museum had organised the three-month retrospective, which was extended a bit. Because many people in Kerala got an opportunity to see a wide range of works that Reji had produced at different stages in his career and to see them in the original. Because it makes a big difference whether you see an artist's work in a book or a laptop or in a computer while visiting various sites and to see them in their original, full size and with the texture that is there in the canvas. When I was here I noticed that it was a very well organised exhibition. So you get to see a whole range of his work but the other fact is that Reji has mentioned this several times that the Kerala museum had played an important role in his early days. He had come here to spend a year or two and this helped him to take art very seriously. This experience here opened up the art world for him in new ways and it also enabled him, he says, later to get admission at the famous fine arts program in Baroda. So it's very good that Kerala Museum hosted the retrospective of Reji's work.

These are some pictures that I had taken during that retrospective. which enabled us to take stock of the nature of Reji's work, the recurring motives that feature in his work, and also why his work matters. I shall make some introductory remarks on how to approach painting in general, Reji's work,

during the first half. And in the second half, we will look closely at a few of his paintings.

How to approach K.P. Reji's paintings?

Now, to start off, artists themselves often tend to not like being limited to biographical or generic or social or political frameworks within which critics and academics tend to situate their work. So for example, when the famous artist Balthus, who's an influence on Reji, was asked to send a bio note to the Tate Modern Museum, he just sent these two lines saying, "No biographical details, just begin. Come, see the work and regards be". But, for audiences like this and others watching online, it helps to know how a certain artist has been seen by other artists, by critics, and society in general, so that over time, what happens is the ways in which an artist's work is seen becomes influential enough and becomes part of how other people respond to or see the work of an artist. So I'll present you with some views that others have expressed.

So there is a fairly well-known critic who has said this about Reji's work, that in his paintings, Reji is widely regarded as somebody who works with ordinary scenes and situations. He begins there, and then as you look more closely at his images, the familiar becomes slightly strange.

It also takes on other meanings, some somewhat sinister, some disturbing, and it remains at the level of the everyday. Reji always contains a whiff of the extraordinary.

The everyday is seasoned with something sinister, says Zehra Jumabhoy. Fellow artist and friend of Reji, Riyaz Komu, has made an interesting observation about his work which is that his paintings may look simple. There's a simplicity to Reji's figures, figuration, the way he presents as a childlike. Some people have noticed that, at least in his early work, a resemblance to Paul Gauguin's type of shaping of figures and the minimal idea of what is put on the surface. And yet, they are, once you begin to look at them closely, they are fairly complex and he even uses the word political and goes on to explain they conjure up a cognitive narrative of political Kerala from a marginalised perhaps Dalit perspective. This hesitation that perhaps Dalit perspective is something that we will, you know, sort of encounter when we look at some of his paintings, and I will say something about that later, and we could pick it up in the discussion as well. Our gaze enters into a zone of tension or alignment with a gaze from what Riyaz has called a marginalised, perhaps Dalit perspective.

A Kerala-born, Baroda-based artist

Should we use the term Malayali painter? I'm happy enough to go with it because, of course, he is from Kerala. He reads and speaks Malayalam. Most fluent language is Malayalam. He's here. The experiences and the memories that he crafts in his paintings are mostly drawn from memories that he has had in early life from Kerala. And of course, he is no longer just promising, but he is one

of our very prominent artists. So as people from Kerala, as Malayalees, we should be quite proud of his work. But still, I feel there is something to be gained by thinking of Reji's work as a Kerala-born, Baroda-based artist. This distance from Kerala and Reji's alienation from the prevailing ideas about Malayaliness is an important aspect of his work.

A part of this alienation, of course, comes from his, you could say, existence or his experiences at the margins of Kerala society. Another part of the alienation is of course self-chosen and self-fashioned as he engages with other trajectories and formations. So his work, for example, draws on Euro-American modernism, world cinema. He even works with popular art in the form of the kind of sketches and illustrations that come in popular magazines or sometimes even are reminiscent of posters, film posters from an age before these digitally perfect photographed images. There was a time where those kinds of hand-drawn posters used to exist. But he also draws on, as we will briefly see today, television advertising of commodity culture, consumer culture. So he draws his energies and figural language from a variety of sources and binds them together on the surface of his painting.

The other reason why it is important not to forget his origins in Kerala but his drawing upon experiences specifically in Baroda. So this experience of being an immigrant, let's say, is reminiscent of the cultural critic Megan Morris when she describes the work of film theorist Paul Willeman. Paul Willeman is

originally from Belgium but at a young age he migrated to Britain and for him there was a shock of living in a society which had never known something like surrealism in art. So this was a shock for him and Morris uses the term 'double outsideness' to characterise the mode in which Paul Willeman engages with film. He is a film theorist. So the double outsideness. He is outside of his Belgian national origins. He has migrated to Britain but even in that location where he lives there is an outsideness to British culture also. This double outsideness feeds Paul Willeman's approach to both British cinema and world cinema. That he doesn't identify with any national tradition. He draws on it. He mobilises the energies that drive that particular formation. But always with a view to figure out how can this be made different in a sense of better, fairer, more meaningful for audiences that are in change. And that is one of the excitements that somebody like me feels when I look at Reji's work, not simply as the work of a Malayali artist or belonging to Baroda, but drawing on both these traditions and yet working outside both these systems, or pulling away from both these systems.

The artist's style

Is Reji a political artist? Well, the answer to that has to be yes and no, depending on how one defines the word political. He does not do what he calls newspaper art or activist art. You know, that kind of political propaganda where you choose a given side and elaborate

a known point of view. That is a position he does not usually do. If that is the definition of the political, he pulls away from that kind of politics. He also does not do abstract art, you know, pure form, art for art's sake, speaking only to other people who are interested in abstractions regarding art, not about social relevance or political pertinence, but abstraction. So Reji avoids that kind of work also. So he is situated in between these two, and the political in his work, rather, is to reveal complexity to the viewer to enable her or him to reassess the fields in which we find ourselves placed. In other words, he seeks to rework what in the language of visual art is called the figure-ground relationship. In his various interviews with friends and other scholars who are thinking about fine arts, Reji has said some interesting things that give us insight into how he thinks of his work.

What is figure-ground relation?

Let me, for the benefit of those who may not fully know art history, I won't go into great detail here, but there are certain terms that are useful for us to keep in mind. The figure-ground relationship, for example. Now, the figure-ground relationship is a stylistic convention within art to create a feeling of depth and realism on a flat surface. So the canvas is a flat surface within which you have to create an illusion of three-dimensional reality. And what basically happens is that the depth is a mapping of physical space. So a distinction is made if you do art theory 101. What you will have there is the difference

between shapes and forms, which are objects and individuals, objects and subjects that are the focus of attention.

And then there is something called space. So forms and shapes are supposed to be the figure, and the ground or the background is supposed to be space. Space is less important. Figure is more important. And there is a relationship. This figure is located within a space. And the space is also organised, to use this language further, there is the foreground, which is closest to the viewer. Closest both in terms of physical distance, but we could imagine it also in terms of subjective, social, or political distance. So things which are closest to the viewer. The middle ground is a bit farther away, yet visible and significant, informing either through tension or lighting up the subject with its meaning in that relationship. Then there is a background which is supposed to be the farthest away. Perhaps least significant. Now this is the conventional way of thinking about the figure ground relationship. The ground is space, the figure is at the forefront and the meaning is concentrated on the figure.

An additional twist to this, after which I will come to Reji's paintings, to think about the relationship between figure and ground is what is called the planar and the recessional styles in painting. It sounds very complicated, but let me quickly explain it, simple enough. In a planar style, you have to think of the surface of the canvas, the surface of the image as a plane, and all the subjects and

objects are organised in a series of parallel planes. So there's something at the forefront. The middle ground is also another plane which is behind the initial plane, and then there is another plane at the back. So this is the planar style. The recessional style, on the other hand, is one in which an illusion of depth is created, not in a series of parallel planes, but in a diagonal space where there is a vanishing point at an angle from the surface of the painting.

Let me show you two examples. I'm using this in particular at some of Reji's early works, but it's a style that has persisted through his career, and has the appearance of planar painting. That is full frontal and there is a series of planes that come one behind the other. But I'm going to suggest later in this talk that we might think of it being more complicated than just the simple planar images.

Work 1: Mother and Child / The Fall

Let's look at two examples, from Peter Bruegel The Elder, which is a very famous painting called Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. And below here is K.P. Reji's Mother and Child / The Fall. There is a similarity, that's the reason I have chosen it, that if you look at Reji's painting below first, you can see the mother and child of the painting here. She seems to be selling something in a roadside shack. So in the front lane, there is this road with the shop that she has. And this is the first thing. It's parallel to the surface of the painting. Behind her in the middle ground

flows that river in which you can see a very prominent splash. So that would be the second plane. Third plane is beyond the river, across there, where there is some kind of a field which vanishes in the distance into a mountain where the sun seems to be rising or setting. Right? Okay, let's now look at the other image. Here you have a series of planes. Plane 1, plane 2, plane 3, plane 4. One behind the other. This is a planar style.

Landscape with the fall of Icarus is in a recessional style because the feeling of depth is you begin here but it goes diagonally across. You see there's a diagonal perspective here where there is a ship here in the foreground. There is this peasant who is going down the road with an animal. You can see the shadows being cast like lines this way. There are the huge cliffs in the background but which are smaller in size because it's, you know, in the third or fourth level of the ground. So this would be a recessional style where perspective is organised towards a vanishing point. Now, just pay attention. The common element here, of course, is the guy, Icarus, who flew too close to the sun with his waxed wings and he fell down with a plop there. And it is seemingly an insignificant event. It's dwarfed by the everyday life within which this flight for knowledge and the failure happened. And everybody seems to be indifferent to his fate. They are turned away.

In Reji's painting also there is the fall. Now the fall can doubly refer to both the fall of Icarus, but there's also within Christian mythology, mother and child, the fall that

leads to... So we are not exactly clear what it is. There is a very prominent plop in the river. Unlike Icarus, here there is a splash of a figure falling in. People turned away from it, not perhaps aware of it. But what is interesting is that the plains here at the end you would see it does not get smaller and smaller in size. It seems to be acquired. This is not realism of the European perspectival kind. The final plane is itself quite prominent. And it seems to cast a glow of meaning or a shadow of meaning on everything that is happening in the foreground. It is not the least significant thing. So is the sun rising or is it setting? This event which is supposed to have great meaning, is it that the quest for knowledge ends in failure and this setting sun or is it you can fail once and yet the sun is coming up. There is a cycle which will repeat. There are different ways in which you can think about even a simple painting like this. So I'm just asking you to consider the possibility that even with a planar painting, Reji is able to do things to the figure-ground relationship. Okay.

Sudhir Patwardhan and K.P. Reji

The term planar recession is used by the critic Ranjith Hoskote to refer to the work of another artist called Sudhir Patwardhan. Now, I'm not suggesting that Sudhir Patwardhan and K.P. Reji's paintings are similar or that there is any influence. In fact, to anybody who has seen their work, you know that they are very different from each other. And yet, I find this idea of planar recession useful to think

about the form of Reji's work. What is a planar recession? Hoskote says that Sudhir Patwardhan became more conscious of the possibilities of representing deeply recessed pictorial space as surface. So he has a series of images where modernization comes or spreads across space. So what you will have in many of Sudhir Patwardhan's paintings is a city-like formation in the foreground, and then you move in the middle ground to the edge of a city. And behind that lies the hinterland or the village or the forest. But instead of vanishing into small figures, irrelevant figures in the background, he manages to enhance the size. So it's not realistic like a photographer would see an image. Instead, the foreground and the background are of similar size. So the so-called background, or the forgotten, or the less significant, in Sudhir Patwardhan's painting, the background begins to impose itself, if you look at it long enough, on the figure in the foreground. And this is something that, at least I feel, is constantly happening in Reji's work. It may look as if there is a flatness to the surface, but the organisation of space and the organisations of objects within that space, you know, cast a meaning on the so-called prominent figures on the subject, as I hope to show you. So what Hoskote says is, Patwardhan was fascinated by the twin relationship between figure and ground as positive and negative space, made of the same material but endowed with significance by the opposition, by the implied movement separating them yet holding them together. So there is a separation and yet you will see that

they exist together. One cannot exist without the other. So it's not just some helpless conjoining. There is a more active connection that the painter establishes between a hinterland that is now getting urbanised and the urban itself, which depends on the resources, the exploitation of the background. So this is what Patwardhan is trying to show in his paintings.

Work 2: Mary Had a Little Lamb

Now, here is another example. We'll now get to some of the paintings of K.P. Reji. He has a very interesting relatively recent work by Reji, which is called Mary Had a Little Lamb. Now, from the title, you will immediately recognize this little ditty or nursery rhyme that generations of children going to school, even in countries like India, have sung. And what you have is perhaps a girl called Mary with a little lamb going to school. This is a recurring motif in Reji's work. Schoolchildren on the way or back from school. You will see this in several of his paintings, but located in a space that is different from space that lies in the background. So there at the depths of the painting, you will see a big aeroplane that is taking off, that is an airport in the background. There is some kind of a river where you see the clouds reflected. There is a water body in the middle ground. And it is in the foreground full of vegetation and animal life that these kids are on their way to school or back from school. We don't know. One of them. And then when you keep looking, you begin to notice other interesting things which

are there. Mary had a little lamb. We know from the nursery rhyme that the girl took the lamb to school. Where the teacher said it cannot be brought into the classroom because it's very distracting or it's simply not done, and the goat was turned out of school. But she is not just carrying the lamb to school and, you know, a living animal.

On the other hand, she also holds some kind of a cardboard object perhaps as a part of a scientific project which she is doing in a lab or an exhibition there. So she is carrying a living animal and a cardboard, it's the outline of a satellite. It's a science project, it's a satellite. It's 2020, so it's not Chandrayaan 3, which is now successful, but Chandrayaan 2 in 2019, which has failed.

It had just dropped on the surface of the moon. Chandrayaan 2 was a failure. So Reji is here referencing Chandrayaan 2. The object that she is carrying as part of the scientific project is that satellite.

The aeroplane taking off in the background, those of you who have seen enough of Reji's work will know that planes don't end very well in his work. So the flights into modernity take off very well, but very soon they come crashing down in his work. So that is also there. In all prior works, the minute you see an aeroplane in Reji's painting, you are, how come this is flying? Because you expect it to crash land.

Now in the foreground, there are these two children who are also carrying some other

kind of project work and this time it is not science and technology but if you look carefully enough there is the unmistakable sign of two figures who some people would like to imagine them in a happy brotherhood together but others think that that togetherness is causing confusion and problem.

So most of you would have guessed it these are images of this is M.K. Gandhi with his trademark walking stick. And in close embrace, at least in this cutout here, is the figure of Ambedkar with his pointing hand. So Gandhi and Ambedkar are held together within the arms of these two children at the back. And the other familiar work is there's one person who is looking straight ahead, but there are three eyes, three looks that come straight at you. Her face is serious and not without too much expression, Mary, if that is Mary. Whereas here there's a kind of a smile or you could even call it a smirk. So when I look at this painting and I look at my past history of viewing Reji's paintings, what strikes me is, is that plane going to end well? Is this goat's career at school going to end well? Is Chandrayaan going to end well? And is this fraternal embrace going to end well? We don't know. He is not giving you a straight answer. Maybe it will. You post a hope that it might. But chances are it might not. So it's just, he leaves it to you to find your way into how to make sense of what is a very simple, almost like a nursery rhyme simplicity in this, the reference, but as well as the organisation of meaning here. There are, of course, as you

know, Mary had a little lamb, that nursery rhyme is not just parroted by children. It has also been interpreted in very different ways. If you go back into history, I'm not going to get into all that here. Is Mary a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary who had a little lamb? I mean, Christ as a sacrificial figure. Goats are another motif in Reji's work. So is it a sacrificial lamb, which is Jesus Christ? And if you say Mary had a little lamb, it was taken to school but was evicted from school. All kinds of other meanings swim to the surface. So in Reji's painting, that is the kind of work which begins to happen once you start to pay attention.

Work 3: The Birds

Let's look at another painting. This is a famous early painting called The Birds. Maybe some of you have seen this before. Again, there is simplicity and there is a planar organisation. The first plane in the foreground is this couple here. And this couple is reminiscent of some of the love paintings that Reji did at the start of his career. There's a whole series of love paintings that Reji did. And these figures seem to come from there. And yet, there is also some sort of an inter-class, inter-caste, forbidden, transgressive possibility of romance maybe, because the genre is love painting, but this is out in the public, on a street, there is somebody who is a cycle repairman on the street, and there is this perhaps from a different class because of the bag that she is holding and the kind of fancy female cycle

that started to come in during the turn of the century. So girls began to get cycles like this. So maybe she belongs to a different class. On the way to work or study, her cycle has a puncture and she stops by. And like in Tamil films like Kadhalan, there is this possibility or a promise of a romantic interest between people who belong to different classes and castes, but also of course presented in a still simple way. This is another image that might remind you of the illustrations in say Mangalam, Manorajyam, that kind of art. It used to be fairly common in the 70s and 80s, this kind of painting. But when you begin to pay attention to what else is going on in the background, here's a plane which has not ended well, right there up on the tree. It crashed onto a tree without any leaves.

And if you pay attention, there is a reference that Reji is making to Picasso's Guernica. There are these birds that are breaking out and looking up at the sun. Here is a reference to Reji's own earlier work. There is a whole series that he has done called To Move a Mountain, which is a biblical reference. If your faith is strong enough, you can move mountains. But Reji uses that phrase to talk about the displacement of agrarian and tribal communities in India who are displaced by the processes of development. So in those set of paintings, you have a series of suggestively drawn truck or a van which looks like a military tank being pulled in opposite directions and which is where these families, tribal or agrarian, have to herd themselves in and move with their animals, their elders,

whatever possessions they have, not sure which way they are supposed to go. So there is a reference to that image here. On top of it is an inverted cow. You can read whatever meaning you want into it depending on what level of allegory you want to pitch it. There's a cow and a calf on top of it. So there's a process of uprooting and inversion that he's making reference to here.

The Hitchcock reference

And the painting is called *The Birds*, and which he has glossed over as a reference to Alfred Hitchcock's famous film called *The Birds*, based on a Daphne du Maurier novel. But Hitchcock's film, one interpretation of that is it is a film about female sexual desire which is transgressive in nature. So those of you who have seen the film would know that the character played by Tippi goes off into a village where she is attacked by the birds. There is no explanation for that. Other Hitchcock films have a certain ending. It ends, it's resolved in a certain way. But *Birds* is one film where the horror or the shock or the suspense, whatever you want to call it, persists even in the final frame. Here are birds and those are the seemingly harmless birds. So this is also a reference to Alfred Hitchcock's movies and it gives it the title. But what Reji says about this is interesting.

In one interview, this is what he has said about Hitchcock's movies, especially *The Bird*, "In his movies it is also that you often know the outcome beforehand but as a spectator you are rendered helpless and you have to

face it through the end. I was specifically interested in capturing that particular feeling in this work which is also why I used the title as a direct reference to Hitchcock. We know what is going to happen, what is happening in the world but we have no option but to deal with it". You can't interrupt it. He is talking about a process, it could either be the promised romance getting thwarted, I mean nine times out of ten, if you are going by newspaper reports or personal experiences, maybe this does not often end very well. Chances are it may succeed, so there is hope, but there is also a foreknowledge that you bring to it, that it may not end well, but it is going on, there is little you can do to stop it. Like there is little you can do to the failures of our political or technological modernity. You can go from the simple to the deeper or higher, whichever way you want to think about this.

And those cast meaning on what is happening in the foreground. This may seem like an isolated incident in the foreground, but what is driving it, what is energising it, is more abstract, larger forces within which we are placed. The characters in the painting are placed, but also we as audiences are placed. We know this is not going to end well, but we cannot stop it. But we have to bear witness. And finally, this little detail here, I've shown it to many people. They just don't understand what this is. It's supposedly a simple, realistic painting. Then with all the surrealist references, film references, self-referential portrayals here, you have a nuclear family

walking down the road with what seems like strange heads. And when people first see this, they don't understand what is happening. Are they aliens? What has happened to them? Are they suddenly growing alien heads? Is their head getting turned? What is going on here? Because nothing else is confusing in the same way. But the clue to this, as Reji has said, is that he is drawing on a series of popular advertisements. I counted at least 10 on YouTube, and I'll show you a couple. This is a time where television advertising was coming to the fore, and the citizen of old who had to worry about social and political issues was invited to concentrate on improving his or her life, be more self-engrossed, and partake of the pleasures of the new things that are on offer. So there was a series of very imaginatively done advertisements by the company called Cadbury which is chocolate. And they looked something like this. Okay, so the consumer culture of the early 90s and the turn of the century is offering us, as spectators, as citizens, as consumers, 'chocolate ka meetha bomb'. If you can turn your eyes away from the world around you, forget that, there's nothing you can do about it, but there is enjoyment on offer if you have the money to buy this happiness. So this is one example. Here's another about the pleasures of transgressive desires. You know this is not supposed to happen, and yet you want it. You are invited not to be guilty about your pleasures. So there's a playfulness in this advertisement which Reji borrows and deploys, you can say, either playfully in the same playful spirit or bends it towards more

serious commentary on what's going on in society.

Work 4: Untitled or Girl with a Toy

Let's take a look at one more. There are many, but I've just chosen two. So this is one which features a young teenage girl and her excitement over the arrival of new neighbours, but she's interrupted. Her pleasure is interrupted. Interrupted by the father's note. Let's see what happens. Okay. So pleasures are on offer but interrupted horizontally through other kinds of social gazes. So this is the reference to the exploding heads which feature in many of Reji's paintings during this period, in the first decade of the 20th century. So there's a playfulness there but there's also serious intent about the new consumer culture, its pleasures but also the cost that has to be paid for it.

I now move on to another painting of his which is not very well known. The only place where I found this painting was untitled. I mean half of western art seems to be untitled. But various students have suggested that this could be named Girl with a Branch or Girl with a Toy because of a certain image which is presented here. So again there is the organisation of the foreground. Then there is a middle ground which is where the wall is. And then there is the background. If you look at this painting, which references Reji's earlier work, which is called The Bad Catch, which has a similar set of figures, with the dog with the ball in its mouth.

Now, at first glance, this may seem like children being mischievous somewhere, having fun. They're just playing games, and it would look as if the little girl has set fire to a toy hut, and her friend or companion is trying to douse the fire with available resources at hand. And the dog is sitting there watching the fun. It could be the surface level meaning. But then there are other things in this which destabilise that way of thinking about it. What if that is not what had happened? So what is the reference to a tree, again without leaves, but with a cat perched there, looking at you, as a crow perched there, and a catapult. Catapult, again, is a toy and possibly doubles as a weapon. Where is it pointed towards? So there is the pet cat. There is a scavenging bird called the crow. So those are the references there. Here is another kind of a pet with an injured leg. And holding in its mouth, you know, these squeezey balls, these stress-buster kind of balls with a smiley face on it.

Now, let us look at the details in this painting a bit closely. So you have those figures at the top and the dog which comes here. Now this young man who is standing there pissing, I mean in a relaxed way he's pissing, possibly whistling and looking straight at you with a sense of fun. But then when you notice the fact that the piss is landing on a house which is on fire, is he trying to douse the fire? Or could it be that he is somebody who, this is at an allegorical level now, at an allegorical level, is he somebody who with impunity has come, set fire to the hand, and letting us

know what he thinks of this act, about whosoever house this is, and if we then think that the house might actually have belonged to the young woman who you see on the left now. What if she is not the source of the fire, but what if she, like, let's say, Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi, or Draupadi Mejan, is somebody who has been physically but also socially been under attack? assaulted, feeling the brunt of the violence from a social superior possibly with the background of somebody else and has now decided to pick up available resources which is a branch and a stone on her other hand or a toy and taken the fire from the burning house and has decided to turn available tools or toys into weapons. And the reason for this reading could also be what you see in the background there, which now throws a different meaning on it. Do you see some kind of an armoured vehicle or truck like a military convoy passing in the background behind the wall? So is it that they are ignorant of what is happening in the foreground? Is it that they are indifferent? Is it that they are complicit with whatever is happening? Is there a complicity here maybe which she is determined to fight? There are no clear answers, obviously. But the organisation of visual language is such that each part then begins to put a different spin on what is there in the foreground. This figure is very important. You can see the way in which she is sitting. There is this suggestion of almost some kind of an erotic tension. So it is playing with a male gaze. There are ways in which within painting the female figure is sometimes represented.

Work 5: Dinner with a Pinch of Salt

Reji has said in interviews, and I think it is convincing, that he is drawing on the modes of representation by a Portuguese painter called Paula Rego. I'll just show you some sketches. But look at this figure, the way she is sitting there. There is a suggestion of the way the legs are parted and the way she is positioned. Sexual tease or invitation to the male gaze but also the stare back which is coming is that I know this happens. I know that you know this kind of violence happens. I am talking to you. I am locking eyes with you to confront you with what you think. Do you think this is proper? This is good? So let's look at this. This knowing glance that comes. This is Dinner with a Pinch of Salt. One of his famous early paintings where you again see this kind of positioning of a young girl, legs parted on either side of a branch, she is playing with a toy.

And in an interview, Reji has said, I deliberately made this image of the child at dinner with a pinch of salt disturbing. I wanted to evoke some kind of age or experience beyond her years, which is why I made her face much more mature than that of a 10 or 12 year old girl. This is also reflected in her gaze which meets you directly, which meets the viewers, and which in effect says, I know what you want. I'm haunted by an almost Dostoevsky experience I had in Bangalore, where a young child prostitute accosted me on the street, which is actually where the image comes from. So he's drawing

on some disturbing experience that he had, an encounter with a child prostitute in Bangalore, and he puts this kind of innocent but also disturbing figure on the and leaving you to figure out, to respond to this, find ways how you are going to respond to this figuration. But, as I said, it also comes from other sources of representing sexual and moral violence on the female body. So for example, this would be an instance of, this is from 1938, Balthus, Teresa Dreaming, where the figure of a young girl is eroticized. You can see the way she is represented. She looks away, so then becomes available for your gaze. Whereas in Paula Rego's work on abortion, this is political art which came out around the turn of the century, where Portuguese had made abortions abortion illegal, forcing many young women to seek unsafe abortions on this slide. So Paula Rego did a series of paintings in which women, young and old, who had no access to legal termination of pregnancy, were forced into this kind of extremely painful and perhaps dangerous abortions. But the representation here shows both the violence of what society and morality acting in concert, places on the female body, along with the defiant stare right back. This is not some woman who is shamefully looking away. She locks eyes with the viewer and demands from us, if you have an answer to what is going on, if you think this is right, or if you think this can be sorted out, if you want to help, or if you need to consider what you are saying yes to in society. This kind of eyes which look out at you in a whole series of paintings is something which

Reji's work deliberately notates. He's drawing from that tradition. I mean, here the thing is not about abortion per se, but about the female body looking back and posing questions at the viewer.

So another representation of this kind of a female figure can also be seen in this painting of again school children away from school going about a set of activities which are either childish mischief, you can see people here doing casual kind of violent acts on the animal world. Here's a boy sitting on a tree branch. This teenager, there's also this phallic suggestiveness of his body and what he's doing is dangling down some kind of a spider or insect into the mouth of his friend here. So there's this very suggestive act of putting something into the mouth of somebody, whether he wants it or not. And here there is this female who is positioned in a sleepy, lethargic kind of a mood with other suggestions.

If you look at the whole series of representations which have been there, which point in this direction? Your familiar broken aeroplane has come. There is a broken bridge in the title. This bridge is broken. There is another plane which seems to be one of the pieces of that bridge. There are birds flying in the sky and a whole series of people on that bridge who are fishing under a broken bridge. Some people have pointed out the fact that these fishing rods begin to look like swords that have been drawn out. I don't know if you can see them from a distance. There's been a suggestion that a tool with which you go

about everyday activities, work related activities or leisure related activities can double as weapons.

So if that is the case, then this diptych is an interesting one. There is a continuity in the road, but there is a discontinuity when you look at the branches up there. So there is a suggestion, the form itself breaks up the surface, that some things are seamlessly together. There is a feeling that when you look around, this world is one, it's seamless. And yet Reji manages to insert into the surface of the printing a fissure, a break.

Work 6: To Move a Mountain

Okay, let's move on now. This, of course, was a picture I took at the Kerala Museum. We are now going to talk about one of his other paintings, but I just put this here to give you a sense of the size of the paintings. This is the 'To Move a Mountain' series. This was referenced in *The Birds*. This is the painting that we now move on to. It's called *Making of the Mahatma*. It has an alternative title called *Migratory Birds*. This is from 2011. So again, if you look at this painting, you can see that it has a frontality. There is a planar organisation of space here. Seemingly. At first glance, there's a planar organisation of space. And yet, the title of the painting and the way certain temporal and political signs are organised within this painting are worth paying closer attention to. Notice here this square, this yellow square here, which is one

part of this painting. It has this iconic image of Mohandas Gandhi here with his stick and this schoolboy leading him on holding a stick. So this is a very familiar image. A photograph exists. Its iconic stamps exist. All kinds of images of this incident exist. And yet in recent times, is this history? Yeah, it actually happened. There's a photograph. But is this historical event being rendered in a mythic mode elsewhere? Does it enter into this game, this effort, this enterprise of making Gandhi into a Mahatma? So what role does it play? Father of the nation, gentle old man, peaceful resistance. Now, is this image from 1930? Because for a long time it was believed and circulated that this is from the Gandhi march. It's the peaceful salt satyagraha. And while he was there for the satyagraha, one fine morning he woke up and he went on this march where his grandson, Kanu Gandhi, or somebody joined him. For a long time, this was the known story. But in recent times, it has also been suggested that this could not have happened. In fact, this is a picture that was taken in Juhu Beach in 1937. Much later, seven years later, and this is not his grandson. It is some other boy. So this whole idea that something which is a historical truth is suddenly rendered slightly uncertain through the ways in which that event is described and its significance explained and elaborated. That is the process in which myth-making happens. And the other aspect of this, of course, if you move to a wider frame, now you look at this red square, you have the historical event which is later being filmed by what looks like a foreign film crew. And, of

course, the most well-known would be the moment in the 1980s. I mean, it took a long time to make, but Richard Attenborough's film Gandhi, which played a very important role in educating a whole new generation about the significance of Mahatma Gandhi's life and his message and was a worldwide blockbuster. But this alerts us to the process of rendering history in the mythic mode. What Ashish Rajadhakshan has written about it in response to this, Gandhiana and Gandhialogy. How the fine Gandhi is refashioned across different historical periods and the technological and financial mechanisms through which you know, the very expensive way in which somebody like Gandhi is shown to be a poor person working for the poor. I'm not challenging the veracity of that. I'm just saying it is more complicated than simply somebody who was for the poor and himself very poor and used khadi all his life. There's a very expensive and a very accomplished technology across the decades that has kept Gandhi in the orbit of being a Mahatma in our collective consciousness.

Work 7: Making of the Mahatma

So this painting and the title of the painting is Making of the Mahatma. So who makes him? Is it Gandhi himself as a young lawyer who made himself a great soul? Or is it nationalist historiography and nationalist politics that transforms a political figure into a myth called the Mahatma, where all questions should stop. So, Reji alerts us to some of the mechanisms of the creation of reality. Then

there is a wider frame within which the film shooting itself becomes a spectacle. So on the beach, When a film is being made in a realist mode, in a celebratory mode, there are also people who have turned up at the beach, they thought they would just have a swim and relax, but a film shooting is going on, so they interrupt their pleasures to look at the film being shot. And they are all turned away from us, their body suggests a certain kind of relaxed, but interested gaze at the history making which is taking place. And they seem to be in a thrall of that image making exercise. We can't see their faces, but chances are that they are very interested in what's going on. Maybe some of them are sceptical, but we don't know. But there's a whole series of women here who are guards at the beach, security officers. There are some sellers of sweets and other commodities in the beach who are less in a thrall of what's happening. They are there to do their work. but it is this class of people who seem to be engrossed in the myth-making that is going on. There is then a wider frame to this. If you move to a plane that is closer to you, there is another set of figures here. Two young men are either trying to go in there and either find out what's going there or they have a view that is different. They want to interrupt, intervene in and interrupt what's going on there, but they are stopped and interrogated by a policeman whose gaze is not looking, he is listening attentively to them, dealing with them, but his eyes lock with the spectators. And in some ways the making of the Mahatma is being

tested on the viewer, not just on the subjects who are represented within the frame, or even these people, but you, do you buy into this myth, or are you anti this myth? On which side of the divide are you? This policeman's gaze seems to be testing your credentials or your loyalty to the myth of nationalism. And then, of course, there's an element there which gives it the second title, Migratory Birds, which is a wider frame above and away from this human world with its looks and frictions. That is a set of birds, again, with exploding heads that we referenced earlier. Each bird is flying away, they are migrating to better postures, maybe, or they have got caught up in this kind of nationalist myths, and their heads are full of these blossoms in their head, and they are nevertheless leaving for better shows elsewhere. It's not clear how to read this image. Is there one meaning, or you can choose which meaning you want to align with. So here are a series of planes. There's a planar organisation of space, and yet if you tunnel your way through these various planes, you see that there is a vanishing point, but the vanishing point is not the perspectival way of organising space within realism, but here it's a tunnel of time. You are located in the contemporary, you go closer and closer, but also backwards into history. From The 21st century, you tunnel your way back into the time. It's like a film playing in reverse. And you end in the 1930s to the origins of this myth-making enterprise called the making of the Mahatma. So even though the organisation of space is planar, there is a

recessional aspect here. So Patwarzan's paintings, which was described by Hoskote as a planar recession, might be seen to be at work here. But not in the sense of merely a formal organisation of space, but also how to think of historical existence, how to think of the evolution of history in a way that is not linear, not smooth, but frictional. There are frictions along the way and by working our way back against the tide of time, we have to work our way backwards and reach that point and then retrace the steps back into the making of the Mahatma.

Work 8: Tumbingal Chatan

Okay, the final painting I want to discuss is something that Reji painted on site at the end of 2012, but 2013 is when it was completed, I think, at the first Kochi Muziris Biennale. And this is called Tumbingal Chatan. Again, planar organisation. The view is frontal. You see a series of planes here. But like we have been seeing, things are more complex than seems to be the case at first glance. So what are the images that are located here? On top, this is a triptych. It has three panels. On top, you see a series of birds up there. But on the left and right side, there are trees that are full of leaves. They are green in colour. In the middle, there is a tree without any leaves, dead branches with lots of crows sitting on it. We will come back to the crows in a minute. On the left side are school boys, either going to school or returning from school, holding a series of tools in their hand which double as weapons. They are pickaxes, axes, and other

things. Some of them are looking straight at you. There is also the sacrificial lamb or a pet lamp that we have seen earlier. On the other side of the frame, again two children, boy and girl, boy and girl. The boy here holds a sickle in his hand and he is looking away from us. The girl here tries to meet our gaze. There are two small children defecating in the foreground. They are sitting and shitting there. At the bottom, it is not very clear here, is the person or spirit named in this painting, the Tumbingal Chatan. Chatan is an interesting word. Chatan is usually like in KuttiChatan or something. It's an evil or a mischievous spirit. It does all kinds of terrible things or it creates nuisance. So Chatan can be thought of as an impish or a mischievous or evil spirit. But Chatan is also the source word for Shasta. Shasta is a term for a god or a good spirit, a guide, a senior who instructs the younger generation to live according to values that are fair and make sense. He's a guide. He's a spiritual guide, you could say. So this doubling between a Chatan and a Shasta, of course, it's also the difference of superior language and language which has been inferiorized. So if a spirit comes from a lower social order, it is Chatan or evil. So this is Tumbingal Chatan and Reji is of course drawing on this myth which exists in different parts of the world about somebody who sacrifices his life for the welfare of the community.

Now what is the origin of this story? He said it was a story of a lower caste person who fell in love with an upper caste woman and was

of course killed for this transgression and his body was dumped in the paddy field. That story has later on become a story of somebody who senses the danger of sea waters entering into the paddy fields and would destroy the crop. So he just put his body in the line and blocked the sea water so that the paddy fields and food for future generations would remain safe. So this is how he has entered into the consciousness of communities which value him or worship him as the Tumbengal Chatan. The Shasta of Tumbengal who saved future generations and is remembered in gratitude. And at the middle is a whole series of ducks in the foreground and in the background is a very huge but grey-coloured, lost in the mists as it were, a big ship. Now, this connection between the crows on top and the chatan down below, they belong seemingly either to a realist time, the time of the now, in the memory of the present, or they may belong to mythic time. So the crow, for example, doubles as a scavenger bird. We have seen this in other paintings of Reji. But the crow is also a bird that in many societies is summoned when you want to pay, you know, respect to your ancestors. When you feed them during the Pindam and the Shraddha which is there on their death anniversary, you invoke the birds and the crow coming and eating what is on offer is supposed to guarantee that your ancestor will be able to enter into a happy afterlife or is happy with you. It's a complicated story. I don't have time to go into the details. But the crow sitting on the dead branches in the middle might be

seen as ancestor spirits from the past who are communicating or trying to communicate with the present. So is the figure of the Chatan.

If you notice it carefully, his eyes are open. He is seemingly a dead body, positioned against the bund, but his eyes are open. So two ancestor spirits communicating with this generation of children on their way to school or back. Who seem to be interested more in the goats, ducks, and the river, the paddy fields, but some of them also on the ship behind. So what is this mysterious ship in the background? Now, Reji has of course said, I won't go into the details, this painting is also engaging with Gandhi in a certain way because most of the children here are from Dalit families. But they were called to school on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti to clean the school campus, he says. He's not complaining, he's not bitter about it. He just observes that we were called, maybe because we had the tools required for cutting grass, and we would go there, we would do this job. So he has memories of this experience in Gandhi Jayanti. And then he also says that although it was done in the name of the apostle of peace, we used to have a bit of violence by using the knives because instead of this peaceful staff and charaka, these people are armed with other tools they use for work but which can double as weapons. But the ship is what we should pay attention to.

This ship, those of you who have read about this painting would know, has a very long and

interesting history. It is not just any other ship that you would see standing in the harbour of Cochin. It is full of huge ships. But this is a very specific ship. Before 1982 this used to be the HMS Hermes. Her Majesty's Service. It was a British Navy frigate. It was a warship of the British Navy. And it was also very famous for having fought this war in 1982 in the Falklands. That was the last war that it fought for the British Navy. After that, it was decommissioned in Britain and India bought it for a subsidised price. And in India, it figured as a very important warship called INS Virat. So this is the ship that figures in this painting. It's a very recognizable shape if you look at these three paintings. The INS Virat represents a conjoined history. It is not a ship that belongs to Cochin Harbor today as Reji is painting it. What throws its light on the events at the foreground is this long history of British, you could say, colonialism, its imperial might which has continued for long centuries and there is a passing of the baton literally when HMS Hermes becomes INS Virat.

So you could say that longer history either has no relevance to the lives of these children, they are ignorant of it, they are unaware of it, it doesn't either positively or negatively affect them or chances are it does affect them. they are now increasingly becoming aware of the history and its connections and are maybe preparing to respond to that history. It's one way that you could read the way these different temporalities are assembled together in

paintings like this. So this is of course Reji while he was painting this at the Biennale.

Conclusion

Now let me conclude now since we really run out of time. When the figure-ground relationship that we have been seeing in Reji's paintings are rethought after looking at these images, there are some things which strike us. The figure-ground relationship appears to have a dominant hold on our ways of seeing. It brings into alignment both a natural and a scientific mode of perception. It also tends to make the socially dominant ways of seeing, of how we see reality, it makes them seem natural and apolitical. But the politics of the aesthetic that Reji is mobilising in these images, seeks to open up such naturalised ways of looking at social reality by revealing the fissures and contradictions within our field of vision. It invites us to become aware of the problematic nature of the common ground that prevails through the so-called social contract and urges us to move past this common ground in the interests of justice.

So here are various people who have written about it. One is of course a political philosopher, Paul Virilio, who says that perhaps unconsciously we have repeated the typologies of apprehending reality from the initial separation of the figure from the ground, the detachment between the line of the earth and the sea, between the shoreline

and the primordial ocean, to the elaboration of a scientific perspective. Rudolf Arnheim, who is an art historian, says that all shapes belonging to the ground plane tend to be seen as parts of a continuous backdrop. Since the ground has no shape, it lacks a dynamics of its own. So the ground doesn't matter. What matters is the figure. Similarly, another psychologist, educational psychologist has also used this language to say, in relation to the ground, the figure is more impressive and more dominant. Italics are his, the capital letters are his. I'm just quoting him. Everything about the figure is remembered better and the figure brings forth more associations than the ground.

Now the common ground, if you were to look at dictionary meanings of what is a common ground, is the shared interests, beliefs or opinions between two people or groups of people who disagree about most other subjects. So the Gandhi and the Ambedkar contradiction that we saw. It is possible that there is a fundamental disagreement about something and they seek to find a common ground on, let's say, constitutional morality or social amity and brotherhood. When possible, you seek out a middle ground and you play down the differences or the contradictions which exist. The common ground is a foundation of common interest or comprehension as in a social relationship or a discussion. It is an agreed basis accepted by both or all parties for identifying the issues in an argument. Let's agree on the agenda. What is up for discussion? What is not? Maybe

there's a common ground from where we can begin negotiating. So this is used in all kinds of fields, but there is a need, and Reji is already responding to this need, of moving past the common ground. He illustrates, he evokes, he brings up what the common ground seems to be in India. So the everyday images that he presents us are in some ways images of the common ground. But within this ground, as we keep looking, fissures appear. As we continue looking, frictions begin to proliferate. The frictions become more apparent. Rosalind Cross has said this about western modernism. The modernist not-ground, her emphasis, the not-ground, is a field or background that has risen to the surface of the work to become exactly coincident with its foreground. A field that is thus ingested by the work as a figure. So the background rises to the surface and almost like an amoeba or something it threatens to or attempts to ingest what is there in the foreground. So that's what I think is a useful way of trying to figure out what might be happening in Reji's painting. Enough said by me, I will leave the last word to Reji, who says, "I always wanted to avoid that excessive noise and the political posturing. I was more interested in capturing some kind of silence". So I feel I have spoken too much already. What he is trying to do is to suggest these things. And I think we should begin to respond to the silences and the suggestions he makes.

Thank you very much.
