Songs of Reclamation:
The Art of A. Ramachandran

R. Siva Kumar

Published by | **EMAMI ART PRIVATE LIMITED**

Kolkata Centre for Creativity

777 Anandapur | E.M. Bypass | Kolkata 700107 | W. B. India
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on the occasion of the exhibition
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Designer | Deshraj

Printed in India at Archana, www.archanapress.com

ISBN: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

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Foreword

Emami Art is honoured to present a large-scale solo exhibition of A. Ramachandran in collaboration with Vadehra Art Gallery. Curated by eminent art historian R. Siva Kumar, *Songs of Reclamation: The Art of A. Ramachandran* features a significant body of the artist's recent work in various mediums and scales.

A painter, sculptor, printmaker, designer and art educationist, A. Ramachandran is India's one of the most distinguished and prolific artists. An alumnus of Santiniketan, he is known for his large-scale,highly colourful figurative paintings, in which tradition, modernity, myth and reality intermingle, revealing a distinctive style and eclectic vision. I am particularly fond of his watercolours and drawings from nature and observation, which show his deep sympathy for the rural people and life in Rajasthan. In the age of conflicts worldwide, Ramachandran's vibrant, beautiful works on village subjects and natural beauty give us a soothing experience. However, outside the mainstream art world, Ramachandran, like K. G. Subramanyan, is one of the few contemporary Indian masters who think of children seriously, writing and illustrating books for them. Some of the book's original illustrations on display offer a glimpse into his art for the kids.

The exhibition revealing different aspects of Ramachandran's creative genius is a prominent highlight on the gallery's calendar. I thank A. Ramachandran for trusting us with his works, and I also thank R. Siva Kumar, who has known the artist and his work for a long time, for conceiving and curating this remarkable exhibition. Emami Art is committed to bringing the best of modern and contemporary Indian and South Asian Art to the discerning audience of Bengal, along with innovative parallel activities, collateral events and more. Emami Art also has a flourishing library, a publishing programme, seminars, research projects, talks and workshops to create, little by little, accessible space for the audiences to shape critical awareness of art.

Lastly, I extend my sincere gratitude to my team at Emami Art; without their dedication and effort, the exhibition would not have been possible. I wish the show every success.

Richa Agarwal

CEO, Emami Art

Introduction

My association with Ramachandran goes back a long way. I first heard of him through my art teacher at school, who had known him during his pre-Santiniketan days. They both shared an interest in art and Carnatic music. A few years later, like Ramachandran, partly encouraged by my teacher, I reached Santiniketan, albeit ten years after he left for Delhi. As a student, Ramachandran's paintings, like the *Last Supper*, *Ceiling*, and *Kali Puja*, made a deep impression on me. I even tried to mimic them as I hopped, skipped and jumped from one style to another, following my fancy.

I first met Ramachandran in my third year in Santiniketan, during one of his visits. Other meetings and conversations followed. One such conversation we had sitting on the veranda of the Ratan Kuthi guest house remains etched in my mind. It was past midnight, and there was a power outage, not uncommon in those days, but there was enticing moonlight outside. Ramachandran was then toying with the idea of Yayati. Sitting on the veranda, he shared his visualization of Yayati, narrating it image after image like a vivid film script; and I kept unspooling it in my mind like a new wave Malayalam film by his close friend G. Aravindan. The final painting, of course, turned out to be very different.

Many years later, when his first retrospective exhibition at NGMA, Delhi was being planned, Arun Vadehra asked me, probably prompted by Ramachandran, if I would write the catalogue text. I agreed, and it finally took the form of a two-volume book on his oeuvre. Since then, I have curated four large exhibitions of his works, including two retrospectives. The present exhibition is the fifth, and hopefully a summation of sorts.

This exhibition is happening thanks to Richa Agarwal of Emami Art. When she asked me if I would curate a show of Ramachandran's work, I readily agreed because Kolkata is closely associated with his beginnings as an artist. The haunting images of the post-partition economic and social crisis he encountered on the streets of this city had set him off on the path he travelled for the first 20 years of his career. Ramachandran, and Sonia Ballaney of the Vadehra Art Gallery that represents him, also readily agreed to come on board. I am equally thankful to the three of them.

Despite a large number of works, this exhibition is not a retrospective. It is a fairly comprehensive presentation of certain themes and aspects of his work that I find both appealing and vital. They include his large paintings of lotus ponds, a sculptural ensemble, a set of subtle watercolours, large independent drawings, innumerable studies, and artworks for five illustrated books. Together they help us know his thoughts and work process as an artist.

In each work Ramachandran arrives at the final image through a long process of observation and study from the real world. Personal experiences are filtered by his sensibility and condensed by his mind into a work of art; and he is committed to exploring multiple possibilities as an artist. Sometimes he tells stories about the world; sometimes, he reflects upon his own work process; sometimes, he enters into a dialogue with past traditions; and sometimes, he enchants us. And they often overlap in a single work to create a complex web of experiences and ideas.

An exhibition and publication of this scale could not have been possible without the help of many people working behind the scene. To Deshraj for designing this publication, to the dedicated team members of Emami Art for useful suggestions and for giving physical and digital visibility to the exhibition, to Vinod Bhardwaj and FIAE for permissions to use the documentary film on Ramachandran and the animated films based on his illustrated books as part of this exhibition; I owe them all a big thank you.

R. Siva Kumar

Central figure of ***Bahurupi***
H: 47”, Bronze, 2006

Songs of Reclamation:
A Reading of Ramachandran’s Art

R. Siva Kumar

Every artist carries an idea of an artist in his mind, and his work is closely connected with this idea he holds within. Societies, too, subscribe to and nurture a particular notion of the artist. They support artists who agree with the reigning idea and neglect those who do not. But such ideas are not permanent. They change with time, collectively for society and individually for the artist. Occasionally an individual artist is compelled by some moral or aesthetic reason to give up one idea of the artist and take on another. It sometimes sets him against the tide and costs him dearly. But artists do this often, although they know they stand to lose by ploughing a lonely furrow. The history of modern art is full of such examples, and several of them have led to critical rethinking.

Bahurupi, Mandala base: 80” x 80”, Central figure H: 47”, Standing figures H: 77”. Goat H: 52”, Mukhalinga H: 8”, Bronze, 2006

What is the idea of the artist that Ramachandran nurtures? The lone sculpture, or rather a sculptural ensemble in this exhibition, gives us an insight into the matter. It is an ensemble of 14 sub-units arranged upon and around a six-pointed star or a shatkona yantra symbolizing the union of masculine and feminine energies placed on a raised platform. At the centre of the yantra sits a Buddha-like figure on a lifted base in meditation. Its symmetrical repetitive patterning and the combination of sculptural three-dimensionality with decorative two-dimensionality, recall Wei and Asuka Buddha figures. At the six points of the yantra are placed small bronze heads. At the four corners of the platform stand four lithe nymphs, their bodies wreathed in floral tracery, riding on dwarf mounts resembling abasmara purushas, traditional symbols of ignorance. And finally, in an axial line to the meditative figure are arranged a tortoise-man and a cymbal playing goat-man, paying homage to the iconic figure at the centre of the sculptural constellation. Between the tortoise-man and the meditative icon stands a plate heaped with red powder, like some ritual offering.

The arrangement resembles a temple. Ramachandran has an old fascination with temples that goes back to his experience of the local temple in rural Attingal as a child. He has written about its dim, cavernous space in which the painted images of supra-human beings made themselves visible as the eyes adjusted to the ambient light of the flickering lamps. Later, starting in 1962, he began researching the temple murals of Kerala, and after three decades of research he published a magisterial study. And in the middle of that period he painted the resplendent *Yayati*, a three part mural conceived as a temple to human desire.[1] Seen in conjunction with *Yayati*, this sculptural ensemble can be seen as an open shrine devoted to his idea of an artist. To ensure that we do not overlook the point, the meditative figure at the centre, the goat-man and the tortoise-man, the heads that mark the tips of the shtakona yantra, and the dwarfs on which the female beauties stand or ride are all turned into stylized portraits of himself.

Symbols are aplenty, and they pull us in different directions. The iconic figure at the centre resembles the meditative Buddha or a yogi with embossed chakras on

Detail of ***Bahurupi***, Bronze, 2006

his body, and he has a shock of hair turned into a jata-mukuta or matted crown. Seated in padmasana posture, his body is splayed out like an opened book with the torso rendered in elevation and the legs shown like a plan. Twisted into the most improbable manner, it is a posture that can be achieved only by a contortionist or an artist unimpeded by realism. If he is a Buddha, his hand gestures are unconventional; with both hands extended downwards, they perform a double

Detail of ***Bahurupi***, Bronze, 2006

Detail of ***Bahurupi***, Bronze, 2006

bhumisparsha mudra, asserting, as it were, an inviolable call to the world to stand witness to his work. Rejecting realism and yet calling the world to stand as testimony to his art, he multiplies into several uncanny creatures: the slow and steady tortoise that wins races, the curious nimble-footed goat that champs at everything, the direction marking disembodied heads, and the dwarfed mounts that carry sensual-bodied women who like the nymph in Botticelli's *Primavera* turn into blossoming nature. Despite these empathetic hybridizations and transformations, seated at the centre of this queer and expanding sensuous world with his eyes shut, he seems to suggest that he creates from an internalized vision of the world and does not record it like an open-eyed camera.

He calls this ensemble, which can be read as an elaborate sculptural metaphor celebrating multifaceted creativity *Bahurupi* or the multi-formed. By lending his face to many figures, he also suggests that to him, art is a way of finding and expressing oneself in multiple ways. Perhaps there is an element of self-love

in all art. Like the primeval creator of the Rig Veda, he brings something into existence where nothing existed, and like the god of Genesis, he looks at his work and sees it is good. Yet lest we mistake it as blotted narcissism, with the proliferation of self-portraits as god, beasts and mounts, Ramachandran also douses it with a good dose of self-mocking. The same seems to be true for the yantric diagram. He could be alluding to the sacred geometry of relationships underlying the creative act or playfully mocking his neo-tantric contemporaries who used yantras to mystify their work and feign philosophical profundity. He is aware that creation is a serious matter; it requires determination, knowledge and perseverance, but it also needs the levity of humour to enliven it, and he leaves his works tantalizingly suspended between serious assertion and mischievous jest. In his works he plays the role of a vidushaka or an odd wise fool who reveals and deflects. To miss that is to miss Ramachandran and the way he works.

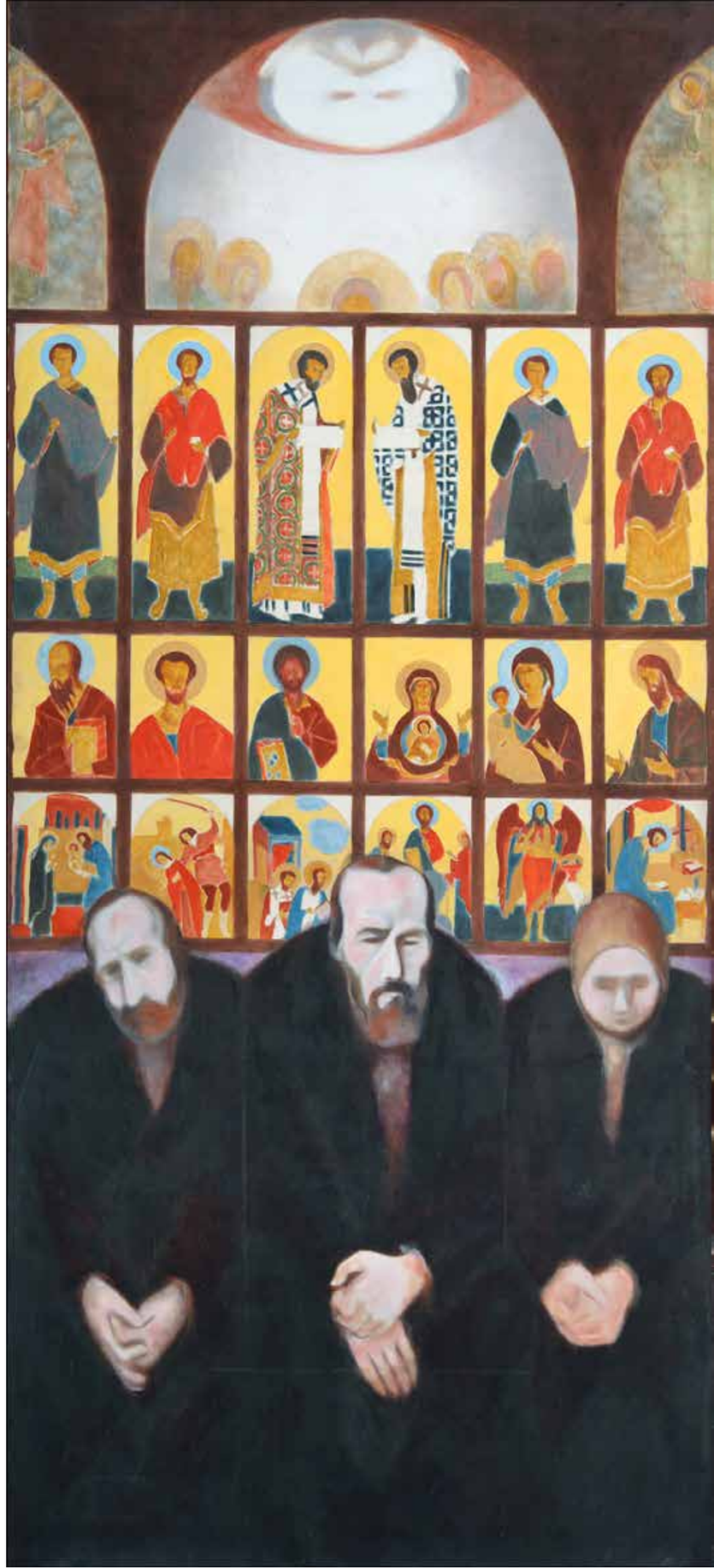
However, this is not where Ramachandran began as an artist. He worked with a different idea of the artist's role for over three decades before changing his mind and taking on the position discussed above. Born in 1935, his year of birth coincided with the formation of the Progressive Writers' Association. Indian expatriates held the group's first meeting in London in November 1935 and their first all-India meeting in Lucknow in 1936. At the Lucknow meeting, Munshi Premchand spelt out their vision of literature. He said, "There have been many definitions of literature, but in my opinion the best definition for it is—'the criticism of life'. [....] The aims of ethics and of literature are the same—the difference is only in their manner of teaching. Ethics tries to mould intelligence and character through arguments and preaching, while the chosen field of literature are mental and emotional states. Whatever we see in our lives and whatever experiences and blows we encounter, once they reach the imagination they inspire literary creativity. [....] It is the duty of a writer to support and defend those who are in some way oppressed, suffering or deprived, whether they be individuals or groups. [....] A writer or artist is naturally progressive. [....] He wants to put an end to these unpleasant conditions so that the world can become a better place to live and to die. This pain, this feeling keeps his brain and heart active. His heart, laden with pain, cannot bear to see any group suffering under the constraint of rules and conventions. Why cannot we find the needful to free that group from slavery and poverty? The more acutely a writer feels the pain, the greater the force and truth his work will produce."[2]

A literature of social introspection was already underway in Kerala.[3] By the 1940s, there was a new crop of writers calling for and catalyzing change in Kerala's caste-ridden feudal society. Three among them stood out. P. Kesavadev was the most politically oriented among them. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, a naturalist in language and subject matter, brought the life of the peasants and the poor into focus. And Vaikom Muhammed Basheer was a subtle and suggestive social critic; he mingled pathos and beauty with humour and empathy. The very names of their novels—*Odayil Ninnu* (From the Gutter), *Nati* (Actress), *Bhrantalayam* (Mad House), *Arukuvendi* (For Whose Sake) by Kesavadev; *Thottiyude Makan* (Sacvenger's Son), *Randidangazhi* (Two Measures), and *Chemmeen* (Prawns)by Thakazhi, and *Entuppuppakkoranendarnnu* (My Grandpa had an Elephant), *Pathummayude Adu* (Pathumma's Goat) by Basheer—indicate the social change they supported and amplified. Ramachandran's own experience of the changing fortunes of his family confirmed the new realities and made him sympathetic to the literature that reflected it. As a student of Malayalam Literature at Kerala University, he came close to several of them. Kesavadev even became an early mentor. However, it was Basheer who left a more lasting impact on him.

Among his close friends from this period, N. Mohanan would later become a well-known short story writer, G. Aravindan, an acclaimed filmmaker, and C. N. Sreekantan Nair, a seminal playwright. Mohanan and Aravindan were themselves sons of writers. Mohanan's mother, Lalithambika Antharjanam, was a path-breaking woman writer and social reformer, and Aravindan's father was a noted satirist. Like Aravindan and Sreekantan Nair, Ramachandran imbibed the spirit of the progressives and took it forward by giving it a surrealist, existentialist and, finally, a quasi mythic twist in the later years. Ramachandran was also a trained Carnatic singer and an amateur painter. His engagement with the literary activism of the 1950s was primarily in the form of a singer.

While there was a robust literary scene in contemporary Kerala, there was no parallel in art, which continued to wallow miserably in an enfeebled post-Ravi-Varma tradition. Ramachandran looked for alternatives in the reproductions of the Bengal School artists published in the *Modern Review* and in the varied collection of their works put together by J. H. Cousins that was accessible to him at the Sri Chitralayam Art Gallery. While they showed him ways out from the staple academicism of local art, they were unlike what he admired in literature. At this point, in a book on Santiniketan, he came across a reproduction of Ramkinkar Baij's monumental sculpture, the *Santal Family*. Unlike anything he had seen, it resonated with physical vitality and empathy for the marginalized he was looking for in art. And it took him to Santiniketan in 1957, changing track from music and literature to art.

Ramkinkar, and Ramachandran's other teachers in Santiniketan, especially Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee, taught him to take art as a vocation to which one was wedded for life and to observe and learn from local realities. And he continues to subscribe to both lessons. But it was Ramkinkar's spirited representation of the Santals in his sculptures and paintings that made an immediate impact. He absorbed the energy and vitality of the master's work, but Ramkinkar's utopian celebratory vision clashed with the dystopian reality he saw in post-partition Bengal. After encountering post-partition suffering on the streets of Calcutta, passionate exploration of the human condition in troubled times through anti-heroic figures became his primary concern. That took him to two other sources; Dostoevsky, an old daemon of his, and the Mexican muralists he discovered newly in Santiniketan. Moving to Delhi in 1964, he found that despite its ancient monuments and the pomp and grandeur of a capital city, it had an enormous underbelly of oppression and suffering. In response, mixing the monumentality and baroque energy of the Mexicans with Dostoevskian anguished black humour, he painted mural-scaled canvases in which nameless and faceless victims of irrational actions and social violence conjured dystopian visions suffused with empathy for the humiliated and the dehumanized. For the next 20 years, through his art, he fulminated in angst, anger, derisive laughter and through barbed satire against heartless elites, insensitive bureaucracy, demagogues,



Portrait of Dostoevsky
Oil on canvas
120" x 54", 1977

Encounter, oil on canvas, 72" x 288", 1967

and saboteurs of democracy, who humiliated, harangued and liquidated fellow citizens in the name of progress, ideology, and ethnic or class cleansing.

In Ramachandran's experience, the hope and optimism with which the modernist project began and to which he had subscribed did not hold up. There was material progress and real advances in patches, but on the whole, the socialists and the capitalists failed on the Enlightenment promise of equality, fraternity and justice for all. Knowledge, especially coming from science and technology, improved living conditions, and it made life more comfortable for a considerable number of people but not for everyone; in fact, keeping out a vaster number of people outside its benefits was one of the engines of modernist progress. The love for technology overtook the passion for knowledge, and science came to be used to dominate and subjugate rather than create an equitable world. Technology perfected new tools of violence and the modern period saw collective violence in the form of manmade famines, brutal wars, and genocides. Modernity was not all anti-repressive; despite advances in knowledge, it failed morally and socially;

new knowledge often led to new ways of repression, not universal freedom. Oppression and exploitation, he concluded, accompanied modernization.

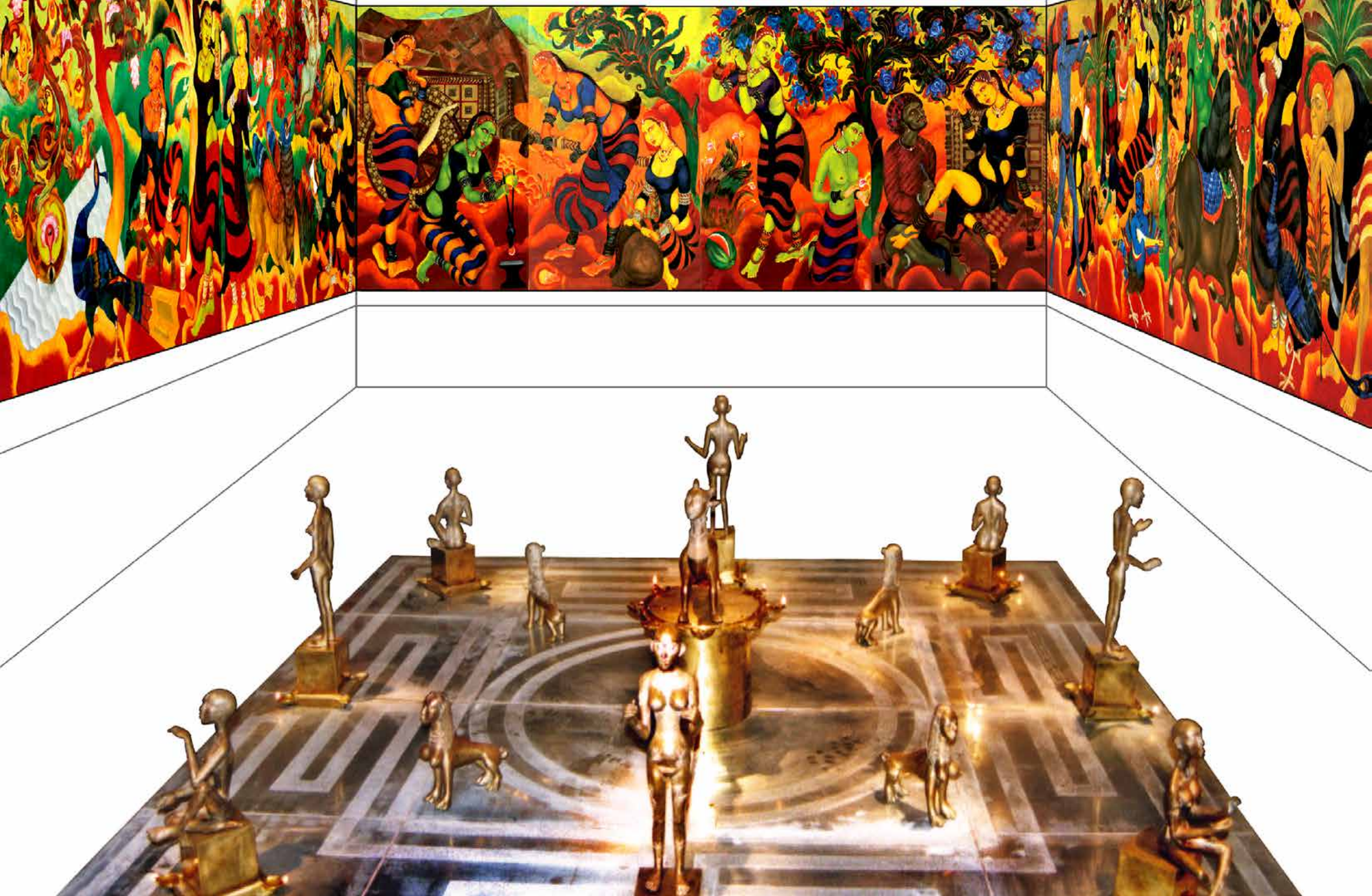
The Indian experience was no different. Independence brought with it the brutalities of partition. Even as India was recovering and consolidating as a nation, she was drawn into wars by her neighbours. Feeling that weapons of greater violence were necessary for self-preservation, she decided to go nuclear even as poverty raged rampantly. That was followed by insurgencies and mindless violence in the name of revolution and brutal suppression by the state. On the positive side, the Green Revolution helped her to address the issue of poverty. Yet, her insecure rulers subverted democracy, precisely as her neighbours were doing with even greater élan.

Through paintings like *Indian Resurrection* (1965), *Encounter*, and *Entombment* (1967), *Machine* (1968), *Gandhi and the Twentieth Century Cult of Violence* (1969), *Ceiling* (1970), *Anatomy Lesson* and *Audience* (1971), *Kali Puja* (1972),

Kali Puja, oil on canvas, 68" x 135", 1972

the *Nuclear Ragani* series and *The Chase* (1975), *Vision of War* and a series on the triumph of human absurdities (1977), and the *Puppet Series* on the subversion of democracy (1981) he documented the march of post-independent India. Ramachandran saw it as suicidal, and as early as 1973, he painted a cataclysmic image of monumental self-destruction, the *End of Yadavas*. Eleven years later, he saw what he had envisioned as a metaphor unfolding right in front of him in the form of the 1984 Delhi riots. This time it was not happening at a distance but right before him and more brutally than he had depicted in his paintings.

Schematic arrangement of ***Yayati,*** painting and sculptures



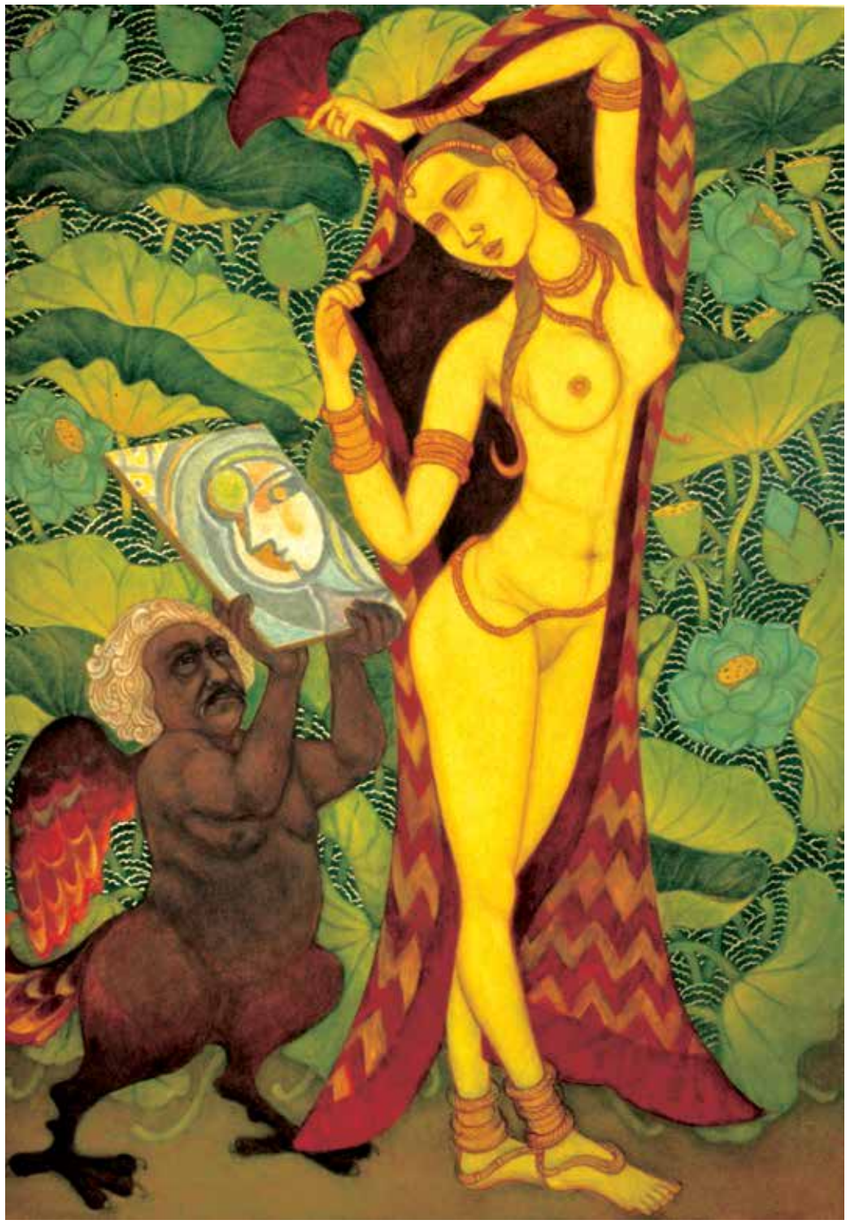
Sandhya, Last section of ***Yayati***, oil on canvas, 96" x 240", 1986

Confronted with such violence, he felt that his lifelong protest against repression and violence had become futile and absurd. And painfully realized that neither Premchand's call for art as 'the criticism of life' nor Dostoevsky's anguished cry for awakening the Christ within, to which he had enthusiastically subscribed, had made the world 'a better place to live and to die.'

Ramachandran's modernism was, from the outset, formulated as a critique of modern society's violent and repressive nature. With hopes of humanizing what modernity decimated, he now began to take stock of everything he had repressed while pursuing his modernist project. And there were many: the sensuality and fullness of the human figure, the beauty of nature, the impulse to tell stories, and the representational and expressive possibilities of visual traditions that lay outside the narrow purview of modernism. He took all of them together in one big sweep in *Yayati*. Besides a sense of failure in his artistic efforts as a modernist that the riots brought home, *Yayati* was influenced by his research into Kerala murals, to which he was returning after a break, and his study of Indian art at large. He noticed that the pursuit of sensuality and pleasure was presented up front and not segregated from other human pursuits, including religious and spiritual quests in Indian art. And the visual languages of many of its schools

Urvashi and Minotaur, oil on canvas, 80” x 54”, 1990

could perfectly express it without being realistic in the usual sense. Signs of this recognition were already visible in some of his paintings and drawings leading



Urvashi’s Toilet, oil on canvas, 80” x 54”, 1990

to *Yayati*. At a more personal level, Ramachandran was diagnosed with ocular tuberculosis. The possibility of eye impairment was traumatic to him as an artist;

just as he was beginning to savour the visual pleasures of the world, he felt it would be snatched away from him. The story of Yayati from the *Mahabharata* became an apt metaphor for his predicament.

Yayati was a flawed and all too human hero. Ramachandran decided to turn his 60 feet painting, displayed like the painted inner walls of a temple, into a monument to the fallible human being. Using characters and stories from the *Mahabharata* was not entirely new to him. He had already used them in the *End of the Yadavas* (1973) and *Gandhari* (1979). However, in the earlier works, they were used as metaphors for social realities, but in *Yayati*, the persona and the story of Yayati are used as a metaphor for the artist's own psychological predicament. To underscore this, for the first time in his works, he gave his face to a serenading kinnara adopted from Ajanta. Similarly, the rest of its visual imagery and language was also adopted from various sources. While several figural motifs were taken from Ajanta murals, stylistically, *Yayati* was an amalgam of the sensuality of Kerala murals, the decorative exuberance of Hoysala sculptures, the rhythmic cadence of Ajanta murals, and the intense palate of Malwa miniatures. Using this complex and uneasy amalgam of sources, he brought together the angst of losing his vision and thus the world and the bodily sensuality of the Gadia Lohars, who served as models for his female figures, into a tense conjunction. In retrospect, it comes across as a bold and determined effort at breaking away from everything he stood for until then, and a forceful declaration of intentions, rather than as the first undisputed masterpiece of his second period.

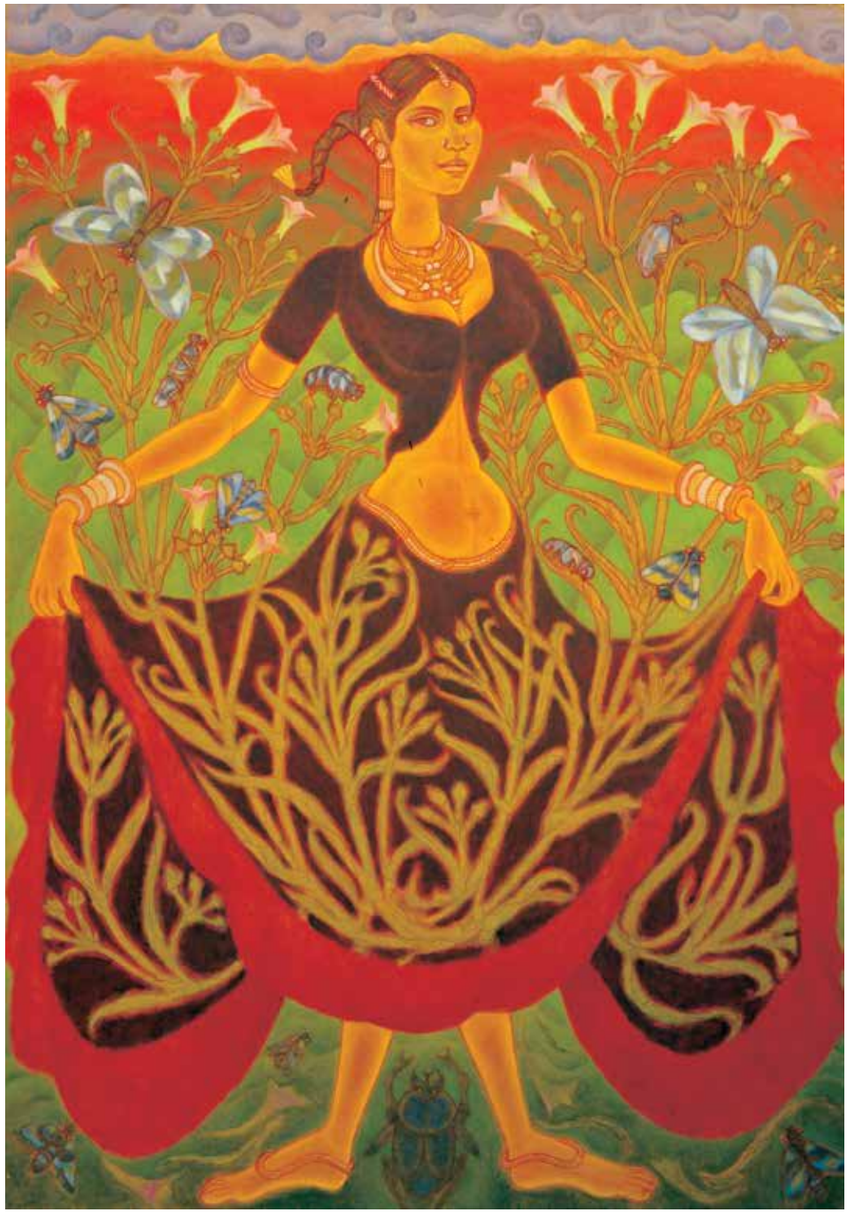
Having signalled with *Yayati* his intention to turn narrative, employ mythology as modern-day metaphors, and reclaim the visual imagery and language of Indian art, he felt an urgent need to escape from the abstract world of ideas he had slipped into and regain his grip on the concreteness of the living world. In Santiniketan, his teachers had taught him to go out into the surrounding villages and to draw people and landscapes from life rather than work from posed models in the studio to get a grip on reality. That had progressively become difficult in Delhi as it became more and more urbanized. Although his subjects were not directly drawn from life, like that of his teachers, he had always felt the need, unlike many of his contemporaries, to be in touch with the world and use drawing as a means to do so. During his early years in Delhi, it was possible to observe life from close, if not actually draw, as he lived close to the bastis of the urban poor at Jangpura or to the villages adjoining Okhla. As he moved closer to expanding city outskirts in the early 1980s, keeping in touch with the world through drawing became difficult. A chance visit to Udaipur provided him with an opportunity. The Bhils who lived in nearby villages were welcoming and did not resent being studied. He began to visit Udaipur annually and explore the Bhil villages in the company of his old artist friend Suresh Sharma.[4]

The Bhil villages were in every way the opposite of what Delhi was. It was untouched by the rationalist disenchantment that led to modernity. The Bhils lived in the midst of a vast open landscape, their lives regulated by nature, myths, rituals and customs. Compared to them, he lived in an urban barrenness, and in his imagination, the visit to the Bhil villages became the annual trysts of Pururavas with enchanting Urvashi. In the process, he transformed the villages and their simple inhabitants into enchanted visions of beauty. Most of his paintings done between 1987 and 1991 belong to this category. Several of them (from 1990) show Urvashi and her companions sporting against the large lotus ponds he discovered in these villages with Pururavas transformed into a minotaur or kinnara bearing his visage. Despite their mythological references, these paintings were based on observed facts, but, as in *Yayati*, in these paintings too, the motifs were cast in various historical styles. However, in this case, not all of them were Indian. These were followed by paintings representing the everyday reality and rituals that regulated the social life of the Bhils, and occasionally by paintings celebrating the dramatic efflorescence of a tree or plant on the barren landscape caught in close-up. Through them, he introduced beauty back into modern Indian art.

Like bringing back pre-modern art styles into circulation, this also was an act of reclamation, for art and beauty had parted ways in the modern period, and beauty that belonged to art was declared distinct from beauty in nature. This

negation of beauty was part of the modernist negation of the long tradition of idealized and reified western classicism and expanding the canon of possibilities. Erasing beauty and embracing non-beauty or displacing grace by plainness, even ugliness, was seen as an assertion of truthfulness and authenticity. By this, the modern artist wished to turn art into an instrument of knowing and truth-telling. With the pursuit of the real, beauty became frivolous, and eventually, it was relegated to the domain of kitsch and uncultivated philistine taste. Art's role was to challenge, disturb, and not please. The only beauty that was legitimate in art was that of the material. And Ramachandran himself had subscribed to that idea in his early career. Bringing back beauty in a more conventional sense into contemporary art was, therefore, a bold and daunting act. It scandalized the cultivated contemporary art specialists and gallery goers just as they were once scandalized by Picasso's demolishment of beauty in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. For Ramachandran, beauty became a means for re-enchanting the world that was not so long ago disenchanted by modernity.

From the modern urban point of view, Ramachandran's works might look like yet another romantic return to the primitive, of which there are several instances in the history of modern art. Even if there is an element of Romanticism in his recent works, they also have a deeper message for us. By enveloping the Bhils and their world in sheer beauty, he is not merely idealizing them but restoring the old link between beauty and goodness. We should look at them as we look at Botticelli's *Primavera*, as allegories in which the sensible is rendered as the symbolic body of the suprasensible, and beauty is proposed as the embodiment of goodness and wisdom. Ramachandran is not a romantic who wishes to turn the clock back and resurrect a traditional society. He is a modern artist revisiting what has been repressed in the name of progress, what has been alienated from us by our urban lives and the attendant notions of modernity. By rendering the Bhil world as beautiful, he is trying to draw our attention to issues such as communitarian life, neighbourly fraternity, and man's relationship to nature. He knows that the Bhils are poor, lack access to good health and education, and that their lives could be better, but he also knows that this is equally true of the urban poor. Further, he is not an activist and refuses to be an agent of reform



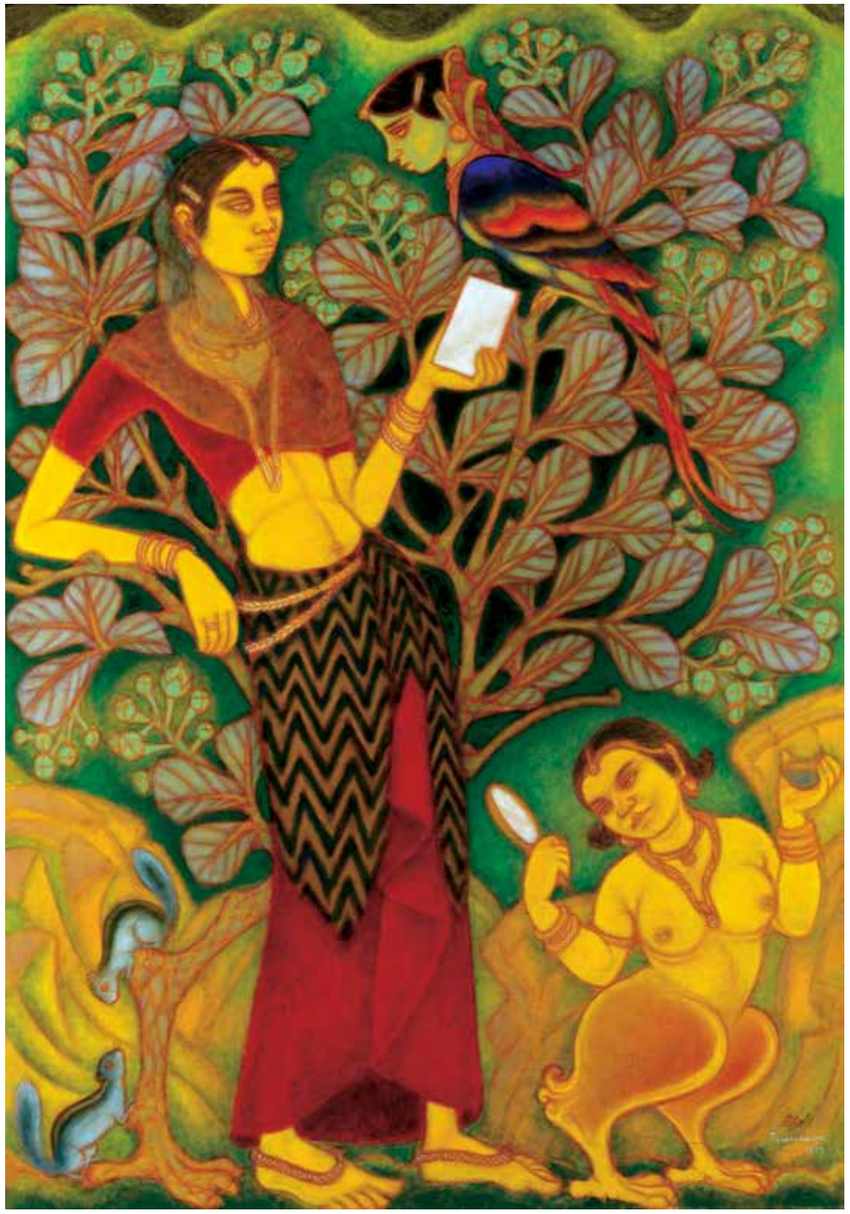
Jamburani and the Tobaco Plant, oil on canvas, 80" x 54", 1993

and modernization, just as he is not a diehard romantic critic of capitalism. He believes in individuality, democracy, and rationality as much as his urban

viewers. But he does not subscribe to I-know-best intellectual elitism, the state-knows-best form of governance, or the suppression of individual freedom through social engineering and the erasuer of plurality. His paintings are his despatches to fellow urban dwellers from the parallel world of the Bhils, conveying the contrarian experience of his sojourns to one of the marginalized communities considered underdeveloped.

Thus in his paintings, Ramachandran does not speak for the Bhils because he does not want to play the role of a colonizer or an activist who wishes to civilize or bring development to them. He is also not necessarily speaking against activists who wish to do so; as a painter, he is merely working like an anthropologist in the Bhil country. He represents what he observes in the form of stories that paints the picture of a parallel world, where people, animals and landscape are equal players; a world where men do not see themselves as the master species and nature is not simply natural resources waiting to be exploited ad nauseam. As an artist, Ramachandran is marginal to their stories. He is either an invisible and omnipresent narrator, as the author is in a story, or is a neutral observer within the scene like an anthropologist. Where he is an observer, to clarify that he is a marginal observer and not a spokesperson, he shows himself as a bird or animal, something lesser than the Bhils whose story he is telling. In these paintings, he is the other, and yet simultaneously, he brings the stories from an alien land to us as a witness. To underscore once again, the paintings are an aesthetic and ethical meditation on a parallel world addressed to the gallery-going, urban, modernized, progress-obsessed viewers. And they should be seen as such.

Ramachandran's pictorial meditations and stories come in two formats, in the form of life-size, richly painted canvases in oils and smaller, more delicately rendered watercolours. The canvases often show Bhils singly in relation to nature, such as *Jamburani and the Tobacco Plant* (1993), *Mirnama* (1994), *Savita and Solki with Aparajita Flowers* (1995), and *Hanna with Akanda Flowers* and *Hanna with Amaltas Tree* (1999). In larger canvases, he records their communitarian life: *On the Way to Baneshwar Mela* (1998), *The Bathers in the Blue Lotus Pond* (2000), *Dance of Monsoon* (2003), *The Spring Passes By* (2005), *Summer Wedding (2007),*

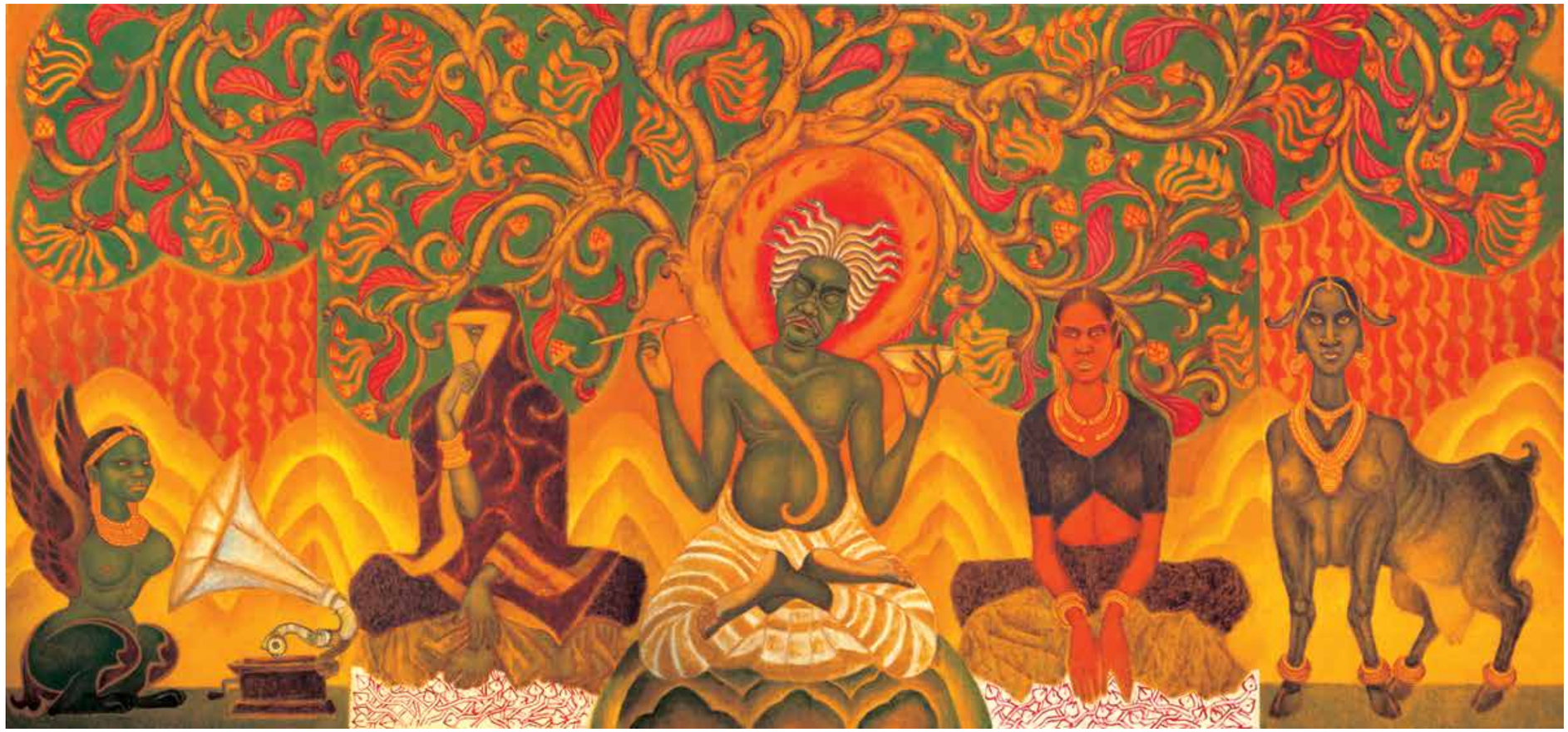


Hanna and Akanda Flowers, oil on canvas, 80" x 54", 1999

Vision of Ramdev and *Bathers at Jogi ka Talab* (2008), *Lullaby to the Unborn Child* (2009), *Dancing on Full Moon Night* (2013), *The Monsoon Flowers* and

Summer Wedding, oil on canvas, 78” x 168”, 2007

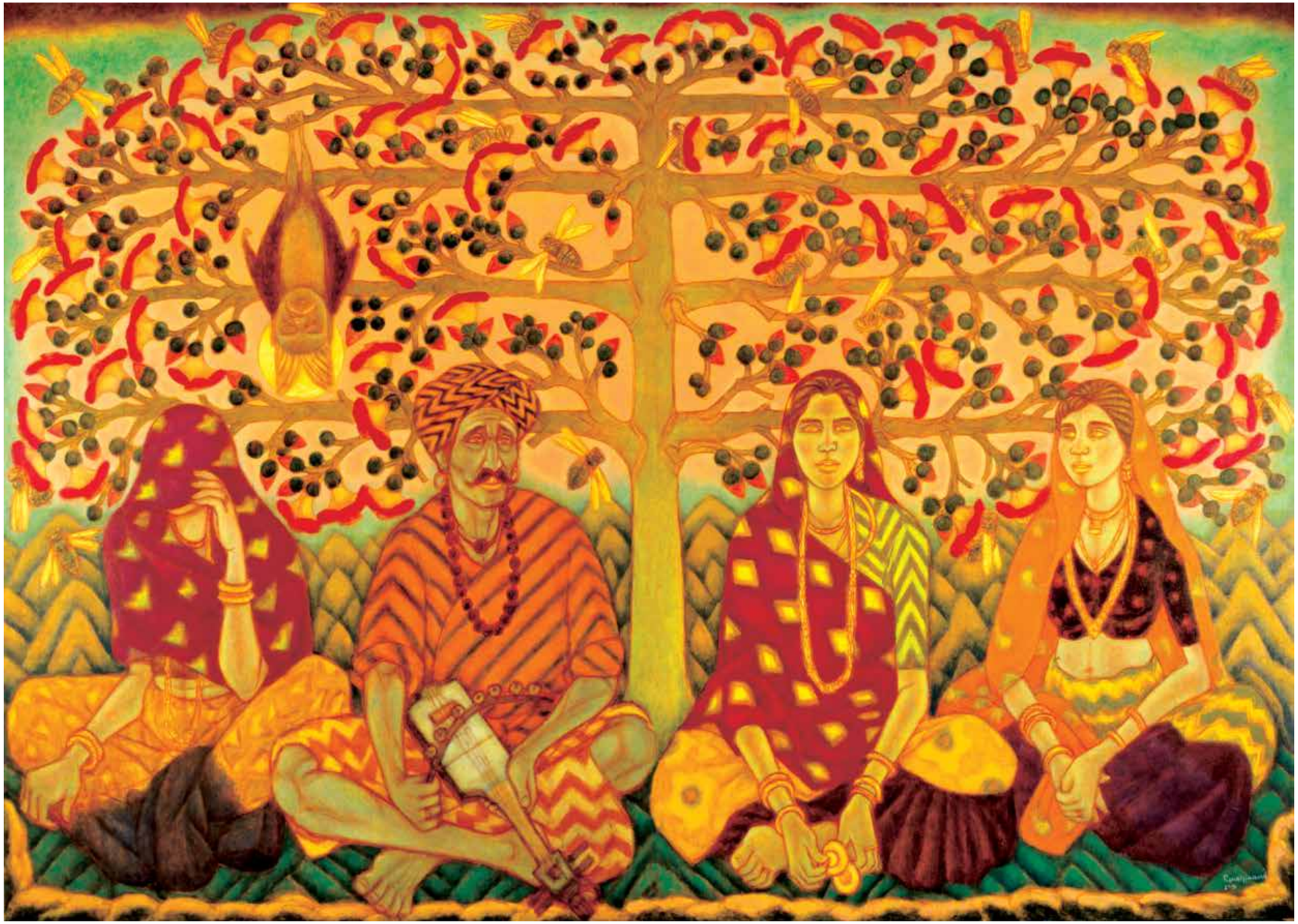
Lullaby to the Unborn Girl Child, oil on canvas, 78" x 168", 2009



Iconic Self-Portrait with Umbilical Mahua Tree
Oil on canvas
80" x 170", 1994

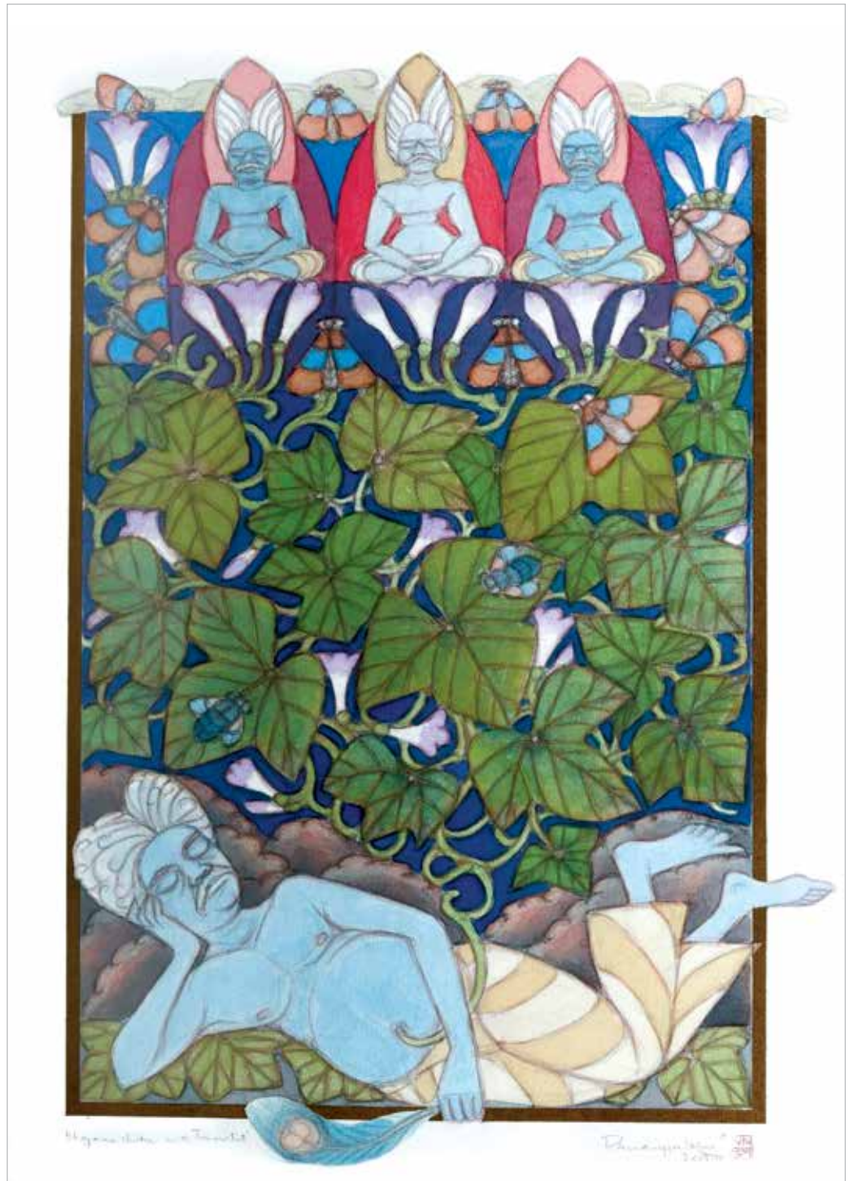
Worship of Dasamata (2014), and *Springtime in Undri Village* (2018) for instance. And this long pageant of relatively straightforward renderings of Bhil life is punctuated by dense allegorical images that are more condensed visions than narrations. They cannot be easily decoded; they tease us into thinking but eventually, like icons, compel us to submit to their tantalizing and strong evocative presence. They are the periodic summations of his collective experience. And they include *Birth of the Palash Tree* (1993), *Iconic Self-Portrait with Umbilical Mahua Tree* and *Hanna and Her Goats* (1994), *Song of the Simbul Tree* (2002), and *Rituals for Resurrection* (2013).

Alongside the large canvases, Ramachandran painted several sets of charming watercolours (1998, 1999, 2001, 2007 and 2010) in which he presented what he saw and felt in the form of brief narrative episodes. Each of these paintings has the exquisite brevity and focus of a short story, and together they present an idyllic picture of a slow-moving life lived in the lap of nature with its little



Song of a Simbul Tree, oil on canvas, 80" x 114", 2001

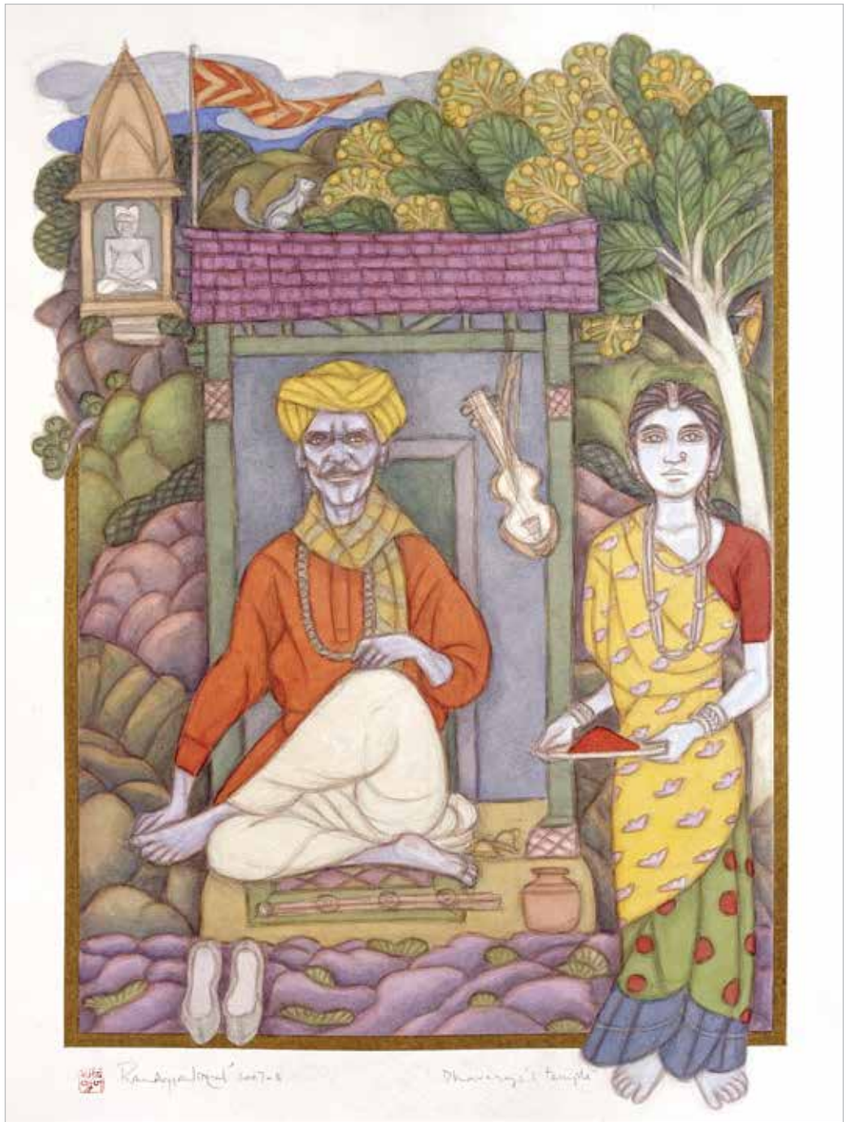
Birth of Palash Tree, oil on canvas, 80” x 136”, 1993



Dhyanachitra with Trimuratis, watercolour on paper, 29" x 21", 2010

Dhyanachitra -III, watercolour on paper, 29" x 21", 2008

pleasures, desires and wistfulness. While the larger paintings have an air of distance and objectivity, there is a feeling of nearness and emotional intimacy in the watercolours. This difference between the large canvases and the smaller watercolours brings home his twin roles as an observer and a chronicler of their life. Starting with *Birth of the Palash Tree* (1993) and *Iconic Self-Portrait with Umbilical Mahua Tree* (1994), he began to acknowledge that, although marginal



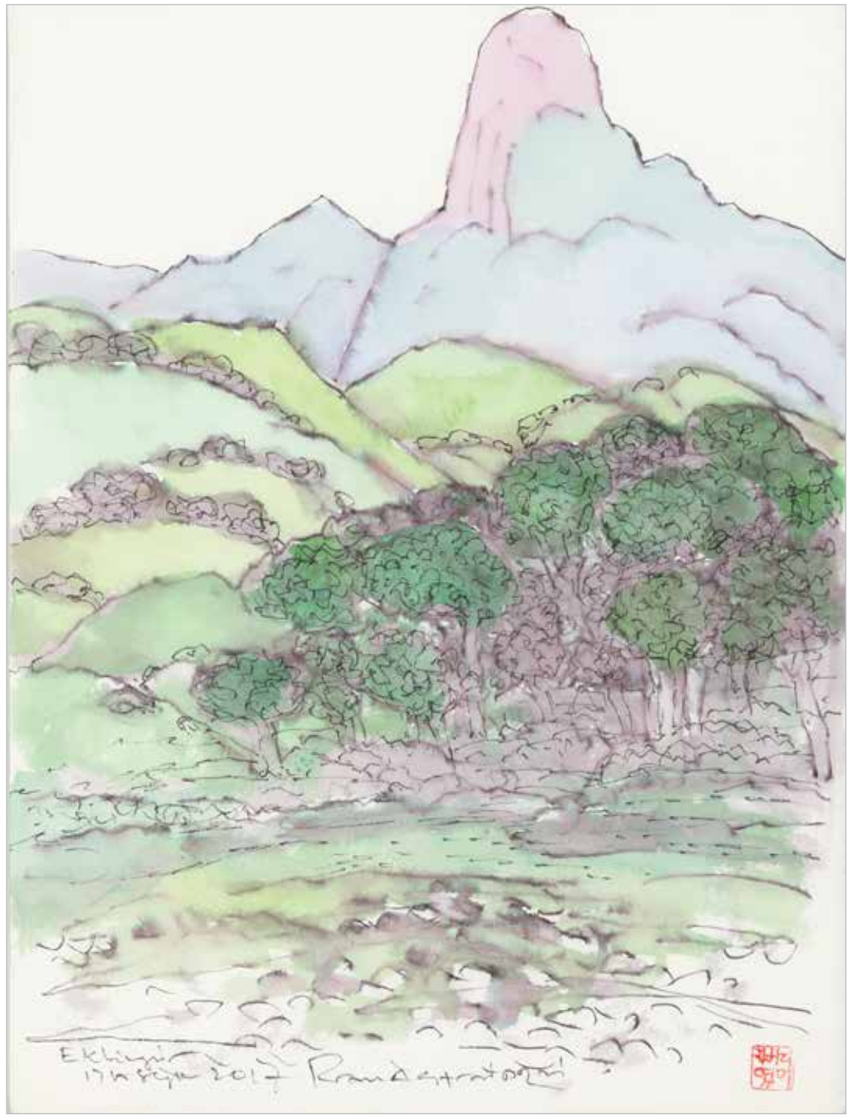
Dhowraji's Temple, watercolour on paper, 29" x 21", 2007-08

to the story, his role as a narrator also makes him the creator of the stories. In them, he is simultaneously within the paintings and creating them. A set of later watercolours from 2008, of which several are on view in this exhibition, express the

same idea. Instead of showing him as a marginal or sub-human viewer, as in the first set, they show him as the central figure using two tropes. That of the sleeping Vishnu from whose navel Brahma the creator is supposed to have risen in the form of a meditating yogi, and that of the meditating yogi that nationalist writers widely but fallaciously used to claim that Indian art was non-materialistic and spiritual, as opposed to western art that is materialistic and secular. By invoking them, Ramachandran, playfully and self-mockingly, as in *Bahurupi*, proposes the idea that the artist is at once the observer of what he represents and its creator.

However, the metaphor of the artist as a yogi who calls forth the world from within through meditation should not fool us into thinking that is how Ramachandran works. That, at best, is a partial view of his work method and points perhaps to the last part of a more elaborate creative process. An extended period of open-eyed sadhana or observation and endeavour precedes the birth of the inner vision. The smaller drawings in this exhibition give us an insight into the long process that precedes painting. As we have already noted, Ramachandran, like his mentors, does not create without engaging with the concreteness of the world. Like them, he uses drawing to observe and internalize the world. Drawing is the tool and the process that opens up the motif and helps him to know it intimately. It is not a one-time event but a continuous exercise necessary to keep impressions fresh, and with each drawing, he learns to see and know the motif more clearly. And therefore, his many visits and revisits to the same places and motifs.

Similarly, each time he draws something, while the eyes learn to see more, the hand learns to economize and to be thrifty with his pictorial means. The ability to call forth images from within and improvise faultlessly comes only at the end of a long apprenticeship to nature and endless experimentation with translating reality into language. Once this stage is achieved through repeated study from life, Ramachandran moves on to larger improvisatory works done from imagination in the studio, be they paintings or large drawings. The large drawings in the exhibition, done between 2015 and 2019, are of this kind. They are closer to the watercolours and the oils in essence and complexity than to

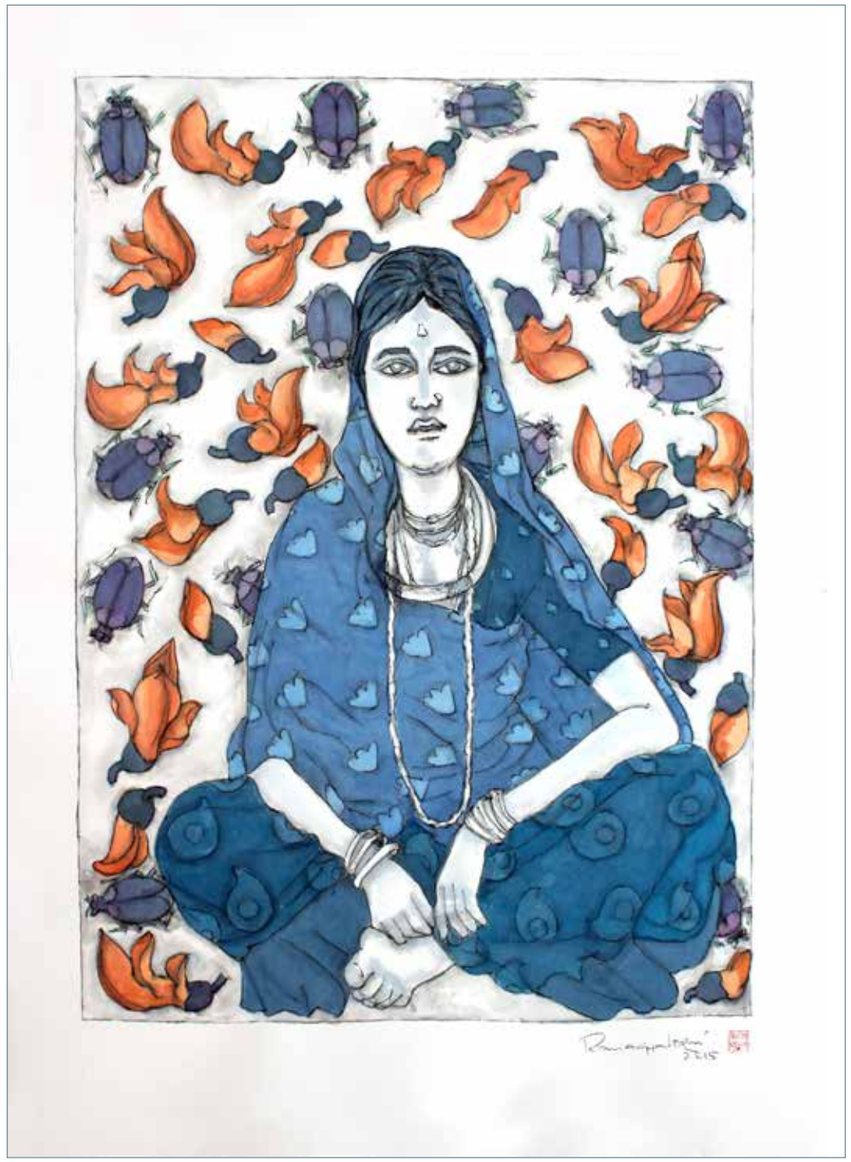


Study, ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2017

Study, ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2018

the studies done from nature. They are drawn directly onto the paper without using underdrawings for guidance. Over the years, Ramachandran has made the writing pen his main instrument of drawing. Using the evenly thin lines it produces, he creates drawings that are complex networks of lines modulated by movement and cadence alone. That makes the finished drawing look like a luxurious sprawl across the surface. With the edge and surface of objects suggested by a combination of interlinked movements, some tremulous with nervous energy and some quick like assured steps, it is difficult to say where he

Study, ink and watercolour on paper, 11" x 14", 2018



Seated Woman , ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2015

began and where he ended. This makes each image a labyrinth created by a line on a walk, moving at varied rhythms across a field. And when he wants to stress a detail, enhance its materiality, or give it an added volume, he does not model

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot', Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

with hatching but gives it a light wash with a wet brush or a touch of colour.

All but three of the large drawings included in this exhibition belong to three groups titled *Image Poem: Earthen Pot* (2016), *Insignificant Incarnations* (2018),

Insignificant Incarnation, ink and wash on paper, 30" x 22", 2018

Fragments of Enlightenment, ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2019

and *Fragments of Enlightenment* (2019), and are similar to the watercolours in intensity and purpose. But they are not as narrative or iconic as his watercolours. In them, narration or time is condensed into a moment pregnant with symbolic potency. The central motif of these drawings is a young woman enveloped by fecund nature; they are not village women at work but women wistfully waiting. Though stylistically different, they bear a family resemblance to the utkanthita

Lotus Pond in Afternoon Sunlight, oil on canvas, 78" x 192", 2019

nayikas of Indian miniatures. Further, as in Indian miniatures, her desire is not expressed by her gestures or movement but by the voluptuousness of the trees and flowering plants surrounding her, and their luxurious explosion in contrast to her rather listless and sublimated figure. The artist is also present in each drawing, not as a free being within the picture as in the watercolours, but as an embryo, an insect or a meditating yogi within a womb-pot, waiting to be born into this world of voluptuous sensuality. Ramachandran also acknowledges the latent reference to the nayikas we notice here by calling a closely related group of oil paintings of Bhil women he painted in 2020 *Subaltern Nayikas*.

We have already noted that Ramachandran's post-mid-1980s paintings can be read as the reclamation of several elements from which modern artists, especially urban modern Indian artists, he felt, stand alienated. Such as the experience of beauty, the continuing possibilities of pre-modern Asian art languages, the concreteness of things, and communitarian life lived in symbiotic harmony with nature. Born in lush rural Kerala, educated in rustic Santiniketan, and familiar with the history of Asian arts, he was already familiar with some of these experiences and ideas. Still, awakening to the enchantments of nature was a new experience for him. Though his teachers in Santiniketan paid close attention to

Lotus Pond on Starry Night, oil on canvas, 78" x 192", 2019

nature and celebrated the local landscape, landscape as a subject did not enter Ramachandran's works. Until the mid-1980s, he was a painter of human figures and, more pointedly, a painter of the predicament of modern man. But this changed with his visits to the Bhil villages around Udaipur. Almost all of them had large lotus ponds, and their beauty and presence were compelling. Four of them, at Ubeshwar, Eklingji, Nagda and Jogi ka Talab, stood out. Surrounded by different landscapes, each was different from the other, evoked different moods and exuded different auras, as if they were four different people. They enchanted him as much as the spirit of the Bhils and turned him into a painter of nature.

At first, the lotus ponds appeared as backdrops to his figure paintings, then gradually, they became a recurring theme, large enough to occupy a space in his oeuvre equal to that of human figures. Initially, as with the Bhils, he read them through their art historical renderings in familiar styles. But as he began to observe and to know them concretely and intimately through studies, he recognized that they were not just objects of beauty that added charm to the landscape but living entities in themselves, a world within the world. Each pond was different, yet there was something inherently common to them. He realized that each pond with its fishes and snakes, with the water birds and insects that lived in it or visited it, is a self-contained ecosystem. It was one thing from the

Drying Lotus Pond, oil on canvas, 78" x 192", 2020

outside and another from within. As he entered deep into the large lotus ponds, he discovered that the humidity and the weather inside were different from the one outside. While he sat on its banks and drew, it kept changing with time and illumination, and he noticed it had different moods, as if it was conversing with the world. They appeared different at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night. A slight change in light changed the colour of the flowers, the colour of the two sides of the leaves, and of the water and the sky. It altered their shapes and relationships, and the ponds seemed to become dense and contract or expand with the changes in illumination. And sometimes what was bright became darker and what was dark became lighter. The same pond assumed different configurations, different images. He watched it in summer, in spring, during the monsoons and in winter and saw it springing into life, blooming into fullness, drying, decaying and dying year after year. And in its life cycle, he experienced the earth going through endless rounds of life, death and renewal. To him, that was enchanting, awe-inspiring and sobering in turns, and he shares that experience with us in his lotus ponds.

As an artist, he paints what he observes and intuitively realizes. Unlike an activist, he doesn't begin with a message he wishes to communicate or popularize and

then find the image to carry it across. To an artist like Ramachandran, insights dawn on him as he engages with a motif or object over a period of time. And the message remains latent in the image even when it is clear. He leaves it to the viewers to see and experience it, informed by his context of making and our context of viewing. We can view his over 50 lotus ponds painted during the last 35 years as vast stretches of well-painted soothing views. We could look at them as representations of places we would like to visit on weekends to calm our nerves and breathe in nature's charms or buy and hang them on our walls to give us the vicarious pleasure of being in the presence of nature and beauty. However, we could do this not only to Ramachandran but also to other artists like him who have obsessively explored aspects of nature. To Monet, who painted over 200 lily ponds in three decades; Cezanne, who painted Mont St. Victoire over 60 times in four decades; and Ansel Adams, who patiently and repeatedly photographed the Yosemite Mountains and Valley for a whole lifetime. But we also need to ask why they did do so. The impulse behind it could have been deeply personal. But it is clear that the subject mattered; it fascinated them, moved them, pulled them in and prompted them to excavate deeper into it and search for something of unfathomable significance not to themselves alone but potentially for everyone. It is not a simple obsession, and whatever our explanation, it cannot be frivolous, like the lure of money or lack of ideas. They are not inane entertainers over-killing a formula but thinking artists who use representation as a way of thinking through. And it is not difficult to see that each painting of the lily pond or lotus pond and each painting or photograph of the same mountain is a new image. A careful observer can readily notice the passage of a thinking mind moving through them, like the wind through a field. In the end, it is the movement of the mind which keeps the artist going that matters.

As suggested, our answers can be different; they could alter with time and the circumstances in which we view them. As we have noticed, Ramachandran was impelled to move away from his early work by his disenchantment with modernization and a wish to reclaim several possibilities it suppressed. When he started on it, it could have looked like a romantic, nostalgic, and retrograde act, and he would have appeared as a modernist turned renegade to many. But today, learning from nature is no more considered a sign of Luddism. The Scientists who helped fashion the machines of industrialization and modernization are telling us today that we have gravely injured the planet by treating nature as an unlimited source of natural resources to be exploited for our convenience. By considering ourselves the master species for whose sake and consumption the planet was created, we have unleashed changes that have brought civilization and our future on the earth into question. Over the last two centuries, our actions have brought us closer to a predicted sixth extinction. Scientists are urging us to realize, and realize fast, that our ecologies are interlinked and planetary, that what we do locally has a planetary impact, and that we have to move beyond anthropocentric thinking and action.

Scientists had started talking about all this, in ones and twos, a little before Ramachandran decided to turn his back on modernization and look at alternate models of life. Among other things, this effort led him to take a close look at nature. I am not suggesting that he was aware of what the scientists were saying or paying attention to them. Anyhow, artists like Ramachandran do not move from abstract ideas to concrete works but intuit universal and abstract thoughts from local and tangible experiences. He initially looked at the lotus pond as an object of aesthetic interest, and when he looked closer, he realized that it was an independent world within the world. And yet every change he noticed—its cyclical life and the life cycle of the birds, insects and dragonflies associated with it, even the change of light that lit it, the summer heat that breathed life into it, the monsoon winds that blew through it, and the winter cold in which it went dormant and died—he realized, was part of a planetary system. Sitting on its banks and drawing it, he got an insight into the planetary system of which the lotus pond and he are parts. The impact of our actions on the planet is not a distant phenomenon today; it is tangible and visible at our doorsteps. Today we know that nature is also an actant, that she has as much agency as we have, perhaps even more. It is in this climate that we should be looking at Ramachandran's lotus ponds and searching for their meaning.

An artist like Ramachandran, we have seen, discovers the meaning of what is around him through a process of seeing and making. And making has two sides:

The first set of six ***Children's Books***, published by Thomson Press in 1972

language and its materialization through technique or its skilful application. They are inseparable in practice but can be conceptually differentiated. While language is the structural principle by which an observable fact or experience is turned into an analogous image, technique and skill determine how deftly it is materialized. Among the several modernist orthodoxies he chose to critique, one was the attempt to universalize particular styles or art languages developed in the west and labelled as modern while dumping pre-modern Asian art languages as incapable of sustaining modern practices in art.[5] In Santiniketan, Ramachandran should have heard Benodebehari talk about the difference between art languages in the art history classes. As a student, he was also expected to work in various Asian styles and formats. And from the surviving example of a hand scroll from his student years, we may conclude that he was an enthusiastic student of art languages, even if they lay outside his immediate interest. Later in 1962, when he began to copy and document Kerala murals, he should have gotten a good feel of the representational language of their original painters. But, though he made at least one iconographic reference to the Kerala murals in his early paintings, he did not immediately absorb its language into his work.[6] As a modernist, he did not find his knowledge of Asian art styles expressly useable, but that did not end his engagement with them. It continued to grow and flourish on the fringes before it entered his paintings and became central to his artistic expression.

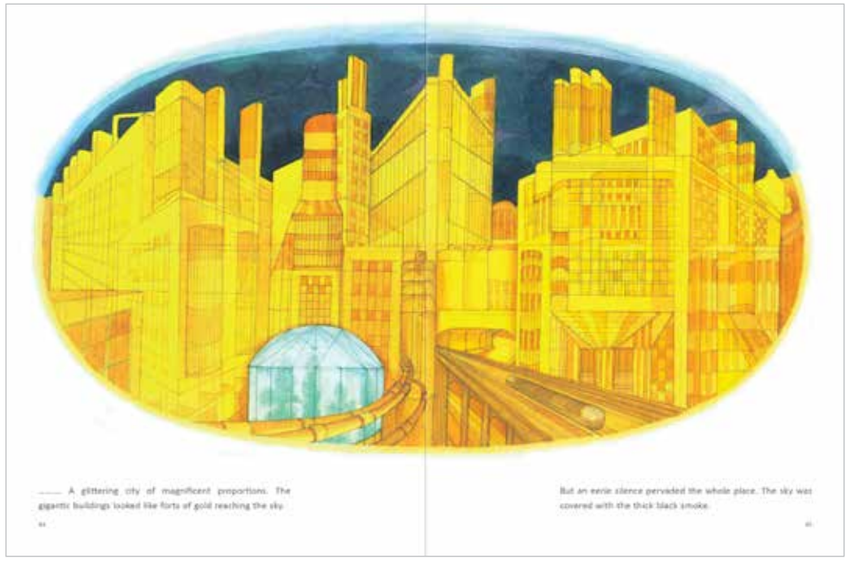
Two things kept Ramachandran's interest in Indian art going. On the one hand, his first gallerist Virendra Kumar was also a collector and dealer in Indian miniatures. Thus he got to see them closely and develop a special interest in them. On the other hand, as a teacher of art at Jamia Millia Islamia, in the absence of an art historian among its staff, he took upon himself the responsibility of introducing his students to different art traditions, even as his teachers had done in Santiniketan. While doing so, he also realized that Indian art was given short shrift, and the ability to respond to it was declining at all levels—among the educated public, art school students, and even professional artists. At the beginning of the 1970s, he decided to do something about it. The initial impulse came from his efforts to entertain and engage his young daughter and son with stories and illustrated books. He decided to create books for them, and his wife Chameli joined in. The first set of 6 books they did was published in 1972.[7] It gave him the freedom to work in styles different from his own. In one of them, he used paper cuts and fabrics, collage-like, to simulate Rajasthani puppets and combined them with photographs to represent the puppeteers, thus creating a difference between the physical world and the world of art and suggesting that the two are parallel realities. Following this, he illustrated Sheila Dhar's *This India*, published in 1973, using images in a host of folk styles and those drawn from decorative arts, along with photographs of real people and places and even of works by Sher-Gil and Picasso.

The success of these books encouraged him to introduce children to diverse Indian arts through illustrated story books. His reasoning for undertaking such a

Golden City, 1992

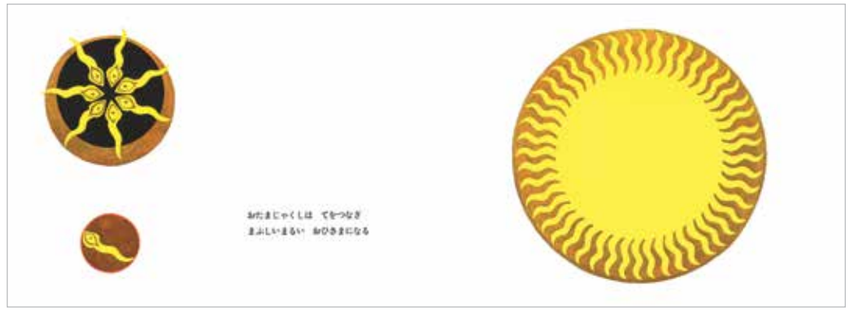
project was simple and cogent. Through his reading of Viktor Lowenfeld, Arnold Arnheim, and Herbert Read on children's art and his own observations, he knew that children, unlike grownups, were not biased towards any style; they did not develop a preference for realism or a particular style until they were inculcated through acculturation. Further, anyone working with children would realize that they are naturally more responsive to non-realist styles like post-cubist Picasso, Ukiyo-e prints, and various folk and primitive arts. They respond instinctively to styles that look distorted or exaggerated to adult eyes. He also concluded that the widespread bias toward realism among modern Indians and their inability to respond to non-realist aspects of Indian art was a product of colonial aesthetic acculturation. He decided to counter this by introducing children to a wide variety of non-realist visual styles while they were very young and responsive to them. He surmised that children exposed to the expressive possibilities of non-realist art styles would develop a broad visual sense and responsiveness to unfamiliar styles as adults. With this in mind, between 1973 and 2007, he produced over a dozen books for children, including *Hanuman* (1973), *Song of Circles* (1975), *Land of Ramol* (1976), *The Bad King Who Became the Good King* (1977), *Jivya and the Tiger God* (1982), *Hitopadesha* (1985), *Golden City* (1992), *Dakiya The Mailman* and *Bhima and the Fragrant Flower* (2000), *Gaudi's Ocean* (2005), and *Woodcutter and the Tiger* (2007).

Hanuman, *Land of Ramol* and *Gaudi's Ocean* were illustrated using different adaptations of the style of Madhubani painting. In *Song of Circles*, he played around with decorative circular motifs and Tantric yantras; in *Jivya and the Tiger God,* using intaglio etching, he simulated the style of Warli painting, and in



Golden City, 1992

Hanuman, 1973



Song of Circle, 1975

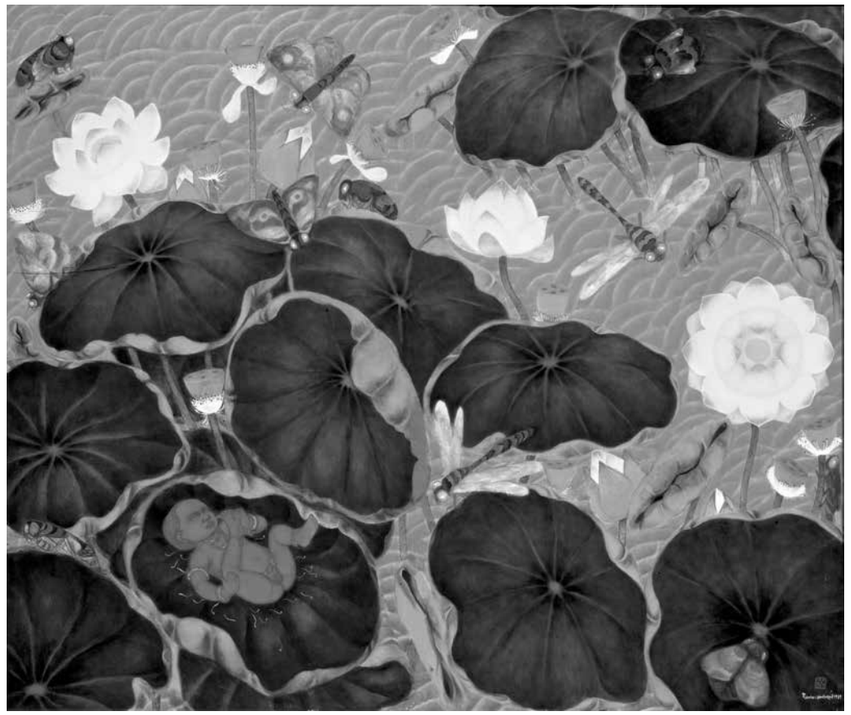
Dakiya The Mailman, 2000

the title gave a call out to Jivya Soma Mashe, the celebrated Warli painter. He employed paper cuts in *Dakiya the Mailman* and the Chitrakathi or Paithani style in *Bhima and the Fragrant Flower*. The *Golden City* was conceived as an elaborate allegory of modernity presented as a journey through art historical styles beginning in India and ending in modern America. *The Bad King Who Became a Good King*, *Hitopadesha,* and *Woodcutter and the Tiger* were done in different and innovative personal styles. Of these, the original artworks for five books are included in this exhibition.

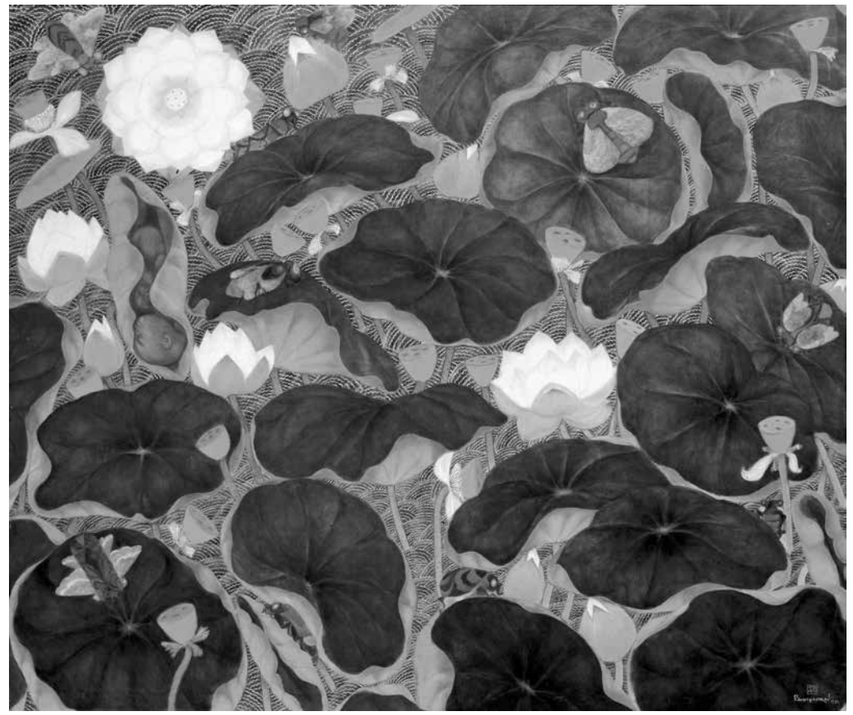
While the children's books allowed Ramachandran to experiment with diverse folk styles, the *Lotus Ponds* allowed him to experiment with the language of Indian

Bhima and the Fragrant Flower, 2000

miniature paintings and explore its representational and expressive possibilities in great depth. The modulation of local colour in accordance with chiaroscuro to suggest volume, and insistence on tonal unity of colours in paintings did not allow post-Renaissance European realists to represent ambient illumination without sacrificing colour. That meant bright colours existed only in scenes lit by bright and even light. However, in contrast, by translating local colour into a hue with a value corresponding to ambient light and conceiving paintings as configurations of unmodulated colours, Indian miniature artists succeeded in suggesting subtle shifts in ambient illumination while using bright colours consistently. While each school of miniature artists worked with a discrete palette, they used it with great flexibility to evoke the times of the day or seasons. Although their use of colour is often dubbed as decorative and arbitrary, they understood the interaction of colours as well as Josef Albers did and used it to evoke light and mood. As colour is never seen as they are but only subjectively experienced within a configuration in relation to other colours, and as they also modify each other, each new painting is an innovation rather than an application of a rule or



Lotus Pond - Day, oil on canvas, 72” x 85”, 1989



Lotus Pond - Night, oil on canvas, 72” x 85”, 1988

system. Confronted with the challenge of representing the shifting experience of the lotus pond through the times of the day and seasons, Ramachandran did not merely adapt the language of the miniature painters but also learned to be experimental and constantly innovate. No two painting, even if representing the same time of the day, has the same palette, the same sense of light, or the same mood. A juxtaposition of the same paintings in colour and black and white reproductions, as we have done in this catalogue, will make this evident.[8]

For an artist, as Borges says, "each language is a tradition… each language is a new way of feeling the world."[9] Similarly, familiarity does not exhaust experience; every day, the mountain, the tree, the pond, and the light shining on them appear anew to the artist. He does not merely represent what he sees using a fixed vocabulary; he explores the shifting reality through line and colour, just as a

Lotus Pond with Insects, oil on canvas, 96" x 72", 1992

Autobiography of an Insect, oil on canvas, 86" x 86", 2000

poet explores poetic possibilities with new arrangements of words to call up new rhythms and new textures of feeling. Perhaps this never-ending game of capturing the same transfigured into a new experience by rearranging the elements of one's language has kept Ramachandran and his ilk—Monet, Cezanne, and Adams—tied to one motif for years together. It also establishes a close tie between motif or subject matter, language and meaning. This is true of all arts, but in art forms like painting, language has a material side to it. Unlike the writer's handwriting, the painter's craft that translates his experience into an image becomes part of its meaning. Ramachandran's working process in his large canvases is the same as the one we noticed in his large drawings. However, since the canvases are larger, and he often combines several canvases of the same size to expand space laterally like a wall, he also invariably begins by gridding the canvas. The grid is

First stage - Drawing with brush in Indian red colour

Second stage - The first stage of colouring

Third stage - Developing the images with colour strokes

not used to enlarge a layout but to give a sense of proportional relationship and coherence to the image while drawing directly onto the canvas. It serves him as the beats serve a singer while improvising and helps him to progress from one motif to the next, guided entirely by the movements of the drawing hand and to hold the image together.

While the initial stage is improvisatory, Ramachandran proceeds more systematically and patiently once the image is established. He paints on canvases tinted with luminous ochre, just above the middle tone but bright. And once the drawing is done, he fleshes it out with thin washes, literally thin washes of paint, building up the colour layer by layer rather than by applying it in one thick opaque layer. The matte yet scintillating colour that we see finally is thus the result of innumerable layers of different colours placed one over the other, which again is testimony to his deep understanding of our perception of colour. And it plays a part in his effort to make the image a coalescence of subject matter, language and meaning. The sensory delight it offers is his way of saying that the world he paints is desirable. To him, our ability to see it as beautiful is proof of our being bound to the earth and its larger meaningfulness for us. Ramachandran's

recovery of beauty, nature and neglected languages is not anti-modernist. It is the plea of an anguished modernist to revisit our post-Enlightenment beliefs and reconstruct modernism as something less anthropocentric and more humane to each other and towards other species with which we share the planet. It is a vision that does not simply look back; it is a vision that proposes reconsideration and the search for an alternative path forward. He does not offer us solutions, and he does not think it is within an artist's purview. He is sharing with us what experiences he has gained through long periods of engrossed engagement with neglected aspects of the world and pleading for a rethink by presenting a re-enchanted vision of the world.

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1 Ramachandran began researching on Kerala murals in 1962 but left it in 1964 when he shifted to Delhi and decided to be a professional artist. But he returned to it periodically and documented the murals extensively in 1974, 1986 (just after completing *Yayati*), and again during 1991-92. His findings were published in the form of a definitive book on the subject titled *Painted Abode of Gods: Mural Traditions of Kerala* in 2005.

2 Premchand, "The Aim of Literature," Appendix, *The Oxford India Premchand*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004, unpaginated.

3 For a detailed account of Malayalam literature see Krishna Chaitanya, *A History of Malayalam Literature*, Bombay, Orient Longman, 1971.

4 Later, L. L. Varma and Lalit Sharma, students of Prof. Sharma, would join them on these sketching expeditions.

5 Although perhaps Ramachandran's effort to critique it was more noticed and considered an anti-modern turn, perhaps because of his radical change of subject matter, he was not the only Indian artist who was raising this issue in the early 1980s. Artists like Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and Nilima Sheikh also began to explore the possibilities of pre-modern Asian art languages and narration around the same time. And Bhupen Khakhar had started the process even earlier by embracing the popular both as subject matter and style.

6 The multi-limbed figure at the end of *Encounter* can be seen as an amalgamation of Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* and the dynamic Ettumanoor *Nataraja*.

7 Ramachandran did his first illustrations for children's literature while he was a student in Santiniketan. These were simple line illustrations for stories by Malayalam authors, and were not individually distinctive. Although later children's books brought him international attention and fame, none were published in India except the first six brought out by Thomson Press. They were published in Japan, where museums have collected them; and in Korea, England and the United States.

8 A similar juxtaposition of certain miniatures will show a similar approach to colour. Among the modern western painters, only Matisse achieved a similar use of colour based on contrast of the hues independent of tones.

9 Jorge Luis Borges and Osvaldo Ferrari, *Conversations: Volume 3*, Calcutta, Seagull Books, 2017, p. 8.

Paintings, Sculptures, Watercolours and Drawings

Drying Lotus Pond with Insects, oil on canvas, 78” x 144”, 2018

Lotus Pond in Afternoon Sunlight, oil on canvas, 78” x 192”, 2019

Lotus Pond on Starry Night, oil on canvas, 78” x 192”, 2019

The Monsoon Wind, oil on canvas, 78” x 192”, 2019

Lotus Pond with Water Hyacinth, oil on canvas, 78” x 192”, 2020

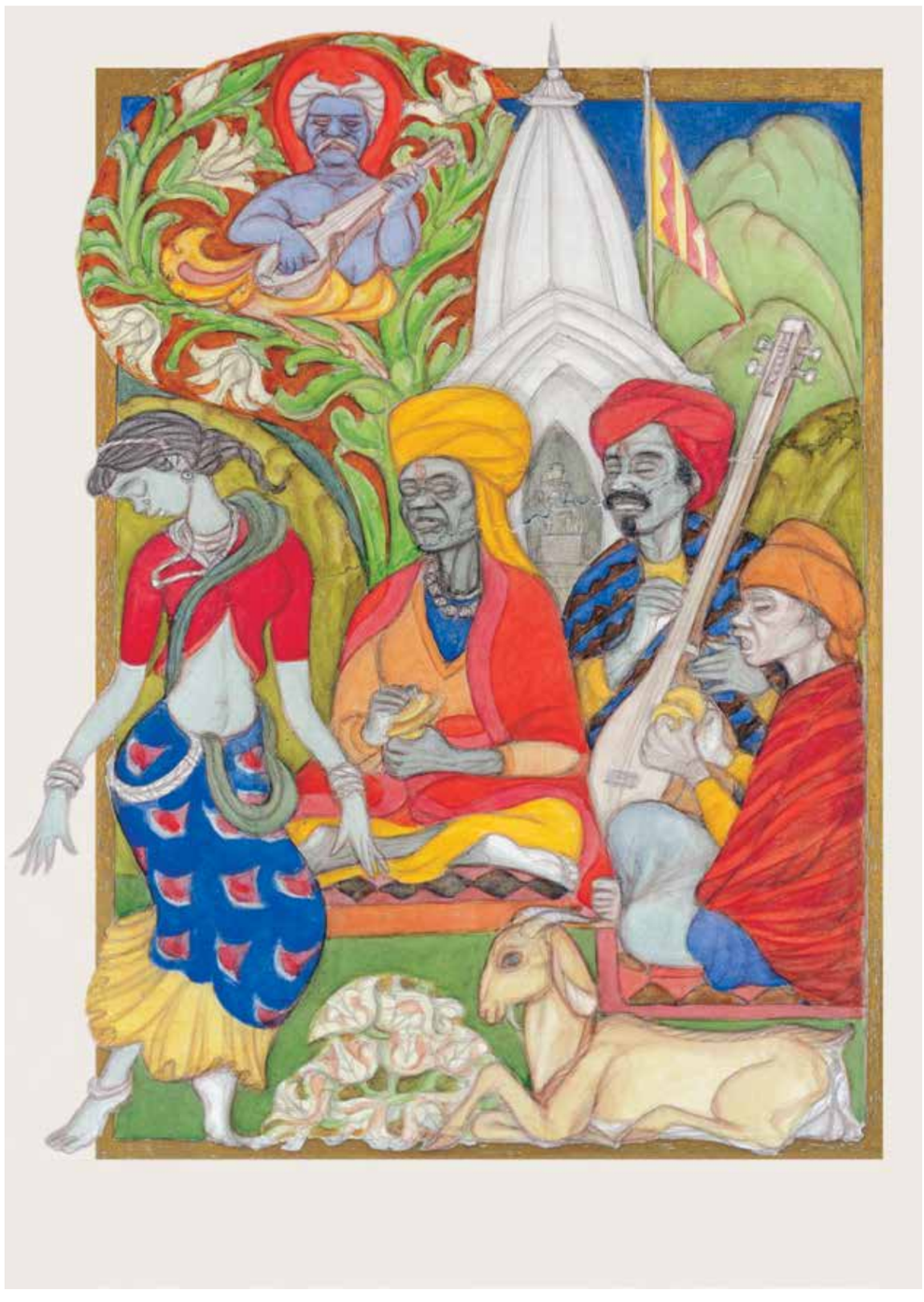
Lotus Pond with Bumble Bees, oil on canvas, 78” x 192”, 2020

Drying Lotus Pond, oil on canvas, 78" x 192", 2020

Lotus Pond with Water Reeds, oil on canvas, 78” x 192”, 2022

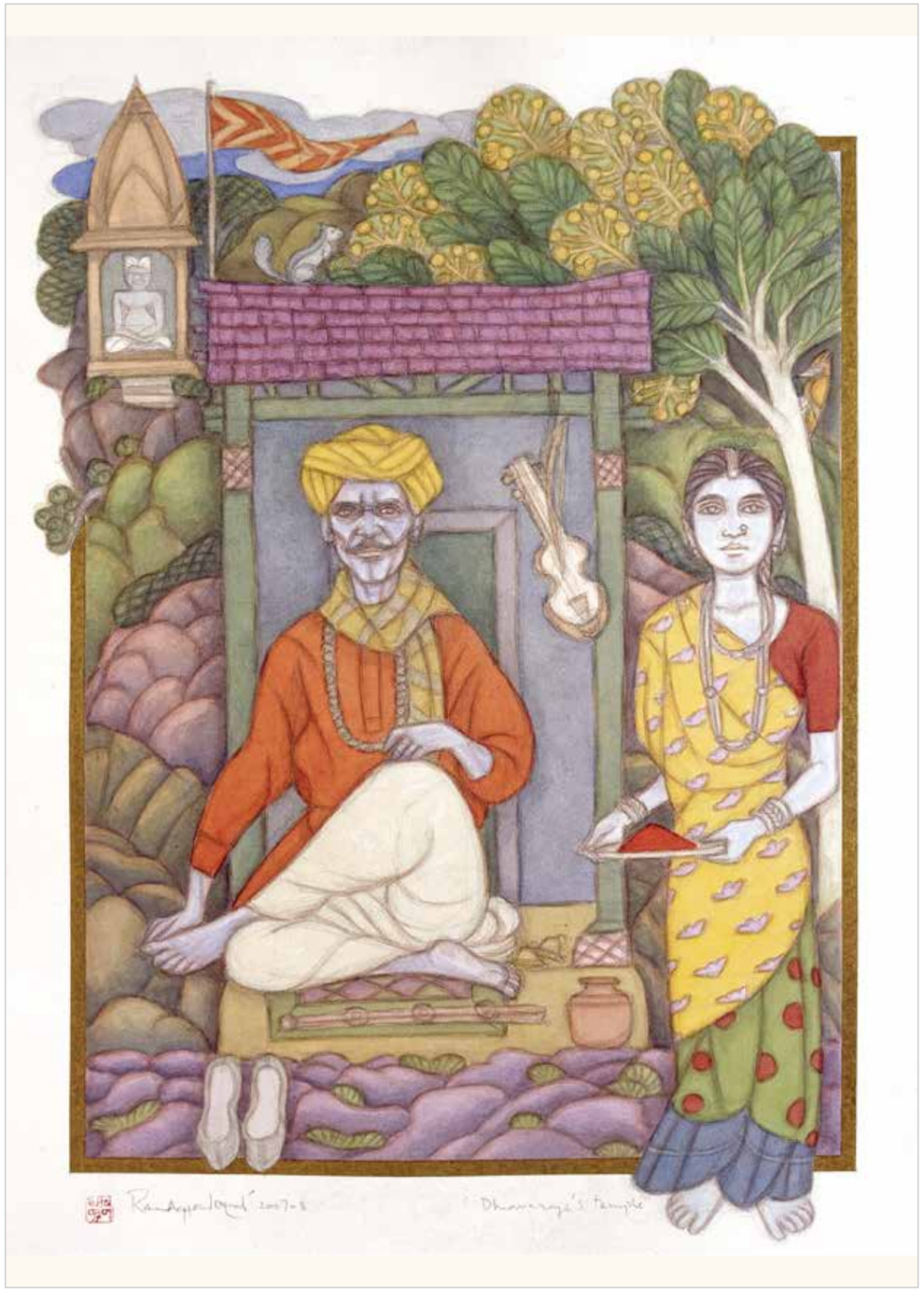
Bahurupi, Mandala base: 80" x 80", Central figure H: 47", Standing figures H: 77". Goat H: 52", Mukhalinga H: 8", Tortoise: 10", Bronze, 2006

Parable of a Dutiful Wife and a MCP Husband
Watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 1999

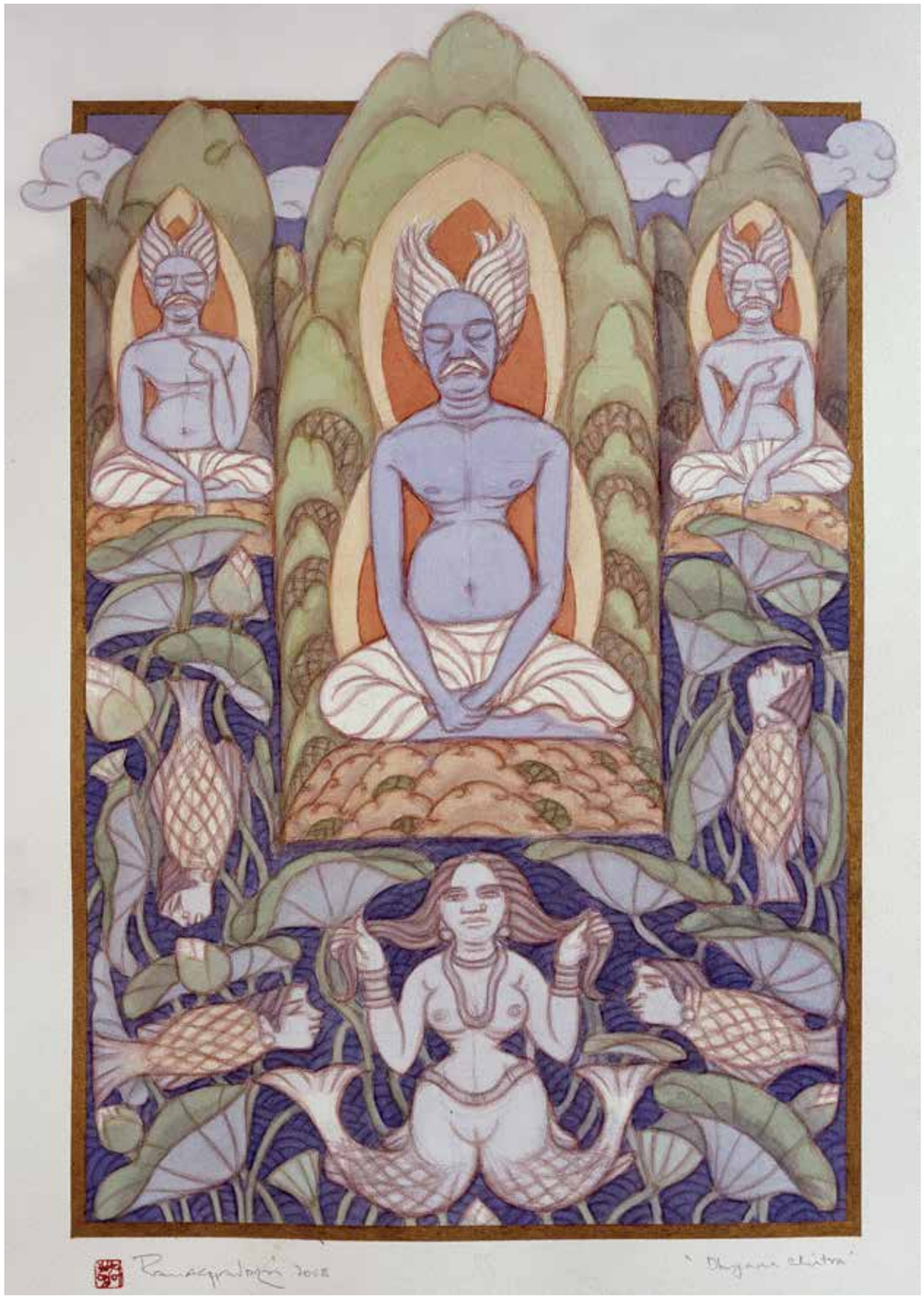


Bhajanmandali of Dhowraji
Watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 1999

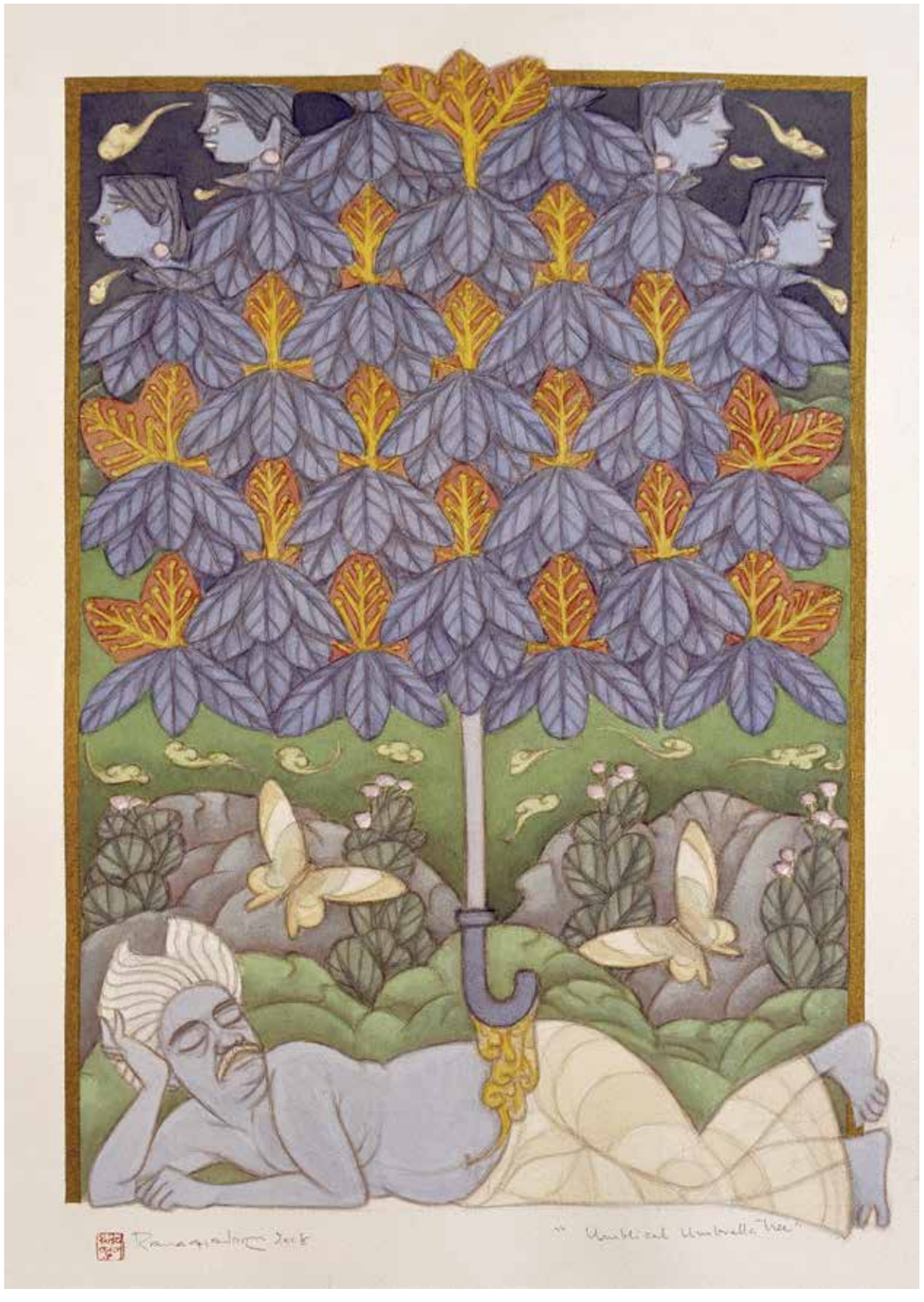
Jogi Ka Talab
Watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2007



Dhowraji's Temple
Watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 1999

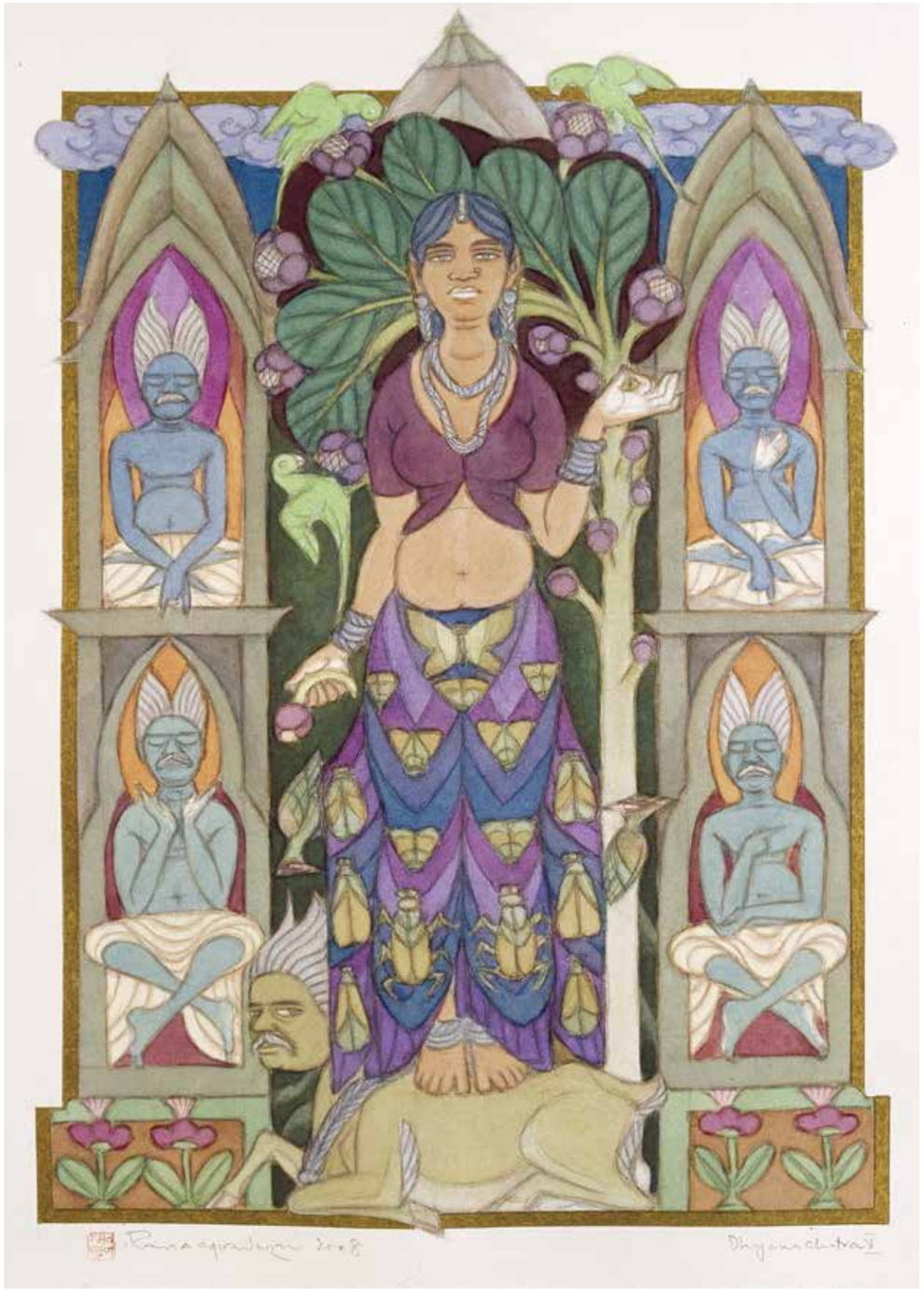


Dhyanachitra
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008

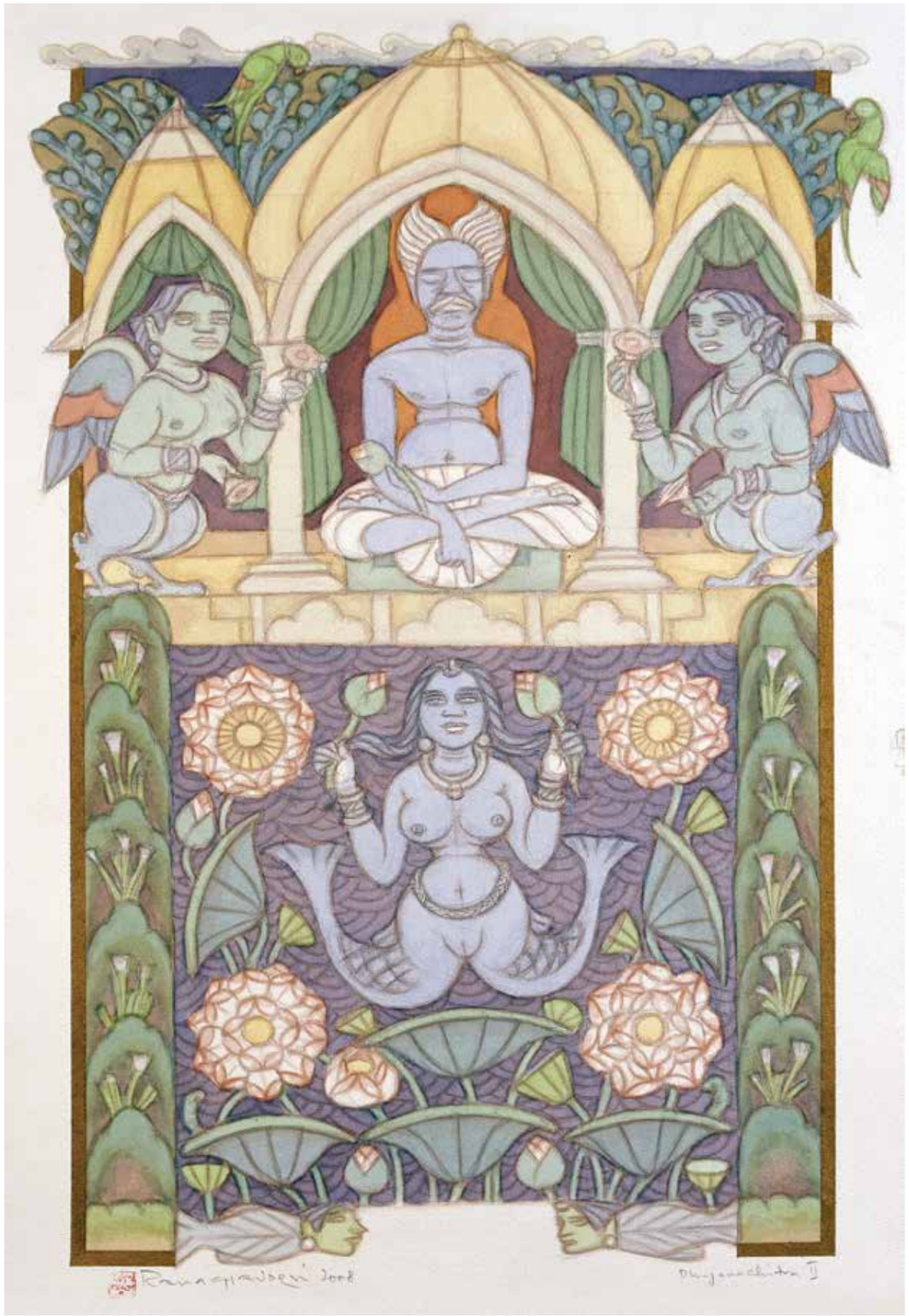


Umbilical Umbrella Tree
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008

Umbilical Creeper Carpet
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008

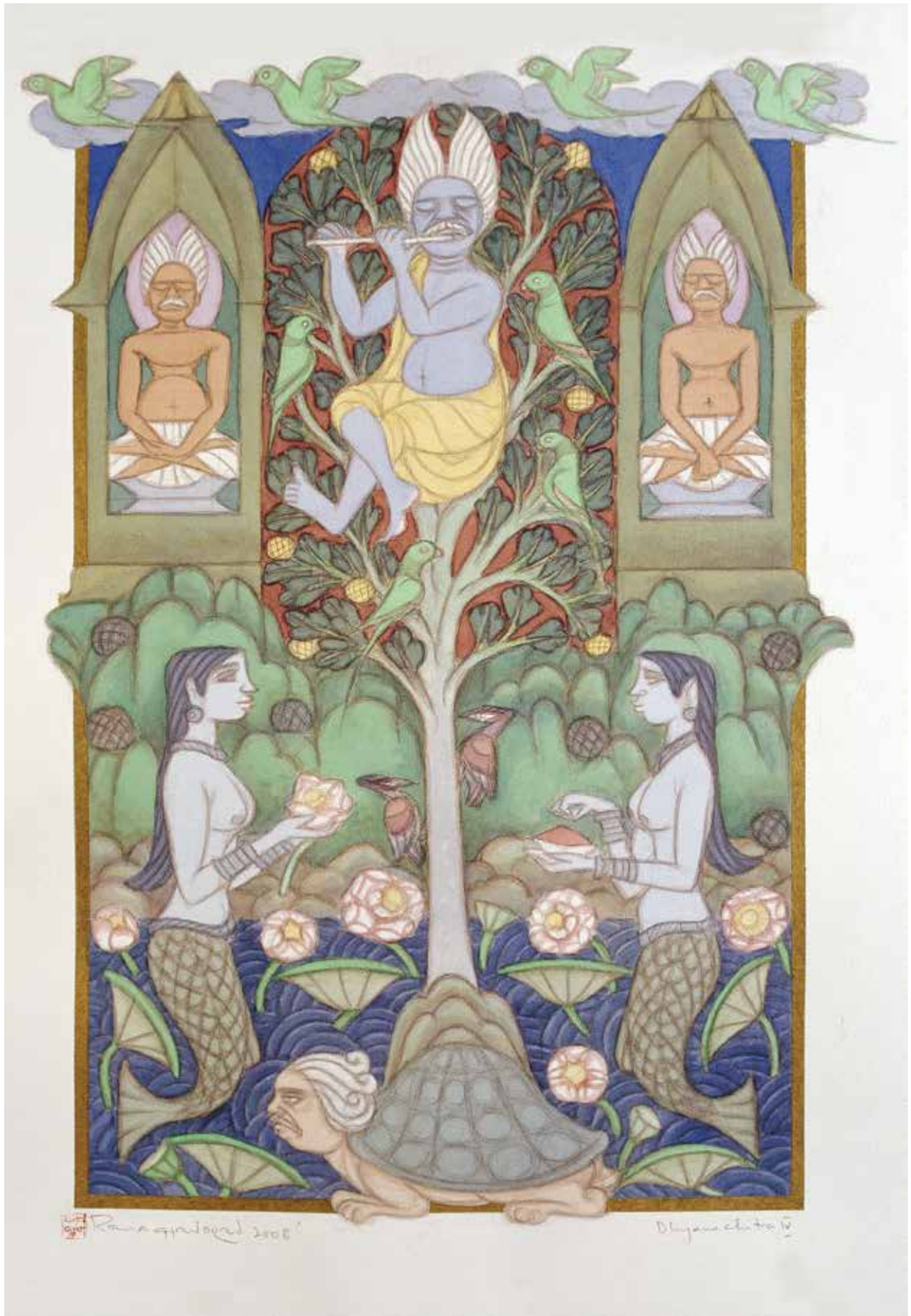


Dhyanachitra - V
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008

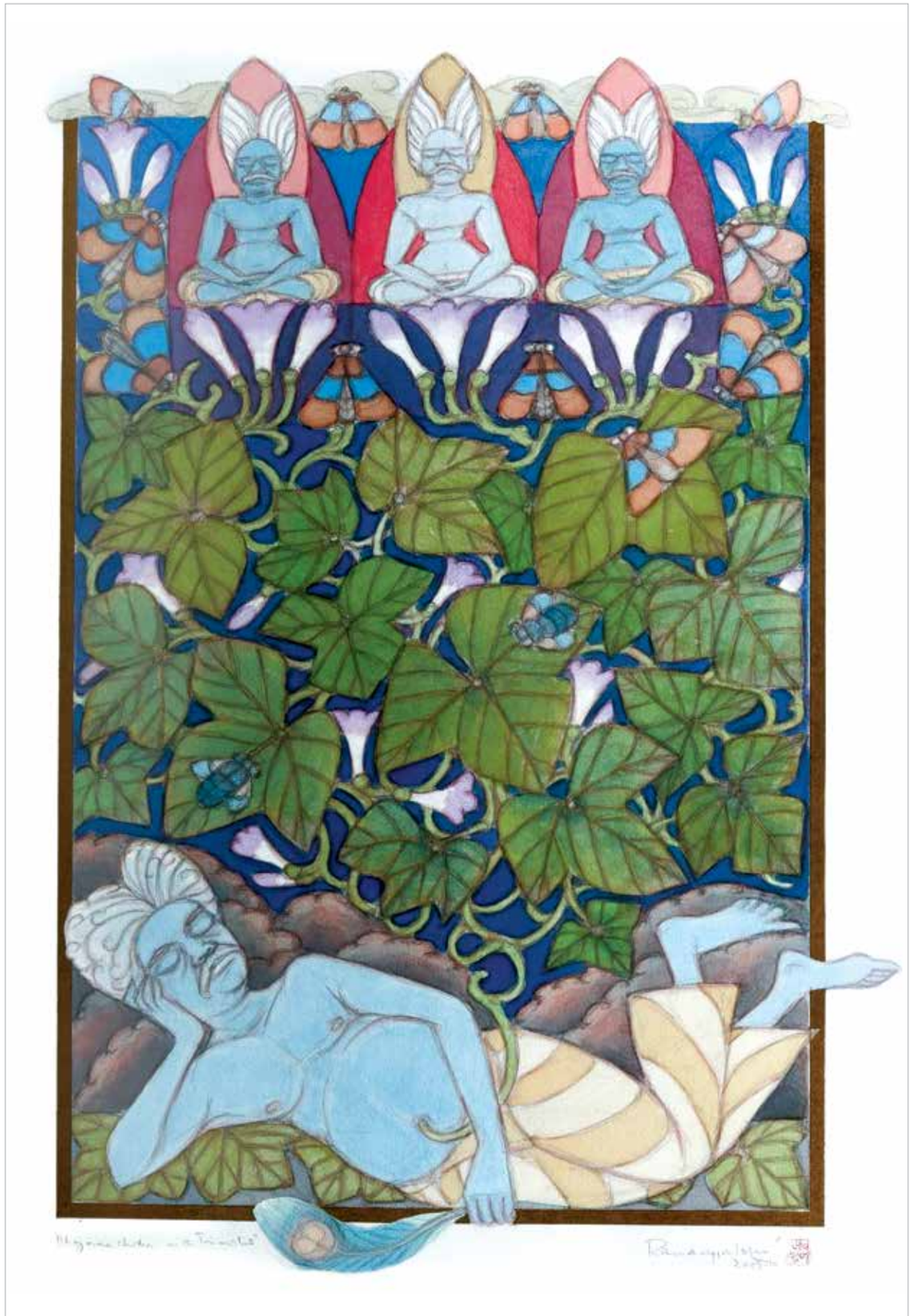


Dhyanachitra - II
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008

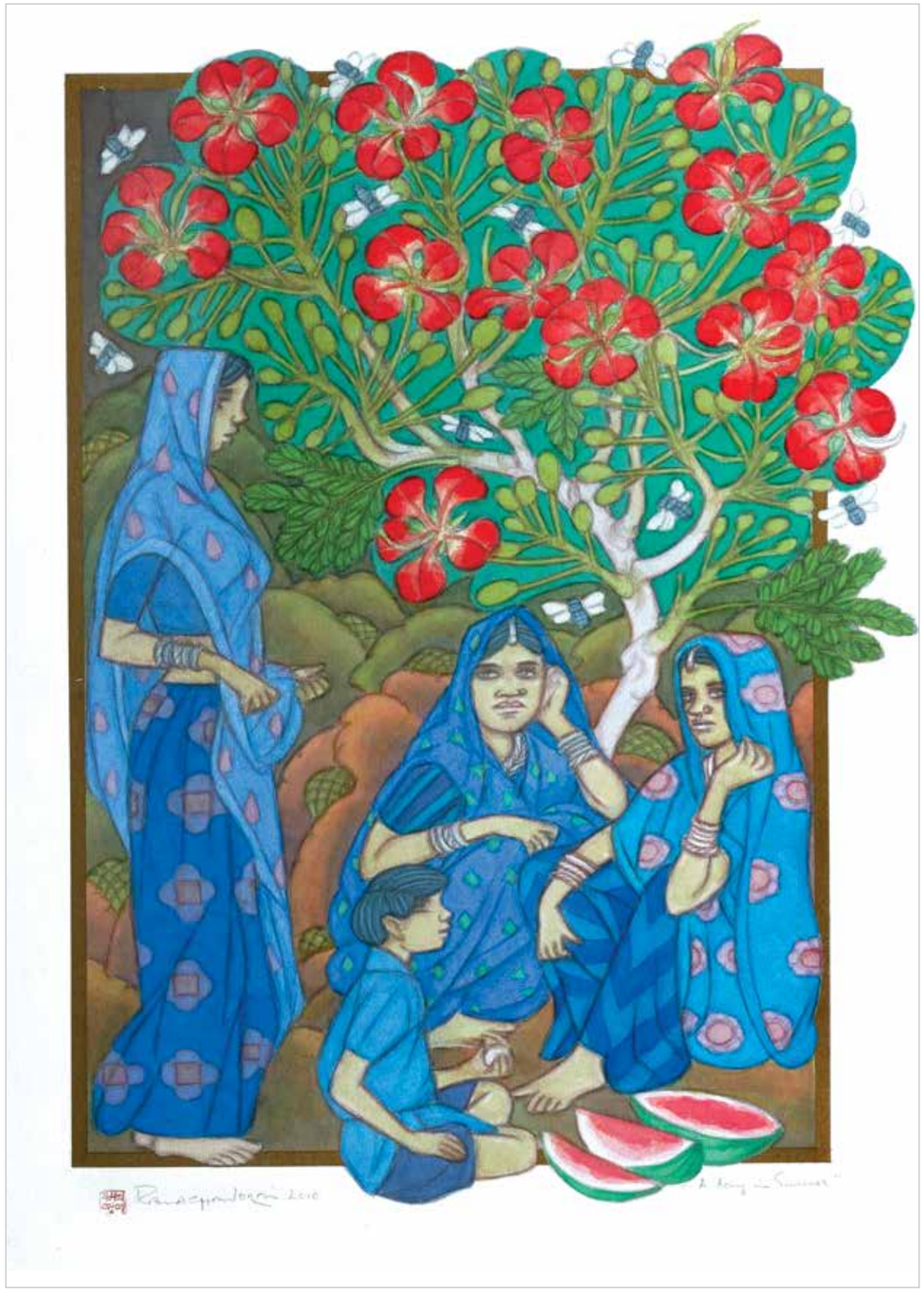
Dhyanachitra - III
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008



Dhyanachitra - IV
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008



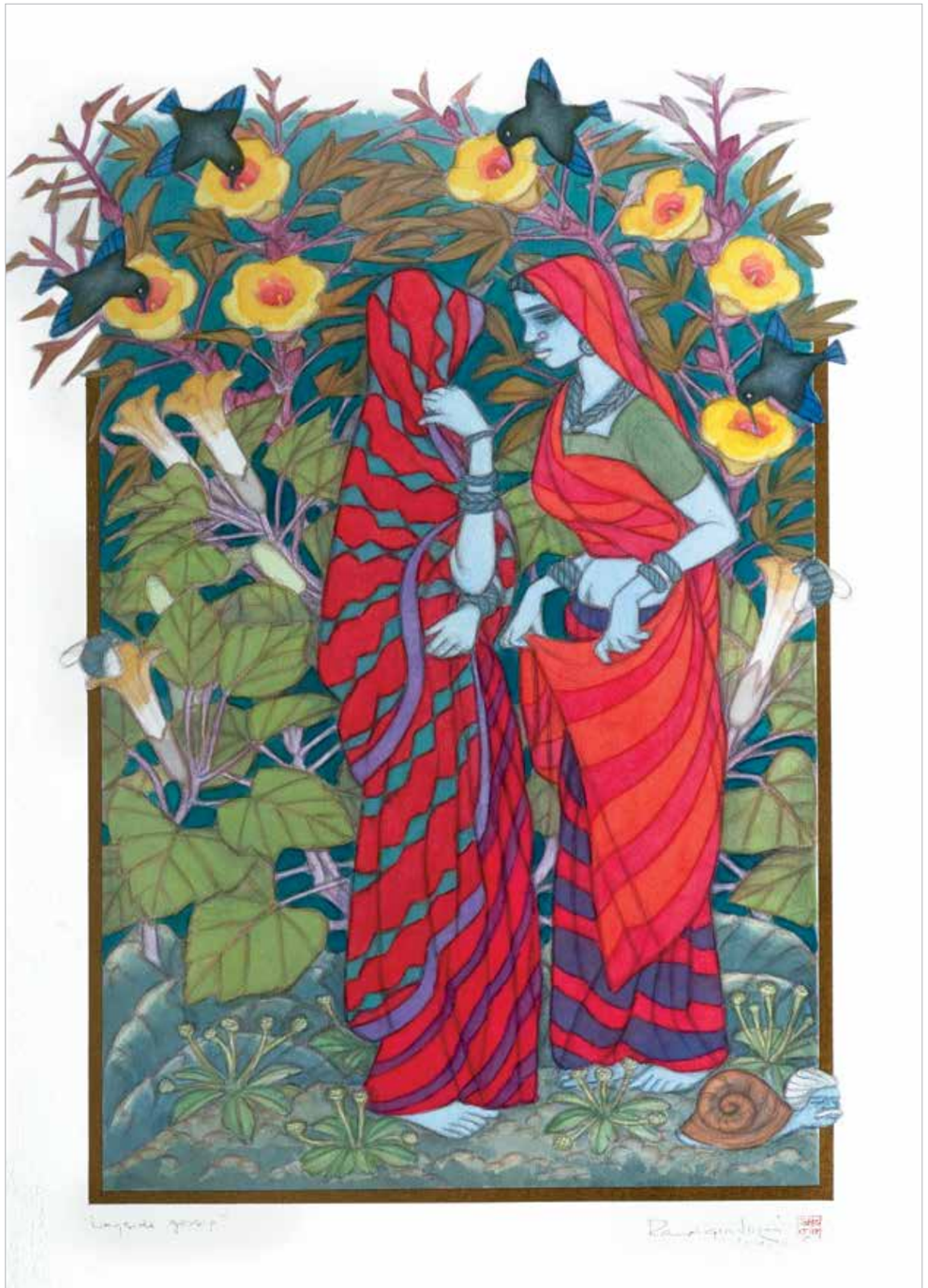
Dhyanachitra with Trimurtis
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2008



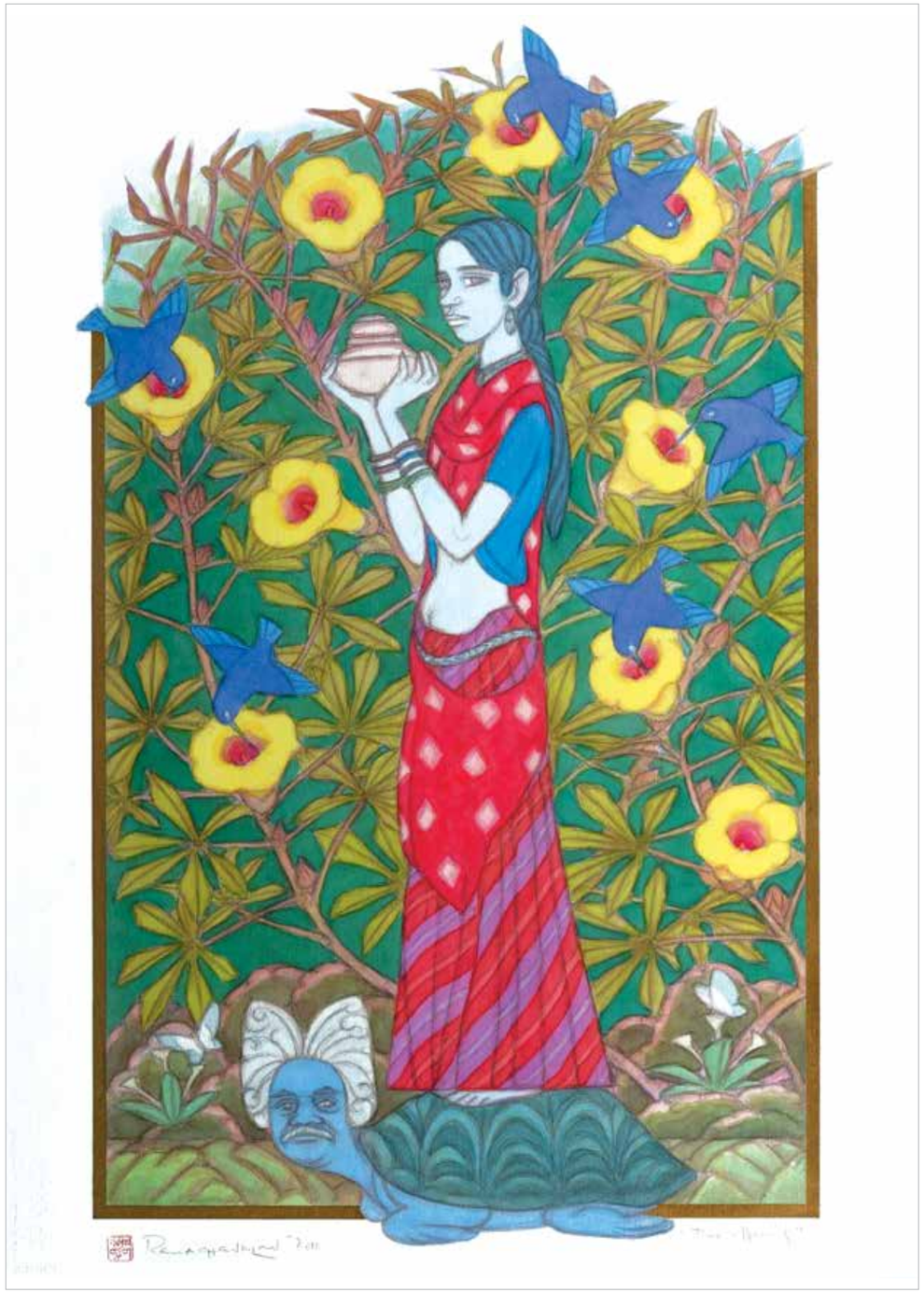
A Day in Summer
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010

Bed of Arrows
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010

The Peacock Tree
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010

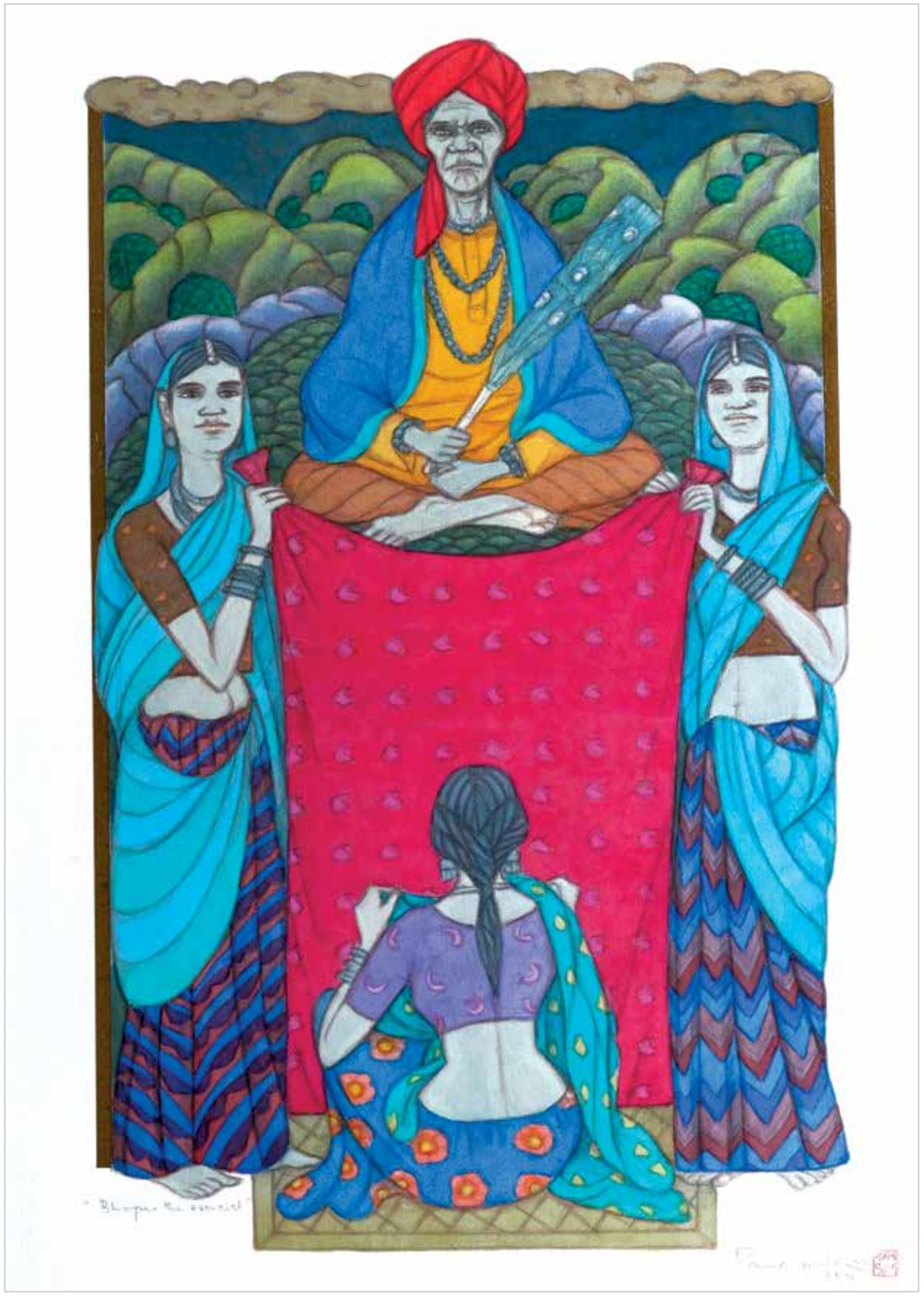


Waterside Gossip
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010

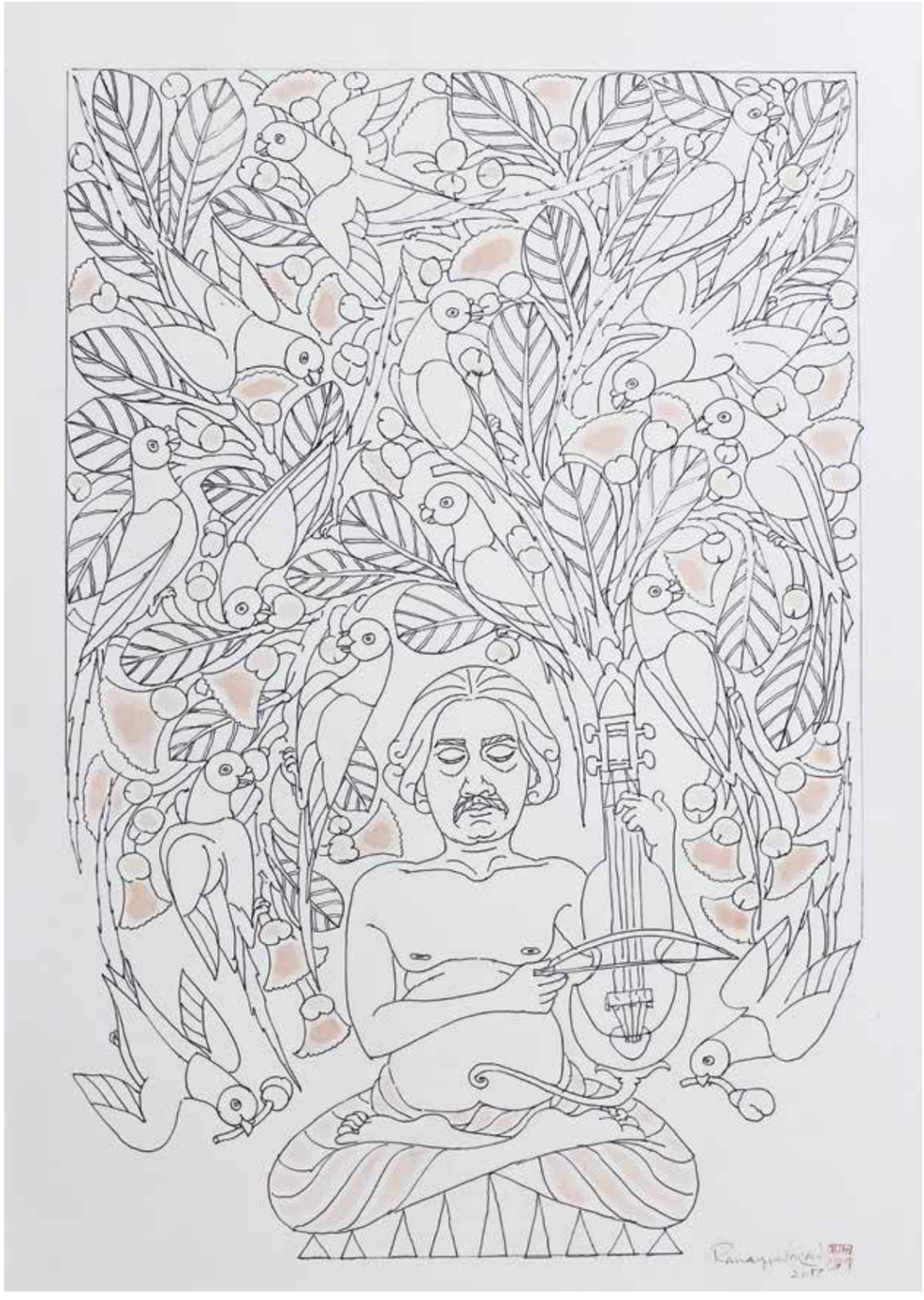


The Offering
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010

Kurmavatar
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010

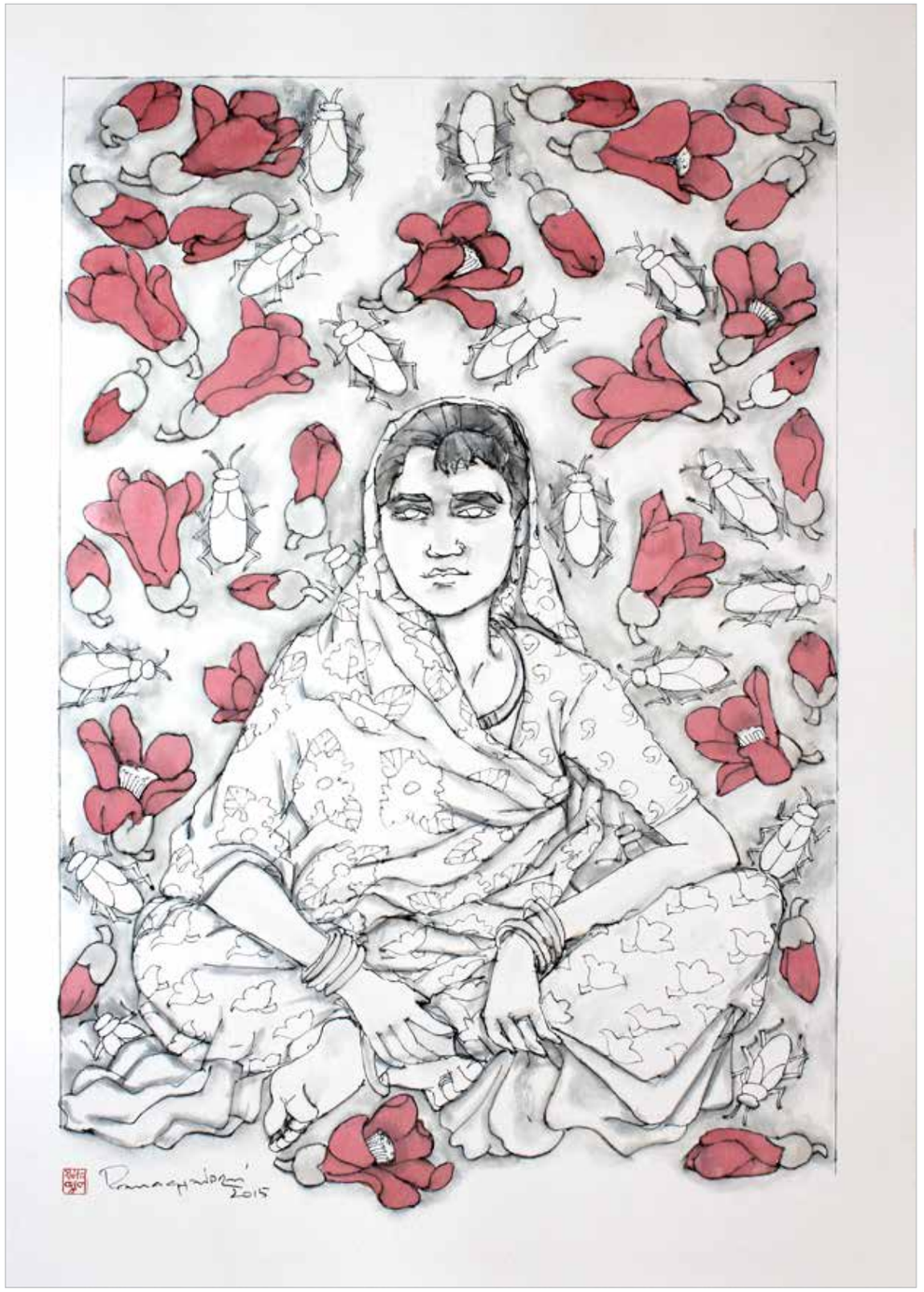


Bhopa the Exorcist
Watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2010



Self-Portrait
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2017

Seated Woman
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2015



Seated Woman
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2015

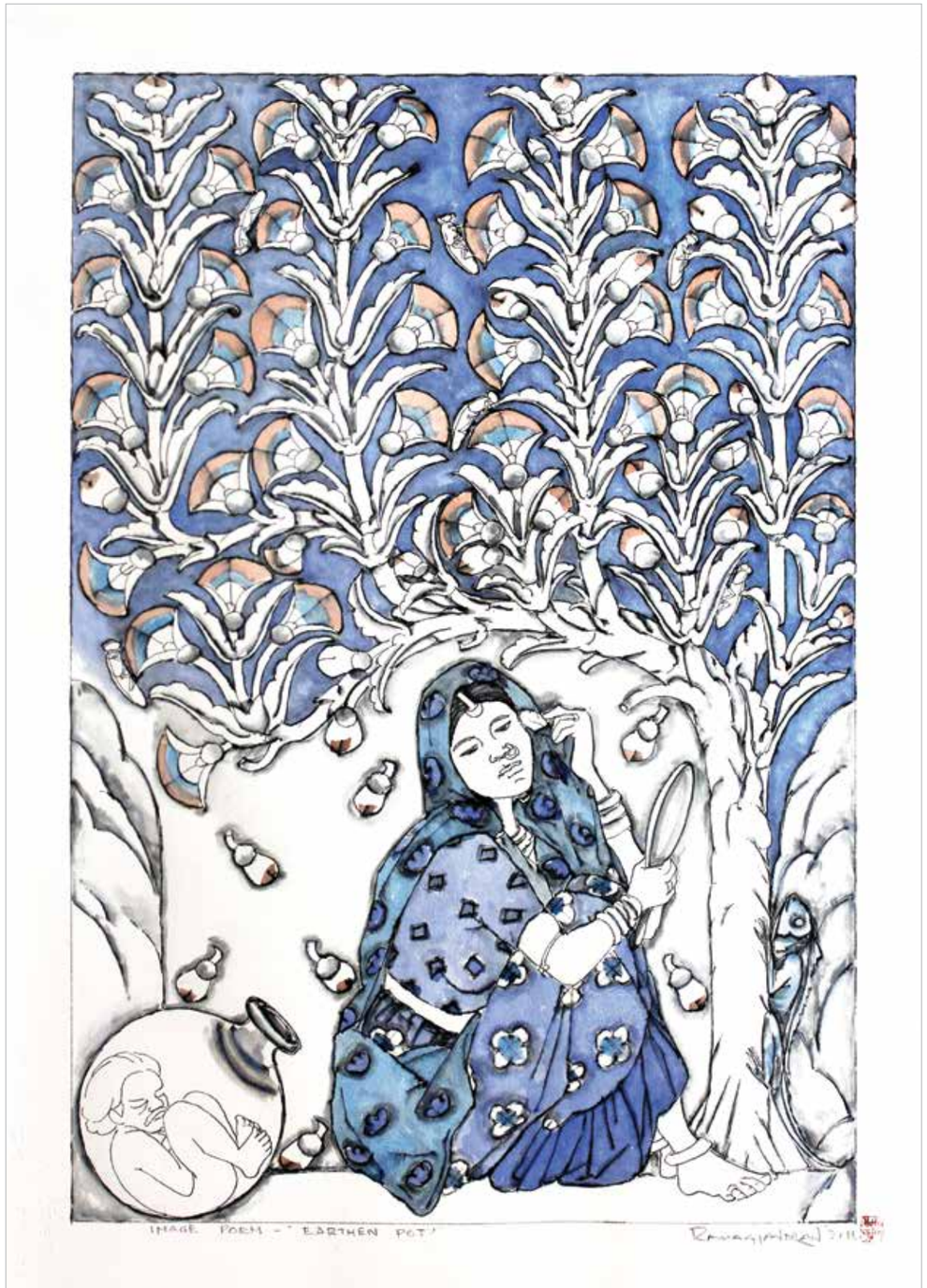


Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

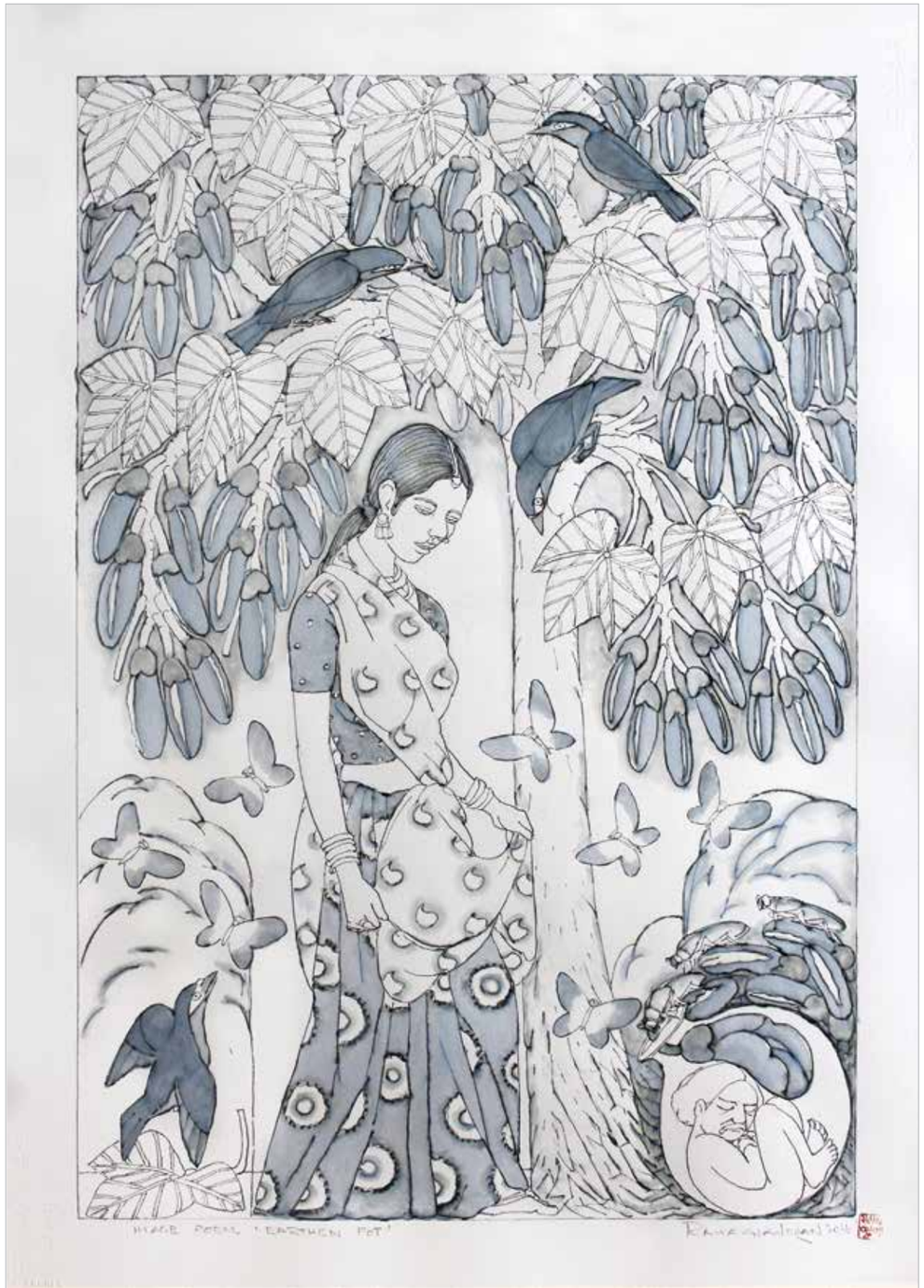


Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

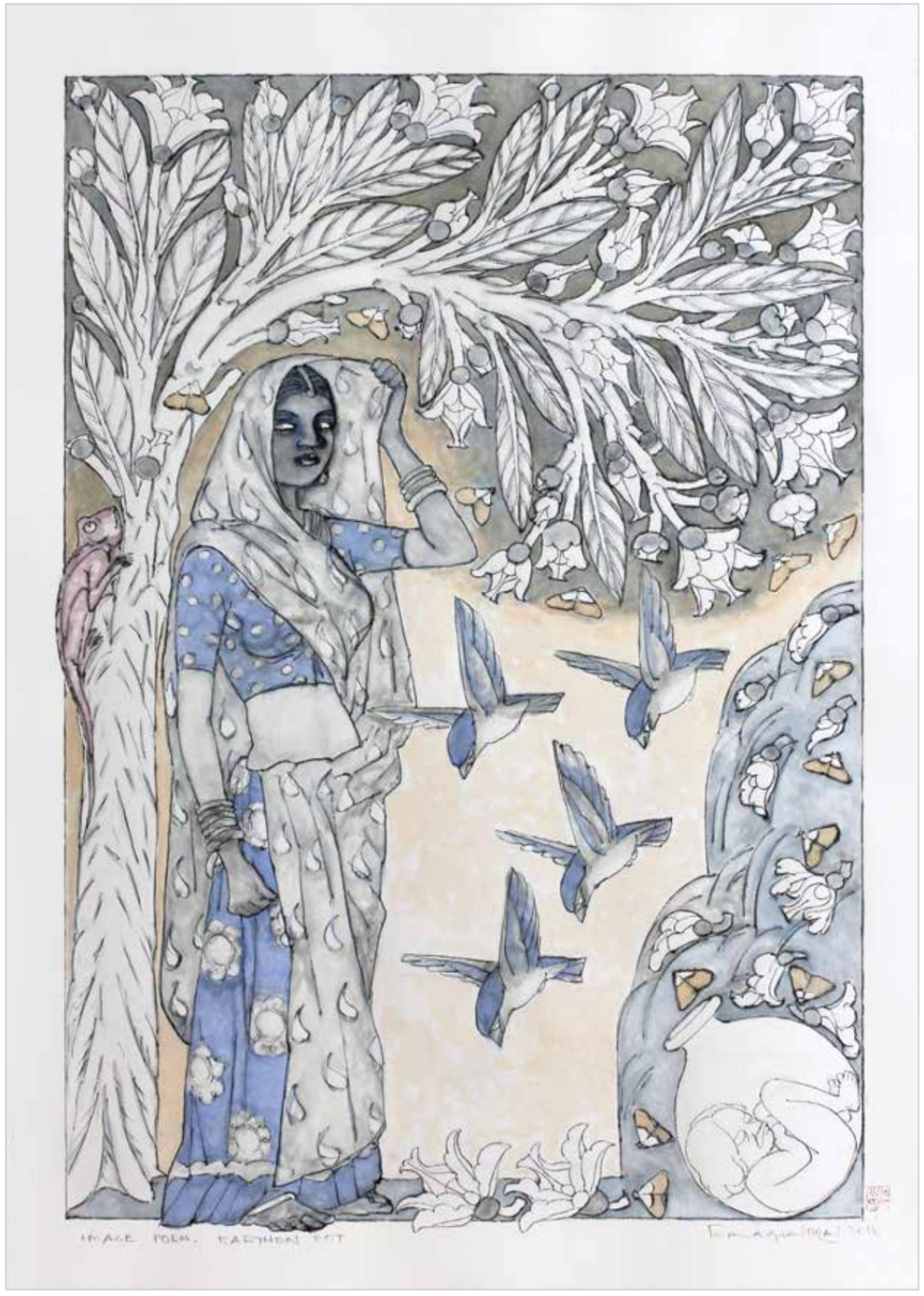
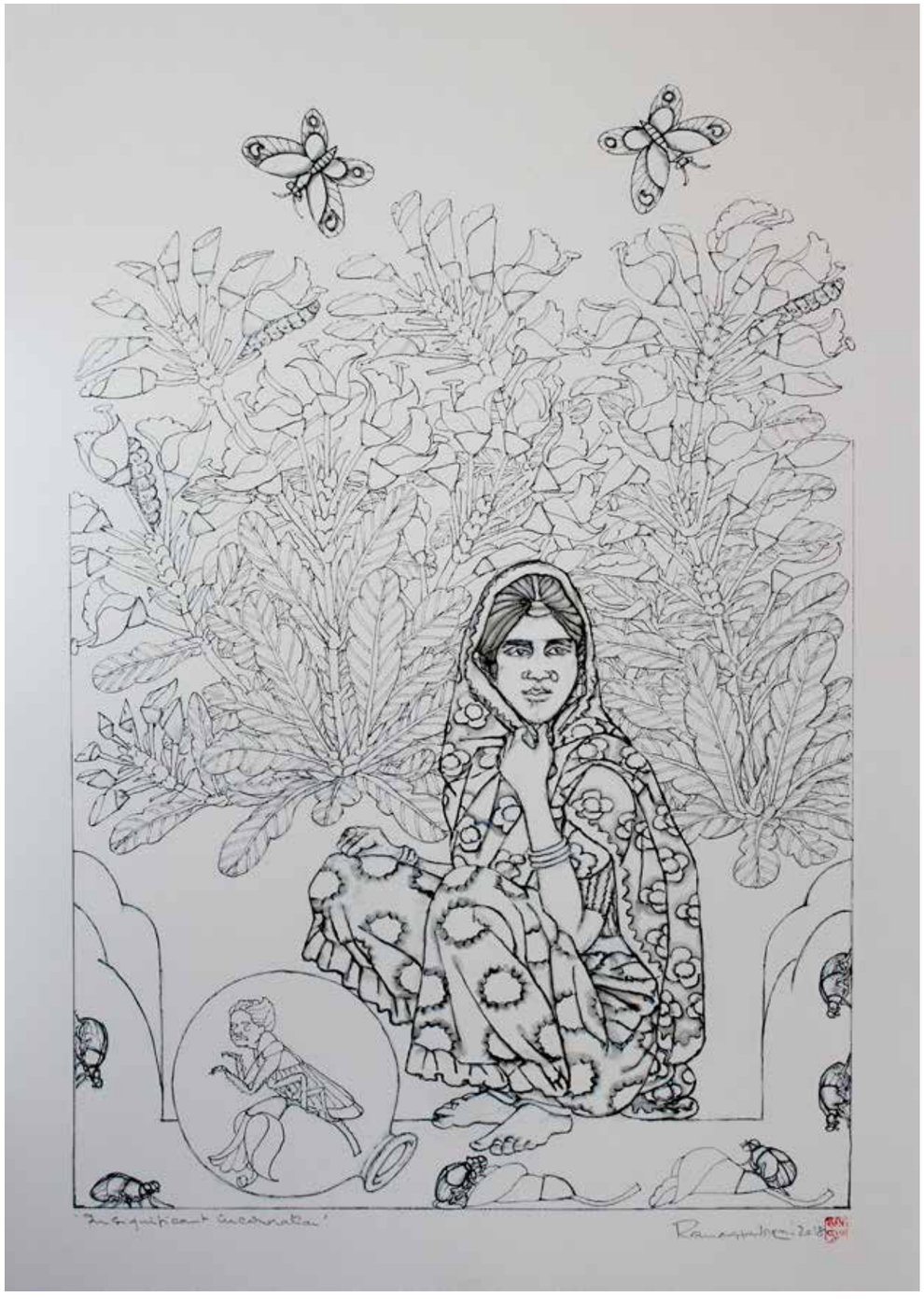


Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Image Poem, 'Earthen Pot'
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2016

Insignificant Incarnation
Ink and wash on paper, 30" x 22", 2018



Insignificant Incarnation
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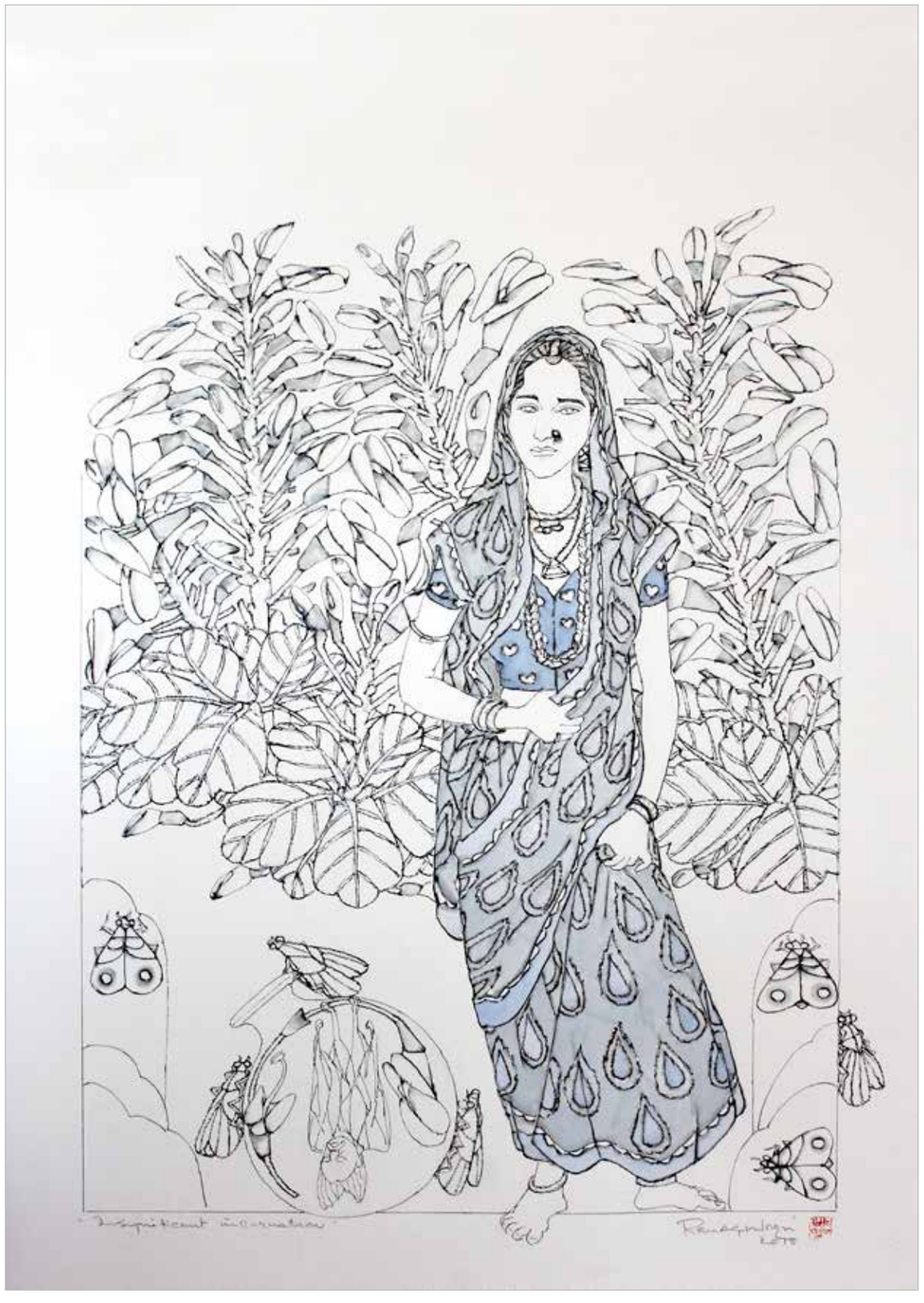

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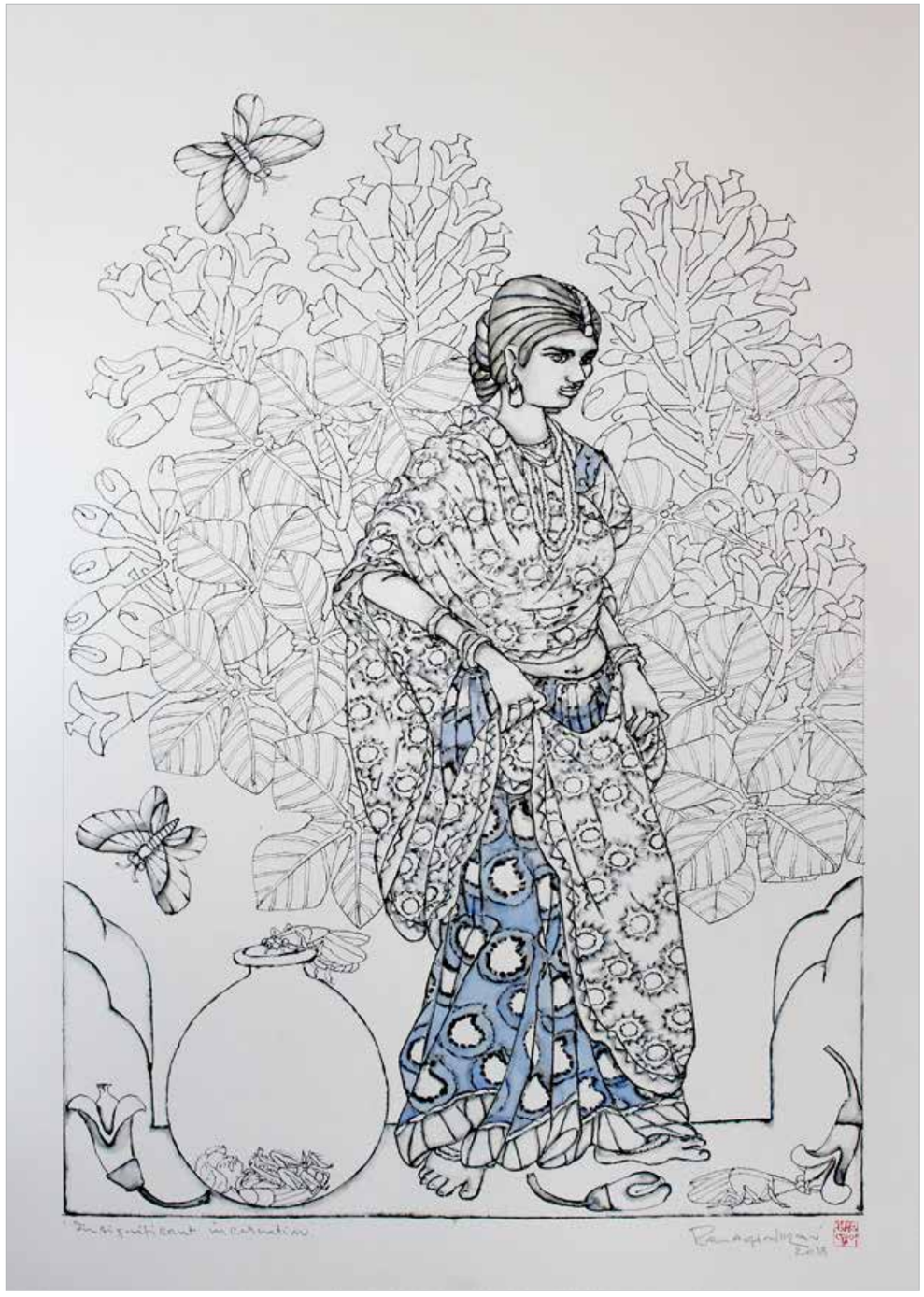

Insignificant Incarnation
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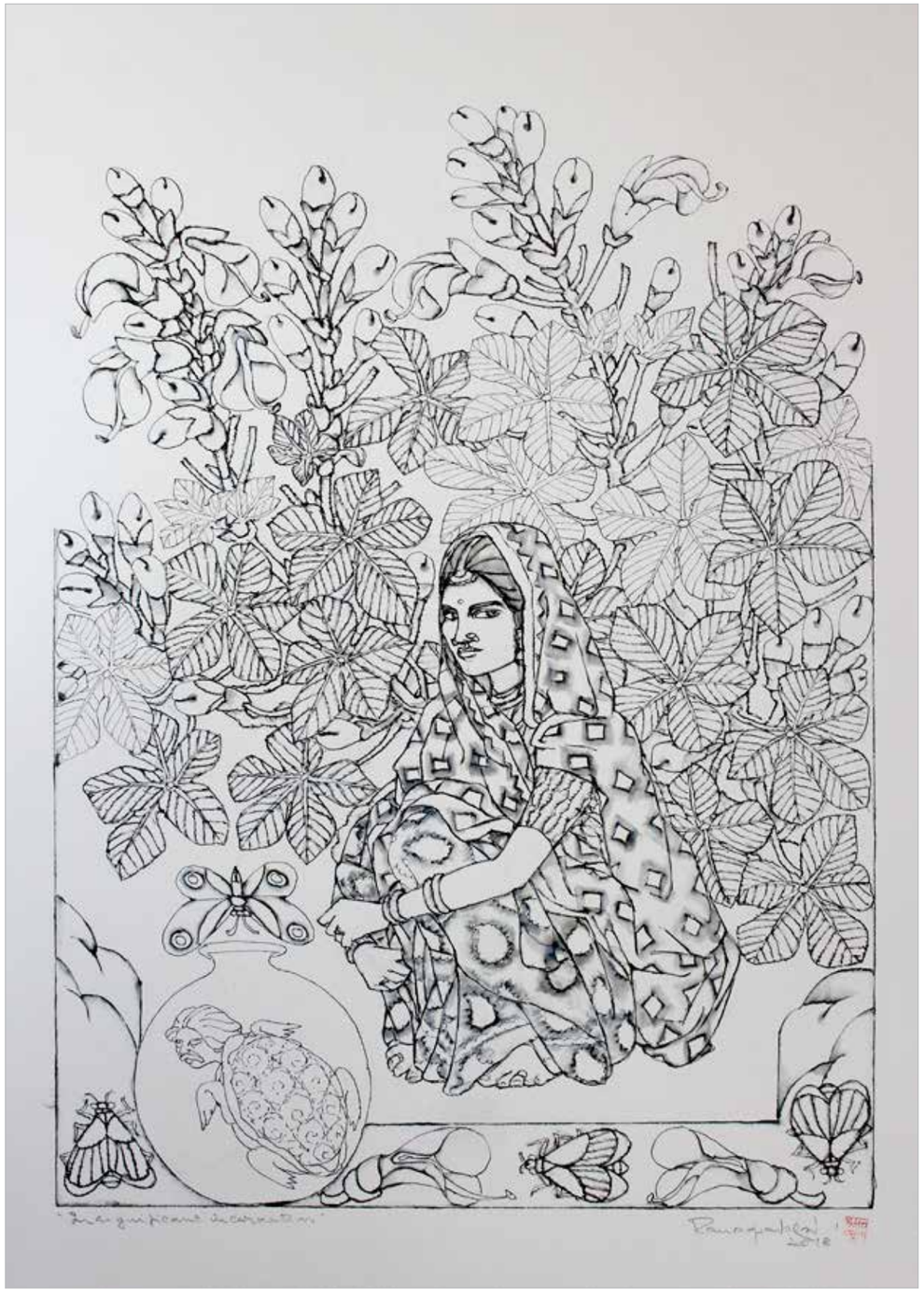

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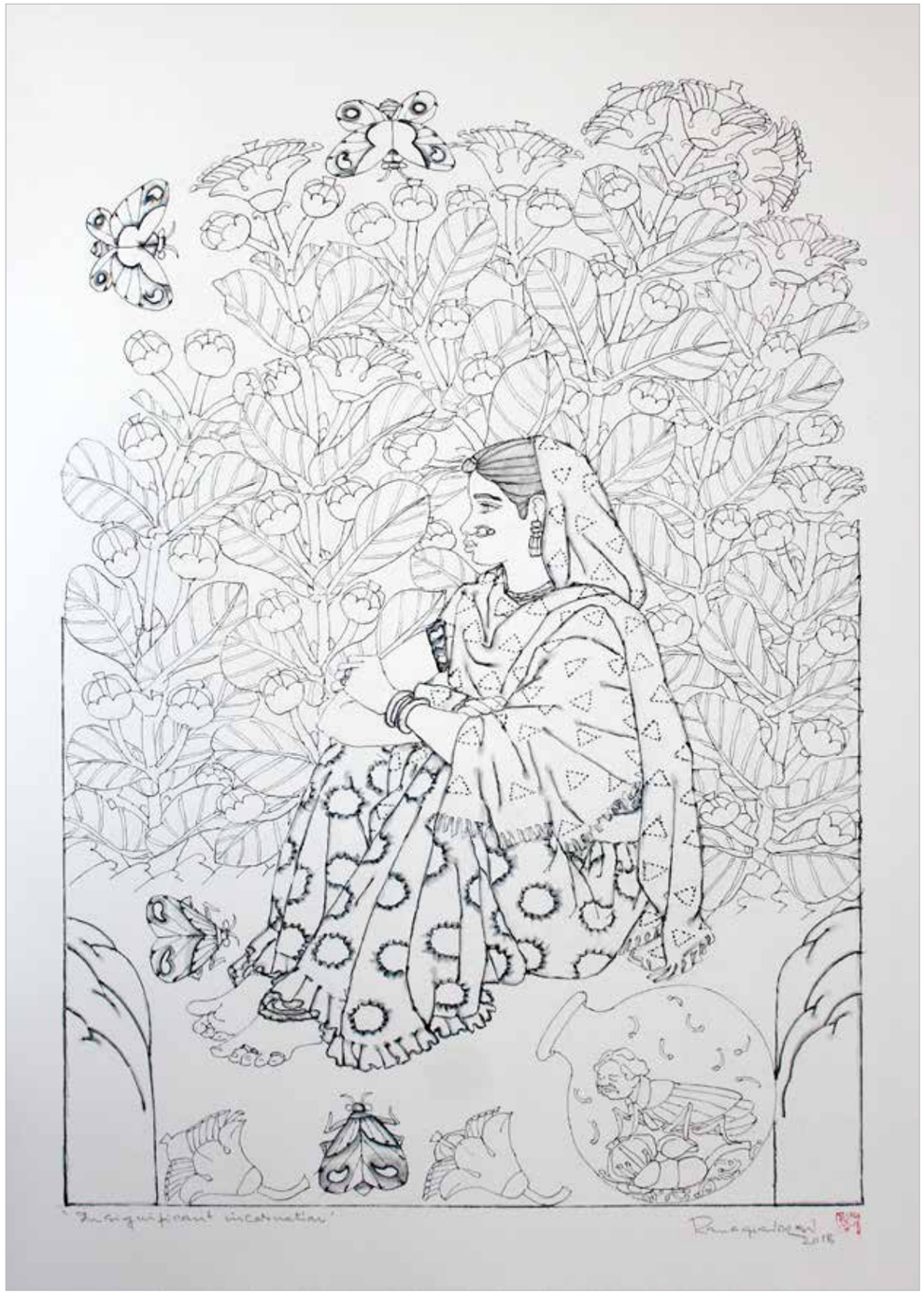


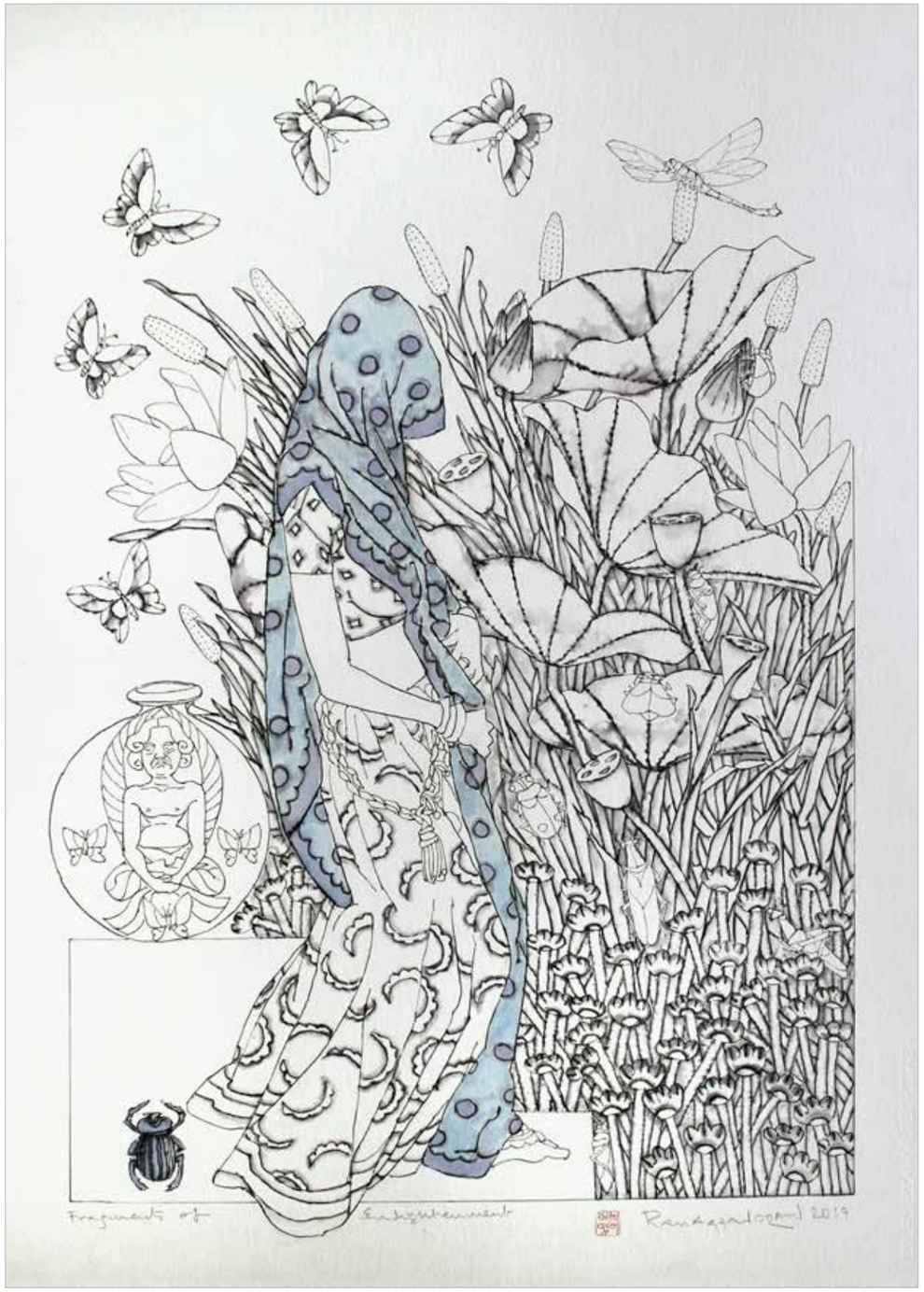
Insignificant Incarnation
Ink and wash on paper, 30” x 22”, 2018

Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019

Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and wash on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019

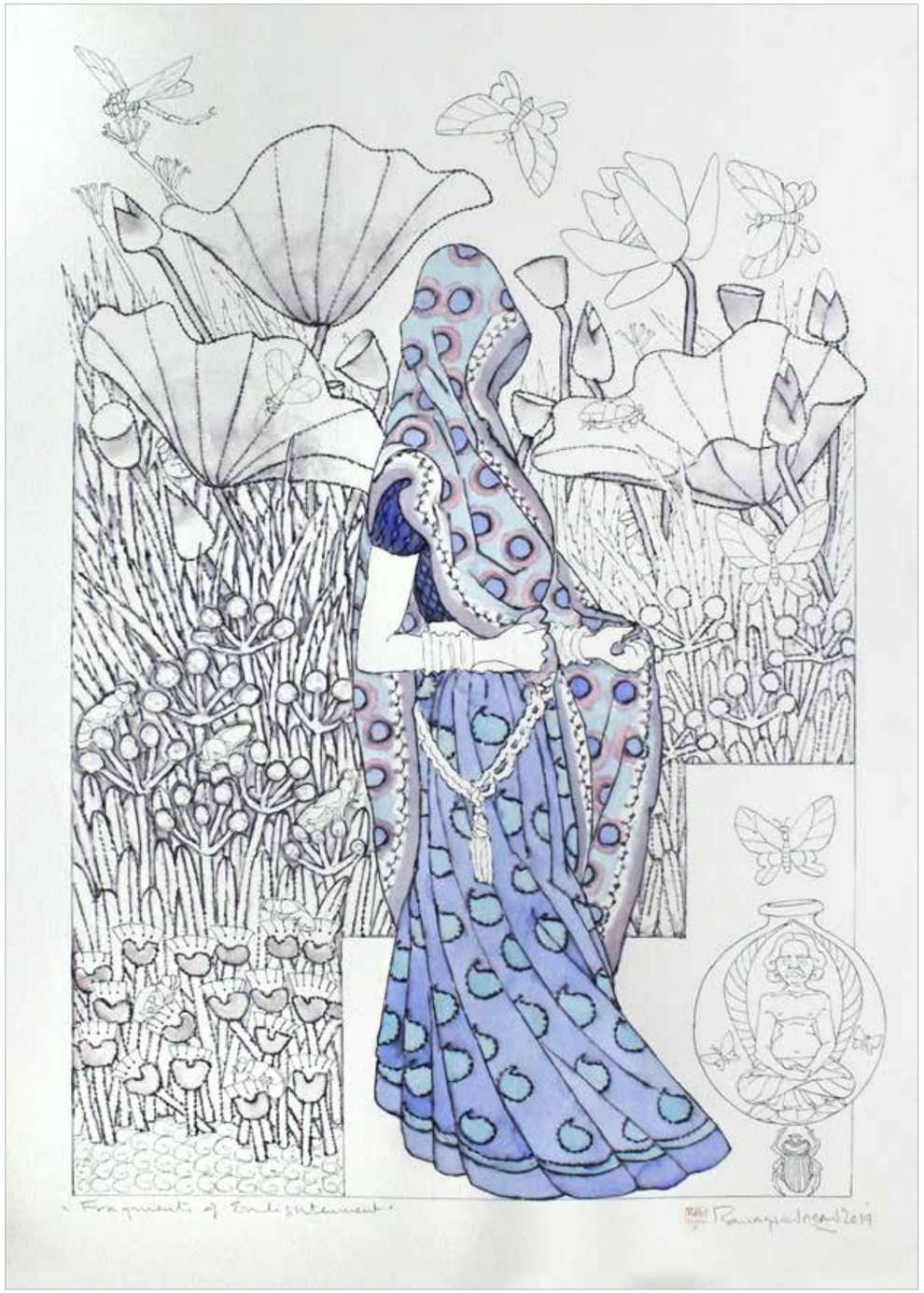
Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and wash on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019

Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and wash on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019



Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019

Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019

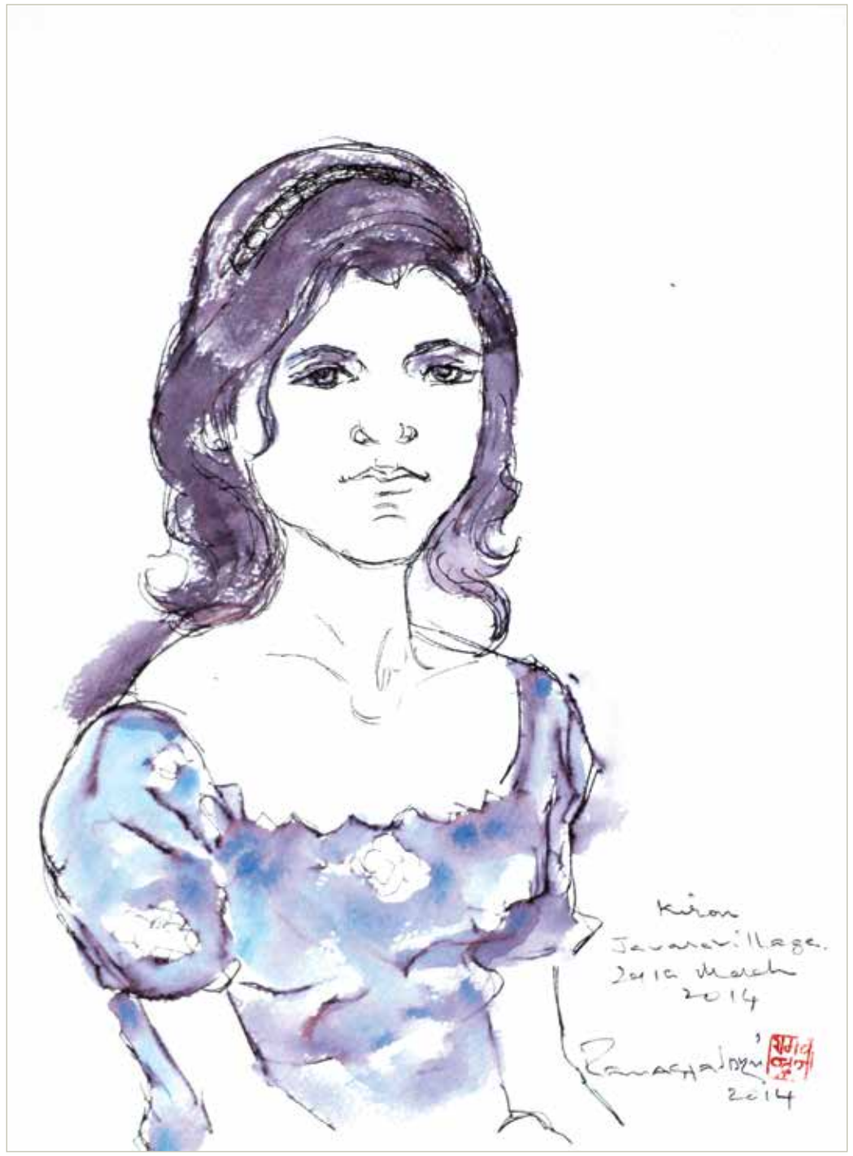


Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30” x 22”, 2019

Fragments of Enlightenment
Ink and watercolour on paper, 30" x 22", 2019

रामचन्द्रन

Studies



Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2014

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Study
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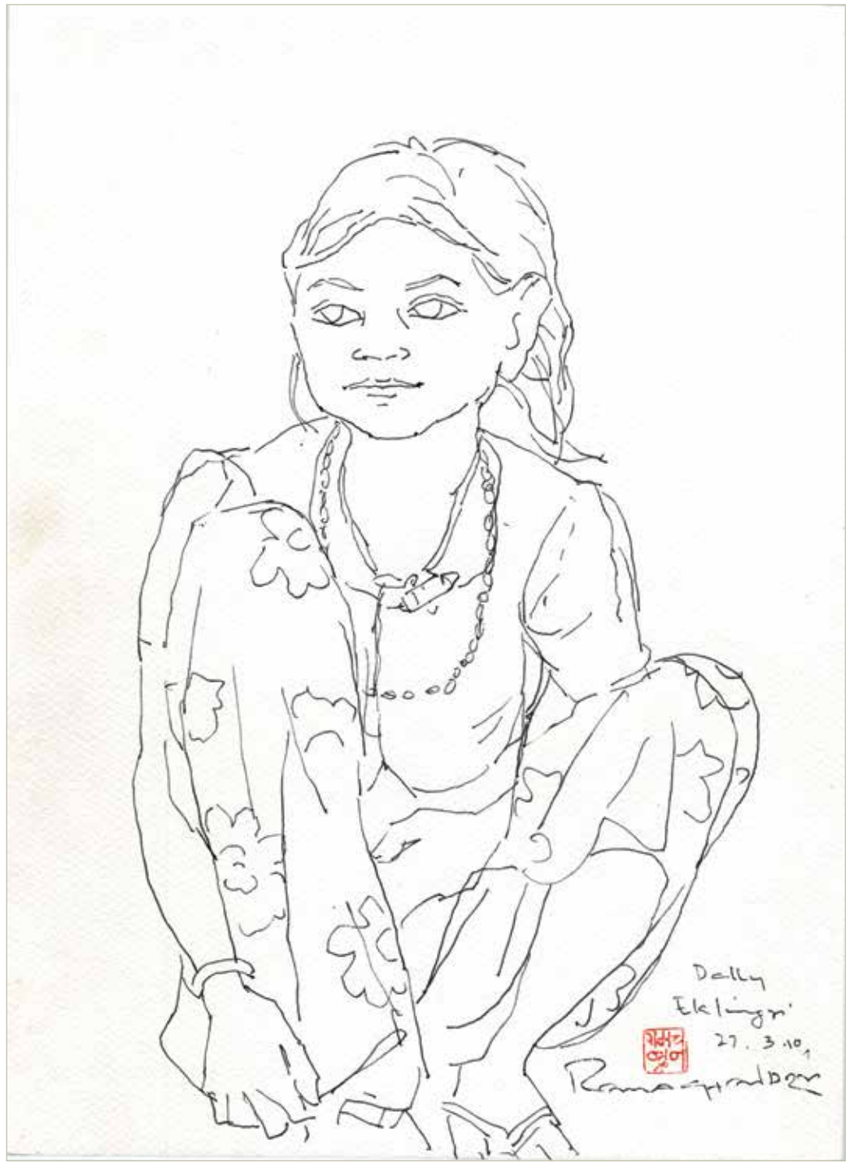

Study
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Study
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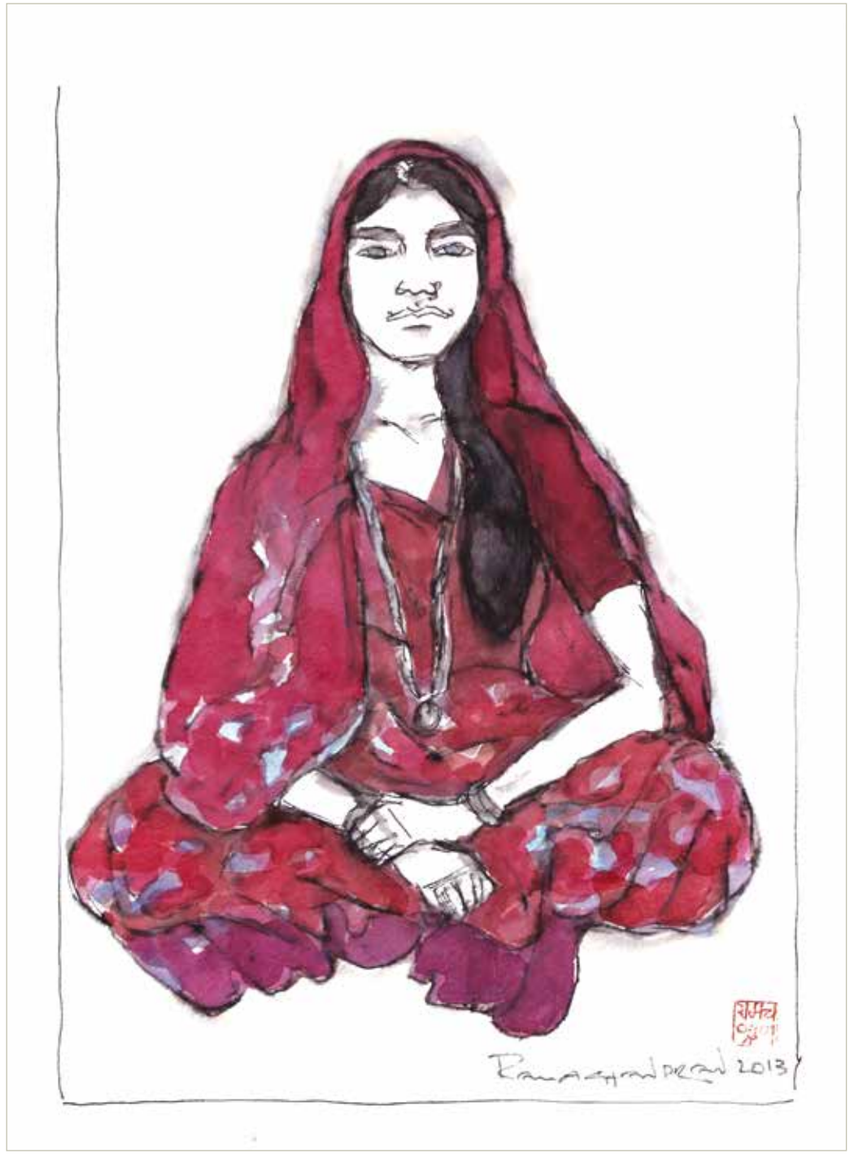

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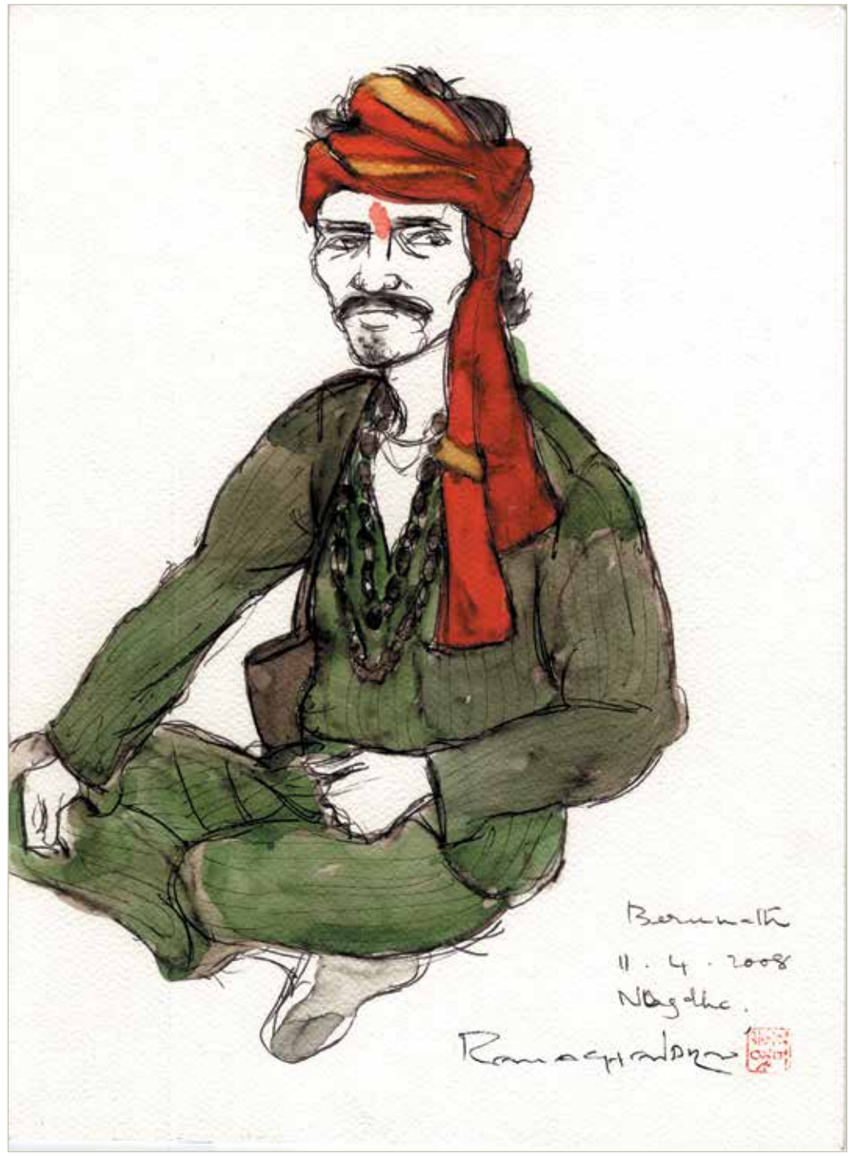

Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2008

Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020

Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020

Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020

Study
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Study
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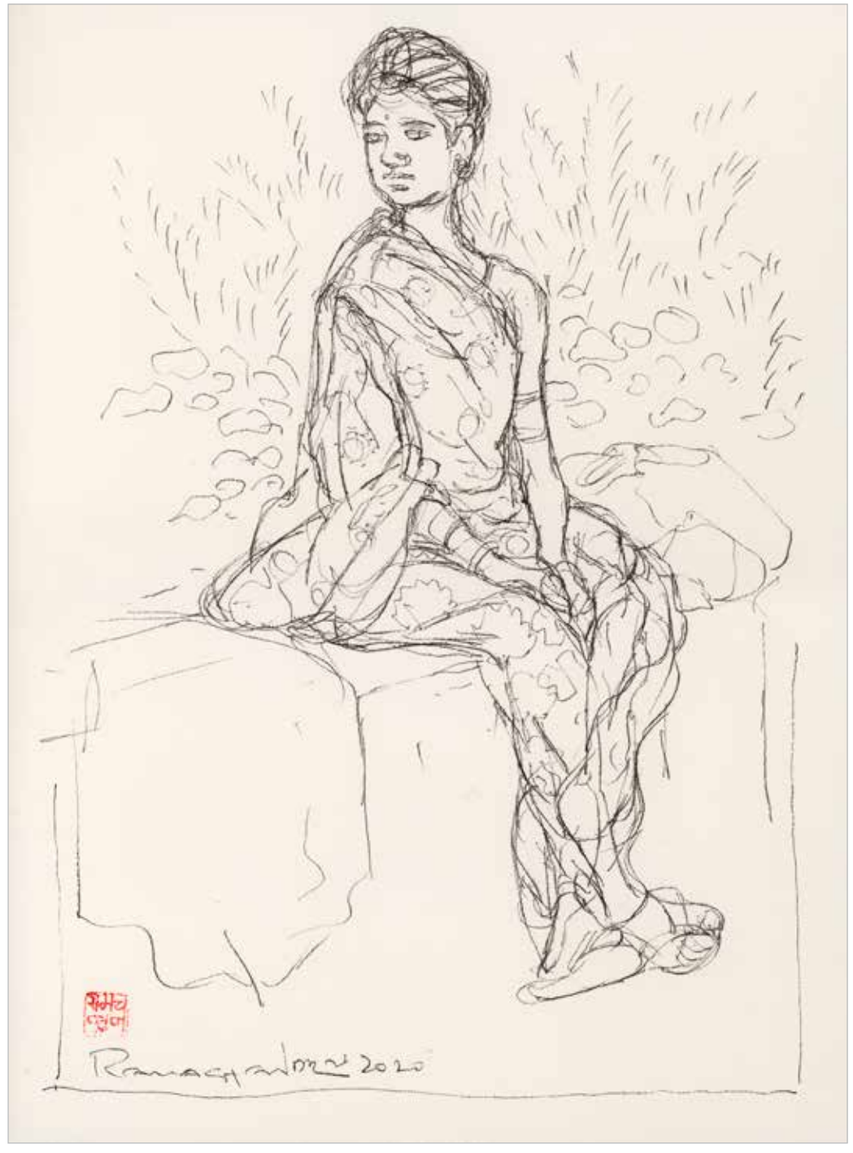

Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020

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Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020

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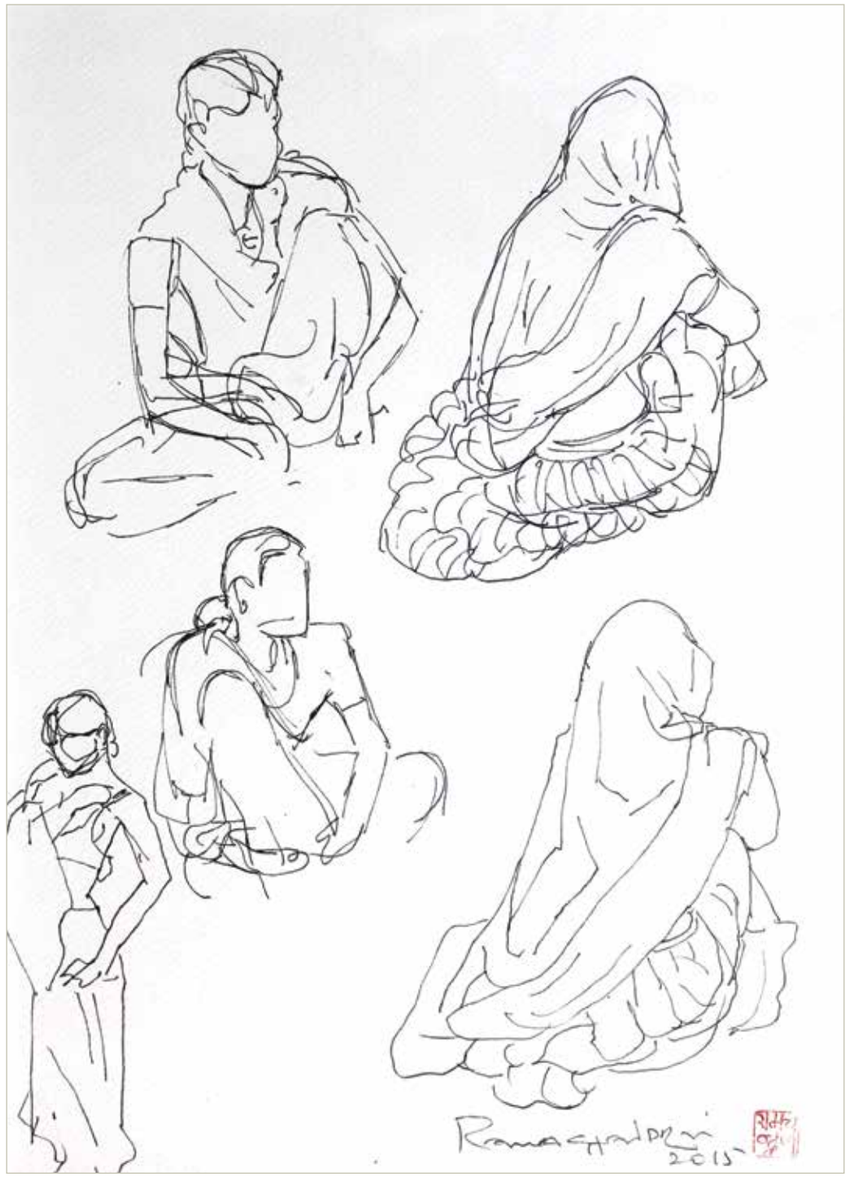
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020



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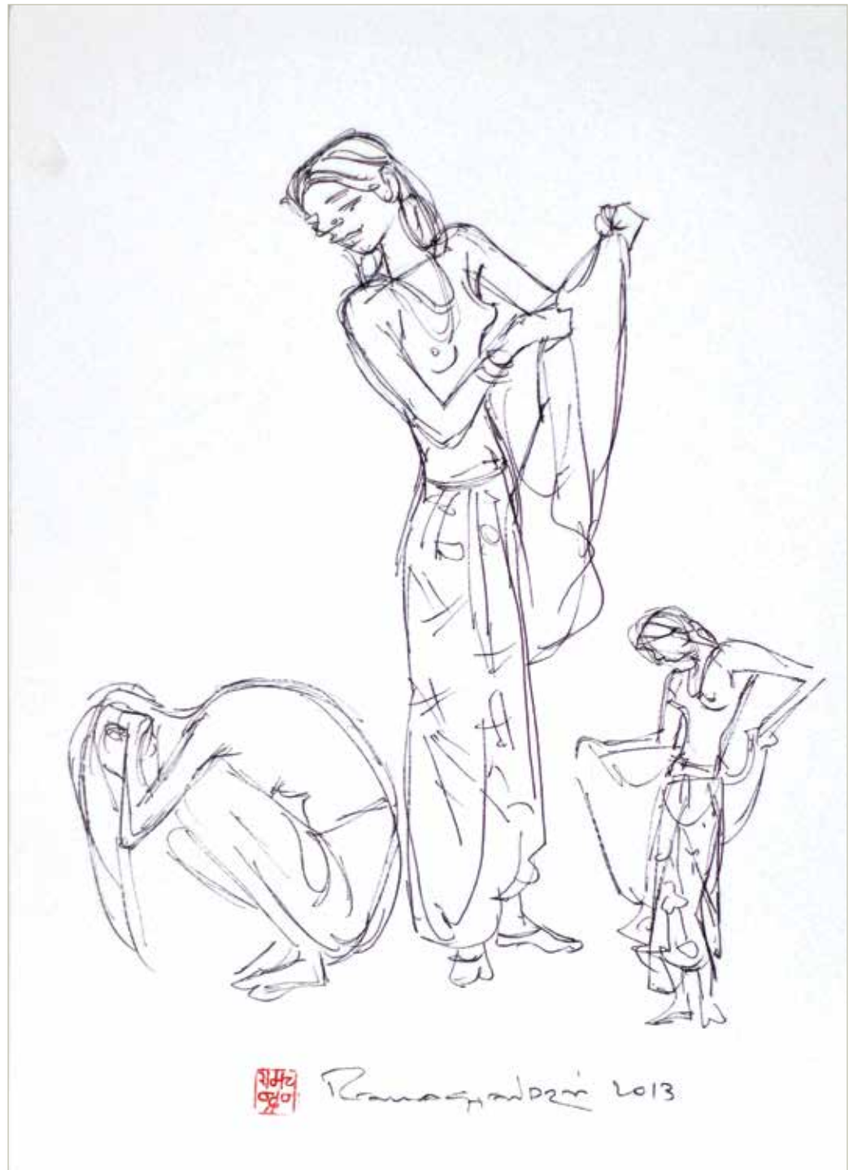

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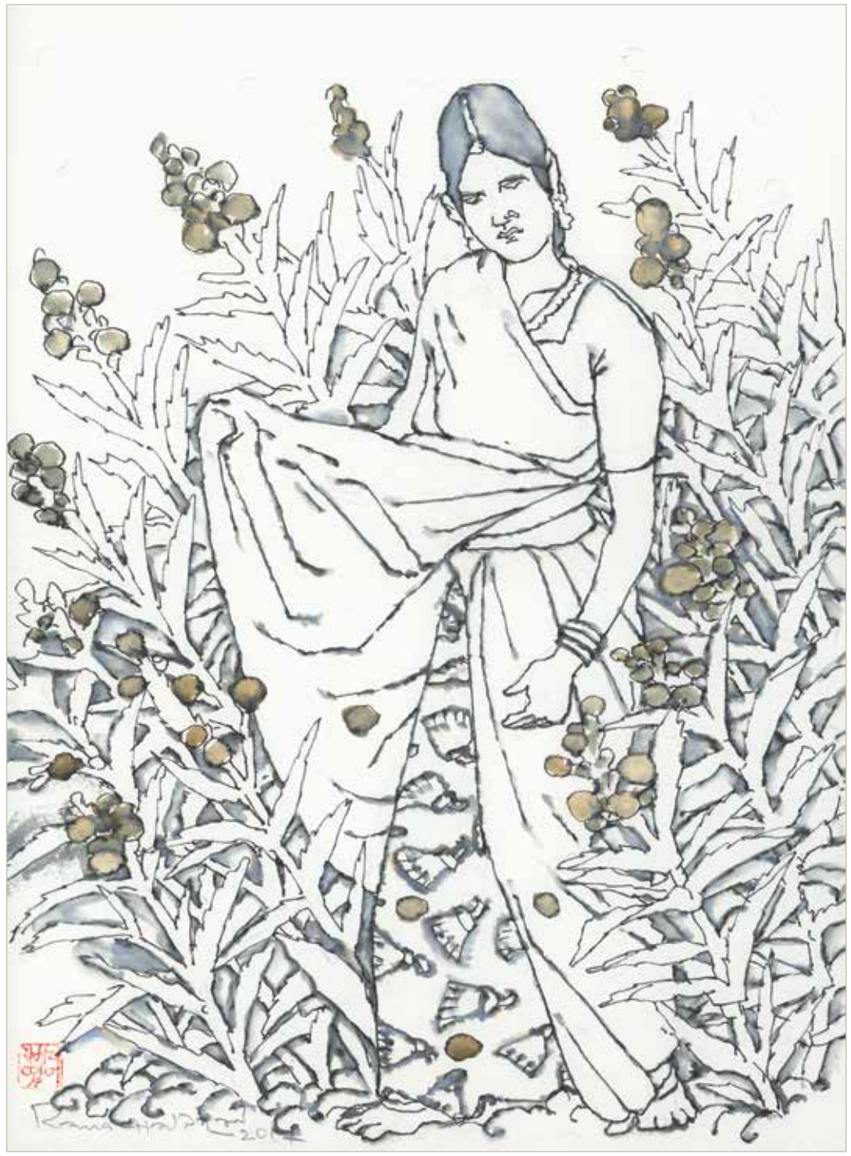

Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14” x 11”, 2018

Study
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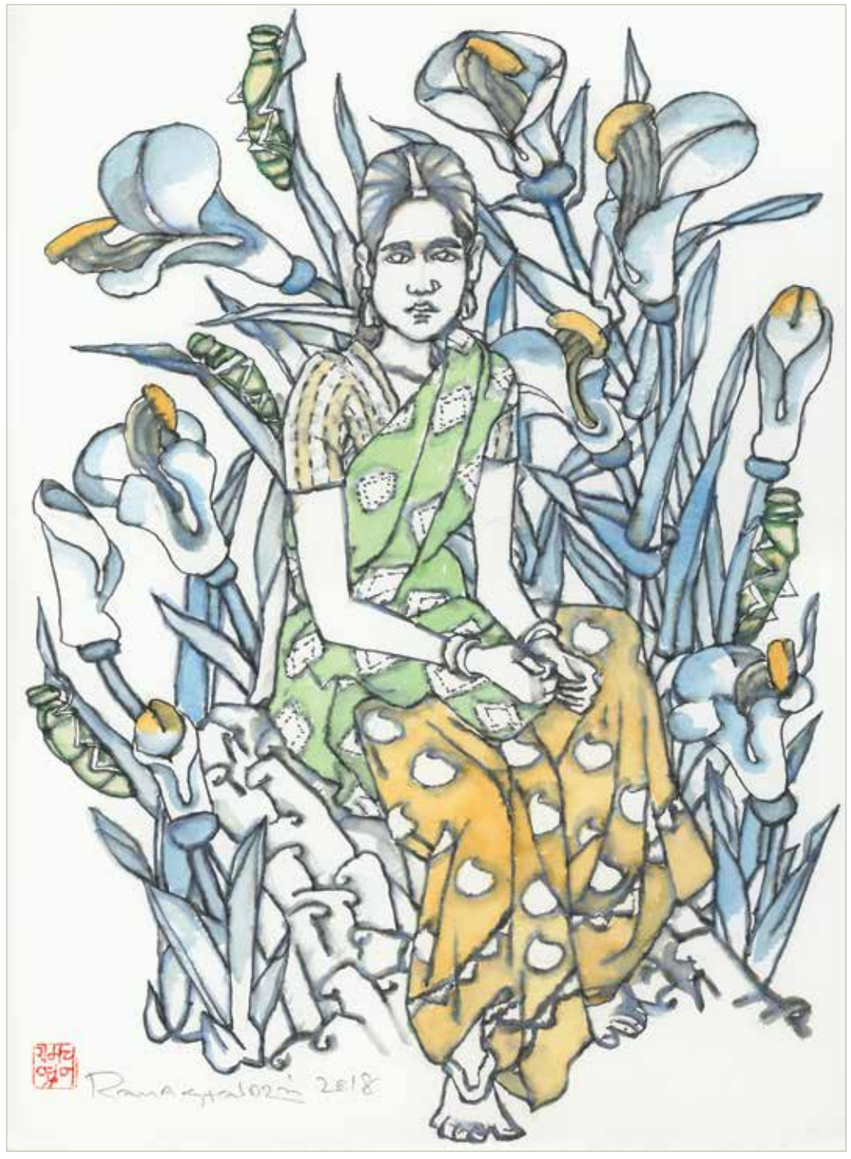

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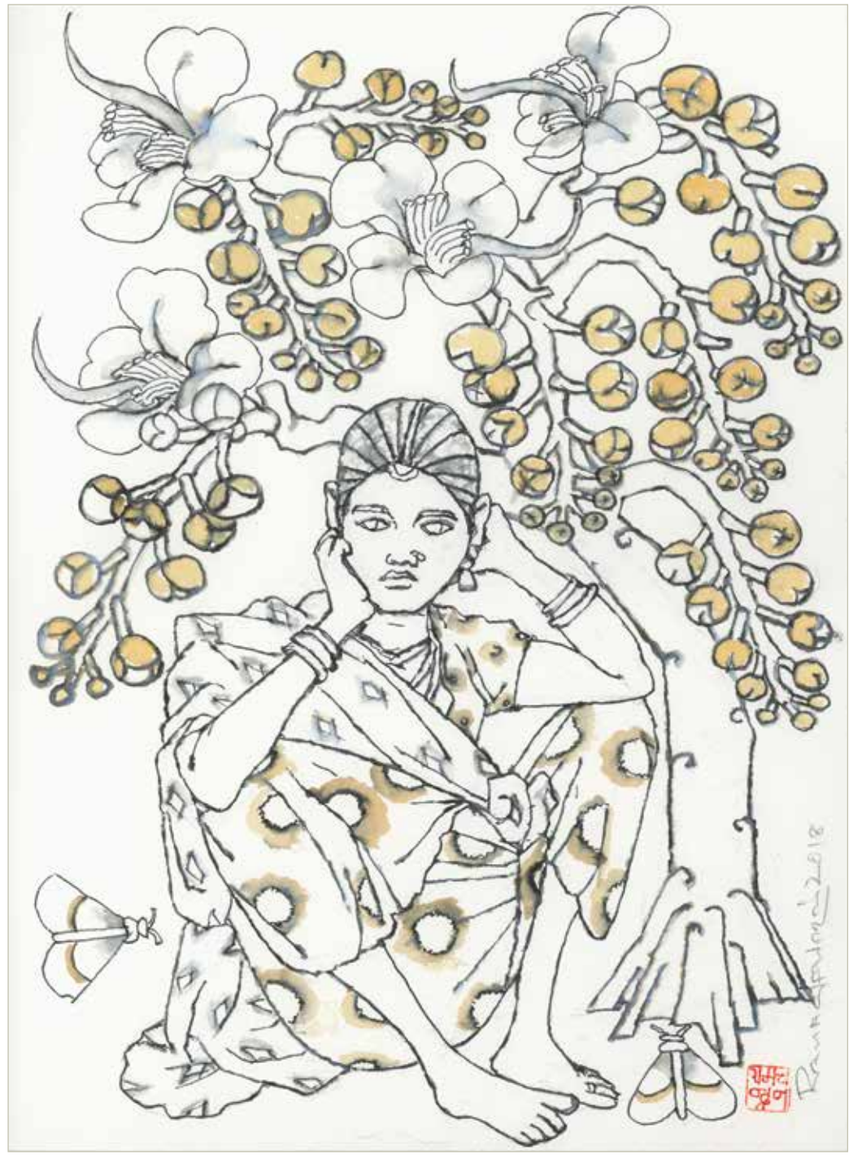

Study
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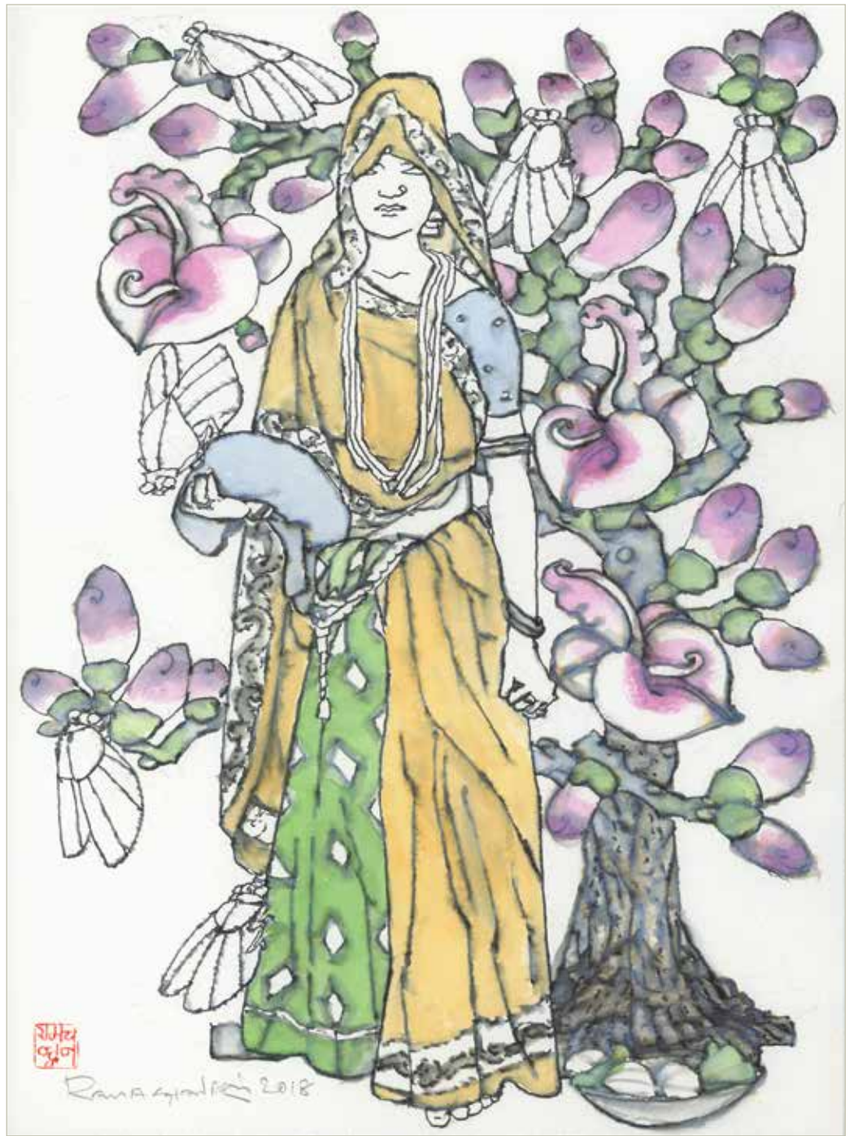

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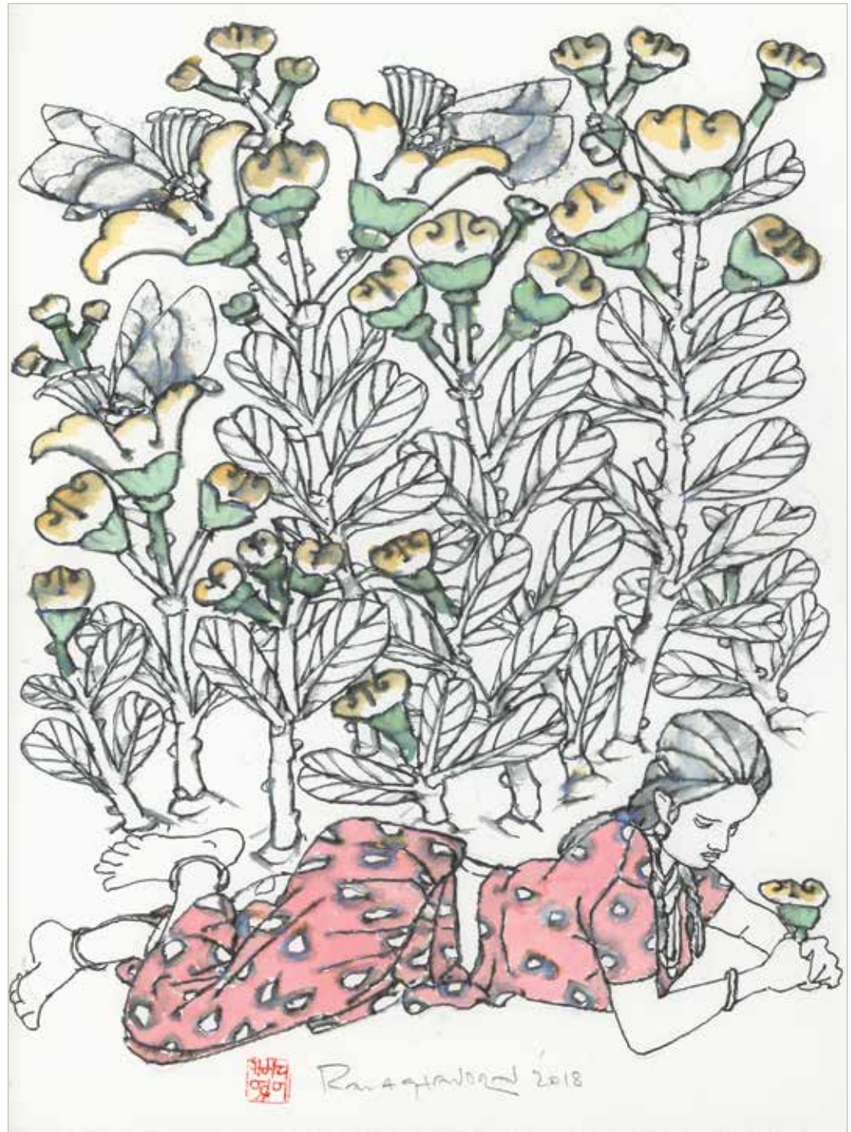

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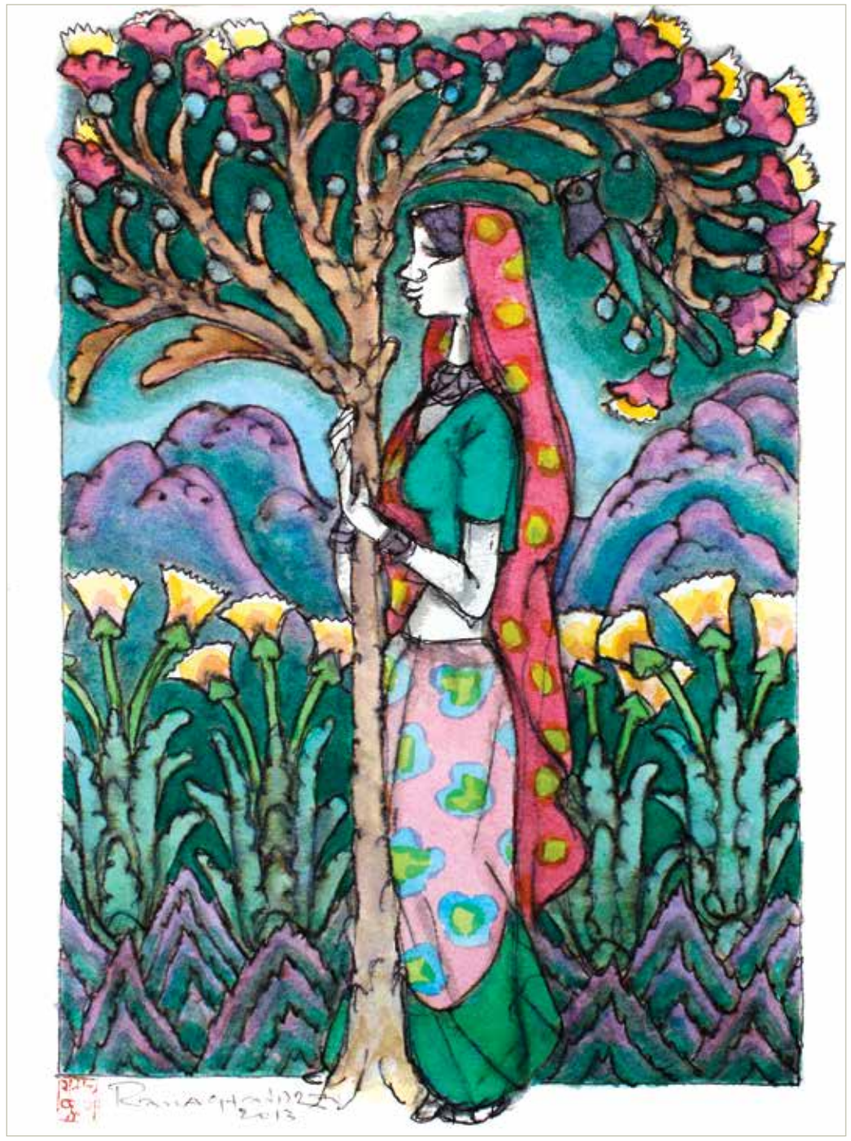

Study
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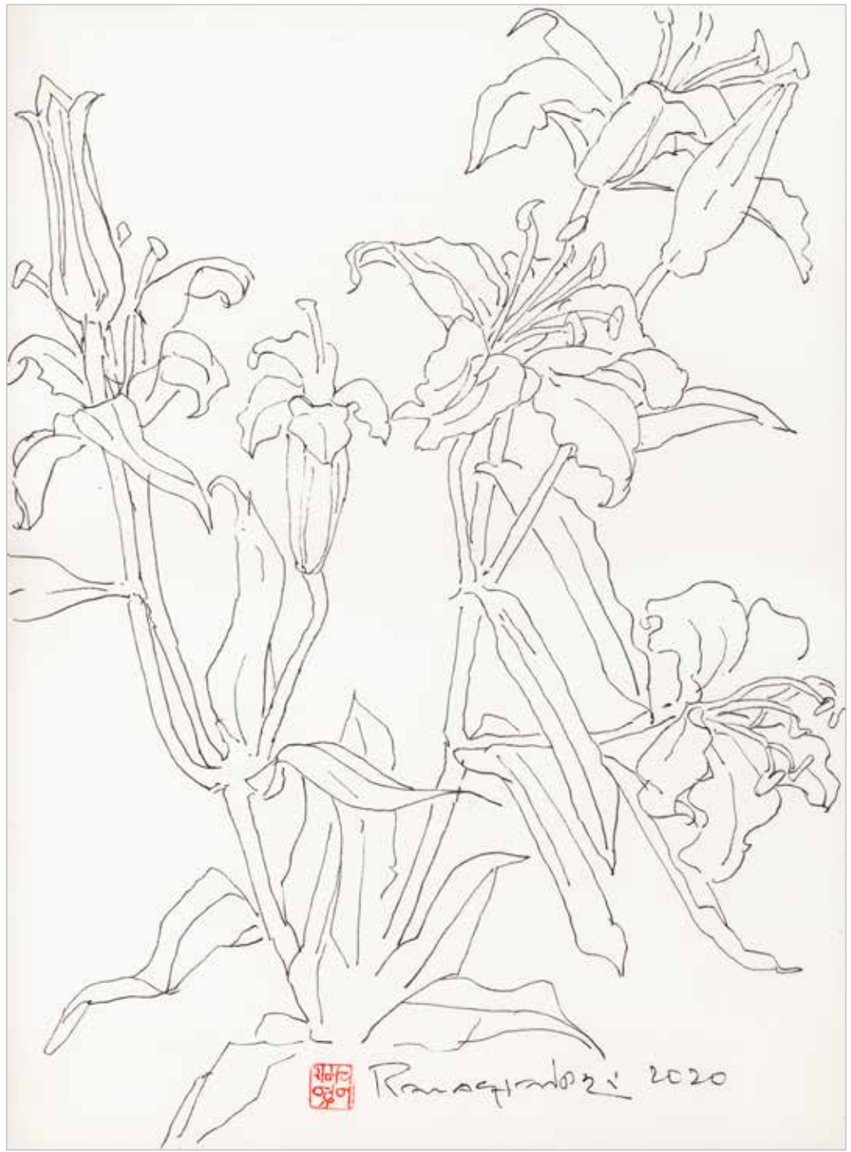
Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14” x 11”, 2013

Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2013

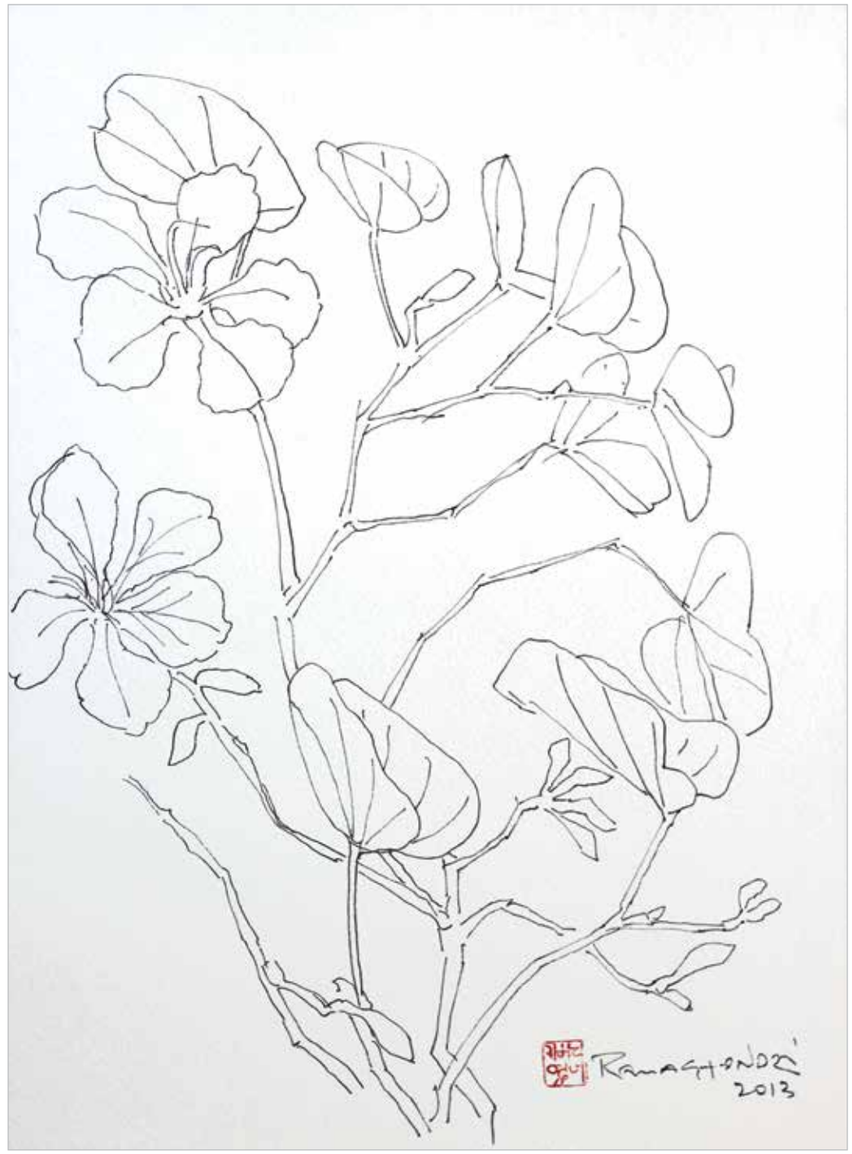
Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2015

Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2016

Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020



Study
Ink on paper, 14” x 11”, 2020



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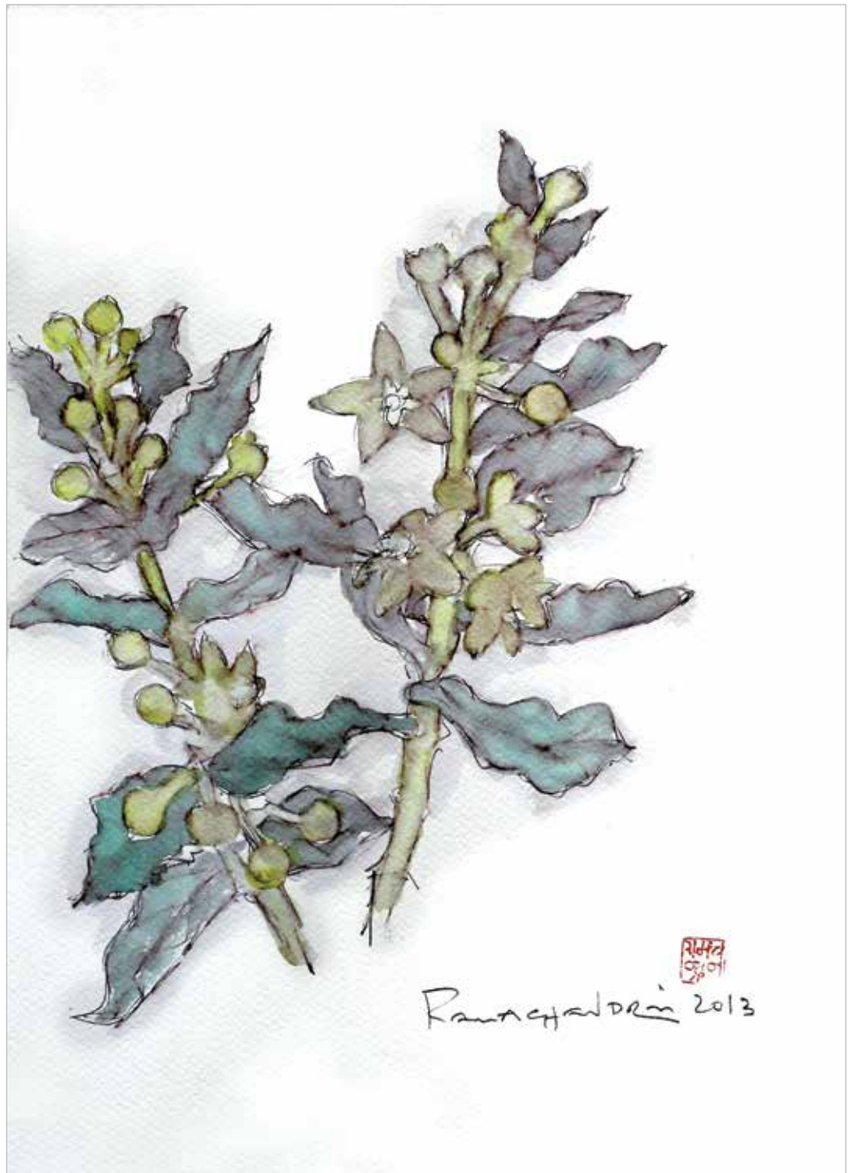

Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14” x 11”, 2013

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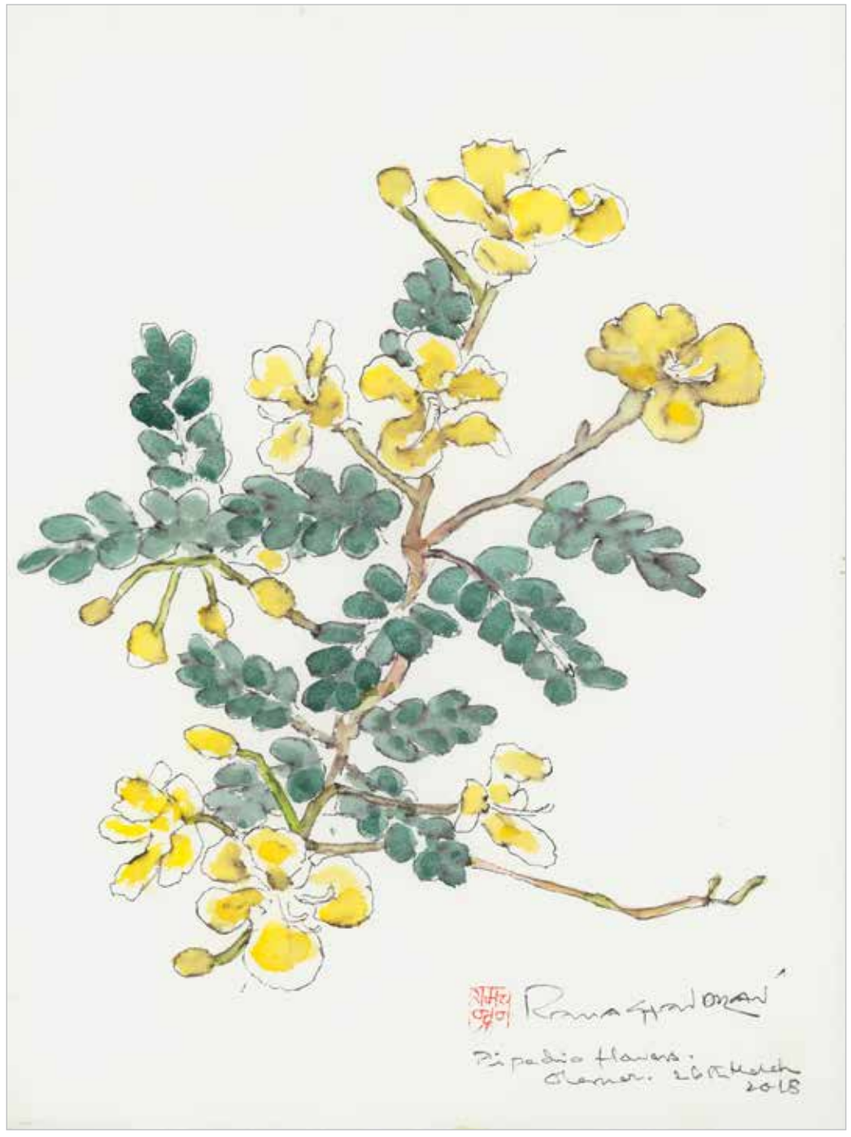
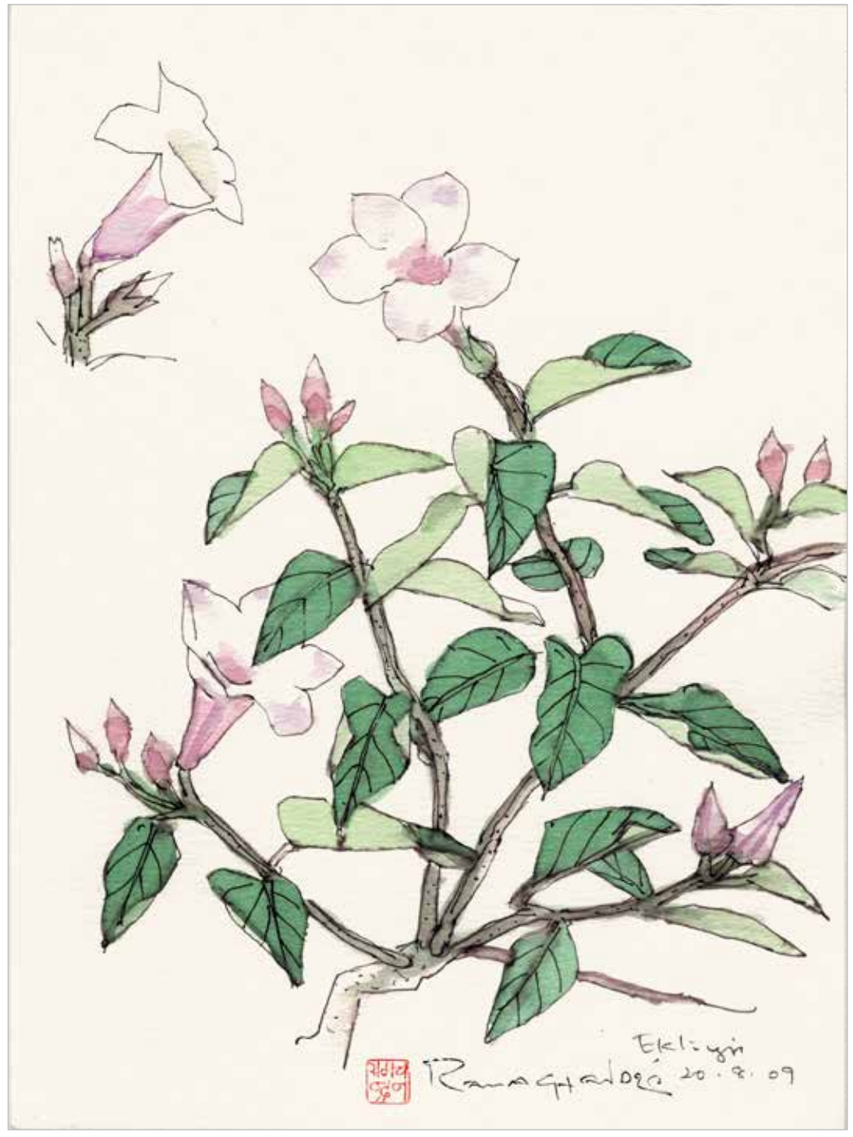
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14” x 11”, 2013



Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14” x 11”, 2018



Study
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Study
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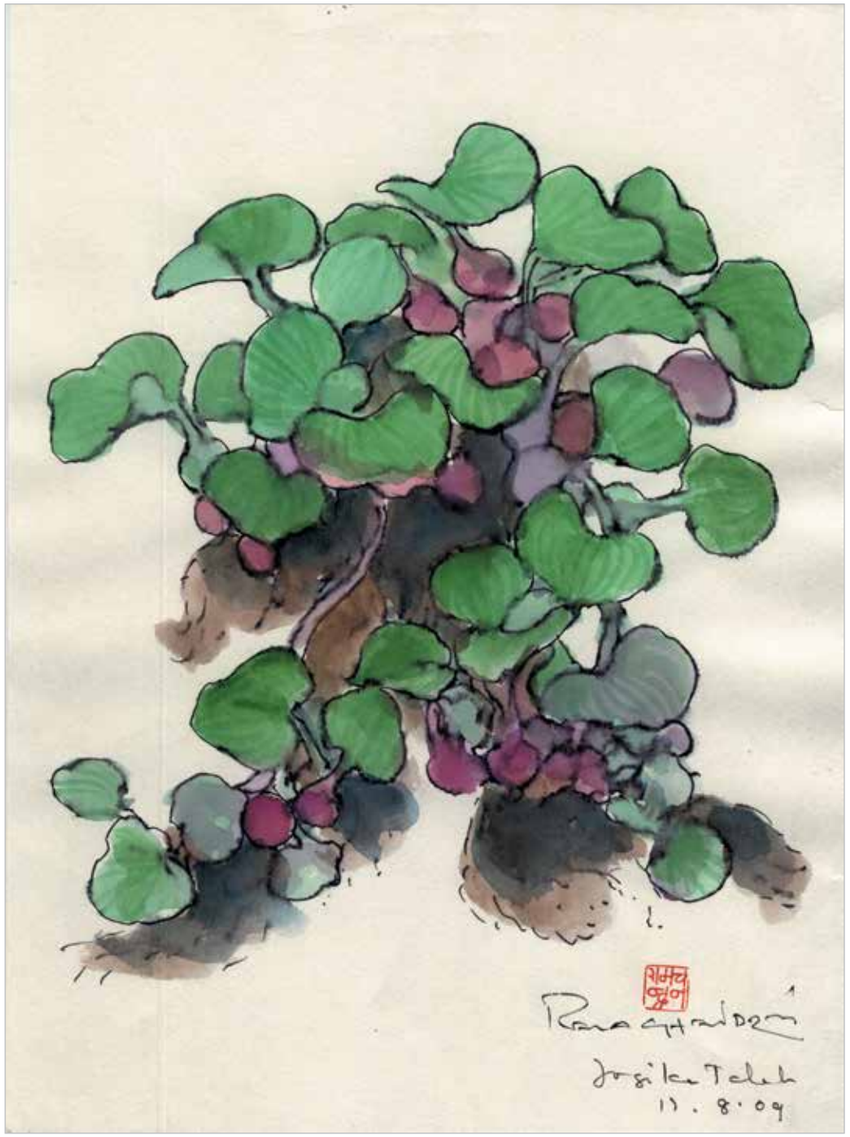

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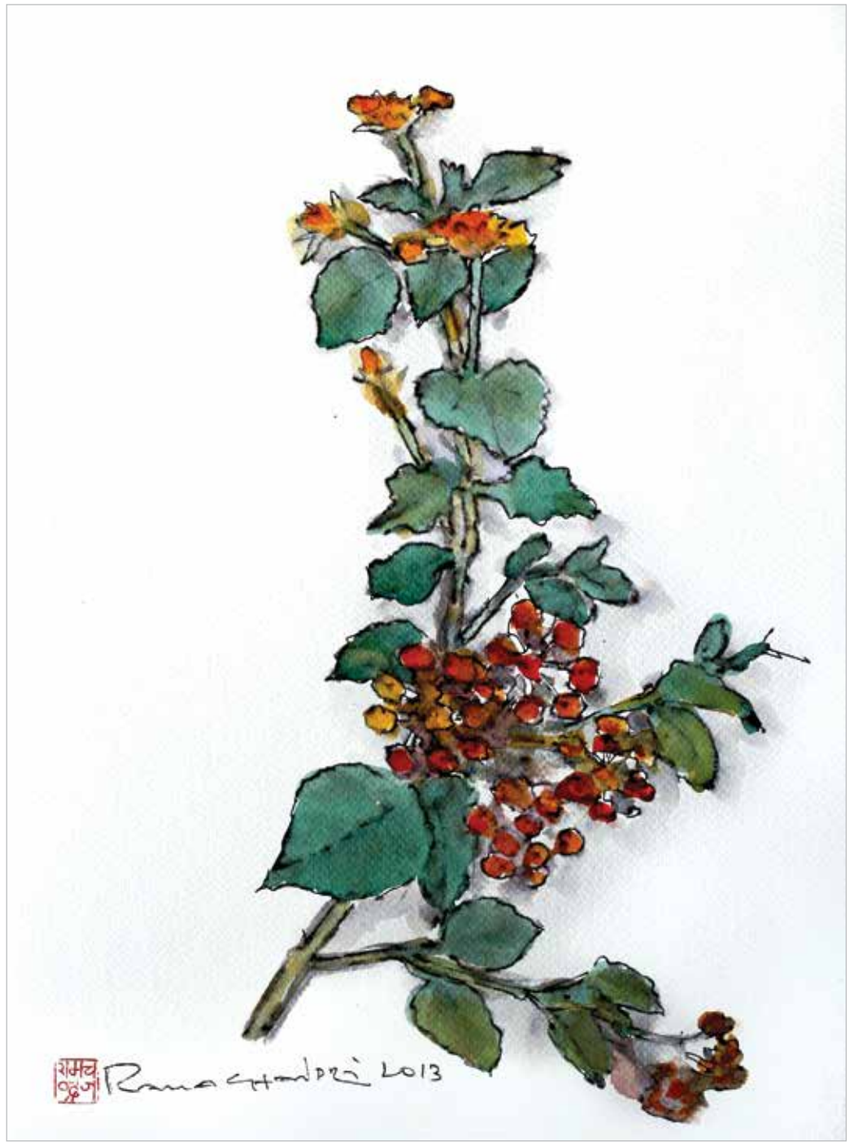

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Study
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Study
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Study
Ink and watercolour on paper, 14" x 11", 2014

Study
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Study
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Study
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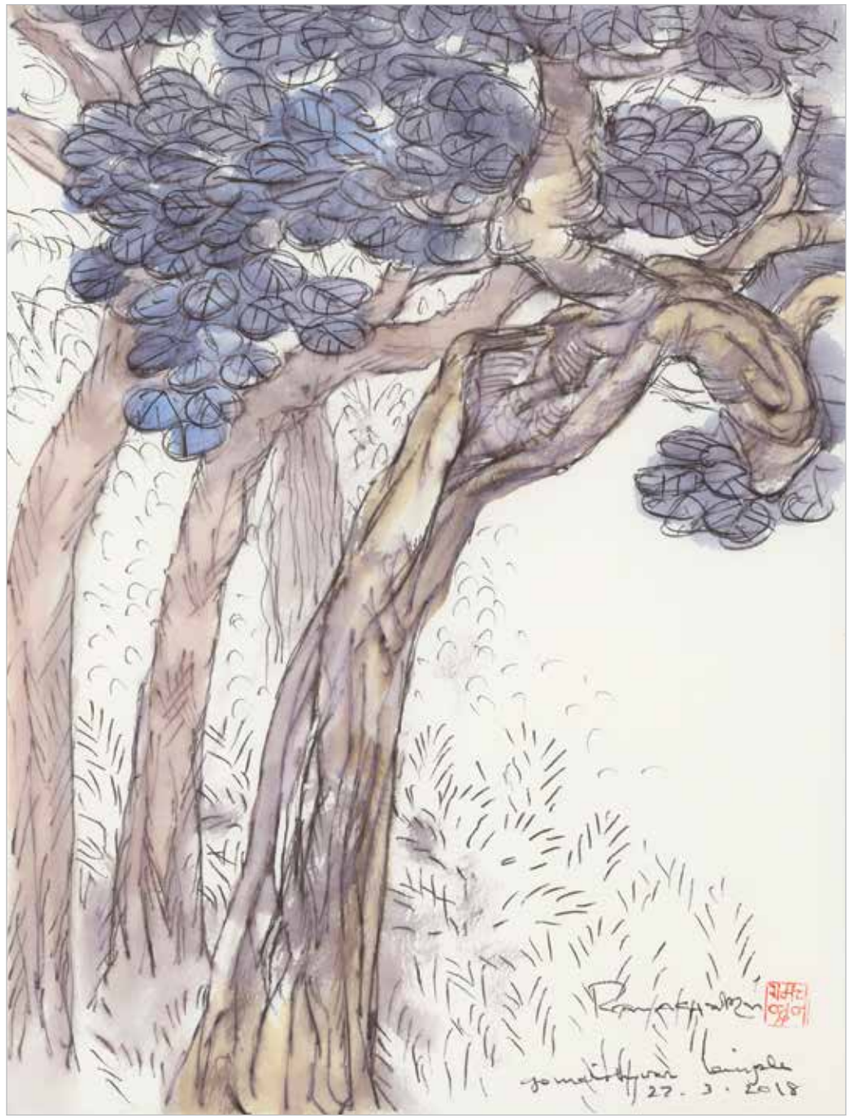

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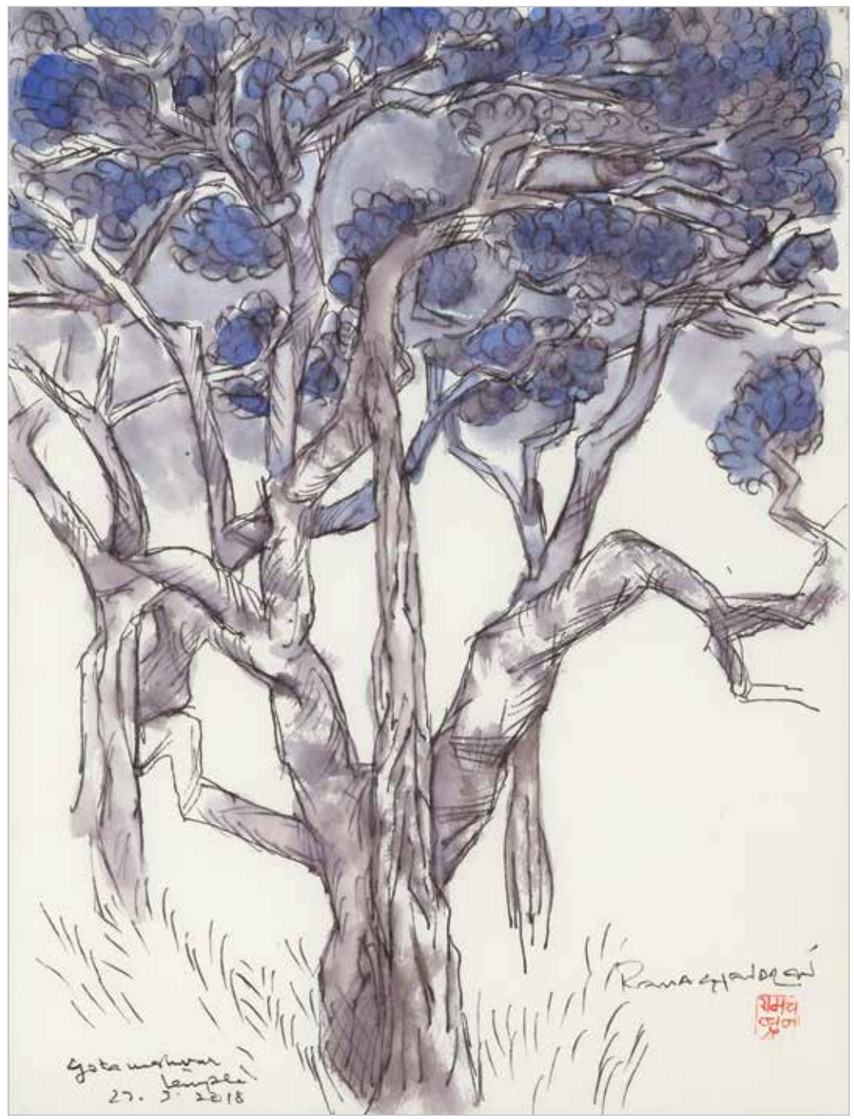

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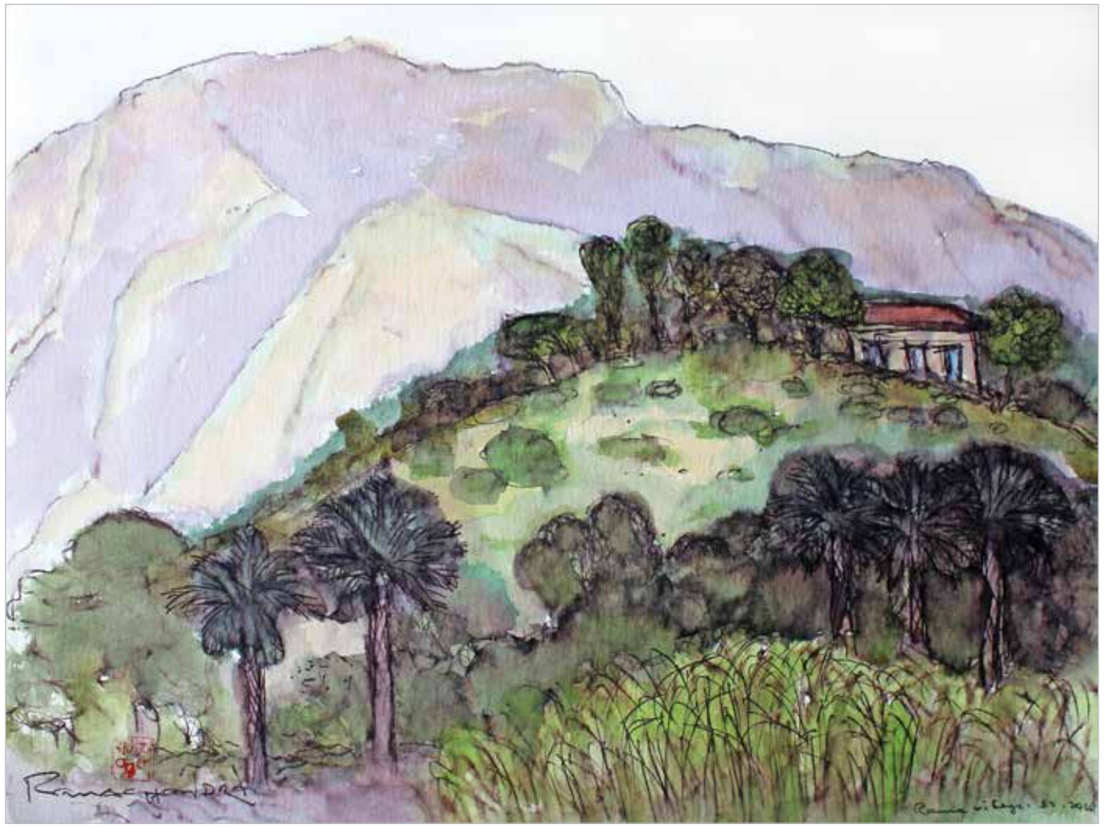

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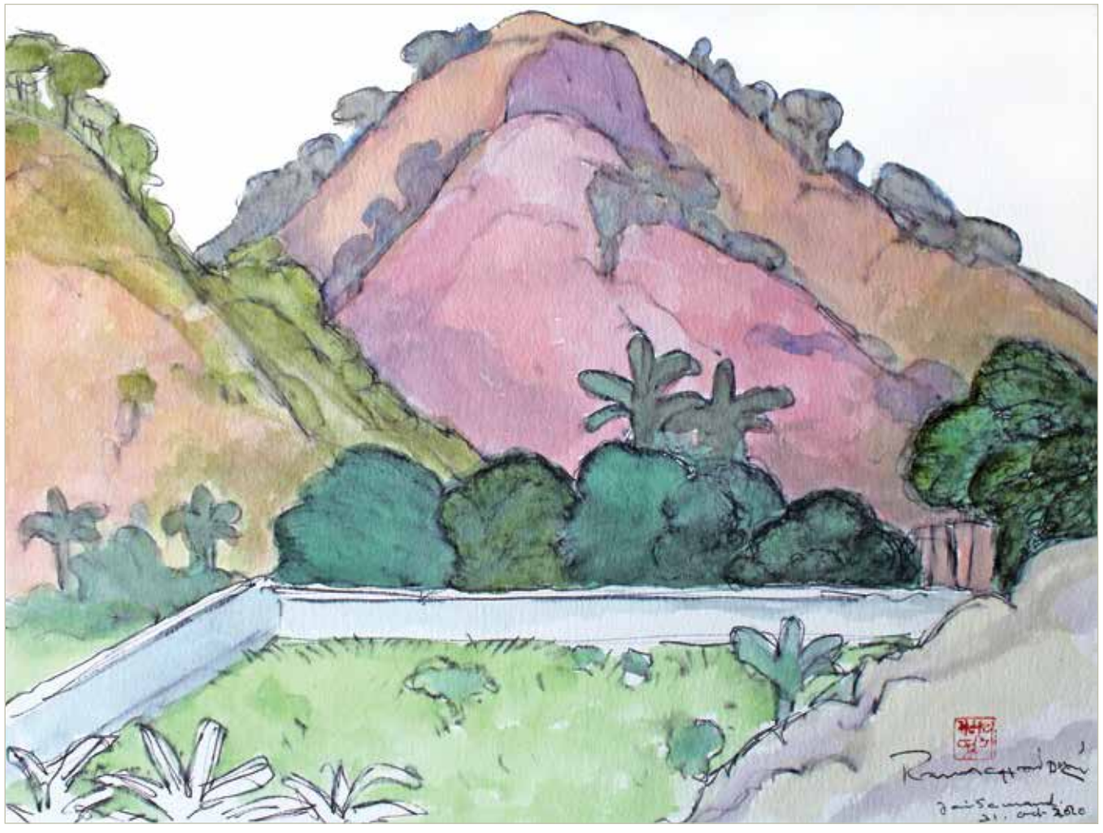

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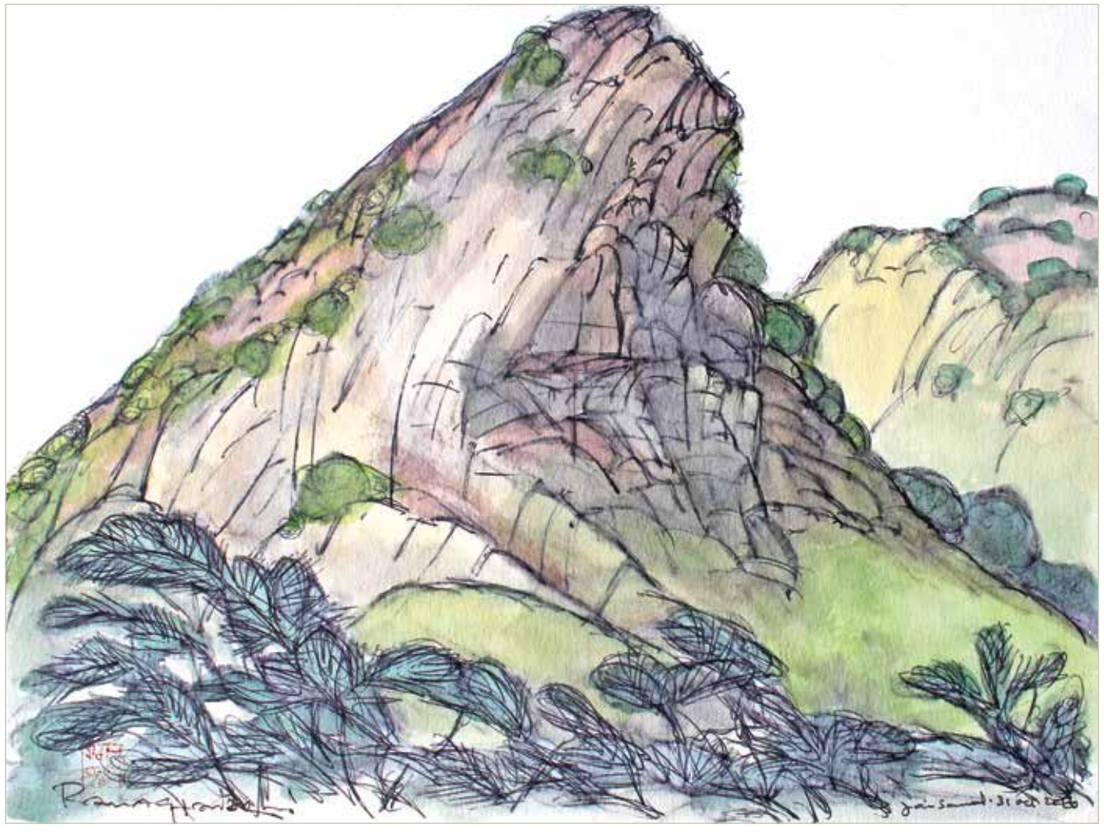

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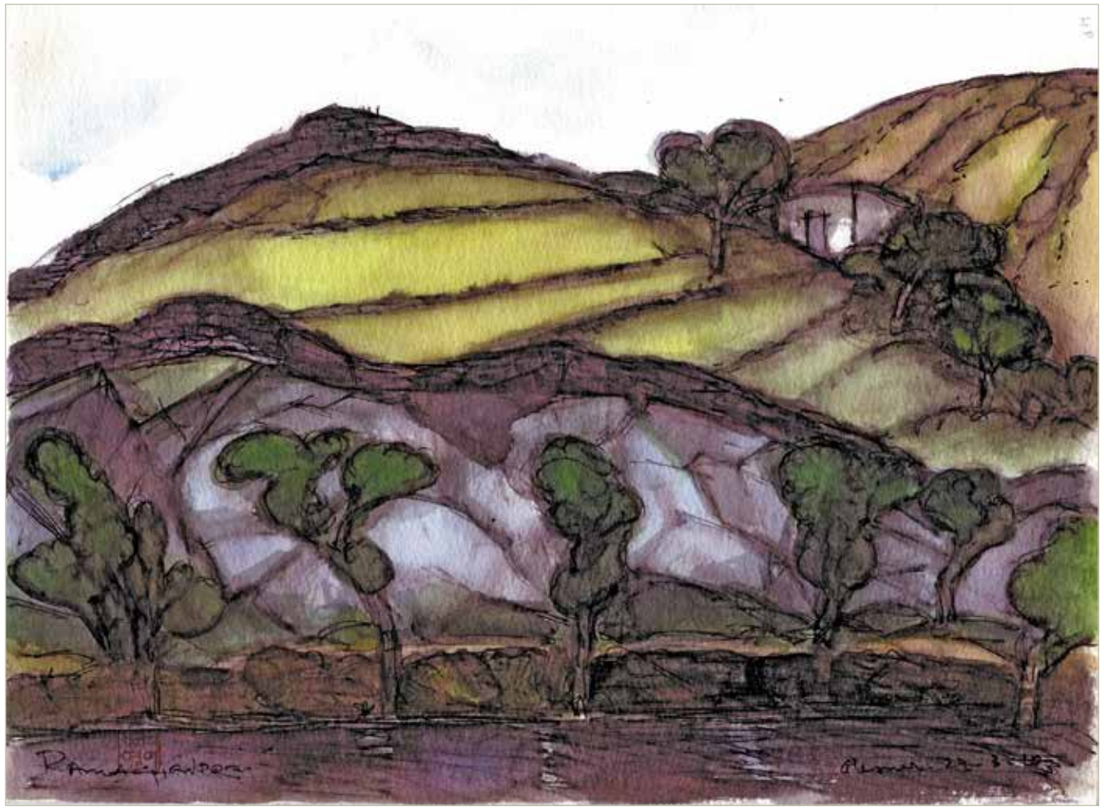

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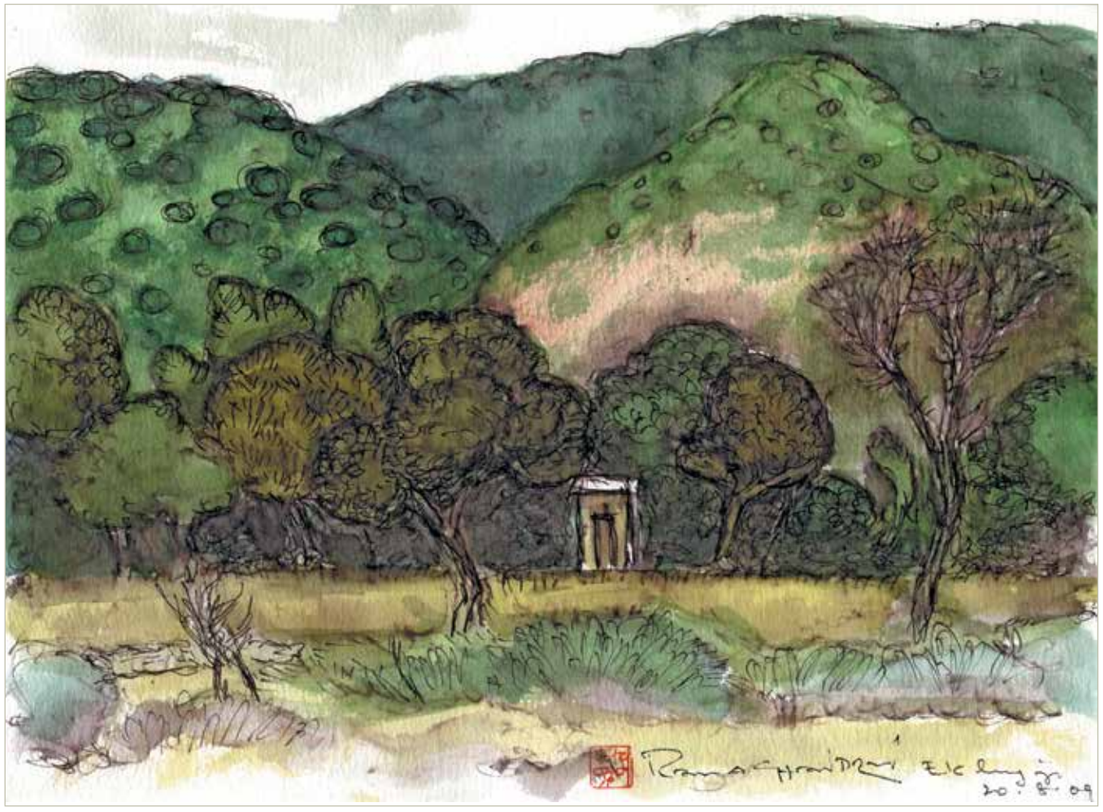

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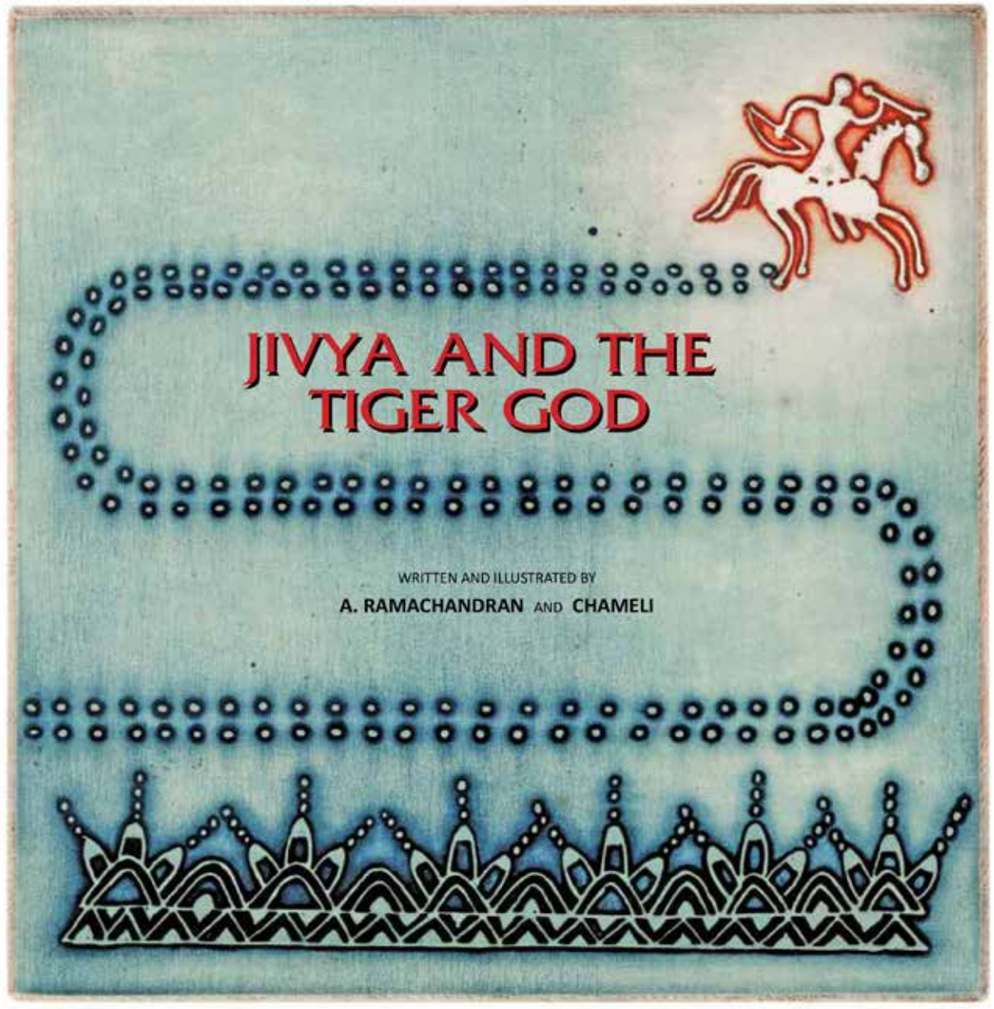
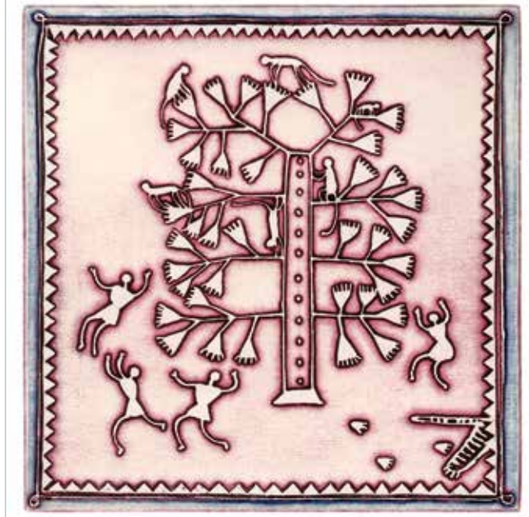
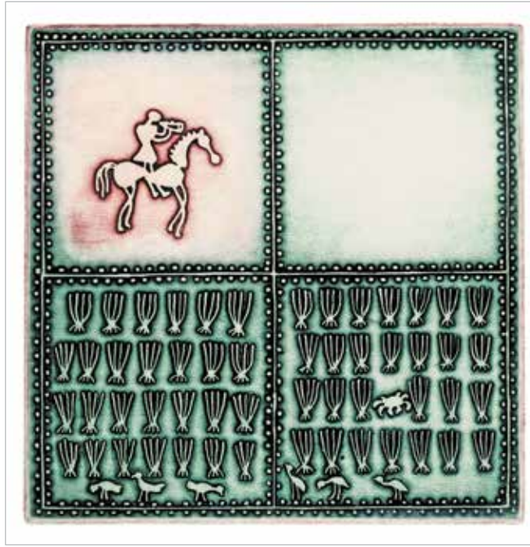
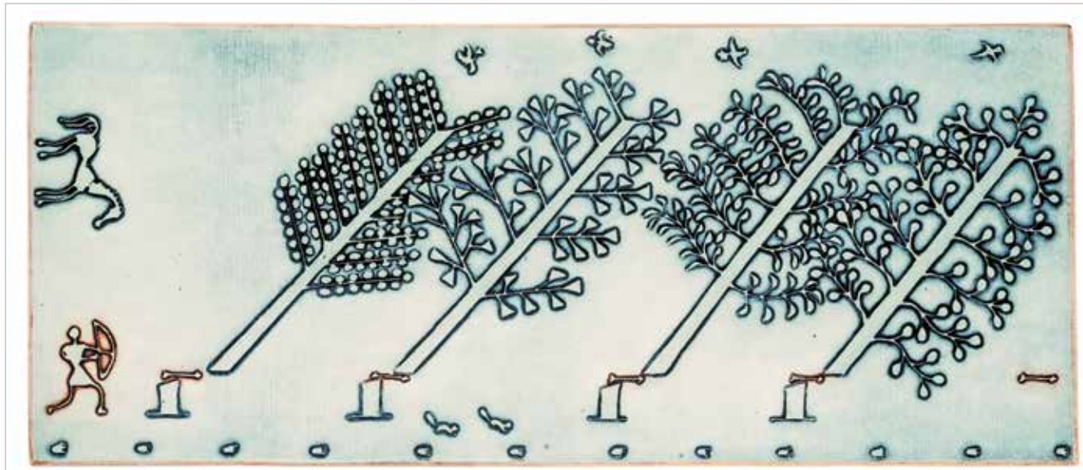
Children's Books



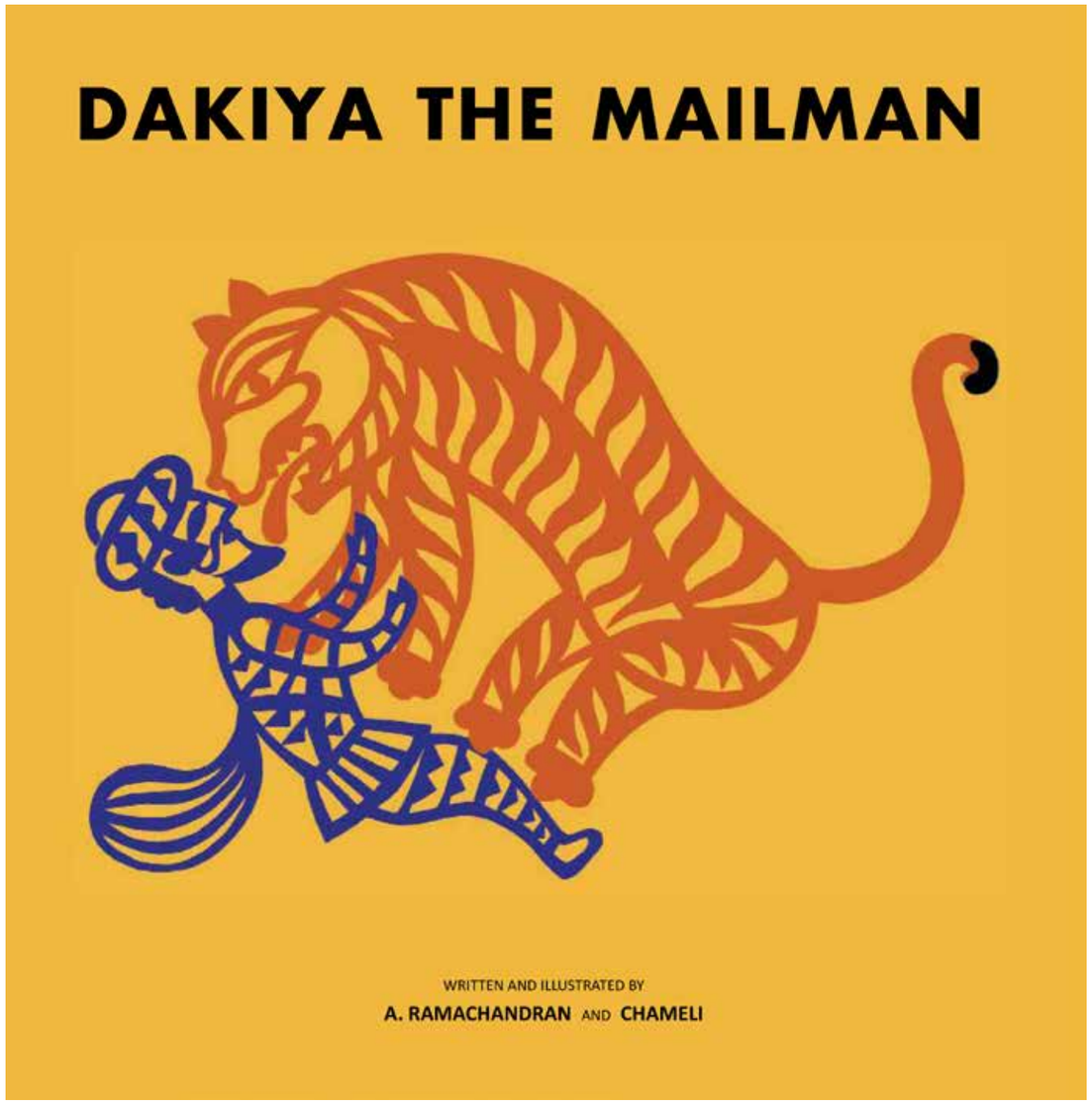
Book Cover- ***Jivya and the Tiger God,*** 1982



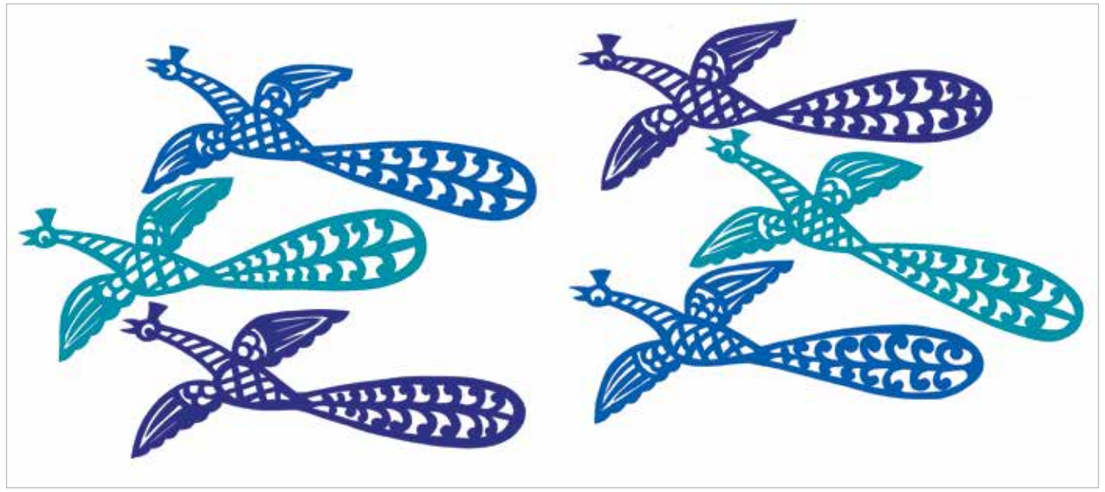


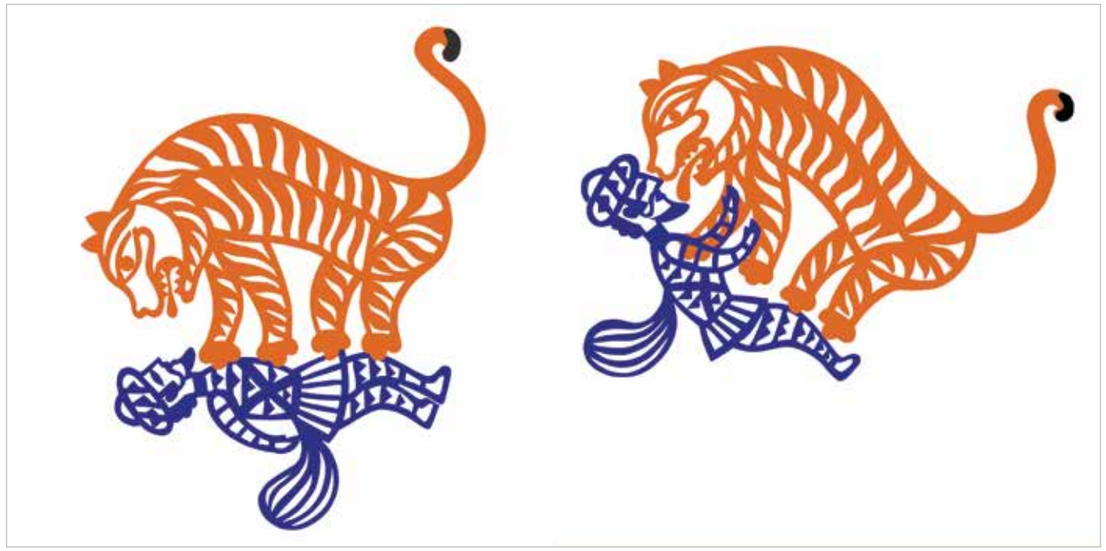


Illustrations from- ***Jivya and the Tiger God,*** 1982



Book Cover- ***Dakiya the Mailman,*** 2000





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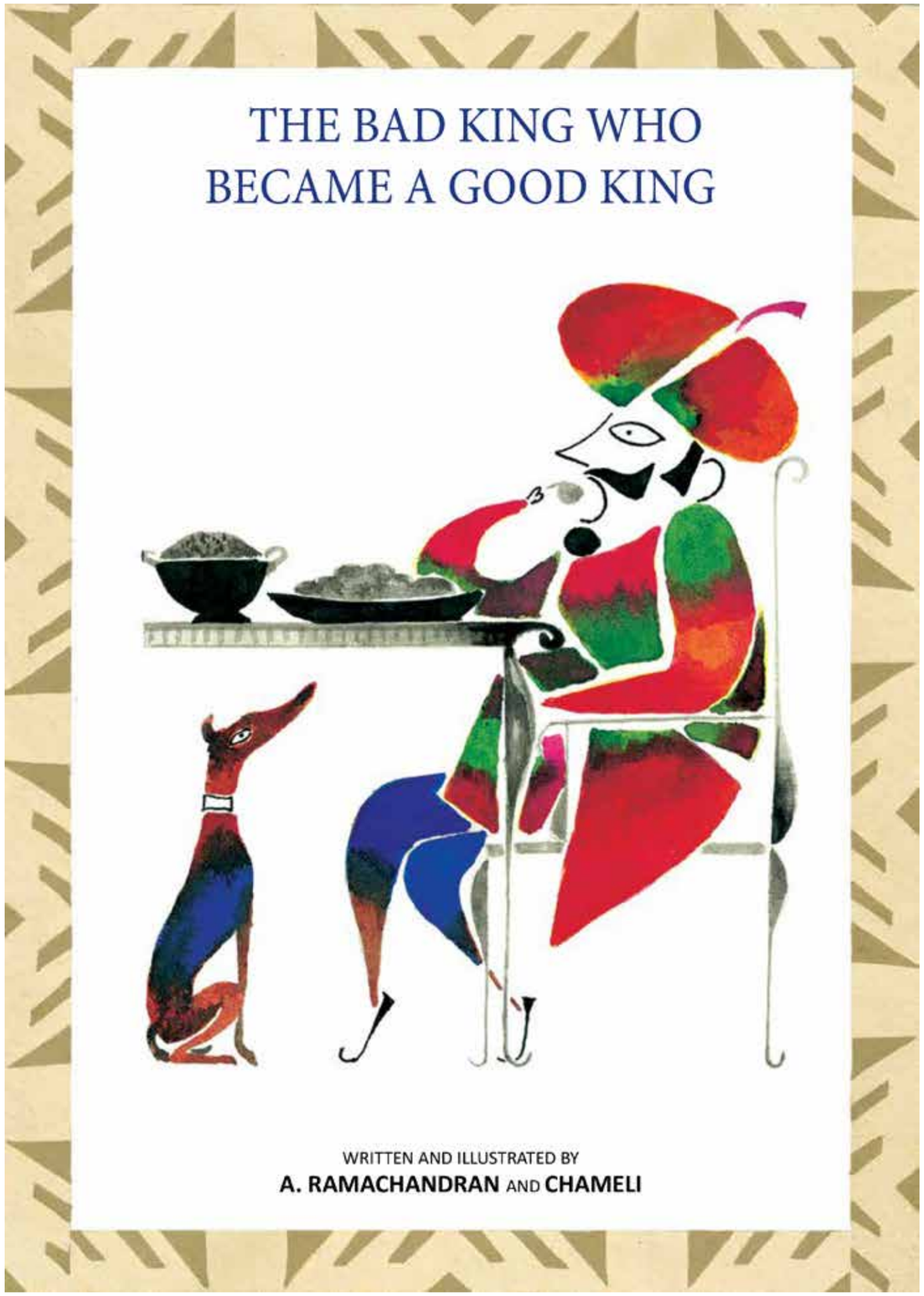
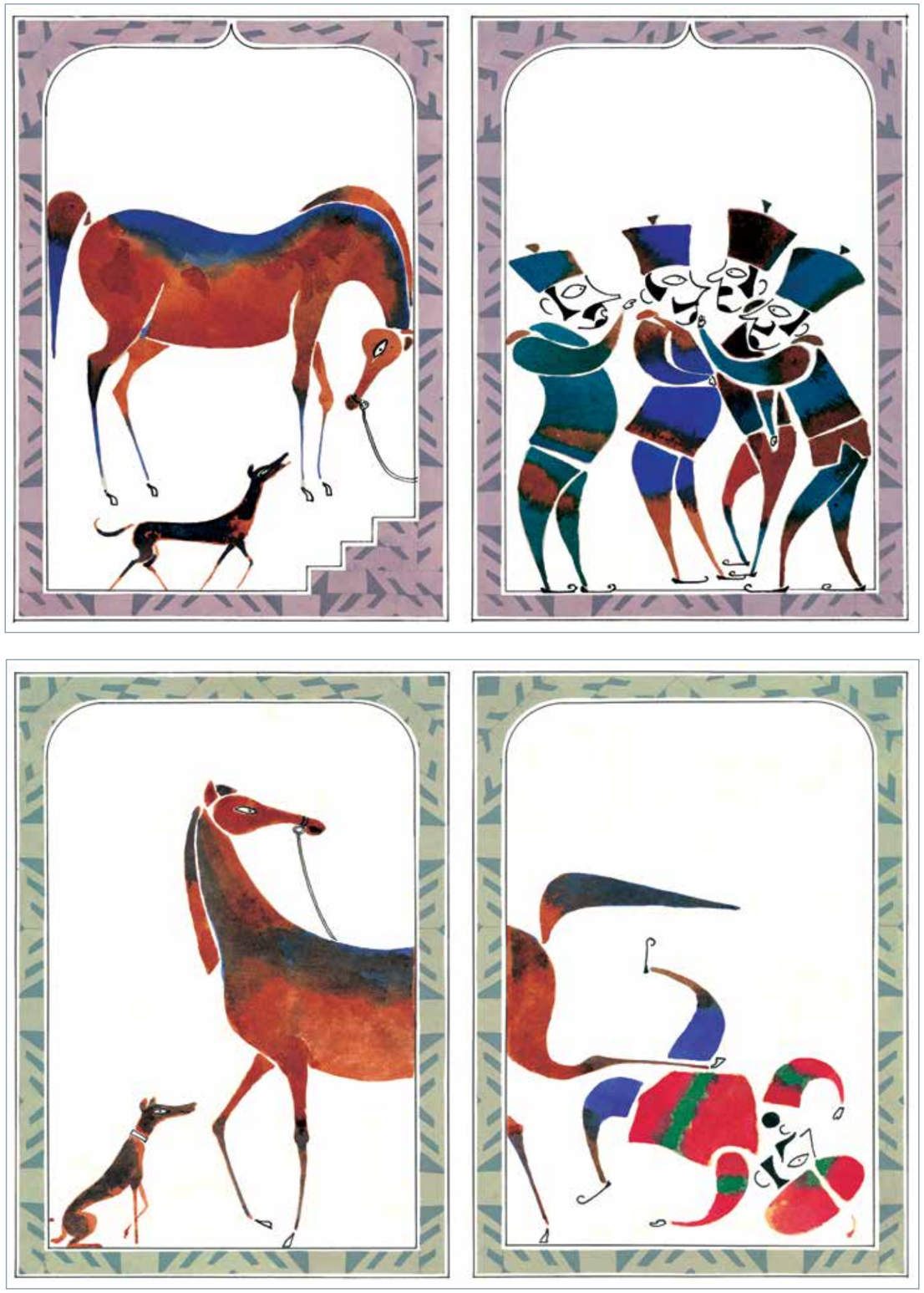
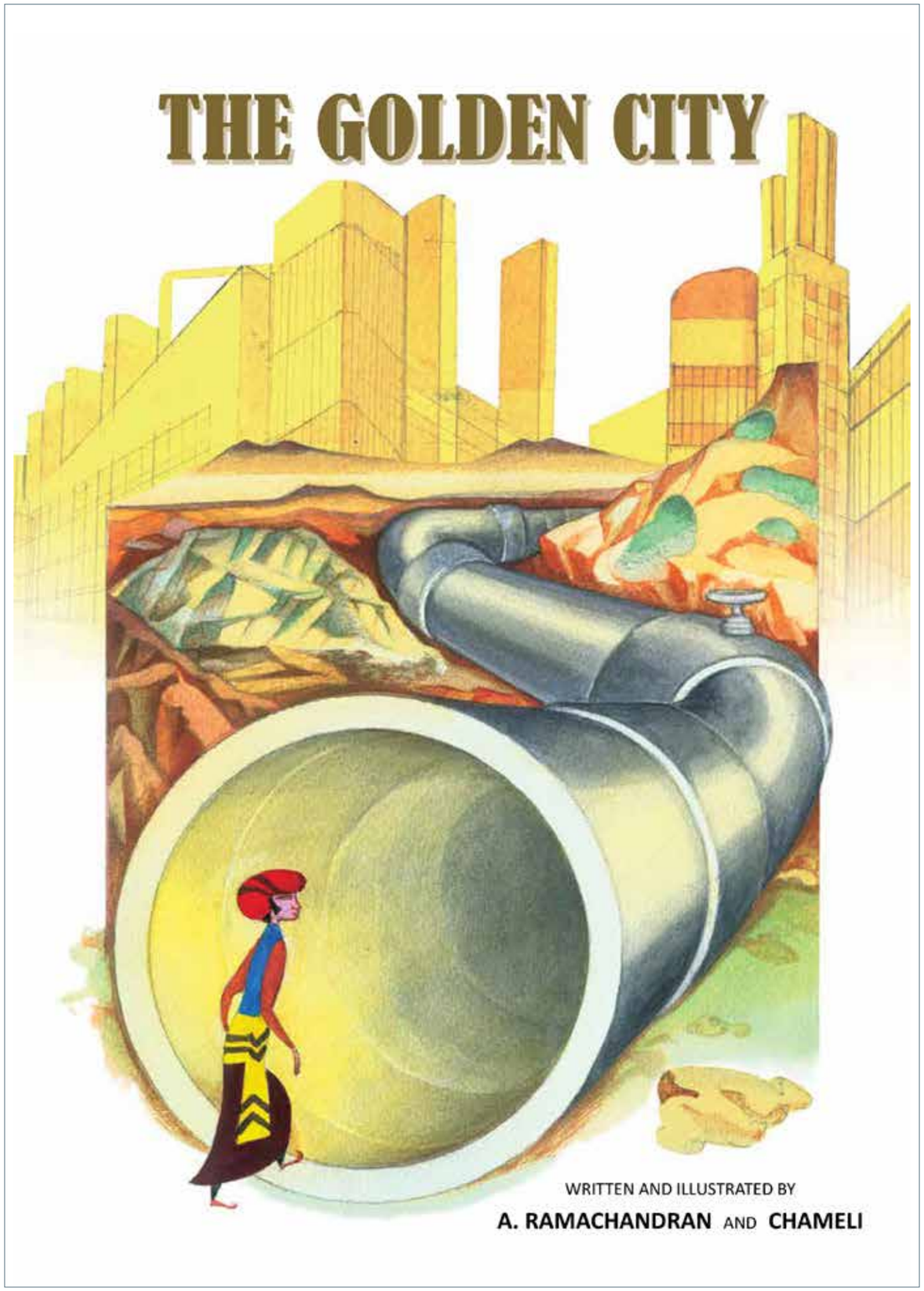


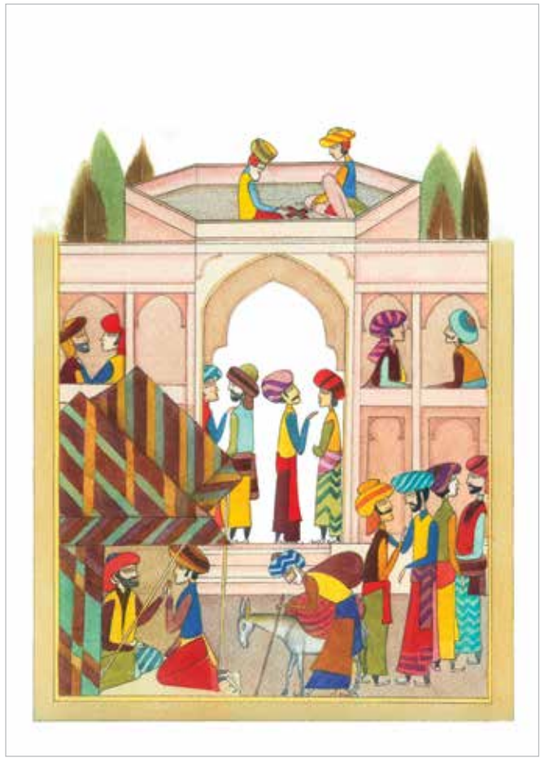
Book Cover- ***The Bad King Who Became a Good King,*** 1977

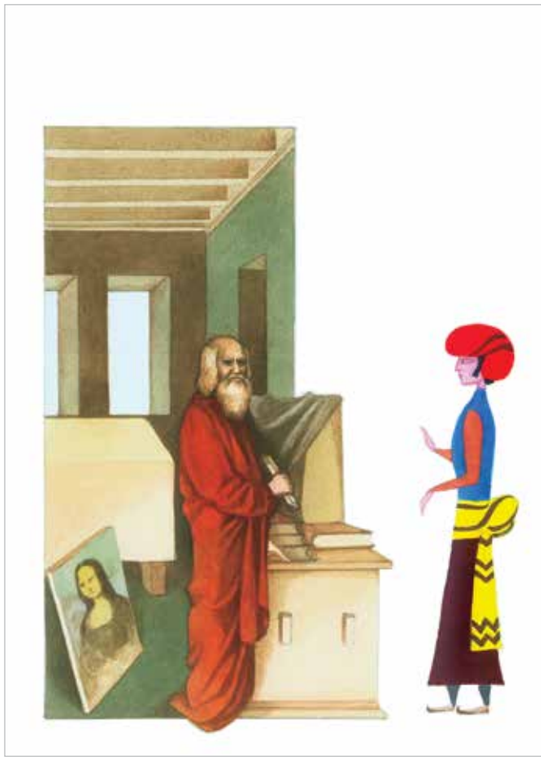


Illustrations from- ***The Bad King Who Became a Good King,*** 1977



Book Cover- ***The Golden City,*** 2000





Illustrations from- ***The Golden City,*** 2000

BHIMA AND THE FRAGRANT FLOWER

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

A. RAMACHANDRAN AND **CHAMELI**

Book Cover- ***Bhima and the Fragrant Flower,*** 2000

Illustrations from- ***Bhima and the Fragrant Flower,*** 2000

A RAMACHANDRAN was born in Attingal, Kerala, in 1935. Early in his life, he developed an interest in arts, including painting, music and literature. While pursuing an individual path in painting from the outset, he learned Carnatic music for ten years and established himself as a professional singer before he turned to painting.

He did an M.A. in Malayalam Literature and came into close contact with the literary figures of the time, especially those associated with the Progressive Movement. In 1957, he went to Santiniketan to study art under Ramkinkar Baij, who he thought was an artist comparable to the writers he admired in Kerala. There he came into close contact with Benodebehari Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose, and his interactions with these teachers at Santiniketan left a lasting impression on his artistic career.

In 1964, he moved to Delhi after his works, shown in group shows, were received well there. The following year he joined Jamia Millia Islamia University as a lecturer in Art Education, which he and his colleagues developed into a full-fledged faculty of art. Over the years, along with his growing reputation as an artist, he was recognized as an important and inspiring teacher.

With his distinctive monumental style and deeply humanist concerns, Ramachandran's stature as an artist grew with each exhibition. Beginning with the *Ten Indian Painters* show at MIT and the New Jersey State Museum, USA, in 1966, his works began to be shown internationally. And with his third one-person show in 1967, he was established as one of the most original Indian artists of his generation.

During the seventies, Ramachandran developed into a very versatile artist, doing sculpture, prints, writing and illustrating very imaginatively for children, and even designing stamps besides painting tirelessly in the scale of both murals and miniatures. To his credit, he has many books for children, a score of essays on art and a well-researched book on the murals of Kerala. Fiercely independent in his outlook and thinking, his work is distinctly original and has always stood out from the mainstream. One of its distinct features has been its gravitation towards non-European modernism. And beginning with *Yayati*, painted in 1984-86, this gave way to a more open engagement with Eastern art traditions and its visual languages. This shift has also been accompanied by a parallel change in thematic focus from human suffering to the beauty and pleasures of the world in his recent work.

A much-honoured artist, he received the National Award in 1969 and 1972, the Noma Concours for Picture Book Illustrations in 1978 and 1980, the Parishad Samman from the Sahitya Kala Parshad in 1991, the Gagan-Abani Puraskar from Visva Bharati University in 2000, the Manaviyam Award in 2001 and the Ravi Varma Puraskaram in 2003 from the Government of Kerala. He was appointed Professor Emeritus at Jamia Millia Islamia University in 2002, conferred with Padma Bhusan by the Government of India in 2005, and a Hon. D. Litt. degree from the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala, in 2013.

In 2014, Ramachandran held a major exhibition covering fifty-six years of his drawings, sketches and studies, along with recent paintings and sculptures. Curated by Ranesh Ray, about two thousand drawings and sketches were displayed, covering the entire Rabindra Bhavana. On this occasion, a two-volume book, *"A Ramachandran: Life and Art in Lines"*, edited by R. Siva Kumar with a special autobiographical essay by the artist, was released.

In 2016, an exhibition of a set of twenty-one coloured drawings titled *"Earthen Pot: Image Poems"* was held at the Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi.

In the same year, a Retrospective Exhibition of paintings, sculptures, watercolours, drawings and graphics covering the period from 1964 to 2016, curated by R. Siva Kumar, was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru, in collaboration with the Vadehra Art Gallery.

In 2017, his large painting titled *"Homage to the Setting Sun"* was exhibited at The Cleveland Museum of Art, USA, in its Indian section, along with classical Indian sculptures. This special exhibition was on display for two years.

In 2018 an exhibition of recent paintings & drawings titled *"The Changing Moods of Lotus Pond and Insignificant Incarnations"* was held at Shridharani Gallery, Triveni Kala Sangam, organized by the Vadehra Art Gallery.

In 2018, the Madhya Pradesh Government awarded him with *"The Kalidas Samman (2014)"*.

In 2019, a selection from the artist's fifty years of art practice by R. Siva Kumar was exhibited at The National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, in collaboration with the Vadehra Art Gallery.

In the same year, an exhibition of recent paintings, sculptures, watercolours and drawings titled *"The Mahatma and the Lotus Pond"*, curated by R. Siva Kumar, was held at the Darbar Hall, by the Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, Kochi, in collaboration with the Vadehra Art Gallery.

In 2021, two exhibitions of Ramachandran's drawings were held at the Vadehra Art Gallery. The first show in July, titled *"A Lifetime of Lines"*, showed a selection of drawings from his early years to the present day. The second exhibition, titled *"Gandhi: Loneliness of the Great"*, showed a set of his recent drawings on Gandhi.

In 2021, a major two-part exhibition of his recent oil paintings titled: *"Subaltern Nayika and Lotus Pond"* was held simultaneously at the Shridharani Gallery, Triveni Kala Sangam and the Vadehra Art Gallery.

R. Siva Kumar

Born in Kerala in 1956 and educated in Kerala and Santiniketan, R. Siva Kumar is an art historian, curator and the author of over 18 books.

His notable books include *The Santiniketan Murals* (1995) and *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism* (1997), *A. Ramachandran: A Retrospective in two volumes* (2004), *Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore* (2008), *Rabindra Chitravali*, a comprehensive four-volume compilation of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings (2011) *and Enchantment and Engagement: The Murals of K. G. Subramanyan* (2015).

He has also curated several seminal exhibitions, including *Santiniketan: The Making a Contextual Modernism*, *K. G. Subramanyan: A Retrospective, Benodebehari: A Centenary Retrospective* (co-curated with Gulam Mohammed Sheikh), *The Last Harvest: Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore*, which travelled to nine museums across the world and four museums in India, and four major exhibitions of A. Ramachandran, including two retrospectives.

His research on the three Tagores and artists associated with Santiniketan has contributed to the remapping of a significant trajectory in modern Indian art. And in recognition of his contributions, he was awarded the Kesari Puraskaram by the Kerala Lalitakala Akademi in 2010, the Manojmohan Basu Smarak Samman by the Paschimbanga Bangla Akademy for his book on Ramkinkar Baij in 2013, the title Rabindra-Tattwacharaya for his work on Rabindranath Tagore in 2015, the Life Time Achievement Award of the Paschim Banga Charukala Parishad in 2018, and the Zainul Sammanana by the Dakha University in 2021.

After a forty-year teaching career, he has recently retired from Visva Bharati University and continues to live in Santiniketan.