

# The Manifest **A**bsence



## A **C**onceptual Retrospective

Paintings by Kota Neelima

# The Manifest **A**bsence

A **C**onceptual Retrospective

An exhibition of paintings

by

Kota Neelima

September 2018

The Nehru Centre  
High Commission of India  
8 South Audley Street, London W1K, 1HF  
United Kingdom

# The Manifest Absence

Kota Neelima, August, 2018

*True, there may be no difference anymore, but I belong to you, and not you to me;  
just like the waves belong to the ocean and not the ocean to the waves.*

Adi Shankaracharya<sup>1</sup>, *Vishnu Shatpadi*, 8<sup>th</sup> century AD



Nirguna | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Truth is an incomplete construct, and it must remain so; knowing is to know it in parts and not its whole. The only knowledge that survives is the knowledge of what the truth is not, *neti neti* (not this, not this).

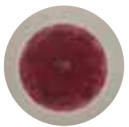
The truth of the Self, similarly, is framed by that which we know is not true about the Self. The skepticism of the scientific is unrequired here to establish as baseless the belief that the Manifest maybe a form of the Unmanifest.

It is not about tangibility of the proof or the evidence of causation. It is merely that truth cannot be absolute, the mind knows better. And within this disobedience of the human thought is the great possibility of exploring the various aspects of truth about the Self - what it is not, what it can never be, and, resultantly, what it might be.

It is in the Manifest Absence that the human mind situates itself, despite being surrounded by and being part of the Manifest Presence. For, it is only then that it is one with its own matter - that which the Self is made of, and unmade from.

<sup>1</sup> Adi Shankaracharya is an Indian philosopher and thinker who propounded the Advaita Vedanta based on non-dualism. He wrote the commentary for 10 of the 14 most important Upanishads, which elevated the Hindu religious discourse to an exploration of the soul of all human kind. He established four centres of knowledge and practice of his philosophy in four corners of the country; Sringeri in South of India, Puri in East, Dwaraka in West and Badrinath in North. Shankaracharya's non-dualism finds resonance in modern Indian thought and influences varied fields from spirituality to the politics of secularism.

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The Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad (BU)<sup>2</sup> states:

*This self is not this, not this. It is incomprehensible, indestructible, unattached, unfettered, uninjured, unaffected by that which it has done. Or not done.*<sup>3</sup> (BU, IV.4.22)



Nishkama | 36" x 36" | Oil on canvas

Such independence of the Self from all issues of existence, however, is not registered in any place other than the Self itself. That makes it problematic for determining its effect. Further, there is the issue of defining what represents the Self. How can the Self know its own nature, especially when there is little clarity on whether Self symbolized an entity other than the human mind and thought, or if it was part of the process of death and birth like the rest of the body? This question must remain unanswered, perhaps, in the service of a greater and deeper understanding of the immersion that the human mind is capable of.

The Upanishad states:

*If the Self is known and wished for, then why would one suffer the body?*<sup>4</sup> (BU, IV.4.12)

The variety of the Manifest Presence provides a menu of the materialistic things that the Self is not. In doing so, the Self is immediately removed from the measureable and the worldly, to be placed along with things that are larger than the cyclic life and death, and all that which takes place in the sensory realm. It is only through experience that the mind can discard things that the Self is not and merge its multiplicity with the singular Absolute, as a truth beyond all truths.

The Upanishad states:

*The Absolute is not a quality or attribute of things in the world, the object of thought, or action. It can be understood only by elimination or example.*<sup>5</sup>

2 Upanishads are Indian philosophical texts that debate ideas of self, god and man, along with knowledge, truth and consciousness. There are said to be 108 Upanishads, of which the oldest date back to 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. Of these, the Brhad-Aranyaka (BU) is one of the oldest and is considered the most important.

3 S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, p. 279.

4 Ibid., p. 276.

5 Ibid., p. 67.

However, the knowing of this does not alleviate the Self from the process of life that remains irreversible and unalterable by power of the Self. Such knowing also does not facilitate detachment from the world because of the awareness that the Self is only a partial expression of the Absolute truth. And so, what choice has the human thought but to find completion in the incomplete; accepting the Manifest while always searching for the Unmanifest. The particularity of life represents the whole, just as the generality of the part.



Nirakara | 36" x 36" | Oil on canvas

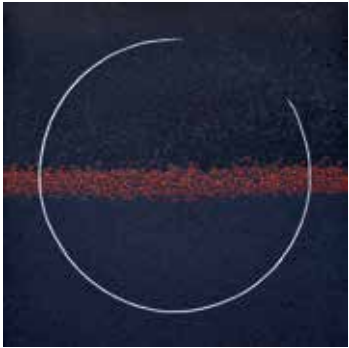
*purnam adah, purnam idam, purnat purnam udacyate  
purnasya purnam adaya purnam eva vasisyate*<sup>6</sup> (BU, V.2.1)

At the same time, the mind is cognizant of the Manifest Presence as a function to demarcate the Manifest Absence. It is aware that the employment of the mechanics of the form or the *akara* is a temporal avocation. It is based in the need for a point of reference driven by organic cells that hurtle towards their eventual death and destruction. The mind is cognizant, also, that the Manifest Presence is a physical avocation as well to actualize the Manifest Absence or the *nirakara*. It is an exercise in constant reconstruction of the present from the debris of past and possible future. It rebuilds the structure from its ruins, despite the knowledge that it would be in ruins again. Essentially illusionary, it calls for something stronger than logic to explain and support it, and that's faith.

The sensorial vulnerability to stimuli that allows these functions of the Manifest Presence facilitates belief; for instance, without the Manifest Presence there would have been no religion. As the mind is aware of the difference, the Manifest Presence seems to burden itself with all the provocation for the existence of the Manifest Absence. The duality is established, like the Bhagavad Gita<sup>7</sup> suggests, in the separation of the mind from the action.

6 'That is complete, this is complete, it is from the complete that the complete arises; Even when something is taken from the complete, what is left is complete.'

7 The Bhagavad Gita, or the song of God, conceptualises Hinduism as both a religion and a way of life in India. It contains philosophy and ethics conveyed during the epic battle of Mahabharata by Lord Sri Krishna to the legendary Pandava warrior Arjuna. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Homer's *Iliad* are similar in many aspects, especially in the stories of Arjuna and Achilles. When a distraught Arjuna wants to give up battle, Krishna convinces him with his message of *nishkama karma*, or action without desire, which is part of the Karma Yoga philosophy and forms a template for contentment in a materialistic universe.



Nirantara | 36" x 36" | Oil on canvas

The question arises on why is the presence even necessary? What difference would it have all made if the Manifest Presence was never extracted from its Absence and remained single, whole Absolute? Also, if the form is merely an avocation, then its own marginality is established and affirmed by the *maya* (illusion) and the *avidya* (ignorance) that surround it, as Adi Shankaracharya argues. What, then, is the need to delve into the Absence, that which renders everything incomplete?

The Upanishad refers to this:

*It is the duality that seeks and senses the others. The duality allows for the other to be known through sight, smell, sound, language, thought and understanding. If everything was the Self, then by what and by whom would one be seen, known, heard, spoken about, thought about and understood? It is by duality that the unknown can be known.*<sup>8</sup> (BU, II.4.14).

The integration of the Self with the Absolute might, therefore, never happen without the Manifest Presence. This is especially true if the Manifest Absence is seen as the destination for the *return* of its Presence in its truest, purest form. For, it is only through the dissolution that the differences are gone, only death equalizes all forms and plurality. Once again, the rationalizing mind seeks answers which are not there for the taking. For, the finding is not the finding of the answer. It is always the finding of a question. There may be a final question where all questions of the human mind converge. But because it is the human mind that asks it, there can never be a final answer that satisfies it.

As the Upanishad states,

*The Self cannot be understood through instruction, thought or listening to others. It is to be attained only by those whom the Self chooses for this knowledge. To them, the Self reveals the truth.*<sup>9</sup> (Katha Upanishad<sup>10</sup>, I.2.23).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 619.

<sup>10</sup> Upanishads are Indian philosophical texts that debate ideas of self, god and man, along with knowledge, truth and consciousness. There are said to be 108 Upanishads, of which the oldest date back to 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. Katha Upanishad is based in the Yajur Veda and contains the story of Nachiketa and his conversation with the god of death, Yama.

Based on the Upanishadic debate about the Self, *The Manifest Absence* is the 2018 collection of paintings and prints by the artist. The works represent the various ways in which the Self is described through negation and contrast, rather than a categorical identification. The paintings, oil on canvas, seek to visualize the Absence before it converts momentarily to the Manifest Presence. Notable are the works that picture the *Nirguna* or the absence of qualities, *Nirakara* or the absence of form, *Nirbheda*, or the absence of discrimination, *Nishkama* or the absence of desire, *Nirviseha* or the absence of attributes and *Nirantara* or the absence of interruption. In the artist's works, the Absence is never inert but is textured with all that which could have been and all that which still can be. The Absence is, also, never the opposite of the Presence, in the same way as the half Moon is not half, but always complete. The Absence is the Unmanifest; it is the original state of the Creation and the mind recognises that through what the eyes can see – and, that has been the objective of this series of paintings. *The Manifest Absence* is the 8<sup>th</sup> solo exhibition of the artist, who lives in New Delhi, India.



A Name | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

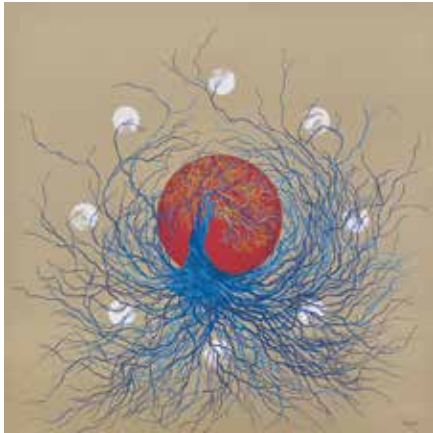




Kota Neelima  
A Conceptual Retrospective  
2006 – 2018

# Metaphors of the Moon

7<sup>th</sup> solo exhibition, 2018



Metaphors of the Moon | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

The absence, like the presence, is a much-misunderstood notion. The absence of pain is not happiness, the absence of faith is not treachery, the absence of difference is not uniformity, and the absence of isolation is not togetherness. The absence represents reconciliation in a world torn apart by loss, defeat, desperation and death. The humankind, born and bred on poverty and deprivation, learns to reconcile to the absence, and rationalize the presence.

The absence is never inert. It interacts with the mind, in the same way as the absence of the Moon leaves the sky open for reinterpretations. The absence is never homogenous. It is not sameness; like the changing Moon, it is textured with all that which could have been and all that which still can be. The absence is never the opposite of the presence, in the same way as the half Moon is not half, but always complete. The absence is the Unmanifest; it is the original state of the Creation and the mind recognises that. This may be the reason why reconciliation is intuitive and inevitable in human life.

If such a void is the original state of the mind, it seeks to return to it as often and as permanently as possible, through the cycle of creation, immersion and regeneration. The creation is caused by stimuli for thought that have the power to replace the absence with presence. The Unmanifest is manifest because of the mind. It is, after all, the same Moon, the same eyes. But the mind that perceives it has changed, and in its endless changing, sees the Moon as a stranger would. This immersion of the mind in thought endows it with the power to create. It also leaves an absence in the mind once the creation is formalised and returns the mind to a state of void.

The regeneration of the mind takes place with the shared experience of the world. The mind has never been individual, it has always been collective. The universal mind, which travels to the stars and back in a moment, can also feel every beating heart of humanity, every cry of pain, and every tear of happiness. In this regeneration of the mind, there is freedom; there can be no restrictions on which influences are to be chosen and which are not. The mind, like the Moon, attracts that light which it wants to reflect. And thus, creates new thought, new action in a cyclic repetition of absence and presence.

In the deeper realm, where the mind allows itself to be boundless, it solves the mysteries of its origin and progress. Its singularity allows it to reconcile to the absence without the help of the Manifest world with its pleasure and pain, loss and gain. With the help of the Manifest world, however, such reconciliation is never complete. The (un)reconciled will defy any normative resolution because the Manifest is a perception, an interpretation, a fable. The Manifest seeks reconciliation and is disappointed when it fails to find it. With the Unmanifest, there is no need for reconciliation, and there is no (un)reconciled. For this reason, the mind locates the absence at the heart of every presence; the (un)reconciled at the back of every reconciliation. No life is reconciled, no peace permanent. This is a world built on belief in the imagination of the human mind; it is neither final nor true. It is, however, universal.

The 2018 series of paintings, Metaphors of the Moon, charts the trajectories of the mind as it travels from absence to presence in an eternal cycle. The mind is the metaphor for the Moon. It represents the cyclic process of thought; its creation, immersion and regeneration, and also is a metaphor for absence and presence. The lessons of the Moon are about the fragility of reconciliation and the assurance of restoration. The paintings are this visualization of the individualized collective mind that embraces the one and the infinite with the same ease as it deals with universal pain, suffering



The Presence | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

and loss. The mind engages with natural ease with the task of the larger and impersonal, rather than the smaller and personal.

Like the Moon, the mind too reduces itself to fit the mortal world. It binds itself to the temporal, despite the knowledge of its timelessness, and expanse. The paintings in the present series seek to depict this universal mind that encompasses time and space, and comprehends past and future. They envisage the consciousness as the tree whose roots seek its origin, to be found at a distance from its material branches. The 25 works in the 2018 series represent the various metaphors of the Moon, from the waters of creation to the transcendent imaginations of future. The gods were created by the human mind that knows of the Unmanifest; like the Moon, it is the same that is different, it is a metaphor of the mind.



## Places of Worship

6<sup>th</sup> solo exhibition, 2017

The self-undertakes two kinds of journeys in a lifetime, the sensory and the spiritual. Like in any journey, points of reference mark the progress towards the destination and also help to find meaning in the landmarks crossed on the way. For the self, such points of reference could be a place, a symbol, a practice or anything that might be externally representative of its internal journey. Temples, mosques, shrines are places of worship where the lines of the sensory and the spiritual journeys intersect. These places are points of reference that provide context to the mind's spiritual and sensory search. Through rituals and prayer, the sensory journey is achieved while through contemplation the spiritual journey is accomplished. And yet, although ritual and tradition could enlist each place of worship to a sensory journey under a particular religion, the spiritual journey defied such fixation. For this reason, the identification of places of worship with a religion must remain a mere functional aspect of the sensory journey. But, when the purpose of the sensory journey is to seek a spiritual destination, a place of worship must facilitate this transition by undermining its own relevance. Places of worship, thus, are temporary points of reference on the sensory journey of the self to its spiritual destination.



Places of Worship | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Religion seeks to assign permanence to places of worship for the purpose of god-making through arguments that are mythological, historical, philosophical, temporal, traditional, among other. The question, therefore, arises on whether the places of worship are restrictive towards the natural quest of the self to be spiritual. If so, what contours demarcate a place to be occupied by the religious symbols and un-demarcate it to return it to the whole? What, for instance, would occupy the space left behind by the removal of a place of worship?





The Residence | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas

Will the space still serve as a point of reference and if yes, would it be a sensory point of reference or a spiritual point of reference?

If the point of reference were derived only from rituals and traditions of religion, then the ceasing of these would end the tenure of the place of worship. If, on the other hand, the points of reference were spiritual, it would continue to be such a place even without the religious rituals and traditions. The space left behind by a place of worship must relocate

itself in the mind of the traveler on the sensory and spiritual journey. The space cannot be territorialized like a landmark or a structure, or demarcated like a nation or a household, but must be reimagined in every place that sought a spiritual destination.

It is in this context that Ayodhya<sup>1</sup> is to be seen. Ayodhya as a permanent place of worship might have been a sensory point of reference towards a spiritual destination. Ayodhya as an absent place of worship may now be a spiritual point of reference. The paintings in the series, *Remains of Ayodhya*, *Places of Worship*, seek to reconceptualise Ayodhya in the mind of the travelers of various religions and unshackle it from its ritualistic territorialisation and traditional demarcation. The absence of the point of reference secularizes the space and equalizes it with other absences that must guide the spiritual journey. Ayodhya symbolizes the elevation of every ritual and tradition to its meaning, and of every place or structure to an empty space. The hegemonic appropriation of the space as a point of reference in any religion is further evidence of the sensory journey that seeks only the sensory destination. On the other hand, the lack of a point of reference in Ayodhya is sufficient for the spiritual journey that seeks the spiritual destination.

The paintings represent the absence of the point of reference in Ayodhya that equates it with any place of worship of the spiritual journey. In that, Ayodhya

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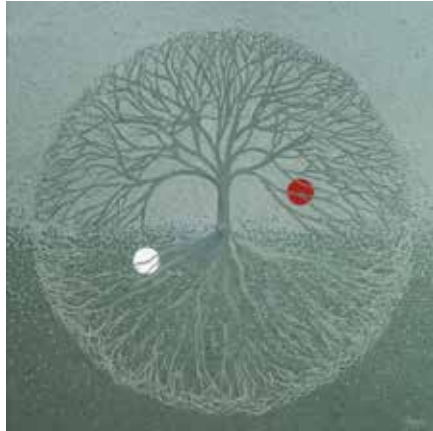
<sup>1</sup> Ayodhya is an ancient town in the eastern state of Uttar Pradesh in India. The Indian epic *Ramayana* by Valmiki identifies it as the birthplace of Lord Rama and the location of his reign. In modern times, this has also been a site of communal dispute and presently does not contain any religious structure. This absence, however, does not impact the spiritual journey to Ayodhya for the devotees of any religion.

today could be compared to places that did not have temples, mosques and shrines. It is the space between religious structures, and is represented by non-ritualistic places of worship, like symbols of nature, trees, sky, the day and the night. This space is depicted through 23 works of oil on canvas that free Ayodhya from its perceived boundaries and find it the way it always has been, without form that belonged to any one religion and without tradition that belonged to any one faith.



# What The Eyes Can See

5<sup>th</sup> solo exhibition, 2015



What The Eyes Can See | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

Is Red not gathered from battlefields,  
The colour of tribute, the last rose?  
The eyes see beneath wounds healed,  
the lingering scars, the settled score.

Was Blue not colour of lonely journeys?  
Of those left behind or lost in transit?  
The eyes see the cost of destiny  
Paths that don't cross,  
roads that don't exist.

Where did Green come from,  
If not desire for power, the will?  
The eyes see fallen walls of history,  
Lines in sand to live by, to kill.

And what of nature, of trees?  
Free of human wrong and right?  
In the changing colours of complicity,  
The eyes see no leaves of White.

Is the Moon never constant  
To promises made in its name?  
Why does it change when it's absent?  
The eyes see no Moon the same.

What colour the birds?  
Dreams of impossible things?  
Eternal thoughts, mortal words,  
Prisoners of limited wings?

What colour the common sky?  
Before nation, religion, books of rules?  
What colour freedom?  
The eyes can see the personal Blues.

These mountains of flight,  
these roots of rest;  
Mind of the mind knows them to be free  
They wait their turn to exist  
To be what the eyes can see.

Perhaps it can be remade,  
The Other's truth, the One's fancy  
Recall any sky of memory  
Reclaim what the eyes can see.



The Search | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

# First Cause

4<sup>th</sup> solo exhibition, 2012

*What is the cause? Is it Brahman? Whence are we born?*

*By what do we live? And on what are we established?* (Svetasvatara Upanishad<sup>1</sup>, 1.1)

*Is there one Cause of all the varieties in the world;*

*that Cause when known, all will be well known?* (Mundaka Upanishad<sup>2</sup>, 1.3)



First Cause | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas



First Day | 48" x 48" | Oil on Canvas

It stayed back as effect  
In canopies of hope  
Over a world of chance,  
The first cause till the last.

<sup>1</sup> Upanishads are Indian philosophical texts that debate ideas of self, god and man, along with knowledge, truth and consciousness. There are said to be 108 Upanishads, of which the oldest date back to 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. The Svetasvatara Upanishad is derived from the Yajur Veda, and promotes the philosophy of unity of all souls.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. The Mundaka Upanishad is based in the Atharva Veda, and differentiates between knowledge of the world and the eternal truth.

What will change if that cause is known?

What will we become then?

Will the cause remain uncaused?

Will the world remain its effect?

It must have rained before it rained here,

It must have burnt before these ashes,

It must have bled before it flowed here,

The cause of all causes.

It is part of the reborn,

One part sadness, one part joy,

One part good, one part evil,

Briefly together till all parts die.

The cause equalizes all,

One part belief, one part lie,

One part god, one part man,

Briefly together till all parts die.

Substance of this cause is known,

It is the substance of its effects,

Their success, their suffering,

Their perfection, their defects.

That which moved the unmoved

That which caused the first cause,

Only to make forms, give names?

Only to break and form again?

Maybe this is the first karma,

Of the Absolute, the Light,

First fate, first cut, first part

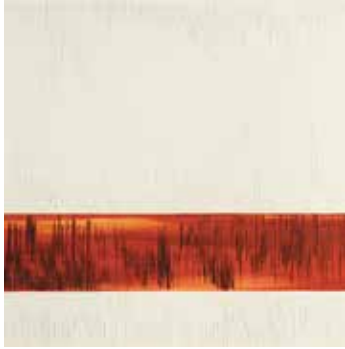
Of the last light, the Night.



# Neutral Witnesses

3<sup>rd</sup> solo exhibition, 2009

*The witness, the only one that knows, the one without attributes.* (Svetasvatara Upanishad<sup>1</sup>, 6:11)



Possibility | 36" x 36" | Oil on Canvas



Arbiters | 30" x 30" | Oil on Canvas

They have seen it being broken and built a thousand times,  
The neutral witnesses of life, living and death.

They are mind within mind, thought within thought,  
Cause for trickle of plasma, cause for shift of ocean  
Reason for falling eyelash, reason for falling star

They are at the first step, they are the first step,  
They are in need of rescue, they are the rescue.

They are the muscle torn by knife, they are the knife,  
They are the thought before words, they are the thought after.

They are neither friends, nor foe  
They look like us, like them.  
Like no one we know

The immortal cells that have made a million brains think  
The immortal bones that have caged a million hearts  
They keep the secret of time, they keep time.

<sup>1</sup> Upanishads are Indian philosophical texts that debate ideas of self, god and man, along with knowledge, truth and consciousness. There are said to be 108 Upanishads, of which the oldest date back to 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. The Svetasvatara Upanishad is derived from the Yajur Veda, and promotes the philosophy of unity of all souls.

They carry no baggage of memory, no colour of emotion  
No poetry of existence  
They are free of mediocrity, free of excellence

Should fire burn them, the bones smell of wood,  
The skin smells of promises,  
The ashes feel like dew, the dust feels like wind

Should we look for them outside in the forest,  
Or in the forest within  
Should we search for them between breaths or after.

It is easy to miss them, they look like trees among trees,  
Paths among paths,  
And, waters among waters

They look like gods among gods,  
Saints among saints,  
And, sinners among sinners.

Indifferent to all that they are part of,  
Untouched by all that they witness  
They know the truth of all truths

The truth about why rain tastes like forgiveness  
Or why blood tastes of predestination  
The truth that memory does not end with death  
And that time is not our creation

Ask for those who keep time for eternity,  
Let's find where their loyalties lie  
For whom they turn the fresh leaves of history  
These neutral witnesses of time.

— ● —

*Never was there a time when I was not, nor you,  
nor these lords of men,  
nor will there be a time hereafter  
when we all shall cease to be.* (Bhagavad Gita<sup>2</sup>, 2.12)

<sup>2</sup> The Bhagavad Gita, or the song of God, conceptualises Hinduism as both a religion and a way of life in India. It contains philosophy and ethics conveyed during the epic battle of Mahabharata by Lord Sri Krishna to the legendary Pandava warrior Arjuna. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Homer's *Iliad* are similar in many aspects, especially in the stories of Arjuna and Achilles. When a distraught Arjuna wants to give up battle, Krishna convinces him with his message of *nishkama karma*, or action without desire, which is part of the Karma Yoga philosophy and forms a template for contentment in a materialistic universe.

# Sliver of Time

2<sup>nd</sup> solo exhibition, 2007

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Flowered Reflection | 30" x 30" | Oil on Canvas

It is a thin layer of memory. Out of place in present.  
Too early for future. Too late for past.

It is easy to confuse the past with the future because  
both meet for a moment in the present.  
But how is one to know that this moment is indeed the present,  
if it is already passing on into the past?

The synapse of memory in the brain  
is already forming for this passing moment.  
But what if the moment is frozen now,  
before it turns future into past?

It will be a very thin layer of memory.  
Of clouds before they become waves.  
Of lotuses before they return to the depth.  
Of waters resting before they turn into rain.

Of that layer of time which exists only for one heart beat.  
In the next beat,  
it would have formed a memory, unchangeable, forever.

But for now, it belongs neither to present, past nor future.  
It does not even belong to time.  
In time, however, it will be finally lost.

Here is that precious layer of memory in paintings and  
photographs, colours and pigments,  
the only means pure enough to qualify for this momentary mischief.

For, it is a moment stolen from time.  
A moment that the future gave up and the past has not yet claimed.



# The Echoing Life of Nature

1<sup>st</sup> solo exhibition, 2006

*Who knows truly from where and by whom the universe was created? Perhaps the Creator has the answers. Or perhaps, even the Creator does not know.*

(Rig Veda<sup>1</sup>, 10.129)



## The (Un)Reconciled Heaven

The inevitable consciousness of mortality necessitates reconciliation. It is part of the human condition, and as such is the source of weakness as well as strength, much like memory, emotion, pain, or any other sensation of the body that translates into perception in the mind. Hunger, for instance, cannot be reconciled with, but the mind does reconcile with violence associated with survival. Reconciliation to the needs of the body is necessitated for the mind. But survival is not adequate for this reconciliation, as the mind operates with the awareness of its own transience.

The mind requires further reconciling to the need for survival. Reconciliation has to be based in a satisfactory answer as to why the survival of the human life was necessary and defend the sacrifice of other lives, and natural resources, for the upkeep of the human kind. The mind, therefore, seeks a greater purpose to the human life beyond the maintenance of the circle of death and birth. This search is immensely assisted by the tangibility of the sensory experience of life, which frames it as part of a larger design of Creation.

The sensory reconciliation with the world and the purpose of human life, still does not address the other, less reconcilable aspects of the body, which the mind perceives, like memory, emotion or pain, as mentioned before. This perception of the intangible within the body leads to reconciliation being always incomplete, partial and superficial.

<sup>1</sup> Veda literally means 'to know' and the four vedas form the earliest 'documents of the human mind' (Radhakrishnan, 1923). Rig Veda is the most important of the four vedas of Hindu religion, the other three being Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda and Sama Veda. Rig Veda dates back to the period between 1500 BC to 1200 BC. Rig Veda's 10<sup>th</sup> book contains the Nasadiya Sukta, translated here, that questions the origin of the Creation.

The mind itself, because of the need for survival it faces, must reconcile to a purpose that is at a much lower level than what it would like to assign to itself. Such compromise leaves the search for the purpose constantly open and possibly unending.

This reconciliation is necessarily spiritual, and as a rebellion to all things tangible, sensory and inherently reconcilable. The spiritual reconciliation, therefore, extends to the history of human kind, from politics to society, from war to peace, from vice to virtue. Human kind has had to reconcile to violence and suffering due to ills inflicted by other human beings. The spiritual reconciliation to the injustices meted out by man against man has been the most incomplete, the most partial and the most insufficient. And yet, the human mind opts for the sensory reconciliation to try and make up for this inadequacy and the individual must settle for the 'purpose' found in religion, politics, society, etc.

The knowledge of the lack of spiritual reconciliation is continuous and deep. The self finds itself in this solitude that is timeless and, at the same time, transitory. The constant availability of the sensory reconciliation in a marginal, subjective, and meaningless way, only enhances the deficit for a more complete spiritual reconciliation. Like the Gita, the sensory reconciliation of the battle is irrevocably, and spiritually un-reconciled. As Arjuna says, there is nothing that can drive away the sadness that fills his senses or *indriyam*; neither the dominion or *adhipatyam*, over earth nor heaven.<sup>2</sup>

The binary of the sensory and spiritual reconciliations is most vividly accessed through symbols; of pain and hope, of life and rebirth, of earth and heaven, of man and god. It has been my endeavor to represent the inadequate explanations of our world and



Conversations | 20" x 30" | Oil on Canvas

<sup>2</sup> S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita*, HarperCollins Publishers India, New Delhi, 2006, p.101.

how we reconcile to the symbols of this inadequacy. Although I have searched for ways of representing it in language as well, it is through art that I find this to be more successful, perhaps, because the visual is also inherently a spiritual experience.

The tradition of skepticism of Indian religious thought informs my works, which seek the visual to also represent the unrepresented and the unreconciled. The symbols used are trees, sky, the moon and birds. The tree in my work, for instance, is more than the tree of life or a sensory reconciliation; it is the tree of immortality or a spiritual reconciliation with a constant and eternal return, as in the painting. There can be no dimensional limit to what the eyes can see only if the mind explored beyond the visual.



**Kota Neelima** is an artist and her work is impressionist-abstract that seeks to deconstruct contemporary reality through spirituality. She holds a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and a Doctorate in political science from the University of Delhi. Neelima was Senior Research Fellow, South Asia Studies at The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC.

Neelima's follows an elaborate process of making the works, which begins with extensive research of texts, followed by charcoal drawings on paper before, finally converting them to oil paintings. The symbols used in the paintings are trees, sky, the moon and birds, which undergo multi-faceted and complex redefinition. The accessible symbols, each immersed in one or the other aspect of the concept, assist in the elaborate exploration of each painting. Besides the solo exhibitions, her paintings have been featured in art shows in India and abroad. Her work is also a part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Sacred Art, Belgium.

Her work for over a decade had deconstructed contemporary reality through spirituality, presented in seven solo exhibitions in Delhi. Her fourth solo show, *First Cause* (2012), was based on the Upanishadic exploration of the cause of all Creation, the cause of all causes. Three works from this series can be seen on display at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. Neelima's fifth solo exhibition, *What the Eyes Can See* (2015), continued her inquiry into causation by a contemporary and critical understanding of questions from Indian philosophy. The works articulated the questions of Nachiketa in Katha Upanishad, about that which is beyond the right and wrong, the cause and effect, and the questions of Kena Upanishad on what drives the eye, the mind, the speech, and highlight a force that is separate from choice or survival. Her sixth solo exhibition, *Places of Worship* in 2017, reimagined devotion spiritually and through symbols of nature. Her seventh exhibition in 2018, *Metaphors of the Moon*, charts the trajectories of the mind as it travels from absence to presence in an eternal cycle. Her upcoming eighth exhibition *The Manifest Absence* is in September 2018 at Nehru Centre, London.

Neelima is also an author and her book on devotion, *Tirupati: A Guide To Life* (2012) has been translated into several languages. The book drew from Skanda Mahapurana to explore the temple of Tirupati in Southern India. She also co-authored another book with Dr. AV Ramana Dikshitulu, *Tirumala, Sacred Foods of God* (2017), which explains the traditions of Naivedyam. Besides religion and spirituality, Neelima is the author of four bestselling novels on poverty and political corruption, of which one book, *Shoes of the Dead* (2013), is being made into a movie. Her non-fiction book, *Widows of Vidarbha, Making of Shadows* (2018) traces the life and times of women after farmer suicides. She paints from her studio, StudioAdda, and lives in New Delhi.

### **Highlights of Artist's Exhibitions**

#### **Selected International Shows:**

Forms of Devotion: The Spiritual in Indian Art

- Conde Duque, Madrid, Spain, 2017
- Las Francesas, Valladolid, Spain, 2016
- China Art Museum, Shanghai, China, 2016
- Art & Culture Building, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, 2015
- Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, India, 2015

ICCR-Seher's Puducherry Blue

- Jaffna Hindu College, Sri Lanka, 2011
- Bengal Gallery, Dhanmondi, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2011
- Puducherry, India, 2010

The Epic Journey of Indian Art, Contemporary Art Exhibition

- Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India, 2017
- National Museum of Fine Arts, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2016

#### **Solo exhibitions :**

1. *The Echoing Life of Nature*, 2006
2. *Sliver of Time*, 2007
3. *Neutral Witnesses*, 2009
4. *First Cause*, 2012
5. *What the Eyes Can See*, 2015
6. *Places of Worship*, 2017
7. *Metaphors of the Moon*, 2018
8. *The Manifest Absence*, 2018 (upcoming)

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