

Ganeshism

One happenin' deity



As Mahen Chanmugam confesses somewhat self-deprecatingly, "I was anal. I was an overworked, stressed-out creative director." The solo artist of the upcoming Ganeshism art exhibition at Utterly Art now radiates an aura of simplicity; chatting with me on the metamorphosis of the last 8 years, we're seated in Mahen's home, nestled in a obscure part of Singapore (the cab driver certainly got a run for his money), surrounded by his paintings of Lord Ganesh.

"I was quite the party animal," he laughs, "I'm a lot nicer now." It doesn't take a genius to figure out the cause for Mahen's change; religious-themed art has abided through the ages and constantly served as an expression for humanity's spiritual evolution. Everything seems to make perfect sense, till you discover that Mahen isn't a Hindu.

Born in Sri Lanka, he was brought up in a family that converted from Hinduism to Christianity three generations ago and only started to study the iconography and symbolism of Lord Ganesh eight years ago. Without the usual religious undertones, you naturally wonder, what on earth birthed this unusual love for the elephant Hindu God?

"I was fed up with things. I needed to find something that could add meaning in my life. Lord Ganesh just came to me from nowhere," reveals Mahen, "Now, I believe in things happening at the right time because it's supposed to happen because you're looking for it. I started reading up on him as a study and found a lot of things I could relate to."

Incidentally, Lord Ganesh is perceived as one of the most human of the Hindu gods. He's pleasure-loving, enjoys food and drink as shown by his big belly. He symbolizes many things, amongst them creativity, wisdom and success. Ganeshism is a representation of the philosophy Ganesh inspires within Mahen, and he's not the only one.

The old craftsmen who created sculptures of Lord Ganesh had to meditate for months while observing a strict diet, performing a sort of mental gymnastics to create their art simply from the powerful images they conceived in their minds.

You might say Mahen is the modern equivalent of these craftsmen. His work is a startling blend of traditional and modern forms. A first survey of his work has you feeling vaguely reminiscent of the retro era, with luminous pinks, greens and oranges lending a sense of funkiness to the art. Modern touches like the use of lines and circles are also prevalent.

"The modern generation just aren't connecting with traditional, old-style art. I've portrayed Lord Ganesh as bright and funky instead of more dark and moody to make it more touchable for today's young people," explains Mahen, "There's a different sort of feeling when you go to a temple. Maybe I might be losing the feeling of reverence a little, but I'm making it more accessible as well."

There's something quite captivating and engaging about reinvention, the transformation of the old into a more contemporary, accessible form. If you would love having one of these paintings printed on the cover of a notebook, then Mahen has just succeeded in bridging the rift between tradition and today's youth. In other words, he's just made something traditional, well, plain cool.

His painting, Lord of Thresholds, proves this point most acutely with its satirical take on Lord Ganesh. Created after the Bali bombing - Mahen was feeling "frustrated with all the violence around" - Ganesh here is dressed in a black and blue jersey, his fingers showing the universal symbol for peace. While Mahen does admit that "purists might find the painting a bit wrong," the picture invokes an almost instantaneous emotional reaction from even the ordinary man.

Besides the emotional responses that Mahen tries to evoke, the paintings stimulate one's mental faculties as well. Each of his paintings have deep philosophical significance. The lotus, for example, symbolises the regeneration of the soul, and in the painting of the same name, the deeper underlying meaning harkens people to see past the mundane and to seek a more truthful and aware approach to life.

With this philosophy firmly in place, Mahen doesn't see himself painting anything else in the future, and is even contemplating quitting his job to paint fulltime. This might not seem such a crazy notion, especially if you start to understand the kind of inner calm his craft has given to him. To Mahen, "When I paint, it takes me to another plane of consciousness. Ganesh is something on the inside. It's a way of living your life, a way of bringing out the best in me. He teaches you that you have to make the most of your life. You create your own future."