

NS Harsha | Upward Movement

26 March – 25 April 2015

Victoria Miro Mayfair, 14 St George Street, London W1S 1FE



NS Harsha, *Why*, 2014

Victoria Miro is delighted to present *Upward Movement*, NS Harsha's second solo exhibition with Victoria Miro and his first in the Mayfair gallery. One of the most significant Indian artists of his generation, Harsha draws on a broad spectrum of Indian artistic and figurative painting traditions and popular arts as well as the western art canon. He has worked across a range of media including painting, sculpture, installation and performance.

For his exhibition at Victoria Miro Mayfair, Harsha has produced a series of paintings that explore notions of ascent. Each canvas features variations on the motif of a particular human, animal or hybrid figure engaged in a singular activity, which may involve physical elevation, technological innovation or spiritual transcendence. These figures are striving to reach something above or beyond, acknowledging and attempting to connect with unknown regions.

Individual paintings focus on musicians and dancers and on langur monkeys and cows, both of which are venerated in Hindu culture. The figures are depicted in a flat, shallow space on backgrounds featuring a single strong colour. There is a musical connotation to the compositions; the figures, in orderly rows, suggest notes on musical staves, and their recurrence and variety can be seen as a visual analogy for chanting and other repetitive or cyclical musical structures.

Harsha has said of this series, 'Slowly I feel my thoughts are moving towards a kind of abstraction while keeping the absurd narrative as its central engagement'. He has cited Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as a point of reference, and the paintings emphasise how a quest for higher meaning sits alongside the absurdity of everyday existence.

Raha Dikhanaywalay Thay Hai Rahengay (Path Showers Were/Are/Will Be There) features langurs around and atop scriptural stone formations inspired by the arrangements of rocks in Japanese landscape painting. The monkeys are pointing upwards, suggesting the desire to transcend earth-bound concerns. This work followed on from Harsha's large 2013 installation *Tamasha*, made during the artist's residency at the DAAD, which featured life size langur sculptures scaling the façade of a building in Berlin-Mitte. As in the installation, in the painting the monkeys' long tails are entwined; this posture is drawn from German mythology related to rat kings, groups of the rodents conjoined by their tangled tails.

Mooing Here and Now and *Only Way is through Milking Way* were inspired by Harsha's visits to dairy farms near his home in Mysore in southern India and in Germany. Viewing the rapid adaptation of technology by the farming industry and the interactions between cattle and humans, he conceived the 'absurd dairyscape' of *Mooing Here and Now*, which gently satirises the increasingly remote scientific relationship between people and cows on industrial farms. Conversely, *Only Way is through Milking Way* pictures a more poetic, bucolic vision of dairy farming, showing the simple act of people milking cows by hand. Harsha reduces this ancient tradition to its purest form, removing even the containers in which the milk would be collected. In both paintings the action is interrupted by a charging elephant. This surreal intervention was drawn from an incident in Mysore in 2011 in which two wild elephants went on a rampage killing a man and several cows.

Chirp peep chirp peep... exemplifies the ambiguity of contemporary scientific and industrial development. A rank of parrot-headed figures crowd around telescopes and microscopes, symbols of the incessant human desire to explore the macrocosmic and the microcosmic. Like workers on an assembly line of eureka moments they seem fated to continue their search indefinitely. These absurdist figures are punctuated by musicians, who suggest an alternative method of discovery, and the enduring need for artists to provide a context and commentary around scientific journeys.

These musicians, specifically veena players, recur in *Chamber Concert*. Each player is isolated from the others, seemingly playing alone yet perhaps longing for a connection with other musicians and listeners. After many years of travelling, Harsha spent all of 2014 in Mysore, where he spent time at concerts with local musicians. Black on black footprints on the strips on either side of the canvas suggest how internal 'journeys in darkness' provide a conducive atmosphere to focus on the finest details of communication from elsewhere.

In *Time and Again Upward Movement Beautiful Beautiful*, Harsha explores the human figure in an extreme posture, with the leg extended above the head. This position, familiar from classical Indian dance and sculpture, has been used historically to denote upward movement and a quest to reach out into the unknown. The painting features a parade of figures in this posture, emphasising the beauty of continually reaching out into the unknown. Harsha includes a nod to depictions of a similar spiritual and philosophical quest in western Renaissance art in the top right corner of the composition, replicating the figures of Plato and Aristotle from Raphael's Vatican fresco *The School of Athens*. Brahma, a Hindu icon for creation of the world, also appears as an observer of this ballet.

Biographical details:

Born in 1969, NS Harsha lives and works in Mysore, India. He was a recipient of the prestigious DAAD Scholarship in 2012. He was also awarded the Artes Mundi Prize in 2008. Harsha has taken part in a variety of collaborative projects and exhibitions internationally. He has had solo presentations at INIVA, London (2009), and at Maison Hermes Tokyo (2008), and has been included in various group exhibitions, including the Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art (2013); Dojima Biennial, Osaka (2013); Adelaide International Festival (2012); Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (2012); the Yokohama Triennial (2011) and the Bienal de Sao Paulo (2010). He was also a participant in the major touring exhibition *Indian Highway*, which was staged at the Serpentine Gallery, London (2008); Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo (2009); Herning Art Museum, Denmark (2010); Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon (2011); MAXXI, Rome (2011-12) and Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2012).

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