

Canvassing For Wildlife



In a tête-à-tête with ornithologist, author and publisher, Bikram Grewal, artist Meena Subramaniam tells readers that she wants aesthetes to feel the connection we have with the web of life and to inspire them with positivity. Settled in the little town of Kumily, near the Periyar Tiger Reserve, she spends her time painting nature-inspired canvasses.

You have carved out a niche as an artist who depicts lush tropical landscapes full of birds and animals. What inspires your work?

I work on creating a visual impact, focusing as much as possible on aspects of an ecosystem or landscape. Generally, my chosen landscape is a forest that is festooned with epiphytes, has beautiful, not so common avian and other life forms. Many of these landscapes are fragile and delicate. I never include humans, as I prefer the stance of a voyeur rather than a participant.

I tend to make bright paintings, which means I use bright focal points of light. I paint only the natural world, exclusively, from this part of the world. India and the subcontinent is a treasure trove of amazing biodiversity. In my lifetime, I hope to contribute to a legacy of wildlife art for the future. I use light to great effect or as much effect as I possibly can. With every new painting, I work more and more on controlling and releasing light, as a key component in showcasing biodiversity. In that sense, I find myself going forward more in visionary art, with the natural world as the subject, using techniques like tromp d'oeil, to create hyper depth. The natural world and the spiritual world are perhaps, the same thing.

What is the most challenging part about being a nature painter?

The assemblage of different species together into a cohesive work of art, with no serious black spaces, and restraining myself enough to not make the painting too busy is probably the most challenging part.

Who influenced you the most and who are your favourite artists?

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The list of my favourite nature and visionary artists runs long. Suffice to say, I really admire many women artists, and especially women like Marianne North, Ann Pratt, Maria Sibylla Merian and Elizabeth John Gould. I also venerate Margaret Mee. Some of my favourite visionary artists are William Blake, Alex Grey and Anderson Debernadi.



Photo Courtesy: Meena Subramaniam.

What is the secret behind your creative process?

I normally start out with a very rough doodle of the landscape I am going to be painting. I make notes, and research the elements, birds, butterflies, plants that the landscape. Once I have marked them on the canvas, I start to work in all the plant material and any landscape features I may want to add. Well after that I work out the light, and the drawing of any interesting and rare plants I may want to include. I have a good set of my own photographic and sketch records of plants of northeast India. I am extremely fond of Himalayan songbirds and their stunning flock diversity. I find myself now almost entirely involved in recreating their lives. I keep updating myself on new plant discoveries in the Western Ghats and the Himalaya and try to include them whenever possible. Floral diversity usually includes impatiens, ferns, orchids, wood fungi, mushrooms, trees, just about any plant or creature that I can weave into the narrative.

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What is your preferred medium and technique?

I have worked a lot in the past with pen and ink and watercolour. I journeyed through a lot of texture, light, shapes, colour washes and the many disasters that accompany a self-taught artist! Over the years, I find acrylic on canvas works the best for me and suits my style. I do a lot of extensive washes, and texturing. I intermingle thin washes with some wet on wet techniques. I juggle very tight, dry brush work and very loose wet, brush work.

What are your plans for the future?

I would love to use my work to promote biodiversity. I am also happy to contribute art for such projects that promote food security, forests and deserts, oceans, indigenous foods, medicinal plants, rare birds and insect life.

Meena Subramaniam accepts commissions for her artworks that are usually acrylic on canvas. Her website: www.meenart.in



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Photo Courtesy: Meena Subramaniam.

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