

## **SPEAKING OF OTHERNESS**

### **Recent Works by Viraj Naik**

#### **Ranjit Hoskote**

To enter the world of Viraj Naik is to make landfall on the island of Dr Moreau. As though retracing H G Wells' dystopic fantasia of that title – in which a deranged scientist is discovered to have isolated himself on a jungle island peopled by animals that he has re-formatted into humanoid creatures – Viraj populates his works with unidentifiable chimeras, cyborgs and monsters. There is high-spirited irony and a brooding defiance to these portraits, yet also a tenderness and sympathy. Arising from a capacious laboratory of the mind, Viraj's hybrid creatures are welded together from human, legendary, animal and mechanical elements; but, in the effect they have on us, they are far more than merely the sum of their disparate parts. Masked as predators, camouflaged in the costume of visitants, these creatures are – on closer examination – readable as versions of ourselves. We realise this with a chill, for they are portraits of ourselves as translated into the language of instinct and raw desire, motive and even delusion.

Horned and maned, armour-plated and hide-encased, many of Viraj's hybrids are midway between the mediaeval knight and the buffalo soldier: these warriors of the psyche make their way and establish their camps in landscapes that are febrile, tropically fertile in menace and uncertainty. The richly grotesque appearance of these figures may hold us at a distance at first, and our sense of their place in a fabular script also allows us to disclaim any kinship with them. But they oblige us to attend to their stories, which are implied rather than stated. And we see, then, that these figures represent the roles we could adopt as alternative selves: these are figures that sleep in our subconscious and come into play through the force of predicament, the treason of circumstance.

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Viraj works like a jeweller whose gemstone is the detail: every one of his paintings and drawings grows from the embodiment of limb, metal, cloth, rock, leaf and water; each feature rendered with a precision so focused as to become hallucinatory in its intensity. Trained in the subtleties of print-making under the redoubtable Laxma Goud at the Sarojini Naidu School of Fine Art, Hyderabad, Viraj knows how to shuttle between authorship and contingency, between the controlled finesse of a well-crafted image and the unpredictable idiosyncrasies of material and duration. Process, for this artist, is not an excuse for effects incidental and accidental, but rather, a means of playing between an outline in the mind and the various possible articulations that ink, grain, graphite, humidity and dryness will allow it to make.

For his imagery, Viraj draws upon a number of parallel archives: natural history, with its abundance of snouts, horns, hooves, claws and wings; political history, with its flamboyant dramatis personae of emperors, viceroys, demon-haunted clerics, shrewd

chieftains and tiger-striped dictators; Indic wisdom literature, with its tableaux of astute foxes, stentorian lions, wise birds and resourceful monkeys; and science fiction, with its freight of improbability traps and boundary conditions, individuals caught up in the turbulence of change and communities overtaken by forces from beyond their psychic or physical environment.

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Viraj is a connoisseur of strangeness. Born in Penha de Franca, Goa, in 1975 and raised in his home state, Viraj trained as an artist at the Goa College of Art in Panjim, and later at the Central University, Hyderabad; he has lived outside Goa for several years, and shown his work in Bombay and Delhi, among other metropolitan centres. Thus, he knows what it means to explain himself as the bearer of an Indo-Iberian cultural identity to fellow Indians who assume the master narrative of British India and the Gandhian freedom struggle to apply equally to all regions of South Asia. They forget that Goa emerges from the specificities of another historical dynamic, from an Indian Ocean internationalism that predates our contemporary globalisation by two millennia; from a vexed yet productive engagement with Portuguese political history and Lusitanian culture.

Goa was a nodal point in a circuit of trade and cultural exchange that linked India's western coast variously to the Roman Orient, East Africa, the Arab world and China: the Enlightenment came to Portuguese-ruled Goa before it arrived in British-ruled India, from French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese sources; for a time in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Goa was not a colony but a long-distance province in the Republic of Portugal, before it was overthrown by a right-wing clique of intriguers and military officers. The stereotypes of sun, sand and a relaxed ease verging on indolence, commonly associated with Goa, render this complex cultural matrix a considerable injustice.

Against such a backdrop of ignorance and indifference, an artist like Viraj Naik becomes, not only a representative voice from an undervalued region, but, just as importantly, an ambassador of strangeness. His art speaks of an otherness that subsumes variance, dissidence, foreignness, which pose a challenge or a counter-definition to the condition widely accepted as normality. Viraj's art urges us to question our assumptions about self, identity, belonging and direction. By confronting us with figures and tableaux from heterotopias, places of otherness, he obliges us to accept that we are all guilty of a certain *xenography*: a representation of others through generalisations and suspicions, on the basis of species, ethnicity, race, religion or nation. He shows us, also, that many of these others are in fact dimensions of the self. And he empowers us, through his testimony, to advance from antagonism and suspicion to a calibrated understanding of self and others.

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