*The Last Decade*

K. G. SUBRAMANYAN

K. G. Subramanyan had a career of seventy years. This exhibition presents works from the last decade. Not comprehensively, but a particular aspect of it. The late works of artists with long careers are often characterized as a distinct category, done in a “late style.” However, not all long-living artists have late styles; some have only late works marked by a sense of ageing and impending death. Ageing is a biological, social, and mental phenomenon marked by decreased bodily abilities, reduced social life, and diminished cognitive power and memory.

Yet, for Subramanyan, ageing meant neither social isolation nor loss of cognitive power. He remained much sought after and interested in the world around him, and his mental and critical faculties remained sharp till the very end. The three large murals he painted between 2009 and 2012 – the first of these measuring over 2000 square feet and painted standing on scaffolding – demonstrate that he refused to be tamed by age and that his ambition and artistic abilities remained undiminished. To him, age meant primarily the awareness that he had more life behind him than ahead, which, in turn, required living fully in the present and packing as much work as possible into it and completing them, as he often said, within a snap of the fingers.

Subramanyan’s late works demonstrate a change of attitude to art making rather than a new style. Having less time ahead, he worked with a new urgency and became disinterested in keeping up with new developments in art. The pleasure of creation became more important than success or how viewers and critics received it. Here, he is in good company. Late Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Picasso and Guston have also shown how liberating that can be.

Further, with an abundance of memory and a mind constantly reimagining possibilities, he discarded his previous standards of finish. For Subramanyan, this meant dissolving the distinction between drawing and painting, liberating himself from the rigid structures of prior practice, embracing a language that is visceral and fluid, moving from representation to registering the gush of thoughts and images in his mind, and turning paintings into the desegregated trace of his shifting thoughts and his subliminal consciousness in flux. Picasso called it “another way of keeping a diary”.

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