The Banyan turns the spotlight on art by people with mental health conditions

Titled 'A brush with madness', the exhibition displaying the works of Boston-based artist Preetha Mahadevan will be at Chennai's Apparao Galleries.
Preetha Mahadevan, an artist who lives with bipolar disorder, shares that she found painting therapeutic. She finds the soothing colours and calming patterns in her abstract bursts soothing during depression. And during her manic episodes, she says she gravitates towards stories of communities and environment. Her latest exhibition, which is currently being displayed at Chennai’s Apparao Galleries, includes 20 paintings.

Titled ‘A brush with madness’, the exhibition displaying the work of Preetha, who is also an architect and baker, was launched by Member of Parliament Kanimozhi Karunanidhi on July 24. US Consul General Chennai, Judith Ravin, anthropologist Andrew Willford from Cornell University, and Vice-president of HCL Technologies Srimathi Shivshankar were also present at the event.

Preetha tells TNM that she turned to art-based therapy in 2019. "When I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and an eating disorder, there were different forms of therapy that I could undertake. I was more drawn towards art-based therapy and I ended up painting everyday. Despite being allergic to paints, I continued going there. The experience was very powerful," says Preetha. Soon, she turned to digital paintings and shared her artwork on social media everyday, and also shared it with friends with similar interests.

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Preetha, who got acquainted with Vandana Gopikumar, co-founder of The Banyan, by sharing her work on social media, got the opportunity to be associated with the organisation for this exhibition. The Banyan, a non-governmental organisation, is widely known for providing mental health services in institutional as well as community settings for people coming from distressed situations such as homelessness and poverty.

The Banyan has a slate of projects such as ‘A Brush with Madness’, that will include poetry, photography, prose, paintings, and testimonials from persons living with mental health issues and members of minority communities.

“Vandana explained how showcasing my work in Chennai could inspire persons living with mental health conditions who might want to pursue art professionally or as a hobby, or turn to art-based therapy. It can be a very transformative journey for a lot of people,” Preetha adds.

Preetha’s work has been identified as a part of art brut or outside art - art movements - founded by 19th century sculptor and painter Jean Debuffet. Jean Debuffet’s art brut movement was based in his affinity towards art by psychiatric patients, prisoners, and children, which did not fall in line with the established aesthetic norms of the time.

Sixty of Preetha’s paintings have been included as a part of a coffee table book that goes by the same title as the exhibition, and 20 of her paintings are being exhibited at Nungambakkam’s Apparao Galleries. Preetha’s exhibition - A brush with Madness - is just the first in what The Banyan hopes to make into a larger series called ‘Musings of the Mind’ which will include more exhibitions, poetry, and movement which highlights the aesthetic and artistic sensibilities of artists living with mental health conditions.
Plans for a ‘Museum of the Mind’

Sonu Apparao, the head of the gallery, shares that she was looking for a project through which they would be able to display the work of artists living with mental health conditions. “I believe that the moment there is some energy in the art, there is a difference. In this case, Preetha using painting as a form of therapy was an added angle and falls in line with the art brut movement. I have also been wanting to team up with The Banyan for quite some time. I was travelling all over the world, looking at art of this nature, and wanting to find similar kinds of programmes here. This was the perfect time to team up and the experience was serendipitous,” she remarks.

“For a long time, we have been attempting to build a repository of lived experiences from the global south,” Vandana explains. “If you look at international declarations or policies, they are all inspired by the lives of English-speaking, privileged people, and lack the granularity that we feel people living with mental health and psychosocial disabilities, as well as persons from minority communities deserve.”

The artwork and performances featured in the ‘Musings of the Mind’ series will eventually be documented and consolidated into a ‘Museum of the Mind,’ along the lines of the ones that already exist in London. The Bethlem Museum of the Mind, which showcases the history of Bethlem Royal Hospital, hosts exhibitions of contemporary artists who are current or former patients. This project is currently being developed by The Banyan along with experts like Sanjeev Jain and Pratima Murthy from the Department of Psychiatry at NIMHANS, and psychiatrists Alok Sarin and Anirudh Kala.

“One on hand, it will be focusing on the journey of psychiatry and how mental hospitals have transitioned. On the other hand, it will act as a reflection of the progress and evolution of marginalised voices who will be able to use art forms such as poetry, spoken word, books, etc. as expression pathways,” Vandana adds.

Preetha’s artwork will be on display at Apparao Galleries, Wallace Garden 3rd street, Nungambakkam, till July 28 from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm.

Read: How a TN NGO is helping people with no documents get IDs, and get back on their feet

Artwork by 5 Benga