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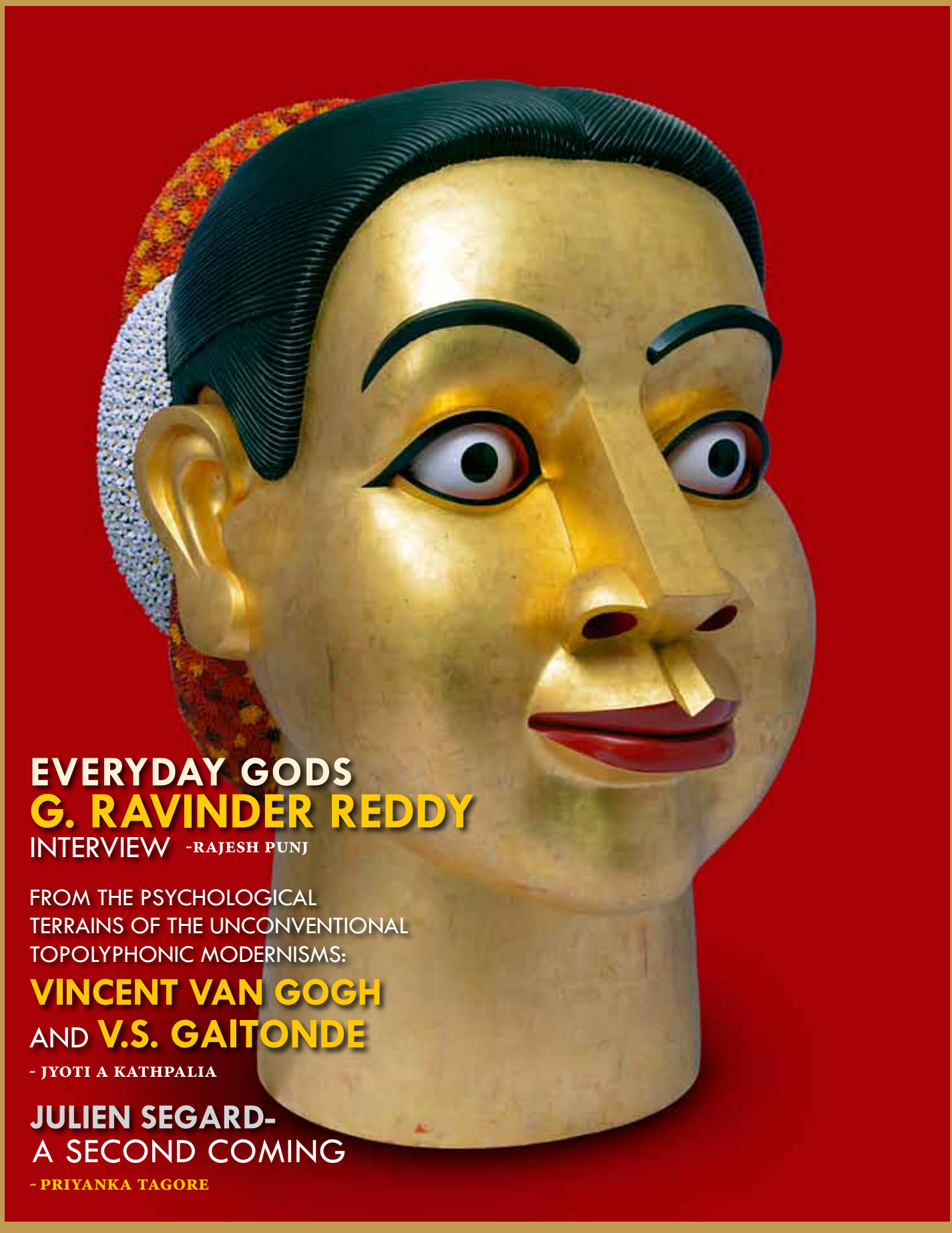

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G. RAVINDER REDDY INTERVIEW

RAJESH PUNJ

The sixteenth-century Italian soldier and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini asserted that 'the art of sculpture was at least seven times greater than any other, (because) a statue of true sculpture ought to have seven points of view, which ought all to boast equal excellence.' Such an elevation of the physical arts appears to play into the hands of South Indian artist G. Ravinder Reddy; whose brightly coloured busts of traditional women, have to be experienced 'in-the-round' - as the simple almost becomes sacrosanct. As he well explains, "for me transient emotions and feelings do not play any role in the creation of the object. I am concerned with forms that are universally understood."And by removing so much of the individual from a work, Reddy appears to revel in the subsequent simplicity of the situation, as he removes entirely any sense of personality or portraiture from his monuments to mankind. Seeking instead to mould his busts into these garishly coloured totem pole like faces. As he intends they speak for a culture of devoted and devotional women across the sub-continent.

While Cellini addressed the significance of the individual, at a time when courters and canons of mathematics and science were being rewarded with their own statues, Reddy aligns himself with everyday individuals, who he sees as at the service of one another. Emphasising how they are deserving of his attention, and of their acknowledgement by the arts. These brightly coloured busts have become the artist's signature works, that for their scale and colour,are as aesthetically enthralling as anything attached to the country's pyramided temples. The alchemy of his work is that whereas religious icons facilitate our faith, Reddy's sculptures are celebrations of the commonplaceness of the communities of women who make-up India's population. Seeing beauty as not entirely exclusive to Indian films and popular pageants, but manifest as a devotion to the elegance and anatomy of ordinariness, as he himself explains, "beauty is not possible for me. Over the centuries the concept of beauty keeps changing. Every region, every culture, every continent has a different concept of beauty. I have never tried to capture beauty. Beauty is indefinable. I try to put volumes, concave and convex shapes, and forms into meaningful ways to build sculptures. And to add texture and colour to make a meaningful image for the onlooker."

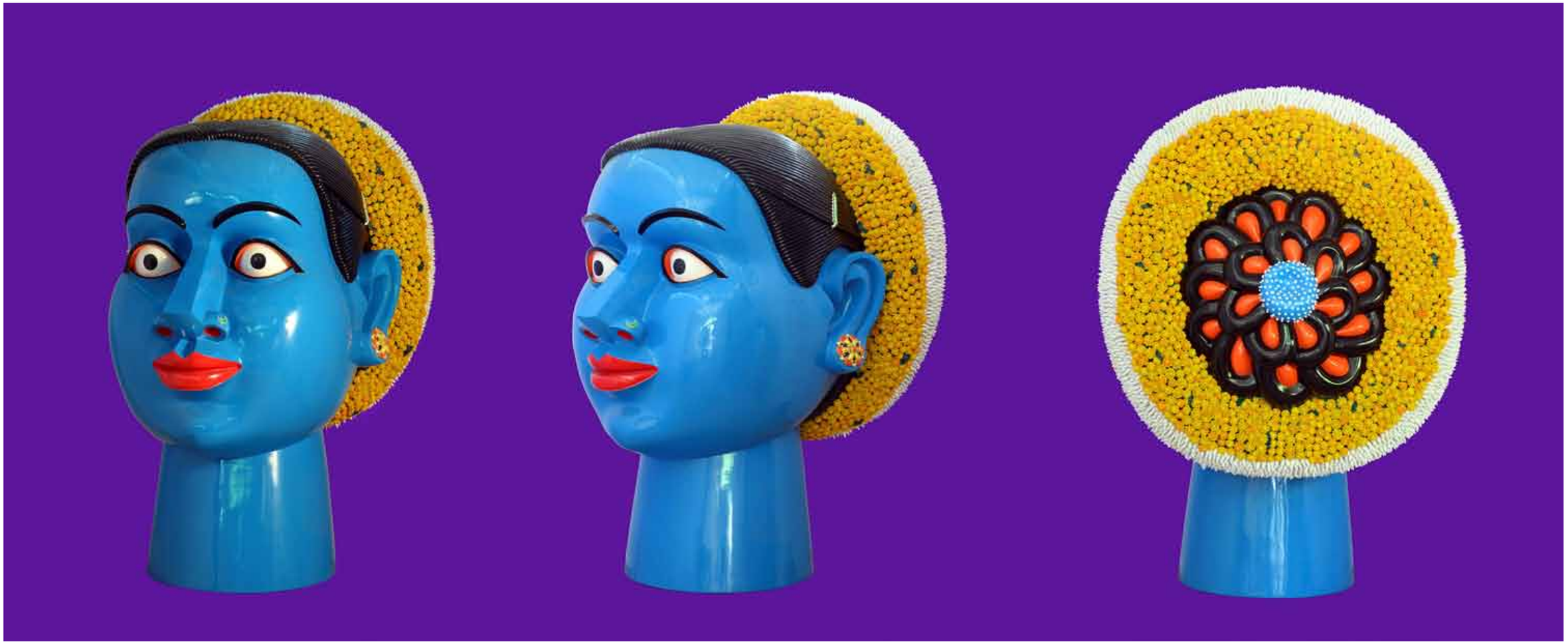
Reddy's finessed figures have for their luminosity become instantly recognisable to audiences outside of the sub-continent,as much as they are thoroughly real to Indians, for his concentration on the castes and creeds of the southern state of Hyderabad. Successfully managing to immortalise the traditions and contemporary tendencies of generations of

I normally title the work to allow for an open-ended interpretation for the viewer. And the spectator, based on his background, connects with and interprets the object in front of him, in whichever they choose. My effort ends when the viewer stands in front of the sculpture.

^ G. Ravinder Reddy, Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit: Vibhav Raj Shah

> (L to R)Installation view of Rasa at Emami Art, 2019, Courtesy of Emami Art
G. Ravinder Reddy, Kishnaveni with Long Braid
Courtesy of the artist and Emami Art

My inspiration is derived from life itself. My work is a celebration of life and the common man is a strong element. We are living and breathing our surroundings. Knowingly or unknowingly, everything affects our thinking and actions. None of us lives in isolation, and my works are a reflection of the things I do or observe from where I live. My works manifest into a religion, and reflect contemporary culture subconsciously.



women who have cultured India into a self-sustaining country. Employing commonplace materials, including car paints and clay, Reddy rewards himself with the task of transforming hissizable sculptures into idols to the ordinary individual. Espoused by a politics to the common man, Reddy's work is a reminder of how important it is to embrace the country's social and cultural character, as much as the influx of the modern world.

Like Socialist or Soviet emblems to the servants and soldiers of communism, Reddy's faces and figures, employ the same kind of sharp simplicity to embody the populous, as people who are as relevant to his country, as the entrepreneurs and actionists of new India. And as he insists, his interest and influences manifest from the earth and the atmosphere closest to him. Saying, "I live and breathe day-in and day-out here in India,and experience essential India. That experience is reflected in my works, and I am immensely proud of it. Even if these exhibits relocated in a different geographic location, they wouldn't lose their original 'form', in spite of their dislocation from and immediate relevance to the local area. The artworks have an 'Indianness' instilled into them, and into their form, and form speaks volumes."Reddy's monuments, deliberately dispassionate, as colossal caricatures capture entirely the drama and defiance of the female - as he conveys his unqualified adoration for the ordinary everyday 'gods' that live amongst us. Sensitively citing how "when creating a sculpture, I want it to communicate with its details, surfaces and striking paint. The expressions of the subjects are taken from everyday life, of the countless women I encounter on the street. The sculptures expressions reflect everyday people - from mothers, sisters, elderly women, maids, to vegetable sellers, and sanitation workers. Their expressions are intended to be timeless and undefined. For all of us."

Even more than bulbous busts, Reddy's sculptures engage with space as though landscapes to the human face. The nose and pouting lips protruding sharply from the ballooned facade, like the contours of a modern car. And as much as the scale muddles with one's imagination, it somehow champions the human spirit. With these works, and the new sculptured heads included in his current Kolkata show, Reddy replaces the humanness of the figure, with a stone-faced homage to humankind. The earring and nose piercings appear like the decorative elements over a doorway, and his consideration of the hair, as it is routinely tied back, divulges Reddy's interest in positioning a particular class and caste of woman at the centre of this work. As he insists on emphasising the significance of the populous, and the people that he encounters on a daily basis. Readily declaring, "my life force is women – they are the source of growth and life in my work. They are one of the most celebrated and universal forms of all. Without women there isn't life. The female figure has been a classical and very enduring form of Indian sculpture for many centuries."

Reddy's reverence of women recalls art history as in part, being about and belonging to the female

^ *G. Ravinder Reddy, Devi-III, 2016-17, Painted and Copper Gilded on Polyester Resin Fiberglass. Courtesy of the artist and Emami Art.*

figure, as she has been painted and portrayed - women as muses, as with Marie-Thérèse (tormented second wife to Spanish artist Pablo Picasso), Emilie Flöge (life partner to Austrian painter Gustav Klimt), and more recently Edie Sedgwick (troubled muse to American pop artist Andy Warhol). As much as women artists, challenging the status quo, by introducing a new perspective on the emergence of modern thinking with the birth of the Renaissance, through to the vanguard of modernism. So much of art is, as Reddy would argue, either about women or by women. And his works, including the new coloured busts for Kolkata, are about an on-going devotion, less sexually and more sensually, to the child-makers and mothers who nourish our children and nurture its country's culture.

Seeing them as these very bold and brash symbols to society, that as bodyless busts make no reference to the human form, to the cut and curve of the female figure, instead concentrating entirely on the neck, rising up to the head. These are figures that go no way, rooted to plinths that elevate them to our height, as they come to be experienced in a David looking into the eyes of Goliath scenario. Mythically they also recall the majesty of the Chilean Easter Island heads. As there is something monolithic about Reddy's choice of scale for his individual faces. In conversation Reddy sees his work less as a reaction to modern circumstances, the cut and thrust of modernity, as explained, but more as part of the order of things –equally historically and cultural. "I am inspired by Indian culture and the art of civilisations in Asia, and from the rest of the world; mostly Egyptian, Mesopotamian and African. Art movements appear and disappear all the time, and my concern is to create something that exists for generations to come. If you look at the great Pyramids in Egypt, or at our Indian temples and sculptures, these enduring forms are inherent to us all. This universality is what I try to incorporate into my work." Thus Reddy isn't intending his sculptures to be received entirely as aesthetic exercises, but more than that, that they become integral to our psyche. Rooted to the landscape, touches and talked about - worshipped, and wondered around; in order they enjoy an attention and devotion all of their own.

When creating a sculpture, I want it to communicate with its details, surfaces and striking paint. The expressions of the subjects are taken from everyday life, of the countless women I encounter on the street. The sculptures expressionsreflect everyday people - from mothers, sisters, elderly women, maids, to vegetable sellers, and sanitation workers. Their expressions are intended to be timeless and undefined, for all of us.

Interview

Rajesh Punj: Can you explain the titles that come with your works, and if their intention is very specific, or whether you are wanting an audience to introduce their own ideas to them?

G.Ravinder Reddy: I normally title the work to allow for an open-ended interpretation for the viewer. And the spectator, based on his background, connects with and interprets the object in front of him, in whichever they choose. My effort ends when the viewer stands in front of the sculpture.

RP: How do you explain beauty, and is it something you intend to capture in your works?

RR: Explaining beauty is not entirely possible for me.

> G. Ravinder Reddy, Portrait in Blue, Painted on Polyester Resin Fiberglass, Painted on Polyester Resin Fiberglass, 23.5x 16.5 x 24.5 inches, Courtesy Emami Art

Over the centuries the concept of beauty keeps changing. Every region, every culture and continent has a different concept of beauty. I have never tried to capture beauty. Because in many ways it is indefinable. I apply volume, concave and convex shapes, and outward forms as the building blocks for my sculptures. Adding texture and colour to create a meaningful image for the onlooker.

RP: Youhave explained 'art as life', that said are your works essentially a celebration of life, and of the human being?

RR: Yes. My works are a celebration of life. We are born on this land to celebrate life and manifest life through our actions and deeds.

RP: Your heads have been exhibited in some remarkable settings, how do you think they translate outside of India, and at the same time what is it they transmit that has them retain such an incredible 'Indianness'?

RR: I live and breathe day-in and day-out here in India, and experience essential India. That experience is reflected in my works, and I am immensely proud of it.Even if these exhibits relocated in a different geographic location, they wouldn't lose their original 'form', in spite of their dislocation from and immediate relevance to the local area. The artworks have an 'Indianness' instilled in them, and equally evident in their form, which resonates.

RP: You have previously talked about how your surroundings influence your work, how important is your studio and Vishakapatnam for that?

RR: Vishakapatnam is a quiet, serene city which is far away from the hustle and bustle of conventional metro cities. The city is neither a small town nor a huge metropolis, thus becoming a perfect location for an artist to think and spend quality time with their work. My surroundings are one of the many sources of influence that can be seen across my works. One has to keep their senses alive all the time, as well as being responsive to our own surroundings as inspiration.

RP: There appears to be an incredible simplicity to the ideas and objects that inspire your works, why do you think that is?

RR: I enjoy simplicity. With inspiring movements like Folk Art, simplicity speaks volumes by minimal means.

RP: Your influences suggest you have an affinity for the common man, is that so?

RR: My inspiration is derived from life itself. My work is a celebration of life and the common man is a strong element.We are living and breathing our surroundings. Knowingly or unknowingly, everything affects our thinking and actions. None of us lives in isolation, and my works are a reflection of the things I do or observe from where I live. My works manifest into a religion, and reflect contemporary culture subconsciously.

RP: Can you explain more of your intention with your

My life force is women – they are the source of growth and life in my work. They are one of the most celebrated and universal forms of all. Without women there isn't life.The female figure has been a classical and very enduring form of Indian sculpture for many centuries.

> G. Ravinder Reddy, Installation view of Rasa at Emami Art, 2019, Courtesy of Emami Art

sculptures for much more simplified forms? Am I right to suggest your voluminous heads are supposed to represent all of mankind?

RR: I am inspired by Indian culture and the art of civilisations in Asia, and from the rest of the world; mostly Egyptian, Mesopotamian and African. Art movements appear and disappear all the time, and my concern is to create something that exists for generations to come.If you look at the great Pyramids in Egypt, or at our Indian temples and sculptures, these enduring forms are inherent to us all. This universality is what I try to incorporate into my work.

RP: And what is your choice of expression that has since become symbolic of sculptured heads?Of a wide-eyed and tight-lipped woman.

RR: When creating a sculpture, I want it to communicate with its details, surfaces and striking paint. The expressions of the subjects are taken from everyday life, of the countless women I encounter on the street. The sculptures expressions reflect everyday people - from mothers, sisters, elderly women, maids, to vegetable sellers, and sanitation workers. Their expressions are intended to be timeless and undefined, for all of us.

RP: Your choice of colours – gold, red, black, blue, appear to replicate religious iconography. Are your works supposed to be worshipped in the same way?

RR: Colour is an important factor in my work; it enhances the surface and gives deeper meaning to the existing form. Colour had played a very significant role historically, from the pre-historic era to the early 19th century. During which time sculptures were painted according to the artist's final thought.Throughout India's history, and the wider world, if we look at sculptures – the colour is the final intervention to it. As it plays an important role regionally, nationally, and religiously. Attributing a work as well to a geographical perception. I use Gold as it is regarded as a very auspicious colour, and at the same time using it enhances the surface and gives a richer feeling to the form.The use of gold colours makes the sculpture glow, and elevates the visual experience. The colour yellow also has a significance in everyday life and religion, from the colour of turmeric to the strength of the sun.

RP: If not religious, are your works intended as monuments to mankind?

RR: Yes, entirely.

RP: How significant is the icon in India?

RR: The icon is widespread across India, from inside temples and people's homes, to street signs. It reveals a connection to the past with the present.

RP: You have also said 'local beauty becomes something universal', what do mean by that?

RR: When people from across different continents, regions, religions and ages can engage with another's notion of beauty, it expands and grows associations with beauty, fusing it with another's ideals.

RP: I want to understand your appreciation of the 'figurative', and of your obsession with representing and recreating the human form in various materials. Why is that?

RR: My life force is women – they are the source of growth and life in my work. They are one of the most celebrated and universal forms of all. Without women there isn't life.The female figure has been a classical and very enduring form of Indian sculpture for many centuries.

^ G. Ravinder Reddy, Terracota Bust, Courtesy of the artist and Emami Art

> G. Ravinder Reddy, Installation view of Rasa at Emami Art, 2019, Courtesy of Emami Art

RP: There is something incredibly interesting art historically and culturally about the nude figure, and of how it holds our attention. Do you see your works as indicative of that?

RR: My works draw upon the old and the new, the past and present. We are always shifting between the balance of what's been before and what is to come. Universal forms remain across these, the human figure being one of them.

RP: How should we understand the scale of your work, the fact that the figure is less human but more monumental?

RR: My practice strives for something iconic and monumental to celebrate life, to transcend the boundaries of culture, nature and geography. I'm always striving to take my art at a higher level.

RP: How does your schooling and education influence your work today?

RR: My studies at Goldsmiths, London, and the University of Baroda in India have given me a strong foundation.The opportunities in London opened up my perspective to another part of the world, while Baroda has enabled me to focus on my sculptural skills. Teaching as well at the Department of Fine Art, at Andhra University is a pleasurable job because one is always occupied and constantly thinking. So when you are interacting with young minds you come across a lot of questions, which arouses one to think in multiple dimensions. You are able to share your knowledge with younger minds, and at the same time you gain a lot from their position and perception, which also greatly influences one's own thinking. Teaching has benefitted me a lot.

RP: Your anonymous women laid bare appear like landscapes of curves and contours, that you immortalise in sand and stone. What are you doing to the human being when that happens? Is the figure an entry point into the sense of self and of existence?

RR: It is for you, and for the audience to decide.

RP: How do you feel about the international attention of your works, and the impact that has had on your practice?

RR: The last four decades have seen a stark difference in the tastes and attitudes of local audiences and undoubtedly, they have become more global. The attention from different communities and ages has only encouraged me to make my work more accessible by exhibiting them in diverse environments.

RP: If life is generative, then how you explain death? Can anything creative come from that?

RR: Death is a part of life. Without death, there can be no life. The duality of the two co-exists with one another.

RP: Can you talk more about the works intended for Emami Art at Kolkata Centre for Creativity, specifically of the heads that you intend for this exhibition?

RR: For the exhibition hosted at Emami Art, it will be my first solo exhibition in Kolkata. I have created new works that will be shown for the first time, and I see it as an opportunity to exhibit and engage with audiences in Bengal.

RP: Where have you arrived now with these works, in terms of your practice? What are you working on now?

RR: As a sculptor or as a medium of expression using sculptures, one keeps encountering problems, but with persistence, trial and error, one tries to overcome them. An idea that takes you into unknown territories, and makes the task a challenge, is what sustains my interest in everything artistic.

RP: There is with your works as much of a striking attraction as mild repulsion, to how we encounter their exaggerated beauty and overbearing scale. Do you see such a mix of emotions within your works?

RR: Transient emotions don't play a major role in the creation of the works. I focus on universal forms, and the means to express them in materials, subjects and colours, pushes me to refine these forms.

Death is a part of life. Without death, there can be no life. The duality of the two co-exists with one another.

> G. Ravinder Reddy, Radha, 2019, Courtesy of the artist and Emami Art