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8 COVER STORY

ARTIST OF ALL TRADES

LEAVE ALONE CURATOR AND CREATOR, **BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI** IS ALSO A TRAINED DANCER, THEATRE ARTIST AND A FORMER RESTAURANT SKETCH ARTIST!

WHAT DOES HE ENJOY THE MOST?

Text by Ananya Ghosh

Photos shot exclusively for *HT Brunch* by Abhijit Bhatlekar

The studio is a huge, whitewashed, stark space, broken by huge wooden cartons marked for shipping. The furniture is sparse. It looks like a godown. But the colour-smudged floor assures me I am at the right address.

We are at the studio of Bose Krishnamachari, the artist and curator of international repute, known for his bold abstract paintings, figurative drawings and multimedia installations. He is also the founder of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. With just four editions since its inception in 2012, it has become India's introduction point to contemporary art, especially installation art. Bose, named by his uncle after freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose, has indeed turned out to be a revolutionary, though of a different kind. But his basic mantra, like his namesake's, is simple: involve general people in any endeavour.

THINK LOCAL, ACT GLOBAL

"When we were students, there was hardly any opportunity to see original contemporary artwork. There was a Triennale, in fact India hosted the first Triennale in 1968, which was the first time we could see original contemporary works from across the world, but it was not a curated show and it eventually closed," says Bose, who is in Mumbai for just a few days.

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale was conceived at

an informal gathering at Bose's house in Mumbai, which included the then culture minister of Kerala, M.A. Baby, Riyas Komu and a few of his artist friends like Jyothi Basu. Today, it is not only a talking point beyond the artist community, attracting people of all ages and from all walks of life, but also one of the best curated art exhibitions in the world.

"We wanted it to be a public event. So we distributed brochures across the town, to autowallahs and local shopkeepers; we had theatre artists performing skits on the streets, etc., we wanted to include the entire community. But we didn't think it would become the biennale. It is now a model of how to get common people to an art show!" says Bose, proud of its success.

"WE WANTED IT [KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE] TO BE A PUBLIC EVENT. SO WE DISTRIBUTED BROCHURES ACROSS THE TOWN, TO AUTOWALLAHS AND LOCAL SHOPKEEPERS"

BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI CO-FOUNDED THE KOCHI BIENNALE IN 2012

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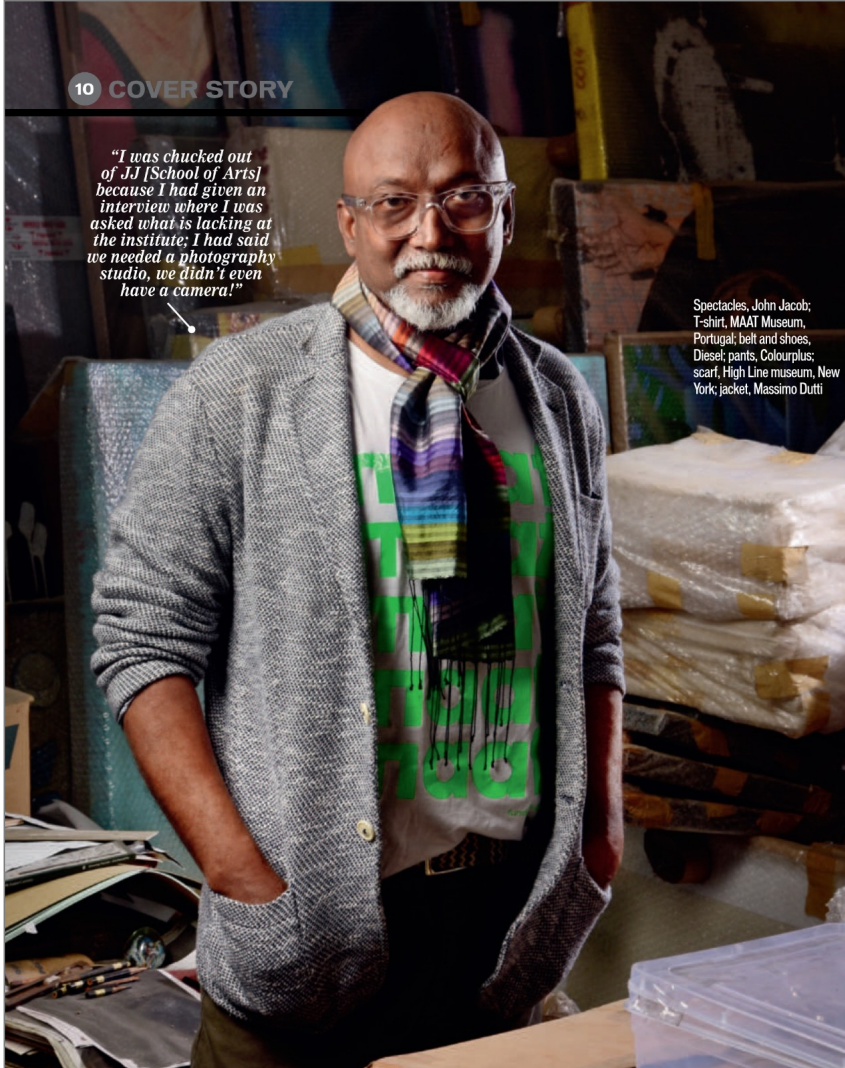
"Art making is not just about techniques, materials and mediums, but also what kind of philosophy you are interested in, your political beliefs, everything!"



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USING #CreatorVsCurator**

Spectacles, John Jacob; T-shirt, MAAT Museum, Portugal; shirt, Pepe; belt and shoes, Diesel; pants, Colourplus

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"I was chucked out of JJ [School of Arts] because I had given an interview where I was asked what is lacking at the institute; I had said we needed a photography studio, we didn't even have a camera!"

Spectacles, John Jacob; T-shirt, MAAT Museum, Portugal; belt and shoes, Diesel; pants, Colourplus; scarf, High Line museum, New York; jacket, Massimo Dutti

LOVE & HATE
CURATOR Vs CREATOR

As a creator...

- "Bose can also be the Boss of the job"
- "The challenge is the lack of public infrastructure, museums and exhibition spaces in India"

As a curator

- "Finding talent and creating opportunities for this talent is exciting"
- "Translating works of art to text is a challenge!"

A 360-DEGREE APPROACH

The 56-year-old artist, who is also a trained dancer and musician and has participated in amateur theatre, believes that art cannot be made in isolation and that his experiences with other forms of art have been instrumental in making him the artist he is today.

"If you know music, you can compare your lines and textures with notes and scores. Then there is theatre, which is a 360-degree experience. I consider myself lucky to have spent quality time with various filmmakers, actors, architects, theatre people," he says.

But Krishnamachari is not obsessed with his art. "I learned from life itself that it is really important to keep a little distance from things you really love. That gives you a better perspective. There is a difference between obsession and passion. I believe passion is important," he says.

DESTINY'S CHILD

If destiny had not intervened at the right time, Bose might have been a doctor instead of the artist he is today. He was studying science, but at 17, he had a sudden illness that changed the entire course of his life. "Most of my youth was spent in and out of hospitals. It was some kind of haemophilia, but later turned out to be something else which took a very long time to be diagnosed," he says. Since he was unable to attend regular classes he pursued his other interests: theatre, classical dance, music, and art. But it was only in 1985, when one of his paintings fetched him a Lalit Kala Akademi award, that he considered painting as a serious career.

NOT ART FOR ART'S SAKE

Ask him how he juggles being a curator and an artist and he laughs. "Anybody who is an artist can be a curator. The process is the same. As an artist you need to constantly update yourself, you need to be aware of what is happening in society and in your field. And as a curator also, you need to do the same things. But the responsibility of a curator is different," he explains. "Art making is not just about techniques, materials and mediums, but also what kind of philosophy you are interested in, your political beliefs, everything."

Whether it's his popular works inspired by the 'average Mumbaikar' that includes ballpoint pen portraits of household staff as a reflection of the class divide, or his 1990 Braille-inspired solo show where his minimalist black on black done on perforated paper was a comment on the contemporary culture, Krishnamachari's works are always socially aware.

"I had just done a film appreciation course from FTII and

was a regular at Prithvi and NCPA; all these experiences and learnings were reflected in that show (the 1991 solo show), which became a huge success," he recalls. His first show in 1989, inaugurated by Adoor Gopalakrishnan at Kerala Kalapheetom, received great reviews as well but none of his 30-odd paintings sold. "And my mom had mortgaged some of her jewellery to help me with the expenses!"

"IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP A LITTLE DISTANCE FROM THINGS YOU REALLY LOVE. THAT GIVES YOU A BETTER PERSPECTIVE."

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"I come from a family of skilled carpenters. So while growing up there was always an interest towards sketching, design and construction. In fact when I was 16, I designed a pair of shoes and flaunted them proudly! But it was when I won that award, that a friend from Bombay suggested I take up a course in Sir JJ School of Art," he says.

SECOND TIME LUCKY

So in 1985, he came to Mumbai, took the entrance exam, and was rejected. "I had not taken money from my parents when I left home, so for one year, I stayed in a chawl in Saki Naka, a single room shared with 10, often 12 people. I was on cooking duty, although I was a horrible cook! And I would earn a paltry sum sketching portraits," he reveals.

The next year he again took the exam and this time his name was on the list. "By that time I had figured out the politics a bit, and had gotten to know a few people!" he laughs adding that it was after he got selected that he got to know that his name was on the top of the list the first time as well, in fact, one of his teachers was shocked to know that he got rejected.

In college, apart from concentrating on the course material, he was a regular at the college canteen, thriving on conversations with students from different departments. "I used to

"There are many art shows in India that are not curated. That is a dangerous thing. Then you are just peddling mediocrity!"

"EUROPE, LATIN AMERICA, THE US, AND EVEN CHINA UNDERSTAND THE VALUE OF SOFT POWER. THEY INVEST SO MUCH IN THEIR CULTURAL WEALTH..."

also organise symposiums, talks, poetry readings. When the British artist Dexter Dalwood had a residency in Bombay, I invited him for a talk. The university never had

money for such things, so I paid for them," he reminisces.

He earned that money at his restaurant job. "I was working as a sketching artist at a Colaba restaurant. There was a palmist, a joker, singers belting out old Hindi songs...I would get ₹10 for a five-minute sketch of which the restaurant took ₹5 as commission. But slowly I started charging more. Apart from supplying me with pocket money, these quick sketches were great as practice lessons. Also, I was a Malayali from Kerala who had studied in a government college and hardly knew any Hindi or English, and my stint at the restaurant helped me pick up much-needed conversation skills," he recalls.

At JJ, he went on to be the gold medalist, before getting thrown out of the college! "I was chucked out of JJ in 1992 because I had given an interview where I was asked what is lacking at the institute, so I said we needed a photography studio, we didn't even have a camera!" His

An installation at Bose's exhibition, Ghost/Transmoeir (2007), features tiffin boxes symbolising the chaos in the lives of Mumbaikars

needed to experiment with cameras was adequately met when he resumed his studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London, after eight years.

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Even today, the Indian education system, especially in the arts, lags when it comes to infrastructure and practical knowledge, says Krishnamachari. "When I was a student, it was really difficult to find any contemporary art magazine even at JJ.

Art colleges should get more visiting professors from across the globe. Students need to be aware of contemporary practices, they need education they can use. Art schools don't teach you how to approach a curator or a gallery, or how to write a proposal, or how to edit your works for a show. Today, for an artist, these are important."

He adds: "It is also partly on the students. When I was studying, I would regularly visit studios of other artists, listen to conversations, watch installations being put up, I would even help the artists exhibiting at Jehangir Art Gallery. You have to develop as an editor, as a curator, it is not just about creating artwork."

NEED FOR SPACE

Bose also points out that there is a severe need for public spaces to showcase art. "When you look at Europe, Latin America or the US, or Australia, or even China, they understand the value of soft power and the importance of art and culture. They invest so much in their cultural wealth. In China, in 2011 alone, they built around a thousand museums. Now they are apparently developing a cultural city near Shanghai of a 26-kilometer radius. Although, we have an incredible cultural heritage, we never valued it or utilised it to its fullest potential. Every state should develop at least three contemporary museums. We need curated programming. There are many art shows in India that are not curated. That is another dangerous thing. Then you are just peddling mediocrity..."

He pauses, and adds: "But I must say that today we have a lot of good curators in India and the privately-owned galleries are also focusing on well-curated shows."

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The Mirror Sees Best in the Dark, is on display at Emami Art, Kolkata till March 10



A snapshot of a work by L.N Tallur at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale

