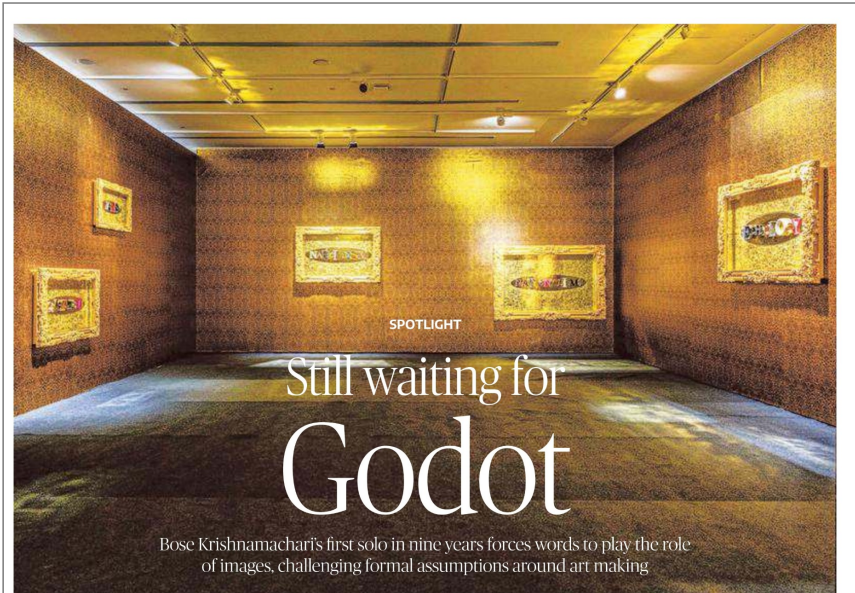


News monitored for: Emami Group



Bose Krishnamachari's first solo in nine years forces words to play the role of images, challenging formal assumptions around art making

Vaishna Roy

Workers were still putting finishing touches to Bose Krishnamachari's ongoing solo show when I visited it at Kolkata's Emami Art, their bustle accentuating a sort of starkness unfolding in the outer spaces of the gallery. Walking into the cavernous room carved out in one corner, I stopped short, assailed by a feeling of having wandered into a chamber in the Versailles Palace of Louis XIV – such was the overpowering presence of gold and opulence and larger-than-life luxury that assaulted the senses.

In the dim-lit room, massive gold-edged frames dominated gold-and-black papered walls and the carpeting hushed one's footsteps. Tentatively, I stepped closer and found giant letters winking and glinting out words within each frame: 'Capitalism', 'God', 'Religion', 'Casteism', 'Racism', 'Narcissism', 'Nationalism', 'Technology', 'Regionalism', 'Chauvinism'. Ten words that framed ten distinct thoughts, ten preoccupations with the present that Krishnamachari is trying to articulate.

For me, the artist's success lay in that moment – that without a word exchanged, the very first thought the show had summoned was that of the *Roi Soleil*, the Sun King with his absolutism, his famous '*l'état, c'est moi*' (I am the state), his legendary self-obsession. Later, stepping back, one saw how Krishnamachari is also trying to contrast the maximalism of that room with the stark minimalism of the metal frames outside with their perforations in Braille that also spell out the same ten words, but now in a script that the sighted cannot decipher.

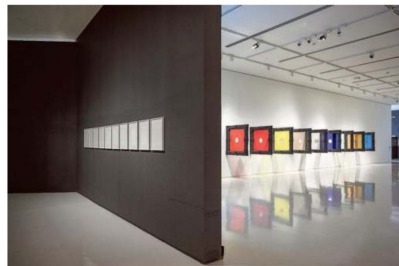
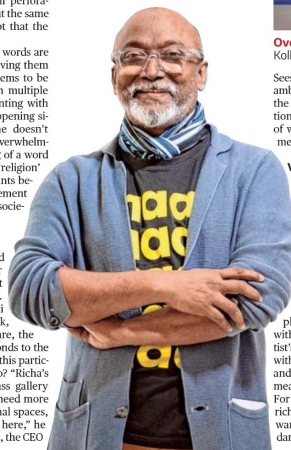
For Krishnamachari, the ten words are like the nine rasas, and by carving them out in various materials he seems to be trying to recreate the rasas in multiple ways, like a dancer experimenting with *abhinaya*. But what is also happening simultaneously is something he doesn't seem to have strived for – an overwhelming sense of irony. The framing of a word like 'casteism' or 'racism' or 'religion' within those giant golden mounts becomes quite a remarkable statement in irony, applicable not only to society but to art itself.

New vocabularies
In fact, this show was intended as the opening exhibition for Emami Art's launch in 2018 but wasn't completed on time. Krishnamachari visited Emami repeatedly before starting work, and although he seems unaware, the show deeply mirrors and responds to the grandiosity of the gallery. Why this particular venue for a comeback solo? "Richa's vision is to make a world-class gallery space, which is very rare. We need more such cultural and conversational spaces, which is why I agreed to open here," he says, referring to Richa Agarwal, the CEO of Emami Art.

This is not an easy exhibition; it doesn't yield quick pleasures or meanings, but that is in line with Krishnamachari's continuing attempts to dramatically change the way society consumes art. This solo, coming nine years after LaVA, the travelling archival show that he ran from 2005 to 2011 to challenge meanings of museums and displays, is as disruptive as that one, smashing preconceived notions of art making and challenging viewers to expand their vocabulary of art.

Why these ten words? "I filtered and edited and brought down all my experiences into these ten words, they are my obsession right now," he says. "They reflect my experience of society and political situations." Krishnamachari has always been a significantly political artist, a sensitivity he extends to the Kochi Biennale, which he co-founded with artist Riya Komu and continues to co-curate, but "I don't make a revolution with it," he says. And that's largely true – even the present solo is not a loud declamation. It winks and dazzles and plays, creating multiple reference points. Artistically, it doffs a hat to conceptualism and to materialism, but also to craft, design and decor. In imagery, it engages with the idea of mirrors – the show is titled 'The Mirror

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Overpowering Bose Krishnamachari's works on display at the ongoing show at Kolkata's Emami Art gallery, and (left) the artist. • EMAMI ART

Sees Best in the Dark' – but it also tackles ambivalence by juxtaposing the stark with the sumptuous; it deals with ornamentation as superfluity; it exposes the danger of words and the hollowing out of their meanings.

Vehicles of meaning

It's interesting to trace how words have always been as important to Krishnamachari as images. He pays a lot of attention to how he titles his shows. LaVA was an acronym for Laboratory of Visual Art; in 1992, he created AnUseM Memorials, where he played with 'amuse', 'aumi', 'muse', 'museum'; he called the Nano car he painted the 'Maximum Nano'; and in this solo, he makes words play the role of images. This fixation with verbiage is an extension of the artist's continuous effort to imbue his works with a conscious symbolism, where form and content both become vehicles of meaning in a highly thought-out process. For example, beneath a wall with nine richly carved frames, he places a saw – "I wanted to show that there is a kind of danger in the ornamentation," he says. And as much as his sheer joy with ma-

teriality is obvious – the ten words are cut out in ceramic, graphite, copper, glass, steel, granite – he is also seeing the Aramula mirror or the polished steel as metaphors for self-obsession. In the outside hall, carved frames protrude from the wall in a series, enclosing multi-coloured acrylic sheets in the centre of which is an irregular mirror reflecting the viewer. "Narcissism is dangerous, it can become capitalism, it can become dictatorship..." he says, going on to talk of how darkness itself reflects light, of light as 'enlightenment', of the journey from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. The words spill over, jostling for space, eager to connect, to illumine. In many ways, this is not a visual exhibition at all – it is as much a verbal and cerebral one. Yet, paradoxically, it also exposes the absurdity of words. As a teenager, Krishnamachari says he was deeply influenced by theatre, by Beckett and Ionesco. And this exhibition manages to suggest, as the artist says earlier in the context of theatre, that we are all, indeed, still waiting for Godot.

On show: 'The Mirror Sees Best in the Dark', Emami Art, Kolkata; till March 10.