

“Becoming a plastic surgeon was the closest thing I could think of to creativity”

Senaka Senanayake, one of South Asia's most recognised and celebrated artists, talks to Akhila Ranganna about his creative process, why he's been painting rainforests, and more.

A painting from Senanayake's 'Homage to the Rainforest', an exhibition hosted at Gallery Sumukha, in Bengaluru, this year



From left: 'The Guardians of the Rainforest', first displayed in New Delhi, in 2009; and Senanayake's early paintings focussed on life in Sri Lanka and vividly captured scenes from daily life there



Senanayake had his first solo exhibition when he was seven

A child prodigy, Senanayake started painting at the age of five and had his first solo exhibition at seven. However, it's when the Sri Lankan went to Yale to study art and architecture — the first time he received any formal training in art — that the dream to become a professional painter finally took shape. Over his illustrious career, the 65-year-old has dabbled in several forms — Cubism, Expressionism and figurative paintings — but over the last two decades, his creative palette has focussed on the verdant and multi-hued beauty of the fast-depleting rainforests, a cause close to his heart. "The outcome of his efforts is a powerful, enchanting, perhaps even hypnotic, world of birds, beasts and beings," wrote art writer and curator Kishore Singh in an introduction to the exhibition 'An Iridescent Land', held at the Tao Gallery in Mumbai in 2013. "You are drawn into his web of hues till you watch helplessly, seduced into submission and compliance. Escape is impossible; the colours inhabit your dreams; they surround you." Senanayake has notched up more than 100 solo exhibitions, exhibiting in some of the most prestigious galleries across the globe in New York, London, Rotterdam, Paris, Moscow, Prague, Tokyo, the Grosvenor galleries the world over, at Sotheby's auctions, and the Art

Alive Galleries in Mumbai and Delhi. Recently, he was in Bangalore, where his new set of paintings, 'Homage to a Rainforest', were being showcased, at Gallery Sumukha.

**You took to painting at a very early age. Can you tell us how that happened?**

When I was in primary school, we had a very progressive teacher. After our lessons, she would put up huge pieces of brown paper on the walls, give us jars of poster colours and say "Today you learnt about Africa, why don't you paint the African animals". Because the sheets were so big, it was quite a different experience, as a kid, to be able to stretch your hand and have the full sweep and range to express, as opposed to normal art, where we would be directed to work on regular A4-sized sheets. I thoroughly enjoyed it. My parents encouraged me to do something at home as well. I started painting lot of scenes and images of life in Sri Lanka. The Chairman of the Arts Council saw my work and was very impressed. He wanted to do a solo exhibition of my paintings at the National Art Gallery. My first show, at the age of seven, was a grand success. An art gallery in San Diego contacted me after reading about my showing in the Christian Science

Monitor, to do an exhibition of my work in the States. My parents agreed, my work was sent, and it was very well-received. That led to many other offers and that's how I started my art career.

**Yale is an important milestone of your career, isn't it?**

My great-grandmother was a very good artist; my mother and grandfather dabbled in art. But none of them was a professional artist, and my parents didn't want me to be one either. They wanted me to go to a university and get a degree. I began to think of medical school and becoming a plastic surgeon as that was the closest thing to creativity I could think of. Then I met this gentleman from the Smithsonian Institute who was passing through Sri Lanka. He came home, saw my paintings and advised me to try for a top American university like Princeton or Yale as they offered scholarships. I secured a full scholarship to both and chose Yale. I majored in Art and Architecture with my minor in Political Science. Yale was the first time I worked with other artists, got any formal training in art, studied art history and this was a catalyst for my work and opened so many doors, and was a wonderful experience. Also I was lucky that 1968-72 was when all the exciting things in America were taking place: the anti-war movement,

Black Panthers, Jimi Hendrix, Woodstock. I was there for the change and it inspired me tremendously. I did revolutionary paintings, experimented with crazy things. You go through all these experiences and then finally end up with what you want to do in life.

**What got you interested in making rainforests the subject of your paintings?**

My cousin, who lived in Ecuador, took me to the Sinharaja Forest reserve in the south-west of Sri Lanka. While I had been to many national forests, like the Yala National Park, this was my first visit to a rainforest. I saw birds, butterflies, plants, monkeys, lizards, a rainforest leopard that I had never seen anywhere else in the world; there were huge trees with shafts of light coming through them. My cousin told me that more than 70 per cent of the rainforests had been lost, thanks to the British and subsequent political apathy, but in the last 15 years, the governments had realised their importance and were trying to reforest and preserve what is left. He advised me to make use of my skill and popularise the importance of saving the rainforest. That's how I got inspired. I am also concerned about the state of today's corals. They are losing their brilliant colours



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While studying at Yale (1968-1972), Senanayake was exposed to a variety of influences, including Jimi Hendrix and his music, which served as a catalyst for his craft

and getting bleached white due to the changing PH balance of the water due to global warming. I also want to make people aware of the need to preserve these reefs.

**Your paintings are full of positivity. What is the reason for that?**

The people who will listen to me are the youth. Our generation has messed up the world, and they won't change. But if the young realise that their grandchildren and great grandchildren will not have a world to live in, we can hope for change, as they will be our leaders of the future. So I decided to focus on positive paintings: showing them the beauty and variety of the foliage, the birds and butterflies, and see how it inspires them. I want children to look at my paintings and get excited with what they see, and then tell them that we could soon be losing everything. They will then get upset, and that is what I want: a reaction. They will go home, talk to their elders; the pressurising process starts there.

**Can you take us through your creative process? How does your vision develop and change?**

It evolves. I start with a basic idea, and as I paint it changes. I start off with the canvas on charcoal, and halfway through I change it if I am conceded about the colour balance, distribution and composition. Sometimes, when I do the sketch, it may not turn out the way I want it to work, then I make

changes. Each painting is a different brushstroke. Some paintings take four to five days, some more than two weeks. My paintings have many different layers, so I have to wait for one to dry before I start on the next. So I paint two-three paintings at a time. I work out of a studio in the garage at the back of the house. I don't need absolute silence or anything like



From 'Homage to The Rainforest'



Dalí's "Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man", 1943



Salavador Dalí, with his Surrealism, was one of Senanayake's influences

that when I am painting; the phone is ringing, people are visiting and my grandchildren are running about. Yes, when I am thinking about what to paint and sketch, then I do it in some quiet time. That is when I am coming up with the initial concept, putting the charcoal on the canvas to make the sketch. Once I have mentally worked out what to do, it becomes a mechanical process. Each painting excites me as I do it, each is a new experience. But I don't get attached to anything once done; I move on.

**All your paintings have circles in them. Why is that?**

One reason I use it is that it creates rhythm and movement. And the other is because of the concept of No Beginning, No End: the eternal cycle of life, The Wheel. This is a Buddhist philosophy and is there in all my work, as I am a Buddhist.

**Your paintings stand out for their bold brushstrokes and even brighter colours. Are the colours so bright in reality?**

Yes, there are. Sometimes even brighter. What I do is that I take birds and foliage from different sources and put it together and create a painting. The painting with the three ginger flowers: all the ginger may not be from the same forest, one may be from Papua New Guinea, one from South America and so on. I have used macaws from Brazil — the rainforest for me is a global issue. Bold brushstrokes depend a lot on your

technical skill and confidence. If you are not confident, you will be in a bit of mess, and your paintings will be wishy-washy.

**I have read that you are an avid follower of Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi...**

Yes, I do follow Sri Sathya Baba of Puttaparthi. In one of his discourses he talked about how happiness is sandwiched between sadness and the power of positive action. That was what got me thinking about painting positively about rainforests. I was thinking whether I should do a mixture of burnt forests and the beauty in them, and then I realised the need to be happy and positive. Those discourses had a big influence on me.

**Who are the painters whose work you admire? Any artists/art movements that have influenced you?**

The Indian artists I admire are [MF] Husain, Satish Gujral, Jehangir Sabavala, SH Raza and Anjali Menon, among others. I don't like everything they do, but only some of their work. There are many art movements that have influenced me in the different stages of my career. In the early years, it was the Impressionist movement, then the German Expressionism, then it became Picasso and Cubism, Dalí and his Surrealism works, and then the more contemporary artists — the masters I just mentioned. ○