

# Dialogues IN COLOUR

Colombo-based Senaka Senanayake's latest body of work is a journey through the disappearing rainforests of the world, finds **Nikita Puri**



A turning point in Senaka Senanayake's life was the visit to Sri Lanka's rainforests



In Bengaluru's Gallery Sumukha, moving from one canvas to another classifies as a virtual safari in a tropical jungle for the time being. The artworks here paint a picture of a world far removed from the concretisation one has become so accustomed to. In this world, flowers seem to take on the yellowness of the sun, and dragonflies share as much canvas-space as elephants and butterflies. Tucked behind layers of thriving life and foliage, shadowy greys find no place in Senaka Senanayake's work.

Colombo-based Senanayake's work has often been a celebration of life in all its multi-hued splendour, and this solo exhibition, called *Homage to the Rainforest*, fits right in his jubilant repertoire. One of Sri Lanka's most sought-after artists and the grand-nephew of the country's first prime minister, Senanayake grew up being



encouraged to study medicine, and paint only as a hobby. But when Yale and Princeton both offered him a full scholarship to study art, "the family had to agree," says the 65-year-old who finally studied art and architecture at Yale from 1968 to 1972.

"As a foreign student on scholarship, it wasn't taken too kindly when I marched on Washington's streets, demanding the return of American troops from Vietnam," says Senanayake. "That was my time of

experimentation, I tried everything from cubism to impressionism."

Formal education in art, he believes, is important as it throws open one's mind to the many possibilities of style and form. After he returned home from college, Senanayake continued to paint, never wanting to venture into politics. And when a cousin talked him into visiting the rainforests in Sri Lanka, it proved to be a significant turning point in Senanayake's life. For the last two decades, his work has been marked by a distinct cause — the conservation of these forests.

When the British came to Sri Lanka, they cleared out huge tracts of forest areas for rubber and tea plantations. But they would leave a small patch on top of these estates because they knew that these brought rainfall, says Senanayake, who first exhibited his work when he was 10.

"After Independence, the forests continued to be chopped, but no one left behind patches anymore. Only 30 per cent of the original rainforests remain. But this isn't just about Sri Lanka, it's about conserving nature," he adds.

"There is nothing between the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka and Antarctica. If icebergs melt there, half of Sri Lanka will be gone. And that'll just be the start," Senanayake understands that while island-countries will be the first casualty of global warming, the rest of the world will not remain untouched by the events that follow.

He says he could have painted depleted forest reserves or melting ice caps, but negativity never inspires anyone. It is this line of thought that encouraged Premilla Baid of Gallery Sumukha to invite Senanayake as the gallery celebrates 20 years of showcasing art. "Senanayake's work uplifts you," she says.

While translucent orbs drawn atop foliage highlight Senanayake's Buddhist's beliefs and the circle of life, horses painted mid-leap and hummingbirds drawn mid-flight show how his works are part of a bigger picture. These scenes are but fragments of the story of tropical rainforests where mushroom and ginger flowers thrive alongside elephants and macaws.

The show is on at Gallery Sumukha, Bengaluru, till August 27