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A rainforest in a city

Senaka Senanayake's tropical foliage uncovers the destruction wrought by urban living



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Avantika Bhuyan





Senaka Senanayake.

The warm rays of the sun lend a luminous glow to the curling banana leaves on one canvas; on another, butterflies, painted in a coruscating kaleidoscope of colours, are perched on vibrant flowers. Looking at these works, it is hard to believe that during his early years at Yale in the US, where he studied art and architecture from 1968-72, Senaka Senanayake used to paint images of suffering and sadness.

“Negativity never inspires anyone,” says the Sri Lankan master, who will be showcasing *Homage to the Rainforest*, a new set of paintings at Gallery Sumukha, Bengaluru, from 1 August.

“To mark the 20th year of Gallery Sumukha, I wanted to showcase an international artist who has not been shown in Bengaluru before. And Senaka was the perfect choice as he has a huge following in the south,” says Premilla Baid, founder-director of the gallery.

Anyone who has followed Senanayake’s work over the past two decades would know that rainforests have been a recurring theme, though he has dabbled in several forms—cubism, expressionist and figurative—since he returned from Yale. A chance visit to a Sri Lankan rainforest with an environmentalist cousin who was visiting from Ecuador was a flashpoint for the artist, who saw flowers, foliage, birds, butterflies, insects that he hadn’t

set eyes on before. He came across rare plants, such as a water lily that was able to fuse a broken leaf to its stem. “Ayurvedic doctors in Sri Lanka use pulp from branches for repairing broken bones,” says Senanayake. “And I realized that this world might soon disappear as we had already lost 70% of the Sri Lankan rainforests.”

The biggest shock came when his cousin took him to the tea estates in the Sri Lankan highlands. Lush rainforests had once flourished in gay abandon here—but the colonial masters had hacked these to make way for tea and rubber plantations. “Then they realized that there will be no rain without these forests, so they left a small patch on top of every estate,” says Senanayake.

He felt he was faced with a choice—to either paint a violent and gloomy picture or to show the magical realm of the rainforests in all their glory. He chose the latter, also turning to religious discourses on positivity for inspiration.

Senanayake uses colour as a trope, whether in his current works or in past shows like *In An Iridescent Land*, *Lost Horizons* or *Paradise Lost?*. It startles you out of a stupor and draws you, as if in a hypnotic trance, into a vanishing world of flora and fauna.



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Senanayake is popular with collectors like Sri Lanka-based Mohan Tissainayagam or B.H. Surtani from Singapore. In a world riven by gloom and despair, his work shows that there is something out there worth fighting for.

“Senaka Senanayake, critics say, is a painter of our vanishing environment. Collectors say he paints rainforests. Both miss the point—for Senaka is, first and foremost, a painter of colours,” wrote art writer and curator Kishore Singh in an introduction to the exhibition, *In An Iridescent Land*, held at the Tao Gallery, Mumbai, in 2013. For Senanayake, the use of colour has one fortunate consequence—children love his shows. “Young children come to my shows and the first thing that they notice is colour. Images of butterflies, heliconias

and macaws gets them all excited. So, they tell their parents that they want to see a hibiscus or a bird like the ones in the paintings,” explains Senanayake. “That’s when they realize the joy of a rainforest. At least my work gets them interested in the concept.”

Senanayake’s paintings are important documentation of a fast-disappearing ecosystem. The images are not fanciful reconstructions of a memory, but depictions of what actually exists. The cicadas, torch ginger, hummingbirds, ferns and frogs are lifelike. His studio in Colombo is surrounded by a lush tropical garden teeming with flora and bugs. The only artistic licence he allows himself is to place plants and birds from different rainforests together on the same canvas.

Marine life too has begun to find place in his paintings. As a child, he loved snorkelling or pottering around the beaches close to his home town. “However, when I take my grandchildren to the same locations, we see that the once vibrant corals are now absolutely white due to bleaching. There is no fish. The pH content of water has changed due to global warming,” he explains. If this continues, he adds, a time will come when half of Sri Lanka will be submerged under water.

For Senanayake, art and activism are interlinked, and he takes his role, as a crusader creating awareness about the destruction wrought by materialism, very seriously. “I am not a businessman or a politician. I am an artist and only have my paintbrush to communicate,” he says. “We can’t turn the destruction around, but we can save what we have. You through your pen and me through my brush.”

Homage To The Rainforest will be open from 1-27 August, 10.30am-6pm (Sundays closed), at Gallery Sumukha, 24/10 BTS Depot Road, Wilson Garden, Bengaluru. The paintings start at ₹ 6 lakh.



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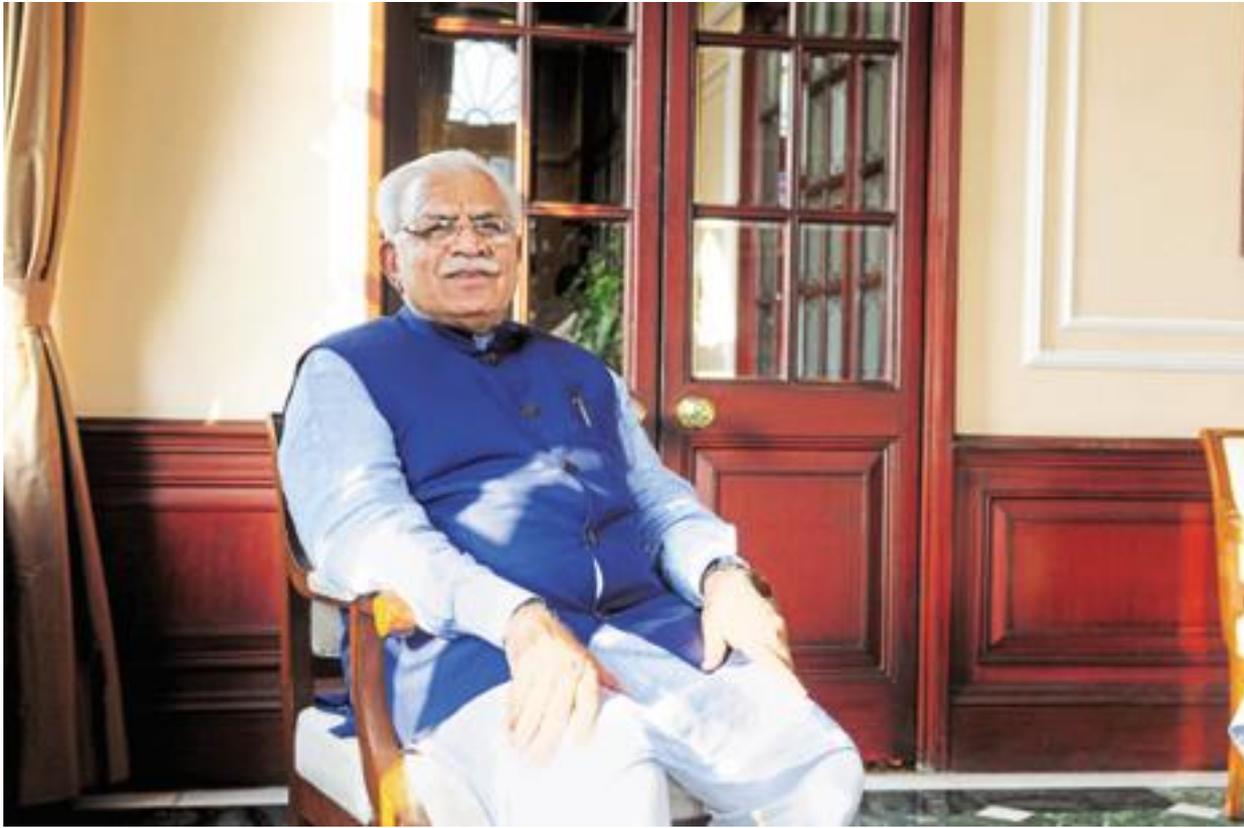
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