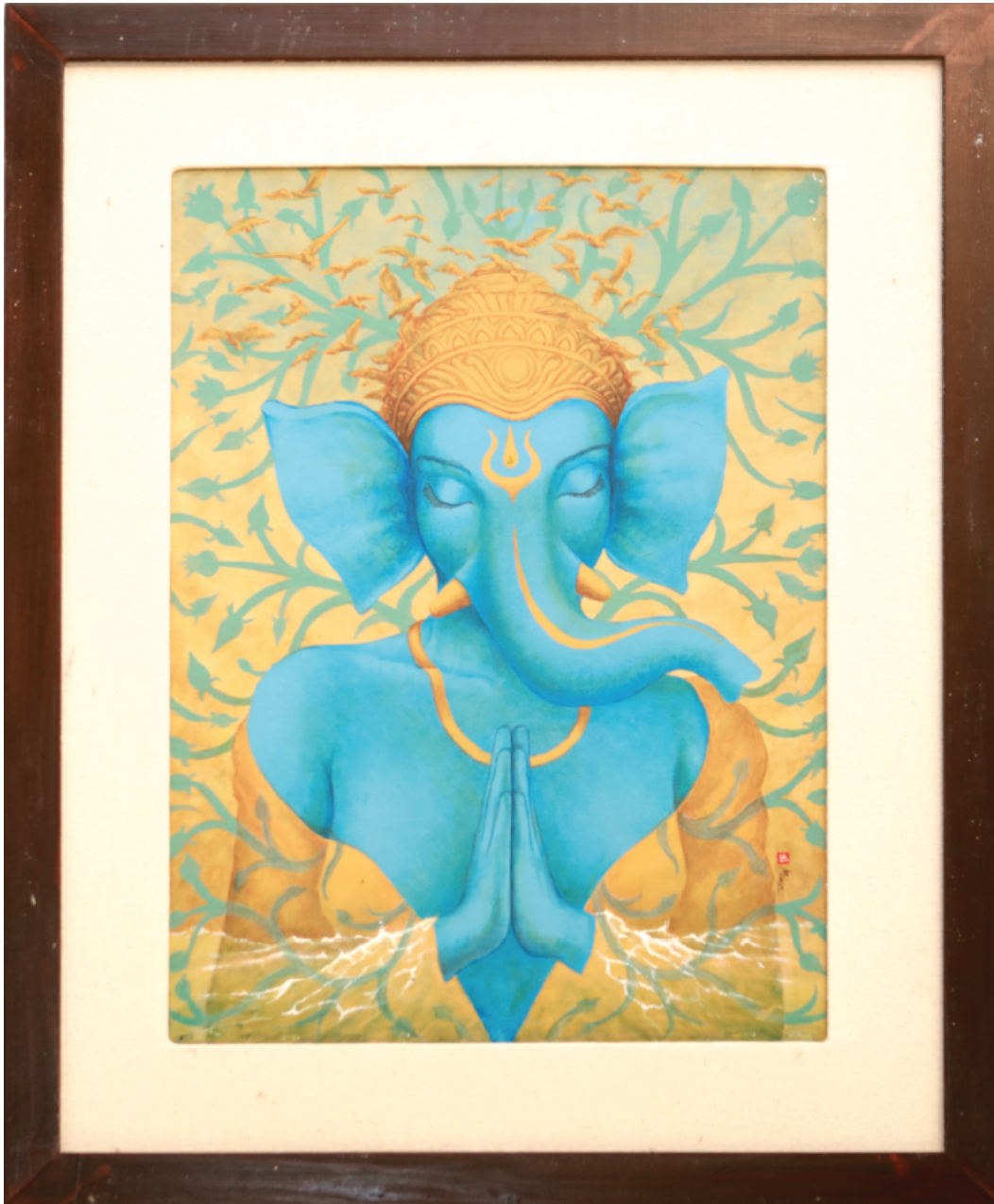


Mahen Chanmugam celebrates Ganesha by exploring his own spiritual ideas through the deity. Through a rich and vivid color palette, he manifests the much-loved god in different perspectives in an authentic and instinctive gush of tenderness. His one subject - Ganesha, is depicted so solemnly in many forms, making every painting fascinating, like the deity himself, full of meaning and allegory. He invites those exploring for a universal purpose beyond the self and into the vast world to his latest exhibition of paintings, Ganeshaism5, at the Barefoot Art Gallery from June 1 - 24, 2023.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.



Seen through the artist's own emotions, the female form of the deity in reflection.

Can one muse become an enduring love story for an artist who captures his fascination with the elephant-headed god in countless moods and moments? The artist's imagination renders the deity in some of the most breathtakingly imaginative canvas compositions, in reflective and jocund temperaments, through nature, and within nature, on lotuses and leaves, the buoyant deity dancing in joy or floating sublimely. His soft eyes and muted gaze are

canvasses for meditation. A window to the soul. Ganesha is Mahen Chanmugam's creative universe of expression. His inspiration opens his mind's eye to an outpouring of deeply personal messages bearing universal significance. His work is worship in strokes, unveiling an inner conversation with his beloved deity. But there is more to what meets the eye, an artist's outpouring of emotions through a study of Ganesha's iconography, with far-reaching cosmic significance for Mahen. It is a visceral connection and complex relationship.

Mahen's paintings render a quality of mysticism that demand careful study through an exploration of complex concepts like the nature of consciousness - individual and universal, the idea of inner worlds, the interconnectedness of all things, and the relationship between humanity and the universe, the creation of the universe and everything within it, of emotions of love and joy, pleasure and of gratitude and humility. The muse in Ganesha stands in his presence, in his mind, and guides his hand on canvas, creating images and stories that transcend convention that even the artist sometimes wrestles with understanding.

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To understand Mahen's paintings, one must know the symbolism behind the physical form of Ganesha. Beyond the manifestation of Ganesha's body lies the obscure symbol. Every aspect of the deity, from the elements surrounding him, his body, and the drawings on them to the articles he holds, are symbols of spiritual truths of meditation. Wisdom and intellect are signified by his large head. His trunk represents change. He is a keen listener with large ears. His mouth symbolizes the natural human desire to enjoy life. His tusks mean wisdom and emotion. His belly is the whole universe, the one who holds sway over the material universe, gravity being his potency. The snake around his waist is the energy that has the universe together. The Thrishul tells of his mastery over time. The mouse represents ego and hence the need to control it. Full of mystic potency, Ganesha is a deity closest to the material plane of consciousness.

Fundamentally, Mahen depicts Ganesha in his various classical forms, 32 in all, a manifestation of his traits. Ganesha, the powerful, the youthful, the happy dancer, the flutist, the creator, the deity with the noose and the goad in the mudras, orange, red, and golden-hued, in green and blue, bedecked in jewels. His various forms are hewed into the artist's imagination to create a connection to universal truths and lived experiences. Ganesha, the god of beginnings, outlaid in the lotus, symbolizing fertility and creation and representing life's cyclic nature. The coming of the lotus through the mud, wilting and returning to the very foundations from which it burst forth, an unbroken rotation like everything in the world, night and day, and the human evolution from the fetus to a return to the same in old age. The deity riding on his resourceful mouse, the victorious granter of success, or like Mushika at Ganesha's feet, the human ego must remain subdued away from our heads low down at our feet.

Mahen uses spiritual art to birth new ideas and to push people to the realm of reflection, to think beyond the surface into the profound. And so, through Ganesha's constancy, Mahen captures a range of emotions and themes in his paintings. For instance, his collection of paintings of silhouettes and feminine forms with Ganesha commingled in "God Within" conveys that divinity, or spiritual awakening, is found in the self, from within and not from the outside. A celebration of individual freedom to explore spiritual truth outside religious doctrines and to personally experience a spiritual element within us. In God Within, Mahen reveals Vinayaki, the female form of Ganesha, the unexplored one. In revealing Vinayaki, he also reveals the duality of nature, the masculine and feminine elements of all living creatures and inanimate objects. He depicts nature as a living testament to duality, woman and man as composite opposites, side by side, cohabiting and interdependent, and everything in nature operating within a strict set of natural laws that produces order, structure, and meaning.

His complex collection of paintings depicting the "Inner Worlds" draws upon the Vedic tradition of multiple levels of reality, of universal truth beyond our physical world, both inner and outer worlds. The outer world is a combination of the sensory perceptions of the human mind. The inner world is a space of consciousness extending beyond the mind and our physical senses. The complexity of this narrative is hard to imagine, but Mahen expresses this theme through the face of Ganesha. He describes it as an inner energy that works deeply within the human, within the human's spiritual domain, and within the depths of the mind. In "One Man's God is Another Man's Nature", Mahen conveys the personal nature of human perception and interpretation of divinity, suggesting that there is no one correct way of understanding the world, that different perspectives and beliefs can coexist and be equally valid.

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He explores sexuality and new beginnings through his symbolic representation of the Thrishul, the trident extended into depicting the yoni and the lingam, the cobra coalesced as the yoni surrounding the lingam as the divine cosmic energy of Kundalini, which rises through our body as a sexual force. This energy is represented by the coiled snake residing at the base of the spine or the Muladhara where Ganesha resides. Kundalini means an elemental force or energy which rises to reach the head, causing a profound transformation of consciousness over the physical self, an expression of pleasure and spiritual bliss in unison.

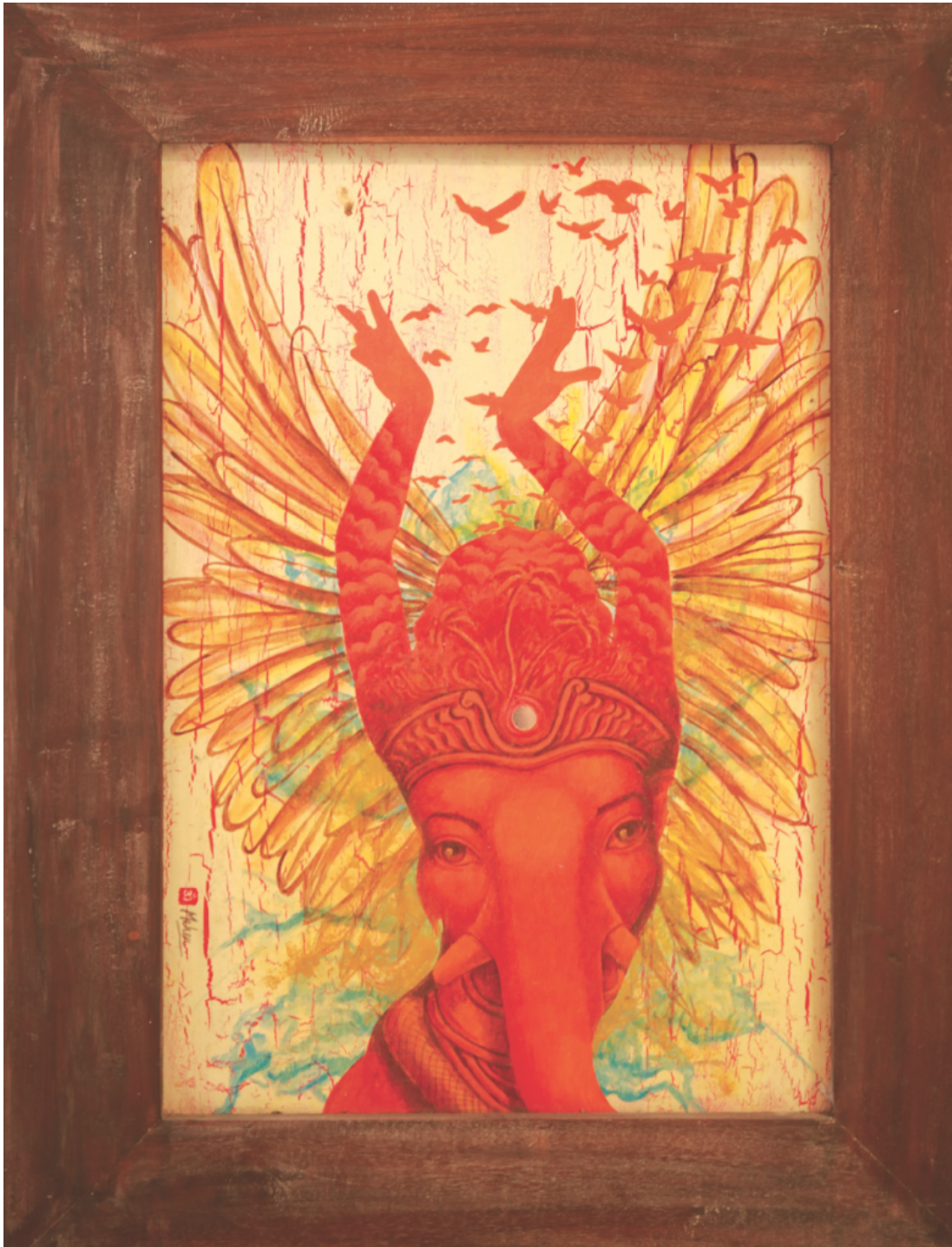
Mahen is a self-taught artist who has always returned to his passion for painting, even while working in media and the creative industry in the Asian region. Today, art has become his occupation, where he finds the space to immerse himself entirely and wholeheartedly in his core subject - Ganesha, who signifies new beginnings, and so is Mahen's journey. His spiritual journey began the day he found peace with Ganesha when he stepped outside his mind to embrace an unknown higher knowledge. His newfound meaning with Ganesha turned into an exploration, an interaction, and meditation on seeking the truth. As he transports into a cosmos of divine interaction through painting, he sees god in nature, the woman and the man, and everything soft, pleasant, and beautiful. That, for Mahen, is an exposition of spirituality that reveal somber yet powerful sentiments of devotion.



Ganesha through nature - That there is no one correct way of seeing or understanding the world.



Mahen Chanmugam in conversation, painstakingly explaining his philosophy of everything Ganesha.



One of his paintings is from a collection of silhouettes and female forms titled Wings.



Where Ganesha Dwells

From the Inner Worlds collection.



The complex thoughts of the artist painted on canvas, depicting nature and energy through a series of paintings titled Microcosm and Macrocosm (V).



Path to Release (II) - One of Mahen's earliest paintings of Ganesha in a joyful mood playing the tabla.

Where Ganesha Dwells



One of multiple interpretations of the much-loved deity.



The veritable gallery is Mahen's residence.



Rising energy - The Kundalini Shakti.



Mahen is a self-taught artist who explores spirituality in the form of god through Ganeshaism5