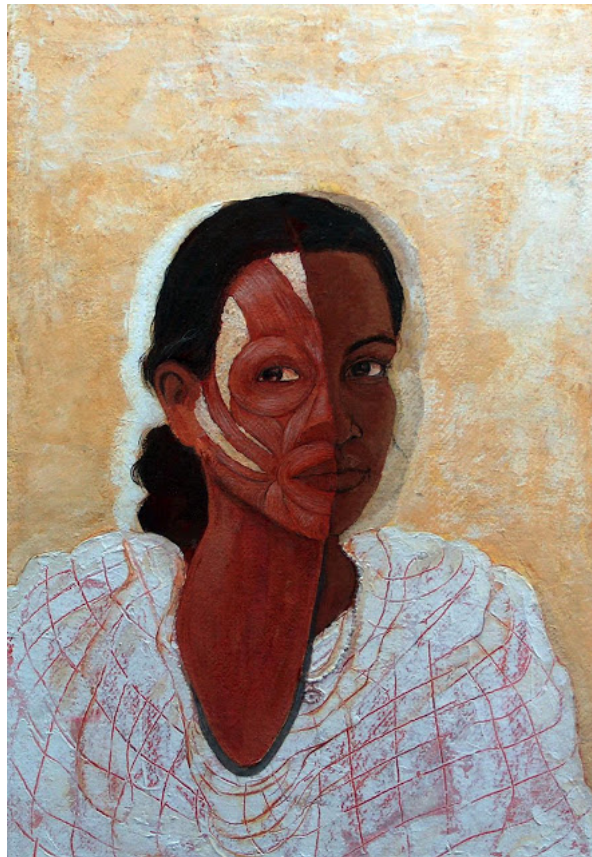


# RE-BIRTH

## The Art of K. Benitha Perciyal

It is hard to believe that eight years have passed since I first met Benitha Perciyal at Lalit Kala Akademi in Chennai. She was an immediately impressive artist, able to articulate through her work and through her words her artistic message. This combination is actually rather rare. This exhibition at The Noble Sage charts the changes of Perciyal's work from 2004 to 2008, a seminal period in her career so far. The earliest piece from this first visit to Chennai is 'Nothing Else' (2004). As was often the case back then, her art had a rawness of approach, her self-portraits owning a dark edge and a self-exploitative element. In this work for example, one sees Perciyal use texture to convey the closeness of bone beneath her face's skin. The effect is eerie, as if we are undressing her face with our eyes, yet the portrait shows the artist peaceful.



As Perciyal has explained in interview, she has always felt neglected. Making herself the subject matter of her work made and continues to make great sense. In her changing work she is constantly revising the meaning of self-portraiture, stretching its boundaries to include exploration of her physiology, her mental state, her personal growth, her soul and spirituality, her role in society and indeed her sense of what it is to be a woman.

Perciyal has often used (loosely) loaded motifs such as 'the seed' and indeed this is a form that binds this exhibition. In 'Untitled' (2006) a pod of seeds is meticulously created within the central varnished silhouette of Perciyal herself. We see the seeds before we see her perhaps implying that we are literally our years of growth and change. Seeds also divide the portrait in 'Sketchbook Series' III (2006). Here used in a patterned manner, we start to see Perciyal's artistic attention to detail and decoration combined with her stylised and simplified silhouette form. We also see the artist's interest in organic materials and media. Her interest since 2006 has been to work as much as possible with naturally-born media (the colour created from soil, cardamom, saffron, ground leaves etc) on naturally-made materials such as handmade paper or other surfaces and fabrics she has collected on her numerous trips abroad and throughout India. In some ways the material individuality of these substances and materials appear to be the only way that the artist can articulate her own make-up and self.



The subject of her body, on a molecular level, as a woman in particular, and also indeed physiologically in relation to the psyche, is considered and explored in many of the examples from 2007. In 'Diptych' (2007) Percival examines her internal space and relates it to a vessel. The structure of the skeleton is notably erroneous indicating something *greater* than the mere physicality of our bodies and hinted at in the soulful glow of the contents of the bottle in the counter image. In 'Endless Loop' (2007) her own female reproductive organs are described subtly, again relating imagery in form to seeds but also cells and DNA. The subtlety of imagery is astonishingly effective. We cannot help but look inside the artist and invade her privacy. The title likewise suggests ideas like the circle of life, inevitability of motherhood and indeed the certainty of maturity and death. 'Untitled' I (2007) again looks at her anatomy, reconfiguring her body, making herself stand out as different from everyone else. This is an evocation of selfhood and individuality.





Perciyal's spiritual values and their effect on her body is also conveyed in some of her works from this year. One is drawn in particular to 'Without a Pattern' (2007) which by contrast is heavily patterned with her circular rice paper 'feathering'. Is this ironic title the artist pointing to religion and its in-built (unproven) ideas on fate and destiny? One notes the slightly pink nipples and of course the more pronounced halo. The work in this way relates itself to Christian images of the Virgin and other martyred female saints. One is faced with an image of the artist's own sacrifice, perhaps due to her profession in a predominantly male dominated South Indian art world.

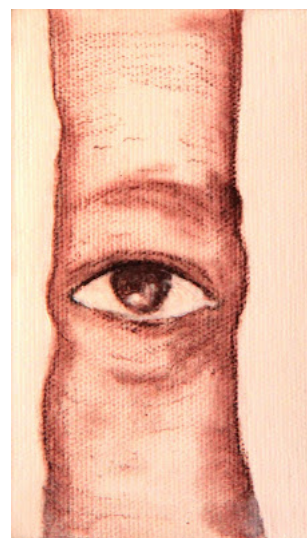


In 2008, the psychological aspect of some of Perciyal's work lessened as new softer themes emerged. She began to use the materiality of her natural mediums to bring a sensation of warmth and familiarity for the viewer. Colours and textures exuded a new welcoming aspect in their choice and execution that no doubt reflected the mental wellbeing of the young artist. A good example is 'Self-Portrait with Squirrel' (2008) from the 'Jerry' series of works. Jerry is her pet squirrel that she befriended in the Lalit Kala Akademi studio. Today she looks after Jerry and his growing family, like a mother, with kindness and love. It has awakened in her feelings she wasn't aware she had as well as given her a new understanding of those little sweet things of life that are so easily overlooked. In this work, the artist hides in the background, a fragile receding ghost, lending a shoulder to her pet represented by contrast in full colour. It is the artist surrendering to the biological urge to mother, to relinquish

existence for the sake of one's baby.



In the most recent works in the exhibition, created during her London stay in 2008 and never displayed before at The Noble Sage, Perciyal continues to show her love of materials and newly found imagery. 'Untitled' (Leaf) (2008) and 'Untitled' (Bark with eye) (2008) both were inspired by a visit to Tate Modern. Rather than the art within the building, it was the trees outside that inspired both these works. Typical of the artist, it is in nature that she sees herself and her art rather than in the messages of other artists.



In 'Untitled' (2008), Perciyal uses her classic rice paper 'feathering' effect along with acrylic paint and subtle drawing in pencil and brown conte. Both works have the bulbous conte shape, though in one the shape sprouts from a boat to produce a house. It suggests change: from nomadic freedom to stability and strength of place. In the partner piece, the Perciyal profile emerges from the bulb shape which in turn comes out of a vase like a bouquet. Again change and personal growth is the theme here. Seen together, these works are reassuring for the viewer; a diptych dedicated to the artist's new place in the world. Neglected no more.



**'Re-Birth: The Art of K. Benitha Perciyal'** runs from the 10th June until the 6th July 2013. To view the exhibition or see artworks in person, contact the gallery on 07901944997 or by email on [info@thenoblesage.com](mailto:info@thenoblesage.com). If you would like to gather more information on any of these works or on the artist, click on this [link](#).