

# mythical menagerie

Laced with irony and inspired by human and animal legends, Viraj Naik's work is an explosion of brilliant imagination, with hybrid images often executed with a bizarre slant; yet his treatment is imbued with empathy, displaying, on closer scrutiny, the similarity his creations share with man. He is of the belief that humans and animals have the same instincts, but man carefully camouflages these senses and other animal-like qualities.

Naik's world of creatures, monsters and animals beguiles the senses. He explores the strangeness of hybridization that has been present since pre-historic times, evolved in the world of myths, with images of gods and demons.

Naik creates his mythical animal realm juxtaposed with human beings, a reality in hybrid nature, where consciousness and perceptions run parallel, as he gently insinuates his wonderful stories through his work in his inimitable style, which has subtle messages of equality and harmony.

He uses his mystical world as a vehicle to convey his beliefs which his images do not disclose directly, but by teasing the viewer's imagination.

The artist's amazing journey of creativity starts with his drawings. His artistic anxiety emerges, giving birth to his imagination, using flora fauna, color and other devices combining sometimes to make his images bear a frightening grotesque ugliness. It may seem that Naik's fantasy drawings are worthy of the futuristic world but that does not detract from the artist's projection of his extraordinary ideas on paper. He wishes to make his real world of dreams come true with surrealistic imagery and supernatural aspiration.

"The presence of aesthetics in nature attracts my consciousness, always inspiring me. It serves as a time to search for the essence of visual pleasure with a difference, perceived by the eye, the mind and the soul," says Naik.

His use of line and space is lyrical in "Jovial"

where a tortoise has the face of a man smoking a pipe as he views a butterfly with a fish face, both happy with each other.

In the same vein is “Prim” where a butterfly bears a man’s face only to be confronted by a child on all fours with a dog’s features and a snake twining itself around his visage, indicating that there is place for all in this world.

“As I draw, the narration of cause makes reality transform into visual elements, to construct an image of self. Pure thinking, clear ideas, variable contours, enrich the velocity of the draughtsman. The object has its linearity, covered with a mass of textures that hide its skeleton. There is a constant investigation to refine classical finesse in my work, for qualitative hybridization of post surrealism. The drawing will always be continued as records of human civilization. It will be followed as the purifier of my soul, the highest form of expression for mankind’s existence,” explains the artist.

Born in Goa, Naik trained at the Goa College

of Art at Panjim and then went on to the Central University in Hyderabad. He followed this up with a course in printmaking under the well-known Laxma Goud at the Sarojini Naidu School of Fine Arts in Hyderabad.

The artist represents the unusual spirit of true Goa with pride, displaying a deep understanding of its bond with the rest of the world. There are many layers in his work that cannot be ignored. His images reflect his search for identity, realising and understanding others and his own inner self.

Naik’s work is redolent with detail as he executes idiosyncratic images in ink and pastels. His precision and well crafted images have an intensity that makes his wildest interpretations plausible as he communicates his universal dream.

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and boundary conditions, individuals caught up in the turbulence of change and communities overtaken by forces from beyond their psychic or physical environment.

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Viraj is a connoisseur of strangeness. Born in Penha de Franca, Goa, in 1975 and raised in his home state, Viraj trained as an artist at the Goa College of Art in Panjim, and later at the Central University, Hyderabad. He has lived outside Goa for several years, and shown his work in Bombay and Delhi, among other metropolitan centres. Thus, he knows what it means to explain himself as the bearer of an Indo-Iberian cultural identity to fellow Indians who assume the master narrative of British India and the Gandhian freedom struggle to apply equally to all regions of South Asia. They forget that Goa emerges from the specificities of another historical dynamic, from an Indian Ocean internationalism that predates our contemporary globalisation by two millennia; from a vexed yet productive engagement with Portuguese political history and Lusitanian culture.

Goa was a nodal point in a circuit of trade and cultural exchange that linked India's western coast variously to the Roman Orient, East Africa, the Arab world and China. The Enlightenment came to Portuguese-ruled Goa before it arrived in British-ruled India, from French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese sources; for a time in the early 20th century, Goa was not a colony but a long-distance province in the Republic of Portugal, before it was overthrown by a right-wing clique of intriguers and military officers. The stereotypes of sun, sand and a relaxed ease verging on indolence, commonly associated with Goa, render this complex cultural matrix a considerable injustice.

Against such a backdrop of ignorance and indifference, an artist like Viraj Naik becomes, not only a representative voice from an undervalued region, but, just as importantly, an ambassador of strangeness. His art speaks of an otherness that subsumes variance, dissidence, foreignness, which pose a challenge or a counter-definition to the condition widely accepted as normality. Viraj's art urges us to question our assumptions about self, identity, belonging and direction. By confronting us with figures and tableaux from heterotopias, places of otherness, he obliges us to accept that we are all guilty of a certain xenography: a representation of others through generalisations and suspicions, on the basis of species, ethnicity, race, religion or nation. He shows us, also, that many of these others are in fact dimensions of the self. And he empowers us, through his testimony, to advance from antagonism and suspicion to a calibrated understanding of self and others.

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# SPEAKING OF OTHERNESS

## Recent Works by Viraj Naik

Ranjit Hoskote

To enter the world of Viraj Naik is to make landfall on the island of Dr Moreau. As though retracing H G Wells' dystopic fantasia of that title – in which a deranged scientist is discovered to have isolated himself on a jungle island peopled by animals that he has re-formatted into humanoid creatures – Viraj populates his works with unidentifiable chimeras, cyborgs and monsters. There is high-spirited irony and a brooding defiance to these portraits, yet also a tenderness and sympathy. Arising from a capacious laboratory of the mind, Viraj's hybrid creatures are welded together from human, legendary, animal and mechanical elements; but, in the effect they have on us, they are far more than merely the sum of their disparate parts. Masked as predators, camouflaged in the costume of visitants, these creatures are – on closer examination – readable as versions of ourselves. We realise this with a chill, for they are portraits of ourselves as translated into the language of instinct and raw desire, motive and even delusion.

Horned and maned, armour-plated and hide-encased, many of Viraj's hybrids are midway between the mediaeval knight and the buffalo soldier: these warriors of the psyche make their way and establish their camps in landscapes that are febrile, tropically fertile in menace and uncertainty. The richly grotesque appearance of these figures may hold us at a distance at first, and our sense of their place in a fabular script also allows us to disclaim any kinship with them. But they oblige us to attend to their stories, which are implied rather than stated. And we see, then, that these figures represent the roles we could adopt as alternative selves: these are figures that sleep in our subconscious and come into play through the force of predicament, the treason of circumstance.

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Viraj works like a jeweller whose gemstone is the detail: every one of his paintings and drawings grows from the embodiment of limb, metal, cloth, rock, leaf and water; each feature rendered with a precision so focused as to become hallucinatory in its intensity. Trained in the subtleties of print-making under the redoubtable Laxma Goud at the Sarojini Naidu School of Fine Art, Hyderabad, Viraj knows how to shuttle between authorship and contingency, between the controlled finesse of a well-crafted image and the unpredictable idiosyncrasies of material and duration. Process, for this artist, is not an excuse for effects incidental and accidental, but rather, a means of playing between an outline in the mind and the various possible articulations that ink, grain, graphite, humidity and dryness will allow it to make.

For his imagery, Viraj draws upon a number of parallel archives: natural history, with its abundance of snouts, horns, hooves, claws and wings; political history, with its flamboyant dramatis personae of emperors, viceroys, demon-haunted clerics, shrewd chieftains and tiger-striped dictators; Indic wisdom literature, with its tableaux of astute foxes, stentorian lions, wise birds and resourceful monkeys; and science fiction, with its freight of improbability traps



## Beastly tales from here and there

Viraj Naik inhabits a world of fantastical beings. Creating his own mythologies, Naik traverses from the world of the credible to create the incredible; he achieves this with a stroke of his ink pen, his graphite pencil or his colour tipped brush. With a leap of his imagination, he enters the world of hybrid sprites and benign ogres.

This Goa based artist has a flair for humour running in his veins, one that has struggled and wrestled free of his earlier melancholic musings. At The Goa College of Art in 1998, Naik was tutored in the skill of applying paint on canvas, more importantly though he finally had a venue to unleash his creativity and fostered a strong taste for figurative work. Naik's natural love for animals led him to study them closely and scrutinize their physical appearance and demeanour. The similarities between human and animal began to surface in those early days and Naik began to see a parallel between these two worlds. This predilection for merging the two worlds of man and animal was further sharpened as he did his Masters in Fine Art, in Hyderabad in 2000. Here he honed his skills as a printmaker and graphic artist. The linear nature of the artist's work is perhaps shaped by this extended exposure to the expressive qualities of line. His current style is primarily graphic and colour comes merely as an enhancement.

The exaggeration of features, the clever twisting of bodies and the hybridisation of forms—where man and animal fused in a grisly yet entertaining manner—emerged from a fascination for Egyptian and Prehistoric cave art, a discipline he was exposed to during the course of his studies. Naik finally began blending the two worlds of the primordial animal spirit and that of 'cultured' man. As he explored this darker side, his early works were more foreboding than what we see today. However, he realised his tenor was too terse and finally, stubborn and melancholic forms gave way to lighter humorous creatures who could laugh at their own plight. Though his sources are ancient, Naik blurs the boundaries between the contemporary and the primeval. His Shamans and forest people parade across the canvas and paper surface in a timeless pageant of life. They escape the trappings of humanity and are free to breathe and strut around in a world where the rules are deviously bent.

In this current body of works, which consist mainly of drawings on paper and a few canvases, Naik presents a slice of this fantastical world that inhabits his mind.

A peacock grows a tree from its head. A winged horse merges with a torso of an Atlas-like figure. The artist crafts a nose the size of a large pumpkin and grafts it to a diminutive human body. He brings together the head of a buffalo with the comically poised body of a wrestler. A rat, a bird and a human all converge into one body and the result is a strange and hilarious character that could belong to the world of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. The wise crow ponders as the cunning parrot plots. The oafish, winged lion crouches precariously on stilts with roller-skates below, he is a calamity just waiting to happen – the human face behind the gladiators mask more than confirms this. Meanwhile a passive half-fish-half man contemplates the universe, as if he was Plato or Aristotle introduced from a Greek play.

One is constantly tempted to put speech and thought bubbles above the head of these characters as the artist seems to have caught them in the act of pondering some profundity or hatching a wicked scheme. This also comes from the artist's fondness for caricature and comics. However, taken away from their context of the obvious narrative that comical tales often have, there is a certain gravity that surrounds these beings.

Georgina Maddox