

# Kevin Pearsh

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## GANGA 21: THE STORY



### A Project by Kevin Pearsh

The River Ganges has never been painted from source to mouth. Kevin Pearsh, one of Australia's most distinguished contemporary artists, set out in 2006 to create an important series of images which would define the unique persona, both spiritual and mystical, of the *Ganga*.

*Ganga 21*, the resulting collection of paintings, is a defining piece of work: a vibrant and vivid biography of one of the world's great natural resources, and a reflection in water and light of the Hindu religion and culture which make *Ganga* so much more than just a river.

Kevin Pearsh divided his epic journey down the *Ganga* into three sections, traveling by foot, land vehicle and boat. In the spring of 2006, he completed the first of these by hiking from the massive ice cave of Gaumukh to the ancient town of Haridwar. From October 2006, he journeyed from Haridwar to Varanasi and on to the border of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The third and final voyage from Buxar in Bihar to the Delta and Ganga Sagar, 2500 km from the source, was completed in the spring of 2007.

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## GANGA 21: THE ARTIST



Kevin Pearsh was born in 1951 in Melbourne, Australia. Before moving to London in 1972, he attended fine art school in Perth and later lived in Zurich. By the age of twenty-five Pearsh had works within the permanent collections of the Tate Gallery. He continued to live and work in London until 1983.

In 1982 Kevin was commissioned by American diplomat Robert H. Thayer to paint his 12th century chateau in Burgundy, France thus introducing Mr. Pearsh to the region that would become his artistic base, and place of residence.

While visiting Tasmania in the early 1990's Kevin was inspired by the power and beauty of the island's unique waterfalls. A phase of work resulted where water becomes the catalyst combining elements of luminosity and serenity.

In addition to the Tate Gallery, works by Kevin Pearsh can be found in the permanent collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge and the Santa Barbara Museum in California as well in numerous private collections throughout the world.

From the start of the new millennium through to the end of 2002, Kevin developed a water series influenced by visits to China. Between 2002 and 2005 Kevin further expanded his work on the subject of water through aspects experienced while regularly travelling throughout India and Morocco.

Kevin Pearsh's work is infused with an intuitive perception of light and reflection. Regular travelling throughout India has heavily influenced his palette of colors and resulted in several projects for Air India.

From 2006 to 2009, Kevin Pearsh produced a collection of 21 large format oil-on-canvas works depicting the inner character of the Ganges River. These works highlight geographical features and illustrate a pilgrimage along the entire length of the river. The artist has journeyed by foot, boat and land vehicle from the river's source within the ice cave of Gaumukh in the Himalayas to the delta where the Ganges flows out into the Bay of Bengal. In 2010, the "Ganges 21" collection of oil paintings was inaugurated and exhibited under the high patronage of the Indian government – ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) - at the Azad Bhavan Art Gallery in Delhi. The exhibit then traveled to the Rabindranath Tagore Centre in Kolkata, and in early 2011 opened at the Bharat Kala Bhavan Gallery of the prestigious Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi.

In 2012, the Ganga21 collection travelled back from India to Europe and will be exhibited at the Waterhall of the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery from November 4th to 18th, 2013.

## GANGA 21: THE CANVASES

1



The first canvas shows us Gaumukh, the spiritual source of the Ganges, and the place where the source waters from the mountain peaks start to gather and form.

2



Eighteen kilometers further down, Gangotri is where some people believe the *Ganga* first touched the earth. Only a small amount of water is suggested in this painting, as our attention is focused on the white stone leading down to the river. The central figure, an assistant priest, guides towards the rest of the journey.

3



At Devprayag the feeder rivers of Bhagirathi and Alaknanda meet, and, at the confluence, the sheet of the water officially becomes *Ganga*. It is a turbulent point: you see currents converging with pilgrims bathing in the background.

4



Here we see the last foothills of the Himalaya: a giant statue of Shiva, at Haridwar beckons us on into the Indo-Gangetic plane which will follow.

5



Pilgrims bathe here at one of the seven most sacred sites of the river - a bustling mosaic of individuals of all ages and backgrounds.

6



Now we are in the plains, suddenly the river opens out as much as two kilometers wide in places. A lone fisherman dramatizes the solitude.

7



Further along, a woman is saying prayers, a symbol of thousands of pilgrims up and down the river.

8



Further south at Allahabad, the *Ganga* and Jumna rivers converge. The actual point is shown here, one hundred meters off the bank. The rich color of the Jumna and the agitated *Ganga* join – while one lone petal, the remains of a flower offering, floats by.

# 9



This is the first of the three central paintings, which depict Varanasi. Here we see the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the main centre, with Brahmin priests receiving pilgrims.

# 10



The central painting of the whole series, a vast complex reflection of the myriad colours in the waters, it draws together all the themes of the twenty-one canvases.

# 11



The last rays of the sun cast their light on Varanasi, as the city settles for the night. As day ends, so does life. We can see cremations happening on the “burning ghats.”

# 12



Suddenly, south of Varanasi, we come upon the *Ganga* cliffs. Friable, they tend to collapse with each monsoon. This is suggestive: the *Ganga* also has a certain fragility and vulnerability.



# 13



Now in Bihar, a boy idly contemplates the river in the late afternoon at Buxar. Here we sense, as he does, a feeling of infinite space.

# 14



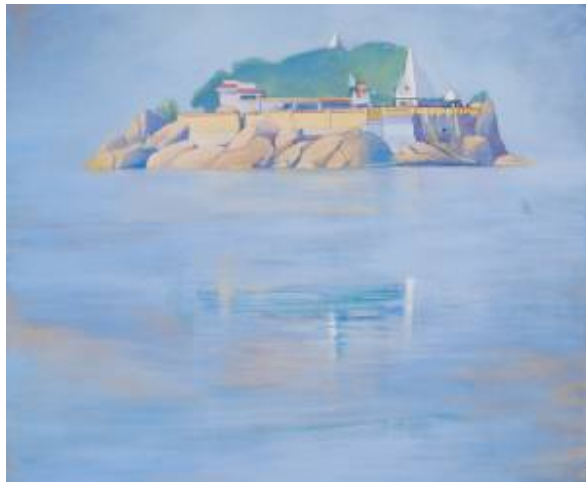
Downstream, there are strong currents: the use of sail allows boats to ease the strain of upstream journeys. In this reflection of the sail, a piece of plastic floats in the agitated waters: even in this remote area plastic invades.

# 15



As one gets closer to Bengal, palm trees appear, and the business of extracting sand becomes evident. It is said to be the best quality sand in India. Here a boat is conveying a cargo.

# 16



Next we come to the wondrous islands of Kahalgaon, each one with its own accretion of temples built over the centuries. In the first painting, we discern, shrouded by mist, an island in the very early morning.

# 17



And, in the second, equally mysterious, the late afternoon light casts its spell.

# 18



Suddenly we come to Calcutta. The Howrah Bridge with its impressive 19<sup>th</sup> century engineering is merely suggested, as the *Ganga* prepares to reach the sea.

# 19



The flower offering, another symbolic image in the series, is a representation of the many offerings thrown daily into the *Ganga*, and giving a feeling of a long journey about to reach its end.

# 20



These offerings lead us to the *Ganga Sagar*, the sacred point where the river finally meets the sea. In these disturbed waters one cannot easily see which is which.

# 21



Finally, a couple takes a sacrificial bath together, possibly mourning a family death. In this last canvas of the series, after all the activity there is a sudden sense of isolation, but also of tranquillity. The great journey, as much spiritual and mystical as physical, has finally concluded.

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