

FRIDAY REVIEW

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Mapping the Ganga

EXHIBITION Kevin Pearsh follows the trajectory of the mighty river in his 21 canvases.

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Following the flow of the Ganga, France-based Australian artist Kevin Pearsh created a body of 21 paintings reflecting its myriad moods as it negotiates its way through various cliffs, ridges, hills and plains. The mighty river has often been a muse to creative minds, with each of them singing paeans to its waters in their unique voices. Albeit a bit late, because it was not until 2004 — though he had been frequently travelling to India since 1978 — that Kevin found himself under its magical spell.

Kevin then undertook a massive journey covering a distance of 2500 km from the river's source, the ice-cave of Gaumukh, to Ganga Sagar, at the mouth of River Hooghly in West Bengal, breaking up into a number of streams before it drains into the Bay of Bengal. The exercise resulted in the 21 canvases that hang at ICCR's (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) art gallery depicting vignettes of the journey.

The first canvas showcases the Gaumukh, from where originates the Ganges. The snow clad Himalayas beneath the light blue sky with a tiny patch of green in the foreground exude a glow. Kevin leads the viewers to Gangotri in his second oil work with a priest standing on the steps as its central figure. The focus here is on the steps leading down to the river, which is only suggested through pebbles but not actually shown. Interestingly, the priest is a fig-

ment of Kevin's imagination, "created like a narrator who takes the viewers along the passage of Ganga". The gargantuan project was divided into three phases. So, the spring of 2006 was spent hiking from Gaumukh to Hardwar; from October onwards, he travelled towards Varanasi and on to the border of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Revisiting memories

Revisiting the memories of the voyage, he says, "After great difficulty we managed to hire a boat to travel from Allahabad to Varanasi. There were five of us in that small boat for three days, each having just enough space to sleep. I kept painting, and yes, I used Ganga water in the work. All the original work is in watercolour and all of that together is just like my travel diary."

The work showing the actual point in Allahabad, a hundred metres off the bank, in which the Ganga and Yamuna rivers merge, with just a tip of the boat visible in the backdrop, features an agitated Ganga joining the turquoise blue waters of the Yamuna even as a lone petal floats by. Such creations evoke spirituality but wherever there enter human beings in the fray, the works acquire documentary flavours, like in the depiction of a morning scene of Dashwamedh Ghat in Varanasi. As bright as it can be, bustling activity on the ghat is seen with several boats parked on the river's shore.

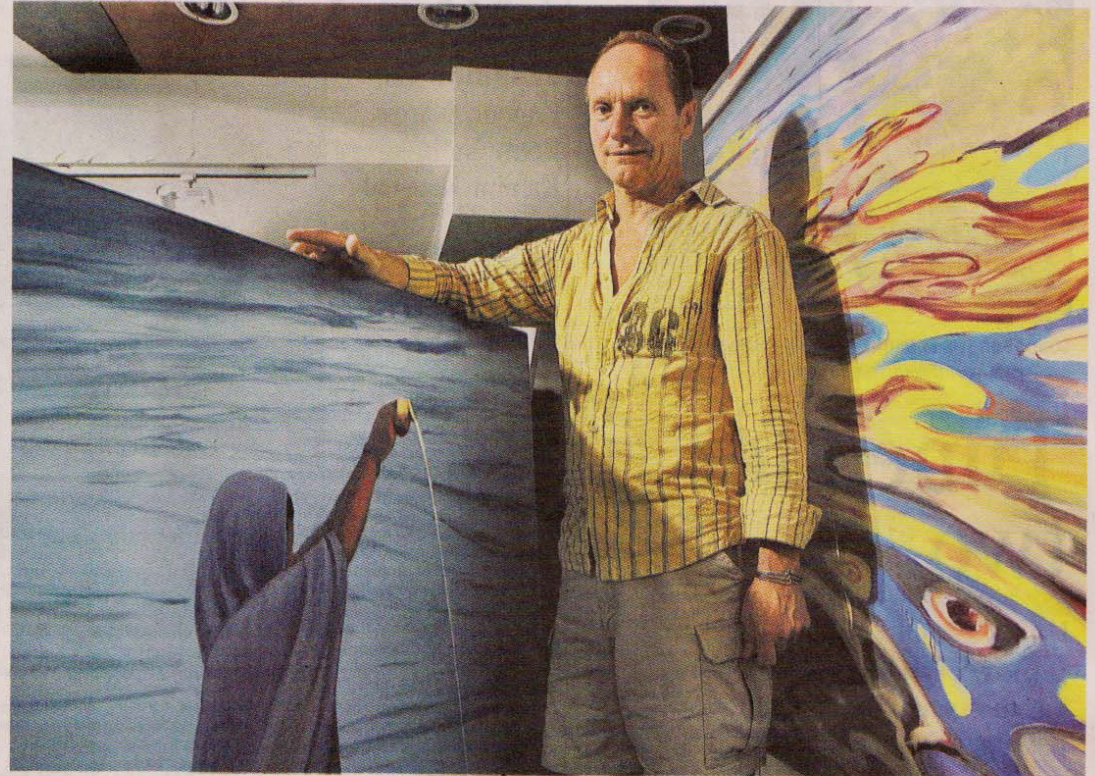
"The lady half submerged in wa-

ter saying prayers...or the pilgrims bathing in Hardwar.... here I just wanted to depict a daily occurrence, whereas in some I strived to create personal experiences. For instance in Buxar, I saw a boy sitting on the wall gazing at the river and I painted that," Kevin says.

The brush strokes are visibly spontaneous in his close portrayal of the water, and reflection assumes significance in his oeuvre. Besides the one with a reflection of a sail, the central exhibit too has complex reflection of the water's myriad colours. "It is like all the colours of the journey coming together. I use reflection as a metaphor for awareness and to render mystery to the work," says Kevin whose works are part of the permanent collections of Tate Gallery in London.

Water has often found its way to the artist's canvas. In the past, besotted by the beauty of Tasmania's waterfalls, Kevin's work began to be imbued with luminosity. He took it further with his travels in India, China and Morocco. As always, a part of the proceeds will go towards the maintenance of the 12th Century Chateau in Burgundy, France, which has been his home for the last 25 years.

The exhibition will be taken to the ICCR Rabindranath Tagore Centre, Kolkata, in August. In Delhi, the show is on at ICCR, Azad Bhawan, I.P. Estate till July 28.



REFLECTIVE Kevin Pearsh evokes the spiritual and mystical aura of the river. PHOTO: S. SUBRAMANIAM

I USED GANGA WATER IN THE WORK. ALL THE ORIGINAL WORK IS IN WATERCOLOUR AND ALL OF THAT TOGETHER IS JUST LIKE MY TRAVEL DIARY.