

# JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

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*Registered Office*  
AM art India Pvt. Ltd  
26 B.G. Kher Marg  
Mumbai 400 006  
India

*Administrative Office*  
504B Dharam Palace  
100/103 N.S. Patkar Marg  
Mumbai 400 007  
India

+91 22 2369 3639  
info@jhavericontemporary.com  
www.jhavericontemporary.com

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## **Life in the Deep: K Ramanujam and Kaushik Chakravartty**

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The two artists paired in this exhibition, K. Ramanujam and Kaushik Chakravartty, have much in common, as even a brief glance at their biographies shows. They were near-contemporaries: Ramanujam was born in 1940 in Madras (now Chennai) and Kaushik in 1946 in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Both artists attended, in their formative years, prestigious schools of arts and crafts in their respective cities. Each had to live with, contend with, a disability—Kaushik was hard of hearing and Ramanujam suffered from schizophrenia and depression; as a result of this, each artist worked in relative isolation. And both of them died at a tragically young age. Ramanujam took his own life in 1973 and Kaushik died in a car crash in Tanzania in 1975—ages 33 and 29.

There are biographical resonances and then there are artistic ones. *Life in the Deep* juxtaposes two figures who broke new ground through their colourful and often fantastical paintings. Differences in scale and method disguise several common factors that unite their work—an interest in colour, fantasy and the animal world. Both artists seek, also, to erase a sense of deep space in their paintings by arranging all elements of the composition as foreground and into immediate view. And, from a historical perspective, neither of them is easy to assimilate into a ‘school’. National or cultural concerns that distinguished the work of many of their peers from this period—the 1960s and early 1970s—played little part in their approach to art making. Their perspectives did not emerge through a formal movement or a place. Instead, their work is driven by fable, fantasy and, in the case of Ramanujam, a very personal iconography. If all art is, to some degree, a form of catharsis, and a revelation or outpouring of an inner emotional reservoir, this is doubly true of Kaushik and Ramanujam.

Needless to say, any meaningful juxtaposition will disclose distances as well as conjunctions. Kaushik was born into an upper-middle-class milieu, and his family had friends who were artists—Pradosh Dasgupta and Paritosh Sen. He was supported, not neglected, in his artistic ambitions. Without a school leaving certificate, he gained entry to the Government College of Art & Craft in Calcutta, where students with disabilities were encouraged to study craft. Kaushik, however, was determined to study art. He was accepted into the art department, where he spent five years, eventually passing with distinction in 1964. He went on to the College of Art in Delhi before winning a national scholarship to attend The M. S. University, Baroda. Here, under the watchful eye of K. G. Subramanyam, he was allowed to experiment in different media, something that was frowned upon in the more conservative art education in Calcutta.

Kaushik left India in 1969 for Paris on a French government scholarship. He studied at the cole Nationale Sup rieure des Beaux-Art and also attended the legendary workshop of Stanley William Hayter, Atelier 17. Whilst in Europe, the opportunity to visit art museums opened up a new world for him. He became interested in Chinese and

Japanese art. His works combine Asian traditions —painting in the ink and scroll format, for example—with American ones. Like the earlier generation of American abstract expressionists and colour field painters, Kaushik was concerned with the forms and energies latent in nature. Working on unprimed canvas laid out on the floor, he began using colours with increasing purity and directness. With the texture of raw canvas visible in many of his works, there is a close relationship between image and surface.

Ramanujam was born into a poor Brahmin family. He had a speech impediment and was physically stunted in growth. His brothers scorned him, he was practically homeless and penniless at times. But, since he had shown an interest in drawing at a young age—he was a failure at school— his mother took him to the School of Arts and Crafts in Madras. At this institution, K. C. S. Paniker, at that time the Principal, became something of a mentor to this strange-seeming, reclusive and extraordinarily talented young man. He soon became proficient at drawing and painting and began to ‘churn out pictures in an almost continuous stream’.

Ramanujam is well-known for his detailed pen and ink drawings that drew upon the singular world of his imagination. Big birds with outstretched wings and enormous serpents based on mythical nagas appear in his dreamlike compositions. Often, he would appear in these drawings, always impeccably dressed with a hat and a cigarette in hand, often astride winged figures floating through an imaginary landscape. The settings were filled with pillars and domes he encountered in reproductions of Venice, adorning them with the embellishments of more familiar South Indian temple architecture. Included in the exhibition is a small body of work that relies on bold fresh colour in combinations reminiscent of South Indian painting traditions and the pop iconography of Tamil cinema posters.

Kaushik held seven exhibitions between 1968 and 1974—three in Delhi, two each in Bombay (now Mumbai) and Paris. He travelled to Tanzania in 1974, where the local fauna was a new source of creative vigour before his untimely death. Ramanujam was also awarded a national scholarship in 1962 and his works were shown at the National Exhibition of Art in Delhi and also at international venues across Europe, including the Commonwealth Arts Festival in London. He was commissioned by the architect Geoffrey Bawa to paint three large murals for the Connemara hotel in Madras. He found a home, of sorts, at the Cholamandal Artists’ Village near Madras. Despite the prospect of a promising career, his deteriorating mental health led to suicide.

Even though the title for this exhibition is taken from one of Kaushik’s paintings—he was fascinated by oceanic life forms—it can be taken to refer to the experiences, and creations, of both Kaushik and Ramanujam. Kaushik experienced a wall of silence because of his disability, and Ramanujam’s world was, in a quite literal sense, an inner and solitary and self-formed one because of his mental illness. But, as *Life in the Deep* demonstrates, despite obstacles (and in part because of them), both artists succeeded in creating unique and enduring art—a testament to resilience as well as survival.

*Life in the Deep* remains on view through 22 October 2016. Included in the exhibition is a film by video-artist Mochu, *A Gathering At The Carnival Shop* (2015), inspired by the life and art of Ramanujam. We are grateful to all the lenders to this exhibition, especially Chatterjee & Lal, Delhi Art Gallery and Piramal Collection.

Kindly contact [info@jhavericontemporary](mailto:info@jhavericontemporary) for images and additional information.