

Born 1953 in Malaysia, Kumari Nahappan lives and works in Singapore and is considered to be one of South East Asia's leading artists. She studied art in England, Singapore and Australia. Kumari exhibits regularly in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Australia, Indonesia and Sweden. In 2006 her monumental red chilli-pepper sculpture, Pedas-Pedas (3.8M) was incorporated into the landscape of the new National Museum of Singapore. The 2007 exhibition in the Museum der Kulturen is Kumari's first show in Switzerland.

U.R.: Kumari, the colour red plays a significant role in both your paintings and sculptures. This has artistic as well as cultural roots in Hinduism in South India. You continually participate in Indian religious rituals which you experience as works of art in your life, and I believe you look upon your own artistic development as a personal ritual. In this ongoing process, red plays a dominant role.

K.N.: Hindu rituals with their complexities have intrigued; as well as inspired me to approach art as a ritual, and ritual as an art. I have documented and also participated in many of these rituals. The processes marking TIME have been equally important as the participation. The processions, offerings, sacrifices all include elements of fire, water, flowers, seeds, pods, pigments, colours, fragrances and sound. In ritual they merge to create a work of art that touches all the senses. Ritual art inspires as well as energizes me. As an artist, my work is created as an act of ritual and in that ritual I write my own history.

U.R.: Do you remember your first encounter with the colour red, at the temple or the family altar at home?

K.N.: The red in nature, especially flowers impressed me as a child. I found the shades and tones fascinating. As a young girl, it was my task to collect red hibiscus flowers, which I brought home to the family altar in a wicker-basket. When I was a little older I made the garlands for the deities from white and red flowers. It was then, that I learnt that the five petals of the hibiscus flower or the number 5 was symbolic for the five senses. Gradually, I began to realize that red had an important role in Indian food, an example being the chilli. It is customary or practice to hang a string of red chillies at the entrance during an auspicious event to ward off negative energy. Moving along these lines I found that RED was a colour that I identified as a source for expressing all my emotions.

U.R.: Kumari, you're married and have a family. Red is also the colour of the bindhi, like a third eye, that adorns the forehead of Hindu women, to mark their status. What does red signify to you in this context?

KN.: Hindus attach great importance to this eye-catching ornamental mark on the forehead between the two eyebrows, a spot considered a major nerve point (sixth chakra) in human body. The “red dot” or kumkum is part of a heritage and culture with multiple meanings. In Sanskrit it means, a drop. Traditionally, the bindhi symbolizes the mystic third eye of a person and his or her connection with the universal principle of creation. The red dot is a prerogative of a married Hindu woman. It is a sign of worship to the inner Guru to overcome the ego. Loosely known as “pottu” the bindhi, signifies sacrifice and performing selfless acts out of love for family. Adorning it is a sacred act for SHAKTI or strength.

U.R.: The sari a woman wears at her wedding is red as is her mark of marriage, the bindhi.

K.N.: The sari for the wedding is given by the groom and it often happens to be red too as the bindhi. The power of red weaves through all customary gifts for the bride who is regarded as Shakti, the protector of her husband and children. Red pigments are used for ceremony and adornment for good fortune and to usher in prosperity. It is felt that this red is the very essence of Mother Earth, symbolised by the Goddess, Parvathi. With all these powerful elements at her disposal a wife keeps her husband’s light agleam, whilst playing the role of wife and mother. Significantly, when the wife has the misfortune of becoming a widow, she stops wearing the bindhi or the colour red.

U.R.: kumari, as I understand it, red can stand as much for peace and calm as for heat and passion. It can be life-giving and also life-destroying.

K.N.: Red is associated with power, strength and energy. Power creates and power destroys. The famous dance of the Lord Shiva in a circle of fire, symbolizes the endless cycle of creation and destruction, life and death. Nothing is ever still but flows and spins just as the earth spins on its own axis. We can feel this power and the colour red is part of this timeless process; it speaks to us about positive and negative energies, about the sun, about fire, about love and passion, about envy, fear, resentment, aggression and war. Red is not the preserve of only Hindus, it speaks to all men: Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists alike. Red is the colour of blood, the bond that all human beings share. Red has a universal significance beyond religions, sects and cultures. The material and physical world is always aligned beside spiritual elements. My experiences of daily life and practice run parallel with my work. The journeys through different time-realms are converted into visual images.

U.R.: *The colour red is a fundamental element that artists everywhere have worked with for thousands of years. Recently, you've developed the colour red into a unique language of your own in your work. It is a metaphor for the Sun, for Shakti and for the sound of Silence.*

K.N.: I am still exploring the use of reds in my work... every red has a story to tell. The spectrum is never ending. Each shade of red addresses a different feeling and a different mood. The excitement and sadness, of Surya (Sun) when it rises and when it sets, is the beginning of an end. It speaks of eternity... of energy that cannot be contained. In a similar pattern I would like my work to communicate this. The process energizes me and I would to return a fragment of this vision in a mark, trail, or footprint.

U.R.: *With several smooth layers of red you create deep and vibrant spiritual spaces. It is a meditative art with a sacred dimension, similar to Mark Rothko's masterly works.*

K.N.: I hope my works will be meditative to others as it is for me.

U.R.: *How do these images come to you and how do you transform your visions into painting?*

K.N.: I begin with layering, applying a basic red (Cadmium red light) with a brush, usually about four to five thin layers of paint on a canvas. I never work with an easel, but on a flat surface instead. This way it's easier to create a ground consisting of multiple layers. Adding one layer after the next is like performing a ritual; it's like singing the first mantras in a temple or repeatedly chanting the sacred OM before going into meditation. This ritual makes me forget my daily routine and allows me to gravitate into my work. After a while I begin to visualize light and form like in meditation. It's like a revelation. I continue working with the alternating feelings of being inside the painting and at the next moment of being outside it, seeing it from a distance. This way I create a painting that is flooded with light from meditation.

U.R.: *... and together with the vision and the light, the dots and lines appear?*

K.N.: In the end all forms are reducible to a single dot, just as the meaningful bindhi – a simple dot. If I extend the dot I get a line and along this line there are many other similar dots, which I work on until they form a unique language of their own. The result being, a fragment.

U.R.: *Your pictures contain a vibrant energy, red spaces filled with invisible power inviting the observer to enter with all his senses. I noticed that you neither sign nor frame your works.*

K.N.: Energy cannot be confined and an offering does not need a stamp.

U.R.: *In other words, what we see is a small part of the cosmos, a small visible fragment of a continuing and unending process?*

K.N.: What you see are fragments that are continuously evolving. They are visions that connect to a larger cosmic body It could be a heartbeat – a rhythm, a movement, flow, time, journey, growth, history and eternity..... And in all this, red plays a major part. Energy, time and space are linked to the power of RED.