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SOSA JOSEPH

IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN MATHEW

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*The following are transcripts of
Sosa Joseph's conversations with **John Mathew**, recorded over three
years, between early 2018 and late 2021. They were translated from
Malayalam and edited by the interviewer.*

CONVERSATION 1

About her approach to painting and the ‘What are we?’ series

JM: Before talking about your works, shall we talk about ‘talking about works’? I will start by saying that you seem to speak very little about your paintings, I mean, in your interviews. You seem not only reticent or unforthcoming, but even evasive about talking about your works.

SJ: I see you want to start by making an allegation! [Smiles] Let’s see. As I see it, I speak just enough. Also, a certain level of reticence, that’s good, isn’t it? I must not bias viewers or introduce barriers to viewing. I also don’t want to restrict free interpretations of my work by talking much about them.

JM: Of course, you are the best judge of how much you want to talk about your works. And I do understand the caution. However, your reticence seems to lead to confusion over certain basic facts about some of your works. For example, writers don’t seem to be sure if you have painted Christian nuns or Muslim women in your *What are we?* series. Shall we discuss what makes you so wary that you offer almost no explanation of the content of your works?

SJ: Indeed, I am a bit wary of explaining the content, meaning etc. of my works. There are several reasons. It’s a complicated issue. I mean, there is no simple answer.

JM: If it’s complicated, it must be interesting!

SJ: Well, if you insist. Firstly, there is this thing about capacity or capability. Offering a structured, coherent explanation of the content or meaning of my works—indeed, if there is one—may

be beyond me. And that may precisely be the reason why I have chosen to explore it through painting.

JM: Interesting. Beckett said something similar—I mean, the latter part. He said if he had been able to explain his works in philosophic terms, he would have no reason to write them. What else?

SJ: I am also not crazy about requiring an artist to offer explanations of her works in the first place! It's like being called in to defend your work. And I am not sure a work of art needs a defense. 'What do you mean by this?' or 'What are you trying to say?' See, art is what's there on the canvas, not something else it 'says'! It is its own content, as in, the primary content of the painting is its formal aspects. In that sense, form is the content. And people can see it, without me saying a word! But it is a presumption that there is always an invisible 'meaning'. I find such presumption unfortunate.

JM: It's exasperating, isn't it? It's a bit like asking a kid who created a mess to explain why he did it. 'What have you done! Why would you do this? Okay then, let's hear your philosophical or political reasons!' [Laughs] It's similar, isn't it?

SJ: Of course. [Smiles] But these questions are problematic in many ways.

JM: Can you explain why they are problematic?

SJ: Because I don't paint primarily to 'make a statement'. I paint because I enjoy painting, and I choose something to paint because I am interested in it. It's as simple as that. Of course, what interests me about what I paint may vary; often, it may just be its aesthetics. Beyond that, my works may or may not end up saying something because I am a person with opinions, worldview, concerns, and preoccupations which may well be reflected in my paintings. That's different from making a

statement in a planned manner. I don't paint to say anything consciously. Assuming that I always paint to say something is just the wrong approach because it misses the whole aesthetic pursuit in my practice, and the work's aesthetic, to focus only on content or meaning instead.

JM: Just for clarity, is that an exclusive formalist stance? Are you denying content or meaning?

SJ: Nothing exclusive as such. I am a figurative artist, and, surely, I can't deny 'content' as such; nor am I saying works of art don't make statements. Of course, they are expressions, so certainly, they would communicate something. I am saying two things. One: I am not painting to make a statement. Making a point, philosophical or political, is not my primary purpose. It is, indeed, creating a painterly aesthetic. And, two: at least for me, art doesn't always have to make any such statement; sometimes, it can be just an aesthetic exploration. What matters to me in a painting is *painting*; what's vital is challenging myself as a painter. My only concerns, quests, and considerations are formal and aesthetic; what is more important to me than what I paint is *how I paint* it. I hardly ever set out to paint with a 'concept', or 'theme' in mind, or to 'say something' or 'make a point'. Themes manifest; they present themselves based on who I am, what my worldview is, or what moves me. It's not a conscious choice I make for each canvas. Art, at least for me, is not driven by an agenda.

JM: I understand. You seem to say, a painting is an end in itself; it's not the means of saying something, on which its art hinges.

SJ: Exactly. As I said, art is what's on the canvas. What it might seem to say, that is, any philosophical, social or political points it might make, if at all, are secondary.

JM: I am with you, totally. But go on, is there anything more that makes you wary of talking about your works?

SJ: Of course. See, I warned you; this is complicated and maybe tedious! So, thirdly, this may perhaps be the most important one—this exclusive focus on content or meaning of a work has another problem. It impairs seeing and appreciating the art itself. Let me explain. If I say something about the ‘content’ of a work or ‘what it is about’, then it necessarily undermines the particular work. And this is why I want to talk as little as possible, and want people to see in my works what they would.

JM: How exactly does any explanation you offer undermine a particular work?

SJ: If I offer any explanation, the work is instantly reduced to its content or meaning. ‘This work is about that’ and ‘that work says this’. Nothing else seems to matter anymore, as ‘what the work is about’ takes attention away from the ‘work’ itself. That’s how this impairment works. Interpretation often tends to reduce works of art to their ‘meaning’, ‘politics’, or ‘philosophy’. And to my mind, reducing a work of art just to its ‘meaning’ or ‘content’ is somewhat reductive and simplistic.

JM: By now, it’s evident that your resistance is essentially ‘Sontagian’. You clearly align with Sontag in ‘Against interpretation’.

SJ: Of course. What took you so long? [Smiles] But my discomfort about the approach to interpretation predates reading Sontag. Reading her was like running into a person who understands you. I almost gushed: ‘oh, finally, someone gets me!’

JM: That essay can be either very comforting or unsettling, depending on how one is used to seeing art. Sontag says: ‘By reducing the work of art to its content, and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art.’ She further says: ‘interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.’ She even speculates that abstract art and pop art—the former because it has no content,

and the latter because its content is so obvious—are attempts of visual art to flee from interpretation.

SJ: You can quote! Yes, I remember those lines.

JM: In any case, as you know, Sontag doesn't deny that interpretation is possible or required. She is making a case for a different kind of interpretation, which she says should focus more on the form.

SJ: Indeed. Let me clarify; I am not against any kind of interpretation. Anyone inclined to 'squeeze out' or 'pluck out' meanings, as Sontag puts it, may do so. I'd be delighted. All I am saying is, I just don't want to be the one offering it.

JM: But that's where I would take a slightly different point of view. Even if you don't offer the 'meaning', you can give people some insights into what interested you in the subject matter. This way, at least the context is known, and facts are accessible right away. Uncertainty about if you painted a large number of nuns or Muslim women in niqab wouldn't persist, in that case. By not speaking what you know about what you painted and why, you perhaps encourage interpretation that gets even the basic facts wrong.

SJ: I understand where you come from.

JM: You said you choose to paint what 'interests you'. Can we qualify or characterise this interest? What causes or constitutes this interest? You also said the 'aspect of the subject that you find interesting could vary'.

SJ: Often, it's simply its aesthetics. Its shape, colours, textures, some or all of them make me want to paint it. Otherwise, it may be its condition, its perceived spirit, what it seems to feel, which makes me feel some connection. For example, a few years ago, I painted a lone coconut palm, which I had gone past on my daily

walks to my studio. It was tall, withered, apparently because it was struck by lightning, uncared for, and had an unusual amount of trash piled-up below it. I felt a connection with it. Perhaps I felt it was a bit like me. That's why I painted it, not just because I was interested in its physical form alone.

JM: I understand the aesthetic appeal part. Maybe that's how Van Gogh chose to paint his shoes. Being interested by identification, as in the case of the coconut palm, is fascinating. But sometimes, could this 'interest' also be based on social and political aspects of the subject matter?

SJ: Of course. Many of my works that feature women, for instance. I have painted them because of my interest in women's lives. This is quite obvious in *What are we?*, *What must be said*, etc. Women are seen as staging an agitation in the latter, and it cannot be devoid of my political preoccupations. But even then, despite the subject matter being evidently political, my primary concerns remain painterly, my exploration artistic, my goals aesthetic. The interest I have in the image of women protesting—in this case, based on a well-documented agitation mounted by the women of Kerala—progresses into a creative exploration through painting. In other words, once I decide to paint something, even if I have chosen the subject because its politics interests me, from that point onwards, my concerns and considerations are entirely formal.

JM: That's clear. But since you said 'from that point', I think it's apt to ask: what is the process from that point onwards? How does a typical work progress after the point of picking out a subject to paint?

SJ: Essentially, it evolves through spontaneous improvisation. I go by my instinct rather than a plan, intuitively adding elements of the composition as I feel fit at the moment. In most cases, I don't even think consciously about colour. A place or setting appears. A palette emerges. Figures walk in. This way, the

whole canvas comes together. It becomes what it wants to be.

JM: There are writers who work entirely like that. In writerly terms, you are not a ‘plotter’, but a ‘pantser’, though I don’t like the latter term. They start with a single character, image, or situation; the rest emerges, and characters walk in. It’s a process of ‘self-mining’. I can’t remember who said, ‘I write to see what is there in my head.’

SJ: I like that. Once I am inspired to paint, I paint to see how what I have in my head looks on canvas.

JM: But in a novel, it can be dangerous; one can end up with something unwieldy, structurally unmanageable.

SJ: In a single canvas, the risks are minimal though. Just two weeks or so are at stake, not years. If it evolves into something I don’t like, I say ‘it didn’t work out’, and move on! [Smiles] That’s the only way I work—starting just with a vague idea of the subject that interests me. A preparatory drawing to fix the composition is almost never done. It’s an unconscious, spontaneous, and intuitive evolution, much like an entirely improvised performance.

JM: Unconscious spontaneity, the emphasis placed on accident and evolution, relinquishing a certain amount of control to fly by instinct, etc.—all these were also valued by post-war surrealists and abstract expressionists, including Miro, Max Ernst, and even Pollock. You seem to have a similar temperament while still occupying a space between abstraction and figuration. Besides, you almost make it sound like you are not in control.

SJ: But these are not ideological positions for me. Instead, they are practices that have evolved. That’s how I am. I do not do much according to a plan but prefer to go by instinct. You should see me cooking! But believe me, it does mostly turn out

okay! [Laughs]

JM: I see. I believe you!

SJ: Also, I am not saying I am not in control. Since I am the one who is improvising, and since it's my instinct that is being spontaneously followed, I am in control at some level. Besides, if I don't like what I see, I change it or even discard it. So, I am in control, but it's a control employed after the image develops; it's like playing an editor. And since the development of the image is not an entirely conscious or planned process, I cannot be called in to explain! In fact, all explanation I can offer is in the capacity of a viewer.

JM: If I may exaggerate to make a point, it's a bit like being asked to explain your dreams, isn't it? It's no more logical than someone insisting, since you have seen the dream, you must know what it means, totally disregarding the fact that, though the dream occurred in your head, you didn't plan it?

SJ: That's a fascinating parallel. Though an exaggeration, it totally makes my point. In a manner of speaking, I am 'dreaming up' my canvases.

JM: However, the fact that dreams are products of the unconscious and the dreamers 'didn't mean' anything in particular by producing them, didn't deter Freud from writing an entire method of their interpretation, involving how to look for the 'latent content' beyond the 'manifest content' of dreams. So, even when improvised totally by instinct, interpretation can find meanings in each of your works.

SJ: Of course! And I am all for it. I am only saying I cannot and am not obligated to interpret my works just because I have produced them.

JM: To use a Sontagian expression, meaning can be 'squeezed

out' of even seemingly simple works with evidently no further meaning than it's a still life study. I've seen *The Origin of the Work of Art* on your bookshelf; you must be aware of the controversy about Van Gogh's shoes, involving Heidegger, Schapiro, and Derrida. A classic case of 'over-interpretation', and 'vengeance of intellect upon art' indeed!

SJ: Yes. [Smiles] I have seen only Heidegger's text, not the other two. I am sure they are equally obscure. In any case, I am not against any such interpretation, including the so-called 'over interpretation.' Just that, I have nothing to add to that. But please do it on your own! I do wonder if people are doing the same at galleries and museums—standing in front of paintings desperately trying to interpret them by decoding the 'meanings' instead of enjoying them!

JM: It would appear this meaning-hunt is one of the ramifications of the dominance of conceptual art. It seems paintings are approached with the same interpretational modus operandi applied to installations and other forms of conceptual art.

SJ: Perhaps. But of course, even from paintings, people can derive what they want. I have no control, neither do I want any, in how they choose to engage.

JM: That is the spirit of Barthes's 'Death of the Author', isn't it?

SJ: I am glad you brought it up! Look, if I am dead, along with my intent, as far as my canvases are concerned, why would anyone expect me to talk about them? Don't call me and ask for an explanation; I am dead, you see! [Laughs] But I do get called in for such things.

JM: An example or two would be interesting.

SJ: A few years ago, I painted a series called *Meenchatti*. They

were tiny paintings of clay pots used for cooking fish in Kerala. I painted these with raw fish in them. A critic promptly asked me, 'What's there in the *Meenchatti*, Sosa?' The query was clear. He could not have raised the question about the material contents of those pots, as they were plainly visible. He was obviously talking about their philosophical, ideological or political content. There had to be some idea, concept, or political stance, associated with a series of still-lives! That kind of insistence isn't uncommon. As if I simply couldn't have painted the series because I was interested in the shapes, colours, and textures of fish, as painters have been for hundreds of years before me, and for a painterly exploration as such. I answered: 'What's there in the *Meenchatti*? Fish, what else?'

I'll share another case in point. About a decade ago, I painted a series of large watercolours, which showed fish in a net. I painted these netted fish because it's a vivid image from my childhood. The fish paintings were promptly declared symbolic feminist works; the fish were women, and the net was patriarchy! [Laughs] As a personal joke, and spoofing Klee's title, I titled them *Limits of understanding*.

JM: Delightful little stories, indeed. Especially how the work with netted fish came to have the title!

SJ: You don't know the half of it! [Laughs]

JM: Shall we then talk about *What are we?* paintings specifically? I think they were a turning point in your career in many ways. In talking about them, we will keep our enquiry first formalist, treating what's visible on the canvas as its content. After that, it would be helpful if you explain where they came from, that is, what inspired you to paint these images.

SJ: Okay. The *What are we?* series; I would like you to start by saying how you like them.

JM: I thoroughly enjoy them. Before going any further, I must say I think these three canvases and a few other Mattancherry works place you among the foremost expressionist painters.

SJ: Wow, that's too generous! But, if I may ask, what do you like about them? What do you see in them?

JM: Oh, I thought I was the one asking questions! It seems you want to turn the tables. Anyway. Let me try and get this right. Well, I'll first try and tell you what I see in these canvases and how it strikes me, off the top of my head. Let me just pull up your website and keep the paintings in front of me.

SJ: Please do.

JM: What strikes me first is the space. The artfulness in rendering it and peopling it with the veiled figures. While largely retaining a single-point perspective, the compositions seem to deconstruct the urban Mattancherry landscape and rearrange it into something of a fictional, parallel, otherworldly place, as seen in many of Neo Rauch's works. I am sure you are familiar with them.

SJ: Yes. Please go on.

JM: The whole scene strikes me as dystopian, and at least in the second canvas, somewhat surrealistic, wherein these buttresses of large warehouses of Mattancherry warp around the women, as if to trap them in. But it's also a 'broken place', if you will, characterised by its decay, visibly trash-ridden, and yes, totally devoid of vegetation. As for the figures—they seem to be an isolated urban tribe of women. They are similarly attired, as if all of them are wearing a uniform like in *The Handmaid's Tale*, adding to the sense of dystopia. All uniforms are forced, in any case. The near absence of individuality also makes them seem like inmates in an institution, or let's say, somewhat dehumanised members of a dystopian society. Therefore, the

reimagined Mattancherry in these canvases reminds me of Atwood's Gilead, where women are officially property. It could even be a prison of some kind, maybe an open jail! They could be inmates socialising in the common area during the hours meant for such occasions.

SJ: Interesting. I haven't read *The Handmaid's Tale*. I've never thought a comparison was possible.

JM: The compositions reiterate the spatial and social isolation and alienation of this rather curious community of women inhabiting this dreamed-up space. Everyone knows everyone else, but social life is limited to intra-tribe. I read them as Muslim women from Mattancherry—nuns don't walk around with their children, do they? And there can't be seven or eight-year-old nuns! One can see up to the horizon behind the loading trucks in the first composition and the last, unlike any place in Mattancherry. These seem to leave an exit open, from whatever reality or place that has trapped them in.

Altogether, the canvases look a bit like a project of social anthropology, studying this community of women, their lives. While the second and third canvases catch them in candid social interaction, though rather solemn, in the first one, they are self-aware, conscious of being watched, as they survey what seems to be the devastation in their lives. As if it's a morning after a destructive hurricane or so, all of them frozen, except the little girl to the right who marches across. That's what I see when I see these canvases. Now, on to the stylistic aspects.

SJ: Let me stop you there, just to quickly clarify: of course, they are Muslim women in niqabs and not nuns in habits. And I like this reading of a dystopian community that keeps women as property. But let me just say dystopias are deeply unsettling only when they are rooted in reality. Being inmates trapped in some 'institution' or an 'open jail' kind of situation, is rather close to the reality of women surviving in repressive patriarchal

societies. It's not that I planned these canvases to say precisely this; I am just responding as per my own readings as a viewer. But I know my subject, which is women's condition in general in patriarchal societies, the Muslim women of Mattancherry being just a microcosm.

JM: But why Muslim women, and not all kinds of women? Patriarchy runs across all sects and classes, doesn't it?

SJ: It's incidental, as my studio is located in a sort of a Muslim ghetto, where Muslim women just happen to be the more visible part of the demography. So, the typical Mattancherry women are niqab-wearing Muslim women. That's all. But please do go on. What else?

JM: Your figures are remarkably studied, I must say. Especially for a painter who operates in the boundaries of figurative abstraction, and also for someone who works so spontaneously, without even drawings, the precision you show in capturing the dynamic figures, often in movement, is stunning. Particularly, this group of seven women on canvas three, including the first one from the left, who is struggling to control a wailing child. On canvas two, the two women in the foreground carrying umbrellas, behind them to the right, the slender woman with a child—she looks a bit like you, doesn't she? And the little girl spinning round or dancing to the left, even the randy billy goat chasing its mate, and the yellow cows, all are well captured. Are these figures studied from life or from memory?

SJ: I am glad you like them. Especially that goat you mentioned; it's one of my favourite figures on the canvases. I did go out on a field study and did a few preparatory sketches for these, which is rare in my process. Though I sketched quite a bit, my field studies were more for observing the community of women in my neighbourhood. I have never been good at life study; looking at something in front of me and drawing is not my thing. I mostly work from memory. However, for these

canvases, sketching women in the neighbourhood helped.

JM: Your figures seem quite aligned to the expressionist tradition of figuration, the way you simplify the anatomy and paint them vigorously, yet without losing the mood or momentum. Also, the interplay of flatness and depth with just enough modelling, the way features are rendered minimally, are reminiscent of German expressionists. I am sure you have heard this before: These three canvases seem to evoke Kirchner's Berlin street scenes remotely.

SJ: All kinds of comparisons have been made. My liking for German expressionists is very old, since student days. Their influence is natural.

JM: Talking about Kirchner, it seems apt to make another observation, particularly about your figures. I remember Carol Duncan writing in 'The MoMa's Hot Mamas', about how most female figures by modernist masters sexualise 'available female bodies', including those in Kirchner's street scenes. Of course, he was painting the streetwalkers, pimps and their customers. But generally, your female figures, here and elsewhere, seem to be conspicuous by the absence of the male gaze. I think it gets very noticeable because there are at least a hundred or so female figures on these canvases. I am not aware of any modernist painting by any artist, let alone female artists, portraying so many women.

SJ: I have never thought about it that way. Coming to think of it, I am unaware of any painting with so many women, especially by a woman artist. And the interesting thing is, these women are already objectified, dehumanised as objects of gratification, and marginalised into gendered, subservient roles.

JM: Precisely. It seems to me, as against the works by the modern masters Carol Duncan wrote about, your canvases seem to empathise with their condition instead of perpetuating

their objectification, as in, say, Kirchner's rendition of the already objectified prostitutes objectifying them again through art!

SJ: I see your point. It's an interesting perspective.

JM: Well. I am sure you have been told this before: you are quite a colourist. I have come across more than a few comments about the 'undersaturated', 'washed out' nature of your colours, which I don't think do any justice to the wonderfully sophisticated palette of these works. Anything you want to share about your choice of colours?

SJ: 'Undersaturated' palette is not true at all. I have used fauvist—like 'The Bridge' artists, the Fauves were an early inspiration—kind of palettes in other paintings, *Dancers/Performers, Episode*, and recently *Pietà* etc. The choice of the palette is mostly unconscious; it depends on what you are painting, when, and where. I don't mean it's controlled by concerns of representation: anything can be of any colour. Colours are chosen instinctively by the mood or emotion I work towards. Colour can also be a frame of mind. For a hundred plus women in niqabs, the palette is, of course, bound to be dominated by the uniform colouration of their clothes; I think I have tried to keep the colours sophisticated by using sombre purples and blues standing in for the black of the niqabs. Olives, roses, mauves, and minimally used ochre seemed to have worked well in creating the effect I wanted.

JM: Now, can you give me a few insights into how you came to paint these three canvases? As is well known, you are reusing the question from Gauguin's work in your title. Did these paintings start with the title? And your figures, like Gauguin's, are all women. Did you know the paintings are exactly the same size, too?

SJ: Oh, I didn't know Gauguin's canvas is twelve feet by five,

just like the three of mine; it's the first time I come to know of this. And yes, all his figures are female, too. But the similarities end there. His title was on my mind, and it seemed apt and interesting to use a part of it. *Where do we come from...* was done before his suicide attempt, and the title seems to be asking spiritual questions. Of course, his work has been called sexual colonialist, misogynist, objectifying, and perhaps problematic in other ways. 'Guilty as charged', I recall the title of a Guardian article about a Tate show of his work. Nevertheless, while holding the Gauguin mythology as problematic, I have always admired aspects of his art, particularly his palette and brushwork.

JM: How did you come to paint these? Did you start with the title?

SJ: No. My titles mostly come last, and often are nothing but names to identify paintings with. So, I didn't really set out to do a Gauguin reinterpretation or rebuttal. While Gauguin's questions appear spiritual, the way I used a part of it is primarily existential. In what became the What are we? series, what I set out to do is a study of women's lives around me, while being preoccupied about the 'meaning of women's lives'. Are women not anything more than means to make men's lives easier while they go on their quests to make their own lives meaningful? Numerous women I knew from my neighbourhood seemed to do nothing more than playing the gender-specific role that patriarchy had imposed on them: making men's lives easier. As I said, I had seen the niqab-wearing women around me for years; the works are about women in general, at least in geographies like mine. In their imposed, gendered roles, they are just wives and mothers; they cook for the men, clean up after them, and bear and raise the children to ensure the men's legacy. They get daily paroles—much like in a situation you read as 'open jail'—to make pointless conversation about what they cooked and how their children are doing at school. They stick it out, perhaps because

they have nowhere else to go. *Pokkadamillathavar*, is an expression in Malayalam. ‘Those who have nowhere to go’, it means. A lot of women are like that. Nowhere to go. Except for the homes where they play their gendered roles.

In a sense, as you interpreted, they are ‘inmates’ in an ‘institution’. Just that the ‘institution’ is patriarchy. Everyone, even people with privilege, run into an existential crisis on a bad day; but the condition of the women portrayed in *What are we?* is nothing short of a life-long existential crisis. Barring a young girl cavorting here and there in her playful, cheery self, the women in *What are we?* are solemn, melancholic even. But the little girls have no idea what is awaiting them, do they?

I have been there. I have had my own relentless struggle to find myself, to become anything for my own sake. Indeed I could feel one with the women around me. The questions that kept me awake were, ‘What are we, as women? What do we expect from ourselves?’ These paintings came out of such preoccupations about the purpose of women’s lives, which throughout history, right from the creation of Eve, seemed to have been taken to support men’s lives.

JM: The theme of the meaning or meaninglessness of women’s lives, in the context of imposition of gendered roles, seems to have persisted. Though the setting changes—from social space to domestic—and titles are unrelated to *What are we?* I remember *Interior figures*, *Family figures*, *Episode* and so on.

SJ: Yes. And *Dancers*. I was disturbed about dancing being imposed on girls from a young age. I mean dancing to entertain others, male audiences, historically. But social dancing is prohibited and stigmatic. There are other canvases where I have portrayed women, though with a focus on domesticity.

JM: As is well known, middle-class women’s domesticity has been a genre, at least, since the Dutch ‘golden’ era—not just

Vermeer, but also notably Pieter de Hooch, Gerard Borch, and others—but from the patriarchal perspective, celebrating the ‘virtues’ of such domesticity. While a number of feminist artists have produced works that challenge and subvert such celebration of gendered domesticity, I think very few of them are painting these days. Do you plan to explore this theme more?

SJ: And women’s lives haven’t changed much, at least here, from the ‘content and virtuous domesticity’ that we see in Vermeer or Pieter de Hooch. In 400 years, that is! And, yes, I do plan to paint the domestic lives of women. Sometime soon.

CONVERSATION 2

About Kerala's socio-political space and the
'Mattancherry works'

JM: I would like us to talk about a few of the other Mattancherry canvases. If I may pick, *Where are we going?*, *It seems*, *Unspecified*, *What must be said*, *Other colours*, and *Irul*. Now, they don't seem to be specifically women-oriented, or with feminist preoccupations, do they? Also, I can see all of them are scenes on the street, and have crowds depicted.

SJ: Yes, you may pick. Streets and crowds—we will come to that. But before that, I am a feminist and a painter. Yet it does not mean all my art is feminist art. Indeed, I am wary of labels like 'feminist painter', because such labels tend to make it seem that I cannot or do not paint without a feminist perspective.

About these canvases—these are all works I did between 2011 and 2018. Mostly, after *What are we?*

JM: Can we talk about what fascinated you about these scenes? Or what inspired you to paint them?

SJ: Indeed. There's something about crowds that I find fascinating and amusing. I live in a densely populated place, wherein a crowd gathers for a lot of reasons. In a sense, these canvases are my perception of the phenomenon.

JM: What's it about crowds that you find fascinating?

SJ: The way people throng together, get lost, and behave in crowds, I find all that interesting. Besides, at least sometimes, the reason for forming such crowds seems

bizarre, absurd even.

JM: The ‘mob’ is a fascinating subject indeed. Crowds have been studied by social scientists of various disciplines and have been depicted by artists for a long time. For a painter, I think the subject is especially exciting?

SJ: Yes. In painterly terms, it’s a challenging subject. A crowd is a place where people lose themselves; their borders blur physically and emotionally. However, while people mix together, they also remain distinct. In other words, a crowd’s structure and its dynamics are supremely interesting because of its fluid, ever-evolving nature. I enjoy such a painterly challenge.

JM: Anything else?

SJ: Yes, as I said, their comic absurdity; a lot of crowds and crowding around here—I find them absurd.

JM: Shall we say, then, it’s the absurdity that especially fascinates you?

SJ: That too. Not all, but many such crowds strike one as comical. But I have always thought the tragicomic, absurd and magical—as in unreal—nature of the social reality is a Kerala thing. Mattancherry is just representative of that.

JM: Interesting. This line of your works have earlier been interpreted as ‘street-theatre’. What I hear now seems to say, it’s not just the theatrical or dramatic that catches your eye; it’s more of the ‘theatre of the absurd’ which is almost magical. These paintings are an expression of such absurdly magical reality which you perceive.

SJ: I guess you can say that.

JM: I am sure you are aware García Márquez has said

something similar about Caribbean life. That everyday reality itself is magical in his geography.

SJ: Certainly. There is something about his Caribbean magical reality that resonates with people in Kerala. There is no other explanation for such overwhelming popularity of his work here. He was even called a ‘Malayali writer’!

JM: Yes, M Mukundan said that, claiming him for Malayalam. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* sold, in translation, over fifty thousand copies in Kerala. Did you read any Márquez?

SJ: Several short stories, including ‘Big Mama’s Funeral’. Among the longer works, only *Cholera* and *No One Writes to the Colonel*. I tried reading *Solitude* but didn’t finish. I was reading him in English, and my command of the language wasn’t good enough for me to enjoy *Solitude*. Of course, I could always read it in Malayalam. Something great about being a Malayali is that you get to read almost any author in your mother tongue. But I haven’t. I might go back to *Solitude* again in either language.

JM: Coming back to what you call the absurdly magical social reality of Kerala; can you tell me what exactly strikes you as absurd? And therefore unreal or magical?

SJ: Notwithstanding all my respect for considerable progress Kerala has made on human development indices compared to the rest of the country, the place does strike you as unreal. Well, I will give some macro-level examples; but the absurd vein manifests even in the smaller, everyday things. For starters, is there another place on the planet where women had to mount organised public protests and strikes to be allowed to cover their breasts? We have had several such agitations here known as *Maru marakkal samaram* [covering breasts agitation] . You see a glimpse

of this in *What must be said*. If it weren't for many such instances in recorded history, nobody would even believe something like this could happen. While it's admirable that even in the 19th-century women in Kerala led such agitations, the very fact that women had to mount strikes to win the fundamental right to clothe themselves is incredulous, bordering on the absurd.

And it continues well into the 21st century. You must be aware of *Chumbana samaram* [kissing agitation]. A few years ago, thousands of people assembled to kiss in public, protesting against violent prudes. Just to win the freedom to display affection in public without being attacked by prudish mobs.

Where else did women have to get a Supreme Court order to be allowed into a place of worship in the 21st century? One that had disallowed them from accessing the premises for decades because the deity was supposedly a celibate one and would not like women—of fertile age—visiting him? And the few women who, empowered by the court order, tried to visit the said place of worship, needed the protection of hundreds of policemen, lest ultra-conservative, violent mobs lynch them? Where else would tens of thousands of conservative women go on the streets to protect the 'chastity of a deity' by preventing their fellow women from entering a temple? If all that is not absurd, what is?

JM: I understand. And you seem to say, as a microcosm, Mattancherry reflects this tragicomic, absurdist bent of Kerala's sociopolitical scene, and your canvases reflect your perception of that.

SJ: Yes.

JM: There are several such contradictions about Kerala

which can seem bizarre. For one, the state has the most educated people in India: beyond 'literacy' per se, the percentage of college graduates compare well to many parts of the developed world. Yet, the religious fervour across the state, among all faiths, is only increasing.

SJ: Indeed. When I was a young girl, Muslim women were distinguishable only by a headscarf that barely covered the hair. They didn't wear even a full hijab.

JM: I remember those days very well. It was so until the early 90s or so. Islam's quest to reiterate religious identity in Kerala seems to have coincided with the national rise of *Hindutva*, or the Hindu nationalism, in the decade.

SJ: Yes. Now the niqab is universal among Muslim women, even little girls. Have you seen ads about 'Modern burqas in the latest fashion'? I am sure you know, the birth rate of Christians increased substantially in Kerala recently, because couples are having four and five children, with the sole objective of increasing 'the strength of the community'. There are even incentive schemes of bishops attending baptisms directly, if you have more than three children.

JM: Yes, Christians, especially Catholics, seem determined to increase their numerical strength. As a result, upper caste Hindus have the lowest birth-rate in the state today.

SJ: How can anyone escape the absurd tragicomedy of a lot of things like that? How can anyone not ask, 'Where, as a society, are we going?' In *Where are we going?*, you see a religious procession on account of the feast in the Catholic church right next to my studio, which has been, for years, killing my peace. As the procession progresses, we see a woman with mental health problems dashing into the scene, on her roller-skates—these were added, the real

woman did not have them on—an educated society that can't take care of its mentally challenged, spends so much on celebrating the feasts of the saints. Isn't that bizarre? I haven't said this to many: in *It seems*, what we see is the crowd that gathered to see Prince Charles and Camilla Parker, who were celebrating his birthday in Kerala, and their itinerary included the synagogue and the palace right next to my home. And in leftist Kerala, it gathered such a crowd, with people scrambling and jostling to get a view of the Prince and the Princess of Wales! To me, there doesn't seem to be much difference between this and the beauty queens paraded on Maconda's streets.

As seen in *Unspecified*, one often sees such a pointless crowd in front of the government hospital that stands close to my studio, which happens to be in poorer health than most of its inmates. The place is teeming with people who have brought garlands and so on to receive important inmates who come out, after their conquest of illness! In *Irul*, the dark underbelly of Mattancherry becomes active, while the homeless look for shelter for the night, all under the gaze of the erstwhile king—he used to live in Mattancherry, as it was once the capital of the Kingdom of Cochin—while a man and a woman spread their wings, hoping to fly away.

JM: I realise there is considerable exploration of the bizarrely comical in these canvases, which I suspect is largely missed.

SJ: To my mind, it's comical and tragic at the same time; meaningless and unreal. That's my idea of the absurd. I think most funny things are sad things, and vice versa. That's why I have painted Chaplin in one of those canvases: in *It seems*. Chaplin taught me how to look for the funny side of everything that's sad.

CONVERSATION 3

About the body of work called 'Where do we come from?'

JM: Shall we start by asking, where does *Where do we come from* come from? What made you go on to paint these images?

SJ: Everybody comes from somewhere, don't they? And I think where people come from makes them who they are. If I say, this body of work is an exploration of where I come from, it also becomes an exploration of who I am.

JM: Interesting. Let's say, therefore, this is some sort of a visual-introspection. Or maybe a visual enquiry into your identity? But is this about your childhood? And is nostalgia at play here?

SJ: Yes, no, and no. I was twenty-four when I left the world I was born in. And there is not really much nostalgia, because I haven't lost that world; I keep revisiting and experiencing it, though the place has changed quite a lot. It's still my emotional home.

I think of it as an exploration of the genesis and evolution of my visual sensibility; my visual coming of age, if you will. All the images are recurring motifs of not just my childhood, but also adolescence and early youth. They are, sort of, anchor points in my visual journey. Of course, sensibility is an evolving thing. Things you see, watch, read, listen to, everything keeps adding to it. However, for a visual artist, I think, there is an original visual lexicon and grammar; a language which is used to perceive and assimilate everything new. When I encounter something unfamiliar, I perceive, understand and interpret it in

comparison with this familiar visual world; how the unfamiliar resembles or differs from the familiar. That's what I mean by the original visual vocabulary. I am just trying to explore the visual world that makes up my fundamental visual language in a few canvases.

JM: Very well put, Sosa. Well, I have seen a few early canvases. What else can one expect in this series?

SJ: I am just getting started, and it's evolving, as usual. As you know, I am not a big planner. So, I don't know yet the actual scope of this project. Let me just say there is a lot more to come, perhaps over a dozen canvases in all. I believe in spontaneity, serendipity, and evolution. When I say I am painting a body of work about where I come from, I mean, I am committed to it. What I don't mean is, I list out subjects, the number of canvases, their sizes, think why these subjects are relevant, identify the underlying ideas or themes, agonise over what palette I will use, nothing of the sort. That's not me. I don't overthink, at least when it comes to my work. I just paint. Now, this project: I know the territory of visual exploration, its emotion. The rest evolves. Of course, in some projects, if I feel the need, mostly mid-way, I go on to do life studies, preparatory drawings etc. For me, what's more important than the result is the process. And it's essentially exploratory. Frankly, if I don't enjoy the process, I don't think anyone else will like the result. Please don't get me wrong: I am not against planning, or being more methodical. I would like to do that or be that way! It's just that I am just not wired that way. So, I generally let things take their course, evolve, and become what they want to be.

JM: Still, there must be a few images in your head, which might find their way onto canvases?

SJ: It's all about the river. And the people whose lives it

flowed through. I mean River Pamba. That's the leitmotif, if I may say so. I was born and raised on the bank of this river. From our house, I could see and hear the river.

JM: Do your memories begin with the river?

SJ: I can't be sure. But certainly, nothing impressed or overwhelmed me as much as the river in those days. See, neither of my parents used to be at home. My father would come home at night. But the river was always at home.

JM: Wonderful. Please go on.

SJ: When I was a child, about six years old maybe, I would wake up from a nightmare during the siesta, and cry out loud, almost every day. And then, I would go out into the yard in front of the house, sobbing all the way, and watch the river and the woods beyond. I used to think the opposite bank of the river is where the world ended! [Laughs] Something about the unknown beyond, or perhaps living at the edge of the earth, bothered me constantly.

As a child, I thought of all forms of water as the river. I am serious! Be it the ponds, the lagoons, the little streams that crisscrossed the land, several little water bodies around, and even the innumerable small puddles of water that were everywhere, I somehow thought all of it was River Pamba. In my understanding of the world, my juvenile cosmology, if you will, River Pamba enveloped us; we sort of lived in a bubble inside its riverine universe. Our homes, buffalos, goats, hens and ducks, the haystacks, the sugarcane fields, the numerous trees—jackfruit, moringa, silk cotton trees, portia trees and so on—everything stood within a world swathed by the river. Beyond the river, where my father took his boat, the world ended. To my mind, he was like a space traveller: a man who paddled up to the edge of the

earth, and looked at what lay beyond! [Laughs]

As people who live by the river know, the river is like a lover. It brings you something or the other daily. You might spot it floating at times. Sometimes it washes ashore, as if the river was bringing you a gift to the doorstep, just to leave it there for you without a word or a note, before flowing away silently—driftwood, bunches of fresh coconuts, branches of tamarind trees, cattle, and sometimes bodies too; but mostly a lot of trash. The river told us what people living upstream owned and then threw away: a lot of stuff that could be used as playthings by the children from families living by the river, including defunct bicycle and automobile tyres that were popular among boys, and surprisingly, whole bunches of glass bangles tied together, apparently discarded, though new, by peddlers.

I have memories of my father coming home with his paddle on his shoulder, walking through the sugarcane fields that stood by the river. My aunt lay dead in the same sugarcane field, after she was bitten by a viper there. I remember the Party marches that formed a red river along the river, and the church processions that took the same route. There is a lot that happened around and the river. A writer would write a novel. I would paint.

JM: It's magical. It also sounds like a project of social anthropology and ethnography. Do you plan to revisit these places to study the geographical, botanical or cultural elements that may be relevant?

SJ: It would surely help, though it is impractical during a pandemic. However, such studies are not instrumental in my process. I am an artist; I am not obligated to paint what is or was there. I paint what is there in my head. Accurate portrayal of the reality as I have experienced is less important than expressing my sense of that reality, no

matter how inaccurate that may be. That being said, in some details, such studies do help. When convenient, I might spend some time doing exactly that.

JM: You have named the series *Where do you come from?*, obviously after Gauguin, again.

SJ: The body of work per se has nothing to do with Gauguin. From his original title, I had already used the second and third parts in *What are we?*, and *Where are we going?* So I thought I might as well use the first part. That's all.

JM: I think I need to ask this question— where do you come from, Sosa? Besides the river, what kind of a place is that? I am not asking because I don't know; I do. But most people think you are from Cochin, and more specifically, Mattancherry. Until now, though not all of them, several of your better-known images are from this part of Kerala. In contextualising your new work, perhaps it's important to know where you really come from.

SJ: The exact place where I am from is called Parumala. That's where I come from. It's a village in the Kuttanad region. I moved to Cochin in my early thirties. So, I am not from here at all; I still speak a dialect that sounds laughable here. Most of my family is still scattered around Kuttanad. Now, Kuttanad is a geographically distinct region, spread over three southern districts of Kerala. Like many places in the Netherlands, including Amsterdam, the altitude is below zero, as the lower parts of Kuttanad is well below sea level. I am told it is the lowest-lying land in India. It is also one of the few places in the world where farming is done below sea level. Naturally, Kuttanad has more wetlands and water bodies. There are four rivers around, including River Meenachil that Arundhati Roy has written about in *God of Small Things*. One more of these

four rivers is River Pamba. So, that's where I come from. A rather watery place. Full of paddies. More buffalos than cows. More ducks than hens. A lot of sugarcane along the river. Most people are poor. Summers are sultry. Flooded during the monsoons. Politics is left-wing.

JM: It's also very Christian, isn't it? Elsewhere you said, in Mattancherry, your adoptive hometown, the most visible culture is Islamic. Did the overwhelmingly Christian atmosphere play any role in shaping your sensibility?

SJ: Yes, the cultural landscape was distinctly Christian, especially in my village. Parumala was also a pilgrimage destination for Syrian Christians, as Saint Geevargese had lived there. However, I can't say Christianity has had an overwhelmingly important influence on me. I have hardly gone to the church or prayed at home, as this would terribly displease my father, a communist. I have rarely been to our church. Maybe twice or thrice, but only because my grandmother bribed me with candy!

JM: People seem confused about your ethnicity, the so-called 'Syrian Christian'. I saw multiple articles identifying you as 'catholic'. Does it bother you?

SJ: It doesn't. Especially because I am not religious.

JM: But it's not just a matter of religion, but identity, isn't it? Do you want to explain the Syrian Christian ethnicity for the uninitiated?

SJ: Why don't you? You are more knowledgeable about the history of the community, aren't you? I will add whatever I can.

JM: People don't get it primarily because they think of Christianity in binary terms, that is, either catholic or

protestant. Whoever is not protestant must be catholic, and vice versa. But this binary savours of Eurocentrism. They consider Christianity itself to be European. Regardless if Jesus was God or not, he surely wasn't a European white; he was a west Asian Jew. So, there are other kinds of Christians across Asia, and ancient ones at that, called Eastern/Oriental Orthodox Christians. They are neither catholic nor protestants and have nothing to do with Europe. So, the first thing about Syrian Christians of Kerala is that they are Eastern Orthodox Christians. Such Christianity exists all over West Asia and the Middle East—from where it came to Kerala—besides Russia, Greece, Egypt and so on. In Kerala, they existed long before the arrival of western Christianity, and by that I mean, the Roman one, which arrived with the Portuguese. So, basically, ours is the pre-Portuguese Christianity of India.

SJ: But Syrian Christians aren't a monolithic community anymore. They have split into several churches or denominations by now. Perhaps half a dozen? My extended family themselves have started following different churches by now.

JM: To the last count, there are at least seven factions. It's just low-down politics, anyway. And to add to the confusion, these Christians were called 'Syrian' by the Dutch though the community self-identified as *Mar Thoma* [Saint Thomas] Christians or *Nazranis*. This was not because they have anything to do with today's country called Syria, but because their liturgical language—the language of prayer and the Mass—until the 20th century, was Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, apparently the language Jesus himself spoke.

SJ: To be more accurate, they should be called 'Syriac Christians', therefore. God is called *Alaha* in Syriac. There is that famous Malayalam novel by Sarah Joseph called

Alahayude penmakkal [God's Daughters] and I think even many Malayalis don't understand *Alaha* means God there! My name comes from Aramaic/Hebrew; it's an abbreviation of *Shoshanna*, which in Hebrew means 'lily' the flower. But you know that.

JM: Yes. Talking about your background, can you briefly tell me something about your Communist father? A lot of people, especially in the west, I think, are unaware of this misnomer of 'democratic communism' that exists in Kerala, the very word 'communism' evoking images of totalitarian regimes, atrocities of Stalinism, and so on. Frankly, I think, CPI and CPI (M), the two Indian 'Communist' Parties, should rename themselves. They don't seem to be any more left than the left in many liberal democracies. So, your father; what kind of communist was he?

SJ: See, I come from a working-class family. Both my grandfather and my father were ferrymen who rowed boats—a *vallam*—for a living. Later, my father became a factory worker. The Party first came to power in Kerala in 1957, and became the world's first 'communist' government to come to power through free and fair elections. Yes, as you say, though the ideology remains 'Communism' or 'Marxist-Leninist' nominally, it's just another left-wing democratic party. There is no totalitarianism or 'dictatorship of the proletariat'! Recently, the ex-finance minister and the economist of the Party even said on TV that the Party's policy-making is now focused on the middle class, as the working class has been increasingly becoming the middle class now. So, by now, it's a self-declared party of the middle class—the original bourgeoisie! [Laughs]

In any case, when the Party split in 1964 into CPI and CPI (M), my father went with the latter. In my parents' home,

on the walls, my father would keep framed portraits of Marx and Lenin. My grandmother, who often asserted Marx was the Antichrist, would replace the Marx and Lenin portraits with Jesus and saints when my father used to go away for a few days. After returning, he would in turn quietly replace her Gods with his own, and this would go on. However, my father is the most altruistic, and the most selfless man I have ever known. He lived for the people, the peasants and workers of the villages around; there is nothing he wouldn't do for them. And this was not because we were any better off. He was a party worker at the very grass-roots level—was never elected to any high office, never had any power other than the power one garners over one's fellow men when one selflessly lives for them. We were rather poor. On many festive occasions, such as Christmas, when my friends had new clothes, and my parents did not have money to buy me anything, my mother would pinch a length of fabric from the bale of red cloth that belonged to the Party—meant for the Party flag—to sew a new blouse for me. I would be overjoyed. None of my friends ever had a blouse in such bright red. Misappropriation of the Party resources, indeed! [Smiles]

JM: That's quite a story. The 'flag-blouse' one. I hope that becomes a painting. In any case, you are no stranger to autobiographical work. I remember *March 17*. It shows you weeping over your father's body, shrouded in the Party flag.

SJ: Yes, it's an early work. Titled after the date of my father's death. It's pastels; a few years before oils became my medium.

JM: After many years of focusing on exploring motifs from your immediate surroundings, how did you happen to think of creating a body of work on the place where you come from?

SJ: It's not true. I have been painting works with material from my life in Parumala all the time. *Your earth, my world*, *Interior figures*, one of the *Waits*, and so on. That said, yes, I am now focused on painting a body of work from the riverbank and the wetlands where I am from.

JM: Good luck with that! I really look forward to seeing your riverine universe on a dozen or so canvases.

CONVERSATION 4

About love of animals and animal life depicted in her works

JM: One more of the several recurring motifs in your works is animal life. You have done many animal portraits, and a few canvases dedicated to animals or insects in an ecosystem, like in *Residual*, *Dragonfly* etc. But even when you paint urban life, like in your Mattancherry canvases, animals are often present. I remember the yellow cows, goats, and several birds in *What are we?* paintings, and the water buffalo in *Other colours*. I can see an artist who is eternally interested in animals.

SJ: Indeed, I am interested in animals. Given my rural upbringing, naturally, I have had a childhood rich with animal life; other than domesticated animals, there were a number of civets, mongooses and such around, and various birds specific to riverbanks and wetlands, including moorhens, coots, jacanas, grebes, cormorants, ibises, and teals. Besides, at home, we often had water buffalos, cows, goats, and chickens.

JM: I understand that. Interestingly, several birds in *Residual* look much like jacanas. However, your fascination and connection with a variety of animals seem exceptional. There is considerable tenderness and empathy in the way you portray animals. In fact, beyond your works, it is apparent in you. You anthropomorphize animals in everyday life, don't you? For example, you seem to use human pronouns indiscriminately for animals. Not just a cat, a dog, or a cow, even a gecko, a spider, or a mosquito is a 'she' or a 'he' for you, isn't it? Being well aware of your early admiration for Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, I suspect if it's 'Basheerian'.

SJ: I have always been like that. [Smiles] Even before I was old enough to read Basheer. I am my parents' youngest child; my peers at home were the calves and lambs. I used to talk to them all the time. I would have long conversations with even the banana plants, and particularly a neem tree. My brother used to tell everyone I was loony because of this! [Smiles] About Basheer—as you know, *Bhoomiyude Avakashikal* ['Inheritors of the Earth'] celebrates collective ownership of the earth by all living organisms. The idea that all creatures, including rats and scorpions that he specifically talks about, are equally rightful heirs of the earth, just as much as we, humans, was eye-opening. It deeply impressed me.

JM: Fascinating! And yes, the story almost seems to propose a society based on trans-species egalitarianism.

SJ: Yes. Even today, I honestly believe in the central idea of the story. And perhaps that keeps me acutely aware of the presence and condition of the animals around me. Not that I do much about it except painting animals.

JM: You are an artist, not an activist. But you always see the animals, it seems, in whatever geography you are. And with tenderness. And seeing is important, especially in art. In Malayalam literature, for example, I think now there are considerably fewer animals, birds, and insects, and much less plant life depicted than when Basheer and Thakazhi wrote. I mean, 'biodiversity' in literature, if you will, has dwindled dramatically.

SJ: But isn't that expected when biodiversity is shrinking in the real world?

JM: Not so much. The trees are still in flower, season after season, and the birds still sing. But in literary works, few characters ever seem to hear or notice. The Gecko that

crawled around in *Oru Nazrani yuvavum gauli shastravum*

['A Nazrani youth and the Gecko Science'] is still there in every home. But in literature, very few humans seem interested in anything but humans. It's as if writers have banished animals and plants from their works. In visual art, too, there is significant distancing and alienation from nature. It's interesting, given that environmental consciousness and concerns are growing globally. While it is indeed a sweeping generalization, I suspect writers and artists today display much less aptitude and diligence to depict the human condition as a part of nature, in the context of animal and plant life. My point is, this is why it is so delightful to see so many animals in your works, and especially a goat that is giving birth in the middle of a street!

SJ: There are two! The one you are referring to is in *Residual*. There is another in *Other colours*, which is less noticeable, maybe.

JM: I am sorry I hadn't noticed it. Childbirths involving animals seem rather frequently depicted. There is a buffalo giving birth in another work, too. It does seem you are moved particularly by the feminine among animals. You have painted several hens but no rooster, I think. The water buffalos are female as well. And there are cows, but no oxen.

SJ: That must be because I am more used to the female of each species, that is, not the bulls and billies. Males of many species are much less useful, aren't they? [Laughs] Of course, there are tomcats I have painted, *Casanova the cat*, for example. But I get what you are saying. And yes, as a child and an adult, I have witnessed or attended to several animal childbirths. Something about it is deeply moving, heartbreaking, almost.

CONVERSATION 5

About 'Morikuni' and other 'Shodoshima works'

JM: Let's talk about a few works you did in Japan, shall we? I understand you were in residence at Shodoshima before the Setouchi Triennale. The three of your 'Shodoshima works', if I may dub them so, I think, are amongst your best. While talking about your 'muted' and 'unsaturated' palette has become a cliché, I see your colours are vivid in these works, especially in *Morikuni*. What would you like to share about your time in Shodoshima?

SJ: I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Shodoshima; maybe a little too much. I wouldn't shut up about Shodoshima for months after I returned! It was early spring; though it was cold, the landscape was astonishingly beautiful. I lived in a cottage by the sea, but worked at a studio a little far. Other than *Morikuni*, the two other works, *Torii*—the entrance to a Shinto shrine—and *Fishermen* are scenes I observed during the commute.

JM: These works are different from your Mattancherry works. I mean, spectacularly so.

SJ: How, in your opinion, are they different?

JM: Well, apart from a considerably different palette, compared to *What are we?*, the main body of work you showed at the Triennale, and the conspicuous presence of the outline here and there—especially, the group of four figures to the bottom right of *Morikuni*—I think the main point of departure is this: you hadn't painted anything but urban landscape recently. There was almost nothing in your works with such terrain, and distinct geographic

features, and, yes, vegetation. In fact, I can't think of any trees in any of your canvases before these two works. There are bamboos in an early work called *Dragonfly*, paddies in *Your earth...*, coconut palm in *Otta*, but no trees proper! But they appear in a many of your recent works, *Washer woman*, *Poultry thieves*, *Pieta* etc.

SJ: Guilty on all counts! [Smiles] Yes, I seldom had a visible outline around figures earlier, but now they are more frequent. You can see outlines in *Man who owned the world*, one of my latest, for example. See, I don't make any underlying drawing on the canvas, I paint straight away. This hasn't changed. The lines you see are part of painting, not something that precedes it.

About trees. Very true. I wasn't very 'tree-friendly' before. [Smiles] In fact, I was very nervous about painting trees. They were magnificent life forms that awed me, which I was apprehensive of painting.

JM: Such caution about painting trees has existed throughout the history of art, I would think. Classical or renaissance painters approached them very carefully, with meticulous draftsmanship. Until the impressionists cracked how to paint trees with irreverence and insouciance, most of the painted trees were heavily drawing-led: coloured drawings, in fact. There are dozens of *Fall of man* or *Garden of Eden* paintings, including Michelangelo's; each leaf is painstakingly drawn or painted, much like in a botanical illustration.

Da Vinci's few trees— in *Adoration of the Magi*, or *Portrait of Ginevra de Benci*, or *Baptism*, for instance—are all dealt with the same excruciating discipline and rigour. Even in the Indian miniature tradition, trees are actually rendered with barks and individual leaves drawn out and filled with colour: you can actually count the leaves. The point is, no

one seems to have taken trees lightly. I think the impressionists have approached trees with ease because they haven't tried to paint the trees per se. Barring a few modern masters from the Bengal school such as Benode Behari Mukherjee, so few Indian painters approach trees with ease. For example, I can think of only very few Shergils with any trees in them—*Winter*, for one—and some of these are just barks. Perhaps trees present the most complex anatomy in nature, don't they? It seems the issue is the difficulty in painting trees *without* painting them, or making them look laboured. Interesting. Somebody should write a history exclusively of painting trees.

SJ: Exactly. Painting them *without* painting them, that's the tricky part. They are so complex that capturing their essential character—without drawing and then painting each part—is difficult. But I am getting used to painting them. I thoroughly enjoyed working on the tree forms in *Pietà*. I even did a few landscapes recently, *Morning in Coorg* included. I can say I am getting myself to approach trees with ease. Trees are rather important for the work I want to do further.

JM: About *Morikuni*. I gather it is based on your studies at the café-bar of the same name. Perhaps you would like to talk about the experience?

SJ: Morikuni is famously the only sake brewery on the island; it's an old soy sauce factory refurbished and repurposed, if I am not mistaken. The bar is relatively new, I think. I frequented the place, though I drank very little. Watching customers at Morikuni's sake bar, while making studies, was particularly enjoyable for two reasons. Firstly, I was delighted to see so many women in such social spaces, sharing a drink and more. The time and place in which I grew up, and even where I live now, such social

spaces remained and continue to be out of bounds for women. In the villages, the institution called the toddy shop has always been there. Like the erstwhile ‘tavern’, these remain men-only, mysterious places of privilege, where a lot happens besides drinking. In those days, almost every movie had elaborate toddy-shop scenes, where plot-altering action would take place often—even duels and murders! But the women could see toddy shops only in movies. Even today, women do not go to toddy shops. And a woman, especially by herself, at modern bars in Kerala still makes heads turn, and eyebrows raise. So, centuries after the ‘tavern’ emerged as an important social institution, in patriarchal Kerala, a woman in a place meant for drinking is still a stigma. I am sure my mother and all my sisters haven’t seen the inside of a bar of any kind yet. Most of the figures in *Morikuni*, even the ones seated at the bar, are female. That delighted me considerably.

JM: I think the whole canvas has only two or three men among the two dozen or more figures. That’s quite unusual.

SJ: Deliberately so. Of course, the place had many more men. But I banished a few from the canvas. My space, my rules; it’s my revenge! [Laughs]

JM. Interesting! What’s the other thing? I mean, what else did you enjoy about studying people at *Morikuni*?

SJ: Well, I am always moved by the drama in everyday life. Seemingly banal, mundane situations in life contain a lot of interesting material. The way humans, and even animals, express and emote when they are alone or in company is infinitely fascinating. I mean, the postures, how the anatomy is organised and how it keeps changing, the facial expressions that come and go, and so on; I find them all so

endearing and creatively challenging. Besides, the situations themselves are often absurd and tragicomic, poignant and laughable at the same time. People around us are spectacles themselves; at times, I think the theatre is in our home, workplace as well as our social space. The day-to-day is the drama. The banal is the creative. The shallow is the deep. The ordinary is the interesting. In such a scheme of things, even boredom isn't boring. Morikuni allowed me to explore everyday drama in a new setting.

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