



Master's pieces

Ilango is a name that is synonymous with art in Chennai. A teacher, a philosopher, a painter, a sculptor – what Ilango can do is evident, just by glancing around his beautiful work space. Who he is, however, requires a more in depth study.

By Anjali Alappat

At his studio, aptly named 'Artspace', Ilango is surrounded by students – young and old – and is clearly in his element. He radiates a mixture of contentment and excitement – a heady *joie de vivre* which makes him a pleasure to talk to.

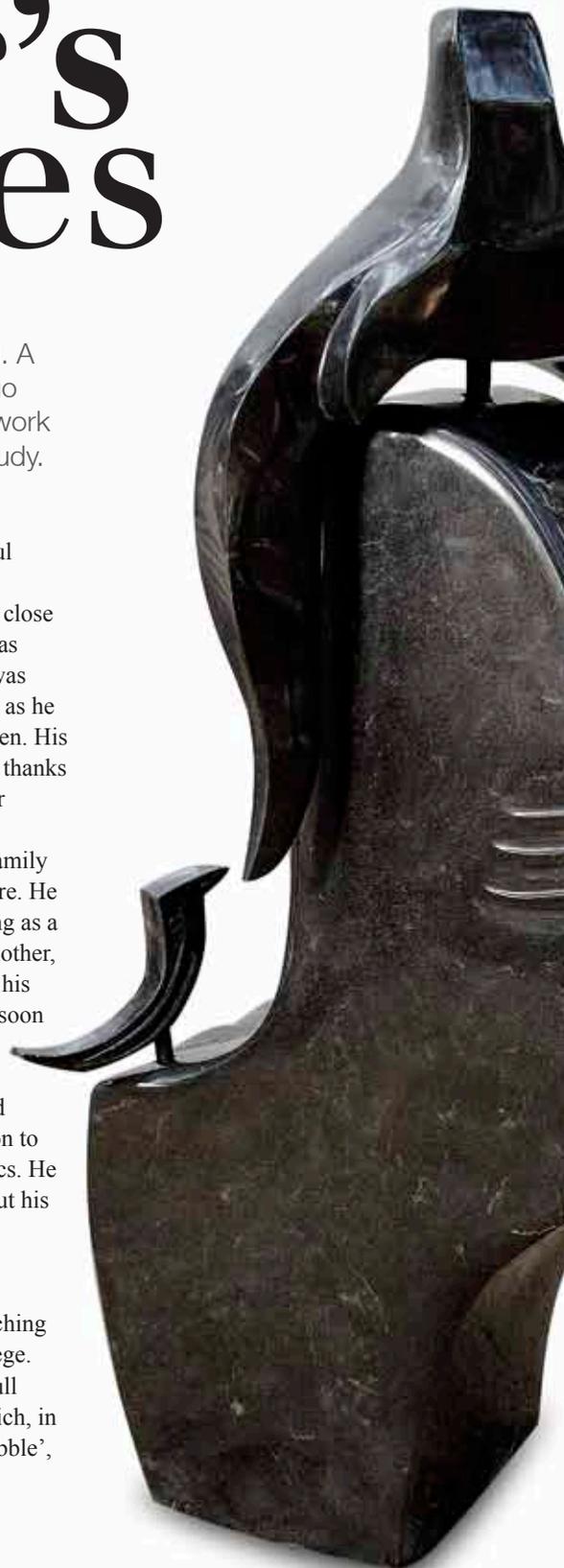
MAKING OF AN ARTIST

Born in Gobichettipalayam, a small village nestled between Coimbatore and Erode, Ilango's childhood memories have clearly shaped who he is as an artist. He describes his childhood home as he saw it. "The village was full of lush paddy fields, nothing else, the Bhavani River passes through; the name of the village is also Bhavani. There are many tributaries of the river. One passes through my village and it meanders along the paddy fields and the road is laid along. And for miles together you can see rows of coconut trees on both sides of the road." It sounds like a rural paradise and Ilango is quick to point out that it indeed is. "It is a green carpet for miles together, with a backdrop of the

Western Ghats. It's a beautiful place," says the artist.

Growing up in a large and close knit family, Ilango's talent was overlooked, not because he was neglected, but more because, as he says, things were different then. His parents travelled a great deal thanks to his father's work in the Air Force. He remained with his grandparents and extended family in the village and studied there. He has fond memories of drawing as a child, portraits of his grandmother, jumping horses, scenes from his then hero, MGR's films, but soon art took a backseat due to his education. Ilango did his first degree in agriculture and mathematics and then went on to do his Masters in Mathematics. He nearly opted to do his PhD but his fascination for art won out.

At 27, he and his family moved to Chennai where his wife, Chandra, took up a teaching position at Stella Maris College. Ilango then began painting full time. After his first show which, in his own words, 'burst my bubble', he began teaching again.



His classes, for the most part, are grouped by age. He teaches several young children as well as young women. He also teaches children who have learning disabilities and other problems such as ADHD and autism. Some of the young women who attend his classes are also from troubled backgrounds



Mahishasura IV, Acrylic on Canvas, 2007, 90 x 120 cm

ANGRY YOUNG MAN

It is hard to imagine Ilango as an angry young man, as he checks his young students' work and teases them about their depictions of elephants ('that one looks like a mosquito!') but he laughs and says, "I was very restless when I was young." About his work in the early years he says, "The paintings were based on social themes because I was a young man and when you are very young, you have all this anger against society, and an unexplained rage about so many things and that angst comes out through your creativity." Ilango

lists the names of his paintings as a clincher – 'Gone with the Wind', 'Agony of Gift', 'Desertion', etc.

He describes his initial work as realistic and impressionist, citing his love of Van Gogh as one of his inspirations. Most of the paintings in his first collection were done with a palette knife. He says, "I made my own palette knives because I didn't know if they were available in the market or not."

ART IMITATES LIFE

When asked about the 'Indian' themes of his paintings, a majority of which focuses on aspects of

rural and urban life, Ilango states that instead of selecting themes based on their social relevance, he merely relived his life. "I constantly relive my life and it (the theme) keeps changing based on recollections and experiences." He describes Gobichettipalayam as 'his place', having lived there from the age of 7 till he was 15 and then having returned during his holidays while he was in college. According to Ilango, that was where he found his friends and felt the first fluttering of puppy love. Living in a village had its advantages. A principally agricultural village, Gobichettipalayam had several festivals. It was at these festivals that Ilango learnt to love dance. He describes these time as "fun, with no purpose because I had no ideas of drawing and painting, I was just watching." He goes on to say, "The memories have all remained with me, staying inside my head, like a DVD." Many of his paintings feature festival scenes.

His famous bulls, which feature



Above: *The Parai-I*, 2008, 54 X 48in



in so many of his paintings, are also inspired by his experiences. When he finally left his home to live in a hostel, his new room overlooked the home of several bulls. Ilango watched them everyday; though he never sketched them they left a

deep impact on his life. Perhaps more so because of the period of transition that he himself was experiencing, leaving home for the first time.

LIVING AND TEACHING ART

Ilango has an interesting and humbling way of looking at his work over the years. He believes that art has guided him throughout his life. He speaks of art as a separate entity, a force of nature in its own right, one that has used him as a willing instrument. “You can say life has lived me, or art has lived me. I never had any agenda, I wanted to become a good artist and in the process, I kept on painting.” He admits at the time, his ultimate goal was to show off his work.

He also reminisces about the lack of a teacher in his artistic

quest. Ilango is an entirely self-taught artist with no formal training. He laughs and says, “Nature is my teacher.” Though he lacked a guru, it is clear that he revels in his own teaching experiences. He states, simply, “I think I am a natural teacher.” He is currently writing a book based on the concepts of space, line, form and time. Ilango says he cannot write sitting at a computer or even by putting pen to paper. He prefers his own, unique method – teaching a class on the subject and then using his students’ notes to compile his book.

His classes, for the most part, are grouped by age. He teaches several young children as well as young women. He also teaches children who have learning disabilities and other problems such as ADHD and autism. Some of the young women who attend his classes are also from troubled backgrounds, struggling to deal with issues such as depression. According to Ilango, “I cannot call it art therapy, I am not qualified for that, but it helps them.” His genuine affection and pride in all his students shines through. He has their work displayed in the classroom and even stores some of his students’ work in his own studio.

EXPERIENCES IN THE ART WORLD

Ilango has travelled extensively, showcasing his art in various art capitals all over the world. From Paris to Malaysia, his experiences are varied and vast. However, when asked about Chennai’s art scene, he confesses to being disappointed. He explains, “In Europe they had impressionism, expressionism, kinetic art, op-art, pop-art and cubism. And with Dada, they had the anti-art movement. Here, the maximum they have had is an anti-artist movement.” Though he laughs when he speaks of the

disharmony in the Chennai art community, it is something that clearly weighs on him. "Each artist hates the other artist. They are not together at all." He made his point clear at a recent panel discussion which he participated in, along with three other artists. "If five or six lawyers come together, they start a firm. Doctors would start a hospital. Many people would start

companies. But if three or four artists get together, they start fighting." He went on to say that very few people in the art community truly understand that it is important to see the bigger picture, putting art above their personal issues. He is philosophical about it, saying, "Maybe it is happening finally, with Cholamandel artists' community."

Bull Fight , 2009,-36 X 36 in

As for the international art scene, Ilango has had varied experiences with the West. He was baffled by the western perception that there is no real art in India.

Most westerners, he believes, have only seen north Indian styles of artwork, which has totally eclipsed the offerings of the south. He spoke of the many galleries he has visited abroad, especially in New York City and the lack of Indian galleries there. He remarks that even M.F Hussain, one of the biggest names in Indian art, is not as well known as we believe outside our borders.

Ilango is a mix of cultures, styles, lines and forms. A man, who takes inspiration from life, yet believes art controls his destiny. He has travelled all over the world and yet a tiny village in Erode district is his biggest inspiration. He has taught several students, despite having no teacher himself. He's a complex man with what he claims is a simple vision. A master in his own right, it is perhaps easier to revel in his contradictions than try to find the source of his magic. As he paints a beautiful picture in the space of 10 minutes and poses for pictures with youthful enthusiasm, it is easy to see why he is so revered, both as an artist and a man.

