

Sujith S. N. *Seeds of Silence*

Exhibition: January 17 – February 23, 2019

Press Preview & V.I.P. Reception: Thursday, January 17, 6:00pm – 8:00pm
35 Great Jones St., New York NY 10012

Aicon Gallery is proud to present ***Seeds of Silence***, the first major U. S. solo exhibition by Mumbai-based artist **Sujith S. N.** The exhibition is framed around a new series of monumental works on paper depicting the artist's iconic otherworldly landscapes sparsely populated by haunting structures and fragile human figures under vast and mysteriously luminescent night skies. This is the artists first solo exhibition with Aicon Gallery.

Prominent Mumbai-based critic and curator **Girish Shahane**, in his essay about the current exhibition, states "Sujith S. N. is an anomaly, having dedicated himself to painting in a period when his peers, virtually without exception, have been drawn to the promise of cross-media experimentation. Not only has he stayed committed to brush and pigment, but has focused almost exclusively on crafting watercolors on paper. Former classmates catching up on his practice are astonished at the turn in his work, for they remember a boy who abhorred watercolor. Far from virtuosic in those days, Sujith was frustrated by the medium's unforgiving nature, but painstakingly mastered it, being possessed of the single-mindedness required for such a task. He grew to enjoy the challenge posed by gravity, a force sometimes to be harnessed, at others countered. Working in the warm climate of South and West India, he learned to achieve results he desired in the fleeting moments before the paint dried, switching between a vertical surface for first application and a horizontal one, laid flat on the floor, for elaboration. The process demanded a kind of choreography, which augmented the intimacy and organicity he valued.



Sujith S. N., *Isle* (Detail), 2018, Watercolor on paper, 37 x 83 in.

A residency in Lucerne provided an entirely different perspective on the medium. In those frigid surroundings, the import of the phrase 'watching paint dry' applied to watercolor. He noticed some pigments floated to the top as the fluid was slowly absorbed, endowing surfaces with a powdery texture, and learned to replicate that effect in the room in his Bombay home which serves as a studio. More critically, the European residency reinforced his faith in his chosen medium at a time of profound self-questioning. Atul Dodiya, the leading painter of an older generation, has spoken about the crisis of confidence engendered by his own initial encounter with European painting, which forced him to ask if there was anything left to paint given the power, beauty, and abundance of the tradition. For Sujith, on the other hand, the long queues and packed museums he saw were proof of painting's continuing relevance, its retention of unique expressive possibilities.

Pinned to a softboard in his studio is a postcard reproducing a masterpiece from one of those museums, Brueghel's *Tower of Babel*. His first show in 2008 drew its title, *The City and the Tower*, from a passage in Genesis describing the mythical edifice that threatened to reach heaven. Since those early endeavors, he has been



Sujith S. N., *Dialogue*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 26 x 47 in.

engrossed by the relationship between figure, landscape and architecture, a preoccupation he takes forward in the works that make up *Seeds of Silence*. The landscapes in these paintings are majestic, the buildings enigmatic, and the humans incongruous. A phrase from T. S. Eliot, 'lonely men in shirt sleeves', comes to mind in describing those figures, although their undefined faces provide no hint of their mental state.

The paintings suggest stories, invite us to decode their mise-en-scène, but ultimately thwart any satisfactory narrative. We cannot know whether the man in *Isle* will move into the

molten light emerging from the cottage squeezed between high rocks. We cannot know the source of that light, nor explain the peculiar location of the structure. In an untitled painting dominated by an other-worldly red sky, we suspect the bent figures are engaged in agricultural activity, but whether it is sowing or gleaning is as unclear as the nature of their crop. The tower rising on one side with mysterious glyphs cut into its walls appears menacing, but who is to say it is not a sanctuary? The cottage in *Isle* may seem welcoming in comparison, but the rubble around it contains human skulls. Imagination begins where knowledge ends, Sujith believes, and curbs the extent of his own comprehension of what he paints in order to give imagination freer rein.

The sources from which the artist draws inspiration are varied. The wide format he prefers echoes Chinese scrolls as well as panoramic landscapes, their scale and aspect ratio imbuing his paintings with an immersive quality. He acknowledges, also, the influence of Indian miniatures, especially their tendency towards vertical layering. Within the conspicuous horizontality of his compositions, he inserts vertical divisions, some of which can be missed at first glance, such as the narrow band at the bottom of *Isle* that might delineate a cliff. The European tradition of Fantastic and Symbolist art from Brueghel to Arnold Böcklin has undoubtedly made the deepest impression of his art.

His primary connection to symbolism lies in the openly emotive effect of his work. Symbolism strove to evoke a particular mood or mental state in viewers, and he does something similar, though with a predilection for ambiguity that puts a greater range of emotions in play. The paintings in *Seeds of Silence*, like the title of the exhibition itself, are frequently melancholic, occasionally drifting to doom-laden. The apocalyptic tendency predominates in an untitled painting in which five figures stand on rocks in front of a formation that carries an erotic charge, a landscape that might depict a cliff face but is also suggestive of the fires of hell. It plays a role in the semi-dystopian vision of farmers, tower, red sky, and winding road. Other works in the show are far gentler, conveying the beauty and despondency of twilight.

He is confident now of making good paintings but knows good paintings can be traps. There is a moment when the work tells you it is complete, he says, which represents a point of safety. To go further is to risk spoiling a perfectly acceptable configuration, and he sometimes stops in that safe zone. Carrying on beyond that point offers the prospect of achieving a quality difficult to pin down, the opportunity of entering the space of the sublime. He cites Mark Rothko as his ideal in that respect.

He remains a purist at heart, refusing, for example, to use a little charcoal to blacken a section of a painting, though nobody would notice the difference. He feels it would be unethical to do that, a short-cut for which he may pay a price down the road. Though committed as fully as imaginable to watercolors, he believes the effects he can achieve with them, the drama of translucency and opacity, are ultimately irrelevant. The medium cannot be the message if one is to enter the space of the sublime." – Girish Shahane, 2019

Please contact Aicon Gallery (Andrew@Aicongallery.com) for more information.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Isle*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 38 x 83 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Archetype*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 35 x 82 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Se(a)e - I*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 35 x 82 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Se(a)e - II*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 35 x 82 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled II*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 38 x 82 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled I*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 48 x 92 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Swan Song*, 2017, Watercolor on paper, 32 x 82 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Dialogue*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 26 x 47 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 6*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 26 x 47 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 3*, 2018,
Watercolor on paper, 71 x 42 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Last Bout*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 28 x 20 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 4*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 14.5 in.

Sujith S. N.



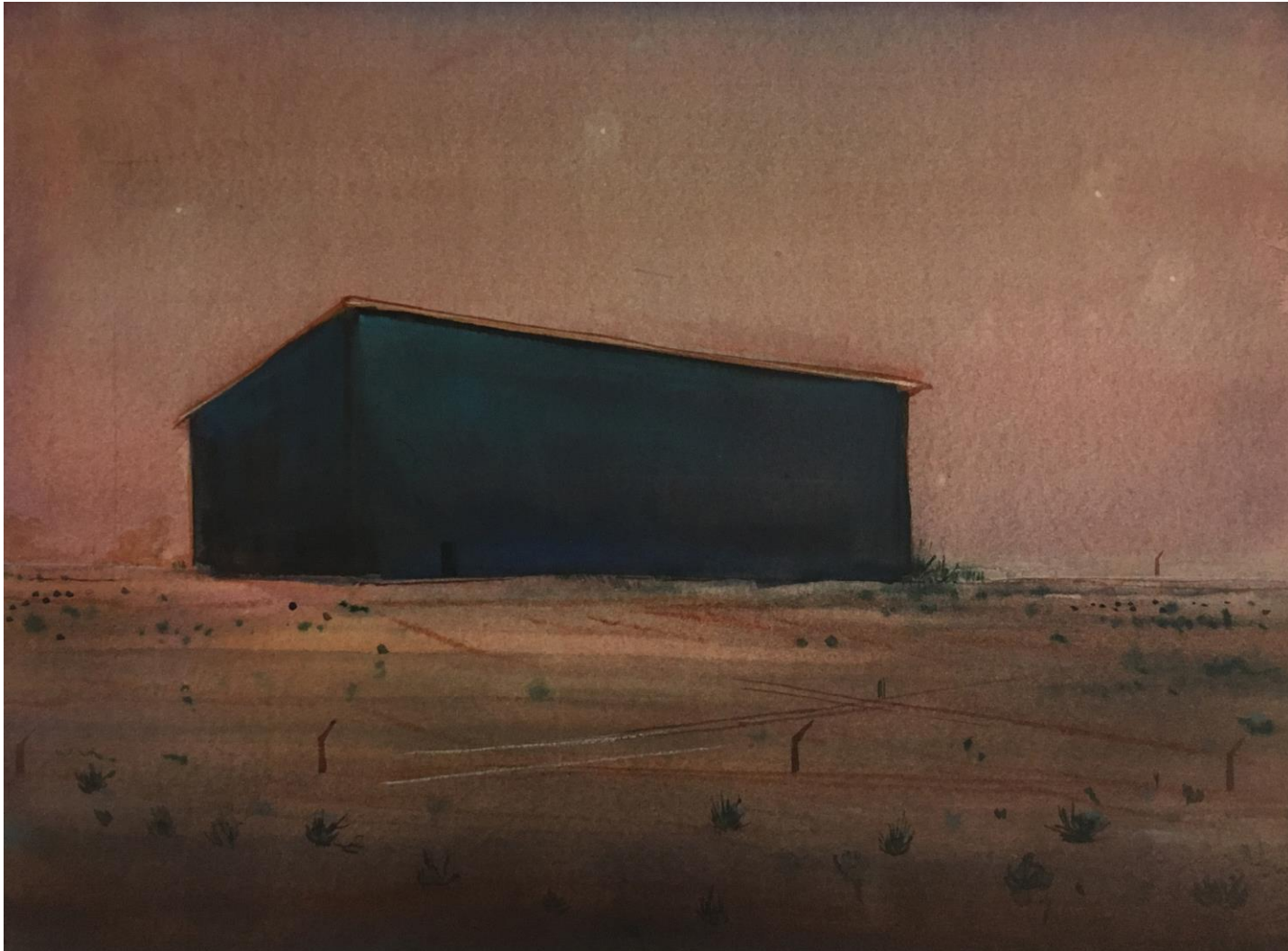
Sujith S. N., *Untitled 5*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 14.5 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 7*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 14.5 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 8*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 14.5 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 9*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 14.5 in.

Sujith S. N.



Sujith S. N., *Untitled 10*, 2018, Watercolor on paper, 10.5 x 14.5 in.

SUJITH S. N.

Born 1979, Baroda, India

Sujith's works are his reactions to the urban landscape that he encounters every day in life in Mumbai. His visual language brings together a world that is poetic, narrative, abstract and evocative all at the same time, as he paints vast landscapes flushed with light and shadows. His large format works present a plethora of landscapes, forests, and cities, almost magical in its imagining, hinting at the discomfort with the world that he inhabits. His landscapes are sometimes inhabited by a select few figures and some haunting architecture, both of which are devices for Sujith to capture a state of mind rather than to create a narrative. Much like how spoken or written language works, he approaches the visual not directly but through metaphors and suggestions, using the visible to enter into a abstract world of contradictions, emotions, and relationships that we share with the world. Sujith SN creates artworks that map out how spatial rhythms and territorial boundaries of modern urban landscapes inevitably lead to violence. His work addresses the relationship between politics and architecture and its effect on modern societies, and specifically how modern architecture has come shape the political, social, and cultural behaviors of its inhabitants. Having grown up in various cities in South India during a period of rapid urbanisation his practice is informed greatly by these spatial transformations. His work is further inspired by his training as a draughtsman in the construction industry.

The artist lives and works in Mumbai.

Education

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| 2007 | MFA in painting at the SN School of Fine Arts, Performing Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad |
| 2005 | BFA from Government College of Fine Arts, University of Calicut, Trichur |

Selected Solo Exhibitions

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| 2019 | <i>Seeds of Silence</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York |
| 2017 | <i>Archipelago</i> , Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi |
| 2014 | <i>Stains of Stimuli</i> , Forum Art Gallery, as part of Art Chennai |
| 2013 | <i>Psalms of an Invisible River</i> at Vadehra Art Gallery |
| 2010 | <i>Map is not the territory</i> , at Latitude 28, in collaboration with Sakshi Gallery |
| 2010 | <i>Earth</i> , curated by Rajan Krishnan at OED Gallery, Kochi |
| 2008 | <i>The City and Tower</i> , Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai |

Selected Group Exhibitions

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| 2016 | <i>Sown Together</i> , Aicon Gallery, New York |
| 2016 | <i>Listen to the Lines Look for the Signs</i> , Gallery 27, Kochi |
| 2015 | <i>The Lay of the Land</i> , Latitude 28, New Delhi |
| 2015 | <i>Reviving the Retinal</i> , Gallery OED, Kochi |
| 2013 | <i>Convergence – Contemporary Art from India and the Diaspora</i> , William Benton Museum, CT, U.S. |
| 2013 | <i>Small is Big</i> , Durbar Hall, Kochi |
| 2013 | <i>Embedded Landscape</i> , Religare Art, New Delhi |
| 2010 | <i>Indian Subway</i> , Curated by Yashodhara Dalmia at Grosvenor gallery London |
| 2009 | Group show, Tangerine Art Gallery Bangalore |
| 2009 | Group Show, Sakshi at Triveni Delhi |
| 2007 | <i>The RebelGraffiti</i> , curated by Jhony ML at OED, Kochi |
| 2007 | Group Show, Tangerine Art Space, Bangalore |
| 2007 | <i>Open-eyed Dreams</i> , Durbar hall, Cochin |

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| 2006 | <i>Auto Hanger</i> ,with Indian contemporary artists, Mumbai |
| 2004-05 | Kerala Lalit Kala Academy Annual Show |

Awards

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| 2011 | FICA Emerging Artist Award |
| 2011 | Longlisted for the Skoda Prize |
| 2005 | Kerala Lalit Kala Academic State Award |