Review
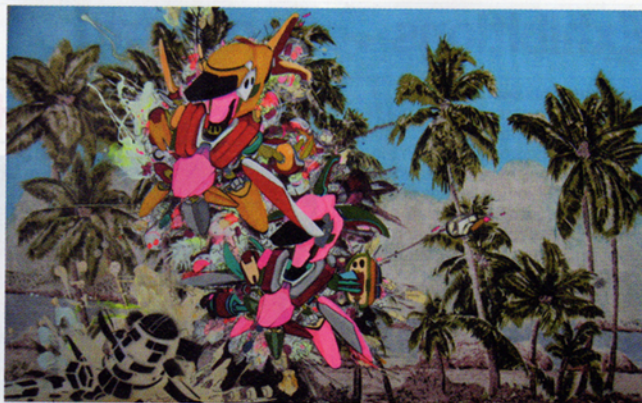## Cosmic relief

Toby Barnes, an Asian-American painter with Thai roots, gets a handful of things right with his new show. For instance, he sends out invitations, requesting extrasensory RSVPs for his show of pop/techno-culture iconography inspired by Eastern philosophy. The show's titled *Prananime* (that's prana in Sanskrit, meaning "breath, life force or vital energy", fused with anime or Japanese animation)–catchy enough to bring in coffee crowds from across the street. And his art, given its Pokémon meets Takashi Murakami drift, is bound to be popular with spring chickens.

The kitsch, the landscapes, the digital art, and the doodles–it's all here. Barnes has a sense of humour too. "I enjoy very much dazzling the audience the way a dancer might engage with a crowd," said the artist–he was born in Miami, Florida in 1974, is based in Brooklyn, has showed at Queens International and New York's P.S.1 MoMA, was part of a group show (Psionic Distortion) in Tokyo, and was one among the magazine *ArtSlant New York*'s "Emerging Asian Artists" in 2007. That he's fixed on what he calls "the collective unconsciousness of Generation X&Y-ers born and bred on video games and Saturday morning cartoons" is easy to tell. "I create mindscapes that serve, akin to our familiar television sets, fantastical screens and portals to new forms and cosmologies," explained Barnes.

At the show, it's when you arrive at the piece "Ultra Sage" that you realise there's more to Barnes' Murakami-esque world of Space Invaders and Nintendo characters. Retrace a few steps and you'll pick out elements like amulets and jewellery that would fit in on crude calendar reproductions of Hindu gods you'd find on sale on sidewalks at about this time of the year. Barnes did say he's inspired by Eastern philosophy, and hence you'd figure the Buddhist mandalas in some of his pieces. But hold on, is that a trident? And, yes–the "Ultra Sage", with its glowing blue orb-less eyes, is the Thai Asian-American's version of Shiva. "I create landscapes populated by robotic forms and spiritual icons," said Barnes. "In some of my paintings, these [robotic] forms appear as sages in meditative poses. In others, they take flight as alien visitors on snowy mountain tops or on lotus blossoms." Funny? Barnes thinks so. Such representations are, to him, "humorous deviants", and he'd gladly represent Krishna in animé. It is all "contemporary playful language" after all.

"Throughout, my paintings work with the tensions between the sacred and the kitsch," added Barnes, "past thus meets present in a strange synthesis of the technological and the spiritual." In one of his older installations, titled "100 Faces of Tom Delay", Barnes had taken a shot at the defamed former US Representative Tom DeLay. The artist's serious side is apparent in the themes he rattles off: exploring "impermanence, hybrid-ity, and the politics of cultural representation in digital modernity". Forget about how grave things are for a moment; just how cool is a Samurai-like Lord Shiva?
See Exhibitions.

In Solitude P Surendran, Giridhar Khasnis, P Sudhakaran

Sometime in 1984, the artist Yusuf Arakkal scribbled a poem about having his "crammed, dirty palette" crying out for the "vastness of canvasses" so the colours could "float free, melt into one another and wipe out the emptiness of unimagination". The verse ends with the lament that all he can do is sit – "blinded by the whiteness… afraid to disturb the nothingness" – presumably the reason he preferred the pen to the brush on that occasion.

He ought not to have worried too much about it because he has gone on to disturb a good deal of nothingness and sullied considerable tracts of whiteness since. And *In Solitude*, a freshly released and nattily packaged coffee table edition (to coincide with a retrospective on the artist at Galerie Sara Arakkal), attempts to document his creative development as well as his thematic and formal

yusuf arakkal
in solitude
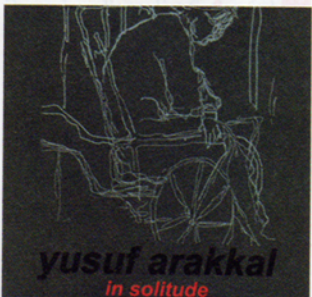
preoccupations over the years.

It's a good enough time to have put it out. Over 35 years along his art-making sojourn and with numerous national and international shows behind him, there is reasonable consensus that Arakkal is one of the important southern presences on the contemporary Indian scene. The book features a lushly printed (selective) catalogue of his paintings and sculptures, evocative of the scope and tenor of his output. Most often that happens to be a textured, expressionistic contemplation of human beings framed against an isolating cosmos, indeed one of a quintessentially Indian reference. But where many have milked the udders of social malady hard enough to ooze high sentimentality or pathos, Arakkal, at his best, succeeds in holding a difficult balance – clothing his brooding figures with the quiet dignity of those who are hemmed in but never fully disclosed or laid bare by his canvasses.

"When I say my paintings are basically figurative, it need not just be the human figure; it can be the figure of an object also. But when I paint a chair, I want it to look like a chair; people should be able to recognise it; it is not abstract… first and foremost my work is a painting, a work of art; the subject, social concern and all those things come later," he says, explicating his central impulses in the introduction to the book's selection of his paintings.

Arakkal's longstanding, though less-visible engagements with sculpture are represented here as well, in rich, well-reproduced prints. The three accompanying essays – one each by P Surendran, Giridhar Khasnis and P Sudhakaran are a pastiche of biographical data, quotation and analysis. Though occasionally insightful, they collectively veer uncomfortably close to a hagiographical account of Arakkal's art. And the book's considerable photographic section that registers him hobnobbing with an assortment of heavies (MF Husain, KR Narayanan, Ian Chappel, Picasso's goat and so on) while doing a Phileas Fogg ought to have stayed in the family albums. It disturbs the nothingness and the solitude with a hue of self-congratulation. *Bryan Richard Galerie Sara Arakkal, Rs 1,500*