

Epic journey of dance

An exhibition celebrating the tradition of the Indian Odissi dance explores the diverse ways in which this ancient art form can be interpreted.



Movement Study IV by Renee Krall.

By JAMIE KHOO

HERE is much lyricism and grace to be admired in the Odissi dance, especially in the way the dancers shape-shift their bodies into the many classical poses. To celebrate an art form that has enthralled audiences for generations, Galeri Petronas, in collaboration with Sutra Dance Theatre, is holding an exhibition called *Stirring Odissi* in conjunction with the 4th International Stirring Odissi Festival 2008.

The event features 15 visual artists and photographers from Malaysia and India and showcases how different artists interpret the Odissi dance.

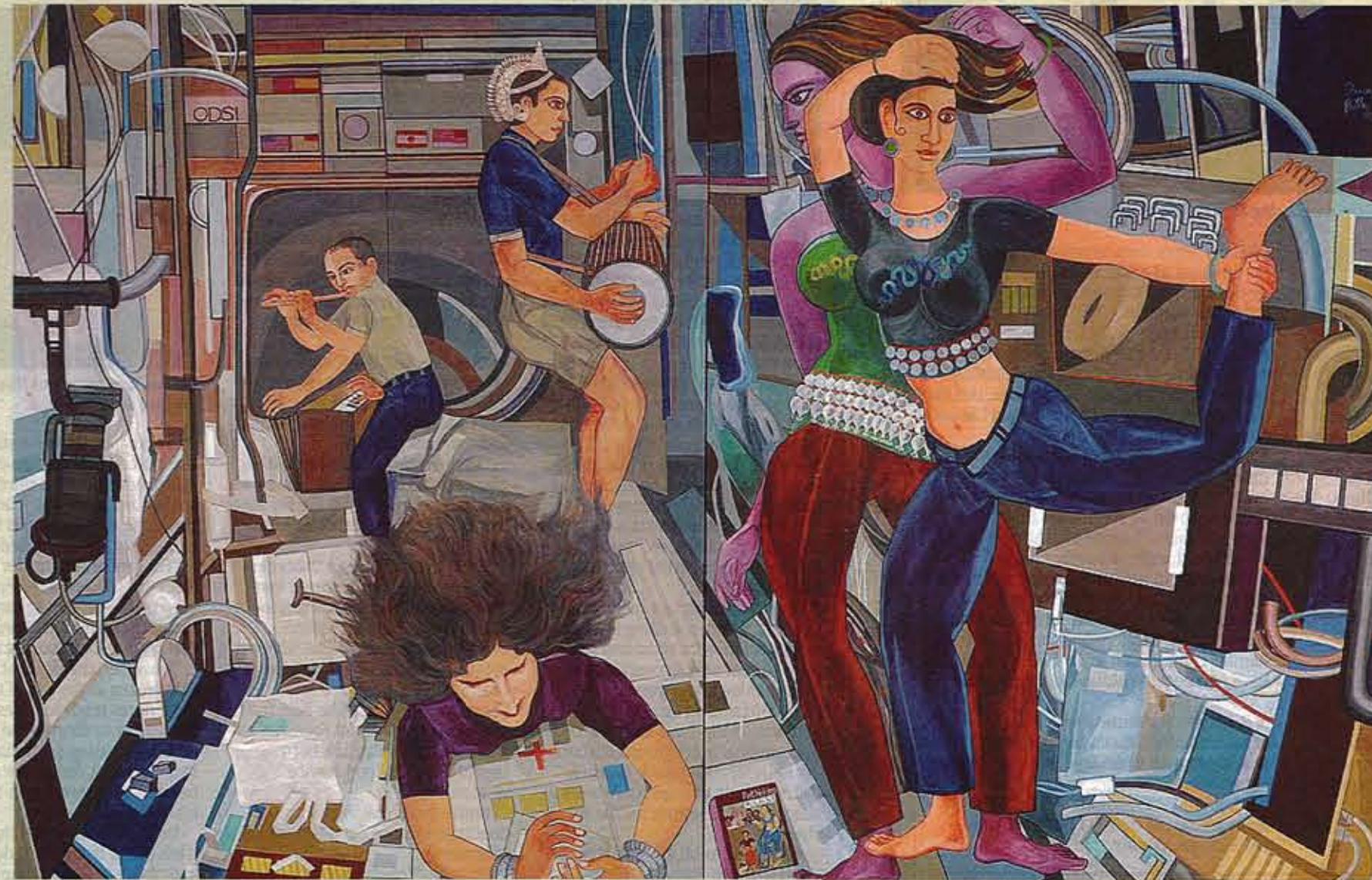
An evolving art form

It's been performed for hundreds of years in India and increasingly around the world, but how viewers react to the

dance form is not necessarily the same. According to Odissi dance painter and co-curator of the exhibition Dr Dinanath Pathy, Indians react to this art form in a very "direct way" as it is a very integral part of their culture in India. Their works thus find expression in more traditional forms.

Malaysians, however, are more open to interpreting the old dance form in unusual mixed-media formats, he says. This is obvious in the works of, for example, Sivarajah Natarajan, lighting and set designer for Sutra, who explores the beauty of Odissi dance through both photography and painting, overlaying the two in single installations that capture both the forms and colours of figures and faces.

"Odissi dance is a very old form but recently revived in the 1950s and 60s," explains Dr Dinanath. "(The) Dance takes



Dr Dinanath Pathy's *Rethinking Odissi in The USA Destiny Lab*.

in the whole culture and the exhibition explores how it has evolved."

In response to whether or not the "essence" of Odissi dance is lost in transition between dance to art forms, Dr Dinanath stresses that the key to appreciating Odissi is not necessarily dependent on keeping the dance exactly as it is in India.

"The essence (of Odissi) is not lost – the dance takes on diverse forms and

now has different flavours from being in different countries and places. From this can it become truly international."

The interpretations of the body, and the traditional *tribhanga* three-part body bend, is a recurring motif throughout the exhibition.

While some feature very feminine, flowing forms, others locate the body within more geometric, cubist shapes. Sculptures reposition this classical form into something abstract, while photographs capture a moment in movement, documenting the pose in its transitions.

Dr Dinanath's own paintings are featured in the exhibition – large, brightly coloured pieces with a distinct pop-art feel which force the viewer to view Odissi in a contemporary context.

There is *Rethinking Odissi in the USA Destiny Lab*, for example, which showcases Odissi dancers in jeans and crop tops dancing half-suspended in a space shuttle.

The all-important question would be if something that far-fetched could also be Odissi?

Why not, says Dr Dinanath who in his book, *Rethinking Odissi*, debunks the purely romantic, spiritual aspects of Odissi. Instead he exposes the commercial and entertainment value that has become more recently attached to the dance form since its revival in the 1950s.

It seems apt then, that the art works are so very diverse both in content and media. The whole exhibition proves just how versatile and relevant Odissi still is, even in a culture and time that seems

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DR DINANATH PATHY



foreign to the tradition of this dance.

The other-worldly aspect

Other works in the exhibition take Odissi to a whole other realm and explore not only its creative expression but also the "energy" of the dance form.

Its religious roots make Odissi a very spiritual art form, revered through the ages for the religious allegories and stories that are depicted through the dances. Artists capture this aspect of dance and distil its essence in their art.

Renee Krall, more often known for her vivid paintings inspired by her interest in the metaphysical, explains that this exhibition, "has inspired and chal-

lenged me to find a new language of expression..."

Her fluid sketches which detail ethereal outlines of the bodily form seek to "capture almost the impossible. I want to capture its colour, smell and aura. It is the elusive essence and the spirit rather than the sheer physicality of the movement of Odissi that I seek to visualise," she explains.

Figurative and lyrical painter Syed Thajudeen also takes as his subject the bodily form of the dancers, and he focuses on meticulous details. Imbued with a strong use of colour and surrounded by finely-crafted motifs, his paintings reflect how deeply involved he is with



Bhanda by Jeganathan Ramachandram.



Lotus of Life by Syed Thajudeen.

the subject matter.

Like the intricate movements of the dancers, each detail on the canvas is itself an intimate experience for Syed himself: "I am almost in a trance as each precious stone of jewellery is studied and replicated; each bud of jasmine of the headdress meticulously drawn; each finger of the dancer articulated; each ankle bell lovingly arranged. When painting the Odissi dancers, I find myself drawn into their mythical world."

Malaysian-born painter, Jeganathan Ramachandram, trained in fine arts and traditional Indian painting, explores in his works the deep-rooted impressions of the subconscious that are related to myths. Finding its perfect expression in Odissi, Jeganathan's works in *Stirring Odissi* are like stories in themselves.

As he explains, "To me, every figure that is moving is performing a dance and every expression that it portrays is the emotion that inspires my work. I flow together with the drama of life as an observer and a story-teller, relating my thoughts and aspirations through visual images." The result? An epic six by 4.5m masterpiece, done much in a lively cubist style, tells of the 10 incarnations of Vishnu, often performed as the first song of Odissi.

And while emotions and stories are often "told" through the medium of paint and canvas, the element of photography within the exhibition demonstrates how much of the storytelling and essence of Odissi is captured during live performances of the dance.

Nirmala Karupiah, one of the few active Indian women photographers in Malaysia, marries personal emotion with the "reality" of what is captured through the lens.

"Dance is one of the most direct forms of communication," she says of her startlingly beautiful images that capture the intimate spirit of the dance, either in preparation or in performance.

By becoming directly "involved" with the dancers through her photography, she is able to translate her own personal input of desire, hatred, frustration, happiness and joy into the image itself, making the photograph as much a reflection of her own artistic spirit as it does of the dancers' essence.

The Odissi dance is most well known for the epic stories it always tells of human condition, strife, relationships and spirituality. In the true spirit of Odissi, this exhibition marks different stories, as told by each of the artists. By using Odissi as its main inspiration, the

PRESENTED by Ramli Ibrahim's Sutra Dance Theatre, *Stirring Odissi* 2008 will continue over the next two weeks. Apart from dance performances to be staged at the Malaysian Tourism Centre, and the KL Performing Arts Centre (both in Kuala Lumpur), lectures, dance demonstrations, and a two-day seminar are scheduled to encourage dialogue on how this classical dance style is moving into the 21st century.

For a complete listing of events, go to stirringodissi.com or call Sutra Dance Theatre at 03-4021 1092 / 03-4022 9669.

Dance performances

Malaysia Tourist Centre, KL

June 3: Performances by female solo dancers January Low (KL), Masako Ono (Japan), Mitali Devi (Britain), Madhavi Mudgal (India).
June 4: Performances by Shantona Bag (KL), Raka Maitra (Singapore), Rathimalar (KL), Aruna Mohanty (Orisa, India).

June 5: Performances by Revathi (KL), Arushi (New Delhi, India), Sujata Mohapatra (Orisa, India).
June 6: Performances by Sharanya Mukhopadhyay (US), Tan Mei Mei and Nishah Devi (KL), Shibani Patnaik (US), Jyoti Shrivastava (New Delhi, India).

June 7: Performances by Pallavi Das (US), Sonali Mishra (US), Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy (Bangalore), Minati Mishra (Switzerland).

June 8: Performances by Janhabi Behera (Orisa, India), Ranjana Gauhar (New Delhi), Sharmila Biswas (Kolkata, India), Bijayini Satpathy and Surupa Sen (Bangalore).

The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre

June 10: Group dance performances by Sutra Dance Theatre (KL), Odissi Dance Academy (Bhubaneswar, India).

June 11: Performances by Gandharvamahavidyalaya (Delhi, India), Sutra Dance Theatre (KL).
June 12: Performances by Odissi Vision & Movement Centre (Kolkata, India), Sutra Dance Theatre (KL).

June 13: Nriyagram (Bangalore, India), Srjan (Bhubaneswar, India).
June 14: Suvarna Fine Arts (KL), Nriyagram (Bangalore, India) and, at the matinee, performances by Geethika Sree (KL), Sivagamavalli & Divya Nair (KL), Sreyashi, Ishika and Kritika (US).

Exhibitions, seminars

Galeri Petronas
May 27-June 22: Art inspired by Odissi exhibition.

June 2: Lecture/demonstration by Ramli Ibrahim (KL)

June 7: Lecture/demonstration by Dr Dinanath Pathy (India), Minati Misra (Brugge, Switzerland).

June 8: Lecture/demonstration by Pallavi Das (US), Sharanya Mukhopadhyay (US), Guru Gangadhar Pradhan.

artworks create a whole new canon of human expression, spirituality and interconnectedness with the world, achieving exactly what the dance form itself has always been about.

■ *Stirring Odissi* is showing at Galeri Petronas at Level 3, Suria KLCC every day except Monday, from 10am to 8pm, from now until June 22. For enquiries, call (03) 2051 7770.



Odissi III by Sivarajah Natarajan.