

# HOME ALONE IN THE GUTENBERG GALAXY

A Brief Account of the Life of C.T. Nachiappan

RAYMOND FOYE

"I like Madras because I was born there and because in Madras the ancient and the modern coexist. Madras is both old and new, and you can find lots of things there - drama, theaters, lectures, religious discourses, musical concerts. Some Madrasis are very orthodox. There are parts of the city where people with a traditional background in Sanskrit are still living. I like talking about Madras much better than talking about India."

—R.K. Narayan, Interview with Stephen R. Graubard

"People who are without creativity build dead institutions."

—Krishnamurti (Jayakar, 277)

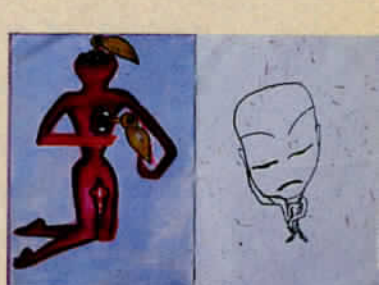
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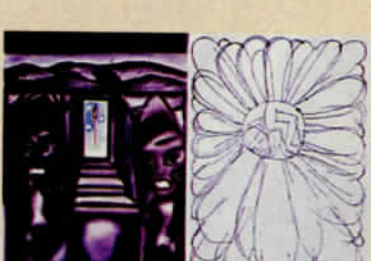
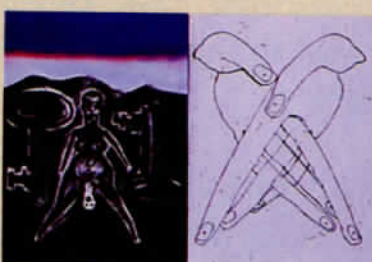
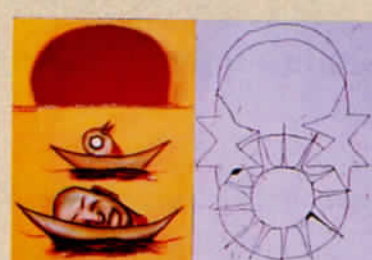
The life of C.T. Nachiappan and the life of his city, Madras, are inextricably entwined. When the British poet W.H. Auden took American citizenship he declined to identify himself flatly with that nation: "I am a New Yorker," was all the poet felt needed explaining. Likewise it is as a "Madrasi" that one identifies C.T. Nachiappan. His vocations have been many, and they reflect the broadness and vitality of the cosmopolitan center where he has made his home these seventy-odd years. His reputation is established in Europe and America as printer and unique practitioner of the book arts. In his village of Adyar, he is better known to the locals as a nature-cure doctor. Further afield, in the surrounding temple cities of Kanchipuram, Madurai or Chidambaram, (from whence the initials of his given name are derived) he is known as a devout Hindu, a scholar and ethnographer who has devoted his life to the assembly of an encyclopedia of Hindu gods and their attributes. In later years, he has become known as a benefactor in the preservation of ancient temple rituals, now in danger of being lost.

Down through the years I have heard Nachiappan's name crop up in some of the unlikeliest of contexts. On a visit to the great scholar of Indian art, Stella Kramrisch, the ninety-two-year-old Viennese hostess spoke at length of the marvellous photography the young Nachiappan was able to contribute to her many volumes on Indian painting, sculpture and architecture. (She recalled how) he was as adept in negotiating his way around petty officialdom as he was in carrying the large view camera and floodlights into the darker recesses of temples and caves. In the literary salons of New York, Allen Ginsberg would always quiz me as to Nachiappan's latest publications—the type of books he once referred to as being “published in heaven.” Or, on a remote mountain-top in Kauai, while searching out a rare crystal Lingam in a Shiva temple, Nachiappan's name was mentioned unexpectedly at lunch as an accomplished Ayurvedic practitioner of the medical arts.

From his four-room, two-storey publishing house overlooking the Bay of Bengal, C.T. Nachiappan has issued a steady stream of pamphlets, books and deluxe editions over the past four decades. A world-wide audience for art and literature has been created and nurtured from this tiny but magical corner of the world. Using handmade paper from Pondicherry, and exquisite English monotype and four-colour engraving, Nachiappan's publications could not have been produced anywhere else. Every limitation that has been presented him, has been cleverly transformed into an exquisitely enduring strength. Many years ago he sought to acquire a lithography press but found the cost to be hundreds of times beyond his means. A few months later in a customs warehouse he discovered a large unopened crate that was being auctioned off, its contents unknown. Nachiappan placed a meager bid on the crate and acquired it. It contained a four colour engraving machine suitable for letterpress operation.

The gods have consistently smiled down, not only on Nachiappan, but on the corner of the world where he makes his home. There are certain charmed locations in this world where creativity and the life of the mind seem inexplicably fertilized by the very soil underfoot. In ancient times these areas were recognized as holy places, where sages gathered, temples were built, and oracles imparted their prognostications. In modern times they may be urban bohemian communities - the Left Bank in Paris, or New York's





Greenwich Village. The Madrasi village of Adyar, located on a long sandy beach overlooking the Bay of Bengal, is just such a place. Home to Kalakshetra School of Music and Dance, the Theosophical Society, the Krishnamurti Foundation, and various other schools and temples, it has been a spiritual center and enclave of erudition for the better part of the twentieth century.

It was within the walls of the Theosophical Society in Madras that the twelve-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru first dreamed his dream of Indian independence, inspired by the nationalist lectures of Annie Besant, then President of the Society. And it was here, in 1909, that the Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater “discovered” the fourteen-year-old Krishnamurti, walking on the beach with his younger brother Nitya. The story is well known: perceiving the remarkable aura surrounding the boy, Leadbeater soon designated Krishnamurti the new Messiah, as foretold in divine transmissions received by Besant and other Theosophists. It was a role Krishnamurti abruptly renounced in 1930, deeming the occult and the mystic “limitations placed on man on his search for truth” (Jayakar, 80).

Years later, Krishnamurti founded his own organization just up the road from the Theosophical Society. Here he would return every January for public talks, and the cognoscenti of Madras would gather. On one occasion Krishnamurti spied Nachiappan in the audience (Thursday morning discussions), and accosted him with a twinkle in his eye: “Sir”, you have been coming to my lectures for forty years but you haven’t changed!” To which Nachi replied with an impish grin: “Well now, Krishnaji, we can’t all be as enlightened as you!” It was a teasing exchange, all in the neighbourhood.

Just as Krishnamurti was essentially an “adoptee” of the Theosophical Society, Nachiappan found himself in a similar situation at Kalakshetra. After his mother died at an early age, Nachiappan’s father decided to enroll the boy in the (local) Montessori school. He was befriended by Rukmini Devi, the great classical Indian dancer, who had returned with a mission from an extended tour with Diaghlev’s Ballet Russes: to resuscitate the waning art of *bharata natyam*. Nachiappan recalls:

“My mother died very young. I was more or less an orphan. Rukmini Devi liked me, because I worked hard as a young boy. She was the one who helped me through school, because I did not have any support. This was 1938. There was a Dutch artist teaching at that time, Conrad Woldring. He was a commercial artist and a photographer. One day, he saw what I could do



with my hands - I was lettering very well. The library had to catalogue everything, so I created little cards - subjectwise indexes, authors, and so on. He happened to see this lettering and asked the librarian, "who did this work?" We located each other. I wanted to learn from him, but the only way I could study was during the games period, between five and six in the evening. I never liked to play games, I thought it was a waste of time. But games were compulsory in our days. There was an American housemaster named Felix Layton. He used to drag me brutally to the field, because I was always the last one to leave. Then I approached Rukmini Devi and told her I wanted to learn art, but the only available time seemed to be in the games period. She said yes! So I excused myself from games. Then I started working with Conrad. He knew a bit of everything. He was an excellent photographer, a very fine composer, and a commercial artist trained in Holland. He was a very fine man, a Theosophist. He came to India, like many other Theosophists, to spend time in Adyar. Conrad stayed on from 1938 until 1941. Unfortunately in 1941 he passed away. He was electrocuted. Poor Conrad. I felt so sad when he passed away—in fact that morning I showed him one of my prints, of a rose. I showed him the print and he critiqued it. In the afternoon he was gone. So I spent three years learning from him—commercial art, photography, furniture design, and so on. The furniture in this apartment for instance was designed by him. All solid teak. He got me started very well with these things. I left school the year he died, in 1941. Then I went to college." [Interview with Amanda Barrow, March 7, 1992]

Nachiappan attended Presidency College on the Marina in Madras. He enrolled in Group Two, Natural Sciences, and specialized in zoology and botany. It may seem an unusual choice in retrospect, but Nachiappan has always harbored a keen interest in the sciences. A background in chemistry aided him greatly in his pioneering work in color photo processing. His studies in ethnobotany—the ways in which plants and humankind interact—has been virtually a second career. An understanding of plant and nature forms likewise informs his work as a designer, since it is from nature that all aspects of ornament derive. And ultimately it is the balance between all living things, the *yoga* if you will, that is the very principle of life.

After college Nachiappan returned to Kalakshetra, having decided on his life's mission: to assist Rukmini Devi. It was a decisive moment, and one which he has never wavered from. This act of service, of faithful effort on the part of another person, directed towards the greater good of the community, became the motivating force for the rest of his life. His reason for so doing, when asked, was simply stated: "Because she was the one who helped me."

It is difficult from today's perspective to consider the privation that was the norm at Kalakshetra in those days. Supplies were few, and support from patrons or the state was non-existent. Much of the community at large was hostile towards this project, given the disrepute into which Indian classical music and especially dance had fallen during the period of British domination. Even the artistic community, with the usual orthodoxy and petty jealousies, took a dim view of Devi's project.



Books were scarce at the time, usually ancient Tamil treatises on music or dance. To fill the need for proper textbooks, Kalakshetra borrowed time on the Theosophical Society's printing press, and began publishing textbooks in editions of five hundred copies, two or three a year. At this stage Nachiappan worked strictly as a layout artist and graphic designer, but his interest in printing and photography grew. Kalakshetra owned a great many old photographs that needed to be preserved through copy negatives. Proper documentation of choreography (before the advent of the video camera) was always a vexing problem, requiring an extensive amount of still photography. Soon he convinced the school authorities to establish a photographic darkroom on the grounds of Kalakshetra proper:

"When I joined Kalakshetra in 1945 there were a lot of old photos, and I sorted them out. There was a lot of copying work, a lot of photographic work to be done. It all used to be done at an outside company. I used to go every day to buy paper, collect prints, and so on. Then it occurred to me that if we had a darkroom in Kalakshetra, I wouldn't have to do all that running around. So I asked for a small sum, 500 rupees, to buy some photo equipment. I was not trained, but I trained myself to do it. Dr. G. Srinivasamurthy was our treasurer, a very old, orthodox man, who would never think of such a thing. But he had faith in me, so he gave me the money. I created a makeshift darkroom and started working. It was great fun, because that's when I learned to make prints and became a full-fledged photographer. All self-taught. I gained a complete understanding of the black & white photographic process. At Kalakshetra I had the freedom to use what I earned to buy more equipment. In time the department became a little bit better and well known because I was the first person in Madras to process an Ektachrome transparency. I was also the first one to start Kodacolor processing and printing. This brought me a lot of work from movie people. So I earned a little money, and put it back into the department. By 1958, it became a very well-known color processing factory in Madras. It was called Kalakshetra Color Laboratories. It was not mine, I was an employee. I was earning in those days Rs.250. I took only enough for food, water, and lodging. There were eight or nine of us who worked on an honorary basis, because we felt it was good work, and we should be like missionaries. In 1958 it became a full-fledged photo department earning money, and by then we had 2,00,000 rupees worth of equipment." [Barrow, 1992]

Through his contacts in the photo processing business, Nachiappan soon established influential contacts worldwide. Staff photographers for *Time*, *Life*, and *National Geographic* magazines were all clients of his, as were numerous photographers from the Magnum photo agency, including the great Henri Cartier-Bresson, whom Nachiappan counted as a close friend. Nachiappan also served as a technical advisor in Madras to the multinational advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson. It was only a matter of time before Nachiappan felt the lure of the world at large, and in 1963, with a host of invitations, support, and sponsorship from the connections he had made as a lab technician, he set off on his first trip abroad. "You know, you will find a Magnum photographer in every country," Nachiappan recalled, "so starting in Hong Kong and all the way round the world I had help from Magnum photographers."



When he arrived in New York, Nachiappan studied the color processes at Eastman-Kodak, and the Rochester Institute of Technology. In those days Nachiappan lived on a shoestring budget. In Rochester for three months he stayed in the YMCA for eighteen dollars a week. His first impression of America was how high off the ground the beds were. "What happens if you roll off?" he thought to himself. The cafeteria dinner at the Y cost one dollar, and breakfast was fifty cents. Eastman-Kodak provided lunch free. Through Kodak, he made connections in the commercial photography business in New York City. There he usually ate at the now-defunct Automat, the famous self-serve restaurants, where one could first see the food through a little glass door before inserting a coin to make the purchase. There he could select a vegetarian meal for less than a dollar.

"In New York City I was introduced to David Esminger, who was a very well-known photographer doing ad work for *Time* and *Life*. He had a studio in Manhattan and had me work for him for three months in 1963. I worked with David on Kellogg's Corn Flakes ads. And oh, it was fun working in this studio every day! I was an assistant, I would set up the photographer's camera, set up the scene — you know, dress up the little pieces of chicken just right, make sure the light is perfect. He had his own dummy kitchen, with fake ice cream, which looks as if it's melting but it's not! One day, David asked me where I would go when the photographers ate lunch. Every lunch hour I would disappear to the Jewish kosher restaurant on 42nd street, because I could eat vegetarian there. David said, "Come on you grass-eater, stay with us during lunch and I will feed you vegetables." So you see, he really took care of me — a very fine man. He would sell a color transparency for \$500 to \$1,000 apiece, a fantastic fee in those days! He would sell ten transparencies for ten thousand dollars, just like that. For one day's work!

There has been a lot of change since then. All the typesetters have disappeared. So these experiences I had in Manhattan are now history. I went to a collotype company to study. Collotype is color printing without a screen, by a matrix process. I would say it is still the best color reproduction for museum reproduction work. I spent a lot of time with the collotype people. I tried to find them again in the 1970s, but they had all disappeared. You know, the change in the Manhattan marketplace has been so tremendous. So I learned colotype, photographic colour processing, I learned a lot of things in Manhattan. Then my friend Glen Petersen asked me to supervise Petersen Colour Labs. He offered me \$2,000 a month, in those days a very good salary. I said no! Because firstly I cannot survive in Manhattan for that long, and secondly, what would I do, living there in a cubby hole for three years? No, I thought, I've come here for Kalakshetra to learn things to take back to India." [Barrow, 1992]

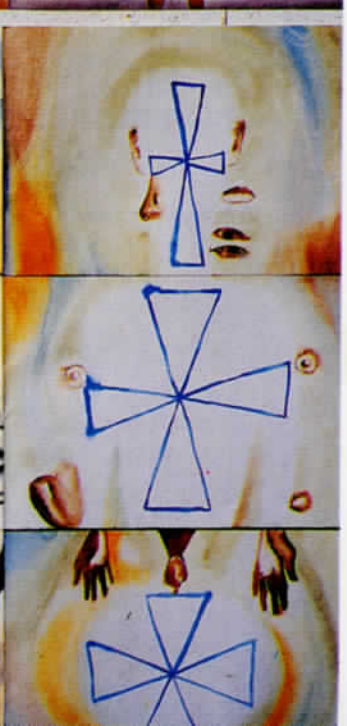
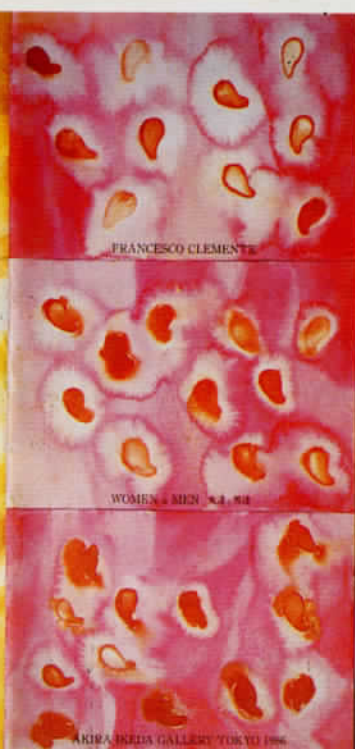
That autumn, Nachiappan continued his long trip back to India. He arrived in Milan on Christmas eve, and attended midnight mass in the great cathedral there, a beautiful and moving experience of which he still speaks. His final stopping off point was Greece. By now his funds had dwindled to where he was no longer able to eat lunch. On his final day abroad he climbed atop the Acropolis before dawn to watch the sunrise. That evening he boarded a plane and returned to Madras.

The next fifteen years were a tremendously exciting time for Nachiappan and Kalakshetra. The tradition that had been established by Rukmini Devi had taken root. "To have gathered a live tradition from the air," in the words of poet Ezra Pound, aptly describes the undertaking at Kalakshetra. It had become a vital institution, with the school at the core: it had been well understood by Rukmini Devi that the only way to have a steady supply of dancers was to establish a place in which to train them--not merely in the technicalities of the dance, but in all of the interrelated disciplines that must inform the dance:

"Bharata's *Natya Sastra* is the oldest treatise of Hindu dramatic art. *Natya* means dance and mimed representation, but from its origin the Hindu theater was a total art. It is dance, mimicry, music, chant, poetry, architecture, mise-en-scène, and even painting. The *Natya Sastra* is, in all these matters, the first authority; it is traditional knowledge; it is even called the fifth *Veda*." (Rene Daumal, "The Origin of the Theater of Bharata," in *Rasa*, tr. Louise Landes Levi, NY:New Directions, 1982, p39)

The 1960s were a time when the outside world rediscovered India and its message, and Nachiappan often speaks with delight of this period. Despite the occasional excesses or misunderstandings on the part of many visitors, the exchange of ideas between India and the West deeply affected popular culture and philosophy. It may be part of his background, amongst the old theosophists in Adyar, but Nachiappan has always held a strong belief in the commonality and unity of human experience, combined with an intrinsic understanding of the fundamental principles of Indian thought, which are indeed the understructure of all languages and philosophy in the West. Perhaps it is indicative of his background, or even something inherent in the Dravidian nature, but he is a man of adaptability, many-sided in his interests. Like the Ambassador automobile he drives, or the English monotype machines in his shop, his attitude is pliant: if a missing piece cannot be found, one simply makes it anew. Parts, like ideas, are interchangeable. It is the more important attitude of open-mindedness that takes precedence, and I believe this accounts for both his longevity and good-naturedness.

Nachiappan's response to difficult situations is always a kind of infectious laughter that seems to echo the riddles of life and death one finds in the ancient myths. In spite of great odds, production schedules were always met, yet one was never quite certain how. Once when he asked me to obtain in New York a wristwatch that told time by the phases of the moon, I thought I might have come closest to divining his methods.



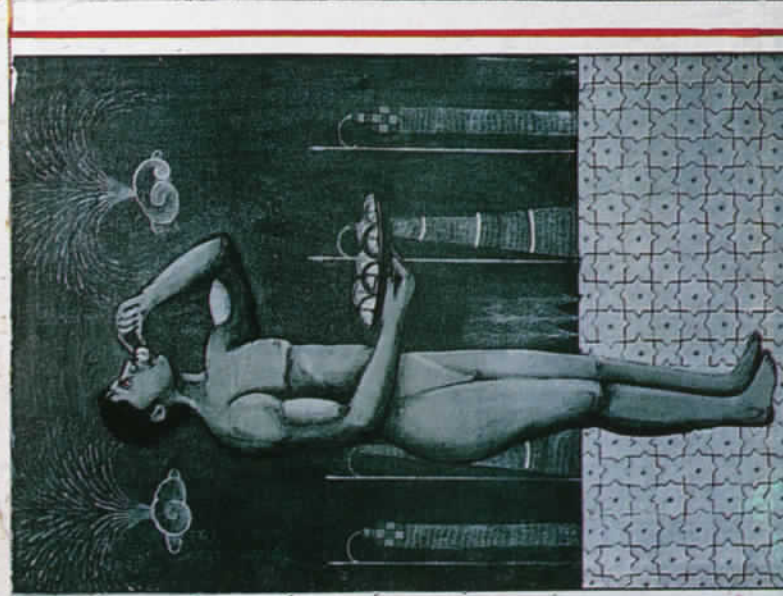
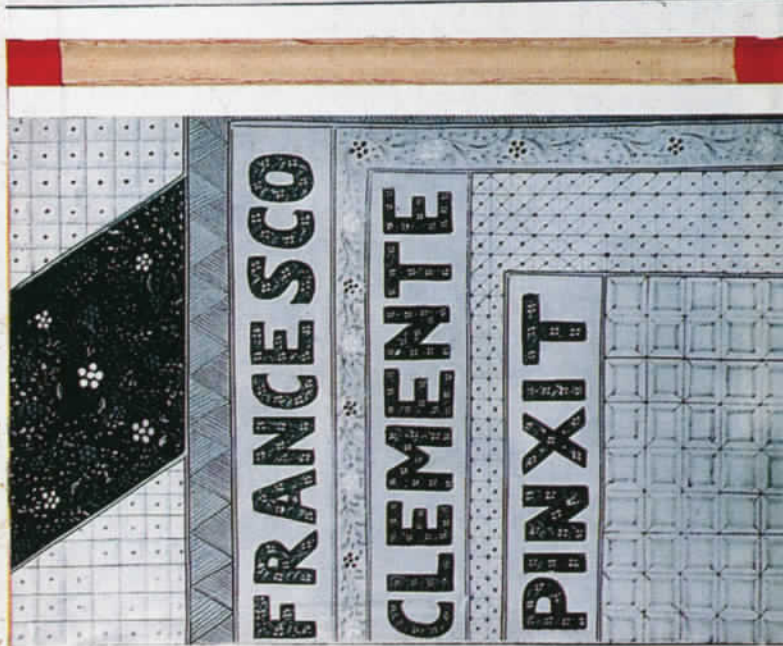
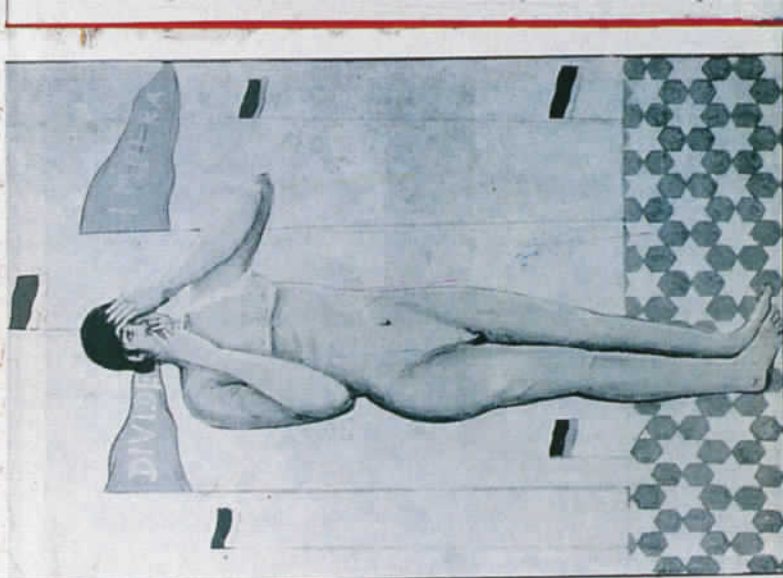
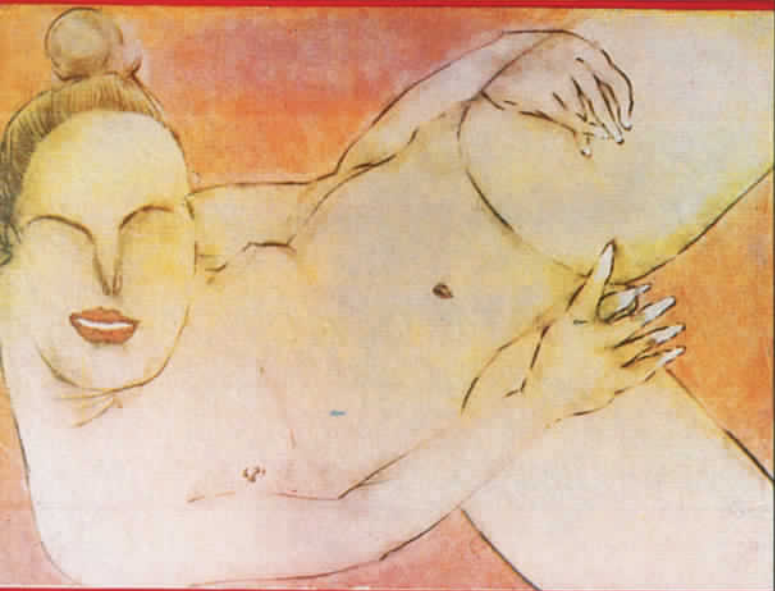


outlets were part of Ghandi's dream for the economic independence of the Indian villager and can still be found in every major Indian city. (The famous image of Ghandi at the spinning wheel was essentially an advertisement for Khadi.) Hence from the start, Clemente and Nachiappan shared a common love of traditional materials. Through his knowledge of small surviving pockets of artisans, Nachiappan was crucial in helping Clemente realize his desire to connect up with an indigenous aesthetic sensibility that was now quickly disappearing:

"Working with Nachi added the possibility of using a number of hand made processes—the printing and binding and setting of type by hand. We could make the covers with those Khadi fabrics that I like for their tactile sense. The origin of the Khadi idea had to do with the boycott of English goods. There is this great photo of Gandhi at the spinning wheel, which I find an extraordinary image, because it's both historical and political and also esoteric and mystical. All of that was fascinating to me, and very sympathetic to the feeling I had about India in those days: a contemporary industrial society where things were made by hand. Nachi was very amused by this first book we made, because somehow the book cost more to look cheaper. That completely puzzled him and created our first bond of curiosity and friendship." [Foye, 1997]

The issue of collaboration is much misunderstood by critics and audiences—one that stems from the desire to elevate or glorify individual authorship. Clemente's approach is much closer to the Indian mentality, which is less possessive and more mediumistic where creativity is involved. Clemente is an artist who hates even to sign his work, and will go to great lengths to avoid doing so (creating much grief on the part of his dealers). When he first began working with the billboard painters of Madras he observed, "I was copying them and they were copying me." This remark goes a long way toward describing the ideal state of creation, where the boundary lines of identity fall away. In other cases, collaboration served a more practical purpose, a way of simply getting the job done. "Execution is the Chariot of Genius," Blake wrote. It is one thing to have a conception of how a picture should look, but quite another thing to bring such a work into existence. Furthermore, in glorifying the solitary artist we are also ignoring the historical fact of the *atelier*. As a Neopolitan, Clemente would have a keen awareness of this:

"I enjoy being part of a standard—that's exactly what I'm missing as a painter in the twentieth century. I've noticed that everybody always says to me, "Do whatever you want to do." That's terrible. It's a terrible situation to be in. So it was a great relief and joy to hear someone in a Jaipur workshop say, "No, it must be this color." In these works the image is totally mine, but the craft I'm relating to is the craft that is used in the decoration of temples, or for movie posters, or souvenirs for the tourist trade. In India I never go to the museums, I go to the streets and look at all the things I like. The most beautiful things you see in India are the ones



For Clemente, India became an unexpected link with the pagan past of southern Italy. "The gods, who left us thousands of years ago in Naples, are still in India, so it's like going home for me," he once remarked. Arriving in India brought with it an unexpected jolt of recognition: echoes of myth and symbol resonated in a living tradition. Leaving behind the lethargy and weight of European culture, Clemente discovered in India a society of limitless diversity, which Madras in the nineteen seventies still typified. The city offered a vibrant and modern cityscape, seemingly industrialized, but full of handiwork:

The feeling I had in India in those days was, that here was a contemporary industrial society, where things were made by hand, to look as if they were machine-made. Yet it was all done by hand, with an incredible skill for imitation and an extreme patience that the labor force exercises in India. They could really make something by hand, that looked like it was made by machine. [Interview with Raymond Foye, August 7, 1997]

The essential paradox was an optimistic one for Clemente, because it offered an alternative to the dead end of industrialization, where sameness overrules diversity, and local colour is considered at best expendable, and at worst a threat.

By 1977, on his second visit to India, Clemente and his wife Alba had settled into a comfortable routine, living at the Theosophical Society in Madras. "I didn't have a life yet, so I could more or less do as I wanted," the artist noted. Excepting the fact that one had to leave the grounds of the Society to smoke a cigarette, it was as close to a life of luxury that an unknown and unemployed artist could achieve. The "T.S.", as it was fondly referred to, was a place time forgot. With their infant daughter Chiara, they occupied a large room on the second floor of the guest residence. As the artist recalls, "It was a very lively and open place, where one could live in relative comfort, without being locked in some hotel." The single large room was furnished with spare, but comfortable teak furniture, and hung with photographs of Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott, and other founders. An ancient ceiling fan whirled, and large screened doors opened onto a second floor balcony—a kind of arched colonnade that extended along the length of the building on both sides. To the east were views of the sea. To the west one overlooked the gardens, and a magnificent sacred banyon tree whose spreading branches grew downwards, back into the ground. The entire institution seemed to be some exquisite invention of late-nineteenth century idealism, kindly inhabited by an eccentric and ageing population, who still

held to the adage that "All Religions Are One." It was described by Alain Danielou in his memoir *The Way to the Labyrinth*.

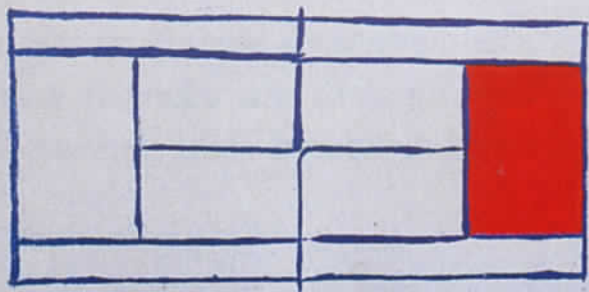
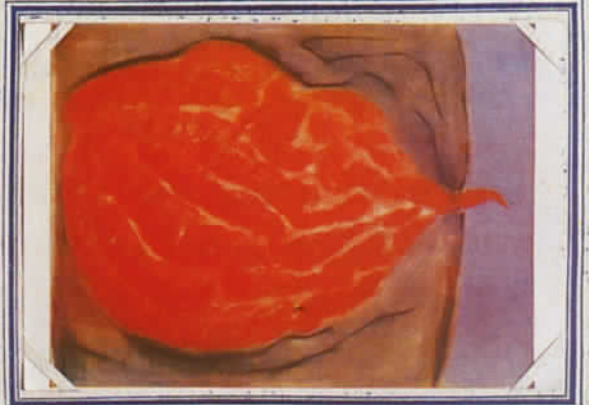
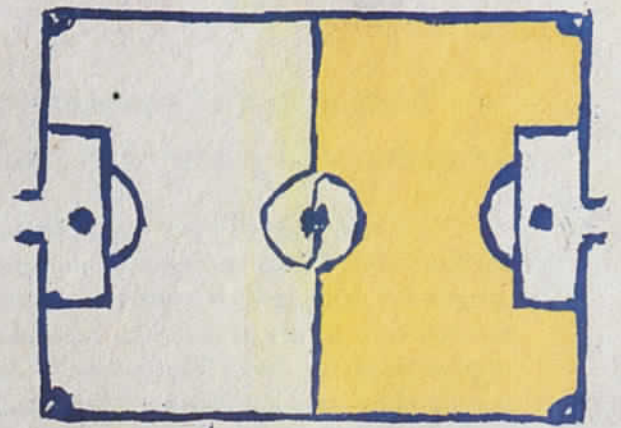
"In Adyar, south of Madras, the Theosophical Society owns a great park beside the sea, covered with magnificent trees, so that the temperature is always nine degrees lower than in the surrounding countryside, which is quite barren. Pavilions of various sizes and styles are scattered all over the park. There are also a number of small temples, one for each religion: a church, a Buddhist temple, a mosque, and various other buildings..." [Alain Danielou, *The Way to the Labyrinth. Memories of East and West* (NY: New Directions, 1987), p. 199]

This neighborhood, known as Adyar, was made up of the Theosophical Society, Kalakshetra Colony of Music and Dance, and the Krishnamurti Foundation. Together they formed an enclave that was sympathetic not just physically but intellectually and spiritually. Although the T.S. provided a quaint, anachronistic cloister, it was Theosophy's prodigal son who inspired Clemente:

"There was always the long shadow of Krishnamurti, whose influence on this group of people was quite strong. I think the iconoclastic attitude of Krishnamurti helped create a new freshness in Indian thought, to be able to look again at these rituals and this tradition in a fresh way, and to recover the actual reasons they came into existence. Krishnamurti means a great deal to me. The idea of a contemplative attitude for the twentieth century is an extremely important one—and the notion that an industrialized hell does not have to be the end of our history. His notions of beauty and the sublime connect up with everything from Tolstoy to Thoreau to the Abstract Expressionist painters." [Foye, 1997]

By the end of 1977 Clemente had completed a series of collaborative works, taking advantage of local crafts people, in particular the sign painters, who created the billboards for the vast South Indian film industry. Given the large scale of many of these works, and the artist's nomadic lifestyle of the time, Clemente decided to collect these works into a small book. Also included were painted trays, inspired by the decorative tinware of Madras, and small papier-mâché sculptures. These were works that delighted in the folkloric aspects of the culture, in the souvenirs sold at temple gift shops, or in the handicrafts markets of the Khadi Bhavan. Attempts at locating a printer who could realize the type of book Clemente had in mind proved difficult. The road that eventually led the painter to C.T. Nachiappan and the workshops of Kalakshetra Publications was a typically circuitous one. As Francesco Clemente recalls :

I'd been attempting to print a small publication about a group of works executed in Madras. The first printer I found collected a large advance from me and then used it to finance his pilgrimage to a sacred temple in Kerala. I imagine the deities there considered my contribution to this holy endeavor, because they somehow propitiated my encounter with Nachi. I found Nachi by going to an industrial printer, who told me they would not do small scale



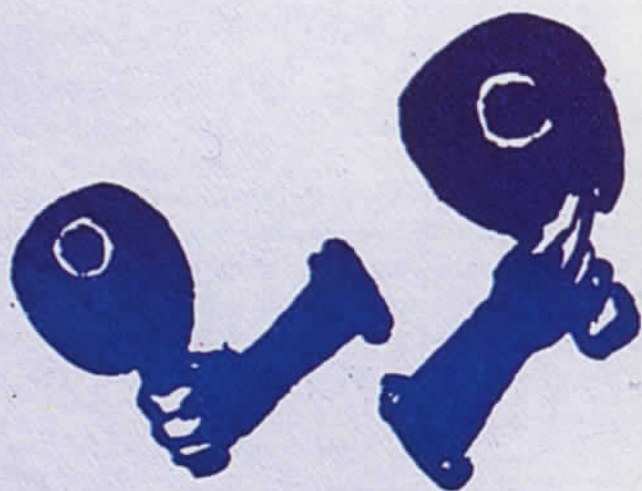
things like the publication I had in mind, but there was one person in the South who could print it, and that was Nachiappan. Of course, after I met him, the few people I knew in Madras all said, "Oh, of course, why didn't you ask! He's the perfect person..." That's the essential difference in attitude between East and West. In the East nobody ever tells you anything unless you ask at least five times in a very direct way. I suppose in India people are more keenly aware of the web of life and how it can unfold in unexpected ways, so they have a more cautious attitude towards things, they try to be less involved than people do in the West.

Meanwhile, the monsoon was late in Madras, the rains came in February. The city was invaded by flies, all the wells got polluted. My well-to-do neighborhood was no protection against any of this, and I contracted hepatitis. I arrived bright yellow at Nachi's office at the Kalakshetra Colony. He looked at me in my silk jacket, which was too warm for the weather, and my yellow coloring. And I looked at him as a possible devotee, who would run away with my advance money to some other pilgrimage. So it was in this atmosphere of mutual suspicion that we met." [Foye, 1997]

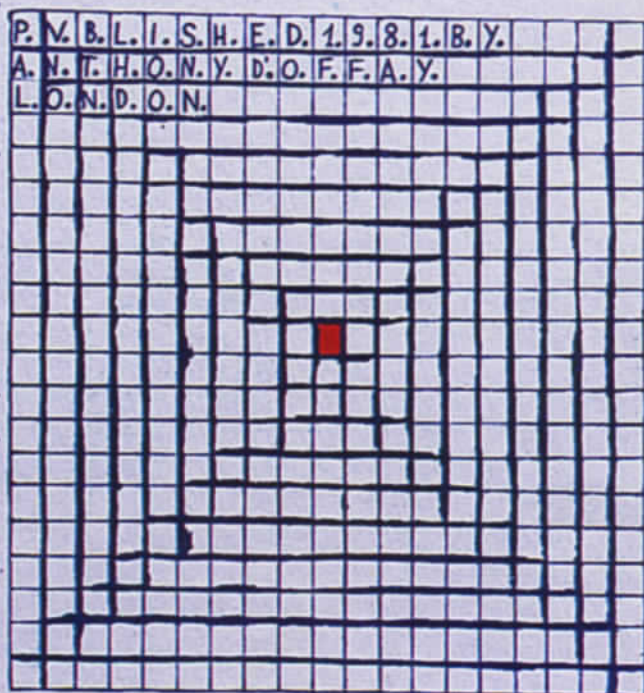
To hear tell of the meeting from Nachiappan's point of view is likewise amusing, and shows that the "atmosphere of suspicion" was indeed mutual:

"By the late 1970s I didn't have all the roaring business I once had. High technology killed all that. But I had enough to keep me going. I was very happy designing books, working on small projects. I only had to accept the work I liked. I was far happier by this time. One day I was sitting here in my office, like I am this morning, and a gentleman who looked like a hippie appeared at my door. You know, I am always nervous of hippies, I don't know what kind of people they are. He did not have long hair but he was funnily dressed. At that time he was ill with hepatitis, his eyes were yellow — he was funny looking, you see. So I was on my guard. He asked, "Are you Nachi?" and I said "Yes." It was Francesco, and he was looking for someone to make a book by the old process. He was finding out what these processes were. He went to the biggest press in India, and the manager told him "Go see Nachiappan!" That's why Francesco came to me. When he told me what he wanted, I was a bit cautious. I told him he would have to pay a bit more, it would take a bit longer, the usual things. The next morning he came back and I showed him a proof I had done the night before. I could see that he was taken aback. "This is so good," he said. I was so happy! The way he wanted to put the book together fit exactly with my way of doing things — handmade paper and so on. We made a very nice book. A small book, about twenty color pages. [Barrow, 1992]

The book they were producing would be titled *Undae clemente flamina pulsae*, self-published in 1978 on the occasion of an exhibition at Art + Project, an alternative space in Amsterdam — one of Clemente's first public exhibitions. The illustrations were printed as colour plates, tipped into the book using a method of corner slits, similar to the souvenir books sold in those days at temples in South India. Decorative borders surrounding the images were printed in letterpress. The pages were made of thick, brightly colored paper, made from cotton rags at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram paper mills, four hours south of Madras in the former French colony of Pondicherry. The signatures were hand-sewn, as is always the case at Kalakshetra. The binding cloth was likewise handmade, obtained at the Khadi Bhavan — state-sponsored retail outlets for handicrafts and handloomed fabrics. These



P. V. B. L. I. S. H. E. D. 1. 9. 8. 1. B. Y.  
A. N. T. H. O. N. Y. D. O. F. F. A. Y.  
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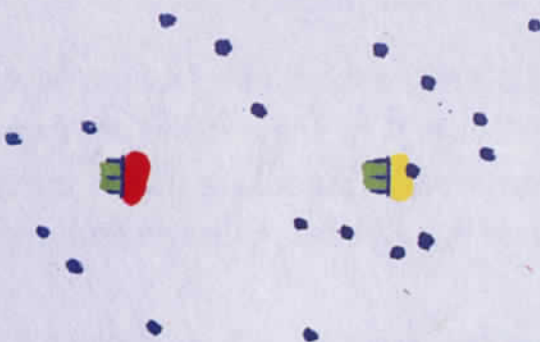
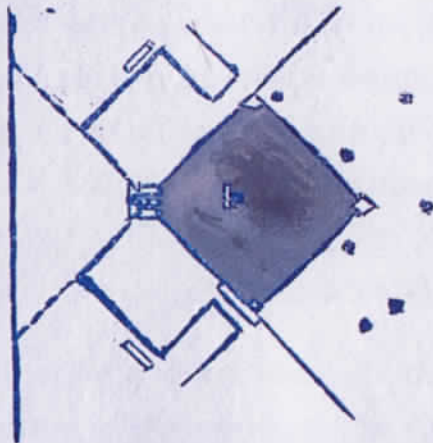


outlets were part of Ghandi's dream for the economic independence of the Indian villager and can still be found in every major Indian city. (The famous image of Ghandi at the spinning wheel was essentially an advertisement for Khadi.) Hence from the start, Clemente and Nachiappan shared a common love of traditional materials. Through his knowledge of small surviving pockets of artisans, Nachiappan was crucial in helping Clemente realize his desire to connect up with an indigenous aesthetic sensibility that was now quickly disappearing:

"Working with Nachi added the possibility of using a number of hand made processes—the printing and binding and setting of type by hand. We could make the covers with those Khadi fabrics that I like for their tactile sense. The origin of the Khadi idea had to do with the boycott of English goods. There is this great photo of Gandhi at the spinning wheel, which I find an extraordinary image, because it's both historical and political and also esoteric and mystical. All of that was fascinating to me, and very sympathetic to the feeling I had about India in those days: a contemporary industrial society where things were made by hand. Nachi was very amused by this first book we made, because somehow the book cost more to look cheaper. That completely puzzled him and created our first bond of curiosity and friendship." [Foye, 1997]

The issue of collaboration is much misunderstood by critics and audiences—one that stems from the desire to elevate or glorify individual authorship. Clemente's approach is much closer to the Indian mentality, which is less possessive and more mediumistic where creativity is involved. Clemente is an artist who hates even to sign his work, and will go to great lengths to avoid doing so (creating much grief on the part of his dealers). When he first began working with the billboard painters of Madras he observed, "I was copying them and they were copying me." This remark goes a long way toward describing the ideal state of creation, where the boundary lines of identity fall away. In other cases, collaboration served a more practical purpose, a way of simply getting the job done. "Execution is the Chariot of Genius," Blake wrote. It is one thing to have a conception of how a picture should look, but quite another thing to bring such a work into existence. Furthermore, in glorifying the solitary artist we are also ignoring the historical fact of the *atelier*. As a Neopolitan, Clemente would have a keen awareness of this:

"I enjoy being part of a standard—that's exactly what I'm missing as a painter in the twentieth century. I've noticed that everybody always says to me, "Do whatever you want to do." That's terrible. It's a terrible situation to be in. So it was a great relief and joy to hear someone in a Jaipur workshop say, "No, it must be this color." In these works the image is totally mine, but the craft I'm relating to is the craft that is used in the decoration of temples, or for movie posters, or souvenirs for the tourist trade. In India I never go to the museums, I go to the streets and look at all the things I like. The most beautiful things you see in India are the ones



that only last for a day. I hate the whole authorship frenzy we have in the West. I don't believe in it, I don't care about it—how everything has to be known down to the last brushstroke. If you look at Mantegna you know this man had some fourteen year old boy helping him, and they were modestly doing the best they could. And now Mantegna's up there. But the reason why he's up there is because it was done without flaw, it was done modestly, to the craft." [In Conversation with Vikasha Desai, Asia Society, New York, 27 May 1993]

The pleasure Clemente received from *Undae clemente flamina pulsae* led him to return to Kalakshetra a year and a half later, to begin work on a larger format publication, *Francesco Clemente Pinxit*, this time to accompany an exhibition at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery in London. The book illustrated works in a wide variety of media: oils, pastel, fresco, sumi ink on paper, and a page from Clemente's first series of miniatures made in India. Opposite the color plates were gouache studies, sumptuously reproduced in silk screen. The book was uniquely bound in hard cover gatefolds, front and back.

Over the years I have always been struck by how similar Clemente and Nachiappan are in personality and creative temperament. Both tend to be taciturn, cryptical in their intentions, and somewhat fatalistic in their general outlook, which is not without humour. Neither will reveal any more information than is absolutely necessary - if even that much. Clemente commented on these traits in Nachiappan:

"Hitting it off was a long process. Nachi would not tell me anything directly, but I wouldn't ask anything directly, either. So it took years for me to discover certain things about him. I was always very amused by the fact that Nachi always affected a great ignorance or distance from everything, from books, from the arts, from this and that. Meanwhile, every time you mention anything - Paris, for instance, he would say, "Oh yes, I was there with Henri Cartier-Bresson for ten days." You mention school, and he says, "Oh yes, I picked up Montessori at the airport when she came to Madras for the first time." You mention painting, and you find out that he published and designed the only monograph of the writings and drawings of Nandalal Bose, in the early 1950s, which is exquisitely designed. You would discuss photography and he would mention that he had done photographs for the Skira publications in the 1940s and 50s, and he had worked for Stella Kramrisch, and he still remembers how demanding and meticulous she was in her requirements for her photographs. So he has always had this intuition and curiosity for things that were worth the curiosity or interest. And a set of reference points, a cosmopolitan map, which is also the character of Madras. I think growing up at the Theosophical Society gave him this cosmopolitan perspective which made it a necessity once every few years to go around the world, and to come back with an even stronger motivation to do good work in Madras, which is the place where he feels most at home." [Foye, 1997]

By the early 1980s Clemente was still more infamous than famous, owing in part to the subject matter sometimes depicted in his works, and the expressionistic handling of his materials. Even his choice of traditional media - oils, fresco, pastels, Indian miniatures - was considered radical, for



this was a time in the West, when the avant-garde had deemed traditional painting long dead. The degree to which the early books created at Kalakshetra contributed to Clemente's growing renown cannot be underestimated. Long before I met the artist I recall seeing his work in these strange books that issued from the Kalakshetra Press, and one was always struck by the other-worldly look they possessed.

No matter how removed from society, artists are still in the business of communication, and Clemente has always understood that far more people are going to see his work through reproduction than are ever going to see it in the flesh. For that reason he has always taken care to create publications that convey as much of the ethos of the work as possible. This is a matter of translation as much as anything. Although in printing one works with an entirely different set of processes than in painting, some sense of the materiality of the work must be conveyed. It was here that Nachiappan was able to serve as an inventive interpreter. In time, with each book, new materials were tried out, from the hammered copper covers embossed with the great mandala for the *Pondicherry Pastels*, to the leopard-skin saris used in binding Clemente's illustrations to Allen Ginsberg's *White Shroud*. Many of these materials Clemente came to use only reluctantly:

"As the years went by I got more comfortable with certain materials which at the beginning I thought would be too obvious. Also, materials that looked too obvious ten years ago, maybe now they're on the brink of disappearing, so you feel you almost want to save or preserve them. For instance, the last book I made with Nachi had one hundred and eight posters of Indian gods. Somehow I never touched these images before. They had this strange, attractive quality. But maybe I'll go back to Madras next year and they won't be printing them anymore. Or the style will change. A few years ago I used a marbled paper from Pondicherry which I always considered too cute, but then I decided, why not?

As time goes by Nachi knows quite well what my sensibility is, so he's able to actually surprise me by doing certain things just the way I would have done them. One of the books he made entirely on his own was the *Chenonceau Pastels*. I suggested the design of it, but he did all the printing without my assistance, because he's now familiar with the sensibility and look of the work. He always affects that he doesn't understand what I'm doing, but I think it's his way of keeping a certain distance and being a little bit ironic about the whole thing, and then, of course, it's important to be able to laugh. We also joke about the efficiency of the West and how oppressive it can be. In India there is a way of working that may look crazy, but it creates more mental space, and anyway everything gets done eventually, so what's the fuss? Why should everybody be so oppressive and strict about things, when you can get the work done anyway." [Foye, 1997]

Another important group of works (which Clemente created within the very walls of the Theosophical Society) were later collected in the book *The Pondicherry Pastels* (London : Anthony d'Offay), (1986), one of Nachiappan's



finest achievements, and a book that can be found in the collection of the British Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Bibliotheque Nationale, and dozens of other institutions. The pastels are small in format, rarely larger than five or six inches in height or width. They reflect the laconic softness of their Adyar environs, and depict simple objects: a palm frond, a frog, a rosary, his wife's earrings. In his now-antiquated four-color letterpress process, Nachiappan manages to capture both the softness and sub-tropical saturation of these works. The reproductions are tipped onto thick sheets of brightly coloured Pondicherry paper, and bound with green muslin and sheets of copper that have been incised with the great mandala. The effect is reminiscent of an eighteenth century specimen book, or perhaps a medieval Psalter.

It is appropriate to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Anthony d'Offay of London, whose enthusiastic appreciation for the work that issued from Kalakshetra Publications was expressed in his support as publisher over many years. Without him we might well have had far fewer of these books to enjoy. A gallery owner who began his career as a rare book and print dealer (with special interest in William Blake), d'Offay recognized the unique place of the *livre de peinture*. Indeed, the very spirit of William Blake animates Clemente's illustrations for Allen Ginsberg's long poem, "White Shroud" (Kunsthaus Basle), (1989), in which the tradition of the illuminated manuscript is updated in resplendent fashion. As a student, Ginsberg once had a vision in which William Blake spoke to him; it was a transformative experience, one that continued to inform his poetic life many decades later. When Ginsberg and Clemente met, a passion for the works of William Blake was an immediate bond.

Blake taught that the world of appearances is a delusion: the real world (Eternal world) is in the imagination, which is Divine, i.e., that which unites man with God. Concerning poetry and painting, Blake once wrote to a friend, "You have only to work up imagination to the state of vision, and the thing is done." It is in the spirit of Blake that Clemente and Ginsberg collaborated on "White Shroud." By placing the visual and the verbal on equal planes, word and image are wedded in vision.

I first met Nachiappan in 1985, when I lived in India for several months with the Clementes. I recall our first meeting distinctly. Nachi had just

**C**T Nachiappan, affectionately known as 'Nachi', has distinctive skills. He is a world-renowned expert on the letter press, producing marvels of four-colour printing, much closer to original paintings entrusted to him than any latest technology-driven offset can do.

Nachi was nurtured in the Kalakshetra ethos of old, taken under the formidable Rukmini Devi's wing as a small boy, who had run away from a difficult home, to find and make his own life.

His varied accomplishments are to be highlighted in three commemorative exhibitions held from February 28 to March 3 at the Lalit Kala Akademi. 'Nachi' speaks to **Maya Narasimhan** for *ExpressWeek*.

**MN:** What were your early influences at Kalakshetra?

**N:** I came to Besant Memorial School where Rukmini Devi actually started her work. Kalakshetra itself was started in 1936, and it was then known as the International Academy of the Arts.

The classes were held under the trees, in a small thatched hut with a huge mirror, now known as the *Kannadi Kottai*.

There was a lot of interaction between the school children and Rukmini Devi or *athai*, as she was called, was always accessible to youngsters. This was why I could approach her and ask if I could learn art instead of playing games which I disliked.

**MN:** That was when you became interested in photography?

**N:** There were many foreigners at the Theosophical Society then - Alex and Mary Elmore, and Conrad Woldring from the Netherlands. Conrad, a photographer was free in the evenings.... so I started my apprenticeship in both commercial art and photography - it was an informal learning that extended to four years.

**MN:** You started work as...?

**N:** I did not complete my college education. I returned to Kalakshetra, in all respects my true home, and joined as Rukmini Devi's assistant on a honorarium of Rs 50/- per month. All of us who worked for Kalakshetra then were paid more or less on those lines. I

did not see it as work at all, it was my mission, my act of service to Rukmini Devi.

**MN:** Your photography and producing expertise brought you into contact with some famous names in art and photography...?

**N:** Yes, it was my privilege to have moved closely with the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Esminger who did ad work for *Time* and *Life*, and others from the famous Magnum photo agency.

My apprenticeship abroad at Eastman Kodak and the Rochester Institute of Technology, with Agfa-Geavert in Germany and Antwerp, helped me produce work for the advertising agency, J Walter Thompson. Mr R K Swamy was then in JWT, and he was a source

of encouragement.

**MN:** What has been most satisfying, work-wise, after your work at Kalakshetra?

**N:** It was my work for the Italian artist, Francesco Clemente, an internationally famous artist in the contemporary idiom.

In a sense, my work for him on the letter press was meant to be. I say this because when the use of the letter press began to fade out all over the world, I resolutely stood by it - to me the letter press itself is an art form.

Francesco came to me after being let down by other printers. When he saw the reproduction, he was very happy, and like most artists, generous in his praise, saying that my copy was 'better than his work'. We have become friends now - I call him my 'amigo'.

**MN:** What work have you done for Francesco?

**N:** I have produced several monographs of Francesco's work, collaborating with him on a total of 11 projects. They have all become collectors' items. Some of them originally cost between \$500 - \$1000 and now sell for as much as \$2000 each.

**MN:** What do you value most about this work?

**N:** It gave me an opportunity to use all the skills I had garnered over the years. I have used materials like jute and metals like copper and zinc to produce the

required effect.

**MN:** Which works do you cherish most?

**N:** All of them were special to both Francesco and I, because we were trying out different materials each time, and I also had to reproduce work in different materials, like oil, fresco, pastels, miniatures that Francesco was working in at different times over the past 20-25 years.

I could perhaps single out *The Pondicherry Pastels*, done for Anthony d'Offay in 1986. These are now at the British Museum, the

**A Rukmini Devi vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

**Devil vintage**

# Not a still life

**C T Nachiappan recalls his beginnings and the many influences that made him an expert with prints and photographs**

Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Bibliothèque Nationale and other institutions.

**MN:** This is where 'the reproductions are tipped onto thick sheets of brightly coloured Pondicherry paper, bound in green muslin and sheets of copper that have been incised with the great mandala'?

**N:** Yes, I have been told that it is reminiscent of an 18th century specimen book or a medieval psalter. Another book I enjoyed printing was Francesco's illustrations for Allen Ginsberg's long poem *White Shroud* in which I was able to revive and update the

tradition of the illuminated manuscript.

**MN:** You have striven for and produced quality work in everything you took up.

You could continue producing quality work in printing, a speciality not available elsewhere in the world. What made you take to *sanyasa* which is a withdrawal from everything that you have done and excelled in all your life?

**N:** Of course, one can continue to work and make money but there is always something else - I was always inclined towards *sanyasa*, so when the headship of the Kollur Mutt was offered to me, I did not refuse. Apart from one's personal salvation, one can do so much good to the world. I also believe in our cultural traditions, and this gave me the opportunity to try and strengthen them.

**MN:** Would you say that the three exhibitions you are holding now are a summation of the various fields to which you have added a special value?

**N:** More than showing my work, the exhibitions are my tribute to Kalakshetra and to the genius of Rukmini Devi who I consider my mentor. She gave me space in Kalakshetra to grow and make possible my work.

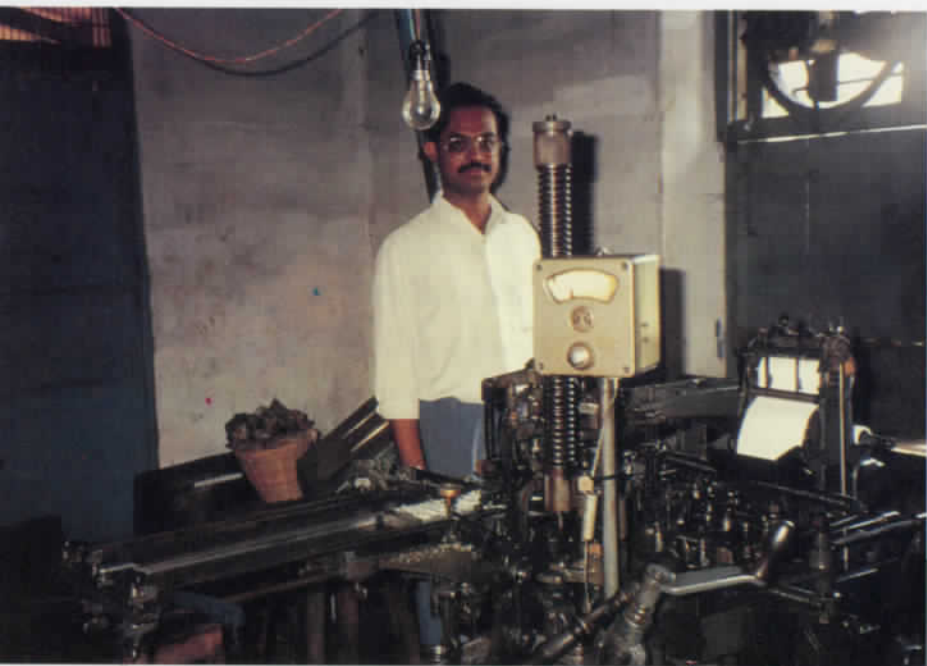


PRINT OF PAINT: Francesco Clemente's Arabesque, 1994 (Pastel on paper)

arrived at the house on Chamiers Road, to join us for lunch. His arrival was greeted by tremendous cries of joy from Francesco's two small daughters, who shouted his name over and over. Based on this reception, I immediately liked Nachi, assuming that anyone, who could inspire such enthusiasm on the part of the children, had to be worth knowing. During those months we enjoyed many long drives in his Ambassador automobile: to faraway temples, sacred mountains, British hill stations, tropical bird sanctuaries, obscure ashrams, spice markets and fabric bazaars. Nachi is an exquisite travelling companion. He carries lightly his vast knowledge of all things Indian. He is adaptable and imperturbable, two essential qualities for touring in that country. He has a tremendous curiosity, coupled with a great sense of humour, particularly for the absurd. He is at heart a villager, and possesses a kind of folk wisdom: earthy, sceptical, unpretentious and superstitious. There is an old fashioned air about him, particularly in his dress, which is always the traditional white dhoti (except when travelling in the West, when he dons a grey or beige business suit and tie so as not to stand out). There is undoubtedly a slightly mystical air to his person. (Whenever we would lunch at the Connemara Hotel on Mount Road they would always ask if he were an astrologer.) At other times strangers would approach and ask for a blessing, assuming he was a holy man. Nachi would laugh and wave his hand, partly in a pseudo-benediction, and partly to say "go away".

It was on that trip that I began assembling a collection of miniature handmade books, produced for the pilgrim trade: sayings of holy men, scriptures, and the like: "Thus Spake Ramana Maharshi," "Sayings of the Holy Mother," "Verses from the Upanishads." One day when a flood had driven us out of the Chamiers Road home, I managed to rescue the soaked books. As I lay them out on my hotel bed to dry, Francesco walked in the room and saw the collection for the first time. We had been discussing the idea of publishing a magazine, but now struck by the visual array, it occurred to us that we had hit upon the ideal format. Naturally, Nachi was soon enlisted as our printer:

"Francesco and Raymond had the idea for Hanuman Books. We agreed I would design and print them. We liked the small format. They had seen the little prayer books that people carry around here with scriptures and sayings of holy men. Francesco and Raymond are both very interested in poetry — Ginsberg, Kerouac and all those guys. You know, they came from the hippies! My idea was that these books were like little jewels, so I said, let's have gold. That's



why we used the gold lettering. Hanuman Books was born in Madras. It was six books at first. Then six more books. Then six more. I frankly thought that America would not take these books so seriously. Well, gee! After three years I see they're in all the book shops and all the museums. I was thrilled. I wanted to make everything good. I still like it to be, hand-stitched and hand-bound. I still like the old process, and the handmade paper, I still like the individually crafted book. That's Hanuman." [Barrow, 1992]

Eventually, fifty titles were published in the miniature format, over a period of ten years (there was an additional title by poet Rene Ricard, printed in a larger format). Writings by artists, documents of the Beat Generation, overlooked European Sanskrit scholars, Lower East Side poets, rock musicians and Warhol superstars made up the author list. Over the ten year period of its existence, Nachiappan printed over 1,50,000 books, each one set in English monotype, hand-sewn, with four-colour dust jackets and gold stamping. For Clemente, the project (in retrospect) seemed once again about the specifics or voice of a place:

"Hanuman Books have been a way to bring my Indian itinerary and my American itinerary together somehow, I've never really been conscious of it, but I think it was a way to internalize my American experience and make it Indian, and the other way around. And to find a way to connect apparently such far away places as the Theosophical 1930's cosmopolitan tradition, and then the American spiritual cosmopolitan rebellious Beat lineage of the 1950s and 60s. Two worlds that apparently have nothing to do with each other, but maybe they do. Again, we tried to create this friction between the expectations of a Western audience, and the look of these products that come from another place. But one should never anticipate these things. Really, I never asked myself the meaning of it, it was just there, it just happened." [Foye, 1997]

I have many fond memories of Nachi, but one of the fondest is when he picked me up at the Madras airport after a long night flight from London. We drove with the Clementes for several hours, far into the hilly countryside, to attend a birthday party for a remarkable guru named Monaswami. Nachi had been a devotee of this holy man since the 1950s. Monaswami taught that the closest one could come to god was the rapture experienced while listening to music. Consequently he became a spiritual mentor to many of the classical and folk musicians of South India. As a young man Monaswami was recognized as a yogi of exceptional power and erudition. He was chosen as the only initiate of his generation, to whom would be revealed a highly secret poem of one thousand verses, dedicated to Rama. Upon learning the verses, Monaswami immediately went on All-India radio and broadcast it, because he said he could not bear being the only person to know such a beautiful poem. (Needless to say he was promptly tossed out of that sect.) The birthday party was a day-long celebration, with much excellent food and music, including singing by Subbulakshmi, and the Bombay Sisters. As we



approached the guru to pay our respects, Nachi offered darshan: fruits, flowers, several large bank notes — and several Deutsche Grammaphone tapes of Beethoven.

Another important holy man for Nachiappan was Pandrimalai Swami. I have always been intrigued how, for a seemingly conservative man, Nachi has always chosen rather iconoclastic gurus. I think this is indicative of an intuitive and poetical side to his nature, which otherwise only emerged in his work. As Nachiappan leaves behind the world of business, and enters the final stage of his life as a man of the cloth, these two aspects of his nature have become fully reconciled, as Francesco Clemente points out:

"It's really wonderful to see Nachi at this moment, where all the years of accumulation of strength and knowledge have come to great fruition. I think a crucial realization for Nachi in this regard came from Pandrimalai Swami. He was a man who gave Nachi strength in terms of reconciling his practical and business sense with his spiritual desires, and making him see that they could go together. And as much as I've been travelling to India over the past twenty years, I know this sort of transformation is possible, but it still comes as a complete surprise to someone from Europe or America. This notion that you live your life, you do your work, and then when the age is right you can really turn around and give this final sense to your life, and there exists the vocabulary to do so. I think it's an extraordinary thing that there's a social organization that gives you the option to make a choice like this. If you want to do this in America you have to become a bum and a homeless person and people despise you. It's terrible that in the West there's no way to render a service that goes beyond mundane social or economic duties. Because what is left at the end of life is this experience of detachment, and service towards other people. You're finally free to do this without an effort... it seems reasonable at this point, there's nothing strident about it. And most people would do it too, if there were some way available to them." [Foye, 1997]

From the time the young boy sat hunched over a library table lettering index cards, to the creation of some of the most remarkable examples in the illustrious history of the art of the book, is now a world away. Through hardship and privation most of us cannot understand, C.T. Nachiappan pursued his vision with grace and devotion. There is an old Hindu saying, that what you do-whatever you do-should be done as an offering to god. So it has been with Nachi all of these years. It is somewhat sad to think, that one will no longer see him (like a character from an R.K. Narayan novel) pattering down the long sandy drive, from his one room house to his small print shop, dressed in flowing white garments, with a set of freshly printed proofs under his arm. But as he moves into this final, and perhaps, even, most important chapter of his life, one knows that all of the good works he has done will continue to find their way into the world at large: 'a little light in great darkness.'

