

Madhu Kumar

From one world to another

Madhu Kumar was born in India into a military family in 1963. She had her first brief encounter with painting in the eighties, but her parents encouraged her to pursue teaching because of the stability this field offered. Family commitments got in the way of making art. She moved with her family to Ottawa, Canada in 2001. It was not until 2010 once her children started university that she went back to making art. Madhu then moved to Regina, Saskatchewan in 2013, and enrolled in art classes at the University of Regina. She was encouraged by her professor David Garneau to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts. She earned this degree in 2017 with Great Distinction.

As an immigrant woman, she understood the challenges that women faced in a new country. It was the loss of identity and a rebuilding of lives all over again that she identified with. They had to learn new customs and new languages while supporting their families and facing discrimination. Women often have a harder time when they come from under-developed patriarchal countries where fewer rights and inequality is a way of life.

In India, horses play a significant role in the military. Madhu's online exhibition *Off Duty* illustrates horses less conventionally than what she remembered from this military background. A strict set of rules and



regimental training applies in the performance of military duties, but outside working hours, Madhu would see these military horses frolicking and being themselves. Madhu painted them in this relaxed state, sometimes using arbitrary colours to reflect their sense of play and freedom.

Her first big university project was a painting titled *Let me be more* done in 2014. It depicts an empty apartment which belonged to a woman that Madhu wanted to help. Madhu does not include this woman in the work to underline the loneliness of this immigrant and to protect her identity. It only has one rug, one mirror containing the reflec-

tion of a hanging monkey toy, and a laptop sitting on the floor because the woman did not own a desk. The painting has a very somber and lonely atmosphere. Madhu allowed this woman to name the painting, and she chose *Let me be more* because she wanted to be free, but her husband and her religion were holding her back. This painting is now hanging in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Regina⁽¹⁾.

“It takes guts to share your story.”



When in Ottawa, Madhu had met a single mother who had to work late every night with no one to look after her child. Madhu looked after the child until the mother finished work. This experience was the motivator for the Stories of Immigrant Women series. Madhu painted portraits of newcomers which included descriptions of their experiences to give their stories a platform. Madhu's portraits in this series are large because she wants to make the women feel honoured and respected as well as to make their stories more impactful. The idea came from large portraits of past aristocrats, royalty, and religious authorities. The artworks were therapeutic for those who related to immigrants' stories. One portrait was of a Syrian woman whose family began talking for the first time about their experi-

ences during the war after seeing the show. Madhu's art started conversations that were not happening before. As a result of this exhibition, Madhu received the YWCA Woman of Distinction Award. Madhu met many incredible, brave, and unapologetic immigrant women whose stories were remarkably similar. They were fierce warriors yet very compassionate. The exhibition started touring in 2018 and will continue until 2023.

When David Garneau was commissioned for public art on the Tawatinâ Bridge in Edmonton, Alberta, he gave Madhu the opportunity to collaborate with him. She is immensely proud of the thirty pieces she produced in her first public space project experience. Although being an artist has its challenges, Madhu is profoundly grateful for how her

career is progressing. Giving back to the community is important. Madhu believes that art benefits society as a universal language capable of communicating between diverse cultures. The power of art has everlasting effect on peoples' lives.

Based on an interview by Isaac Beland

References

1. <http://www2.uregina.ca/president/art/classroom/madhu-kumar/>