



# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





# The Ink & the Line

An interview with printmaker and artist, Rm Palaniappan, on the journey of the line and the language of movement in the unpredictable trajectory of his art

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For this story to truly begin, we need to go back in time and space; to the year 1970, and into the darkened halls of one Lakshmi Theatre in Devakottai, a small town in southern Tamil Nadu, where a 13-year-old boy is watching a World War II Russian film, *The Fall of Berlin*. This is his first foreign film, even though it is technically a subtitled one, and between scrambling to read the subtitles and watching bullets and war planes careening across the screen, the boy at 13 doesn't know just how pivotal this moment will be. He would go on watch 30 more war films in Chennai as an art student at the Government College of Arts and Crafts till the movement of the airplane becomes an intrinsic part of his DNA. And as a printmaker, it then begins to soar.

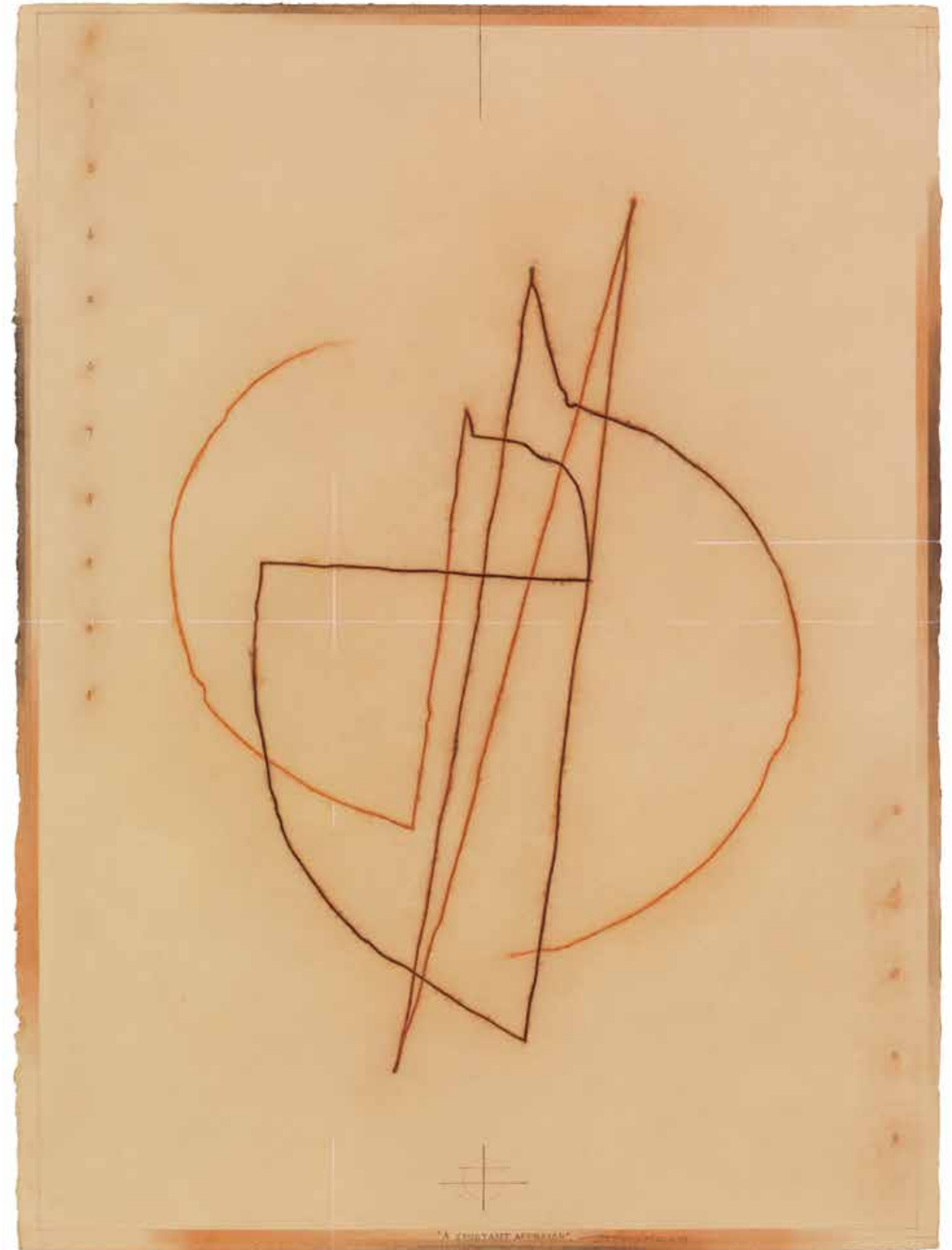
'I finally took my first flight in 1990. It was a long flight to the United States. I had the window seat. I could make out lines that marked the rivers and the roads and the lights;

and as we gained altitude, I watched the landscape change, all of the lines merging into each other till it becomes completely black. It was a magical experience. Before I took this flight, my prints were metaphysical in nature. After this experience, everything became more physical and arithmetical. And later still, I could sense the line suspended in universal movement and how everything is connected, like a story,' says Rm Palaniappan.

Rm Palaniappan is many things rolled into one – a printmaker, painter, curator, former Regional Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi, a closet scientist, a mathematician, a philosopher, and an avid reader. But most of all, he is an amalgamation of the pattern-finder, the pattern-maker and the pattern-keeper. Within the freedom of movement that the sky generously offers, Palaniappan discovers the filaments of expression that then become painstaking etchings for prints, or

powerfully simple lines on canvas. It seems like an understanding that comes from a deep engagement with his environment. That's true of most creative endeavours, you think? I agree, but in Palaniappan's case, there is an added step – the understanding/engagement also sits inside an airplane, buckles its seatbelts, and then proceeds to make the sky fall down into the earth and the earth to rise up to meet the sky.

I met him for a conversation on his artistic journey, and, like the line that loops and curves, Palaniappan was one minute recounting his childhood memories and in the next bumping into the present, or going from the physical to the philosophical, or simply mapping the line. And so, it only seemed right that this print version was also structured that way. Plus, it's 'reverse' – so it's all legitimate, methinks.



A Constant Approach, Conte Crayon on Treated Paper, 56.5 cm x 76.5 cm, 2007.



Where do you think this journey of printmaking actually began?

When I began painting, I mostly experimented with graphics and print. I come from a family of printers – my father ran a commercial printing business and my brother too worked in the same field. So I learnt a lot of the technicality of printing while growing up. In fact, it was my grandfather who encouraged me in the arts. Also, my father was a calendar agent before he began his printing business, so there used to be several albums of printed images of paintings by masters in the house. Of course, all of these influences I see only in retrospect. As a child, I wanted to become a scientist, and then I fell in love with the arts as well. My first choice of subject was actually architecture for its perfect blend of science and art. But I didn't qualify, so I chose painting and printmaking.

You have been an artist in residence in several places, you have curated shows, you have been the regional secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi – you have had so many external responsibilities. How do you keep the artist in you rooted and alive at all times?

I think I might have a split personality, in the sense, I can compartmentalise. This Palaniappan talking to you is not the same as the artist or the same as someone doing administrative work. Ultimately, every experience lends itself to my art.

Document - Albuquerque N.M., Lithography, 56 cm x 108 cm, 1990.

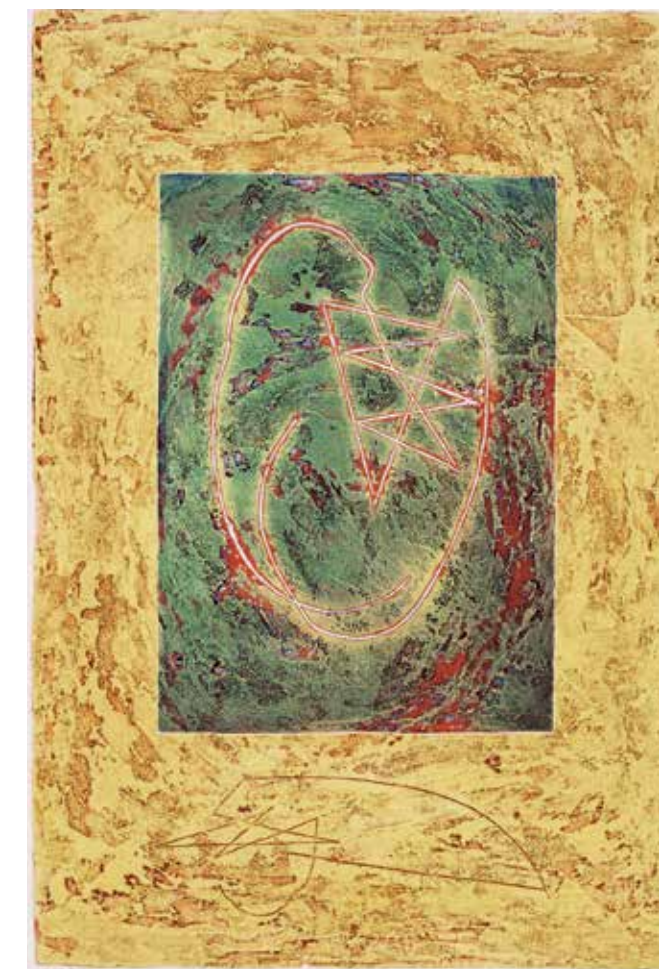
When you imagine something in reverse, how does the character of imagination change?

In the beginning, when I began printmaking, there was this dilemma between the negative and the positive image, about working on the reverse especially in colour. With experience, though, the conversion becomes more natural. And I had the opportunity to really experiment a lot with colours and prints. It's like a different language. Print has a different sensibility; like nerves, deeply engraved.

You have talked a lot about your love for science and mathematics. What do you think creativity can learn from scientific fact?

What is it about contemporary art today that you think is significant and that which is lacking?

I feel art cannot be restricted to one culture. Art is a visual science, a global language. But, at the same time, art that isn't situated within a personal history, within the truth of that time, is not art. That knowledge system I feel is lacking today. Also, I predicted two decades ago, that Indian art will face a lot of cultural invasion. It is happening today and we need time for it to simmer and cook. With deep understanding and courage to harness the self, I feel something good will come out of this.



Descriptive Move, Viscosity and Drawing, 37 cm x 53 cm approx., 2004.

It's hard for me to split art and science. In some aspects, they are the same to me; or rather, the same line connects the two. Science, on the surface, might be all about facts, but when you enter the world of metaphysics, it is endless. I would say they bring a kind of truth – one is the perception of aesthetic and the other one is physical.







*Between the idea, the image and the aesthetic, where does the artist in you stand to connect all the dots?*



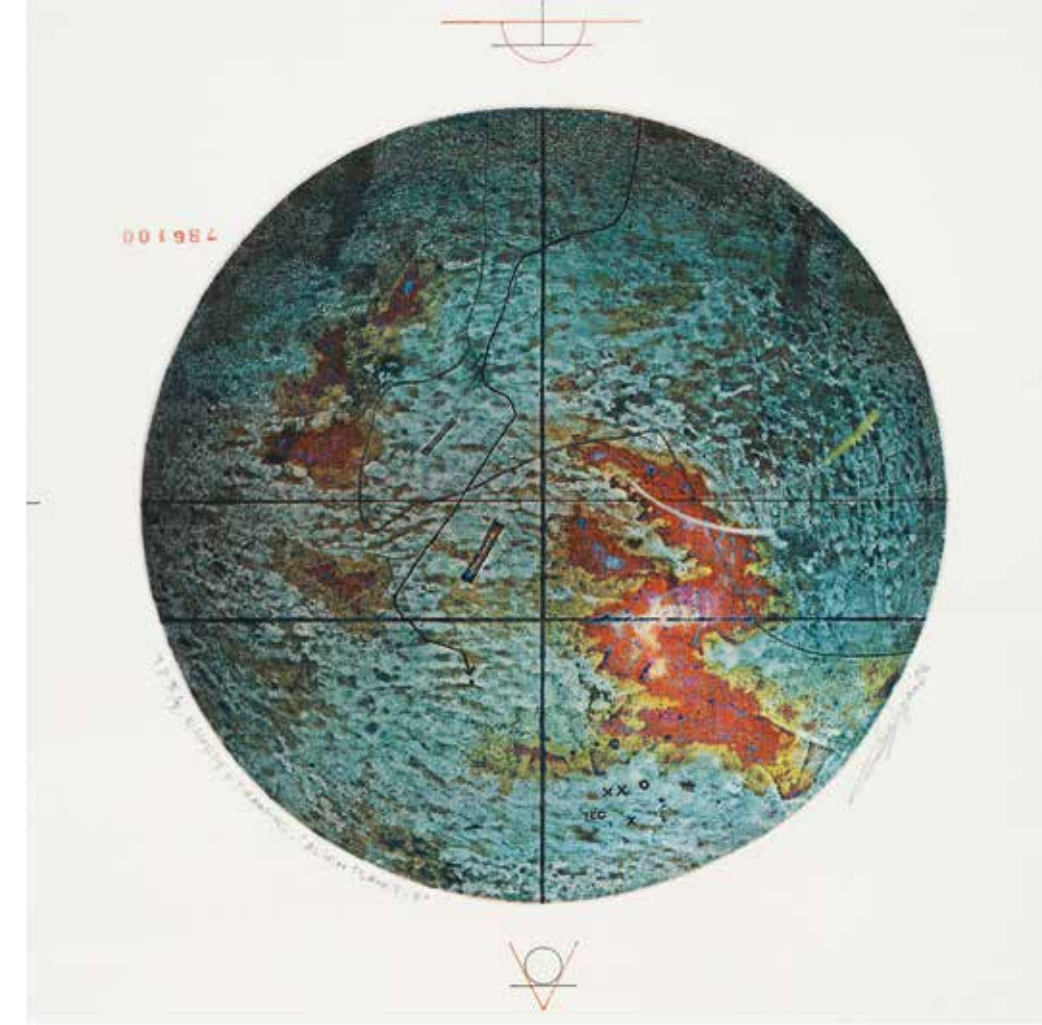
Document - Journey to Nine Planets, Mixed Media Graphics, 56 cm x 76 cm, 1987.

*How do you navigate the space between imagination and process?*

Most of the times, for the artist, it is the process that is most important. It is something I can never exactly explain. While I am in the process of creating, I am inhabiting a different time and space, and when I talk to you about it, in retrospect, it is a different time and space. I might be interpreting it as something else – the same picture can have so many interpretations. The process and the interpretation can never be the same. Art and the idea is only a formula to elevate yourself, like a gateway, nothing more than that. You can never exactly know what it is.

To be honest, I did not know then how to relate imagination and dreaming to art. I could see beauty and science everywhere, even in a switchboard, but I did not know how to convert that into a work of art. One day, when we were in a hotel with friends, I remember admonishing a friend for scratching his buttocks in public. He remembered that, went back, and painted a surrealistic image of a man scratching his back, that appeared like a monkey's face biting its fingers. That's when I began to become conscious of this process and started to draw whatever came to my mind.

*When you look back at your journey as an artist, how has the quality of truth evolved in your thought process?*



Alien Planet H, Viscosity & Mixed Media Graphics, Dia 24 cm, 1988

*You have said once before that drawing defines the constant ideas of our motion at a given time and space – what did you mean by that and how has that changed, if at all?*



Rm. Palaniappan  
All Images Courtesy of the artist.

Over the years, the distance between seeing and imagining has changed. Now I only know that what I want to do is what I have to do. I was born to create something, and in the time I have left, I want to be as true to this process as possible.

When you draw, or in fact in any physical movement within time and space, it is something that is constantly changing. Which is why I feel printmaking is nearer to drawing. You can cut and stitch a print, because psychologically, it is mirroring this constant change. I remember spending hours and days and sometimes months on an etching for one print, to get that texture of the ground for a flight movement right, and then, over the years, I shifted to the simple geometry of lines, to pure lines. This internal dialogue between the physical and the psychological never stops.



