

## At the heart of art therapy

An art exhibition curated by V-Excel Educational Trust, under the theme 'Freedom of Expressions', showcased the artworks of 35 individuals with cognitive and intellectual challenges.

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Art exhibition TATTVA 2022. (Photo | (Photo | P Jawahar, EPS)

By **Sahana Iyer**  
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CHENNAI: There is a lot to be said about art. It is expressive, it is therapeutic and above all things, it is forgiving. This is best explained, in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* where she describes the journey of an artist whose skills worsen with exposure to art education.

She writes, "...they were made to learn how to draw: to re-draw, in essence...It was a flower. Then a vase. Then a hand. Then a head. Then a body. And with each week of proper training, Dennys got worse and worse. By the time the term had ended, his pictures were never displayed on the wall. He had grown too self-conscious to draw."

I could certainly understand arguments for this but, to me, these lines emphasise the rawness that comes with art made from the heart. And as I walked the exhibition TATTVA 2022 at the Museum of Possibilities on Saturday, the paintings held the essence of Hanya's words, as a collection built not on technique despite being skilful but on the heart.

The exhibition curated by V-Excel Educational Trust, under the theme ‘Freedom of Expressions’, showcased the artworks of 35 individuals with cognitive and intellectual challenges, a culmination of one month’s work. Along with artists from V-Excel were also many from other NGOs Jayam Special School, Anandham, Sri Arunodhayam and SNEH Foundation.

“We use music, dance and art during educational training; it is an integral part. When we see the artworks, they surprise us. It is like a vent for their pent-up emotions.

To many of them, communication is hard and this is one way of communicating. Upon looking at some of the artwork by our students, we thought we should showcase this talent. You may see similar patterns by one artist; it is the way they express themselves.

And there are a lot of variations of the paintings and different techniques used (taught by the mentors). The key objective of Trust is social integration. We want people to understand there is much-hidden talent in them and given the opportunity, they do excellent work,” shared Gayathri Suryanarayanan, centre coordinator, of Youth Empowerment Services at the Trust.



Art exhibition TATTVA 2022. (P Jawahar, EPS)

## Communicating with colours

Every painting was unique to its maker, sharing their thoughts, interests and experiences. Some canvasses showcased abstract work, some recreated their surroundings, and others displayed their favourites.

There was also a sense of empowerment in many, titled ‘We are ready to compete with everyone’ and ‘My fingers can do wonders’. One of my favourites was a drawing by M Keerthana titled ‘Shapes attract me more’ that constructed a cityscape in simple shapes.

The diversity on canvas was also indicative of the varied journeys that each had. Art therapist Puja Bhalla said that there is no expectation of what one must do while wielding a brush.

“This medium is very healing to them. Many times, you see someone and they are agitated. When they come to the art therapy room, something in them relaxes because of the space before they even hold the brush. And the colours work deeply with them — some help them breathe better, others build better circulation. As an art therapist, I understand what works with a particular child.

Their initial idea is to spill everything on paper and release it until I gain some control. It builds a therapeutic process for them,” she noted.

In her process of training, she has found unique experiences.

“One boy used to take all the colours and make them murky. His only aim is to bring one bit of glow to it. It’s interesting to see him do it. When that glow of light comes, all of him relaxes. Another child would only work with certain shades. And another would tear through the paper the minute the brush came to him. That he managed to create this painting is quite remarkable. There are many ways to use art therapy; it is not an immediate process. I think art is something that connects deeply, especially when you are working with children who don’t speak. One thing I learned during my training was that the product does not have to be beautiful, the process does,” she explained.

And it seems all of them did enjoy the process. Twenty-two-year-old artist Chandra S Kalapahar began painting two years ago and shared that she likes it.

“It’s easier with help from ma’am and I’m happy to see all the displays here today,” she said, adding that along with art, she also hones her dancing skills. Another artist Arpith Ashok, who is 18 years old, shared that he enjoyed mandalas and wants to try his hand at them. His mother added that his interest in art has even inspired her.

Later in the day, all the artists were felicitated by the chief guests, Seetharaman, chairman, Super Auto Forge and Radha Seetharaman.

## **Beyond art**

Where the exhibition gathered people on the first floor, several also occupied the ground floor where the Trust had set up games and activities for visitors. These showcased a different sort of several individuals went through at the Trust.

“For people with special needs and learning disabilities, we have occupational and remedial therapy and art therapy. Each of these activities helps with different things,” explained Lekshmi Ramesh, unit head for early intervention and remedial unit of the Trust. She pointed to a pyramid of cups and said, “This helps with hand-eye coordination.

There is another activity where the individual blows a ball over cups of water into another cup that helps many whose speech is not developed. Many things, we feel are easy but when you try it out, we know how difficult it can be for us as well.” This became apparent when activity for left-right orientation demanded my full concentration.

Supporting people with intellectual disabilities is about opportunities. Gayathri concluded, “All of us either get an opportunity or grab it. For these individuals, we need to give them opportunities. It is not that we have a lack (of opportunities to provide), but it is our lack of awareness that can sometimes lead to their exclusion and we need to be a little more conscious.”