

**liminal figures liminal space**

*Photography*

Pradeep Dasgupta  
K.S. Radhakrishnan  
Raimi Gbadamosi  
Prabuddha Dasgupta  
Brent Eldson

*Design consultant*

Ishaan Dasgupta

*Editing consultant*

Peter Briggs

*Layout*

Shaiju Augustine

*Image Editing*

Ritesh Malhotra

Published on the occasion of the exhibition  
'liminal figures liminal space' at Jehangir Art  
Gallery, Mumbai.

25th January to 31st January 2010.  
Art Musings,  
1 Admiralty Building,  
Colaba Cross lane,  
Mumbai - 400005, India.  
[www.artmusings.net](http://www.artmusings.net)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may  
be reproduced or utilized in any form or by  
any means, electronic or mechanical, including  
photocopying, recording, or any information  
storage and retrieval system, without permission  
in writing from the copyright holders.

All works of art copyright K.S. Radhakrishnan

Essay copyright R. Siva Kumar

Photographs copyright the photographers.

Printed in India at Lustraprint Process Pvt. Ltd.,  
New Delhi

Published by Art Musings, Mumbai, India.

Paper courtesy Sona Commercial



# K.S. RADHAKRISHNAN

liminal figures liminal space

Text

R. Siva Kumar

ART MUSINGS

---

### Travels into Liminality with Musui

He wanted to dream a man: he wanted to dream him with minute integrity and insert him into reality...

*Jorge Luis Borges*



A part of Radhakrishnan's recent work can be read as an effort to dream a man and insert him into reality – the other part of his work can be read as an effort to picture aspects of this reality but that shall not concern us here. He calls the man he has imagined 'Musui', and for a few years now he has been on a journey with Musui. But the seed of this journey goes back to an earlier period; to the time he was an art student at Santiniketan. He chanced upon Musui when he turned up one day to pose for the class. The generous smile of this skin-headed young Santhal, sublimely innocent and ridiculously silly at the same time, captivated Radhakrishnan and he followed up the initial studies with a life size study of Musui in the nude.



*Musui*, bronze, 20cms x 18cms, 1977

When he finished his studies and moved to Delhi, the sculpture being too large and heavy and more in the nature of an academic study, he sawed off the head and carried it with him. There the smiling head of Musui remained on his studio shelf gathering dust like a forgotten trophy from an earlier campaign, but for all this apparent neglect it also kept breathing and subliminally growing somewhere within him like an old dream the meaning of which still remained to be known. The head freed from the body seemed to reveal the spirit of Musui better. But then it is common belief that portraits as a genre do just this, and in modern art there are heads – Brancusi's 'Muse', Picasso's 'Skull' – that are exemplary embodiments of complete beings. But like Rodin's many studies for Balzac there are also sculptures that are formally complete but constantly urge us imagine bodies for them. For it is only through such imaginings that their meanings become clear and complete.



*The Imp Series*, bronze, size: variable, 1997



*Freehold Musui*, bronze, 96cms x 211cms, 2005



In the course of time, Radhakrishnan realized that the severed head of Musui too called on him to imagine a body, to know its meaning and make it evident to others. And this meant not restoring to the head the supple and plumpish body from which it was severed but imagining a body beginning from the head, a body that would make the secret meaning of the head manifest.

The lean, pared-down body he imagined for Musui – just a wee meatier than stick figures, and a little diminutive in scale for the head – reveals to us the spirit of lightness, of physical and mental lightness, of the imp, of the child, of the saintly mind, of the quick thinking wit. Neither rigid nor heavy, his anatomy embraces the spirit of the boyish and the wisely aged, and negates that of the earth-bound practical man.



*Freehold Maiya, bronze, 2005*



*Freehold Musui, bronze, 2005*



*Musui Maiya (Detail)*





*Ramp*, bronze, 270 cms. x 480 cms., 2004



Since he imagined the anatomy of Musui some eight years ago, Radhakrishnan has been on a journey with him. In a way this journey has been more Musui's than that of the artist who conceived him; it has been a part of the artist's discovery of the meaning of Musui as much as a part of unravelling it to his audience. Once characters are given birth to they take a life of their own and their creators are no more the absolute arbitors of their destiny. Authors and artists are thus taken on journeys by the characters they give birth to just as our children take us along on their life's journey. As in certain stories of Borges the dreams of characters shape the life of an artist or author just as his imagination had shaped them. This explains why an artist sometimes appears to be moving in different directions at the same time, or even be on conflicting courses.



*Terraflly*, bronze, 2006



*Musui*, bronze, 2005



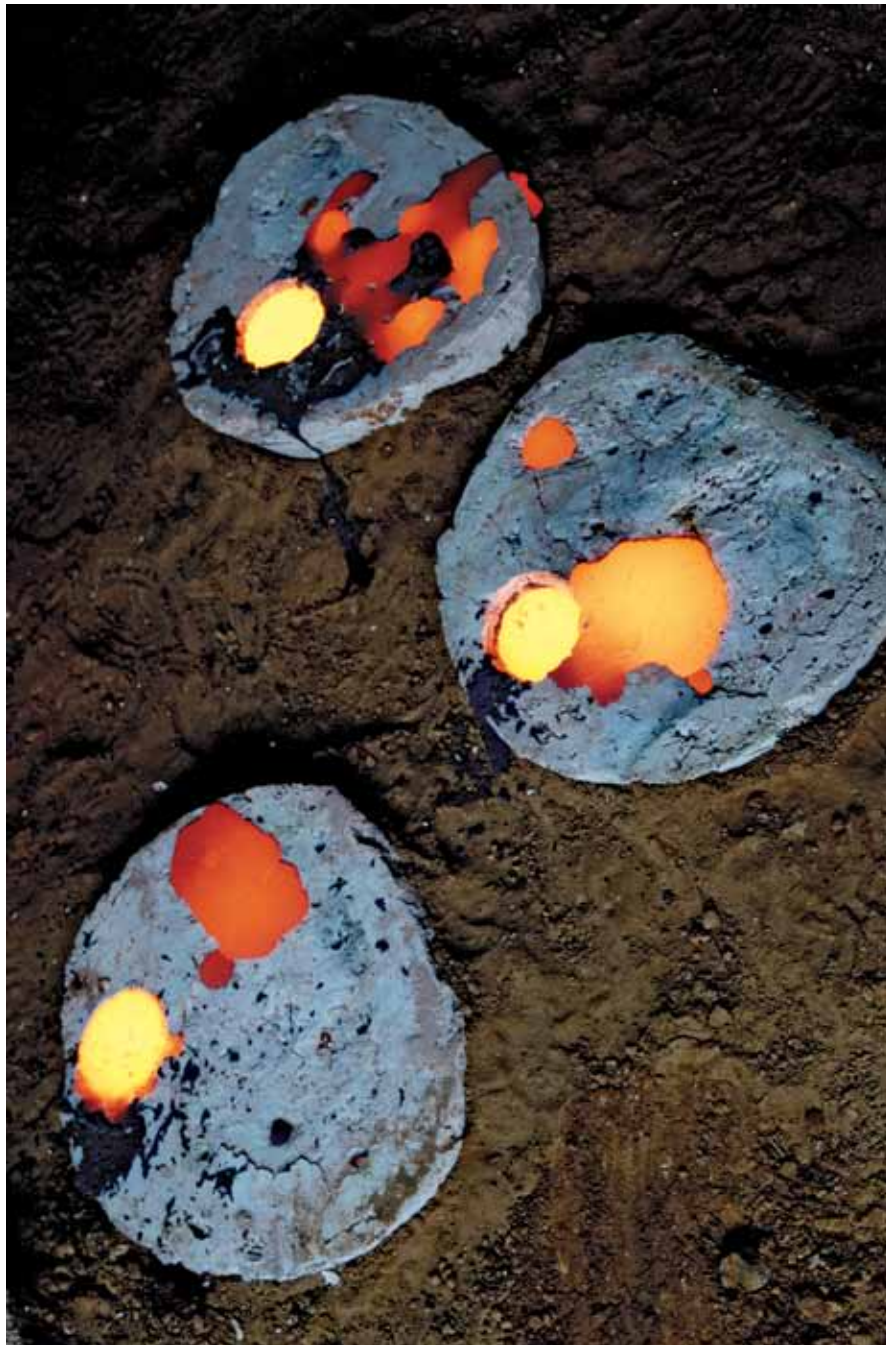
Radhakrishnan's work since then has been revolving around two themes or motifs. One centering on the individual figures of Musui and Maiya, his animus, his dream incarnate, his Eve pulled out of his psychological rib – remember Adam appears sleeping in Renaissance representations of the creation of Eve – and the other representing scores of figures in migration. One group representing individual figures in near-human scale with iconic focus, and the other showing them as collectives, small in scale – not larger than four or five inches – and un-gendered, and reduced to that modern abstraction called masses, they represent primal antinomies of human existence – the individual and the collective, the unique and the universal. And one of the things Radhakrishnan learns on this journey with Musui is that these are only apparent antinomies, not absolute but relative.



*Migrating Figures*, bronze, 2000

opp. page, *Maiya as Selkit*, bronze, 2005





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008



The Musui and Maiya sculptures, true to Musui's innate impish spirit, are parodic impersonations. Playing at being exemplary individuals – the Buddha, Christ, Nataraja – like impersonators and actors, they call to question our faith in immutable individualities and subvert them into feigned identities. They are liminal figures who through assuming multiple identities, dissolve all social demarcations and by being 'this' and 'that' are always betwixt and between. The second group of sculptures showing un-gendered, identity-less bodies in migration are essentially about liminal spaces. Boxes, vessels, and every kind or receptacle and surface into which they fly into, or cling onto, assume identities – become home, city, the world – through human occupation.



*Musui as Nataraja*, bronze, 115.5cms x 71cms, 1998



*Musui as Jesus*, bronze, 120 cms. x 133 cms., 1998



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008



These two sculptural ideas come together in Radhakrishnan's more recent work in different ways. In one group near life-sized figures of Musui or Maiya appear sporting on the top of pedestal-pillars covered with miniature figures in low relief that look like swarms of drowned fireflies floating on water. Already recognized as interrogators of our faith in unique identities, these nimble figures of Musui and Maiya perched on columns of human anonymity and hoisted above our heads, are teasing monuments to our cult of uniqueness. The trope is explored more explicitly in a second group of sculptures where larger-than-life figures of Musui and Maiya in the guise of the wise and the divine, stand towering on ramps teeming with tiny figures. In these works the ramp, a space for display and self-illumination, a space for becoming a gliding star and the world's cynosure, is also the space colonized by the multitudinous and turned into the sphere of everyday reality. Further, the small figures that swamp the ramp and represent the nameless are all miniature images of Musui and Maiya, each different in rhythm and posture but actually assembled from identical body parts cast in hundreds. The kinship between the individually crafted, larger-than-life figures, with impersonated or acquired uniqueness, and the mass produced masses underscores the paradox of liminality: that in the liminal state the individual is at once nothing and all potentiality.



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008







In Radhakrishnan's most recent work, which is the central piece of this exhibition, iconic images of Musui and Maiya, hoisted on pillars and the ramp colonized by the multitudes, come together in a new narration of liminality.

It brings together all the sculptural devices and images he has employed during the last eight years and thus reveals certain relations between them more pointedly. Firstly there is the matter of scale or perspective to be considered. If the masses on the ramp are miniaturized versions of Musui and Maiya with their individualities dissolved, as if seen at a distance, the genderless, faceless figures swarming the pedestal-pillars and the wall are then the same, seen at an even greater distance. Reality, we are reminded, is a matter of perspective.



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail) bronze, 2008*



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail) bronze, 2008*

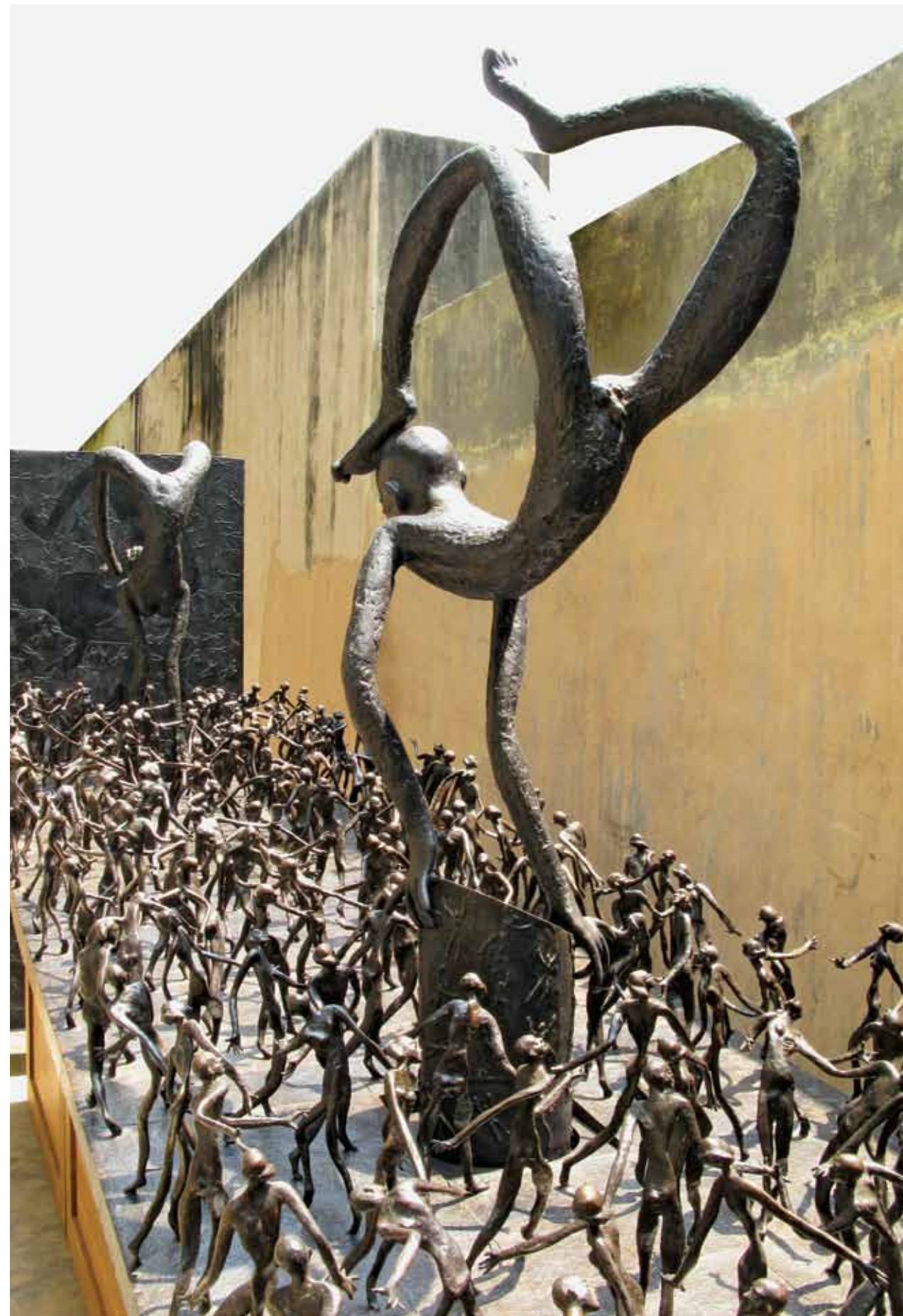
This is reiterated and made more evident in the viewing of the ramp. It presents a series of varied gestalts depending on where we view from. Viewed from different heights, angles and distances – starting at the ground level and rising to eyelevel, the ramp is designed for such viewing – we encounter different images, different rhythms. From a height the figures on the ramp look like objects moving on a conveyor belt, from closer the image is that of a milling crowd, and from close proximity our frame of vision has the business of a city square with people moving in all directions. If the effect is one of chaos from one distance, it is that of choreographed order from another. As we shift perspective the busy city square turns into a dance floor and hurrying feet become dancing feet. Seen from close the seething crowd gives way to ecstatic dancers, light-bodied and swaying like dervishes, almost levitating. As we scan the crowd we see people meeting like lost friends, witness visitations on the dance floor, see lovers swaying to a unifying rhythm, and



occasionally recognize, like an old familiar face standing out from the crowd, the impish face of young Musui. If our encounter with the ramp and the encounter between the figures on the ramp are governed by chance, our interaction with the larger figures on the pillars and theirs with the ramp are more planned. While in the earlier ramps the larger figures arose from the ramp itself, in the present ensemble the pillars with figures start outside the ramp and extend into the ramp and intersect with it at regular intervals. And the pillars being all of the same height they are progressively submerged by the rising ramp with the last one almost completely swallowed up. Further, beyond the ramp, where the eighth pillar should have stood, is a wall; a screen seething with embossed miniature figures and the sunken contours of an acrobatic figure similar to the modelled figures on the pillars but invoking not material



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space* (Detail) bronze, 2008







presence but an embedded absence. The ramp thus stands bracketed between the freestanding first figure and the wall, between palpable reality and its spectral shadow; and all three – the freestanding first figure, the ramp and the wall – together constitute a single imagination.

The substance of this imagination and its sculptural incarnation becomes clearer by focusing on the large and alternating figures of Musui and Maiya and tracing their progress. They form a sequence and are not bound to the pedestal-pillars that hoist them into the air. They merely use the pillars, like gymnasts using equipment to vault over and leap ahead. And as a chain of moving figures their bodies are clearly subsumed to their collective movement. The first of these is an image of Maiya, her body fully horizontal and lifted on her forearms as in some yogic posture, but with her feet arched like that of a sprinter on the starting block. The next figure is one of Musui with one leg high in the sky and the other turned down forming an 'S' in the air, with the body swinging to the right and the arms bent to its rhythm. The third figure is once again that of Maiya; her body swinging to the left, her legs sketching an inverse 'S' in the



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Work in progress) bronze, 2008*



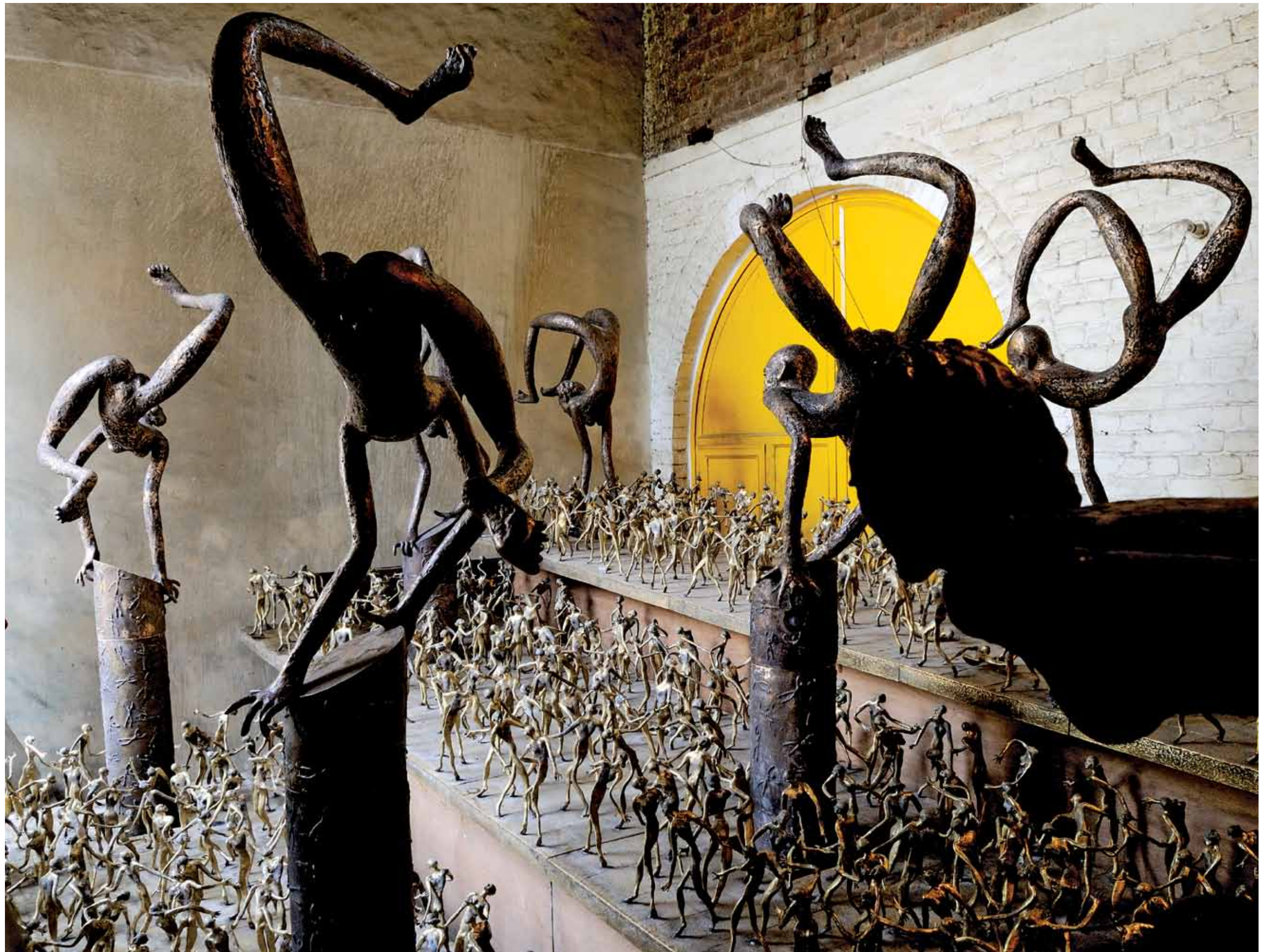
air, she is a mirror image of the preceding figure of Musui, and carries his movement forward. Through them the movement emanating in the yogic sprinter is turned into a hop, skip and leap of a speeding langur. And the movement assumes a new turn in the next figure. With the raised legs arching forward the simian run is transformed into an acrobatic head over heels. Slowed down, the movement is refined over the next two figures and in the seventh and final figure, again that of Maiya, it achieves the poise and symmetry of an ace gymnast executing her final movement.

She is the point at which all the movements within the ensemble meet. The ascent of the ramp culminates in her body. So does the progression of the Musui and Maiya figures. If her first figure invokes a take off, the final one suggests a landing. The movement of the Musui and Maiya figures, in relation to the ramp, is both one of progress and descent. She is thus the point at which ascent and descent meet, the point at which the tumultuous energies of the ensemble converge and are contained. But her body standing like a frozen wave does not mark the end; it only marks the end of what we can perceive. The movement continues beyond. The wall/screen with its tiny firefly-figures in low relief and the thin shadow of a vaulting figure – a double image of distance and unperceivable presence – is a token of this beyond. And the beyond is, like the beginning, pure liminality, where as the 'Creation Hymn' of the Rig Veda says there is: *"...neither non-existence nor existence.... neither the realm of space nor the sky.... neither death nor immortality... nor distinguishing sign of night nor of day... [only] darkness hidden by darkness... [awaiting] the first seed of mind."*

R. Siva Kumar















*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail) bronze, 2008*



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Work in progress)*





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008









*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Work in progress)*





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Work in progress)*















*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008











*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008



















*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008





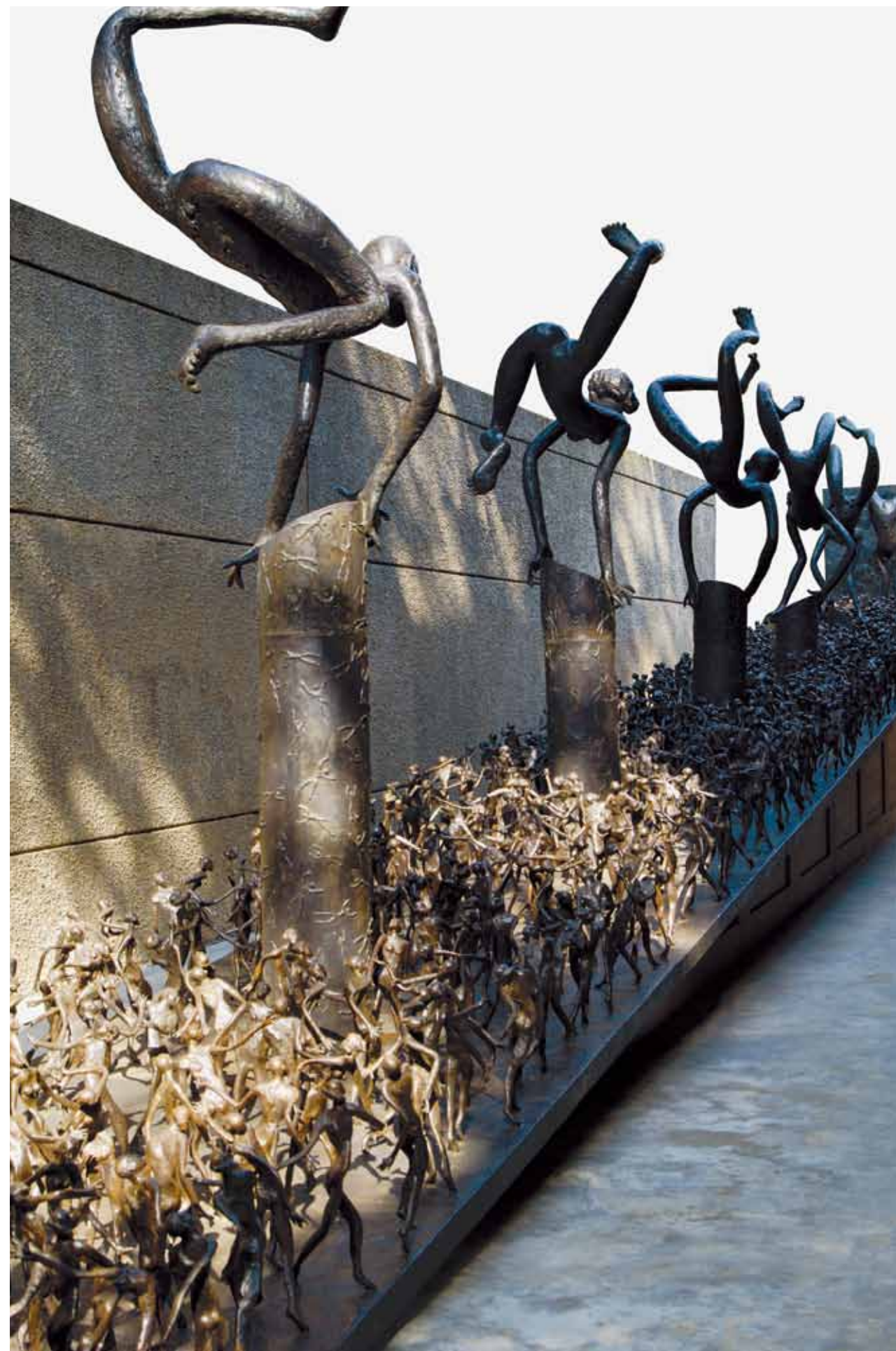




*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail) bronze, 2008*











*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail) bronze, 2008*







*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008















*Musui as Warrior*, bronze, 2006



*Liminal Figures Liminal Space (Detail)* bronze, 2008





Study for *Terraflly*, bronze, 2008



Study for *Liminal Figure*, bronze, 2007



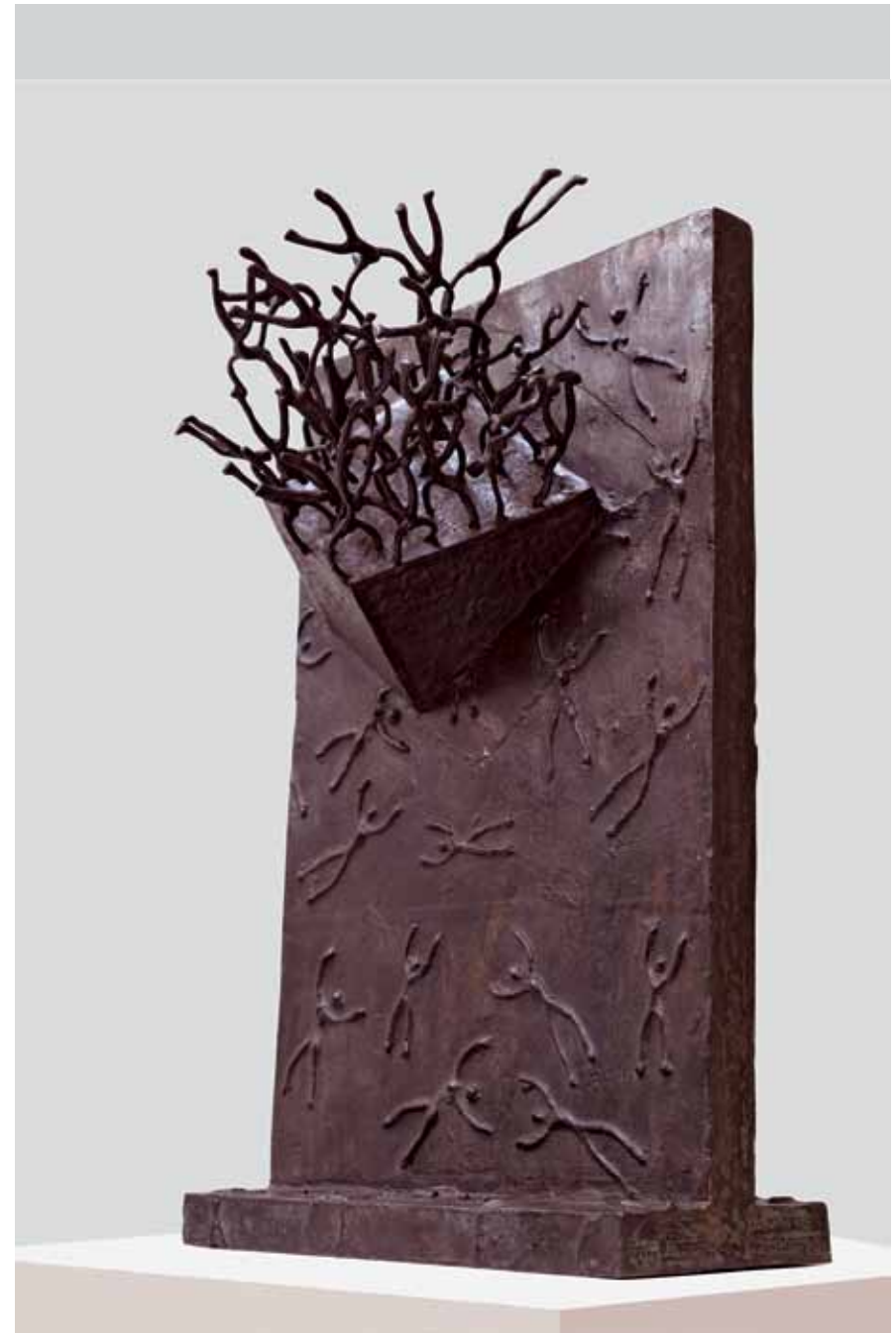


*Portal*, bronze, 2008



*Study for Home*, bronze, 2008





Study for *The Wall*, bronze, 2008





*Human Box*, bronze, 2008



*Human Square*, bronze, 2008





*Terrafly on the Human Square*, bronze, 2008



*Human Square (Detail)*, bronze, 2008





*Maiya walking with a home, bronze, 2008*



*Musui walking with a palm leaf, bronze, 2008*





*Maiya walking with a boat, bronze, 2008*



*Boat on the human wave, bronze, 2008*





*Human Cylinder, bronze, 2008*



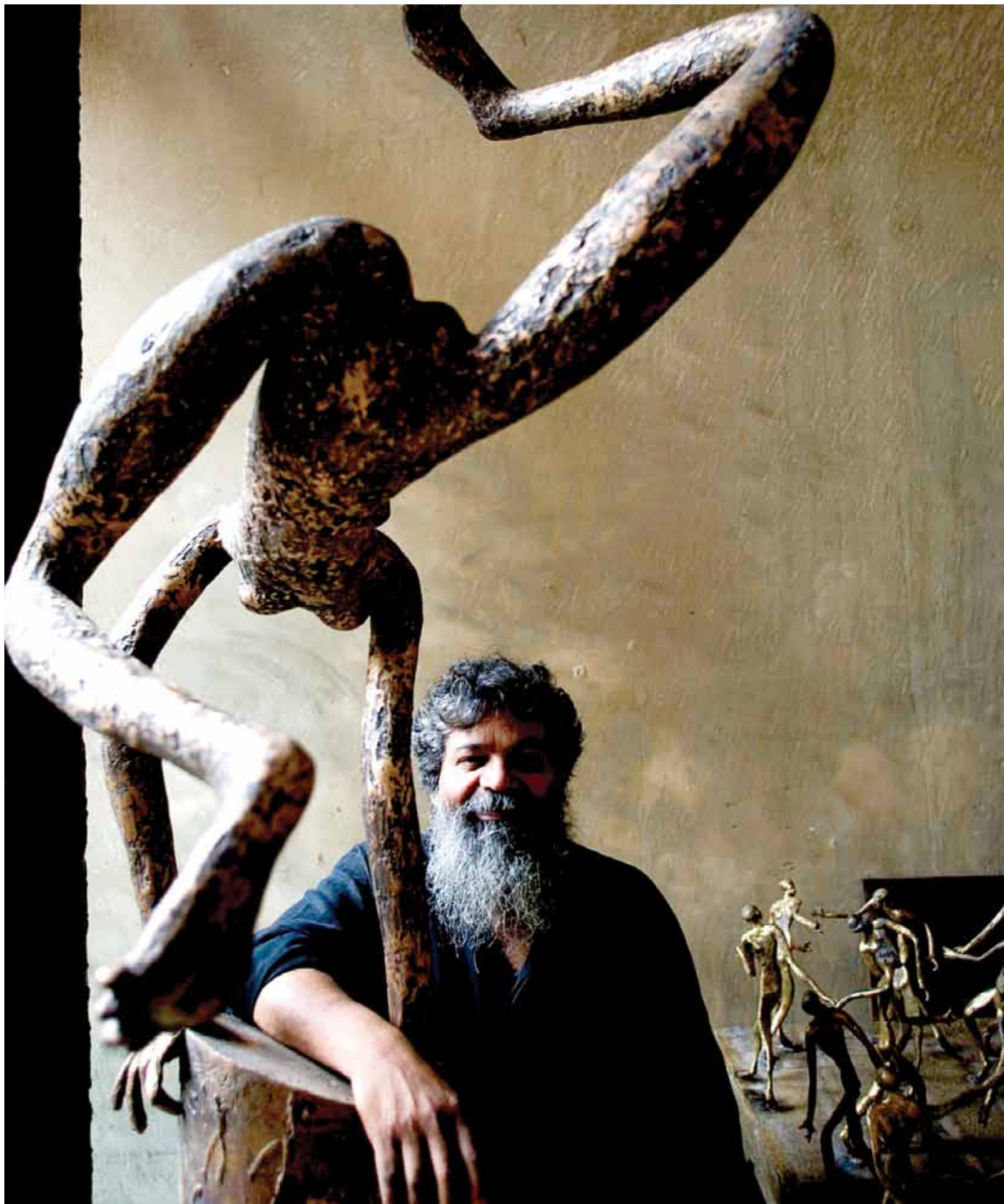
*Terraflly on the portal, bronze, 2008*





*Liminal Figures Liminal Space*, on display at Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata, 2008.





**K.S. Radhakrishnan** is one of the most notable among the new generation of sculptors who has successfully brought about a definitive resurgence in Indian sculpture. Like many of his contemporaries he is a figurative sculptor, but his preference for modeling and bronze casting over new materials sets him apart. A modernist, he recharges age old sculptural processes with a new sensibility. His work, at once both intimate and universal, takes the celebration of sensuality as one of its central themes.

His works are in a number of public collection across the world. Born in 1956 in Kerala, he trained at Santiniketan. He lives and works in Delhi.





**Pradeep Dasgupta** was born in 1952 in Calcutta, he took up photography in 1970.

He graduated in English Literature from Calcutta University in 1971 and after working in advertising till 1983 he moved to Delhi to pursue his career as a photographer. He received numerous awards such as New York Festival, Asia Pacific Adfest, Clio nominations and Cannes nominations. He had solo exhibitions in Calcutta and Delhi in 1997, 1998, 2006 and 2007 and has participated in numerous group shows of photography, digital art and sculpture in India.

His work is in various private and corporate collections in India, Europe, South East Asia and the U.S.A.



**R. Siva Kumar** is professor in History of Art at Kala Bhavana, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan. Born in 1956, he was educated in Kerala and Santiniketan, and has been on the faculty at Kala Bhavana since 1981.

He has written extensively on modern Indian art and is noted for his significant contribution to the study of the art and artists of Santiniketan. Besides numerous papers in various journals, Siva Kumar has authored the following books: *The Santiniketan Murals*, 1995; *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, 1997; *K.G. Subramanyan: A Retrospective*, 2003; *A. Ramachandran: A Retrospective*, 2004; *K.S. Radhakrishnan*, 2004; and *My Pictures: A Collection of Paintings by Rabindranath Tagore*, 2005, *Benodebehari Mukherjee: A Centenary* 2006, *Khoai* 2006, *K.G. Subramanyan: The Painted Platters* 2007, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore* 2008, and *Sensibility Objectified: The Sculptures of Sarbari Roy Chudhury* 2009. Currently he is engaged in editing a comprehensive catalogue of Rabindranath Tagore's pictorial oeuvre.



