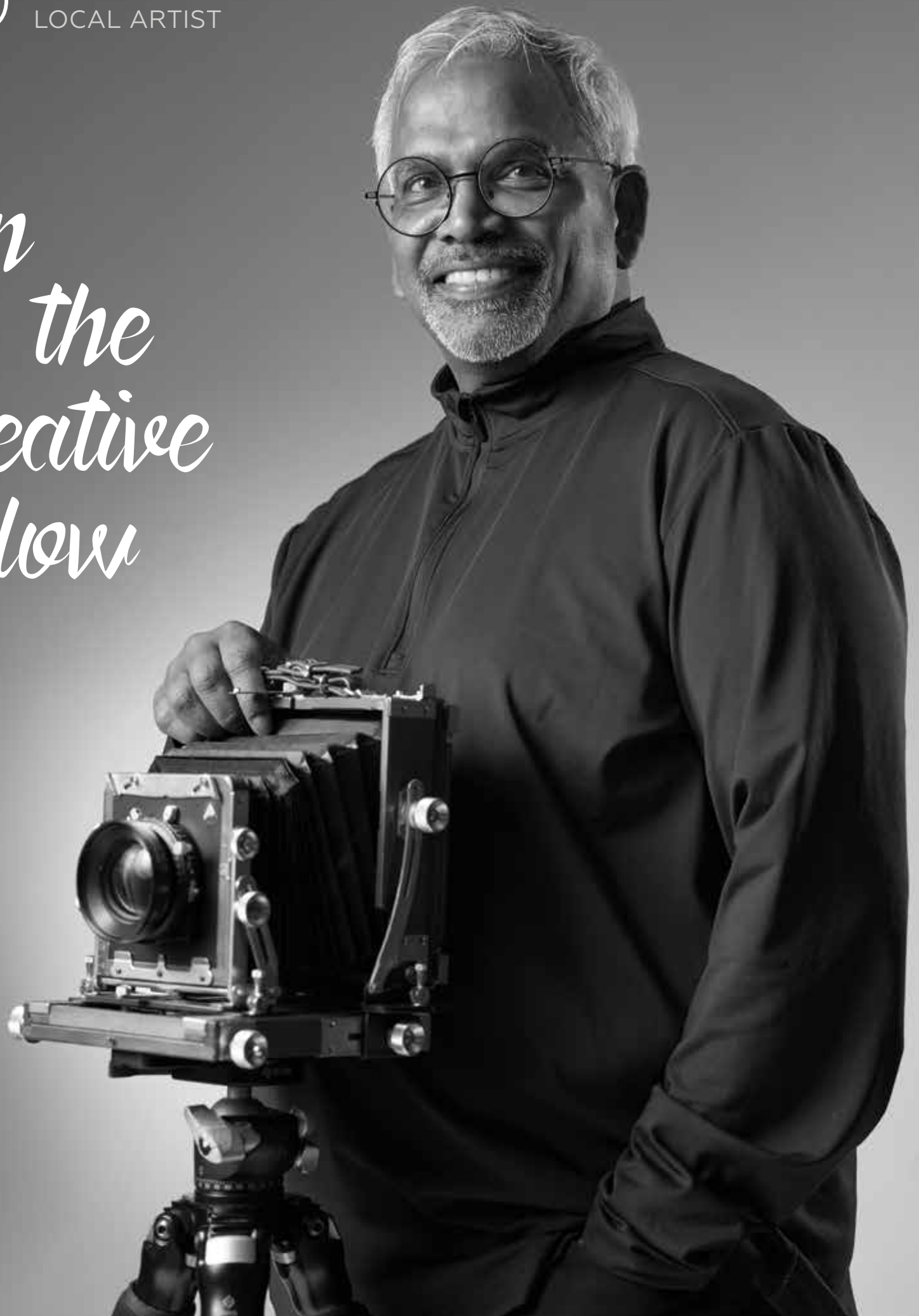


210 LOCAL ARTIST

*In
the
creative
flow*



The walls of the SteamMaster headquarters in Minturn are filled with Raj Manickam's photography.

Raj Manickam and the art of observation

By Kimberly Nicoletti

Raj Manickam doesn't just think outside of the box; he kicks the box aside. In his world, there are no limitations; there's just the pure potential of observation, creativity and service to his community.

Manickam spent 35 years in his native Malaysia, then lived at Kauai's Hindu Monastery for six months. He moved to the Vail Valley in 1998 to start a family. His experience led him into local banking, but then he moved over to SteamMaster Restoration and Cleaning in Minturn, ultimately becoming its CEO and co-owner.

About a decade ago, he took his first photography class at Colorado Mountain College (CMC). The instructor encouraged him to enter contests, saying he had a natural eye for capturing photos — something not everyone has.

These days, Manickam's award-winning work has been shown throughout the nation, from San Francisco to Massachusetts.

He's also earned the 2024 Ralph Bloss Humanitarian Award, a national recognition honoring cleaning-and-restoration-industry members "whose compassion, self-sacrifice, leadership and creativity produce significant and outstanding benefits for mankind." In 2014, the Better Business Bureau gave Vail Valley's SteamMaster a Torch Award for Ethics Winner, which



they touted on New York City's Times Square in bold lights.

Manickam's art of observation is uncanny. He takes in moments most people walk right past. He might photograph shadows of a tree, along with its dropped, yellowed leaves upon ice or a group of people staring at something more interesting than his camera.

His aspen series depicts soft pink, yellow, green and blue hues — vertical lines that look like a painting. But it's intentional camera movement — which employs techniques from moving the camera up or down, rolling the lens inward or out or sliding it side to side — that produces his fine art photography.

"Everything is about observation. There is no Photoshop; it is all camera work," he says.

For example, "Juniper's Last Gasp" portrays a dead juniper in Colorado National Monument,

with a colorful photo of landfill overlaid in-camera.

He accompanies his award-winning photos with essays, revealing his thoughts and process — QR codes take viewers deeper into the story.

Within the juniper essay, he reminds us that even though the gnarled trees thrive in the most inhospitable conditions, they "will perish if we pollute indiscriminately." He advocates both reducing waste and recycling.

While some photos carry environmental messages, others reveal his humor, which he finds in the most mundane moments. A few garlic cloves sitting on his kitchen counter became a photograph titled "Take Off Your Cloves." Sitting at a red light in the rain, he snapped a photo using a lens flare, calling the brightly colored, blurred lights "Festivity." When he glanced up from his desk

at SteamMaster and saw his blue wall and the tan-colored open door, he took a photo, naming it "Door of Opportunity" and asking in his essay: Do we confidently walk through or hesitate?

Always expanding his creative vision, his subjects range from nature to photojournalism, documenting bare shelves during Covid to portraits and abstract pieces.

He artistically represents traditions of both Eastern and Western realms by showcasing Indian dancers and rodeos, respectively.

His ability to convey the grit of cowboys and cowgirls or a sacred Eastern dance has earned him plenty of awards. One depicting Sri Lankan dancers has won so many awards that he's retired it from competition circuits and donates money from sales to buy seedlings and teach Sri Lankans to grow food.

Sometimes, he takes a counterintuitive approach to

photography, stopping on Leadville's busy sidewalks during Skijoring to capture the play of light and shadow among bordering window blinds. He developed those in black and white, generating compelling abstracts.

"The subjects that draw my lens remain diverse," Manickam says. "With photography, I sometimes plan, and at times, I wander."

Such was the case when he noticed a Banksy-style wall mural near the jail in Eagle. He returned, months later, at night, with frozen hands carrying a bird cage as a prop, then "painted" the wall with bright light and captured the scene, titling it "Freedom Night." It's just one way he inspires people to view their surrounding environments — and even others' art — differently. A Fort Collins choir later featured the photograph, which also inspired a poem about peace and calm that poet Jennifer Gurney read, during their "Shared Visions" concert.

Another happenstance occurred walking through the forest, when he encountered pine beetle kill.

"I'm like, 'Well, there's some purpose for this ecosystem. We cannot just be crying about what beetles do to our trees,'" he says, talking about how when he zoomed out, using intentional camera movement, it became a piece of fine art. "We walk through so many things in a day — if you stop and look again, there's a whole story about it."

Other times, he searches long and hard for his hero shot. When the Northern Lights dazzled viewers in Colorado, he spent the entire night, beginning in Glenwood Springs, attempting to frame a satisfactory shot. He finally ended up at the bridge by Gilpin past midnight to create an intriguing foreground. Another night, he was shooting the Milky Way at 2 a.m., while everyone watched Fourth of July fireworks. His great patience allowed him to wait for one car to come from Red Cliff and the other to come from Leadville, resulting in matching streaming lights. Then he drove to SteamMaster and started his day job.

He explains how observation first requires attention — and attention entails slowing down. He even placed

a bell on his dashboard to remind himself to remain in the present moment. Meditation practice helps him, as does spending time in nature.

"Nature always draws me in," he says.

Running SteamMaster takes time, so at one point, he wondered if he was indulging in his creativity too much.

"One of the monks in the monastery said, 'Keep doing this because this creativity will bring up better creativity in your marketing and your sales in your business,'" he says. "It doesn't stop in the art. It goes to

whatever you're doing in your life because it is a form of balance.

He said, 'Don't be an island.'

That means don't just take from this place, so I volunteer."

His community work ranges from 19 SteamMaster Golf tournaments that have raised over \$680,000 for nonprofits like Eagle County Emergency Responders Fund, Vail Valley Charitable Fund and more to freely taking photos for nonprofits or for his employees' big events to posting public service announcements online to prevent wildfires — and much more.

"You're giving it away, and that

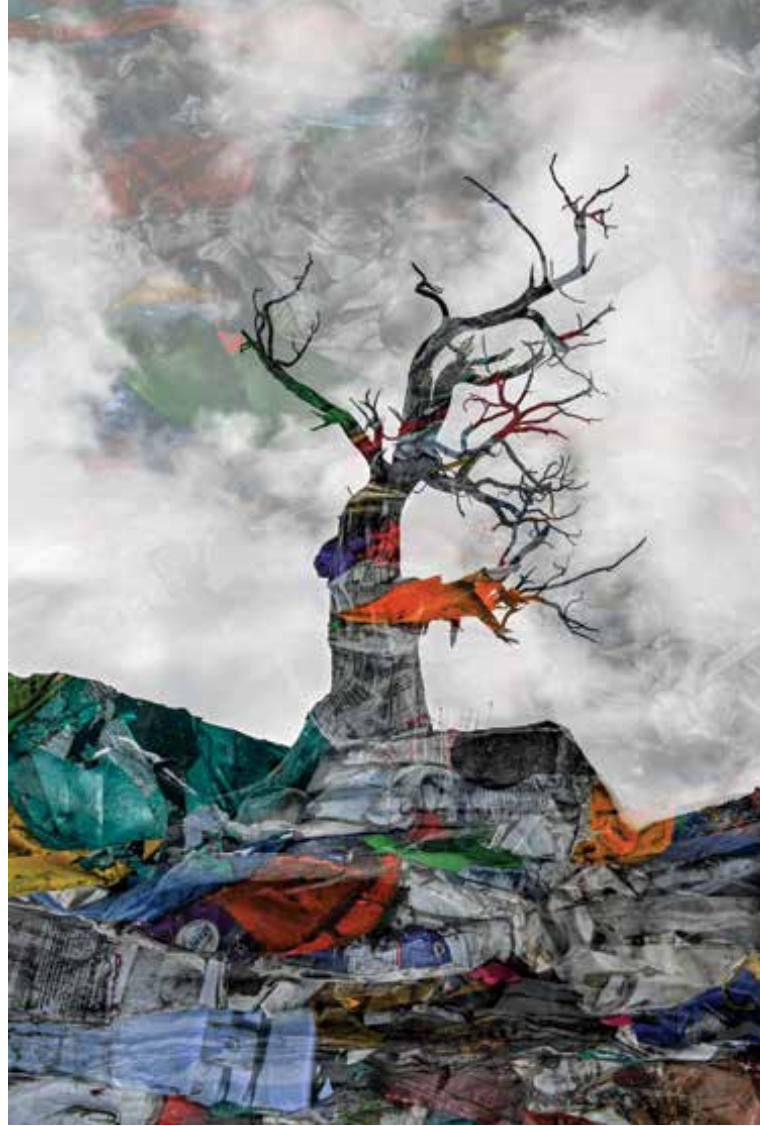
alone brings good will," he says. "You do it in a way that is without any expectation."

Art became a lifesaver for him when trigeminal neuralgia, aka the suicide disease, struck. Its dramatic nickname stems from some of the most excruciating facial pain known. It's often triggered by everyday activities like brushing teeth, talking or smiling. During the six or so months it took medical experts to diagnose and treat him, he began assembling three-dimensional sculptures, which helped him distract from the pain before undergoing brain surgery

"Everything is about observation. There is no Photoshop; it is all camera work."



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: “Juniper”’s Last Gasp,” “Paradox of Freedom” and “Freedom Night.”



to remedy it. He won first place in sculpture at the CMC-Vail Valley Art Guild Annual Fine Art Show for “Paradox of Freedom.”

In 2024, he opened his own gallery, AllInGoodLight, in the same Minturn building that houses SteamMaster and its nine employee bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchen. He hosts open houses and is always willing to open the gallery on weekends for visitors. His opening day exhibition drew 150 people.

He doesn’t make a living selling his photographs, but he jokes that if people don’t buy his art, he can sell them carpet cleaning or another SteamMaster service.

“Why shouldn’t a business been done creatively?” he says. “Twice a year, we have a walk through (the gallery) with wine. It can’t pay the bills, but it brings joy.”

This summer, his “No Name” exhibition is more interactive. Rather than labeling photographs with titles, they have numbers, accompanied with a piece of paper stating names of the pieces — however, visitors have to guess; the paper won’t reveal answers.

It’s just another way Manickam shows his humor and encourages people to pause and look a little closer.

“This is the outcome of all of the observation — and then for you to use a little bit of your creativity to name it,” he says, admitting that, if you really want to know, he’ll tell you.

His gallery is his tribute to living creatively. He doesn’t take photos to please critics. Every photo he frames emerges from his keen observation of lasting impressions that tell deeper stories.

In turn, he encourages people to take time to do things they’re driven to do.

“If you just suppress every single thought that comes to you, and then time goes by and you didn’t do it ... that’s the regret,” he says. “I live joyously. I don’t get too caught up in life and how serious it is.”

Whether you encounter Manickam through his photos, at a community event or through SteamMaster, you can be sure it will be a heartwarming, memorable experience. **vvm**

